



LIVING LEXICON FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL
HUMANITIES

Eco-comedy

GEO TAKACH

School of Communication and Culture, Royal Roads University, Canada

Plastic to Exceed Fish in Oceans by 2050!

Earth's Species Going Extinct in Record Numbers!

One Decade Left to Prevent Climate Catastrophe!

Welcome to our exceptional, existential, ecological moment, a global discursive avalanche of alarmism, righteousness, techno-utopianism, fatalism, half-truths, post-truth, and willful blindness. Multitudes of us find ourselves nursing the largest mass case of cognitive dissonance on record as we navigate daily life in the face of a crushing onslaught of horrifying, tragic, and numbing ecological crises. Surely there's no better time to ask not what we can do for the environment, but what eco-comedy can do for us.

Eco-comedy prances with the audacious precept that environmental Armageddon is a laughing matter. That seismic threats to our planetary survival merit a less-than-sober response. That if Nero fiddled while Rome burned, then we can fiddle around while the Earth takes its turn. One might find this seriously weird. But read me out: when it comes to our rising rash of ecological crises, comedy is not only a salutary salve but also an essential oil in our salvation cabinet.

Just what is comedy? With aridity rivaling the Atacama Desert, deep thinkers seeking an objective, reductionist riposte to this acme of human subjectivity have alligator-wrestled the question down to a commonly claimed troika of ridicule, relief, and incongruity.¹ But more subtly and importantly, as a preeminent purveyor of its observational form, Jerry Seinfeld, observes, comedians see the world differently, "re-form

1. Roberts, *Philosophy of Humour*.

[ing] what you see into what you want it to be.”² Comedians show us new possibilities and engender inclinations to get there—or die trying. That comedians refer to failing onstage as “dying” illuminates the tightrope forever separating comedy from tragedy—and why eco-comedy is particularly puissant in helping us navigate that toxic discursive tsunami.

Alarmism, often served with a side of righteousness, is a prototypical go-to for environmental appeals. Small wonder that the public glances askance at them. Nicole Seymour deploys queer ecology to challenge the purity politics and heteronormativity of mainstream environmentalism, coining the term *bad environmentalism* as a comic corrective.³ She tosses a fat cream pie (nondairy, non-GMO) in the face of earnest greens who either scare or bore the sunblock off people by cataloging our carnage in escalating sea levels, parts per million of atmospheric carbon, and tallies of extirpated species. Unencumbered by even a (chlorofluorocarbon-free) whiff of reflexivity or audiencing, these well-meaning sentinels of ecocide are disengaging the very souls that they strive to save. Thus Seymour calls for counter-appeals to baser human instincts through “not only irony, irreverence, perversity and playfulness, but also absurdity, camp, frivolity, indecorum, ambivalence and glee.”⁴ This view democratically welcomes environmentalists as readily as laggards, denialists, and flat-out liars into its crooked crosshairs.

Lurking beneath this seemingly flippant response to the world’s rising eco-anxiety is the deepest and most subversive irony of all: yawning, widening chasms among people’s environmental attitudes cannot be broached by appealing to elusive ideals of morality, perfection, and sacrifice. Nor by merely acknowledging our shortcomings, our failures, and even our eventual deaths at some stage (if not on a stage), but by outright reveling in them. Bear-hugging all of the contradictions, imperfections, and ambiguities of the human experiment, Seymour’s *bad environmentalism* proffers the project of eco-comedy as bottom-booting the binaries that calcify the discursive status quo. Which of course beautifully mirrors imperatives of both comedy and environmentalism: (a) to critique business-as-usual and (b) to set the stage for positive change. Eco-comedy is also a handy tool for educators seeking to engage students in a merry mash-up of creativity, critical thinking, and citizenship.

This approach has plural paybacks. It invokes comedy’s longer-term, process-oriented focus on developing relationships rather than simply winning arguments.⁵ It proffers a palatable counterpoint to the deluge of dystopian dollar dreadfuls fashioned by fatalist factions.⁶ And it slides a banana peel beneath the heels of human hubris stoking our subjugation and destruction of nature.⁷ That arrogance slips from us in many forms. Take the neoliberal brutality mocked in the Yes Men’s prankishly posing as

2. Seinfeld, *Is This Anything?*, 6.

3. Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*.

4. Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 23.

5. Burke, *Attitudes toward History*.

6. Galleymore, “Dark Ecology.”

7. Meeker, *Comedy of Survival*.

officials of Dow Chemical to apologize for a devastating, poisonous gas leak in Bhopal.⁸ Take the techno-utopianism skewered by Richard Brautigan's poem envisioning "a cybernetic meadow / where mammals and computers / live together in mutually / programming harmony / like pure water / touching clear sky."⁹ Please!

Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman peg comedy as an engine for social change for its proven powers to raise awareness of issues and messages, disarm audiences and open them to persuasion, squash social barriers, go viral, spur discussion, shape public conversations, challenge status-quo media frames, and showcase alternative ideas and marginalized interests.¹⁰ They assessed the impact of two comedy sketches from the Funny or Die website—"Old People Don't Care about Climate Change" and "Climate Change Denial Disorder"—on 801 American adults alongside a serious news clip on climate change. They found that the sketches inspired greater enjoyment, hope, and likelihood to express intentions to engage in that issue and take political action than did the news clip.

This follows a glorious tradition of deploying comedy to challenge the status quo: François Rabelais's carnivalesque writing during the Renaissance, unsettling established social binaries; Dick Gregory's monologues for civil rights in the 1960s; and, more recently, Beppe Grillo's parlaying comedy into politics (if not vice versa) and the political turn by the comedy teams Za Nyūsupēpā (that's "The Newspaper" for gaijin) and Woman Rush Hour, radical couture in relatively button-down Japan.

All of this is heady stuff. Yet eco-comedy is not an end in itself, merely a means to one. It does not blunt our planetary blitzkrieg. And it certainly doesn't sugarcoat it. But it does offer new ways of seeing—new possibilities—as alternatives to the discursive fog polluting the public sphere. It both plays on and calls on our collective creativity, irreverence, mutuality, and perhaps the most primal quality demanded by our pivotal, cognitively dissonant, environmental moment: hope.

Thus eco-comedy is more than a fringe electric in the environmental humanist's garage. It's a vehicle that can disarm, reveal truths, engage, spread, unite, inspire, empower, and, above all, create new orientations, visions, and spaces to jump-start us to beneficial action. So whether it pumps up a practitioner's toolkit, a teacher's lesson plan, or a scholar's lexicon, eco-comedy is certifiably (ahem) a natural.

Oh, and one last thing. An utterly delightful thing.

Eco-comedy can be funny!

GEO TAKACH is professor in the School of Communication and Culture at Royal Roads University on the traditional lands of the Xwsepsum and Lekwungen peoples in what's often called Victoria, BC, Canada. His adventures include performing comedy professionally at conferences and special events, and in his spare time for no particular reason.

8. Bichlbaum, Bonanno, and Engfehr, *Yes Men*.

9. Brautigan, "All Watched Over."

10. Chattoo and Feldman, *Comedian and an Activist*.

References

- Bichlbaum, Andy, Mike Bonanno and Kurt Engfehr, dirs. *The Yes Men Fix the World*. 2009. <https://archive.org/details/The.Yes.Men.Fix.The.World.P2P.Edition.2010.Xvid> (accessed November 2, 2021). Strasbourg: ARTE et al.
- Brautigan, Richard. "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace." 1967. <http://www.brautigan.net/machines.html> (accessed November 2, 2021).
- Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes toward History*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Chattoo, Caty Borum, and Lauren Feldman. *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020.
- Gallegmore, Isabel. "A Dark Ecology of Comedy." *Green Letters* 17, no. 2 (2013): 151–63.
- Meeker, Joseph W. *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. 3rd ed. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997.
- Roberts, Alan. *A Philosophy of Humour*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Seinfeld, Jerry. *Is This Anything?* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- Seymour, Nicole. *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.