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Reading with the Body: Embodied Cognition and Narrative Worlds

***Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* by ALEXA WEIK von MOSSNER**

Ohio State University Press, 2017
\$34.95USD

Reviewed by **DAVID TAGNANI**

From canonical non-fiction nature writing (John Muir's *The Mountains of California*) to contemporary fiction (Helena Maria Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*), from documentary film (Josh Fox's *Gasland*) to Hollywood blockbusters (Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*), *Affective Ecologies* casts a wide net in the texts it examines. Equally wide is the breadth of scholarship von Mossner brings to bear on these texts. Such expansiveness could get unwieldy, but fortunately she manages to maintain clear focus amidst this incredibly diverse array of subjects.

The theory of embodied cognition is essential to *Affective Ecologies*. Embodied cognition is the idea that our mind or consciousness is not something that is seated in the brain, but is something that arises in the complex interaction among all the parts of our bodies and with the external environment. Von Mossner uses the neuroscience of embodied cognition to understand the mechanism by which nature narratives effect emotional resonance with audiences. The identification and exploration of this mechanism is her central insight.

She proposes that nature narratives work primarily through not plot, character, or argumentation, but by evoking a sensual response in the reader to the real or imagined landscape and characters in the

storyworld of the text. This response, simulated in the brain and body as if we were really experiencing it, enables empathy, which in turn stimulates care and attention—perhaps even action.

In the first of three sections, von Mossner builds her case that the very purpose of most nature writing (inducing activism around an issue, preservation/conservation of a landscape, etc.) can only be fully understood by examining the mechanisms by which such writing attempts to achieve this purpose. Being transported into the narrative world is the vital first step in seducing readers into a relationship with a landscape that they may never see or characters that are entirely fictional. And that transportation takes place via the senses.

In the first chapter, she compares Muir's *The Mountains of California* with Nadzam's *Lamb* to demonstrate the parallels between different narrators (first-person vs. third-person) in different genres (non-fiction vs. fiction) when it comes to evoking embodied simulation of sensory experience. This similarity derives from the "skilled use of sensory imagery" common to both texts, as this is what

activates the sensorimotor cortices in readers' brains and ensures vivid imagined perception and, as a result, a distinctive affective experience. (48)

The body, therefore, is central to our experience of texts and storyworlds, whether real or imagined.

The second chapter transposes these ideas to the subject of film. To focus her analysis, von Mossner foregrounds the idea of *movement*, in the sense of how the movement on the screen moves the viewer

emotionally. Shifting perspectives and camera movement work on the sensory level to produce an emotional response in the audience. She details the ways in which the environment (broadly defined) in film functions as the foundation for the emotional content of plot and character, often operating at a pre- or sub-conscious level to set the stage for the conscious experience of plot and character. This emphasis on movement and the environment are applied to the natural disaster film *Twister*, as she details how the movement on the screen, created by editing techniques as well as focus and camera motion, creates a large share of the emotional content viewers experience.

The second part of the book shifts from a focus on environments to a focus on characters in order to explore how embodied cognition allows audiences to empathize with both human and non-human others. Chapter three examines how environmental justice texts use the empathy that has been evoked by sensory imagery to forward a political cause or moral argument. Here, Von Mossner continues her point that our cognitive simulations of sensual imagery blur the line between fiction and non-fiction, which in this context allows fictional narratives to make a salient argument about real-world environmental justice concerns.

Chapter four focuses on trans-species empathy, using the films *The Cove* and *Gorillas in the Mist* to demonstrate her point that anthropomorphism alone cannot account for such a response. The capacity for narrative to evoke cognitive simulation in us is not restricted to human stories: the transmission of affect can cross the species boundary.

Finally, part three focuses on speculative fiction and how “ecodystopian”

texts engage our empathy in order to provoke us to care about current ecological problems. This becomes especially important with issues such as climate change, which needs to be addressed before its effects can be seen. This dynamic means that speculative fiction plays a pivotal role in helping people see possible futures that their actions now may prevent or allow. Von Mossner focuses mostly on T.C. Boyle’s *Friend of the Earth* and Roland Emmerich’s *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Overall, von Mossner builds a compelling case for the interdependency of the senses, imagination, emotion and the aesthetic experience that is both interdisciplinary and convincing. Throughout, she demonstrates how the sensory information conveyed by texts works on a visceral level to involve readers bodily in the storyworld, leading to emotional and empathetic responses.

This is synthetic work at the vanguard of ecocriticism, and therefore it is of relevance to scholars working in many of the various subfields within green humanities: material ecocriticism, ecophenomenology, ecopsychology, affect theory, ecocinema, and narratology, to name a few. Cognitive science is marshalled to demonstrate how description on the page or simulation on the screen can affect our embodied consciousness so profoundly. The book also engages extensively with concepts from narratology, as concerns about narrator, perspective, genre, and authenticity, among others, are major themes.

If I were to nitpick, I’d like to see von Messner emphasize more often how her approach contradicts or differs from others, or how it fills in glaring holes in the scholarship. This is not always clear enough. But her book is surely a successful one, a

strong example of the ecocritical tradition of interdisciplinary synthesis.

Lastly, a word about style: this is readable, clear, direct prose—a welcome respite from the constipated jargon too often found in academic writing.

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