UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO

Enviro-toons:

How Animated Media Communicate Environmental Themes

A DISSERTATION

For partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ENGLISH: LITERATURE & ENVIRONMENT

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August 2010

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the dissertation
prepared under our supervision by

DEIDRE M. PIKE

entitled

Enviro-toons
How Animated Media Communicate Environmental Themes

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August, 2010

Abstract

Enviro-toons: How Animated Media Communicate Environmental Themes adopts an ecocritical approach to exploring environmental themes in contemporary U.S. animation. As such, it exemplifies a newly emerging strain of green cultural criticism that considers the texts of popular culture while rooting itself in ecocritical literary theory. Animations geared for adult or mixed audiences are examined in light of Joseph Meeker's considerations of tragic and comic discourse modes and Mikhail Bakhtin's folk culture, carnivalesque, and distinctions between the epic (a fixed monologue) and the novel (an open dialogic exploration). This study proposes a loose taxonomy of animation with environmental themes—enviro-toons—situating these texts along a continuum between the monologic and dialogic texts, to borrow Bakhtin's terms. The term monologic as used here indicates animated texts with dualistic social or political agendas evidently intended to indoctrinate the masses. The designation of dialogic enviro-toon refers to a text that exemplifies multiple-voiced and pluralistic perspectives. Aiding this textual analysis is Scott Slovic's taxonomy of the rhapsodic (celebratory) and jeremiad (warning) forms in the rhetoric of the literary nature-writing genre. Finally, this work also considers animation as a form, in light of media scholar Marshall McLuhan's categories of "hot" or detailed, high-resolution media like 3D version of *Avatar* and "cool" or low-resolution media, like The Simpsons Movie and *South Park*, digitally crafted to look like the figures are roughly cut from construction paper. A close reading of Disney-Pixar's *Wall-E* offers a glimpse into a text that straddles the border of monologic and dialogic media. The messages and forms of enviro-toons considered together provide a rich means of better understanding and characterizing the genre.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help of several individuals. My colleagues at the Reynolds School of Journalism have offered continual support and encouragement. In particular, important feedback and needed contributions came from Dr. Donica Mensing and Dr. Michael Edward Lenert, committee members. Donica continually inspires me to create academic work that's relevant to the things I love—teaching and writing. Ed's sense of humor, knowledge of media studies, and valuable advice on academic protocol proved indispensible.

This project began as an outgrowth of the work I began in an environmental rhetoric class taught by Dr. Jane Detweiler. A paper I began in Jane's class turned into my first published academic work, "Carnival in the Rainforest," which is chapter eight in *The Deep End of South Park* (2009).

I feel privileged to have two of the founding scholars of the ecocritical community on my committee: Dr. Cheryll Glotfelty and Dr. Scott Slovic. Cheryll's insights and careful reading of my dissertation prospectus and drafts provide numerous useful ways of thinking about the larger questions of ecocriticism. Scott's passion for nature writing and environmental criticism captured my interest when I was an undergraduate taking his contemporary American nonfiction class more than a decade ago. His writings, along with his thoughtful pedagogy, motivated me to spend five years working on a doctoral degree focusing on literature and environment. I am honored that a scholar of his international renown would chair my doctoral committee.

Support and encouragement came from Dr. Susan Tchudi, Launie Gardner, Kathleen O'Brien, Carli Cutchin, Misty Kinser, and my family. My cartoon-watching

teenagers became cartoon-watching adults while I pursued this degree: Jesse, Stephanie,

Tabitha, Eric, Dan, Terina, daughter-in-law Tania, granddaughter Lilia and family

partners Sara and Jeff. I am proud of their choices to live simply and lightly on the planet.

The project was made possible, most of all, by the continual support of my laugh partner

David. All good things.

Table of contents

Preface

To kick-start a discussion in an introductory media criticism class, I show the first half of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animal's notorious "Veggie Love," which is billed as a "Banned Superbowl Ad." This is a live-action TV spot, not an animation, but I think the example represents what I want to talk about in this dissertation. First, I tell students that I am not convinced the ad was actually banned by the network. The cagey strategy got some attention from reporters, though, and that's what PETA is all about. Plenty of people wanted to see the ad that was said to be "too sexy" for the Superbowl ("Veggie Love").

At the ad's page on PETA's Web site, a blonde in revealing black lingerie reclines against a crimson background. Her eyes are closed under a black mask partially lifted over her forehead. In one hand she holds a bunch of asparagus close to her glistening chest. The other hand rests on her inner thigh. A streaming video player is embedded on this crimson page. When we click on the too-hot TV spot, loud electronic music begins and a strip tease ensues. Three women discard, in turn, a black jacket, a towel, and a silky robe. Shots from the rear show the women's, well, rears, clad in translucent bits of fabric. Women strike erotic poses with vegetables that one of my students describes as "phallic" to the chuckling of others. On the screen, a woman crawls up to a pumpkin and gives it a nice long lick. Another drizzles oil over broccoli. One takes her greens into the hot tub. During this short human-veggie sex expo, text throbs over the screen. "Studies show vegetarians have better sex."

At this point, I pause the video and talk about its message and its intended audience. Nothing too subtle here. Sex sells. Vegetarians are sexy. Porn-star sexy. The ad

seems geared to football-watching guys, for obvious reasons. Also, a female student notes that women may be part of the intended audience, as the short video teaches women how to act in seductive ways and might even suggest that vegetarianism would help women look like these slender and attractive supermodels.

But the ad is not over. It goes on for another couple of minutes at the PETA Web site. I play the remainder of the streaming video. Strip show over, the music shifts, becomes ominous and dark. The activist advertisement quickly gets serious. Between the several "reasons to become a vegetarian" offered by alternating narrators, PETA footage of dying animals, slaughter, inhumane treatment of chickens, pigs, cows flash on the screen. The "reasons" begin reasonably. Going vegetarian can help combat heart disease and it keeps you thin, and "in every package of chicken, there's a little poop." The word "poop" is repeated with a slight giggle. The reasons, at first numbered, begin to fly at the audience faster and the narrators become more emotional. Animals feel pain and fear. They don't want to die. Everybody wants to be free. "No matter how you slice it, it's still flesh" ("Veggie Love"). The message turns to harsh indictment. If you aren't a vegetarian, you can't call yourself an environmentalist. You can't call yourself a vegetarian if you eat fish.

Our world of possibilities shrinks at this bleak monologue. Though students chuckled at the start of this video, the room is now quiet. When the ad shows a worker dropping a large cement block on a pig's head, a few students gasp.

Then it's over. We talk about how the message shifted from sex to violence. "It's propaganda," one student observes. The students want to debate the facts. One young man argues that most farms treat livestock humanely. One young woman demands to

know how an animal is slaughtered humanely. A few students note that the "poop" argument is old and we've already come to accept that there's a little poop in everything, and not just meat but cereal and French fries. Several meat-eating students point out that though they eat meat, they are not fat.

Overall, more than a few students are angry. Some feel fear or guilt. But what of it? For this demographic of college-degree-pursuing twenty-somethings, the message can be pretty easily discarded. We've heard this. We're desensitized. The ad isn't real. A few students speculate that PETA picked its most sensational and heinous video footage to convince us not to eat meat. The commercial, a few students suggest, might even be detrimental to their motivation to act in environmentally responsible ways. The PETA ad seems to take away our rights to call ourselves environmentalists for the efforts we may be making to live lightly on the planet. The argument demands an all-or-nothing response.

"I feel like I can't live up to those standards, so why bother trying?" one woman says.

One thing on which my students seem to agree is the difficulty in communicating messages about the treatment of animals, and these complications extend to the larger discourse about environmental issues. In an essay in *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America* (1996), Scott Slovic taxonomizes environmental discourse into the rhapsodic or celebratory mode, the jeremiad (a critique or warning), or a hybrid of the two. The jeremiad, a label that might easily be applied to at least the latter portion of PETA's commercial, raises awareness via a "shock effect," but Slovic questions whether it achieves any "long-term transformation of values" ("Epistemology

and Politics in American Nature Writing" 105). It might even be counter-productive in some cases. "[T]he strident presentation of ideology or environmental information in the form of an overt and sustained jeremiad is likely not only to drive non-environmentalists further away from an environmentally concerned attitude, but to produce a response of denial even among an environmentally attuned audience" (105). Slovic concludes that the jeremiad is useful for getting the public's attention while rhapsodic nature writing may be more likely to shift values, especially with repeated exposure. Much environmentally themed discourse blends these forms in useful ways.

Slovic's insights provide one useful method of considering this PETA commercial with my class and, in a larger sense, with regard to the question of environmental topics in animated discourse, which is the topic of this dissertation. Arguably, the PETA ad begins with what might perhaps be described as a bit of a rhapsodic tribute to the vegetable-enhanced sexuality of the spectacular women stripping on behalf of the protection of animals. But it quickly turns into the kind of jeremiad that, as Slovic writes, might cause its audience "to flinch, to pull back and say, 'Wait a minute—things can't be that bad'" (105). The PETA has made my students flinch. Though I've seen it several times, it still chokes me up and, despite this, makes me feel more helpless and guilty and less empowered and ready for action. I have not yet turned from my carnivorous ways.

"I can't be an environmentalist unless I give up meat and fish," I say. "My commitment to a low-emission vehicle that gets great gas mileage doesn't matter. Riding my bike means nothing. That I buy less and shop more often from sustainable manufacturers doesn't count. Growing my own food in the backyard? No points for that. I might as well say 'Why bother?'"

The students get it.

My son and daughter are vegetarians. But neither of them seems to appreciate PETA's efforts to sensationalize or judge. How did they acquire this attitude? I'm sure many factors come into play. Both have watched several episodes of *The Simpsons* (and several other cartoons) so often that they can quote lines from it. In one episode, "Lisa Becomes a Vegetarian." I describe the plot of this cartoon to my students though several have seen it.

In the episode, Lisa decides to become a vegetarian after she falls in love with an animal at a petting zoo. She loves animals and decides she can no longer eat them. At first, she makes passionate and aggressive efforts to convert her family and friends. Her efforts are met with ridicule. She learns to accept others at the advice of her new vegetarian friends, storekeeper Apu and recording stars Paul and Linda McCartney.[1] The cartoon received a high rating when it aired in October 1995, during the show's seventh season. The episode won an Environmental Media Award and a Genesis Award for its treatments of environmental and animal issues. Paul McCartney agreed to voice his animated self for the episode on the condition that Lisa Simpson would remain a vegetarian for the life of the series. And she has.

"I think we can learn things from a cartoon character with a yellow bulbous head," I say. Several of the students have seen the episode to which I refer. A few of my students argue that *The Simpsons* is a fine show for older people like me. *South Park* is edgier and more suited, a few argued, to their generation. Though at age forty-four I'm practically a senior citizen to them, I say that I love *South Park*, too. In fact, the only

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[1] This leads to a well-known Homer Simpson line: "Rock stars, is there anything they don't know?"

thing I like more than *The Simpsons* and *South Park* is having an interesting conversation like this one with my media criticism classes at the Reynolds School of Journalism.

Perhaps in a future class, I'll show them the award-winning cartoon short that parodies a popular Hollywood film on behalf of promoting vegetarianism, *The Meatrix*. In it, a cow named Moo-pheus shows us the reality behind our meat consumption—factory farms. Now a series, *The Meatrix* animated short has been translated into 30 languages. More than fifteen million viewers have seen it, according to an estimate at the Grace and Free Range Studio Web site.

I think my students will laugh at the parody of *The Meatrix*. Laughter and conversation may be the most important things that I can offer to my students, my friends, and my family. I began this dissertation with an epigragh from François Rabelais's prologue to *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. In the sixteenth century, Rabelais argued in favor of jests and mockeries as an antidote to "fair, goodly books, stuffed with high conceptions" (2). Rabelais proposed that his drunken musings, profane word play, and visceral accounts of bodily fluids did hold something of value for the discerning reader. Rather than let "sorrow consume" the minds of his audience, he suggests: "One inch of joy surmounts of grief a span; Because to laugh is proper to the man" (1). That's my motto for this dissertation, and it's not a bad thing to have in mind when considering environmental discourse.

Chapter One: Ecocriticism and Animation

In enunciating itself, animation enunciates America: history, mythology, freedom.

--Paul Wells, Animation in America (6)

Animation [...] readily lends itself to investing the worlds of inanimate objects, of animals and of nature with real spirit and character. For thousands of years nature and the animal world were considered to possess these qualities. Only in more recent ages has the pursuit of reason weakened our perceptions.

--James Clarke, Animated Films (2)

Marge: You won't be watching these cartoons any more. Ever.

Lisa: But Mom, if you take our cartoons away, we'll grow up without a sense of humor and be robots.

Bart: Really? What kind of robots?

-- "Itchy, Scratchy and Marge" The Simpsons

As an ecocritic with experience in environmental journalism and a taste for U.S. nature writing, I might have once dismissed the question of whether cartoons could have a wide cultural impact. Greek philosophy changes the world. Judeo-Christian writings gathered into a Bible impact a hemisphere or two. Thoreau's *Walden*—invoked by

everyone from the religious right to nudists, U.S. soldiers, and Kimberly-Clark Corp.,[1]—

shapes a nation's self-image. But the foul-mouthed fourth graders of *South Park*? Fox's

Homer Simpson? A klutzy binocular-eyed robot animated by Disney's Pixar?

Ecocritical scholars are beginning to pay attention to the role that pop culture texts

might have in a contemporary global village threatened by climate change, deforestation,

mass extinctions, and peak oil issues, to name a few. This attention comes at a crucial time,

as scientists, activists, and community leaders work to guide humans to the kind of awareness

that might provoke ecological attitude adjustment on individual, state, and corporate levels.

Despite passionate efforts to communicate these urgent ideas, at the beginning of 2009,

Americans deemed the environment and global warming low on a list of priorities for an

incoming presidential administration.[2] Ecocriticism as a discipline began as a mode of

literary criticism committed to observing narrative patterns and stories that impact human

awareness of and engagement with our environments. In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism*

Reader, an 1996 collection of essays in the field, Cheryll Glotfelty explains that ecocriticism

is rooted in a desire to contribute to the kinds of cultural changes that lead to changed

actions:

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[1] In *The Environmental Imagination*, ecocritic Lawrence Buell writes of Thoreau as "cultural icon." He quotes *American Heritage* magazine as listing *Walden* as the first of "ten books that shaped the American character" and goes on to list the nudists, the soldiers and the paper company that invoked Henry with a new line of paper, Thoreau vellum (Buell 313-14).

[2] A poll by the *Pew Research Center for the People & the Press* conducted the first week of January 2009 found that people felt the top three priorities for incoming president Obama should be the economy (85 percent), jobs (82 percent), and terrorism (76 percent). About 41 percent of those surveyed thought something called "environment" should be a priority. "Global warming" (30 percent) was dead last of the issues included on the Pew Center's graphical chart.

Many of us in colleges and universities worldwide find ourselves in a dilemma. Our

temperaments and talents have deposited us in literature departments, but, as

environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous.

[…] How then can we contribute to environmental restoration, not just in our spare

time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature? (xx-xxi)

Though the field has exploded in multiple directions since 1996, ecocriticism is still often

infused with activist sensibilities. As I will show in this chapter, ecocriticism as a critical

approach is being increasingly applied to texts and genres beyond those that are explicitly

"nature" writing, from speculative fiction to films. Yet ecocriticism retains its early

commitment to investigate the relationships between ecosystems and texts, exploring how

these texts might alter views of the world, change behaviors, and lead to commitment to do

the work that Glotfelty calls "environmental restoration" (xxi).

The term enviro-toon comes from cultural critic Jaime Weinman, who sorts animation

into two simple categories. Some cartoons are useful for depicting the complexity of

ecological issues. Others represent "a terrifying type of kiddie show" ("Things That Suck:

The Smoggies"). Example of the latter: Weinman calls the *Captain Planet* and *The Smoggies*

of the late 1980s and early 1990s "hideous" and "pretty offensive," respectively. Weinman

explains:

[T]he enviro-toon poses as an "educational" show, but it's not actually educating in

the sense of teaching children about certain facts; instead of facts, it teaches a

particular morality, and stacks the deck to make it seem like their morality is the only

one that kids should accept. It's indoctrination, and though I don't like polluting sea

captains any better than the next kid, I feel queasy about using cartoons to

indoctrinate young children. ("Things That Suck: *The Smoggies*")

As an example of a more useful enviro-toon, scholars Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann quote Weinman's take on a 1955 cartoon, "Goofy Gophers and the Lumberjerks": "Instead of showing that only evil people harm the environment, it shows that trees are being chopped down in order to make the things we use every day – in other words, we are the ones harming the environment" (qtd. in Murray and Heumann 51).

What characteristics might make "Goofy Gophers" seem beneficial? In contrast, what smacks of propaganda in *The Smoggies*? This is the question that prompts my study of environmental themes represented in the content of animation and how the medium of animation might inform its message. Specifically, I want to examine the continuum of above-described attributes in animated discourse in order to comment on the usefulness of cartoons in communicating environmental themes in ways that engage audiences in hopeful action. As the state of the animation art becomes continually more refined, realistic, and profitable (think James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar)*, it seems important to develop ways of looking at and talking about the environmental themes in popular animated texts.

Animation's influence now extends far beyond the world of Saturday morning cartoons. I mentioned *Avatar* above, which qualified as "animation" in the definition used by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for award purposes. The term animation is applied to the process of making a film frame-by-frame, most often done now through the use of computer-generated imagery. Nearly all of the top twenty-five box-office blockbuster

films were made employing computer-generated imagery ("Box Office Top 100").[3] In their

inception, cartoons began by photographing hand-drawn pictures that, when viewed in

sequence, appeared to move due to the phenomenon known as persistence of vision. For

some, the images that come to mind at the mention of cartoons are simply colored, low-

resolution animations, like *Mickey Mouse*, *Road Runner*, and *Scooby Doo*. In the past 20

years, half-hour animated situation comedies have grown into adult entertainment. In Fall

2009, the Fox Network continued its now well-established tradition of running a two-hour

block of prime-time cartoons for an adult audience: *The Simpsons*, *The Cleveland Show*,

Family Guy, and *American Dad*. As texts with a wide commercial appeal that reach huge

global audiences, adult cartoons with environmental themes like *The Simpsons* and *South

Park*, and popular animated films like *Wall-E* and *Avatar* are among the many that deserve

serious ecocritical study. Several have won Environmental Media Awards in the past 20

years.[4] These texts interact with wide audiences, from cocktail waitresses to artists to

university students. Applying scholarly approaches to animated texts is more than a frivolous

exercise, one that might entertain the consumers of a university or community college

education. The medium can benefit students' understandings of environmental realities in

profound and useful ways.

In this introductory chapter, I will consider central questions with which ecocriticism

has been concerned and explore how the newly emerging state of green cultural criticism

roots itself in these ecocritical themes. Then I will consider how an ecocriticism of animation

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[3] *The Passion of the Christ* seems to be the lone live-action exception. It is No. 14 on a list filled with *Star Wars* films, *Spiderman*, *Shrek*, *Finding Nemo*, *Transformers*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and of course *Avatar*. ("Box Office Top 100")
[4] See Appendix for a list of animated films and TV shows that have won Environmental Media Awards.

might benefit from several theorists. Joseph Meeker's considerations of tragic and comic discourse modes and Mikhail Bakhtin's carefully drawn distinctions between the epic (a fixed monologue) and the novel (an open dialogic exploration), heteroglossia, folk culture, the carnivalesque, and ultimately laughter offer tools to familiarize an audience with ecological issues. I propose a loose taxonomy of animation with environmental themes—enviro-toons—situating these texts between two poles, monologic and dialogic, to borrow Bakhtin's terms. By monologic, I am indicating animated texts with dualistic social or political agendas evidently intended to indoctrinate the masses. In contrast, a dialogic[5] enviro-toon may jump start larger conversation that helps a broad and diverse audience reconsider the roles and responsibilities of humans in our interactions with external realities of a planet in distress. Used here, the terms describe the ends of a continuum that stretches from single-voiced and dualistic monologues to multiple-voiced and pluralistic dialogues. In a similar vein, it's useful to examine environmental themes in animation using the tools Slovic introduces to discuss the rhetoric of the literary nature-writing genre. Particularly applicable to my work is his taxonomy of the rhapsodic (celebratory) and jeremiad (warning) forms, neither of which operates exclusively in most texts. Finally, my work considers animation as a form, in light of media scholar Marshall McLuhan's categories of "hot" or detailed, high-resolution media like 3D version of *Avatar* and "cool" or low-resolution media, like the simple characters of *South Park*, digitally crafted to look like the figures are roughly cut from construction paper. The messages of enviro-toons and the form of the

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[5] Dialogic, here, is used as an extension of Bakhtin's ideas about a multi-voiced discourse in which language describes multiple perspectives that intersect and collide. The term should not to be confused with "dialectic" or dualistic argumentation.

animated medium considered together provide a rich means of better understanding and characterizing the genre.

Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies

In David Mazel's *A Century of Early Ecocriticism* (2001), ecocriticism is defined simply as "the study of literature as if the environment mattered" (1). Though the ecocritic field has become more rhizomatic in the past couple of decades, the field still seems unified by consideration of whether and how literature describes and models the human relationship with something characterized as the non-human, external flux, or nature – and what that might mean. In ecocriticism's earliest incarnation, the critical approach established itself with an appreciation for nature writing and other environmental discourse that was guided by a mostly shared idea that textual interpretations ought to be rooted in a corresponding appreciation for nonhuman nature, or a reality not mediated by various cultural forces. Still operative in ecocriticism is an understanding that the meaning of a text might be best apprehended through parallel study of, say, environmental science or biology, or that the intricacies of artistic expression in a text can best be grasped in the natural setting that prompted its creation. Early ecocriticism favored this type of science-oriented and/or sensory experience over heady literary theory. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell describes efforts to "appeal to the authority of experiential immersion and the efficacy of practice over the authority of 'theory'" (7). An ecological literary criticism would counter the endless wordplay of theory. In place of theory, relevance would emerge as central to the ecocritical task. William Rueckert, who coined the term "ecocriticism" in a 1978 essay, laments countless iterations of literary theory that seem largely irrelevant to "the

present and the future of the world we all live in" (107).[6] To these ecocritics, literary studies

may have seemed a realm inhabited by wonkish critics, pale from laboring at desks under

artificial lights, who had developed a taste for complicating texts and problematizing the

already problematic. Literary critics had attended to many other matter of concern, from

Marxism to feminism to queer studies. But little attention had been allotted to the subjugation

of Mother Earth. As Glotfelty writes in *The Ecocriticism Reader*:

> If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the
>
> major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race,
>
> class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would
>
> never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you
>
> might never know that there was an earth at all. (xvi)

Poststructuralism took a deep hit from ecocritics, some of whom equated the former's

sense of a culturally constructed understanding of exterior reality with the idea that these

misguided poststructuralists believe that *no reality exists at all*, or that these solipsistic

poststructuralist critics possessed sole control over a theoretical reality that was not *real* in

any real sense of the word.[7] At the same time, environmental historian William Cronon noted

that rejecting a cultural means of grappling with the relationships between humans and

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[6] Rueckert worried over the continued attempts to stake out new scholarly territory that had
led to the forcing of a production of "theories which are evermore elegant, more baroque,
more scholastic, even, sometimes, somewhat hysterical—or/and, my wife insists, testesical"
(Rueckert 106).
[7] To discredit the social constructionist perspective, Glen Love quotes biologist Richard
Dawkins's famous statement: "Show me a cultural relativist at 30,000 feet and I'll show you
a hypocrite" (45); and Edward Abbey's: "To refute the solipsist or the metaphysical idealist
all you have to do is take him out and throw a rock at his head. If he ducks, he's a liar. His
logic may be airtight, but his argument, far from revealing the delusions of living experience,
only exposes the limitations of logic" (26).

external nonhuman existence might be overly simplistic. He noted a discrepancy between goals of reuniting these categories and what he saw to be achievable results. "If we wish to understand the values and motivations that shape our own actions toward the natural world, if we hope for an environmentalism capable of explaining why people use and abuse the earth as they do, then the nature we study must become less natural and more cultural," Cronon writes (36). Whether or not an ecocritic aligns herself with this more expansive view, that conceptions of what we call nature and culture cannot be formed independently of one another, matters little. More important, I argue, is humble acknowledgement that the ecocritic is a human with the goal of caring for a planet that is home to her species. That Earth will outlast this human species seems inevitable, as Robert Michael Pyle observes in *Wintergreen: Rambles in a Ravaged Land*. Pyle quotes the saw "nature bats last" and yet he finds optimism in the idea that "the perpetuation of my matter in crocus, coal, or comet is all I need to know about the next act […]" (276). In this dissertation, I return often to the balance of hubris and humility that I propose is necessary to a useful ecocritical approach. Yes, we are anthropocentric and we cannot help but be species-ists.[8] Though I surely risk sounding clichéd here, the first step to solving a problem is admitting that we have one.

Things have shifted as ecocriticism expanded its borders, or as Buell contends, its palimpsest is overwritten time and again. Now the questions ecocritics ask vary from the simplicity of looking at representations of nature in poetry, examining the relationships of gender in nature writing, and looking at interdisciplinary links between literary studies and environmental discourse. In the contemporary milieu of, say, a literary conference, ecocritical

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[8] The word comes from Richard Ryder and describes the idea that humans are positioned above other species because we always have been positioned above other species, a bit of a circular argument that seems rather widely accepted by religious and humanist communities.

scholarly panels might delve into regionalism, queer theory, ecofeminism, and urban ecology

or be fused with the study of contemporary American literature, medieval

discourse, and Shakespearian texts.[9] Applying theory, often cafeteria style,[10] to textual

readings produces a wide variety of intriguing results that may seem difficult to assemble

into any kind of standard theoretical canon. This decentralization, however, turns out not to

be a flaw at all as it serves to strengthen a pluralistic ecocriticism that encompasses multiple

perspectives. If a connective tissue exists, it must come, as Glotfelty suggests, from

ecocriticism's foundational premise that humans, nonhuman nature, and culture are

intrinsically connected. Ecocriticism, Glotfelty writes, "as a critical stance, […] has one foot

in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human

and nonhuman" (xix). Ecocriticism, then, is at least as much a taking of responsibility for the

fate of humans on the planet as it is a scholarly profession.

    As new applications and uses for ecocritical theory crop up in multiple fascinating

places, so expand the genres of texts to which ecocriticism attends. Meeker's consideration

of literature rises unabashedly from a cultural model that separates high-culture literary texts

(Shakespeare, Tennyson, Faulkner) from commercial low-culture texts ("cheap thrillers,

color comics, and television plays" [xi]). In the decades since Meeker wrote his book,

scholars have been increasingly amenable to a wider scope for literary studies and perhaps an

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[9] Here, I name a few of the ecocritical panels featured at the Northeast Modern Language
Association Convention held in Montreal, 2010. I was presenting a paper on "Ecocriticism
and Contemporary American Literature" on the last day of the conference. A film critic from
London noted to me that she was impressed by the growth and diversity of ecocriticism, as
represented at the conference.
[10] I first heard the term "cafeteria-style" applied to theory by a candidate for a position in the
University of Nevada, Reno's Literature and Environment program. I have since seen this
concept put into practice with some frequency.

even broader vision of "nature" inclusive of the stuff of cultural production. One key shift insists that human conceptions of nature and understandings of "environment" are formed not merely through literary texts of a selected high canon, but in varied and diverse forms throughout human cultural production. In *Green Culture*, Stuart C. Brown and Carl G. Herndl describe the texts that can be said to contribute to cultural norms and ideas:

> The values and beliefs we hold about the environment are established through the discourses of a bewildering variety of genres, institutions, and media. For example, the value the environment holds in our culture is shaped not only by documents such as environmental impact statements, but also by books like Thoreau's *Walden: Or Life in the Woods* or television shows such as Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom* that we watched as children. (4)

Because reality television, YouTube, and animated sit-coms work together to inform our roles in realities external to the worlds of texts, they deserve as much consideration as more traditional literary texts. Given the familiarity of mass audiences with the former more often than the latter, it might be argued that pop culture texts are a rich site for exploration. Brown and Herndl begin their work with usefully assembled essays on public policy rhetoric and the communication efforts of activist groups like Earth First! The index shows that the book references *Silent Spring* author Carson, Rachel and Thoreau, Henry David each seventeen times. Though the book's introduction gives a nod to the child's experience of a nature program on television, however, the essays included in this anthology do not discuss the environmental rhetoric of Disney, Walt, or Simpson, Lisa.

Ecocritics and scholars seem increasingly less allergic to popular culture texts. A study of these widely experienced and easily accessible narratives is, by necessity, an

interdisciplinary project that pulls together strands of theory, ideas, and practices. Glotfelty

writes that the compartmentalization of scholarly work exacerbates efforts to educate a public

with regard to environmental crisis. "[H]umanities scholars are increasingly making an effort

to educate themselves in the sciences and to adopt interdisciplinary approaches" (xxii). With

that in mind, this dissertation dips its tentative toes into ecological literary criticism, rhetoric,

and media ecology. Through these, I craft a theoretical approach that positions works of

popular culture, specifically animated situation comedies and full-length films, along a

continuum that ranges from the monologic or dualistic works that resemble, at best,

propaganda, to those dialogic or pluralistic texts that democratize environmental discussions.

Green Cultural Studies: A Literature Review

In many popular forms of discourse, including numerous Hollywood films,

discussions of issues like environmental degradation are tricky and prone to be

oversimplified or represented poorly. Within these texts, problems develop, complicate

themselves, and are solved in the space of two hours. In the world outside theses texts,

effects of pollution and global warming and deforestation manifest over long periods of time.

The solutions to these problems take long periods of time. These complexities are difficult to

represent in the type of texts that are also commercially successful. In his book *Green

Screens* (2004), David Ingram notes:

> Firstly, the tendency of melodrama to construct environmental issues as
>
> individualized, Manichean conflicts between one-dimensional villains and heroes is
>
> seen to simplify the complex, often ambiguous allocation of blame and responsibility
>
> in such matters. Secondly, the closure effected at the end of a melodramatic fiction,

when the hero resolves the narrative problem through decisive action, may appear too

pat and glib a response to environmental crises which, in the real world outside the

cinema, do not have their loose ends neatly tied up. (2)

Ingram's work analyzes ways that particular Hollywood films navigate the complex

ideologies of conservationism and preservationism as well as mainstream and radical

environmentalism. His book is one example of how green or ecocritical cultural studies have

recently moved toward film criticism and, in some cases, touch on animation. Ingram's book

provides critical analysis of *film vert*—a green film movement Ingram traces back to the

silent film era's adaptations of Peter B. Kyne's novel *The Valley of the Giants* (1918), a

conservationist account of the battle "to preserve a valley of giant sequoias for its spiritual

value" (vii). Ingram engages with a few animations, including the partially animated *Who*

Framed Robert Rabbit? He finds counterproductive the unreal environment of Toontown and

the film's utopian fantasy of resolution. "The movie offers […] a cartoon solution to the real

problems to which it alludes" (165). Ingram's discussion of ecofeminism and its "spiritual,

less political" form represented in films like *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest* will be useful for

a critique of *Avatar* in a later chapter in this project. Ingram concludes that *Ferngully*'s

"pious ecological sentiments," "recourse to feminized magic," and "mythopoeic approaches"

may be viewed as "greenwashing" for the corporation that produced the film. As an

interesting comment on how a cultural message might be co-opted by its corporate roots,

Ingram notes the ties between the media company and its interests in the coal business. I will

specifically address this question in the coming pages.

Another key work of ecological film and cultural criticism, Jhan Hochman's *Green*

Cultural Studies (1998), begins with an indictment of culture, which "scrawls itself on

nature's flesh" (1). The book describes the goal of green cultural studies as becoming "intimate with the cultural history of nature" and also being "knowledgeable about the workings and history of the particular media depicting it" (3). Hochman offers readings of several films, including *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Deliverance,* and critiques other critical works, including Derrida's *On Grammatology* and the writings of Donna Haraway (12). Hochman turns to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's ideas about "becoming-in-the-world" by acknowledging borders and boundaries while also blurring them into what Hochman calls "a shape-shifting multiplex postmodernism" (15) that does not glibly seek to reconcile our conceptions of nature and culture. To merge these notions would take "generations of internal cultural struggle," Hochman writes:

> If green cultural studies is to be an effective politico-cultural tool in service of nature and culture, it will need to study not only how to become nature, by attempting to merge with the real or imagined subjectivity of a plant, animal, or mineral and of air, water, earth, and fire; it will also need to pull back and grant these beings and entities unromanticized difference, an autonomy apart from humans, a kind of privacy and regard heretofore granted almost exclusively to humans. (16)

Hochman's analyses do not move into the terrain of cartoons, enviro- or other.

Pat Brereton moves closer to green analysis of cartoons when discussing the use of special effects to represent imaginative unreal scenes—for example, the nightly remaking of landscapes by inhuman fiddlers in Alex Proyas' film *Dark City.* In *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema* (2005), Brereton suggests that environmental films (live action) can be "dismissed as ideologically regressive" but in another respect, he shows that the films can also exemplify and promote an environmental agenda of seeing

"problems from a synoptic, contextual perspective" through the films' uses of ecological/mythic expression, evidenced in a range of narrative closures" (11). Brereton examines the "apparently unmediated" representations of nature and landscape in Hollywood films. When these representations serve the audience as more than mere depictions of background (romantic) or "narrative *deus-ex-machina*," they can work "to promote an ecological meta-narrative, connecting humans with their environment" (13). Brereton looks at thirty-five films, many from the science fiction genre and all primarily dramatic rather than comedic. He calls for close textual analysis of film from an ecological perspective, arguing that Hollywood's creation of popular stories is rooted in broader cultural discussions: "Mainstream films have at least covertly exposed direct links between environmental and human problems with the resonant hope of ecological harmony becoming embedded within the Hollywood dream factory" (236). Brereton's discussion of films as mainstream narratives can be transferred to the more specific study of popular animated films, though he does not make this distinction.

More recent interest in pop culture texts comes from emerging ecocritical scholarship including Noël Sturgeon's *Environmentalism in Popular Culture: Gender, Race, Sexuality* (2009); *Ecology and Popular Film* (2009) by Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann; *Ecosee: Image, Rhetoric, Nature* (2009), coedited by Sidney Dobrin and Sean Morey; and Sean Cubitt's *EcoMedia (2005)*. In distinguishing between animal, human, and machine drawing in Hiyao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke,* Cubitt critiques the decontextualization of the latter, computer animation, "which by eliminating gesture eliminates continuity with the physical, turning knowledge into array and data" (20). Cubitt's assessment begins to address animation as a medium possessing through its form a message about media environments and

human responses. Sturgeon provides a useful explanation of why it's important to examine environmental themes in popular culture narratives as a strategy to identify issues of political power, gender, and race:

> […] it makes sense that U.S. environmentalists use popular narrative tropes to get their message across in ways that they think will be widely effective. But they do not often critically examine what relationship those stories have to the long-standing use of arguments from the natural that have promoted inequality and supported conquest throughout the U.S. political and social history. (12)

Sturgeon examines the validity of one message over another through the filter of the social justice movement. Sturgeon writes of the necessity to identify and consider the impact of "certain narratives about nature" because some of the environmental ideas embedded in popular culture promote ethnocentric and imperialistic practices or position the wealthy, white environmentalist as superior to the indigenous tribes of a nation faced with, say, deforestation issues. She writes: "[…] some of those narratives are simultaneously used to uphold troubling ideas about U.S. power, heterosexist and sexist concepts of families and sexuality, and racist ideas about indigenous and Global South peoples" (7). The problem, then, is not that these monologic enviro-toons do not foster dialogue but that the monologue is not the correct monologue to teach audiences what might be seen as a more enlightened value system that condemns colonialism and redefines values and family structures formerly known as traditional.

In addition to examining the implications of pop culture texts for political and social messages, studies of the visual content of popular media provide integral insights into how a medium like animation works and its efficacy. A visual ecocritical approach attends to the

"logic of the image, specifically because images have effects that words do not, effects that have 'real' ramifications" (Dobrin and Morey 25). A thorough consideration of the rhetorical power of images is needed, argue Dobrin and Morey, because images "short-circuit critical reason and influence how people behave toward each other and toward the earth, behavior that receives little attention" (25). The power of visual image has not been lost on the persuasion industries in developed nations. Advertisers and promoters have long understood that the visual image speaks louder than words. They've put this knowledge to good use, over the decades, to sell products and ideas. Activists have also long used the power of the image and the image event to further their activist goals, from the Boston Tea Party of revolutionary war days to feminists burning bras in the 1960s. In *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (1999), Kevin Michael DeLuca writes about the staging of image events by such groups as Greenpeace. When the media reports that activists have chained themselves to harpoons or spray-painted baby seal pelts (to make them worthless), the result, DeLuca argues, has led to the banning of commercial whaling and the protection of baby seals. Visual symbols reduce complex ecological issues for an audience in ways that create conversations about the practices in question. DeLuca writes that goals of environmental activists began with McLuhan's observations about the impacts of mass media technologies: "The early members of Greenpeace thought of themselves as media artists and revolutionaries, in line with McLuhan's contention that the 'artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time'" (4).

McLuhan's work is also referenced in an essay in *Ecosee*. In "The Test of Time: McLuhan, Space, and the Rise of Civilization," Tom Tyler revisits McLuhan's work for

"theoretical resources that could usefully inform the consideration of visual and environmental rhetoric" (258). As Tyler's work explores the ideas of space represented in a computer game, the work could serve as a valuable precursor to ecocritical animation studies from visual or geographic theoretical perspectives. In my dissertation, I turn to McLuhan's discussions of form as content, unpacking the scholar's familiar maxim: "The medium is the message" (*Understanding Media* 7).

Examples of green criticism that specifically deal with animated texts are scarce for the time being. Sturgeon writes about environmental pop culture messages geared to children in one chapter of her book. She discusses briefly *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss, popular films like *Babe* and *Jurassic Park*, as well as animations like *Ferngully*, *Captain Planet*, and *The Simpsons Movie*. Overall, Sturgeon finds in these texts overarching themes that "obscure differences of power and resources that underlie our problems" (106), and that promote U.S. cultural hegemony and free-market ideologies (107):

> These are exactly the kinds of messages that global environmental justice activists might seek to counter. Like the discourse of anticommunism that in the 1950s and 1960s popular culture pitted American apple-pie democracy against godless evil communists, the hegemonic discourse of globalizing environmentalisms too often turns out to be about good-guy U.S. scientists and ecologists against bad-guy foreign polluters and poor brown people squandering resources. (107)

Sturgeon's helpful work outlines the importance of considering the culture-shaping function of popular cultural production, and I return to her observations to inform discussions of *Avatar* and of *The Simpsons Movie*. *Avatar* seems to offer an antidote to the above critique of power—but the film's crafted monologue about environmental concerns, though perhaps

more correct from a social justice perspective, complicates a richer understanding of either ecological or social justice issues.

Another ecological treatment of animation comes in David S. Whitley's *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation* (2008), one of the first to exclusively examine the role of animated pop-culture Disney works in expanding environmental consciousness. Rather than snub cartoons for their silliness or sentimentality, Whitley suggests that academic study attend to the "heightened emotions and humour" of cartoons (2). Like Sturgeon, Whitley seems to appreciate the ability of animation as an indoctrinating tool; environmental themes in animation increase the likelihood of a critical engagement with ecological concerns, he contends, and "offer a relatively safe sphere within which crucial issues could be rehearsed and even—in light forms—explored" (2). Whitley's linking of cultural impact and comedy buoys his work.

Perhaps the most influential to my own work here, and referenced above already, has been Murray's and Heumann's article in *ISLE*'s Winter 2007 issue, "Environmental Cartoons of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s: A Critique of Post-World War II Progress?" The scholars examine 500 cartoons from the period noted in the article's title. The scholars found environmental themes to be few and far between in animations of that era. But when discovered, these enviro-toons offer strong critiques of "environmental devastation and negative consequences of progress" (52). As noted above, the scholars adapt the term "enviro-toon" from Weinman, using it in the way I've more specifically ascribed to the dialogic enviro-toon. This type of environmentally themed cartoon, Murray and Heumann argue, does not deliver a preachy bit of propaganda but instead builds heightened awareness through subtle messages about the "power of nature over the human world, the need for

controlling human intervention and nurturing the natural world in order to strengthen their interdependence, [and] criticism of human exploitation of the natural world" (55). The scholars conclude that the post-war enviro-toons took strong useful stands on conservation issues:

> The environmental movement as we know it did not begin with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. In a nod to conservationists like Aldo Leopold, environmentalism was a growing concern before, during, and after World War II, at least in the world of animated film. (68)

As noted above, the Warner Brothers cartoon "Goofy Gophers and the Lumberjerks" from 1955 explores the linkage between the consumption habits and the exploitation of a forest—not by merely evil baddies—but by those who work to make items that humans use every day. The ways in which the less-than-subtle monologic messages of *Captain Planet* or *The Smoggies* differ from the more open, comedic and dialogic discourse of the "Goofy Gophers," are similar to the differences observed in the examples that I plan to discuss in this dissertation, *Avatar*, *The Simpsons Movie, South Park*, and *Wall-E*.

Fusing animation, media studies, and ecological criticism

Though books of green cultural criticism are proliferating at a fast pace as I write this dissertation, green animation criticism still seems to hold plenty of potential for exploration. Contemporary U.S. enviro-toons seem to be low-hanging textual fruit for ecocritics. In a larger context, I do not propose to offer a complete treatment of animation studies here. Several excellent books already compile the underlying theories and innovative practices in the field of animation studies. Below, I sum up some of the major conversation strands. For a

thorough treatment, I recommend Norman M. Klein's *Seven Minutes*: *The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon* (1996), Paul Wells' *Animation and America* (2002), and *A Reader in Animation Studies* (1998), edited by Jayne Pilling.

Animation studies, in its own right, barely existed in the academic realm before the founding of the Society for Animation Studies in 1987. In the past two decades, the field has exploded with scores of new scholarly books published. Some common themes emerging in animation studies point to its inherent ability to challenge the status quo and its non-threatening means of delving into mature controversial themes, from global warming to homosexuality, and ultimately its potential as a unifying medium—which is of the most interest to my work here. Animation scholar Paul Wells writes that the art of making films frame-by-frame "serves to question and challenge the received knowledge which governs the physical laws and normative socio cultural orthodoxies of the 'real world'" (Wells 5). In a paper presented at an Animated Worlds conference in 2003, Rachel Kearney writes that animation is considered anarchic, a "subversive medium" (in Buchan 2) with the potential to unite opposing cultural contexts. In the introduction to his encyclopedia of influential animation, James Clarke writes that animation embodies "the spirit of true anarchy and the antic spirit" and cartoons play a "coyote-like role" in U.S. culture. Animation is "a liberating form that free associates like crazy and makes audiences see the world afresh […]" (Clarke 2). Communications scholar Douglas R. Bruce reveals message systems in children's cartoons, which he calls the "rhetorical heirs of the nursery rhyme" (230) and traces the contributions of these embedded messages to cultural identity. Bruce argues that mature themes can be safely expressed in the medium because animated cartoons are thought to be nothing more than children's entertainment. He writes: "[…] animation may actually offer a

more compelling and authentic critique of contemporary culture than is possible in more scholarly approaches" (230). These observations merely skim the surface of animation studies while clearly offering a rationale for this work. Scholarly cartoon criticism underscores the power of animation that lies in its humble status as comic pap for children. Because it flies under this radar, so to speak, the dialogic enviro-toon may offer a strategy for communicating environmental themes—not by preaching but by sparking conversations about active strategies for change.

To unpack the attributes of the dialogic (versus monologic) enviro-toon, I have found the theories of Meeker, Bakhtin, McLuhan, and Slovic useful, and here I will begin to introduce them with a bit more depth. Though not all animations qualify as humorous, "comic" discourse has attracted the interest of media scholars, ecocritics, and rhetoricians. In a book introducing the concept of a literary ecology, Meeker positions comedy as a survival-oriented literary strategy.[11] The Western legacy of tragic discourse leads to monologic and readerly tales of humans overcoming difficult odds to succeed in the end. Meeker notes the relationship between the anthropocentrism of tragic discourse and the humanistic hubris that has led to environmental devastation (carelessly exploiting nature for our own purposes). In contrast to the Western tragic discourse invention, comedy's long history transcends all human cultures and dates back to Saturnalia, the works of Greek playwright Aristophanes, and the so-called "new comic" tradition of Menander. Karen Newman traces this history in her book on comic characters in the works of Shakespeare. Newman quotes Auden on the

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[11] In a similar vein, ecocritic Katrina Schimmoeller Peiffer's *Coyote at Large: Humor in American Nature Writing* (2000) engages with comedic narratives in environmental discourse, noting that humor allows access "through the liminal territory that abounds with taboos to the world beyond where all social value is negotiable" (13).

distinction between the comedies and tragedies of Shakespeare, which is: "not that the characters suffer in one and not in the other, but that in comedy the suffering leads to self-knowledge, repentance, forgiveness, love, and in tragedy it leads in the opposite direction into self-blindness, defiance, hatred" (qtd. in Newman 7). In *The Comedy of Survival*, Meeker looks for narrative patterns in cultural production that encourage cooperative survival strategies. He taxonomizes literary tropes into categories of less useful tragic discourse and survival-oriented comedic discourse. The tragic mode operates most often as a monologue and the comic mode more often juxtaposes varied voices and multiple perspectives for humorous effects that can provoke a dialogue within its familiarized territory, which I will describe in more depth using Bakhtin. Meeker suggests that a comic literary mode promotes a view of life in which humans endure through humility and adaptation to environmental conditions while a tragic view that positions humans as warriors in a battle for power that involves destruction or sublimation of obstacles. I think it's important here to note that, in calling for cultural and artistic narratives that are "consistent with a diverse and stable natural ecology" (xx), Meeker argues that nostalgia for a more primitive human existence does not solve the problem. "The way out of environmental crisis does not lead back to the supposed simplicity of the cave or the farm, but toward a more intricate form of living guided by a complex human mind seeking to find its appropriate place upon a complex earth" (xx-xxi).

While looking at the comic and tragic mode in animated texts, this project rarely strays far from Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about the epic and novel, the monologic and dialogic form, heteroglossia, and the carnivalesque, which could arguably be described as a theory of laughter. Bakhtin's critical observations on the sixteenth-century works of Rabelais can be

aligned with readings of contemporary crass cartoons, like *South Park*, and applied to the multiple voices evidenced in *The Simpsons Movie*. Bakhtin's distinctions between two types of discourse, the epic and novel, relate closely to the ideas of monologic and dialogic discourse. The epic, he writes, is a monologic discourse that does not invite interaction or dialogue:

> We speak of the epic as a genre that has come down to us as already well defined and real. We come upon it when it is already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre. Its completedness, its consistency and its absolute lack of artistic naiveté bespeak its old age as a genre and its lengthy past. (*Dialogic Imagination* 14)

Bakhtin's epic text may seem a stodgy artifact, serious, with lingering smell of stale cigar smoke. Again, this reference to the text as complete and consistent, lacking artistic naiveté, parallels in part McLuhan's observations about hot media (well-defined) and Meeker's consideration of the tragic discourse mode. Bakhtin observes that the epic text removes itself from close inspection and can only be accepted reverently: "One cannot glimpse it, grope for it, touch it; one cannot examine it from just any point of view; it is impossible to experience it, analyze it, take it apart, penetrate into its core" (16). What we learn from the epic text must be accepted passively, memorized like a mathematical formula with unquestionable validity. It does not invite questions, let alone laughter. Bakhtin calls laughter the second nature of man, opposed to hierarchical structures, radical, and liberating. Laughter rose from medieval culture as a response to the one-sided monologue of religious and institutional discourse. Today, I believe laughter rises from the same places, with the addition of scientific or environmental discourse as what often might be considered, in many of its manifestations, serious, umambiguous, and overall frightening in its accounts of coming eco-apocalypse. In

the medieval era, Bakhtin writes, serious discourse served to establish power: "It oppressed, frightened, bound, lied, and wore the mask of hypocrisy" (*Rabelais* 94). Laughter, on the other hand, reveals external truths about censorship, power, and oppression. It can provide a means of democratization, freeing people through recognition of uncensored realities: "Laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it did not convey fear but a feeling of strength. It was linked with the procreating act, with birth, renewal, fertility, abundance" (*Rabelais* 95). Audiences today, as in medieval times, appear to trust laughter more than they do manipulative monologues foisted into public discourse by politicians, corporations, and public relations practioners.

McLuhan suggests that, for a world in the throes of strife and change: "[…] the cultural strategy that is desperately needed is humor and play" (*Understanding Media* 31). One of the changes that increase collective social stress comes from proliferating media technologies. Communications scholar James W. Carey identifies McLuhan as a spokesman for technologized social arena: "An increasingly prevalent and popular brand of the futurist ethos is one that identifies electricity and electrical power, electronics and cybernetics, computers and information with a new birth of community, decentralization, ecological balance, and social harmony," Carey writes (114). Among McLuhan's more incendiary observations in *Understanding Media*:

> The American stake in literacy as a technology or uniformity applied to every level of education, government, industry, and social life is threatened by electrical technology. The threat of Stalin or Hitler was external. The electric technology is within the gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind, and mute about its encounter with Gutenberg

technology, on and through which the American way of life was formed.

(*Understanding Media* 17-18)

One of McLuhan's more cryptic observations came from his use of the metaphor of hot and cold media to differentiate between a high-resolution medium that an audience might accept more passively and a cool or low-resolution medium that requires an audience to work furiously to fill in its details. Raymond Gozzi writes that the idea that a medium might have a temperature is "provocative" however he argues that McLuhan's differentiation "ultimately did not fly" (229). Gozzi attributes this to the faulty aspects of the metaphor. McLuhan had called television a cool or low-definition medium when it seemed to so many that TV should be seen as hot. And yet a book, simple phonetic text printed in lines on pages, McLuhan considered hot. Though the examples did not seem to make sense to Gozzi in all cases, McLuhan was "onto something," as Gozzi admits. While I agree that McLuhan's examples may seem flawed or outdated in a few cases, I find in McLuhan a remarkably apt description of media technologies and their cultural impacts. Perhaps it would help to position the notion of hot and cool media in the larger context of McLuhan's ideas.

One way to understand a particular medium, McLuhan suggests, is to observe cultures in which the medium does not yet exist. The members of our species in industrialized nations undergo one kind of evolution into digitally extended selves and communities. At the same time, these changes lag or proceed at a slower pace for other populations, ethnic groups, and nations. The digital divide becomes an evolutionary gap, a speciation of sorts. To see how this speciation is progressing, one need look no further than access to universal search engines like Google. The newly evolving human might access the Internet using a wireless connection as she rides a bus. Interested in the topic at hand, she types "Marshall McLuhan"

into a search engine, and within .09 seconds, she finds 629,000 results. She can learn more at *The Official Site of Marshall McLuhan*, read an entry at *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, watch a YouTube video of McLuhan speaking, view photos of the scholar looking scholarly, peruse more McLuhan links collected by Professor Bernard Hibbitts of the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, and preview his books at *Google Books*.[12] This digitally enhanced human experience can be described as accessing what McLuhan called "instant total field awareness" (*Understanding Media* 47). Media theorists differ on the utility of the ability of humans to extend themselves into a large realm of knowledge when this act is not always paired with the ability to sort through a vast accumulation of online fact-ish material.

Juxtapose this human experience with the one of those living in less "developed" nations with limited or no access to the same type of technological extensions. How does the human experience change? And how do we technologically altered/enhanced humans respond to the resulting digital divide? McLuhan observes the consequences of possessing information: "With such awareness, the subliminal life, private and social, has been hoicked up into full view, with the result that we have 'social consciousness' presented to us as a cause of guilt-feelings" (*Understanding Media* 47). In its humanitarian haste to leave no African tribesman behind, members of our mediated species send used electronic machines to nations that do not share the same level of technological innovation. Western guilt might be assuaged somewhat under this guise of "aid." More likely, this "recycling" serves as a

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[12] As a quick experiment, I typed the search term "McLuhan" into Twitter and found that 140 mentions of McLuhan were made in the past eight days. Most of them were quotes. MaxLife2009 posts this: "I don't necessarily agree with everything I say. ~Marshall McLuhan." One post on the fusion of man and machine was in Portuguese: MarcusMaggioli: "O globo news tá passando uma entrevista foda sobre fusão de homem e machina. A singularidade como o entrevistado fala. Mcluhan na veia."

way to get rid of toxic e-waste. Used televisions, computers and monitors, audio/stereo equipment, VCRs, DVD players, video cameras, telephones, fax and copy machines, mobile phones, wireless devices, and video game consoles pile up along the shores rivers in India, in polluted Chinese cities, and outside villages in Africa. Another approach to assuaging our guilt involves creating educational programs like "One Laptop Per Child" to send computers to countries like Sri Lanka. All of this while the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 1.02 billion people are undernourished in the world, up from 854 million in 2006.

It matters little whether we approve of or are disturbed by the evolutionary status update I've described above. I do not believe it is possible to move backwards on our evolutionary journey. We will never again be native tribeswomen, even if this reversion seems to be celebrated by films like *Dances With Wolves* and *Avatar*. And really, do we want that? Should an apocalypse turn out our lights and take away our petroleum products, we would move into the new Dark Ages as a collectively changed species, possibly one not well-suited to a new environment and thus doomed to extinction. Our hope lies in the possibility that we can understand how media work even now, to alter individuals, politics, societies—and the external environment in which we exist. There is, after all, a *real* heating-up environment, an authentic climate-changing, deforested world where oceans are swirling with plastic detritus that kills fish and albatross communities who lack the resources to defend themselves with activist Web sites.

An understanding of media might begin in a fascination with becomings, with realizations of our species' role as our evolutionary journey continues. In *Media Ecologies* (2005), Matthew Fuller riffs on Nietzsche's term "untimely" for "the moment of becoming"

(92). An understanding of history, Fuller writes, is untimely; it's an understanding of the potential of dynamic interactions, of unrealized formations that can result from interactions with "other devices, drives, or patterns" (92). This untimely approach to the past involves perspectivalism "or a handy way with bad memory" (92): "But it is the extreme naked weirdness of the past, the residue of history as itself a process of becoming, that in turn demands the appreciation of the equally extreme possibilities of becoming in the here and now" (92). As a species with the means of total field awareness, with a world of information at our fingertips, understanding through evolutionary "becoming" wouldn't seem difficult. One problem: Periods of new technological development can prove so shocking to our central nervous system, McLuhan theorized, that an internal "censor" kicks in to protect our senses and values. Continual immersion in media technologies, for some, can bring on "a lifelong state of rigor mortis, or of somnambulism" (*UM* 24). A state of wakefulness, of being consciously present in the world, has never come easy for us, as Henry Thoreau noted in *Walden*, a century and a half ago: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (5) and "[Man] has no time to be anything but a machine" (4). Thoreau believed that we could learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, however. "To be awake is to be alive" (73). To be awake is to become aware of our environment—and not merely the trees and rocks and predatory birds that swoop over my head as I hike in the desert. We must begin to consider the reality that our environment is—far more often—the space between our selves and the something flat we face, whether paper or screen of one sort or another. This environment has a soundtrack, which is all too rarely the genuine hum of insects, rustling of wind through leaves, or howling of coyotes. Far more often, our environment sounds like prerecorded music, talk radio, car alarms, and the buzzing of cable TV news.

Understanding media, in McLuhan's sense, continues by grappling with his basic categories of hot and cool media.[13] I think McLuhan's insistence on taking the temperature of media is valid, even if the examples he gave nearly 50 years ago seem to have shifted in contemporary times. What doesn't change is this: A hot medium offers so many details, such a complete package of sensory information to those who encounter it, that it demands very little from its audience. A hot medium frames reality and packages it for consumption. An info-rich documentary on global warming, like Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, is a hot medium for reasons that transcend its chosen subject. A documentary film, with its high-definition account of reality—including studies, pointed interviews, facts, charts, and illustrations that point in exactly the same direction—is an example of a medium that greatly extends a human sense in one direction. Much like a monologic message, a hot medium, McLuhan argued, turns audiences into passive receptacles for carefully tooled representations of reality. In contrast, an example of a cool medium might include a roughly representational animated sit-com that reduces our hero Al Gore to geometric shapes, as if cut out of construction paper. The cool low-resolution form might take a satiric approach, ridiculing the national leader as a buffoon warning villagers about ManBearPig, as *South Park* does. Just as Bakhtin argues that the dialogic discourse demands active participation in the meaning-making process, cool media similarly invite vigorous work on the part of an audience. As such, a cool medium offers the means of apprehending realities not through passive reception by instead through active cognitive interaction. McLuhan suggests that these forms make a

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[13] McLuhan's colleague Harold Innis similarly distinguished media in categories. Space-binding media, like print and electronic media, connected, Innis argued, geographical spaces to form empires. Time-binding media, human speech and handwritten manuscripts, tended to flourish in small tight-knit groups. The implications of these distinctions might be explored in future ecocritical examinations of animation.

real difference in human interactions as a hot medium "heats up" a culture, and a "cool" one does the work of slowing, soothing, calming. McLuhan makes no judgments here and does not privilege one form as better or worse, but proposes that both work together toward cultural balance, in varying amounts depending on various cultural factors. That is, a medium like film may not be as "hot" for a visually literate culture as it is for an illiterate tribal society.

A hot medium explodes human experience, in a physical and cultural sense. It is a medium "that extends one single sense in 'high definition'" (*Understanding Media* 22). Like the high definition television sets sold at the corner electronics chain store, McLuhan uses the term "high definition" to refer to media jam packed with data, rife with details, packing more pixels, facts, or bits of data per inch than ever. In 1964, McLuhan's hot media list included photographs and movies that contain much visual information, radio that extends the auditory senses, the phonetic alphabet (versus a hieroglyphic or ideogrammic one), a book, and a lecture. These distinctions, however, might be acknowledged to alter with their changed status over time in contemporary culture.

Bakhtin's ideas about the engaging nature of dialogue over monologue are only one parallel of many for McLuhan's observations. The hot medium, as McLuhan describes it, also shares some of the attributes that Roland Barthes describes as those of a "readerly" text. A readerly text plunges its user into "a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, serious: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with now more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum" (*S/Z* 4). Viewers can take or leave the monologic discourse or the readerly text or the hot medium—but the engagement must

end there. "[H]ot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience," McLuhan writes (*Understanding Media* 23).

McLuhan refers to cartoons as a "cool" medium (*Understanding Media* 22). Cartoons are low resolution, sketchy symbols of the realities they represent. Because of these outlines leave so much to the imagination, the imagination is put to work on behalf of filling in the blanks with details that are, to one member of the audience, relevant on an individual level. Another audience member might fill in the blanks differently, creating a richer experience for himself. No listener, however, is left behind. All are invited to join in the narrative.

McLuhan and Douglas Rushkoff offer useful insights into the power of animation's form and substance. If the medium is the message, as McLuhan suggests, the message of animated film's medium may be that humans, from childhood, share a craving for an imaginative rendering of reality that's at once simple and subversive. "The optimal [empathic] mode of TV image is the cartoon," McLuhan writes. "For the cartoon appeals to natives as it does to our children […] with the bounding line of a cartoon, as with a cave painting, we tend to be in an area of the interplay of the senses, and hence of strongly haptic or tactile character" (*Gutenberg Galaxy* 39). Douglas Rushkoff writes about the subversive messages embedded in cartoons and other "Kids' TV" shows in *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (1994): "[…] kids' television has become perhaps the media's best conduit for controversial memes. The shows, their styles, and their characters serve as innocuous veneers for the hidden agendas of their creators." (101) Rushkoff cites *Rocky and Bullwinkle* as "satire of America's cold war paranoia"(101) and the eternally ten-year-old Bart Simpson as the embodiment of "youth culture's ironic distance from media and its willingness to dissemble and resplice even the most sacred meme constructs" (109).

The hot medium, as a discourse mode, might be counterproductive for sparking dialogue about environmental issues. When human expression becomes overheated with the kinds of unarguable details, evidence, and facts that I've now defined alternately as hot media, readerly texts, monologic or epic, then human audiences may sense not only the imbalance but also a lack of control when faced with what to do about the problem. Unengaged, they tend to feel helpless, in a hypnotic trance, unable to make a difference. An audience may experience what author Susan Moeller calls "compassion fatigue"—the knowledge that all is not right with the world accompanied by the sensation that there's nothing to be done about it. Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger's *Break Through: From The Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (2007) offers a contemporary account of how ecological narratives work to encourage or discourage social and political change on behalf of creating positive solutions for environmental problems. Inspiring guilt or self-hatred through narratives of impending global doom is perhaps not the best solution for activists, as it contributes to a terrified and immobile populace, Nordhaus and Shellenberger note (149). The authors argue that increasing fear and insecurity in a society can result in a scenario opposite to the hoped-for change to increased sustainability. Instead, the tragic mode of environmental discourse produces eco-despair and individuals who feel helpless in the face of indisputable proof, presented as thoroughly accurate, that points to coming doom. Eco-despair provokes more zero-sum thinking and is less likely prompt thoughtful conversation and useful action. "Think pre-Hitler German or pre-genocide Rwanda," Nordhaus and Shellenberger write (149).

Nordhaus and Shellenberger describe an unproductive potential of the jeremiad that is similar to the one Slovic notes in his essay in *Green Culture* and in his book, *Seeking*

Awareness in American Nature Writing (1992). In the book, Slovic wrestles with the possibility that a piece of nature writing or scientific work like that of Rachel Carson can inspire needed change. Though ecocritics may assume that increased awareness leads to changed behaviors, Slovic considers the reality that a book like Carson's has only had limited influence on pesticide use: "If *Silent Spring* can achieve only 'limited influence' then what influence are such complex and obliquely ideological (or even anti-ideological) works as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Desert Solitaire* likely to exert upon the general public?" (*Seeking Awareness* 170). If the texts themselves cannot produce quantifiable wide-ranging results, perhaps green criticism can call attention to the ways that texts prove useful or less so in communicating ecological concerns? The assumption that critical activity might lead to corrective action, however, also concerns Slovic. Even if scholars aren't worried about allowing advocacy to eclipse their teaching and scholarship, the efficacy of doing so remains problematic: "In our role as teachers, we do have a captive audience, but even if we feel comfortable in the role of environmental indoctrinator, we'll likely find that our students are woefully inattentive" (*Seeking Awareness* 171). Slovic concludes that the goal of awareness that leads to action might best be achieved through simpler (more ethical and pedagogically richer) means: "aiming not to stimulate 'the right thoughts of the righteous' (to borrow an old phrase of Cotton Mather's), but to provoke thoughts, period. Any thoughts" (171).

On behalf of provoking thoughts, any thoughts, I offer the cool, comedic, dialogic enviro-toon. To be thoroughly transparent, I do not know whether or not a cartoon can raise awareness of ecological issues in a way that leads to direct action. Attempts to develop a rigorous hot-cool, monologic-dialogic media effects model might begin with a longitudinal effects study, complete with lengthy questionaires about viewing habits and observations

about later environmental habits and, perhaps, a bit of a research budget. I can only here offer

a description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of the recurring patterns in selected

examples of cartoons with environmental themes. These messages reach their intended

audiences; the number of viewers indicates this. But because members of the audience

interact and engage differently with these texts, it's difficult to ascertain whether

encountering the text equates to engaging with its message in a way that leads to awareness

or even action. As is the case with the nature writing literary texts that Slovic discusses in his

book, it's nearly impossible to say, overall, whether a book by Annie Dillard or a

conversation about Homer Simpson will motivate respective audiences toward changed

attitudes and behaviors. But both, I argue, have made a place for thought, for conversation,

for dialogue. Slovic writes: "And we can hope, with no more guarantee than the writers

themselves ever get, that when our students' and readers' thoughts settle, their actions will

follow suit, and the earth will be a little more secure" (*Seeking Awareness* 171).

Selected Enviro-toons

It's not difficult to locate animated texts with environmental themes. Films that might

be useful for consideration include *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest* series, *Futurama*, the

Brave Little Toaster trilogy, *Monsters Inc.*, *Bambi*, *The Lion King*, *King of the Hill*, to name a

few.[14] Animated TV series like *Dinosaurs* and *Captain Planet* offer plenty of fodder for an

environmental critique. Such a list could include popular animated films from outside the

United States, like the Japanese film *Princess Mononoke,* revoiced for a U.S. audience.

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[14] See appendix for a list of animations that have won Environmental Media Awards in the
past twenty years.

Several of these films, including *Ferngully* and *Princess Mononoke*, provide that nature-versus-human-exploitation tale of the monologic enviro-toon with a questionable strategy of idealizing the former (an idealized Nature) while lambasting the latter (a villainous Culture). Meeker would call these examples of the tragic discourse mode. Narratives that position humans in a war against an evil force – whether terrorists, a wrong-believing religious or political faction, or even exploiters of nature – are narratives that do not facilitate cooperative strategies to solve real problems: "[…] we need a story and a plan that makes people feel more in control of their future and better able to address the climate crisis" (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 222). To show how the tragic mode operates in contemporary ecological discourse—as filtered by Hollywood's James Cameron, I will examine the animated blockbuster film *Avatar*. This film was released in theaters as I was writing this dissertation, but it provides a perfect storm of hot, high-resolution medium with an epic, monologic enviro-toon featuring a marvelously tragic blue hero who rides in on a ferocious leather-winged bird to save a native population and their forest from greedy forest-destroying humans. In *Avatar*, glorious floating mountains meet hand-grenades exploding in 3D for theater attendees wearing black-framed plastic 3D glasses.

As a contemporary U.S. animation that engages audiences in the realities of environmental issues, dialogic enviro-toons are often more complex than the Manichean nature versus culture, man versus machine narratives might imply. The *South Park* series (Viacom), *Wall-E* (Disney), and *The Simpsons Movie* (News Corporation) provide examples of adult-themed U.S. animations that encourage ecological understandings of the human relationship with environment. These texts accomplish Meeker's goals: "Spiritual and artistic creativity are not special powers provided so that humans can transcend the natural world,

but features of human biological development useful for connecting humanity more deeply

with the world" (188). Dialogic enviro-toons do the work of connection, from the visceral

bodily fluids of *South Park* to the joyous moments of drift—an authentic non-goal-oriented

moment of being—in *Wall-E*.

An important short disclaimer here: It might be noted that my examples may seem co-

opted by their corporate roots. I argue that corporate funding, popularity, and potential

profitability don't necessarily deter from the dialogic function of these animations.[15] *South*

Park and *The Simpsons*, as half-hour animated adult sit-com fare, pushed animation from its

Saturday morning kids' TV status into prime time. Both shows contributed to the success of

their companies—*South Park* is one of the top offerings of Comedy Central (owned by

Viacom) and News Corporation's many expansions were assisted by the profitability of *The*

Simpsons and its twenty-year duration on the Fox stations. The qualities that make the

dialogic enviro-toon useful as a tool for engaging human audiences in a larger conversation

are perhaps the same qualities that stymie attempts to control the texts on behalf of

indoctrinating an audience. That's the optimistic premise from which I would like to begin.

Chapter Two: Waking Up From *Avatar*

My first critique of an animated film begins with the blockbuster *Avatar*, an animated

film that broke box office records shortly after its release in December 2009. The richly

detailed, high resolution, and even three-dimensional (thanks to that recyclable pair of black-

framed plastic 3D glasses) environment of *Avatar*, combined with its largely humorless

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[15] What large corporation with religious leanings paid Michelangelo 3,000 ducats to paint the
ceiling of its Sistine Chapel again?

content work together to provide a tidy example of hot medium, a stunningly detailed imaginary environment, and a tragic futuristic message for fallen humanity: Humans have killed our "mother" (the planet Earth) and we've traveled through space to exploit another planet, with no regard for the native humanoids who live there. In this chapter I show how Jake Sully, a paraplegic former U.S. Marine, assumes the tragic hero role, as described by Meeker. In this chapter, I consider the imaginary world of Pandora, looking at what might be salvageable as a point of engagement for its enormous audience.

Chapter Three: Hand-drawn Homer, a Comic Hero in *The Simpsons Movie*

As a text that exemplifies the comedic discourse mode, as described by Meeker, *The Simpsons Movie* offers a humorous and multi-voiced exploration of the complexities involved in a local ecological disaster. The feature length animation does not simply posit a tale of villainous greed versus good-hearted moral eco-sensibilities. Its tragic hero(ine) Lisa Simpson mounts a sound activist campaign and even achieves results. Nonetheless, the actions of her careless bumbling father Homer Simpson launch the city of Springfield into a contained version of eco-apocalypse. Though his approach is free of moral turpitude and, in the end, never moves more than a few degrees away from complete self-absorption, Homer Simpson demonstrates the survival prospects of the comic hero. Instead of a monologic epic that foists a pro-environment message on its hapless audience, the layered comedic approach of *The Simpsons* engages audiences in a highly participatory mode through its cool medium and pluralistic approach. By inviting thought-experiment participation in the navigation of environmental solutions, dialogic enviro-toons might contribute to the feelings of empowerment and belonging that Nordhaus and Shellenberger argue are key to sparking

positive environmental activism. *The Simpsons Movie* offers potential to establish a case for human responsibility through realistic and humorous representations of irresponsibility of its comic hero, Homer Simpson.

Chapter Four: Farting Hybrids in *South Park's* Rainforest

In this chapter, I employ the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin to explore *South Park* as a raunchy and profane example of the carnivalesque in which the comic operation of dismemberment (the severing of component parts of a fixed textual message) operates to invite close inspection of environmental issues. Though several episodes of the crudely animated series could be used to talk about ecological themes, I choose three to examine in some depth. The *South Park* series revolves around the adventures and discoveries of fourth-graders in a small, mostly middle-class Colorado town. The satire of the show reveals the young people as the only beings capable of grasping the realities of existence in contemporary America. The adults are so conditioned to their own perspectives that they are virtually unteachable. These episodes work well to discuss Bakhtin's ideas about heteroglossia, multiple-voiced discourse, and the upside-down realm of the carnivalesque, where nothing is as it seems and no ideology or belief system receives special treatment. In one episode taken up in chapter four, the young people of South Park travel to the Costa Rican rainforest and learn that it isn't the magical land of *Ferngully*. In fact, the rainforest is, with apologies, red in tooth and man-eating plant. In another episode, the adults of South Park are convinced by one child's song to convert to driving hybrid cars. This sets off a destructive "smug" storm as the self-satisfied adults bristle with pride over their ecological commitment. A third episode reveals the Nobel Prize-winning Al Gore to be a paranoid,

friendless cretin, obsessed with the dangers of a fictive creature called ManBearPig. The creature is half man, half bear, and half pig, which should provide a clue to the episode's tone.

Chapter Five: Hovering Humanity in *Wall-E*

Chapter Five explores *Wall-E* as an example of a medium and message that blurs and transgresses the borders of tragic/comic, monologic/dialogic, and hot/cool medium that I set up in the first examples. The film depicts a desolate Earth, 700 years in the future, inhabited by two moving beings—a garbage-collecting robot Wall-E and his cockroach sidekick friend. The earth seems uninhabitable until Wall-E comes upon a green plant growing in a garbage dump. Wall-E ends up traveling to space, where the remnants of humankind—now fat stupid amoeba-like animations—live in pampered comfort with all their needs attended to by machines. The parody of a future in which human consumption leads to a (d)evolution of the species will be explored, attending again to the ideas of Bakhtin and Meeker. Is *Wall-E* a predictable jeremiad about the dire consequences of a polluted Earth? How does the rhapsodic memory of Earth, as conveyed by computers to the ship's human captain, contrast with the reality of a bleak desolate planet—and to what end does this message work? These questions will be addressed and I will also examine how *Wall-E* provides an example of McLuhan's ideas about technological extensions, how the robot, in effect, becomes the new (albeit humble) super(man) of evolution.

Chapter Six: Animation Energy

In this chapter, I characterize the dialogic enviro-toon as a text with the potential to energize conversation. As a pluralistic, cool medium, the dialogic enviro-toon can be said to operate as a negentropic force, to borrow a term from Rueckert, who uses the term negentropy to describe the process of energy "entrapment and creation" (In Glotfelty and Fromm 111). The Oxford English Dictionary defines "negentropy" as negative counterpart of entropy, which is the degradation of energy in a closed system. Entropy renders energy incapable of doing work. Negentropy, or negative entropy, is energy captured and ready for action. The OED cites L. Brullouin's *Science & Information Theory* (1956): "We prove that information must be considered as a negative term in the entropy of a system; in short, information is negentropy" (xii). As I explore the negentropic potential of animated texts, it becomes evident that characterizing monologic and dialogic aspects of texts could be extended beyond discussions of enviro-toons. The ideas certainly can be applied to other environmental texts, including journalistic accounts of environmental degradation to global warming documentaries (arguably hot and most often monologic media) or more familiarizing and thus potentially engaging approaches, like comedic news programs or Carl Hiaasen novels. In conclusion, I hope to show how hot and cool media, monologic and dialogic texts, the jeremiad and the rhapsodic, and comedic and tragic discourse modes can be seen working in tandem to prompt informed, energized audiences.

A Comment on Style

I have tried here to avoid crafting my own monologue about the importance and impacts of enviro-toons. Though I have some salient observations and conclusions, I also

rush headfirst into the paradoxical. Overall, I have attempted to connect many dots and to craft reasoned arguments when possible because I do not want to lose readers interested in analysis and evaluation of environmental themes in animated discourse. But in this book, I make an argument for pluralism and laughter. I believe that comedy and a multiplicity of voices in the dialogic enviro-toon are useful (and perhaps often overlooked) ways to handle the complexities of important and serious issues. If my occasional blending of multiple voices from blogs, YouTube videos, academic writers, and a dog-eared copy of Thoreau's *Walden* makes this work seem cacophonous, I beg the reader's tolerance and understanding.

Chapter Two: Waking Up From *Avatar*

Why, when we evil, white dudes showed up in the 'new world,' in Africa or whenever, weren't we met by a native force strong enough to give us the boot? Since most of you are products of either public education or the state uni system, I don't expect you to be able to answer. Consequently, I'll give you a leg up. They do idnt (sic) *because tehy* (sic) *couldn't. They were still stuck in the stone age, which is where tehy'd* (sic) *take us, if they had their way. The good news is that they won't!*

-Norm at 3:18 a.m. 24 Dec 2009,

posted to a discussion of the film Avatar *at* InsideMovies.Moviefone.com

(spelling errors original to post)

The tragedy of Jake Sully, protagonist of the blockbuster film *Avatar*, grows out of his limited choices. He's an ex-Marine with war injuries that have left him in a wheelchair, without the use of his legs. In the film's first scenes, Sully is mocked by other ex-military as "meals on wheels." Surgeries exist in the futuristic year 2154 that would fix Sully's condition. Sully explains this in a voiceover during the film's beginning scenes. But he can't afford the surgeries, not on the kind of military disability pay that he collects.

That's why Sully leaves Earth to travel four light years away to Pandora, and we theater-goers wearing black-framed 3D glasses come along for the show's wild and richly detailed animated ride. Driving the film's plot: Sully has been hired to "drive" an avatar (a biological puppet of sorts) created for his twin brother. His twin brother, a PhD-wielding

scientist who trained for five years, died in a petty crime on Earth: "Killed for the paper in his wallet." Because his DNA is identical to his brother's, Sully is the only person who can drive this expensive biological puppet. So Sully takes his brother's place. His ideals are not noble. He simply hasn't given goals much thought. So when ex-military leaders turn Sully into a spy to infiltrate the Na'vi, an indigenous tribe on Pandora, on behalf of exploiting the planet's natural resources, Sully agrees. The commander of mercenary corporate forces on Pandora promises that if Sully helps to "learn these savages from the inside, gain their trust […] and report back to me," Sully will get his legs back.

Sully agrees to spy on these so-called savages, also referred to by ex-military and corporate forces as "blue monkeys" who are considered "very hard to kill." Over the course of the film, Sully gives the corporate mercenaries vital information that strengthens their campaign against the Na'vi. By the time Sully realizes what he's done—how he's betrayed a world, an ecological system, a tribe, and a loved female—it's too late to make amends or achieve any kind of peaceable solution. Enter machine guns.

The film *Avatar* is credited for its strong ecological message—humans have killed their own planet and are setting out to destroy the delicately balanced ecological system of another planet. At the same time, the film might also be read as the kind of tragic literature that mirrors, as Joseph Meeker observes, the humanist values and ideals that "regard the world as mankind's exclusive property" (*Comedy of Survival* 41), that exemplifies "the belief that human morality transcends natural limitations" (42), and that insists on the "supreme importance of the individual personality" (42-43). While Meeker does not go so far as too suggest that the tragic view of life in literary texts causes ecological crisis, he notes that: "the tragic tradition in literature and the disastrous misuse of the world's resources both rest upon

some of the same philosophical ideas" (59). While the tragic story of Jake Sully in *Avatar*

seems to be a morality tale against the human exploitation of nature, it may be read as an

extension of humanist ideals that have led to the exploitation these ideas seem to condemn.

At the least, the film's message can be seen as muddying the waters of productive ecological

discourse through its use of a tragic mode. Narratives of ecological crisis are too complex to

be reduced to the simple requisites of tragic discourse. Meeker writes:

> It is tempting to see Western man as a collective image of the tragic hero facing the
>
> ecological crisis as tragic heroes have faced other crises. Man has sought the good
>
> and brought evil upon himself as a consequence of his efforts, just as all tragic heroes
>
> have done. […] Environmental disasters can never be tragic, for they cannot be
>
> conceived as the moral error of an individual. Oedipus caused the pollution of Thebes
>
> by his sinful murder and marriage, but who causes the pollution of New York? What
>
> was rotten in Denmark could be remedied by Hamlet but who will take responsibility
>
> for what is rotten in Chicago? No hero will suffer transcendently for the
>
> extermination of hundreds of animal species or for the degradation of the oceans.
>
> Environmental guilt is collective, distributed unevenly among the people now living
>
> and those who have lived before. Without a personality to focus upon, ecological
>
> crisis presents merely a spectacle of catastrophe with none of the redemptive
>
> prospects of genuine tragic experience. (58)

Collective guilt over an expanse of time serves as one reason ecological issues are complex

terrain not easily handled within a dualistic tale of good and evil, however tragic or

melodramatic. The realities of environmental devastation and potential solutions are lost on

audiences, who nonetheless appreciate the reduction of ecological bafflement to a familiar

simplicity in a narrative. It's comforting, perhaps, for audiences in the United States and in other developed nations to speculate that environmental woes can be conquered by a machine-gun-toting hero flying a giant predatory bird, as Jake Sully does in *Avatar*.

The film's appeal in a global cultural hegemony dominated by U.S. popular cultural production is wide-reaching. If a screenwriter set out, a few years after our collective consciousness was raised by Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), to make a commercial film for the average twenty-something that incorporated the themes of movies that this young adult saw in his or her childhood—films like *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) and *Pocahontas* (1995)—and matured those themes with subtitles, fast-paced action, video-game weaponry, and of course riveting 3D animation, that screenwriter wouldn't be able to top the animated/live-action hybrid film *Avatar*. The film does all of the above, and additionally throws in vague religious allusions to everything from Christianity to Gaiaism, a white male military (tragic) hero who saves what's basically an ignorant (noble) and anorexically thin (animated) native population, a smidgen of imperialism critique, and an inter-species love story. It's recipe for a film intended to break box office records, and *Avatar* was no disappointment on that score.

But what of its environmental "message" when saving this planet involves a Hollywood-style battle of good (sublime harmony, divine nature) and evil (greed, exploitation)? By the end of this film, I argue, no ecological subtleties remain with which to grapple. The inadvertent betrayal of the native population by Jake Sully culminates in the ruin of their village in a gigantic tree. The plot warns its audience about the consequences of human hubris and instills a fair degree of misanthropy. In an interview, *Avatar* director James Cameron said that he structured the film so that the audience would be so emotionally

engaged that by the time of the tree's destruction, "everyone in the theater would feel moral outrage" (Wilson).

My ecocritical reading of the film *Avatar* rises from the historic roots of the tragic mode and its relationship with ecological considerations, referring to Meeker to examine how tragic discourse modes fail to navigate the complex terrain of environmental thought. As an interesting contemporary example of the tragic discourse mode, *Avatar* offers a speculative examine how a human[oid] species rules over nature (in a balanced way, of course), how human[oid] morality transcends natural limitations, and how the contribution of one important heroic individual saves the day. Is there room for interaction with the text in this film, which I will argue to be largely a monologic effort? Does the film's mix of rhapsodic Pandora-scapes, rendered in imaginative and highly detailed 3D animation, balance its scary jeremiad—or does it merely fuel our fears? The extraterrestrial environment of Pandora, created using ground-breaking computer generated imagery, lands *Avatar* on the hot end of the media spectrum. Such a medium gives an audience little to do other than passively experience the manufactured narrative. We enter something very near a hypnotic state, one that may actually obfuscate the film's facile plot, predictable characterizations, and formulaic resolutions. If so, the themes that hint at complex ecological and social dilemmas of resource exploitation through colonization may be delegitimized at the same time as they are being exposed.

Tragic Jake Sully

As the 2.5-hour film *Avatar* begins, Jake Sully lands on Pandora, a moon of the planet of Polyphemus, some 4.3 light years from Earth. He had heard about the place as a kid, but

never thought he would go there, the character says in a voiceover. As Sully's spaceship approaches, the planet's landscape comes into view, grey grid of industrial buildings. The shot swoops over an immense open pit mine, where humans are ants next to the skyscraper sized wheels of giant bulldozers and other ground-moving machines. A close-up shot of the wheels reveals that some have been shot by long feathered arrows. Humans with large guns wear face masks. Dust and dirt and weapons make Pandora seem a hideous, unfriendly place. The craft lands and the 3D environment jiggles a bit, as if the audience seated in the theater, wearing 3D glasses, might feel the queasy sensation that these fictional characters would feel. We are not an audience looking at a flat screen. We are positioned within this hot medium; our visual senses are extending in every direction as we float into the computer generated imagery of the scene. This is McLuhan's total field awareness taken to a new extreme.

Avatar's story is set against the backdrop of futuristic operation on a planet Pandora, where an Earth-based (greedy profiteering) corporation mines for Unobtainium. A native population lives on top of the galaxy's largest known deposit of Unobtainium. Corporate profits depend on moving the natives so that additional open-pit mining can begin. Enter tragic hero, ex-Marine Jake Sully. As the film begins, Sully makes a deliberate choice, a choice he senses is wrong from the start. He calls himself a "dumb grunt going some place he's going to regret." But from the start, it's evident that Sully's character—a Marine injured in the line of duty—is of the high moral order that Aristotle defines as the tragic character in *Poetics*. Sully does not look like the blonde male Indian-fighting John Smith hero of *Pocahontas* or the handsome logger Zak who learns to love the forest in *Ferngully*. A wounded veteran, Sully resembles more closely Kevin Costner's character in *Dances With*

Wolves, a character charged with a similar task in a more familiar setting, the plains of the U.S. frontier. Costner's character walks with a limp. In *Avatar*, Sully is a paraplegic. His war injuries have landed him in a wheelchair. But this will turn out to be OK. Sully's disability disappears when he's "driving" the gigantic blue body of his avatar, a genetically engineered creature of the bipedal, human-like Na'vi race. Sully's job is to infiltrate the Na'vi, get to know them, and figure out how to get them to move. This will turn out to be the course of action that leads inevitably to the near-doom of both Sully, his tall blue avatar, his love interest, his newfound tribe—and, in fact, the entire ecological system of Pandora. Because with the information Sully has gleaned from spying on the Na'vi, mining operations on Pandora can expand—cue musical number from *Pocahontas* in which a greedy imperialist orders his proletarian workforce to "Dig!" Cue the bulldozers of *Ferngully* to begin demolishing the forest. The sky people (humans) of Earth, we learn in *Avatar,* have killed their mother. "There is no green there," Jake Sully says of Earth. And now, the sky people will destroy Pandora. Cue theme from *Dances With Wolves*.

As noted above, Meeker lists three ideas attained in Western tradition that appear implicitly and explicitly in tragic literature: nature exists for the benefit of mankind, human morality transcends natural limitations, and the individual personality is of extreme importance. In the film, humans and Na'vi both struggle for planetary dominance. One or the other will win. The fate of the rest of the planet's beings depends on the outcome of this human/humanoid struggle.

It's clear that corporate interests, aided by former military personnel, view the natural environment of Pandora as hostile. "If there's a hell, you'll want to go there for some R&R after a tour on Pandora," says ex-military Colonel Miles Quaritch in an initial briefing. He

informs the new arrivals that the planet is full of things that "want to kill you and eat you."

The local humanoids are dubbed Na'vi so that there will be no mistaking their indigenous

status.[16] The Na'vi are sturdy folk with carbon fiber bones. "They are very hard to kill,"

Quaritch warns.

The Na'vi, understandably, do not view their natural environment as a hostile one.

Because the audience sits through the immersive 3D experience of wandering in this

realistically depicted unearthly landscape, we are infused with the idea that the Na'vi people

seem to live in complete harmony with the natural world. Along with Jake Sully, we the

audience first experience a dangerously sublime Pandora that's red in tooth and claw.

Overnight, however, we fall in love with this strange paradise and a community that forms

around the large Hometree that serves as the Na'vi's village site and includes the various

surreal creatures that the Na'vi eat and ride. Here, sacred seeds pulse through the sky like

airborne jellyfish, gracefully landing on the chosen hero Sully. The drifting seeds serve as a

sign of the presence and blessing of a spiritual being identified as Eywa, the Mother, the

keeper of ecological balance.

The Na'vi are primitive people, who sleep in hammocks suspended over the forest.

Their tools are the weapons a contemporary audience would equate to the indigenous people

of the Americas—bows, arrows, and spears with poisoned tips. The only other "technology"

that the Na'vi possess is biological. Each Na'vi has a long braid of hair that serves as a

natural plug-in to the Pandoran information superhighway, a distributed network of sentient

beings, including the spirits of ancestors. The Na'vi can plug this hair extension into a six-

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[16] This is not the first clue that this film will be lacking in subtlety. By appealing to the lowest common denominator and offering an intensely immersive visual experience, the film assures that it will not fly over the heads of any diverse audience members.

legged horse-like creature, climb on its back, and direct the creature through thoughts. Similarly, more skilled Na'vi can tame a bird for personal use in flight. As Jake Sully progresses in getting to know the natives from the inside, he ends up performing a cowboyesque ride on an untamed reptilian bird. After his wild ride, Sully forces the beast into submission, plugs his avatar's hairpiece into the bird and giddily drives the winged beast through the sky. It's clear that the beasts of Pandora, though wild, can be conquered and compelled to submit to the Na'vi for the benefit of the Na'vi. In fact, the animals seem to ultimately want this relationship—though they do put up a bit of a fight. That the Na'vi are the dominant species on the planet seems ethically acceptable because the Na'vi live simply. They are not interested in schools, roads, light beer, or blue jeans, and so they are better than the superficial humans of planet Earth.

Sully learns that the native population is good, and that we exploitive humans are, overall, bad. But because human morality transcends natural limitations in tragic discourse, as Meeker defines it, Sully's morality will nonetheless be the driving force of salvation on this planet. We will discover that these natives cannot save themselves. When their Hometree is destroyed, the Na'vi people wander off, collecting in lugubrious groups to mourn their dead. The scenes recall a post-earthquake Haiti, or as one of my students pointed out, the superdome in New Orleans after Katrina. These people need help, need a savior, and it will be a fearless human (in a familiar Na'vi body) that arrives to save their planet. In a mellow pre-battle scene, Sully plugs his hairpiece into the Tree of Souls and prays to Eywa for help. His prayer seeks to educate the Pandoran spiritual "mother" about the devastation that humans caused on their own planet Earth. If the goddess does not want the same thing to happen on Pandora, she'd better wake up, smell the devastation, and help out. Of course,

during a battle scene in the latter part of the movie, just when all seems lost, Eywa comes through with a battalion of beasts who kill their quota of mercenary human forces.

Of key importance to the tragic Western tradition, is Sully's personality—fearless and loyal—that drives the film to resolution. In the film's opening scenes, we follow Sully into a research facility where he meets Dr. Grace Augustine. Augustine directs a research program on Pandora. She is said to like "plants better than people." In fact, she does not hide her disdain for Sully, the former Marine who has not trained for the mission, who does not have his brother's credentials, and who has not studied the native language for five years like one of the other new recruits. Sully is given helpful advice in dealing with Augustine: "Try and use big words." As it turns out, Sully's lack of training will suit his mission perfectly.

We first see Sully's blue-skinned avatar floating in a long horizontal tank in this lab. Sully notes that its face looks like his brother's. "It looks like you," Sully is told. The avatars grow quickly, though this process is not described in much detail. The creature's native DNA has been combined with human DNA to allow a human brain to bond remotely with it and to move this body through the wilds of Pandora. This body is nearly ready to be inhabited by Sully's mind, notes one lab worker, it merely needs to "be decanted." Sully's individualism is enhanced by human technologies, and it's assumed that the audience will accommodate this plot device. An organic being has been raised for research purposes; some kind of bioengineering evidently took place. This is a biological "object," not a machine assembled in China. Did it ever have a brain or personality of its own? Though ethically disturbing, this is a non-issue for the film's makers and thus for its audience. The body is merely a tool, biological machine, like a puppet, only animated by a human brain projection. As the show progresses, the avatar body will only be "awake" when the actual body of Sully is "asleep" in

one of the tanning-bed-like pods that serve as "links" to the avatar. Additionally, from a technological standpoint, the wireless technology that Sully uses to drive his avatar represents a higher state of technological innovation than the old-fashioned hair-plugs that the Na'vi use to access their electrochemical information network. The unquestioned acceptance of this technology used by Sully further calls into question any assumption that the Na'vi are "really" better off without human technology while also demonstrating paradoxical social attitudes toward technological connectivity. We like/need to be plugged in to a network—and wireless technology is convenient. Humans use our tools for good or for evil, the narrative suggests, but the technologies themselves have no innate morality. McLuhan would likely disagree with this assumption. The medium being the message in this case means that the wireless remote control of the biological puppet avatar is ultimate human control and freedom from physical restraints. This individualism corresponds closely to the hubris that leads to resource exploitation.

Because he's confined to a wheelchair, Sully's mind has been trapped. But now that his mind is linked to the extremely athletic body of his avatar, he can realize his full potential – for good. This biological machine is ready to be inhabited with Jake Sully's mind and personality. When Sully is not "driving" the body, it is only a limp pile of inanimate flesh. When he inhabits this body, stronger and more agile than his own broken human form, Sully deeply enjoys a new manifestation of self. When Sully is allowed to "drive" his avatar body for the first time, he is euphoric. He refuses to take the experience slowly, as demanded by the scientists attending to his experiment. Instead he stands on his avatar's working legs, rips free from a series of cords and tubes that attach him to various monitors and fluids, and his avatar runs outdoors. He races across pavement where other human-driven avatars are

playing basketball, leaps a fence and runs through a field. He stops and digs his toes into the Pandoran earth. The shot lingers on a close-up of large blue toes pushing into the brown dirt. The shot shifts to show pleasure on the human Sully's face, as he lies sleeping in the link pod. This is about dreams, a point that Sully makes several times. "But you always have to wake up." While that will be true for the audience who will wake up and walk from the theater into the earthly afternoon or night, it will not turn out to be true for the fictitious hero, who—spoiler alert!—will be able to extend his Pandoran dream forever.

In early scenes, the military leaders are happy to have an ex-Marine like Sully driving an avatar, as opposed to another of the "limp-dicked science majors," as the colonel describes them. The epigraph to this chapter, a post to an *Avatar* discussion site, demonstrates that the colonel's attitude is fully appreciated by some of the film's audience. Might makes right; it is the job of a progressive society to bring natives kicking and screaming into the "civilized" world rather than let the savages yank humankind back to the stone age. There's no subtlety in the dualistic frame of Avatar's characters. The corporate and ex-military leaders are racist, unpleasant, greedy, and overall evil. The Na'vi are innocent, balanced, and overall benevolent when properly respected. The colonel reminds Sully that the corporation's mining efforts have been stymied by the stone-age Na'vi who will not leave their village at Hometree, even though that village sits atop a rich deposit of the mineral unobtainium. Here is another clever and even comedic rhetorical move on the part of screenwriters—to use a word that engineers have coined to refer to a material that would be perfect for a project's goals, a material that, though costly, has only one defect—it doesn't exist. Movie-going audiences might be more sympathetic to the mining corporation if the mineral deposit were

gold or oil, because we understand the value of these.[17] Instead, we experience only to the

greedy nature of this corporation. By the time corporate head Parker shows only slight

reluctance in ordering the destruction of a village with women and children, we despise the

corporation and its motives.

Sully's mission turns problematic when our hero discovers he loves the female

Neytiri who will be the spiritual leader of the Na'vi tribe. The two exchange the Na'vi

greeting, "I see you." This profound moment is reprised near the film's end, when Neytiri

comes to the human Sully's rescue. As he drives his avatar while fighting an ex-military

leader, Sully's frail human body almost dies in the planet's hostile atmosphere. Neytiri

administers an oxygen mask to Sully's human body. It's the first time she's seen his "real"

human body but she looks into his eyes, tears rolling down her own, and says: "I see you."

As noted, Sully's human and avatar bodies are mostly inconsequential, merely serving as a

biological hosts for the more important part of the human equation—the mind and individual

personality. By the film's end, Sully realizes his exceptional role in the Pandoran drama. He

takes himself seriously, realizing the fate of this world depends on him: "The exceptional

individual is always at the heart of Greek tragedy, and subsequent literary tragedy as well"

(Meeker 48). This crafting of a Western hero may not seem frought with potential difficulties.

But the underlying attitude seems problematic when extrapolated to the attitudes and actions

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[17] In a post to one *Avatar* discussion site, a viewer relates sympathetically with the mining corporation, whose goal is speculated to be getting "a material which from its name is likely used as a last resort power generation for earth." There's no evidence in the film to support this assumption but, for this viewer, the narrative is complex and objective: "Humans are not evil money-grubbing businesses who carpet bomb the world to get at the precious metals. They spend billions of dollars to try and get the na'vi to move peacefully and when that is found to not be an option they reluctantly attack and do it in such a way that limits casualties" (Insidemovies). This sounds not unlike a Fox New viewer's justification of the war in Iraq.

of six billion people sharing the real planet Earth. The tragic mode, Meeker observes, turns the world into a "battleground where good and evil, man and nature, truth and falsehood make war, each with the goal of destroying its polar opposite. Warfare is the basic metaphor of tragedy, and its strategy is a battle designed to eliminate the enemy" (38). At the risk of reducing my own argument to polarized terms, I will concur with Meeker that the tragic mode is an unproductive strategy for environmental rhetoric in contemporary times. As *Avatar* exemplifies the tragic mode in many ways, its value as means to build ecological literacy is uncertain. But there are some other important factors to consider with regard to *Avatar* and the conversations that it has quite obviously provoked on Internet movie discussion sites, in classrooms, and on social networking sites around the world.

On the Author's Eco-Intentions

  Avatar director James Cameron considers his 2009 animated work the most successful environmental film of all time, according to an interview in *Grist*, an online magazine. Cameron told reporter Janet Wilson: "There is no studio anywhere in the world who would say an environmental message would make $3 billion … I can't think of any other really commercially successful ones, can you?" At this, wife Suzy Amis Cameron suggested: "*Wall-E*, maybe?" The interview took place at a fundraiser for the Natural Resources Defense Council about two months after *Avatar* opened in theaters and quickly became the sort of blockbuster for which the *Titanic* director is known. His last film *Titantic* (1997) held the record for biggest money-making film ever—until Cameron broke that record with *Avatar*. As of the first week of March 2010, *Avatar* had hit around $2.5 billion in domestic and international gross box office returns. *Titanic*'s record was $1.8 billion.

Though he said he did not set out to make a film that would please critics, Cameron won a Golden Globe for Best Director, and the film was nominated for nine Oscars. During the NRDC event, Cameron likened his work to Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which Cameron called "boring with bar charts," according to Wilson's report.[18] People only listened because of Gore's ethos, Cameron contended. (Wilson's report notes that Cameron made four "semi-successful" documentaries about the ocean before he did *Avatar*.) Cameron wanted, he said, to do a film with a deeply embedded environmental message.[19] Doing it as a science fiction adventure would displace the annoyance, perhaps, of the environmental skeptics. "My feeling was if we have to go four light years away to another planet to appreciate what we have here on earth, that's OK."

Cameron said his goal was for the film to pack "an emotional whallop" of moral outrage over the devastation of the natural habitat and, specifically, the home of the Na'vi under a giant tree interconnected to a huge sprawling electrochemical rhizomatic information system. "Further, after the triumph of nature's creatures over evil military contractors, he wanted the audience to feel hopeful enough to do something," Wilson writes.

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[18] Not all bar charts, Gore's film included an animated scene taken from *Futurama* cartoon episode "Crimes of the Hot." *Futurama* and *The Simpsons* were both created by Matt Groening. Gore's daughter, Kristen Gore Cusack, was a writer for the *Futurama* series.
[19] In a press conference after the Golden Globes, he said wanted to make a commercially successful film.

But what is that *something* to do? Cameron[20] uses florescent light bulbs and drives a hybrid. He's a fan of wind power and not of so-called clean coal. He said that when the News Corporation studio executives asked him to "tone down the tree-hugger crap," he refused. The line made it into the film, however, when Jake Sully notes that he hopes learning about "all the treehugger crap" from the indigenous population "won't be on the final." Cameron told Wilson that he does not have plans or ideas about what might work to solve environmental problems. "I'm willing to engage or indulge real ideas. But if we don't do something, we're all going to die! What's it going to take, a big fucking disaster with all kinds of people dying? We need to change our priorities fast." This kind of vague sweeping notion—something needs to change—permeates many of the discussions I've had about the film with students, Facebook friends, and strangers who sit next to me at restaurants. In fact, Cameron seems to be paraphrasing a line from the end of *Ferngully* (1992): "Guys, things have gotta change!" The film *Ferngully*, certainly an ideological precursor to *Avatar*, is discussed further below. Incidentally, it's listed on one blogger's Web site as No. 2 on "Things that Traumatized Me in My Childhood." The blogger "jerrydazzlepants" could not cope with the film's "depressing" messages about animal testing, among other things. Environmental messages in popular culture texts have, over the past decades, not varied much from a standard trope that Nordhaus and Shellenberger describe:

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[20] A recent article in *The New York Times* reports that Cameron's research on an *Avatar* sequel took him to the Brazilian rainforest. There, he met with natives who did not know who he was, showed them his film, and pledged to help them fight a hydroelectric dam that would obliterate some of their native land. As Cameron spoke of civilization creeping in to destroy native cultures, an actual poisonous snake fell from a tree and landed near Cameron's wife. The nonplussed natives killed the snake, an act that Cameron then equated to fighting the power company that wants to build the dam (Barrionuevo).

Environmentalists are constantly telling nostalgic narratives about how things were better in the past, when humans lived in greater balance with nature. These stories depict humans not as beings as natural as any other but as essentially separate from the world. (25)

In the next section, I will examine how the dualistic environmental narrative finds its genesis in the human domination and individualism tropes of Greek narrative tradition and Judeo-Christian mythology. These observations further develop Meeker's conclusions on the tragic mode and its role in perpetuating the idea that nonhuman nature exists for the benefit of mankind (43).

The Tragic Legacy of Western Culture

In his essay "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," Lynn White Jr. traces contemporary attitudes about human domination over nature to Christianity and its legitimate offspring, Western science. White calls Christianity "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" and notes that the religion's creation myth posits a loving God that creates the whole world to meet the needs of His special creature, the human. The human, being made in the likeness of this transcendent God, is not a part of nature but above it: "Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except perhaps Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (in Glotfelty & Fromm 10). While this may seem a harsh indictment, White goes on to trace the value and attitudes established by Christianity that recur in Western science, which White refers to as "cast in a matrix of Christian theology" (in Glotfelty & Fromm 11). The sciences still position humankind as

superior to nature. We work to subvert natural forces to our whim at each and every turn. We

harness energy to move ourselves about and we allow human population to explode. White

writes that humans are guilty of the "carcinoma of planless urbanism" and creators of "now

geologic deposits of sewage and garbage" and concludes that "surely no creature other than

man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order" (in Glotfelty & Fromm 5). White

calls for a repositioning of the human as one of many players in our planetary drama. He

proposes St. Francis of Assisi "who tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures,

including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation" as a patron saint for ecologists

(in Glotfelty and Fromm 14).

 While White appropriately tracks ecological crisis back to the Judeo-Christian

mythos, he gives less consideration to another contribution to occidental thought—the

democratic humanism of the Greeks. In devising a narrative system that explores the mimetic

relationship between art and reality and in predicting exactly what types of narratives seem to

work well for what ends, Aristotle sets up the philosophical school that readies the Western

world, hundreds of years in advance, for the impact of Christianity.

 What is the messianic story—god becomes man and comes to earth to suffer for the

sins of all—if not a tragic tale of epic proportions? In *Poetics*, Aristotle writes: "Tragedy,

then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" and it

"excites the emotions of pity and fear" (25). Certainly the decision of an omnipotent god to

drive the avatar of humanity, to teach and lead people and ultimately be tortured and killed

on behalf of universal salvation is the ultimate tragedy brought about through the character

flaw shared by most of humanity—a great love. The Biblical tragic mode sums up the idea

the greatest love is signified by sacrificing one's life. Built from the same cultural tools, Jake

"Christ" Sully similarly risks his life (or at least his avatar's life) because he has learned to love the planet and people of Pandora. We pity him (no legs, no money); we fear for him and support his battle to do what is good and right.

Meeker also traces human hubris to its roots in classical art and philosophy. He begins a discussion of "Literary Tragedy and Ecological Catastrophe" with a summary of misguided reasoning:

> Whatever errors may have been committed by means of human technology, the human spiritual tradition is regarded as one that all can take pride in. Plato and Jesus were not environmental exploiters, nor were Sophocles and Shakespeare. On the contrary, the message repeated over and over again by philosophy and literature seems to be that man does not live by bread and bulldozers alone, but must give thought to goodness, truth, and beauty, all of which are ecologically safe. (40)

Meeker quickly disabuses us of this misconstruing of the relationship between art and environment: "Actually, the engineering mentality has always worked closely with that of humanists: engineers enthusiastically perform only what the philosophers and artists have determined to be valuable and desirable" (40-41). White puts this evenly: "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them" (in Glotfelty & Fromm 9). And what has a couple thousand years of Western tradition taught us? We are still large and still in charge. We control our reproductive cycles, the temperatures and lighting conditions of our homes, our media consumption, and our food consumption. We can eat seasonal fruit all year long. We eat sushi in Kansas and drink Coca Cola while hiking in the Peruvian rainforest. Our dogs wear bark collars to keep them from acting like dogs. Our kids take Ritalin to keep them from acting like kids. It comes as a huge

surprise to us that so-called natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina can still wreak havoc on a U.S. populace. We chuckle and shake our heads when a few religious leaders insist that such disasters are punishment for our sins. At the same time, perhaps we secretly share a guilty fear that this might, indeed, be the case.

Films like *Avatar*, serious and weighty, however surreal, offer a kind of catharsis for the collective guilt—religious or environmental—born during a couple millennia of human supremacy. While Meeker proposes that tragic literature has lost influence as its foundations came into question, it seems evident now that the power of tragic discourse is still in vogue. The convenience of a dualistic worldview cannot be understated. It's easy to communicate in black and white terms, handy to reduce the world into categories of good and evil, victim and villain. On this model, media pundits build large audiences. The savior with universal appeal today, however, can no longer appear to be a long-haired homeless hippie of Mel Gibson's *A Passion of the Christ*. The messiah of 2010 is a good old boy from the United States of America, complete with a crew cut and a cocky attitude. It's marketable. We buy it. Jake Sully is fearless and good. When he realizes his mistakes, he takes responsibility. His courage is laudable. His loyalty to justice and morality is unquestionable. Meeker might be describing Jake Sully when he writes:

> The universe is shown to care enough about man to punish him when he goes astray, rather like a stern but compassionate judge. And man appears as a worthy object of love, for he has the capacity to grow and to learn, even to the point of transcending many of his own weaknesses and limitations. Tragic man is ennobled by his struggle, and mankind is ennobled through him. (42)

Jake Sully might be *ex*-military but the values he sports are those used to market the "true" U.S. Marine Corp—not the for-hire hacks that the *Avatar* screenwriter positions as corporate mercenaries greedily exploiting Pandora. Cameron points this out in a press conference at the Golden Globe award ceremony. When asked about the possibility that his film portrays the U.S. military in a poor light, Cameron contends that the opposite is true: "Everything about [Jake Sully] celebrates the Marine Corps and their value systems. He evinces the qualities the Marine Corps are teaching" (Hfpavideo).

Cameron argues that Jake's ability to adapt to the local culture is one such value that the U.S. military instills in its troops. Cameron quotes the familiar line from the film in which Sully and his Na'vi love interest Neytiri exchange the greeting: "I see you." Marines, Cameron says, are taught to try to "see" the individuals in other cultures with similar acceptance. The writer and director of *Avatar* reminds viewers not to examine the "nemesis" for the film's value system, but to look to its hero. "And there's no better tribute to the fighting man than our hero," Cameron says (Hfpavideo).

It's clear that Cameron believes his film is both pro-military and pro-environment. He is not afraid of having a message-film, so long as it makes money. Because of its humorless themes, its simplistic treatment of complex ecological issues, and overall scary single-voiced message, *Avatar* might be considered as a monologic enviro-toon. When Weinman writes about the 1980s enviro-toon, *The Smoggies*, arguably monologic, she doesn't bother to hide her disdain. The cartoon's preachiness, she argues, overwhelms any utility it might have, as does its reduction of a complicated issue like pollution to the simplest of terms. The villains of *The Smoggies* include "a bumbling sea captain, a woman who's sort of a blandified version of Natasha from *Rocky and Bullwinkle,* and a big dumb guy" who pollute the planet for the

hell of it. The saviors of the show are the Sun-Tots, described by Weinman as "a bunch of little annoying Smurf-like creatures who use solar power and never get anything, but anything, dirty" ("Things That Suck: *The Smoggies*"). As noted in chapter one, the monologic enviro-toon is about indoctrination, iterating a polarity that must be accepted or rejected. This dualistic rhetorical mode positions nature as harmonious. Culture (certain aspects that don't include the cartoon you're watching or the screen on which you're watching it) ruins nature and spoils our peaceful lives on the planet. In *Ferngully*, the character voiced by Robin Williams jokingly gives a historic account of how civilization progresses: "First thing, all the trees go. Then come your highways, then come your shopping malls, and your parking lots and your convenience stores, and then come … 'price check on prune juice, Bob price check on prune juice' …" (qtd. in Ingram 42). Problems like pollution boil down to simple non-ambiguous terms: "To review: all pollution is caused by ugly, bumbling people who have nothing better to do than dump icky stuff in the water. Good guys use pure, clean, non-icky power and are rewarded by staying young and cute forever. There is nothing to gain by polluting and nothing to lose by not polluting" (Weinman "Things That Suck: *The Smoggies*") Similarly, in the *Avatar* enviro-toon, human civilization must look like its manifestation on Pandora, a giant open-pit mine with gargantuan dirt-moving machines depicted in the opening scenes of the film. The back-story is similarly unflattering: On Earth, Sully can't get the care he needs to walk again because he doesn't have the money for the necessary surgeries. His brother was killed for the "paper" in his wallet. The civilization on Earth may offer stuff but it can't provide a satisfying relationship with nature because "there is no green there." In contrast, the existence of the Na'vi on Pandora is pleasant—worth

rhapsodizing over. They have nature, a simple life, shared spirituality, hunting skills, community, family, and creatures to ride—creatures that fly!

Monologic Enviro-toon

The good guys include the Na'vi, their trees, their goddess, and a few moral humans including tragic hero Sully, the Pandoran scientists, and a lone ex-military helicopter pilot who decides to help the Na'vi. Wearing the black hats are evil corporate humans, amoral reactive primates guided by the law of mutual struggle. From the former military workers who used to be valorous military personnel and now are mercenaries for a corporation to the corporate leader who's willing to kill innocent native women and children, humans are greedy and self-absorbed. For corporate execs, apparently, the only reason not to annihilate natives is bad public relations. Quarterly reports are more important than avoiding bad press, though. Money gets people what they want. It funds the science operation. It will get Sully's legs back. This hubristic anthropocentrism sets the stage for the jeremiad about humankind's greedy exploitive ways.

The dualism disguises the much messier message about consumption, pollution, and living in "balance" with our external environments on the real planet Earth. Monologic enviro-toons like *Ferngully* and *Avatar* share an uneasy vibe concerning consumption. Ingram notes how the commoditization of consumer culture is paradoxically challenged while still somehow celebrated in *Ferngully*. Initially, this seems not the case in *Avatar*, unless one counts the wireless communication technology that Sully uses to communicate with his fellow Na'vi warriors or to inhabit his avatar. Or the helicopters, machine guns, oxygen masks, and even Jake's genetically engineered avatar body. Clearly, a conflict exists

that cannot be navigated without some maneuvering through grey areas. Because the film

lacks a pluralistic rendering of complex ecological issues, some viewers find it unsatisfying,

to say the least.

In *Avatar* as in *Ferngully*, the pristine goodness of nature is depicted as never, of

itself, out of balance or chaotic. In critiquing the latter animated film, Ingram quotes

Ferngully's goddess Magi Lune's explanation of this fundamental truth to the central female

character: "Everything in our world is connected by the delicate strands of the web of life,

which is balanced between forces of destruction and the magic forces of creation" (qtd. in

Ingram 42). The movie ignores, Ingram contends, any evidence that destruction and creation

can be interdependent. All destruction is depicted as unnatural; even volcanic activity is tied

to the evil work of Hexxus, the spirit of destruction that must be contained, according to the

premise of *Ferngully*. Ingram writes: "There can be no role for instability in this

preservationist vision of nature as timeless, static balance" (42). Similarly, the mining

operation in *Avatar* is seen as evil and unbalanced, while the forest is, in contrast,

breathtaking in the 3D depiction of its colorful, splendid biodiversity. During one immersive

moment, as the character Sully begins to see the beauty of the pristine Pandoran nature, I

found myself holding my breath. The moment was spoiled briefly, for me, by the realization

that this film experience itself is made possible only through the processes it claims to

eschew. Is it not a bit hypocritical that the film bashes human environmental exploitation

while the industry itself, from cameras to projectors, computers, televisions, iPhones, and

countless other gadgets, realizes its potential through materials that must be mined? "Tree-

hugging is not, Cameron acknowledged, in the moviemaking industry's genetic makeup, it

being a carbon-intensive process," Wilson writes at *Grist*. In their new book, *Ecology and*

Popular Film, Murray and Heumann note the rarity of discussions of the film industry's impact on a real external environment. The scholars cite a report by the UCLA Institute of the Environment that finds the film and television industry to be the area's No. 2 polluter, beaten only by the area's petroleum refining industry. The film and television industry contributed more air pollution than aerospace manufacturing, apparel, hotels, or semiconductor manufacturing. On the bright side, the number of environmental messages in Hollywood films and TV shows has "increased significantly from 2002 to the present," Murray and Heumann write (2-3). Does the film industry's commitment to "a powerful environmental rhetoric that moves audience members to action" balance the impacts of filmmaking with "energy consumption, waste generation, air pollution, greenhouse gas emission, and physical disruptions on location" (3)? I guess that remains to be seen.

The film *Ferngully* is salvaged through laughter (Robin Williams and cute animated creatures) and its nonviolent resolution to the eco-crisis. There's no resorting to brute force in this children's cartoon. Instead, Zak turns off the engine of the "Leveller" and Crysta uses a magic seed to turn the evil Hexxus into a tree. Zak concludes, simply: "Guys, things have gotta change." Using magic as a resolution to combating ignorance and restoring ecological balance, however, does not give real human audiences much with which to do the real work of change. Ingram quotes social ecologist Janet Biehl's argument that such mythopoeic approaches to ecological conflict resolution are limited strategies. They offer little to explain how non-human nature works. She writes that magic "by its very definition in terms of what we know today ignores any real relationships between cause and effects. It seeks effects essentially without any causes at all" (44). Better might be a strategy that invokes some of the (albeit limited) powers of reason and science. Ingram also quotes Kate Soper's

conclusions that "concern for nature rather than mystical awe and reverence for it, is more likely to lead to effective environmental strategies" (44).

Avatar is largely void of humor, unless one counts the Hollywood one-liners like "You're not the only one with a gun, bitch!" shouted by the female helicopter pilot at one point or hero Sully's first clumsy attempts to ride a six-legged horse. When Sully faces off with the evil colonel near the film's end, the leader suggests that he won't quit fighting until he's dead. "I was hoping you'd say that," Sully replies. The audience chuckles here because Sully's (human) morality requires an excuse to kill the bad guy—self-defense. Sully is a hunter, one of the Na'vi now. He "betrayed" his race, perhaps, but only because the human race deserved betrayal. The colonel deserves death. But if the colonel surrenders, Sully cannot justify killing this enemy of the Na'vi people. Human morality must not be violated.

As a jeremiad, the film certainly works to warn humans that we've exploited our own planet's resources and killed off populations of indigenous people to justify our acquisition of everything from rubber in South America to oil in Iraq. The parallels between the human presence on Pandora and U.S. troops in Iraq could not be more evident. The aliens from Earth have tried to help the Na'vi, building schools, teaching them English, giving them medicine, and building roads. But the Na'vi are unappreciative. They don't want roads. They prefer mud, the colonel complains. And relations are only getting worse. Lead scientist Augustine attributes the natives' recalcitrance to the questionable use of machine guns in winning the hearts and minds of the natives. The allusion to U.S. nation-building efforts in Iraq is starkly evident, though U.S. troops were sent to Iraq to look for weapons of mass destruction or to free the Iraqi people from a despot, of course, and not to mine the country

for its "unobtainium."[21] This allusion to Iraq aside, Sully is instructed by the colonel to "learn the natives from the inside, gain their trust, walk like one, quack like one and report back to me." The unobtainium on Pandora goes for $20 million a kilo. "That's what pays for the whole party," corporate director Parker Selfridge tells Augustine. "That's what pays for your science."

Cooling the Heat

Because of its rich detailed visual environment, *Avatar* is a hot, hypnotic medium. Some viewers describe walking out of the theater feeling as if they are still in a trance. A hot medium, McLuhan argues, leaves little room for audience participation. We sit in theaters, encountering a carefully stitched together narrative presentation of an unreal reality. We are presented with messages that turn out to be readerly and epic, a valorized account of the ultimate tragic hero, who must leave his human body behind but can keep the indomitable and privileged human spirit and personality. The narrative is presented in a single voice, that of Jake Sully, who tells the story through voiceover and by recording a video blog to archive his experiences. The film lacks laughter, which might, as Bakhtin suggests, open up the discourse for closer examination. Comedy cools a medium, McLuhan notes (*Understanding Media* 32), in writing about practical jokes. The comic discourse mode that Meeker describes is better suited perhaps for human survival because it discovers solutions through human humility and not through hubris, and through community rather than warfare. A closer how

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[21] Iraq's unobtainium turns out to be obtainable, after all, with the correct appropriation of drills and oil rigs.

how heroism operates in the comic mode comes in the next chapter's critique of *The Simpsons Movie*.

At this point, it might be surprising for me to conclude that none of the film's faults—its tragic humanism, lack of comedy, or dual purpose as advertisement for the U.S. military—lead me to the conclusion that *Avatar* is entirely without value as ecological discourse. If the film existed solely in the movie theater as an event to be experienced, it would remain a monologic enviro-toon—a dualistic tale to be accepted or rejected passively. But in the contemporary media milieu, *Avatar* becomes a cultural artifact that will not exist in isolation. From the moment the idea for the film was first announced publicly, *Avatar* as cultural artifact became the topic of countless discussions on Internet discussion boards, on cable and network TV, on radio talk shows, and on Twitter, to name a few places for public conversations. So the hot medium of *Avatar* is cooled because it does not exist as a powerful stand-alone text, like a Judeo-Christian Bible in the middle ages. As a contemporary text, it fragments into shards of consideration, from YouTube mash-ups that set the audio track of the *Avatar* trailer to visuals from *Ferngully* or *Pocahontas* to a *Hustler Video* satire. Within a week or so of *Avatar*'s release, an episode of *South Park* ingeniously concocted a sprawling plot for which a reference to the film *Avatar* became the punch line. Through these media remixings and mash-ups, the hypnotic spell of the monologic enviro-toon shatters into a million conversations. It becomes grist for empassioned discussions in a critical analysis of mass media class and fodder for discussions between viewers walking out of the movie theater, or in Sunday School classes, or at legislative hearings. My most recent discussion of the film occurred with a 30-something stranger sitting next to me at a sushi bar. He loved the

message of *Avatar*, he said, and after watching it in 2D and 3D, he concluded that the 3D experience distracts from the all-important message.

"What is that message?" I asked.

"That we need to live in harmony with the world."

"But what hope is there for humankind now that we've killed our mother?"

My new sushi friend replied that we have not yet killed our planet but we are killing it. We once lived in harmony with nature. He is nostalgic for that time.

"Have your individual actions changed because of the film?"

No, he said, because he already believed the message. He was just happy to see it get out there so other people can hear it. I asked him what kinds of things he already does, knowing that the planet is in danger.

"I knew you might ask that," he said, frowning. It seemed his exuberance was turning to guilty self-reflection. He doesn't drive a hybrid. He doesn't recycle.

"Sorting through trash isn't my thing," he said, "and I think we all have to do our own thing."

We all have to do our own thing. The message of the tragic mode, the celebrated individual hero, is not lost on its audience—even after it fragments into a thousand shards of conversation. Though rife with rhapsodic (and not a little romanticized) portrayal of a balanced natural environment on the fantastical Pandora, *Avatar* operates as a jeremiad with an inescapable fixed message about the mostly despicable "fallen" human race. The message of the film itself is readerly, a closed argument about the value of the moral individual hero in fighting for change. This hero carries a machine gun. He doesn't need to recycle. Though director Cameron intended the film's happy ending to move his audience to "hopeful" action,

it's unclear exactly what form that action might take. Unlike Al Gore, Cameron offers no advice to switch light bulbs or visit an activist Web site with further tips on individual and collective change. It seems that the hopeful outcome of *Avatar* cannot be duplicated by a human audience without genetically engineered giant blue bodies, plaits of hair that conveniently plug into a global organic network of all living things, and some high-tech military weapons.

Might it be possible that, though flawed, the film serves the educational and ethical portion of an environmental agenda through, as considered in Chapter One, what Brereton called ecological metanarratives and the closure of mythic expression? Again, I find the answer to that question is complicated. In a post to the *Inside Movies* Web site, a user named "1john219" writes about the film's messages that "humans are killing the earth." The user continues: "I cannot say I personally help it very much with my gas guzzler and waste of plastic water bottles, but I have started using ethanol and recycle as much as possible. I wish the world looked like theirs, it was very plentiful and peaceful!" Another poster wasn't quite so conflicted: "The message is … take care of your planet!" wrote "Sid" ("*Avatar* Movie Reviews"). However, the violence of the film's resolution was not lost on Sid, who added that survival (planetary or otherwise) takes power, and power comes through brute force. Might makes right, and another Hollywood film that finally solves problems *Terminator*-style with guns and guerilla war tactics comes as no surprise to Sid. The film's message comes through loud and clear. And yet, if the film's audience retools the message in varied paradoxical ways, the discourse is ultimately doing the work that Slovic suggests as important—the work of provoking thoughts, any thoughts (*Seeking Awareness* 171).

Chapter Three: Hand-drawn Homer, a Comic Hero in *The Simpsons Movie*

With little guilt over the past and little expectation from the future, the comic mode seeks its

fulfillment from the present. Its greatest pleasures arise from the satisfaction of basic bodily

needs and from the flexibility of the human mind as it responds to the ironies and

bewilderments of daily experience.

> *--Joseph Meeker,* The Comedy of Survival (192)

Paul Wells offers *The Simpsons* animated TV series as an example of "how the very

language of animation is deployed in the service of ideologically charged material" (6). The

show is, on one level, "merely a variant on the American sit-com tradition […] but its very

status as an animation asks an audience to re-perceive supposedly everyday issues, themes,

and knowledge" (6). This kind of engagement suggests the most important characteristic of

the dialogic enviro-toon. A generation of young people grew up with this animated prime-

time situation comedy and what might arguably be called its re-perception of cultural norms

about capitalism, gender, sexuality, and anthropocentric attitudes toward the environment.

The Simpsons presents a version of the white middle class nuclear family similar to *Leave It*

To Beaver (1950s), *Happy Days* (1970s), and *Family Ties* (1980s). But *The Simpsons* twists

the story, presenting viewers with a skewed presentation of family—one that calls into

question the notion of authenticity in representation.

This chapter explores *The Simpsons Movie* and its parody of contemporary life and

institutions in light of Meeker's tragic and comic discourse modes, the heteroglossia, or

differentiations of usage in American English that signify age, gender, race, and

socioeconomic distinctions, operating within the animated discourse, and its status as an "ugly" or low-resolution cool medium. The depiction of a non-valorous comic hero, the heteroglossic aspects of *The Simpsons*, and the cool medium itself, I will show, create a participatory and multi-voiced conversation within the text that invites access from innumerable entry points.

In chapter two, the monologic enviro-toon *Avatar* was considered as an example of what Joseph Meeker describes as the tragic discourse mode. Like *Avatar*'s protagonist Jake Sully, the animated character Lisa Simpson also exemplifies the tragic hero who hopes to save her community and its environment. Unlike *Avatar,* Lisa's project is, overall, not successful. In the comedic mode typical of *The Simpsons* TV series, Lisa's Duff-beer-drinking father Homer epitomizes a comic hero driven by self-interest. The narration of *Avatar* depicted a single voice in that the central character Jake Sully narrated the film through voice over and his fictive video journal. As a parodic-travestying feature-length animation, *The Simpsons Movie* bridges the gap between language and reality through what Bakhtin called heteroglossia, a multi-voiced narrative that exemplifies multiple perspectives. Bakhtin writes that laughter is the quality that "destroys the epic" and it is a "vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically" (*Dialogic Imagination* 23). The comic mode of this imaginative text along with its heteroglossic features brings us closer to an understanding of contemporary reality. Finally, the *Avatar* film experience itself was an immersive, even three-dimensional event for film-goers. McLuhan would consider a high-resolution medium that wildly extended sensory perception in one direction a hot medium. A hot medium requires little or no audience participation but instead allows its viewers to passively consume its form

and message. In contrast, the gaudy unreal colors, simple two-dimensional characters, and stereotyped settings depicted in *The Simpsons* TV series and its derivative feature-length film are low-resolution, cool media, which McLuhan predicted would demand from an audience a higher level of engagement.

Welcome to Springfield

     The Simpsons Movie derives from the animated *The Simpsons* TV series, which is also the longest running situation comedy—animated or live action—in U.S. television history. *The Simpsons'* series success may be considered surprising as its content delves into many controversial topics like religion, gender, and sexuality. In *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and The Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, John Alberti writes: "From the beginning, a key attraction for many fans of the show has been the sense of 'getting away with something,' a delight in the idea that a program could become one of the most popular shows on television while dealing in and even promoting the subversive and the transgressive" (xii). The success of the subversive animation lies, in part, in its medium. Alberti notes that expectations were uncertain regarding the "ambiguous cultural space" of children's television (the cartoon) and adult prime-time programming (the sit-com). Show creator Matt Groening credits comedy for his cartoon's status: "I find you can get away with all sorts of unusual ideas if you present them with a smile on your face" (qtd. in Rushkoff 109). Groening is a graduate of Evergreen State College in Washington, which offers a collaborative interdisciplinary learning environment in order to prepare students to be responsible global citizens who are committed to values like social justice and sustainability. It's safe to say that environmentalism places high on the college's educational agenda.

Since the inception of Groening's animated series in the 1990s, environmental themes have frequently recurred in the show. In the opening sequence of each episode, Homer Simpson chases a glowing green bit of nuclear waste through the fictional town of Springfield, parodizing careless human attitudes toward hazardous environmental toxins. This running theme serves as a harsh critique of middle-class complicity with environmental destruction, a critique that some environmentally themed cartoons would rather avoid.[22] In an interview with MTV's Kurt Loder, Groening said:

> Pollution and the environment have been at the core of *The Simpsons* since the very beginning. Homer works at a nuclear power plant. He's not a good power plant worker — he causes a lot of meltdowns every week in the main titles. So we knew that the environment was going to be at the core of the movie, because it's at the core of the show. ("*Simpsons Movie* Creators Talk Pig Farms, Pixar, Green Day With Kurt Loder")

Episodes of the weekly TV series have addressed genetic mutations from pollution, grease recycling, and the complications of sustaining ecological balance. In one episode, Lisa Simpson's faith in democracy is challenged when she catches a local representative taking a bribe for a permit to cut down Springfield National Forest. In the episode outlined in this dissertation's preface, she becomes a vegetarian but learns to live her values without judging

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[22] Noel Sturgeon quotes the producers of *Captain Planet*, who say that they do not want children to identify their own parents as eco-villians, if these parents work in a polluting industry: "Although our show is basically realistic, our eco-villians are intentionally exaggerated so that they are clearly operating outside of the law. They are symbolic of the environmental problems rather than representative of the actions of individuals. We are careful not to be critical of business/industry, but to encourage responsible business practices and a balance between the needs of people, environment/wildlife, and industry" (qtd. in Sturgeon 116).

others. In another, Lisa joins an Earth First!-style protest group and sits in a tree to protect it from loggers. In Lisa's character, we see the tragic hero at work to convey messages of environmental responsibility to her ignorant family and fellow Springfield residents. Her personality is moral, righteous, and a little self-important, at times. Her indignation mirrors the accumulated angst of generations of environmental activists who complain that "the public is irrational, in denial, or just plain foolish" (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 131). Lisa is smart. But the survival of the species (or at least the residents of Springfield) it turns out, will end up in the hands of Lisa's less intelligent father, a buffoon, the comic hero, Homer Simpson.

Homer the Comic Hero

The rock band Green Day's barge dissolves in the polluted lake. The barge and band sink under the surface as the residents of Springfield boo at them and throw pieces of trash. Green Day's front man, Billie Armstrong, has the audacity to warn the townsfolk about environmental disaster in the opening scene of *The Simpsons Movie*. For this, he is called "preachy." But even the fictive demise of the band Green Day in the polluted water of Lake Springfield doesn't change the minds or thoughtless actions of Springfield residents. When Lisa Simpson canvasses her neighborhood to enlist people in the task of cleaning up the polluted lake, she encounters pure disinterest—and a few slammed doors. When Lisa presides over a town meeting for a presentation called "An Irritating Truth," the citizens of Springfield turn a deaf ear. The latter scene is an obvious satire of Al Gore's documentary,[23]

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[23] Though *The Simpsons*' satire is remarkably lighter handed than the scathing upending of *South Park*.

complete with a scissors lift that breaks as Lisa tries to show the dramatically high level of

pollution in the lake. Like the newly enlightened student in Plato's allegory of the cave who

returns to bring light to the darkness, Lisa seems to behave "awkwardly and appears

completely ridiculous" (*Republic* VII 373). Lisa's attitudes and actions inform her status as a

tragic hero, who seeks to do good but ironically fails to achieve it—often prompting

unexpected and counterproductive results.

The tragic mode in literature rises from the view of humankind as a noble creature

who suffers on behalf of greatness, Meeker explains. Lisa is willing to suffer the ridicule of

the townspeople for the deeply felt belief that she can make a difference. She sacrifices her

Sunday afternoon and endures the scorn of adults. Meeker describes the tragic mode as

presented by Sophocles: "[…] through his characters he demonstrates the enormous human

capacity for creating and enduring pain, for following a passion to its ultimate end, for

employing the power of mind and spirit to rise above the contradictions of matter and

circumstance even though one is destroyed by them" (21). The problem with the tragic hero,

Meeker suggests, is the humanistic hubris that suggests the same kind of control over nature

that leads to ecological exploitation. The tragic mode is particularly unsuitable in dealing

with ecological problems, which cannot be conceived of as "the moral error of an

individual," Meeker writes (58). As stated in the previous chapter on *Avatar*, Meeker calls

environmental guilt "collective, distributed unevenly among the people now living and those

who have lived before" (58).

Nonetheless, the tragic mode appears in much environmental discourse, and also

turns up in environmentally themed popular culture animations, like *Ferngully*, *Princess

Mononoke*, and *Avatar*, to name a few. In *The Simpsons Movie*, the utility of the tragic mode

is held up for close inspection in the character of well-meaning Lisa Simpson. With dogged determination, Lisa concocts a plan for the town-hall meeting, one that gets immediate results. "This town is just one piece of trash away from a toxic nightmare!" she tells Springfield residents. "But I knew you wouldn't listen. So I took the liberty of pouring water from the lake in all your drinking glasses!" The crowd collectively spews polluted green water. Local bar owner Moe says, "See, this is why we should hate kids." The tragic hero can claim a victory in the short-term, but hasn't impacted long-term public attitudes. It's possible to coerce an audience into doing the right thing, but I argue that real change comes from engaging listeners in a conversation that is real and personal.

Scene change. A newspaper headline announces the clean-up of Lake Springfield, referring to Lisa as a "pushy kid." Even with her limited success, this tragic figure does not receive due respect as a heroine. That doesn't matter to Lisa as the animated residents of the fictitious city get to work cleaning up the lake and taking steps to prevent further pollution. The victory turns out to be short-lived and short-sighted. The goals of the clean-up were not universally communicated. The toxic nightmare occurs despite the tragic hero's best efforts. Despair ensues. Meeker calls the tragic view of man in literature one in need of replacement: "The tragic view of man, for all its flattering optimism, has led to cultural and biological disasters, and it is time to look for alternatives which might encourage better the survival of our own and other species" (Meeker 24). Lisa's careless buffoon of a father—the comic hero—presents an example of this alternative.

While activist Lisa canvasses the town on behalf of its polluted lake, her father wastes time. In one scene, he dares Bart to skateboard naked through town. This leads to Bart's arrest and Homer's predictable denial of responsibility. But no matter, Homer is hungry. He

takes his son to Krusty Burger, where Homer meets and falls in love with a pig used in a TV commercial but otherwise destined for the hatchet. Seeming oblivious to the meat he is consuming, Homer objects to the execution: "You can't kill him if he's wearing people clothes!" The pig runs to Homer to the pop song "Happy Together" and a dream sequence follows showing Homer and pig running through a field of flowers. Homer's thoughts are rarely directed, unless consumption is an object. For the majority of the film, Homer drifts ignobly, from whimsical act to mindless doltery. That gives him a certain potency fitting Meeker's description of a comic hero. Meeker writes: "Comedy demonstrates that man is durable even though he may be weak, stupid, and undignified" (24). Homer adopts the pig, storing its excrement in a backyard silo that becomes the tipping point for pollution levels in Lake Springfield. His actions epitomize the weak, stupid, and undignified human animal.

A comic discourse, Meeker writes, depicts a loss of equilibrium—one that will be recovered by story's end (25). The fall to disequilibrium is paved with Homer's self-absorbed choices. Homer makes no pretense of morality. He boasts no presumptuous ethical underpinning. When Marge comes upon the silo, she remarks: "It's leaking." Homer explains that the silo is not leaking, it's overflowing because he's been adding his own fecal matter to the mix. Marge attempts to force Homer to listen carefully to her and urges him to dispose of the filled waste silo responsibly. Homer agrees, at first, though he's distracted by his own internal noise, that of an animated monkey clanging on cymbals drawn in Homer's thought bubble. But he dismisses his promise to Marge quickly. Distracted by the lure of donuts, he drives to the recently cleaned-up lake instead of the hazardous waste disposal site. To proceed with his irresponsible dumping, the recalcitrant Homer must barrel his car over several warning signs. He tips the silo in the lake.

The lake is immediately transformed from sparkling clean reservoir to a black monster, skull and crossbones emerging in its dark surface. Homer, the comic hero, is also the eco-villain. I'm reminded of Nordhaus's and Shellenberger's observation of the multiple human roles as great destroyers and also great creators (152). Villainy is not as simple as the epic monologic discourse might suggest. In this dialogic enviro-toon, blame extends beyond Homer to government agency, political authority, and the corporate entity that ultimately pulls the political strings. Prompted by the fictional head of the Environmental Protection Agency, Russ Cargill, voiced by Al Brooks, a fictitious President Arnold Schwarzenegger decides to quarantine Springfield for its pollution by dropping a giant dome over the city. The dome cuts the community of Springfield off from a larger global village, turning the community into a literal greenhouse where residents, things, and creatures imprisoned in the city are steeped in their heat and their own pollution. Unlike the government and corporate entities, portrayed as incompetent or even evil throughout the narrative, the eco-villain and comic hero Homer finds redemption. Homer's unpredictable behavior as comic hero leads to the loss of equilibrium and provides the catalyst for its recovery.

When the residents of Springfield discover Homer's silo of pig crap in the lake, an angry mob storms the family's home. The Simpsons escape the dome through a sinkhole in their backyard. The exile family moves to Alaska, a state that pays residents to ignore the oil companies' resource exploitation, as Homer learns when he enters the state. Life is idyllic for a time. Until the family learns that the government plans to cover its misdeeds in Springfield by bombing the town—and creating a new grand canyon in its place. When Homer refuses to return home and try to save the city, Marge and the kids leave him. The nuclear family is fractured in ways that reprise the shattered environmental equilibrium. This moment in the

film reminds me of Sturgeon's critique of how environmental themes and family stability are handled similarly in popular culture narratives. Sturgeon sees the presentation of nuclear family narratives—the family breaks up but is restored as natural balance is restored to external environments—as problematic: "In these stories, the white, middle-class, nuclear family form is presented as 'normal' and 'natural,' without any critique of its complicity in the overconsumption of corporate products in an environmentally destructive system in which the toxins, waste, pollution, and radiation produced are visited on the poor, people of color, and the tribal peoples of the world" (104). This is a useful observation. I think the satire of *The Simpsons Movie* moves the so-called naturalized family to an exaggerated state that actually exposes the faulty feel-good stories that permeate more static cultural narratives. Homer Simpson is legitimately a mixed bag of intentions and actions. He works for the "enemy"—a nuclear power plant. He poisons the lake. He ultimately crafts a responsible mode of action. For a bulbous-headed stereotype of blue-collar dad, Homer feels rather real.

Neither does *The Simpsons Movie* gloss over social and racial inequities in its depiction of environmental apocalypse. The power eventually goes out in Springfield's domed city. But the power does not go out in the hilltop mansion of Mr. Burns, the corporate exec who runs the nuclear power plant where Homer works. A trio of townsfolk comes to beg Mr. Burns for power. He cackles at them: "For once, the rich, white man is in charge." He demands that these men convince him to turn the power back on but Mr. Burns is unmoved by the plight of hospitalized humans. He's slightly more intrigued by the demand of electricity to carry out a death sentence by electrocution at Springfield's prison. But when convenience store owner Apu, an Indian-American, passionately argues that Mr. Burns should "look inside your heart and it will tell you what to do," Mr. Burns pushes a button

releasing "the dogs" who chase the visitors away from the mansion. More irredeemable eco-villainy here, along with a real examination of money, power, and exploitive practices that impact less advantaged population groups.

Unlike Mr. Burns, Homer is not an irredeemable villain. Abandoned by his family, the self-absorbed Homer ends up helped by an indigenous American—the naturally ecological noble savage that Sturgeon notes is integral in U.S. cultural imagery (109). In this case, however, the character is intensely exaggerated in ways that call attention to the character's stereotypical status. With this character's help, Homer experiences an epiphany, not that "bananas are an excellent source of potassium" but that by helping his community, he is helping himself. The comic hero leaves for Springfield, shouting, "Thank you, Boob Lady!" to the tribal woman. While traveling, he sees her image in the aurora borealis, a nod to the Disney film *Brother Bear*.

Comic hero Homer Simpson seems to be the antithesis of Jim Anderson, the alpha male father in the wholesome *Father Knows Best* sit-com of the 1950s (also set in a town called Springfield). Homer is not unlikeable. Though he lacks Anderson's moral grounding and parenting skills, Homer "has grown quite fond" of his family. He eats and drinks too much. He's fat and lazy. Yet though occasionally tempted, he doesn't cheat on his wife. He's arguably an abusive father, especially to son Bart, though the show includes many moments of father-son or father-daughter bonding.

While a tragic hero might suffer or be killed for his principles, the comic hero stubbornly plods on. He may compromise morals and ethics. But the comic hero overcomes. "At the end of his tale he manages to marry his girl, evade his enemies, slip by the oppressive authorities, avoid drastic punishment, and stay alive" (Meeker 24). In the twenty years of

Simpsons' episodes, Homer never fails to fit Meeker's portrait of comic hero. In writing about the cultural impact of the series, other scholars have noted how Homer is an unthinking buffoon whose redeeming qualities are his child-like enthusiasm for life, his painfully pleasure-seeking *jouissance*, and what his wife Marge describes as his "in-your-face humanity." Raja Halwani quotes Marge's line, from the "Class Struggle in Springfield" episode, in a discussion of Homer's character flaws and redemptive qualities (20). In pop culture evolution, Homer is a "missing link" between the stone-age Fred Flintstone and the futuristic George Jetson, writes Doyle Green (202). In an essay arguing that *The Simpsons* cannot be considered an example of avant-garde television, Green writes that Homer "personifies the stereotype of loud, working-class ignorance" and enjoys a middle-class status "effortlessly attained in the miracle of the corporation" (202). Green concludes that *The Simpsons* merely repackages "the Golden Age domestic sitcoms and dominant ideology" (211); its satire supports the status quo (210). I argue that the positioning of *The Simpsons'* narrative within the status quo strengthens its internal and satiric critique of the status quo. Marge is a stay-at-home mom, yes, but her role in her family and community is not glossed over by dogma. Its complexities are pushed, prodded, and explored in every episode. When Homer returns home with a pet pig in the film, he asks: "Hey, Marge! Isn't it great being married to somebody who's recklessly impulsive?" "Actually, it's aged me horribly," she replies, wryly. Indeed, through its medium and message, *The Simpsons* presents pointed challenges to the status quo from its family and social representations to its environmental complexities to its comic hero, the monkey-faced missing link, Homer.

How might such a comic hero serve environmental discourse? Homer doesn't listen to dire warnings, whether prophetic or scientific. He does the convenient thing—dumping a

silo of pig crap into the lake—so that he can experience the joy of free donuts. He is the anti-Al Gore. When his wife Marge confronts him, he admits that he just doesn't think about the consequences of his actions: "I don't think about things. I admire people who do but I just try to make the world not hurt so much until I crawl in next to you." As Homer acts and reacts in various circumstances, Marge is alternately disgusted and charmed by Homer's felicity. In the end, he accomplishes the comic integration of will and desire "rather than the conquest of one by the other" (Meeker 191). Though a comic view of human interactions inspires little pride in the species, it mimics the reality of the human condition more authentically, Meeker proposes, than does a tragic view, with its positioning of humans as large and in charge. In the end, Homer does the heroic thing and risks his life to save his town—if only out of pure self-interest. This real motivation to work toward a solution to ecological problems should not be lost on those seeking to communicate the realities of environmental issues. Meeker makes a convincing argument that the comic discourse represents the complications of environmental concerns in ways that the tragic discourse mode, enamored as it is with human self-aggrandizement, cannot (Meeker 192). This complexity is also navigated well though *The Simpsons Movie*'s multiple-voiced heteroglossia, to which I now turn.

Heteroglossia: Putting the D'oh in Dome

As the film begins, the town of Springfield is viewed first through its opening "shot"—exterior natural environment—lake and trees—swooping past before the "camera" takes viewers inside the community to examine its composite parts. We see at work Mr. Burns, the wealthy corporate industrialist who runs the town's primary industry, and the

small business counterpart Apu, the East Indian who runs the Kwik-E-Mart.[24] An exterior

shot of the school, an institution featured (and critiqued) in most episodes of *The Simpsons*, is

followed by the traditional interior shot of Bart Simpson writing on a chalkboard: "I will not

illegally download this movie." In this multi-faceted way, *The Simpsons Movie* calls attention

to the many characters it represents as well as breaks the fourth wall to attend to its own

identity as a film, an artifact of cultural production that operates with its own set of rules

about such things as illegal downloading.

The film depicts varied voices, from mass media newscasters to rock stars,

politicians, housewives, bartenders, religious leaders, friendly neighbors, senior citizens,

children, and even animals. As the film evidences heteroglossia through these multiple ways

of operating within a single national language, the film operates to decentralize the discourse,

to pull at the strands of ideological norms, as Bakhtin would note (*Dialogic Imagination* 67).

To put this more simply, the messages of the movie are mixed and strewn about and confused

and pulled together into chaotic strands that represent accurately the confused shifting ideas

and norms of contemporary society. All this, and a coherent narrative—that's some feat. The

creative strategies underlying the film were discussed in an MTV interview with film creators

James L. Brook and Matt Groening. Groening said the movie's genesis came from a

newspaper article about pollution and factory pig farms. "And then Homer falls in love with

a pig, and the rest wrote itself," he told an interviewer. The interviewer asked about the film's

"mixed message about environmentalism." After all, the rock band Green Day is boo-ed

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[24] As a promotional campaign for *The Simpsons Movie* in summer 2007, a dozen 7-Eleven
convenience stores were renamed Kwik-E-Marts, selling Simpsons products like Buzz Cola
and Krusty-Os cereal.

when it tries to talk about the environment for one minute. Lisa's warnings are initially

ignored by the townspeople and the head of the Environmental Protection Agency is one of

the film's eco-villains. Replied Brooks sardonically: "We like to do the pro-and-con about

whether to pollute the planet." Brooks' answer is appropriately sarcastic. The interviewer's

question was flawed. Any "mixed messages" on environmentalism in *The Simpsons Movie*

merely reflect our own chaotic mix of attitudes. Through its parody, the film presents the

conflicted global conversation in which many perspectives present themselves. As noted

above, Bakhtin called a discourse that reflected multiple voices or dialects within a single

language a heteroglossic one, in that it did not merely depend on a fixed or common "unitary

language" composed of linguistic norms (*Dialogic Imagination* 270). Heteroglossia

accommodated a variety of social languages, a diversity of voices, jargon, and stylistically

individualized dialects (*Dialogic Imagination* 262). Where unified language operates at a

high-culture level to gather populations under a narrow umbrella of readerly epic truths,

heteroglossia works at lower levels to gather audiences under a wide noisy circus tent:

> […] on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the
>
> clown sounded forth, ridiculing all 'languages' and dialects; there developed the
>
> literature of the *fabliaux* and *schwanke* of street songs, folksayings, anecdotes, where
>
> there was no language-center at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the
>
> 'languages' of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all languages were
>
> masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face.
>
> (*Dialogic Imagination* 273)

By representing (and ridiculing) a cacophony of voices, the discourse opens itself up to as

many points of view. Rather than compressing the multiple voices of a community into a

single-voiced discourse, the heteroglossic discourse opens itself up, lends itself to interpretation from multiple perspectives. It becomes more real.

The Simpsons Movie, as heteroglossic animated text, renders an imaginative universe in which speech is extended to bodies of water. When Lake Springfield finally turns black with pollution, a skull-and-crossbones emerges on its surface. The lake speaks one word in a low sinister voice: "Evil!" Key roles are also given to the film's creatures, which drive the plot. Religious neighbor Ned Flanders, hiking with Bart, comes upon a squirrel with dozens of eyes, mutated by an encounter with the lake's pollution. He calls it a marvel of intelligent design and gives thanks to a creator. Bart Simpson begins poking the creature's eyes. The Environmental Protection Agency comes upon the scene, threatens Bart with a felony charge, and cages the mutant squirrel as an example of the devastating levels of pollution now evident in Springfield. All of these events were predicted in the film's early scenes, when Grandpa Simpson had a religious experience, a vision in which he warned about a creature with "a thousand eyes." During his vision, Grandpa Simpson begins to mysteriously shout: "EPA! EPA!"

The unofficial voices of individuals are contrasted with the official voices of political leaders, including the fictional Russ Cargill,[25] the head of the EPA and also head of the company that manufactures the dome that will be dropped over Springfield, and a fictional

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[25] Cargill Inc. is a real U.S.-based multination corporation, one that could perhaps create such a dome as the fictional one used to quarantine Springfield. The company's profits make it the largest privately held corporation in the United States, producing and marketing food, agricultural, financial, and industrial products and services. The "grain giant and Brazil's biggest soy exporter" has come under attack by human rights activists and environmentalists for, among other things, its contributions to deforestation in Brazil. In 2007, the Associated Press reported that the Brazilian government shut down Cargill's deep-water port on the Amazon, citing failure to provide a required environmental impact statement (Associated Press "Brazil Shuts Down Cargill's Amazon Port").

U.S. President Arnold Schwarzenegger. The latter individual speaks with the same familiar accent as the California governor, though the animated role is not voiced by the "real" Arnold. When presented with various options for remediating Springfield's pollution, the fictitious Schwarzenegger chooses one randomly: "I was elected to lead, not to read." These varied voices inspire laughter, a laughter that comes from the recognition that this fiction represents, through exaggeration, various recognizable tendencies of contemporary speech. We hear the familiar language of our evangelical Christian neighbor, of the bureaucratic politician, and the corporate executive obsessed with money and power. That these forms of speech are recorded in a fictitious animation—written by a team of comedic screenwriters— is not lost on us. One example: When the Russ Cargill character orders soldiers to be stationed around the perimeter of Springfield's dome so that no others can escape, an EPA official suggests that he has gone "mad with power." Cargill replies: "Of course I have. You ever tried going mad without *power*? It's boring. No one listens to you." This word play reminds the viewers that this is simply fiction—the familiar voice of Al Brooks (*Broadcast News, Lost in America*) voices the comedic corporate villain. These kinds of moments pull us out of the narrative and provide psychic distance—a further benefit of heteroglossia. The intersections and crossings of these many "linguistic points of view" gives a discourse the flavor of real life, Bakhtin argues (*Dialogic Imagination* 76, 339-40). The text is not a monologue, but a dialogue, a writerly discourse with multiple entry points and maximum potential to engage an audience.

At the start of the film, these voices work together to establish, within the film's narrative, a stable community. The community depicted in *The Simpsons Movie* is certainly not a model of smooth-running utopia but its composite parts are functioning. The discourse

mode follows the community into chaos. What happens to the diversity of voices? Many remain eerily unchanged. The voice associated with news media remains a constant. After the dome drops, cutting the city off from all outside resources, Springfield news anchorman Kent Brockman, offers a special report called "Trappucino." Brockman notes that supplies of needed items and Botox are running low. As he speaks, the skin on the anchorman's face slides down and the broadcaster clips it up behind his neck. Seemingly unperturbed by this, Brockman ends the broadcast, "as always," on a lighter note—the return of swallows to Springfield. Ensuing animated "B-roll" shows the birds crashing haplessly into the dome's exterior. A pack of snarling cats await them at the base of the dome. The familiar language of news media speaking in the same even balanced tones contrasts with astonishing visuals of an exterior environment that seems to be falling apart. We are reminded that, though civilization as we know it crumbles, humans can count on a few static realities, like shallow TV news.

Ugly is Cool

The medium is the message, McLuhan writes famously in *Understanding Media* (7). That axiom works well to begin a discussion of a low-resolution medium like *The Simpsons*. To show how *The Simpsons Movie* contrasts with richer contemporary animation efforts, I will describe the 2006 trailer advertising *The Simpsons Movie*. The trailer opens to the strains of "The Nutcracker Suite." A shot pans over a richly animated landscape of flowers and butterflies. This is the deliciously animated stuff of Pixar, it seems. An animated bunny pops his head out of an animated hole and begins prancing on his detailed tiptoes in the field of flowers, dancing with daisies. Narration begins: "In a time when computer animation brings

us worlds of unsurpassed beauty, one film dares to be ugly." A large bland logo against black background subsumes the scene, mashing the animated bunny in its trajectory. One of *The Simpsons*' notoriously non-beautiful characters, the bartender Moe, chomps on a huge cartoon donut and announces: "*The Simpsons Movie* … in 2-D!" He looks down from the logo to the bottom of the solid black frame and says: "Uh, the bunny's not moving." From its trailer, it's evident that this movie will not be intensely detailed with the richness of *Avatar*'s computer-generated imagery or the depth and dimension of a Pixar animation. The hand-drawn line, with the tactile character of the cave painting, as McLuhan would note, is celebrated by the show's creators. The technique of the cool medium itself hints at its comedic Aristotelian roots:

> Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type - not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain. (*Poetics* 34)

The medium is ugly, and its imitations are those of "characters of a lower type"—a common dolt like Homer Simpson—fat, yellow, amoral, insensitive. We don't like these traits individually. But when they come together in this humorous characterization of American blue-collar dad, we are smitten. The objectionable character of Homer is saved by the cool medium of the *The Simpsons* and its comedic message. These characteristics also make the show and derivative film popular and accessible texts, as well as commercially successful. The characters are drawn simply with large round heads, round eyes and only four fingers. The yellow color of these humans—Groening thought it would be funny to see people try to

correct the color on their TV sets—gives them a certain universal appeal. The animated film medium integrates simpler shapes, primary colors, recognizable characters, and familiar sounds in ways that connect audiences with the reality of an imagined world. In an interview, Matt Groening contrasts his cartoon with the highly detailed animation work done by the animation studio famous for *Toy Story* and *Monsters Inc.*:

> The Pixar stuff is a great use of that medium, of computer-generated images. But it's not *The Simpsons*. I love the crude, hand-drawn line. It's not perfect, but you can see the humanity in it. CGI animation, when it's not done with the wit and style of those films, is cold and airless, and I don't think you can say that about our movie. It's definitely flawed and imperfect and crazy; but it's hand-drawn. ("*Simpsons Movie* Creators Talk Pig Farms, Pixar, Green Day With Kurt Loder")

Humanity evidences itself in the imperfect, crude hand-drawn line. This is the art of the cool and dialogic enviro-toon. Italo Calvino notes, in relation to cel animation, that the movement of simple cartoon figures on a static background is similar to arranging texts, phonetic symbols, on a blank sheet of paper: "The animated cartoon has a lot to teach the writer, above all how to define characters and objects with a few strokes. It is a metaphorical and a metonymic art at one and the same time; it is the art of metamorphosis […] and of anthropomorphism" (qtd. in Wells 82). The inviting openness of these texts comes from their simplicity. The viewer is not daunted by the text's perfection, which may lessen the likelihood of the viewer exercizing a role in completing the text. Instead, she feels able to act, to help, and to draw meaning from the text.

Aesthetics aside, the low-resolution medium has been cost-effective for a TV network like Fox, home to *The Simpsons*. Making an animated sit-com is cheaper than making a live-

action sit-com. Alberti notes that the studio overhead is low—no sets, studio audience, cameras, lights, or crew needed. A small group of voice actors play multiple characters. For example, Homer Simpson is voiced by Dan Castellaneta, who also provides the voices for Grampa Abraham Simpson, Barney Gumble, and Krusty the Clown. Knowing that one talented human provides voices for several beloved and culturally resonant characters adds to the sense of play and familiarity in the medium. It's as if a handful of local youngsters were performing in a play where the young actors and actresses acted many roles—to the applause and appreciation of delighted, forgiving parents. What might be considered a "flaw" in polished contemporary discourse enhances this cartoon with cool media charm.

Homer's epiphany

Even now, however, my audience might remain unconvinced that Homer represents a different heroic model, one more suited to enlightened and enriched human survival, than Jake Sully of *Avatar*. Both heroes accomplish their goal. One accomplishes the goal through violence and pride-filled certainty that he represents the forces of "good." The other bumbles onto a non-violent solution. Driven by selfish motives, humbled by his frail humanity, the comic hero finally musters up real bravery in the face of daunting odds. I return here to the development of Homer Simpson's character in the comic mode, the use of heteroglossia and the cool medium of *The Simpsons Movie*. Human comedy, Meeker concludes, seeks the reconciliation of will and desire, what Dante called felicity (191). The comic hero restores ecological balance as a matter of course, not viewing it as a mighty struggle of good and evil but as a means to an end, often a selfish one. Homer's character does not exactly make us proud to be human but he does make us "mindful of human limitations and modest in [our]

assessment of human potentials" (191). More than anything, Meeker writes, "comedy seeks joy" (191). Certainly, Homer seeks joy—the delight of a pet, the friendship of his son, a mug of beer or a donut. When we valorize our tragic heroes, we forget their raw humanity. In the next chapter on the cable comedy *South Park*, the characters' uncensored human-ness—expressed in vulgar farting, profane language, and proliferating bodily fluids, will be made even more evident.

The heteroglossia of *The Simpsons Movie* gives us insights into how diverse perspectives turn into a multiplicity of voices. As we hear these familiar dialogues overlap and intersect, we begin to feel the complexity of the larger ecological conversation that we hope, as activists, to provoke. As a cool, writerly guide for assuming responsibility and taking action, the film's form and content involves its audience in an active consideration about knowledge and informed decision-making. Western man, McLuhan writes, acquires from technology the ability to act without reacting, to encounter knowledge with complete detachment. This resulting apathy or numbness could lead to disastrous consequences, McLuhan writes, as increased knowledge ought to require increasing involvement with the global village. "It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner," McLuhan writes (4). With total field awareness, hot or cool, comes responsibility.

How can we employ this responsibility? Or as Wendell Berry asks: "How can we work without doing irreparable damage to the world and its creatures, including ourselves? Or: How can we live without destroying the sources of our life?" (*The Way of Ignorance* 59). In its safe low-resolution, low-culture medium, *The Simpsons Movie* addresses these concerns, presenting a mix of humility and the need for responsibility through its animated

medium, juxtaposition of a tragic and comic hero and the heteroglossia of its animated community.

The audience for environmental discourse is a human one, plagued by human desire. A dualism that positions human desire as an evil polluting force, whether it comes from Christianity or environmental science, might produce simple guilt and could possibly drive activism. But the pluralism of the comic mode, as depicted so well in a dialogic enviro-toon, presents a better mode for navigating the terrain of ecological thought. The pivotal moment for Homer Simpson comes after his family has left him. He's rescued from a snowy Alaskan landscape by the previously mentioned Inuit woman who begins a ceremony to cleanse the spirit of the yellow-headed cartoon narcissist. The woman gives Homer a potent drink and the two begin a guttural chanting that will last, she says, until Homer has an epiphany. "What's an epiphany?" Homer asks. "Sudden realization of great truth," the woman replies. For twenty years, Homer has had epiphanies. They tend to be accompanied by his own guttural sound, "D'oh!"

What sudden realization of great truth does this fictive text finally offer? As the drum beats, Homer descends into a surreal dreamscape where he has minor epiphanies about such inconsequential things as the fact that potassium comes from bananas and that soccer won't catch on in the United States. Finally Homer's hallucination shifts. He is being tortured by a hostile forest of animated trees who pull Homer apart, limb by limb. Homer abdicates: "Do whatever you want to me! I don't care about myself anymore." "Because?" the Inuit woman asks. "Because other people are just as important as me. Without them I'm nothing. In order to save myself, I have to save Springfield!" This scene, a heteroglossic mode that explores

the voices of a pop cultural forms—the stereotype of ecological noble savage, a forest of speaking trees, and the comic hero himself, is Homer's "D'oh!" moment.

Homer's epiphany leads to his new selfless resolution to do what it takes to restabilize the network of his community. He trudges back to his town and, through another series of comic mishaps, manages to save it. In an action scene that reprises, tongue-in-cheek, hundreds of Hollywood heroic endings, Homer risks his life to toss a ticking bomb out of his town. In the upside-down comedic narrative, he succeeds only through sheer luck—and not through Bruce Willis tough guy heroism or via tragic self-sacrifice. At the last minute, the bomb lands on the dome, shattering it, and releasing the town. Homer Simpson is not unlike the Greek demigod Comus, who left heady intellectual debates and intense passions to other gods. Instead Comus engaged himself in simpler tasks – keeping the equilibrium stable for drifting forms of life.

How can we live, Berry asks, without destroying the sources of our life? How can we transcend the "aloof and dissociated role," as McLuhan suggests we must? *The Simpsons Movie* offers a model, a yellow-headed drifter, a comic hero who happens upon a reason to become deliberate. Without others, we are nothing. Individualism does not, ultimately, work. The solution to ecological balance on this planet we love does not require large automatic weapons. To save ourselves, we take responsibility for our communities, humbly acknowledging our self-interests. When deliberations overwhelm, the task to the comic hero is to deflate human hubris but not to "trivialize what is genuinely important" (Meeker 192). From a cool multiple-voiced animation filled with laughter comes humility and responsibility. That's the message of *The Simpsons Movie*—a joyful laughter-filled epiphany,

shared by the multiple voices of a community, and couched in the cool medium of ugly

animation.

Chapter Four: Farting Hybrids in *South Park's* Rainforest

Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically.

--*Mikhail Bakhtin,* Dialogic Imagination (23)

A dialogic enviro-toon should be an equal opportunity offender. *The Simpsons*, discussed in the last chapter, offers a bit of progressive, pro-environmentalist bias in its satire. Operating in the comic mode and presenting multiple perspectives on complex ecological issues keep *The Simpsons* from sounding preachy. Less bias is evident in the animated adult situation comedy *South Park*, which has provoked outrage from Catholics, scientologists, atheists, parents, gays, liberals, conservatives, and Tom Cruise. Environmental messages are not exempt from the taboo-free creators. The drivers of hybrid cars, in an episode called "Smug Alert," are depicted as so self-satisfied that, ironically, they provoke a devastating environmental disaster. Al Gore is portrayed as a crazed attention-seeking dolt warning the public about a fantastical "ManBearPig" in an episode that parodies Gore's documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. In the episode "Rainforest, Schmainforest," a cause célèbre of environmentalism receives fastidious and uncomfortable inspection.

The above-mentioned episodes do not necessarily overturn tragic narratives in favor of comic ones in ways that model changing ineffectual tropes in environmental discourse. Instead the reversals in the world of *South Park* offer close access and familiarization with

topics like environmentalism through the kind of profane, bawdy mocking process that Bakhtin refers to as a "comic operation of dismemberment" (*Dialogic Imagination* 24). By pulling apart the strands of fixed and accepted discourse, an audience is invited to perform what Bakhtin calls a scientific and artistic investigative experiment: "Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it" (*Dialogic Imagination* 23). Writing well before *South Park* creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker were born, Bakhtin's ideas are better understood, however, with regard to his scholarly treatment of the sixteenth century works of Rabelais. Media critic Toni Johnson-Woods aligns Rabelais' "scatological humor, gratuitous violence, and crude insults" (xiv) with the toilet humor of *South Park*, and finds Bakhtin's work to be most useful in a critical account of the contemporary Comedy Central show. My narrow study focuses on several episodes of *South Park* with environmental themes. I argue that these are dialogic enviro-toons that accomplish, through laughter, an important critique of environmental discourse, and these episodes offer such a critique without seeming to pursue any such goal. Perhaps against its will, the animated series, characterized by profanity of word and deed, offers a useful engagement tool for dealing with the complexities of ecological issues.

Inadvertently educational? Certainly show creators claim to avoid attempting to agendize anything other than a complete lack of agenda. That's why *South Park* is not easily interpreted in the context of any inherent political or social philosophy, warns Doyle Green: "[…] the show deliberately obscures the inherent binary of the literal versus the ironic

message and meaning in satire altogether, and seeks to confuse and confront rather than elucidate and educate" (217).[26] In *South Park*, individuals, institutions, ideologies, and idiots are dissected and splayed open on the parodic operating table. The inconsistencies of one belief system are displayed for all to examine and even mock. So are the hypocrisies of its counter. The burden of a polished, carefully maintained perspective diminishes as an audience circles the examination table. Through an animated form that insults the intelligence by its exaggerated simplicity, aided by the laughter of recognition, the viewer receives permission to freely examine these multiple perspectives.

The show's underlying philosophy of universal mockery is explained within the show's content by *South Park* character Kyle in a fourth-grade bull session. Kyle explains to a newcomer that their practice is to pick on friends for any observable anomaly. Says Kyle to a newcomer: "We're guys, dude. We find something about all our friends to rip on. We made fun of you for being rich for the same reason we rip on Butters for being wimpy. … And Stan for being in love with Wendy. And Cartman for being fat. And Cartman for being stupid. And Cartman for having a whore for a mom. And Cartman for being a sadistic asshole."

Interjects Cartman: "Hey. You did me already."

Its success in accomplished democratization through pluralistic representations is evidenced by praise and criticism from all interested factions. The show's been celebrated for environmental skepticism, as Brian Anderson does in his book *South Park Conservatives*. Yet its creators have also been praised for their messages about ecological responsibility. When Parker and Stone built a home in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, they chose to incorporate

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[26] The same might be said of Thoreau's *Walden*, which has also been widely claimed by the adherents of wildly different political and social factions, as well as advertising executives and banks.

ecologically sustainable features (Lawrence). Bloggers at Ecorazzi write: "We knew *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone were into weaving green themes into story lines, but who knew they were also into doing it with their own homes?" (D'Estries). A careful and thorough reading of *South Park* episodes with environmental themes demonstrates the usefulness of this ultra-cool even-handed comedic critique in examining unquestioned modes of ecological action and communication. The cool medium of the cartoon, from its crude geometric figures "drawn at grade-school level" (212), as Greene notes, demands a high level of participation. Also, the show positions laughter as a key condition for representing external reality, as the epigraph by Bakhtin suggests at the start of this chapter.

The Makings of Crude

South Park aired its first episode in 1997 on Viacom's cable station, Comedy Central. The show quickly caught on with young people though some community minded adults were outraged over the show's bad language, irreverence, anatomical fixations, and obscene themes. From the first episode "Cartman Gets an Anal Probe," viewers have been treated to a steady stream of "dirty" words and bodily fluids. A statue of the Virgin Mary shits blood in one episode. Martha Stewart's rectum is violated by an entire turkey in another. Women celebrate liberatory "queefing"—emitting noisy vaginal farts—in "Eat, Pray, Queef." In "Woodland Critter Christmas," three orphaned mountain lions learn to perform abortions in an animated montage of clinical instruction. The animated human abortionist, who remarks that since it's only three days until Christmas, tells the lions that he has plenty of abortions to perform. He invites them to watch and learn. As the roughly animated doctor inserts shiny

metal objects under white sheets, a cheery holiday tune plays. The mountain lion cubs use their new skills to abort the antichrist.

From *South Park*'s start, Johnson-Woods reports that the show made a "media splash" characterized by positive reviews that referred to the show as "devilishly original" and "deliciously demented" with "twisted, perverted charm" (qtd. in Johnson-Woods 24-5). *South Park* is a signature offering for the cable network on which it airs, Comedy Central. Nearly four million people watched the 2008 season premiere. The show is responsible, along with fake news and parody offerings of *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, for a 2007 Nielsen Media Research calculation that ranked Comedy Central as the No. 2 cable network for male viewers. The network's concentration of male viewers is surpassed only by ESPN (Carter). After football, tennis, and golf, comedy earns a generous slice of audience for its accessible open-ended disclosure of absurdity in governmental, social, and media milieus. Until someone figures out how to weave ecological themes into a pro-football game, comedy could be considered a remarkably useful way to engage this audience.

The first episode of this ultra-cool medium, like its short Internet-distributed precursors, was created with construction paper cut-outs through the use of stop-motion animation. The animation style has been called vulgar, primitive, and crappy. Each frame of the animation positions the cut-outs in slightly altered positions for a rough animation in which character's body parts move with unrealistic choppiness. The low-definition settings are simple, unmoving, unchanging. Perhaps the richest, most visceral details in *South Park* come from depicting the spewing of bodily fluids—excrement, urine, vomit, and/or blood are given special treatment here. Greene calls this "intentionally vulgar," an appropriate format for intentionally vulgar content: "By standards of network TV animation, *South Park*'s 'anti-

animation' appears absolutely amateurish yet outrageously experimental: the animated

sitcom done through a détournement of children's drawings, collage, kitsch, photography,

Pop Art, and underground comics" (215). As Greene notes, the show often includes realistic

photos or film clips within its low-resolution frame. The episode "Whale Whores," which

mocks the efforts and motivations of *Animal Planet*'s eco-activist reality TV show, includes

real photographs of Paul Watson, captain of The Sea Shepherd (and an early member of

Greenpeace), and black-and-white film footage from the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima. Early

in its history, the makers of *South Park* tapped digital computer technology while retaining

the primitive look of construction paper cut-outs. This enables the animators to work fast,

creating episodes on the fly. Because of this, creators can riff on current issues in the news,

from presidential elections ("About Last Night" aired the day after Barack Obama won the

2008 election, and shows the newly elected president arriving at the White House far too

early) to the Terri Schiavo case (the Emmy Award-winning "Best Friends Forever" episode

aired in 2005) to the recent popularity of Glenn Beck as a question-begging talk show host

(2009's "Dancing With Smurfs," which also includes a timely reference to the film *Avatar*,

breaking box office records as the episode aired).

Like a typical U.S. nuclear family situation comedy, the show's plots revolve around

the antics of preadolescent boys as they begin to apprehend the realities of their worlds. The

seemingly formulaic plot mirrors the sitcom format of rising conflict and resolution with

moral lesson learned. That's where the comparison ends, as *South Park* subverts the sit-com

form mercilessly. Unlike the Beaver who learns from his elders, the naïve fourth graders of

South Park are the show's voices of reason—not their parents. In fact, the adults of *South

Park* seem to be beyond help, permanently stupid and uneducable. At the end of an episode,

the boys will have learned something—something they attempt to communicate to narcissistic, absurd grown-ups in charge of their homes, schools, religions, and governments. The adults inevitably refuse to hear the often self-evident wisdom of the boys. The audience, however, is privy to this absurdity. We get the parody. While the kids' attempts to communicate epiphanies fall flat with the show's fictional adults, viewers can't help but encounter blunt childlike perspectives on homosexuality, religion, terrorism, and the American celebrity obsession, not to mention sadomasochism, drug use, and tampons.

As an example of dialogic enviro-toon, *South Park* represents, perhaps, some challenge to the audience of my dissertation. Ecocritics are by definition a group of literary critics who care profoundly about the state of our species and the fate of our planet. I admit that my heart races a bit fast when I feel my own deeply held ecological values and perspectives under the microscope of *South Park*'s satire. What if I don't want to explore this discourse openly and freely, which Bakhtin suggests is what comedy enables us to do? The cartoon's content is introduced with a warning: "The following program contains coarse language and due to its content should not be viewed by anyone." Yet by discouraging engagement in these ways, the show offers another kind of invitation—one that invites viewers to suspend cherished perspectives and examine the real complexities through a simple lens. Perhaps their likenesses to a contemporary, media-saturated Huck Finn type of American male adolescence explains why Stan, Kyle, Eric and Kenny—boys coming of age in South Park, Colorado—have fixed themselves in our national identity. The show, through these characters, deconstructs unchallenged narratives and offers new and perhaps more realistic "morals" for our contemporary milieu. In a *Reason* magazine article, Nick Gillespie and Jesse Walker credit the animated sitcom with being the "sharpest satire of American

politics and culture." They observe: "*South Park* will prove every bit as long-lived in the American subconscious as Mark Twain's Hannibal, Missouri, or Laura Ingalls Wilder's prairie" (Gillespie and Walker). A discussion of environmental discourse in contemporary U.S. animation cannot ignore the impact of this long-running iconoclastic cartoon.

South Park is perhaps the coolest of cool media, and its content is contemporary carnivalesque, citing Bakhtin's term for discourse that celebrates folk (popular) culture. Less "family friendly" than *The Simpsons*, *South Park* presents a profanity that presents a barrier to some parts of the audience and at the same time provides what some of the young people in my university class consider an engaging terrain for gaining knowledge about contemporary realities. In an essay about "Whale Whores," one student wrote that the episode provided a useful explanation of the whaling issue for the uninitiated: "The factual roots combined with the fictional story allow an audience who has never heard of this topic to become interested." To explore how an audience might engage with the series, I will look closely at the three *South Park* episodes mentioned at the start of this chapter.

"Rainforest, Schmainforest"

Aired April 7, 1999

Co-creator Trey Parker explains in a DVD commentary that the *South Park* episode "Rainforest, Schmainforest" was inspired by a visit to Costa Rica and his negative experience there. These experiences are reflected in the episode through the harsh perspective of a foul-mouthed fourth-grader named Eric Cartman. Of the four South Park youthful male

caricatures, Cartman represents the prototypical mook[27]—a word Douglas Rushkoff coined

to describe the media stereotype of ignorant self-absorbed U.S. male (*Merchants of Cool*).

Cartman attends the South Park Elementary School where kids fart, flip off teachers, and

invite administrators to "suck my balls." This environment operates like the space of the folk

carnival culture described by Bakhtin, where *billingsgate* melds with play in an all-too-real

representation of institutions, including schools. Even the official adult voices of the

institution are weary of plastering over external reality. But that does not stop them. When

introducing choir leader/activist Miss Stevens (voiced by Jennifer Aniston), teacher Mr.

Harrison admits to students that environmental activism via performance art is "totally stupid

and lame" but he still nonetheless demands his students' attention. As a punishment designed

to remedy Cartman's lack of cultural sensitivity, the boy is compelled to travel to Costa Rica

with Miss Stevens and an activist kids' choir provocatively named "Getting Gay With Kids."

The choir's goal is to "raise awareness" about the dangers facing the rainforest. When choir

director Miss Stevens waxes eloquent about the fragile delicate rainforest and how important

it is to save it, she tips her animated head to the side. The visual representation here evokes a

comparison to a stereotypical[28] environmental activist with odd affectations that provoke

laughter—and make spurious her motivations. The dialogue ascribed to Miss Stevens

reprises eco-clichés like: "We must take only photos and leave only footprints" and "We have

to respect Mother Nature and she will respect us." This activist seems to care deeply about

animals, plants, and saving the planet from human hubris. She acts out a typecast role in the

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[27] Other mooks in the media: John Belushi's character in *Animal House*, Howard Stern, and the guys who do incredibly stupid things on the show *Jackass*.

[28] I cannot think of an actual environmentalist friend who fits this stereotype and yet the images rings true to me. I suspect the stereotype might be the one invoked and maintained by the repetition of media imagery.

U.S. pop culture imagery, the unthinking New Age Environmentalist. The goals of this stereotypical individual are suspect. She seems to join a cause because others are joining a cause.[29] Miss Stevens gushes with delight at the opportunity to tour the rainforest with a Costa Rican guide. She repeats the tragic narrative common to environmentalism, urging the children not to upset the delicate balance of nature and teaches them to sing about the magical rainforest that needs the help of humans to save it and, thus, create a better world entirely covered by rainforest. "Environmental tales of tragedy," write Nordhaus and Shellenberger, "begin with Nature in harmony and almost always end up in quasi-authoritarian politics" (131). By the end of the episode, however, Miss Stevens and her obtuse eco-idealism reveal the eco-tragic narrative to be one of humanistic hubris that (hypocritically) identifies with a certain race (Anglo) and socioeconomic class (privileged). When Miss Stevens encounters unmediated reality in the Costa Rican rainforest, she quickly changes her tune.

In the episode's multiplying social absurdities, Miss Stevens can't speak Spanish. She seems to "care" about indigenous populations but it becomes evident that she cares more about political correctness than about human beings. When Cartman makes honest, albeit insensitive, observations about the poverty in Costa Rica, she tries to silence him by informing him that people in this third-world country don't have the same advantages as he does. When Cartman leans out a bus window and suggests that the natives should better their lives through education and employment, he is again silenced by his teacher's politically correct demand that he respect other cultures "this instant." Miss Stevens insists that she will

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[29] To be honest, I recognize a little bit of myself in Miss Stevens. I don't tip my head to the side. At least, I don't think I do.

change Cartman and help him to respect nature and cultures different from his own. But this is Cartman, and not The Beaver. So the plot disrupts what might be, in the epic monologue of more traditional narratives, a predictable Cartman epiphany. Instead of the boneheaded mook coming to appreciate the glory and diversity of Costa Rican culture and the Central American rainforest, it is Miss Stevens who experiences an unexpected transformation after a large snake swallows the group's jungle guide, enormous insects attack, a carnivorous plant attempts to ingest a student, and "gentle" tribal folks capture Miss Stevens and attempt to sacrifice her to their large god. When a U.S. bulldozer crew heroically arrives to save the day, Miss Stevens heartily approves. "You go right ahead and plow down this whole fuckin' thing," she says.

The show's credits roll with faux facts about the rainforest, evoking similar fact campaigns used by environmental activists in rainforest-saving rhetorical strategies, directly satirizing the likes of Save the Rainforest's fact sheet, which includes: "If present rates of destruction continue, half our remaining rainforests will be gone by the year 2025, and by 2060 there will be no rainforests remaining" and "70 percent of the plant species identified by the U.S. National Cancer Institute as holding anti-cancer properties come from rainforests" (*Save the Rainforest*). *South Park's* satiric fact sheet includes the rainforest's responsibility for thousands of deaths from accidents, attacks or illnesses and its containment of more than 700 things that cause cancer. Are these facts true? Yes. Do they have a place in a monologue created by rainforest preservation activists? Probably not, as no hint of these complications appears on Save The Rainforest's Web site. As the *South Park* credits roll, viewers are urged to join the fight *against* the rainforest. But please recall, the show's opening includes a disclaimer suggesting that the show should not be viewed by anyone.

Creators are not suggesting a course of action but pointing out the absurdities of commercialism and the hypocrisies of activism. This episode contains additional important critiques of environmental discourse in popular culture that we'll return to after introducing two more episodes.

"Smug Alert"

Aired March 29, 2006

Fourth-grade *South Park* character Kyle's dad Gerald buys a hybrid and spends his days driving the city streets, turning his ecological commitment into a conspicuous moralistic display. "I couldn't just sit back and be a part of destroying the earth anymore," Gerald tells people, leaning out his window. Meeting another hybrid car driver, the two men engage in a mutual moment of clichéd self-congratulation: "I like to be part of the solution and not part of the problem." This attention to environmental discourse, as filtered through the show's parody, exemplifies what Bakhtin might have called a comic verbal composition, a parody that subverts the phrases and deeds of a religion or institution, in this case the environmental activist community, and exposes them to ridicule. Gerald takes his kids to the parking lot of a hardware store where he encourages Kyle to join him in writing fake citations for gas-guzzling SUVs. As Gerald writes tickets "for failure to care about the environment" and puts it on his friends' cars, Stan's dad Randy rebukes him: "Ever since you got a hybrid car, you've gotten so smug that you love the smell of your own farts." Randy notes that Gerald now talks with his eyes closed because "that's what smug people do."

Feeling superior to the backwards citizens of his community, Gerald decides to move his family to San Francisco "where everyone is motivated and progressive like us." Indeed,

as the family moves into a SF apartment, they're greeted by neighbors who drive better hybrids with even lower emissions. Sure enough, during a few self-congratulatory conversations, the SF-ites emit loud farts and double over to inhale deeply. One neighbor refuses wine and instead fills his glass with flatulence, raises it to his nose for a blissful moment. There's no mistaking the smug in the air. As the satire progresses, smug itself provokes environmental disaster both in San Francisco and then in South Park, where the residents have now also taken to driving hybrids and feeling superior.

Smug becomes physically tangible, a grey cloud drifting east from San Francisco and west from South Park. Then a tuft of smug from George Clooney's Academy Award acceptance speech—in which Clooney claims people in Hollywood are ahead of the curve on social matters—moves north toward the developing cyclone of smug. This sets off "the perfect storm of self-satisfaction" that leaves thousands homeless across the West. And San Francisco? "I'm afraid San Francisco has disappeared completely up its own asshole," one adult character observes. The scene in which South Park citizens destroy their hybrid cars— to offset the smug storm—disturbs. When I recognize my own feelings of self-satisfaction over my own environmental activism, the show feels mean-spirited and unfair. But perhaps not as seemingly mean-spirited and unfair as an episode that turns global warming awareness hero Al Gore into a dumb, fear-mongering, attention-seeking prophet of doom.

"ManBearPig"

Aired April 26, 2006

When he comes to speak at the South Park elementary school, none of the kids know who he is. This is Bakhtin's ritual spectacle in which the fool takes the crown and the king is

dethroned. The famed award-winning former vice president will not be a hallowed leader in this episode. As Al Gore speaks to the children about "the biggest threat to our planet, which threatens our very existence and may be the end of human existence as we know it," we fully expect the next line to be something about global warming. After all, this episode aired at the end of April 2006, just a few weeks before Al Gore's documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* opened in U.S. theaters. But though the fictional Gore visiting South Park does preach about coming doom, the villain in the animated sitcom is not global warming. "I'm talking about ManBearPig," Gore says, showing a sketch of a creature that is, impossibly, "half man, half bear, and half pig." Some people say that ManBearPig is not real, Gore explains. "But I'm here to tell you that he certainly exists, I'm cereal, and he doesn't care who you are or what you've done. He just wants to get you. I'm super cereal." As depicted in the episode, Al Gore is too dumb to do simple addition (half man, half bear, half pig) and he mistakenly substitutes the word "cereal" for "serious," a play on a verbal slip Gore made during an interview with Oprah Winfrey. Gore's goal revolves around his ego. When he saves the world from ManBearPig, he predicts that: "Everyone will say thank you, Al Gore, you're super awesome."

The kids take pity on the former vice president. "I feel bad for him. I don't think he has any friends," Stan says. But when the fictional Gore involves the four friends in a scatter-brained attempt to combat ManBearPig, the former vice president puts their lives in danger. He begins shooting a gun at a popular tourist attraction, the Cave of the Spirits, causing a disaster that traps the kids. He uses a bulldozer to change the course of a river, in order to flood the cave and kill ManBearPig—and the four kids trapped within. When the kids find their own way out of the cave, he takes credit for saving them, which handily fuels his self-

esteem. "Everyone is super stoked on me even if they don't know it," he tells no one in particular.

In this reversal of pop culture environmental celebrity, Gore lacks intelligence, and his work to warn the public about the dangers of global warming—a fantasy not unlike ManBearPig—is motivated by his need to be the center of attention. Environmentalists might feel as threatened by this show as we were by various environmental resolutions enacted by the Bush Administration under misleading appellations like "Healthy Forests" and "Clear Skies." In this episode of South Park, a satiric approach, uncomfortable though it may be, provides space for a critique of humanistic hubris, the goals of wealthy, white environmentalism, and the unexamined tropes of U.S. environmental discourse. Perhaps unintentionally, the simple perspectives that emerge from the content and stories of *South Park* bring the complexities of real ecological issues close for careful inspection.

Another Look at Rainforest Farting, Smug Storms, and Gore

On the surface, the "Rainforest, Schmainforest" episode seems to mock naïve environmentalists whose romantic notions about the fragile nature of the rainforest are disabused by a hostile encounter with nature's realities. The *real* rainforest is home to quick sand, deadly snakes, man-eating flowers, and "gentle" tribal folks who decapitate visitors. Saving the day—and the South Park children who get lost in the rainforest with their well-meaning choir leader, Miss Stevens—are the bulldozers driven by Westerners who are engaged in rapid deforestation on behalf of a U.S. corporation.

Satirizing inconsistent environmental discourse in "Rainforest, Schmainforest" offers a rich site of discourse interplay for activists who aren't afraid to take a hard examine

ourselves and our own unquestioned narratives. A close examine the Rainforest episode pushes viewers into a pluralism that straddles ideological borders, where unlikely minor characters navigate the contradiction-ridden space between the extremist views of Miss Stevens (the poorly informed, romantic environmentalist) and Eric Cartman (the juvenile slacker who views all reality through a media lens). Because the cartoon is a low resolution medium, the audience can fill in the blanks and locate themselves and others between Stevens-Cartman poles. In one such dialogic straddling, a hostile military leader threatens to kill Miss Stevens and the children, explaining: "You white Americans make me sick. You waste food, oil and everything else because you're so rich and then you tell the rest of the world to save the rainforest because you like its pretty flowers." In a different dualistic environmental narrative, this brown-skinned man might offer a stereotypical eco-villain—the kind of deforestation terrorist easily subdued by, say, a hero with a machine gun. In *South Park*, however, we are faced with real and valid questions about social justice in environmental discourse. We are encouraged to consider why is it that environmental activism thrives in direct correlation with economic well-being, a point that Nordhaus and Shellenberger make in their book *Break Through*.

In a similar dialogic moment in the *South Park* episode, an emcee announces the start of a Rainforest Summit refers to the hundreds of U.S. environmentalists who've come to Costa Rica: "Everyone is here so they can feel good about themselves and act like they aren't the ones responsible for the rainforest's peril." As in *The Simpsons Movie*, a more complex treatment of responsibility results from raising these hard questions. Though here the guilty parties are not specifically identified as large corporations, it is clear that we are all complicit in matters of overconsumption. We are all responsible for allowing (even begging, as Miss

Stevens does) for the bulldozers that make possible our suburban homes, roads, strip malls, and comfortable lives, safe from the perils of untamed nature.

Overall, as in *The Simpsons*, this *South Park* episode evidences what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia consciously opposed," as discussed in the previous chapter. The juxtaposition of multiple voices—officials, environmental stereotypes, guerilla leader, obnoxious Cartman, teachers—results in a deep, thoroughly uncomfortable probing of all unquestioned, less-than-considered but wholly embraced ideological perspectives. It is open-ended anarchic carnival speech—the kind that Bakhtin considers as disruptive and free:

> Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (*Rabelais* 10)

The start of this chapter included an explanation of how the young voices of *South Park* often arrive at epiphanies that evade the show's adults. The "moral" of a comic verbal composition like "Smug Alert" comes predictably at the end of the episode, though it's hinted at throughout. Kyle tries, early in the episode, to convince his parents to calm down their hubristic pretensions about driving hybrid cars. He and his little brother attempt to show their mom and dad how the people of South Park might be feeling alienated by this self-satisfied attitude. A better solution to converting the townsfolk to hybrid car awareness comes from the artistic efforts of young Stan, who writes a song promoting hybrids. The song, played on a local radio station, is simple and repetitive. As people hear it, they nod their heads in agreement—and immediately rush out to buy hybrids. An ensuing adult self-satisfaction throughout the town's populace sets off the smug storm. Finally, at the end of the

episode, the city of South Park, devastated by the smug storm, sets out to rebuild. The townspeople meet to discuss buying new cars. When someone pipes up with, "Let's make sure nobody gets a stupid hybrid," Stan attempts to educate the adults. The ensuing dialogue evidences a heteroglossia, the voice of youth versus the voice of what we'd imagine to be mature reason:

Stan: "No, hybrid cars are a good thing."

Adult: "But hybrid cars are the leading cause of smug."

Stan: "Hybrid cars don't cause smugness, people do. Look, hybrid cars are important; they may save our planet some day. What you all need to do is just learn to drive hybrids and not be smug about it."

Adult: "You mean, drive in hybrids and not feel like we're better than everyone else because of it? I'm … I'm not ready."

Another adult: "I don't think I can do it either."

Another adult: "It's simply asking too much."

Adult: "Perhaps one day we can learn to drive hybrids without being smug about it but for now the technology is just too much. Come on, everybody, let's all go buy wasteful gas guzzlers."

Hybrids might save the planet. They are important. And a young child could lead them—but the self-absorbed adults of South Park, Colorado, refuse to be led. The depiction of this extreme level of hypocrisy is self-consciously satiric; in it, elements of reality are exposed to the familiarizing impact of comedy. By humorously depicted heteroglossia—from Stan's truisms about the usefulness of hybrids to the reality of humans who continue to live in self-absorbed ways—contemporary ironies are brought into crisp focus. Because we're

laughing, we are more likely to suspend judgment. Once brought close, the audience sees the

wrinkles and inconsistencies of accepted cultural truth. The audience is invited, as Bakhtin

suggests, to participate in the ideological experimentation described at the start of this

chapter. Can we, the savvy audience, drive hybrid cars and retain humility? Of course we

can.[30] We are not the adults of *South Park*, though we might recognize ourselves in its vulgar

cool form.

The fictive "ManBearPig" caught on quickly in U.S. cultural consciousness. And yes,

it has been used by global warming skeptics eager to mock and summarily dismiss the dismal

warnings of climate change and any lifestyle or regulatory changes that might be invoked on

behalf of slowing the damage we've done. Much of this skepticism is handily fueled by

leaders of industries from power to fossil fuels that have the most to lose from widespread

calls for changes that address increasing carbon levels in the atmosphere. When it comes to

greed, consumption, and unintended consequences, however, the message of the

"ManBearPig" episode has a subtle effectiveness that might easily be missed. The episode

fits the mode that Bakhtin would have called a ritual spectacle. In it, inequality is suspended

– the vice president becomes a fool, one of the kids—an unpopular kid even—though he still

has the grown-up power to get the boys out of school. In ritual spectacles, hierarchies are

turned upside down. Johnson-Woods notes: "It was a medieval free-for-all." Why upend

Gore's work, though? Al Gore's real-life global warming projects, from his Powerpoint road

shows to the book and documentary, contain frightening apocalyptic images of cities deluged

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[30] I'm reminded again of the *The Simpsons* episode mentioned in the prologue in which Lisa
becomes a vegetarian. In the course of the episode, she learns not to be militant about her
beliefs but to tolerate the food choices of people around her. The episode promotes
vegetarianism in a gentle way, reminding the concerned activist not to alienate others.

by water, melting icebergs, stranded polar bears. Nordhaus and Shellenberger found Gore's

work, arguably an example of tragic narrative that positions humans as fallen, to be

singularly unhelpful: "There was nothing in the movie or the accompanying book aimed at

helping viewers or readers imagine a brighter future for themselves and their families" (105).

Bakhtin might note the "medieval seriousness" of Gore's discourse, which is made more

powerful by the ethos of Gore himself, who might have been the President of the United

States and thus leader of the free world.

In *South Park*, Gore's depiction flips on its head the valorization of tragic hero that

Meeker finds objectionable. Everything about the animated Gore smacks of humanistic

hubris. Here is a leader who takes himself far too seriously, which raises the tragic discourse

mode warning flag. In opposition to laughter, Bakhtin argues that seriousness is "infused

with elements of fear, weakness, humility, submissions falsehood, hypocrisy […] or with

violence, intimidation, threats, prohibitions" (*Rabelais* 94). While seriousness impresses

people, it also contributes to an imbalance of social power. As Nordhaus and Shellenberger

observe, the inconvenient truth that Gore sought to communicate was not that global

warming is real or even that it is caused by humans "but rather that it demands sacrifice"

(125). They go on to repeat the oft-reported news that Gore's own home, about the time of

the documentary's release, used ten times the electricity as the average home in Nashville.

Though Gore argued that he purchased carbon offsets for his energy use, his purchase merely

supports the public's conception of Gore as a rich, famous environmentalist. Smug, even.

The object of the satire, here, is not the reality of global warming; it's the narrative of

celebrity environmentalist as tragic hero that must be dissected. In the end, the tragic hero is

dethroned and power returns to the people. The ritual spectacle of "ManBearPig" depicts this shifting of the power structure, if only for a safe, instructive moment.

As a positive dialogic contribution to ecological discourse, the episode humorously provokes deep consideration of the unintended consequences of exploitive human behavior. *South Park*'s 20-minute parody of Gore's ManBearPig pursuit progresses to a violent end. The tragic hero views himself as an exceptional individual (think Jake Sully) engaged in a war, an epic battle of good and evil. This savior-of-the-world mentality justifies the behaviors of the character Gore depicted in *South Park* who causes much damage and even potentially the death of the children on behalf of ridding the world of a monster. At one point, the Gore character begins shooting a large gun in a cave filled with tourists, as well as his team of recruits—Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman. The cave collapses, trapping the boys. Gore waxes eloquent about the loss of the four boys, whose names he cannot remember, as sacrifices in the war on ManBearPig. When it looks like ManBearPig (and the boys) might have survived the cave's collapse, Gore steals a bulldozer and changes the course of a river so that it floods the cave. He could care less about his fellow man; his only overarching concern is the Beast and maintaining personal celebrity. The Gore character becomes a terrorist of sorts. Bakhtin writes: "As spokesman of power, seriousness terrorized, demanded, and forbade. It therefore inspired the people with distrust" (*Rabelais* 94). *South Park*'s Gore does not inspire fear; he makes us laugh at the absurdity of his pretentious claims and demands. Laughter inspires trust and replaces fear with strength.

The boys make it out of the cave on their own, even saving Cartman, the aforementioned mook who further represents an important subtheme of the "ManBearPig" episode—greed and consumption. While trapped in the famed Cave of the Spirits, Cartman

walks alone down a side passage to discover a room filled with glittering treasure. Struck

with a nasty case of gold lust, Cartman lies to his friends, fearing the possibility that he might

have to share the treasure with them. He slinks off and begins to consume the gold, ingesting

coins and jewelry while washing these down with gulps of water. His animated body puffs

out and distorts in impossible lumpiness as he weighs himself down through the act of

consumption. Thus expanded, he becomes nearly immobile. When the cave begins to flood,

Cartman demands that his friends rescue him. Kyle, Stan, and Kenny struggle to drag

Cartman out of the cave. They struggle to keep him afloat while traversing a body of water

and fight to help him scale a cave cliff. When the boys finally arrive, safely, in front of the

crowd gathering to memorialize them, Cartman begins to shit treasure. Profusely. In multiple

directions. His friends are disgusted. In a delightful ironic twist, a cave guide remarks that the

treasure was part of a fake display, a tourist attraction within the cave. What we learn:

Cartman nearly died and almost killed his friends for $14 worth of faux treasure. Without

being didactic or moralistic, the episode clearly remarks on the absurdity of ignorant, greedy

consumption—in Cartman's case made all the more visceral by his actual ingestion and

excretion of the gold. *South Park* offers a libertine dialogue over a monologic iteration of an

ideological perspective. The episode first levels the playing field, then offers valuable

insights on the absurdity of the tragic hero, exposes the unintended consequences of human

hubris, and prompts a healthy aversion to Cartman's greedy acts.

Parker and Stone treat the sacred cow of environmentalism with their usual twisted

irreverence and no special treatment for those who've designated themselves the saviors of

the planet from ManBearPig or hybrid drivers or corporate American bulldozers. Or for

celebrities who take up progressive causes. Or for any smug activist whose motives might be

suspect. "You only fight these causes cause caring sells," children sing at the close of "Rainforest, Schmainforest." There is no room for unexamined discourse in this dialogic comedic universe. Parker explained that the show's comedic formula has remained consistent. In its first episode, a pilot created in 1995, Jesus and Santa fought over ownership of Christmas. Parker told an interviewer:

> There was Jesus on this side and there was Santa on this side, there's Christianity here and there's Christmas commercialism here, and they're duking it out. And there are these four boys in the middle going, "Dude, chill out." … The show is saying that there is a middle ground, that most of us actually live in this middle ground, and that all you extremists are the ones who have the microphones because you're the most interesting to listen to, but actually this group isn't evil, that group isn't evil, and there's something to be worked out here. (Gillespie and Walker)

Something remains to be worked out—and the tools for this project are offered by the comic strategies of *South Park*. Like the medieval culture of humor described by Bakhtin, the discourse of *South Park* is populist, anarchical, with no gods, no masters, no privileged perspectives receiving special treatment. Umberto Eco describes Bakhtin's theory of the carnival "as positing an 'upside-down world,' where 'carnival is revolution (or revolution is carnival): kings are decapitated (that is, lowered, made inferior) and the crowd is crowned'" (Janack 210). By confronting environmentalism with an open-ended parody of its communication strategies, the episode demonstrates the value of comedic discourse to remediate the boundaries of real and representation. The show allows permission to explore various perspectives and become attuned to intended audiences and the realities they experience. Accepted as such, parodies of ecological activists could help environmentalists,

and I include myself in this group, become better communicators as we relinquish attempts to control our messages and adopt more playful realistic sensibilities. Writes Bakhtin:

> The basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play. (*Rabelais* 7)

A useful strategy for ecological discourse, then, might include crafting a pluralistic representation of multiple points of view. A certain relinquishing control over a text seems requisite, while taking into account where contemporary media consumers spend their time: "Thus carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life" (*Rabelais* 8). The carnivalesque discourse of *South Park* reminds us to laugh at ourselves, even when our cherished values are the object of scathing satire. And it may help us reshape a dualistic environmental narrative—the world is in danger, we must sacrifice—into a new form. That said, the profane world of *South Park* is certainly not for everyone. For an example of a wide-reaching dialogic enviro-toon that offers a pluralistic account of ecological realities and that blends a rhapsodic bliss over humble joys of living with a jeremiad about responsibility, I turn now to the animated Disney-Pixar film *Wall-E*.

Chapter Five: Hovering Humanity in *Wall-E*

Evolution itself is a gigantic comic drama, not the bloody spectacle imagined by the sentimental humanists of early Darwinism. […] [T]he evolutionary process is one of adaptation and accommodation, with the various species exploring opportunistically their environments in search of a means to maintain their existence.

--Joseph Meeker, The Comedy of Survival (33)

Released in 2008, *Wall-E* is corporate blockbuster family film meets post-apocalyptic jeremiad on the evils of over-consumption, an outwardly ironic fusion that netted box office returns of $223 million. The first scenes of *Wall-E* transpire against a background so visually detailed that, as in the hot medium of *Avatar*, the viewer may forget this is animation and not a live-action film. It's not entirely clear, at first, whether Wall-E the robot works as an example of the benevolent tragic hero or better fits the comic hero bill. A frightening animated depiction of a futuristic Earth, nearly lifeless, might also at first remind viewers of the stark jeremiad of environmental classics like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.

Where does *Wall-E* fit? The tragic hero of *Avatar* exemplifies Meeker's concerns about the proud tradition of humanism in Western culture, the same attitude that leads to environmental exploitation. The high-resolution 3D film, a hot medium, offered a single-voiced monologue about ecological disaster. In contrast, *The Simpsons Movie* offers a cool low-resolution medium model for the comic hero and exemplifies the use of heteroglossia in depicting the multiple voices that comprise ecological discourse. In *South Park*, another cool roughly animated medium, the ability of laughter, or the carnivalesque, in creating

familiarization with the pluralistic complexities of environmental discourse is evidenced. A

reading of *Wall-E* gives me a chance to reimagine some of the binaries inadvertently rising

from these previous chapters: hot-cool, monologic-dialogic, tragic-comic, rhapsodic-

jeremiad. The film *Wall-E*, in its form and message, exemplifies a richly pluralistic medium

and message. Hochman turns to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's ideas about "becoming-

in-the-world" by acknowledging borders and boundaries while also blurring them into what

Hochman calls "a shape-shifting multiplex postmodernism" (15) that does not glibly seek to

reconcile our dualistic conceptions of nature and culture. To merge these notions would take

"generations of internal cultural struggle," Hochman writes:

> If green cultural studies is to be an effective politico-cultural tool in service of nature
>
> and culture, it will need to study not only how to become nature, by attempting to
>
> merge with the real or imagined subjectivity of a plant, animal, or mineral and of air,
>
> water, earth, and fire; it will also need to pull back and grant these beings and enities
>
> unromanticized difference, an autonomy apart from humans, a kind of privacy and
>
> regard heretofore granted almost exclusively to humans. (16)

Wall-E complicates a simplistic taxonomy of monologic/dialogic enviro-toon. It can be seen

as immersive (*Avatar*) and also interactive (*The Simpsons, South Park*), offering

familiarization through laughter and engaging its audiences in complex consideration of

ecological issues like pollution. It exemplifies the useful blending of the two rhetorical

modes that Slovic describes as the rhapsodic or epistemological (celebrating relationships

between humans and the natural world) and the jeremiad or political (persuading an audience

to embrace new environmental attitudes) ("Epistemology and Politics In American Nature

Writing" 84). *Wall-E*'s narrative offers a parody of human evolution and demonstrates refusal

to valorize the past in the way that Bakhtin calls a feature of the epic text. Meeker's observations about the biology of comedy also seem to fit the bumbling comic hero Wall-E. Wall-E is not a human but a robot, which further complicates and ultimately, I argue, resolves the problem of human individualism.

To be fully transparent, *Wall-E* has been the hardest text for me to critique. As I will conclude at the end of this chapter, I find that this film fits closer to the dialogic pole of animated discourse as it engage audiences through parody and a familiarized but not valorized view of what Bakhtin calls "contemporary reality" (*Dialogic Imagination* 18). Acknowledging distinctions and contradictions in environmental discourse, and how they inform one another in ways that are both celebratory and may also possess a political impact, may not take "generations," as Hochman proposed, but can perhaps be glimpsed in the following pages. In literary nature writing, Slovic notes the "constant and enriching tension" between the rhapsodic and jeremiad modes (83) concluding that most nature writing is not one or the other, but might instead be positioned along a spectrum.

Some unsuspecting parents who thought they were taking their children to a safe, sterile Disney movie, were offended by the film's message. On a Web site with professional and amateur film reviews, *Wall-E* was either "preachy and chock full of tree hugging left leaning gibberish" or "brilliant" and "sincere" ("*Wall-E* Movie Reviews"). About half of the reviewers wrote things like katiepi95: "This movie really brought a tear to my eye, and made me really think about saving our planet." Others, like MystrMk, seemed furious, as if they'd been tricked into wasting money on the film: "I couldn't believe that it was a Disney movie. The entire movie is politically charged to the point where I wouldn't have been surprised if I had found that Al Gore had a hand in writing it" ("*Wall-E* Movie Reviews"). It seems

surprising that a person might not suspect Disney of sponsoring a film with a concrete and obvious ideological promotion. From the days of *Bambi*, Disney audiences have been shown an idealized version of nature, complete with cute anthropomorphized woodland creatures. (Nature good; hunters and forest fires bad.) Girls are taught to be princesses, busty and beautiful if slightly headstrong. There's a circle of life, usually featuring a handsome prince and ugly stepsisters who will ultimately fail at whatever nefarious task they set out to accomplish. As a Disney film, created by the corporation's more recent acquisition Pixar, *Wall-E* fits a mold—and paradoxically also breaks it, in various ways that I will demonstrate.

Machine as Tragi-comic Hero

Begin plot: Wall-E's lonely existence and endless task—his "directive" to clean up Planet Earth—is interrupted by the arrival of a robotic probe, an Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator (EVE). Gracefully whizzing about over the Earth's surface, EVE is as lovely as she is dangerous, blasting at random noises with her shotgun limb. Wall-E is smitten with EVE. He follows her and tries to befriend her. The new relationship is threatened when she acquires a rare specimen of life—a green plant that Wall-E has found and transplanted into a discarded boot. EVE's directive dictates that she must return to the Axiom with her specimen, which is proof that the Earth's potential as a garden is restored. Wall-E follows her to space.

A parodic shift occurs when *Wall-E* the robot leaves the Earth to travel to the spaceship Axiom, where the remnants of humanity live out their lives in blissful mediated consumption. Not a few viewers were offended by the futuristic representation of humanity. Humans rendered for the film are low-definition cartoons, not quite the crappy characters of

South Park or the hand-drawn *Simpsons*—but certainly not the near-perfect human-like blue

giants of the film *Avatar*, either. These smooth, puffy humanlike creatures constitute an

exaggerated parody of a human evolution. The humans on the spaceship Axiom have

evolved—or rather devolved—into amoeba-like creatures who are carried about in

hoverchairs. Their limbs can no longer support their weight, which appears considerable.

Each human in each chair is positioned in front of a personal electronic screen. Humans

sitting in adjacent chairs do not talk to one another face-to-face. Instead, they talk to their

screens, and it's no stretch of the imagination to conclude that this is where our screen-

fixated species may be headed. This caricature is barely hyperbolic. If we can laugh at

ourselves, we will surely laugh at the comic mode that uses parody to present us with an

absurd vision of the future of our species.

So the message of *Wall-E* seems at once free and democratic, yet undeniably

possesses a hint of purpose. The aforementioned reviews of the movie—loathed it, loved it—

reflect these swings from the celebration of human spirit to the more apt recognition of

needed humility in the human role. An *ABC Radio National* reviewer said: "Ultimately, the

elevation of technology to center stage and the relegation of humankind to supporting act left

me cold" (DiRosso). A *CNN* reviewer called the first half hour "a delectable demonstration of

visual storytelling" and declares the film full of "grace, beauty, joy, laughter, and love"

(Charity). A *Washington Times* reviewer took offense at the film's anti-consumption theme: "

[…] suffice to say the film treats our capitalist system as the Earth's ultimate sin. (But don't

let that stop you from buying *Wall-E* mugs and T-shirts)" (Toto). And this from *Rolling*

Stone's film critic: "It's a landmark in modern moviemaking that lifts you up on waves of

humor, heartbreak, and ravishing romance. Want proof that animation can be an art form? It's all there in the groundbreaking *Wall-E*" (Travers).

Wall-E's dirty metallic frame carries into space the evidence of his physical closeness to the Earth, again with a sensory richness. He clings to the exterior of a shuttle carrying EVE to the spaceship Axiom. On reaching the ship, he observes the remnants of the human race living in blissful ignorance, cared for and, as it turns out, imprisoned by the machines they've created. When Wall-E begins to traverse the Axiom, he leaves a trail of dirt behind him. A small cleaning robot, obsessed with ridding the ship of "foreign contaminants" follows Wall-E along, sweeping up the dirt. After Wall-E's first encounter with the ship's human captain, the captain orders Wall-E to be cleaned. But the captain also handles some of the dirt, asking his computer for an analysis. As the captain discovers the physicality of dirt, soil, Earth, he begins a quest to learn more about the substance – and ultimately the "home" from which it comes. This sets off the chain of events that leads to the captain's ultimate choice to fight for a return to Earth, home. Wall-E's close connection with the Earth empowers the character, a conscious being superimposed on a heap of spare parts, informed by the cultural leftovers of the human race. The terrestrial remnants that pollute the Axiom also provoke homesickness. The captain begins to imagine a more satisfying life, one that involves more than mere survival. Multiple voices are at work here, from the machine protagonist to the "speech" of the earth, the (weak) human captain, and the encyclopedic memory of a computer. At this point, I might argue that *Wall-E*—though it begins with some hot media imagery and clear jeremiad—also shares some of the features of the dialogic enviro-toon. But first, I will look at its monologue.

Eco-images as Monologic

The first half of the feature-length animation *Wall-E* stuns audiences with its high-definition rendering of a futuristic Earth covered in trash. The computer-animated landscape of derelict shopping malls, decaying parking lots, and wafting bits of detritus—including paper money—is punctuated by neatly constructed towers of garbage that rise far above the abandoned skyscrapers of a city. The visual environment works as jeremiad, an argument to show a human audience where we might be headed if we don't change our polluting ways.[31] The visuals of Earth in the opening animated scenes of *Wall-E* operate not unlike visual images of the harpooning of whales, the clubbing of baby seals, or the cement block smashing a pig's head in the PETA advertisement I described in this dissertation's prologue. In fact, the oft-used view of Earth from space, which plays a notable role in Al Gore's documentary,[32] is rendered by the makers of *Wall-E* in muted sepia and brown tones. This presents a jeremiadic twist on the photograph much loved and used by contemporary environmental activists. In *Ecosee*, Maarten Hajer is quoted at length on the representation of planet Earth:

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[31] As recent evidence that humans are, indeed, thinking plenty about garbage and its lasting impact on the landscape, note the transformation of one of the largest landfills in the world, Fresh Kills Landfill into a 2,200-acre Freshkills Park. At three times the size of Central Park, the landfill where World Trade Center debris was deposited after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, will be the largest park developed in New York City in over 100 years. "The transformation of what was formerly the world's largest landfill into a productive and beautiful cultural destination will make the park a symbol of renewal and an expression of how our society can restore balance to its landscape" ("Freshkills Park").

[32] Al Gore equates the first photo of the planet, "Earth Rise," to the birth of the contemporary environmental movement. He writes: "The Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Natural Environmental Policy Act, and the first Earth Day all came about within a few years of this picture being seen for the first time" (*An Inconvenient Truth* 12).

>If there is one image that has dominated environmental politics over the last twenty-
>
>five years it is the photo of planet Earth from outer space. This picture, which entered
>
>the public imagination as an offspring of the 1960s Apollo space programme, is said
>
>to have caused a fundamental shift in thinking about the relationship between man
>
>and nature. The confrontation with the planet as a colorful ball, partly disguised by
>
>flimsy clouds, and floating seemingly aimless in a sea of utter darkness, conveyed a
>
>general sense of fragility that made people aware of human dependence on nature. It
>
>facilitated an understanding of the intricate interrelatedness of the ecological
>
>processes on planet Earth. Indeed, the image, it is said, caused a cognitive elucidation
>
>through which the everyday experience of life in an industrialized world was given a
>
>different meaning. (qtd. in Dobrin 7)

Dobrin notes how environmental groups incorporate images into their rhetorical strategies,

using the strength of the image's pathos, logos, and ethos to activate audiences. Yet Dobrin

also observes that the activists who rely on these images also present text to position images

in ways that suggest control. Controlling a text means crafting a monologic representation, a

fixed vision of reality. At the same time, unintended consequences may also result from the

use of images to promote ecological concerns. Nordhaus and Shellenberger note the benefits

and problems involved in using an image, like a shot of the Earth from space or a photograph

of animal abuse, as environmental argument:

>Environmental leaders and activists today overwhelmingly believe that these images
>
>are the lifeblood of their movement, responsible for motivating the public and
>
>policymakers to take action. And so they return again and again to the same idea: if

they can just show Americans what is happening to nature, the people will rise up and

demand action. (24)

But, the authors warn, an overdependence on visual imagery, whether of a polluted body of

water or a clubbed baby seal, might prevent an audience from moving beyond maudlin

nostalgia for some imagined pastoral scene. They write: "And like almost all expressions of

nostalgia, it is reductive and simplifies a much more complex picture, ignoring the values and

context that defined the moment and obsessively returning to the same partial memories"

(24). The authors clearly see a downside to reliance on visual imagery—in particular, the sort

of hot medium image that depicts, in vivid high-resolution form, a bleak future. I go into

some depth with this idea because I think the sepia-brown tones of the animated Earth image

shown in *Wall-E* navigate the terrain of this debate over image, without pushing this enviro-

toon too far into the realm of the monologic text.

The brown image calls to mind the celebrated photograph we all know and love, shot

in December 1972 during the Apollo 17 mission. At the same time as it warns us of a coming

dark era of pollution, it also presents a bit of a satire, a repositioning of the visual rhetoric of

ecological activism. In *Wall-E*, the opening scenes of a polluted Earth are literally over-the-

top, as in the piles of trash are higher than the derelict skyscrapers left on Planet Earth. This

is the scary Earth that our environmentalist friends warned us about, so extremely

represented that we have to smile at this exaggerated eco-disastrous view of the future. The

same holds true with the atrophied Jell-O Pudding bodies of the futuristic animated humans.

This seems less a prophetic view of any real future and more like a mash-up of all the worst-

case environmentalist scenarios assembled into visual narrative form for our consideration.

Taken for straightforward discourse, these detailed exaggerated images of an ecological post-apocalypse in *Wall-E*'s opening scenes would "heat" this narrative, in the sense that McLuhan uses the word. Because it lacks a serious epic tone, however, the Disney-Pixar film does not exactly reprise the "Fable for Tomorrow" with which Rachel Carson begins her book, *Silent Spring*. Carson depicts a landscape blighted by death of natural things, from birds to farm animals to vegetation: "No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves" (14). Carson explains that the grim scenario was not real yet but that it could be: "A grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know" (14-15). This is the scary stuff of the jeremiad, as Slovic describes the rhetorical mode of environmental warning. The *Wall-E* film seems to reiterate Carson's landscape, but with the kind of self-reflexivity that keeps the text open, free, and democratic. The monologic depiction of a polluted uninhabitable Earth is tempered by the humorous physical presence of Wall-E the robot, a human-like machine that fully engages in the restoration of Earth through Project Clean-up. Existing along on Earth, with his silent cockroach sidekick, Wall-E (an acronym for Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class) pursues the Sisyphean task of compacting the trash of what seems a bygone species. The film lacks the single voice of an *Avatar*-like narrator. Wall-E never talks to the audience; indeed, he speaks very little throughout the film. In the first part of the film, heteroglossia rises from the beeps and squeaks of the robot, along with voices of centuries-old media: a recorded song playing on Wall-E's built-in stereo, print news stories on wafting newspapers, and talking billboards that explain the futuristic situation serving as the film's frame story. The film shifts dramatically (thematically and visually) after the first act, when Wall-E leaves the Earth and

travels to a spaceship where human survivors have lived in luxury for more than seven centuries. As the plot unfolds and Wall-E challenges the status quo of life on the spaceship, the cute mechanical protagonist is maligned as a "rogue robot." The message delivered seems single-voiced and reductive here. The Earth became too polluted for human life. Humans escaped the planet on luxurious spaceships. Wall-E is one of many machines that were built to "clean up the mess" while humans are away in space. Pristine nature spoiled by polluting humans sounds remarkably familiar. Yet a closer reading of *Wall-E* suggests richer interplay between the monologic jeremiad and the dialogic narrative in this parody of a dystopic human future. As a machine, Wall-E cannot represent humanistic hubris though we clearly see the results of celebrated human set-apartness and individualism on every square inch of the futuristic vision of polluted Earth. True, the personable robot is shamelessly anthropomorphized by the same animators that wowed audiences with animated Mr. Potatoheads in *Toy Story* and who bring to life and make charming the boogey-guys that lurk in the closet in *Monsters Inc*. But even if Wall-E's characteristics landed him in the category of human-like, he is too contented to be a tragic human hero of the Jake Sully variety. Wall-E does not mope about the planet, longing for a nostalgic return to some prehistoric state of humankind. Though lonely, he is generally happy and a bit of a bumbler, evidencing as a machine the biological processes of adaptation and accommodation required by evolution. Nostalgia certainly plays a role in the film, and Wall-E learns the ways of a past human race through assembling collections of and fostering appreciation for cultural production. Yet Wall-E lives in the present, in the mode characterized by Meeker as comic: "With little guilt over the past and little expectation from the future, the comic mode seeks its fulfillment from the present" (192). On Earth, Wall-E the robot epitomizes existence that forms itself to its

surroundings, rather than the other way around. For Wall-E, this means fulfilling his "directive" while excavating human culture, circa 2000 or so, and caring for his pet cockroach. Wall-E's survival is clearly a matter of muddling through, as Meeker suggests survival must be (33).

Wall-E, as a recalcitrant medium, evades simple categorical distinction with regard to its animation style, as well. Its digitally animated medium alternates from high-definition realism, gritty and dark, depicting the state of a futuristic Earth to a softer, brightly colored low-resolution representation of a human future aboard the spaceship Axiom. Its message leans to the dialogic, with multiple perspectives offered regarding the role of technology in evolution—humans with technological extensions interact with machines with human extensions. Wall-E represents the last vestige of agency on a dead Earth. With his nameless sidekick, a cockroach, he traverses the dystopic brownfield to strains of a show tune from *Hello Dolly!* (1969): "Out there/there's a world outside of Yonkers." Wall-E takes trash into his body, compacts it, and arranges blocks of trash into structures. This action has the feel of a biological function as he ingests, digests, and excretes elements of his environment much like a cow grazes in a grassy field or a teenager ingests a McDonald's hamburger. Wall-E's identity is plural, a blur of machine, animal, culture-appreciating animal (man), and perhaps even indestructible superman, a new evolutionary height. First, Wall-E is clearly a machine, more than 700 years old, with binocular-like eyes and a solar battery. But also, Wall-E has evolved to accommodate a range of human emotions, from fear to sadness to love. This occurs, the audience can surmise, from his interactions with human cultural production— leftovers from a more prosperous human realm. Wall-E may be a machine, but he's hardly inorganic. He renews his batteries (energy!) through solar power. He merges with and

emerges from his environment in many ways. In an early scene, it appears that one of his leg-feet, a wheel on tracks, is worn unevenly, causing him to wobble as he cruises through the trashscape. He happens upon another of his kind, a defunct Wall-E, along his path. He sees the robotic corpse as a repository of spare parts. We next see Wall-E zipping along with a new tracked foot. Through these scenes, the audience comes to understand how Wall-E has kept himself working—following his directive to clean up the Earth—over the centuries. But on another level, the film offers a futuristic vision, a creature with humanlike sensibilities that can live forever by replacing worn parts with new parts. The physical components of a self are interchangeable; the self deposits itself like an anomaly into an organismic amalgam—be it organic or thinking inorganic.

The biologic and mechanical ambiguities of this text add to a reading of *Wall-E* that disrupts simple categorization. Adding machines to the ontological mix of organic being facilitates obliteration of pure distinctions between nature/culture, a binary rooted in the deeper polarization of metaphysical determinism and biological continuance. Animals bring technology to life, writes Akira Mizuta Lippt, and technology might be considered its own species. "Machines might fail, suffer, experience the breakdowns of exhaustion and confusion, but animated machinery as a technogeny would survive the demise of individual apparatuses" (188). The *Wall-E* character, as a technogenic model, merges human responsibility and libratory amalgam of being into an everlasting gobstopper of self-awareness. In this post-apocalyptic future lorded over by a Disney-like corporation, the dystopic hero Wall-E may look like a machine. But this new Adam feels with the intensity of a poet while invoking the less complex moral agency of animality. Wall-E's human sentience is signified by aesthetic appreciation for artifacts of culture, by moral agency and by his

abstract longing for a romantic relationship. The resulting hybrid experience, as expressed by Wall-E, seems the joyful stuff of the comic mode, as Meeker describes it.

Wall-E may be a machine, programmed with a directive, but he also represents the picaro, a rogue adventurer who doesn't necessarily "rebel" against his surroundings but adapts to seek the fulfillment of desire. Meeker writes: "Picaresque life is animal existence augmented by the imaginative and adaptive powers of the human mind" (105). In correspondence with the comic and tragic modes, Meeker contrasts picaresque with pastoral modes. The latter crafts "alternatives to a dangerous present reality" while the picaresque accepts the present and adapts to its conditions. The picaro accepts the biological limitations of animal embodiment while also enjoying the human attributes of "consciousness, intelligence, language, [and] imagination" (Meeker 107). This drives artistic expression, Meeker writes: "He uses his gifts for self-defense and for more intense enjoyment of his surroundings. Dominance over environment is not his goal, nor is he tempted to use his imaginative powers for the creation of idealistic fantasies" (107). When Wall-E collects artifacts from the trash heap of Earth and uses these items, in one scene, to craft a found-art portrait of his new love interest EVE, we see the picaro exercising these imaginative traits within his environment. He does this not to conquer insurmountable obstacles but to win love and friendship.

A Message Film?

The film's blending of hot visual imagery depicting a stark warning about Earth's future combined with its joyfully Zen protagonist and its parodic representation of humanity's future also prompts mixed reactions. Some viewers were put-off by the

possibility that the film was simply another bit of green propaganda. A post to InsideMovies

by DBarnes306 states: "HATED IT ... This movie is for all those bleeding heart liberals who

think Al Gore is a god. We went to see a cute animated movie and were subjected to 100

minutes of a environmental message" ("*Wall-E* Movie Reviews"). The film's theme was

welcomed by others. In another post, Plasticanimalz called the film beautiful and touching: "I

was crying by the end. It was so sweet and rich with humanity. I walked away from this film

feeling like I want to make a difference and further recognizing the importance of what we

have around us and our need to take care of our planet, ourselves and our minds" ("*Wall-E*

Movie Reviews"). The more aesthetically minded did not fret over the message of the film

because the narrative, soundtrack, and visuals were stunning. *The Rolling Stone* reviewer

Peter Travers wrote:

> Those viewers with a fear and loathing of "message" may flinch at the script's
>
> warning about fat, consumerist humans and the ignorance that landed the planet in
>
> such disarray. But it's thrilling to watch Stanton and his genius crew of Pixar artists
>
> discover new levels of creativity. No movie can be a downer that fills you with pure
>
> exhilaration. You leave *WALL-E* with a feeling of the rarest kind: that you've just
>
> enjoyed a close encounter with an enduring classic. (Travers)

Travers' comments are illuminating with regard to how this movie begins to operate in the

dialogic mode. Travers' description of "pure exhilaration" recalls both Dante's felicity,

invoked by Meeker (191), and the liberation of the dialogic text about which Bakhtin writes.

When asked about the incorporation of environmental themes in *Wall-E*, director

Andrew Stanton told a reporter that he was "freaked out" by the suggestion that he'd made a

"message movie" with an "environmental bent." Stanton explained: "The reason I picked

trash was because it didn't require any narration to explain. You get it, you see it,

it's right there, it's stuff in the way, and you've got to pick it up"[33] (von Riedemann). Stanton

co-wrote *Wall-E* with Jim Reardon, a twelve-year veteran of *The Simpsons*. Despite Stanton's

protests, the movie was alternatively despised as an attack on American consumerism or

praised as a hopeful take on the post-environmental-apocalypse. In his 2008 column, "Wall-E

For President," Frank Rich of *The New York Times* tied the 2008 film to a Michael Moore

documentary by noting that both films opened at the same time of year. Rich writes:

> As it happened, *Wall-E* opened the same summer weekend as the hot-button movie of
>
> the 2004 campaign year, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Ah, the good old days.
>
> Oil was $38 a barrel, our fatalities in Iraq had not hit 900, and only 57 percent of
>
> Americans thought their country was on the wrong track. (Now more than 80 percent
>
> do.) *Wall-E*, a fictional film playing to a far larger audience, may touch a more
>
> universal chord in this far gloomier time. (Rich)

Perhaps this universal chord was struck. For the human audiences of cultural production, the

planet's environment deserves attention because it is home to humanity. Sustaining human

life is the highest goal for humans, a truism easily explained by evolutionary biology. In

Wall-E, mere survival of the human species, however, is not the ultimate good. By the end of

the film, the captain of the Axiom spaceship, the film's human protagonist, embraces the

pastoral ideal of a return to Earth, to dirt, to home – as an antidote to mere "survival" in the

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[33] A.R. Ammons' booklength poem, *Garbage*, comes to mind: "garbage has to be the poem
of our times because / garbage is spiritual, believable enough / to get our attention, getting in
the way, piling / up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and / creamy white: what else deflects
us from the / errors of our illusionary ways […]" (8).

safe, mediated corporate womb. While fighting with the ship's autopilot Auto in a comedic reprisal of Kubrick's *2001*, the Axiom captain declares: "I don't want to survive, I want to live." While the captain, the tale's tragic hero, struggles to do the right thing at all costs, it's the simple good-hearted comic hero Wall-E who bumbles along to save the day.

When Meeker argues on behalf of the comic hero's survival skills, it's doubtful that the scholar might have considered the implications of a mechanized hero. Science fiction is, after all, low genre fiction of the sort that Meeker might have called "corny" (xi). The blurred lines between machine and human, however, also can contribute to the kind of humility Meeker sought through comedy. The tragic view, whether Greek or Judeo-Christian or humanist hubris,[34] positions humans as overlords of the planet. As noted previously, Meeker argues that the tragic view of humans as transcendent and morally superior to other beings ultimately can lead to the exploitation of these beings and things (42-43). Drifting along to set things right, the comic hero. This human quality, along with robotic physical characteristics that render Wall-E basically indestructible, may even suggest an evolutionary ideal, a mechanical comic *Übermensch*. Though Nietzsche writes that a new "overman" would be embarrassed by the old form of human—"What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 41-42)—Wall-E is characterized by humility. Flimsy humans are not embarrassments but become Wall-E's friends. Good, long-lasting, hard-working, and funny—the new comic overman is a machine.

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[34] As I do in the chapter about *Avatar*, I reference here the conclusions of Lynn White's 1974 paper, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."

I Consume Therefore I Am

Though the character Wall-E is accepting of humanity's weak status, the film does portray the remnants of humanity as a painful embarrassment to the species. For example, consider Mary's existence aboard the Axiom. She rides through town in a personal hovercraft and talks to the screen floating in front of her face instead of the person sitting right next to her. Oblivious to her environment, this human-like creature personifies what McLuhan called the "non-perceptive somnambulist." She's not asleep but certainly not awake, either. Mary is an overfed fetus gestating in the seventy-two-degree amniotic interior of a spacecraft womb. To recap the film's (futuristic) crisis, the trash-packed Earth is uninhabitable so humans have had to flee the planet in a mother ship, a Noah's Ark for humans and machines. Here they survive, comfortable and well-fed, thanks to the monopolistic monolith, Buy N' Large. The above-quoted *ABC Radio National* critic noted that the film's automatons Wall-E and EVE didn't hold his interest even though "a spaceship full of fat, stupid humans […] arrives in the film's second half." While the film's robotic Wall-E is a machine with human tendencies including a sense of humor, fear, sadness, and the ability to create art, the humans in the film are presented as helpless but comfortable caged animals—helpless organic matter, pets of the machines that care for their every need.

Mary's cozy quasi-human-existence is thrown off-course by Wall-E. In a serendipitous scene in which Wall-E pursues EVE through the Axiom, Wall-E accidentally turns off Mary's ever-present screen. The human is disconnected from electronic interface with others, including those "humans" sitting physically right next to her. "What the …?" she begins. And then, "Ooh!" She looks around at the flashing lights and signs of her world, the spaceship Axiom—a manmade, machine-sustained environment. She sees blinking signs:

"Live your dreams!" and "Buy now, pay later!" Mary appears to be waking up—seeing her environment for the first time without the help of her screen. As the hoverchair moves her along through the ship, she makes discoveries: "I didn't know we had a pool."

Wall-E "frees" the human John in a similar comic collision, ramming into the man's chair and knocking the flabby immobile John to the ground. John flails about on the floor, unable to get back into his hoverchair. Robots create a detour around the flailing human. Wall-E gives John a boost back into the chair and introduces himself. In the midst of hundreds of humans moving about in various states of bored near-slumber, John and Mary discover a new sense of being. No longer trapped behind a screen and extended solely through mesmerizing media images, these two begin to recover the use of their human limbs. In subsequent comedic scenes, John and Mary splash in the pool and sit together to watch the stars that other humans cannot notice. Their low-resolution puffy hands brush, human flesh meets human flesh. Though this connection isn't accompanied by explanatory dialogue, the audience feels the power of this touch, its being-alive-to-the-world. The possibility of an unmediated moment still exists for humans, at least in the fantastical future of *Wall-E*. That's something about which an animated filmmaker can rhapsodize.

Notes on Nostalgia

Earlier in this chapter I noted a conflicted flirtation with nostalgia in *Wall-E*. The robotic hero is obviously fond of twentieth century cultural production, from VHS tape to a Rubik's Cube, and a spork, to the assorted Pixar memorabilia strewn about Wall-E's home on Earth. David Denby, in a review in *The New Yorker*, calls *Wall-E* a "work of tragic nostalgia":

> […] the junk items he finds become fetishes for him. He holds on to plastic forks,
>
> hubcaps, and Zippo lighters, and throws away a diamond ring while keeping the felt
>
> box (he likes containers). He lives in a steel garbage dump that is at once home,
>
> arcade, archeological museum, and church. Among his collection lies not a recording
>
> of *Messiah* or of Beethoven's Ninth but a tape of the 1969 musical "*Hello, Dolly!*"
>
> […] and what he watches again and again is not the famous Louis Armstrong–Barbra
>
> Streisand duet but a wan little love song, 'It Only Takes a Moment'—with skinny
>
> Michael Crawford holding Marianne McAndrew's hand—and the routine dance
>
> production number 'Put on Your Sunday Clothes.' (Denby)

What Denby notes here is important on a couple of levels. First of all, the critic imposes on a

futuristic machine-being a human understanding of cultural production in presuming that

Wall-E might be nostalgic about the items of lost culture. Wall-E is quite obviously

encountering these objects for the first time, and he finds in these objects a way of informing

his contemporary situation. The robot is not nostalgic. We, the audience, are nostalgic. At the

same time, and this is the second important thing about Denby's critique, we are a bit

offended by Wall-E's taste in media. For a true aesthetic experience, Wall-E should be

appreciating the finer artistic expressions of Western culture, if not Beethoven then at least

Barbra Streisand. The notion of nostalgia in Wall-E is undercut by the crappy nature of the

stuff to which Wall-E attaches. This is not the valorization of the past that Bakhtin

characterizes as "epic" (*Dialogic Imagination* 18). The utilization of lower orders of artistic

representation throw a bolt into the mechanism of the epic text, which reveres a completed,

idealized past. Bakhtin describes how this epic mode, a monologic one, works: "One may,

and in fact one must, memorialize with artistic language only that which is worthy of being

remembered, that which should be preserved in the memory of descendants; an image is created for descendents, and this image is projected on to their sublime and distant horizon" (*Dialogic Imagination* 18). This mythical past, carefully reconstructed and presented as a distant, completed, closed circle, does not invite imagination or free association, as does Bakhtin's novel, which explores the contemporaneity of reality through its accessible low-genre forms.

Indeed, even were audience nostalgia in *Wall-E* to exist, must be a projected imagined nostalgia because the narrative takes place 700 years in the future. And the past it fails to valorize is, in actuality, fairly close to our present. As a text positioned in the present about the future, *Wall-E* resists epic status. For Bakhtin, a present or contemporaneous text challenges the authority and privilege of hierarchical mythology: "The present is something transitory, it is flow, it is an eternal continuation without beginning or end; it is denied an authentic conclusiveness and consequently lacks an essence as well" (*Dialogic Imagination* 20). Because of the flowing and transitory attributes of the dialogic text, it cheerfully annihilates the epic, high genres, and national myth. Such a text levels the playing field, as Bakhtin writes: "It is brought low, represented on a plane equal with contemporary life, in an everyday environment" (*Dialogic Imagination* 21). The film, for its celebration of the mundane or low, celebrates the democratizing of information. Again, like its robot protagonist, *Wall-E* the film's nostalgia refuses to follow its pre-programmed epic directive.

Joyous Drift

Through the cool aspects of the medium and its comedy—in particular its physical comedy, *Wall-E* communicates at a deep level to preschoolers like my four-year-old

granddaughter Lilia, who's seen it multiple times. Also, my father, nearly eighty years old

and a ferocious critic of all things with a "green" or environmental label, enjoyed the tribute

to the (cool) silent film era as well as a soundtrack with musical-comedy oldies like "Put On

Your Sunday Clothes." The Pixar Web site notes that less dialogue meant more work for

animators who wanted to make the characters expressive. "Every Chaplin movie, every

Keaton movie, every day at lunch we watched one," says Stanton. "It's enlightening. It

makes you realize that we actually lost more storytelling skills than we gained as a result of

going to sound" (Pixar). Sound adds definition, heating up the medium. The wordless

moments in the film keep it cool, engaging the film's diverse audience. Many of these

moments do not portend logic or any reasoned argument. As Wall-E collects trash in the

film's first scenes, he listens to recorded music. He haphazardly sorts trash, choosing

unlikely items to keep in a grubby lunch box. He finds a brassiere and places it over his eyes.

Giggles. This contributes little to the film's plot or denouement. But it does provoke laughter,

and through laughter, a positive, creative, and regenerating energy. Wall-E's playfulness and

his collections of cultural artifacts—unlike his "directive" to clean the earth—do not have a

serious or practical goal. Between Wall-E and EVE, the film's clumsy comic moments are

many. Wall-E ends up under a pile of rusty shopping carts or slams into the roof of his home.

EVE ends up trapped by a magnet and as she frees herself, the ensuing chaos involves the

collapse of an entire row of huge derelict ships.

Again we laugh, now at the comedy of the physical. To restate Bakhtin, laughter

points the way to internal truths; it liberates from fears of the "sacred," of prohibitions and

power (*Rabelais* 94). Laughter frees—and "could never become an instrument to oppress and

blind the people" but "always remained a free weapon in their hands" (94). Between the

satiric account of an unpleasant depiction of futuristic human embodiment and the physical comedy in *Wall-E*, the film produces characters more real to us, more recognizable than the human action hero who overcomes great odds to rescue a maiden in distress. We begin to see *Wall-E* as a film leaning more toward the dialogic end of the spectrum. This is a celebration, an epistemological exploration of what it means to "be"—not just to be human but to be, to exist as a sentient being in any form.

The Wall-E character represents a stepping-stone on a evolutionary path of sentient beings. Because humility and joy remain in this new form of existence, fear over change dissipates. Wall-E and EVE not only embody a simple (human) bliss, they teach it to the humans who've lost this talent. In a scene mid-way through the film, Wall-E travels through space, his being-machine transcending any biological need for an oxygen-based atmosphere. He propels himself using a fire extinguisher. After a short, goal-oriented chase by EVE, who fears that Wall-E is "dead," the two meet and their maneuverings through space turn into a joyous gravity-free dance. A rhythm of existence flows through the two beings. The robots "kiss" and a spark flies. As newly self-aware beings-human, John and Mary watch the cavorting robots from inside the spaceship, and the robots' dance leads to the humans' epiphany. Life is, in fact, more than survival. It is a film, a dance, a drifting comedy experienced right now. That's a hopeful vision of the future that *Wall-E*, while beginning with a stark jeremiad about the future of our home, offers to a human audience. Interviewed for a short bonus feature on the DVD, "The Man and The Machine," Stanton likens himself to his character: "There's a lot of Wall-E in me. He's just a nerdy romantic. I would apply for that job."

Chapter Six: Animation Energy

In the previous chapters, I create a model for reading ecological themes in animated

texts on a continuum from single-voiced and monologic or heteroglossic and dialogic.

Cartoons have been characterized, for the most part, as a cool, low-resolution medium. The

comic mode of discourse has been juxtaposed with the tragic mode, with a nod to Meeker's

conclusion that the comic mode is "the most appropriate expression of animal and human

gifts":

> [The comic mode] is respectful of the prerequisites for life and is careful in is
>
> maintenance of them. When ecological balances are disturbed, comic action seeks
>
> their restoration. What is more, comedy seeks joy. […] Human comedy seeks
>
> reconciliation of will and desire rather than the conquest of one by the other. […]
>
> Human comedy does not offer a proud view of mankind but an accurate one, mindful
>
> of human limitations and modest in its assessment of human potentials. (191)

Enviro-toons can spark conversations about human limitations and potential, about our

conflicting human will and desires, and the impact of limits, potential, will, and desire on the

larger ecological network we inhabit. Critiquing these works through the theoretical frames

of Meeker, Bakhtin, McLuhan, and Slovic demonstrates how these texts work and how they

differ on a continuum between monologic and dialogic to exemplify themes and attitudes that

are less or more survival-oriented. That is the ultimate utility that I refer to throughout this

project.

As the first decade of the twenty-first century ends, humans are awash in media

messages. A 2009 University of California, San Diego, study reported that the average

American consumes 34 gigabytes of content, 100,000 words of information in a single day.

That is the average amount of information coming at us from speakers and screens: TV, radio, Web sites, text messages, and video games. University students in my introductory mass communications classes tell me that they begin their day on Facebook or other social networking sites, spend hours listening music on iPods, devote nights to watching movies or reality TV shows, hold weekend-long TV show marathons, and frequently "escape reality" (their words) with video games. Americans consume 11.8 hours of information a day, the UC-San Diego study observes (Bilton). We spend 4.5 hours a day in front of a screen watching TV-related content and an additional two hours online. Our appetites for information increase by about six percent a year, the study suggests. That's a 350 percent increase in the amount of information—measured in bytes—over the past three decades. It's noisy out there and getting noisier every day.

Marketers and advertising agencies work tirelessly to consider what types of media and messages might break through this information clutter. I do not want to suggest here that the power of enviro-toons be tapped for its propaganda potential. The co-option of art on behalf of a political or corporate goal is a sensitive topic about which much has been written. Slovic quotes nature writer Rick Bass on the author's decision to pursue both artistic and political goals in separate ways:

> I'm just trying to put out brush fires.… I'm standing there with a paintbrush in one hand and a bucket of water in the other hand. And if there's no fire around, I'll paint a pretty picture; but if a fire's burning, I've got to dump water on it. So I do separate in my mind, totally, the didactic or political writings from art. (qtd. in Slovic "Epistemology and Politics in American Nature Writing" 82)

Rather than be used as a weapon in the arsenal of public relations—a monologic practice that seeks to maintain a consistent brand and the reiteration of carefully constructed talking points—the dialogic enviro-toon might boast the potential to energize conversation. It seems of key importance to an emerging critical practice like ecocriticism to ferret out the qualities of texts that lead to increased engagement between audiences and their external environments. In *The ISLE Reader*, Patrick D. Murphy, founding editor, writes of ecocriticism as first and foremost "a sustainable and rejuvenative method of criticism" and "part of an ongoing dialogue, which many of us believe must contribute to different ways of living in the world [that] requires humility on the part of its practitioners" (Branch and Slovic ix).

The ongoing dialogue of ecocriticism, its sustainability and humility, operates as a parallel to the potential of literary texts to counter the decay of cultural entropy. As a pluralistic, cool medium, the dialogic enviro-toon operates as a *negentropic* literary force, to borrow a term from Rueckert. Rueckert uses the term negentropy to describe the process of energy "entrapment and creation" (In Glotfelty and Fromm 111). The Oxford English Dictionary defines "negentropy" as negative counterpart of entropy, which is the degradation of energy in a closed system. Entropy renders energy incapable of doing work. Negentropy, or negative entropy, is energy captured and ready for action. In a 1994 paper on thermodynamics, Mae Wan Ho defines negentropy as "living organization, space-time structure, stored energy, coherence, coupled cycles, thermodynamics of organized complexity" (50). The term comes into play in fields as diverse as statistics and risk management, where it describes the pressure that defies increasing disorder. Thus negentropy would include the pressure of political systems to defy social disorder or, as applicable to this

project, to disrupt the pressure of monologic messages intended to reify social or political agendas. The OED cites L. Brullouin's *Science & Information Theory* (1956): "We prove that information must be considered as a negative term in the entropy of a system; in short, information is negentropy" (xii). Information works, then, as a kind of ordering in information theory, an idea that might be transferred to the consideration of literary or popular culture works like a dialogue-producing, democratized enviro-toon.

As I've noted earlier, cartoons, by their nature, are not burdened with expectations about their contributions to art or political thought. Cartoons might delve into heavy and controversial issues, but through humor and satire, a topic that might have seemed taboo becomes available for close inspection. To an engaged audience, animation offers a non-threatening forum for debate. "Cartoons frequently display overt political, social, and economic messages without arousing much ire from the viewing public," writes Douglas (231). In this work, I have explored how monologic and dialogic enviro-toons discourage or further the goals of engaging a sprawling, diverse global populace in wide conversations about critical ecological issues. Not surprisingly, Bakhtin, once a Soviet exile, lauded the democratizing effects of dialogic discourse over the dogma and suppression of the monologic homogenizing single-voice (*Dialogic Imagination* 275). Bakhtin considered the audience of the monologic form to be "a person who passively understands but not for one who actively answers and reacts" while for dialogic discourse, he theorized, the audience is "responsive" in that the dialogic text requires the listener to be an active participant, engaged in the enriching "formulation of discourse" (*Dialogic Imagination* 280-81).

Further, information—in the form here of popular culture texts—might be seen to possess a potentially inexhaustible source of stored energy, as Rueckert suggests is the case with poetry:

> A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow. Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustain life. Poems are the verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source on energy, coming, as they do, from those ever-generative twin matrices, language and imagination. (In Glotfelty & Fromm 108)

Rueckert's equating of text to fossil fuel seemed odd, to say the least, when I first encountered it. I was a beginning student in a University of Nevada, Reno English Department program called "Literature and Environment." I had previously worked in media industries, writing for newspapers, editing, shooting photos, doing print layouts, building Web sites and feeding content to the info-hungry Internet. I called myself a platform agnostic content whore, roughly able to feed writing, photography, audio, and video to various publications. Leaving the professional world to return to the academy, I would soon recognize the need for the kind of "experimental criticism" for which Rueckert called.

This realization occurred one summer afternoon in the Bay Area. I was attending a journalism education conference and reading McLuhan's *Understanding Media* between sessions. Part of the time, I sprawled on the floor of my friend's apartment in San Francisco, on the third floor of a building near the corner of Sutter and Polk streets, the sketchy Tenderloin. Sex shops lined the street, interspersed with bars and head shops, ethnic food, thrift, pawn shops, a funeral home, and a doggie daycare.

A pillow tucked under my chest, I gnawed through the ideas that McLuhan had encoded into his text in 1964. McLuhan insisted, as Rueckert would later, that media are power, possess hybrid energy, and ultimately transform human societies. That a text possesses stored energy is illustrated in McLuhan's chapter on "The Written Word," which begins with an anecdote from a West African:

> The one crowded space in Father Perry's house was his bookshelves. I gradually came to understand that the marks on the pages were *trapped words*. Anyone could learn to decipher the symbols and turn the trapped words loose again into speech. The ink of the print trapped the thoughts; they could no more get away than a *doomboo* could get out of a pit. (81)

Trapped words. Stored energy. Poems as green plants. Negentropy. It wasn't that these thoughts challenged any previously held and cherished beliefs. I had simply never thought about media—the texts of newspapers, novels, broadcast TV, film, social networking posts, and poetry—as more than their content. "To the blind, all things are sudden," McLuhan writes in a chapter titled, "Hybrid Energy," explaining that media are "make happen" agents rather than "make aware" agents. A text is more than what it says. While makers and critics of media for decades have troubled themselves over content—surveying audience demands and balancing the advertising influence on mass media production—the transformative power of the medium itself was largely ignored. McLuhan cites the change wrought on human society by the advent of electricity—which he called a message of "total change […] pure information without any content to restrict its transforming and informing power." The electrical environment shifts perception, promotes a new kind of evolution, and thus requires a new kind of consideration.

McLuhan continues: "If the student of media will but meditate on the power of this medium of electric light to transform every structure of time and space and work and society that it penetrates or contacts, he will have the key to the form of the power that is in all media to reshape lives that they touch" (52). As a budding theorist who'd hoped to, as Rueckert writes, "generate a critical position out of a concept of relevance" (107), I thought perhaps I'd found a starting point in McLuhan. I drew a star with a ballpoint pen to mark the passage in my paperback anniversary edition of *Understanding Media*.

Thinking about relevance—and perhaps compelled by the need to counter the decay of entropy in my urban surroundings, I set the book down, pages spread open. I stood and walked to the window overlooking Larkin Street, a block from Van Ness. In the parking lot of the funeral parlor, employees of the doggie daycare threw tennis balls for a trio of dogs. A tall man stood under my window arguing with a heavily made-up woman in high heels and a revealing white tank top. Another man stood in front of a bar, aiming a high-pressure hose at the sidewalk. These details seemed relevant, an environmental backdrop to my reading of McLuhan that impacted my own experience of loosing the text from its prison within the pages. Perhaps if I had ingested McLuhan on an airplane or in a cottage tucked at the far end of a wooded twenty-acre plot, the words would have found a different reception. But the urban street scenes reminded me of the state of the world, of people living and breathing and drinking and procreating, of animals and plants, of water and earth and air, of ecological and social crises about which we often do our level best to avoid thinking.

Poems have energy. Texts have stored potential to change a mind, a society, a world. To ward off decay through negentropy. To stretch the metaphor, I think that some texts possess more nutrients than others. As open as my mind might be, I can find little of value in

most reality television programs. Value judgments aside, for any transformative event to happen, the texts must engage. To introduce a classroom of literature students to the power of a book-length investigation of global warming seems productive, but limited. A small audience would be enlightened, possibly in ways that provoke fear, ecodespair, and feelings of helplessness. The audience that needs to be reached—the sex worker, pimp, bartender, doggie daycare worker, and burger flipper—is less likely to encounter the energy of such a hot (and largely uninviting) medium. It seems more likely that these individuals, along with my own children and university students, might encounter the energy of a popular enviro-toon on their television, iPhone, or on the big screen of the nearby multiplex on Van Ness.

"Hollywood bankers," McLuhan writes, "are smarter than literary historians, for the latter despise popular taste except when it has been filtered down from lecture course to literary handbook" (54). That afternoon looking out a window in the city, I knew I could walk out the door, down the stairs to the street, and engage most of those San Franciscans in a conversation about an episode of *The Simpsons* or *Wall-E* or the foul-mouthed fourth graders in *South Park*. I could walk across a college campus and do the same. The dialogic enviro-toon, as a popular medium, allows a breadth of simplicity and complexity that unites a wide audience in a shared moment of cultural consumption, as I've indicated earlier. As contemporary texts go, the simple form of animation seems to me to possess negentropic energy.

Energy, Anarchy, and Ecocriticism

As noted in Chapter One's brief discussion of animation studies, animation has been called an anarchic form. It can be seen to suppress the rationality of assumed physical laws

and reveal psychic drift, hallucination, and the workings of the subconscious. Its messages often work to subvert the status quo of cultural messages and received truths that indoctrinate humans from birth. The animated films and shows I've chosen for this project exemplify this type of anarchy. It may seem contradictory to point to the anarchic qualities of animation on one hand and simultaneously to argue for its negentropic potential—a means of *countering* chaos and disorder—on the other. Anarchy, as I use the term here, represents a disordering of one kind—and a reordering of another kind, a liberating release from ideological hegemony of Western corporatized culture. It's in this liberated mode that anarchy boasts its greatest potential as creative energy—or negentropy.

Though the OED's first definition for "anarchy" involves "lawlessness" and "political disorder," the second half of the first definition reads thus: "A theoretical social state in which there is no governing person or body of persons, but each individual has absolute liberty (without implication of disorder)." Anarchists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries including Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, Leo Tolstoy, and Mikhail Bakunin called for abolition of property, government, and state, after which the people would "form themselves freely according to the necessities dictated to them by life itself" (Kropotkin "The Paris Commune" 108). This is anarchy geared toward freedom, a different kind of order than one imposed by the brain-crunching, will-reducing ideological state apparatus. By purusing such a goal as "forming themselves" according to the dictates of their environments, it could be said that these early anarchist thinkers operated in the more sustainable mode described by Meeker.

In the case of artistic expression, the control of cultural production follows similar patterns to the control of state or wealth. The hegemony of cultural production can be

observed in the makings of literary canons, the funding of performing arts, the choosing of

museum masterpieces, and more generally the stranglehold of high-culture assumptions

about worthy aesthetics. This is certainly no new discussion and I won't go into any kind of

depth arguing that Western Art has been co-opted by capitalism, commercialism, and cultural

imperialism. Instead, I hope only to offer the dialogic animation as cubist dadaism, surreal

neo-expressionism, a fragmented, chaotic, dreamscape. At the same time, it's capitalistic and

commercial, operating to promote information democratization within the system it critiques.

Several episodes of *The Simpsons* have blatantly mocked the hand that feeds the show—the

News Corporation. The creative disordering of canons, masterpieces, and high-low culture

distinctions fuels animation's negentropic potential. Creative energy erupts from the

deconstructed and fertile overturned landscape like the proliferation of vegetation after a fire.

Herbert Read writes in "Poetry and Anarchism" of breaking through the "static system of

ideas," to counter the form, patterns and order that lead to fatal energy-sucking stagnancy:

> To make life, to insure progress, to create interest and vividness, it is necessary to
>
> break form, to distort pattern, to change the nature of our civilization. In order to
>
> create it is necessary to destroy; and the agent of destruction in society is the poet. I
>
> believe the poet is necessarily an anarchist, and that he must oppose all organized
>
> conceptions of the State, not only those which we inherit from the past but equally
>
> those which are imposed on people in the name of the future. […] (498)

How might anarchy, then, as a kind of chaos or disorder, lead to negentropy or reordered and

democratic information that makes available new understandings of the human role and

responsibility, the navigation of human will and desire, reason and instinct? The cool

medium of animation, operating in the comic mode as a dialogic text with subversive

messages and wide global reach, drives its energy. Form is broken, collected, and spliced back together. Change emerges from this process.

By now it seems evident that this idea of textual energy and the exploration of monologic and dialogic aspects of texts as a critical exercise does not necessarily need to be confined to discussions of enviro-toons. The ideas certainly can be applied to other environmental texts, including journalistic accounts of environmental degradation to global warming documentaries (arguably hot and most often monologic media) or more familiarizing and thus potentially engaging approaches, like poetry, comedic news programs, or Carl Hiaasen novels. By examining these aspects in enviro-toons, I have shown how hot and cool media, monologic and dialogic texts, the jeremiad and the rhapsodic, and comedic and tragic discourse modes can be seen working in tandem to prompt informed, energized audiences.

Who are we? Where are we? What must we do to live? *Avatar*, *The Simpsons Movie,* episodes of *South Park* and *Wall-E* take up these questions, as monological and dialogic enviro-toons, hot, cool, tragic, and comedic media that encourage or in some cases discourage a wide audience to engage in a free democratized conversation about ecological issues and realities. The stories we tell have consequences for the reality we imagine, envision, and attempt to create and recreate. Stories give us models of our environments and social relations. The monologic enviro-toon by definition reduces a complex reality to a single essence or solution. The dialogic enviro-toon is multi-voiced and open to individual engagement—negentropic. It may be reasonable to consider how environmental goals might be achieved through the use of either or both of these means on behalf of conveying environmental realities. For some exigencies, cognitive grist for thought comes from a safe,

often humorous space. The comic or picaresque mode of discourse is certainly not limited to enviro-toons, a point that might be an important thing for creators and critics of environmental journalism and non-fiction nature texts to consider. At the same time, I feel confident in concluding that many environmental texts are dualistic ones that provoke fear, guilt or anger in ways that might be counter-productive to human survival. I have quoted Nordhaus and Shellenberger, who have observed that flooding the media landscape with threats and guilty accusations may not be the best way to handle, for example, the global warming issue. A better mode of discourse is one that empowers, gives us hope, and guides us to collective action, they write (222). The writers equate some environmentalists, perhaps unfairly, with the depressed patients of a psychologist who see their existence as bleak, themselves as failures, and futures as hopeless. They chide the environmentalist essentialism that oversimplifies a harmonious nature that's at odds with our selfish "reactive primate species." Instead, Meeker's comic mode of discourse, Bakhtin's dialogic text, Slovic's rhapsody, and a low-definition cool medium like a contemporary dialogic enviro-toon might be part of a better communication solution possess the energy to enhance awareness and promote our willingness to act on newfound knowledge. In short, yes, I think that an enviro-toon, fearless and funny, can create conversations and spark thoughts—any thoughts, as Slovic suggests—that "when they settle" might make the world and our species a bit safer.

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Appendix: Environmental Media Awards for Animation

In 1989, the Environmental Media Association formed to begin recognizing mass

media products in television, film, and music for their contribution to the way audiences

around the world think about environmental issues. The group began giving awards in 1991,

stating that "the entertainment community has the power to influence the environmental

awareness of millions of people" ("About EMA"). Of the group's work, Al Gore says: "I

greatly admire the work of this organization. No group has had a larger impact on the

thinking Americans bring to the environment, on the way we, as a nation, converse with the

problems that beset the environment" (qtd. in "About EMA").

In the past twenty years, the organization has given numerous awards to animated

films and sit-coms. Following is a list of these awards for animated works:

1991
- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  The Simpsons: "Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish"
- **Special EMA Award For Ongoing Commitment In Episodic Television**
  Captain Planet
- **Children's Programming/Animation**
  Tiny Toon Adventures: "Whales Tales"

1992
- **Children's Programming/Animation**
  Widget: "Sort It Out"
- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  Dinosaurs: "Power Erupts"
- **Feature Film**
  Ferngully: The Last Rainforest

1993
- **Children's Animated Programming/Animated**
  Captain Planet & The Planeteers: "Dream Machine"
- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  Dinosaurs: "If You Were a Tree"

1994

- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  The Simpsons: "Bart Gets an Elephant"
- **Children's Animated**
  The New Adventures of Captain Planet: "Gorillas Will Be Missed"

1995

- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  Dinosaurs: "Changing Nature"
- **Feature Film**
  Pocahontas
- **Children's Animated**
  Scholastic Presents The Magic School Bus: "…Meets the Rot Squad"

1996

- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  The Simpsons: "Lisa Becomes a Vegetarian"
- **Children's Animated Program**
  Rocko's Modern Life: "Zanzibar"

1997

- **Children's Animated**
  Scholastic: "The Magic School Bus"
- **Television Comedy**
  The Simpsons

1998

- **Children's Animated**
  Hey Arnold! "Save the Tree"

1999

- **Children's Animated**
- *The Wild Thornberrys*

2000

- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  Futurama: "The Problem with Popplers"
- **Children's Animated**
  The Wild Thornberrys: "You Otter Know "

2001

- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  King of the Hill: "It's Not Easy Being Green"
- **Children's Animated**
  Braceface: "The Meat of the Matter"

2002
- **Feature Film**
  Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron
- **Children's Television Program – Animated**
  The Legend of Tarzan: "Tarzan and the Outbreak"

2003
- **Television Episodic – Comedy**
  King of the Hill: "I Never Promised You An Organic Garden"
- **Children's Television Program – Animated**
  Clifford the Big Red Dog: "Lights Out"

2004
- **Television Episodic – Comedy**
  The Simpsons: "The Fat And The Furriest"
- **Children's Television – Animated**
  Braceface: "Ms. Spitz Goes To Warsch & Stone"
- **Documentary Short**
  "The Meatrix"

2005
- **Television Episodic – Comedy**
  King of the Hill: "A Rover Runs Through It"
- **Children's Television**
  Lilo & Stitch: "Ploot"

2006
- **Feature Film**
  Ice Age: The Meltdown
- **Television Episodic Comedy**
  The Simpsons: "The Bonfire Of The Manatees"
- **Children's Animated Television**
  The Wonder Pets! "Save The Tree"

2007
- **Feature Film**
  Happy Feet
- **Children's Live Action/Animated**
  Handy Manny: "Sculptor Manny/Manny Goes Solar"

2009
- **Children's Animated**

  Timon and Pumbaa: "Safety Smart Goes Green"