

GOTHIC NATURE



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Simon C. Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*

(London: Routledge, 2018)

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In this study, Simon C. Estok builds upon his established scholarship on ecocriticism—such as his *Eco-criticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (2011)—by presenting us with the concept of ecophobia in opposition to, but also as an augmentation of, biophilia. In Estok's view, we must acknowledge the value and contribution made to ecocriticism by work which highlights humankind's affinity with nature (biophilia or ecophilia); nevertheless, the current ecological crisis cannot be truly understood, nor combatted from this perspective alone. For Estok, we must also recognise and interrogate the notion of ecophobia, which sits on the same theoretical spectrum as ecophilia. *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* proposes—forgive my somewhat ungainly over-simplification—that we as humans suffer from a morbid fear of nature that is grounded in a perfectly reasonable and necessary fear of nature that has been vital for our survival as a species (fear of snakes, lightning, earthquakes, for example). However, that rational fear has been maladapted into an unconscious and irrational phobia which is contributing to our extinction. Estok maintains that we have to accept that our harmful behaviours towards the environment are far from 'unnatural'; that they are in fact the behaviours that have enabled humans to succeed and thrive. The problem we have to confront if we are going to combat ecological damage in any meaningful way is that we are going to have to somehow act *contra* to behaviours that are encoded in our genes. Simply put, in order to survive, we will have to act against our survival mechanisms. While Estok unapologetically embraces scientific thinking and its findings, his position is far from deterministic and not exclusively rooted in an unproblematic acceptance of empiricism. He acknowledges and discusses how cultural and media forces come to play on ecophobia, and, indeed, how they contribute to, institutionalise and perpetuate ecophobia.

To say this book was chilling would be an understatement of massive proportions; indeed, it makes us wonder if any action we are currently taking regarding the environment is any more effective than hanging up a wind chime. What is most frightening is Estok's claim that the behavioural changes required to significantly avert ecological disaster are in conflict with our human behaviour patterns to such a degree that we consciously and unconsciously

refuse to entertain them as ideas. However, I'm going to turn away from the substance of the book itself (probably due to ecophobia) and discuss a broader role it plays in the advancement of academic study.

The Ecophobia Hypothesis is a truly interdisciplinary work: it draws upon the humanities, social sciences, and—importantly—the hard sciences, particularly biology and neuroscience. The book also assumes that its readership will be interdisciplinary and, as such, introduces concepts and explains them in a manner which is accessible to a reader who is not familiar with them. Nevertheless, Estok never over-simplifies or 'dumbs down' these principles. As a humanities academic—who is very much on the literary/philosophical rather than social science wing of the discipline—whose understanding of science is limited, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* had me understanding quite advanced aspects of biology and neuroscience rather effortlessly.

The Ecophobia Hypothesis also demonstrates a great deal of intellectual courage; not only does it confront the reader with some very disturbing and positively frightening information regarding the ongoing ecological crisis, but it challenges dogmas and orthodoxies that are prevalent in many disciplines. As Estok explains in his introduction:

'Ecophobia, like any other human behaviour (including biophilia), is written into our genes. It cannot be otherwise since there is no magical ventriloquism here, no enchanted space outside of our genes from which human behaviour can reasonably be thought to originate. Yet, as Michael Beard—the voice of evolutionary compulsions in Ian McEwan's *Solar*—notes, one must be wary when theorizing about genetics and culture. *Solar* nevertheless seriously questions the human capacity to make the behavioural changes needed to stop climate change, reflecting a larger debate that has been going on for a long time.' (p. 20)

By making such claims, Estok takes certain risks. In some academic circles (and yes, I do realise I am going to sound like a 'snowflake'-bashing Youtuber), theoretical approaches that were once revolutionary and challenging in the 1960s and 1970s have become ossified into a new orthodoxy: a church with its own saints. Philosophical approaches that are mutually

grounded in Marxism and postmodern relativism *do* have a proclivity to police academic discussion with Stalinist rigour. As the first chapter of this study observes, any recourse to scientific method or empiricist thinking within some universities is tantamount to fascism, and any humanities or social science academic who merely suggests that biology, specifically genetics, has an influence on behaviour is nailed to a cross and burned for heresy. If we are going to combat climate change, or even just discuss it with any meaning, those of us on the ‘artsier’ end of the academic spectrum are going to have to review our attitude to science. If we acknowledge that the ecological crisis is happening, then we are responding to information scientific method has revealed; it is nonsense, therefore, to dismiss scientific method in the next breath on the grounds that it is not congenial with our world view, or contradicts our favourite critical theory. Estok makes a much better job than I have of addressing this issue, and Chapter 1 of *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* unapologetically and rationally makes the case for scientific method and its findings. This will no doubt upset many people in academia, but in my view this book should be saluted as much for this achievement as it is for the contribution it makes to ecocriticism.