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Eco-Lessons: Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s HOME and the Republican Pedagogical Contract

This article situates Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s 2009 ecofilm, HOME, in a pedagogical tradition of active, sensualist learning that, while not exclusively French, has long been central to French republican educational ideology. It specifically examines the film’s use of the estrangement effect, a manifestation in aesthetic terms of object lesson pedagogy, in order to provoke a more careful scrutiny of its principle object of study, the Earth.

Like Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth (2006) and Leonardo DiCaprio’s 11th Hour (2007), Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s HOME (2009) is a didactic film. Its message is clear. It emphatically calls attention to the problem of climate change, the rapid depletion of the Earth’s resources and other harmful effects of modern industrial production. HOME, like these other films, is also a call to action: it entreats viewers to become more conscientious and responsible stewards of the planet, to become what is routinely termed global citizens. And yet, the film delivers this now familiar message in remarkably unfamiliar ways.

HOME relates the story of the Earth’s origins and stages of development up through man’s discovery of oil and the environmental havoc that this discovery would eventually wreak. Its stunning aerial images of the Earth taken from 120 different locations in 54 different countries document this dramatic saga with a vividness that no ordinary reportage could ever achieve. The esthetic and narratological innovations in this cinematic montage distinguish it from the more traditional
modes of transmitting information that we find in the films of Gore and DiCaprio.

This essay examines more explicitly how Yann Arthus-Bertrand and (screenwriter) Isabelle Delannoy’s original esthetic serves a pedagogical and, ultimately, political purpose. In fact, I will argue that Arthus-Bertrand’s esthetico-pedagogical technique is not as original as it might at first seem. His bewildering images of the earth’s surface arouse the viewer’s faculties of perception in a manner that recalls a republican pedagogical tradition emphasizing direct, sensory observation of concrete objects. This pedagogy, known as intuitive or object lesson pedagogy, was not only an elementary form of scientific inquiry. It was also a mechanism for teaching republican values rooted in Enlightenment rationalism; it gave concrete form to abstract notions of citizenry and civic duty. In other words, a pedagogy of scientific observation also promoted the spread of republican ideology and thereby fostered the emergence of a national community united around a common set of civic values. HOME’s global citizen is, in many respects, a republican citizen on a planetary scale.

The film’s distribution indicates already an attachment to the republican educational tradition. It was released worldwide on June 5, 2009 on World Environment day and made available in all media formats — movie theater, television, DVD and internet — free of charge (DVDs are sold at cost). Translated into nearly 40 languages, the film has been viewed by more than 200 million people in 131 different countries; an estimated 14 million people have viewed it on YouTube. The large-scale, nonprofit distribution of the film signals the filmmaker’s commitment to universal access to knowledge. While this may not be an exclusively French preoccupation, it is certainly a cornerstone of the French republican tradition inherited from the Enlightenment, most famously typified by Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopedia.

1 Space does not permit a listing of all those who, along with Arthus-Bertrand and Delannoy, contributed to the writing of the scenario. As is customary in discussions of film, I will refer to HOME as principally the work of its credited director, Yann Arthus-Bertrand.

2 This information was communicated in a press release received from Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s foundation, Goodplanet.