

Uses of Environmental Humanities: Nicole Seymour

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Series, Uses of Environmental Humanities

The Uses of Environmental Humanities series explores diverse and creative ways of thinking with the Environmental Humanities in responding to socio-environmental challenges. Contributors address the influence of the Environmental Humanities and ways in which we might use this field of study, offering insights into the interactions between societies, science, politics, and culture. The series is curated by Samantha Rothbart.

“The Aesthetics and Affects of Art in the Plasticene”

By **Nicole Seymour**

We’ve all seen it: a dead bird carcass on the ground, plastic shards and objects heaped where its stomach would have been. The image comes from US artist **Chris Jordan**’s photo series ***Midway: Message from the Gyre (2009–present)*** and, along with others in the series, it has been widely circulated as an emblem of the Anthropocene and, more specifically, **the Plasticene**.

As an environmental humanities scholar who has long been engaged with questions of aesthetics and affect, and who has recently started a project on microplastics, I am particularly struck by Jordan’s body of work, especially his recent documentary *Albatross* (2017). Filmed on **the Midway Islands**, the same location for his photo series, *Albatross* documents the births, lives, and occasional plastic-related deaths of the titular birds. (In one segment, we learn that parent birds can inadvertently swallow plastic when fishing in the ocean, and then later regurgitate it into their offspring’s mouths. When the fledglings need to purge later in order to fly, the plastic can tear their insides—leading to slow and painful demises. *Albatross* thus clearly hopes to move viewers emotionally, perhaps to the extent that they reduce the use of plastic in their own lives.

I'll return to the emotional in a moment. To begin with the aesthetic: I am intrigued, even surprised, by the fact that artists who seek to bring attention to plastic pollution also highlight its beauty and potential; Jordan, along with other contemporary artists such as Mark Dion, Stuart Haygarth, and Ruth Peché, cluster salvaged plastics by shape, by color, and into patterns. For instance, when staging a funeral for a dead albatross in his documentary, Jordan ritualistically encircles the bird with a **rainbow-hued ring of plastic**. We might also note that Jordan's voice-over diction is (inadvertently?) artistic, as when he tells us that "each time I opened [a dead bird] up it was like a *gallery* of [plastic] horrors" (my emphasis). Even Charles Moore, the oceanographer and author of ***Plastic Ocean*** whose expeditions recently brought the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch" to public attention, seems swayed by the aesthetics of this enemy substance; when he appeared at my local theater for a post-screening commentary on *Albatross*, I couldn't help but notice that he was wearing a necklace made of pieces of plastic.

My point is not to call such artists and activists hypocrites, or to criticize them for romanticizing problematic materials—but rather to suggest that these figures demonstrate larger truths: the attraction to plastic, and the impulse to aestheticize it, is part of human nature. Or, perhaps, animal nature: we find pleasure in collection, curation, and color, not unlike many species of birds. And just as birds like the Midway albatrosses have trouble distinguishing between what is food and what is trash—thus accidentally ingesting plastics—we blur the lines between trash and art by turning the former into the latter. In my work on microplastics, I want to identify a deeply ambivalent scenario: aestheticizing plastic is a way of living both against and with it.

While I find the status of the aesthetic in Jordan's work to be intriguing, I am much more critical of his engagement with affect—or what humanities scholars have variously defined as “mood” or “tone” or “emotional appeal.” *Albatross* has a generally somber mood and tone, and it makes many poignant emotional appeals. It asks us variously to marvel in wonderment at the beauty of nature, to grieve its wanton destruction, and to be moved to act by the tragic plight of nonhuman creatures. To offer a few specific examples: early on, Jordan films the hatching of baby birds in a slow and sentimental close-up; in later scenes, a melancholy opera track plays while we watch other birds die.

But so what? After all, mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse regularly make the same “asks” as *Albatross*, deploying pathos of this same heart-string-tugging variety. And that's exactly the problem, as I argue in my recent book, **Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age**: mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse is affectively narrow, and has therefore become predictable and formulaic. Indeed, I find it quite strange that the Mountainfilm festival claims that *Albatross* is “**not your textbook nature documentary,**” considering that it follows the affective, and aesthetic, formulae of familiar works ranging from the wonder-provoking programming of the Discovery Channel to the tear-jerking passages of the Oscar-winning documentary *The Cove*. (For example, when Jordan cradles a dying bird and cries, or when he solemnly stages the bird funeral, *Albatross* echoes the scene in *The Cove* in which activist Ric O'Barry cries over the “suicide” of the show dolphin Flipper.)

But perhaps most problematically, the formulaic elements of mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse often invoke unproductive and paralyzing affects in viewers, including guilt, despair, and doomsday fatigue. Thus, somewhat ironically, they work against their own aims to effect change.

What I show in *Bad Environmentalism*, however, is that a new wave of environmental artists and activists are rejecting these typical affective modes—wonder, sentimentality, seriousness, solemnity—and embracing alternatives such as absurdism, irony, irreverence, and campiness. They critique *both* mainstream environmentalism and anti-environmental forces, and insist that environmentalism be funnier, queerer, and more diverse—both in terms of affect and in terms of demographics.

Writing *Bad Environmentalism* has inspired me to continue looking for affective and aesthetic alternatives to mainstream environmental texts. When it comes to my new research topic of plastic, perhaps a place to start is Andrea Westmoreland's **snapshot of limpets making a home on a discarded scuba mask**. This image exemplifies what scientists now call the **Plastisphere**, or the lifeforms *enabled* by plastic. A foil to Jordan's tragic albatross, this image captures life's strange persistence, as well as the ironically productive entanglements of nature and culture, those supposed opposites. The image, in short, tells us another story about plastic, one with a notably different mood and tone.