

Mapping New Methods on Ecocriticism for the Humanities

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Abstract:

Contemporary Ecocritical Methods broadens ongoing debates and reorients existing perspectives on ecocritical methodologies within the humanities by encompassing corpora drawn from literature, film, visual arts, and media. Moving between theoretical reflection and illustrative examples, this anthology functions as an emerging ecosystem within Ecocriticism. As such, the volume constitutes a valuable resource for those who wish either to become acquainted with the field or to undertake ecocritical research.

Eine Kartografie neuer Methoden der Ökokritik für die Geisteswissenschaften

German Abstract:

Contemporary Ecocritical Methods erweitert aktuelle Debatten und richtet bestehende Perspektiven auf ökokritische Methoden neu aus, indem es Korpora aus Literatur, Film, bildender Kunst und Medien einbezieht. Der Sammelband bewegt sich zwischen theoretischer Reflexion und anschaulichen Beispielen und fungiert als neu entstehendes Ökosystem innerhalb der Ökokritik. Als solches ist der Band eine wertvolle Quelle für alle, die sich mit diesem Gebiet vertraut machen oder ökokritische Forschung betreiben möchten.

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In response to the growing environmental challenges of our time, the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism, along with ecocritical perspectives, has gained increasing prominence. Several of these approaches are explored in *Contemporary Ecocritical Methods*, a book edited by Camilla Brudin Borg, Rikard Wingård, Jørgen Bruhn, and published in 2024 by Bloomsbury Publishing. As an edited volume, the book – referred to by its editors as an *anthology* – aims to function as “an inventory as well as a handbook and a map” (p. 13) of methodologies and approaches in ecocriticism. Here, this field is framed and characterized by methodological plurality: drawing upon a reconfiguration of close reading, approaching it via posthumanism, ethical, political, spatial, intermedial, empirical, and decolonial turns.

Across its fourteen chapters, each devoted to the development of a specific ecocritical method, a pattern stands out: Some chapters emphasize discussion of the method, others focus on the analysis of examples, while some adopt a hybrid approach.

The chapters that develop their methods through the discussion of examples and/or case studies constitute the largest group in the anthology. This group, comprising seven chapters – that is, half of the volume – introduces a range of ecocritical approaches, including Tom Moylan’s concept of “critical utopia” as a methodological framework, post- and decolonial situated reading, Timothy Morton’s notion of “ambient poetics,” comparative frameworks that combines intermedial with communication theories, among others. For instance, in Chapter 1, “Zooming Out to the Anthropocene,” Björn Billing develops a scalar mode of analysis for ecocritical interpretation, termed “zooming out” (p. 17), a method that relies on both macro- and microscopic scales, as well as geological temporalities, in order to apprehend planetary themes through shifting perspectives. In Chapter 11, “Overstories: Reading, Digital, Media,

Ecologies,” Per Israelson and Jesper Olsson present a compositional and experimental mode of reading described as “media ecological” (p. 203) drawing upon digital systems and algorithmic criticism. Here, reading is conceived as embedded within digital and media ecologies, thereby expanding ecocritical attention from ‘nature in the text’ to systems of circulation, platforms, and technological mediation. Finally, examining space and place as analytical categories, Camilla Bruding Borg develops a “spatial mapping method” (p. 245) in Chapter 13, “Ecocritical Spatial Analysis Methods,” a framework resulting from the combination of geocriticism, narratology, and related approaches. In this chapter, Borg seeks to construct *storyworlds* and generate meaning through storytelling by combining field studies and metaphor analysis with econarratological perspectives.

In contrast, three chapters in the anthology develop their methods in a metalinguistic manner, addressing the method per se. For instance, in Chapter 2, “Holistic Method as an Ecocritical Quest,” Rikard Wingård draws on David Bohm’s critique of fragmentation and Goethe’s delicate empiricism, articulating a methodological approach that seeks to resist the modern illusion of separation between observer and world, which the author terms “holistic” view/perspective (p. 40). The discussion of empirical approaches is likewise addressed elsewhere in the volume. In Chapter 10, “Empirical Ecocriticism: Evaluating the Influence of Environmental Literature,” Wojciech Małecki and Matthew Schneider-Mayerson outline the employment of a wide range of experimental methods drawn from the social sciences – including surveys, interviews, and both qualitative and quantitative research – resulting in what the authors describe as “empirical ecocriticism” (p. 190). Furthermore, in Chapter 14, “Storying Exposure with the Transversal Methods of Ecocritique” – the closing essay of the anthology –, Cecilia Åsberg, inspired by Donna Haraway’s feminist material-semiotic approach, foregrounds storying as a form of world-making and accordingly develops ecocritique as a transversal practice, one that crosses disciplines, scales, bodies, affects, and systems of knowledge.

The final group comprises the hybrid chapters, that is, essays that balance the development of method(s) with the discussion of examples. Chapter 3, “Power, Resistance, and More-than-Anthropocentric Leakages,” by Ann-Sofie Lönngren, develops “power analysis” and “posthumanist reading” in order to identify “leakages” (p. 67): moments in which

anthropocentric control breaks down. In Chapter 7, “Econarratology and Metaphor Analysis,” Johanna Lindbo brings together narratology – expanded beyond the human – with metaphor theory and a form of attentive reading, highlighting how storyworlds and figurative patterns construct ecological meaning and agency. Resisting the reduction of animals to mere allegories (the conventional symbolic mode of reading), Chapter 8, “Animal Studies: Metonymic and Zoopoetic Ways of Reading,” by Amelie Björck, explores animal agency, animal temporality, and nonhuman expressivity by outlining two ecocritical approaches: “metonymic reading” and “zoopoetic reading” (p. 161).

Among this final group (the hybrid essays), Chapter 9 stands out for its particularly well-balanced integration of methodological reflection and illustrative analysis. In “Co-researching Literature Conversations,” Martin Hellström develops a participatory and dialogic method in which readers – often non-academic participants, especially children – become co-researchers through structured conversations, allowing interpretation to emerge in a social and ethical manner, namely through “co-researching literature [in] conversation” (p. 181).

Overall, *Contemporary Ecocritical Methods* advances the debate within Ecocriticism by offering a diverse range of essays, some primarily concerned with methodological reflection and others centered on illustrative examples. Moreover, the volume functions as a repository of emerging approaches in the field, inspiring scholars in the humanities interested in ecocritical inquiry through the deployment of new perspectives. Nevertheless, despite its stated aim of serving as an inventory of innovative methodologies in ecocriticism, the anthology places a disproportionate emphasis on literary corpora. Of the fourteen chapters included, only three (namely Chapters 1, 12, and 14) focus on the analysis of non-literary objects. Just as the scarcity of publications devoted to methodological discussion prompted the present volume, here the relative lack of studies engaging with non- (or more-than-) literary objects highlights the need for further research and methodological experimentation beyond the literary domain.

Despite its emphasis on literary objects of analysis, the anthology successfully fulfills its aims by foregrounding collaborative research (as an edited volume in which some chapters are co-authored), re-evaluating established analytical practices (such as close reading) and functioning as a source of creative and innovative approaches to ecocriticism. Owing to its breadth and

internal coherence, the volume operates as an emerging ecosystem within the field, showcasing its high-quality methods in the format of individual chapters, hence its designation as an anthology. In short, its strength lies in the fact that the chapters are conceived as a ‘toolbox’ for conducting ecocritical analysis, rather than merely arguing for the relevance of such analyses or for the importance of the field itself.