

Ecologue

NEWSLETTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY

Fall 1991 Volume 2, No. 2

Conference Report:

From July 29 through July 31, forty-six registered academic scholars and environmental professionals attended the Conference on the Discourse of Environmental Advocacy at the Alta Lodge, Alta, Utah. The two days of meetings included paper panels, a graduate seminar, informal discussions, enjoyment of the natural surroundings, and excellent meals. Attendees departed filled with enthusiasm for the conference and compliments for the hosts, the Humanities Center and the Department of Communication at the University of Utah.

The keynote speech was delivered on Monday night at the University of Utah Alumni House by Bruce Piasecki of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Piasecki presented a substantive and lengthy defense of the thesis that environmentalists should move "beyond blame" to cooperate with private and governmental interests in environmental enterprises. He noted that environmental communication that focuses merely upon facts is not as effective as the rich, articulated language usually associated with literature. A lively question-answer session followed his speech, which was attended by approximately 60 people.

The two days of meetings at Alta Lodge that followed featured both common and special-topic sessions. Respondents presented intellectually challenging replies to each session, of a length and quality rivaling the papers themselves. The discussions that followed the sessions indicated directness in addressing complex and controversial ideas, respect for differing opinions, and a great deal of knowledge about the environment and communication issues. In addition, attendance and involvement at the special graduate seminar far exceeded the expectations of its organizer, Dennis Jaehne of San Jose State University.

On Tuesday evening, Robin Zeff of the

Environmental Research Foundation led a discussion of videos containing public service announcements shown on cable by Greenpeace during Earth Week. Zeff graciously agreed to fill in after Jim O'Connor and Barbara Laurence, who were to present a slide show that evening, could not attend due to health reasons. Zeff's discussion focused upon the technical difficulties involved in representing abstract, globally-significant ideas in a visual medium. Participants related personal stories of involvement with environmental groups and efforts to promote environmental causes.

Attendees agreed that the conference was a resounding success and that another conference should be held in one or two years' time. The conference organizers, Jim Cantrill of Northern Michigan State University and Chris Oravec of the University of Utah, received this suggestion with mixed delight and trepidation. "It's a lot of work," Oravec was heard saying, "but I'm sure we'll get some eager volunteers to contribute their energies when the time comes."

Planning for the 1993 Conference

Since the Alta conference was so well received by those who attended the event as well as many who could not travel to Utah, plans are now being made for the second national meeting. This time around, Jimmie Killingsworth of the Department of English at Texas A & M University has volunteered to serve as conference coordinator along with Jim Cantrill who will be in charge of local arrangements. Although we learned much from planning for the first conference, there remain numerous issues to consider in the next two years. Jimmie and Jim plan to incorporate many of the suggestions offered in Utah (e.g. shorter panels,

more time for discussion, a weekend time-slot) and hope that additional comments will be provided in the coming months. In particular, they are seeking immediate input regarding the following items:

- * Where would be an appropriate location for the next conference?
- * When in 1993 should it be held?
- * How should the paper review process be modified?
- * Who would be appropriate nominees for the review and executive committee?

If you have any thoughts along these lines, please send them to either coordinator. Alternatively, since many of us will be at SCA, Jim suggests that we get together for breakfast on Saturday, November 2nd. If you plan to be in Atlanta and want to discuss the 1993 conference, contact Jim in Michigan (906-227-2045) or leave a message for him at the convention hotel.

SCA PANEL:

(**Note change in time from published schedule)
Friday, November 1, 1991--8:45 a.m.--Confederate, Level 7.

3310. Diversity, Perspective, and the Ecology of SCA: Using Environmental Advocacy Research to Assist Industry and Environmental Organizations.

Sponsor: Dimension Series

Chair: J. Robert Cox, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

"Environmental Advocacy and the Timber Industry."
Clifford Howlett, Georgia Pacific Corporation, Atlanta, GA.

"Environmental Advocacy: An Environmentalist Perspective." Charles McGrady, Sierra Club, Atlanta, GA.

"An Academic Perspective of Research in Environmental Advocacy." James G. Cantrill, Northern Michigan University, Marquette.

"Breaching Barriers: The Working Relationship Between Academics and an Environmental Public."
Robin L. Zeff, Environmental Research Foundation, Washington, D.C.

Respondent: Kenneth E. Anderson, University of Illinois-Urbana.

Commensurate with calls to have communication scholars reach out and assist industry, government, and the mass public in wisely using the planet's finite resources, this panel addresses environmental advocacy from a range of diverse perspectives. In particular, each participant will discuss the role of strategic considerations for, and research opportunities associated with, environmental argument in either the timber industry, major environmental organizations, academia, or research foundations. In response, the ethical dimension of promoting communication consultation to various vested interests will be considered.

Kireji

Breaking Word



"Notes" on the Conference:

Anyone who's ever been to an academic conference, particularly the most exciting ones, knows that it is something more than the papers delivered, the presentations given, or the manuscripts brought back home. It's also the question-asking sessions, the informal conversations over lunch, the hallway chit-chat that creates an atmosphere. As I try to reconstruct my impressions of the Conference on the Discourse of Environmental Advocacy, I find myself falling back

on a short list I kept of topics, themes, and ideas that emerged in the conversations, as well as the papers, as we went along. This (more or less unedited) is what I wrote:

- rhetoric of blame (vilification, mortification, guilt)
- rhetoric of anxiety (not parliamentary wrangle of liberal guilt, but the abyss)
- the sign-nature gap
- nature as text
- what is environment? Is it everything?
- definition of communication: narrow (shared cultural understandings) vs. broad (symbolic gesturing)
- polarity and opposition of sides; dualism
- facts vs. complexity & density of prose
- instrumental (rhetoric) vs. constitutive (poetic)
- "progress" critique
- public vs. private: government, business, people.

Of course my conference was not the same as yours, so your list may be different. In particular, it might be a lot more meaty and substantial than these hastily-jotted notes. But I think they indicate something important about what happened to us collectively in Alta this summer.

First, as might be expected of a "first" conference on environmental advocacy, we were highly involved in the process of **definition**. Not only were we interested in determining the boundaries of the very subject area that seemed to obsess us, but we were willing to abandon definitions that did not seem to help or be of use. Of particular relevance, I think, was our willingness to blur the distinctions between nature or environment as "real" and discourse or text as "unreal" or "unnatural." We recognized that language at times could be as real and material as the earth, and that the earth could just as easily be taken as a sign. Of equal importance was the need for establishing some kind of definitional consensus. We recognized that neither "environment" nor "communication" should mean "anything and everything you can think of." Both of these definitional moves, the restrictive and the expansive, are necessary to make in an area that challenges disciplinary boundaries.

The second focus was our concern about **opposition**. This focus examined dualities that might start as mere differences but ultimately

become polarized through symbolic struggle, such as humanity/nature, society/ individual, and public/private. And this was the single most important issue in distinguishing each of us as one of another kind of environmentalist. Conservative environmentalists saw progress and ecological values moving hand-in-hand; the more radical among us were not so sanguine about the designs of industry and government upon the earth and its resources. Interestingly, some of us felt our strongly-held beliefs shift slightly when we recognized that our particular ways of seeing the world might entail, on one hand, overly-rigid thought patterns, or on the other hand did not account adequately for political realities.

The third theme was that of **quality**, what is environmental discourse like now, today? The critique that emerged (for there was a collective critique) took aim at two uneasy states of being: blame and anxiety. Thus the questions arose: Is environmental discourse today fully functional, or does it simply increase the existing level of human despair? Is it beneficial to appeal to qualities of human experience that most of us experience as negative? Do we need a new discourse that does not play upon humanity's more primeval and self-regarding motives? Needless to say, we did not come up with final answers to these questions.

Finally, we addressed the issue of **function**; what is it that we want environmental discourse to do? Some of us were excited by the power and influence of language that was revealed in applying the persuasive paradigm to environmental discourse. Others saw dangers in instrumentalism; seeing language as a tool could easily encourage using that tool to alter the landscape. And some of us saw renewed power in what might have been perceived as an outdated poetics of nature to alter the way we look at the world and ourselves.

So, by reviewing my notes I've gotten a pretty good grasp of what we were about at the conference. Seen at such a high level of abstraction, it's not surprising that we hit upon these fundamental topics: **definition, opposition, quality, and function**. But it's also reassuring, because these are some of the big issues in any new investigational enterprise. Based on the conversational evidence, I think that we're on the right track toward fashioning a new area of inquiry into the power and possibility of discourse to shape the environment.

Chris Oravec

Dear Friends,

It was rather cool this morning as I left the cabin I rented along the Buffalo Fork River and began the trip back to Salt Lake and a flight home. Now, with the sun upon the water of this small Henry's Fork tributary, I am warmed both by its soft romance as well as the tiny dimples of young feeding trout in the film of the slow-moving current. I'm tempted to try my fly-line one more time before packing for the lengthy return to the shores of Lake Superior, but I am weary and troubled by the late-night conversation of the previous evening.

Yesterday, after hours of enticing fish of leviathan proportions from the depths of Island Park, I shuffled my damp, river-grunged, and chilled frame back to my bedroll at Phillips Lodge Resort. I was its only paying tenant (no one seems to know where it is, much less care for its rustic appeal), so I joined the owners for a nightcap and what I hoped would be pleasant interaction. They were well into their seventies and had spent a long mountain life punctuated by blizzards, forest fires, and the departure of several offspring. It had not been a profitable tourist season and they still could not convince their children--at least one--to take over the business. And in their parlor, surrounded by the accumulated insignificance of life in the Rocky Mountain West, they were visibly perturbed by my efforts in conjunction with the Conference on the Discourse of Environmental Advocacy.

"It's the gawdam Eee-Pee-Aayee, that's what it is!" said Ms Phillips when queried about the local economy. "Them and those Park Service idiots don't know a thing about this country. Hell, we can't log the land like we're supposed to. It's a crop, you know, and all this commotion about erosion and ecology is a bunch of nonsense. There's nothing wrong with clearcutting this timber and you and your environmentalist buddies are destroying everything we've worked for . . ."

And on and on and on till I tired of trying to fathom reasoning that didn't make sense, yet nonetheless did, and I retired if only to avoid the accusations.

Blaming. These is a political and social epideictic which infuses our discourse about the environment with a rancor that is inescapable. Just as the Phillips and I could not avoid holding one another accountable for the sorry state of the natural or economic environment, so too did several of us spend two productive days at Alta

dancing around the theme of blame. We blamed soulless industrialists and all too idealistic activists. We blamed our cultural heritage of religion and inherent inequities. We blamed those who blame the victims. We blamed the producers, peasants, polity, and promiscuous consumption of the times. We blamed our language and our laziness. And I feel that many of us also blamed ourselves for somehow remaining above it all as we travelled to a vale of calm in a repressive state to discuss lofty issues a canyon away from the pollution of a copper-colored eyesore.

One thing that struck me about the Alta conference was that some forty-odd attendees, as they mingled and presented demonstrably sterling analyses of how we communicate about our environment, seemed to readily choose up sides. Some of our number began the conference by assuming a moral high-ground in response to Bruce Piasecki's keynote address and they seldom wavered the accusing finger for 48 hours. Others, a minority to be sure, wanted to view issues from the perspective of those on the environmental docket stand. Yet I don't sense that, in light of all the progress we made in describing the landscape of environmental advocacy and the collegiality of the conference, we made much headway in bringing people together. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is the sense of futility it engenders; if we cannot move beyond the rhetoric of blame in analyzing environmental discourse, how can we expect those who would use our scholarship to forge alliances for a better planet?

Some have suggested that a major shortcoming of the 1991 conference was that not enough time was allotted for fruitful discussion. Veni, vidi . . . yet the reasoning remained incomplete. Perhaps the next time we meet we will have the opportunity to more fully explore opposing views and walk the common ground that surely lies beneath us. Let's hope that, in carving out more time for environmental discourse, we don't slight the structured analyses that lent themselves so well to the success of the Alta conference.

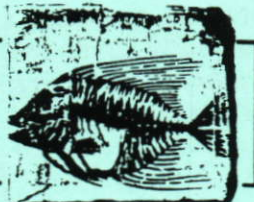
Still concerned about who we are and how we do what we do, I find I must leave this sunny glade beside the river and continue the journey home. As I always have, I'll return to this wondrous corner of the distracted globe to play with the trout and count my blessings. I hope I'll see the Phillips again and have more time to consider the world as

they do. It's just as real as mine.

Cordially,
Jim Cantrill
August 13, 1991
Warm River, Idaho

Belles Lettres

Literature



BOOK REVIEW:

Ecological Communication

Niklas Luhmann. Translated by John Bednarz, Jr.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; pp.
xviii + 187.

by Tarla Rai Peterson
Texas A & M University

Ecological Communication developed in the context of Luhmann's radicalized functionalism as a theoretical perspective toward society and its environment. Rather than viewing functional relations as causal, Luhmann claims that "cause" is a special, and singularly opaque, case of function. Functional relations exist between a problem and a range of possible responses, and problems that do not acquiesce to such a range of social problems. Finally, Luhmann argues that such problems are best explored by focusing on society's relation to its environments, rather than by focusing on internal social relations.

In Ecological Communication, Luhmann claims that human society is alarmed by the realization that it undermines the conditions for its continued existence, yet is unable to predict or direct action relating to the environment. Having jostled the social consciousness to the extent of distorting communication, the environment can no longer be ignored. Those who are looking for an advocacy guide will find Ecological Communication disappointing, for Luhmann is not primarily concerned with what society can or should do to manage environmental problems. Rather, he is concerned with how society becomes aware of environmental dangers.

Luhmann devotes approximately half of Ecological Communication to explaining how "environmental problems find resonance in social communication" through the six function systems that encompass the most important, if not all, communication (36). These systems (economy, law, science, politics, religion, and education) sort all information according to a binary code, wherein negation secures system closure by assuring that every value refers exclusively to its counter-value. Conversely, programs which refer to binary codes, yet are not terms of the code, retain the system's openness. They operationalize the system's code, and they must remain variable because determining the relative suitability of one of the other binary value requires information from outside the system.

Luhmann describes each system, explains its simultaneously open and closed nature, then details the limited potential for environmental questions to resonate within society through that system. Before society can observe environmental disturbances, it must artificially decontextualize that part of the environment to be studied, thereby choosing which data will become information without any means of rationalizing the selection.

After describing how ecological problems can trigger resonance among society's function systems, Luhmann returns to a discussion of society as a whole, claiming that his theory of system differentiation serves primarily to adjust the focus of sociological investigation. His theme is the world, and difference provides the means for "reflecting the [social] system by distinguishing it" from its environment (7). When exploring the ecological question, Luhmann advocates simultaneous attention to the unity of ecological interconnection and the difference between a system and its environment.

Luhmann identifies the problem of Ecological Communication as producing both too little and too much resonance within society. The unity of the difference guarantees that, given two system references working at the same time, environmental dangers will produce too little resonance in society, partially because they can be articulated only after translation into a function system's binary code. While screening society from its environment by sharply reducing what counts as information, function systems produce too much resonance at the internal boundaries of society because that is where communication takes place. Communicative interdependence between function

systems thus limits the resonance that environmental dangers can produce, while producing too much resonance between themselves.

In his concluding chapter, Luhmann briefly discusses environmental ethics. Although the discussion is, by his own admission, superficial, it emphasizes the centrality of paradox to environmental problems, suggesting that ethics must derive a more direct response to that phenomenon in order to deal with the morality of ecological problems.

For those who are interested, a more complete review of Ecological Communication will appear in Quarterly Journal of Speech.

Proceedings Update

The Humanities Center under its director, Lowell Durham, has graciously offered to support the printing of the Conference Proceedings through its secretarial and financial resources. The materials are being assembled and edited now. If you presented a paper or response at the conference and have not yet submitted your IBM or Macintosh disk using a major word processing program and APA format, please do so! The address is: Laurie Spetsas, Humanities Center, 201 Carlson Hall, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112.



**The Proceedings of the Conference
on the Discourse of Environmental Advocacy**

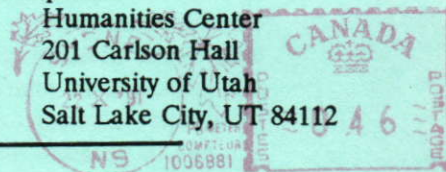
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