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# Eco-choreography for Environmental Crisis Communication in Contemporary Thai Dance: A Multi-case Study

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## Abstract

Environmental crises are frequently communicated through scientific reports, yet public engagement often depends on embodied, affective, and culturally resonant forms of meaning-making. This paper proposes an analytical framework termed “Eco-choreography” to examine how contemporary Thai dance communicates environmental crisis narratives through dramaturgy, movement quality, material symbols, and sonic atmosphere. Using a multi-case design, the study analyses four performance dossiers that address (1) deforestation and heat, structured as destruction-restoration-abundance; (2) coral reef degradation driven by marine plastic, framed as deterioration-restoration-flourishing; (3) disasters of the four elements (earth, water, wind, fire) as nature’s warning against human negligence; and (4) drought interpreted through an Isan rainmaking ritual, contrasting hope with failed supplication and loss. Data comprise textual performance documents and structured performance analysis guided by the proposed framework; the paper additionally outlines an audience-oriented evaluation extension using creator interviews and pre- and post-performance audience measures of understanding, emotional connection, and behavioural intention (e.g., reduced plastic use). Analytical synthesis of dossier-coded cues suggests that clear narrative arcs from crisis to repair, together with tangible on-body objects (e.g., nets, plastic-like materials, debris), may strengthen potential audience legibility of causal responsibility and possibilities for restoration. The paper contributes a transferable tool for analysing and designing environmental performance in Thai cultural contexts and supports arts-based approaches to sustainability communication.

**Keywords:** audience reception, contemporary Thai dance, eco-choreography, environmental communication, theatre ecology

## 1. Introduction

Environmental degradation and climate-related disruption are increasingly experienced as lived and bodily realities—through heat, polluted air, floods, drought, and the slow erosion of ecosystems. In Thailand, contemporary choreographers have begun to mobilize Thai dance vocabularies and creative dance practices to render these crises sensible, translating abstract environmental processes into dramaturgical arcs, kinesthetic dynamics, and material symbols that audiences can see and feel. Performance studies frame such work as a mode of cultural

knowledge production, where meaning is generated not only by verbal explanation but also by action, ritual, and embodied signs (Schechner, 2020).

This paper focuses on four contemporary Thai dance works—*The Log’s Cry: The Heated World*, *Whisper from Coral*, *Ominous Four Elements*, and *The Last Drop*—each articulating environmental crisis through distinct ecosystems and narrative structures: deforestation and global heat; coral reef decline and marine plastics; elemental disasters as nature’s warning against human negligence; and drought refracted through an Isan rainmaking ritual. Across the cases, the choreography repeatedly moves from harm to possible repair, inviting audiences to recognise both causal responsibility and restorative agency.

### **1.1 Background and research gap**

Scholarship on theatre and ecology has argued that performance can intervene in environmental humanities by generating forms of attention, care, and ethical response that differ from data-driven messaging (Lavery, 2018). Dance scholarship similarly emphasises how spectatorship is mediated through kinesthetic and affective processes rather than a direct, automatic empathy (Foster, 2011). However, there is limited work that systematises how Thai dance-making, with its culturally specific movement lineages and symbol systems, composes environmental meaning across dramaturgy, movement, objects, and sound. The current study addresses this gap by proposing “Eco-choreography” as an integrative framework for analysis and design, grounded in Thai contemporary dance cases that explicitly narrate ecological harm and repair.

#### **1.1.1 Research questions**

This paper asks:

- 1) How do contemporary Thai dance works structure environmental crisis narratives across episodes (e.g., crisis–restoration)?
- 2) What movement qualities, objects, and sonic atmospheres are used to materialise causal responsibility, loss, and hope?
- 3) How can these cross-case patterns be synthesised into a transferable Eco-choreography framework for research and practice?

#### **1.2 Research Objective**

The objectives are to (1) analyse and compare environmental meaning-making across four Thai contemporary dance cases; (2) develop an Eco-choreography framework with practical analytical indicators; and (3) outline an audience-oriented evaluation plan.

## **2. Literature review**

Environmental performance scholarship has increasingly argued that theatre and performance can function ecologically by cultivating modes of attention, affect, and ethical response to climate change, pollution, and extinction that extend beyond representational critique alone (Lavery, 2018). Rather than merely illustrating environmental issues, performance operates as a cultural practice that reconfigures how ecological crises are perceived, felt, and negotiated by audiences. This perspective situates performance as an active participant in environmental meaning-making rather than a secondary communicative medium.

Within dance and performance studies, ecological approaches further foreground the material entanglements among bodies, environments, and nonhuman agencies. Spalink (2023) conceptualises choreography as a site where movement, matter, and ecological conditions intersect, emphasising that dance does not simply represent nature but is shaped by—and responds to—environmental forces. Such approaches resonate with contemporary concerns in the environmental humanities, which stress relationality, embodiment, and materiality as critical dimensions of ecological understanding.

At the level of reception, scholarship on kinesthesia and spectatorship challenges assumptions of automatic empathy between performers and audiences. Foster (2011) argues that what spectators ‘feel’ when watching movement is socially mediated, shaped by cultural codes, embodied training, and prior experience. This insight is crucial for analysing environmental dance works, as it underscores that affective response is not inherent in movement itself but emerges through structured choreographic cues and culturally legible signs.

From the perspective of choreographic construction, Rungsawang et al. (2022) identified core principles in dance choreography design for narrative contexts, highlighting how movement organisation, spatial patterning, and symbolic gesture contribute to meaning-making. These principles provide methodological grounding for analysing choreography not only as aesthetic form but as a system of communicative strategies. In environmental dance works, such strategies become particularly significant in translating abstract ecological processes into embodied, perceivable experiences.

In parallel, environmental humanities scholarship has critiqued the communicative challenges posed by ‘slow violence’—forms of environmental harm that unfold incrementally, are spatially dispersed, and often remain invisible within conventional modes of representation (Nixon, 2011). This critique underscores the need for cultural forms capable of rendering gradual ecological degradation perceptible and emotionally resonant. Performance and dance, with their emphasis on temporality, embodiment, and affect, are especially well positioned to address these challenges.

Taken together, these bodies of scholarship motivate the development of an analytical framework that treats choreography as a structured constellation of environmental cues. By attending to narrative organisation, movement quality, material symbolism, and sonic atmosphere, such a framework enables systematic analysis of how environmental crises are composed, communicated, and interpreted through dance. This study responds to this need by proposing Eco-choreography as an integrative framework for examining how contemporary Thai dance articulates ecological crisis, responsibility, and possibility.

### 3. Methodology

A multi-case qualitative design was used to compare four Thai contemporary dance works: *The Log’s Cry: The Heated World*; *Whisper from Coral*; *Ominous Four Elements*; and *The Last Drop*. The cases represent four environmental problem-spaces: (a) deforestation and heat; (b) coral reef degradation and marine plastic; (c) disasters of the four elements (earth, water, wind, fire) framed as nature’s warning; and (d) drought interpreted through an Isan rainmaking ritual. Primary data for this paper are the textual dossiers and structured performance analysis. Each case was coded using the proposed Eco-choreography dimensions: (1) dramaturgical structure, (2) movement quality, (3) material/visual symbols, (4) sound/atmosphere, and (5) responsibility-and-hope framing. Coding was conducted by the author using a structured

template and iteratively refined through within-case and cross-case comparison. The paper additionally outlines an audience-oriented evaluation extension via creator interviews and pre- and post-performance audience instruments measuring understanding, emotional connection, and behavioural intention (e.g., reduced plastic use).

Indicators were operationalised as observable features in each dossier. These included movement dynamics (tempo/force/coordination), dramaturgical episode labels, on-body/prop material cues, and sound–visual texture, refined through within- and cross-case comparison.

#### 4. Results and discussion

Cross-case analysis indicates a shared dramaturgical preference for arcs that move from damage to repair. The forest-heat and coral-plastic works, for example, articulate crisis through an initial ‘destruction/deterioration’ episode followed by restoration and renewed abundance/flourishing. This structure supports narrative legibility, allowing spectators to map causal harm onto the possibility of regeneration.

Across cases, meaning is intensified when environmental harm is made materially present on the dancing body. Nets, plastic-like materials, and debris function as tactile signs that collapse the distance between environmental ‘issue’ and embodied consequence. Movement qualities similarly carry semantic weight: sharp, accelerated, forceful dynamics can stage extraction and violence, while softer, coordinated movement can frame repair and collective care. Finally, the ritualised logic of the drought case positions environmental uncertainty within cultural practice, foregrounding grief when the ritual fails and re-situating sustainability as both ecological and communal.

Based on these patterns, Eco-choreography is proposed as an integrative analytical tool with five dimensions (dramaturgy, movement quality, material symbols, sound/atmosphere, responsibility-and-hope). Tab. 1 summarises how the dimensions appear across the four cases. The framework can guide both analysis (how meaning is produced) and design (how future works can compose clearer pathways from crisis to action).

**Table 1: Cross-case Eco-choreography summary**

Case	Environmental focus	Dramaturgical arc	Key choreographic cues	Primary intended response
Four-elements work (Fig. 1)	Disasters of earth, water, wind, fire	Human negligence → elemental warning → reflection	Contrasting elemental motifs; escalating intensity to ‘warning’	Acknowledge responsibility; shift everyday practices
Coral-plastic work (Fig. 2)	Coral reef degradation and marine plastic	Deterioration → restoration → flourishing	Nets/plastic-like materials; debris as on-body symbols	Reduce plastic use; protect marine ecosystems
Forest-heat work (Fig. 3)	Deforestation and rising heat	Destruction → restoration → abundance	Forceful, accelerated dynamics; imagery of cutting/clearing	Recognise causality; support reforestation and mitigation
Drought-ritual work (Fig. 4)	Drought and water insecurity	Hopeful rainmaking → failure → grief	Ritual motifs; communal movement; collapse into stillness	Empathise with vulnerability; value water stewardship

Source: Author’s synthesis from performance dossiers.

*Figure 1: Ominous Four Elements*



*Source: Author's figure from performance dossiers.*

*Figure 2: Whisper from Coral*



*Source: Author's figure from performance dossiers.*

*Figure 3: The Log's Cry: The Heated World*



*Source: Author's figure from performance dossiers.*

*Figure 4: The Last Drop*



*Source: Author's figure from performance dossiers.*

## 5. Conclusion

This paper advances Eco-choreography as a framework for analysing environmental crisis communication in contemporary Thai dance. The multi-case synthesis suggests that (1) clear narrative arcs from crisis to repair, (2) tangible material symbols on the body, and (3) culturally specific ritual logics may enhance potential audience legibility of environmental causality, loss, and hope.

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The selected case studies—The Log's Cry: The Heated World, Whisper from Coral, Ominous Four Elements, and The Last Drop—embody diverse eco-choreographic practices that articulate environmental concerns through movement, ritual, and culturally embedded aesthetics. These works provided critical embodied knowledge and artistic insight that informed the analytical framework of this research and contributed significantly to understanding how contemporary Thai dance functions as a medium for environmental awareness and ecological reflection.

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