

**From *Chinatown* to *The East*:  
Charting the Shift in Ecological Paradigms in Hollywood Cinema**

Course: CIN320H1F Special Topics in Genre & Modes: Ecocinema: The Nature of Film

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Date: December 17, 2015

Aiming toward an understanding of the history of the environmental movement and its evolving paradigms, a look back at its manifestations in cinema provides evidence of and insights into the changing paradigms of environmental thought. Since the majority of films dealing with the most serious environmental concerns – from pollution and water rights, to clean energy, clean air, population and indigenous rights, to climate change – are addressed in the proliferation of films operating in the documentary genre, it is helpful to turn our gaze to the more traditionally popular and celebrated genre of narrative filmmaking, since the commercially-dependent Hollywood cinema provides a barometer signaling the general health and consensus of these issues in the popular mind (Willoquet-Maricondi, 48-49).

From the birth of the environmental movement in the 1970s, to the contemporary response in cinema today — the shifting values in environmental discourse may be located in films like *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) and *The China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979) in the 1970s, and in more recent contemporary films like *Night Moves* (Kelly Reichardt, 2013) and *The East* (Zal Batmanglij, 2013) today. An analysis of these films in their historical and contemporary context provides examples of a marked shift, not only in formal approaches to the challenges of discussing environmental concerns in cinema; but also a shift in changing environmental paradigms as the films demonstrate a transition from the dominant patriarchal mode, emphasizing an authoritative approach to power and control over the environment, to a more holistic, egalitarian, and feminist approach that engages the individual to act in accordance with local values, in search of empowerment – for both the individual, and the collective.

Both *Chinatown* and *The China Syndrome* tell the story of power and corruption at the corporate and industrial levels, as capitalist forces operate to exploit natural resources at the expense of the health and safety of the people and against any ecological concerns. In both stories, there is the awareness and understanding that corruption exists, but this fact is mitigated by the faith that the structures of truth will prevail to correct and realign circumstances to restore justice and order.

In *Chinatown*, the main protagonist is Los Angeles detective, Jack Gittes (Jack Nicholson), who is set up to frame a man who ends up dead. Gittes embarks upon a search for the truth of his murder and to find out who framed him and understand the dead man's fixations. In the process he unravels a complex web of corruption, murder, and lies. The story is a dramatic retelling of corruption and environmental damage – including a reference to the worst man-made disaster in California history: the breaking of the St. Francis dam in 1928, where 600 people died when a 180' wall of water rushed into San Francisquito Canyon. In the specter of this dark past, Hollis Mulwray (Darrell Zwerling), Chief Engineer for the L.A. Dept. of Water and Power, refuses to build a new dam that would irrigate the Central Valley, providing water to the farmers and fields stricken by drought. Gittes learns that Mulwray knows that the water is in fact being diverted, effectively causing a man-made drought. After Hollis' suspicious death, Gittes stops at nothing to uncover a truth that no one would believe — the story of magnanimous corruption, incest, murder, and lies – but money, power – and the L.A. crime unit – are against him. Gittes has to ferret out the crime, yet the real criminal is too powerful to be believed.

*Chinatown* illustrates the instruments of power and corruption in 1930's Los Angeles where powerful people will stop at nothing to “buy the future.” The film traces the history of land development where the exploitation of the environment for patriarchal domination and

control occurs at the expense and sacrifice of those who are weak, vulnerable, and easily exploited. The film relates the story of the deliberate contamination of lands by corporations who effectively render them useless for arability; the destruction of land and poisoning of waters combined with drought has destroyed the value of land in the valley, thus allowing the purchase of vast areas of land for a fraction of its worth, enabling those in power to build new developments, while extending the city limits, following the construction of a dam and irrigation networks.

The film portrays not only a narrative rendition of a moment in Los Angeles history, but also characterizes an attitude toward the environment where resources are exploited for power — not only hydroelectric power, but also wealth, where land and water resources are exploited along with people in the name of progress. The film reveals an environmental agenda driven by the principles of economic ecology, a mode of thought that dominated the 1920s to the 1950s, where land is viewed as a resource, and nature as a machine to be regulated for profit. In the economic paradigm, the natural world can and should be utilized to meet the needs of humanity, as nature operates as one part of a system in a pyramid, with man at the top. This patriarchal mode of thought illustrates the dominant paradigm responsible for exploiting the resources of the world over the past century, leading to massive, unregulated resource extraction and exploitation, skyrocketing profits for those who benefit, and disastrous health and economic consequences for the majority of those who don't. The film reflects the emerging consciousness and activism of the environmental decade — like *The China Syndrome*, *Chinatown* was produced in the era of Greenpeace, the decade of environmental regulation, four years after the first Earth Day, and the emergence of ecological activism embodied in organizations like Greenpeace.

In *The China Syndrome*, a young female reporter uncovers a near-catastrophic weakness

at a nuclear power generating plant and fights to uncover the truth in an effort to save people's lives. The film takes place at the end of the environmental decade, in the age of environmental protections, where the environmental movement's efforts led to the successful institution of environmental measures like the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, reinforcing the belief in protections to ensure the safety of human health and the environment. From a feminist perspective, the film is also about the struggles of a woman who must prove her worth as a reporter capable of handling big news stories; as a woman she perceives the risks involved in a possible nuclear disaster as potentially devastating to the lives and health of citizens. Yet both *Chinatown* and *The China Syndrome* reflect the challenges of the individual operating within the constructs of patriarchal society to resist and overthrow the unethical and unsustainable practices of capitalistic powers that seek to exploit resources and society in the name of power and profit.

In two very different depictions of environmental values, the more contemporary films, *Night Moves*, and *The East*, present a clash between Marxist and feminist interpretations of nature. In the Marxist paradigm, nature is represented in first and second orders: the first order represents the non-human world of ecological relations, or the world as it exists, while the second nature refers to the artificial nature structured on top of that, as a product of historical forces that mediated the natural world in its first order (Garrard, 32-33). In the Marxist interpretation, these two forms of nature are at odds with each other. Marx provides a class-based argument such that humans are alienated from the natural world by capitalism, as embodied in the second experience of nature. The feminist paradigm depicted, by contrast, is socialist in the sense that nature is understood as the material basis for life and is at the same time socially and historically constructed. Socialist ecofeminism aspires to reach a duality in nature and human production (Merchant, 87). Each of the protagonists in *Night Moves* and *The East* perceive the

conflict between these paradigms differently.

*Night Moves* depicts the struggle of ordinary citizens, and the powerlessness they experience, as they try to effect change in an age of increasing awareness of irreversible environmental devastation. *Night Moves* presents the story of young alienated citizens who attempt to blow up a dam in an effort to effect change — ultimately a futile attempt to reclaim personal power in an age of powerlessness and despair: the world is devastated beyond repair and, as power remains in the control of the few, there is nothing they can do about it. *The East*, alternatively, presents a set of anarchist “dropouts” who, borne of privilege, have the means to use their power to effect change for good — operating under the “eye for an eye” belief, they deliver messages to the media, using the principles of culture jamming to draw attention to environmental concerns and to effect change through action. Branded eco-terrorists, the protagonists in both *Night Moves* and *The East* believe that the only way to reverse the damages done to society and the environment is to inflict damage upon the perpetrators themselves – in the case of *Night Moves*, the characters plot to bomb a dam; in *The East*, a series of “jams” sees the anarchist collective plot revenge upon corporate stakeholders who cause harm to the poor and vulnerable of society. The “eco-terrorist” label is applied to both equally, though in reality this term is often conflated with the non-violent modes of resistance advocated by organizations like Greenpeace and Earth First! as the term has been recently appropriated to describe all environmental dissidents who threaten the majority way of life through political action meant to disrupt the norms.

Ironically, a news broadcast in *The East* makes an early mention of Earth First!, a non-violent activist organization which, under the leadership of environmental activist and feminist labour leader Judi Bari, in the 1990’s successfully stopped the logging of California’s Redwood

forests, winning their environmental protection. The organization is explicitly non-violent, and yet, activist Judi Bari was in fact the target of a car bomb which exploded under her seat, shattering her pelvis. She and her passenger, fellow activist Darryl Cherney, were immediately accused by the FBI of carrying the bomb, although they were unable to produce evidence and a court found them not guilty, awarding them a major settlement. However, this outcome would sadly occur after Bari's death by breast cancer some years before (judibari.org). The mention of Earth First! in *The East* typically equates the non-violent organization with the film's anarchist collective, The East, which is depicted in more serious terms as a domestic terrorist organization.

*The East* presents the story of Sarah Moss (Brit Marling), an undercover intelligence agent working for a private firm hired by corporations to uncover threats to their organization. Hired to infiltrate an anarchist group called The East, she participates with the group in "jams." The term "jams" comes from the "culture jamming" principles of Adbusters Magazine, however the approach is applied in *The East* with a more serious intent: this is "ecotage" without remorse; the philosophy is "an eye for an eye"; revenge is the game. This approach to activism is a more radical form which gets lumped under the heading "ecoterrorism" today.

In contrast to the protagonists in *Night Moves*, members of The East have access to some of the most high-profile actors they wish to change: as one has access to the home of the CEO of a major pharmaceutical company, members of The East join an exclusive event where executives announce the release of a drug which will be administered to the military. Participating in her first jam as undercover operative, Sarah tries to intervene as the corporate executives are poisoned by the drug, which members of The East surreptitiously add to the champagne. The drug causes nerve damage, brain damage, and seizures, resulting in the individuals afflicted being unable to recognize their own faces in the mirror. Sarah learns all this after the jam, as Doc

(Toby Kebbell) relates the story of he and his sister being poisoned by the drug while in Kenya.

Another jam targets a different member's father, who happens to be the head of a corporation that dumps toxins into the watershed. Sarah learns that Izzy (Ellen Page) has joined *The East* for the purposes of carrying out an attack that targets the company CEO. As another publicity stunt, they kidnap the CEO and Izzy's father, and force them to enter a toxic river, precisely at the time of the corporation's dumping of waste into it. The stunt is videotaped, with the purpose of broadcasting the admission of guilt to the world, but not before her father willingly enters the water in acknowledgement of his guilt, with heartfelt apology to his daughter. This story of carcinogenic industrial pollutants being knowingly released by corporations into fragile waterways is in fact very real. In the high-stakes world of corporate greed, the absence of enforced environmental regulation means that firms frequently take risks to maximize profits for shareholders, resulting in the deliberate withholding of truths about health hazards to the public, the dumping of toxic chemicals into the environment, and the poisoning of vital watersheds. In fact, a recent news story broke of the deliberate lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan's water supply, poisoning children as lead causes nerve defects and brain diseases related to toxicity (Washington Post, web).

As Sarah embeds herself into *The East*, she is warned not to get too close. The problem, typically referred to as "going native," refers to the common experience of anthropologists working in the field, who invariably adopt the belief systems and practices of those they study. Yet, taken out of her natural paradigm — the world of corporate power and profit — Sarah develops a new consciousness and awareness of the impact of corporations on society's most vulnerable. The end of film suggests the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) has increased power thanks to whistleblowers like her — but in fact, the EPA is largely disempowered by the

instruments of deregulation, an ideological problem which constricts ecological efforts and remains one of the greatest hindrances to the environmental movement today.

By depicting the characters operating from a position of privilege and success, the film suggests you have to be inside the power structure to effect change. The characters in *The East* have access, and therefore the means, to effect change, because they are borne with the power of privilege to effect change. This fact exists in contrast to *Night Moves*, where the protagonists are largely disempowered individuals who embark upon a futile attempt to effect change by blowing up a dam, which ultimately leads to not only the death of an innocent citizen but also the death of one of the members, and consequently (we can assume), impending murder charges.

*Night Moves* is therefore as much about powerlessness as *The East* is about empowerment. However, *The East* functions as a fable for the privileged few who are called to wake up to realize the truth of their role as complicit members of a society that feeds off the poor and weak. *Night Moves* is, in contrast, a film about a different set of drop outs who join forces to work together to bomb a dam in a non-violent form of ecotage. Yet their attempt is futile because the dam exists as part of a network, and thus, represents only one of many. Also, as one character in the film argues, we are reliant upon the technologies we use everyday that require electricity, not only for our subsistence but also our ability to connect and communicate. We, as a society, are inextricably tied into a relationship of reliance to the hydroelectric power grid, regardless of what we choose. This fact defines where we are as a generation, and how we negotiate the problems of our generation will define our future.



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