

Ecologocentrism: Unworking Animals

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. . . with a glance toward those who, in a society from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.

— Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (293)

Whoever is the wisest among you is also just a conflict and a cross between plant and ghost.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (6)

Ecology without Nature¹

One of the things that modernity has damaged in its appropriation of the Earth has been thinking. Unfortunately, one of the damaged ideas is that of Nature itself. (I shall be capitalizing this word where necessary, to highlight its metaphysical qualities.) How do we transition from seeing what we call “Nature” as an object “over yonder”? And how do we avoid “new and improved” versions that end up doing much the same thing (systems theory, Spinozan pantheism, or Deleuze-and-Guattari type worlds of interlocking machines, and so on), just in a “cooler,” more sophisticated way? What kinds of collectivity emerge when we think ecology without Nature? How do we coexist with nonhumans without what Dimitris Vardoulakis and Chris Danta in their introduction to this issue call the “social fantasies that create and sustain a collective ‘we’ in the name of whom violence is exercised”?

By “unworking animals” I reference Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of the “community of unworking” derived from Maurice Blanchot’s interpretation of the Romantic fragment poem. If we make animals truly “political,” if we include them on “this” side of social collectivity, this collectivity will be radically redefined. Yet “unworking animals” also

emphasizes the deconstructive work of undoing the general category of “the animal,” a work (or unwork?) begun by Derrida in his essay on the occasion of his cat looking back at his naked body (“The Animal That Therefore I Am”). For to encounter what we commonly call animals is to be confronted with the inadequacy of the idea of an essential, central “nature.”

The issue is upgraded, but not transcended, in the notion of “environment,” which tries to be a “new and improved” version of the reified substance or essence called “nature.” Until recently, the left has failed to take ecology into account together with race, class, and gender. Ecology should be viewed as intrinsic to these complexly intermingled spheres rather than as outside or beside them. As Walter Benjamin writes in the *Arcades Project*, when the weather becomes a topic for collective imagination (as now), it stops being that thing over there called the weather. It “stand[s] in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon [it] in politics and history emerges” (convolute K1, 5).² Likewise, when nonhumans become politicized, they lose their place in “the eternally selfsame,” and “the animal”—that mythical, invisible beast—withers away. Even “the animal question” (how like “the Jewish question”) starts to look fishy.

The problem of “the political animal” is also a symptom of the failure of ecological thinking, and of deconstruction, to approach each other with anything like an understanding of their shared—even mutually constitutive—claims. Deconstruction is the secret best friend of ecology. Deconstruction is the way in which the collective can seize upon the environment on the micro level. Deconstruction is a rigorous thinking of difference and deferment or “spacing,” deriving from what Derrida’s seminal lecture “Structure, Sign, and Play” calls an awareness of “the structurality of structure” (278–80). If there were ever a structure whose structurality had begun to be thought, in tandem with the emergence of cybernetics and other contextualizing phenomena (*Of Grammatology* 8–10), it would be the environment. Only consider the difficulty of thinking the *climate*, and of explaining the difference between *weather* and *climate*. Climate is a structure with a specific and highly complex structurality, which emerged through the early applications of systems theory. Derrida was already thinking deconstruction as the birth (though whether this organic metaphor holds is precisely at issue) of another, entirely other, “species of the nonspecies”—of animals, in their most radical sense (“Structure” 293). Thinking the political animal is deconstruction.³

Derrida argues that logocentrism underlies Western philosophy’s attempt to ground meaning in an essential form. This essay holds that

ecologocentrism underpins most environmentalist philosophy, preventing access to the full scope of interconnectedness. Thinking, even environmentalist thinking, sets up “Nature” as a reified thing in the distance, “over yonder,” under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener, preferably in the mountains, in the wild. “Nature” accords with Benjamin’s proposition about the aura: it is a function of distance. Benjamin uses an image from “Nature”—or from the picturesque? But that is my (and his) point—to describe the aura:

We define the aura . . . as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close [the object] may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (222–3)

Since we are not living in the mountains, distracted in them by day-to-day tasks, we can be aesthetically captivated by them, as we can by an auratic work of art.

When it approaches fullness, ecological thinking does not allow this kind of distance to congeal. Thinking genuine interdependence involves dissolving the barrier between “over here” and “over there,” and more fundamentally, the illusory boundary between inside and outside, which Derrida asserts is the founding metaphysical opposition (“Violence and Metaphysics,” 151–2). This means that society can no longer be defined as purely human. Thinking interdependence involves thinking *différance*: the fact that all beings, not just symbolic ones, are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without center or edge. Consider the image of Indra’s net, used in Buddhist scripture to describe the interrelationship between things:

At every connection in this infinite net hangs a magnificently polished and infinitely faceted jewel, which reflects in each of its facets all the facets of every other jewel in the net. Since the net itself, the number of jewels, and the facets of every jewel are infinite, the number of reflections is infinite as well. (Mingyur 174–5)

A cursory reading of Darwin shows that life forms are no less intricately, intimately, and infinitely interrelated.⁴

In this essay, we shall slide from human being to nonhuman “animals,” discovering how these neighbors confront us with the trauma of infinite responsibility prior to any specific code of ethics such as “animal rights.” We shall then slide from the animal to the vegetative, as we recognize in the “idiotic” livingness of life forms an a-rational, “a-cephalic” core. And insofar as animals raise the specter of consciousness, we shall be sliding to the mineral realm—to the possibility that sentience can be embodied in silicon, for example (the question of artificial

intelligence). In a way, this essay mimics the history of evolution, in which it is necessary to imagine a strange “pre-living life” consisting of RNA replicators attached to self-replicating silicate crystals (Dawkins 582–94). To “unwork” the animal is to slide in this way.

Likewise, we shall be sliding from ethical *responsibility* to the psychoanalytic question of *enjoyment*. The issue of the political animal demands that once we start demolishing ecocentrism, we go to the end. My essay thus jettisons the usual phenomenological approach to nonhuman beings with its too easy talk of “worlds,” and instead opts for a disturbingly unsentimental mix of Lacan and Derrida. Curiously, this mix allows for a greater intimacy with nonhuman beings than the normal ideological lubricants such as Heideggerian mysticism, phenomenological languages of embodiment and embeddedness, and Gaian holism. These lubricants slip a rich, luscious film between us and other beings, paradoxically to prevent us from articulating a theory of our coexistence with them. Finally, this means that we shall slide from the ontological to the ontic. Truly to address the political animal is to shake ontology to its very foundations. It is only thus that we shall be able to articulate a properly materialist ecology.

Strange Strangers: Animals in the Open

The category “animal” is among the ways in which thinking reifies the ecological. Ecology without Nature implies a nonconceptual network of infinite proliferation and diversity. This network resembles the community of “unworking” that Nancy’s philosophy of social form develops from Blanchot’s understanding of the Romantic fragment poem: the way it offers not a total “work” of art, but a *desœuvrement*.⁵ The “human” is not at the center of this almost unthinkable network. Nor is “nature,” nor indeed the “animal.” For at each node of the network, there is a radical gap. Our encounter with the network at any point is with an irreducible alterity.

Our experience of the gap is perhaps best described in the language of Emmanuel Levinas, in which other people directly are infinity. Levinas strives towards a profoundly social view in which the “self” is always already caught in a traumatic asymmetrical encounter with an “other.” This other is what appears at each node of the ecological network: the stranger, or in Derridean terminology the *arrivant*, the utterly unexpected arrival, towards whom there must be an infinitely open hospitality (or “hostipitality,” in Derrida’s extraordinary reworking). I use the word “stranger” rather than “other” to emphasize the radically unknowable quality of this *arrivant*.

Ecology without Nature is an endless network of strange strangeness: the strangeness of the strangers is irreducible. We cannot predict exactly who or what they are—indeed, whether they are a “who” or a “what.” This radical openness to non-identity means that questions of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism are untenable. But so are questions of “ecologocentrism” or “biophilia.” Preserving differences between humans and animals has well documented disastrous effects on philosophy, culture and politics. But erasing differences disastrously collapses the profound alterity of the strange stranger. To preserve strange strangers, we must do away with anthropocentrism and ecologocentrism in a single stroke.

This essay’s view of nonhumans and humans is not far from traditional animism. Because of the nonessentialism of ecology without Nature, we must put this term under erasure (~~animism~~). Like animism, ecology without Nature regards all beings as people, while not restricting the idea of “people” to human being as such. There is no Nature, only people, some of whom are human beings. On this view, there is no such thing as “the animal” and no such beings as “animals.” Instead, there is this cat, that tree, this nematode worm. I am always already in a social relationship with these people, prior to any specific concept of social formation—prior, in fact, to any ontology. Thus it is not that animals are whatever we say they are—a form of nominalism. We are dealing here with uniqueness, with singularity. The “The” in “The Political Animal” becomes a marker of unicity, not generality. Curiously, this unicity is a better way of beginning to imagine collectivity (not community), because ~~animism~~ undermines the idea of “person” itself. Let us find out how.

In her poem “Come into Animal Presence,” Denise Levertov figures animal “presence” as a space one enters:

Come into animal presence
No man is so guileless as
the serpent. The lonely white
rabbit on the roof is a star
twitching its ears at the rain.
The llama intricately
folding its hind legs to be seated
not disdains but mildly
disregards human approval.
What joy when the insouciant
armadillo glances at us and doesn’t
quicken his trotting
across the track into the palm brush.

What is this joy? That no animal
 falters, but knows what it must do?
 That the snake has no blemish,
 that the rabbit inspects his strange surroundings
 in white star-silence? The llama
 rests in dignity, the armadillo
 has some intention to pursue in the palm-forest.
 Those who were sacred have remained so,
 holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence
 of bronze, only the sight that saw it
 faltered and turned from it.
 An old joy returns in holy presence.⁶

Levertov achieves the sense of *this* animal as opposed to “the animal” in general, and yet the general notion of “animal presence,” reappears as the “holiness” that is “a presence / of bronze” (22–3). This is not a community in the sense of an organic, close-knit fellowship. Nor are the animals the kin of humans. There is an implied habitat, a high desert plateau perhaps. This hinders the possibility that each animal is there to exemplify something particular for the human gaze, in a neoclassical allegorical style. The poem broaches the Rilkean idea that animals are unique in their access to an “open” to which human eyes are temporarily closed. What we turn from is “a presence of bronze” (23). Holiness itself is an opacity, not a transparency but an aesthetic density (of material, bronze) that impedes our view. We shall revisit this notion of ontic, phenomenal holiness, rather than ontological, “worldly” holiness, at the deepest level of this essay’s engagement with the political animal.

Giorgio Agamben’s *The Open* explores this community of animal unworking via a transformed notion of the aesthetic, which he articulates as “profound boredom” (63–70). Agamben interprets the post-coital languor of lovers in a Titian painting as representative of “the inactivity ... and *desœuvrement* of the human and of the animal as the supreme and unsavable figure of life” (87). *Desœuvrement* models a sociality prior to any human–nonhuman split, because its fragmentariness is an open form that includes what lies around it. Agamben discerns in this “a higher stage beyond both nature and knowledge” (87)—higher than both human and animal being. The “presence of bronze” (Levertov) is not yet a reified object, but a materiality that resists the auratic distance of the artwork. It is “unwork,” the unworking animal. Like a lump of metal in an art gallery, we wonder where the work stops and the boundary begins.

Agamben unworks the human into the animal, moving from self-consciousness to boredom. But might *desœuvrement*, unworking, go the

other way around? Might a feature of human being considered distinctively human be found at the animal level? Dare we claim that this feature is the very capacity to reflect, in particular the capacity for aesthetic contemplation? It is a profound question, because the aesthetic is not simply an intentional consciousness (consciousness of...). It shows us sheer awareness as such. Kantian beauty is not so much in the eye of the beholder as it *is directly* the eye of the beholder, projected onto the object. The aesthetic implies an open, even passive receptivity, rather than activity. It is fundamentally non-utilitarian: nonhuman life is not simply fulfilling a telos (survival, adaptation, and so on). A good reading of Darwin includes his intuition that life forms are not purely utilitarian, for instance in the case of sexual selection (Morton, *The Ecological Thought*).

The question of aesthetics is significant for the politics of animality. Anthropocentric and ecocentric ideologies alike perform what Vardoulakis and Danta describe as “the gesture of aligning politics with the rational and the reflexive—a cornerstone of humanism—[that] also leads to a disturbing separation between the active (or legislative) ‘human’ and the passive (or collective) ‘animal’ ” (introduction to this issue). We glimpse this perhaps in the “mild disregard” (6–9) of Levertov’s llama—pun intended? Is this llama a lama? This may be borne out by “The llama / rests in dignity” (18–19), as if she were meditating. One of the deepest questions is not, “Can animals think?” but “Are animals capable of aesthetic contemplation?” Why? This would mean that the aesthetic was not a “high” function of “greater” cognitive powers, but a “low” (who knows, perhaps the lowest) one. What if the aesthetic were the default mode of sentience as such? Humanists must at least ask the question. Perhaps we should be in the business not simply of reacting to science, but of proposing scientific experiments.

A threshold that resisted the separation of human and animal would not only resist their collapse into each other. It would also resist the “posthumanism” that all too readily dematerializes the nonhuman. It is a paradox that alongside necessary political action on global warming and animal rights, a more trenchant ecological approach in philosophy and culture would hesitate precisely on this threshold, at the very moment at which the world is telling us to stop hesitating and do something. To do nothing, intelligently, is a good definition both of “animal” passivity and of aesthetic contemplation, and even of religious forms of contemplation found for instance in apophatic Christianity and in Buddhism. Strangely, the political urgency today is about becoming animal in this sense. Far from transcending animality, theory can think

itself as becoming animal.⁷ Along lines similar to Agamben's, contemporary Buddhism has established the connection between boredom, existential angst and meditative insight (Trungpa, 56–7).

This "becoming animal" is not a Deleuzo-Guattarian "line of flight" from the normative political sphere, but a radical deconstruction of that sphere.⁸ The Deleuzo-Guattarian approach flies too hastily towards what may turn out to be ideological mirages. The political urgency of thinking animals is proportionate to its difficulty, not least because of the increasingly fungible quality of everything in a hypercapitalist, nanotechnological age of bioengineering and genomics—in which everything might be capable of being liquefied into everything else. This fungibility increases the compulsion towards the total domination of life forms. Posthumanism and transhumanism are in danger of providing a perfect alibi for another round of Nietzschean mastery. And there is a further difficulty. Any attempt to get beyond the Nietzschean strategy risks ending up simply reaffirming Nietzsche, since his is the philosophy of winners rather than losers (Bull). An ecological approach would surely identify with the losers, with the "subhuman" rather than the superman. To think the political animal, then, is to think "lower" and "less than," to shrink in vulnerability and hide in introversion, to dig holes and hibernate. Theory could be a mole's-eye view rather than an eagle's. Marx's favorite quotation from *Hamlet* springs to mind; "Old mole. Canst thou work i' th' earth so fast?" (1.5.183).

This essay now exfoliates becoming-animal-theory, by closely examining a text that is profoundly preoccupied with questions of strangers, interdependence and intimacy. This text articulates the global awareness promoted by environmental thinking through a radical coexistence that still outruns normative ways of imagining ecological care. The text is Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris* and its film adaptations by Andrei Tarkovsky and Steven Soderbergh.

Planet as an Ape: *Solaris*

Solaris is a planet whose surface is a vast ocean that exhibits signs of sentience, as if the entire planet were a gigantic brain. Lem's novel was written about fifteen years earlier than James Lovelock's formulation of the Gaia hypothesis; the sentient ocean has striking similarities with Lovelock's image of a self-sustaining set of feedback loops that appear from a distance to demonstrate something like sentience. Yet there are some striking differences, not the least of which is that while Gaia is a holistic concept, *Solaris* is portrayed in an absolutely nonholistic way.

Gaian language portrays the Earth as telling us that we are harming it, through indirect, emergent messages—parts that communicate a whole. *Solaris* communicates in a far more direct way, as a singular being speaking to singular beings. Kris Kelvin, the protagonist, is a psychologist conducting tests on the scientists on a space station orbiting *Solaris*. He becomes aware that the planet may be telepathically aware of him. It is precisely because we are not sure whether animals are conscious or not that we should act ethically with regard to them. The question about whether the Gaian ecosystem imagined by Lovelock is genuinely intelligence, artificial or otherwise, is thus prone to a larger, more deconstructive ethics in which, precisely because we will never know for sure, we should treat “artificial” beings (who isn’t one?) as if they were sentient beings.⁹ The Korean government recently released guidelines for the ethical treatment of robots in this manner.¹⁰ It is worth reiterating this essay’s hesitation concerning scholarship’s use of “posthumanism.” Gandhi’s comment about Western civilization (“It would be a very good idea”) also applies to humanism, an unfinished project. Indeed humanism incorporates a not-yet. Ideally the deconstructive encounter between the human and the nonhuman or inhuman *is* the human [see Zizek 159–60]).

The question of an ethical regard towards nonhuman beings deliquesces into a set of questions pertaining to artificial intelligence. Where does one draw the line between personhood and non-personhood? Where does one draw boundaries of sentience, if at all? Is intelligence embodied in any way? *2001* addresses the question from the point of view of multiple components—HAL 9000 is made up of them—while *Solaris* tackles the theme from the point of view of the whole, imagining the biosphere as a colossal brain. Fascinatingly, however, *Solaris* by no means suggests holism as a solution. Every encounter in the story is an encounter with a singular being. The planet is precisely not a mystical web of life, greater than the sum of its parts, but a vulnerable, unique being for whose existence Kris is directly responsible.

Solaris vividly poses the Levinasian notion of otherness as the way in which the stranger always already subtends me, by imagining the planet as a giant brain that sends out impossible-real embodied thoughts in the form of people. These incarnations are derived from the scanned memories of the scientists aboard the space station. *Solaris* holds up the mirror to the souls of the inhabitants of the scientists. The Doppelgänger-like “simulacra” are themselves only dimly aware of their uncanny illusion-like status (65). Kris’s relationship with *Solaris* rapidly becomes his

relationship with his ex-lover Rheya, who committed suicide and now returns to haunt him in the flesh, as a metastasized version of the planet Solaris's drive to communicate, a superbly realized image of the Lacanian *sinthome*, the inconsistent-impossible-real sprout of enjoyment.

In Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film adaptation, Snaut calls this simulacrum "the materialization of [Kris's] conception of her." Sartorius calls her "A mechanical reproduction. A copy. A matrix." Yet the people whom Solaris materializes are no hallucinations, as Kris finds out quickly in a Cartesian experiment to prove his sanity. They begin as all too real sprouts of liquid imagery on the surface of the sentient ocean. Because she is unaware of her status as an embodiment of this liquid being, Rheya herself has to come to terms with her alien identity, giving the story a Frankensteinian, *Blade Runner*-like theme of discovering the alien within oneself. This discovery is surely the profound lesson of Darwinism, a theory of mutagenic replicants whom we can only tentatively call species.

Lurking at the back of Kris's encounter with his ex-lover Rheya (or Hari in Tarkovsky's film) is the existential life-substance, meaningless spurts of ideation material. When Kris locks Hari in his room, she emits terrible sounds and claws open the metal door. He tries to kill her by sending her out into space, but she returns, a Xerox of his memory. Disturbingly indestructible, when she drinks liquid oxygen, she spontaneously revives. She is literally a text, information written in material flesh, and like a text, she is utterly reproducible. We see the living inkwell from which she springs. The sprouts of the ocean mind's enjoyment are called mimoids: the planet is a mimic—a parrot, or an ape (*OED*, "ape," n.1, 3). Mimoids are thus simple reflections, "apings" or "parrotings." When a parrot or a computer copies our language, is he, or she, or it, behaving like us? Is it behaving consciously? Are we? The trouble with animals is that their apparent mimicry of us reflects back on us, making us wonder whether our own behavior is unique or deep.

Watching the mimoids and the simulacra is like reading text while simultaneously watching it being written on a special page that writes itself, automatically, without a separate author. This is a radical image of the "book of Nature." We see the "genotext" (the spurting matter) and the "phenotext" (simulacra) at the same time (Kristeva 89–136). Or—to translate Kristeva's language back into the language of biology—we see the genotype (genetic material) and the phenotype (what this material "expresses"—from enzymes to organisms) at once. It is as if we were watching replication, onto which were superimposed layers of information. Of course, this is what actually does occur at the genomic

level. Given such a harrowing proximity between hardware and software, between mimoid and apparently sentient being, can we call Rheya a person or even a subject? Again, this is animality up close: DNA, RNA, and enzymes can operate simultaneously both as hardware and as software. The symbolic language of "life" is encoded directly in the real. We need a rhetorical term like "anti-anamorphosis" or "dedeformation," a kind of metalepsis or "un-metaphor," to evoke the double twist in which what is ambient and environmental turns into what is frontal and singular.

Kris transcends his fantasy projection. Having tried to destroy or ignore the simulacrum of Rheya, Kris decides to relate with her precisely as a living message from Solaris. Kris's ethical dilemma is about learning to treat the replica of his ex-lover as a unique person who just happens to possess all the memories and characteristics of the woman from his past—a person who is also an interface for the planet-brain. In joining Rheya, Kris performs an impossible (inhuman?) identification with the planet as ecological real, via a radical acceptance of one of the potentially endless series of Rheya-replicas. This is beautifully embodied in the horrifying, surreal end of Tarkovsky's neo-Christian film interpretation. Tarkovsky wants the encounter with the planet to be a metaphor for the encounter with the really other other in the form of God. But as the imagery makes explicit, this encounter (staged as the meeting between Kris and his father) takes place on a little island of symbolic consistency (and only just: it's raining indoors) in a psychotic ocean of unmeaning. Kris has made a drastic choice to stay on the space station and be drawn down onto the sentient planet by the attractive force of its gravitational field (Newtonian symbol of God's love). The planet detects "islands of memory" in the astronauts, and simulates them in the external world. The conclusion materializes this when Kris himself inhabits a literal island of memory with his father, kneeling to him on the threshold of their forest home. Kris knows very well that Rheya/Hari is not his lover, and so he knows as much as we the audience know about the final shot. In an extraordinary ethical perversion (perversion as ethical), Kris is fully aware that his *Lebenswelt* is a simulation. Kris exists without Nature, yet with a profoundly ecological ethics.

The simulacra are metaleptic embodiments of the filmic surface itself, the actual "environment" in which they appear. As well as being uncanny Doppelgängers, they are also idiotic, idiomatic sprouts of planet stuff. These beings are neighbors par excellence, strangers whose strangeness is irreducible. The simulacra show us what is most traumatic about so-

called animals. As Lacan says of alterity, “what constitutes pretence is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s a pretence or not. Essentially it is the unknown element in the alterity of the other which characterizes the speech relation on the level on which it is spoken to the other” (48). And as Slavoj Žižek explains, “The neighbor . . . as the Thing means that, beneath the neighbor as my *semblant*, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be ‘gentrified’ ” (Žižek 143). If animals are people, according to our hypothetical **animist** view, they are neighbors. Ethics is grounded both on not knowing whether they are “for real” or not, and in glimpsing an abyssal Real beneath the simulative surface. The question of the political is inextricable from the problem of the political animal. Treating nonhumans as people is a political choice that faces the vulnerability and responsibility towards other beings in which we are entangled.

From Animal to Vegetable

Solaris brilliantly causes the forest and the trees, depersonalization and the personal, to overlap. It works towards something like what Dimitris Vardoulakis calls “a notion of subjective difference that is not underpinned by subjective identity” (104). This view imagines relationships along the lines of what Žižek says of Hegel, in a passage that alters the normative view of Hegel’s intersubjectivity to accord with a notion of non-identitarian subjectivity: “What if the Hegelian ‘recognition’ means that I have to recognize in the impenetrable Other which appears as the obstacle of my freedom its positive-enabling ground and condition?” (Žižek 142). Ontological hesitation thus becomes the essence of aesthetic contemplation, which forms the basis for an ethics of non-violence.

One should assert, moreover, that this subjective difference implies somewhere that is not a “world,” that is not home, that is irreducibly, uncannily homely and alien. This alien “unhomely” (*Unheimlich*) home is impossible to think ecogocentrically as a total system bounded by an outside. The home-as-alien is ecology without Nature. Ontological hesitation is the most profound reason why aesthetic contemplation may be the key to understanding life forms. If nonhumans can contemplate thus, we are truly dealing with “unworking” animals, with animals as those beings who not only provoke us to theory, but are theory directly. Thus Levertov is incorrect to praise animals for not “faltering” and “know[ing] what [they] must do” (14–15).

In *Solaris*, the environment of the planet turns itself “outside in” in order to make intimate contact with the astronauts. The simulations

disclose the phantasmatic truths within the truism that all sentient beings both constitute and are made up of their environments. The problem with life forms is always in part a problem of semblance, a problem of not knowing with whom we are dealing. The theory of evolution makes this utterly explicit: every life form is made up of other life forms. The simulacra are both too unreal, and too real.

There is something like this encounter with the environmental real in Freud's essay on the uncanny, in which environmental tropes sometimes stand in for the encounter with the traumatic kernel of other people and the otherness of people. Forests are iterations of trees, and so uncanny: "when one is lost in a forest in high altitudes, caught, we will suppose, by the mountain mist, and when every endeavor to find the marked or familiar path ends again and again in a return to one and the same spot, recognizable by some particular landmark" (Freud 17.237).¹¹ The forest is a quintessential image of the text, which is why we say, "he can't see the forest for the trees." We are always trying to make forests into wholes. The scandal of Wordsworth's so-called environmentalism is that at crucial moments he expresses it as a perverse, singular love for a unique thing: "There is a tree of many, one" ("Intimations of Immortality," 52). If there is no Nature, this does not mean that there is nothing. We are not dealing with sheer nominalism here, but with an ethics of singularity. Yet the forest-as-text is also an image of collectivity. The dialectic of strange strangeness compels us to see "animals" both as unique and as part of a non-holistic collective.

Solaris's simulacra are called Phi-Creatures, which for a Lacanian is almost too perfect. Phi (Φ) is Lacan's symbol for the "imaginary Real." The "negress" Phi-Creature (30) is the imaginary Real of racist enjoyment (Kris's reaction is horror). What emerges from the sentient ocean are pathetic embodiments of enjoyment whose excess parodies the ideological frames in which they normally appear. The gigantic stature of the negress is overwhelming, like Frankenstein's creature, parodically threatening the onlooker with her or his own racist desire, through the trope of hyperbole: the textual overdoing of something, the sprouting forth of something extra. The sprout of enjoyment persists, zombie-like, even after the ideology that framed it is useless—like a "primitive negress" walking around on a spaceship. The sprout is the a-rational, nonconceptual and inconsistent core of ideological fantasy, and as such it provides a way of dissolving the fantasy. When found walking around the space station, outside their ideological frames, the Phi-Creatures put the scientists to shame: "Shame, the feeling that will save humanity" (Kris, in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*). Shame, the awareness that I am caught in

the gaze of the other, is always the “animal presence” in which one finds oneself. (I part company here with Levertov, who suggests that we can “Come into” this “presence.”)

Should we then suggest that when I see an animal, I am always seeing something disturbing from my inner space, scuttling around outside of me? I am ashamed precisely because “it is me” more directly than I myself am. Surely this is the basis for the social practice of scapegoating: literally loading the shame of the community onto an animal and sending her or him out into the wilderness. Every attempt to get rid of this disturbing “object” thus directly wounds me and disturbs even more profoundly the social space, thus readying the closed community for another round of scapegoating. This is precisely why animals cannot just be accepted as humans with fur and feathers into the human “community,” because accepting animals implies dissolving the holistic notion of community as such that always serves as a screen to prevent me from witnessing my inextricable intimacy with other beings.

Against this disturbing of human beingness—this maximal externalized eccentricity—Kris attempts to formulate Cartesian sanity in a closed loop (I know I am sane because I can prove that something exists, 50). Unfortunately this must be done with the help of a giant computer. The thinking machine is a prosthetic externalization of the *res intellectus*. Because the “something that exists” is the computer whose “brain” sticks out like a sore thumb, the experiment itself deconstructs existence into ex-sistence (literally, “placement outside of oneself”). The very form of Kris’s experiment makes clear that personal identity always depends upon some external, supplementary substance that undermines its identitarian claims. That Descartes was half conscious of this is confirmed by his parapraxis of “res”—what we find beyond and above matter is a *thing* that thinks. Likewise, the Phi-Creatures are emanations of the ultimate wetware, the brain-ocean.

Human being collapses into “animal presence,” and “animal presence” collapses into writhing, vegetative life. Tarkovsky decided to begin with Kris amidst the fecund, wet, birdsung ambience of a rural Russian upper middle class. Looking into a stream, Kris Kelvin sees what could be reflections of a mass of undulating fronds—a figure both for the Imaginary (we are seeing a water image, possibly a reflection, perhaps distorted by the flow of water) and for the Real (we are beholding, in the rippling anamorphosis of the flow of water itself, the sprouts of enjoyment). The fronds wonderfully encapsulate the mimoids of Solaris—

the vegetable and vegetative lurking at the back of the animal.¹² Compared with Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, where everything is done to erase the body's specificity from the text, Tarkovsky's *Solaris* contains much meaningless physicality: the almost pungent sweatiness of Kris, the familiar old routines of a run-down farmhouse (that frame the technology ironically), the morphing mind-ocean that sends out sprouts of enjoyment . . . The closest Dave (*2001*) comes is to the view outside the space pod of the mucus-like colors and surfaces expanding and contracting. Kelvin embraces the sentient ocean and decides to live the rest of his life in contact with it. He plants himself in the phenomenal (not even phenomenological) world: the ontic "sacred" (that is, disturbingly intimate) world. The phenomenological world is *for* someone. It is this "someone" that the phenomenal world does not permit.

A conservative reading suggests that at the end Kris decides to stay on the planet to be reunited with a transcendent god or father—an abstraction of mind. But a more radical reading suggests that Kris's own consciousness depends (as a child upon a parent) upon, literally "hangs off" or "grows from" the undulating fronds that he contemplates at the beginning of the film and to which he returns at the end. The fronds also bring to mind the undead, vegetative quality of the palpitating film stock and its uneasy equation with palpitating life—*is it life?* In this sense, the film itself is a Phi-Creature, a mechanized, robotic simulation of sentient being—again, we face the uncertainty as to whether all sentient being is this robotic simulation.

It gradually becomes clear that the ocean is offering sprouts of enjoyment as part of a seduction—an intimate communication, a caress. A caress of shame! Indeed, the planet insists upon communication. The astronauts kill, maim, attack and abandon their Phi-Creatures, but this does not prevent the sentient sea from sending out more. To accept that is to transcend the projection of imaginary identities onto the mimoids. *Solaris* shows us how to love beyond identity. Both Tarkovsky's and Soderbergh's films imply this, in the former case with the gigantic panning shot that includes the island of father and son in the psychotic ocean, and in the latter with the divine glide into seeming utter madness. In an ecological twist on *film noir*, the protagonist in each case accepts the illusion of the Phi-Creature, knowing that it is an illusion, as a way to join with the sentient ocean itself. Kris radically opposes Sartorius, whose experiments stand in contrast to his collaboration with the illusion. Kris sends an "encephalogram" to the planet, an X-ray modulated by a brain wave (155–6), a message that includes the totality of his mind, conscious

and unconscious, and thus includes content of which he cannot be aware. To quote Lacan again, “the unknown element in the alterity of the other” (48) also applies to the communication of the speaker herself or himself.

Soderbergh’s version is in one sense more disturbing than Tarkovsky’s, because instead of God, the sentient ocean is a metaphor for consumerism. Soderbergh’s version is the nihilist misreading, just as Tarkovsky’s is the theistic misreading. Kris becomes a solipsistic consumerist who gets sucked into the vortex of narcissistic enjoyment. At the end we are told that all has been forgiven. Kris gets to have his cake and eat it too by joining with the planet and possessing Rheyra all over again, now capable of acting as if the suicide had never happened. In Tarkovsky Kris notices that it is raining indoors, a poetic inversion. In Soderbergh a self-inflicted cut on Kris’s hand, which we saw earlier in the film, heals itself, indicating that he is fully in the world of the planet Solaris—while not communicating with it at all (has he just been downloaded?). Soderbergh renders Kris’s encounter with the real of the planet in a penultimate scene, where white noise engulfs the ship, temporarily overwhelming the Ligeti-esque score. But this penultimate-ness suggests an ability to live through the psychotic encounter with the real and achieve a minimal consistency that is denied, or is at any rate far more precarious, in Tarkovsky’s version.

Space limitations do not permit further elaboration here of the occluded *correspondence* between the nihilistic-consumerist and theistic-Christian versions of *Solaris*, but there surely is one, since nihilism is simply a form of belief, albeit an ostensibly more sophisticated one—“believing in nothing.” Both film versions play with the way in which Kris radically dissolves what Benjamin, in his work on capitalism *as* religion, calls the “guilt history”—the timeless time of guilt—in which, on this essay’s terms, the subject is suspended in a dualistic relationship with its object, whether the object appears to belong to a consumerist universe (the free fall of window shopping, Kantian browsing without purpose, as the zero degree of consumerism), or to a theistic one (the relationship of endless guilt and retribution).¹³ Collapsing the subject-object dualism does not mean entering into a world where all is either just brain firings or just God. It means entering into the traumatic encounter with a strange stranger. Thus the manner in which both adaptations of the story resolve the deadlock of the scientists takes the form of a radical coexistence with the stranger, short-circuiting religion and, or as, capitalism.

We thus return to the theme of the political animal, and its world-historical significance. How does *Solaris* thematize this politics of the

animal? In Tarkovsky's film, the zero gravity scene prefigures the image of Kris's home island floating on the psychedelically swirling, mimetic ocean. Here the camera floats around the bounded horizon of a Brueghel painting of a feudal village in a snowy forest clearing, an invocation of a *Lebenswelt* made strange by the floating point of view. The planet's gravitational field is such that the space station temporarily loses its artificial gravity, so the floating camera angle literally floats Brueghel's world in a wider, displacing ocean. We are drawn into a cinematic world in which form enacts content. The images of and metaphors for the planet ocean have an analogue in the imagery of fronds in flowing water that recurs once at the beginning of the film and once before the concluding shot. The fluid motion of the water, with floating detritus—living and dead—is an analogue for the filmic surface itself.

Thus the closest the spectator comes to the encounter with the really other other is in our encounter with the mute, metamorphic surface of the film stock, as in Stan Brakhage's experiments such as *Dog Star Man*, in which he worked directly on the film stock itself. In *2001*, the monolith stands in for the dark letterbox shape of the blank screen, a space into which ape creatures and humans project desire, and from which shoot beams of technical knowledge, immersing them in a horrifying high pitched scream of white noise—does this noise not strangely prefigure the sound of a dialup modem connecting to a server? In the final sequence of *2001* the monolith becomes a screen within a screen, out of which emerge not undulating wet fronds but spectacular beams of light: frightening, fast, "wowing" Dave and us with a lightshow, yet leading him to cosmic rebirth. By contrast, Kris washes his hands in the water in which the fronds slowly undulate, returning him and us to a world that he and we know is an illusion. As in Brakhage's experiments, the filmic surface is *already* populated with an other, with being as otherness.

In answer to Kubrick's presentation of the cinema screen as void, Tarkovsky gives us the screen as fullness—but not as full presence. In his later film *Stalker*, the screen is filled with garbage, the detritus of human desire, as the camera tracks across the surface of the water in *The Zone*. In *Solaris* the film stock becomes the (other) planet, the environment itself. Zizek expresses it eloquently in a passage on *Stalker*:

in our standard ideological tradition, the approach to Spirit is perceived as Elevation, as getting rid of the burden of weight, of the gravitating force which binds us to earth, as cutting links with material inertia and starting to "float freely"; in contrast to this, in Tarkovsky's universe, we enter the spiritual dimension only via intense direct physical contact with the humid heaviness of earth (or stale water)—

the ultimate Tarkovskian spiritual experience takes place when a subject is lying stretched out on the earth's surface, half submerged in stale water; Tarkovsky's heroes do not pray on their knees, with their heads turned upwards, towards heaven; instead they listen intensely to the silent palpitation of the humid earth. . . (Zizek, "The Thing from Inner Space")

A materialist ecology is faced with the choice between Nature and ecology. We can have Nature, or ecology, but not both. We can have animals, or a world, but not both. As this essay has argued in various different modes, "Spirit"—self-reflection—must be installed at the material level rather than on some "elevated" level. Thus "animal passivity" will have entered into the political realm through a discovery that self-reflection is lowly rather than lofty.

Solaris is ambient art at its finest—environmental art without Nature.¹⁴ The encounter with the sentient real of the environment-turned-person is staged at the formal level as the aesthetic encounter with the medium of transmission itself—the material density of the film surface. Tarkovsky's films are to cinema what drone music is to popular music. They annihilate the sense of time and use an experience of boredom that Agamben asserts as the link between what we think of as the fully human (aesthetic contemplation) and what we think of as nonhuman or animal. The film itself is animality. Tarkovsky tries to achieve an encounter with God in content, but only succeeds, and in a far more deconstructive manner, at the level of form. We should recall the phrase of George Morrison, the nineteenth-century theologian, who in the sermon "The Reawakening of Mysticism" declares that "the one intense reality is God, nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet" (106). Kris decides to live in this world of ultimate intimacy, rather than fending off the shaming Phi-Creatures. It is as if Kris leaps out of the film's content and into its form, deciding to live on the surface of the film stock itself. In this sense he traverses the fantasy and commits to living in the traumatic, impossible-real environment that is the person of *Solaris*. God is one word for this intimacy, "nearer than breathing." But so is animality.

According to this logic, properly inhabiting the Earth is the opposite of self-delusion, and the delusion of the self. And yet, at the same time, it is a full acceptance of the phantasmic illusion, in the radical form of coexisting with the monstrous, sprouting thing embodied by the cinema screen and its writhing imagery. The form of *Solaris* becomes the limit of animality: the planet as an ape. The political animal is a matter of intimacy with the neighbor, not of being-one with Nature.

This raises a question concerning the notion of the animal as a being with an identity, a person. Furthermore, it raises the question of what

counts as a person. If we accept Gaia, why resist the opposite idea: that rather than the weather being sentient, sentient beings are like the weather? If the two terms are indeed related by identity, or even simply resemblance—which is what the Gaia metaphor implies—then surely the concept is reversible? And if so, where do we draw the line between *this* and *that* weather, or even between weather and non-weather? We can tell that Gaia is ideological because the copula is not reversible: Gaia is a whole greater than the sum of its parts. A careful reading of *Solaris* shows that to enter into relationship with a strange stranger is precisely not to forge a communion with a Gaia-like, holistic entity.

Again, neither a theistic nor a nihilistic outcome appears possible or desirable. The philosopher John McDowell claims, “it is doubtful that we can conceive of thinking as a subjectless occurrence, like a state of the weather” (McDowell 256). Derek Parfit, whose *Reasons and Persons* strongly argues for the idea that there is no independent, single or lasting self, refutes McDowell’s claim that a reductionist or “no-self” view would entail a process without a subject (“Experiences, Subjects, and Conceptual Schemes”). Such a view might simply require that we expand or limit our view of what a subject is—in the language of this essay, this is the encounter with the strange stranger. Something like this is required of Kris in his relationship with replica-Rheya, who is at once a person in her own right, and an interface for Solaris itself. Kris has to perform two difficult operations: to recognize that replica-Rheya is not Rheya; and to acknowledge at the same time that she is not an independent person, but something like an avatar (to use the internet term) of the planet-mind.

The Cost of Intimacy

It should by now be painfully, frighteningly obvious that we are entering an age where ecology will be one of the most dominant, if not the dominant, way of describing our world and discussing policy. Advances in science are helping us understand just how enmeshed we all are in the world. Like that charity song from the 1980s, “We Are The World”—and it doesn’t feel so good. I know that my body probably contains some mercury and has been affected by radiation. I can take tests to make sure. But even without them, there remains a sneaking suspicion that I *might* be contaminated, just like most of the plants and animals. And thus, even if by some remote chance I’m not swimming in my own poison, then I have still been affected by ecological thinking. So yes, we are all interconnected, but not, it turns out, in a nice utopian, hippy manner. We are starting to learn just how interlinked everything

is, the hard way. This idea has now lost its charming, naïve 1960s aura. Such is the effect of risk society (Beck).¹⁵

Since the late eighteenth century (the period we call Romantic), the arts and humanities have held an idea that “nature” is something (some *thing*) “over yonder.” Science, and current events, have outstripped this idea. How can the arts and humanities catch up? Unfortunately for some, this will mean de-Bambifying nature: it cannot be just cute any more. The logic of the movie *Happy Feet* is that you can only be nice to one species at a time: seals look nasty from a penguin’s eye view. A somewhat cynical reading might be “Dance for us, or we’ll keep on killing you.” Children flushed their goldfish down toilets when *Finding Nemo* came out. Sentimentality is not working. Nor is the wild energy of the sublime. For nature to be sublime, we have to be at least a little distant from it. A toxic leak is not sublime by the time it has entered the lungs. Global warming is not sublime: it is far more disorienting, and painful, than that.

This essay has not advocated “postmodern” relativism, nor has it claimed that trees and rabbits and coral do not exist. It is simply that human beings cannot afford (in all senses) to pursue old-school thinking about our coexistence with all the other beings on this Earth. Thinking must take a step back and rearticulate “the environment” at the very moment at which it is flooding into our homes on the airwaves and as the all too real waves of events such as Hurricane Katrina. Crises make us panic, and panic wants us to act, and act fast. We are going to need to act and think at the same time, and this praxis is not as easy as walking and chewing gum. Ecology without Nature is itself a form of the ontological hesitation with which the political animal confronts us.

Ecology without Nature does not mean that it is okay to keep on drilling for oil rather than exploring solar and wind energy. Entities such as coral reefs do exist. It is not scholarship but modern life that is doing its best to make sure that they *really* do not exist. While tackling global warming with all deliberate speed and trusting the near total scientific consensus, we should be using culture not only to create a framework in which global warming science becomes recognizable and legible. And in general, we should be slowing down, reflecting, and using this moment as an opportunity to change and develop.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels state that under the current economic conditions, “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (224–5). If this idea is to mean more than people from several different countries

writing the same thing in the same ways, it must include the idea that writing in general can, under certain circumstances, meditate upon the idea of *world* as such. This capability is not unconnected to the globalization of specific kinds of misery. It eventually becomes possible to sing a song called "We Are The World," and wince about it, or to see the many levels of painful irony within the phrase "United Nations."

Ecology has reminded us that in fact we *are* the world, if only in the negative. In material historical terms, environmental phenomena participate in dialectical interplay insofar as they bring an awareness of environmental negatives such as global warming, the Asian "brown cloud" and toxic events such as Chernobyl. Far from needing filling out with some positive "thing" such as "nature" or the ecofeminist and Lovelockian image of Gaia, this negative awareness is just what we need. Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* and its film versions thematize the drastic, queer quality of what has been normatively and neuteringly called the love of nature. *Solaris* is about getting over our projections, and yet staying with the planet. I return to the idea of subjective difference not grounded in identity: the Buddhist metaphor of Indra's net is never experienced as an integrated whole, only as traumatic and singular encounters with a stranger qua irreducible-real Thing, an animal whose vegetative being is not far from the surface. Are we intimate with ghosts or with plants? In the ecological society to come, we are going to need more and less than nature lovers and tree huggers.

If leftist ecology is to have an ethics, then it cannot be the fascist one in which we are components of a greater whole. It must instead reside in the singularity of, and conscious commitment to, the other. Such a responsibility cannot be reciprocal, otherwise we return to the holistic web of life. This asymmetry is elegantly demonstrated in the *Solaris* thought experiment. The planet is not a biosphere on which the astronauts depend. Indeed, no life forms do. This dependency comes after the ethical commitment, when Kris decides to let the space station fall into Solaris's gravitational field. Biospheric holism, then, is at odds with the infinite responsibility towards the political animal opened up by a decision to coexist—that is, to coexist ultimately with coexistence itself, which happens whether we like it or not. *Solaris* is a radical text of animality, since it deprives us of the phantasmatic support of a background world, a wonderful Gaian web of life in which, like couch potatoes spectating the Iraq War, we are "embedded."

In our age of ecological panic, what we are losing is precisely this sense of "nature" or "the environment" as an enveloping, nonhuman and/or non-sentient "world." This world provided a background to our

foreground, offering meaningfulness precisely in its opacity, acting as a screen on which we project our fantasies. Wordsworthian Romanticism is a locus of the artistic production of this screen. Geoffrey Hartman's analysis of Wordsworth's view of nature as a sounding board has not been surpassed, even by the ecocriticism that claims that Hartman reduces Wordsworthian nature. Ironically, no matter how much Romantic forms of deep ecology try to imbue this screen with a kind of personality, deep ecology is firmly on the side of the abstract "world" as opposed to that of the strange stranger. The pre-ontological gap between persons is far more properly infinite than the palpable vastness of the natural or nonhuman world of deep ecology. Deep-ecological vastness is measurable or immeasurable, but always *there*, like the authoritarian image of the Burkean sublime—a huge mountain or a thunderstorm. In striving to patch up the tear in the ontic substrate of our existence with an ideologically integrated, holistic Nature, ecological panic is thus part of the problem. Ecology without Nature, then, is part of a left solution—not a flight from Earth (really or metaphorically) but dwelling with the necessarily traumatic encounter with the torn ontic level. We must come to terms with the fact not that we are destroying Nature, but that *there was no Nature*.

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Notes

1. Thanks to Scott Shershow, David Simpson and Dimitris Vardoulakis for their helpful comments on this essay, and to Derek Parfit for corresponding with me about personal identity.
2. I develop this further in Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 160–9. Other scholars have noted the ways in which figures of the weather can stand in for history, in more and less problematic ways. See for example Cadava.
3. The recent publication of Derrida's complete seminar on animals is a case in point. See Works Cited.
4. I discuss this fully in *The Ecological Thought*.
5. See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 57–8. Scott Shershow has powerfully demonstrated this linkage (165–82, 193–205).
6. Denise Levertov, "Come into Animal Presence," from *Poems 1960–1967*, copyright © by Denise Levertov, reprinted by permission of New Directions, Pollinger Limited and the proprietor.
7. This has been strongly asserted by Dimitris Vardoulakis in "The Politics of Impassivity in Agamben and Spinoza." See also Wall.
8. I am thinking of the argument in *A Thousand Plateaus*, reprinted in Atterton and Calarco's *Animal Philosophy*.
9. I take my cue from Ferry 53–4.
10. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6425927.stm>.
11. For a comprehensive study see Harrison, especially 2, 5, 84, 186.

12. This is surely the environmental significance of Agamben's and Zizek's discussion of the *Muselmann* (*Homo Sacer* 184–5; Zizek 160–2).
13. I am grateful to Dimitris Vardoulakis for discussing this with me. See Hamacher for further discussion.
14. For further discussion, see Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 29–78.
15. For further discussion see Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 84–5, and Heise 53–4, 119–23.

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