

ECOCRITICISM

the ability to investigate cultural artefacts from an ecological perspective

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A recent TV advertisement for a self-storage company shows a tidal flow of ordinary household junk – CD and DVD cases, surplus clothes, shoes and the like – furling and lapping in a bedroom like waves on a shoreline. Most people can probably identify with the predicament, but what interests an ecocritic is a critical absence: a human being with money, by whose agency all that overwhelming *stuff* ended up there.

Ecocritics, who analyse literary and other texts from an environmentalist standpoint, observe that environmental crisis poses not only technical, scientific and political questions, but also *cultural* ones. Our habits of representation affect and reciprocally reflect our actions, but the enormous temporal and spatial scale of phenomena such as climate change and mass extinction, and the complex moral questions inherent in them, pose challenges for our existing artistic forms. A feeble effort like the film *The Day After Tomorrow* is an object lesson: it compresses decades of real but insensible climatic change into a few days of climactic drama, vilifies an individual - the US Vice-President - for the whole problem, and reduces global warming to a silly spectacle like *Independence Day* or *Volcano*.

At the same time, our language is packed with seldom-examined assumptions about sustainability, such as the notion of the ‘consumer’, a strange but ubiquitous creature described by Raymond Williams as ‘a very specialized variety of human being with no brain, no eyes, no senses, but who can gulp’ (Williams 1989: 216). Ecocriticism, then, is the ability to critique existing discourses, cultural artefacts, forms and genres, and explore alternatives. There is extensive published material on ecocritical research and pedagogy; what follows is a compressed and simplified example of how its first principles might be taught.

Three Hours to Save the Planet!

Hour One: Infosphere

The exercise was inspired by Bill McKibben’s *The Age of Missing Information*, which contrasts two versions of May 3, 1990: his own experience of camping and walking in the countryside of upstate New York, and the thousands of hours of cable TV recorded for him in Fairfax, Virginia, that day: drama, sports, infomercials, Christian programming, soaps, adverts, nature documentaries, everything. Having collected the tapes, he watched *all* of them, concluding that:

We believe we live in the “age of information,” that there has been an information “explosion,” an information “revolution.” While in a certain narrow sense this is the case, in many important ways just the opposite is true. We also live at a moment of deep ignorance, when vital knowledge that humans have always possessed about who

we are and where we live seems out of reach. An Unenlightenment. An age of missing information. (McKibben 2006:9)

Rather than recount his insights to learners – who hate to be preached at as much as anyone – the educator can see what observations they make on their own in just one hour of channel surfing. They must avoid stopping for more than a few minutes to watch any one programme; it is the cumulative *effect* that matters here: what is shown and what is not shown, and the implicit values communicated. It is not simply a case of ‘rejecting’ TV – as if anyone could – but of exposing its constitutive assumptions for discussion.

The learner needs some questions to be getting on with, although more may well occur to her. She needs to surf *all* the channels to get a real sense of scope – the looping repetition of ‘TV Gold’ and the music channels, the cheery bullying of the shopping channels, the portentous banality of most of the news, and the particularities of what are called ‘nature’ and ‘history’. She needs to make notes of what she sees, what it says to her, what seems to be *missing* – not just accidentally absent (which is everything it does not show), but excluded necessarily by the exigencies of the medium and its commercial demands. So:

- What sorts of *places* are represented on TV? Which countries and on what sorts of scales (i.e. inside houses, underneath rocks, from space, etc.)?
- What is the *good life*, as seen on TV? What makes us happy? What is valuable? What about death?
- Where does *history* begin and end, and what sorts of things happen in it?
- What about *pace*? Are there implications about whether faster or slower is better?
- What counts as *nature*? What sorts of creatures, doing what sorts of things, in what locations?
- What is *news* – and what is not?

More generally, the questions can be about when and why we watch TV, what it feels like to watch for a long time, and what it does to our range of emotions and experiences.

My own immediate – and pretty obvious – responses would be that history seems to be mainly populated by Nazis, nature is full of medium-sized animals eating and having sex, faster is always better – as in the tedious frenzy of 24 hour news – and the good life is about managing your body (‘You’re worth it.’), admiring other people’s, and accumulating stuff that, at the same time, you don’t really care about because you’re above that sort of thing: ‘Some things in life are priceless. For everything else, there’s Mastercard.’ The preoccupation in recent years is *transformation* – of your body, home or ‘lifestyle’. Good things come to those who can’t wait, whereas the dedicated practice using patiently-acquired skills is at best unrepresentable and at worst just *sad*.

Hour Two: Biosphere

Bill McKibben spent a day on a mountaintop, but our learners are going to spend just one hour out of doors, either sitting still quietly somewhere, or wandering around aimlessly. The further away from each other and human habitation they can get, the better – although that’s a tall order in most parts of the UK. Even just being in the garden alone will do. Crucially, all electronic devices must be switched off. For some, this will be like going cold turkey, and of

course that's part of the lesson. Getting dressed properly may be a challenge too: learners may not have any appropriate clothes. You might ask them to write down their thoughts and feelings, or wait until they return. Bringing back found objects feels like primary school, but can be surprisingly exciting.

So, again, here are some questions. This exercise is harder, because the conclusions are in some ways paradoxical or elusive. The mere sensation of *decompression* will be bewildering for many; I have had students tell me they have never been silent for so long.

- Do you know what things around you are called – the names of trees, birds, clouds? Does it matter?
- What sort of 'information' could you glean – and what do you need to know – out here?
- Is it uncomfortable? Is discomfort bad? Why?
- Is it boring? What do we mean by 'boredom'?
- Focus on each of your senses one at a time – sight, smell and taste, hearing, touch, temperature, inner physical sensations (tiredness, hunger, desire, muscular tension). What's going on?
- Vary the scale a bit – try to take a long view, then get as close up as you can, turning over rocks or bits of rotten wood, looking behind things. What happens to your sense of time and space? What about death?

Not many will experience some Romantic epiphany, but most will be surprised. Silence, boredom, discomfort and non-competitive, unpaid exertion – anathema in TV world – turn out to yield strange insights.

Hour Three: Poetry

Poetry confuses many students because it is at once visceral and intellectual: it pounds like a heartbeat or ululates like a mourner, yet can seem a fiendish cipher to which the educator alone has the key. From the childish pleasures of rhyming to the synoptic allusiveness of 'The Waste Land', poetry seems somehow to straddle nature and culture. In fact, an ecocritic will ultimately want to use poetry to question that familiar dichotomy.

There are several anthologies of 'ecopoetry' of varying quality and character, such as Neil Astley's useful but finger-wagging *Earth Shattering* and Alice Oswald's marvellously estranging *The Thunder Mutters*. Romantic poetry inspired some of the first ecocritical studies, but contemporary poets engage with nature in ways that go beyond encomia to beauty or sublimity. Try the widely-anthologized 'Corson's Inlet' by A.R. Ammons (Astley 2007: 99), inviting learners to contrast it with Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey'. Some questions to ask:

- The most striking difference is surely formal: Wordsworth's blank verse and Ammons's jagged free verse lineation, and, correspondingly, iambic pentameter versus shifting, pulsating 'eddies of meaning' and rhythm. What difference does this make?
- How does the poetic persona relate to the environment? How is he physically situated in it? What sorts of lessons does he find in it?

- What do the poems have to say about memory, beauty, fragility, danger, constancy and change?
- Characterise the diction: the kinds of nouns, verbs and adjectives you find in each poem. What do these say about the poem?
- Which do you like the most? Why?

A simple way of contrasting the poems is to say that Wordsworth's is a poem *about nature* – its (rather general) aesthetic allure and the sustenance it offers the human spirit – while Ammons has written an *ecological* poem that is attentive to the detail of a specific environment in the process of a particular encounter. 'Tintern Abbey' reflects upon the speaker's 'sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused' than the phenomenal world of animals and plants, while Ammons roams amongst myriad creatures struggling for survival – but epitomising beauty nonetheless. Wordsworth's happiness depends upon the 'cheerful faith, that all which we behold is full of blessings', whereas Ammons resolves only to 'try / to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder', always acknowledging 'that there is no finality of vision.' The advent of evolutionary biology and ecology marks a fundamental breach between Wordsworth and Ammons: the first decentres the human subject from the pinnacle of creation, and the second foregrounds a notion of *fragility* unavailable to most Romantic poets (although see Bate 2000: 153-75).

Conclusion

Criticising telly, looking under rocks and reading poetry will not save the planet, but not because ecocriticism is simply ineffectual: culture and its values will need to be understood, critiqued and transformed if a sustainable society is to be achieved. It will not save the planet because that phrase – like the very idea that you could do anything of ecological significance in three hours (besides perhaps making a baby) – is part of the problem. First of all, 'the planet', in any meaningfully complete sense, is well beyond our capacity to 'destroy'. We can disrupt the climate, wrecking large-scale human civilisations and annihilating thousands of other species, but life – the vast majority of it microscopic – will go on. And even if we really mean 'our planet' - the habitats and food species favoured by humans, the creatures we love, need and are fascinated by - saving is a religious concept, not an ecological one. As Rebecca Solnit has pointed out:

Saving is the wrong word. Jesus saves and so do banks [sic!]: they set things aside from the flux of earthly change. We never did save the whales, though we might've prevented them from becoming extinct. We will have to continue to prevent that as long as they continue *not* to be extinct.

Just as there's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing, there's no such thing as 'saving the planet', only keeping on thinking and working for a sustainable society forever. No environmentalist wants to leave behind anaesthetic dentistry, safe obstetrics, clean drinking water or even just Gore-Tex and mountain bikes; still better technologies than these will be required. Yet, as Big Yellow Self-Storage recognise, we are already drowning in stuff, and we need better ideas, feelings and values even more urgently than scientific breakthroughs. As the nature writer Aldo Leopold concluded in his seminal *Sand County Almanac* in 1949:

We are remodeling the Alhambra [desert] with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use. (Leopold 1968/1949: 226)

In the face of a lethal compact of ignorance, economic self-interest and the legacy of anthropocentric values, we shall paradoxically have to define and assert such 'gentler' criteria – what Leopold calls a 'land ethic' – with all the vigour, wit and critical insight of which an alternative culture is capable. Ecocriticism is a part of that struggle.

Visit www.asle.org.uk and www.asle.org for definitions, discussions and bibliographies of ecocriticism

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