

GREEN SCREEN

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND HOLLYWOOD CINEMA



David Ingram

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Green Screen identifies the various ways in which the natural world and the built environment have been conceptualised in American culture, and analyses the interplay of environmental ideologies at work in Hollywood movies. David Ingram argues that Hollywood cinema plays an important ideological role in the 'greenwashing' of ecological discourses, while largely perpetuating romantic attitudes to nature, including those prevalent in deep ecological thought. These arcadian constructions remain ultimately at the service of a mainstream environmentalist agenda.

In classifying films as 'environmentalist', *Green Screen* does not presuppose that they treat their subject matter in a way that is either serious, complex or profound or that they present a single, coherent or clear intellectual position towards environmental issues. Rather, the central thesis of the book is that Hollywood environmentalist movies bring together a range of contradictory discourses concerning the relationship between human beings and the environment. The natural world is shown to be implicated in complex human conflicts over gender, ethnicity, class and national identity.

'This book is primarily an agenda-setter. As such it makes clear how complex and important are the debates that film studies and, more widely, American studies will need to tackle regarding representations and critique of late-capitalist consumerism in its global phase.'

Forum for Modern Languages

'*Green Screen* combines film criticism, cultural criticism, ecocriticism, and a bit of environmental history in an engaging and useful way. Its selection of films, many of which are described in some detail, will be useful to those who are entering the field. Its insights will be of value to ecocritical scholars and to those who want to bring environmental film into their classroom.'

Interdisciplinary Studies for Literature and the Environment

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GREEN SCREEN

Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema

David Ingram

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Preface

In September 1990, the *Hollywood Reporter* announced the arrival of a new movie genre: 'film vert'. When *Audubon* magazine confirmed 'the greening of Tinseltown' in March 1992, the 'green' movie, it seemed, had become an identifiable cycle within Hollywood film production.¹ The new trend centred mainly on the issue of rain forest depletion, which formed the premise for a varied group of films that included the comedy *Meet the Applegates* (1990), the drama *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1991), and the children's animation *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992). It is with such self-consciously environmentalist films that this book is mainly concerned, tracing their history as far back as the silent era, when two film versions of Peter B. Kyne's novel *The Valley of the Giants* (1918) reconciled a desire to preserve a valley of giant sequoias for its spiritual value with the official conservationist ideologies of their day.

The environmental issues that inform the narrative of such films clearly occur as matters of degree. What this book refers to as an 'environmentalist' film, then, is a work in which an environmental issue is raised explicitly and is central to the narrative. Such a film is at one end of a continuum that includes, at the other, the vast majority of films in which representations of the environment serve merely as a background to the central human drama. However, the omission or denial of an environmentalist discourse in such films can itself be significant. Geographer Neil Smith comments that non-human nature is usually rendered in literature as 'a backdrop, a mood setter, at best a refractory image of, or rather simplistic metaphor for, specific human emotions and dramas that inscribe the text. The play of human passions is the thing'.² The same, of course, holds true for Hollywood cinema. Nevertheless, critical analysis of films of this type can bring to the foreground their

unacknowledged, unreflective references to non-human nature, so that their environmentalist implications can become both visible and open to question.

In classifying films as 'environmentalist', *Green Screen* does not presuppose that they treat their subject matter in a way that is either serious, complex or profound. Nor does it imply that they present a single, coherent or clear intellectual position towards environmental issues. Indeed, many of the movies discussed in this book use such issues as a premise for the exploration of more familiar Hollywood concerns, in particular the testing of the white male hero in gender and ethnic relationships. In this sense, Hollywood cinema has treated environmentalism in the same way as all other topical issues. The institutional and ideological constraints of what Richard Maltby and Ian Craven call Hollywood's 'commercial aesthetic' have always placed a value on the pleasures of entertainment rather than on polemic. Political subjects are therefore appropriate when they can provide scriptwriters and directors with the human interest stories, 'dramatic potentials' and 'angles' that they require to make a commercial movie. Given the commercial imperatives of the industry, Maltby and Craven argue, there is no incentive for such movies to be politically clear. Instead, the representation of political issues tends to take the form of what they describe as 'exclusions, hesitations, and absences'.³ Stephen Prince also argues that Hollywood's commercial intent to maximize profits by appealing to wide and diverse audiences works against ideological and political coherence in the films themselves. Instead, a Hollywood movie is typically what he calls an 'ideological agglomeration' that constructs a 'polysemous, multivalent set of images, characters, and narrative situations'.⁴ The central thesis of this book, then, is that Hollywood environmentalist movies are ideological agglomerations that draw on and perpetuate a range of contradictory discourses concerning the relationship between human beings and the environment.

Green Screen is divided into three parts, according to broad differences in environmental subject matter. The Introduction examines the way Hollywood cinema has tended to represent environmental issues according to the conventions of melodrama, and speculates on the implications for environmentalist politics of such aesthetic strategies. Part One explores the continuing symbolic role that wilderness plays in American popular cinema. Chapter One examines the way in which Hollywood movies have constructed 'nature' as a site of ecological concern, while perpetuating romantic desires for wilderness as a pristine, sacramental space. Chapter Two develops this notion further in an exploration of the aesthetics of landscape cinematography. Chapter Three analyses the gender implications of Hollywood's representation of non-human nature, while Chapter Four focuses on questions

of ethnic difference, particularly as manifested in the recurring figure of the ecological American Indian. Chapter Five brings many of these themes together in a study of Hollywood movies set in the Amazonian rain forest.

Part Two of the book explores the representation of wild animals in Hollywood cinema, analysing the symbolic meanings projected onto them in American culture, and speculating on the implications for environmental politics of such anthropomorphic representational strategies. Chapter Six is concerned with the emergence of anti-hunting narratives in Hollywood cinema from the 1950s, while Chapters Seven and Eight trace the changing symbolic roles played by those 'stars' of modern conservationism—dolphins, orcas, wolves and bears—from monsters or varmints fit only for eradication, to idealized representatives of a benevolent wilderness that must be preserved. Chapter Nine examines Hollywood cinema's reconceptualization of Africa and its wild fauna in the light of modern conservationism.

Part Three deals with issues of development, land use and technology. Chapter Ten explores representations of agrarian and urban spaces in film, from the role of the family farmer to the ecological problems of urban environments. Chapter Eleven focuses on the ecological implications of automobile culture in Hollywood film, and Chapter Twelve focuses on movies which dramatize the hazards of nuclear energy.

Green Screen analyses these themes in Hollywood cinema by attempting to synthesize two approaches within film studies: close textual analysis and the general survey. The first critical strategy is useful for exploring the polysemic complexity of a small number of films. Nevertheless, it can have the drawback of being misleadingly narrow in its focus, in that it does not create a sense of how the chosen texts are representative of the full range of texts produced within a given culture. The second approach, which explores similarities and differences between a larger number of texts, can be more productive in this respect. Moreover, given the relative scarcity of critical work on cinema and environmentalism, *Green Screen* covers as large a field as possible in order to indicate directions for further research.

Inevitably, the selection of films covered in the book can be challenged. Films have been chosen for being either exemplary or typical, irrespective of the size of their budget or their box-office or critical success. Though the book mainly considers films as mediators of social issues irrespective of their artistic value, such value judgements inevitably inform all critical work, at least implicitly. The making and justifying of value judgements is, however, not the main intention of the book. Nor does it speculate at length on the 'influence' that the movies it explores may have had on attitudes to the environment in the United States or elsewhere.

Nor is the book intended as an adversarial polemic for a particular theory of environmentalism. Nevertheless, the approach taken in *Green Screen* doubtless favours certain critical stances more than others. In particular, its theoretical approach to non-human nature tends to endorse a critical realist position, as articulated for example by philosopher Kate Soper, and thereby seeks to distance itself from the more anti-empirical, anti-scientific and extreme social constructionist tendencies of some poststructuralist thinking. Soper points out that the epistemological confusion in extreme social constructionist ideas of nature lies 'in supposing that because we can only refer in discourse to an extra-discursive order of reality, discourse itself constructs that reality'.⁵ She goes on to formulate the critical realist conception of nature that has been used as the basis for this book:

the nature whose structures and processes are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not a humanly created product) and whose forces and causal powers are the condition of and constraint upon any human practice or technological activity, however Promethean in ambition (whether, for example, it be genetic engineering, the creation of new energy sources, attempted manipulations of climatic conditions or gargantuan schemes to readjust to the effects of earlier ecological manipulations). This is the 'nature' to whose laws we are always subject, even as we harness it to human purposes, and whose processes we can neither escape nor destroy.⁶

It is this nature, independent of and external to human beings, that is the ground for the historically and culturally varied 'constructions' of its meanings that are the subject of this book. *Green Screen* seeks to identify the complex ways in which both non-human nature and the built environment have been conceptualized in American culture, and to analyse the interplay of environmental ideologies at work in Hollywood movies, while ultimately keeping the debate over environmental politics open and provisional.

Introduction

Melodrama, Realism and Environmental Crisis

Greenpeace video co-ordinator Karen Hirsch reportedly responded with horror at Sylvester Stallone's plan (subsequently abandoned) to make a movie in which Rambo takes on a band of environmental criminals. 'The issues are extremely complicated', she commented, 'they're not *supposed* to be black and white'.¹ A similar concern that the realities of environmental degradation are prone to be misrepresented by the conventional forms of the mass media is shown by social theorist Barbara Adam, who notes that the effects of environmental hazards such as ozone depletion, global warming, nuclear radiation and toxic pollution all tend to be slow to develop and are not amenable to simple or fast solutions, while their causes are invisible and systemic, and thereby complicate questions of individual and collective responsibility and liability.² In the face of such complexities, the aesthetic strategies of Hollywood cinema may indeed appear inadequate. Moreover, that Hollywood movies oversimplify complex social and political issues, and provide facile resolutions to real-life problems, has, of course, been a familiar complaint voiced by audiences throughout the history of American cinema. As Shohat and Stam argue, film spectators 'come equipped with a "sense of the real" rooted in their own experience, on the basis of which they can accept, question, or even subvert a film's representations'.³ In recent years, interested groups have criticized environmentalist movies for their lack of correspondence to what they understand as the real world. Indeed, groups who feel they have been misrepresented by such movies have a history of public complaint, examples of which occur throughout this book: the nuclear industry challenged *The China Syndrome* (1978), for example, while the oil industry, Greenpeace and Native Alaskans all took exception to *On Deadly Ground* (1994).

These popular accusations of misrepresentation presuppose a realist interpretative context, in which a film is judged against a particular conception of

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reality, and is found wanting. Such demands for realism may find dissatisfaction in the tendency of Hollywood movies towards melodrama, defined by Linda Williams as a form 'that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action'. Such aesthetic strategies are 'false to realism', and consequently open to accusations of misrepresentation.⁴ With regard to environmental issues, negative criticism of melodrama, such as that of Greenpeace towards the prospect of a Rambo movie about environmental crime, takes two main forms. Firstly, the tendency of melodrama to construct environmental issues as individualized, Manichean conflicts between one-dimensional villains and heroes is seen to simplify the complex, often ambiguous allocation of blame and responsibility in such matters. Secondly, the closure effected at the end of a melodramatic fiction, when the hero resolves the narrative problem through decisive action, may appear too pat and glib a response to environmental crises which, in the real world outside the cinema, do not have their loose ends neatly tied up.

Yet Linda Williams places in a positive light the controversies that perennially surround Hollywood's melodramatic treatment of history and politics. Part of the 'excitement' of melodrama as a mode, she writes, 'is the genuine turmoil and timeliness of the issues it takes up and the popular debate it can generate when it dramatizes a new controversy or issue'. She defends the 'wish-fulfilling impulse towards the achievement of justice' in melodrama that 'gives American popular culture its strength and appeal as the powerless yet virtuous seek to return to the "innocence" of their origins'.⁵ The next section will explore further the ways in which environmental conflicts are mediated in Hollywood cinema by the melodramatic mode.

The environmental politics of melodrama

Leo Braudy remarks that the heroes and heroines of what he calls the 'nature' movie of the 1980s were all figures identified with an authentic, primitive nature: ecologically sensitive tribal peoples (American Indians, aborigines, Neanderthals), children, women, animals, and psychics or natural wonders.⁶ In explicitly environmentalist movies, these protagonists often enjoy a privileged, emotional and unmediated relationship with a re-enchanted nature. Moreover, heroic leadership in such films is often centred on a rebellious outsider, usually white and male, such as Forrest Taft (Steven Seagal) in *On Deadly Ground*, Jesse (Jason James Richter) in *Free Willy* (1993), or the maverick inventor Thomas Alden (Jeff Daniels) in *Fly Away Home* (1996), usually in alliance with family members or friends. In all of these movies, the trope of the reluctant outlaw-hero provides the means for representing ecological crises, in Robert Ray's terms, as 'short-lived' and 'solvable by decisive action', in keeping with familiar American mythological patterns.⁷

Environmental movies oppose the humanitarian innocence of their heroes to the commercialized values of their villains, for whom greed tends to be the prime motive. Environmental villainy takes two main forms. Firstly, hunters are often represented as the main obstacle to wild animal conservation. Once a heroic type in Hollywood cinema, the white hunter is now, with occasional exceptions, one of its arch villains. The second recurrent villain in the environmental movie is the representative of big business: the property developer, oil tycoon or nuclear plant manager. Environmentalist movies visualize the destructive effects on the environment of corporate capitalist greed in images of industrial technology as impersonal and unemotional. In particular, the noisy, brightly coloured bulldozer features as an impersonal and artificial destroyer of beautiful natural landscapes and traditional communities in conservationist movies as diverse as *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988), *Fly Away Home*, *Meet the Applegates*, *Fern Gully* and *Medicine Man* (1992).

The framing of environmental issues as Manichean conflicts raises two important political questions: firstly, concerning the assumption of moral innocence on the part of the heroes, and secondly, the tendency of melodrama to individualize social conflicts. These questions will now be addressed in turn.

The melodramatic construction of heroism in terms of moral innocence and what Linda Williams calls 'virtuous suffering' has important implications for the question of responsibility and blame in environmental matters.⁸ Sociologist Greg Myers, discussing the representation of political agency in the American children's environmentalist television show *Captain Planet*, argues that if 'villains are at the root of the evil, then environmental wrongdoing is removed from everyday actions'.⁹ By making a melodramatic distinction between virtuous heroes and evil villains, *Captain Planet* allows for the complicity of its young audience in environmental degradation to be conveniently denied.

A related melodramatic strategy is the displacement of blame and responsibility for environmental degradation onto a generalized 'they' or 'we'. This rhetorical move also prevents the recognition of possible complicity in environmental problems, and also obfuscates the complex causality of those problems. In *The River Wild* (1994), Gail (Meryl Streep), a former river-guide dressed in a 'Save the Earth' T-shirt, wants to show her son the river 'before they ruin it'. This attribution of blame to a nameless and inaccessible 'they' is a consistent element in the depoliticization of environmental issues in Hollywood film. Gail's own possible complicity in environmental degradation, as a tourist using nature for recreational purposes, is conveniently denied. The obverse of this strategy is the framing of environmental issues as the responsibility of humanity as a whole. The end title of *Roar* (1981) informs the audience that 'we' are responsible for the decline in the lion population

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of Africa. That a homogeneous 'we' are all equally responsible is a form of mystification that also evades complex political issues of responsibility, liability and complicity by eliding social differences such as class, race, gender and geographical location. Given conditions of global inequality and exploitation, there can be, as Kate Soper puts it, no 'general species accountability' for environmental harm.¹⁰

The political problems raised by the construction of heroism and villainy in melodrama are matched, for Marxist critics Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, by the tendency for Hollywood movies to formulate social and political problems as conflicts between individuals, and thereby to endorse liberal solutions to those problems, preventing proper recognition of the need for more collective forms of political action. They argue, for example, that *The China Syndrome* is a failure in political terms, in that, by representing corporate power as individual rather than systemic, it 'fosters the rejection of the one solution to the social problems which liberalism so unsuccessfully addresses'.¹¹ Nevertheless, the writers concede that the movie's personalization of big business 'aids the enlistment of audience identification even as it misrepresents the reality'.¹²

There are, however, other ways of evaluating the way in which social and political conflicts are dramatized by the melodramatic mode. Richard Slotkin, for example, is more open to the aesthetic strengths of melodrama as a form that he views not simply as a failed or inadequate form of realism. In contrast to Ryan and Kellner, Slotkin argues that the construction of social conflicts in individual terms does *not* necessarily individualize power relations. Instead, he points out that the relationship between individual character types in a work of popular fiction can stand for complex, systemic power relationships. 'The hero's inner life—his or her code of values, moral or psychic ambivalence, mixtures of motive—reduces to personal motive the complex and contradictory mixture of ideological imperatives that shape a society's response to a crucial event', he writes. 'But complexity and contradiction are focused rather than merely elided in the symbolizing process.'¹³

Popular fictions, according to Slotkin's analysis, dramatize ideological contradictions and work out possible resolutions to them. This understanding of melodrama as a mediator of social contradictions is a useful way of discussing the representation of political issues in environmentalist movies. For example, the image of a group of chanting, placard-waving protesters features in *Fly Away Home*, *On Deadly Ground* and *Free Willy 2* (1995) as a signifier of collective dissent. Although these scenes are brief, and the narrative soon returns to the actions of the central protagonists, the suggestion of a link with larger, collective protests is nevertheless made. Accordingly, the politics of these environmentalist movies can thus be understood as reconciling individual, non-conformist protest with a broadly populist politics which endorses

collective opposition to the destructive forces of corporate monopoly and elitist managerialism.¹⁴ The melodramatic mode in this way provides a dramatic focus for ideological conflicts central to American society.

The following section will explore the complex interaction between melodrama and realism in two very different movies concerned with environmental crisis: *Day of the Animals* (1976), which takes ozone depletion as its starting point, and *A Civil Action* (1998), based on a real-life case of toxic contamination in Woburn, Massachusetts.

Environmental crisis in *A Civil Action* and *Day of the Animals*

The term ‘realism’ has, of course, been much debated within film studies, and is the counter-term to not only ‘melodrama’, but also ‘fantasy’ and ‘modernism’.¹⁵ The Hollywood movies discussed in this book may be thought of as variously located in a constellation between these key critical terms, the meanings of which are themselves not singular or fixed. In one region of the constellation lies *A Civil Action*, a movie which, although drawing mainly on a realist mode, also employs melodramatic conventions. At another end of the constellation is *Day of the Animals*, which draws on the genres of fantasy and horror to dramatize the effects of environmental catastrophe.

Realism in *A Civil Action* is signified in several ways. Firstly, the movie foregrounds its origin in an extra-filmic, real-life referent: lawyer Jan Schlichtmann’s fight on behalf of eight families in Woburn, Massachusetts, whose children died of leukemia allegedly after drinking water contaminated with toxic waste dumped by two companies, W.R. Grace and Beatrice Foods. Indeed, Disney-owned Touchstone Pictures refused to change the names of the key protagonists in the case. Producer Rachel Pfeffer commented: ‘If you change names, you have to start changing history. To be able to say this was based on a true story was important to the film-makers and the studio’.¹⁶

What the producer did not say, however, is that the movie is based on Jonathan Harr’s account of the Woburn trial: it is a mediation of a mediation of history. Also ignored is the fact that Harr’s account was itself criticized by other parties in the case; firstly for playing down what other commentators saw as Schlichtmann’s mishandling of the case, and secondly, for concentrating on the lawyer’s side of the story, rather than that of the victims.¹⁷ The ‘reality-effect’ of *A Civil Action*, then, is the product of selection and subjective evaluation of historical information, as well as aesthetic decisions over both narrative ‘alignment’ (the story is told from Jan Schlichtmann’s point-of-view) and audience ‘allegiance’ (the audience comes to sympathize and ‘root for’ Schlichtmann, as played by John Travolta).¹⁸

The second way in which *A Civil Action* signifies itself as realist is through audio-visual and narrative conventions. As Noël Carroll observes, ‘realism’ in

cinema implies not a direct, unmediated correspondence between a representation and reality, but a set of stylistic choices. Realism, he writes, 'is not a simple relation between films and the world but a relation of contrast between films that is interpreted in virtue of analogies to aspects of reality'. There are, then, several types of cinematic realism, including Soviet realism, deep-focus realism and Neorealism, none of which 'strictly correspond to or duplicate reality, but rather make pertinent (by analogy) aspects of reality absent from other styles'.¹⁹ The stylistic choices that most often signify realism include, as Bordwell and Thompson note, 'authenticity in costume and setting, "naturalistic" acting, and unstylized lighting'.²⁰ In *A Civil Action*, then, realism is signified through deep-focus cinematography, location shooting, under-stated 'naturalistic' acting, and a screenplay that prefers complex but low-key action to sensationalism, and graduated characterization to Manichean caricature.²¹

Nevertheless, elements of melodrama are central to the movie's dramatization of Harr's book. The screenplay adds a simple arc of character development to the central protagonist which is absent from the book, as Schlichtmann begins the film arrogant and selfish, but is transformed into a man of conscience, learning through his experiences that, in the words of the magistrate at his bankruptcy hearing at the end of the film, 'the things by which one measure's one's life' are ultimately more than financial and materialistic. This familiar narrative formula combines with the charisma of Travolta's star performance to turn the movie towards melodrama in spite of its rhetoric of realism. Moreover, after the settlement with the food company Beatrice, the movie invents a scene in which Schlichtmann parts company with his firm and 'goes it alone'. 'You always went your separate way, Jan', he is told by his colleague, thereby becoming another familiar type in Hollywood melodrama: the individualistic, heroic outsider battling an impersonal bureaucracy. When Schlichtmann's perseverance finally unearths evidence of a cover-up at the Woburn site, he summarizes in a voice-over what he has learned from his experiences: 'if you calculate success and failure, as I always have, in dollars and cents divided neatly into human suffering, the arithmetic says I failed completely. What it doesn't say, is if I could somehow go back, knowing what I know now, knowing where I'd end up if I got involved with these people, knowing all the numbers, all the odds, all the angles, I'd do it again.' These words are accompanied by ethereal choral music on the soundtrack, suggesting thereby the apotheosis of the lawyer-turned-hero: Schlichtmann, as played by Travolta, a flawed but charming man redeemed and made noble by self-sacrifice. In Hollywood cinema, Linda Williams notes:

supposedly realistic cinematic *effects*—whether of setting, action, acting or narrative motivation—most often operate in the service of melodramatic *affects*. . . . If emotional and moral registers are sounded,

if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama.²²

If the representation of environmental crisis in *A Civil Action* is achieved through a combination of both realist and melodramatic techniques, then the science-fiction-horror movie *Day of the Animals* (1976) lies at the other end of the constellation between realism and melodrama, and realism and fantasy. The plot of the movie cleverly exceeds everyday notions of realistic plausibility: increasing levels of solar radiation caused by the hole in the ozone layer have triggered a virus which causes wild animals to attack a group of backpackers in the High Sierras. Nevertheless, the movie conforms to the conventions of science fiction by placing this narrative within a rhetoric of 'scientific' plausibility, established by the opening title:

In June 1974, Drs. Frank Sherwood and Mario Molina of the University of California startled the scientific world with their finding that fluorocarbon gases used in aerosol spray cans are seriously damaging the Earth's protective ozone layer.

Thus, potentially dangerous amounts of ultra-violet rays are reaching the surface of our planet, adversely affecting all living things.

This motion picture dramatizes what COULD happen in the near future, IF we continue to do nothing to stop this damage to Nature's protective shield, for life on this planet.

Writing of the science fiction movie *The Thing* (1982), Steve Neale observes that the film is 'involved both in establishing its own credibility, and in establishing its own regime of credence—the rules, the norms and the laws by which its events and agents can be understood and adjudged. What is probable or possible in this world? How does it operate? What is regarded within it as unusual, unlikely, inexplicable?'²³ Different genres and fictional modes, then, rely on different types of motivation and justification for their fictional events. The rhetoric of realistic plausibility employed at the start of *Day of the Animals* is thus typical of a science fiction 'what if' scenario, in the way it draws on hyperbole (the ultraviolet rays are 'adversely affecting all living things') and an obfuscation of the difference between possibility and probability ('what COULD happen in the near future'). Clearly, if such playful strategies are judged according to the criteria of plausibility normally applied to a more realist film such as *A Civil Action*, the movie may be judged inadequate to its initial premise about ozone depletion.

Indeed, such a negative evaluation of the film was made in the anonymous review in *Variety*, which noted that the appearance of the opening card merely provoked laughter in the audience. 'Hitchcock, by the way', the reviewer

continued, ‘never stooped to explain why his feathered characters went wild in “The Birds”, which was one reason why his pic was so genuinely scary. Once it’s blamed on spray cans, it all seems mundane and silly’.²⁴ What is ‘silly’ in the film, and recognized by the audience’s ironic laughter, is the incongruity of scale between the cause given by the movie (spray cans) and its effect (mad animals on the rampage). Comedy arises as the audience recognizes that the film fails to motivate in a satisfactory way, even within what Neale calls its own ‘regime of credence’, the incongruity between the phenomenon of ozone depletion, whose effects as understood by science are slow, subtle and spatially dispersed, and its fictional representation in the narrative as simple, localized and fast-acting. ‘I told you that sun seemed damned peculiar today’, says the policemen in the film, when radio reports about the hole in the ozone layer begin to come in to the town in the High Sierras from all over the world.

Despite the hostile critical reception of *Day of the Animals*, it is nevertheless important to recognize the artistic strengths of melodrama and fantasy as ways of mediating environmental issues. As Steve Neale notes, melodramas can have a political power that transcends the more culturally respectable forms of naturalism and verisimilitude.²⁵ A more positive interpretation of *Day of the Animals*, then, may view it as a symbolic narrative which visualizes the potentially disastrous effects of a process (ozone depletion) that is invisible and abstract. In doing so, the film repeats a recurrent motif in horror and disaster movies: that of the revenge of nature on the human beings that have harmed it.²⁶ Maurice Yacomar notes that stories of ‘natural attack’ in the disaster genre dramatize ‘people’s helplessness against the forces of nature’, while animal attack films ‘provide a frightening reversal of the chain of being, attributing will, mind, and collective power to creatures usually considered to be safely without these qualities’.²⁷ *Day of the Animals*, accordingly, dramatizes the monstrous return of nature as the repressed of modern industrial society.

The apocalyptic character of such a narrative is, however, politically controversial for some commentators on environmentalism. Socialist environmental writer Tom Athanasiou argues that the use of apocalyptic rhetoric in non-fictional books such as Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968) and Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* (1989) is ultimately a symptom of political despair rather than of radical empowerment, and makes environmentalists easy targets for attacks from right-wing anti-environmentalists.²⁸ In contrast, M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer defend the use of apocalyptic rhetoric in non-fiction texts, including Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), for what they see as its subversive political function. Apocalyptic texts, they argue, by presenting ‘worst-case scenarios’ as ‘foregone conclusions’, constitute a radical attack on the notions of progress held by big business, big government and big science. The ‘image of total ruin and destruction’,

they write, 'implies the need for an ideological shift'.²⁹ While extending this argument to a discussion of Hollywood cinema is initially problematic, in that fictional movies clearly do not make claims regarding empirical truth in the same way as the non-fictional texts cited above, the notion that apocalyptic fictions can also articulate a desire for radical social change, or at least a protest against the status quo of big business and big science, is nevertheless worth exploring.

A recurrent tendency that may be discerned in such fictions is that the 'image of total ruin and destruction' to which Killingsworth and Palmer refer is usually averted at the end of the film. Thus the dystopian science fiction film *Soylent Green* (1973) ends on a freeze-frame of Charlton Heston's upraised finger, as he pleads for further action to restore civilization from the grip of corporate capitalism, which has degenerated into cannibalism. This combination of affirming the power of the individual to change the future, with a relatively open and unresolved sense of that future, is a typical strategy for movies dealing with environmental apocalypse, as will be seen in discussions of *The China Syndrome* and *On Deadly Ground*, for example, later in this book.

It is in comparison with such relatively open endings that the resolution of *Day of the Animals* appears problematic. As the corpses pile up, and law and order breaks down, the Environmental Protection Agency suddenly announces on the radio that the ozone level 'continues to correct itself', and that the 'virus mutation infecting human and animal life is unable to sustain itself as the sun's radiation decreases to normal levels'. The radio announcement concludes: 'All altitudes will be completely safe within twenty-four hours.' Although this reversion to a state of equilibrium conforms to the normative expectations of the horror genre, the abruptness with which nature heals itself seems evasive given the literally global extent of the problem posited at the start of the film. Moreover, environmental catastrophe has been averted contingently, rather than through the action of the characters in the story. It is the abrupt and arbitrary nature of the movie's closure, then, that appears pat, trivializing and exploitative of the seriousness of its environmentalist premises.

Such incongruous endings are, of course, common to Hollywood movies, which, as Maltby and Craven write, are marked by 'the dynamic reciprocity between the sometimes pat resolutions of individual stories and the frequently gaping irresolution of their social implications'.³⁰ Ultimately, then, *Day of the Animals* displaces and contains the apocalyptic anxieties it raises. In this sense, the 'need for an ideological shift' spoken of by Killingsworth and Palmer as a positive implication of apocalyptic texts is itself dissipated. Entertainment, observes Michael Wood, is not 'a full-scale flight from our problems, not a means of forgetting them completely, but rather a rearrangement of our problems into shapes which tame them, which disperses them to the margins

of our attention'.³¹ In its displacement of the environmental issues with which it began, *Day of the Animals* is typical of many of the environmentalist movies discussed in this book. Significantly, the initial premise of ozone depletion is used as a basis for the more familiar thematic concern, that of individual and group survival under competing forms of male leadership, with which the rest of the narrative is mainly concerned. As the following chapters demonstrate, Hollywood environmentalist movies often use their concerns with non-human nature, whether wilderness or wild animals, as a basis for speculations on human social relationships, thereby making those concerns conform to Hollywood's commercial interest in anthropocentric, human interest stories.

The rest of this book will seek to place the films under discussion within the constellation of realism, melodrama and fantasy outlined in this Introduction. The important questions that will be asked of such films, whether a more realist film such as *A Civil Action*, or a more melodramatic one such as *Day of the Animals*, will concern, in the words of Stephen Prince, 'the kinds of linkages that connect the represented fictionalized reality of a given film to the visual and social coordinates of our own three-dimensional world,' an inquiry, he notes, that 'can be done for both "realist" and "fantasy" films alike'.³²

I

**WILDERNESS IN
HOLLYWOOD CINEMA**

ONE

Discourses of Nature and Environmentalism

The Hollywood movies examined in this book draw on and combine a range of different environmentalist discourses, from conservationism to preservationism, and mainstream to radical environmentalism. It is useful at this point to offer a brief overview of these discourses, before undertaking an analysis of how they are mediated by the films themselves.

Conservationism, since its origins in Progressivism at the turn of the nineteenth century, has taken a utilitarian attitude to non-human nature, treating it as a resource to be managed and developed for use and economic profit. In contrast, preservationism has argued for the need to preserve wilderness as a realm of spiritual and aesthetic contemplation separate from resource use.¹ With the rise of modern environmentalism in the early 1960s, conservationism has become the 'mainstream' ('reform', 'moderate', or 'shallow') wing of environmentalism. Mainstream environmentalism continues to place environmental concerns within the needs of a capitalist economy to sustain commodity consumption, profit maximization and economic growth, by calling on the expert knowledge of economists, engineers and scientists to provide *ad hoc*, technical solutions to environmental problems. For example, the addition of catalytic converters to automobile exhausts is a key mainstream environmentalist proposal to address the problem of air pollution. In being defined as technical rather than political, environmental problems are viewed as solvable within the existing system of capitalist bureaucratic-technocratic rationality administered by the state and private corporations. Advocates of mainstream environmentalism argue that these solutions are practical, pragmatic and realistic, and are therefore the most effective form of environmental restoration.

Radical environmentalism includes a range of different approaches, from deep ecology to social ecology and ecofeminism. The broad area of agreement

between these groups is that mainstream environmentalism is ultimately counter-productive, in that its attempts to strengthen capitalism simply perpetuate one of the fundamental causes of ecological decline itself. According to radical environmentalists, mainstream environmentalist faith in the reform potential of technology is also misguided. Moreover, they argue that by depoliticizing environmental issues, mainstream environmentalism prevents the emergence of more radical or revolutionary environmental politics based on notions of social justice.² Mainstream environmentalism relies instead on 'greenwashing', or the attempt to deny or cover up the fundamental causes of environmental degradation. Socialist environmentalist Tom Athanasiou defines 'greenwashing' as a mainstream strategy in which 'images of change substitute for and exaggerate change itself'.³

Marxist David Harvey draws on Herbert Marcuse's notion of 'repressive tolerance' to argue that mainstream environmentalism is in the process of incorporating more radical and oppositional environmental ideologies for its own benefit. What he calls a 'limited articulation of difference' in official environmental discourses thus plays a 'sustaining role for hegemonic and centralized control of the key institutional and material practices that really matter for the perpetuation of capitalist social and power relations'.⁴ Harvey contends that prospects for environmental restoration and social justice are set back by the incorporation of radical ecology into mainstream environmentalism, because the latter is thereby strengthened. In contrast, anthropologist Martin W. Lewis argues that the incorporation of radical ecological thinking by mainstream environmentalism is bad for the prospects of environmental restoration, not because it *strengthens* mainstream environmentalism, but because it weakens it. For Lewis, radical environmentalism is itself counter-productive, particularly in what he sees as its anti-scientific, romantic and technophobic tendencies.⁵

The main intention of this book is not so much to adjudicate between these contending theories, as to analyse the ways in which particular Hollywood movies mediate such ideologies in often complex, contradictory and incoherent ways. The rest of this chapter will therefore examine the different constructions of non-human nature in Hollywood cinema, and speculate on the implications they hold for environmentalist politics.

Conservationism and the western: *Valley of the Giants*

Although the popularity of the western genre coincided with the emergence of federal conservationism in the early years of the twentieth century, few westerns developed an explicitly conservationist stance towards contemporary