Chapter 3

Environmental Literacy: An Overview – Case Study Readings of Oblivion (2013) and Hacksaw Ridge (2016)

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ABSTRACT

Media literacy has become one of the key qualifications for taking an active part in contemporary society. As media technology becomes more intuitive and media and other social practices intertwine more and more across everyday living, this chapter draws on three contrasting but randomly-chosen popular media texts to tease out how they both situate and address various forms of environmental literacy.

INTRODUCTION: FROM MEDIA TO ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY

Media literacy has become one of the key qualifications for taking an active part in contemporary society. As media technology apparently becomes more intuitive and media and other social practices intertwine more and more across everyday living, this chapter draws on three contrasting but randomly-chosen popular media texts to tease out how they both situate and address various forms of environmental literacy. Historically, media literacy has been defined as the ability ‘to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms’ (Aufderheide 1993: xx). While other scholars highlight the concept of information literacy (Koltay 2011), digital literacy (Hobbs 2011), ICT literacy (Friemel and Signer 2010), new media literacies (Jenkins 2006) and most recently social media literacy (Livingstone 2016). Today communication scholars stress that both media’s affordances, coupled with social interactions play a crucial role in understanding an ever-evolving mode of (digital) media literacy (Livingstone 2016). Following theoretical considerations around securing robust models of democracy, media literacy has privileged the importance of ‘knowledge’ (Potter 2010: 680), ‘information’ (Buckingham, 2007: 45), and ‘analytical competencies’ (Koltay 2011: 217); all the while great emphasis is generally placed on the development of critical thinking.

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Environmental Literacy

With an apparent backlash towards Climate Change adaptation and mitigation, effort has to be placed on promoting new modes of education and most importantly environmental and visual literacy across all aspects of media and communications studies (see Wang et al. 2018). At the outset, critical engagement around environmental literacy is certainly not simply a top down process of disseminating correct attitudes, values and beliefs, but alternatively incorporates and facilitates a dialogue with audiences and citizens of different persuasions and across all levels of knowledge and human engagement. The primary aim of this process includes helping to highlight and at best co-produce consensual solutions for the major environmental challenges of our time.

Yet, as Sonia Livingstone suggests, ‘despite enthusiastic calls for new digital literacy programs’ and the recent ‘embedding of media literacy requirements within national and international regulation’, there remains little agreement concerning media literacy or ‘how to measure it, and therefore little evidence that efforts to improve it are effective’ (Livingstone 2011). By all accounts, this general critical assessment also rings true with regards to the short-term evolution of environmental literacy.

Nevertheless, environmental scholars should learn from their media colleagues and probably go back to basics, asking well-established media questions, including what do citizens and consumers know about their changing media environment and what should they know about the natural environment? Then, most critically, asking more long-term systemic questions such as what pedagogical and curricular tools need to be developed to underpin pertinent questions like, what does it matter if they don’t have this knowledge and, in whose interest, is it if they do? (see Brereton 2019)

In essence, this short introductory chapter will strive to provide an overview of a range of environmental literacy goals, while drawing on on-going comparisons between new media and environmental literacy, by illustrating and foregrounding three popular media texts that can ostensibly provoke a range of cross-media environmental issues and debates. These include applying aspects of eco-feminist analysis in Oblivion; re-purposing passivist modes of conflict resolution in Hacksaw Ridge, or calling on the pervasive power of new media logics in Black Mirror. At the same time by calling attention to the literature used across traditional audience, reception and textual studies, the chapter further hopes to tease out what might be considered the most effective narrative stimuli or tipping points towards engendering active engagement with a broad range of environmental issues.

Environmental Literacy as a New Mode of Learning and Audience Engagement

The concept of environmental literacy first appeared in a 1969 article by Charles Roth, as a response to the then frequent American media references to environmental illiterates who were polluting the environment. Little attention was paid to the essay until a year later, when the then President Richard Nixon used it in relation to the passage of the first National Environmental Education Act.

Environmental literacy as a goal of general education is constituted by a number of precepts which include: