

Ecocriticism as an Economic School of Thought:  
Woody Allen's *Match Point* as Exemplary

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## **Introduction**

The axiom that “whoever controls the language, controls the debate” is a good starting point for an ecocritical analysis of resource allocation. Over the last half of the twentieth century, economists have successfully controlled the language about resource allocation and, by the quoted axiom, the debate. The core questions have been: what goods and services are produced, how they are produced, and for whom are they produced (see, for example, Samuelson and Nordhaus). Banished is the more piercing question as to “why” those goods and services are produced in the first place. Only slightly less taboo than asking “why” is querying “where.” Where does the waste stream go? And what are the moral implications? Once scientists wrench control away from the economists in fixing the language of resource allocation, the why and where questions emerge. But scientists should not get too enthused. Answers to the why and where questions are necessary but not sufficient to answer “what are the moral implications?”

In our age of apathy, art may be the most cost-effective way to jump-start the debate over the moral implications of resource allocation. So, exit positive economics and enter ecocriticism, defined as “the field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations” (Gomides 16). What is the role of the ecocritic in the debate over resource allocation? And which works of art should be the subject of analysis? Preliminary answers to both questions can be gleaned in E.O. Wilson's thesis of “consilience”: “works of art that prove enduring are intensely humanistic. Born in the imagination of individuals, they nevertheless touch upon what was universally endowed by human evolution.” (218-219)

The case will be made that ecocriticism deals with resource allocation in a fashion that is distinct from all the existing economic schools of thought. Robustness is witnessed whenever a work of art, ostensibly not about resource allocation, also makes sense in the light of ecocriticism. Success obtains when the audience of the *analysis*

- (1) understands the causes and effects of resource allocation portrayed in the work of art,
- (2) discusses the moral questions raised and
- (3) becomes more willing to adopt whatever social arrangement is necessary for living within a limit.

### **Distinguishing Ecocriticism from the other Economic Schools of Thought**

To classify as an economic school of thought, ecocriticism must distinguish itself from all the other existing schools. Proving such a distinction can be a daunting task. Fortunately, a short-cut exists: if ecocriticism can distinguish itself in some fundamental way from the economic school closest to it, one can safely assume that it is distinct from all the rest. “Ecological economics” is the closest school and some may even claim that it is *too* close. The distinction between the two can be illustrated by how an ecocritic and an ecological economist would interpret the axiom “whoever controls the language, controls the debate.” To make the case, one must engage in a degree of generalization with the usual caveat about the variance within the statistical populations of ecocritics and ecological economists.

The ecological economist would examine the axiom formally. How does an explanation of resource allocation hinge upon the definition assigned to the words chosen for the explanation? Once assigned, how are our perceptions winnowed? To the ear of the ecological economist, the axiom sounds a lot like “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” which A.N. Whitehead explained as: “neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought.” Nicolas Georgescu Roegen identified the fallacy as “the sin of standard economics” which, like the quote from Whitehead, figures large in the writings of Herman E. Daly, the founder of ecological economics (see *Steady State Economics*, 280-

281). To discover what is excluded in the abstractions, ecological economists consider how energy and material flow through a myriad of man-made systems and, ultimately, into the thermodynamic sink. As technical inventions arise over human history, more and new types of energy and matter are harnessed that, by the Second Law, flow into a sink already sculpted by eons of natural history. The result are multiple disequilibria on a massive scale. “Uneconomic growth,” an oxymoron in standard economic theory, makes a great deal of thermodynamic sense.

Unlike the ecological economist, the ecocritic interprets quite literally “whoever controls the language, controls the debate.” Whereas the ecological economist interprets “language” as the abstractions chosen in the construction of theoretical models, the ecocritic interprets language as the choice of words used in the everyday speech. Similarly, “debate” is not a metaphor for the logical implications of the abstractions, but the give-and-take of conversations among people with opposing positions. For the ecocritic, technical solutions for the most vexing problems facing the planet (e.g., nuclear proliferation, global warming, mass extinction) are either rare or nonexistent. The ecocritic concurs with the ecological economist that thermodynamics is a better abstraction to discuss resource allocation but differs on the expected benefits from simply having corrected the language. For the ecocritic, debate *is* debate and the solution lies in what Garrett Hardin called “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected” (261).

The ecological economist will cringe. Garrett Hardin? Hardin was “politically incorrect” long before the epithet ever gained currency. Herman Daly and Joshua Farley cite Hardin just once in their 2004 textbook *Ecological Economics*, even though “The Tragedy of the Commons” is the most cited refereed article in *Science* and perhaps in all of science (3814 citations by Google Scholar). Ecocritics admire Hardin, not for the unpopular stances he took, but for having thrown himself into the public arena. His analog in nature writing is Edward Abbey---the iconoclastic author who inspired the Earth First! Movement. Inasmuch as “mutual coercion, mutually agreed” demands a national and international conversation, the salient distinction of the ecocritical school of thought from

ecological economics and all the other schools of thought is this: engagement in political life.

Again the economist will cringe. Most disdain politicians and show contempt for the activist academic. Many share the cynicism expressed by Alan Bloom: ““the intellectual, who attempts to influence...ends up in the power of the would-be influenced” (Sleeper 27). Ecocritics are different. They realize that such aloofness is self-indulgent. Cheryll Glotfelty put it well in the Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*:

Many of us in colleges and universities worldwide find ourselves in a dilemma. Our temperaments and talents have deposited us in literature departments, but, as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem.(xx-xxi)

A complementary sentiment can also be found in *Practical Ecocriticism* by Glen Love: “Pragmatic awareness, as I see it, undergirds the discipline of ecocriticism, separating it from that devaluing of the real that characterizes much literary criticism of recent years.” (16) Even the *enfant terrible* of ecocriticism, Dana Phillips urges a proactive role in his scathing *The Truth of Ecology*:

I think a little incivility will serve ecocriticism well, even if its only effect is a change of tone. I have a hunch, however, that the consequences of adopting a critical strategy of incivility will be richer than that because ecocriticism will be brought more into line with what is recommended in the most daring moments of the very literature its practitioners profess to admire. (242)

As the last three quotes make clear, ecocritics are working on changing the way resources are allocated. Although they may hail from the humanities, their endeavors constitute a veritable school of thought in economics.

### **The venue for Ecocriticism as an Economic School of Thought**

Every element of the Gomides definition of ecocriticism can be found in Garrett Hardin's *Exploring New Ethics for Survival: The Voyage of the Spaceship Beagle* (1971). The

book is a delicious romp which alternates between a 5000 year roundtrip voyage of the spaceship Beagle (the text of the subtitle) and a probing analysis of the moral questions that arise within the finite space of the ship (the text of the title). Retroactively, one can classify Hardin as the first and only ecocritic whose object of analysis was his own fictional work. Hardin would have recognized and applauded the axiom “whoever controls the language, controls the debate.” Chapter Eight of *Exploring* is entitled “Word Magic” and the first sentence establishes a thesis that cuts across his many writings: the unofficial function of language is “to prevent thought and communication.”(66) The last sentence of the chapter concludes: “‘Development’ is word magic, designed to keep us from thinking.” (70). The next chapter “Sweet-singing Economists” shows how “much professional jargon [in economics] that poses as objective is merely euphemistic.” (75) Like the environmental impacts themselves, Hardin considered the damage of word magic to be a question of scale. He cites by name the handful of economists who would actually agree but laments that “most...have just sung sweetly.” (p.76)

Like Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, *The Voyage* is a screenwriter’s dream come true. To repeat Wilson’s quote about enduring art, the story is “born in the imagination of [an individual, it] nevertheless touch[es] upon what was universally endowed by human evolution.” The dialog is hilarious demonstrating that resource allocation need not be b-o-r-i-n-g. The scenes are even cinematic with an occasional pan shot:

‘Migwad, look at them! They look like a skillet of worms! How can they stand it?’ Four men were looking out the mountain window at the plain below. The ground could scarcely be seen for the bodies glistening in the synthetic sun. Harry calculated that there must be something like twelve million of them now on this little old three-kilometer-side spaceship. One more doubling...(155)

Thirty-five years after its publication, the ecocritic can affirm that Hardin’s text or any text for that matter, just won’t do: too few people read anything at all and among those who do, an even smaller percentage read critically; among those who read critically, an even smaller percentage find others who also read critically and are willing to express an opposite opinion. Even the blogosphere offers little hope. People join blogs of the same political persuasion (see Young). So, the ecocritic must work with the venues that exist

and not obsess with those that should be. If people are not willing to read fiction or even interact with those of opposing views, how much less so are they willing to slog through any complex theoretical model that demands numeracy. No one reads economics textbooks for fun.

Audience reception is the bottom line in ecocriticism and a few descriptive statistics will serve us well. Table 1 shows the frequency of hits of word sequences relevant to the thesis that ecocriticism is an economics school of thought. What leaps from the table is the fact that the whole discipline of “ecological economics” is two and a half orders of magnitude less than “economics” and scores roughly the same number of hits as the Woody Allen’s movie *Match Point*. Even more depressing for ecological economists is that their leading textbook by Herman Daly and Joshua Farley scores two order of magnitude less than Allen’s movie.

What cuts across demographic lines? Socioeconomic barriers? And political persuasions? The answer is entertainment. People want to be entertained, be they yahoos or culterati, left or right, dull or brilliant, young or old, rich or poor, and all the people between the extremes. The trick for ecocritics is as American as apple pie: bait-and-switch. Lure the public to where it does not necessarily want to go and, once there, engage them in debate. The venue is not a text much less a textbook 6 inches thick and full of graphs, equations and glossaries. It is selection and promotion of film and television which can be judged verisimilar by scientific criteria and engaging by the broadest patterns of human behavior. Given that *Homo sapiens sapiens* is a highly sexual species, a sure bet for ecocritical selection is sex.

*Film? Television? Sex? Oh no, not sex! How low must we sink?* The groan of the economist is the definitive evidence that ecocriticism counts as a distinct school of thought. As an aside, Hardin’s *The Voyage*, like Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, never made it to the screen and the loss is much more than a missed opportunity for some Hollywood mogul. The necessary condition for a work of art to provoke “mutual coercion, mutually agreed” is that it be discussed both nationally and internationally.

**Woody Allen’s *Match Point* is an example that is also exemplary**

Curiously, Garrett Hardin could not possibly have imagined that he would be classified as an “ecocritic” when he published *The Voyage* in 1971. The word was only coined in 1978. (Rueckert) Woody Allen could also not possibly have imagined that his 2005 film *Match Point* would now be considered exemplary. An advanced google search in October 2006 comes up with zero hits for ecocriticism as an economic school among the 92 thousands hits for ecocriticism (Table 1). But even the reader who is persuaded that ecocriticism is indeed a school of economic thought, may be surprised that *Match Point* is deemed exemplary. Ostensibly, the movie has nothing to do with resource allocation. Traffic is the only expression of any “tragedy of the commons” and even that requires interpretation: the street scenes are never congested with cars and the viewer only knows of the traffic through the complaints voiced in posh and tranquil milieus. It falls upon the ecocritic to point out that the upper classes are finding refuge from the “tragedy of the commons” that they themselves provoke through their over-consumption. Scholars in ecology will add that such refuge is only *temporary* when viewed from the long sweep of human history (see, for example, Jared Diamond’s *Collapse* or Paul and Anne Erlich’s *One with Ninevah*).

Table 1: Hits of Word Sequences through Google Searches (October 2006)

Economics	265,000,000
Ecological Economics	1,210,000
Ecocriticism	91,800
Daly Farley “Ecological Economics”	12,700
Ecocriticism “Ecological Economics”	370
Ecocriticism “School of Economics” NOT London	44
(Upon examination of each hit)	0
“Woody Allen” Match Point	1,480,000
“Woody Allen” Match Point allegory	16,700

The ecocritical interpretation about traffic hardly makes *Match Point* exemplary. What stands out is *how* moral implications about resource allocation are raised and, should the debate among viewers ensue, could actually result in action *pro* the environment. The movie begins with a tennis ball in motion over a net on a clay court. The camera is tightly focused on the ball, as it shifts back and forth. The lead character, Chris Wilton, narrates a general principle that he has discerned as a former tennis professional.

The man who said ‘I’d rather be lucky than good’ saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It’s scary to think so much is out of one’s control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net, and for a split second, it can either go forward or fall back. With a little luck, it goes forward, and you win. Or maybe it doesn’t, and you lose.

The movie fleshes out that simple thesis in upper class England in the new millennium.

The ecological economist will prick up her ears. The fate of the tennis ball is a metaphor of path dependence being deterministically reduced to what thermodynamicists call bifurcation points. Although the direction of the ball is ever so briefly indeterminate, once it is known, everything else is determinate “it goes forward and you win, or it doesn’t and you lose.” Such determinacy is the stuff of both Greek tragedy and resource allocation. In “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Hardin cites Whitehead that “The essence of dramatic tragedy is not unhappiness. It resides in the solemnity of the remorseless working of things...This inevitableness of destiny can only be illustrated in terms of human life by incidents which in fact involve unhappiness. For it is only by them that the futility of escape can be made evident in the drama.” (254) *Match Point* can be schematized as a series of unforeseeable bifurcations points which, once known, inexorably unfold in a foreseeable fashion. The suspense lies whenever the metaphorical ball hits the top of the net. Because there are several such instances, unevenly distributed over the length of the movie, the story keeps the viewer highly engaged.

In between the bifurcation points, the ecocritic must explain the unfolding. Enter evolutionary psychology, once known as sociobiology. Each character coheres with broad patterns that are consilient with human evolution. Chris, the protagonist, is from a poor religious Irish family (“faith is the path of least resistance”) and, through excellence in his skill (tennis playing) has penetrated a top social circle. His status as the second-runner up to Agassiz belies the hyperbole in *The Winner Take All Society* (Frank and Cook). Access is the reward for being second runner up. Chris gives private lessons to a brother and sister, Tom and Chloe Hewett, who are also about his age and, best of all, single. Chris makes no pretensions to being something other than who he is and Tom and Chloe find the sincerity both disarming and refreshing. As the story progresses, one sees Chris’ interest in the Hewetts is driven more by a desire for material comfort than for social status. Nevertheless, to swim with in their circles, he must learn their strokes. In his cramped apartment and under a reading lamp, Chris struggles with Dostoevsky. The viewer has a hunch that *Crime and Punishment* will mean something more to Chris than a self-improvement project.

Tom invites Chris to join the family at their box in the Royal Opera House (a true sign of wealth if ever there were one). Chloe takes note of Chris, and in a sign which is out of the sociobiology playbook, signals her receptivity by gently tossing her hair back. He picks up the cue and the courtship begins. She queries him as to his ambition. Presently, he is in a subservient position as a tennis pro which is sociobiologically a turn-off. He knows it and tells her that “I would cut my throat if I had to do it forever.” The ecocritic would stop and ponder the paradox for standard economic theory: doesn’t diminishing marginal utility ever set into money? Chloe will never have to worry about anything materially? Why does she care if Chris occupies his time giving private lessons at a tennis club? The answer is status which is zero-sum and not confined to male hierarchies as Sarah Blaffer Hrdy has assiduously documented among our primate cousins.

Enter Pappa (Alec Hewett). He is a self-made investment banker who has taken on patrician airs. Again, straight out of the sociobiology playbook, altruism peaks within the family. Repeatedly, Chloe reminds Chris that Pappa will help both financially and professionally. Whereas economists consider such nepotism an abuse of the economic system, *Match Point* presents it as indisputable fact of system. The tragedy is in the

making as the material life which awaits Chris is clearly laid before him. Predictably, hormones intervene. Chris meets the nubile Nola at the country house of the Hewetts. Nola is Tom's very blonde American fiancée who hails from a broken home with an alcoholic mother. Nola's vulnerability is also pure sociobiology. Nola knows men find her sensual. Her ambition to become an actress is genuine but deemed delusional by Tom's mother, Eleanor. When Eleanor poses a series of pointed questions, Nola walks out of the room. Tom stays behind and seizes the moment to upbraid his mother. Alec joins in: "I think you have had one too many G and Ts." From the guest room window, Chris sees Nola stomping off through the sculpted English Garden and toward the open fields. It is raining but Chris doesn't bother to get the broly as he is quite literally in hot pursuit. Nola's frustration morphs into receptivity toward Chris' advances and there in the field and rain, the two furiously make love.

The tragedy is in the social structures. Both Chris and Nola realize that they occupy the same social niche---future sister and brother-in-laws who are bound to marry extremely well. Realizing the hazard of any subsequent rendez-vous, Nola rejects Chris' overtures. The viewer senses that Nola is attracted but, in a cost-benefit analysis, expects a big net loss from any further tryst. Again, the divergence in risk taking between sexes is sociobiology in action. Woody Allen serves us a spin ball as we find out that Nola's predictable choice turns out to have been the wrong one. Tom ends up dumping Chloe as he falls in love and marries someone who, coincidentally, is from his class. Nola disappears for a year and in the interim, Chris marries Chloe who sets out to start a family while she is, in her words, "still young." Chris knows absolutely nothing about investment banking but his father-in-law installs him in a promising position over others who have worked their way up---so much for the theory of wages equaling the value of marginal productivity. A sweet deal with Japanese clients will cinch Chris' fortunes.

Luck resurfaces but it is now mixed. Chris goes to the Tate Gallery to meet Chloe and, by chance, catches a glimpse of Nola. As they greet one another, Nola has all but forgotten Chris' passion. As his sexual interest in her becomes evident, she knits her brow and asks "are you still married?" Chloe appears and also greets Nola. In a whisper, Chris urges Nola to say her telephone number. Chloe is just beyond audible reach,

The tragedy is in full motion in the scheduled rendezvous. Luck would have it that Nola gets pregnant from the one and only encounter of unprotected sex while Chloe cannot get pregnant despite carefully planned unprotected sex. Nola refuses to have an abortion and implores Chris “to do the right thing.” An internal debate rages within Chris. He will be shut out of the material comforts of the upper class should he assume responsibility. The logical deduction is apparent: maintain Nola as a mistress. But Nola will have none of it: such an arrangement would confirm the inferior status that she has tried so hard to overcome. Nola nags Chris to break off with Chloe and Chris procrastinates. He invents a series of lies to buy time and figure out what to do. The tragedy is in play when the only apparent solution is to murder Nola. The soundtrack is the passionate "O figli, o figli miei!" from Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth*.

The structure of the tragedy is not original to *Match Point*. American viewers will be reminded of the Theodore Dreiser classic *An American Tragedy* (1925) relating a true life story that occurred in 1906 in Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks of New York. The novel was adapted to the film *A Place in the Sun* (1951) starring Montgomery Cliff (George Eastman, the analog to Chris) and Elizabeth Taylor (Angela Vickers, the analog to Chloe). George drowns the factory girl he impregnated (Alice Tripp played by Shelly Winters) by upturning a row boat in Lake Tahoe. In both Dreiser's novel and the film adaptation, one is never really sure whether or not George really upturned the boat or whether he just let Alice be pulled down by the weight of her heavy skirts. George is electrocuted and the audience senses a certain justice in the punishment. But justice at the end of a movie is so last century!

Chris plans to murder Nola when she returns home from work. To divert attention as to the motive (after all, her pregnancy would show up in forensics), he first shoots the doddering next door neighbor, Mrs. Eastby (Margaret Tyzack). Chris collapses in tears for the crime he has committed. Unexpectedly, a neighbor bangs on the door suspecting something is wrong from the sound of the loud music. It is another match point moment. The neighbor could have persisted but desists and goes away. Slumped on the floor, Chris literally and figuratively picks himself up. He makes the murder look like a drug-related burglary by stealing Mrs. Eastby's jewels. Nola enters the apartment building and rides the lift to her floor. As she enters her apartment, Chris calls out and she turns to faces

him. He shoots her at close range. His alibi will be a theatre engagement with his wife and, in the taxi ride over to the theatre, he again breaks down. In an orchestra seat with his wife beside him, he contemplates the crime he has just committed, alone in a crowded room.

To go unpunished, Chris must now attend to the details of the crime. He returns the shotgun to the storage room of his father's country estate. He is almost caught in the act. It could have gone the other way, another lucky break. In a subsequent scene, Chris takes a handful of Mrs. Eastby's jewels and throws them into the Thames. He realizes he still has more in his pockets. A few more steps and he throws some more jewels. The persistence of the jewels in his pockets is a reminder of his guilt and, for the Shakespearean aficionado, reminiscent of King Duncan's blood that Macbeth cannot wash from his hands. Finally, Chris realizes that he has one last bangle still in his pocket. In a long shot, he hurls the bangle and turns away, not noticing that the bangle hits the iron guard railing much as a tennis ball hits the top of the net. It literally falls not on the outside but on the inside of the promenade. The audience thinks: "Chris, you will be caught. You lose."

An unresolved murder is intriguing unless one is the police. Then it is a job like any other, with its routines and protocols. Two deadpan officers, Detective Parry and Inspector Dowd call Chris to come down to the station. The officers set an age old trap of letting the suspect talk and then confronting the suspect with evidence to the contrary of what the suspect has just said. Chris talks and is then confronted by the appearance of Nola's Diary. His adrenalin surges and it is another match point moment. Chris admits to having just lied and implores the officers not to ruin his family life. His wife is pregnant and his in-laws have much social standing. Perhaps because Chris is not pretentious, the officers do not harbor any class resentment and seem to sympathize. But something just doesn't sit right and Detective Parry mulls over the murders. One night, he pops up in bed and shouts "Chris Willington murdered Nola Rice." The next morning he announces his theory at work. Mrs. Eastby was a smokescreen. Inspector Dowd is unimpressed. Nice theory but the bangle was just found in the clothes of a murdered heroin addict who had a long list of convictions. Nevertheless, intuition tells the detective that he is right. He even correctly surmises that Chris got rid of the evidence and the addict, coincidentally, found it but no jury would ever buy it. So, the apparent bad luck of the bangle falling inside the

railing turned out to be very good luck. An analogy awaits the ecocritic: standard economic theory has long prided itself on building very powerful models on simple assumptions like rationality and selfishness, even though complex causal chains are often the truth.

The Hewetts are abuzz with the front-page story of Nola's death. They attribute her misfortune to a bifurcation point: she was at the "wrong place, wrong time." But Chris is not so easily off the hook. Like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Chris' conscience intervenes. While Chris is alone in the night, Nola and Mrs. Eastby appear as ghosts.

Nola: Chris.

Chris: Nola. It wasn't easy. But when the time came, I could pull the trigger. You never know who your neighbors are till there's a crisis. You can learn to push the guilt under the rug and go on. You have to. Otherwise it overwhelms you.

Mrs. Eastby: And what about me? What about the next-door neighbor? I had no involvement in this awful affair. Is there no problem about me having to die as an innocent bystander?

Chris: The innocent are sometimes slain to make way for a grander scheme. You were collateral damage.

Mrs. Eastby: So was your child.

Chris: Sophocles said: To never have been born, may be the greatest boon of all.

Nola: Prepare to pay the price, Chris. Your actions are clumsy, full of holes, almost like someone begging to be found out.

Chris: It would be fitting if I were apprehended and punished. At least there would be some small sign of justice. Some small measure of hope for the possibility of meaning. It would be fitting if I were apprehended and punished. At least there would be some small sign of justice.

The term "collateral damage" is more than just a euphemism. It is code for the U.S. Military *doublespeak* that dates back to the Viet Nam War. The expression has been resuscitated in the wake of tens of thousands of civilian deaths in the ongoing Iraq War. Woody Allen's placement of "collateral damage" in the most reflexive scene of the movie is highly significant but not at all obvious. It requires the critic. As Table 1 shows,

out of the approximately 1.5 million hits of “Match point Woody Allen,” only 17 thousand perceived an allegory and less than one thousand mentioned Iraq. Nevertheless, the audience is primed for such an interpretation. The film critic Matthew Wilder writes

Not since De Palma's *The Fury* in 1978 have I seen an audience respond like this. It recalls those mythical hillbillies in the silent era who leapt out of the way of the charging locomotive they saw in the very first motion picture.

The movie veers in directions that cause the audience to cry out in amazement, but most of the positive reactions to *Match Point* I've encountered provide an alibi for the audience, some excuse for the pleasure this movie affords. For instance: *It's really an allegory of the Iraq War and the things we'll do to pay for our quality of life. Or: The movie is an unconscious statement on Woody's fetishization of the lifestyles of the rich and famous--he's really more Patrick Bateman than Philip Barry after all!*

And Iraq is not the only allusion. Just as Dostoevsky used wordplay in choosing names in *Crime and Punishment*, Woody Allen seems to have done likewise. Edward Burch posted this message in the blogosphere on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006:

I think this is one of Woody Allen's best movies in years. Is it a critical commentary on the role of class in modern society, and the ways in which the rich (and white and powerful) can act with impunity (Iraq War allegory, anyone?), or is it merely a shameless excuse to fetishize Scarlett Johanssen's pillowy lips and "match"ing (pardon the pun) bosom? Her character's name, after all is Nola (NOLA? New Orleans? Ends up dead?) And what's with those sexualized grunts that she lets loose with? Dear Lord, it's like she's recreating her own little Katrina right there on the screen?

The role of the ecocritic is to bring such interpretations to light. *Match Point* can only be exemplary if informal conversations turn political. The opening voice-over “It's scary to think so much is out of one's control” should not be confined to chance events. It can also apply to the decisions made by Heads of State once elections are past. The skeptic may

be left uneasy. Where is the “eco” in such ecocriticism? How does it cohere with the Gomides definition? By “rais[ing] moral questions about human interactions with nature” (including the evolutionary psychology of human nature), voters may be motivated “to live within a limit that will be binding over generations” such as banning preemptive wars.

The self-imposition of banning preemptive wars will rebound favorably for the environment. Despite what one learns in ECONOMICS 101, the tradeoff for Heads of State and legislative bodies is not GUNS vs. BUTTER but GUNS vs. EDUCATION, GUNS vs. PUBLIC HEALTH, GUNS vs. FOOD SUPPORT PROGRAMS, and GUNS vs. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION. A re-routing of even a small fraction of the budget allotted for GUNS in the U.S. would be a huge increase for ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION. As of January 2006, the costs of the Iraq War were estimated by the Harvard budget expert Linda Bilmes and the Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz at a staggering 2 trillion dollars.

An unexpected lesson emerges. The roundabout impact of *Match Point* against preemptive war and in favor of the environment may be far greater than the direct appeals of documentaries like *Fahrenheit 9/11* or *An Inconvenient Truth*. For the scholar in the humanities, such a thesis is nothing new. The transformative merit of subtlety was perceived long ago by Emily Dickinson:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant---  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind.

## Conclusion

Ecocritics have long worried that their endeavors were frivolous in an environment undergoing collapse. Ironically, when ecocriticism is viewed as an economic school of thought, those same endeavors are quintessentially pragmatic: engage people in debate over problems that have no technical solutions. Art is the most cost-effective mechanism to achieve such engagement. The most vexing problems today belong to a class for which no technical solution exists; the solution is political--“mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected.” Incredibly, despite climate change, mass extinction, and an increasingly toxic environment, many illustrious economists still advocate economic growth as the panacea to the problems that envelop the globe (see, for example, Bhagwati). To the ecocritic, nothing is more frivolous and counterproductive than growth in a world already awash with production and its concomitant wastes.

One may see an indeterminacy frustrating the ecocritical agenda. Once the ecocritic persuades an audience that a work of art is an allegory, doesn't that very interpretation alert those of a different political persuasion? *Match Point* is again exemplary. The film is billed as a drama, romance, and thriller and few people will deny themselves the entertainment of a drama, etc., because some academic somewhere claims that the movie is an allegory of the war in Iraq based on the phrase “collateral damage.” People will want to form their own opinion. At the level of conversation, one does not debate with some faceless ecocritic but with friends and family who may hold an opinion somehow shaped by the ecocritic.

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