Ecocritique

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AGAINST ENVIRONMENTALISM

Every enterprise needs to start with a careful consideration of its tools and materials. In our case, that means looking carefully at the words *media* and *environment* and the conjunction between them. *Environment* presumes something that environs and something environed. It seems safe to presume that the only ones talking about environing are human and that the environment is the nonhuman that surrounds them. For the last two hundred years, humans have inhabited two environments, the natural world and the factory, and now we are entering a third, the information environment. Scholars use the word *environment* to help distinguish the science of ecology from the social construction of environment, but at the cost of demeaning the very thing they most want to value. Ecocritique is a way of thinking these concerns critically, by placing them in crisis, at a decisive moment, as in the crisis of a disease at the turning point between recovery and terminal decline.

The state of crisis that calls for ecocritique is not just the hinge point in history we call the Anthropocene. Crisis is a condition. It has lasted as long as there has been an environment that is something excluded from human affairs. We imagine an ecology as a condition where everything connects with everything else. The problem with this concept is that it presumes there are things to connect; but the truth is that there are only connections, and the connections produce the "things." In the company of media scholars, it is safe to propose instead the formula: in an ecology, everything mediates, and everything is a medium. Graminivores mediate plants mediate sunlight. The Edenic state is primal mediation. The crisis arises when a species converts mediation into communication. Communication separates senders from receivers, signs from what they refer to, and signal from noise. Of these distinctions, the exclusion of noise is the one that most clearly mutes universal mediation in favor of messages between humans about the world.

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This environmentalization of the world, excluding it from participation in human affairs, is the basis of rule (and of all the divisions that subsequently plague humans, as Plumwood [1993] made clear). What humans exclude becomes *externality,* economists' term for resources that do not have to be paid for. Being an externality excludes from economic activity and condemns to economic passivity. Exclusion from communication excludes from politics. Mouffe (2005) and Rancière (1999) observe that slaves and women in the past, prisoners and migrants today, were and are governed with no voice in their governing. That is what is meant by *stewardship:* no matter how benevolent, it is a mark that humans rule, and what is excluded, externalized, and environmentalized is ruled.

The distinction between primal mediation and governmental communication tempts ecocritique to side with the primal ecology. That would be a mistake. It is a law of physics that time goes only one way and of history that it only repeats itself as tragedy and farce. We cannot go back to the inchoate flux of primal mediation and should not wish to. That primordial soup where everything mediates is symmetrical in every direction, a perpetual directionless flow. The more universal our communicative systems become—for example, in the internet of things, logistics, and electronic finance—the more it resembles this directionless soup. The difference between them lies in nuances: between the perpetual and the universal, the meaninglessness of individual events in the old order and their insignificance in the new. The aspiration of the information order is perfect communication, of the kind imagined in theories of the free market, a cybernetic model too often mirrored in cybernetic models of the self-equilibrating natural environment. In this way, contemporary communications stand at the brink of achieving an artificial ecology. In the form it takes today, communication has even erased the distinction between present and future so characteristic of primordial ecology, through the mechanism of debt, which spends tomorrow's money today and makes the future the dustbin of today's waste. The job of ecocritical media scholars is not to praise a lost equilibrium but to build the conditions for a future that neither mediation nor communication countenance.

For all its attempt to perfect a system in perfect harmony, when communication divided senders from receivers, it introduced a temporal difference between them. This explains the otherwise absurd pursuit of instantaneous communication, the paradox of immediate media. This would be mere duration if it weren't for the fact that the excluded world persists in the form of noise, heat, and radiation, interference, glitches, and hiss. Worse still, the technical system itself is noisy, resistant to the power that tries to force it to be nothing but an instrument of human intentions. Noise and heat are characteristics of friction, the friction between planetary and universal systems. This is what we humans feel in our alienation from nature. We cannot pretend to be at one with a world that has been so definitively excluded from ours.

History is the tale of our estrangement. It is the product of the relation between what we are as sentient, embodied, breathing, feeding, and excreting creatures and what we have become as communicative, political animals.

FOR MEDIA

There has been a dangerous lack of ambition in media studies and its various branches—communications, film, music, literature, linguistics, and so on. Each branch has nurtured its patch, and specialism is a fine thing, as Bachelard ([1951] 1977) showed. But by reining itself in to these local concerns, media studies has absolved itself of dealing with the larger scale of human activities, leaving those to history, psychology, sociology, political science, and economics. Inspection of these disciplines reveals that all of them devolve on communications and media, not only in their modes of delivery but also in their content. Polities, economies, and, most of all, societies are notoriously abstract things. Communications are material. Communication—embracing clothing, behaviors, gestures, sex, and cooking—is what humans do. We do not understand human affairs if we do not understand that they are wholly bound up in the channels and messages that connect us and that, in a communicative universe, articulate all our dealings with nature, technology, and information. We may not listen when Wittgenstein's lion speaks, but by erasing its habitat and ability to hunt its prey, we communicate to it.

Media scholars are also historical beings, meaning that we are caught in the tragic rift between perpetual mediation and infinite communication, and like every other human, we face the blank wall of a future already spent and polluted. But as humans, even if not under conditions of our own choosing, we make history and can no more avoid doing so than we can avoid communicating. To make history requires ambition. Pioneering work in textual analysis led toward more recent analyses of less obviously ecologically themed works (Mirzoeff 2014; Fay 2018), implicitly but increasingly vocally asserting that nothing is understood when the ecological implications of media are elided. Pioneering work on infrastructures leads toward deeper understanding of how content and form articulate with the machinery of production and its colonial roots (Vaughan 2019; Iheka 2018). Not only what we say but how.

Media research has, in general, respected old disciplinary boundaries too much. Ecocritical media studies has yet to engage in the kind of work on policy that digital legal scholars have undertaken (see for example deNardis and Raymond 2017; Lessig 2006; Wu 2006-7; Zittrain 2008). What are the implications of intellectual property regimes for ecological politics? How do global and national governance of telecommunications at the critical disjuncture between corporate and state power impact the deep oceans, near space, and the extraction, fabrication, and energy industries? Equally, the media field has yet to expand out from its traditional homes in entertainment and news media to investigate the dominant media of our time—that is, the media that

corporations and states use when they dominate (honorable exceptions since Braverman's foundational *Labor and Monopoly Capital* [1974] include Vismann's *Files* [2008], Rossiter on logistics [2016], Galison on scientific instruments [1997], and Zieger, Starosielski, and Hockenberry's forthcoming collection *Assembly Codes: The Logistics of Media)*. Workplace media, databases, spreadsheets, geographical information systems, financial market and logistical software, information management and planning applications are too important to be left to lawyers and economists. These are media with rapid and violent effects, not only on humans but also on how much of which kinds of fuel are burned delivering which supply-chain components derived from what mines and wells, where and how waste is dumped, with what effects on which rivers and deltas.

The unforeseen by-product of the human divorce from nature is that humans can now greet it as a stranger. If we were still one, there would be no recognition, no shame, no love. If there had been no loss—and neither mediation nor communication are capable of considering loss—there would be no history, and therefore there could be no obligation. Forced to confront the irredeemable past, humans are forced to recognize the limits of both mediation and communication as we have inherited them and the necessity of remaking them. The task of the commons is to end the exclusion of the ruled from their own government: to create the conditions of a "we" that is no longer only and miserably human.

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