

A Response to Shannon Baldo

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Shannon Baldo's "Elves and Extremism: The Use of Fantasy in the Radical Environmentalist Movement" argues that "the use of fantasy themes in the rhetoric of the radical environment movement creates a new reality for its supporters in which they are able to commit violent acts because they are protected by magic, by nature, and by divinity" (108). Baldo frames her argument around the work of Ernest G. Bormann, the creator of "fantasy-theme criticism." Baldo clearly presents the theory of fantasy-theme criticism by establishing the following two elements of her argument: first, the rhetoric of the radical environmentalist can perpetuate a reality through communication; and second, this reality can be a mutual experience, involving multiple participants. Baldo presents some interesting theories and evidence to support her argument for the creation of this alternative reality. She is to be praised for the originality of her analysis. However, Baldo's assessment of environmentalist rhetoric focuses on only a small segment of the movement. In order to fill out our understanding, we must consider other critical methodologies and the environmental justice rationale, which, I would argue, unifies the diverse communities within the movement.

Baldo uses the fantasy-theme criticism of Ernest Bormann to establish her analysis, but according to G. P. Mohrmann, the logic of this form of criticism is by nature circular (121). He declares that fantasy-theme criticism lends no new insight into the analysis of rhetoric and, more importantly, that Bormann misinterprets the foundational work of Robert Bales, upon whose discovery of fantasy in small-group settings Bormann bases his work (110–14). Mohrmann argues that Bormann strays too far from the original intent of Bales's work, indicating that there is "no basis for suggesting a dramatistic linking between chains in small groups and in any corresponding phenomenon appearing in society at large" (115). Mohrmann's critique requires those of us interested in environmental rhetoric to look beyond the fantasy themes of small sub-communities to larger and more cohesive unifying themes.

One need only visit the websites of today's key radical environmental groups to see that the majority of environmental rhetoric is communicating a very different message from the elfish fantasia at the movement's fringe. Take, for example, Baldo's analysis of *Dead Trees*, a publication of Earth First! The bulk of information found in this work "contains reports on direct action; articles on the preservation of wilderness and biological diversity; news and announcements about EarthFirst! and other radical environmental groups; and investigative articles" (*Dead Trees* Publishing). One piece featured on the Eco-Action website, entitled "The Ecological Effects of Roads," details the devastating effects that roads have on the biological diversity of our ecosystem. Another article, "Oil and the Future," analyzes growing concerns in regards to oil consumption. These titles reveal the greater presence of concrete, scientific literature rather than an alternate reality. Baldo does a nice job of extracting the trace elements of elfish fantasia found within

the essays she selects. However, it would be a distortion to conclude that elfish fantasy flows through all environmental rhetoric.

This distortion has two important dimensions. The first is the idea that clearly intelligent, modern-day environmentalists base their advocacy and action on fantasy rather than empirical and scientific data. Baldo describes them in one sentence as “intelligent, composed, and rhetorically effective,” yet goes on in the very next to state that “the radical environmental movement is comprised of people who live in an impractical and fantastic reality” (114). The advocates of the radical environmental movement do not live in the alternate reality that Baldo suggests. The goal of these activists is to engage with real issues, advocate for real policy change, and organize effectively. “EarthFirst! develops detailed wilderness proposals” (Scarce 66) and participates in the intelligent discussion of today’s environmental issues. Mohrmann explains that oftentimes a group’s rationale for creating a fantasy world is to create a “self-contained sanctuary” (116). This idea directly contradicts the desires of radical environmentalists, who wish to generate attention for the real issues at hand. Their efforts have proven effective; we can see the fruits of their labors “in the passage of legislation . . . professionalization of educational programs in environmental engineering, environmental economic, [and] environmental politics” (Ingram and Mann 135).

The second dimension of distortion is the notion that fantasy rhetoric drives environmentalists to action. Fantasy may be one of the many driving forces behind advocates, but it by no means comprises the totality of their motivation. Baldo concedes that “many . . . assume that this mindset [to take action] is best created by rage and harshness” (109). But, as Mohrmann explains, we cannot use fantasy to predict behavior (113). Like the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, the Native American movement, and the gay rights movement, the environmental movement is animated and sustained by a deep sense of justice. If we overemphasize fantasy and ignore the frustration and passion of the advocates, we lose the sense of moral outrage and concern for environmental justice that propels all facets of the environmental movement. One of Baldo’s examples displays this misleading distortion quite clearly. In the “Communiqué ” linked to the Earth Liberation Front, Baldo gives the audience a snippet of writing that highlights fantasy, but she fails to recognize the context of the piece. Directly preceding the example of whimsical imagery that Baldo presents is the declaration: “We are the burning rage of this dying planet. ELF (Earth Liberation Front) works to . . . undermine the foundations of the state. . . . We have to show the enemy that we are serious about defending what is sacred” (“Communiqué ”). It is in fact this resolute mindset that fuels the fire of advocacy, not the mystical idea of an alternate reality. Baldo presents us with proof of this when she quotes Stewart, Smith, and Denton: “Radical activists claim they are morally obligated to counter the ‘tensions’ of murder, atrocity, massacre, slavery and torture, and their motive or goal is summed up in a single word, ‘justice’” (113).

In conclusion, Shannon Baldo’s work identifies a key rhetorical strain within a sub-community of the environmentalist movement. We should not, however, mistake a part for the whole. In a larger context, the rhetoric of the radical environmental movement is based in scientific evidence and motivated by justice. Further analysis can provide us with a more complete understanding of environmental rhetoric.

Works Cited

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