

## **The Cinema of Extractions: Film Materials and Their Forms**

BRIAN JACOBSON, 2025

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Film studies, like much of the humanities, tends to swing between methodological commitments to text and context. In this book, Jacobson proposes a reconciliation that draws on the tools of literary studies to read textual and historical forms together, under the provocative premise that it is possible to bring formalism into materialist analysis of the world. This concise book demonstrates how this analysis may be performed with a series of case studies, which lend themselves well for teaching on specific films or on ecocritical approaches more broadly.

Jacobson makes the case that ‘social processes and their practices’ have ‘aesthetic and formal logics’ (p. 138). Extraction is one such logic, usually taking a linear and hierarchical form. Focusing on the material processes of extraction, and of media production, works to set textual analysis and historical context in dialogue with other disciplinary frameworks and current trends in film and media studies. New materialism, media archaeology and elemental media studies direct attention to the conditions of possibility of any media practice, while Jacobson’s background in production studies and non-theatrical media informs a historiographical approach.

The case studies are clustered in two sections, with two chapters on early and transitional cinema, and two chapters on industrial films, plus a conclusion on counter-cinemas. The title of the book establishes the alignment with Tom Gunning’s theories of a ‘cinema of attractions’ and a ‘cinema of narrative integration’, which structure the first section. Jacobson focuses on the emergence of cinema as a material practice first, in its entanglements with a colonial world-making that used visibility to convert nature and labour into exploitable resource. The second chapter then shows how two transitional era films, *The Lonedale Operator* (DW Griffiths, 1911) and *Sunshine Molly* (Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley, 1915), embed this resource logic into the form of the narrative. Although the films are set in a mining town and an oilfield respectively, what matters is that they both present a homology between their forms and the forms of their profilmic content, that is, of mining, prospecting, communication and transport networks. These are effective examples of how reading film form can help clarify the form of historical processes such as extraction.

It is perhaps harder to read extraction as form in films that thematise mining more directly, such as the sponsored films discussed in the second section of the book. Analysing a 1960s industrial film about tungsten, Jacobson draws on elemental media approaches to historicise artificial light as necessary for film production and exhibition, which thus require mining. If in this way, according to Nicole Starosielski ‘matter becomes media’ (p. 83), then films about mining are ‘reflexive and literal media archaeologies’ (p. 80). This reflexive tendency of industrial cinema, where media are agents of the industries on which they depend materially, is a compelling observation. The fourth chapter offers further nuance to this argument, by questioning the usefulness of ‘useful’ cinema. The alignment with the attractions framework draws attention to the excess of prestige petro-films like *Shellarama* (Richard Cawston, 1965), as ‘ancillary products of corporate spectacle’ (p. 115) that allegorise their own wasteful making. Using expensive visual techniques and fossil-fuelled

mobility, the film also aligns the viewer with oil's non-human perspective, through phenomenological positioning but also 'an ideological kind of illusion' (p. 124).

This turn to subject-formation raises different questions. Earlier in the book, Jacobson discusses cinema as a 'world-making system' or 'a way of thinking about the world' (p. 36), though these are different forms of impact. 'World-making' includes cinema's role in weaving together the global networks needed by capitalism, and in facilitating extraction in practice through operational images and sponsored films. Alongside this material agency, there are symbolic acts: Early films commodified glimpses of places and peoples as attractions, teaching viewers to see the world as resource, while industrial films also 'process' the viewer, educating them into the necessity of extraction. For Jacobson, this ideological operation depends on form, and thus the practice of close reading can regain the political agency it once claimed, if it can "redirect formal knowledge [...] to more critical paths" (p. 144).

The difficulty in articulating such critical paths is clear in the two examples of counter-cinemas of extraction given in the last chapter. Sanaz Sohrabi's film *Scenes of Extraction* (2024) is an ideal choice, being not only a deeply researched, formally compelling film, but one that puts forward an explicit argument about 'the nexus of seeing and destroying'. Margot Benacerraf's *Araya* (1959), on the other hand, calls for the sort of method demonstrated elsewhere in the book, but would require a more detailed production history to be properly unpacked. Focusing on form, however, does open up a meaningful space for analysis – and debate. If *Araya*'s circularity can be seen as critical of extraction, it can also serve to naturalise scarcity and obscure the outgoing vectors of exploitation. As this shows, form is not ideologically unambiguous. But in any case, counter-cinemas can only be contradictory and incomplete, entangled as all media are in this extractive mess. This book proposes a way into this trouble through curiosity and attention, rather than despair.

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