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Virtually There: "Aesthetic Pleasure of the First Order," Ecomedia, Activist Engagement

> What reasonable human being wouldn't be galvanized by the potential destruction of everything they've ever known or loved. How do you think this vision was received, how do you think people responded to the prospect of imminent doom? They gobbled it up... like a chocolate eclair! They didn't fear their demise, they repackaged it—it can be enjoyed as video games, as TV shows, books, movies, the entire world wholeheartedly embraced the apocalypse, and sprinted toward it with gleeful abandon. (Governor David Nix, *Tomorrowland*)

Somewhere 35,000 feet over Kazakhstan en route to Heathrow from Incheon, I was pausing *Tomorrowland* every few seconds so that I could get the quotation accurately. No doubt irritated, the man beside took the liberty to read what I was copying. "Spot on," he spat out, "Spot on." Perhaps, but we were both on a very long flight and in no position to align with the third person accusatory or to muse about how "they" sprinted anywhere. He was obviously excited, moved perhaps to consider doing something different in his life—perhaps not fly anymore, though I doubted it, since even ecocritics like me don't seem to hesitate flying anywhere anytime if someone else is footing the bill. Doing things is easier when others are footing the bill, obviously, and it is

perhaps for this reason that so much of ecomedia[1] ends up reproduc-
ing the structures and ethics that are at the root of so many of the prob-
lems, why the enfranchised sprint with gleeful abandon while those
footing the bill suffer and die. Ecomedia reflects patriarchal self-
obsessions, with even the most promising of recent media perfor-
mances, the laboriously negotiated COP21 agreement, gendering and
sexualizing (hetero-sexualizing, to be more accurate) the Earth with
the phrase "Mother Earth" (UNFCC 21). So, while we are flooded with
images and narratives of environmental crises, things are getting much
worse, and one possible reason is that we are simply not addressing
the problems. Things will only continue to get worse until we begin to
understand and to confront the fact that the problem we face is more
serious than climate change, if that is even comprehensible. Involved
are, as Greta Gaard has recently noted, "issues such as bullying in the
schools, hate crimes legislation, equity in housing and the workplace,
[and] same-sex marriage . . . [that] don't [even] appear in climate
change discussions" (24). *Tomorrowland*, for all its moving rhetoric
about people not responding to the prospect of imminent doom, is just
another in a long line of counterproductive ecomedia narratives. Not
only are they counterproductive, in the sense that they reproduce (and
sell for profit) the ecophobia, heterosexism, and misogyny that got us
into this mess; worse, they also articulate the very thing, the humanistic
narcissism, which will always prevent any change for the better, a nar-
cissism of which the term "Anthropocene" freely indulges. If we really
want ecomedia to encourage activist engagement, then we need to un-
derstand what is preventing it from doing so.

The *Tomorrowland* speech is boring—at least, it should be to any in-
telligent person. Roger Ebert could as well have been talking about
Tomorrowland or about any number of blockbuster eco-movies when he
stated that *The Eleventh Hour* is a "tedious documentary" and that "we
more or less know all this stuff, anyway." Ebert goes on to ask "so does
the movie motivate us to act?" His answer is "Not really . . . finally
we're thinking, enough already; I get it. This movie, for all its noble in-
tentions, is a bore" ("The Eleventh Hour").[2] And we *should* be numb to
this and to *Tomorrowland* and to all of their boring sophomoric breth-
ren, since they are not offering anything new, any knowledge we don't
already have. Like as many ecocritical essays, ecomedia often simply
tells us what we already know. We know the problems. We even know
the solutions. I'm tempted to say that what we don't know is the route,
the way toward activist intervention that will actually change things,
but that would not be entirely true: we do know the way, and it has to
do with assuming responsibility for the bills rather than actively avoid-
ing acknowledgment of the enormous benefits of keeping other people

footing the bills. It is on these matters that ecomedia is often simply silent. And there are clear reasons for this.

Ecomedia finds itself in a bit of a bind, facing what Rob Nixon calls "formidable representational obstacles" (*Slow Violence* 2). On the one hand, it helps us to visualize what he describes as "a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). On the other hand, in depicting assaults on nature and the resulting environmental crises that put in jeopardy so very much on this planet, there is the very real risk of ecomedia (1) reproducing what it critiques—namely, the ecophobic ethics that are so central to the problem in the first place; (2) producing a kind of compassion fatigue;[3] (3) diluting the material to such a degree that important abstract concepts are blurred, thus preventing thinking people from seeing key connections, and (4) merely entertaining, since blurring of virtual and actual worlds makes a lot of the actual news simply another form of entertainment. Indeed, as Nixon observes, "a major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects" (2). But it is not only the novelty of images; it is also their enmeshment with ideologies that have a proven record of marketability and consumption. We know, for instance, that sexism sells well, and it sells whatever it is attached with. 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 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."

Such sexist, anthropomorphic metaphors of a malevolent nature are counter-productive and are not going to help make our environmental crises any better; on the contrary, such sentiments (although they may

sell well) are simply perpetuating the idea that nature (and women) are to be controlled.[4]

But it is not just the marketing of the familiar that ecomedia opts for in facing its formidable representational obstacles. There is also the very real problem of scale.

The irony of our task is palpable: we need to see the long and the slow in an age of the short and the quick, an age of increasingly short attention spans, an age of what Linda Stone has termed continuous partial attention.[5] It is worth quoting Rob Nixon at length here because he nails the problem powerfully and succinctly:

> How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (*Slow Violence* 3)

Indeed, "one of the most pressing challenges of our age is how to adjust our rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice" (8).

If Pat Brereton is correct in suggesting that "for most people the mass media are the primary way in which they acquire ethical attitudes, especially within contemporary culture" (2), then it would seem that there is a great importance in saturating these media with ecomessages. Yet, we might also reasonably suspect that this kind of over-exposure could produce a backlash effect, and that this backlash may end up being very counterproductive. If ecomedia is preachy, then certainly there will be backlash, since few people like being preached to very much.

Ecomedia is less likely to bring about a backlash effect when it produces a strong visceral affect, a sense of pertinence that goes well beyond the delivery of a message and delivers instead understanding, a sense of an involvement with a living object rather than a sense of watching a dying one, a sense of immediate and personal danger rather than of insularity from the future ruin of something from which we are alienated. In addition, it is more likely to have the desired effect of encouraging activist engagement with the world when it offers at least some hope. This is what Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg, and Johan Hedrén perhaps mean in noting that "While issues such as water pollution, habitat loss, and rising global temperatures are certainly

troubling, consistently negative, even apocalyptic, framing may not lead to effective citizen participation and may stifle opportunities for innovative thinking around environmental challenges" (77). Ecomedia is more likely to have an effect, therefore, when it allows us to be participants rather than spectators and when it allows us hope.

The urge to offer hope is certainly behind a lot of the marketing of things eco. Diane Ackerman confesses to being "enormously hopeful" (13) in her recent book *The Human Age: the World Shaped by Us*, a book that is astonishing and disturbing in many ways. Ackerman explains that "our mistakes are legion, but our talent is immeasurable" (14). She talks about how "we rack our sun-smelted brains to find newer ways to capture and enslave the sun" and adds that "wood, coal, oil, and gas were only intermediaries after all, and using them was a sign of our immaturity as a species" (106), but she is missing a plain truth here: our use of renewable resources far pre-dates our use of fossil fuels! She explains that we are "far better at tampering with nature than [in] understanding it" (153) but goes on cheerfully to explain that the animals now going extinct because of us "might all haunt the earth again" (162) because clever humans had the foresight to save their DNA. It is tempting to share in her enormous hope, to smile hopefully at the horrific science here. Ackerman claims that "wiping out the genes of others and planting your own . . . must come naturally to our kind" (273). She offers no empirical evidence for such a hypothesis. Nor does she reference any of the pioneering work of ecofeminists about co-habiting in a world with other-than-human species: somehow, the work of ecofeminists and the topic of gender do not seem to fit into Ackerman's hopeful discussions. But it is when she urges that we change our perceptions of the holocaust in nature we are creating to an understanding that "we're revising and redefining nature" (199) that we get a taste of the arrogance in which Ackerman participates, an arrogance gathering behind growing discourses about "the Anthropocene."

The much-vaunted term "Anthropocene" starts to seem yet another affirmation of the heroic (or anti-heroic) human subject and of our obsession with ourselves. Indeed, we have to wonder about the hubris perhaps implied in the very term "Anthropocene": as Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg, and Johan Hedrén suggest, "calling an epoch after ourselves does not necessarily demonstrate the humility we may need to espouse" (68). They go on to argue that "the rising discourse of the Anthropocene . . . discourages a critical view of precisely how, where, and by whom human effects on climate, ecosystems, and biodiversity are specifically caused" (79) and of "the need to adopt a cautious attitude toward the idea of Anthropocene, in which Man is again placed in the center of the world as a prime mover, in favor of an openness toward alterity and unknowability" (84).

The hopefulness of movies such as *The Day After Tomorrow* resides precisely in a rejection of such humility, precisely in the notion Ackerman expresses that "our talent is immeasurable," that we are somehow in control of the world (an idea that paradoxically undergirds the very notion of the Anthropocene). Our obsession with ourselves is clear here, and we witness what David Abram describes as "a real inability to clearly see, or focus upon, anything outside the realm of human technology, or to hear as meaningful anything other than human speech" (27). Abram goes on to note that

> our obliviousness to nonhuman nature is today held in place by ways of speaking that simply deny intelligence to other species and to nature in general, as well as by the very structures of our civilized existence—by the incessant drone of motors that shut out the voices of birds and of the winds; by electric lights that eclipse not only the stars but the night itself; by air "conditioners" that hide the seasons; by offices, automobiles, and shopping malls that finally obviate any need to step outside the purely human world at all. (28)[6]

There is obviously more to the problem than the simple techno-fixes Ackerman imagines. Greta Gaard speaks to this issue directly:

> climate change has been most widely discussed as a scientific problem requiring technological and scientific solutions without substantially transforming ideologies and economies of domination, exploitation and colonialism: this misrepresentation of climate change root causes is one part of the problem, misdirecting those who ground climate change solutions on incomplete analyses. (24)

Ackerman's hope is ungrounded and foolish.

Desperate for hope, bright people have tended other gardens of great foolishness. The concept of biophilia has been one of the sunnier ideas about us and how we fit into the world, but in the final wash, it just doesn't work out so well as a model for understanding human/environment relations. For Erich Fromm, "biophilia is the passionate love of life and all that is alive" (365). In a wide-ranging discussion of what motivates human cruelty and aggression, Fromm argues that

> Biophilic ethics have their own principle of good and evil. Good is all that serves life; evil is all that serves death. Good is reverence for life, all that enhances life,

growth, unfolding. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it
down, cuts it into pieces. (365–66)

Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson further develops the term "bio-
philia" in 1984 and defines it as "the innate tendency to focus on life
and lifelike processes" (*Biophilia* 1), "the urge to affiliate with other
forms of life" (85), "the connections that human beings subconsciously
seek with the rest of life" (*Diversity* 350). What has come to be termed
"the biophilia hypothesis" posits that biophilia is inherent (biologically
based), part of human evolutionary heritage, and associated with sur-
vival advantages. In addition to being unproven (and perhaps unprov-
able), "the biophilia hypothesis" is a seriously flawed bit of thinking. It
cannot account for the realities of the world, for the kinds of things that
are going on in the world, the factory farms, the rainforest destruction,
the biodiversity holocaust, and it cannot make the connections with
theories about exploitation, about people who gain while others (hu-
man and nonhuman) foot the bill, or about intersections among eco-
phobia, homophobia, speciesism, and sexism.

   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 wa-
ter planet is quashed, impoverished, cut, polluted, and pillaged" (5).
The passives in this sentence are very telling: quashed by what?
Impoverished by whom? Cut, polluted, and pillaged by...?
Apparently for Wilson and protégés, the culprit turns out to be rooted
no deeper than in the soils of biophilia! In *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, a
book that Wilson co-edited, Stephen Kellert explains that "the domin-
ionistic experience of nature reflects a desire to master the natural
world" (56). 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, regu-
lated, and so on? Calling these biophilia is dishonest and misleading.
The term biophilia fails to explain why environmental crises are wors-
ening, does not adequately encompass the complex range of ethical po-
sitions that humanity generally displays toward the natural
environment, and does not envision a spectrum condition but rather a
single point on such a spectrum.[7]

There is a growing sense about the inadequacy of theorizing about biophilia. At the 2015 ASLE-US hosted by the University of Idaho, a meeting of ecocritics that was truly the biggest and most diverse and brilliant to date, there was an enormous amount of exceptional work being done theorizing ecophobia. Nicole Seymour's suggestion that "we might say that ecophobia has a distinct *trans*phobic dimension: a fear of nature's changeability" indeed comes to the heart of several issues we face in discussing ecophobia. Brian Deyo talked about "the psychological dynamics of climate change denial as symptomatic of ecophobia;" Xinmin Liu about relationships between landscape perception/representation and ecophobia; Sophie Christman Lavin theorized (in a panel entitled "Ecophobia, Melancholy, and the Empathy Gap; or, Why the Anthropocene Feels So Depressing") about how memory and trauma are involved with ecophobia and how ecophobic acts "derive from and are embedded in a multidirectional memory of past and future events;" Andrew McMurry talked about "death, denial, melancholy" and ecophobia; Patrick Gonder about Thoreau, noise, and ecophobia in a film called *Upstream Color* (about two people whose lives and behaviors are affected by a complex parasite that has—unbeknownst to its victims—a three-stage life cycle in which it passes from humans to pigs to orchids); Zümre Gizem Yılmaz talked about terror, ecophobia, agency, and robotics; and there were others. The ASLE-UKI in Cambridge in September 2015 also hosted some interesting advances in theorizing of ecophobia (three talks that I heard), but again, though, I want to be clear that theorizing ecocriticism has not always been well-received and still faces considerable resistance.

As recently as last year, a leading American eco-journal deemed theorizing about ecophobia a "low priority."[8] Yet, while there are, of course, many important topics of varying priority, it seems (at least to some of us) a top priority to understand how our ethics toward nature allow us to do the bad things that we do and to move from such understandings to changing those behaviors. Even so, change in values (particularly ethical change) happens slowly.

Change in values and climate change share some common features. Both can be 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 to be to some degree in control of both. Perhaps this is where the common features end.

What exactly are the relations between the ethics of ecophobia and climate change, and how are these represented in contemporary media? How violent are the effects of virtual landscapes and spaces, and

to what degree does the divorce from material realities enforce an ethics toward nature that really points in the wrong direction? To be "virtually there" is not the same as being there. And, of course, in another sense, according to the oft-mentioned "history of Earth on a 24-hour clock," we're "virtually there": less than two minutes to midnight. What exactly is supposed to happen at midnight, and what does it mean to stare at the ugliness of our future, a future that we've created? For Walter Benjamin, it means addressing alienation: "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, is now one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (242). Benjamin might as easily have been talking about climate change fiction (cli-fi) and the spate of environmentally inspired apocalyptic movies that have kept us enthralled for the past few decades with increasing incidence.

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 that are central to such narratives. Clearly, what we have done in the environmental humanities in the past twenty or thirty years has *not* stopped or slowed the rates of species loss, carbon output, or global warming. What might make a difference is understanding why and how ecophobia functions in the production of ecomedia. 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 (often fear) of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism.[9] It is as much a hypothesis as the notion of biophilia is. Like biophilia, it is a point on an ethical spectrum, a spectrum on which everyone everywhere stands. This is not a radical idea. Racism is also a spectrum condition, as is sexism. Few intelligent scholars would deny the importance of identifying how texts participate in racist, sexist, and heterosexist/homophobic discourses. This is not an "anything goes" ethic, a radically fluid scene wherein ambiguity reigns supreme. Indeed, it seems that Karen Thornber too readily dispenses with the notion of ecophobia in the interests of advancing her own thesis on "ecoambiguity," a term at best problematical. As I have argued elsewhere,

> Of course, ambiguity is everywhere, but what would happen if we really did what Thornber is suggesting and walked away from the concept of ecophobia (or biophilia, for that matter) in favor of ecoambiguity? One way to come at this question is to work through an

> analogous model and to ask what would happen if we
> decided against theorizing about homophobia in favor
> of homoambiguity. Certainly a similar case for homoam-
> biguity over homophobia could be made analogously to
> the case Thornber makes for ecoambiguity over ecopho-
> bia. But who would make such a case, and for what rea-
> son? What would be the politics of such a stance toward
> the notion of homophobia? What kind of denial would
> this be? And what position(s) would such a denial im-
> plicitly endorse? What would happen if, following the
> same analogous pattern, Thornber argued for gynoam-
> biguity over misogyny? Again, what would be the poli-
> tics of such a stance toward the notion of misogyny?
> What kind of denial would this be? And what posi-
> tion(s) would such a denial implicitly endorse?
> ("Reading *Ecoambiguity*" 134)

Yet, even an approach that faces ecophobia full-on does not guarantee
that we can save even a single blade of grass, let alone the planet! It is a
necessary step, but it is not the full, ongoing journey. One of the prob-
lems, obviously, is that we are still thematicists stuck in interpretation
mode. As Ursula Heise wryly notes, "somewhat like cultural studies,
ecocriticism coheres more by virtue of a common political project than
on the basis of shared theoretical and methodological assumptions,
and the details of how this project should translate into the study of
culture are continually subject to challenge and revision'' (506). We are
held together by an interest in a common theme, which would be fine,
but we don't go much further than interpreting texts from that point.

A plurality of interests is an important part of what ecocriticism is,
yet, as there are core similarities among and therefore defining humans
(not diminishing or intended to diminish the importance of an extraor-
dinary diversity of shapes, sizes, hues, faiths, beliefs, tastes, sexualities,
walking styles, professions, and so on), so too are there core similarities
in this species we call ecocriticism. What this species lacks, though, is a
backbone, a methodological core that qualifies it as a theory.

While certainly ecocritics have begun to recognize the futility of of-
fering mere interpretations in their work, the fact is that much of the
work still being done in ecocriticism is precisely that: mere interpreta-
tion. Such a situation clearly is not limited to ecocriticism. It has long
been a troubling reality that a lot of literary theory is what University
of Alberta Professor David Miall provocatively dubs "pre-theoretical."
"Literary theories," he contends, "cannot be right because they cannot
ever be wrong. There is no evidence that could confute a literary

theory, thus such writings are strictly speaking no more than interpretations. Literary theorists, like Galileo's inquisitors, refuse to examine evidence for literary reading in the empirical sense; offered a telescope, they rule that such an instrument cannot exist or that it exists only as an ideological construct rather than a tool to aid perception" (23–24). Miall wants to see an empirical study of literary reading that succeeds in giving "central place to the experience of real readers, placing on the agenda for the first time the richness, range, and personal significance of the reading in our culture" (34). Ecocritics want much the same. Posing positions on the thematic function of trees in *Macbeth* is not going to do much to save the trees of the Pacific Northwest from the pine beetle, whose populations in recent years have exploded due to warmer winters. Positing proposals about the role and function of animals in *Tristram Shandy* is unlikely to stop people from eating Big Macs. So much of what passes as ecocritical theory is merely interpretive analyses from thematic starting points lacking a methodology—such as a real theory has (say, deconstruction)—to guide it.[10]

Even the ecophobia hypothesis will remain a thematic venture until it responds to the osmotic fashion in which moral behaviors are redefined by media (however we wish to define media). The tobacco industry didn't fall overnight. Knowing that cigarettes cause cancer isn't enough. Knowing that flying is bad isn't either, and it doesn't stop even ecocritics from flying all over the place: "information alone does not guarantee action" (Willoquet-Maricondi, "Preface" xii). How we change and how media participates in these changes is an ongoing and slow process of osmosis.

How media and literary texts themselves respond to the saturation points requires attention, and such attention *ipso facto* entails theory and methodology. One thing is certain: the more a given narrative *personalizes* a given terror, the more likely is a visceral and engaged response. Like Shakespeare standing behind the curtain, watching the audience's responses and snipping bits out or expanding other bits, media also very clearly responds to the audiences. This is what test screenings are all about, after all. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi notes in an early study of ecocriticism and film that "to study our representations of nature, whether linguistic or imagistic, to scrutinize how we give nature a voice in human artifacts, is to probe into our values and culturally constructed beliefs about the nonhuman world" ("Introduction" 5), and this seems a very good beginning.

There is absolutely no question that "one of the central ways we shape our relationship to other animals, our place on Earth, and the social structures that arise from these understandings is through media

and culture," as John Parham has eloquently explained in *Green Media and Popular Culture* (1). I have stated elsewhere that

> The marketability of disaster films (documentary and fictional) and the representations of future ruin they often display offers both depressing and hopeful possibilities. The narrativizing, on the one hand, writes us into positions as spectators with a poor focus. We are passive (and therefore complicit) viewers of our own dramatic decline. No less, though, are these filmic narratives potentially transformative and radical: their narrativizing of important and often complex and abstract material makes available to a broad public vital information. ("Spectators to Future Ruin" 49)

We have to ask what our viewing of this means, "how images of ecology can be used to activate popular support for the repair of our local and global ecologies" (Ross 175).[11] We have to question the sources, the statistics, and the effects these media offer. As Johanna Blakley asks,

> What if we applied the scientific rigor of the pharmaceutical industry to TV programming? What if we treated media as if it were a drug: which delivery systems would prove most potent and for whom? What types of content would prove life-changing? ("How Does Media Move Us?")

She notes that "virtually no one agrees on how to measure media usage, engagement, and most importantly, *impact*" ("How," emphasis in original). Even the comments about flying in which I have freely indulged here mask other realities about the costs of our lifestyles and about who foots the bills. Indeed, some truly startling facts have appeared about the digital revolution. For instance, what at one point may have seemed (and may still seem to some) to be a paperless, green, digital revolution is, in reality, not quite so green and sustainable as we scholars in the environmental humanities may wish to think, benefitting as we do from today's truly amazing information technologies: 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" (Rust et al. 3).

   Naomi Klein theorizes that the links between environmental destruction and capitalism cannot be ignored,[12] but capitalism is certainly not the cause of our ongoing environmental problems: it is the latest in a long history of models that rely on ecophobia, that exploit

sexism, that bank on inequitable structures, and that depend on obfuscation and lies about real costs and about who foots these bills—and it is an efficient model, well-refined and frightening. As Gaard reminds us, however, we are to "Make no mistake: women are indeed the ones most severely affected by climate change and natural disasters, but their vulnerability is not innate; rather, it is the result of inequities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty" (23). Make no mistake either in thinking that this is new: ecophobia, sexism, heterosexism, and racism predate capitalism by millennia. Capitalism is a symptom, not a cause. Addressing symptoms instead of causes does not seem a promising method for changing things.

We face a challenge that is not just about changing the economy; it is about changing ethics, and this is a monumental task. In his review of Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*, Rob Nixon notes that "to change economic norms and ethical perceptions in tandem is even more formidable than the technological battle to adapt to the heavy weather coming down the tubes" ("Naomi").

But we can be hopeful: indeed, we need to be hopeful—otherwise, why bother? We can be hopeful because there is so much more that ecomedia can do, so much that it hasn't done.[13] We can be hopeful because

> Over the last twenty years, the growing number of films and film festivals devoted to environmental concerns points to environmentally engaged cinema as a powerful tool for knowledge dissemination, consciousness raising, public debate, and, many hope, political action. (Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, "Preface" xi)

We can be hopeful because some movies do cause change.[14] We can be hopeful because there is a lot of exciting theorizing that needs to be done, and, apparently, it has been left to us to do it. To borrow a phrase from David Bowie, "we can be heroes" rather than idiots to the generations that will follow us. Much theorizing has been done, but as Sherilyn MacGregor explains in a 2010 article about the gender dimensions of climate change, much theorizing remains to be done on "the discursive constructions and categories that shape climate politics today" (223): "climate change is cast as a human crisis in which gender has no relevance" (225).[15] We can be hopeful because we know the solutions and we know the way. We know that change will only happen within a feminist framework, when we all foot our own bills. We are virtually there.

N O T E S

1. I use the term ecomedia in the broadest sense to include any media that deals with environmental issues, implicitly or explicitly, though my focus in this article is primarily on filmic media. "Ecomedia studies," meanwhile, is best defined by Stephen Rust "as a historically situated, ideologically motivated, and ethically informed approach to the intersections, of media, society, *and* the environment" (87, emphasis in original).

2. Diane Ackerman, in her exploration about aspects of the Anthropocene, discusses "an ability to bore ourselves that is so horrifying we devote much of our short lives to activities designed mainly to make us seem more interesting to ourselves" (306).

3. In a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece, Scott Slovic and Paul Slovic discuss the "psychic numbing" that attends "when we are presented with increasing numbers of victims" (Slovic and Slovic, "The Arithmetic of Compassion"). On a related topic, see also Slovic and Slovic's *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data* (2015).

4. Parts of this paragraph appear in slightly different form in my "Ecomedia and Ecophobia" (130).

5. 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".

6. See also Richard Louv, *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2008). In this book, Louv argues that access to nature, to the outdoors, and to real (rather than virtual) plants, animals, and landscapes is essential to the emotional and physical development of children. Louv argues that children today suffer from a "nature-deficit disorder." One of the more challenging tasks we face, therefore, is about grasping how technologies have changed our very understandings of nature and space. As Alice Rayner eloquently puts it, "cyberspace, variously known as the Internet, the Web, or an interactive digital technology, offers more than a new landscape for performance; it challenges the very meaning of 'space'" (350). We can't just ignore this.

7. Parts of this paragraph appear in slightly different form in my "Ecomedia and Ecophobia" (133).

8. I am grateful to Scott Slovic for pointing this out to me.

9. The preceding five sentences appear in my "Spectators to Future Ruin," 52.

10. Parts of this paragraph appear in my "Tracking Ecophobia," 30.

11. I am indebted to John Parham for pointing out this quotation.

12. Cf. Estok, "Narrativizing Science," 149: "capitalism and environmental ethics seem in many ways incommensurable." Neimanis et al. rightly note that "many scholars regard [neoliberalism and freewheeling capitalism] as the origin of current environmental degradation" (75–76). The origins, of course, go back much further.

13. Pat Brereton's welcome discussion of ecofeminism in science fiction reveals how much hope there is with this genre. Brereton's discussion devolves on *Elysium* and *The Hunger Games*, both of which position women into powerful roles; yet, the structures remain the same in both films with a simple replacement of men by women. Until the actual patriarchal structures change, it seems unlikely that we will make much progress either in terms of the environment or society. Having an African-American as President of the USA doesn't change the structures of racism that exist in the country, and white police officers continue to kill black men, women, and children; having Elizabeth I as the Queen of Shakespeare's England didn't change the structures of sexism that kept women off the stage, their parts played by cross-dressed men, and women continued to suffer in the Elizabethan period so that men could do their thing; having women at the helm in *Elysium* and *The Hunger Games* similarly doesn't make a lot of difference and doesn't seem very feminist. For that matter, having the environment the focus of so much media attention doesn't guarantee a movement toward environmentalism or to producing environmentally aware or active people. The structures remain the same, ecophobia unquestioned and untouched.

14. How we understand this change is important. In a Tedx Talk, entitled "Movies for a Change," Johanna Blakley determines, "and it took a lot of math to figure this out," that the documentary film *Food, Inc.*, in fact, did change people in terms of attitudes and behaviors. But what about a film such as *The Day After Tomorrow* or *Tomorrowland*? Did these films stop anyone from flying or from using the Internet? Food is a very different sort of category, a very personal matter that has to do with real bodily penetrations. Peter Singer and Jim Mason go as far as to say that often in history, "ethical choices about food were considered at least as significant as ethical choices about sex" (3). So to say that *Food, Inc.* changed people is not necessarily to provide useful data that can be correlated to *An Inconvenient Truth* or *28 Days Later*.

15. I am indebted to Greta Gaard for bringing this article to my attention.

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