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Book Review

Hunter Vaughan, *Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret: The Hidden Environmental Costs of the Movies*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 256 pp., ISBN 9780231182416

Film is an effective medium through which to illustrate the problem of ecological decline, climate change, and other issues related to the environment. It is also an activist platform to consider human impact on the planet and suggest possible ways to solve the current environmental crisis or at least help minimize its effects. Yet film, as Hunter Vaughan demonstrates in *Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret: The Hidden Environmental Costs of the Movies*, despite its ability to engage in a serious environmental discussion, has literally contributed to ecological degradation. For example, during the production of *Titanic* (1997), "Popotla [a village in Mexico] was cut off from the seas and local fisheries by a massive movie wall that was built to keep local citizens away, and Fox's chlorine treatment of the water on set led to the pollution of surrounding seawater, decimated the local sea urchin industry, and reduced overall fish levels by one-third" (74). Studying examples like this one, the book explores film as one of the reasons for current environmental problems and as a medium that communicates these problems to audiences worldwide.

Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret dares to speak openly about the problems that movie-making has been causing with regard to the environment. Drawing on well-known cinematic examples, it reveals how each of them contributed to reshaping the world that we live in. Thus, for instance, to create a spectacle, numerous films have included the scenes of destruction. Vaughan invites the reader to take another look at the well-known film *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and reconsider the making of its famous fire scenes as essentially anti-environmental. A similar problem emerges when one considers movies that include scenes of pouring rain (that, in principle, is just wasting water) or strong wind (that use jet engines to recreate it). The very production of film stock during earlier years contributed to the destruction of the environment. Thus, Vaughan specifies that Eastman Kodak "was not only the nation's second-largest consumer of pure silver bullion [...] but also a cavernous abyss for water use and pollution" (72). It also "drew more than 12 million gallons of water [from Lake Ontario]

daily for the annual production of 200,000 miles of film stock during the 1920s” (72; italics in original).

With the emergence of digital technology, the situation did not get better. Today, film plays a somewhat ambiguous role. On the one hand, it is a tool through which to communicate environmental problems. Various genres – from the environmental documentary to ecohorror – indeed, explore the place of humans on the planet, our relationship with nature, as well as draw attention to the ways we have been destroying the Earth. On the other hand, the film industry continues to contribute to environmental degradation, skillfully “distract[ing] audiences from the very real material impact of digital screen practices” (127). According to Vaughan, “our entry into the digital age has only complicated this relationship [between humans and nature], offering us new ways of understanding the natural world while also moving us farther away from it” (2–3).

Providing the reader with “an environmental criticism of the methods and madness of our screen culture” (11), *Hollywood’s Dirtiest Secret* is an important read that aptly reveals the twofold nature of film, being both a powerful medium to speak about environmental problems and the cause of these very problems. The book certainly acknowledges “the current green turn in American cinema” (11), yet telling the reader about various ‘dirty secrets’ that surround the film industry, it not only helps spread eco-awareness but also prompts one to reconsider the films we watch, admiring certain scenes and never really thinking of their true costs.