

Branka Ognjanović

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia

Book Review: Alexa Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2017, ISBN 978-08-14213-36-0

The 20th and the 21st century have been marked by numerous environmental issues, from climate change and overpopulation of the planet to the extinction of species, which impelled the development of a new interdisciplinary school of thought named *ecocriticism*. Ecocriticism aims to examine the relationship between art, literature, and the environment and has managed to evolve and incorporate different approaches, striving to both explore and influence the way we perceive the natural world and its transformations as well as to emphasize the ethical, socio-political, and cultural dimensions of the ecological crisis and the role of humans in the course of its development.

Alexa Weik von Mossner, an associate professor of American Studies at the University of Klagenfurt in Austria, in her 2017 monographic study *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*, presents another innovative perspective of the literary and artistic representations of environmental issues, based on the disciplines of cognitive psychology and affect theory, thus further broadening the scope of ecocritical studies by asking the questions how we *feel* when we encounter the type of narratives that depict the destruction and suffering of/in the natural world and what strategies are used to motivate us to care. She focuses on “the ways in which [...] narratives appeal to our sensual perception and embodied cognition” (p. 2) and provides an insight into the fictional portrayals of the entangled connection between ecological disasters and human emotions.

The starting point for the study is the empirical research in the field of cognitive science and the so-called 4E's of cognition, stating that the mind is *embodied, embedded, enactive* and *extended*. Weik von Mossner uses, namely, the first two terms *embodiment* and *embeddedness* to develop a new approach to reading narratives and adds a fifth E, that the mind is also *emotional* (or affective). The argumentation for her groundbreaking analysis begins by stating that the early theoreticians of ecocriticism did think about emotions in the context of the key environmental narratives such as *The Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and other nature

writing, yet this is the first attempt to systematically merge ecocriticism, affect theory, and cognitive science as well as the reader-response/reception theory. The relevant questions one must pose when dealing with texts through this lens encompass the way we interact with environmental narratives at a mental and affective level, both from a biologically universal and culturally specific viewpoint, how we perceive the depicted characters, events, and spaces, and whether/in what way they awaken empathy in us toward the human and nonhuman others alike.

The monographic study contains an introductory chapter *Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion*, three main parts, each split into two chapters, and an epilogue.

The first part, *Sensing Place*, analyzes different books (John Muir's *The Mountains of California*; Bonnie Nadzam's *Lamb*) and movies (Jan De Bont's *Twister*; Josh Fox's *Gasland*) from the field of American studies in order to explore the role of the process of a *liberated embodied simulation* in the reader's/watcher's feeling that they have been transported into the fictional world as well as the way narratives rely on the mirror neuron systems to evoke mental images in our mind that are vivid, emotionally charged representations of the environment.

The second part, *Feeling with Others*, focuses on moral aspects, such as exploitation, abuse, and injustice, which also have the power to affect our emotions when we read and/or watch narratives about environmental issues. Their analysis points out different strategies of empathizing that occurs through an insider and an outsider perspective. An important contribution is the consideration of the development of empathy toward animals, so the second chapter is dedicated to the emerging feelings of compassion for depicted characters that take care of animals, but also for the animals themselves, especially when their suffering is narratively presented from an internal perspective.

The third part, *Experiencing the Future*, is a study of eco-dystopias and of the ways they awaken emotions in us in the context of transnational and global issues such as climate change. It examines the strategies for causing negative emotions – fear, anger, and guilt – but also distancing through ironical and satirical elements. It builds on the previous two chapters in order to discuss the way these narratives warn the audience of the ecological problems and awaken a desire for a more ethical and sustainable relationship towards the environment.

The epilogue, entitled *Environmental Narrative Across Media*, presents the future directions for the development of the cognitive ecocritical approach. Weik von Mossner points out that this approach can be extended to include not only literary texts and films, but also different kinds of media texts, digital texts, and, as she emphasizes, most importantly, computer games as a potential way to contribute to green politics. The second possible direction for the development of cognitive ecocritical studies should involve more empirical research in the future. Although the existing research served its purpose throughout the book, its premises are entirely theoretical, whereas empirical studies would help answer numerous further questions.

This monograph presents, ultimately, a seminal contribution to the field of ecocritical studies, as it illuminates the relationship between humans, fiction, and nature from a fresh perspective. In order to be able to react adequately to the environmental crisis and its consequences, it is necessary to care and to experience both positive and negative emotions that would inspire us to act. The fictional accounts of the natural environment in the times of Anthropocene, that is, the times when the human role within the wider context of nature has become consequential, contribute to our perception of the reality of the climate change, ecological risks, and injustice. Weik von Mossner's study of the narrative strategies they use to provoke affective responses provides ideas and tools for a better understanding of our relationship towards environmental issues, and enriches the ecocritical approach by considering the importance of emotional investment.