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Dark Ecology and the Abject

Rebeca Weiman,

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Abstract/Intro

I would like to discuss the possibility of a parallax view of ecology and the environment. There is very little discussion of theoretical approaches to ecocriticism that is not either polarizing dualism or reactionary attempts to dissolve important boundaries between us and the space around us. I draw significantly on the work of Timothy Morton who in turn utilizes new readings of Descartes, Heidegger and other phenomenologists, Marx, and Lacan, among others, to discuss the aesthetic in eco-critique. This has significant links to Zizek's description of parallax and his positioning of Hegelian dialectics, in particular the need for tension between positions, determinate negation, and resurrection of irony as necessary for understanding paradox.

Ambience

It seems important to maintain distance from the object that we are considering to be nature, but what kind of distance? In *The Parallax View* Zizek discusses the “Thing from Inner Space” as central to the function of modern art as a kind of essential Truth that can only be activated through the form of the Subject. Yet this Thing is in a slippery, parallax relationship to our perception of hard, material reality. He elucidates this point via a discussion of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* in which a young boy steals a rowboat and as he rows, the mountain, away from which he is rowing, appears to get larger and larger. Even as his physical distance grows, the perceived distance between himself and the mountain shrinks, and the boy becomes frightful and traumatized by the optical illusion. He perceives the mountain as a growing, threatening being with its own agency. Zizek says of the episode

This is how a ‘thing from inner space’ emerges...what appears to be the excess of some transcendent force of ‘normal’ external reality is the very place of direct inscription of my subjectivity into this reality. In other words, what I get back in the guise of the horrifying-irrepresentable Thing is the objectivization...of my own gaze.

Zizek continues to discuss a kind of similar slippage between modern and postmodern art in which the relationship between abstraction and realism is inverted wherein “the confused intensity of nonrepresentative shapes in the last remainder of reality, so that when we pass from it to clearly identifiable representation, we enter the aetheric fantasy-space in which reality is irretrievably lost” (Zizek 2006: 150-152). In other words, the domain of the ambient opens up our disturbed relationship to what would otherwise be considered hard reality.

Ambience and ambient art often seeks to collapse the space between us the subject and that out there, the object of nature, by embedding us in an immersive experience of “nature”. It is an ephemeral sense of the environment—smells, sounds, flickering images—that are not particular but are evoked through the particular. Ambience, at least in its ecomimetic form, tries to blur the boundary between subject and object but without irony. In so doing it becomes ideological fantasy—a mode of the aesthetic. It is this aestheticized distance, hiding in the guise of immersive ambience,

that retains an outdated Romantic notion of nature, and muddles the need for ethical distance, a kind of close distance.

This type of distance is further investigated in Timothy Morton's discussion of the very same Wordsworth poem, which he uses to describe a kind of "viscosity" in which "it is as if the mountain is stuck to Wordsworth, as is it won't let him go." The scale and position of the subject is changed by this mushy space-time, the trauma of which does not go unnoticed. There is "a traumatic rupture in the continuity of his being, a wound around which his psyche secreted memories, fantasies, thoughts." In this schematic what is ambient is that space of internalized objects, things that are written into (and sometimes emerge from) the space within (Morton 2013: 43). Morton's idea of nature falls more on the side of the mountain looming larger, than on the side of its static, permanent position. There is no optical illusion.

Morton points to the ambivalent quality of ambience, and in so doing seems to retain aspects of it that are potentially radical. He says of its ambivalence: "it does not really collapse the subject-object dualism, either by reconciling subject to object, or by undoing the distinction altogether. Ambience... [is a] 'new and improved' version of the aesthetic" (Morton 2007: 67). Morton also links ambience to Lacan's *sinthome* as the "materially embodied, meaningless, and inconsistent kernel of 'idiotic enjoyment' that sustains an otherwise discursive ideological field." When we attempt to get close to this fantasy object, we start to dismantle the ideological field. In other words, ambient art seeks to takes us close to our fantasy object but it fails. It is not aware that it fails, yet in its failure some other experience of space is available. Morton again: "Imagine the *sinthome* not as figure but as ground: a potent, non-neutral ground, a giant stain. This would square well with the vaginal connotations of the *sinthome*, in patriarchy a *wound* that is also a *space*" (Morton 2007: 67). This kind of ambience disrupts the very notion that "we" can be "embedded" in "it".

Ambient art tries to draw into the foreground something that only exists in the background, and yet contain some of its sense of backgroundedness. It requires a distracted kind of attention. This could be seen as the liberatory aspect of ambience. The very kind of attention that might otherwise be condemned as a by-product of consumerism finds a place here as a way of keeping out of focus that thing that would disappear should we focus too closely on it. Yet it is liberatory only if it remains strange to us. Here Morton rescues *irony* from its hue of post-modern malaise, its sense of

apathetic distance, a too-cool kind of cynicism, and returns to it its original meaning of opposing but not exclusive views. In other words he positions irony as parallax. Irony is necessary: “The only way to remain close to the strangers without killing them (turning them into yourself or into an inanimate object) is to maintain a sense of irony” (Morton 2007: 100).

The Uncanny and the Abject

Utterly unromantic in her portrayal of nature is Marian Engel’s novel “Bear”, a strange fictional tale of Lou, a researcher and librarian sent to an island to catalogue documents, who then becomes involved in an emotional and sexual relationship with a bear. The theorist Catriona Sandilands provides an exciting reading of this text as an investigation into the “natural” boundaries between the woman and the bear. The woman tries to speak and name the bear but continues to run up against only the bodily presence of the Bear and the incommensurability of their relationship, indeed “they are Others to each other” (Sandilands 1999: 182). Through their sexual union Lou risks death, survives, and is in a sense reborn as a redefined, reconfigured subject. Her brush with the Real of her Other leaves her somehow more herself, rescued from the illusory wholeness of a symbolic life full of cataloguing and naming, and thrust into an incomplete place of desire “to become.”

From Sandilands: “It is Lou whom we are to understand as most affected by the encounter with the Other. Unsticking herself from the bloodsoaked sheets of their failed (not insignificantly) penetrative sexual encounter during which the bear wounded her, Lou noticed that

she was different. She seemed to have the body of a much younger woman. The sedentary fat had gone, leaving the shape of her ribs showing. Slowly, she turned and looked over shoulder in the pier-glass at her back: one long, red, congealing weal marked her from shoulder to buttock. I shall keep that, she thought.

Lou carried the scar of a traumatic encounter with the Other, an encounter that transgressed the human/nonhuman animal boundary but could not bring either to fit in

the other's world. The bear, unnamed and unnameable, appears in Lou's world as a significant and active presence, but this presence is not human, not translatable into human speech. His desires leave noticeable marks on Lou's life and body, but his motives remain enigmatic. And it is the very strangeness of his presence, the scar left by the impossibility of the encounter, that causes Lou to change; ultimately, it is not his conversation but his Otherness that propels her to a sense of incomplete selfhood, to a desire to become (Sandilands 1999: 183).



Mark Dion, "Den", 2012

In Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly Man* we hear and see the true tale of a man whose intention is to cross the same boundary into the Other that Lou pushes up against. Herzog's subtle story-telling reveals the deathly effect of dissolving the boundary between self and nature. It is remarkable that Lou too nears evisceration and that it is her survival, marked by her "long, red, congealing weal", the violence she comes back from, which defines her anew. Herzog's real-life subject, Timothy Treadwell, does not have such a lucky outcome. He begins already on the fringe, an impassioned scientist, half-mad by scientific standards. He does not have many relationships, and those he does seem, at least through Herzog's eyes, to be quirky and abnormal. We are told of his repetitive drive year after year to live with grizzly bears in the wild, ostensibly to protect them. He becomes angrier and angrier about the injustice done to these bears due to hunting and development, and as he removes himself from society, he takes on

bear attitudes and mannerisms, stomping and huffing at strangers he runs into in the Alaskan wild. In the end, he is killed by the bears.

In looking at the bears, Herzog sees nothing of what Treadwell saw. He says in the film

And what haunts me, is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. And this blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell, this bear was a friend, a savior (Herzog dir. 2006).

He sees only the bear's "blank stare". However, it is this blank stare that speaks more to the Other than any sense of kinship or connection, as the Other is always that which we look towards for recognition but which does not recognize us. We can consider this moment of incommensurability as a kind of abjection, the possibility that I am abject in the presence of the bear. Or as James Hatley puts it in his essay "The Uncanny Goodness of Being Edible to Bears":

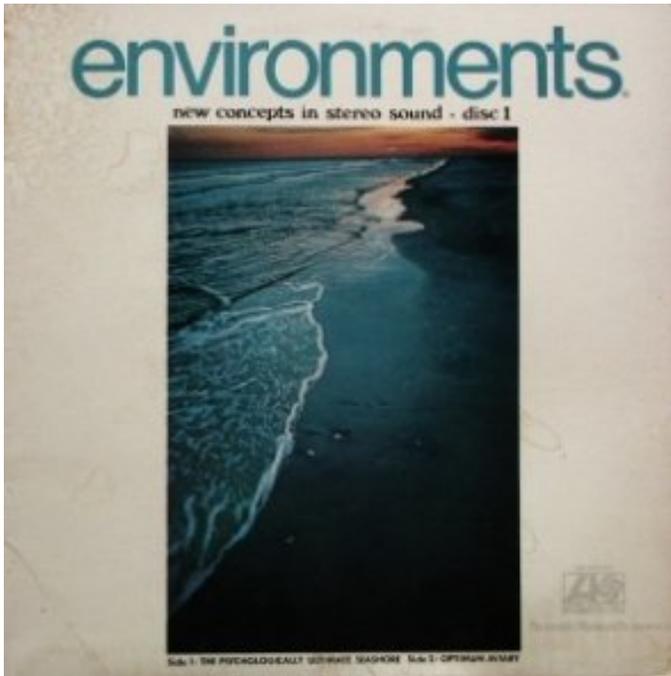
To look into the eyes of a creature plotting to feed itself upon me is to find myself claimed in a way that is quite unsettling. The stalking bear's gaze reminds me that my flesh is not only my own but also a mode of becoming a bear....[T]he uncanny precipitates a crisis in which the very capacity to fix a boundary marking out the difference between one's own and the other's own is undermined...In the uncanny I am placed utterly outside of myself, to the point that I am an other and/or the other is so utterly inside me that no space remains where I can be merely myself (Hatley 2004: 21).



Timothy Treadwell in Werner Herzog's Grizzly Man, Lions Gate, 2005

The Kristevian sense of the uncanny, of the more-than-human created by abjection, governs my relationship with these non-human entities. The “goodness” of this relationship of edibility, lies in my willingness to allow for this inhumanity, this acceptance that the dead human body is a carcass, that intimate predation renders my subject unstable or impossible (Hatley 2004: 24-26). I might re-envision my morality in relation to bears and other wild things as dependent on already being cut off from them. What I do with this apparent lack is my morality. I believe it is here that a symbolic choice is possible, that a willingness towards incommensurability, a self-unconsciousness in regards to nature might provide a more ethical mode of action towards the Other. If I deny the possibility of this lack, I am forever steeped in my own attempts to close the gap between myself and nature, to complete it, to complete pleasure. Ironically then, it seems immorality towards nature might be an unreasonable belief in the whole subject, a fantasy or collapse that is also found in the conflating of duty and enjoyment by the modern morality of the superego. The collapse ostensibly erases the “otherness” of the moralizing voice.

Lack and Sound



"Optimum Aviary" from environments LP recording, Atlantic Records, 1969

I used to drive a lot for fun. "The 5", "The 10", "The 1". In the West highways have personalities, identities, and importance. They traverse great distances, with lanes up to ten across. You can go fast, alongside big SUVs and hauler trucks. In Wyoming you can go 90 mph and no one will stop you. There is freedom here and a certain kind of perverse connection with the landscape that is at once dwarfing, overwhelming, and sad. So much in the western landscape is exemplary of human destruction, and yet it is still so potent with lawlessness and power, an embodiment of that persistent pioneer spirit.

I was in love once during one of these trips. A kind of desperate, unrequited love fueled by long drives and Yellow Jackets mix tapes. One day we detoured through South Dakota to visit the Badlands, a stretch of land with thousands of acres of desolate eroded sedimentary rock and soil, spires and pinnacles shaped by a constantly shifting wind. We off-roaded in the old sedan for miles and miles. The cars kicked up dust, and it was difficult to see. I wasn't sure why we were there.

Finally we stopped and got out of our cars. The dust settled and I looked around. For miles all I could see were crusty brown dunes and an immense sky. My ears began to throb and pulse and my head wanted to explode or implode. My object of desire would say something and his words were crisp and clear, rising and falling, and then as they

faded the imploding feeling would come again. This was the sound of silence. It was a deafening pressure, a presence I had never felt before. The presence of absence.

It was not a beautiful place in that sense. It was terrible and lonely, and seemed to match my spirit of conflict, chaos, and paradox. It helped to crystallize a feeling I had had for awhile about nature as both something incredible and complex, and also something that needed to be contained and controlled, like an inner darkness that threatened to break through the levee at any minute. There was something conflicted about the landscape, as if I was not supposed to be there. The *lack* of being able to define something outside of myself without myself is itself perhaps an indicator of nature, just as it is an indicator of the Other that doesn't exist—a parallax.

It is important to note that it was also love that brought me to that place. I was painfully in love and knew that this love would never be returned. There is perhaps nothing lonelier than having so much love not returned. I wanted to be only that which my other desired, and was willing to cut off from myself anything that was extraneous to that desire. Of course this was impossible and only in that underlying knowledge of impossibility did I know myself to exist. I needed the impossibility to bring myself into existence.

It is also important to note that this experience was an auditory one. There is something less commensurable, less open to representation in the auditory field. It is fluid and moving and hard to pin down. Perhaps this is where the aesthetic ambience of art falls short: it misses that deafening, overbearing sonic pressure from the Badlands. Or perhaps more correctly, it is precisely these ambient representations of landscape that seem so certain, so empty of the disturbing aspect of desire, and that attempt a containment of that pressure which actually distance us more, yet all the while convincing us we are there.

Herzog's film attempts a non-ambient representation when the man's physical union with the bears coincides with a moment when language, vision, and sound are withheld from us. The only document that remains of Treadwell's and his girlfriend Amie's death is an audio recording from Treadwell's own camera camera. We are told of the contents of the tape by the coroner, the manager of death. We see only the back of Herzog's head, sitting with Treadwell's close friend Jewel, as he listens to the recording, describing to us what is happening:

"I hear rain, and I hear Amie, 'Get away! Get away! Go away!'"

Though we cannot see Herzog's face we can see his body shudder, overcome with emotion,

"Can you turn it off?

Jewel, you must never listen to this."

"I know, Werner.

I'm never going to."

"And you must never look at the photos

I've seen at the coroner's office."

"I will never look at them."

"Yeah."

"They said it was bad.

Now you know why

no one's gonna hear it."

"I think you, you should not keep it.

You should destroy it."

While we are not ourselves privy to the recorded sounds of Treadwell and Amie's death, their final crossing over into the Other, we are left with this sense of a remnant, a symptom that is a reminder of the traumatic encounter with the Real. However this encounter does not belong to Treadwell, who cannot return to tell of it, but to us the viewer, as we come up against the Real of the "true" story. In a sense, the audio recording is perhaps too much of a symptom that it must be destroyed, however, this does not erode the imprinting of the symptom through its continued existence via the film, and the viewer. If anything, it is the withholding of the audio in the film that constructs the symptom. It re-solidifies the boundary between me and the Other that Treadwell made so permeable. The film doesn't show the trauma of his death by

evisceration, but withholds it so that we are made to feel the greater trauma of crossing the boundary between self and nature, while stitching that boundary back up.

Nature as Hyperobject

Joan Copjec aptly describes the desire beyond my own subject as full of “caprice, arbitrariness, destruction” and thus moral law stems from my own “recoil before the violence and obscenity of the superego’s incitement to *jouissance*, to a boundless and aggressive enjoyment” (Copjec 1994: 92). It is in the respect of this desire that ethical relationships must develop. Turning away from the existence of such desire, such drive for both pleasure *and* pain, and removing it from the basic structure of the psyche as utilitarianism does, sets the subject up perfectly for a blind and devastating kind of behavior.

We might consider the exposure we get through media to increasingly high-profile environmental disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 as a kind of representation of what Morton would call “hyperobjects”-- substances that confound concrete space-time, localization, and definitive boundaries. Morton equates this with the end of the world as they “end the possibility of transcendental leaps ‘outside’ physical reality.” In other words, they “are real whether or not someone is thinking them” (Morton 2013: 2). We can easily see how hyperobjects instigate frightening and disturbing parallax. The major response to these environmental crises revolved around a development of more resilient technologies, how we have failed to keep the overwhelmingness of the environment in check, or how we might be better prepared. In both, nature was seen as something that *should* be conducive to the status quo of human behavior, such that the debate centered not around whether this is a reasonable belief, but how we have failed to keep the environment reigned in. Yet the visual representations of these events unintentionally belied a different kind of awareness, the hyperobjectivity of the events themselves. During the BP oil spill a [24-hour live feed](#) went viral on Youtube. Viewers could watch in horror as millions of barrels of oil gushed into the murky blue ocean water. Yet we were not only watching an environment catastrophe, but also a breakdown of the structures that were supposed to protect us from the catastrophe (the correct operations of the rig)

and cover up the potentiality of catastrophe. The structure's cover was blown. So our perverse pleasure of watching, could be seen as a turn from a "scientific" super-egoic eye (what the live feed was intended for) to an ironic acquiescence towards *jouissance* (when the feed went viral), which might actually reveal an ethical kernel—isn't there something that reeks of the real in our pleasure/horror? The media responses thus showed both our desire to control, track, and stamp out the disruptive parallax of hyperobjects and our absolute pleasure in it.

In George Rippey Stewart's bestselling 1941 novel *Storm* he tells the story of a meteorologist who tracks hurricanes, a naming virtuoso, who is colloquially credited with starting the trend, later taken up in 1953 by the US Weather Bureau, of naming hurricanes after women. He writes about the storms:

Each one is different. There are the big bluffers, and the sneaks, and the honest dependable ones. Some will sulk for days and some will stab you in the back, and some walk out on you between night and morning, and some do exactly what you expect of them (Stewart 1941: 341).

In thinking about Katrina we might consider the sense of guilt, blame or agency that is given or not given to a "natural" occurrence. If a storm is personified, and more particularly personified as having a female character, how does this create a heightened sense of culpability? A something extra that must be tracked and controlled.¹

A sense of control and domination that is the hallmark of militarized societies is also at play in our relationship to our environment. The post-Katrina commentary revolved around "emergency preparedness" similar to that of post-9/11: why weren't they more prepared? Why didn't they evacuate in time? If tracking weather is possible and if science and our robust military budget can create an absolute accessibility of knowledge, there can be no outside culpability. The individual is thus ultimately responsible for an expected mastery of nature. In lieu of personal blame, blame must be then siphoned back to the government: there must be more control, more engineering, better science, better government.

The heightened sense of "preparedness" similarly drives the characters in Jan de Bont's film, *Twister*. In this 1996 Hollywood environmental disaster thriller, Helen Hunt and Bill Paxton play a scientist couple on the brink of divorce who reunite for one last

tour, chasing tornadoes. Helen Hunt plays the rough tomboy “Jo”, a “wild west” type character obsessed with tracking the tornado, always trying to get closer to it. Her husband “Bill” who is considering remarrying and starting a new life as a “weather man” is the butt of many jokes, and is sucked back in to the life of a tornado chaser by the possibility of finally being able to track the inside of a funnel. What ostensibly drives the research is a hope that they can allow people to have more warning about approaching tornadoes, know where and how fast they will travel, and be better prepared for an emergency.

The emotional climax of the film comes after a (failed) attempt to track a tornado and it is revealed that the real underlying reason for Jo’s obsession is to find an explanation for why her father was killed by a tornado when she was a young child. Her obsession is marked by a traumatic event that she has never gotten over, and the storm is a way of touching or getting close to that event again.

In the cinematic climax of the movie the couple are able to witness the inside of an F5 tornado, a tornado so powerful one character says it is like “the finger of God”. In this scene Jo and Bill use leather straps to bind themselves to a metal pipe that is rooted deep into the ground as the tornado passes directly over them. They are in the center of the funnel and Jo looks up and she can see the sky through the center of the funnel as angelic music signals her connection with her obsession. They are in an empty place, the empty core of the storm. The height of their climax is marked by an absence. There is an interesting combination here of a Lacanian phallic representation of the cyclone, the finger of God that points only to what they are both desiring, and the empty center signaling the possibility for their desire to manifest in different ways. For Bill the desire is one of gaining knowledge, something of the symbolic order, restoring his dignity as a true scientist. The technology that tracks the storm is after all, his design. Jo on the other hand is guided by something much more traumatic, the loss of her daddy, a literal ripping away of that which would create the structure against which to define herself. Their attempts to control, track, and get close to nature ends up touching only the lack at its center.



Helen Hunt and Bill Paxton in *Twister*, Jan de Bont, Warner Bros., 1996

We must consider the possibility that humans *want* to destroy nature. Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Žižekian idea of the parallax may have some insights to offer in this investigation of Americans' muddled, repressed and perverted relationship to nature. The superego's injunction is that not only must we forgo all of the pleasures we had for the sake of some unnameable nature (Other) but that we must enjoy doing so. In the absence of clearly defined symbolic ethical rules the power of utopianism works to camouflage the trauma not just in the destruction and collapse of the environment but in the empty authority and lawlessness of collapse. In opposition to this is a hedonistic and violent assumption of the pleasure underlying the superego, full of destructive *jouissance*, heeding the demand to enjoy without regard to any symbolic contract or authority. So what to do in this double-bind, in the paradoxical relationship of the superego? It becomes necessary to let go in some part the self that is attached to its own pleasure, its own *jouissance*. Žižek is insightful here:

You must have this moment, I am almost tempted to say, of transubstantiation. In the sense that I am "newly born". Not "newly born" in any directly religious sense, but in the sense that I am substantially no longer the same person. Without this leap you don't have true therapy. In this sense, I claim an act, of course, is not something that can be accommodated into an image of deterministic materialism, because it's something that comes ex nihilo (Zizek 1999).

The authentic act can only come from standing firmly within the true desires of the unconscious such that it does not mask itself, in order to redefine itself. This “symbolic suicide” seems close to that moment just before psychosis, of sacrificing the thing at the core of my self that I am most attached to, not always possible, but necessary to try. In the *try* there is something more honest, and perhaps more ethical, in the reaching in towards that dark abyss of the unconscious, allowing pleasure and displeasure, and emptiness itself to emerge.

Failure



Mark Dion, "Polar Bear and Toucans", 1991

To return to the question of representation then, it seems necessary to try and find ways of representing nature—perhaps self-consciously—that are in acknowledgement of its uncanniness and abjection, rather than replicating a pastoral idealism. Despite the advent of psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, as Morton so clearly points out, environmentalism and its representations in art are still muddled in a romanticism that strives to complete nature as a category and the subject within it. That it has utterly failed to do so, and has therefore no real way of dealing with environmental collapse, points to the need for a shift in paradigm to deal directly with collapse, and to also understand and fully accept what this collapse might mean for human life. The current physical and representational crisis in the environment is intrinsically linked to our condition as language-ing beings, as has been discussed, but also parallels the missed encounter of the Lacanian sexual relationship (and the slippage of Žižek's parallax view). We might revisit Lacanian psychoanalysis and its intersection of the Symbolic and the Real in order to open a new space for discussing failure and collapse and for understanding this failure along sexuated lines.

The Lacanian Man fails through his inability to *attain* his signifier, his lost object, his object of desire. In nature this *lack* creates a need for signification, for a symbolic construction of nature that can sew up the subject neatly into a conceptual structure, completing it. It demands a belief in the attainability of nature. This side of failure also sets up nature in terms of the Other, as that which can not be named and yet to which I look for the validation of my condition as a human subject. Nature, as an Other, is a repository for desire, fear, and imagination. It can be of the order of the Symbolic, as something that I come to as a way of understanding myself as subject. The Other is felt as an absence or lack, an effect of the phallic function. It is that in the Symbolic which causes me to define myself as a subject after having sacrificed in order to become a speaking being in society. Desire is then created as a result of this perceived lack, mainly the desire to be desired by the Other. The presence of the Other is what ties me to my subjectivity and keeps me in the Symbolic.

The Lacanian Woman on the other hand fails through her inability to *be* the signified, to be that lost object, and her desire is to cover up this lack by trying to be the fantasy, by masquerading. This parallels an idea of nature as a romantic, fantastical utopia, which is really just a masquerade for the empty, lacking, not-at-all of nature. Yet along with lack comes something extra for the Lacanian Woman, that excessive and real

jouissance that is written by her masquerade. *Jouissance* in the feminine sense is a surplus created by the contradiction of language and reason with itself (as opposed to the lack created on the masculine side by the contradiction of the phallic function). This surplus is not an object or something that exists prior to the failure of language. It is related to the Lacanian *objet petit a*, as a manifestation of something missing. However, it connotes excess instead of lack. It is here that there is an actual perceived experience of just such a *jouissance* in some relationships to nature and that it is precisely this experience, something close to a sexual experience, that is in language and yet more than language, to borrow Copjec's words (Copjec 1999: 209).

Rather than seeking to complete an idea of nature, or maintaining its masquerade, I am claiming that our ability to hold the excess space of *jouissance* might create a more honest and ethical place in which to position nature. In understanding the man-made built environment to appear as an ideal of manipulation and control, with excess *jouissance* only palpable in the creases and failures of that control, I posit nature as being the ultimate repository of that excess pain and pleasure, it is the too-much that is experienced as unbearable in life. Here nature can signal an incursion of the Real, the experience of the un-nameable that appears to dissolve the subject.

It is here in the lacking, not-at-all of nature *and* the too-much of the *jouissance* of nature that the current (American) liberal environmental perspective has been unwilling to look, at the risk of emptying the contents of precisely that which we are fighting for and trying to protect. Due to this fear the debate has missed an essential component of the argument, that instead of dismantling the position would instead only serve it, mainly, that the emptiness of nature itself must be protected for the human subject to persist. The destruction and exploitation of nature is not merely as it appears on the surface, but is threatening to the relationship of the subject to itself. It is this contradiction-- that the destructive policies of many seem *selfish*-- that covers up their true impact.

The notion of *sacrifice* too often seems to play out in environmentalism as a desire to return to some essentialist, or primitive way of relating to the land. In everything from neo-paganism, the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970's, goddess-worship, nouveau-hippie communalism, preemptive post-apocalyptic hysteria, and commercial appropriation of Native American spirituality, there is desire to move towards something that has been lost. In a Lacanian sense, the essence that has been lost is able to take so many forms precisely because it never existed in the first place. Or more precisely, it

is only in the process of sacrifice that the idea of the object that has been lost is created, which creates “something mythical, something after-the-fact about this sacrifice, which remains ultimately a sacrifice of something that one never in fact had” (Hook 2009: 153). The desiring for the object will and never can be satisfied. Again, these roles are self- or circularly-inscribed antinomies that are dependent on and yet represent the failure of language. Nature too can fit this bill, as possessing content that is both within a practical discursive set of useful and concrete things, and also completely eliding those things.

If I am going to speak for nature, I must subvert or make to disappear my own subject. If this were possible-- and given a Lacanian framework it is not—it would be equivalent to attaining that object-cause of desire, a fulfilling of my own *jouissance*. This however doesn't stop me from trying, and it is due to the desire, that the second situation arises: I claim to put aside my subjectivity in favor of an ecological identity, but in actuality my subjectivity is merely repressed and disregarded. This second situation seems dangerous in its ignorance of the basic unconscious drives and desires that function in regards to nature. I am now acting as if I am the big Other.

If I allow myself to respond to nature as if it is the Other, its position (like that of the gaze) is one that establishes the me (in the visible) and through which I speak and see but not one that returns the gesture:

When you encounter the gaze of the Other, you meet not a seeing eye but a blind one. The gaze is not clear or penetrating, not filled with knowledge or recognition; it is clouded over and turned back on itself, absorbed in its own enjoyment. The horrible truth...is that the gaze does not see you (Copjec 1994: 36).

If the Lacanian framework of sexualization can be said to exemplify subjectivity as a whole, a similar framework of environmental identity is what inscribes me as a *human* subject in particular. Lack and excess, the endless chain of signification, and the apparent emptying that is at the center of the (sexualized) subject can be applied to a discussion of environmental politics that seeks to deal parallaxically with dualities like man/woman, culture/nature, man-made/natural etc.

I am not so much interested in refuting the positions of ecologists that could be generally summarized as “conservationist” or “atomist” as these arguments have been

successfully problematized by several theorists. Yet even within these critiques simplistic dualism rears its ugly head again and again. Leading eco-feminist Val Plumwood's discussion of dualism in the discourse of nature in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* seems simplistic in its assessment of "reason" as an imperial kind of dualism. For Plumwood, in dualism, "as in hierarchy, the qualities (actual or supposed), the culture, the values and the areas of life associated with the dualised other are systematically and pervasively constructed and depicted as inferior" (Plumwood 1993: 47). Plumwood's primary example is that of the master/slave relationship in which the master and slave designation are mutually exclusive and mutually defining. One cannot be conceived without the other and this makes them interdependent, with the power being officially awarded only to one side of the dualism.

Plumwood draws many useful parallels between this power relation and the relationship between male and female, human and nature, in her effort to find a "non-hierarchical concept of difference" (Plumwood 1993: 60). She challenges some of the central tenets of hierarchy, and deconstructs practices that create the spinning cogwheel of domination she wishes to upset. I am wondering, though, if her dualism of language further inscribes precisely the problems she wishes to address. While the designations she points to may exist in a historical sense, in a structural sense they are like an overlay, a skin of *appearance* that once peeled back reveals an emptiness of *being* that is so necessary. Redefining subjectivity cannot simply be about creating another, different skin.

The problem seems similar in nature to the issues addressed by Copjec in Butler's treatise on gender difference, mainly the confusion of *being* with *appearance*. Returning to the above statement about dualism, Plumwood's claim is that dualism acts upon the qualities of the subject that are both "actual and supposed" and that these qualities are "constructed and depicted" through the system of hierarchy. In this way she equates and conflates the existence of the subject with the appearance of the subject in the Symbolic order. This dilemma arises at those junctions where the language needed to speak of different orders of difference falls short—the tension of the parallax collapses. So, on the two sides of the dualistic equation, the "nature of each is constructed in polarised ways by the exclusion of qualities shared with the other" (Plumwood 1993: 32). If nature is completely constructed then this would seem to

preclude the pre-existence of “qualities” that could be “shared” or “excluded”. Where do these qualities go once one’s nature is constructed?

Certainly in a Lacanian framework the categories of being and appearance are interrelated and constitutive, one not preceding the other, but they are not however completely dissolved. Through this lens, the mapping of a dualism, like that of master/slave, on to the network of differences between “male” and “female”, between “nature” and whatever it is that is defined against nature, is no simple matter. Plumwood’s mapping seems to reside at the level of a construction, within the Symbolic realm, leaving the mechanism by which the construction may or may not relate to things outside of it relatively unchallenged. It is also a mapping that becomes finite, a kind of logic that disregards the infinite chain of signification and instead defines itself as a closed system. While Plumwood is perhaps aware of the possibility of a different mechanism, a different kind of logic, the language of dualism remains intact.² While her dismissal of reason as a masculinist concept that distinguishes itself against nature, animality, or emotion may have historical precedence she is unable to salvage in it something that could break this dichotomy. A Lacanian use of reason, a process of infinite signification and full of failure, and Žižek’s parallax opens up this new space.

Might a concept of nature exist only as a thing against which I can define myself? Certainly Plumwood highlights the cultural-historical othering of nature that can in many ways be linked to histories of domination, but what of a Lacanian Other? The Lacanian Other is a force (simultaneously constructed by and constitutive of the subject) that does not *actually* exist, but is necessary to keep meaning in place. This Other is the perceived master although it itself plays no such role. The subject has fear of nature and its suspected interdependence in this way. Nature is able to destroy the subject literally, but it is given the power to destroy the subject symbolically as well, dissolving its rigid boundaries or making it abject. This is a power that the subject revolts against. It is perhaps here that the analogy to the master/slave relationship makes most sense; the fear of nature is related to the master’s fear of the revolting slave, which in turn is redistributed to nature itself, further proof of the subject’s need to dominate it. The fear is twofold. There is the fear of the Other, its power, its force, is uncanniness. There is also a fear of the Other that is disruptable, the fear of the very failure that provides such extreme pleasure. Was “woman” *taken* as the holding place for both of these fears-- the Evil Eve, the abyss of animalia, the witch, the preternatural, the possessed? Nature

represents also these two fears: the thing that must be fought against because of its power, and the thing that is already dominated and subdued, non-thinking and inherently subordinate. Woman no longer needs to be hated. The same cannot be said of nature, which has become the new repository for subconscious drives.

Any remaining pleasure that comes not as a product of the structure, but in spite of it, in excess of it, its *jouissance*, can be seen as a breakdown of or gap in the structure. It is here where environmentalism has lost its way, pitting itself against utilitarian practices of exploitation. There is a belief in environmentalism that dominating environmental exploitation comes from an evil desire, when in fact these practices create desire. The necessary *jouissance* that they create appears as essentially something that has been lost. The feeling of this “lost” reflects an awareness of “lack” that is circumscribed by the current environmental condition, yet there is a mistaken notion that what is lacking actually exists, whereas *it* never existed in the first place. In the human/nature or culture/nature split certainly something is excluded, but that something is always missing and can never appear to be found. Nature does not actually exist.

The logic employed by Lacan in his theory of sexualization is one that is not restricted by complementaries and opposites, it is in effect not dualistic, or rather it is doubly dualistic. What this opens up is a way of pointing to paradox and difference without creating unnecessary polemics or identity politics—a holding of the tension of parallax. Can we contain the existence of this gaping hole, this failure of signification and subjectivity? Can we recognize that it is this failure that incites both extreme ecstasy in nature and horrible violence to nature? Any attempts to handle these questions, in any kinds of representative manner, must grapple with the fact that humans may want to destroy nature, and that we may enjoy doing so.

NOTES

¹ It seems relevant that the advent of tracking weather patterns was bound up in the simultaneous militarization of those patterns, which were used tactically. The practice of officially recording weather began in the US in 1814 when the then surgeon-general James Tilton ordered army posts to watch and record the weather and share the information in a “network” of observation leading to the creation of a national weather service within the Department of War in 1870 by President Grant. NOAA, [A History of Observing The Weather](http://celebrating200years.noaa.gov/foundations/weather_obs/welcome.html#adv).

http://celebrating200years.noaa.gov/foundations/weather_obs/welcome.html#adv

² Plumwood favors a move towards a logic of relative negation in which two apparently opposite entities do not cancel each other out, but instead signify something beyond either. This kind of logic would not necessarily be antagonistic to the system of sexual difference set out by Lacan, further supporting the possibility of adapting it to an ecological project. See Plumwood (1993): 58.

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