

On the “Forest Affect” in the Theory of Affective Ecocriticism

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Abstract. “Forest affect” refers to a pre-individual, embodied, and fluid intensity or flow of force that is triggered, transmitted, and transformed in a forest environment through the interaction of material elements, spatial structures, and biological symbols in the forest. Based on the emotional universality of affect and the theory of affect as spatial atmosphere, and in the perspective of arboreal ecocriticism that attributes subjectivity, materiality, and interactivity to trees, “forest affect” gains theoretical vitality in the process of constructing relationships between emotion, body, and environment through affective ecological criticism. This paper systematically discusses the generative basis, characteristics, ecological theoretical value, and practical significance of “forest affect”, pointing out that forests have materiality and subjectivity and form their own “affect-material” field. “Forest affect” possesses the characteristics of “embodied materiality”, “intensity liquidity”, and “transindividuality”. “Forest affect” updates the driving force for forest protection from unilateral rational calculation to a deeper, pre-reflective affective resonance, promoting the construction of an affective network of symbiotic entanglement between humans and forests.

Keywords: “Forest Affect”, Affective Ecocriticism, Embodied Materiality, Intensity Liquidity, Transindividuality

1. Introduction

Historically, affects studies have largely overlooked ecology and the environment. Early ecocriticism focused on the centrality of non-human entities, while the natural sciences neglected the cultural and political value of the environment. These studies lack exploration of the emotional connections between humans and the environment. In fact, affect is essentially ecological. Ecocriticism underwent an affective turn in the early 21st century. The core of emotional studies— affect—and the core of ecocritical research—nature—naturally form a link between consciousness and matter. Affective ecocriticism, starting from emotions and experiences, studies ecology and the environment, making the agency and affectivity of natural objects possible. As the largest terrestrial ecosystem, forests not only maintain internal ecological stability but are also closely connected to human civilization, naturally becoming a field of affect. “Forest affect” refers to a flow of force formed within the forest, with essential characteristics of “embodied materiality”, “intensity liquidity”, “transindividuality”. It plays a role in shaping human affective experience and individual

behavior, constructing an affective network of co-entanglement between humans and forests, and can also provide an emotional perspective for addressing ecological crises.

2. The proposition of “forest affect”

Affective ecocriticism pays attention to the material ecocriticism that attempts to infuse emotional attachment and communication into the exploration of the material world, connecting materialization—a “complex, diverse, relatively open process”—with affect, emphasizing both the material and emotional dimensions. It seeks to reclaim the nourishment of emotions by objects, to recover protection on a spiritual level, suggesting that material leads to emotion, and emotion can take material forms. As a forest in the ecosystem, nature’s biological characteristics determine its materiality. At the same time, the forest possesses far more subjectivity, perception, and intelligence than imagined. American forest ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer points out that forests exhibit significant non-biological qualities among biological and non-biological materials, expressing themselves in a perceptible way [1], which is a silent resistance, a reaffirmation of self-subjectivity and a manifestation of individual emotion. The establishment of forest subjectivity and the discovery of forest emotions shifts attention away from the intense, ideologically charged struggle between environmentalists and loggers, focusing instead on the trees and their ecological communities—in other words, on the forest itself. This resonates with what affective ecocriticism emphasizes regarding the emotional materiality and material perceptibility of emotions. As a result, the forest naturally becomes a unique “affect-material” field, and forest affect acquires an inherent legitimacy.

3. “Forest affect” and its characteristics

“Forest affect” is the establishment of the forest as a unique field or “assemblage” for the generation and circulation of affect, where, within the forest environment, interactions among the forest’s material elements, spatial structures, biological symbols trigger, transmit, and transform a pre-individual, embodied, and flowing intensity or force. It is a product of humans and non-human elements jointly participating in affect within the forest field, affirming the potential for emotional fluidity in the forest and the legitimacy of affect as an inherent attribute of the forest. Its aim is to understand social dynamic processes and meanings that cannot be fully captured through traditional representational symbols.

Affective ecocriticism holds that emotions are inherently ecological, emphasizing the expansion of environmental emotions by reinterpreting familiar feelings in spatial terms, and identifying new emotions that can be better understood through ecological criticism theory, thereby more directly studying the relationship between emotions and the environment and exploring interactions between and within bodies [2]. As an affective field, the forest possesses an inherent materiality, primarily referring to the complex network of living and non-living elements composed of trees, mycelial networks, soil, water bodies, light, scents, sounds. Its spatiality lies in the ecological scale of the forest at both macro and micro levels, as well as its independent breadth and spatial depth. The qualities of “forest affect” are also reinforced by the forest’s materiality and spatiality, manifested as “embodied materiality”, “intensity liquidity”, and “transindividuality” and its operational mechanisms depend on these qualities.

3.1. Embodied materiality

The qualities of “forest affect” are primarily manifested as “Embodied Materiality”. The forest is a non-human body, and the material elements within the forest become factors that trigger emotions. This ecological space of the forest is not static; it inherently possesses the capacity to generate affective potential energy. From a microscopic perspective, the forest is composed of numerous tiny and intricate material structures, each part constituting a complex life system. The systems within and among these components coordinate, adapt, and collectively promote the dynamic stability of the forest ecosystem. Moreover, from the perspective of biological evolution, adaptation is directional [3]. The direction of adaptation is reflected in the flow of material. Moreover, “forest affect” directly acts on the sensory bodies of humans and non-humans, constituting a generative force that spans flesh, material, and environment. It can regulate human bodily experience and emotional responses, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between humans and non-humans, perception and matter, within complex field. Ben Anderson argues that this affective capacity will evoke a material sensation of collective affects that are formless, thereby endowing the materials and forces of encounters with significance [4]. The existence of “forest affect” transforms invisible and intangible affects into a physical reality that can be directly experienced by the body, ultimately manifesting as embodied materiality.

The material phenomena of the forest can stimulate the senses, evoke emotional resonance, or generate psychological effects. This affect originates from the activation of forest phenomena and can also permeate the body, creating a more authentic experience of the forest driven by affect. Anderson points out that any object, event, situation, or experience that can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, tasted, felt, or intuited is a legitimate subject of phenomenological study... All these things are phenomena that humans can experience, encounter, or undergo in some way [5]. “Forest affect” occurs based on encounters with the forest elements through the body.

In his 1993 article *Earth’s Body*, American ecocritic Scott Russell Sanders recounts a story of his intense affective experience through contact with the forest, “I shuffle to the nearer tree and read the braille of the bark with my fingers. Roots hump beneath my feet. Overhead, leaves form a canopy of black lace. I press my cheek and chest against the sharp ridges of the bark and wrap my arms around the trunk. My hands do not meet, the maple is so stout” [6]. Through direct contact with the trees, Sanders touches the “braille of the bark”, feels the raised roots and pulses beneath his feet, and sees the lace formed by the interwoven branches and leaves. This is a direct medium for trees to interact with humans and also an intrinsic attribute of the forest. The trees infuse Sanders with a mysterious yet comforting power. The forest not only generates affects internally but can also communicate emotional meaning to humans through material forms, expressing sentiments that transcend mere survival needs.

3.2. Intensity liquidity

“Forest affect” refers to an embodied, flowing emotion intensity that exists in a forest environment. Anderson defines affect as “the transpersonal or prepersonal intensities that emerge as bodies affect one another” [7], emphasize the prepersonal, bodily, intensive, fluid, and non-representational aspects. The intensity liquidity of “forest affect” can be understood as emotion fluidity. “Affect is a capacity to manifest—a phenomenon that appears and spreads with intensity within a group” [8]. When the forest no longer exists merely as a natural landscape but becomes a living entity with stories and emotions, potential ecological energy is activated and transmitted. The forest’s affective

power is mobilized and acts upon the embodied subject, allowing one to perceive the power of all living things growing and to achieve emotional resonance between humans and the forest.

Baruch de Spinoza regarded the activities, sensations, and emotions of the body as manifestations of an inner power, and he called this power “conatus” [9]. On this basis, Gilles Louis René Deleuze further emphasizes the generation, change, and infinite potential of affect, suggesting that this force constantly changes and flows in the process of encountering and interacting with other entities. When interacting with the forest, positive encounters such as protection and nourishment bring positive forces and affective experience, while negative encounters such as destruction and confinement bring less favorable affective experiences. This represents the flow of intensity in “forest affect” at a non-representational level.

The intensity fluidity of “forest affect” endow the forest with a more autonomous principle of development, revealing the forest’s ability to express life and emotion. In Bruno Latour’s words, “Affect cannot be simplified to anything else, affect cannot be derived from anything else, but affect can be connected to anything” [10]. Affects exist naturally and do not arise from any particular object, rather, they are inherent in the object itself, existing as an intrinsic attribute. However, due to their extensive nature, emotions can permeate every realm of experience. They maintain their independence while also connecting with all things. Massumi points out, “affect, like thought or reflection, could be extended to any or every level, providing that the uniqueness of its functioning on that level is taken into account” [11]. This means that “forest affect”, like thoughts, is not only related to the surrounding environment, information received, and other natural entities, but can also flow through cognition and feelings, connecting multiple subjects in the process of this flow.

The multi-subject connection in “forest affect” weakens and abandons anthropocentric or instrumental views of the forest. American ecologist Kathleen Dean Moore believes that “the forest has developed its own appearance. Its significance is not inferred from human purposes. It does not represent something greater or achieve some human-imposed ideal” [12]. The independence, autonomy, and intrinsic value of forests are further respected, avoiding the imposition of human subjective will onto nature. The “forest affect” is changing the perception of forests as static, mechanical collections of trees and is altering the traditional view of forests as “emotionally numb entities”.

3.3. Transindividuality

“Forest affect” exists between human and non-human individuals as well as within individuals themselves, and is not limited to human individuals alone. This can be observed from its characteristic of intensity and flow. At the same time, the generation of “forest affect” relies on multiple subjects, and its flow exhibits multi-subjectivity. As Stewart points out, “Affect qualities arise from the collection of human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all other bodies that make up everyday situations” [13]. In other words, affects do not merely depend on the psychological state within a subject’s mind, rather, they are an atmosphere diffused in space and context, created collectively by flesh and blood, discourse and culture, and non-human entities. They do not attach to a specific subject or object, but are a collective effect woven from all elements in the relational field.

In the vast ecosystem of the forest, each part establishes its own “niche” and exists in the form of a complex integrated network. Every part contributes its share to the network, and each species depends on the delicate coherence of the entire network [14]. “Forest affect” refers to treating affect as a node that runs through the material network of the forest, linking the various constituent elements of the forest together. It uses affect as a medium of empathy to communicate with each

other, conveying the life states, energy needs, and other aspects within the system. The purpose is to form an interconnected network by influencing the behavior and material forms of internal organisms, thereby maintaining the dynamic stability of the forest ecosystem. The functional realm of “forest affect” is certainly not limited to the interactions within individual trees and their surrounding organisms, but permeates the entire forest. It is an emotional force generated collectively by all the components of the forest ecosystem, directly negating the notion of the individuality of “forest affect”.

The transindividuality of “forest affect” firstly negates the uniqueness of the individual generated by affect, while also emphasizing the plurality of subjects through which affect flows. Stacy Alaimo, in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), proposed the concept of “trans-corporeality”, attempting to establish a productive alliance between environmentalism, disability activism, and ethical and political concepts of “abnormal mediation” across bodies and places [15]. Alaimo uses scientific perception, responsiveness, and the cultivation of risk awareness to understand the essence of human and non-human bodies and their broader environmental interconnections, promoting profound shifts in subjectivity [15]. This illustrates the interconnection of all things and that humans are part of the material world. This material interchangeability and ontological co-construction lay the foundation for individuals to transcend boundaries in “forest affect”, and also extend the subject of “forest affect” from the forest itself to humans. It further establishes that “forest affect” is a product of both human and non-human elements collectively participating in affect within the forest domain.

4. Conclusion

“Forest affect” regards the forest as a generative field for affect, relying on the interactions and stimulations of the forest’s ecological space and material composition to produce a form of embodied, flowing affect that transcends individual uniqueness, creating intensity and streams of affective power. “Forest affect” brings together the theoretical claims from affect studies that emotions are universally applicable and that affect constitutes a spatial atmosphere, alongside the perspectives from arboreal ecocriticism that trees possess subjectivity, materiality, and interactivity, placing the forest within the scope of emotional thinking, gaining theoretical vitality in the process of affective ecocriticism attempting to move towards inclusive, complex emotions related to environmental loss and various changes. Affect holds an infinite generative potential, when research on affect considers environmental contexts, it becomes easier to understand how affects operate within individuals, among species, and across and between various environments, genres, and scales. “Forest affect” aligns with affect’s own expansive, transmissible, and flowing properties, spatializing and diffusing affective research, and permeating from the micro-level of the individual to trees and nature, promoting the pursuit of a more just and sustainable world.

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