

Culture, Environment and Ecopolitics

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Edited by

Nick Heffernan and David A. Wragg

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P U B L I S H I N G

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Culture, Environment and Ecopolitics	
Nick Heffernan and David A. Wragg	
Chapter One.....	32
Environmentalism, Art and Agency	
Malcolm Miles	
Chapter Two	55
Lost Edens and Other Green Worlds: Ecotopia, Politics and Aesthetics	
Lisa Garforth	
Chapter Three	84
The Place of Catastrophe: Mike Davis, Clarence King and the Politics of Contingency	
John Beck	
Chapter Four	111
“I Cannot Heave My Heart Into My Mouth”: Stephen Jay Gould and Ecocriticism	
Heidi Scott	
Chapter Five	137
Room to Speak? A Green Voice for Romanticism in John Clare’s “Swordy Well”	
Anthony Howell	
Chapter Six	156
Thinking Like a Reef: Postcolonial Ecocriticism as a Green Reading Practice	
Hans-Georg Erney	

Chapter Seven.....	177
Terodactyl Apocalypse: Writing Catastrophe in Mahasweta Devi's <i>Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha</i> Ben Conisbee Baer	
Chapter Eight.....	200
Where Has All the Oil Gone? BP Branding and the Discursive Elimination of Climate Change Julie Doyle	
Chapter Nine.....	226
“Fitting Buildings”: Ecological Architecture, Place and Ethics Peter Kraftl	
Chapter Ten	255
Ecopolitical Action on the Desert of the Real, or, What's James Benning's Cinema Got to Do with It? Isabelle Freda	
Contributors	278
Index	281

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INTRODUCTION

CULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND ECOPOLITICS

NICK HEFFERNAN AND DAVID A. WRAGG

I

One of the more predictable consequences of the financial crisis of April 2008 and the worldwide recession that followed has been the industrialised world's swift de-prioritisation of efforts to protect the environment in favour of a renewed focus on economic growth at all costs. Prior to the crisis, "environmental issues, especially global warming, were well established in state decision making and receiving growing attention at all levels of public life" (MacIntosh and Star 2009, 4)—though one must always be somewhat sceptical when a fundamental tension exists between the needs of the "late" capitalist market place, with its assumptions of "free-market" protocols, and the ability of natural resources to cope with humanity's exploitative tendencies. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, had served as the basis for a gradually strengthening international consensus on environmental protection (Hare 2009, 15). Even the government of the world's biggest and most unrepentant polluter, the United States of America, was moderating its hard-line scepticism about the scientific evidence for anthropogenic global warming. In 2002, in a notable change of public posture, the administration of George W. Bush conceded that global climate change represented a material threat to the environment and accepted the role of human activity in causing it. Still, however, the president—alone among representatives of the developed world—ruled out any commitment to the Kyoto Protocol's legally binding targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels. "It would have cost our economy up to \$400 billion and we would have lost 4.9 million jobs", Bush argued. And he continued to insist that "economic growth is the key to environmental progress ... because a nation that grows its economy is a

nation that can afford investments and new technologies” (Bush 2002). Nonetheless, by late 2007, though continuing to reject Kyoto, Bush took a lead in accelerating the Montreal Protocol’s timetable for the phasing out of hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), estimated to be 1,700 times more powerful than carbon dioxide in their greenhouse effects (Lean 2007). It appeared that “there was some hope that the problems were going to be tackled in time to limit, and hopefully reduce greenhouse gas levels (MacIntosh and Star 2009, 4).

Months later, while still baulking at the possible cost of action on global warming, Bush hustled through the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, bailing out Wall Street to the tune of \$787 billion (Stout 2008). Indeed, some calculate the total cost to American taxpayers of the bank bailout to be as high as \$4.6 trillion, a third of US GDP (Center for Media and Democracy 2010).¹ Moreover, the Bush administration marked its departure from the White House with a gift to the fossil fuel lobby that had so generously supported it (Gelbspan 2001)—a raft of last-minute “midnight regulations” overwhelmingly aimed at relaxing environmental protection laws and easing limits on emissions from coal-fired power plants, oil refineries and chemical factories (Smith 2008). Protecting the banking system rather than the environment, and promoting a corporation-friendly, growth-at-any-cost, agenda were clearly the new American priorities. It was, as they say, business as usual.

Fearful that the financial collapse endangered the painstakingly constructed and fragile international consensus on the need to limit global warming, the architects of that consensus sought to persuade policy makers that saving the banks and saving the planet were not antithetical projects. “We face two crises”, they argued:

The global financial crisis is the most immediate; the more existential is climate change. The urgency of the first is no excuse for neglecting the second. On the contrary, it is an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. (Ban et al 2008)

Indeed, but the priorities must be reversed according to James Wines in *Green Architecture*, published over a decade ago:

Compared to the environmental crisis all other social, political, economic, and scientific issues pale into insignificance. Obviously, if humanity expires from global warming, over-population, pollution, starvation, and a lack of water, it will matter very little whether civil rights have been

achieved, the Middle East is at peace, an Aids vaccine exists, or the national debts have been paid. In point, all of these threats to our survival are directly or indirectly related to environmental destruction. (Wines 2000, 11)

In essence, the consensus view promoted what social scientists have called “ecological modernisation” (Baker 2007) as a solution to both crises. “The answer is the green economy”, it proposed. There need be no conflict of interest between the environment and the economy because “the hottest growth industry in the world is renewable energy”, meaning that “we can steer economic growth in a low-carbon direction” (Ban et al 2008).

For many, Barack Obama’s victory in the 2008 US election represented the best opportunity to rebuild the global consensus on climate change around a vision of ecological modernisation first articulated in the 1990s as a device for reconciling the new imperatives of capitalist globalisation with lingering 1970s notions of sustainability (Buell 2003, 43-45). Obama signalled that the United States would now lead, rather than impede, the fight against global climate change. His campaign had placed environmental issues at the top of its agenda. With its central notion of a “green recovery” it sought to undo the opposition between protecting the environment and stimulating the economy that had been so vigorously reasserted in the latter days of the Bush regime. On securing the presidency Obama declared that the shift to a clean-energy economy and the creation of five million new “green” jobs would “be my number one priority when I get into office” (Vidal, 2008). His presidential acceptance speech drew attention to the “planet in peril”. He pledged an eighty per cent cut to US carbon emissions by 2050, exceeding the terms of the Kyoto Protocol. And a month into office, while proposing this radical cut in carbon emissions (allied to an annual \$15 billion green energy programme), he told Congress that to “truly transform our economy, to protect our security, and save our planet from the ravages of climate change, we need to ultimately make clean, renewable energy the profitable kind of energy” (Samuelson 2009). Momentarily it seemed that even the financial institutions, shaken by their role in causing the crisis, would back such a transformation. “For the first time in my lifetime, the investment community is in such disarray that there is an opportunity to change minds”, argued one observer. “It’s the first time that Anglo Saxon short-termism has an alternative” (Masters 2009).

But the green optimism surrounding Obama was short-lived, and the task of dissolving the apparent tension between environmental protection

and economic revitalisation proved more difficult than anticipated. Deepening global recession—indeed the defining characteristic of the 2008 crisis is that it is the first financial meltdown that is properly *global* in character (Reinhart and Rogoff 2009)—led to intensified international economic competition and shook the confidence of the western financial elite in the efficacy of any shift to an environmentally-considerate growth regime. “We live in non-linear times,” declared the head of the European Central Bank, “the classic economic models and theories cannot be applied, and future development cannot be foreseen” (Watt and Treanor 2009). Overshadowed by such uncertainty, the United Nations climate summit at Copenhagen in December 2009 failed to reach a meaningful agreement on global emissions targets and on the transfer of funds to poorer countries to help them mitigate the consequences of climate change. The aim of an eighty per cent cut in global emissions by 2050 was dropped—indeed Obama arrived in Copenhagen proposing just a four per cent cut—as was a commitment to hold the global temperature rise this century down to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The United States and China were blamed for diluting the summit’s aims, reluctant to compromise their own growth prospects or pay to protect developing countries from the effects of American and Chinese emissions.³ A Sudanese delegate concluded, “It’s nothing short of climate change scepticism in action ... Obama has eliminated any difference between him and Bush” (Vidal et al 2009).

In fact, climate change scepticism was back in fashion in late 2009. The leaking just weeks before the Copenhagen summit of over a thousand stolen private emails from the University of East Anglia’s Climate Research Unit appeared to play into the hands of those who argued that scientists were concealing or manipulating evidence in order to make the case for anthropogenic climate change and alarm the public.² Worse, “climategate” overlapped with “glacieregate” in which the United Nations’ advisory body on climate science, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, admitted to having mistakenly claimed in a landmark 2007 report on global warming that all Himalayan glaciers could melt by 2035. Emboldened by these developments, sceptics intensified their already well-funded attacks on the scientific consensus on climate change and on the regulatory initiatives that rested on it. Obama’s weak showing at Copenhagen signalled a shift in the balance of power in the debate over global warming. So too did the subsequent failure of his emissions-reduction legislation to pass through a Congress in which his own party enjoyed strong majorities in both houses. Indeed, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid attributed Obama’s failure to convince fellow Democrats to

back legislation that would compel corporate polluters to pay for emitting greenhouse gases to “economic distress and scientific scandals that bruised the belief around global warming” (Lehmann 2010).

Moreover, a rising tide of climate change scepticism among American voters dealt Obama and the Democrats a serious blow in the Congressional mid-term elections of November 2010. All but one of the Republican Party’s 48 senatorial candidates actively opposed measures to limit global warming with most also openly rejecting the scientific basis for the existence of climate change (Goldenberg, 2010a). For those sponsored by the radical right-wing Tea Party movement “scepticism and outright denial of global warming are among the articles of faith” (Broder 2010).⁴ Greatly strengthened in both houses, the Republicans set about dismantling what remained of Obama’s “green recovery” plan. Not satisfied with taking an axe to spending on environmental policies and research, Republicans also sought to strip the Environmental Protection Agency of its powers to regulate greenhouse gas emissions and legislate against the appointment of a climate and energy czar to the Obama White House team (Morello et al 2011).⁵

Meanwhile US investment in and dependence on fossil fuels raced ahead. The disastrous April 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill cost the federal government \$87 million in emergency clean-up money and a further \$11.8 billion in tax revenues as guilty company BP wrote off its losses as an ordinary business expense (Huffington Post 2010; MacDonald 2011). But Republicans in Congress backed their supporters in the oil business by blocking new restrictions on offshore drilling proposed by a presidential enquiry into the spill (Broder 2011). At the same time, domestic US oil production rose to its highest level in a decade, driven by soaring prices per barrel and the development of unconventional and environmentally-risky onshore extraction techniques. One such is “fracking”, a process which shatters horizontal rock strata—destabilising surrounding rock formations—and pressure-pumps chemicals into aquifers that may supply drinking water. “This is the technology that is hot”, an investor observed. “Most of the money and brainpower has shifted to oil. It gives them the biggest bang for their bucks” (Crooks and McNulty 2011). The prospect of a “green recovery” receded as short-term profitability subverted fundamental reform of energy policy and—as Julie Doyle shows in chapter eight of this book—oil companies appropriated the language of environmentalism as a smokescreen for extending global dependency on fossil fuels. Indeed, Doyle illustrates just how accommodating the

discourse of ecological modernisation is to “greenwashing” and to co-optation by corporate and consumerist worldviews. On the political and economic fronts, then, it seems for the time being to have lost the battle to displace unreconstructed capitalist modernisation as an alternative growth paradigm.

II

We retrace this recent history not in order to plead on behalf of the embattled notion of ecological modernisation which, from a green perspective, is a significantly limited and flawed concept. As Baker (2007, 298) observes, ecological modernisation cannot be seen as compatible with the idea of sustainable development as it fails to address issues of environmental justice, resource redistribution or the limits to growth. We do so, rather, in order to show how financial and economic crisis has sharply refocused attention—perhaps more pointedly than at any time since the emergence of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s—on what many on both sides of the debate see as a fundamental antagonism between the interests of the environment and the imperatives of capital. This is the point that lies behind Wines’ observation, quoted above.

The depth of this antagonism is nowhere better illustrated than in the realm of contemporary popular culture. The release of the technologically ground-breaking 3D Hollywood blockbuster movie *Avatar* in late 2009 catalysed a furious and thoroughly international popular debate about the conflict between the environment and economic exploitation, about the fate of indigenous peoples in the face of the relentless drive for development, and about the meanings of nature, progress and technology. Characterised by *Popular Science* as “every militant global warming supporter’s dream come true” (Lewinski 2009), the film—a showcase for the latest in CGI visual effects and three-dimensional exhibition technology—is a future-set science-fiction spectacular that tells of an aggressive Earth-sponsored but American-led military-industrial adventure charged with extracting mineral resources from the fertile, strikingly beautiful and unspoilt planet of Pandora. When Pandora’s peace-loving, nature-worshipping inhabitants, the Na’vi, refuse to cooperate in their own dispossession, objecting that surrender of the sought-after materials would violate sacred land, the Earth-based forces launch a merciless high-tech invasion. Among the central human characters are some who begin to develop personal and ethical ties with the apparently defenceless Na’vi

and come to admire the alien culture's ecologically-sensitive mode of living. These must now choose sides, and in choosing they invite the audience to do the same in what becomes a naked showdown between the noble aliens' reverence for and conservation of nature on the one hand, and its violent expropriation by an unholy alliance of human mercenaries and industrialists on the other.

Notwithstanding the \$150 million spent by 20th Century-Fox on marketing the film, *Avatar* touched an authentically popular nerve, racing to the top of the US and worldwide all-time box-office charts in a matter of weeks and quickly becoming the highest grossing film in virtually every country in which it was released,⁶ though exactly why it did so may have more to do with the ideologies of filmic consumption than any serious eco-critical awareness on the part of its audience. Promoting his film, writer-director-producer James Cameron announced that its anti-militarist theme was "a conscious attempt to evoke Vietnam" and to comment critically on the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (BBC News 2009). It was also intended to remind audiences of a deeper "history of the human race written in blood" through imperialism and colonialism, especially European expansion into the Americas which "displaced and marginalised the indigenous peoples there". But Cameron drew particular attention to *Avatar*'s environmental message, stating that above all it is about "how we treat the natural world":

There's a sense of entitlement: "We're here, we're big, we've got the guns, we've got the technology, we've got the brains, we therefore are entitled to every damn thing on this planet." That's not how it works and we're going to find out the hard way if we don't wise up and start seeking a life that's in balance with the natural cycles of life on earth. (Telegraph 2009)

In this respect, *Avatar* is a late manifestation of the environmental turn taken by Hollywood in the 1970s and explored by Isabelle Freda in chapter ten of this book. Here the conventions of science fiction were deployed in the service of an emergent green consciousness that, shaped by the hippie counterculture and the anti-Vietnam War movement, critically interrogated the ideologies of capitalist development and American manifest destiny. But Cameron's film enjoys even greater political purchase than its predecessors. As a result of the financial crisis it intervenes in a moment when those hegemonic ideologies are subject to fresh scrutiny and fierce contestation; and it does so at a thoroughly global level as its marketing platform and its cinematic language of extraordinary technological spectacle give it an international reach unprecedented in

movie history. But the stubborn question remains: what effect do its narratives, including the representation of eco-otherness manufactured by CGI, have on its audience? Can such a text sufficiently defamiliarize the given to promote a radical re-think of how we interact with the planet and its resources?

Green-inclined commentators in the press and across the blogosphere seized on *Avatar*'s popularity as an opportunity to promote a range of eco-political positions. "Few better environmental movies have ever been made", argued one blogger, praising the film's "dark green bent and provocative activist message: if the industrial polluters come after your sacred forests, kill them" (Weilbacher 2010). Others dwelt on *Avatar*'s "compelling case for environmental justice" (Tabor 2010), while some found in it green philosophical as well as eco-political ramifications. Jay Michaelson in the *Jewish Daily Forward* argued that "*Avatar*'s deep ecology is interwoven with its pantheistic, quasi-kabbalistic notion of a 'web of life'". Indeed, we could go further: the film's insistence that "we are one interconnected reality" not only links modern environmental consciousness with ancient Jewish mysticism as Michaelson suggests (Michaelson 2010), it also powerfully dramatises Barry Commoner's famous First Law of Ecology: "everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner 1971, 33).

As Lisa Garforth points out in her analysis of environmental utopias and dystopias in chapter two of this book, it is often felt that an emphasis on spectacle undermines whatever potential the Hollywood blockbuster may have as a vehicle for authentically critical forms of political engagement. But *Avatar*'s pioneering use of digital effects, especially the vivid realisation of the planet Pandora's lush and teeming biosphere, was embraced as a key feature of its transformative, consciousness-changing power. Indeed, the film's overwhelmingly immersive Edenic imagery might be understood as a contribution to that "renewed utopianism" called for by Garforth in her chapter. Cameron himself stated that "an overall kind of reverence and sense of wonder for nature and its inventiveness ... imbued every decision we made in terms of the creature design" for *Avatar* (Hance 2010), and environmental scientists have singled out this aspect of the film as its most important contribution to their cause. "A movie like *Avatar* should drive one to learn about our own planet's miraculous and beautiful organisms—and help save them", suggests one (Hance 2010), while another claims that through CGI and 3D the film "has somehow managed to do what no other film has done. It has recreated

what is the heart of biology: the naked heart-stopping wonder of really seeing the living world” (Yoon 2010).

Biologist Carol Kesuk Yoon argues that “it cannot be anything but the intense wonder so powerfully elicited [by the film’s visual effects], rather than merely the technical wizardry itself, that has people lining up to see it” (Yoon 2010). This is borne out by the strongly emotional responses of *Avatar*’s viewers to the experience of immersion in Pandora’s glowing, hyperreal, rainforest utopia. Soon after the film’s opening, thousands of fans flooded internet forums having “experienced depression and suicidal thoughts ... because they longed to enjoy the beauty of the alien world” and were tormented by “feelings of disgust with the human race”. One such fan wrote, “I was depressed because I really wanted to live in Pandora, which seemed like such a perfect place, but I was also depressed and disgusted with the sight of our world, what we have done to Earth” (Piazza 2010). This reaction might suggest that the film’s effect is to demoralise and disempower rather than mobilise or politicise, and it reminds us that one of the standard objections to ecopolitics is that their focus on irreversible loss and impending catastrophe is unproductively pessimistic and demotivating. But it should be noted that *Avatar*’s depressed viewers worked through their feelings collectively, by creating internet discussion groups in which they analysed the film further, often in light of the environmental themes that caused so much distress. One of the most vital threads on the Avatar Forums website (<http://www.avatar-forums.com/forum.php>) is entitled “Human and Environmental Rights” and opens out onto a range of resources detailing the political and philosophical aspects of environmentalism. Perhaps, then, *Avatar* gives evidence that popular culture, despite its undeniably commercial aesthetic and its entanglement with corporate imperatives, can function as at least one possible arena where, to use the terms employed by Michael Miles in chapter one of this book, “a new mass consciousness” regarding ecology may be forged out of “representations of a new environmental imaginary”.

In their chapters, Miles and Garforth explore a range of theoretical positions in debates about how high art and/or popular culture might by way of new kinds of green imagery and storytelling channel aesthetics into politics and effect a change in consciousness on environmental issues. They address questions about the politics of art and mass culture, (self) critical populism, generic interventions in the given, the phenomenon of tolerated dissent (Marcuse, Adorno, et al), and how a sustainable future might be created out of the sense of impending doom which underpins the

current wave of eco-disaster movies, culminating in the apocalyptic special effects bonanza of Roland Emmerich's *2012*, (2009). (Prepare ye for the end of the world, and with a mega-bucks bang rather than a whimper). In this latter respect, in chapter ten of this book, Isabelle Freda identifies in the work of filmmaker James Benning an aesthetic approach that—precisely by repudiating the spectacular and hyper-kinetic artificiality of Hollywood disaster/nature imagery (of the kind that *Avatar* takes to a new level)—goes beyond mere representation to provide “a site of resistance” to environmental degradation and a platform for ecopolitical action. Ultimately, then, Miles, Garforth and Freda are concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and agency, and *Avatar* offers food for thought in this respect too. For one of the most striking effects of the film has been its role as a focal point for the emergence of novel forms of environmental organising and political mobilisation that some commentators have branded “Avatar activism” (Lee 2010; Jenkins 2010).

Politically-engaged viewers were quick to point out how “the film clearly alludes to struggles and injustices that one doesn't need to travel across the galaxy to see, but are occurring right here on planet Earth”. Jeremy Hance painstakingly spelled out the parallels between the plight of Pandora's fictitious Na'vi aliens and “the very non-fantastical situation of indigenous cultures fighting exploitation” in Peru, Borneo, Ecuador and Brazil (Hance 2009, 2010). Cameron himself joined an Amazon Watch visit to Brazil to meet with representatives of indigenous cultures resisting removal from their homelands on the Xingu River to make way for the construction of the vast Belo Monte hydroelectric dam. The dam—designed to power 23 million urban homes at the cost of \$17 billion, and entailing the relocation of up to 40,000 indigenous people and the destruction of 500 square kilometres of virgin rainforest (Hance 2010; Hughes 2011)—was described by Cameron as “a quintessential example of the type of thing we are showing in *Avatar*—the collision of a technological civilization's vision for progress at the expense of the natural world and the cultures of the indigenous people that live there” (Barrionuevo 2010).⁷ Recognising that “I do have a responsibility to go beyond the film ... and use what media power I have to raise awareness” (Lee 2010), the director has become an unlikely ally and figurehead of indigenous people's opposition to destructive forms of development across the world. Even prior to Cameron's rainforest activism, the Dongria Kondh tribe from the Indian state of Orissa took out an advertisement in the entertainment industry trade magazine *Variety*, likening themselves to *Avatar*'s Na'vi and appealing directly to the filmmaker to support their

struggle against British conglomerate Vedanta's plans to mine for bauxite in their sacred Niyamgiri hills (Hopkins 2010). In addition to advocating for indigenous groups and sustainable development at conferences and symposia, Cameron has produced a documentary about the resistance to the Belo Monte dam for the DVD release of *Avatar* and will give a portion of the proceeds of the film's two planned sequels to environmental causes (Child 2011).

But more interesting than Cameron's admirable personal involvements are the political tactics inspired in others by his film. These have imaginatively used *Avatar*'s global-recognition factor to push their campaigns onto a crowded world news agenda. The practice of staging protests in the striking blue complexion and futuristic-tribal garb of the alien Na'vi has become a feature of Avatar activism. Even more interestingly, this tactic mirrors that of the film's sympathetic human characters, who rebel against the military-industrial expropriation of Pandora by repudiating their human identities, wiring their brains into the bodies of genetically-engineered Na'vi avatars, and joining the resistance. In similar fashion, in February 2010 activists in the West Bank village of Bil'in dressed as Na'vi to protest illegal Israeli settlements and the partition of Palestinian communities by the Israeli "security wall". "Like Palestinians", they declared, "the Avatars fight imperialism, though the colonists have different origins" (Bil'in Popular Committee 2010). And in July 2010 supporters of the Dongria Kondh dressed as Na'vi to disrupt Vedanta's London AGM, contributing to the Indian Environment Ministry's decision to halt the conglomerate's bauxite mines (Survival 2010; Singh and Udas 2010). In China, authorities fearful of the political ramifications of this tendency of audiences to identify with the Na'vi abruptly pulled the 2D version of *Avatar* from over 1,600 cinemas as it "created nothing less than a social phenomenon", instantly becoming the most successful film ever released in the country (Hung 2010; Fritz and Pierson 2010). While the China Film Group claimed the measure was taken simply to protect market share for home-grown film productions, others pointed to the parallels between *Avatar*'s story and mounting unrest concerning the impact of development on poor Chinese communities: "All the forced removal of old neighbourhoods in China makes us the only earthlings today who can really feel the pain of the Na'vi", one commentator claimed (Hung 2010).⁸

Such activism not only draws attention to the racist logic according to which oppressed groups are marginalised as aliens or "others" by powerful

interests set on exploiting them, it also deploys the kinds of visual communication and pop-culture symbolism that are increasingly necessary and powerful aspects of consciousness-raising in a thoroughly mediated and socially-networked world. Henry Jenkins argues that “by appropriating *Avatar*, activists have made some of the most familiar criticisms of the film beside the point”. In “rejecting the wonkish vocabulary of most policy discourse”, he argues, the “spectacular” and “participatory culture” of the *Avatar* activists “draw[s] emotional power from its engagement with stories that already matter to a mass public”. By comparison, the rationalist discourse of the orthodox left and of traditional oppositional movements appears “cold and exclusionary” (Jenkins 2010). Mark Dreuze (2010) amplifies the point, claiming that the *Avatar* activists’ joyous disregard of the boundaries between the real and the mediated “contributes to successful survival” across both spheres: not only does it help defend actual endangered places and peoples, it also marks a step in humanity’s evolutionary adaptation to its increasingly interactive media environment.

Yet *Avatar*’s undoubted importance to a new kind of global environmental consciousness has not made it immune to criticism from the left. Several have suggested that the film’s strategy of focalising audience sympathy for the Na’vi through a protagonist who is white, male and American is at best patronising and at worst racist: racial “others” must depend on a white messiah to rescue them. Noting that the hero “has the power to choose between being a dominating ‘Sky Person’ or a Na’vi victim”, and that “only white men are privileged enough to have such choices”, one blogger concluded that “underneath it all is an ugly racial dynamic that reminds us Americans why we’re seen as the bad guys on and off the screen” (The Filmsmith 2009). Another characterised *Avatar* as “the latest sci-fi rehash of an old white guilt fantasy ... about ceasing to be white ... but never losing white privilege”, and wondered “when will whites stop making these movies and start thinking about race in a new way?” (Newitz 2009). Native American writer Daniel Heath Justice (2010) criticised *Avatar*’s dependence on “the ‘white guy goes Native’ Western film formula”, while leftist philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2010) complained that despite its “politically correct themes” the film rests on “an array of brutal racist motifs” which encourage viewers to “sympathis[e] with the idealised aborigines while rejecting their actual struggle”.

It is not as if Cameron himself is unaware of these problems. “I understand the white messiah argument”, he concedes, and defends his approach as one that “tried to show two cultures meeting halfway to find a

solution". But he is prepared to acknowledge the role of "my own parochial, chauvinistic perspective as a writer" in inviting these criticisms, believing that "Hollywood can go further" in its representation of minority cultures (Lee 2010). He has also remarked that building *Avatar* around a white American protagonist was a kind of compromise, a way of deflecting studio pressure to "get this tree-hugging crap out of it" (Kozloff 2010). And in his environmental campaigning he is conscious of the potential contradictions of his position as a rich and powerful westerner. "I think one of the biggest questions", he has admitted, "is 'What is your standing? What are you gringos doing here? What gives you the right to tell us how to run things in our own country?'" (Phillips 2010). This reminds us of the multiple difficulties involved in both aesthetic and political attempts to represent and speak for the "other", no matter how empathetically and with what degree of moral outrage for their suffering, and no matter whether that other is human or not. These difficulties are thoroughly explored in this book in the chapters by Anthony Howell, Hans-Georg Erney and Ben Conisbee Baer, all of which engage with literary variations on *Avatar*'s central theme—the colonialist expropriation of marginalised people's environments in the name of modernisation and development.

Erney and Baer bring to eco-sensitive readings of what might once have been called Third-World literature the sophisticated insights of postcolonial theory. They do so in order to suggest how we might understand the texts in question not just as appeals on behalf of an endangered nature but as complex critiques of development, of globalisation, even of modernity itself. Indeed, Baer's reading of Mahasweta Devi's fictionalised version of the Bhopal disaster's aftermath indicates how such narratives might go so far as to deconstruct the very Enlightenment epistemology on which those ideologies ultimately rest. Erney, on the other hand, shows how the introduction of a postcolonial perspective allows a harder political edge to be forged from the sometimes conservative type of elegiac nature writing found in Romesh Gunsekera's novel *Reef*. And whereas James Cameron draws *Avatar*'s ecological poetry from the intergalactic future, Anthony Howell locates his in the early-industrial British past—in John Clare's meditations on the enclosure of the common lands and the dispossession of gypsy communities. Analysing Clare's poetic attempts to give utterance to the language of the land itself, Howell raises a key question that is also implied by *Avatar*'s use of a white, male, American point-of-view character: how far can "we" (we whites, men, westerners, humans, or whatever) understand, let alone

speak for, the “other”? How necessary or possible is it—to evoke the title of Aldo Leopold’s foundational 1949 statement of ecological thought—to “think like a mountain” (Leopold 1992) or, as Howell puts it, “to understand environmental crisis in terms of the environment ‘itself’”?

This question seems now to be a central issue where the recognition of modernity is concerned, both by contemporary writers and artists, and by their subsequent commentators. In this last context one thinks immediately of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which the plight of the jungle and its inhabitants has been downplayed in favour of a masculinist-existential anthropocentrism, even if complicated by the uncertainties of the narrative frame, and Conrad’s so-called “impressionist” style. Or to take an example from German Expressionism, the cults of what we now call “naturism” referenced in the paintings of Erich Heckel can still all too easily be seen as part of a history of art in which representations of the nude, and the nude-as-bather, are recuperated as part of the internal development of early modernism. Rather than understanding them as symptoms of inadequacies in the portrayal of nature and its inhabitants as colonized others, this limited formal point of view reduces them to the effects of existing generic norms, notwithstanding the critique of normative bourgeois culture implied in the counter-cultural aspects of such pictures.

The case of *Avatar*, then, puts into play a range of eco-political and eco-philosophical questions that are explored in various ways by the contributors to this book. But above all it illustrates how far the present climate of financial and economic turmoil has contributed to a deepening of the ideological polarisation that surrounds environmental issues. For, in equal measure to its embrace by activists and its mixed reception from leftists, has been the furious denunciation of *Avatar* by conservatives who see embedded in its environmentalism an even more insidious anti-capitalist message. Predictably, right-wing commentators were quick to denounce what they saw as the film’s “blatant anti-military” and “blatant anti-American” biases (Breitbart 2009), dismissing it as a “heavy-handed and simplistic sci-fi fantasy/allegory critical of America from our founding straight through to the Iraq War” (Nolte 2009). But they consoled themselves that *Avatar*’s “mindless worship of a nature-loving tribe and the tribe’s adorable pagan rituals, its hatred of the military and American institutions” was so “blitheringly stupid” (Podhoretz 2009) that it would surely alienate American viewers. When it failed to do so, they suggested that Americans were flocking to the film only because of the hype and the

special effects. “Most spectators won’t care what the movie has to say” insisted Suzanne Fields. “They’ll just enjoy the 3D spectacle, fun in spite of politics”. But just in case, she advised, “Adults ought to see it with a teenager ... you can shape the discussion afterward” (Fields 2010). And when it appeared that the discussions sparked by the film could not entirely be shaped by conservative adult wisdom, they took aim at the film’s “hypocritical” entanglement with the very capitalism its narrative appears to denounce. Not only was the \$400 million production “a crass embodiment of capitalistic excess” (Douthat 2009), it was also guilty of peddling its “anti-capitalism messages” and its “global warming alarmist push” through marketing deals with corporate polluters like McDonalds (Blatt 2009). Even the business media were sufficiently alarmed to engage in critical analysis of a film whose environmental perspective, they saw, rested clearly on the view that “capitalism is the villain”. Republican Party strategist and *Forbes.com* columnist Reihan Salam argued that popular identification with *Avatar*’s dispossessed indigenous tribespeople was misguided. “Capitalism represents a far more noble and heroic way of life than that led by the Na’vi”, he announced, suggesting—as George W. Bush reportedly did of the French—that the problem with the blue-hued stewards of Pandora’s biosphere is that they have no word for “entrepreneur”. “Entrepreneurial societies are in a deep sense better than other societies”, Salam maintained, because unlike the Na’vi “no tree whispers into our ears and tells us what to do or how to live” (Salam 2009).

III

Conservative fears that *Avatar*’s sentimental-populist brand of environmentalism might be a Trojan horse for a more troubling anti-capitalism remind us that political positions with regard to ecology tend, now more than ever perhaps, to fall into traditional left-right oppositions. The initial encounter of left politics with the emergent environmental consciousness of the 1970s and 1980s suggested to some that if it did not invalidate them completely then it made necessary at the very least a fundamental revision of Marxist and socialist categories and programs. Critics of Marxism such as Jean Baudrillard (1975), Leszek Kolakowski (1978) and Anthony Giddens (1981) drew on the environmental perspective to expose what they saw as Marx’s dangerous “Promethean” faith in the ability of technology to master nature, remake the world and, in the hands of the working class, usher in an epoch of “de-alienated hyperproductivity” (Baudrillard 1975, 17). Such faith, they argued, had led not only to wanton

ecological vandalism in the communist bloc, it also replicated capitalism's damaging obsession with production and growth at any cost. Meanwhile a generation of European socialists conceded that ecology shook leftist faith in the benevolence of the development of the productive forces and the idea of abundance on which certain conceptions of socialism and communism rested. "Beyond a certain point ... these productive forces ... reveal themselves to be destructive forces", suggested one. "If nature has been damaged ... and that damage is irreversible, then the idea of a free Society begins to lose its meaning" (Enzensberger 1974, 23). "Socialism is no better than capitalism if it makes use of the same tools", asserted another. "The total domination of nature inevitably entails a domination of people by the techniques of domination" (Gorz 1980, 20). These insights led some to question class politics as the basis of social liberation. A working class defined by its relationship to an environmentally destructive system of production could not be the agent of social emancipation without a fundamental rejection of that relationship. Indeed, some wondered whether a recognisable working class continued to exist in advanced industrial societies characterised by the production of increasingly pervasive environmental risks which transcended social distinctions and hierarchies. Risk societies, it was argued, "produce no social unity that would be visible on its own and to others, nothing that could be designated or organised as a social class or stratum" (Beck 1992, 53). Such perspectives fed into the nascent cultural practice of ecocriticism which, as one of its pioneers declared, was predicated on "the possibility that the revolutionary torch now burns in the hands of greens rather than reds" (Bate 1991, 9).

But even if "the move from red to green" (Bate 1991, 8-9) entails reassessment and rejection of a traditional Marxian politics of productivism and class, it does not signal a waning of interest in the characteristically left issues of wealth redistribution, equality and social justice. Each and every contributor to this book makes their own ecocritical investigation of cultural activity the occasion for a searching engagement with these issues. Yet as they do so, they raise questions about the relationship between ecocriticism and ecopolitics. While all suggest that there is some kind of affinity between ecocriticism and left politics, they find it difficult to articulate clearly its precise nature or to establish definite pathways from green consciousness to cultural and political practice. Indeed, several highlight the political indeterminacy of ecological consciousness and of ecocriticism itself. In chapter three, for example, John Beck details how Clarence King and Mike Davis re-evaluate the American West's deep

geological past in order to reject gradualist understandings of evolution and to valorise historical patterns of rupture and catastrophe. But Beck points out how these very similar re-readings issue in vastly different political attitudes towards capitalist social and economic development. In chapter four Heidi Scott shows how another critic of evolutionary gradualism, the palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould, likewise interrogates prevailing views of Darwinism as a way of calling into question ideas of progress and capitalist individualism from a broadly socialist-humanist perspective. However, we might observe that defamiliarising human history by inserting it into the span of geological time while invoking catastrophe as a corrective to complacently linear notions of progress and development is a strategy equally compatible with anti-humanist or post-humanist inflections of ecopolitics. Some of the more radical branches of deep ecology, for example, reject not just development and progress, but civilisation in its entirety, envisioning the return to a pre-agricultural and pre-mechanical primitivism in which if humanity has any place at all it does so only in drastically reduced numbers (Zerzan 1994). And Peter Kraftl's discussion of Heidegger in chapter nine reminds us that the German philosopher's critique of technology and his elaboration of an ecological understanding of space and place, while important for the later development of green theory, presented no obstacle to his endorsement of Nazism. Moreover, in his study of the contradictory meanings generated by the ecological architecture of the Nant-y-Cwm Steiner School in Wales, Kraftl identifies a series of discontinuities between environmentalism in conception, in design and in everyday practice that illustrates how the construction of an ideologically coherent and consistently progressive ecopolitics is problematic indeed. The problem here is how to sift the wheat from the chaff in such a way that contradiction, ambiguity and questionable socio-political attitudes can be resolved for the sake of a more coherent theory—and crucially, a more coherent practice—than some existing versions have been able to provide.

One of the overall effects of the contributions to this book, then, is to highlight the difficulty—as well as the necessity—of forging coherent ecopolitical positions out of cultural engagements with the environment and the insights of ecocriticism. But to return to the concerns with which this introduction began, we might argue that the climate of global financial and economic crisis that has so polarised attitudes towards environmental protection has also focused attention on the neoliberal economic and social policies that both produced the crisis and are being offered as solutions to it. David Harvey has shown how since the 1970s neoliberalism has

functioned as the ideological vehicle for “restoring, or in some instances (as in Russia and China) creating, the power of an economic elite” (Harvey 2005, 19). The multinational corporations, the financial institutions and the international ruling class have staged something not unlike a global *coup d’état* in which “Neoliberalism became ... hegemonic as a universalistic mode of discourse” and secured “a restoration and reconstitution of class power worldwide” (Harvey 2009, 57, 58). As billionaire investor Warren Buffett put it: “There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning” (Stein 2006). Even the meltdown of neoliberalism’s institutional centrepiece, the global financial system, couldn’t shake this hegemony; rather, it was exploited to impose further redistributions of power and resources from public institutions to private corporations and from poor to rich. “Far from spelling the end of neoliberalism, the 2008 financial crisis was, from the standpoint of the consolidation of despotic class power, its culmination” (Harvey 2009, 71).

But Harvey also points out that the application of neoliberal principles to the environment has “disastrous consequences” (2005, 172). More than ever, then, green concerns entail scepticism if not outright hostility towards neoliberalism and its central project of globalising capitalist accumulation processes and capitalist class relations. One sign of this can be found in the way *Avatar* frames its environmental politics within a quite clear and—certainly for contemporary Hollywood—bold anti-capitalist discourse. The film’s predatory mining company, RDA, with its intergalactic reach and its deployment of financial, technological and privatised military “security forces”, is an exact image of the kind of supranational corporate entity that has been the agent of capitalist globalisation these last four decades. Indeed, the scenario in which militarised business interests enforce the privatisation of collective resources appears to be modelled closely on Naomi Klein’s (2008) account of how the US invasion of Iraq served as a pretext for imposing the “shock doctrine” of coercive neoliberalisation on territory that had resisted incorporation into the capitalist world market. Another sign can be found in the confluence of environmentalism and anti-globalism central to the new forms of anti-capitalist mobilisation that emerged so emphatically with the protests at the World Trade Organisation summit in Seattle in 1999 (Yuen et al 2002) and that might also be seen to encompass those instances of *Avatar* activism discussed above.

If a coherent defence of the environment increasingly calls for a critique of capitalist globalisation and a sharpened sense of the class

character of that project then it is no surprise that ecocriticism and ecopolitics must engage in dialogue with a revitalised discourse of green Marxism. Recent re-readings (Benton 1996; Foster 2000; Foster et al 2010) have challenged the view that Marx's work endorses the "Promethean" subjugation of nature by a humanity wielding ever-more sophisticated technological forces of production. Rather, it is argued, "Marx's worldview was deeply, indeed systematically, ecological" (Foster 2000, viii). From his account of the worker's alienation from nature in the early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844) to the analysis in *Capital* (1867) of how commodity production "disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth", Marx shows that environmental degradation is integral to capitalism. Capitalism develops by "undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker" (Marx 1976, 637-638) and "produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent processes of social metabolism" that regulate humanity's relationship with nature (Marx 1981, 949). Thus,

instead of a conscious and rational treatment of the land as a permanent communal property, as the inalienable condition for the existence and reproduction of the chain of human generations, we have the exploitation and the squandering of the powers of the earth. (Marx 1981, 948-949)

As a result, historical materialism rejects any categorical division between the interests of nature and the needs of humanity. As modern science progresses, wrote Engels in *Dialectics of Nature* (1896),

the more men will not only feel but also know their oneness with nature, and the more impossible will become the senseless and unnatural idea of a contrast between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body. (Engels 2003, 76)

Moreover, critical study of the capitalist mode of production reveals

that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly. (Engels 2003, 76)

Thus the Marxist tradition contains a clear articulation of the interdependent, dialectical nature of the relationship between humanity and the environment. There is therefore a compelling argument that it must remain central to the

development of ecopolitical thought and action in so far as they necessarily revolve around

the foundational question of the organization of human labor, because it is through the material activities of laboring that the crucial relation to nature unfolds. Any project that does not confront the question of who has the power to organize human labor and to what purposes and why is missing the central point. (Harvey 2009, 246)

IV

Ecocriticism of the kind to which this book is devoted seeks to read and interpret the images, narratives and paradigms through which humanity's "crucial relation to nature" is imagined, depicted and understood. Its proper function is "to analyse critically the tropes brought into play in environmental debate, and, more tentatively, to predict which will have a desired effect on a specific audience at a given historical juncture" (Garrard 2004, 14). In this latter regard it aims also to contribute to the development of appropriate moral, ethical and political stances towards that relation. We have suggested that ecocritical approaches can give rise to a range of ecopolitical positions that in turn carry various and sometimes contradictory ideological ramifications. Still, we have organised the following chapters into a pattern which, we hope, reflects the fact that ecocriticism is nonetheless structured by a coherent cluster of questions and concerns. Chapters one to four engage with the role that aesthetic and intellectual representations of nature might play in shaping environmental consciousness. These representations might be cultural or scientific in character. If the former, they might derive from visual art, film or literature and be categorised as belonging to high, avant-garde or popular culture. But for the authors concerned they are important vehicles of cognition, and their potential to foster critical thinking about environmental issues is gauged in relation to their compatibility with and capacity to enrich the political and philosophical traditions of the left.

Chapters five to seven continue to dwell on imaginative representations of nature, but here the focus is especially on literary texts that stage a destabilising encounter between the forces of modernisation and some aspect of nature perceived as "other". The authors all suggest that attending critically to such encounters might enable us to rethink some of the more oppressive and exploitative aspects of enlightenment modernity that have contributed to environmental catastrophe. But they also highlight the difficulty and the dangers involved in seeking to speak for or inhabit

the position of the other. While such gestures are necessary acts of solidarity and empathy with the objectified and the marginalised, they can also end up duplicating the very logic of colonisation and appropriation they set out to critique. Once again, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* remains a significant precursor text when the moral epistemology of the narrative remains troubling, though this may be regarded as a virtue if it undermines any premature closure on the text's identity in a world of anthropocentric positivism gone wrong. How, exactly, are we now to regard the legacy of Enlightenment under the gaze of its defenders and naysayers? Is it, to borrow a term from Derrida's usage, best thought of as a *pharmakon*—as both a poison and a cure? If it is to serve as a cure we must think our way out of its well-rehearsed closures on human development. These chapters cause us to ask how we are to use the tools of a flawed Enlightenment to overcome its inherent limitations.

The last three chapters of the book explore instances of what might be called ecopolitical praxis across the disparate realms of corporate marketing, ecological architecture and avant-garde filmmaking. All illustrate what is at stake in the practical deployment of environmental discourse in the public sphere, and all show that such deployments require the intervention of ecocritical perspectives in order to make them "speak" intelligibly. As we see in the cases of BP's corporate rebranding exercise and the Nant-y-Cwm Steiner School's adoption of ecological architecture, environmental discourse in practice is not automatically progressive. And we might note that even the radical experiential revitalisation of the spectator's relationship to nature effected by the films of James Benning is always open to the kind of reservation raised by Theodor Adorno in respect of the impulse to immerse ourselves in nature or in representations of it. Nature and art, Adorno suggests, are all too easily reduced to consoling retreats from modernity for alienated and isolated consciousness. While consoling, they also run the risk of making that isolation bearable, reconciling consciousness to things as they are:

The subject projects itself onto nature, gaining a sense of nearness to nature by virtue of its isolation. The subject's helplessness in a society petrified into second nature [i.e. technological capitalist modernity] prompts it to seek refuge in first nature. (Adorno 1984, 96)

In the spirit of Adorno, the chapters herein recognise both the necessity of and the difficulties generated by our cultural and imaginative engagements with nature. In this respect they demonstrate that ecocriticism is a deeply self-critical and self-reflexive enterprise. But all are committed

to the idea that, while we may be dependent upon science to identify and explain ecological problems, culture plays a determining role in bringing those problems to consciousness. And cultural analysis of the kind found in this book has an important part to play in interpreting and elucidating the varieties of ecological consciousness so that they can be properly debated in a sufficiently well-educated and informed public sphere. Such debate becomes increasingly urgent in the shadow of an economic crisis that appears to have definitively stripped away the pale green veil behind which the hegemonic forces of global neoliberalism masqueraded in the heyday of ecological modernisation. Unwilling or unable to reconsider the logic of capitalist globalisation, these forces resort to their central “fetish belief”: that entrepreneurial dynamism and technical knowledge will produce a “technological fix” (Harvey 2005, 68) capable of repairing and then properly regulating what Marx called “the metabolic interaction between man and the earth” (Marx 1976, 637). In the continued absence of such a fix, which in any case would not address the social and ethical distortions of the system that has produced the environmental catastrophe, the words of Marx’s colleague Engels remain appropriate:

This regulation, however, requires something more than knowledge. It requires a complete revolution in our hitherto existing mode of production, and simultaneously, a revolution in our whole contemporary social order. (Engels 2003, 77)

Too true. But a failure to think through the consequences of its actions has been modernity’s persistent shortcoming, and any ill-considered version of the future in the name of a post-capitalist world would be yet another gamble, another hostage to fortune. What is certain, though, is that if we first of all have to think ourselves out of the box, time is running increasingly short...

Notes

1. *Bloomberg Business News* calculated that if loan guarantees are included in the total bailout package the financial commitment of the federal government rises to \$8.5 trillion (Pender 2008).
2. Three separate enquiries—one by the House of Commons, one by Lord Oxburgh, and one by the University of East Anglia itself—all cleared the Climate Research Unit scientists of concealing or manipulating data. See Carrington (2009) and Adam (2010).
3. China and the United States are the two biggest emitters of carbon dioxide at 24% and 17% of the global total respectively in 2009. For the past decade, Chinese