

A Return to Ecological Awareness in Traditional and Modern Media



Statement of Intent

My Honors thesis will provide an analysis of three pieces of both traditional and modern media: a novel called *The Overstory*, a video game called *The Witness*, and a film called *Still Life*. These three works have unique differences in their structure and devices which direct focus away from the typical human dramas of conflict and progress and emphasize the ways in which humankind is inseparably connected to their environment, a concept which is central to the idea of ecological connection between humankind and the earth.

Ecocritical theorists such as Amitav Gosh and Timothy Morton argue that traditional literary forms and narrative structures create an unrealistic separation between the human and their environment and make physical space within narrative merely a setting for the social or psychological human drama rather than serving as an integral part of the narrative. In effect, the central events of these narratives could really happen anywhere because they are not truly grounded in a place. As a result of this, the events of these narratives often become disconnected from the realities surrounding them and are simply given flavor by the backdrop of “setting.” This, in turn, further perpetuates the modern sentiment that human progress is the central story happening on the earth at any given moment and that the human drama is non-reliant on the existence of the physical, natural space surrounding it. In other words, these theorists argue that these traditional forms of narrative perpetuate the mindset which has led to current environmental crisis around the globe.

In this project I will argue that through experimental and untraditional methods, including the use of spatial logic, non-linearity, and the blending of foreground and background, both new and old forms of media can serve as tools to begin breaking down these artificial boundaries between the narratives we consume and the environmental issues which surround them and create a new sense of global responsibility for, and interconnectedness with, the earth which we live on.

Project Significance

In the school of ecocriticism, an increasing number of critics and scholars are pointing to media as part of the cause for human disregard for the natural world and their neglect of its care and protection. Amitav Ghosh in particular dissect the ways in which fictional narratives drive the cause of the human without regard for the non-human surroundings which may be affected by, and central to, the events of the plot. In his work *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh quotes Franco Moretti as saying that the focused treatment of human drama “offer[s] the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life.”¹ He later states that the physical world of narratives, including the natural environment in which the events take place, has a “relation to the action [which] is as close as that of a stage to a play.”² The central focus of these narratives plants human action firmly in the foreground while the supporting role of the physical is used for a backdrop.

In relegating the environment within these stories toward an uncharacterized space in the background, the plight of the characters and the events of the plot become increasingly

¹ Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017. 19.

² ---. 58.

autonomous and independent of the physical world which surrounds them. As this takes place, issues of human connection with their environment are also left in the background and the story of humanity as an autonomous, independent force of dominion within the natural world becomes an unspoken, but central narrative of each story. To this point of disconnectedness, Timothy Morton's work *The Ecological Thought* makes a definitive claim for ecocriticism in stating that "to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected... is the ecological thought. And the more we consider it, the more our world opens up"³ and that "[e]cology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence."⁴ In a modern world which has an increasing abundance of entertainment media, these stories which are grounded in centuries of human-centric values and motives become increasingly cemented in their reflected reality and have a greater potential to drive people from this sense of interconnectedness which exists within the world. Gosh argues that if media continues to press the effects of human subjects on the physical world to the background of the narratives we consume, our value of the natural world, and our protection of it as our ecological home, will continue to diminish until we reach a time of perceived separation from the physical world—a time when we will be inevitably reminded of our reliance of the natural world as it crumbles beneath the weight of our progress-driven societal structure.

While much of media may continue to perpetuate aspects of this neglectful mindset toward the physical world around us, I would argue that media can also become a central force to reverse the effects which it has brought through perusing non-traditional forms and using methods and devices which can accent ecological themes in tandem with human ones to

³ Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press, 2012. 1.

⁴ ---, 4.

reestablish in our societal narrative that we cannot exist independently from our world—that the story of the human is dependent on the non-human and that the world as we know it would not exist in the same way without human interaction. In my argument, I will hold up a few pieces as examples and explore the ways that their structures work toward this and, in turn, the way that other works/narratives may be able to do the same. This analysis will begin with a more traditional work in the form of a novel and move toward an exploration of newer forms such as film and video gaming which have more spatial capability. I will discuss the strengths of each form and the unique ways that they are able to portray these themes.

Project Overview

Because there is much literary criticism and theory which is critical of the modern novel and other media in the portrayal of “normality” and the ascendant nature of humanity over other forms of life, my project will emphasize three pieces of media which use experimental narrative devices and structures which place more focus on ecology than individuality. I will analyze the ways in which *The Witness* (a video game), *Still Life* (a film), and *The Overstory* (a novel) challenge the idea of progressive narrative, construct places and spaces for the characters to inhabit (“worldbuilding”) rather than simply move through, and blur the lines between the traditional foreground (the human drama) and background (environment) of narratives. My approach will be aided with research regarding the current discussion surrounding the overlaps in literary criticism and ecological study, bridging the gaps between the two and exploring the ways in which media, rather than driving people farther from the world around them, can serve as a tool to draw them back into the world and encourage them to recognize and appreciate the multiplicity of ways in which their daily life is connected to nature and physical space.

This project will require experience in analyzing texts of from various disciplines and genres and a vocabulary which will allow for a careful exploration of the aspects which are most pertinent to the analysis. Because it will be focused on ecocriticism, I have compiled a preliminary bibliography and done research in relation to ecological thought and the ways in which it overlaps with various aspects of media and the arts.

In the pieces that I have selected for my analysis throughout this project, I have focused on works which demonstrate the ways that the form of the work itself, and the methods used to create that form, speaks to the values behind it as much as, if not more than, the values explicitly handled within it. For a novel, I selected *The Overstory* because of use of trees not only as a symbol for environmental preservation, but also as an invitation to play with the form of the novel. Within the interwoven plotlines of the narrative—which themselves are patterned in the form of roots, trunk, leaves, and seeds—the lives of humans overlap and tangle in ways that reflect the interconnected system of the trees which surround the characters. In addition, the temporal frame of the narrative will occasionally shift to be seen from the perspective of a tree, a tactic which brings into question the immediate importance of the human story happening around it when, from the temporal perspective of that tree, the events come and go in a matter of moments.

Still Life is a film which is pertinent to this project because of the ways in which it actively seeks to press the background of the film into the foreground, almost creating space for it to become a character which is actively involved in the lives of each character. The focus and framing of the camera and the methodical way in which the characters move about their landscape constantly call attention to what is happening around the humans in the film rather than promoting the fast-paced drama that film is often known to portray. These techniques press

the viewer to take notice of the events surrounding the narrative, the ways in which it is impacting the environment, and the ways in which the environmental changes then affect the people who are losing their home next to the water. The specific events which drive these people from their homes is not the focal-point of the narrative and the mass-migration from the valley is never directly shown, but because of the techniques used in the film, they become a crucial part of the film's drama and a large part of what the viewer takes away.

Taking one step farther into the realm of visual methods, *The Witness* is a piece of interactive media, a video game, which casts aside all reliance on narrative structure in search for an experience whose focal point is solely on the interactions between the player and the world around them. With the exception of a defined starting point within the game world and an "ending" which can only be accessed after the completion of any seven of the ten areas within the game world, the player is given little direction and is free to explore the world at the pace of their own curiosity, solving puzzles and discovering new places. There is no linear structure which drives the progress of the player in any particular direction and the lack of narrative removes the time-sensitive pressure which drives player progress in many video games. These structures allow the player to become more intimately connected with their world and to focus on the environment without distraction, thus creating a more grounded sense of place which the player inhabits. This sense of place is greater enhanced as the puzzles in many areas of the game require the player to use the environment around them to complete the puzzles, relying on horizontal logic and spatial awareness rather than abstracted rules and patterns. This ultimately leads the player to become more mindful of their surroundings and notice the ways in which the player's point of view and the natural world come together to create an experience which could be done no other way than in an interactive medium.

In connection with these works, I have studied several theoretical texts which have directed my path toward the question of ecology in media. As mentioned earlier, Gosh's work *The Great Derangement* speaks directly of the disconnect between the environmental crisis faced by modern society and the ways in which the structure and methods of the novel are poorly equipped to address these larger issues in a way that does not feel exaggerated or cliché. He speaks for different methods and "hybrid forms" which rely more upon various types of sensory reasoning and communication other than language and claims that these new approaches may be needed to bring about the greater change to solve the issue of climate change and restore a global mindfulness of the human impact on the environment.⁵ This approach which directly connects an environmental issue with issues of the humanities addresses the fact that form can often speak more about values than the themes contained in the novel itself and have a larger impact than just the words which are expressed. The ways in which the environments are described, the pace at which people move through the world around them, and the focus on the human drama create a style which speaks by not only through what it chooses to include, but also by what it chooses to exclude.

Timothy Morton has also been a central source as I have worked with *The Witness* in the past and explored the ways in which visual arts are able to express themes that carry more heavily in experience than in text. *The Ecological Thought*⁶ is the work which I have referenced the most to understand the ways in which the arts can restore the connections between mankind and their environment. In speaking of this, Morton states that "[s]tudying art is important, because art sometimes gives voice to what is unspeakable elsewhere, either temporally—one day

⁵ Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017. 82-84.

⁶ Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

we will find the words—or intrinsically—words are impossible. Since the ecological thought is so new and so open, and therefore so difficult, we should expect art to show us some of the way.”⁷ Approaching the forms of film and video gaming require new ways of analytical thinking and allow a way to explore some of the “hybrid forms” which Gosh speaks of. For Morton, these modern, and sometimes experimental, forms open new ways to make sense of a problem that may be hard to approach through language because it is not based in concepts and ideas but rather in a sensory understanding of physicality and connectedness.

With Morton’s help working through that project, I have come to gain a greater appreciation for the importance of this current thesis project. As I further explore *The Witness* and the other two works which are part of this project, the findings and analysis which arise from it will expand my ability to draw connections between the arts and the world which surrounds them, but to do so with regards to impactful, important, and time sensitive issues which affect people around the globe. In exploring experimental and effective methods of discussing problems which exist in the relationship between humankind and their surroundings, I will be working to elevate and encourage the use of these unique methods, as well as discovering new ways of making the most of a particular medium, to explore timely and significant issues which surround us. Amidst an age which so readily explores social issues within the realm of the arts and seeks change through pathos in storytelling, I feel that an approach to ecological issues is similarly deserving in restoring people to a sense of place—a sense of belonging to the physical world which we live in.

⁷ ---. 12.

Moving forward, my approach to research will be to thoroughly familiarize myself with foundational texts of ecology, place and space theory, and other texts discussing the problems with traditional linear/causal progression in narrative driven media and apply them toward these three pieces and explore the ways in which the differences between the three mediums create both opportunities for and challenges against change.

Preliminary bibliography

Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso, 2008.

Benjamin, Walter, et al. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Schocken Books, 2013.

Bogost, Ian. *How to Do Things with Videogames*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

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Buell, Lawrence. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

Thesis Committee & Qualifications

My honors coordinator, Professor Call, is someone that I have taken classes with and met with over the past year and a half and have gained a lot from working with him. His interest in the potential of new media and the themes which I will be addressing throughout my thesis will be extremely helpful as I begin to explore new forms of media through a theoretical lens. He has helped me in my approach to this project in determining how I can be interdisciplinary, yet still focused in my approach.

Professor Call recommended that I work with Professor Oscarson in the IHUM department as my thesis advisor to help address the ecological needs of my research. I have taken a class from Professor Oscarson and worked with him directly in a semester research project in approaching *The Witness* from a theoretical perspective. His experience in film and its connection with the ecological thought will be helpful as I apply these ideas to non-traditional styles and works. As I have worked with Professor Oscarson in the past, he has been extremely helpful at taking my questions and helping me see new avenues and questions to consider.

Professor ~~Handley~~ was recommended as a reader for my thesis by both Professors Call and Oscarson due to his experience in literature and ecology. Having a professor and author who has worked with the ideas of ecological connection between people and their environments will allow me to have a place to turn with questions concerning traditional approaches to narrative and the ways in which it clashes with new considerations in the ecological thought.

Project Timeline

Proposal completed – May 15

Initial theoretical research – May 15 – May 31

Initial draft of chapter 1 – June 1 – June 30

Initial draft of chapter 2– July 1 – July 31

Initial draft of Chapter 3 – August 1 – August 31

Editing of complete first draft – September 1 – September 15

Editing of second draft – September 15 – November 15

Schedule thesis defense – November 1

Defend theses – December 1

Final thesis submission – December 15

Funding Request

Copy of *The Witness* --- \$8.50

Copy of *The Overstory* by Richard Powers--- \$12.24

Copy of *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Gosh--- \$13.60

Copy of *The Ecological Thought* by Timothy Morton--- \$21

Copy of *How to Do Things with Videogames* Ian Bogos--- \$18.29

Final printed physical copy --- \$6

Total Requested Funding: \$79.63