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How might critique respond to the urgency of climate change?

A challenge for environmental communication.

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Abstract

Scientists, journalists, politicians and academics regularly describe climate change as both urgent and a crisis. During times that demand urgent action academic disciplines, like communication, also need to take critique more seriously. In contrast to accepting the one-dimensional premise that crisis simply demands action, this thesis also proposes that crisis demands critique. Starting with an assessment of the current shape of critique and critical theories in environmental communication as a distinct sub-field of communications studies, this project addresses the broader prospect for critique by examining the work of four key scholars who have spent significant time addressing climate change.

First, the study contrasts Peter Sloterdijk's trilogy of books on spheres that highlights the spatiality of the humans living in an atmosphere, with his anthropotechnic work on how humans go beyond themselves through practice, training and other technologies. Next, the study examines the role of ecological crisis in the work of Slavoj Žižek with special emphasis on his theorising of climate change as one of four existential threats to the world, which necessitates a communist response. The third theorist, Timothy Morton, interrogates how ecological texts privilege the essentialised concept of nature and the subjectivity of the 'beautiful soul' in a manner that undermines the politics of adequately responding to climate crisis. Finally, the study considers Bruno Latour's insights into how climate change is communicated when the tools of critique have been appropriated by those who seek to use doubt to prevent action.

Bringing these theorists together, the study concludes by highlighting four key themes that add critical depth to discussions within environmental communication: the topics of anthropocentrism in the Anthropocene, the global scale of climate change, the role of communism in political responses, and the (mis)use of the concept of nature. The study ends by bringing these themes back to the sub-field of environmental communication, making a series of recommendations to renew the relationship of doubt and scepticism to critique.

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