Ideal Nature:

Utopias of Landscape and Loss

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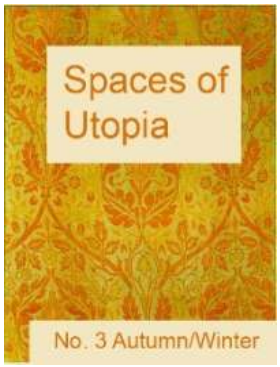

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Introduction

This is a story about entanglements between nature and utopia before and after the "end of nature". In this paper I map some of the ways in which ideas and representations of nonhuman nature are indissolubly caught up with utopianism, both in the conventional sense of blueprints for better societies, and in the sense of the less schematic and systematic utopianism conceived of as the critique and transgression of what is born out of the desire for "better ways of living and being" (Levitas 1990: 7). I focus on "external" nature, the natural environment with which societies and social actors are relentlessly and problematically articulated. In contemporary social and cultural theory the distinction between "external" nature and the "inner" natures of the body is seen as increasingly unstable, dissolving in the experience of social life in conditions of widespread environmental risk (to natures, to bodies) and the operations of global technoscience, so that the materiality of nature/bodies and ideas about selves and environments are imbricated in ever more promiscuous and hybrid relationships. Nonetheless, the imagination of a material and external nature, separate from and indeed conceptually constitutive of a distinctive human nature and culture, is of course deeply embedded in modern and postmodern Western societies.

The construction of that separate nature and its endless representation in text and as spectacle has a long and complex relationship with utopianism. The story of the shifting ways in which nature and utopia are bound up together, and how theorists have characterised the knots and connections, forms the structure of

my discussion. Examining the mutable and braided concepts of nature and utopia insistently unravels claims to universality and essentials. Indeed, one of the most interesting analogies between the concepts of utopia and nature is that both have appeared to offer very particular kinds of certainties and foundations that have proved to be increasingly precarious. Utopian visions have looked like concrete hopes and plans for future societies; nature has seemed to be a material reality that could ground truth claims and guarantee the authenticity or illegitimacy of social values and behaviours. Both, on further examination, prove to be fluid, contested and partial entities – not even, perhaps, entities at all. Rather, nature and utopia are increasingly seen to have given up – in theory at least – their status as objects or things and to have become processual or relational. Both have come to be analysed less in terms of their specifiable substance or content but in terms of their changing social construction and functions. This sense of the changing conceptualisation of utopia and nature means that the relationship between the desire for a better way of being and the idea of nature needs to be examined from different angles and in a range of historical and theoretical contexts.

In the light of the contingent and historically situated ways in which "nature" and "utopia" have operated together, I look at three clusters or constellations of utopia-nature alliances. I begin with *ecotopia*, using the term to refer to the formal and self-conscious ecological utopianism that became thinkable in the light of mid to late twentieth-century political environmentalism, albeit with roots stretching back far further. I move on to discuss the less explicitly political but perhaps more insidiously ideological idea of *landscape* to explore how critical theorists have seen in idealised literary and artistic representations of nature a disguised expression of utopian social values, sometimes argued to be transformative, sometimes compensatory, in function. The landscape ideal has been particularly associated with high modernity, but recent analyses continue to identify the cultural fetish for idealised, untainted nature with a kind of compensatory utopianism that undermines some of the radical claims of ecocentric discourse. In the final section I address the *postnatural*, tracing what happens to landscape, nature, ideology and utopia in "end" times, that is, the complex and contested ways in which cultural representations and even simulations of nature are caught up with utopian ideals and desires in a postmodern society that is arguably "after"

nature and yet simultaneously preoccupied with images and ideals of natural beauty and integrity as well as questions of environmental justice and ecological futures.

This is, then, necessarily a story which implies that we are postmodern – or, following Latour, that we have arrived at a point at which we can say that "we have never been modern" (1993) – and that postmodernity might involve the end also of nature as it has conventionally been conceived – as a material, organic, separate whole that also stands as the nonhuman, non-social or non-cultural "other" in the oppositional discourses that frame Western philosophy and society. As well as being postmodern, however, our historical consciousness is also indelibly marked by (contested and partial) knowledges of the environmental crisis announced in the late 1960s. In its aftermath, I argue that culture is shot through with the problem of how we might avoid or live with environmental apocalypse, and also with desires for a real, unspoilt and beautiful nature. This is, then, also a story about ecological philosophy and politics. At the beginning of this story, environmentalism looks like an inherently oppositional and utopian set of ideas and practices. As the story progresses, however, debates about the meaning of nature in the post-environmental crisis period have increasingly questioned the ideals and functions of ecocentric thought itself. Within a range of critical social and cultural theories, deep green philosophy is stripped of its privileged status as a critique of the alienating and exploitative culture of late modernity and authentic alternative, and becomes instead one more problematic narrative adding its voice to a range of dreams and anxieties about the natural. Specifically, ecocentrism is seen less as part of the solution to environmental problems and more as a discourse that reproduces untenable society/nature dualisms and holds up idealisations of natural environments as spectacles for contemplation. The status of ecologism as a self-evidently utopian (estranging, critiquing, transforming) discourse has been undermined and, in some cases, appears a nostalgic dream compensating for the loss of a nature that never existed. My conclusions, therefore, concern questions about whether and how a postnatural culture might optimistically envisage a future for natural-social relationships, as well as the significance of utopia in environmental epistemology and politics.

Ecotopia

Questions of what role nature can play in plans or desires for an ideal *society* are examined in various ways in utopian theory (see for example Levitas 1984; Davis 1987; Sargent 1994; de Geus 1999; Sargisson 2000; Jameson 2004). One very clear answer has come from the explosion of ecological politics and theory in the period since the idea of an "environmental crisis" became common currency in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Environmentalist rhetoric has insistently framed its arguments about how societies do and should live with nature in relation to the twin tropes of catastrophe and ecotopia. On the one hand, dystopian narratives extrapolated issues of pollution and resource depletion into future scenarios of environmental degradation and social collapse, which challenged modernity's ideological frameworks of progress and unlimited economic growth and urgently argued for the delegitimisation of the technocentric exploitation of nature. A clear "apocalyptic horizon" (Dryzek 1997: 37) emerged from widely read environmentalist texts such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1999) and the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.* 1972). On the other hand, hopes and visions of emancipated and unalienated futures in a right relationship with nature promised an alternative culture of ecological integrity and human well-being beyond growth and domination. Manifestoes for a green and sustainable society like the *Ecologist*'s "Blueprint for Survival" (Goldsmith 1972) and literary utopias like Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1978) envisioned a better way of life for human societies not in opposition to nature or limited by the need for ecological restraint, but liberated and fulfilled by a new holistic and relational conception of the natural world.

By the 1970s, environmentalism was shaping an idea of nature that appeared as part of the new content of utopian expression in explicit and politicised ways, emerging both in the form of closed blueprints for radical social-structural reform, and – with green ideas close to the heart of the themes of the critical literary utopia (Moylan 1986) – in the form of open, processual and reflexive explorations of green values. Ecotopian thought is of course plural and heterogeneous, but its visions of radically new ways of living with rather than at the expense of the natural world share a common core. This has been characterised in a range of ways (see for example Eckersley 1992; Merchant

2005; Dobson 1995; Kumar 1987; Pepper 2005), but for the sake of descriptive clarity I outline ecotopia here under three themes: ecocentrism, sufficiency, and embeddedness. Ecocentrism refers to the displacement of human consciousness from its privileged position at the centre of knowledge and value. Natural entities and systems are accorded intrinsic rather than simply instrumental value, and relational epistemologies supplant essentialist ones so that all living things, including human subjects and societies, are understood not in terms of inherent qualities but as constituted in their relationships with a multiplicity of others. Sufficiency means recognising that modern ideologies of human well-being and progress are predicated upon economic expansion and acquisition that exploit and despoil nature. Radical ecotopias reject the logic of "more" and articulate a philosophy of "enough", proposing that human well-being and fulfilment should be sought not in material progress but in spiritual, cultural and intellectual growth, in community and connections with others, and in an enhanced and vibrant relationship with the natural world. Embeddedness refers to the ecotopian argument that late modern society has become progressively separated and alienated from its natural support systems, both materially and conceptually. Ecocentrism sees proximity to nature – both in the sense of physical closeness to the earth and in terms of cultivating an ethics of empathy and interconnection with all living things – as crucial to an authentically green society and to human emancipation.

Thus radical green ecocentric visions envision a world in which ecological respect, care and integrity expand and enhance rather than reduce and constrain the possibilities for human well-being. Ecotopian dreams of freedom and human well-being grounded in nature and the natural do not, of course, emerge from nowhere. They can be situated in relation to the history of traditions within utopian thought which resist technocentrism and the instrumental, productive rationalities of modernity and oppose control and domination over both the human and natural worlds. De Geus (1999), for example, theorises contemporary ecotopianism as a new version of utopias of "sufficiency" that can be traced from Rousseau to the Romantics and William Morris. There are clear links between contemporary ecotopias and Arcadian traditions in utopian thought, as well as the tradition of the "body" utopia outlined by Sargent (1994). However, as I have argued elsewhere,

recent ecological utopias should be seen as reconfigurations of rather than simple additions to an essential and enduring "nature utopia" (Garforth 2002 and forthcoming; see also Hollm 1998). They are responses to specific social and historical conditions which include the novel idea of a systemic environmental crisis and the new epistemologies and ecological politics that have grown up in response (Dobson, 1995; Eyerman / Jamison 1991; *inter alia*). The nature that is evoked or constructed by ecotopian visions is not identical to the nature vocabularies of the pastoral or the Romantic sublime, for example. Contemporary, ecological, political and philosophical positions constitute a distinctive ideological discourse (Dobson 1995), and their ecotopian visions cannot simply be read as nostalgic or conservative returns to either pre-existing traditions of anti-modern utopian thought or yearnings for a timeless, static, ahistorical nature. Rather, they are critical utopian explorations of the grounds for a genuinely post-industrial society (Kumar 1987), most powerfully expressed in the reflexive narratives of critical ecotopian fiction (Garforth, forthcoming).

In this context theorists of ecopolitical thought have begun to examine ecotopianism not simply in terms of the formal representation of green ideas, but in an attempt to identify the operations and function of utopia as part of the politics of contemporary ecologism. While nature can be seen as part of the content of utopias, green political theory seeks to understand utopianism as an intrinsic aspect of radical ecology. Built on the tenets of ecocentrism, sufficiency and embeddedness, radical ecological thought can be seen as inherently utopian – that is, critical, disruptive and emancipatory. Reformist, light green, environmentalist ethics ask us simply to find ways of moderating the worst excesses of social impacts on the environment – to embrace sustainable development, green consumerism, modest recycling, and marginal nature conservation. Radical ecologism argues for fundamental shifts in the culture that underpins technocentric, dominating and exploiting structures and practices, and offers an alternative set of values for human self-realisation rooted in an ecocentric and relational conception of nature. In essence, radical ecology can be seen as asking for a basic reconsideration of the meaning, value and significance of nature, which in turns means rewriting assumptions about human nature, culture, and society. In its capacity to provoke these conceptual shifts, ecological

and utopian theorists have identified in radical ecology a utopianism of process and critique that is as significant as the detail of its blueprints or reflexive dreams of a sustainable society.

Robyn Eckersley locates radical ecologism's utopianism primarily in its emancipatory qualities. In the wake of limited "survivalist" and "democratic" articulations of the environmental problematic, by the 1970s deep green philosophy had coalesced into a fully critical and liberatory discourse that saw the environmental crisis as an "opportunity for metaphysical reconstruction and moral development" (Eckersley 1992: 19). On this reading, ecocentric philosophy's exploration of new and better ways of living with nature constitutes a "new heuristic of future possibilities" (*idem*, 186). It functions as an ongoing revaluation of nature, society and the subject, which Eckersley describes (following Levitas's work on Thompson and Abensour; see Levitas 1990, Eckersley 1992) in terms of the processual education of desire. At the heart of ecologism's utopianism is its distinctive model of relational ethics. Rather than adopting an abstract or "axiological" approach to ethical value, ecocentric philosophy is predicated on a lived or intuitive ethics (*idem*, 61), inviting us to cultivate a more expansive sense of self through identification with and empathy for other human and nonhuman beings. Its norms are not solely intellectual or cognitive but "ultimately experiential" (Devall / Sessions 1985: 66). This "processual ontology" is also the key to deep green utopianism for Lucy Sargisson (2001; see also 2000). Where Eckersley focuses primarily on its emancipatory qualities, Sargisson privileges its capacity for subversion. For Sargisson, the ecological self and relational ethics espoused by deep green theorists work to disrupt the conventional Western self/other relationship and transgress the boundaries that conceptually separate humans and culture from nature, opening up a potentially utopian space of estrangement and subversion.

Recent theoretical accounts of radical ecocentric thought's utopian qualities are not wholly positive. Sargisson is somewhat sceptical that the utopian possibilities of ecologism's transgressive ontology are actually kept open, noting a tendency within deep green philosophy to resolve the tensions it identifies between self and other, culture and nature, cognitive rationality and intuition/empathy into positions of identity and sameness – that is, to privilege

nature over culture and absorb other into self rather than maintain a transgressive tension between these binaries (Sargisson 2001).[1] From a different perspective, green political theorists Andrew Dobson (1995) and David Pepper (2005) acknowledge the necessity of ecologism's visionary elements and its intrinsically idealist and utopian qualities, but argue that ecological politics has not developed a convincing materialist model for political transformation.[2] In this respect theories of green utopianism reflect and overlap with contemporary debates within utopian theory (see for example Levitas / Sargisson 2001) over the value of settling for a critical, deconstructive or broadly cultural model of utopianism at the expense of calling for collective utopian models of structural transformation.

However, despite these differences of emphasis and cautionary notes as to the limits of the green utopian function, a range of theorists acknowledge the distinctive ways in which ecocentric idealism has both drawn on and refigured the utopian mode, in terms of the content of utopian visions, the transformation of their formal representation, and the unsettling and emancipatory "processual ontology" of ecocentrism. The urgent necessity to reconceptualise nonhuman nature and human social relationships with it in conditions of environmental crisis therefore constitutes one particularly important set of articulations between nature and utopia. Nonetheless, the claim that radical ecological philosophy is an inherently oppositional or transgressive discourse is problematic on two counts. Firstly, it only attends to explicit and politicised utopias of nature and the environment; the more diffuse, ambiguous and indirect ideas about nature and its future in the wider culture are overlooked or treated simply as manifestations of an ideology of domination and exploitation. Secondly, as Sargisson's doubts above intimate, ecocentric thought depends upon assumptions about the taken-for-granted stability and materiality of nature as a discrete cultural category or physical object that have been thoroughly deconstructed and declared untenable within recent social and cultural theory.

Landscape

Thus in this section I ask what happens to the relationship between nature and utopia in theoretical contexts where nature's epistemological status is questioned and in cultural contexts where desires and anxieties about nature and its future(s)

are represented implicitly and symbolically. Social science and humanities theory increasingly argue that nature itself is socially produced and culturally constructed, and that representations of the natural are displaced articulations of social values. Like radical ecology, social constructionist approaches to nature highlight how the culture and dominant epistemologies of Western modernity have traded on a fundamental nature/culture opposition to make the natural available as an object of domination and instrumental use (see for example Pepper 1984; Evernden 1992; Merchant 2003). The ultimate roots of environmental crisis are located in nature's positioning as a reified, separate and devalued object rather than as a multiple and lively set of entities and relationships with intrinsic meaning and value. However, many theorists have argued that those same dichotomies have simultaneously produced nature as an object of aesthetic appreciation and appropriation, infused with both ideological legitimations of existing social relations and structures, and desires for other ways of being in the world. Whilst radical ecologism celebrates this aestheticised construction of nature, building on it an oppositional and emancipatory utopian project, other approaches have tended to see in idealised representations of nature debased utopias of mystification, refuge or compensation.

Cosgrove's work on the emergence of the idea or ideal of landscape (both in terms of "real" natural scenes and their representation, especially in fine art) exemplifies Marxist-materialist theorisations of the socialisation of nature and approaches to the iconography of nature that read landscape for its social and symbolic significance (Cosgrove 1998; see also Daniels / Cosgrove 1988; Williams 1973; Berger 1972). Here, the dominant "ways of seeing" landscape are essentially ideological mystifications that legitimate property and power relations and disguise a real or authentic nature behind them. The "real" nature that Marxist approaches invoke is not an essentialist or solely material category, but rather the nature that is brought into being through its dialectical relationship with the social, primarily through labour and dwelling. It is precisely these traces of human agency, politics and history in nature that, it is argued, are finessed away in the landscape ideal. Landscape, emerging in early modern Europe, encodes capitalist ideology through the development of linear perspective, representing nature from an external point of view in a static, "realistic" scene as an object of the gaze

rather than a site of lived relationships. The social is reified in hypostasised representations of "pure" nature recalling a mythical golden age and natural order, reinforcing the contradictions and lacks of modernity in the moment of offering a refuge from them.

Thus in the concept and history of landscape we see a very different set of connections between nature and utopia than those suggested by ecotopia. Ecotopia's visions of social conditions explicitly politicise the natural and estrange and critique the social; landscape naturalises the social and mystifies nature. Insofar as nature-as-landscape is theorised as thoroughly social, however, it may also be understood as utopian, broadly defined; ideas of nature express desires for better ways of being. Like utopia, landscape's function can be transformative, as part of the ideological project of the rising bourgeoisie, but is predominantly compensatory, offering visions of a harmonious and unalienated natural world that is desired at the moment of its loss. If utopian desires are in some sense always driven by yearning and lack (Bloch 1986; Levitas 1990), then landscape makes nature complicit in their displacement and ideological resolution.

The claim that modern culture is replete with idealised representations of nature that function as corrupt utopias – reactionary and nostalgic rather than progressive and emancipatory, compensatory and escapist rather than critical and transformative – has re-emerged in recent work on the cultural construction of nature, this time often focused on the natures produced by environmentalist discourse. A well-known statement of these positions was the collection *Uncommon Ground* (1996), edited by William Cronon and including essays by for example Donna Haraway and Carolyn Merchant. *Uncommon Ground*'s argument was that whilst nature is routinely taken to signify a foundational and universal reality, in fact it carries our deepest and most culturally specific values. How, Cronon asks, can the diverse and contradictory natures we encounter both physically and in discourse be reducible to a single monolithic entity – "One Thing with One Name"? (Cronon 1996b). *Uncommon Ground* was singled out for criticism by radical ecophilosophers (Snyder 1996; Sessions 1996) and generated a collection of critical essays in response (Soulé / Lease 1995). The general tenor of the criticism was that the Cronon contributors espoused a form of deconstructionist postmodern relativism that in effect "explained nature away" or

denied its intrinsic value. In fact, the majority of the essays in *Uncommon Ground* adopted a rather moderate position, focusing on problems of epistemology rather than ontology, with Cronon and Merchant especially insisting that constructionist approaches were born out of a commitment to environmental justice rather than a rejection of the grounds on which it might be based. This moderate constructionism did not deny but remained agnostic regarding nature's material reality, arguing instead that it can only be grasped via multiple, contested and irreducibly social discourses. "Nature itself" – as a pure, separate entity – is taken to be ultimately inaccessible; we can only understand through the lens of signification and culture, shaped by dominant epistemologies.

More contentiously, though, *Uncommon Ground* identified two discourses close to the heart of radical ecological thought, especially in the US, as particularly problematic in relation to environmental justice: the image of wilderness (Cronon 1996a), and the Eden narrative (Merchant 1996: 2003). Cronon argues that deep ecology's truth claims about protecting and conserving pristine nature depend on an idea of pristine wilderness that is in fact an elaborate and deeply "unnatural" romantic myth with a distinctive history (Cronon 1996; see also Nash 1982; Oelschlaeger 1992). Wilderness is central to the deep green utopia (Eckersley 1992); its essential otherness and separation from the social constructs it both as a material object of care and a signifier of what is important as a foundation for human well-being. For Cronon, "wilderness" is rather a wishful transcendent ideal of moral and physical purity that functions as a physical and symbolic refuge from modernity. The wilderness ideal articulates "unexamined hopes and desires" that conceal and compensate for the socialised and corrupted nature that it allows us to go on producing wherever wilderness has already been lost or damaged (Cronon 1996a: 81). Thus as Luke notes, commenting on Sierra Club-type images of beautiful, pristine, unpeopled wilderness, "[it] looks 'natural', but it is being denaturalised by vast industrial metabolisms even as environmental pressure groups cling to such photographic myths as utopian images of a place and a moment outside our (…) history" (Luke 1997: 137).

As in the materialist approaches outlined above, these arguments show that not only is the sphere of cultural representation suffused with discourses and imagery that work to naturalise or mystify nature and the social, but that such

representations produce or construct the external natures we see and know. More recent constructionist approaches, however, do not suggest that there is a "real" nature to get back to beneath its compensatory and utopian representation. Discourse replaces ideology as the key theoretical term, and "discourses do not reveal or hide the truth of nature, but, rather, create their own truths" (Castree 2001: 12). Cultural constructionist approaches do not make foundational claims about the natural, but seek instead a means of open arbitration between plural truths. In doing so, they offer another kind of nature utopia, most clearly visible in Cronon's arguments. If dominant discourses of nature naturalise what is always already social and encultured, then environmental ethics cannot be grounded in "real" nature; rather, it must explicitly recognise the social and political values built into concepts of nature, and acknowledge that their plurality bespeaks multiple and heterogeneous social relationships with many "others", human and nonhuman. Getting rid of the idea of wilderness and originatory myths of separate nature could thus initiate a process of democratic deliberation over social preferences regarding the future of humans and nature. For Cronon, the critique of deep ecology is necessary "precisely because we sympathise so strongly with the environmentalist agenda: with the task of rethinking and reconstructing the human relationship with the natural world" (Cronon 1996b: 26).

From this perspective, then, radical ecologism is displaced as an intrinsically utopian discourse, its claims to transgression and critique revealed to rest on nostalgic, ahistorical and desiring yet ultimately compensatory visions of a separate and pristine nature. The approaches associated with *Uncommon Ground* do not fundamentally question the reality of nature itself. However, their scepticism regarding the issue of a single and separate nature does hint at the radical ontological deconstructions of the nature/culture binary and anti-foundationalist approaches that I discuss below under the theme of the postnatural. Can there be a nature utopia after the end of nature?

The postnatural

Much has been made of McKibben's argument that by the late twentieth century we had reached the "end of nature" (2003). In the catastrophe narratives of the 1970s the imminent death of nature functioned as a dystopian warning device; for

McKibben, we have already arrived at the end. Global climate change represents the final denaturalisation of nature. By polluting every particle of the atmosphere and being able to change the weather, "we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. In so doing we have deprived nature of its independence... Nature's independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us" (McKibben 2003: 60-61; emphasis in original). For McKibben the end of nature is both cultural and material, but the loss of nature's material separateness is crucial. Stories about the death of nature or end of the real are of course rampant in accounts of postmodernity. In Jameson's analysis of late capitalism, for example, postmodernism is precisely the historical stage at which culture supersedes nature, "when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good" (Jameson 1991: ix). Critical theorists tend to read the end of nature in postmodernism as a consequence primarily of commodification, the colonisation of all aspects of nature – from genes to bodies to rainforests – under the sign of exchange value. Other approaches have followed Baudrillard in locating the death of nature in relation to the proliferation of simulation and spectacle. In the fourth order of simulacra, the natural becomes ontologically impossible in an explosion of culture and signification.

This situation produces debased or corrupted ecotopias whereby hyperreal or idealised representations of nature mask its disappearance outside the realm of simulation. The focus of Baudrillard's scorn is Biosphere II's microcosmic replication of global ecosystems in Arizona, USA – part scientific experiment, part tourist spectacle (Baudrillard 1994; Clark 1997). For Baudrillard, it represents above all the paucity of visions of the good life available in postmodernity, a testament to our desperate attempts to guarantee mere survival:

> [t]he real planet, presumed condemned, is sacrificed in advance to its miniaturized, air-conditioned clone (…) which is designed to vanquish death by total simulation (…) Must this be our only hope? Having lost our metaphysical utopias, do we have to build this prophylactic one? (Baudrillard 1994: 87)

The nature ideals enshrined in environmentalist discourse represent yet more death knells. "Ecology", Baudrillard explains, brings nature entirely into the realm of culture and meaning and in doing so constitutes it as a subject, granting it rights and intrinsic value in an extension of Enlightenment humanism. This process is

essential to radical ecology's visions of ecological integrity and human self-realisation. For Baudrillard, though, making nature a subject simply inscribes it in the hysterical sign-economy of the hyperreal, abandoning it to the logics of spectacle and virtuality. Thus Bartram and Shobrook argue that "eco-utopian" experiences like the Eden Project in Cornwall, England, confirm nature's irrevocable loss and our desire for temporary refuge from anxieties over the environment's vulnerability to human use and abuse. Perfected nature simulations are not testaments to our capacity to care for and conserve nature but nostalgic or redemptive illusions of "forestalling the end through endless duplications of nature" (Bartram / Shobrook 2000: 371). What separates these arguments about nature's disappearance in the explosion of simulation from Cronon's account of discursive construction is their relentless anti-foundationalism, from which no utopian alternative or critique is possible that has not always already been recuperated, whether rooted in nature itself or in the subversion of binary oppositions that are no longer available. All ecotopian representations are prophylactic resolutions of real problems gone too far to address; all utopian desire is channelled into the anxious, excessive production of endlessly circulating simulacra that merely confirm the end of nature they are supposed to deny. Nature cannot find or guarantee an emancipatory or oppositional ecotopian vision; nor does the prospect of a democratic green utopia of explicit values invested in environmental and social justice have currency in the face of an economy of simulation or hyperreality. The environmental crisis itself becomes discursive and depoliticised, another round of hysteria about the loss of the real.

Abandoning the monolithic Nature created by modernity's rationalist epistemologies and embracing instead the position that natures are brought into being as the contingent and temporary outcomes of simultaneously material and discursive articulations between multiple human, technological and natural "actants" is not without hope. Posthuman and postnatural theories have considered the prospects of radically processual, partial and plural utopias of connection; utopias without, in Haraway's well-known formulation, origin myths, and without any final vision, however reflexive, of the ecological good (1990; see also 1997). Vogel's commitment to environmental ethics "after the end of nature" asks us to take responsibility for our fragmented, cyborg selves and the multiple

natures we routinely interact with (2002). Merchant calls for a "partnership ethic" (2003) that parallels Sargisson's hopes for radical ecocentrism in resisting holism and resolution and embracing an ethics of partiality, hybridity and creative tensions playing across self/other, social/natural, material/discursive. It is not clear, however, how well these approaches address questions of loss, desire and crisis, especially in relation to visual and literary representations of the natural. That is, posthuman theory's forward-looking insistence on leaving "nature" behind offers very few resources for understanding the deep-seated sense of loss and mourning for a disappeared nature that are visibly at work in culture. Baudrillard's hysterical nature simulations may be compensatory and prophylactic but they bespeak an apparently unquenchable desire for nature and conservation that is, culturally at least, "real" (and rooted in real environmental and social contradictions), and which may be inseparable from nature utopianism and ecological ethics and representation after environmentalism.

Frederick Buell argues that postmodern and postnatural culture and theory is a symptom of the failure to take McKibben's "end of nature" seriously (2003). Here, the critical deconstruction of natural ontologies is seen as part of a wider "culture of hyperexuberance" that celebrates the end of nature and especially natural limits as an opportunity for human transcendence, unfettered ingenuity, and technological development.[3] Nature hasn't, Buell suggests, died in an explosion of signifiers or as a result of the sober critique of its discursive construction, but rather "in a terrible abundance of sadism and indifference already accomplished" (Buell 2003: 303). In essence Buell argues that the apocalypse anticipated in the environmental narratives of the 1970s has become real and domesticated. Ecological apocalypse as slow, chronic degradation is, experientially and culturally, where we live now – literally in our homes, and where we dwell physically and phenomenologically. Hyperexuberance and crisis denial is one response to this situation, but Buell locates a more appropriate response in "realist" and elegiac evocations of nature's loss.

On one hand this might be seen in the prophylactic ecotopian aesthetics criticised by Baudrillard – sublime, romantic images of nature's beauty and integrity – and on the other by narratives of mourning and loss. Brereton has recently argued that the excessive visual representations of sublime nature that

saturate Hollywood film might be read in terms of their moments of estranging utopian consciousness (2005). Admittedly mainstream film's nature spectacles – in heroic eco-campaigner narratives, in the awe-inspiring scenes of nature's revenge in disaster films, and in the cosmic sublime of postmodern science fiction – frequently function in a "therapeutic" or compensatory fashion, but they figure at the symbolical level an irrepressible desire for a better social relationship with nature. In this sense, as Clark implies (1997), we need Baudrillard's identification of the proliferation of hyperreal nature as a counterweight to narratives of its end, and we need to consider not just its banal and compensatory aspects, but locate also the logic of its excessive semiotic production in relation to utopian yearning and almost libidinous desire.

In powerful readings of, for example, Janisse Ray's memoir *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999), Joy Williams' novel *The Quick and the Dead* (2000), and Terry Gilliam's film *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), Buell finds both landscape and loss in the reinvented nature writing and postmodern film and literature of the late twentieth century. Here, narratives of unstable, risky and thoroughly degraded environments are haunted by the semiotic ghosts of a pristine nature and the possibility of "biophilia". Following Beck's account of the collapse of safety and environmental standards in an age of risk and uncertainty, Buell argues that elegiac visions of lost nature are not simply nostalgic, but keep alive a sense of ecological responsibility in its absence. Only through mourning for a dead nature can we recognise the deeply dystopian reality of the current situation and locate any sense of hope for the future. In this Buell's argument parallels Baccolini's arguments about the importance of memory in critical dystopian literature, whereby conscious historical remembrance is a necessary part of the process of an ethical utopianism, especially in contexts where utopian hope is framed by a dystopian reality. Memory brings us into a "living relationship" with the present and thus with utopian change (Baccolini 2003: 130).

Buell's conceptual vocabulary is troubling from a constructionist perspective, with its insistence on an unproblematically real nature that has been lost once and for all and its unreflexive use of Edward O. Wilson's concept of "biophilia" – the hard-wired human propensity to love nature. But his account enables a fruitful approach to the utopian dimensions of both idealised landscape

and postnatural loss. It allows the utopian elements of representations of nature in a culture deeply marked by environmental crisis to be identified and to be seen as estranging and unsettling – not because they work against dominant discourses or cultural simulation and spectacle, but because they work with and through them, entangled in them. The oppositional ecotopias of radical ecology are necessary to understanding the meaning and hope attached to nature in the early twenty first century, but as constructionist accounts emphasise, they are not enough. Attention to the excesses and losses marked in representational aesthetics of nature is also vital to understanding green utopianism in a situation where idealised visions of pristine wilderness may not only be compensatory, but may encode lacks and desires that urgently demand attention.

Notes

[1] For an interesting discussion of how these tensions have been addressed in ecotopian fiction, see Carol Franko's work on Kim Stanley Robinson (Franko 1994).

[2] Pepper argues that ecological utopianism has not been of the processual and estranging kind theorised by Sargisson and Eckersley; rather, environmentalism has tended to produce nostalgic and conservative blueprints that are universalising and prescriptive. I would note that Pepper might be looking in the wrong places for reflexive and transgressive ecotopian fiction; his primary literary utopia, Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1978), is well-known but unrepresentative of the green utopian writing produced since the seventies. Ecotopias like Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Body of Glass*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge* are best seen as critical and transgressive utopian texts (Garforth 2002 and forthcoming).

[3] In this respect Buell rather problematically sees postmodern and posthuman theory (as represented by Jameson and Haraway respectively) as essentially analogous to cyberpunk, *Wired* magazine's doctrine of posthuman/technological transcendence, and the neo-liberal "chaos" capitalism espoused by for example Julian Simon in the 1990s.

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