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Geo Takach

Scripting the Environment

Oil, Democracy and the Sands of Time and Space

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*Here's to environmentalists, scholars and artists—
and to growing ties among them.*

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While not quite burying the author, whose passing the brilliant literary theorist and critic, Roland Barthes, provocatively posited in his 1967 essay, *La mort de l'auteur* (*The Death of the Author*) (1978), I appreciate his notion that it takes a village to raise a book and share the lifelong learning that goes into writing one. Accordingly, I thank a merry myriad of collaborators, contributors and supporters from the arts, the university and other fertile crannies of creation for helping to bring this effort to the page or screen before you.

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Hopefully this modest offering will stoke your own adventures as much as these Barthesian oracles have fuelled mine—without burning any coal, of course.

REFERENCE

Barthes, Roland. 1978. *Image, Music, Text* (trans: Stephen Heath). New York: Hill and Wang.

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INTRODUCTION

In its first three decades, the field of environmental communication has evolved from its roots in scientific and technical communication, and an initial focus on rhetorical analysis and on media and other communicative practices, to embrace a broader and more complex range of inquiries and approaches. Today, the field draws on disciplines such as cultural studies, geography, history, linguistics, literature, political science, psychology, social psychology and sociology to explore deeper issues around not merely the content of communication about the environment, but also its social, cultural, political and economic contexts, including concerns relating to power and justice (Cox and Depoe 2015). Yet in this Anthropocene Age in which escalating ecological perils, their consequent social inequalities, and relentless urbanization are detaching even more of the planet's more-than seven billion human residents from its remaining natural settings, scholars and practitioners focusing on the environment must do much more. A rising, global environmental consciousness is necessary, but this is only a starting point to engage in the kind of societally transformative action required to sustain the Earth as home to all life and the natural systems on which we all rely for survival.

That this kind of transformation depends on engaging people—individuals, groups, communities, nations and beyond—thrusts environmental communicators to the vanguard of the task. Scholarship and practice in the field, while helpful and laudable, are simply not enough. The eminent scholar, Robert Cox (2007), argues that the field must align itself with the ethical premises and duties of 'crisis disciplines' like conservation biology. Conflicting human priorities, dictated largely by global capitalism, fuelled

by the extraction of potent, plentiful and polluting fossil fuels, have made environmental communication inescapably political in practice. And for those who see and seek to prevent the starkly and indisputably imminent suicide, genocide and ecocide inherent in business-as-usual, the only alternative is a more activist stance, requiring both broader and deeper engagement with citizens at every level of society, on every level of meaning and at the most visceral level of emotion, appealing to our highest hopes, our purest virtues and our innermost values to make change happen. Indeed, the field's current landmark reference text, *The Routledge Handbook of Environment and Communication* (Hansen and Cox 2015), concludes with a clarion call by Susanne Moser for:

A humanistic environmental communication, fundamentally driven by a desire to provide solace in a time of difficulty, a hope to foster understanding and create meaning in a disrupted, disruptive environment, a wish to restore and sustain human welfare in the midst of rapid change, and a longing to support human emancipation and evolution in the Anthropocene toward our highest selves, such a discipline and practice is not just a crisis discipline, but a restorative one. (2015, 409)

This is precisely why this book exists. Building on my experience as a professional writer, communication consultant and filmmaker, and as a scholar and educator engaged in environmental communication, this work explores the potential of engaging broader publics by presenting research in that field, and in environmental studies generally, through artistic forms. Drawing on my practice, this work will focus on writing scripts for the screen and the stage. Using filmmaking in a research process, for example, ‘can be seen as central in both reflection-in-action and reflection on action (Schön 1983) ... [and] ‘[s]cripting and editing, in particular, allow for a highly granulated “reflective conversation with the situation”’ (Arnall and Martinussen 2010, 117).

In making a case for arts-based research in a field rooted in technical and scientific communication, this book's aims are manifested in three ways. First, I provide examples of arts-based research by way of scripts from my practice as a writer for stage and screen. These draw on my multipronged case study of what has been called the world's largest industrial project (Leahy 2006), the bituminous sands found in the boreal forest of northeastern Alberta, Canada—which I'll call the *bit-sands*, as explained in Chap. 2. Further, this work discusses the theory and research

methodology underlying those scripts, to help you situate and assess my efforts (and ultimately, perhaps yours) within established and emerging academic traditions. Finally, I include ongoing, reflective analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of my approach, along with practical suggestions, in the hope that they might help and inspire your own research creation.

As an environmental scholar, you might take up or expand expressions of your own research in artistic forms.

As a teacher, you might instruct and motivate students to take up the tremendous opportunity and challenge offered by artistic forms to affect and move others to action on ecological concerns.

As a practising communicator, you might harness the power of artistic inquiry to boost the ultimate impact of your work, not merely on people, but ultimately, on the Earth that sustains all life, more-than-human as well as our own.

Chapter 1, ‘Environment, Communication and Arts-Based Research’, sets out the project of this book: to study why and how environmental scholarship can and should be represented through arts-based forms, in addition to traditional and emerging quantitative and qualitative methods. I situate the nexus between environment and art, while positioning arts-based research as a newer paradigm for scholarly inquiry, based not on the probability of occurrence (quantitative), nor on plausibility or relevance (qualitative), but on the possibility of individual or cultural transformation via intellectual, emotional and aesthetic engagement. I outline the advantages, challenges and approaches to arts-based research in environmental studies, and lay the foundation for the book’s concluding, proposed framework for engaging broader publics through arts-based research in environmental studies.

Chapter 2, ‘A Line in the Bit-Sands’, introduces the context of my multipronged case study on environmental communication and arts-based research. Building on a core premise of the former field—that representations of the environment ‘reflect and influence our social, economic or ideological interests’ (Cox and Depoe 2015, 15)—this case study centres on how the identity of a place and the values of its residents are constructed and contested in the face of environmental concerns around fossil-fuel extraction in a globalized and highly visual society. Specifically, we take an arts-based look at the rising, international public-relations war around Alberta’s environmental stewardship of the world’s third-largest source of oil and its largest source of synthetic oil. I situate this massive extraction

of fossil fuel as a colossal cash cow, an ecological calamity and a symbolic epicentre of the rising, global clash between the economic-development imperatives of extractive capitalism and its increasingly unsustainable costs. That clash epitomizes what the late, great Canadian theorist, Harold Innis (2007, 2008), described as a struggle for balance between societies with values based on opposing axes of time and space. The chapter concludes with notes on the theory and research methods grounding this work.

The ensuing trio of chapters feature examples of arts-based approaches to environmental communication drawing on research from our case study, followed by analysis and commentary on theory applicable to the medium involved, the context of the creation and dissemination of the work in question, and reflections to help to ground an initial framework for conducting arts-based research in the field of environmental studies. Each chapter begins with a script, followed by a discussion of my choices in terms of the genesis of the idea, sources of the research (stories, or more scientifically, ‘data’), the format, the voices included, the world of the story, its structure and visual style, and other notes on the meeting of synthesis, analysis and (re)presentation in the script.

Chapter 3, entitled ‘Tared and Feathered’, presents a script for a one-hour documentary film, framed as a television talk-show featuring an imagined summit of participants in the public-relations war over Alberta’s environmental stewardship of the bit-sands.

Chapter 4, ‘Voices from the Visual Volley’, presents an audio-visual script for a camera-less documentary film in which diverse documentary filmmakers, government communicators, hired PR specialists and others dialogue on stewardship of the bit-sands as an issue of public health.

Chapter 5, ‘War of the Wild Roses’, presents an extended synopsis of a script for my attempt at advancing a new genre—the *musical* eco-comedy—in which historical and fictionalized characters compete to abort, or accelerate further, the extraction of a fictionalized unconventional fossil fuel. Bits of actual scenes and some sample song lyrics are included to illustrate the form.

Chapter 6, ‘Scripting Environmental Research’, consolidates lessons learned from the preceding trio of chapters to propose an initial framework for engaging broader publics through arts-based forms of environmental scholarship, in this case, writing scripts for the screen and stage. It consolidates my eight-step approach to writing screenplays, audio-visual scripts and stage plays, then synthesizes the emerging literature on evaluating arts-based research.

The Appendix concludes the proceedings with a series of summative questions embodying my proposed initial framework for conducting arts-based research, and engaging broader publics through arts-based research in environmental studies.

I invite you now to turn over the hourglass and begin our journey through the sands of time and space.

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