

Cultural Studies and Environment, Revisited

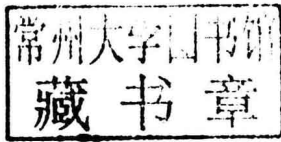
Edited by

Phaedra C. Pezzullo



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Cultural Studies and Environment, Revisited

The environment is perhaps most misunderstood as a static place, somewhere “out there,” separated from the practices of our everyday lives. Given this assumption, environmental movements and concerns have remained mostly marginalized or denigrated in Anglo-Australian-American cultural studies publications, conferences, and presentations. Recent global developments have made changing this oversight and, at times, direct resistance to engaging environmental concerns a new priority. This edited collection illustrates an appreciation of the dynamic, palpable, and significant ways the environment permeates culture (and vice versa), as well as a collective commitment to the ways that cultural studies has more to offer—and to learn from—taking environmental matters to heart. Like foundational categories of identity, economics, and historical context, this collection reminds us why the environment is and should be considered relevant to any work done in the name of “cultural studies.” Including research from four continents and across media, the authors offer insights on timely topics such as food, tourism, human/animal relations, forests, queer theory, indigenous rights, and water.

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Phaedra C. Pezzullo is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication and Culture, and adjunct faculty of Cultural Studies and American Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA. She authored *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* (University of Alabama, 2007) and co-edited *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement* (MIT Press, 2007).

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Phaedra C. Pezzullo

OVERTURE

The most complicated word

We need different ideas because we need different relationships.
(Williams 1980, p. 85)

But you know, grandson, this world is fragile.
(Silko 1977, p. 35)

And when nature is heard as nonsense, (its) music will sound through,
unhampered. Again, nature will be heard.
(Minh-ha 1996, p. 102)

'Nature,' or to what I will refer more broadly as 'the environment,' is perhaps most misunderstood as a static place, somewhere 'out there,' somehow beyond or separated from the practices of everyday life. All too often, when the environment is reduced to a place, we tend to assume it signifies the country, and forget it also refers to the city. We imply that it is static, and not dynamic. We take it for granted, and turn our attention elsewhere. Under industrial, colonial, developmental, and other arrogant influences unwilling to appreciate its fragility or to listen to its complex composition, the environment often falls prey to what Renaldo Rosaldo (1989) calls an 'imperialist nostalgia,' in which 'people destroy their environment and then worship nature' (p. 108).

The environment, of course, is neither pure nor obsolete. Rather, it both exceeds the cultural and invokes a performative, heterogeneous discourse that shapes our entire lives. More than a location, *the environment is what it does* materially and symbolically. Yes, it is where we stand and where we lie down; however, it also heats and cools us. It provides us light at night. It fuels our cars, buses, trains, and airplanes. It permeates every pore of our flesh, DNA strand in our genetic make up, and identity written on and through our bodies. It involves processes with and without us that we still do not – and may never – comprehend.

Over a decade ago in this journal, an issue dedicated to environmental matters was edited by Jody Berland and Jennifer Daryl Slack, signaling the challenging array of scholarly research approaches, critical perspectives, and political stakes involved in exploring this field of research by engaging a range of themes, such as community, technology, water, ecofeminism, Earth Day, the weather, and computer simulations of global warming.¹ Since then, a small handful of cultural studies scholars has provided rich insights into how we might continue to identify, interpret, and intervene within and on behalf of the environment. Eschewing universal abstractions and skeptical of grand proclamations, these creative endeavors tend to be grounded in specific cultural and ecological contexts, while acknowledging that such perspectives shift, like ecosystems themselves, over time and space. Perhaps the most notable indicator of change has been the introduction of 'the environment' itself into the lexicon of cultural studies. For example, in *Keywords*, Raymond Williams' (1976) includes an entry on 'nature' and astutely observes, more than culture itself, 'Nature is the most complicated word in the [English] language' (p. 219). Three decades later, in the revised text, *New Keywords*, the term 'nature' (that notably cites Williams' earlier claim) is accompanied by a separate entry by Jennifer Daryl Slack (2005) on 'environment/ecology,' one that further complicates how these terms 'developed to assert different conceptions of separation and connection' (p. 106).²

Yet, for the most part, the environment remains marginalized within cultural studies publications, conferences, and conversations. Put more bluntly, it is unclear whether or not cultural studies actually is ready or equipped to engage the environment. As Jody Berland (unpublished address 2005) suggests, there seem to be at least three fundamental limitations of cultural studies – as some still currently practice it – that might suggest the roots of this reluctance: (1) an emphasis on the logic of representation that reinforces a dualism between nature and culture; (2) a resistance to critiquing consumption in any context; and (3) a resilient legacy from the Sokal affair and 'science wars' that continues to make some of us fear engaging and border-crossing into questions of science.³ Further, I would add two points. First, it is telling that cultural studies scholars are more likely to publish criticisms about environmental movements or struggles than we are to take seriously environmental critiques. For me, at least, it is disappointing and disconcerting when cultural studies practitioners tend to dis-articulate the project of cultural studies from environmental politics, rather than making linkages and alliances between the two. Second, the environment stubbornly appears ghettoized in cultural studies, the purview of only those of us who identify as environmentalists or who make the environment one of our primary areas of research – as if one can or should talk about topics such as

popular culture, technology, government policy, or global flows without mentioning environmental dimensions as part of the analysis. Like foundational categories such as identity, economics, and historical context, the environment is and should be considered relevant to any research done in the name of 'cultural studies.'⁴

Given this unfortunate lack of a robust response to the last special issue on the environment in this journal, it seems timely once again to revisit and to re-imagine these research trajectories, in order to avoid stagnating in our evasion of environmental matters and risking the political and theoretical integrity of the practice of cultural studies itself. As such, this volume of *Cultural Studies* wishes to animate, rather than delimit our appreciation of the environment as vital to the past, present, and future of cultural studies.

Despite calls to the contrary in the US, this collection of international voices testifies that a eulogy for environmental movements and the environment itself is vastly premature and based on a narrow definition of each. Evidence of the vitality of the environment and those who speak for it may be found in the traces of local and transnational practices across the globe, suggesting both the possibilities and the limitations of language and human agency. As such, each contribution illustrates an appreciation of the dynamic, palpable, and significant ways the environment permeates culture (and vice versa), as well as a collective commitment to the ways that cultural studies has more to offer – and to learn from – taking environmental matters to heart. Motivated by specific contexts and practices, each articulates the environment as only one factor driving her analysis. In other words, although the environment is vital to their practice of cultural studies, each argues how the environment is connected with broader cultural, political, and ethical concerns, such as popular practices, marginalized identities, and the project of cultural studies itself. Overall, they offer a diverse – and, hopefully, inspiring – range of more ethical and sustainable possibilities within and beyond cultural studies.

As an overture for this provocative collection of voices, I offer the following 'brief excursions' (Pollock 1998) or riffs echoing some more familiar melodies and dropping hints of some notes of the harmonies just beginning to be heard in an attempt to invoke the kinetic and consequential spirit I have been describing.

Environments spatialize and temporalize. Multiple and sometimes contradictory social relations. Materially constituted and symbolically operating. Geographically-bound and politically-infused (Massey 1994). Biotic and abiotic ways of operating. Territories created by bird songs (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Communication routes established by beavers and cod fish (Innis 1930, 1940).

Articulations of identity (always are) constituted *in situ*. Even when, as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes, some of us become turtles, voluntarily or involuntarily carrying 'home' on our backs (p. 43). In these contact zones, technological 'fixes' sometimes fail and unstable frontiers often appear simultaneously tangible and mystical.

Environments blur boundaries. When our tongues taste cocoa melting from the heat of our mouths. When our noses smell fresh peaches and mangos at the market. When our necks feel a chill on a winter's day. When our eyes dwell on a photograph of a cat we have not met – and we smile. When our ears hear a horse whisper to us. When we find ourselves in the *intermezzo* of life (Minh-ha 1996) – and also in the *crescendos* and the *diminuendos*. When we imagine local/global communities – including extraterrestrial ones. When norms are queered. False binaries and dualistic borders are obscured and complicated by rhizomes, cyborgs, and actor networks.

Environments elude. In those moments when we desperately and, sometimes, compulsively use Doppler radar to attempt to predict the weather or Global Information Systems to try to track and to forecast forest fires. In the glimpse of a bird quickly flying out of our line of sight. In our own bodies when we attempt to conceive a child and discover human-made toxins have polluted our breast milk and created our low sperm counts. And in the illnesses like SARS, mad cow disease, and avian flu, which plague us suddenly and unexpectedly – though undoubtedly. Like the green fire extinguishing in a dying wolf's eyes or the sense of time a mountain must know (Leopold 1949), it reminds those of us who will listen how relatively fleeting and fragile our own existence is.

Environments charm. As sure as the seasons change, tides ebb and wane, blossoms bloom, and winds whisper through trees. As long as our thirsts are quenched, our stomachs filled, and our homes are built. As soon as we inhale and exhale, dress and undress. We find its movements and colors indispensable to the magic and poetics of our lives. Speaking to our many needs and desires, we relish the ways it can 'fuse function, feeling, and meaning' (Spirn 1998, p. 3).

Environments nourish. Inspiring spiritual refuge and rejuvenation through sacred mountains, sublime canyons, or calming bodies of water. Promising the freedom to roam, climb, swim, dance, relax, and tour. Redefining economic discourse in our everyday experiences with gardens, parks, farms, homes, jobs, and schools. Providing materials to build everything from

skyscrapers to paper. Fostering popular articulations to entertain and to educate us across every media technology from board games (Opel 2002) to IMAX (Acland 1998). Whether inspiring grotesque projections of the unfamiliar future or picturesque nostalgic fantasies, we are captivated by the affective and intimate intensity of the environment. This is why a silent spring is so shocking to imagine.

Environments kill. Tsunamis drown. Hurricanes devastate. Earthquakes demolish. Lead paint deforms. Pesticides destroy. Species die. People murder. Corporations pollute. Accidents – even nuclear ones – happen. Environmental movements and discourses have been articulated to racist agendas (Ross 1994, 1996, 1998, Cronon 1996, Hage 1998, Morris 1998, Moore *et al.* 2003), economically elitist politics (Helvarg 2004, Kennedy 2004), individualized politics at the expense of structural change (Grossberg 1992, Davis 1997), and essentialist notions of sex, gender, and sexuality (Domosh & Seager 2001, Massey 1994, Stabile 1994). Neo-conservatives relish opportunities to frame these hurtful and divisive linkages as universal, necessary, and inevitable. The damage, at times, feels irreparable.

Environments provoke. Governments to war. Authors to write. Activists to protest. Directors to film. Musicians to sing. Engineers to build. Scientists to experiment. People to consume. These acts are uneven and often unequal. Economically. Nationally. Globally. Questions arise. How can we enact long overdue global treaties to prevent further damage from global warming? What if we stopped placing the disproportionate burden of solid and hazardous waste on indigenous, people of color, and poor communities? When will drinkable water and breathable air become appreciated as human rights and not privileges? Is Wangari Maathai's honor of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize a sign that the world is beginning to recognize the link between sustainable environments and democratic movements? Questions continue.

Environments haunt. Our memories. With smells. With sounds. With tastes. With events. Our bodies. In scars. In growth. In pain. In love. Our mattering maps. Of who we once were. Of who we are. Of who we want to be. And, most certainly, (in) the pages that follow . . .

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anticipation of their own work in the summer of 2005 and then, in turn, edited again in the summer of 2006 to help foster linkages between the diverse voices gathered here.

Notes

- 1 *Cultural Studies*, volume 8, issue 1, 1994. That same year, another noteworthy special issue dedicated to the environment was published: *Australian Journal of Communication*, volume 1, issue 3, 1994.
- 2 I favor the term 'environment' because it is more encompassing and less alienating than 'nature,' admitting to the inextricable linkage between people and the Earth. Arturo Escobar (1995) rightly notes, however, that there is a risk in this move in so far as, taken to an extreme degree, the environmental turn may become distorted as a justification for an anthropocentric view of agency and contribute to a belief in nature merely as a passive 'appendage to the environment' (p. 196).
- 3 Jody Berland, 'What is environmental cultural studies?,' Cultural Environmental Studies Symposium, York University, unpublished address 2005, cited with permission from author.
- 4 In this sense, I read Jennifer Daryl Slack and Laurie Anne Whitt's (1992) call for developing a more specialized 'ecoculturalist theoretical perspective' as an invitation to transform how we appreciate and articulate the broader project of cultural studies (as they do, from the historical roots until today), rather than as an attempt to develop a specialized branch that can continue to be marginalized and taken-for-granted. Slack revisits and embellishes on this point in her essay published in this volume, adding five points of her own to this overture's working list of why the environment remains far too marginalized in cultural studies.

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Jean P. Retzinger

SPECULATIVE VISIONS AND IMAGINARY MEALS

Food and the environment in (post-apocalyptic) science fiction films

As speculative visions, science fiction films reveal the dreams and the anxieties of the present. This essay focuses on food scenes in science fiction films depicting the future on a post-apocalyptic earth to explore the commentary they offer on the health of the environment (including humans). Familiar and unfamiliar foods, prepared, shared, denied, and eaten illuminate popular perceptions about nature, technology, and humanity. In this analysis, food is imagined not only as a necessary sustenance for corporeal needs, but also as a liminal cultural symbol of life and death, nature and culture, human and non-human. Such projections of food, whether dramatic or parodic, help illustrate competing claims of nostalgia, progress, failure, control, alienation, and excess.

In 1902, Georges Méliès married science fiction to the fledgling art of motion pictures with his 14-minute film *La Voyage dans la Lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*). Its fanciful painted backdrops, scantily clad actresses, and imaginative narrative (which both critiqued the conservative science of its day and portrayed a hostile encounter between earthlings and the Selenite inhabitants of the moon) earned Méliès an enthusiastic audience. More than a century later, science fiction remains an immensely popular film genre, accounting for five of the films listed among the Top Ten 'Box Office Champions' of all time (Campbell *et al.* 2006, p. 229).¹ With their dazzling special effects and futuristic fantasies, science fiction films perhaps best illustrate Marshall McLuhan's (1964) observation that a movie 'is not only a supreme expression of mechanism, but paradoxically it offers as product the most magical of consumer commodities, namely dreams' (p. 254).

Science fiction cinema inhabits the realm of imagination, offering us glimpses of the world as it might be – whether in an alternate present or

a possible future, on earth, in space, or on a distant planet. In addition to being termed a 'speculative' genre (Merril 1954, Hendershot 1999, Seed 1999, King & Krzywinska 2000), science fiction has also been described as a 'degraded' film genre (Hendershot 1999) in which cultural fears are expressed, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes on a metaphorical level. Regardless of the era or setting depicted, a science fiction film reveals most firmly the dreams and anxieties that mark its own present.² Fredric Jameson (1982), in fact, argues that science fiction dramatizes 'our incapacity to imagine the future' (p. 153).

Science fiction incursions into the dreamworld are reigned in by the requirement that its narratives must be made to seem wholly possible, creating an interplay between the unfamiliar and the recognizable, or estrangement and cognition in Darko Suvin's (1979) words. Science fiction restructures and defamiliarizes our experience of the present as Jameson (1982) notes, yet it is a genre insistent upon explanations, populated by characters offering instruction and edification. The premise of a work of science fiction 'requires material, physical rationalization, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one. This grounding of SF [science fiction] in the material rather than the supernatural becomes one of its key features' (Roberts 2000, p. 5). The insistence on materiality in science fiction leads many films to address humans' biological as well as social and psychological needs. Science fiction films pose fundamental questions about what it means to be human. While other genres may only need to demonstrate humanity as opposed to villainy, science fiction is often forced to differentiate the human from the machine (robot or cyborg) and from the (other-worldly) alien as well.

In many science fiction films, these differences are amplified in food scenes. Familiar foods serve as an anchor in an altered world (evoking both nostalgia and parody), whereas unfamiliar food may become one of the clearest measures of how far we have journeyed from the present. In nearly every instance where food is prepared, shared, and eaten in science fiction films, it aids in what Vivian Sobchack (1988) describes as science fiction's central theme: a 'poetic mapping of social relations as they are created and changed by new technological modes of "being-in-the-world"' (p. 229).

Both on and off screen, food literally 'places' us in the world, both through its materiality and its meanings. In its materiality, food forces attention to the body; in its many psychological and social meanings, food preferences and the rituals of eating help reveal the shadings of gender, class, ethnicity, power, and community (Telotte 1985, Boswell 1990, Dorfman 1992, Barr 1996, Bell & Valentine 1997, Fernandez-Armesto 2002, Ferry 2003, Bower 2004).³ For food not only shapes our bodies, but it structures our lives, fashioning daily rituals and helping mark significant rites of passage. Food connects us to others – both directly, through shared meals, and culturally, through shared 'tastes.' Parley Anne Boswell (1990) notes that food is a staple of film properties in nearly all genres. 'Audiences respond to food,

to eating, to dining scenes because we all understand something about food – we all eat’ (p. 7). Mary Anne Schofield (1989) argues that food in literature ‘articulates in concrete terms what is often vague, internal, abstract’ (quoted in Boswell 1990, p. 7). Depictions of meals in films serve as shorthand that often allows audiences to better understand individual characters through their relationship to food and characters’ relationships with others in interactions taking place over food.⁴

Food not only signifies the needs of the individual, biological body and the grammar of a particular society and culture, but it also represents the interplay of nature and technology. Food at once serves as our most fundamental connection to the environment (as all food represents in one form or another sun, soil, water, and seeds transformed into sustenance) and, simultaneously, illustrates our indebtedness to science and technology. Technology’s role in the foods we eat has become increasingly evident in the decades following World War II in the mass-produced, processed, packaged foods that line grocery store shelves and fill kitchen cupboards and refrigerators. Yet even fruits and vegetables, ‘even the “wild” berry from the bramble,’ as Fernandez-Armesto (2002) points out, are the products of technology, ‘the result of generations or eons of selective breeding’ (p. 2).⁵ Food, then, as Atkinson (1983) argues, ‘is a liminal substance; it stands as a bridging substance between nature and culture, the human and the natural, the outside and the inside’ (quoted in Bell & Valentine 1997, p. 44). In Raymond Williams’ terms, food links ‘in a mutual necessity of profit and power’ the country and the city, as ‘a city eats what its country neighbors have grown’ (1973, pp. 50–51). Food, I would add, also bridges the living and the dead: that which gives us life – whether a cow or a carrot – must first be killed, thus adding a moral/ethical component to our eating. Its liminality makes food a device well-suited to science fiction, which interrogates all of these oppositions or dualities, and is ‘often at its most interesting when the lines become blurred’ (King & Krzywinska 2000, p. 11).⁶

The more than two dozen science fiction films discussed in this essay have in common their attempts to depict future life on earth; most, though not all, fall within the sub-category of post-apocalyptic cinema.⁷ Many of these films were made in the 1970s, a decade in which a wide range of environmental issues gained widespread attention and sympathy. These same and additional environmental concerns continue to find their way into contemporary science fiction cinema. The dystopian visions these films portray originate from the failures of the past: humanity’s inability to balance its relationship with the environment, technology, or both. My examination of the many food scenes found in these films explores the ways in which food, situated in the interstices between nature, culture, science, and technology, helps to answer some of the most fundamental and persistent questions asked in science fiction films: What does it mean to be human? What role should science and technology occupy in

our lives? What responsibilities do we hold toward each other and towards the earth? The presence of food at the critical junctures in which the familiar and the strange, the past, present, and future all collide lends materiality to the answers being worked out on screen. Hunger takes both literal and metaphorical form in science fiction films, arising from scarcity and uncertainty alike. Yet the act of eating rarely satiates a character. More often, the actions taken to assuage hunger further strain the relationships of humans to each other, to the environment, and to technology, provoking even greater anxieties. Science fiction food scenes help obscure, expose, perpetuate, and challenge the divisions of culture and nature.

Familiar foods in unfamiliar settings

Science fiction represents 'a literature of ideas predicated on some substantive difference or differences between the world described and the world in which readers [viewers] actually live' (Roberts 2000, p. 3). But those differences must be bridged to some extent in order for viewers to enter into and understand the world depicted on the screen. Robert Scholes (1979) employs the term 'fabulation' to describe 'fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront the known world in some cognitive way' (p. 2). Fabulation, then, requires that fantasy be 'melded with the mundane' (Roberts 1979, p. 21), the extraordinary with the ordinary, for science fiction narratives to be believable. Food scenes provide an opportunity for such unstable juxtapositions in which the food itself, the setting, or the interactions that take place over food can each in turn provide either the familiar anchor or the fantasy element. These juxtapositions serve as one way in which science fiction films can and often do offer a critique of contemporary culture. But such critiques are not always as progressive as one might assume or hope.

When characters eat familiar, contemporary foods in futuristic settings, food typically represents the world that has been lost. Although many people presume that science fiction is a genre that looks to the future, Adam Roberts (2000) argues that, in fact, most science fiction texts are more interested in the way things have been; science fiction uses the trappings of fantasy to explore age-old issues. Roberts argues that the chief mode of science fiction is not prophesy but nostalgia (2000, p. 33). Nostalgia, however, is notoriously unstable. The past is illusory; what we long for may never have existed.

When Neo (Keanu Reeves) visits the Oracle (Gloria Foster) for the first time in *The Matrix* (1999), for example, she welcomes him into her homey kitchen, its walls, counters, cabinets, and appliances, saturated in warm and comforting shades of green and orange. The Oracle inhabits an illusory world, yet represents the archetypal nurturing mother, offering solace in the form of