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Book Review:

Patrick D. Murphy, *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015, 214 pp., ISBN 978-1-4985-1483-5

Luigi Manca, and Jean-Marie Kauth, eds. *Interdisciplinary Essays on Environment and Culture: One Planet, One Humanity, and the Media*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016, 350 pp., ISBN 978-1-4985-2888-7

Numerous cultural texts attempt to deal with the issues of climate change, ecological decline, the environment, nature, and the role of humanity in causing environmental problems. All these narratives – some more successfully than others – project certain images of the changing environment, trying to stimulate specific responses from their audiences worldwide. The immediate access that we have to most of these texts makes them our chief sources of information on the issues related to ecology and the environment. To what extent can we trust this information and what is the overarching aim of these narratives? These are the questions that the author of *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures* and the editors of and the contributors to *Interdisciplinary Essays on Environment and Culture: One Planet, One Humanity, and the Media* attempt to answer in their books.

In *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis*, Patrick D. Murphy is primarily interested in literature and its ability to stimulate certain reactions from the reader. The scholar argues that “literature and other forms of aesthetic production do continue to hold out the promise of being able to move some individuals deeply through both affective and intellectual durational engagement in ways that facilitate ideological reflection.”¹ For Murphy, cultural texts are “propaganda and the range of possible forms

¹ Patrick D. Murphy, *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), xiv.

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of aesthetic and critical activism.”² From Susan Fenimore Cooper’s *Rural Hours* to Kim Stanley Robinson’s *2312* to the literary works of Mahasweta Devi, Murphy examines ecofiction from an ecocritical and postcolonial perspectives, paying attention not only to the problems related to the environment, including climate change and extreme weather, but also to such social, cultural, and political issues as gender, (eco) feminism, and consumerism. Murphy shows the connection between these issues, outlining the role of humanity in causing the current ecological decline, as well as demonstrates how cultural texts can successfully communicate the existing problems. He suggests using the term “transversal” as the key characteristic of such narratives, for it brings together and stimulates “a multiplicity of viewpoints, perspectives, belief systems, and regions of concern.”³ Along with literature, Murphy briefly examines films and miniseries, including *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Category 6: Day of Destruction*, and *Category 7: End of the World*.

While Murphy’s attitude toward the existing eco-texts is generally positive, the editors of *Interdisciplinary Essays on Environment and Culture*, Luigi Manca and Jean-Marie Kauth, take a rather negative stance on the role that various media play in shaping our understanding of environmental problems. Like Murphy, Manca and Kauth see these media as propaganda, yet the scholars’ chief contention is that “the corporate-controlled media saturate worldwide audiences with a barrage of seductive images and narratives to stimulate over-consumption and to distract us from the consequences of rampant consumerism, while remaining silent about the systematic destruction of the environment and of our future.”⁴ For example, in “Lost in Translation? Public Perceptions and Mass Media Coverage of Climate Change Risks”, Pierpaolo Duce draws our attention to the fact that “[t]he focus of mass media on climate change from the end of the 1980s up to now shows a general increasing trend with time. However, most of media attention has been driven by specific events.”⁵ This selective attention to climate change, according to Duce, leads to the formation of specific and rather limited knowledge about the problem but also influences scientific debates regarding climate change. In “Pope Francis on the Ecological Crisis: Its Nature, Causes, and Urgency”, Martin J. Tracey, in turn, explicitly states that “[h]uman activity is degrading our planet in ways that gravely threaten life on earth. Communications media have failed to convey the true nature of the environmental threats we face.”⁶ Jean-Marie Kauth, in her chapter “Post-Apocalyptic Storytelling as Global Society’s Environmental Unconscious”, argues that while post-apocalyptic fiction deals with a number of environmental problems, it does so only “implicitly.”⁷ The contention that

² *Ibid.*, xiii.

³ Schrag quoted in Murphy, *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis*, xx.

⁴ Luigi Manca and Jean-Marie Kauth, eds., *Interdisciplinary Essays on Environment and Culture: One Planet, One Humanity, and the Media* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), xiii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

unites the essays in this collection is thus that “[t]oday’s media are failing democracy. Even more broadly, they are failing humanity.”⁸

Although Murphy’s *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis* and Luigi Manca and Jean-Marie Kauth’s (ed.) *Interdisciplinary Essays on Environment and Culture* seem to make different arguments, the books are, in principle, similar in their attempt to examine cultural media as the sources of information on such serious issues as climate change, ecological decline, and various other environmental problems. Both books see the existing eco-narratives as a form of propaganda that aims to convey different messages depending on the interests of various external agents. The books thus warn their readers about the traps that some of these texts set, but they also underline the potential of such narratives to work for humanity, helping change our perception about the environment, making us responsible and caring inhabitants of planet Earth. *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis* and *Interdisciplinary Essays on Environment and Culture* are provocative readings that provide meticulous analyses of eco-narratives and their larger role in spreading eco-awareness or failing to do so. The books will be of interest to those working in the fields of environmental studies and cultural studies as well as to general audiences who want to learn more about cultural responses to the existing environmental problems.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xiv.