
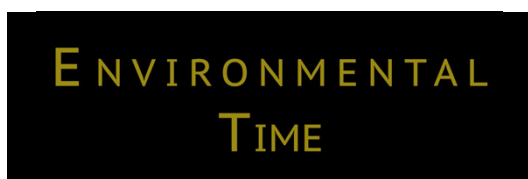


Environmental Time¹

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Received: September 23, 2024 • Accepted: March 06, 2025 • OPEN PEER REVIEWS

Video URL: <https://vimeo.com/1012000636>

ENG Abstract. This video essay juxtaposes selected footage from *Nomadland* (2020) and *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018) to explore the films' hauntological landscapes, proposing a creative engagement with the dilated durations of 'environmental time' (Nixon 2011). By weaving together different temporalities of extractivism and extinction by means of multiple-screen format, it poses questions about the capacity of videographic ecocriticism to make viewers notice the violence of delayed destruction. Conceptualized and first draft completed at the Workshop on Videographic Criticism, Middlebury College, 2024.

Keywords: ecology; environmental humanities; slow violence; videographic criticism.

ESP El tiempo medioambiental

ESP Resumen. Este videoensayo yuxtapone imágenes de *Nomadland* (2020) con las de *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018) para explorar los paisajes hauntológicos de ambas películas, proponiendo un enfoque creativo hacia las duraciones diluidas del 'tiempo medioambiental' (Nixon 2011). Al entretejer diferentes temporalidades del extractivismo y la extinción mediante el formato de múltiples pantallas, se plantean preguntas sobre la capacidad de la ecocrítica videográfica para hacernos notar la violencia de la destrucción diferida. El trabajo fue pensado y redactado en su primera versión durante el Taller de Crítica Videográfica en Middlebury College, 2024.

Palabras clave: crítica videográfica; ecología; humanidades ambientales; violencia lenta.

Summary. 1. Written statement. 2. Acknowledgements. 3. LLM use statement. 4. References.

How to cite: Paszkiewicz, Katarzyna (2025). Environmental Time [Video Essay]. *Teknokultura. Revista de Cultura Digital y Movimientos Sociales* 22(2), 197-200. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/TEKN.98090>

1. Written statement

Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020) was praised by critics as a powerful character study imbued with a poignant critique of capitalism, while dismissed by others as a depoliticized engagement with the cruelty of neoliberalism due to its excessive romanticization of the life on the road, in contrast to Jessica Bruder's source text. This video essay steers away from Zhao's focus on Fern and her becoming a nomad to focus

instead on the 'hauntological landscapes' of the *Anthropocene/Capitalocene*: in Mark Fisher's words, «landscapes stained by time, where time can only be experienced as broken» (2012, p. 21). To flesh out the film's hauntological undertones, I juxtaposed selected images from *Nomadland* with those from *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018), a documentary film collaboratively created by Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, and the photographer

¹ This research was carried out with support from the projects Cinema and Environment: Affective Ecologies in the Anthropocene and Cinema and Environment 2: Ways of seeing beyond the Anthropocene, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities. Grants PID2019-110068GA-I00 and PID2023-152989NB-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

Edward Burtynsky (known for his large-scale images of industrial landscapes). Critics connected the latter film with the concept of the sublime, with some arguing that the film's realist aesthetic is «filtered through a sense of nostalgia» (Selmin, 2020, p. 320) and is problematically universalized, offering «a gaze from nowhere» (Haraway, 1988, p. 581) that elides the different degrees of vulnerability and responsibility. Yet, as Jennifer Fay observes in her reading of *Anthropocene*, the film «gives rise to productive confusion about the sight and state of our planet and the inadequacy of our current concepts and aesthetic categories» (2022, p. 41).

When I started working on this video essay, my initial research question was to see to what extent *Anthropocene*'s documentary aesthetic might supplement viewers' experience of *Nomadland*, defamiliarizing the well-known images of freedom in the wild associated with the road movie, and more particularly, the subgenre of an eco-road film (Brereton, 2013). In my approach, I follow Catherine Grant's reflections on videographic intertextuality, and her emphasis on «the potential for new kinds of research discoveries» (2013, p. 3), which are made possible, in part, through the «affectively charged» multiple-screen format. Thus, I chose to adopt a simultaneous form of montage and the side-by-side positioning (with only some brief instances of full screen used for emphasis), to generate «the aesthetic and affective kinship» (Grant, 2013, p. 5) between the two films.

What is the utility and effect of videographic juxtaposing? Putting these films together reveals and amplifies striking affinities in rhythm, poetic gestures, and sensibility. Muting *Nomadland*'s soundtrack and eliminating the voice-over explanation from *Anthropocene* (which, in the source film, provided viewers with evidence for planetary-scale changes resulting from the human activity), I opted for the minimal use of words on screen and a slow pace of editing that is very much in tune with both films under study. The scattered words that appear in the video essay are not meant to illustrate the image or to offer «a closed argument about it», but rather to contribute to the aesthetics of «disjunction» that multiplies the levels of signification (Rascaroli, 2017, p. 7; Cox-Stanton, 2019), while making room (and time) to perceive environmental loss latent in the films. The deliberately slowed down pace and, crucially, the minimal use of words in the main body of the video essay, the significance of which cannot be fully grasped till the very end of the work, might exhaust some viewers, forcing them to occupy the inhospitable, dilated temporality. The logic behind connecting different scenes from both works is often grounded in graphic similarities, in terms of colors or recurring shapes, while linking the multiple locations and spatial and temporal scales. The question of scale is of particular importance when considering the slow violence of the *Anthropocene*: «a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all» (Nixon, 2011, p. 2).

The damage such violence inflicts on landscapes, as well as on their human and nonhuman inhabitants,

becomes all the more visible in *Nomadland* when viewed with/against *Anthropocene*, challenging our «perceptual habits» and making «accessible and tangible» the loss and threats which might otherwise go unnoticed (Nixon, 2011, p. 15). The video essay weaves together different temporalities through the images of extractivism and extinction, often with unexpected effects. Take, for example, the sequence that combines an aerial view of phosphate mines in Florida (which, at such large distance, look like a natural reserve, with birds flying around and the green and blue color palette obscuring the toxicity of the site), with the images recorded by Swankie before her death from cancer showing endless swallow eggshells floating on the lake, placing resource extraction, birth, and loss into a single frame of reference. The video essay also sheds light on the multiple facets of extinction: the life-sized sculpture of a dinosaur as a tourist attraction seen in *Nomadland* is put together with sculptures in a crafts boutique in Hong Kong made of the tusk of a mammoth exposed by the melting of the Siberian permafrost; or the scene showing Fern and Dave's visit to a roadside reptile zoo, which is made eerie through the repetition, the use of sound and the contraposition with the footage of tigers in a London zoo. The final part of the video creates a critical tension between fact and fiction, while underscoring the hauntological quality of both films: the images of Fern revisiting the real-life, abandoned town of Empire and the gypsum plant now covered in dust are set against the destruction of towns in Germany to make space for a pit mine. Fern's personal (and fictional) loss resonates thus with a sense of loss at a more global, planetary level.

The contraposing of both films also reconfigures the experience of watching *Anthropocene*, which is enriched with *Nomadland*'s gaze from somewhere. The video essay features a few glimpses of Fern's aging, female body, which evidence how the *Anthropocene*/*Capitalocene*'s logics «exhaust both the earth and its people» (Harkema, 2023, para. 44), even if on different temporal scales. The selected film footage from *Nomadland* oscillates between wide shots of Fern's tiny figure filmed against the industrial/natural landscapes (for instance, against a mountain of sugar beets) and close-ups on her face or her body, as when the shower washes the dirt off her skin. In this sense, the video essay provides audiovisual evidence for the recent, new materialist readings of Zhao's film, according to which Fern can be understood as 'a transcorporeal subject' that is «materially enmeshed both spatially and temporally with the physical world» (Harkema 2023, para. 9; see also Laist 2024). Yet, it also changes the way in which we watch *Anthropocene*: witness, for instance, the affective resonance of the images of trees being harvested in British Columbia when viewed in conjunction with Fern's tactile way of relating to the age-old San Bernadino trees in the video's opening sequence, which suggests an embodied engagement with the more-than-human world.

In the context of the 'sensuous methodologies' of videographic criticism (Grant, 2013, p. 7), these readings can be pushed even further. For Jennifer Fay, «the scandal of the *Anthropocene* lies in its hiddenness or the difficulty of perceiving it in plain

sight» (2022, p. 43). In an ecocinematic gesture, videographic ecocriticism might help viewers «retrain» their perception (MacDonald, 2013), not only to see the «slow violence of delayed destruction» (Nixon 2011, p. 1), but become sensorially immersed in it. To paraphrase Fay (2022), it can prompt us to ask ourselves: do I know the Anthropocene when I see and feel it? Thus, the ecocritical potential of the videographic essay format resides not only in the possibility of magnifying the ecological themes articulated in (or merely implied by) the objects it studies, but in the possibility to change our viewing habits by making us notice the details that first passed unnoticed and reorienting our attention «to other sites of promise and ruin» (Tsing, 2015, p. 15). Videographic ecocriticism, like ecocinema, can be understood as a vehicle for cultivating such 'arts of noticing' (Tsing, 2015; Paszkievicz, 2025, p. 2), where 'noticing' refers to both the accountability and the senses (see also Celia Sainz, who coined the term 'videographic ecocriticism' [2025a, 2025b], as well as Kevin B. Lee's and Silvia Cipelletti's [2024] exploration of videographic scholarship as 'an environmental media studies pedagogy', and Lee's piece [2024] on 'video essay as an emerging ecocinema practice').

If noticing can be contraposed to disregard, one could ask how videographic ecocriticism, through its technical production of noticing, can put us in touch with the world, less to look at it than to creatively engage with it. The multi-screen approach proposed in this video essay, in conjunction with the dilated temporality of many of the scenes used, enables us not only to recognize some of the visual similarities between the films, or critically think through them, but also to experience them in a sensorial, corporeal way. In Grant's words, «we can feel, as well as know about, the comparisons these videos enact» (2013, p. 7). When set side-by-side, these films generate something in excess of a simple correlation of patterns; they «restage environmental time», working against «the catastrophe-as-spectacle» (Nixon, 2011, p. 64) as conventionally represented in Hollywood cli-fi films (Svoboda, 2016; Leyda, 2023). In their hauntological landscapes the layers of deep pasts and deep futures co-exist simultaneously in uncanny ways, materializing the existence of «those who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living» (Derrida 1994, xix).

2. Acknowledgements

My warmest thanks to Catherine Grant, Jason Mittell, Dayna McLeod, Naomi Clark and Ethan Murphy, and my fellow videocampers in the Workshop on Videographic Criticism (Middlebury, 2024) for their encouragement, dedication, and invaluable insights. I would also like to thank both peer reviewers for their time, generous feedback and creative engagement with my video essay, especially for bringing up Tracy Cox-Stanton's (2019) use of Adorno and her rethinking of the video essay format through Laura Rascaroli's work.

3. LLM use statement

This article has not used any text generated by an LLM (ChatGPT or other) for its writing.

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