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Christopher Schliephake, *Urban Ecologies: City Space, Material Agency, and Environmental Politics in Contemporary Culture* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), 219 pp.



Christopher Schliephake's 2015 book *Urban Ecologies: City Space, Material Agency, and Environmental Politics in Contemporary Culture* carries out a broad-ranging analysis of books, television series, and films that contribute to what Schliephake calls a "cultural urban ecology" (xli). The book aims to fill two gaps: a lack of attention to urban environments within ecocriticism, and a neglect of culture among studies of urban ecology. Schliephake's work will prove especially useful for readers interested in urban environments, television and film, material ecocriticism, and cultural ecology.

The book's introduction provides an overview of key terms, offers literature reviews for related discussions in various disciplines, and gives a concise preview of the texts and arguments discussed in the following chapters. It begins by developing a notion of urban ecology based on ideas of Lewis Mumford, who sees the city as a "conscious work of art" (xi), and Gregory Bateson, who describes ecology as "a metaphor for the interconnection of all matter" and re-defines "mind" as "a principle that is 'immanent' to all structures and objects, be they natural or cultural" (xii). Schliephake endorses this view that urban spaces harbor "minds" and are made up of "manifold and complex material interrelationships" (xii) with their respective natural environments. Against this background, he emphasizes the role of culture within the urban system: "I argue that an urban ecology which only takes into account the socio-spatial or material processes that frame urban life is incomplete, since manifestations of the cultural imagination have to be seen as integral parts of what we refer to as the 'environment.' I want to show that it is through the imagination that meaning is attached to urban space" (xii). He suggests that cultural works not only ascribe meaning to spaces and reflect on the relationships between natural and cultural systems, but also—following Hubert Zapf's ideas about literature as cultural ecology—create a forum for imagining alternate possibilities (xviii). The middle portion of the introduction situates Schliephake's argument within related discussions from literary studies, social sciences (especially environmental history and political science), and natural sciences. Throughout, Schliephake praises the ways in which the natural and social sciences have recognized "space, materiality, and politics [...] as integral dimensions of urban environments," but suggests that "the cultural imagination has largely been missing from their conceptual framework" (xli). The final portion of the introduction gives an overview of the ensuing chapters that seek to fill this gap.

Drawing on ideas from Ursula Heise and others, Chapter One argues that certain works of creative nonfiction create a sense of "eco-cosmopolitanism" that recognizes

both “the global ecology of world cities” and “local contexts and implications” (10). The chapter discusses three works of urban nonfiction, Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums* (2006), Doug Saunders’s *Arrival City*, and Katherine Boo’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012), that engage with the interplay of global and local forces within the specific setting of slums located at the periphery of major cities. Schliephake describes these slums as “hybrid zones between city and country” (35). The three texts he discusses deal with this hybrid position in very different ways. While Davis offers an acerbic critique of “how city space, material agency, and environmental (in)justice interact to make up the intricate interrelations and abysmal states of this world’s slums” (14), Saunders paints a much more optimistic picture in which slums are seen as “arrival cities,” sites of great potential and social mobility. Finally, Boo writes a hybrid work that unites creative nonfiction with a novelistic tone, resulting in a “powerful, at times angry, but never sentimental text” that emphasizes the status of slums as lived environments, as “storied place[s]” rather than “abstract spaces” (35). The reader is occasionally left wishing for more critical distance; at times, Schliephake’s voice merges with the texts he describes, seeming to endorse the texts rather than analyze them. As a result, a tension arises between Davis’s sharp critique of worldwide slum environments and Saunders’s apologia for “arrival cities.” The analysis of Boo’s text, with its discussion of the book’s hybrid aesthetic and the resulting presentation of the slum as a lived environment, is more satisfying in this regard: it goes beyond the content of the text and examines the specific impact of *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers* as a cultural product.

Chapter Two carries out an ambitious analysis of the HBO series *The Wire*, written by David Simon, through the lens of material ecocriticism. This lens allows urban space to be seen not as “a menacing other, but as a ‘storied place,’ where political programs and media accounts stand in stark contrast to a local sense of place and community” (44). The chapter argues that the show’s expansive webs of communication and interlinked social structures, developed gradually over multiple seasons, demonstrate “an ecological principle of storytelling” (55). Further, Schliephake suggests that drugs and guns in *The Wire* provide an example of what Stacy Alaimo calls “transcorporeality,” in that these substances are inseparable from many of the human bodies within the city. He claims that drugs can be seen as agential forces in their own right, drawing from material ecocriticism’s interest in non-human agency; indeed, a character in the show refers to drugs as “a force of nature” (75). (This quotation provides the chapter’s title, “‘Forces of Nature’: The Ecology of Inner-City Drug Culture in *The Wire*.”) The chapter concludes with a discussion of the “Hamsterdam” project from the show’s third season. The project attempts to contain drug-related crimes by legalizing all drug use within one clearly defined section of the city, nicknamed Hamsterdam. Schliephake carries out a penetrating close analysis of several sequences, showing how the urban environment has been split into idyllic crime-free neighborhoods where “even the birds are heard singing again” (77) and appalling scenes, “stylized in a way that reminds the viewer of a zombie or horror film” (78), set in the Hamsterdam district. The atmospheric portrayal of these divergent environments serves as a powerful meditation on the

violence, unpredictability, and complexity of the ecological forces wrapped up in the urban environment and the drug trade.

Chapter Three examines two films about New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina: Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke* (2008) and *Treme*, another HBO series written by David Simon. Schliephake suggests that cultural products point out the complexity of the disaster and contradict "official readings of the hurricane as a 'natural catastrophe'" (92). He cites a number of scholars who claim that the storm is better understood as a hybrid disaster caused by nature, social factors, and technology (95). Building on this foundation, he offers vivid descriptions and insightful close analyses of *When the Levees Broke* and *Treme*, for example describing the urban landscape within the films as a "waterscape" (101), and pointing out that in Lee's film, it is "literally possible to read the city space in terms of life and death" after the storm: the spray-painted codes of the cleanup effort render the city as a text that is clearly legible in its fatal toxicity (107). The chapter focuses especially on issues of cultural heritage and racism in *Treme*, for example in a passage that interprets a Mardi Gras dance as "a counter discourse against voices that have declared New Orleans and its culture dead" (129). Schliephake suggests that the cultures of music and celebration surrounding Mardi Gras offer a point of local resistance against dominant political oppression (130), and that cultural products such as *Treme* participate in this process of resisting dominant discourses and imagining new alternatives. The analysis does not address the status of music as an integral part of the dominant tourist culture in New Orleans, nor the fact that David Simon (after the immense success of *The Wire*) was writing from a well-established position within the culture industry. These complications would be worth addressing in order to be fully convincing in the argument that *Treme* creates an alternative discourse against dominant political narratives and economic interests.

The final chapter explores the "more-than-human" worlds of science fiction films. Science-fiction and monster films "dramatize city space not as a 'human-dominated ecosystem' in the sense of dominant theoretical models of urban ecology," but rather "re-envision it as a place where human and material agents merge and mingle in manifold ways" (xlv). These film genres "have long reflected upon the more-than-human dimension of urban space and have found imaginative ways of expressing the material embeddedness of human life" (140). Questions from material ecocriticism, drawing especially from Stacy Alaimo, Serenella Iovino, and Serpil Oppermann, offer an important analytical lens for the chapter.

The epilogue offers a brief and suggestive discussion of links between the cultural texts analyzed in the prior chapters and innovative recent developments in urban environmental planning and infrastructure. Schliephake suggests that cultural studies, and especially the Environmental Humanities, could prove useful for planners because they combine discourses from multiple disciplines and re-imagine spaces in creative ways (192).

The book offers strong analyses of specific texts and environments; its weaknesses emerge where specificity is replaced by vaguely defined terms or broad generalizations. The word "ecology" occasionally functions as a buzzword that could

helpfully be replaced by different terms that more precisely fit each context. While the introduction suggests, following Bateson, that “ecology” refers to a system of interacting forces that can include both human and non-human actors, the term in later chapters appears within a wide variety of contexts that render its specific meaning unclear. The book ends with the broad assertion that “cities are the places *where everything is connected to everything else*” (193; emphasis in original). Adrian Ivakhiv’s assessment is useful here: Ivakhiv has suggested that “the main argument of [environmentalism] could be summarized not only with the platitudinous ‘everything is connected to everything else’ but with the more useful ‘everything comes from somewhere and goes somewhere’” (21). In Schliephake’s book, the most successful analyses go beyond vague notions of ecology to examine specific trajectories of materials within particular environments, as in Chapter Two’s discussion of how drugs circulate in the Baltimore of *The Wire*. Schliephake’s strongest interpretations interrogate how these trajectories emerge within the specific medium of literature, film, or television.

Despite an occasional lack of terminological precision or critical distance, *Urban Ecologies* offers numerous new insights on the process of creating meaning within city spaces. Using methods of material ecocriticism and cultural ecology, the book helps illuminate the relationship between culture and the urban environment and, in a call to both ecocritics and urban ecologists from other fields, shows that cultural products deserve close attention in order to fully appreciate the ecological processes at work in urban environments.

Work Cited

Ivakhiv, Adrian. “Green Film Criticism and its Futures.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 15.2 (2008): 1-28. Print.