TODAS AS ARTES

REVISTA LUSO-BRASILEIRA DE ARTES E CULTURA
ALL THE ARTS LUSO-BRAZILIAN JOURNAL OF ART AND CULTURE

Vol. 6, N. 1, Jan.-Abr. 2023
ISSN 2184-38052

SIMPLY LONGING FOR WILDERNESS. FICTIONS OF NATURE PRESERVATION IN WESTERN POP MUSIC

O ANSEIO PELA NATUREZA SELVAGEM. FICÇÕES DE PRESERVAÇÃO DA NATUREZA NA MÚSICA POP DO OCIDENTE

LA NOSTALGIE DE LA NATURESAUVAGE. FICTIONS DE PRÉSERVATION DE LA NATUREDANS LA MUSIQUE POP OCCIDENTALE

AÑORANZA DE LO SALVAJE. FICCIONES DE CONSERVACIÓN DE LA NATURALEZA EN LA MÚSICA POP OCCIDENTAL

Thorsten Philipp

University of Freiburg, Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany

Abstract: The individual and social longing for an intact and untouched nature is a core element of environmental crisis dynamics. To what extent is the reinvention of an authentic nature and of compatible lifestyles a theme of pop music? Can cultural production promote lacking communicative capacity to moderate environmental conflicts and sustainable living? This article reflects the societal dimension of pop music to examine its communicative potentials in processing the problem of environmental degradation and nature preservation. It is particularly the Western trope of wilderness, the idea of an unaltered, virgin nature, that deserves interest. With its origins in the 19th century land ethic, it still today offers an entry to renegotiate fictions, norms, dreams and futures of nature in times of major environmental destruction and apocalyptic disasters. The selected songs show recent attempts to reconcile wilderness and modern life, staging the colonialist narration of the Noble Savage – the Indian as a wise steward of nature. These and similar ideas of wilderness, indigenous knowledge and compatible lifestyles address the core postulate of sustainability for global and intergenerational justice. The analysis of textual and sound regimes not only offers a hybrid mirror of political communication on sustainable development through politainment; it additionally permits to discover latent structures of social systems by unveiling conflict dynamics which are mostly ignored in the public discourse.

Keywords: political communication; sustainability communication; politainment; nature conservation.

Resumo: A ânsia individual e social por uma natureza intacta e intocada é um elemento central da dinâmica da crise ambiental. Em que medida é que a reinvenção de uma natureza autêntica e de estilos de vida compatíveis é um tema da música pop? Pode a produção cultural promover a falta de capacidade comunicativa para moderar os conflitos ambientais e a vida sustentável? Este artigo reflete a dimensão social da música pop para analisar as suas potencialidades comunicativas no processamento do problema da degradação ambiental e da preservação da natureza. É particularmente o tropo ocidental da natureza selvagem e da ideia de uma natureza virgem e inalterada que merece interesse. Com as suas origens na ética da terra do século XIX, ainda hoje oferece uma entrada para renegociar fições, normas, sonhos e futuros da natureza em tempos de grande destruição ambiental e desastres apocalípticos. As canções selecionadas mostram tentativas recentes de reconciliar a vida selvagem e moderna, encenando a narração colonialista do Nobre Selvagem - o índio como um sábio mordomo da natureza. Estas e outras ideias semelhantes da natureza selvagem, dos conhecimentos indígenas e dos estilos de vida compatíveis abordam o postulado central da sustentabilidade para a justiça global e intergeracional. A análise de regimes textuais e sólidos não só oferece um espelho híbrido de comunicação política sobre desenvolvimento sustentável através da política-entretenimento, como permite ainda descobrir estruturas latentes de sistemas sociais através da revelação de dinâmicas de conflito que são - na sua maioria - ignoradas no discurso público.

Palavras-chave: comunicação política; comunicação sobre sustentabilidade; política e entretenimento; conservação da natureza.

Résumé: L'aspiration individuelle et sociale à une nature intacte est un élément central de la dynamique de la crise environnementale. Dans quelle mesure la réinvention d'une nature authentique et de modes de vie compatibles est-elle un thème de la musique pop ? La production culturelle peut-elle promouvoir une capacité de communication insuffisante pour modérer les conflits environnementaux et un mode de vie durable ? Cet article reflète la dimension sociétale de la musique pop afin d'examiner son potentiel de communication dans le traitement du problème de la dégradation de l'environnement et de la préservation de la nature. C'est en particulier le trope occidental de la nature sauvage, l'idée d'une nature vierge et inaltérée, qui mérite notre attention. Issu de l'éthique de la terre du XIXe siècle, il permet encore aujourd'hui de renégocier les fictions, les normes, les rêves et l'avenir de la nature à une époque de destruction environnementale majeure et de catastrophes apocalyptiques. Les chansons sélectionnées montrent les tentatives récentes de réconciliation de la nature sauvage et de la vie moderne, mettant en scène la narration colonialiste du Noble Sauvage - l'Indien en tant que sage gardien de la nature. Ces idées de nature sauvage, de savoirs indigènes et de modes de vie compatibles, ainsi que d'autres idées similaires, répondent au postulat fondamental de la durabilité pour une justice globale et intergénérationnelle. L'analyse des régimes textuels et sonores n'offre pas seulement un miroir hybride de la communication politique sur le développement durable par le biais du politainment; elle permet également de découvrir les structures latentes des systèmes sociaux en dévoilant les dynamiques de conflit qui sont le plus souvent ignorées dans le discours public.

Mots-clés: communication politique; communication sur le développement durable; *politainment*; protection de la nature.

Resumen: El anhelo individual y social de una naturaleza intacta e intacta es un elemento central de la dinámica de la crisis ambiental. ¿Hasta qué punto la reinvención de una naturaleza auténtica y de estilos de vida compatibles es un tema de la música pop? ¿Puede la producción cultural fomentar la falta de capacidad comunicativa para moderar los conflictos medioambientales y la vida sostenible? Este artículo refleja la dimensión social de la música pop para examinar sus potenciales comunicativos en el tratamiento del problema de la degradación medioambiental y la preservación de la naturaleza. Merece especial interés el tropo occidental de lo salvaje, la idea de una naturaleza virgen e inalterada. Con sus orígenes en la ética de la tierra del siglo XIX, todavía hoy ofrece una entrada para renegociar ficciones, normas, sueños y futuros de la naturaleza en tiempos de gran destrucción medioambiental y desastres apocalípticos. Las canciones seleccionadas muestran los recientes intentos de reconciliar los espacios naturales con la vida moderna, poniendo en escena la narración colonialista del Noble Salvaje: el indio como sabio administrador de la naturaleza. Estas y otras ideas similares sobre los espacios naturales, el conocimiento indígena y los estilos de vida compatibles abordan el postulado central de la sostenibilidad para la justicia global e intergeneracional. El análisis de los regímenes textuales y sonoros no sólo ofrece un espejo híbrido de la comunicación política sobre el desarrollo sostenible a través del politainment, sino que además permite descubrir estructuras latentes de los sistemas sociales al desvelar dinámicas de conflicto que la mayoría de las veces se ignoran en el discurso público.

Palabras-clave: comunicación política; comunicación sobre sostenibilidad; *politainment;* conservación de la naturaleza.

1. Introduction

One of the many facets of the ecological crisis concerns its communicative dimension. Mitigation and adaptation strategies require mutual understanding and dialogic processes to manage new social conflicts. With its high need of developing and narrating explanatory stories to pass resistance between interest groups, the "ecological crisis, broadly construed, is a crisis of communication" (Homestead, 2021: 7). Sharing and understanding environmental changes and targeting perspectives in the face of ecological change is a basic prerequisite for political action, as system theorist Niklas Luhmann concluded as early as the 1980s:

> Fish or humans may die because swimming in the seas and rivers has become unhealthy. The oil-pumps may run dry and the average climatic temperatures may rise or fall. As long as this is not the subject of communication it has no social effect (Luhmann, 1989: 28).

Although global climate change is becoming increasingly noticeable in all parts of the world and the issue of environmental protection has long occupied a broad space in public, contemporary societies' on going task is to discover and use forums of communication creatively to negotiate change in times of turmoil. Is a lack of communicative ability in the end one reason for insufficient action on climate and environmental protection? These and similar challenges may give reason to reflect on the communicative dimension of cultural production and in particular to pop music to examine their potentials within sustainability communication. Already one of the key writings of the ecological movements, *Limits to*

Growth (Meadows, 1972), points out that addressing ecological problems is not a purely political or economic task, but requires a profound analysis and reform of a society's *cultural* foundations. Hence, the question is: Can cultural production promote communicative capacity in environmental conflicts? Can it strengthen a language to enable politics and ecological crisis management?

The following reflections start from these considerations and examine the communicative capacity of pop music contributions. It is particularly the Western trope of wilderness, the idea of an untouched and unaltered nature that deserves interest. With its origins in the 19th century, it still today offers an entry to the social longing for living in harmony with nature and practising simple, sustainable lifestyles. To what extent is the definition of nature, the search for harmony, simplicity and concealed lifestyles a topic of pop music?

The analysis of textual and sound regimes in pop music addresses political communication on sustainable development through *politainment* (Riegert & Collins, 2016). But by doing so, this approach does not focus the artists' intentions or the music's effects and will not bring to the surface what individual artist groups really had in mind when they launched their contributions. This article rather focuses the latent, unspoken, and unnegotiated dimensions of conflict dynamics of environmental conflicts. It is based on the initial thought that pop music through its lyrics and sound experiences can reverberate under the surface of public discussion. Pop music therefore needs to be explored as an agnostic social resonance body of conflict processing, in which politics and music permanently mutually stimulate each. For systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, the discernment of *latency* is based on the capability "to observe what another observation does not observe, or, to radicalise the issue, when an observation specializes in observing what another observer is incapable of observing" (Luhmann, 2000: 94). Science and arts constantly develop practices, which permit to discover latent structures, partly unspoken realities of social systems (Luhmann, 2005) by unveiling conflict components which are mostly ignored in the public discourse.

To understand the communicative and unveiling potential of pop music in ecological communication, this article (1) provides an overview of the discourse on wilderness and integral nature in its Western expressions and in its impact on the environment movements, (2-4) explores selected pop music examples which play with the wilderness trope, and (5) concludes with a summary analysis. The songs discussed here are based on a subjective selection. They are not representative or complete, but in the clarity of their reference to the wilderness issue they seem particularly suitable to depict central problems and cornerstones of the debate.

2. Defining wilderness: modern nature preservation norms and their origins

A prominent trope to shape the motivation, inspiration and self-definition of large parts of forming environmental movements concerns the longing for a whole, unspoiled nature, in which of human actions do not bring harmful consequences. The modern, popular conception of wilderness has its origins in the testimonials of US colonial and post-colonial male writers as John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold and Ralph Wald Emerson, who profoundly transform the meaning of the term with their contributions: Whereas in the early 18th century wildernes still referred to a deserted, savage, and desolate landscape, a sort of "antithesis of all that was orderly and good" (Cronon, 1996: 9), Thoreau can affirm emphatically in 1862 that "in Wilderness is the preservation of the world" (Thoreau,

2019: 35). According to the US government's *Wilderness Act of 1964*, drafted by environmental lobbyist Howard Zahnizer and signed by US president Lyndon B. Johnson, "a wilderness, in contrast those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is [...] recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain" (The US Department of Justice, 2015: n/p). In contrast to European ecologists who never had the privilege of working in an environment that was not affected by human intervention (Whitney, 1994: 4), the US civilization was largely interpreted by researchers who were convinced to analyse "plant and animal communities as they must have been in some blissfully innocent era before the advent of man" (Anderson, 1956: 776). Wilderness, by its protagonists, was evoked as a – partly reproducible – resource, and at the same time a natural environment to generate social values (Leopold, 1998). The US National Parks movement's leader John Muir, co-founder of the Sierra Club, explored wilderness as a concealed, spiritual, and anti-modern space of peace and counter-civil education (Muir, 1981: 56-174). His wilderness concept was latently directed against the scientific explanation and demystification of nature as it had been pursued since the Enlightenment. For Muir, nature was a "display of god's power" (Muir, 2007: 228), a "god-like majesty" (Muir, 2007: 828): its most important power consisted in redeeming a fallen human culture, created by God, but fallen through sin (Edwards, 1998). Such an interpretation of this landscape was based on a specifically female and fertile character of nature in need of being tamed: it was *virgin land*. The narration of the domestication, based on violence as a prerequisite of success and survival (Sturgeon, 2009: 54), became a central element of US nationalism. A new public pride turned to the monuments of nature, particularly to massive canyons, to surpass the architectural heritage of the Old World (Radius, 2014: 38).

One central element of this narration was the fact that the first settlers had to conquer the land on the edge of civilization and make it habitable. When Fredrick Jackson Turner coined this land *The Frontier* in 1893, the story of westward expansion and of domesticating wilderness was told as a myth of origin, defining what it meant to be equipped with American character traits. Self-reliance and simplification of needs were gained by taking up the challenge of defying wilderness and pushing the frontier westward (Birch 1998: 502). When the expansion was halted by a natural border, the Pacific Ocean, and when industrialization let to a decline in landscapes, the remaining nature needed to be protected for coming generations to be able to grasp the concept of wilderness as well as the frontier myth. With nothing left to conquer, protection of the wilderness was now needed to preserve the nation's myth of origin.

According to the wilderness lobby, much older than the environmental movements, the idealized reconciliation between humankind and nature was due to the fact that humankind had left (Muir, 1981: 15). Their first affected persons – and victims – were Native Americans: "We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as 'wild'", stated Chief Luther Standing Bear (1998: 201) to counteract the colonialist fiction. "Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. "Despite this alienation and insurmountable tension, the wilderness rhetoric formed the communicative arena to transfer the Native Americans – at first perceived as wild, uncultured, violent and cruel – into a new, bright and serene image: the *Noble Savage*. In contrast to the white civilization (culture), Indians (nature) now appeared complete in their relationship to the entire creation, closer to nature, and practitioners of a single-minded, pure, and honourable lifestyle that was not in tension but in harmony with nature (Sturgeon, 2009: 58). The legendary speech attributed to Chief Seattle, in reality written by a white scriptwriter, was its most popular example:

"Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, [...] is holy in the memory and experience of my people. [...] We are part of the Earth and it is part of us" (Chief Seattle, 2003: 67).

Applying the wilderness idea on a global level, the claim for preservation and protection raised conflicts in many places where the presence of indigenous communities seemed to interfere with humans as "a visitor who does not remain". When in the 1980s, WWF, IUCN and finally Greenpeace started their powerful global campaigns to save the tropical rainforests, the ethical claims were nourished by a mix of anti-colonial, but also colonial rhetoric (Radkau, 2014: 172). The argument was captious and highly attractive to the extractive industries' lobbyists: In Brazil, the degradation of the rain forest was in the 1980s publicly attributed to the cooperation between government, enterprises, and indigenous peoples: the destruction of the Amazon even became perceived as an "Indian Problem" (Hecht & Cockburn, 2010: 230).

3. Beauty and wisdom: Neil Young

Wilderness tropes, concepts of nature as an endangered life-resource, and the plea for an intact environment form a consistent motif in Canadian singer-songwriter Neil Young's works. The allusions in lyrics and sound are wide-ranging. In the early years for instance, Young's folk-rock song *Broken Arrow*, released in 1967, conjures up the image of a Cree Indian standing alone at a river with an empty quiver. The Indian with his broken arrow is subjected to the unstoppable force of modernity and endangered to vanish. Young's dream narrative *After The Gold Rush* from 1970 contemplates nature as a nostalgic home and a therapeutic quantity in the face of its destruction. In 1990, *Mother Earth*, subtitled *Natural Anthem*, takes the listener into the sound sphere of a light rainfall, softly supplemented with harmonica, leading to the emphatic address to "Oh, Mother Earth". Additionally, throughout his career, Young's engagement for nature is linked to a critical involvement with American identities and farming: In 1985, *Are There Any More Real Cowboys?* Provides a reflection about the American contemporary cowboy, a family man who struggles against capitalism.

Whereas nature is a returning element in Young's work, the particular trope of wilderness is at the core of *Natural Beauty*, a ten-minute wistful live track released in 1992. In a drifting and meandering melody, characterized by the high tenor of his voice and surrounded by a discreet instrumentation with guitar, harmonica, banjo, pump organ vibraphone, pedal steel guitar, and bass marimba, Young processes the topic of preservation, expressing a longing for simple, complete nature, untouched by humankind. "A natural beauty should be preserved / Like a monument to nature" exacts Young, backed by female singers in the chorus, pleading implicitly for landscape conservation. Addressing the correlation between nature and beauty, neglected in contemporary environmental debates, but fully developed in Muir's and Thoreau's writings, the speaker presents himself on a roller coaster ride, at the mercy of outside forces. The normative comparison to the monument-like quality of nature finds its counterpart in pop music itself, which works as a knowledge resource to evoke memories of a fictional past (Philipp, 2019: 334). It also picks up on a central notion of the park movement, which explicitly highlights the monumental character of nature to call for protected areas. In a time when natural phenomena such as a "perfect echo" disappear, as Young notices, and the world is re-shaped by digitalis, natural beauty provides consolation: "What a lucky man to see the earth before it touched his hand", affirms Young allusively in reference to an unadulterated primal state of time. In the third verse, the American rodeo is experienced only distantly through the media and as a drama

of failure: "We watched the moment of defeat / Played back over on the video screen." Epitome of US Western country identity, the rodeo works as a competitive arena of measuring equestrian skills, dramatizing the rivalry between the wild and the tame (Lawrence, 1984: 271), but in Young's world remains televised and played back. Wilderness turns out to be inaccessible, fictitious, and un-real. Bird and insect sounds from a rainforest design the end, while the keyboard fades out on the song's basic chords.

Natural Beauty was recorded live in Portland (Oregon), produced by long-time collaborators Neil Young and Ben Keith, and became the closing track of *Harvest Moon*, Young's commercially most successful album. The compilation's title was undeniably an inter text to *Harvest*, Young's country rock album from 1972 with which he became a major star in North America. The black and white album cover shows the silhouette of a person, dressed in plant material, walking in a field, the head slightly tilted to the ground. Supporting the lyrics, Young's stubborn and fragile voice, in warm vibrations, in alto vocal style, characterized by critics as "hesitant, whiny, masculine and feminine conveying sadness and fear" (Halliwell, 2015: 36), is a phonetic technique to integrate masculine-coded with feminine - coded style properties, creating ambiguity and mobility (Bigot & Houellebecq, 2002: 2207): The vocal expression is linked to suffering and mournfulness, but also to youthfulness and memory. The song's sound regime situates nature in the realm of femininity. Drifting harmonica solos, pedal steel guitar and banjo, a nod to country music and in general to older music traditions, nostalgically interlink the song to a fictitious historical past, as does Young's hillbilly fashion style on tour, made up of flannels, jeans, leather vest and reminiscent of cowboy style. Youngs' music and appearance which has always been able to bring together a heterogeneous audience (Petridis, 2000: 134), is nourished throughout from an imagery that evokes the beginnings of America, the Native American population and the Wild West of the late 19th century — in his concerts often with Indian totem poles placed on stage, and on the record covers with images of Indians, Western towns and teepees (cf. Echard, 2005: 25). Young's stage companion Woody, a Native American wood figure introduced in concerts as a dialogue partner and a wise counsel or, is just one of several expressions of lamenting the vanishing Indigenous culture while idealizing Native Americans as wise onstage (Halliwell 2015: 117).

4. Grandeur and disillusion: John Denver, The Eagles and Dan Fogelberg

John Denver, one of the strongest representatives of integrating environmentalist causes into music, picks up wilderness motives from the beginning of his career. Deeply rooted in the culture of rural American West, Denver was a constant campaigner for environmental concern, advisor of the Wildlife Conservation society, and co-founder of the Windstar Foundation, an education institution to inspire people "to live lightly on the planet", as Denver stated (Collis, 2003: 126). Mentored by architect Richard Buckminster Fuller, the foundation's purpose was to buy large surfaces of wild landscape in Colorado in order to conserve it. The title track to his third album *Whose Garden Was This*, released in 1970, talks about a lost paradise, accessible only through memory. *Take Me Home, Country Roads* from 1971, full of feelings and thoughts during a ride home on a country road trip, was a gold record. *Capypso*, released in 1974, was intended to be a tribute to oceanographer and film-maker Jacques-Yves Cousteau with whom Denver was tied by a personal friendship (cf. Ingram, 2010: 92). When the Exxon Valdez oil spill contaminated the Arctic wildlife in 1989, Denver visited Prince William Sound to draw global attention on the 500 miles oil slick. *Raven's Child*, meditating about arrogance and greed of the economy, was his musical response. "To be human is to be nourished by the wild country", stated Denver in a comment on the oil pollution (Collis, 2003: 162).

Denver's title track of *Rocky Mountain High*, released in 1972 with music of Mike Taylor, reached Top Ten in 1973 and leads back to Muir's rhetoric about the grace and sublimity of natural monuments: "He climbed cathedral mountains, he saw silver clouds below", and in the chorus "And the Colorado Rocky Mountain high / I've seen it rainin' fire in the sky / Talk to God and listen to the casual reply / Rocky Mountain high." Denver's song anchored Colorado in the national and international consciousness and established it globally as a natural wonder (Wright, 2021: 96). The wilderness of the Rocky Mountains returned in 1973 with *Rocky Mountain Suite (Cold Nights in Canada)*, inspired by working on a nature documentary movie together with producer Robert Rieger about a drop-out who spent his living in the wild with a wolf pack. The film brought the core question of the park movement back into focus: could a person live in the midst of intact nature without disturbing or destroying it? The song assures a conciliatory perspective: "The man and the mountains are brothers again / Clear waters are laughing, they sing to the skies / The Rockies are living, they never will die. "Named poet laureate of the Rocky Mountains state Colorado, where he had taken his residence, Denver was among the most popular pop singers in the US in the late 70s and believed, it is "important that we always remember that nature, environment, wild places and wild things are a big part of what makes us who and what we are as human beings" (Collis, 2003: 157).

Apart from Denver, the tension between the longing for nature and human induced environmental degradation forms a broad panorama in the rock and country-rock genre across the board. One of the most popular examples, The Eagles' *The Last Resort*, written in 1976 by band members Don Henley and Glenn Frey, is an epic ballad about the dream of escaping from civilization, the hidden heritage of the indigenous people, and the yearn for paradisiac nature, destroyed by human intervention: "Somebody laid the mountains low / While the town got high". The white man's missionary-clad quest for power replaces the given bliss through an untouched nature with a new, artificial reality: "They call it paradise / I don't know why." In the end, the destruction of the natural world is a result of ruthless satisfaction of needs, as the penultimate verse suggests. The song poetically processes the identity-forming narrative of the frontier myth and of the American Dream: the expansion of US civilization, seeking felicity and growth, and thereby destroying the paradise everybody is eager for. The final lyrics statement "We satisfy our endless needs / And justify our bloody deeds", is a frank criticism of the expansive domination of nature and blind consumerism. *The Last Resort* was part of the The Eagles' fifth studio album *Hotel California*. Grammy awarded and Platinum certified, it topped the US charts for eight weeks and became one of the best sold albums of pop music history. Henley was far from thinking to change the world but insisted in the music's transforming influence on individual lifestyles (White, 2000: 81).

Concepts of wilderness and its endangerment also define country-rock singer-songwriter Dan Fogelberg's work in the 1980s and 90s. While his early albums evolve around reflections on everyday life, memory, and social relationship, Fogelberg's *High Country Snows*, released in 1985, and *The Wild Places* from 1990 are outright inspired by wilderness tropes, operating between land ethic, indigenous heritage, and nature preservation ideas. On the latter album, *The Spirit Trail* is a fragment-like play on wilderness and on indigenous nature conceptions like brotherhood to all living things. Including Native Americans' song fragments into the fade-out, Fogelberg's work is a gest of advocacy with a marginalized community and a conciliation attempt between wilderness claims and indigenous worldviews: "And as the moon rises / the black mountain mourns [...] I sing to your spirit where all my dreams dwell". In *Cry in the Forest*, launched in 1991 and dedicated to the Sierra

Club, the speaker hears the call of the bird and recognizes the voice of eternity: "Once they've passed into the timeless, they can never more be found." The oppression of nature is culpable, and the recognition of guilt is the only way out: "Will we ever seek forgiveness / will we ever earn the crown / Or are we in turn eternity bound." The disappearance of the wilderness only preludes the disappearance of humanity and its transition into timelessness.

5. Reimagining the Noble Savage: Aurora

Far from country aesthetics and conventions on Us-American identity, the Norwegian singer-songwriter Aurora Aksnes revitalises the wilderness trope in 2019 with her outstandingly successful production *The Seed*. Aksnes, who according to her own statement grew up among forests and lakes (Aksnes, 2017: 55), processes with her song her emotions in response to advancing climate change. The sonic image comprises experimental folktronica and indie rock patterns, complemented by nature sounds, electrifying tribal drumsand spherical electronic sounds. While the verse consists of light birdsong and restrained instrumentation, the chorus is accompanied by intensive percussion, supported by piano, violin, and choir. Starting with a calm head voice in the verse, the singer compares herself to a seed, fighting to reach for light "through the struggle", "dirt and shadow". The chorus in contrast, is dominated by Aurora's chest voice and picks up a sentence that exists in different traditions: "When The Last Tree has fallen / And the rivers are poisoned / You cannot eat money, oh no. "The historical root of this phrase is unclear, but its popularization goes back to the organized environmental movement: When the German branch of Greenpeace started one of its first global campaigns in 1981, activists fixed a banner on a smokestack in Hamburg which said: *Erst wenn der letzte Baum gefällt, der letzte Fluss vergiftet und der letzte Fisch gefangen ist, werdet ihr merken, dass man Geld nicht essen kann* ["Only When The Last Tree is cut down, the last river poisoned and the last fish is caught, will you realize that you cannot eat money."]. The activists attributed their sentence to the Cree tribe, one of Canada's largest First Nations, but in truth, the origin of the text was doubtful. Greenpeace's affinity with First Nation wisdoms was a heritage of the organization's co-founder Bob Hunter, who in 1971 became inspired by Willoya and Brown's *Warriors of the Rainbow* (1962) a compilation of native American prophecies, which essentially contributed to stabilize the myth of the ecological Indian, a central theme of the environmental movements in the 1970s (Zelko, 2013: 100). In 1993, the Kelly Family processed the proverb in their song *When The Last Tree*.

Wilderness themes and associations of indigenous heritage also characterize Aurora's music video, in which studio dance scenes change with fragments of youth-climate demonstrations and footage of melting icebergs, renewable energy plants and nature, smoking factory chimneys and natural phenomena such as lightning or the growth of the seed. The focus of the studio shots is the artist herself, Aksnes, dancing to the beats of the drums in front of a red, round surface in the background — an open allusion to planetary aesthetics and to the spaceship earth trope (cf. Philipp, 2022). Black plants proliferate in front of her, while Aurora is positioned on a spinning disc of black grass. The artist's expressive dance is a shimmering play, changing between fine and hard movements and contrasting facial expressions. While Aurora moves softly in the verses, her dance and her mimetic expression get stronger as the chorus sets in, ending up in fight-like poses. Distinctively, *The seed* is a reflection on wilderness under the condition of the Fridays for Future movements and their inherent struggle with climate anxiety (Philipp, 2021).

6. The latent structures of wilderness: redefining nature through pop music

The overview shows that wilderness, although developed as a concept in the 19th century and from a colonialist perspective on taming *virgin land*, until today provides a multifaceted trope to produce yearnings, fictions, stories, nostalgia, and lifestyle patterns of the age of ecology (Radkau, 2014) and its pop music culture. Although the original concept is long since inapplicable as most ecosystems have been influenced by human activity, in times of ecological degradation, wilderness has become a place of longing more than ever, and not surprisingly it finds its expression in pop. The fiction of a stable, balanced future through restoration of an authentic relationship with nature implicitly touches the core idea of sustainable development and its inherent postulation of justice, a core motive of modern environmental debates. Pop music popularizes this process of renewal and utopias' construction, shortens it to stereotypes, and complements it with aesthetic stimulus. This is of particular relevance for the US, which due to the US Wilderness Act became one of the first countries in the world to protect wide stretches of land as wilderness territory.

Turning back to the initial question of latent structures, hidden and partly unspoken conflicts, a major trouble of the wilderness discourse concerns the stylization of indigenous people as stewards of nature and carriers of genuine natural knowledge. Whereas wilderness is symbolized by Indians, the imaginary of civilization is expressed by white city dwellers. After the crisis experiences of the late 1960s, the *Noble Savage* turns out to be an ecological Indian, an epitome of a nature that promises redemption, consolation and power against an environmental destruction caused by a white, colonialist majority. The reductionist narrative of wilderness and the Noble Savage reconstitutes the discernment between (white) culture and (Indian) nature (cf. Sturgeon, 2009: 64). Pop music makes visible what is still hidden behind the façades of the conservation idea: Wilderness, as The Eagles show, is used as an argument against colonial exploitation by the white man, but nonetheless remains a product of the white man and his mission. The concept behind Young's contributions is the idea that Natives are stewards of nature and born trustees of wilderness. Also, Denver explores wild nature as space of reconciliation toward indigenous communities, although in reality, many Native communities, far from being perfect land stewards, in their practices are long since compromised by the erosion of cultural practices and capitalist market ideology (Dowie, 2009: 111).

Obviously, it is the moment of *innocence* that until today constitutes the fascination. As Fogelberg's songs show, the wilderness trope is embedded in a renegotiation of guilt and forgiveness, and this regards rather an ontological relationship than an intergenerational one: Can non-humans ever pardon us? Until today, the protection efforts and their musical counterparts are tied to a feeling of innocent nostalgia — the longing for a seemingly better, salvageable past. In times in which more and more people feel detached from nature and potentially wish to be able to return to an ideal wilderness, pop music — and particularly country and soft rock music — provide lyrical and sound experiences to process the deficit and to deliberate from a problematic history, full of stories of alienation. There is, however, no way back to untouched nature; everything is determined by human interaction, and the access to a nature before exploitation, greed, and human induced destruction, is blocked, as Young's work suggests. Most landscapes are a historical product of human activity. From this point of view, it is no surprise that, in contrast to the early ideas of the wilderness trope, even agriculture finds a new, concealed position and the classical opposition between wild nature and (industrial) farming is overcome. In Young's and Denver's contributions, often in context to Farm Aid campaigns, rural economy and

lifestyles appear reconciled with nature, although Rachel Carson's research had already in 1976 proved that the environment was increasingly endangered by the industrial practices of modern agriculture (Carson, 2000). The preservation of wilderness is the communication strategy to spread and conserve a certain definition of culture, and its conciliation with farming has an immediate economic impact.

The wilderness myth and its images help a wounded society to process their losses. If it is true that "we are in trouble just now because we don't have a good story" (Berry, 1988: 123), pop music may contribute to redefine dreams, objectives and ideas of an equitable future for all. Thereby, music can serve the need for public communication that Luhmann — as discussed at the beginning — presupposes for any political problem solving. Such a strategy however cannot escape its past and its inherent conflicts. In the end, pop music shows that the image of wilderness remains a myth built on ignorance. Wilderness was never a natural state, but the result of an aesthetic order that emerged under historical conditions. Creating fictions of wilderness will not serve as an antidote to the ills of the influence of humans. The reality is that in capitalist systems "the enjoyment of nature is an integral part of the consumer society" (Guha, 1998: 239), and so is wilderness an exploitable resource in the entertainment industry.

References

Aksnes, Aurora (2017). Det er hardt nok å være et ekte menneske. Om å være et idol [It's hard enough being a real person. About being an idol]. *Samtiden*, 126 (3), 54–57.

Anderson, Edgar (1956). Man as a maker of new plants and new plant communities. In Thomas, William Leroy (Ed.).*The dream of the Man's role in changing the face of the earth. International Symposium* (pp. 763-777). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berry, Thomas (1988). *The dream of the earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

Bigot, Yves & Houellebecq, Michel (2002). *Neil Young*. In Assayas, Michka (Ed.). *Dictionnaire du rock* [Rock dictionary] (pp. 2200-2207). Paris: Laffont.

Birch, Thomas H. (1998). Wilderness, myth, and American character. In Callicott, J. Baird (Ed.). *The great new wilderness debate* (pp. 500-512). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Carson, Rachel (2000). *Silent spring [1962]*. London: Penguin.

Chief Luther Standing Bear (1998). Indian Wisdom [1933]. In Callicott, J. Baird (Ed.).*The great new wilderness debate* (pp. 201-206). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Chief Seattle (2003). Every part of the earth is sacred. In Rowthorn, Anne W. (Ed.). *Earth and all the stars. Reconnecting with nature through hymns, stories, poems and prayers from the world's great religions and cultures* (pp. 67-69). Eugene, Or.: Resource Publications.

Collis, John (2003). *John Denver. Mother Nature's son*. Edinburgh: Mainstream.

Cronon, William (1996). The trouble with wilderness. Or, getting back to the wrong nature. *Environmental History*, 1 (1), 7–28.

Dowie, Mark (2009). *Conservation refugees. The hundred-year conflict between global conservation and native peoples*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Echard, William (2005). *Neil Young and the poetics of energy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Edwards, Jonathan (1998). The images or shadows of divine things [1758]. In Callicott, J. Baird (Ed.). *The great new wilderness debate* (pp. 23-25). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Guha, Ramachandra (1998). Radical American environmentalism and wilderness preservation. A third world critique [1989]. In Callicott, J. Baird (Ed.). *The great new wilderness debate* (pp. 231-245). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Halliwell, Martin (2015). *Neil Young. American Traveller*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Hecht, Susanna B. & Cockburn, Alexander (2010). *The fate of the forest. Developers, destroyers, and defenders of the Amazon*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
Homestead, William (2021). *An ecology of communication. Response and responsibility in an age of ecocrisis*. New York: Lexington.
Ingram, David (2010). *The jukebox in the garden. Ecocriticism and American popular music since 1960*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Lawrence, Elizabeth Atwood (1984). *Rodeo. An anthropologist looks at the wild and the tame*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Leopold, Aldo (1998). Wilderness as a form of land use [1925]. In Callicott, J. Baird (Ed.). *The great new wilderness debate* (pp. 75-84). Athens: University of Georgia Press.
Loftin, Steven (2019). Human after all. *Dork*, 34–40. Retrieved from: https://readdork.com/features/aurora-interview-jul19
Luhmann, Niklas (1989). *Ecological communication*. Cambridge: Polity.
Luhmann, Niklas (2000). *Art as a social system*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Luhmann, Niklas (2005). *Social systems*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Meadows, Donella H. (1972). *The limits to growth. A report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*. New York: New American Library.
Muir, John (1981). *Our national parks*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
Muir, John (2007). *Nature writings*. New York: Library of America.
Petridis, Alexis (2000). *Neil Young*. London: Unanimous.
Philipp, Thorsten (2019). Popmusikforschung [Pop Music Research]. In Zemanek, Evi & Kluwick, Ursula (Eds.). *Nachhaltigkeit interdisziplinär. Konzepte, Diskurse, Praktiken*. Köln: Böhlau, 330–346.
Philipp, Thorsten (2021). Der Sound der Katastrophe. Popmusik als Resonanzraum ökologischer Krisen. [The sound of disaster: Pop music as a resonating space for ecological crises]. *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen*, 34 (2). Retrieved from: https://forschungsjournal.de/fjsb-plus/philipp.
Philipp, Thorsten (2022). Spaceship earth and its soundscapes. Latency problems of international ecological conflicts in pop music. In Flath, Beathe; Jacke, Christoph & Troike, Manuel (Eds.). *Transformational POP. Transitions, breaks, and crises in popular music (studies)* (pp. 117-134). Berlin: IASPM. Retrieved from: https://www.vibes-theseries.org/philipp-spaceship-earth
Radkau, Joachim (2014). *The age of ecology*. Hoboken: Wiley.
Riegert, Kristina & Collins, Sue (2016). Politainment. In Mazzoleni, Gianpietro; Barnhurst, Kevin G.; Ikeda, Ken'ichi; Maia, RousileyCeli Moreira & Wessler, Hartmut (Eds.). *The International Encyclopedia of political communication* (pp. 974-984). Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
Sturgeon, Noël (2009). *Environmentalism in popular culture. Gender, race, sexuality, and the politics of the natural*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
The US Department of Justice (2015). *The Wilderness Act Of 1964*. Retrieved from: https://www.justice.gov/enrd/wilderness-act-1964.
Thoreau, Henry David (2019). Walking. Mineloa: Dover Publications.
White, Timothy (2000). Don Henley's 'Inside Job' Ponders love, work, copyrigths & wrongs. *Billboard*, 112 (1), 78-83.
Whitney, Gordon G. (1994). *From coastal wilderness to fruited plain. A history of environmental change in temperate North America, 1500 to the present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Willoya, William & Brown, Vinson (1962). *Warriors of the Rainbow. Strange and prophetic dreams of the Indians*. Healdsburg: Naturegraph.

Wright, John B. (2021). *Rocky Mountain Divide. Selling and saving the West*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Zelko, Frank S. (2013). *Make it a green peace! The rise of counter cultural environmentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Discography

Aurora (2019). The Seed. *A Different Kind Of Human (Step 2)*. Decca 7757151.
Dan Fogelberg (1985). *High Country Snows*. Epic EPC 26274.
Dan Fogelberg (1990). The Spirit Trail. *The Wild Places*. Epic 467006 1.
Dan Fogelberg (1991). A Cry In The Forest. *Dan Fogelberg Live (Greetings from The West)*. Epic E2K 48625.
John Denver (1970). *Whose Garden Was This*. RCA SF 8355.
John Denver (1971). *Take Me Home, Country Roads*. RCA Victor 74-0445.
John Denver (1972). *Rocky Mountain High*. *Rocky Mountain High*. RCA Victor LSP-4731.
John Denver (1973). Rocky Mountain Suite (Cold Nights In Canada). *Farewell Andromeda*. RCA AFL1-0101.
John Denver (1990). Raven's Child. *Earth Songs*. Windstar WR-53333-2.
Neil Young (1969). Broken Arrow. *Buffalo Springfield Again*. ATCO SD 33-226.
Neil Young (1970). *After The Gold Rush*. *After The Gold Rush*. Reprise RS 6383.
Neil Young (1972). *Harvest*. Reprise MS 2032.
Neil Young (1992). Natural Beauty. *Harvest Moon*. Reprise 9362-45057-2.
Neil Young und Willie Nelson (1985). Are There Any More Real Cowboys? Columbia 38-05566.
Neil Young and Crazy Horse (1990). Mother Earth. Natural Anthem. *Ragged Glory*. Reprise 9 26315-2.
The Eagles (1976). The Last Resort. *Hotel California*. Asylum 7E-1084.
The Kelly Family (1993). *When The Last Tree*...Kel-Life 93-929.

Thorsten Philipp. Associated Lecturer at Leuphana University Lüneburg and adjunct lecturer at the University of Freiburg (Germany). Thorsten studied Romance languages, art history and political science in Munich, Aix-en-Provence, Vienna, and Brescia. As an advisor to the presidium at Technische Universität Berlin, his mission is to promote transdisciplinary learning at the interface of science and society. Straße des 17. Juni 135, 10623 Berlin, Germany. E-mail: thorsten.philipp@tu-berlin.de. ORCID: 0000-0003-3497-7170.

Receção: 08-10-2022

Aprovação: 15-12-2022

Citação:

Philipp, Thorsten (2023). Simply Longing for Wilderness. Fictions of nature preservation in Western pop music. *Todas as Artes: Revista Luso-Brasileira de Artes e Cultura*, 6(1), pp. 12-25. ISSN 2184-3805. DOI: 10.21747/21843805/tav6n1a1