

Jennifer Fay (2018) *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 270 pp.

Given the rise of the Anthropocene as a critical concept to define the era in which humankind has a greater effect on its environment than it has on man, it would only be logical to say that Jennifer Fay's *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* is a timely book. And yet, to say so would in some senses be to accept *a priori* an anthropocentric conception of time, in that humanity would be the measure of the timely – when the Anthropocene has involved humans imposing a rhythm, or time, upon the planet (culminating in the ceaseless tempo of 24:7 culture), rather than the planet and humans working at a mutually respectful rhythm. Or, to think about the same issue in a slightly different fashion, we might say that time is not just of the Anthropocene, but that time is the Anthropocene, in that time as such is a human conceit – which in this way makes Fay's important book precisely *untimely* because it endeavours to de-centre the human from considerations of cinema, or, more accurately, to demonstrate the destructive nature of humanity's perception of its own centrality, and its subsequent (destructive) creation of a world that supports that perception (including, we might add, through machines like cinema that often pander to humanity's narcissistic belief that it is the be all and end all of existence – with its attitude seeming to be that if it cannot be all, then it will attempt to end all in a fit of vanity-punctured pique).

While Fay does not deal that much with time as a specific concept, even though it forms part of her book's title (the *Time of the Anthropocene*), she nonetheless argues in a compelling fashion that humans are indeed bringing about precisely the destruction of their own planet (thus "ending all"). Indeed, one of the central and most exciting theses of *Inhospitable World* is that nuclear bombs are not designed to kill humans, for example, but rather to kill the planet (p. 17). Meanwhile, natural disasters, such as the Mississippi Flood of 1927, are equally not "natural" but rather "man-made" since they result from our environmental neglect (p. 27). In this way, Fay may reaffirm the power of humanity (humans do in fact control their environment, in that there are no natural but only man-made disasters), but she does this in such a way that we become more cognizant of our role not in controlling, but destroying that environment.

What is most impressive about *Inhospitable World* is that Fay proceeds to chart this argument through the history of cinema, looking initially at how war and the weather (including the Peter Sloterdijk-inspired idea that the weather has been turned by humans into a weapon of war) play

key roles in the cinema of D.W. Griffith and Buster Keaton, with both directors taking their film productions out of the controlled environment of the studio and into the outside world. In particular in *Our Hospitality* (Jack Blystone and Buster Keaton, USA, 1923), Keaton “tests the limits of the earth’s hospitality” as he passes “from one cataclysm to another,” with his sense of being “[i]n but not of the world” demonstrating both how he is alien to the world/the world is alien to him, and his entanglement with that world. This sensibility comes about as a result of his own experiences of war and the weather, which combined led Keaton not to harden or petrify (hiding behind the walls of a house or a studio), but rather to be or to remain “supple” (p. 58). To go outside is in this sense to be an outsider to capitalist modernity.

In the next chapter, Fay looks closely at nuclear test films, building upon her argument that atomic weapons are designed to destroy not humans but the planet by suggesting that they, like cinema as a whole, prepare the human sensorium for survival in/against a hostile environment. Not only do those living within “test” ranges (typically Pacific islanders) absorb the radiation from the spectacular blasts quite literally into their DNA (p. 66), but test films also “standardize human affects” in addition to helping humans to study weapons (p. 78). Via an ingenious comparison to Andy Warhol’s screen tests, Fay suggests that cinema has a similar effect: “one does not *pass* a screen test, one *survives* it,” as the planet becomes a laboratory and as the movie camera functions as “both examiner and inhuman apparatus” (p. 84).

Fay then proceeds to consider how film noir, as a genre that mushroomed in the atomic era, draws upon a nuclear sensibility; the temporary residences depicted in noir films, which themselves were often made using recycled film sets, suggest that the characters live less economically and more ecologically, which in turn places them outside of the law. What is more, their precarious lives lead to a lack of reproduction, making life repetitive and pessimistic. Small wonder, then, that insurance looms large in “film noir’s account of history without a future” (p. 119). Indeed, not only might the human be already dead in various noirs, but this might in fact be better for them than living for the purposes simply of capitalist accumulation.

In the second half of *Inhospitable Worlds*, Fay switches her focus to China, examining how Jia Zhangke charts the effects of geo-engineering projects such as the Three Gorges dam in *Sanxia haoren/Still Life* (China/Hong Kong, 2006). If the film’s original title means “Good People of the Three Gorges,” *Still Life* nonetheless evokes a history of images without humans, as per the influential work of Liu Xiaodong, the subject of Jia’s *Dong* (Hong Kong/China, 2006). Furthermore, the migrant lives

charted in *Still Life* reflect an ethos of tenancy similar to that of noir, with the film's motif of broken timepieces also suggesting an extratemporal existence. Finally, as valleys are flooded for the dam, so does this foreshadow the destiny of "an aquatic human on a submerged planet" (p. 161).

Fay then draws upon Siegfried Kracauer to examine how films of Antarctica can help us to look at our world as if from outside, since it is a continent that has never hosted a shopping mall (it is a space that is inhospitable to capitalism). If for Kracauer cinema's chief strength is its "capacity to render 'life at its least controllable'" (p. 172), then in particular it helps humans to see a previously unknown world (without them) – while photography and film can also make humans seem alien to themselves. Enter films of Antarctica, which similarly is an alien terrain, and in some senses one beyond the scope of cinema – as *90° South: With Scott to the Antarctic* (Herbert Ponting, UK, 1933) progresses from film to stills to drawings and maps as the terrain becomes unfilmable (p. 186). As "territory shares an etymology with *terror* and a *terroror* (one who frightens), designating an area 'from which people are warned off... [so t]erritory at once marks the earth – terra – as a settling place we may call home and designates as terrifying an area that will not be settled" (p. 197). Antarctica may be uninhabitable, but it also provides hope that there are spaces on Earth that can be unaffected by human politics (with the melting of the ice caps surely prompting a rush to colonise these final spaces, even if Fay does not herself make this point).

As Bill Morrison's Mississippi archive film, *The Great Flood* (USA, 2013), allowed Fay to suggest that natural disasters are in fact man-made, so does Fay end with a brief consideration of Morrison's *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (USA, 2016), which in its reworking of material from a town buried in permafrost suggests cinema as an archive of a non-human world, and as a record of humanity for the inhuman times that lie ahead.

In sum, then, Jennifer Fay beautifully writes a wide-ranging and suggestive theory of cinema in the atomic light of the Anthropocene. If, as suggested above, Fay does not engage specifically with time, so, too, might she consider in more detail how Anthropocene discourse and Anthropocene cinema are raced, with the whiteness of Keaton through to the whiteness of Antarctica being perhaps understated at best. Indeed, as increasing numbers of (white) humans fall into precarity as insurance and other companies excavate them for data, the way in which film noir foresaw their status as "already dead" and with no hope for a different future might help them to understand that this "becoming black" of humanity connects those white people to non-white populations

Reviews

that have been forced tenants, or leading post-apocalyptic lives, for much longer than they have. If such issues remain un(der-)examined in *Inhospitable World*, however, this only points to its pressing importance – and the fact that there is much more work to follow this pioneering volume.

William Brown
University of Roehampton, London
DOI: 10.3366/film.2020.0132