A Saving Thought

Story I: Tragedy

Title: Holderlin "But where danger is, grows the saving power also."

Image :(Edward Burtensky, *Manufactured Landscapes, 2007)*

If we direct our attention toward certain shifts in late twentieth century environmental discourse, we are offered a glimpse into the nature of our changing attitude toward our ecological conditions. Between 1960 and 1980, the term "anthropocene" was coined and popularized in its current meaning: a geological epoch determined by human influence alone. Accompanying this semantic development was the articulation of "deep ecology" in 1973, an ecocentric theory advocating the intrinsic value of the natural world.[1]

The theoretical framework of deep ecology had its practical counterpart in the inauguration of structures such as the US Environmental Protection Agency and Green Peace, along with the organization of 'Earth Day.' These groups sought to raise awareness about the negative impact of humans upon the environment, deploying potent imagery like that of acid rain, air pollution, and oil spills, and presenting these adverse effects as decidedly human-induced.

This late twentieth century attitude toward our ecological existence fostered feelings of utter guilt, desperation, and self-pity. In an attempt to overcome these feelings, we sought comfort in a tragic script, wherein the protagonist was 'us humans,' the plot was generalized ecological crisis, the motif was 'carrying capacity,'[a] and the undisclosed theme—veiled instrumental rationality.

1. Arne Næss, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Næss, ed. Alan R. Drengson, (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2008), 85."We need environmental ethics, but when people feel that they unselfishly give up, or even sacrifice, their self-interests to show love for nature, this is probably, in the long run, a treacherous basis for conservation. Through identification, they may come to see that their own interests are served by conservation, through genuine self-love, the love of a widened and deepened self."

a) ***Carrying Capacity***, that is, the earth can support only a fixed number of people at a certain level of consumption without either degrading the carrying capacity of the earth in the future or degrading the quality of life of the inhabitants (Nathan Sayre, 2008). The problem with this definition is that it reduces the relationship between the earth and its inhabitants to an economic relationship. From the beginning of the use of the term, carrying capacity was used to differentiate an inanimate from the useful life that it could sustain. This way of thinking does not allow for a symbiotic relationship between man and nature as it presupposes that man is other than nature; specifically that man is living and nature is inanimate. Carrying capacity in this paradigm becomes a quantified measurement of life that can exist in the world. There is no ability in this rhetoric to explore the quality of this life with regards to culture, experience or relationships. Its appearance of referring to actual relations in the world disguises the fact that it refers only to a constructed idea of a world with static limits.

But to speak of this narrative of tragedy exclusively in the past tense would be a mistake, for the this narrative has not yet come to a close. If anything, humanity's self-understanding remains saturated by the dramatic structure of this tragic script, suspended in that distorted moment where climax and denouement are indistinguishable—both narrative stages defined by a debilitating condition of catastrophe.[2] Indeed, what many regard as today's sudden and unforeseen ecological crisis is in truth, symptomatic of a long and drawn-out process, one marked by humanity's self-distancing from the conditions in which it exists. In effect, this act of self-distancing—which is really a corollary of human solipsism—both facilitates and solidifies a constructed divide between 'humankind' on the one hand, and 'the natural world' on the other.

2. Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," in Selected Writings vol. 4: 1938-1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 184-5. Benjamin writes, "The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are "status quo" is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Strindberg's idea: hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now. Redemption depends on the tiny fissure in the continuous catastrophe." For Benjamin, the modern condition is catastrophic because it remains habitually attuned to a reified notion of progress, wherein history is conceived as continuous, linear, and rational; faith in such an understanding of history inherits and perpetuates the normative conditions for domination and exclusion—symptoms of the 'status quo.' The only way to disrupt the catastrophe—the 'status quo,' that is—is to construct an alternative history by way of subversive actions that interrupt the continual resurrection of reified progress.

How did this division come to be? Was it simply a consequence of human hubris?

The question of where this process begins is precarious, since its origin(s)—considered in all its complexity—is manifold and overlapping. One possible interpretation of this beginning is that which is defined in Judeo-Christian terms: the beginning of the Book of Genesis.[3] In this particular narrative, Adam and Eve commence their lives in the Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise in which all beings—bound by a shared sense of innocence—live in peaceful harmony with one another. Adam and Eve's survival, growth, and flourishing (which, in more technical terms, constitute the various modes of energy acquisition and expenditure necessary for their livelihood) are made possible by the provisions of the land. In this way of life, the human relationship to the natural world is an uncritical one: nature is a loving mother who lavishes her children unreservedly—that is to say, the earth is taken to be a source that gives freely to humans for nothing in return.

3. Note the emphasis on the qualification 'one,' since the following manifesto is indeed, one possible interpretation of many others. In trying to make sense of our 'current' ecological conditions, we have followed what many would consider a markedly western line of thought in an attempt to trace how these conditions came to be. Since much of the impetus for this manifesto is grounded in a critique of adopting a tragic position on these ecological conditions— and this tragic position is, in many ways, distinctively western—examining these issues in light of a western historical trajectory is altogether appropriate and valuable in itself.

Indeed, the current paradigm of sustainability is tainted by the stain of romanticism. The current rhetoric glorifies a supposed perfect state in the romantic period of the past. This vision seems to be most dominantly shaped as one that does not include ourselves and as such, alienates the human. By imagining a past without ourselves as being the pinnacle of the natural state we create a goal of regeneration that, if it ever existed, would also inherently call for our own extermination. These romanticised versions of history are bastardizing our perception of the present and, by extension, the future.

This naïve condition of harmonious existence is quickly shaken: humankind 'falls' from innocence the moment it is persuaded to feed from the tree of knowledge. This coming of human rationality triggers the advent ('Advent') of normativity, accompanied by the corresponding codification of a 'status quo.'[4] Freshly equipped with this precious rationality, the Fallen immediately (and arbitrarily) adopts the state of being clothed as an implicit convention, one which distinguishes the human from the nonhuman. Adam and Eve judge themselves accordingly taking their bare bodies to be naked. Though in their

4. See footnote 2. The 'status quo' = catastrophe.

5. Gen. 2:25 (NIV) Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

6. Gen. 3:7 NIV Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

initial innocence, Adam and Eve "were both naked, and were not ashamed,"[5] in their fallen existence, the two regard their naked state as 'uncivilized'—and for the first time, humankind experiences shame.[6]

Story II: History

Image: (Edward Burtensky, *Manufactured Landscapes, 2007)*

7. Merchant, 315.

8. Diane Ackerman, "Human Landscapes," New York Times, August 31, 2014. "According to the Bible, Adam named the animals. Once mankind named them, they seemed ours to do with as we wished. Yet we were never as distant as we thought, and if we are learning anything in the Anthropocene, it is that we are not really separate from the plants and animals."

9. Oelschlaeger, 7.

With the Fall, "humanity abandons an original, 'untouched' nature and enters into history."[7] But this particular shape of 'history' is not a holistic description of the world's unfolding as told from multiple perspectives; though presented as a tale of universal becoming, this particular history is in actual fact, a first-person account which surreptitiously privileges the human subject alone.[8] In effect, this 'rational' history is one set apart from nature, where the notion of world is merely "a stage upon which the human drama is enacted."[9]

In this decidedly 'human' history, the earth—previously understood as a generous and giving presence—comes to be viewed as an exploiter of human labour; it mutates from indiscriminate giver to oppressive tyrant which forces humans to work the earth so that they may ensure their survival. To the (self-prescribed) dismay of humankind, the unfriendly and unforgiving earth renders human survival a privilege to earn rather than a given fact. To live off the earth we must also do battle with it—such is the nature of punishment for our sin, so the Judeo-Christian story goes.

The secular counterpart to this western theological account is likewise coloured by the theme of humanity's self-distancing from the natural world. Where in the Fall, rationality as normativity was accountable for this distancing, in the secular interpretation, it is rationality as instrumentality that is held accountable. Through this utilitarian lens, everything appears if not a use-value, then at the very least, a use-potential. Here, the natural world is taken as a mere set of objects awaiting transformation by human hands; end products are not a result of a generous earth but of human labour alone.

In the medieval ages, humans came to understand that their livelihood was contingent on a process of energy acquisition and expenditure; accordingly,

the 'use' of use-value itself became characterized by energy. Here, all objects of the natural world were abstracted into their conceptual equivalents as 'energy-potentials.' For instance, trees were regarded as lumber; consequently, a forest was no longer a habitat of animals and foliage to be drawn upon for food, but rather, a possible castle or war machine to facilitate humanity's survival and prosperity. As a result of this transformed conception of the material world, humans organized into warring factions, with each vying for maximum control over territory—space bearing sources of potential energy. As the natural world came to be understood as human territory, organic space became an object of competition—and by extension, an object of commodification. [B]

b) ***Actual Capacity***: In our reaction to the perceived exceeding of our planets carrying capacity we have taken action to alter the actual capacity of our planet without regard to the long term effects. Practices such as hydraulic fracturing, tar sand oil production, geo-engineering, regenerative sustainability emerge as measures taken to change our current condition within the perceived fixed limits of our planets carrying capacity (Nathan Sayre, 2010). These practices are conducted as an economic activity in order to increase the perceived limits of the world's carrying capacity. This practice again denies the possibility of perceiving the world as a complex and dynamic system that we belong to but even more worryingly furthers the philosophy that nature is subservient to use to the extent that we believe we can control its ability to support us. In these practices we elevate ourselves to a higher position then the world we live in thus defining a relationship were the quality of our life is necessarily at the cost of the natural world we live in.

In the so-called 'agricultural revolution,' humans distinguished between fields and areas of natural vegetation, between weeds and crops that were fit for human use.[10] The world became something that humans could artificially shape and categorize according to their desires. The subsequent 'industrial revolution' was brought about by technological advancements that could accelerate this process of shaping the world in compliance with human design. No longer satisfied by the renewable sources of energy drawn from woods and rivers, humans entered a larger scale order of fossilized energy, facilitated by scientific discoveries in the mining practices.

10. Oelschlaeger, 28.

With this explosion in energy availability, humans constructed human-centred industrial 'environments' in the form of cities, and a conceptual distinction arose between urban living on the one hand, and rural living on the other; this distinction was characterized by an increasing ignorance on the part of urban-dwellers with regard to how their space of habitation came to be. Urban-dwellers were conceptually divorced from knowledge of the production of their urban environments—the fact that their urban habitats were only made possible because of certain energy sources.

c) ***Energy***: Energy in narrative so far has been focused on the scientific definition of energy that is, the ability to do work. This is a narrow definition of the term that confines it to an economic quantity. We can reverse this definition just as easily and say that all work is simply an embodied energy. But this does not cover the entirety of energies impact on us. Energy is life. We are beings of energy and as we live we do work. In this sense our ability to live is directly related to the energy available to us. (Allan Stoekle, 2013) We must therefore understand that the quality of the energy that we consume has changed with the change in the quality of our lives. We no longer live as solitary beings in intimate connection to the world and to the things we make. Fossil fuels and nuclear power have unlocked the ability for us to expand our influence through mechanical proxies. As a result, the works that we produce have influences many times greater than we could ever have as a single physical being. What we have failed to acknowledge is that the energy that we consume has costs that are many times greater than we can quantify or conceptualize.

Pure abstraction in thinking about our circumstances is misleading. The act of abstraction is central to conceptualizing a utopia, but thinking in such a way is actually violent. The presupposition of a 'beyond'—one which exists in either a romanticized past or an idealized future—is precisely what hinders us from properly comprehending our ecological conditions. Reliance on some vague, elusive, and obscure—yet nonetheless unfalsifiable—Utopian principle violently debilitates us, effectively reducing our repetoire to a mere floundering.

11. Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978), 12. "Thus we can see growing out of our history a condition that is physically dangerous, morally repugnant, ugly. Contrary to the blandishments of the salesmen, it is not particularly comfortable or happy. It is not even affluent in any meaningful sense, because its abundance is dependent on sources that are being rapidly exhausted by its methods. To see these things is to come up against the question: Then what is desirable? One possibility is just to tag along with the fantasists in government and industry who would have us believe that we can pursue our ideals of affluence, comfort, mobility, and leisure indefinitely. This curious faith is predicated on the notion that we will soon develop unlimited new sources of energy: domestic oil fields, shale oil, gasified coal, nuclear power, solar energy, and so on. This is fantastical because the basic cause of the energy crisis is not scarcity; it is moral ignorance and weakness of character. We don't know how to use energy, or what to use it for. And we cannot restrain ourselves. Our time is characterized as much by the abuse and waste of human energy as it is by the abuse and waste of fossil fuel energy."

Because the immediate perception of originary energy sources was obfuscated in the construct of urban environments, urban-dwellers (who constitute the majority of the human population) developed an epistemic void when it came to knowing about the energy acquisition-expenditure relation that makes life possible. Blinded by this particular shape of human oblivion, human expenditure of newly-discovered energy sources—of previously untapped energy reserves that had been building over millennia—was immediate and unqualified; [D] the human rate of consumption exceeded the rate of replenishment exponentially.[11]

In effect, our relationship to nature was wholly defined by the means-end principle of instrumental rationality. Indeed, notions of 'society' and 'civilization' came to be measured by the efficiency with which humans could exploit the earth.[12] The sociological model of human existence so-cherished by the (allegedly 'post'-colonial) western world—that linear progression from hunter-gather to agricultural to industrial societies—was explicitly determined by an account of humankind's various 'means of production,' the degree to which humans could utilize the natural world to its own ends without expense to themselves.[13]

The resultant classical formulation of human existence, as defined by a linear progression from hunter-gather to agricultural to industrial societies, was markedly determined by an account of humankind's various 'means of production.' That this (overworked) sociological model has become so cherished by the (allegedly 'post'-colonial) western world is indicative of the endurance of instrumental rationality; the very meaning of 'society' and 'civilization' came to be measured by the efficiency with which humans could exploit the earth.

Such blind faith in the abstract has grown tiresome; in the conditions we find ourselves in today, a response of patience is no virtue; if anything, it is a vice. Our succumbing to the moronic dictum that 'time heals all wounds' has committed us to the groundless belief that, for example, "Today, where I live—off the coast of Louisiana, let's say—there is an oil spill that is permeating the water from which I drink and the soil from which I grow my food, but in time, this problem will be resolved." The effect of such a commitment? An attitude of cynicism, a feeling of despair, and a sense of restless immobility—in short, symptoms of romantic delirium. We conceptually displace ourselves from actually engaging in the here and now. Our idle patience for utopia is the active equivalent of a mere waiting (a pining, even) for none other than death.

Indeed, the secular account of human history has thus far been a story of rising above natural disorder and transforming the world from whence we came according to personal whim. This Copernican conception of the universe is reflected in the principle of resourcism, which considers the earth as a source of utility for humans, regarding nature as a mere "stockpile of matter-energy to be transformed through technology...into the wants and needs of consumer culture."[14] It is the "maximum utilization of the earth as raw material in support of one species."[15] We see nature today without an eye for its value as a thing in itself, but as something that exists as a means for human consumption. The whole world is reduced to acost-benefit analysis, and the statement that "nature is the stockpile of stockpiles" becomes an unquestioned fact.[16] As we disassociate ourselves from nature, we simultaneously impose new forms of order and value on to the world around us.

How did this self-perception come to be? Was it simply a consequence of various forms of narcissistic rationality?

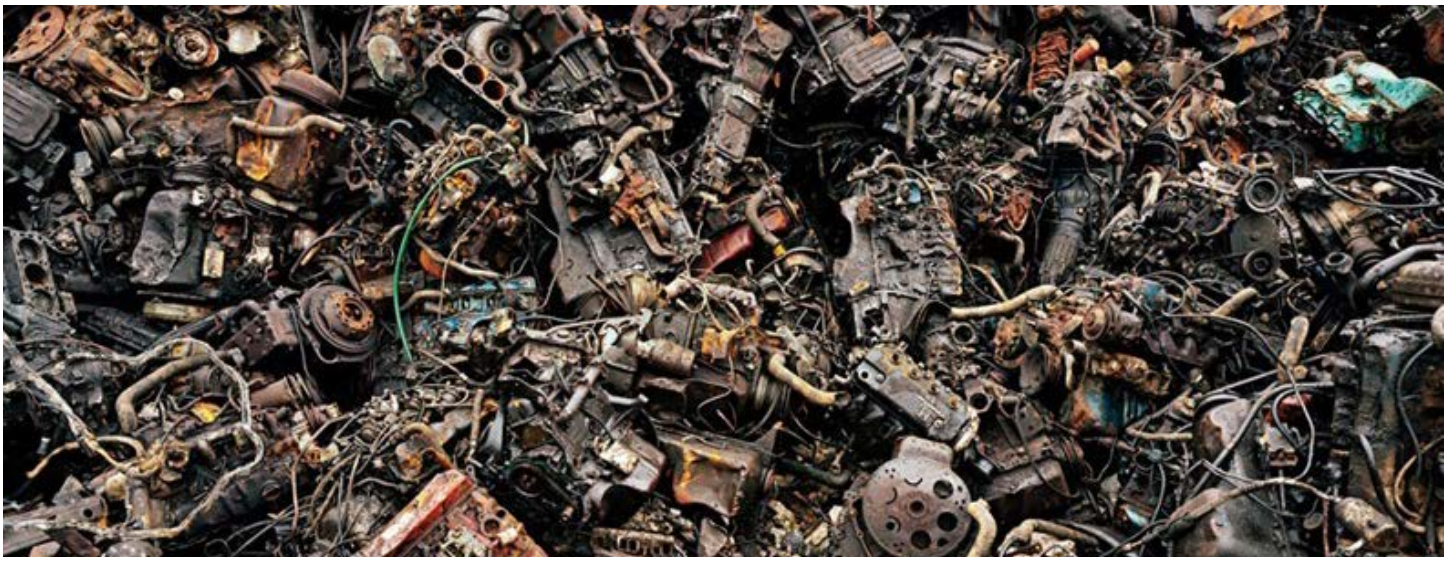
12. Berry, The Unsettling of America, 7-8. "Let me outline as briefly as I can what seem to me the characteristics of these opposite kinds of mind…The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce dependably for an indefinite amount time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work as well as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The exploiter think in terms of numbers, quantities, "hard facts"; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind."

13. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977), 15. "This setting-upon that challenges forth the energies of nature is an expediting [Fördern], and in two ways. It expedites in that it unlocks and exposes. Yet that expediting is always itself directed from the beginning toward furthering something else, i.e., toward driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense."

14. Oelschlaeger, 286; Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 17. "Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [Bestand]. The word expresses here something more, and some¬ thing more essential, than mere "stock." The name "standing¬ reserve" assumes the rank of an inclusive rubric. It designates nothing less than the way in which everything presences that is wrought upon by the challenging revealing. Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object."

15. Evernden, 22.

16. Morton, Unsustaining, 5.



Story III: Technology

Image: (Edward Burtensky, *Manufactured Landscapes, 2007)*

How did this self-perception come to be? Was it simply a consequence of various forms of narcissistic rationality?

17. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 4. "Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it."

In considering present conditions, humans are confronted with a problem of particularly unprecedented potency, one ostensibly derivative of instrumental rationality: the question of technology. The view that humans live in a 'technological age'—having surpassed the hunter-gatherer/agricultural/industrial formations of society—is today taken as self-evident.[17] Terms like 'cutting-edge' and 'innovation' have made themselves at home in contemporary lexicon as common sense concepts, because human contact with technology—with tools and automatic machines—seems constant.

And yet, despite the seemingly necessary proximity between humanity and what is called 'technology,' whether humans really know what technology is remains an open question. Though its existence seems certain, when it comes to actually articulating the essence of technology—the 'technicality' of technical objects, as it were—humans find themselves unable. Indeed, the nature of technology's existence seems at once self-evident, and at the same time, unthinkable—an idea simultaneously intuitive and alien to human understanding.

The difficulty in defining the precise meaning of technology lies in the fact that human vision remains clouded by the means-end lens of instrumental rationality: humans can't help but see 'technology' as anything more than mere 'tool.'[18] Like the stockpile of the natural world, technology obtains significance only when it acquires a use relevant to human livelihood; consequently, discourse on technology "gives nearly exclusive attention to the social and political consequences of technological innovations, leaving unattended the... questions related to the nature and mode of existence of technical objects." [19]

18. Ibid., 5. "The current conception of technology, according to which it is a means and a human activity, can therefore be called the instrumental and anthropological definition of technology… modern technology too is a means to an end. That is why the instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. We will, as we say, "get" technology "spiritually in hand." We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control."

19. Paul Dumouchel, "Gilbert Simondon's Plea for a Philosophy of Technology," Inquiry 35: 3-4, 407.

But in actual fact, technology's existence is not some mental abstraction which obtains concrete reality only in the moment when it bears anthropocentric relevance. In remaining indifferent to this fact, humanity

likewise remains indifferent to a comprehensive understanding of itself.[20] Indeed, an understanding of technology as pure functionality is merely atheoretical insigh, failing to fully appreciate the fact that technology itself creates locales, 'niches' that are "part of the natural world which transformed in order for technical to exist as a functional reality" in the first place.[21]

20. Pascal Chabot, The Philosophy of Simondon: Between Technology and Individuation, trans. Aliza Krefetz, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 125. "Our indifference towards the technical object is also an indifference towards a part of ourselves."

21. Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in Basic Writings, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 1993), 356; Dumouchel, "Gilbert Simondon's Plea," 419.

Descriptions of our ecological condition are ill-conceived. Using the language inherited from the utopian conditions from which we supposedly 'fell' are actually conceptual nonstarters. In fact, use of such terminology is dangerous. The majority of the terms we use to describe the matter of our existence are insufficient not because they are logically invalid, but because they are ultimately unsound. Nature, environment, world, conservation, sustainability, anthropocene—the vocabulary of environmentalist discourse is seemingly endless. That this vocabulary is likewise endlessly contingent is not as immediately recognizable. Indeed, the utility of these terms hinges on the particular assumption that, loosely formulated, 'humans' and 'nature' are at some level, objectively discrete categories in existence.

Because these terms are founded upon this assumption, they are nothing more than some philosophical-linguistic commitment. Their importance then, is solely determined by their material reality. With something like "nature," which clearly references actual objects that give rise to its linguistic labels, the translation of these objects to their terminological form actually resists our thinking about what these objects really are—which get us to our next matter of discussion.

Technology has been so forceful in its influence upon the material realm that it has irrevocably rendered our world a markedly "technico-geographical" one, wherein things are "neither entirely natural nor entirely artificial."[22] In light of current circumstances, there is no returning to some concept of the pure, unadulterated nature of the Garden of Eden or a readoption of hunter-gatherer practices. Though these utopian conditions define the beginning from which we supposedly 'fell,' they are as much based upon a duality between humanity and the natural world as our various exploitative means of production. [D]

22. Dumouchel, "Gilbert Simondon's Plea," 419.

d) ***Regenerative***: Regenerative sustainability strategies presupposes an anthropocentric perspective. In a regenerative strategy we demonstrate an extreme arrogance on two fronts. First, that we have the ability to direct natural process and second, that we are in a position to decide what state of nature is an ideal state. Regeneration implies a return to an earlier (and better) state. In this case we should question what is this better state? Is it a state that better serves our needs? A state in a better natural balance? A state that doesn't have us in it? The interpretation of regenerative in the context of sustainability tends towards a state before our destructive interventions. In this interpretation we again see the alienation of nature from man. Nature is seen as better off without man and our actions are seen as being outside a natural process, hence the need for reparation to perceive damages.

The entire idea of primitivism, of "returning to our roots" is, after all, fraudulent and misleading. It seems, on first glance, that primitivism represents a promising reversal of human development, an escape from the confinement of urban-industrial civilization. But it should be noted that the fundamental ideals of primitivism correlate with the romanticization of the frontier, an attitude which transformed America into the urban-industrial civilization it is today.

Both primitivism and the frontier myth have several problematic notions built into them. They're formed on the basis that there exists a "pure" wilderness out there – a purity that is nonexistent, an illusory and human-

constructed vision of what we imagine wilderness to be. This false conception of wilderness is destructive in that it encourages a very particular definition of what is deemed "natural" to the extent that a place that doesn't have seemingly sublime qualities may be deemed "too small, too plain, or too crowded to be authentically wild."[23]

In addition, primitivism's danger lies in its inherent escapist ideals. Deciding to flee the civilizations and technologies that humans have created for themselves in search of an "authentic" home in the wilderness is akin to absolving themselves from the long histories and burdensome responsibilities that come with human development. "By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit."[24]

As such, in today's environmental conditions, the concepts of technology and the natural world ultimately go hand in hand, both as forces that constitute the complex make-up of our current conditions and as objects that humanity has conceptually distanced from itself. Indeed, in the present so-called 'technological age,' "never has humanity been so far removed from the earth and...been less concerned with the legacy [it is leaving]."[25]

Armed with scientific advancement in the one hand and capitalism in the other—principles of technology and nature in their distinctly instrumentally rational forms—we march forth in this battle to save ourselves and subdue our messy world. But in treating the world as such—in striving to subdue it—these very same weapons effectively destroy the world. Nature may no longer be free for the taking, but it will take more than scientific advancement and capital alone to save our beloved selves. Five years of technological discovery and billions of dollars later, oil from the Deepwater Horizon still smothers the seafloor.

In the face of this tragic state, what appears to confront us is that familiar issue of overcoming—or more precisely, of our self-overcoming. The attempt to make sense of our current conditions is thus, a rehearsal in struggle.[26] This struggle to self-overcome is not a negative course; rather, it presents an opportunity to sincerely rethink our inherited conceptions of nature and technology.[27] Narratives like that of the tragic script are, after all, not set in stone: they exist to give people "the power to change it, to move outside it, and to reconstruct it.[28]

How do we overcome our anthropocentric understandings of 'nature' and 'technology'? Is it simply a matter of our developing a self-consious humility.

The modern usage of the language of 'crisis' has become so ordinary that it borders on banality. Late twentieth century environmentalist movements, along with their corresponding idealist doctrines of conservationism and deep ecology, have aggravated this tendency.[29] Consequently, today's attitude toward current ecological conditions appears a peculiar admixture of despair and indifference—a kind of 'apathetic anxiety' that legitimizes Sisyphean restlessness as a model—the model—of praxis.

23. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Uncommon Ground: Rethinking Human Place in Nature, ed. William Cronon, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 87.

24. Ibid., 25. "By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit."

25. Chabot, The Philosophy of Simondon, 123.

26. Freidrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are, trans. Duncan Large, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16. "My humaneness is a constant self-overcoming."

27. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 28. "In what respect does the saving power grow there also where the danger is? Where something grows, there it takes root, from thence it thrives. Both happen concealedly and quietly and in their own time."

28. Merchant, 325.

29. Ralph Pite, "How Green Were the Romantics?," Studies in Romanticism 35, no.3 (Fall 1996): 372-3. "Most of us all of the time and all of us most of the time are in a condition of denial when it comes to the environment. Conservationism and deep ecology are both symptoms of that denial. The first implies that by cherishing a few sanctuaries, preserves and National Parks, we can limit the damage our societies are inflicting on the natural world. The movement encourages us to believe that the natural and the industrial can continue separately to co-exist. Deep ecology, on the other hand, argues that disaster can be forestalled by an act of mind. By "identification," we are released from our enslavement to industrial society and restored to natural values and behaviors. Whether or not 'identification' is possible or desirable, its political consequences are hard to find. The disaster, however, will not go away."

e) ***Conservation***: Conservation in its current iteration maintains the thought that nature is subservient to us, exists only to serve us. With this knowledge, the conservation sustainability discussion is obviously anthropocentric at best and selfishly destructive at its worst. In fact, it is a path that continues the current destructive consumption of resources that has led us to a state of questioning our relationship with the natural world. By committing ourselves to an idea of doing less with less we willfully refuse an exploration of other ways to develop new forms, uses and values with regards to the energy that we expend (Allan Stoekle, 2013). Conservation is a selfish stance that states these rapidly depleting resources as being a solely human property and that we will use them in the manner which we are currently accustomed to for as long as we possibly can without regard to the cost of these actions even though we know that to continue this way of living, regardless of the pace at which we continue it, will destroy us.

Any announcement of "crisis" ultimately says very little. The longer we steep ourselves in the lexicon of this tragic script, the deeper we inscribe ourselves into a hackneyed tale of willful ignorance about the reality of our concrete ecological conditions. Such a tale is no longer especially tragic, nor is it even cathartic or in the least bit entertaining. The fact of our remaining in this tale of willful ignorance is at worst, futile, and at best, boring.[E]

Story IV: Objects

Image: (Edward Burtensky, *Water, 2010)*

But to completely disavow romantic narratives like the tragic-utopian script—to relegate and isolate them to some sort of 'prehistory'—would be as misguided as uncritically subscribing to them. Though these romantic narratives can be dismissed as ideological, mystifying, or escapist—and not without justification—to turn our eyes away from them altogether would lose sight of what we may actually learn from them.[30] In resisting the idealist, subjective, and uncritical—in short, the precious—qualities of romanticism, we ought to also recognize the value inherent to the romantic position. Indeed, underlying romanticism's predilection for the ideological, mystifying, and escapist is a highly charged creative imagination—an unbridled capacity to 'think otherwise.'[31] Thinking beyond catastrophe must be predicated on such a free thinking-otherwise.

We are steeped in the seeming incomprehensibility of our existence, and these romantic narratives are mere byproducts of this truth of the ambiguity of our existence; we have erred because we have not understood. Phenomena occur, and we can't quite make sense of them. We can't locate them. We can't wrap our heads around them. They evade definition by our inherited categories of knowledge and understanding; these phenomena have "a weirdness that evolution, ecology, relativity and quantum theory all speak about."[21] Our romantic narratives compose the tenor (albeit, an ill-founded one) that

30. Morton, The Ecological Thought, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 10-11."In particular, Romantic literature, from the beginning of the modern age of industry and capitalism, has served as a touchstone for ecocriticism. This brand of criticism, however, restricts the radical openness the ecological thought implies, employing a pre-packaged conceptual container labeled 'Nature.' Ironically, Romantic 'Nature' is an artificial construct. And extra-ironically, Romantic-period art itself already thought about the environment in ways that were decisively 'out of the box.'"

31. James McKusick, Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 227-8. "The English Romantics and the American Transcendentalists were engaged in lifelong scrutiny of the same fundamental questions as today's most advanced ecologists, but they posed these questions in different terms…Rather than dismiss or forget about their work, contemporary ecologists would be well advised to reconsider the various conceptual frameworks afforded by [the Romantics]…By envisioning alternatives to the unsustainable industrial exploitation of natural resources, these writers provide hints, clues, and intimations of different ways of dwelling on Earth. They offer pathways to a better future than we might otherwise be able to imagine."

tempers this broader discussion; it is the reverberating sound of our utter bewilderment. This characterization of the tragic-utopian narratives is not to say that the evil, violent, and dangerous principles that founds them ought to be winked at as innocent thought experiments gone wrong (a nod to that supreme and self-righteous human wit); such a response would miss the point.

This imaginative thinking-otherwise is precisely what our self-overcoming—the 're-thinking' of our inherited conceptions of nature and technology—entails. One expression of radical rethinking has taken place at the level of ontology, an 'object-oriented ontology (OOO), where existence is understood in a way that that resists privileging the human-Subject by regarding the existential status of all entities (human and non-human) on an equal plane.

This does not mean we are without hope. Our error thus far has been one of externalization. Linguistically we use terminology that either alienates mankind from the natural environment or places man at the controls of nature; in either case we consciously elevate man to the level of the 'other'. The fault here is the same. We consider ourselves to be 'other' then nature. This explains a great deal; why we can externalize the costs of our current state of living; why we feel a pressure to deal with depleting resources as if nature is a warehouse of supplies that we can manage; and why architecturally we go to such lengths to insulate ourselves from nature (and even from the social environment, as if we perceive other humans as being a part of that 'other').

Humans are steeped in the seeming incomprehensibility of our existence, and romantic narratives are mere byproducts of the true ambiguity of our existence; we have erred because we have not understood. Phenomena occur, and humans can't quite make sense of them. We can't locate them. We can't wrap our heads around them. These phenomena which bear "a weirdness that evolution, ecology, relativity and quantum theory all speak about" evade definition by our normative categories of knowledge and understanding.[32]

To imagine these phenomena in their totality seems unthinkably vast, and yet we can't help but attempt to think of them in their totality, since it is precisely this totality that makes these objects what they are. The existence of these objects is so concrete that our proximity to them—our complete subsumption within and among them—makes it impossible to acquire some 'objective' perspective on them. But just because these things evade our ability to think of them in a complete way doesn't mean they don't exist, nor does it mean that they're located in some realm beyond us.[F]

Timothy Morton calls these complex phenomena "hyperobjects," examples of which include things like global warming or evolution.[33] We feel the reality of hyperobjects in some way, shape, or form on an everyday basis. We don't have complete knowledge of the totality of global warming's active dynamics and unpredictable potentialities, but this difficulty in conceptualizing global

32. Morton, "Unsustaining," 3.

f) ***Cost***: Seemingly objective devices such as carrying capacity serve to abstract the reality of the world for the model of the world we have constructed. As already established, this abstraction allows us to create the perception of ourselves as being outside of nature. One of the most drastic illustrations of the effects of this abstraction is in the way we perceive cost. In abstracting our current relationship with nature we also abstract the idea of our future with nature. This has been especially evident in our practices of extracting fossil fuels. Hydraulic fracturing and tar sand oil extraction have enormous environmental costs that we have externalized. As a result, the price per barrel of oil or price per cubic foot of natural gas does not reflect the cost of the production and the cost of turning that land back into inhabitable land for the future (not to mention the cost of the by-products of burning these fuels). The true costs of oil today are not easily quantifiable. They are long term effects that will have radical impacts on the way we live on this earth over the next 100, 1000 and 10,000 years. (Allan Stoekl, 2012)

Willfully ignoring these costs does not minimize their effects on us. Externalizing the cost today will affect us in the future and by ignoring them we ignore the opportunity to image the form of our existence in the future. By being aware of the existence of these costs, even without being able to fully conceptualize them, we engage in a process that forces us to imagine our existence in the future and by extension the relationship we will have with the world we inhabit in the future. These visions may not be correct but the important aspect of them is that they engage that thought process.

33. Ibid. For more on Morton's formulation of the hyperobject, see Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World, (University of Minnesota Press).

warming in its totality doesn't stop global warming from having a very real effect on our ordinary, day-to-day lives. Indeed, the once archetypally banal conversation topic of the weather has "taken on a menacing air." [34] In point of fact, these weird, seemingly immanent, unfixed, and irreducible hyperobjects are not at all abstract, but rather, among us; and inversely, we are among them.

34. Morton, "Unsustaining," 4.

An orthodox solution to an issue perceived as human hubris would be human humility. The origin of the term "humility" or "to be humble" is the Latin term humilis, which literally translates to being "on the ground," derivative of humus, which means "earth." Advocating this position of humility in the face of our ecological conditions, William Cronon writes:

> If the core problem of wilderness is that it distances us too much from the very things it teaches us to value, then the question we must ask is what it can tell us about home, the place where we actually live. How can we take the positive values we associate with wilderness and bring them closer to home? I think the answer to this question will come by broadening our sense of the otherness that wilderness seeks to define and protect. In reminding us of the world we did not make, wilderness can teach profound feelings of humility and respect as we confront our fellow beings and the earth itself. Feelings like these argue for the importance of self-awareness and self-criticism as we exercise our own ability to transform the world around us, helping us set responsible limits to human mastery—which without such limits too easily becomes human hubris. Wilderness is the place where, symbolically at least, we try to withhold our power to dominate. [35]

35. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 87.

At first face, OOO appears predicated upon this principle of humility. But to reduce OOO to a discourse of humility would fail to take the theory of OOO and the practice of thinking-otherwise seriously. It is not to be forgotten that humility is codified into Judeo-Christian tropes; while it would be foolish to deny our indebtedness to the tradition of Judeo-Christian fundamentals, it is nonetheless imperative that, in the case of Cronon's appeal, one recognize a negative romantic residue in the appeal's implicit faith in human agency. [36]

36. Philippians 2:3-11. "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

37. Julie E. Cooper, "Humility: Spinoza on the Joys of Finitude," in Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 72-3. Spinoza denies that humility is a virtue altogether, believing it to ultimately be encouraging a guise of false humility.

38. Morton, The Ecological Thought, 77-8. "Believing in an ineffable Nature or Self is wrong. But so is claiming that there is a thrilling, infinitely plastic post-Thing out there waiting to be completely manipulated. Both the Nature people and the post-Nature people have it in for, well, people. The ecological thought is about people—it is people. Coexistence means nothing if it means only the proximity of other machines or sharing components with other machines. Upgraded models of 'post-Nature' deprive of us intimacy…At the bottomless bottom, subjectivity is an infinite void… The disturbing depth of another person is a radical consequence of inner freedom. It's a mistake to think that the mesh is 'bigger than us.' Everything is intimate with everything else. The ecological thought is vast, but strange strangers are right next to us. They are us. Inner space is right here, 'nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet.' Rather than a vision of inclusion, we need a vision of intimacy. We need thresholds, not spheres or concentric circles, for imagining where the strange stranger hangs out."

In contradistinction to this residual romanticism, OOO is not a simple and humble conflation of the 'humanity' and 'nature' categories, nor is it about mere self-awareness and/or self-criticism. [37] OOO does not propose that humanity lower itself to the 'ground' of nature; rather, it demands that people sincerely and unreservedly go outside of themselves, to actually acquaint themselves with the strange such that the strange becomes intimate. [38] In OOO, the condition "for imagining where the strange stranger hangs out" is a necessary one.

Indeed, it is only by way of romantic imagination that entities today may truly unchain themselves from their unchosen subscription to and inscription within the tragic script of ecological catastrophe.

Bibliography

Ackerman, Diane. "Human Landscapes." New York Times. August 31, 2014

Benjamin, Walter. "Central Park." In Selected Writings vol. 4: 1938-1940. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.

Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture.* San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978.

Burtensky, Pauli, Baker. *Manufactured landscapes : the photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Ottawa: Yale University Press, 2003.

Burtensky, Edward. *Water*. Issues in Science and Technology, v30 n2: 47-56

Chabot, Pascal. *The Philosophy of Simondon*: Between Technology and Individuation. Translated by Aliza Krefetz. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003.

Cooper, Julie E. *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In Uncommon Ground: Rethinking Human Place in Nature. Edited by William Cronon. 69-90. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995.

Dumouchel, Paul. "Gilbert Simondon's plea for a philosophy of technology." Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy. 35: 3-4. 407-421.

Evernden, Neil. *The Natural Alien: Humankind and the Environment.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.

Guy, Moore. *Sustainable architectures: cultures and natures in Europe and North America.* New York: Spon Press, 2005

Heidegger, Martin. "Building Dwelling Thinking." In Basic Writings. Edited by David Farrell Krell. 343-364. New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 1993.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology." In The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays. Translated by William Lovitt. 3-35. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977.

McKusick, James. Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture.* London: Routledge, 2003.

Mostafavi, Mohsen. *Ecological urbanism.* Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2010

Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

Morton, Timothy. The Ecological Thought. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Morton, Timothy. "Unsustaining." World Picture 5 (Spring 2011): 1-10.

Næss, Arne. "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World." In Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Næss. Edited by Alan R. Drengson. 81-98. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2008.

Nietzsche, Freidrich. *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*. Translated by Duncan Large. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Pite, Ralph. "How Green Were the Romantics?" Studies in Romanticism 35, no.3 (Fall 1996): 357-373.

Sayre, Nathan F. 2010. "'The Genesis, History, and Limits of Carrying Capacity." Annals of the Association of American Geographers, v98 n1: 120-134

Sayre, Nathan F. 2008. "'Climax and "Original Capacity": The Science and Aesthetics of Ecological Restoration in the Southwestern USA." Ecological Restoration, 28, no. 1: 23-31

Schneider, Till. 2012. "'Invisible Agency." Architectural Design, v82 n4. 38-43

Stoekl, Allan. 2013. "'After the Sublime,' after the Apocalypse: Two Versions of Sustainability in Light of Climate Change." diacritics, 4, no. 3: pp. 40-57

Stoekl, Allan. 2012. "'Unconventional Oil and the Gift of the Undulating Peak." Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies/revue d'??tudes interculturelle de l'image, v3 n2: 35-45

Till, Jeremy 2010. "'Scarcity and Agency." Journal of Architectural Education, v68 n1: 9-11

Winnubst, Shannon. *Reading Bataille now*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007