



Nicole Seymour. *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. 316 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5179-0389-3.

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Published on H-Environment (May, 2020)

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Mainstream Western environmental culture—*March of the Penguins* (2005), Sierra Club ad campaigns, Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *National Geographic Explorer* (2015) and *Hostile Planet* (2019), the BBC’s *Planet Earth* (2006) and *Blue Planet* (2001) series, Netflix’s *Our Planet* (2019)—has a tendency to operate from a position of moral and intellectual superiority, reinforced by definitions of the more-than-human environment that tend to be spatially “superior” as well—pristine geographies that select for wild plants and animals but which exclude our messy urban and suburban environments. Almost universally, these Western environmentalist works rely on “serious” affective attitudes and appeals—doom and gloom, guilt, shame, awe, wonder, reverence, sanctimony, self-righteousness, sentimentality, expertise—that reflect a discourse of moral, aesthetic, and even racial purity. In response, Nicole Seymour’s *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* offers its archive of “bad environmentalism” to help dismantle the affective and ideological barriers that situate the environment as our sanctified, unfunny, nonhuman Other, one whose moral, ethical, and aesthetic standards we fail to live up to (even as we threaten to destroy it).

Seymour’s *Bad Environmentalism* belongs to a growing body of ecocritical scholarship that analyzes the cultural production of environmental af-

fect and sensibility. Foundational to that scholarship is the belief that a comprehensive and discursive understanding of environmental affect can lead to a more ethical engagement with the nonhuman world. However, the prescriptivist bent of environmentalist discourse, with its arsenal of high-minded, moralizing affects and sensibilities, is precisely how *Bad Environmentalism* wants us to break bad. With sources from “low” mass culture, literary satire (Percival Everett, Sherman Alexie, and Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* [1975]), and the artistic avant-garde (Isabella Rossellini’s *Green Porno* [2008], Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan’s performance art project *The Lesbian National Park Service* [1997], and *Goodbye Gauley Mountain* [2013]), “bad environmentalism” is a socially and culturally diverse group of environmental texts that employ non-serious affective modes and behaviors, such as irony, pastiche, absurdity, camp, and playfulness. By addressing the environment and environmentalism with irony and irreverence, claims Seymour, “the works in my archive undercut public negativity toward activism while also questioning basic environmental assumptions: that reverence is required for ethical relations to the nonhuman, that knowledge is key to fighting problems like climate change” (p. 5). Importantly for Seymour, reflexive and non-serious techniques challenge cultural assumptions about

environmentalism while simultaneously offering more enjoyable and relatable forms of environmental affect and engagement through humor, obscenity, disgust, and even arousal. Here we must take Seymour's non-seriousness seriously in terms of its ethical departure from the ideology of mainstream environmentalism: the notion of a reverential environmentalism only reinforces the affective split or barrier between, on the one hand, nature as the distant, suffering, and sympathetic Other; and on the other, the near and all-to-familiar thing in which our bodies—obscenely and toxically—are always already enmeshed and at stake. *Bad Environmentalism* is an attempt to reach out across that barrier. Solidarity rather than knowledge becomes key to fighting climate change.

In addition to its critique of normative environmental attitudes, Seymour's project doubles as a meta-critique of environmental humanities scholarship and its "tendency to reproduce the same dominant affect and sensibilities found in mainstream environmentalism, and to judge artworks primarily by their functionality" (p. 7). For this reason, Seymour's archive can be appreciated on its own terms as both a scholarly resource and a pragmatic workaround to the discipline's tendency of reproducing those same authors—John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and Terry Tempest Williams—in whom we encounter those same dominant sensibilities and perspectives. As unusual and shocking—or just as likely, obvious—as these texts may seem to scholars in the field of ecocriticism, the "bad" archive offers a much-needed challenge to the ruling scholarly paradigm and its definition of a valid environmental text.

Bad Environmentalism is a provocative contribution to the field of affective ecocriticism that, I believe, represents a decisive break from the prescriptivism inherent to the empiricist and cognitive approaches most recently exemplified by Alexa Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*

(2018). Rather than a quest for correct or corrective affect, *Bad Environmentalism* and bad environmentalism together "offer a different way to do politics, one that is both messy and pragmatic" (p. 232). Yet while Seymour's text has gone bad in relation to the general sweep of the field's affective turn, it remains to be seen if Bad Environmentalism's turn to popular culture—a move all too common within academic scholarship of belatedly discovering value in mass culture only to immediately overvalue it—is actually generative in terms of radical politics and perspectives. The deeper question remains for affective-based theoretical approaches, even more radical ones such as Seymour's, of whether sociopolitical systems can be challenged by displacing their conflicts to the realms of culture and individual subjectivity.

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Citation: Jack Kredell. Review of Seymour, Nicole. *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. May, 2020.

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