

Ecomedia and ecophobia

Simon C. Estok^{1,2}

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Abstract This essay argues about the urgency for determining why (despite the saturation of popular media with messages about environmental issues) global temperatures continue to rise, unsustainable practices grow rather than shrink, and viable solutions sprint further and further out of reach. To date, no work in ecomedia studies has seriously addressed the matter of ecophobia—one of the ethical positions unwittingly conveyed in a great deal of ecomedia. There are several reasons why so much of ecomedia has had limited effects on pushing people to change their behaviors and thereby halt or slow the warming of our atmosphere: (1) it reproduces what it critiques: media reiterates and perpetuates the ecophobic ethics that are so central to the problem in the first place; (2) it is embedded in a period in which our continuous partial attention runs hand-in-hand with our compassion fatigue; (3) it dilutes the material to such a degree that important abstract concepts are blurred, thus preventing thinking people from seeing key connections, and (4) it is entertainment, and the blurring of virtual and actual worlds makes a lot of the actual news simply another form of entertainment. It is the first of these—the marketing of counter-productive values embedded (wittingly or not) within green narratives—that raises the alarm bells. This essay argues that some of the ideas of liberty America has enjoyed and promulgated are both unsustainable, in an environmental context, and ironically reliant for their continuation on notions—such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and, not least of all, ecophobia—that are in stark conflict with the very bases of liberty. Liberty stops at hate speech and hate crimes (at least it should), yet mainstream ecomedia participates in marketing these crimes.

✉ Simon C. Estok
estok@skku.edu

¹ Oriental Scholar (东方学者) for the Department of Comparative and World Literature (2015-18), Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, China

² SUNGKYUNKWAN UNIVERSITY, College of Liberal Arts, Department of English Language and Literature, 53 Myeongnyun-dong 3-ga, Jongno-gu, Seoul 110-745, South Korea

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Charlton Heston is on his hands and knees on a sandy beach yelling “damn you all to hell!” The camera pulls back, and the Statue of Liberty, chest-high in rock and sand, comes into view. I was four, and this first iteration of *Planet of the Apes* is my earliest television memory. Living in Vancouver, I hadn’t seen the actual Statue of Liberty, but I knew what it was, and the image was shocking. Thirty-five years later, *The Day After Tomorrow*, as it were, Liberty is buried up to her nose in ice. In the late sixties, contributing to public awareness about the future meant raising consciousness about our capacities to destroy ourselves through nuclear war. By the early years of the twenty-first century, it means raising awareness of our abilities to destroy ourselves by changing the climate. Depicting threats of the erasure of the icon of American liberty remains as potent today as it was in 1968. A victim in these media of the very liberties that it represents, mute “Lady Liberty” stands unshaken and does not yield or change or move. I will argue here that, boundless and unfettered, the concepts of liberty America has enjoyed and promulgated are both unsustainable, in an environmental context, and ironically reliant for their continuation on notions—such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and, not least of all, ecophobia—that are in stark conflict with the very bases of liberty. Liberty stops at hate speech and hate crimes (at least it should), yet mainstream ecomedia participates in marketing these crimes.

The notions cherished about liberty in 1968 with Charlton Heston pounding the sand gets Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin to the moon a year later, taking humanity a giant leap forward from the idea that the world is at its disposal. With the earth irrevocably polluted, it was perhaps inevitable that the universe would end up at our disposal—and, indeed, a site of our disposal, with half a million pieces of space junk totaling more than 2 million kilograms floating around up there.¹ Dangerously wrong ideas about uncurbed liberty are not the only environmentally hazardous notions that the 1960s hosts and that continue in media for decades after. The belief that computers will take us away from paper and from our carbon-vomiting lifestyle was very wide of the mark. By now, some truly startling facts have appeared about the realities of what at one point may have seemed (and may still seem to some) to be a paperless, green, digital revolution: by 2009, “the server farms that allow the internet to operate and that provide cloud-based digital computing had surpassed the airline industry in terms of the amount of carbon dioxide released into the earth’s atmosphere.”² Yet, fantasies persist in the most mainstream of environmentally oriented media, disturbing because this is the venue, as Rust, Monani, and Cubitt observe, most promising for effecting the kind of broad social changes that are currently necessary if we are to survive as a species: “popular media have several

¹ CBC News (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) reported in 2013 that as of 2011, there were more than 500,000 pieces of space debris measuring between one and ten centimeters. Of the 2.3 million kilograms of human-made objects in low-Earth orbit, 90 % is space debris. See References, “Space Junk by the Numbers.”

² Rust et al. (2015, p. 3.). Rust, Monani, and Cubitt cite Boccaletti et al as the source of this data.

important sociocultural qualities (such as their broad consumption and appeal to multiple segments of society) that make them potentially finer antennae than the fine arts for sensing the changing moods and tendencies in cultural perceptions of environmental relationships and concerns.”³

Reflecting an increasing public awareness of radical weather events, an increasing degradation of ecosystems, and an accelerated mining of the Earth’s non-renewable energy sources, “Climate Change Fiction”—what has come to be known as Cli-Fi, a term coined by freelance journalist Dan Bloom⁴—has flourished. So too have documentaries about environmental crises. At the same time, news about global air quality and about species extinctions has become the norm. How is it possible to explain in a meaningful and productive way why it is that media representations of environmental crises rely on an ethical framework that reproduces rather than repudiates the very structures that have led to the catastrophic changes we face in global ecosystems today? How is it possible that both increased awareness among lay people and radical exposure of environmental issues in media can be present at the very moment in history when there are what seem to be exponential increases in assaults on the environment?

While much interesting and informative work has been done examining ways in which contemporary film (documentary and drama) has promoted or sought to promote awareness of issues related to environmental crises of different kinds,⁵ outside of work done from explicitly feminist bases,⁶ indeed little has been done examining the ways that eco-drama and eco-documentaries themselves often re-inscribe the very ethics that they question. A recent Brad Pitt movie entitled *World War Z*, for instance, has a doctor ranting about nature in the following manner:

Mother Nature is a serial killer. No one’s better. More creative. Like all serial killers, she can’t help the urge to want to get caught. What good are all those

³ Ibid.

⁴ Glass (2013).

⁵ Pat Brereton, for instance, in his informative and meticulous *Environmental Ethics and Film* (2015) explores “how mass audience films and their use of a creative imaginary display a range of cautionary allegorical tales that help to promote greater awareness and debate concerning the central importance of environmental ethics for the very survival of our planet” (p. 1), that “Hollywood has an important role to play in promoting awareness around environmental ethics and helping to construct new modes of popular engagement through visualization of environments, drawing on a long romantic history around the therapeutic representation and evocation of nature” (p. 1).

⁶ Recent work by Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg, and Johan Hedrén attempts to diagnose precisely the problem I tackle in this paper about why, despite heavy interest in the environment these days, not much is changing. They discuss

four problems that currently frame our relations to the environment. These include: the problem of alienation and intangibility; the post-political situation; the negative framing of environmental change; and compartmentalization of ‘the environment’ from other spheres of concern—both in practical and ontological terms. (pp. 69–70)

An essential solution for them (as for the argument of this paper) is a need to rethink “the ‘green’ field to include feminist genealogies” (p. 67). My approach to ecomedia through the theorizing of ecophobia parallels and intersects with the work of Neimanis et al. (2015). Theorizing about ecophobia is feminist in nature, transdisciplinary in approach, and committed to inter-species justice in practice.

brilliant crimes if no one takes the credit? Now the hard part—while you spend a decade in school—is seeing the crumbs for the clues there. Sometimes the thing you thought was the most brutal aspect of the virus turns out to be the chink in its armor. And she loves disguising her weaknesses as strengths. She’s a bitch.

And then there is Alvin Duvernay in *The Age of Stupid*:

You stare Mother Nature in the eye. Usually, she’s fairly benign. Then she comes along, methodically, ruthlessly. And then she stands toe-to-toe with you and dares you. *Dares* you: “Go ahead and get your best equipment out. Go ahead. Do it. Let’s dance.”

As I stated in “Painful Material Realities,” such sexist, anthropomorphic metaphors of a malevolent nature are counter-productive and are not going to help make our environmental crises any better;⁷ on the contrary, such sentiments (although they may sell well) are simply perpetuating the idea that nature (and women) are to be controlled. This is the very kind of thinking that has produced the kinds of troubles we currently face. But it sells well, and there is receptivity to endorsements of attitudes that deprive others of liberty; after all, these very attitudes have allowed slave owners, sexists, and colonialists (the founders of America) to thrive.⁸

Patrick Murphy explains in *Culture and Media: Ecocritical Explorations* (2014) that films with “environmentally aware story lines do have the potential to contribute to increasing public awareness of real environmental issues” (35) but that these “writers and directors tend to capitulate to a Hollywood style emphasis on pathos and deemphasis of political critique” (35). Murphy argues that one of the ways films capitulate to Hollywood is “by too frequently focusing on the reintegration of the biological nuclear family and by portraying the inertia of governments and corporate obfuscation of scientific knowledge as the work of evil individuals rather than fundamental drives of the corporate and government systems of power” (35). A perfect example of this—among many indeed—might be *The Day After Tomorrow*. In an almost comic acceleration of climate change with equally comic effects—ships negotiating downtown New York City streets—the real story we follow is Professor Jack Hall’s (played by Dennis Quaid) as he treks through the horrors of a clearly oppositional and hostile nature to find his son. There are several issues here: (1) the male hero and the precious male subjectivity (the focus of so much of what we are talking about here) is unquestioned—neither the environmentally destructive elements of this massively self-centered ego nor the unsustainability of the ideals it embodies are queried—yet, director Roland Emmerich claims to have wanted to critique the environmental policies of the Bush Administration; (2) the film’s choice of Hall as a hero and of the government as an anti-hero is in line with Murphy’s comment that a focus on government sidelines our personal involvement with the issues; and, perhaps most importantly, (3) the overall position of the film is hardly pro-environment, or pro-Nature, or pro-world,

⁷ Estok (2014a, p. 133).

⁸ This and the following three paragraphs appear in slightly different form in Estok (2014b, pp. 51–52).

and it is difficult to imagine how a film that is, in fact, so anti-environment, so ecophobic (and I discuss ecophobia more below) can possibly do any good. Emmerich was very aware of what he was doing, of his portraying Nature as a “bad-guy,” a thing to be fought, an angry opponent to be feared but finally conquered. He is quoted as having said “I don’t need a monster or a villain. Just the weather.”⁹ One certainly doesn’t want to minimize the good work that this and similar films do, and yet neither should we be naïve about the good work that this and similar films *don’t* do and the bad work that they *do* do, the dangerous assumptions they reiterate.

Emmerich’s next film—*2012*—would similarly fail to critique the environmental policies that have caused climate change. Indeed, this ridiculous film (floating with just enough science to be marginally plausible for people who know nothing about plate tectonics) focuses its lens on solar flares that in the film are causing the earth’s core to heat up. The land masses become flooded in a matter of hours, virtually the same time that it took for entire continents to shift thousands of miles in the film. The environment becomes the key antagonist and human ingenuity becomes the solution—a fleet of giant arks in the Himalayas. As with *The Day After Tomorrow*, we follow a heroic man who is trying to keep his family together. Of course, this is a movie, not a documentary.

What is particularly interesting and alarming is that even the intended blockbuster documentaries whose intent are clearly to effect change rather than to offer narrative—even these are radical failures. While we certainly may be thrilled to see Leonardo DiCaprio (*The Eleventh Hour*) and Al Gore (*An Inconvenient Truth*) and Pete Postlethwaite (*The Age of Stupid*) in blockbuster movies on the topic, and while every little bit helps, neither should we be gleefully unaware of the work they do in perpetuating some of the problems. It is not a matter of picking holes in the green credentials of the films or ecocritical conferences (or journals), which is very counterproductive and detracts from the messages that we are all, in theory, trying to get across. Rather, in situating how we market our concerns through the reiteration of sets of popular but fundamentally oppressive ethical world views, we are better able to understand why things are not changing. In looking at the performative ethics that such marketing creates within the context of an age of what Linda Stone has termed continuous partial attention,¹⁰ we may potentially move toward less passive spectatorial positions. There is a real need, as Scott MacDonald has argued, for taking the opportunity to use spectatorship as a way of “expanding our attention span.”¹¹

⁹ Bowles (2004).

¹⁰ Stone explains that

To pay continuous partial attention is to pay partial attention—CONTINUOUSLY. It is motivated by a desire to be a LIVE node on the network. Another way of saying this is that we want to connect and be connected. We want to effectively scan for opportunity and optimize for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, in any given moment. To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter. We pay continuous partial attention in an effort NOT TO MISS ANYTHING. It is an always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that involves an artificial sense of constant crisis. (Stone, see References)

¹¹ MacDonald (2004, p. 111).

Arguably, the ethical assumptions we wittingly and unwittingly carry as we produce and consume environmentalist narratives are as consequential as the latent ethics of engagement and activism clearly central to such narratives. Ecophobia is a subtle thing, involved both in the production and reception of these narratives. We may define ecophobia as an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism.¹² I have argued elsewhere (see, for instance, References, “Conceptualizing”; “Ecocritical Theory”; “An Introduction;” “Theorizing;” and *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*) that ecocriticism needs a very broad scope for the term ecophobia. I first proposed the term in the early summer of 1995 as a part of the first draft of the final chapter of my dissertation (independent of and in no way derived from the manner in which it is used in psychology and psychiatry) “to denote fear and loathing of the environment in much the same way that the term ‘homophobia’ denotes fear and loathing of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.”¹³ At roughly the same time, David Sobel published a long essay entitled “Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education.” As I stated in *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*, “the fact that Sobel and I clearly seemed to coin the same term at roughly the same time and clearly independently is perhaps more than simply coincidental, perhaps indicating a felt need for a viable ecocritical terminology”¹⁴ as early as the mid-1990s for the burgeoning field of ecocriticism.

But, as I noted in “The Ecophobia Hypothesis,” it is more complicated than that. Indeed, conservative American journalist George F. Will seems the first to have used the term outside of its psychological meaning in a *Chicago Sun-Times* article of September 18, 1988, entitled “The Politics of Ecophobia.” Here, Will defines ecophobia simply as “the fear that the planet is increasingly inhospitable.”¹⁵ Will’s definition is also the position from which I start but from which Sobel departs. For Sobel, ecophobia is more a fear of the environmental effects of human actions—for instance, “[f]ear of oil spills, rainforest destruction, whale hunting, acid rain, the ozone hole, and Lyme disease;”¹⁶ but these are clearly more properly the *results* of ecophobia rather than examples of it. Ecophobia is what allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world. No one would say that homophobia is the fear of the corpse of a gay man who has been bashed over the head with a bat; homophobia is *cause* of the bashing. Similarly, ecophobia is the *cause* of the environmental

¹² As Greta Gaard has noted, “ecophobia and erotophobia are intertwined concepts” (2011, p. 125, n.1). In “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” (1997), Gaard defines “erotophobia” (a fear of eroticism) and how it has always been an environmental issue and a “problem... of Western culture, a fear of the erotic so strong that only one form of sexuality is overtly allowed; only in one position; and only in the context of certain legal, religious, and social sanctions” (1997, p. 118). Building on this work, I note in “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness” (2009) that “ecophobia is rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism” (p. 216). For me, as for Gaard, “erotophobia is thus a component of ecophobia” (Gaard 2010, p. 650).

¹³ Estok (1996, p. 213).

¹⁴ Estok (2011b, pp. 128–129)

¹⁵ Will (1988, n.p.).

¹⁶ Sobel (1996, p. 5).

despoliation that Sobel describes. For Sobel, “fear of... whale hunting”¹⁷ is (by his definition) ecophobia, but it seems more sensible to see that whale hunting is a *result* of ecophobia, of a generalized indifference, fear, or contempt for the natural world and its inhabitants. The epic frustrations of not being able to hold and control nature are at core ecophobic and have variously found their way into production of film and literature and have been very important and influential in how some genres have developed.

What has come to be termed “the biophilia hypothesis” neither adequately accounts for the kinds of things that are going on in the world nor makes connections with theories about exploitation, about people who gain liberty at the expense of the liberty of others (human and nonhuman), or about intersections among ecophobia, homophobia, speciesism, and sexism. Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson used the term “biophilia” in 1984 and defined it as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes,”¹⁸ but the limitations of the term are radical—the foremost being that it cannot account for the realities of the world. As Scott McVay explains in the “Prelude” to *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, the concept of “biophilia” doesn’t quite work: “until the biophilia hypothesis is more fully absorbed in the science and culture of our times—and becomes a tenet animating our everyday lives—the human prospect will wane as the rich biological exuberance of this water planet is quashed, impoverished, cut, polluted, and pillaged.”¹⁹ Worse, Wilson’s protégés have gone on to argue (apparently with Wilson’s approval, since it is in a book that he edited) that “the dominionistic experience of nature reflects a desire to master the natural world.”²⁰ This “proficiency to subdue, the capacity to dominate, and the skills and physical prowess honed by an occasionally adversarial relationship to nature” (ibid.) are, in this view, somehow a part of “the biophilia tendency.” Aversion, indifference, and fear-driven anxiety? An adversarial domination of nature? Resentment, hostility, and the imagining of nature (often gendered as Mother) as an opponent to be conquered, subdued, beaten, eaten, raped, ploughed, mutilated, regulated, and so on? Calling these biophilia is dishonest and misleading. The term biophilia fails to explain why environmental crises are worsening, does not adequately encompass the complex range of ethical positions that humanity generally displays toward the natural environment, and does not envision a spectrum condition so much as it does a single point on such a spectrum.

In some ways, we must see what I have called the “ecophobia hypothesis” as a tonic to E. O. Wilson’s “biophilia hypothesis” (the idea that our love of other living things guides our ethical relationships with the natural world). It seems, in many ways, as silly to theorize ecocriticism without discussion of ecophobia as to articulate feminist theory without discussing sexism. And it is worth repeating that ecophobia (no less than sexism) is a subtle, ubiquitous, and marketable thing, one very relevant to our topic here.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Wilson (1984, p. 1).

¹⁹ McVay (1995, p. 5).

²⁰ Ibid, p. 56.

²¹ This paragraph appears in Estok (2014b, p. 53).

The topic of climate change and environment generally has become an increasingly marketable one, with the Animal Planet/Discovery Channel's joint production of the CGI series *The Future is Wild* (2003), Alan Weisman's 2007 book *The World Without Us*, the History Channel's *Life After People* (January 2008), and the National Geographic Channel's *Aftermath: Population Zero* (March 2008). Each, in their own way, tacitly present an implicitly ecophobic vision of a Nature that will finally conquer humanity, reclaim all of the world, and remain long after we are gone.²² Such is also true of the adventure-nature genre Salma Monani describes, which includes

shows on the Discovery Channel (Lee Stroud's *Survivor Man*, Bear Gryll's *Man vs. Wild*, Steve Irwin's *Crocodile Hunter*) or ESPN Outdoors (Spook Span's *Monster Buck Moments*, Cyril Chaquet's *Fishing Adventurer*, Tom Miranda's *Territories Wild*); films on extreme sports such as Mark Obenhaus's *Steep*, Dean Potter's *Aerialist*, or the adaptation of Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*; or films such as Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* (another Krakauer adaptation), and Peter Lynch's *Grizzly Project*.²³

A setting for privileged he-men, these land- and seascapes are playgrounds for big boys, their big toys, and their macho games. The shows pimp and pander to these patriarchal crocodile hunters and grizzly men. Far, far away from these "nature" programs are the transformative visions of feminists and ecofeminists. Odd indeed to see narrative science purportedly about "saving the environment" carrying across sexism and its ugly brother, ecophobia.

Marketing environmental concerns has become big business. Narrative science carries and generates both a desire for engagement and a desire for narrative and forgetting. These two seem mutually incompatible, and what is troubling is that the latter seems ascendant. Narrativized science sells books and films—and it does so to audiences with, it seems, increasingly short attention spans. It sells the ideologies that spell profit, the ideologies that profit from the bodies and work of women, that ransom and exploit animals and ecosystems, and that unquestioningly steal from the land, the seas, and the skies. While potentially a call to arms, therefore, these narrativized versions of science can also—in terms of activism—result (and seem to be resulting) in virtually nothing. This is perhaps clear in the stunning example of films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Eleventh Hour*, neither of which says a single word about gender inequality or about meat.²⁴

²² Estok (2011b, p. 129)

²³ Monani (2012, pp. 102–103).

²⁴ Parts of this paragraph appear in Estok (2010, p. 143). As an aside (and one doesn't want to seem preachy), we might note that meat is not good for the environment and that it is odd that these films don't mention this fact. There is, as is very well documented, enormous waste and inefficiency in meat, milk, and egg production in terms of the energy input to protein output ratio, compared with the energy required to produce protein directly from vegetables. There is also an enormous and similarly well-documented waste of water in such processes. The impact of meat on climate change, however, has only recently caught the attention of the UN, which has singled out beef production as a key contributor to greenhouse gases. An online report posted by Ecofong mentions that a cow produces more greenhouse gases (methane in particular) a day than a 4X4 SUV and that "Methane is a greenhouse gas more than 20 times worse for climate change than CO2 emissions." There is indeed a growing consensus that a vegetarian (or, better

If it is dubious whether or not the spate of climate change narratives based in science that have bombarded the public over the past several years have had a measurable immediate²⁵ effect, then it seems incumbent upon us to figure out why. Part of this means seeing how our assumptions are represented and confirmed in film, and one of the important first steps for us here is to see connections.

There are important parallels between ecophobia, on the one hand, and things such as sexism, racism, and homophobia on the other. We continue to see blockbuster movies about heroic heterosexual men with docile and often stupid women trotting after them²⁶; we continue to see inadequate representations of Asian-Americans in film; we continue to see homophobia, racism, and sexism in filmic narratives that confirm what the mainstream audiences want to think, what they profit from thinking. No less is true of the role and function of ecophobia than of homophobia, racism, and sexism in much of the media ostensibly about “saving the planet.” The narrative object remains distant, and the audience does not want to hear about how personal this “environmental crisis” stuff all is, that it might, for instance, require us to change what we put into our bodies. When Peter Brooks thus explains narrative desire as a “desire for the end,”²⁷ we know that “the retrospective knowledge that it seeks”²⁸ is one of confirmation. Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, Franny Armstrong’s *The Age of Stupid*, and Leonardo DiCaprio’s *The 11th Hour* are part of this docu-drama genre, this narrative science spewing out a lot of very good information, yet also “confirmational” in the sense that Brooks describes. I do not personally know anyone who has stopped eating meat—or stopped driving, or stopped flying to conferences—because of these movies.²⁹

If Patrick Murphy is correct and movies *do* capitulate to a Hollywood style emphasis on pathos, then it is because this (like the ethics embedded in the language and the plots) is what sells. Like all narrative, filmic narrative seeks an audience. Narrative, as a form, is ethically uncommitted to environmentalist praxis and seeks simply the retention of an audience, and what we are faced with is, to be plain,

Footnote 24 continued

yet, a vegan) diet is good for the environment (Eat Less Meat. see References). If there is hope at all in the power of media to cause changes in how we relate with the environment, changes that might ultimately help us to slow climate disasters, then it might be found in the new attention that very mainstream media outlets such as CNN are giving to meat, attention that might have similar effects that media pressures against smoking ultimately had. CNN has run stories about “Why Beef is the New SUV” (Sutter, see References), about “How to reduce your cancer risk and help the environment: Eat less red meat” (Nestle, see References), and asking “Ditch meat to fight climate change?” (Mouk, see References), and the cumulative effect of these can only be good.

²⁵ See Estok (2010, p. 145). The urgency of the problems we have created obviously requires immediate action. This is not, however, to devalue the importance of the longer time-scale changes, the extensive intellectual shifts that must occur at a popular level before we can produce any meaningful and lasting changes in our relationships to the world around us.

²⁶ The final scene of *Planet of the Apes* with which I began this article is interesting in its focus on the heroic male subject and his precious feelings. Before him is the mute Lady Liberty. Behind him is Nova, the mute woman who has trotted after him in this horrific dystopia where nonhuman animals have taken over the world. It is interesting that the film gives voice to apes before it gives voice to women.

²⁷ Brooks (1984, p. 104).

²⁸ Ibid, p. 94.

²⁹ An earlier version of this and the following paragraph appears in Estok (2014b, pp. 54–55).

entertainment. Naomi Klein has shown convincingly³⁰ that the problem we face does not have to do with our technological ability to change or with the logistics of such change itself; the problem does not have to do with our capacity to work collectively; and it does not have to do with our understanding of the severity of the issue (except for the few climate change deniers, idiots on whom we do best not to waste time). The problem is that *we are not doing anything*. Klein reiterates a sentiment that might explain at least one cause: “Already, climate change is changing us, coarsening us. Each massive disaster seems to inspire less horror, fewer telethons. Media commentators speak of ‘compassion fatigue,’ as if empathy, and not fossil fuels, was the infinite resource.”³¹ At the very moment that we need to engage with the material, we are becoming numbed by it. Thus, at this point, it is clear that there are several reasons why so much of ecomedia has so little effect on pushing people to change their behaviors and halt the warming of our atmosphere: (1) it reproduces what it critiques: media reiterates and perpetuates the ecophobic ethics that are so central to the problem in the first place; (2) it is embedded in a period in which our continuous partial attention runs hand-in-hand with our compassion fatigue; (3) it dilutes the material to such a degree that important abstract concepts are blurred, thus preventing thinking people from seeing key connections, and (4) it is entertainment, and the blurring of virtual and actual worlds makes a lot of the actual news just another kind of entertainment.³² Living in an age of spectatorial complicity means having such blurred boundaries among the various kinds of narratives that we produce and to be unable to distinguish fact from fiction —as well as, to a great extent, to be unable to really care.

Content, of course, can express ethical commitment. Within a system of business built on selling as much as possible to as many as possible, however, form and content must, it seems, often come together if the narrative is to sell. It wouldn’t do for Al Gore to advocate for and succeed in *stopping the use* of fossil fuels. The system would grind to a halt. Perhaps it wouldn’t do for him to use his voice to shut down the meat industry either. At any rate, capitalism and environmental ethics seem in many ways incommensurable.³³ The system needs varieties of ecophobia (fear of bugs or loathing of bodily odors or ethical disregard for animals, for instance) in order to continue functioning, and it is probably this that explains why, in spite of the enormous investments in ecologically progressive narratives, not much is changing.³⁴

Change in values (particularly ethical change) and climate change share some common features. Both are so slow as to be almost beyond the capacity of people to perceive. Both are in some sense global. And both are earnestly addressed in contemporary media. How, where, and at what pace ethical change happens varies; how climate change manifests in particular places also varies. And humanity seems

³⁰ Klein (2015, pp. 16–17).

³¹ Ibid, p. 53.

³² Cf. Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén, note 6 above.

³³ While Klein is certainly not the first person to have suggested this, her best-selling *This Changes Everything* is a valuable popular contribution to the discussion.

³⁴ An earlier version of this paragraph may be found in Estok (2010, p. 149).

to be to some degree in control of both, but there are many inconvenient truths that we³⁵ would like to forget—and, indeed, ecomedia helps us to forget them. One of the creeping fears in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is that “man’s life is cheap as beast’s.”³⁶ We hear about “American exceptionalism,” and may feel appalled, but the affect of human exceptionalism never really comes home to us. The whole question of human exceptionalism emerging through Sandy or Sendai or any number of other natural disasters tells the world that we humans—the whole bunch of us—are nothing. The creeping reality—one which we are desperately trying to keep at bay—is that we are as expendable as carrier pigeons.

We tend to forget—would like to forget—many inconvenient truths. We tend to believe—would like to believe (notwithstanding the increasingly first-person plural realities of our narratives)—that the ontological realities outside of us are somehow not personal, that we are somehow not part of and not in discourse with them. We tend to forget—would like to forget—that our conjugal relationships with toxic lifestyles and practices are here, among us, the readers and the contributors to this journal, and indeed among all of us. Our participation in toxic lifestyles, our enmeshment with matters of death, pain, and suffering, is something from which we would like to have ethical exception. Toxicity amnesia and eco-exceptionalism are our guides, and we fall into their hands. We have created regimes of displacement that allow us distance from matter. Perhaps we have become so blinded by the enormity of what we do, the theft without compensation, the wholesale robbery on an enormous scale, the aggravated violence and torture, the colossal profit we take from the world,³⁷ that we have simply lost perspective on our capacities.³⁸

We have become stupid. It is understandable why Pete Postlethwaite would say that we are living in the Age of Stupid. It seems that “the market” has come to rule everything.

It is a truly fine and excellent thing that environmental narratives have become so very marketable and within academia that ecocriticism has itself also become hot and marketable. The flooding of the market with disaster movies, apocalyptic narratives of our own self-destruction, documentaries, and so on offers up both threats of relegating the material world to mere spectacle and commodity to be consumed by passive viewers (and to maintaining itself as such), on the one hand, and, on the other, offers opportunities for action and engagement. For the latter to happen and for the former to stop happening, several things are going to have to change. One of these changes has to do with how we organize our genres.

In times like ours when the natural environment increasingly intrudes into the affairs of humanity in ways increasingly understood in terms of terror, expanding

³⁵ I use the terms “we” and “us” in this and the following several paragraphs to denote the people mainstream Western media addresses.

³⁶ Shakespeare (*King Lear* 2.4.267).

³⁷ I write intentionally mimicking Conrad’s description of colonial racism because seeing and theorizing connections (such as we find between racism and ecophobia, or between homophobia and ecophobia, or between misogyny and ecophobia) is a vast business. Ecophobia is a big thing. Ecophobia is a spectrum condition. No less are sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, and speciesism. We all stand somewhere in these spectra, and it is good if we see where we stand. Then we can act.

³⁸ This paragraph appears in an earlier form in Estok (2013, pp. 6–7).

the definitional range of tragedy to accommodate nonhuman agents will allow us to see the world more accurately and with broader ethical magnanimity. Tragedy is not the sole domain of humanity: “Rather than limiting tragedy to an artistic genre—written by a playwright and performed on stage—it is helpful to loosen up these criteria, giving it much broader scope. For tragedy does not always hinge on human authors and human victims.”³⁹ The collapse and derogation of the natural environment is a tragedy in itself; our being dislodged and our troubled individuality are surely tragic too, but the fall of that bigger body of which we are a part—the fall of nature—is a tragic one. The question is not whether nature will survive: it will, but diminished. The question—if we may borrow a line from Robert Frost—“is what to make of a diminished thing.”⁴⁰ Theorizing tragedy (which is beyond the ken of this paper) for the modern world is very necessary. Theorizing tragedy to address the diminishing of nature (a diminishing that is itself a direct result of ecophobia) is an act of political engagement. Implied here, therefore, is also the need for recognizing the urgency of activist engagement among academics: “It no longer seems responsible for theorists to engage in *apolitical* analysis,” Jeffrey R. DiLeo and Uppinder Mehan argue: “there is an obligation to take theory out of the classroom and the library, and to bring it into the public arena.”⁴¹

Moreover, it is not enough simply to know things or simply to teach things. Knowledge, in itself, is not enough. If it were, then there would be a lot less smokers in the world.

The environmentalist movement shares many things with the anti-smoking movement. It is hindered by mammoth companies (most notably oil companies, meat production companies, and agriculture companies) that benefit from unsustainable lifestyles. Hired researchers blow smoke in our eyes about the causes of climate change and environmental degradation being outside of our influence, no less than tobacco companies have blown smoke in people’s eyes about how smoking was *not* the cause of cancer, was *not* harmful, and was actually *beneficial* in many ways (“Watch your nerves... let up—light a Camel,” a cigarette advertisement ran in the 1930 s), having spent years and years and billions of dollars in the process. In North America, 52.9 percent of the men and 31.5 percent of the women smoked in 1964, the year that I was born⁴²; eventually, however, people *did* finally get it that tobacco was lethal.⁴³

³⁹ Dimock (2008, p. 68).

⁴⁰ Frost (1979, p. 118). The title of the third biennial conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE)—“what to make of a diminished thing”—is the final line of a Robert Frost’s “The Oven Bird.”

⁴¹ DiLeo and Mehan (2012, pp. 18, 20).

⁴² See References, “Appendix A: Cigarette Smoking in the United States” (p. A-9).

⁴³ This paragraph and part of the next appear in an earlier form in Estok (2014b, p. 60). When I first observed the similarities between the tobacco lobbyists and the climate denialists (giving a keynote speech at a 2010 conference in Mainz, Germany), I thought that I had been quite clever and wondered why no one else had seen the similarities. Many, in fact, have, perhaps most extensively Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway: they discuss how scientists have obscured the truth on matters regarding tobacco smoking, acid rain, DDT, and the hole in the ozone layer and make explicit comparisons of these with the rhetoric of climate denialists. See References, *Merchants of Doubt* (book 2011; film 2014).

It took various kinds of legislation against smoking, which many people saw as an infringement on personal liberty. It took appeals to emotion, to reason, and to financial sensibility. It took a broad-based change in ethics. It took sacrifices. It took years. And when the tobacco industry was thriving, no one would have thought it possible or ethically defensible to bring these behemoths down. Many people would have lost work, and, anyway, there was little felt need for shutting down these businesses. It seems that we take ourselves and our sense of liberty a little too seriously. As there are limits to free speech (for instance, when such speech endangers other people), so too perhaps it is time to take a good look at what is illuminated by “Lady Liberty” and her torch.

We flatter ourselves as academics on our abilities to produce and dispense knowledge, as if this were enough. Marketing narratives and the knowledge that such narratives produce, however, simply isn’t enough to cause change. If those behemoths that seemed so unassailable (Malborough, Camel, and others) have been overwhelmed to some degree, then it was through an enormous amount of effort, not simply through the dissemination of knowledge but through a change in social understandings of relations between personal liberty and public responsibility. If knowledge were enough to cause change, then we’d have problems explaining the average air passenger, or driver of a car, or meat eater—indeed, my own presence at many conferences. If there were laws about how much we could fly, then there would be changes.

The question, then, is simple: what will it take to cause change? The answer is disturbing. As with movements against tobacco industries, it will take various kinds of legislation against things that we like doing, which many people will see as an infringement on personal liberty. It will take appeals to emotion, to reason, and to financial sensibility. It will take a broad-based change in ethics. It will take sacrifices. It will require serious analysis of the role and function of our changing media. And it will take years. We may not have as many years as we need. We may indeed now be doomed to remain spectators to our on-going ruin.⁴⁴

Popular representations of our on-going crises provide potentially important clues to where we might go from here. In a brief monograph entitled *Ecomedia* (2005), Sean Cubitt states that

we have no better place to look than the popular media for representations of popular knowledge and the long-term concerns so little addressed in dominant political and economic discourse. In their own ways as complex as the language of scientific papers on policy documents, popular media think aloud about who we are, where we are going, and what debts we owe to the world we live in.⁴⁵

While Cubitt does note that “many films are predictably bound to the common ideologies of the day,”⁴⁶ exploring the implications of these sites of bondage is not the primary concern of the book. Yet, since these sites of bondage *are* the main

⁴⁴ This and the previous paragraph appear in an earlier form in Estok (2014b, p. 60).

⁴⁵ Cubitt (2005, p. 1).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

thing holding ecomedia back and preventing it from having a genuine effect on the status quo, it seems to me, as I have been arguing here, of paramount importance to look at these issues.

Stephen Rust defines ecomedia studies as “a historically situated, ideologically motivated, and ethically informed approach to the intersections of media, society, and the environment.”⁴⁷ Assuming that ecomedia is, in fact, ethically motivated, then it cannot be anything less than absolutely crucial to understand what is holding us back. In following John Parham and discussing “the possibilities of and limitations for an ecological perspective within mainstream media and culture,”⁴⁸ we might go a step further and ask what it is exactly that defines the contours of those possibilities and limitations. To do this, theorizing about ecophobia must be front and center.

Work linking ecophobia and ecomedia has not yet appeared in publications, though there have been important connections made between the broad areas of “environmental studies” and “media studies.” The development of the subfield “ecomedia studies” is very promising. Sean Cubitt’s (2005) *EcoMedia* stands out amongst the work in this area in that it directly attempts to deal with the question of data overload in ecomedia and with what is implied in the absence of a common code for dealing with such data. Cubitt notes that “the mere absence of a common code [for cataloguing data] does not pre-empt the desire for dialogue: on the contrary, it spurs on invention of means for mediating between distinct and asymmetric entities.”⁴⁹ We can surmise from Cubitt’s observations that the digital eco-humanities collects and works with data and with the narratives that are necessary for making them accessible. Some narratives are filmic; some are in the form of databases; some are in the form of interactive websites, and so on.

Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Cubitt co-edited another milestone work in the field: *Eco-media: Key Issues* (2015). While discussions of feminism and ecofeminism would no doubt strengthen the arguments in the book, as would investigations into matters about ecophobia, the collection offers an expansive set of analyses on every type of ecomedia and is a tremendous contribution to the conversation. In general, however, the absence of work integrating feminism⁵⁰ and theories about sexuality, erotophobia, and ecophobia seems a liability in ecomedia studies, since it is the very degree to which ecomedia carries across sexism, homophobia, erotophobia, and ecophobia that it is held off from having the kinds of interventionist effects that it ostensibly seeks—that is, to fixing what is wrong.

In the introduction to her enormously popular and consequential *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, Naomi Klein asks precisely this question: “What is wrong with us?”⁵¹ And there is something wrong. Part of it, of course, has

⁴⁷ Rust (2015, p. 87).

⁴⁸ Parham (2015, p. xiii).

⁴⁹ Cubitt (2005, p. 134).

⁵⁰ Things are changing, to be sure. For instance, Pat Brereton’s *Environmental Ethics and Film* (2015) has an entire chapter entitled “Ecofeminism, Environmental Ethics and Active Engagement in Science Fiction Fantasies.”

⁵¹ Klein (2015, p. 15).

to do with attitudes that deprive others of their liberty. Relationships between the attitudes toward women in patriarchal societies is not an issue Klein mentions at all, despite many other quite brilliant observations.

Long involved with analyses of intersections among gender, sexuality, class, and environment, Professor Greta Gaard is one of the strongest advocates of the need to ask difficult questions and to see issues within their proper contexts: “Issues [such as] bullying in the schools, hate crimes, marriage equality, fair housing and health care aren’t even noted in climate change discussions,”⁵² Gaard observes in a 2015 article entitled “Ecofeminism and Climate Change.” A focus on studying ecophobia—which will always be feminist, will always recognize erotophobia as one of its components, and will always ask about individual responsibility—is necessary because the effects of work in studies about “biophilia” have been radically unsatisfactory and simply do not lead to any kind of awareness about the ecophobic ethics within ecomedia and how these are translated to popular constituencies.

It is essential to focus on the unacknowledged ethics in our everyday consciousness that contribute to environmental problems, ecophobic ethics in human consciousness of which we are simply unaware and therefore are powerless to control. It has been said that “the mitigation of [our] environmental crisis may necessitate nothing less than a fundamental shift in human consciousness.”⁵³ Looking at ecophobia promises an innovative approach to achieving such a necessary shift. The academic and practical value of this research is vast and offers not simply to expand the range of ecocriticism but to formalize interpretive strategies of reading and viewing that could potentially change the trajectory of ethics through which environmental matters are represented. What this means in terms of the environment has to do with the connections between media representations of the natural environment, on the one hand, and our relationship to that environment on the other. Analyzing ecophobia allows us to develop an entirely new ethical paradigm within which to house our thinking about nature. If we compare anti-sexist and anti-racist movements and how these movements have invariably involved changes in the kinds of representations prevalent in media, then we can understand the possible direction ecomedia may follow. In the United States, for example, racially-inflected comments fall under a recently developed legal category called “hate crimes.” Other countries have similar legal structures in place. Many countries also now have laws against representing violence toward women. The point here is that as the moral circle expands, so too must there be changes in the kinds of representations permitted in literature, news media, the internet, film, and so on. Why are ecophobic representations of and actions toward nature not subject to the law? Why are they not under the category of hate speech and hate crimes?⁵⁴ Having them so would seem a reasonable outcome of the expanding circle

⁵² Gaard (2015, p. 2).

⁵³ Kellert (1995, p. 26).

⁵⁴ One of the reviewers of this article astutely perceived that because “distinguishing hate speech from free speech has been a long battle, as the ‘freedom of speech’ is guaranteed in the United States by that nation’s Bill of Rights,” the suggestion of banning representations may garner controversy. The reviewer then asks: “Will this essay be charged with censorship, in the way that anti-pornography feminists were similarly charged in the 1980 s (i.e., Catherine MacKinnon, Andrew Dworkin)?” It is a risk, certainly, but

of moral concern that has already produced greater protections against sexism, racism, and speciesism. If ecomedia reflects dominant culture, and sells well in so doing, then it need not confine itself to reflecting the creepiest sexist and ecophobic aspects of dominant culture: the expanding circle of moral concern is also a dominant cultural trend.

One of the important points John Parham makes in his *Green Media and Popular Culture: an Introduction* (2015) is about the necessity for media, if it is to have any effect, “to adapt itself to and speak in the modes and language of the dominant culture.”⁵⁵ The dangers here are multiple. One of these is that when adapting to the language of the dominant culture, playing into sexism and ecophobia is an easy trap to fall into, and its results are counter-productive. Another matter, of course, is the danger of being sucked in and unable to withdraw from the views that accompany speaking “in the modes and language of dominant culture.” This would explain the primary contradiction of ecomedia and how it delivers comments about nature being a bitch and daring people to dance.

On my way to the 2015 MLA, the man sitting beside me on the SkyTrain in Vancouver reflected this contradiction well. He asked why I was going to the MLA and what I would be talking about, and after the conversation turned toward environment, gender, and race, he identified himself a feminist and told me that “girls these days have it rough, still don’t get paid the same, you know. Nuttin’s really changed.” I wondered but didn’t ask, “Do you know that girls are children?” A feminist would know that. Our conversation fell into a lull, and the man ate his Egg McMuffin. I opened the website for McDonald’s on my phone and noticed a tab about sustainability and wondered how many people get sucked in by it. Meat and the American lifestyle that McDonald’s promotes, notwithstanding its professed concerns about sustainability, are obviously incompatible with any strained version of meanings inherent in the word “sustainability” or “feminism,” aren’t they?

It is the capacity of what we say to confirm the status quo that requires attention. The danger of bringing things to the lowest common denominator—whether we are talking about the more than eight million people who take to the skies every day,⁵⁶ or a burger joint that serves sixty-nine million customers daily⁵⁷—is that it is within the very language and the ethics that media uses that we find the biggest problems. When media trivializes nature as an object of entertainment, or as a gendered hostile enemy (a bitch trying to get you, an angry mother nature, and so on), or as the antagonist in a series of dramas about a humanity imagined as besieged and embattled, it is just not going to help. These ideologies haven’t helped so far, and they won’t. There can be no question that there is a profound importance of making available to lay audiences material that is difficult, or inherently scientific, or simply

Footnote 54 continued

the ethical position is unassailable: ecophobic representations are indeed hate speech and should therefore be banned, just as “snuff” films sexualizing assaults and murder of women, people of color, animals, and so on have been banned.

⁵⁵ Parham (2015, p. xvii).

⁵⁶ This statistic is from the International Air Transport Association (IATA). See References, “New Year’s Day (2014) marks 100 Years of Commercial Aviation.”

⁵⁷ See References, “Better, Not Just Bigger.”

numbing in its enormity, but it must be done honestly and without reproducing the very terms it seeks to critique. Otherwise, we're doomed.

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