3-2008

Environmental Devils

Terence Check
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, tcheck@csbsju.edu

Environmental Devils

Terence Check

As rhetorical scholars are well aware, Burke (1968) identified scapegoating as a central feature of societies burdened by collective guilt. In his essay, ‘‘Environmental Melodrama,’’ Schwarze (2006) recognized this pattern as a feature of environmental narratives, arguing that melodrama ‘‘frames situations as confrontations between the virtuous and the villainous, and encourages audiences to take sides in such confrontations in order to repair the moral order’’ (p. 251). That villains are central to rhetorical narratives both real and imagined should come as no surprise to communication scholars, even as our ‘‘scientific world view lulls us into thinking we have progressed beyond a primeval symbolism of us-versus-them’’ (Carter, 1996, p.25). However, Schwarze (2006) saw rhetorical possibilities in melodrama, including the use of villains to heighten moral awareness of environmental threats. He defended it as ‘‘an enticing rhetorical strategy for environmental advocates’’ (p. 240), and called on environmental communication scholars and activists to seek the ‘‘conditions that are more or less favorable for melodramatic intervention’’ (p. 256). In response to Schwarze’s essay, I argue that the central feature of a melodramatic narrative is the presence of a rhetorical devil and I explicate its features. While affirming the potential of melodrama in some cases, I raise questions about its ability to mobilize the public on global environmental threats, and I remain concerned by the possibility that it can distract attention from core issues.

Environmental devils*those secular agents that constitute the villains in environmental melodramas*are remarkably similar to the theological Devil that inspires them. The religious devil is a fallen angel of God, and thus it represents power. Melia (1989) claimed that the attributes of a symbolic secular devil ‘‘are no less stringent than those required by the sacred counterpart’’ and he identified power as a key characteristic of a rhetorical devil (p. 416). This echoed Burke’s (1945) description of a scapegoat as a ‘‘concentration of power’’ (p. 407). Further, the extent of the devil’s power must be proportional to the degree of guilt society carries. Given the frustration environmental advocates feel over the rapid deterioration of the planet, they must locate a worthy villain to achieve the ‘‘‘catharsis’ which will ‘stylistically’ or ‘symbolically’ wash away this guilt’’ (Holland, 1959, p. 75). Wealthy corporations such as W.R. Grace and ExxonMobil certainly fit this description, but even lesserknown entities can be environmental devils if they acquire the infrastructure to destroy the planet*bulldozers, chainsaws, oil rigs, and smokestacks*given that these tools are loaded with the symbolism of violence and pollution.

Although rhetorical devils in any context are imbued with power, environmental devils in particular are associated with greed and indifference toward future generations. Environmental devils are typically infatuated with economic profits at the expense of natural ecosystems. They are not constrained by laws and flaunt them whenever possible. Alsford (2006), who wrote about fictional characters such as the Borg from Star Trek, argued they take special status as iconic villains because ‘‘everything that they encounter is to be regarded as a resource, something that can be consumed and used. The villain is, first and foremost, a user’’ (p. 132). Alsford claimed the ‘‘essential difference between the hero and the villain’’ is that villains do not see themselves connected to the world (p. 137). Thus, an environmental devil views the natural world as fit for exploitation and is indifferent about the impact of its actions on future generations.

Rhetorical devils are widespread, since the Devil ‘‘is omnipresent’’ (Kohak, 1975, p. 56). Multinational corporations meet this criterion easily, but so can smaller groups or even individuals as long as they represent evils of the larger community. For example, not only did the captain of the Exxon Valdez represent a company with global economic interests, but also as a flawed person he symbolized the evils of alcoholism, and as such served as a synecdoche for the sins of personal indulgence and irresponsibility related to drinking-driving. In addition, if one confines the devil to a particular physical location, it can nonetheless acquire significance if it threatens something precious and unique. The fact that the devil ruins something original, rare, or sublime heightens the emotional pain, particularly if the loss of the unique is ‘‘juxtaposed against the usual, the ordinary, the vulgar, that which is fungible or interchangeable’’ (Cox, 1982, p. 229).

The rhetorical devil is deceitful; it is ‘‘chameleon-like,’’ changing ‘‘its colors according to the circumstances’’ (Braaten, 2000, p. 102). Theologically, ‘‘in the struggle with God for the winning of souls, the devil has to play tricks’’ to win over admirers who might otherwise recognize it (Florescu, 1975, p. 74). In the realm of environmental policy, corporations engage in a variety of tactics that mask their true intentions. One of them is ‘‘greenwashing,’’ a form of ‘‘public relations propaganda’’ intended to give polluting companies a green image (Greenwashing, 2006, p. 1). Another tactic is the creation of citizen front groups that provide an illusion of grassroots support for corporate policies (Stauber & Rampton, 1995). Still another ploy is the creation of public hearings, where officials sometimes feign concern for public complaints only to ultimately ignore citizen input (Daniels & Walker, 2001). Corporations have also funded scientific studies with predetermined results, used media to shape public opinion on environmental policies, and used lawsuits to intimidate activists (Beder, 1998).

The rhetorical devil ‘‘is, by definition, quintessentially evil [but] is also, paradoxically, strangely attractive’’ (Melia, 1989, p. 416). Without this feature, the devil would not be consubstantial with those who ‘‘would ritualistically cleanse themselves by loading the burden of their own iniquities upon it’’ (Burke, 1945, p. 406). Corporations that despoil the environment also claim to provide local communities with economic benefits and wider publics with the resources to sustain comfortable ways of living. These attributes function to make the environmental devil appealing, particularly in those instances when the consequences of industrialism are remote and invisible, compared to benefits that seem immediate and tangible. The environmental devil often poses an immediate threat to the environment, thus requiring urgent action by victimized publics. This sense of urgency may not exist if the devil has masked its true nature, but once the disguise is revealed there is a pressing need to rid oneself of the real or symbolic contamination. The devil also preys on the weak and powerless in a society. An environmental devil may try to exploit natural spaces and non-human animals, or it may seek out vulnerable human communities lacking the political organization or resources to resist polluting industries.

An environmental devil, then, must be powerful; it must be greedy and indifferent to the violence it causes; it must be ubiquitous either in its physical scope or in the evils it represents; it often immediately threatens that which is unique and precious; it is deceitful and cunning; it preys upon those who are defenseless; and despite all of this, it is attractive to many who admire its qualities. With these features, the rhetorical devil may function as a compelling villain in an environmental melodrama. Schwarze’s (2006) description of W.R. Grace fulfills these characteristics, which is perhaps why the case served as a compelling justification for melodramatic intervention.

What of other environmental threats? Many scientists have asserted that global warming ‘‘is the most severe problem that we are facing today*more serious even than the threat of terrorism’’ (King, cited in Speth, 2005, p. 203). However, unlike terrorism, where rhetors can point to foreign foes and diabolical acts, environmental advocates have struggled to frame climate change in melodramatic terms. This is because there is no clear villain; the causes of climate change are diverse and systemic; the consequences and threats are not immediate; it is not prone to a quick solution; and the offending acts are tied to economic progress, one of the many God terms of our age (Weaver, 1953, p. 216). In fact, on this issue, opponents of environmental legislation have co-opted the melodramatic frame for their own purposes, as when the United States Senate passed a resolution in 1997 condemning the Kyoto treaty. Even those lawmakers who agreed with the science of climate change succumbed to the emotional rhetoric of critics who accused China of gaining an unfair advantage over the US by virtue of exemptions from some of the treaty’s provisions. Schwarze (2006) may be right that ‘‘melodrama can foreground the moral dimension of all human actions’’ in a manner that overcomes ‘‘the reassuring rhetoric of technical reason’’ (p. 250), but in the case of Kyoto, this hurt the cause of environmentalism.

However, Schwarze acknowledged that appeals to melodrama are bounded by situational exigencies. Other environmental controversies may be better suited for this type of tactic. Advocates have used melodrama successfully in cases such as the Natural Resources Defense Council’s BioGems campaign in 2000, which halted the construction of a Mitsubishi salt factory near the San Ignacio lagoon in Mexico, the home of a gray whale birthing area. In cases like this, environmentalists can invoke appeals against a rhetorical devil, leading to ‘‘corporate boycotts [that] often villainize a particular organization or industry by demonstrating how their actions victimize unsuspecting citizens’’ or animals (Schwarze, 2006, p. 247).

Moving beyond the features of an environmental devil and the likelihood of locating controversies where its use might be plausible, critics and practitioners alike should consider a more fundamental question: what type of identity does a rhetorical devil demand from its audience? In the realm of environmental policy, does a rhetorical devil challenge assumptions related to growth and progress, or does it divert attention from their interrogation as ideals in a consumer culture? Critics of melodrama have cautioned it may divert public attention away from systemic reforms. Writing about the use of melodrama in environmentally themed films, Ingram (2000) summarized several concerns, including ‘‘the tendency of melodrama to construct environmental issues as individualized’’ conflicts that ‘‘simplify the complex, often ambiguous allocation of blame and responsibility in such matters’’ (p.2). Further, theorists have cautioned against the use of scapegoats in public controversies, noting how demagogues such as Hitler have used this tactic to advance their own despicable causes (Burke, 1941; Allport, 1948). The construction of literal and figurative devils may worsen this tendency, as it strips audiences of personal responsibility for their actions (May, 1975).

Schwarze (2006) offered a counterpoint to these assumptions, arguing based on the case of Libby that ‘‘the personification of villains also can point precisely at a system’s pressure points and provide the motive force for sustaining social critique’’ (p. 247). Perhaps the best way for advocates to do this is through use of oppositional arguments that block enthymematic assumptions. In their essay on the anti-fur movement, Olson and Goodnight (1994) contended that advocates constructed arguments that inverted

the social and economic meanings of fur. Instead of a commodity associated with luxury and wealth, advocates redefined the social meaning of fur so that it represented cruelty. It seems plausible that environmental devils could serve the same function as ‘‘acts of interruption’’ that question dominant narratives (Pezzullo, 2001).

However, it is unclear whether an environmental melodrama similar to that seen in Libby has the power to generate the kind of widespread re-evaluation of corporate practices needed to confront national or global environmental threats. Some have argued an event larger in scope and significance is needed to invoke that kind of response. According to Speth (2005), ‘‘sweeping policy change happens when a major wave of new and previously apathetic citizens are attracted to an issue,’’ usually the result of a ‘‘major event or ‘crisis’ [that] can help redefine the issue and attract wide attention’’ (p. 199). If such an exigence involved the presence of an environmental devil, could it have the power to disrupt enthymematic assumptions about growth and progress on a large scale? An answer to this question might lie in an examination of past melodramas of significance.

One of the most prominent environmental melodramas in American environmental history remains the ExxonValdez oil spill. In the late evening hours of 23 March 1989, the Exxon Valdez collided into a submerged reef in Prince William Sound, spilling more than 11 million gallons of oil into Alaskan waters. Oil company officials failed to recover most of the spill, and it quickly blanketed beaches and wildlife, resulting in the worst oil spill in North American history (Davidson, 1990; Keeble, 1999). Public outrage was high, and people directed their anger at two villains: Joseph Hazelwood, the captain of the supertanker, and the Exxon Corporation. Both agents fulfilled the qualities of effective rhetorical devils. Further, there was widespread belief that the event altered public thinking on environmental issues. Sancton (1989) wrote in Time that ‘‘theValdezspill convinced all but the most skeptical observers that humanity was courting ecological disaster’’ (p. 60). Reflecting on the disaster, some scholars have reached a similar conclusion. For example, Kellner (1990) argued that the television news coverage of the incident ‘‘pointed to the need to provide stronger environmental protection and to curb the self-interest of big corporations’’ (p. 109), and Schwarze (2006) mentioned the event briefly in his essay, arguing that the ‘‘depiction of oilsoaked birds after the Exxon Valdez crash encouraged sympathy for innocent victims and brought the ‘costs’ of oil dependence home to audiences’’ (p. 252).

However, the transformative power of melodrama in even this defining case is questionable. For one, Hazelwood became a scapegoat because blood alcohol tests conducted hours after the accident showed he had consumed an unacceptable amount of alcohol, leading to suspicions that drinking had caused the grounding. Revelations about Hazelwood’s past drinking problems only further entrenched this narrative. This functioned to divert attention from the environmental issues raised by the spill, such as the nation’s dependence on oil and the costs of oil production and exploration. Ultimately, the Hazelwood narrative resulted in technical proposals (breathalyzer tests for skippers, tugboat escorts and double hulls for tankers), encouraging audiences to view the spill as a transportation problem, not an environmental one (Check, 1993, 1994).

As for Exxon's role in the melodrama, the public narrative centered on the company's incompetence and inability to clean up the spill. While the crisis communication scholarship widely viewed Exxon's response to the spill as a public relations debacle (Tyler, 1992; Williams & Treadaway, 1992; Benoit, 1995), the melodramatic framing of the villain in this way failed to function as an argument that might have challenged the assumption that society was capable of cleaning large oil spills. Rather than situating the event on a moral or political plane that might have rendered a critique of consumption and/or a reconsideration of oil drilling practices and policy, the melodrama involving Exxon-as-devil directed attention towards technical issues about the proper way to respond to oil spills (Check, 1997).

The construction of rhetorical devils as part of a melodramatic frame is a common resource for advocates of social change (Carter, 1997). Schwarze's essay is an important reminder to keep melodrama at the forefront of critical attention. There may be serious limitations to its use in some contexts, since environmental conflicts using a melodramatic frame require a rhetorical devil that is powerful, ubiquitous, deceitful, and identifiable. The use of this devil must coincide with a strategy that Schwarze (2006) argued must counter ''the ideological simplifications of dominant public discourses'' (p.255). However, while the devil in an environmental narrative may foster indignation directed at particular company, its ability to generate widespread change in belief and attitude remains doubtful, as the Exxon case points out.

Although I remain pessimistic about the successful use of environmental melodrama on issues such as global warming, the environmental devil has great potential for social critique in some cases. Even though the construction of Exxon as a villain failed to generate widespread systemic criticism after the Valdezspill, a recent campaign by a collaboration of environmental and public advocacy groups to ''Exxpose Exxon'' has established a clear link between the company and efforts to derail a national energy policy and perpetuate a consumption ethic. The campaign highlights how advocates can channel indignation of a devil into a productive social and environmental critique. The presence of a devil, after all, has a way of bringing moral clarity to some situations. ''It may actually be that by recognizing radical evil and naming it we may gain the tools with which to fight against it,'' wrote Russell (1986); ''An understanding of radical evil may help us get past palliative measures... to the heart of the matter'' (p. 300).