

Book Review

Iheka, Cajetan. 2021. *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Reviewed by Marielle Papin
MacEwan University

Any academic discipline can be an environmental discipline. This is what Cajetan Iheka's book *African Ecomedia* proves through the study of the relationship of the environment and African media, in particular film and photography. The author argues that media diffuse representations of environmental issues, yet, through their materiality, also participate in environmental degradation. Indeed, media technologies are made of plastic, oil, or minerals that need to be extracted and then disposed of. The media of the Hollywood industry embody excess, which "promotes resource depletion, and leaves a significant ecological footprint" (226). Iheka explores how this Western extravaganza affects the African continent, its peoples, and its lands, but also how African media arts encourage us to rethink how those same media could reduce their impact on Earth.

With a background in literary studies, Iheka approaches his subject via various fields, including media studies, African studies, environmental humanities, and energy humanities. His interdisciplinary perspective allows him to tell diverse stories: Western overconsumption through waste aesthetics (chapter 1), the exploitation of Black bodies in the Ghanaian electronic waste site of Agbogbloshie (chapter 2), the exploitation of land in the uranium mines of Niger and the oil production sites of Nigeria (chapter 3), the white male hubris and dominance over African animals (chapter 4), and the precarity of African cities and urban dwellers (chapter 5). Each chapter tells a different story yet they are all linked. Iheka uses visual analysis to counteract the invisibility of the violence of the media infrastructure life cycle. The result, *African Ecomedia*, is a beautiful introduction to this topic, combining eloquent readings of films with reproductions of carefully chosen photographs.

African Ecomedia presents two important ideas that permeate the book. The first one is *network forms*, which are interpreted broadly as interdependences of time and space revealing "multiplicities and complexities that structure life in the contemporary moment" (18). For Iheka, media take on network forms in their production, distribution, consumption, and disposal. For instance, chapter 1 presents a temporal network form of media waste. It examines how Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* and Fabrice Monteiro's collection of photographs *The Prophecy* propose African utopias through waste aesthetics building on old African cultural forms. Chapter 2 analyzes a spatial network form. Iheka also

features Pieter Hugo's collection of photographs *Permanent Error*, on electronics recycling in Ghana, and Frank Bieleu's film *The Big Banana*, about the ecological footprint of banana plantations in Cameroon. He highlights the links between Western overconsumption and African free labor, where those who sort mountains of e-waste only get paid for what they collect.

Chapter 3 studies oil extraction in Nigeria and uranium extraction in Niger through the readings of Michael Watts, Ed Kashi's film *Curse of the Black Gold*, and Idrissou Mora-Kpai's film *Arlit*. Iheka highlights the link between extractivism, environmental degradation, and displacement of local populations. The extraction of oil and minerals to satisfy the greed of Western societies has an immense impact on the land, animals, and people of African societies. Media production is seen as a subject of planetary politics.

An interspecies and spatial network form is analyzed in chapter 4, which links the photo of the murder of Cecil the Lion by an American hunter with Black Lives Matter activism. This story underlines how a photo of a dead lion can cross borders much more easily than Black bodies and highlights particularly well the second idea of the book: planetary politics. While underexplained, this concept seems to highlight how all the network forms presented, which involve human and non-human beings, are embedded in complex power structures. Planetary politics leads to the "mode of 'being-in-the-world'" (17).

Chapter 5 provides another example of how media enter planetary politics with the study of African cities as sites of precarity as well as of geopolitical contestations and invention of alternatives, that is, of different possible futures. An important argument made here is that China's benevolent activities in African cities reveal its interests in the region, specifically its need for African raw material to pursue its manufacturing activities. Overall, Iheka suggests that all media activities are linked and embedded in planetary politics.

However, this is where *African Ecomedia* shows weakness. The author adopts a broad understanding of networks and uses it as a seemingly all-encompassing metaphor. But how does the network form help us see the way forward? The network form does seem a useful tool for reflection on how to rethink the media industry. Iheka does provide potential ways to reduce media's ecological footprint. His idea of imperfect media that thrive while using fewer resources, suggesting that scarcity leads to innovation, is brilliant. Yet, on its own, this will likely remain a local or independent film practice. Drawing the network form of imperfect media might help advance transformative ecomedia practices globally.

Iheka's introduction to African ecomedia shows how any discipline might enter the field of environmental and planetary politics and deepen reflection on lessening our collective impact.