EcoSeeing Greenwash: Revealing the Heuretics of Hidden Agendas

This essay is alive. It grows out of recent activist work dealing with issues surrounding the hydraulic fracturing of the deep Marcellus Shale gas wells in my home region in northern Appalachia, in conjunction with the reading materials for this Eco-Cinema workshop, and will continue to grow after this writing because it is not to meant as interpretation but as a to creation of something new and malleable--at least this is my hope. However, my contribution to this workshop herein focuses on an ironic or subverted version of eco-cinema, the green-washed images in commercials paid for by the corporation, Range Resources. Such commercials (Herein “videos”), which are played on Pennsylvania television stations and are available on the Myrangeresource.org website are a reaction in part to the shock value of the film *Gasland* and hundreds of allegations of environmental problems the process and consequences of drilling so deep into the earth. The videos borrow from eco-cinema in that they have both “stunning and arresting” qualities, which Killingsworth and Palmer note could cause “the cessation and truncation of action” (301). Moreover, the videos build pathos by depicting the beauty of Pennsylvania in conjunction with a steady and responsible corporate partner, meant to reassure a population that has heard and seen negatives about drilling. Herein, I examine them as part of a holistic and systemic campaign to gloss over the negative health, public policy and infrastructural issues-- issues that have caused some places like New York to enact moratoriums and other places such as the country of France to issue outright bans; my examination will move beyond the outward greenwash to discover, invent heuretics of hidden agendas. Drawing from the principals of *Ecosee* in the below essay I wish to show how viewing the Range Resource videos through the lens of exigency and reverence helps to clarify such rhetorical agendas, and then drawing from Ulmer’s *Heuretics*, inventions not interpretations will work to expose true reverence and exigency. But, first, here’s a bit of context.

As the geological story goes, 5000 or so feet below much of the region known as Appalachia lie a repository of natural gas, which industry people call the “Marcellus Shale play.” The process of extracting these deposits, known as hydraulic fracturing (or “fracking”), involves both vertical drilling of 5000 feet and up to one mile of horizontal drilling and shooting a mixture of water, sand and toxic chemical to fracture the shale which releases the gas deposits. Technology is such that gas companies can horizontally drill for up to a mile in several directions, steering the probes within millimeters of precision. One wishes that DeLueze and Guatari’s body without organs would cry out as it did in when Doyle’s Professor Challenger suck in the spear, as recounted in *Ten Thousand Plateaus* (Pindar and Sutton). No such luck though and despite more subtle screams, the manifestations of many public health and environmental concerns and problems, Fracking is being force fed to my Southwestern Pennsylvania region by the industry and state political leadership as the “economic opportunity of a life-time. ” Just two weeks before this writing, the head of the state-wide Marcellus Task Force, the Lieutenant Governor Cawley, told our community task force that there has “never” been water well ruined by Marcellus drilling in PA. So, welcome to Pennsylvania, dear reader, where economic opportunity abounds. Never mind the allegations that fracked portions of Arkansas are seismically shifting; or that the long-term economics of heavy industry often don’t pan out for particular regions; or that the time for non-renewables have come and gone. Thus, the Range Resource videos operate within this pro-industry milieu.

Along with being a way to analyze images, Dobrin and Morey envision Ecosee in part as “how humans use images to construct ideas of nature and environment and how these images create and reinforce those constructions, and how humans may use existing images (or make new ones) to create alternative ways of seeing nature and environment” (8). I offer the frame of exigency and reverence to work toward the creation of such alternative images. Much is lost through false exigencies imposed upon us by powerful entities, masking hidden agendas. This is true in both education and the larger world. One illustration of the latter is contained within in the *History of Madness in Western Civilization,* wherein Foucault uncovers that the hidden agenda behind the sudden proliferation of insane asylums in the 1700’s Europe was due as much to the curing of leprosy than the supposed exigency that was given as the official reason. The very root of the term, exigent, which the OED defines as an, “urgent want; pressing state (of circumstances)” comes as a demand in law, a warrant occasioning “the sheriff to summon the defendant to appear and deliver up himself upon pain of outlawry.” Thus, the etymology of the word connotes a legal demand. Those whose mechanized activities are fueled by greed often pursue these activities with the full force and command of laws written specifically to protect them. Our world abounds with destructive examples of these types of exigencies. For instance, it has been perfectly legal for mining companies to blow up mountains in the service of an “urgent” need for electricity, even though such a process destroys or changes forever local watersheds and causes countless health problems. Pennsylvania Oil and Gas law is extremely powerful, so much so that local governments cannot act to prevent drilling and mining in certain due to the risk of lawsuit. Broadly, the exigencies imposed seem mostly to be fueled by greed. The Range Resource videos promote this as the economic opportunity of our lifetime, as if the gas wouldn’t be there for those in the next lifetime.

According to Paul Woodruff, the virtue of reverence was heralded by Greek poets but downplayed as a virtue by Plato, perhaps because of his concern that leaders would use it to abuse their power. However, as Woodruff shows in his work *On Reverence*, its ancient origins in the west and east has more to do as check on power. Woodruff begins from a certain “schema” of the term which he describes as the “well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when those are the right feelings to have.” For instance he gives the example of feeling awed by “a great whale, a majestic redwood, or a range of tall mountains” (9). He finds that reverence has more to do with power than religion. Yet, because one often thinks of reverence as something involved with blind ritual or dogma, Woodruff also works to separate and define other aspects of this virtue. For instance, he is also careful to explain and define irreverence, noting that the term is often misused and mistaken in the place of boldness, or subversiveness. In doing so, Woodruff describes a modern American society which has misconstrued the idea of irreverence in that when someone criticizes or satirizes a corrupted official *or* institution, that critic or artist is held up as being irreverent. This could not be further from the original intention of the idea of reverence. Rather, this person is perhaps acting out of boldness, and this action may have been occasioned by irreverence on the part of the entity in power (Woodruff 36). From Woodruff’s perspective, the man who spends his life making documentaries detailing abuses by the powerful, acts out of reverence, or the poor Mexican farmer who carries a sign protesting free trade at a world trade convention protests out of reverence in the service of the way of life that has occupied his family for generations. Thus, the bold, the creative, and the subversive are often acting out of reverence. The idea of reverence and irreverence is not to reduce this complexity to a binary but to show how this shift subvert and reveal the complexity in power structures. The Lieutenant Governor’s insouciance about the well-documented concerns for our water was an act of irreverence toward the people of which he is charged to help represent. The videos themselves play upon certain types reverence-inspiring images discussed below.

The identification of exigency and reverence represents a gaining of awareness which comports with Morey’s rhetorical discussion of Ecosee, which provides a malleable foundation for the viewing of electronic images. In “A Rhetorical Look at Ecosee,” Morey carves a path for us to view images beyond hermeneutics, showing that writing is not just “vehicle to this world but its ontology” (23). This idea featured in Derrida’s *On Grammatology* and further illuminated by various scholars such as Gregory Ulmer and Raul Sanchez, is that interpretation is simply a part of the function of writing and that is part of a system that can be understood in various ways, including as phenomenon in and of itself. Morey shows that images are no different; for instance, images, such as that of a meadow full of wildflowers, do not simply represent nature, but also composes it (24). Thus, *Ecosee* seeks to employ a full range of analysis that leads in part to an awareness of how these images are being used. Morey offers a literary example, describing how Edward Abbey’s characters in the *Monkey Wrench Gang*, who spent their free time chopping down newly erected billboards as the embodiment of such an awareness. Of course in Abbey’s case, it all started what could loosely be called “love” or reverence for his natural surroundings and this caused a reaction that could be considered new and creative. The understanding of how reverence along with imposed exigencies can be another path to help us gain such awareness.

Cut to the series of Range Resource videos. A steady, melodic, and folksy acoustic riff plays while the viewer takes in vast fields of green. Substitute images of healthy cattle and children, or a couple walking hand in hand, lots of sunshine and white puffy clouds. In most of the videos a man is speaking about nature or how he loves his dog/wife/ cattle/farm/job. A few of the videos feature women, a single mother who has a job as secretary in the gas industry, a grandmother leaseholder who is able to pay for her grandchildren’s college expenses, another who owns a stable. The characters--company employees, community members, business owners to leaseholders, those who profit off of the drilling—seem to owe much of their happiness and good fortune to their gas drilling company, Range Resources (MyRangeResources).

These videos exploit reverence to establish pathos by using what Sean Morey ecologic iconography or “econs.” Morey uses his concept of “econ” to convey global symbols --the bald eagle or the panda—or regional images such as the Manatee in Florida. From numerous econs presented in the videos, I have chosen to focus on fishing and waterways, and farming. However, rather than simply interpret these images, I wish to employ ideas that spring from Gregory Ulmer’s *Heuretics* to suggest shadow or alternative versions of these images and hopefully create images which will raise questions. The first bio-econ I look at in a bit more of general way, that of family farms, which pastoral views punctuate the country side. Numerous videos depict leaseholders who are family farmers, who of course have reverence for their land. Unlike the vast majority of homeowners in PA, these farmers tend to own their mineral rights. As mentioned above, many of these images relate to the traditional pastoral images that one would associate with a rural setting. Many have reverence for the images portrayed and all have a connection with rolling hills. A number of the films depict families and relationships, but the one I wish to focus upon deals with an idea that politicians and industry people are employing, that Marcellus drilling has helped many farmers to keep their farms, thus, the exigency is the drilling itself.

The second bio-econ is fishing in the streams and lakes- A video of the father and son centers upon fish and fishing as the very idea of home. Like many other places, environmental consciousness in PA often begins with fishing on PA lakes, creeks. Steingraber writes that water “amniotic fluid is creeks and streams that fill rivers.” Northern Appalachia has an abundance of these water sources and amid this abundance people develops affinity for particular places, the bend of river, a beaver dam, a spot where the Kingfisher drops into the water, a soft bed needles in the hemlocks will be a resting place for the evening. Eventually a person knows a place so well that it becomes part of her; out of this embodiment, reverence grows, environmental concerns often blossom either from this. Briefly, the fishing video introduces a father and his son who appear to be fishing on a tree-lined PA lake. After graduating from a PA university with fisheries degree, the son had to take a job out of state. He was only able to return after being offered a job from Range Resources. Thus, the pathos here is built between the relationship between father and son enjoying the timeless act of fishing and ethos is that the son, who has fished his entire life, is returning as a water quality expert to protect his home place. Toward the end of the video, one sees the silhouette shadow image of the father and son fishing reflected in a lake, and while I could many on this particular, I would focus on the shadow to expose what is hidden. The question is then, besides the obvious, what can be found in the shadow images of these videos?

In *Heuretics*, Gregory Ulmer provides a method of assimilating theory through invention rather than interpretation ( 3). While I lack space here to fully elaborate, I would like to proceed in the spirit of invention by thinking about what is in the shadows in this very ecological-looking green-washed of a return to the home place? The sons return home seems to co-opt Wendall Berry-esque images of the home place. The story also points to the complexity of the return home, of healthy intergeneration relationship with the region, but what deals does do they have to make. The hidden agenda then is to move beyond the somewhat obvious and reductive half-truths expressed by the green-washed ideas--that jobs will created, that water supplies will be kept clean, that a Pennsylvanian with a “fisheries” degree is watching over us—the problems have been touched above. Otherwise, some might find themselves carried away by the pathos inducing aspects of the video.

However, an awareness of exigency and reverence helps us to reveal the real power structures. Part of this hidden agenda is to hide the fact that those of us who live in PA are part of veritable energy colony that has existed since the Appalachian farmers were tossed out of the hills years before. The gorgeous placid water that father and son were casting into was *already* polluted with mercury, which come coal-fired plant sold to the local citizens as a panacea jobs, the need for the power to be one the major suppliers of jobs. In PA, a fishing license comes with a warning that a may only be safe to eat one fish a week due to high levels of mercury, PCB’s and other contanaiments (“Fish Advisory”). Thus, the hidden agenda is revealed in the holistic images of this econ. Exigency is imposed upon a citizenry when the leaders lack vision. This area the vision has been led by industry created false exigencies of relatively short term jobs. A quick look at the Range Resource main page for stockholders and investors shows that their reverence clearly lies within the idea of making a profit and “cutting costs.” Nothing is mentioned about concern for leaseholders, communities, or the environment. This in conjunction with the milieu of the local officials allows us to envision a very different situation. Of course, the exigency of the small farmer has been caused by subsidies to large scale agribusiness operations necessitating other operations such as drilling on small farms. Many farmers in my region have decided that deep Marcellus drilling is too risky.

I would thus like to conclude by inventing a reaction to the true reverence and exigencies herein. The production would begin with “Twentieth Century Schizoid Man” playing in the background and Lieutenant Governor Cawley’s “joke” about *Gasland* *--*how after challenging us the Marcellus task force to “get the facts,” he then supported his point by condemning the flaming water scenes in \*Gasland.\* His "facts" consisted of talking to a local in Bradford PA who told him that people around there have been lighting well water on fire for years because of the shallow gas industry.

Viewers would then be coaxed into putting on their “Ecosee” synaesthetic spectacles which will engage all of the senses to make extra sensitive, to witness the full spectacle. The Mercury for coal-fired plants, would smells of thousands of years of decay, just looking at numbs the face and dulls the brain and sounds like the roar of a superhighway. The water is filled with the dead humans and animals, those who have been sacrificed to fulfill the greed of industry. [[1]](#endnote-1) The barium from the toxic flow-back grows out of the water like tumors, the father, reverent are weeping over their spoiled water, leans and is pushed into the water by his son, now an agent of the industry and state.

The scene changes to the pastoral, a typical farm scene, except all animals lie dead.

A Land Man whose job it is to lock farmers in leases says, “The only way you can keep my farm is to poison the water, mine, yours, the neighbor down the road. Don’t blame me, blame it on Earl Butts. You haven’t been right since Earl told the farmers to get big, or get out. This is why you poison my water; you have got to drill. But it’s your land, and you are allowed to do what you want with your land. I love my land and would pour battery acid all over it to save it. A later scene depicts how the real farmer and his wife watching horror as the television as with ecosee glasses on watching their neighbors and friends unwittingly drink “frack fluid.”

Out of these extreme examples, perhaps more positive visions may spring, that of the son returning to work on a renewable energy project, helping local farms become holistically and energy independent by turning themselves into mini power stations, while setting up sustainable systems, such as food cooperatives and farmer’s markets. Also, one could envision changes in the Oil and Gas act to protect all citizens, not just corporate citizens and leaseholders. This is a beginning, a blossoming. Understanding the idea of reverence and exigency can help.

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1. In this idea of abject or silent sacrifice for something we as a society don’t officially recognize, I have been influenced by Ulmer’s *Memorial,* especially through the 2011 4-C’s presentation, “Mapping the Spill, Mapping Ourselves (a Memorial)” presented by Nicholas Guest-Jelley and Sean Morey. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)