Session 2: New Perspectives on Resilience – Paper Presentations & Discussion

Jennifer Lawrence

Eco-Resistance as Eco-Resilience

Abstract:

In 1973, CS Holling wrote about the limits of ecological resilience in reference to the amount of disturbance that an ecosystem can withstand without changing its capacity to continue organizing itself.[1] More than forty years later, environmental disasters that involve highly complex industrial systems are increasing in regularity and scope and eco-resilience has begun to take on a new meaning. The lived experience of sustainable disasterism must not only be born out by the local communities that bear the brunt of visceral events like the Deepwater Horizon disaster but is also endured through the longer and slower violence of climate change that exacts a disproportional burden onto the most vulnerable populations among us.[2] The normality of environmental disaster has not only become a business to be managed, to be profited from, and to be litigated but has become an embedded part of the most resilient system of all—capitalism. Discourses of eco-resilience, then, must not only assess the underlying social, economic, and political conditions that manufacture environmental disaster but, should also offer a way to resist these very conditions that sustain disaster. Eco-resilience has the potential not only to allay the anxieties that come along with sustainable disasterism but also has the power to interrupt detrimental environmental and political alienation. To contextualize eco-resistance as a new direction for eco-resilience, this paper examines artwork that emerged in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill as a critical political response to governance of the oil industry and the disastrous consequences for the Gulf of Mexico. To highlight how the aesthetic response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster represents an alternative politics, or counter-discourse, which resists the construction of environmental disaster as a political subjectivity this paper employs an eco-governmental assessment of three examples of eco-aesthetic resistance and highlights this particular form of political activism as a critique of the commodification of nature. First, Anthony Burrill's screen prints "Oil and Water Do Not Mix" reflect how "art contains the rationality of negation [. . . and can be understood as a] protest against that which is."[3] Secondly, Daniel Beltra's award-winning photo compilation "Spill" is assessed as a discursive strategy conveying the consequences of this disaster on the natural world, while subtly critiquing the power of humans to destroy the environment. The third discursive strategy of eco-resistance examined is the manipulation of the BP logo, and coinciding re-design contests which were geared toward exposing BP not only for not being 'beyond petroleum' but for actually being heavily invested in unconventional oil extraction. Each of these vignettes, raise important questions about the practices that govern environmental disaster and about what exactly is being made more resilient through these practices. Moreover, this research implicates the uneasy relationship between democracy, capitalism, and the commodification of nature, especially with regard to whose or what voice is heard through traditional channels of governance. This paper proposes that the

---

[1] Holling, Crawford S. "Resilience and stability of ecological systems." *Annual review of ecology and systematics* (1973): 1-23.

[2] T.W. Luke, "Neither Sustainable nor Development: Reconsidering Sustainability in Development," *Sustainable Development* 13 (2005): 228–238.; Klein, Naomi. *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. Macmillan, 2007.; Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

[3] Marcuse, Herbert. *Art and Liberation: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*. Vol. 4. Routledge, 2007.

emancipatory potential of aesthetic eco-resistance offers a way to speak to truth to powerful (mis)conceptions of environmental disaster and its governance.