

Review



Tar Wars: Oil, Environment and Alberta's Image. By Geo Takach. Edmonton, AB: The University of Alberta Press, 2017. 256 pp. ISBN: 9781772121407.

When environmental preservation and human health are put in jeopardy by Alberta's oil industry, largely overseen by global corporations, ideally the best minds on the issues would engage a nonpartisan dialogue that respects the human, cultural, environmental, and economic interests at play. *Tar Wars: Oil, Environment and Alberta's Image* by Geo Takach, examines how the debates over Alberta's bituminous oil sands projects (i.e., known popularly as *the tar sands*) were conducted via a filmic battle between filmmakers, global corporations, and governments to define Alberta's image amidst its bitumen boom. Takach's study "questions the ultimate utility of using film and video as media in the discourse of Alberta and the bit-sands" (p. 157). While film can also advance drama over scientific detail and nuance, it can also rally public support to stave off potential disasters. Takach's study attempts to explore how identity is constructed through communication, here documentary and promotional film, so that readers might take the insights of the study to critically engage issues of ecological, economic, and human interest in their own communities through film/media. *Tar Wars* was adapted from Takach's University of Calgary doctoral dissertation that was funded via a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant (Takach, 2013).

The first of six chapters, "The Problem of the Sands," explores how economically and environmentally significant Alberta's bitumen is while noting how stakeholders are grossly reduced in public discourse into a binary of rapacious robber barons versus communist eco-terrorists. Takach argues that the economic vulnerabilities, social, and cultural change that such projects bring can be overlooked in polarized debate. In Chapter two, "Four Foundational Principles," Takach articulates his four theoretical principles: environmental communication matters, the media make a difference, visual media are particularly powerful, and place branding matters. Chapter three, "Images and Frames of Alberta," uses four ecological ideology categories adapted from Corbett's (2006) work to organize his fifteen visual frames for analysis, specifically: instrumentalist (pride, green, ethical oil, money, progress, status quo, bridging), conservationist/preservationist (compromise, sellout), moralist (rogue, greed, eco-justice, health), and transformational (present-minded, ecocide). In Chapter four, "Positioning and Contesting Alberta," Takach applies these frames to analyze nineteen documentaries (and contextually relevant news/promotional videos). This chapter speaks to the greater global, as opposed to domestic, significance of the images being created of Alberta due to international economic interests and Canada's need for international buy-in to its internationally cultivated image as an ecologically-minded and pro-social nation. Chapter five, "Visually Redefining Alberta," allows Takach to provide readers

with a way forward by way of his analysis, while the last chapter, “Implications,” provides Takach’s assessments of the limitations of his work and compelling suggestions for the dimensions that future inquires might take.

Tkach’s work is valuable on one hand as research on visual framing analysis, a method well established for studying social movements and activism. *Tar Wars* also provides valuable insight for future discourse shapers (i.e., filmmakers, advocates, activists, and strategic communication professionals) on capturing the complex and contradictory nature of a place and its people while eschewing problematic frames that harken back to a time or place that never existed (e.g., the pristine colonial landscape or western frontier fantasy). Takach analyzes a wide range of film texts on Alberta’s oil sands during the years 2005–2014 and he also speaks to the environmental, economic, and political events and social discourses concurring with the production and/or reception of these films. Takach argues that “a more realistic visual redefinition of Alberta could build stronger connections between its natural majesty and the humanity with which nature is inevitably interconnected physically, biologically, emotionally and spiritually” so that we might achieve “depictions of how the place is actually lived in by Albertans” (pp. 134–135).

Tar Wars would do well to deepen its analysis by exploring social media, particularly the influence of memes, for both establishing contextualizing content and co-opting, reinforcing, popularizing, parodying, and rejecting visual frames. Takach rightly argues that looking largely at films limits the discourse to that which is largely controlled by elites. Memes allow non-elites (i.e., young people) to access political discourses and to bridge media platforms (Plevriti, 2014). Relatedly, the section on the 2013–2015 resistance to Alberta’s bitumen sands could be expanded and better integrated into the book, as it seems like an add-on to an already voluminous data chapter. Also the contexts provided by French language media and films on the bitumen industries, like McCreedy & Asselin (2015), are important given Canada’s/Alberta’s vigorous public relations work within the European Union and to document the growth of opposition outside Alberta.

Tkach acknowledges that his book overlooks grassroots and do-it-yourself filmmakers and how orderly scholarship such as this is reductive of stakeholders and their positions. However, he admirably calls for more arts-based research into environmental communication issues (e.g., a musical eco-comedy stage play). Arts-based inquiry could provide Albertans and Canadians the imaginative space in which to reflect on how the bitumen sands and related projects challenge not only the environment and the economy but also the communities around where such projects are situated and those communities across Canada from which workers have been eagerly sourced. Both types of Canadian communities can expect to see their cultures indelibly changed in ways that they might not understand for years yet to come.

Tar Wars offers one perspective on the constantly changing face of Alberta, its people, its bitumen industries, and their ensuing discourses and debates. This book is relevant to scholars in communication studies, specifically those with a focus on environmental communication and activism, as well as those in strategic communication, specifically PR, marketing, and branding, and obviously those in the fields of journal-

ism and film. *Tar Wars* does not claim to have all the answers but Takach understands the need to protect our environmental legacy while upholding all Canadian's/Albertan's right to self-determination. His respect for Wild Rose Country does not cloud his critical perspective as he tries to understand "a place of dazzling initiative and innovation on the one hand, and of disturbing, systematic neglect of underprivileged citizens, democracy and the planet on the other" (p. 12).

References

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