

Nature and Critique: Notes Against Indifference (1990)

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"Sheriff, what kind of fantastic trees have you got growing around here?
Big...majestic!"
"Douglas Firs."
"Douglas Firs...[appreciative pause]...Can somebody get me a copy of the
coroner's report?"

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This exchange occurs early in the pilot episode of *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch), while the town is still in shock at the discovery of Laura Palmer's body. FBI Agent Dale Cooper's boyish curiosity concerning the local trees seems both out of keeping with the prevailing mood within the town and absurdly irrelevant to the macabre crime that is his legitimate concern. Here then, enthusiasm for nature appears incongruous and ludicrous - the naive legacy of another, less complex, age.

Cultural Studies adopts a similar attitude. In this postmodern, urban, information age what possible relevance can a concern with nature have? Nature scarcely exists and then only in a tokenistic, picturesque, between quotation marks, irredeemably cultural kind of way. Within the hermetic autonomy of this vision of the contemporary cultural world the notion of nature as vital other can only appear as an anachronism. Difference, heterogeneity, the non-identical play happily within - there is no without (and in any case the difference between within and without is untenable).

I wish to argue against this view, to suggest that Cultural Studies should rethink its position concerning the relationship between culture and the non-cultural space of nature. Nature has for so long been cast as a deterministic bogey, as something that must be relentlessly cleared away in order to open up a properly cultural space of enquiry, that it is very difficult to even speak of culture's practical (necessary) and ethico-aesthetic relation to nature without appearing reactionary. But in an age when human culture has already cleared quite a large enough space for itself, when non-human nature is increasingly under threat, indifference seems much more reactionary than concerned engagement.

Cultural studies has tended to champion otherness only in its human aspects - the working class, women, other cultures, the body, the unconscious - largely ignoring the exploitation and destruction of non-human nature. Nature, it seems, falls outside our proper field of concern and in any case emerges ultimately as merely a human construct. Contradiction: nature is both excluded as alien and regarded as inescapably cultural.

Nature is not reducible to the status of an historically specific cultural construct. It is not only a differential term within our linguistic and cultural system but also a space which precisely exceeds systems of representation. The term "nature" provides a means of grasping and demarcating this space but can hardly affect its genuine alterity. There is a need then to distinguish between the sign and its non-identical referent.

Why has cultural studies engaged so little with environmental issues? Three possible reasons:

1. Environmental issues may not have been regarded as a properly cultural concern. They may have been seen as more the preserve of the natural than the human sciences. This seems a very dubious excuse. Questions of wilderness preservation, for instance, can clearly never be resolved on narrowly scientific grounds. Beyond assessing the ecological significance of any particular piece of wilderness there is also the need to make judgments on ethico-aesthetic grounds. Cultural Studies must surely have something to say about the latter, must surely be able to speak about the meaning of wilderness for contemporary society - the various ways in which wilderness is represented and engaged with.
2. One of the founding and most characteristic gestures of modern cultural studies is to insist upon the historical character of cultural systems. Culture, it is argued, is not governed by invariant natural laws (whatever these are) but is rather the malleable product of human history (why history cannot have a natural aspect is beyond me). Appeals to the "natural", whether related to breakfast cereals, the sporting prowess of a particular race of athletes, or to the distribution of wealth within society, are regarded as the worst form of bourgeois mystification. The structural autonomy of culture must be defended, it appears, at any cost. So nature has had a bad press within cultural studies (the word itself seems to arouse, in a Pavlovian fashion, an immediate sense of discomfort and suspicion). Consequently the temptation is much more to debunk concepts such as "wilderness" than to affirm them - to emphasize their culturally determined status rather than to recognize their genuine orientation toward a rapidly vanishing field of non-human otherness.
3. Cultural Studies has tended to concentrate upon urban, mass-mediated, culture - everything that seems most characteristically modern. Within this context, environmental issues may seem to be linked to an anachronistic way of engaging with the world. The environmental movement itself may seem inextricably bogged down in naive romantic nostalgia. Yet not all of us live, or care to live, in the privileged space of the post-modern metropolis. Engagement with nature both at a practical (necessary) level and at an ethico-aesthetic level is still possible. Moreover the apparent free-floating autonomy of the postmodern cultural system has its hidden basis in the massive exploitation of the natural world. The post-industrial world emerges from the industrial one. The contemporary regime (the world of credit-driven corporate high finance) is ultimately a world of swirling surplus-value, spuriously imagining that it has somehow slipped free of necessity to become self-generating and self-regulating. Within this context, to concern ourselves with environmental issues is less to lapse into 'naive romantic nostalgia' than to stand up for a domain that has been sadly abused and neglected and that requires urgent political action.

Interior gardens in the postmodern metropolis while the forests are destroyed in Borneo. The two are indissolubly linked.

Theoretical alignment between radical criticism and corporate, credit-driven, capitalism: both portray self-sufficient spheres unaffected by natural limits, where growth can progress regardless, where foundation is unthinkable. Note that when poststructuralism speaks of 'the economy of the trace', the metaphor would seem to relate more to the 'ecstatic' world of high finance, than to the traditional economy characterized

by scarcity and necessity (the insistent presence of natural limits). Note also that the notion of the 'the free play of the sign' could be related to the privileging of the sphere of exchange over that of production, so that the latter comes to resemble the former, so that production is brought playfully into line with the spurious notion of the death of necessity.

Arguments that once served as means of ideological critique now serve as means of legitimation. The interests of capital demand that the exigencies of nature now be bracketed and thrown into doubt. Nature is embraced so long as it does no more than provide an alibi for the existing mode of social and economic production but once it appears as finite and endangered then it must be firmly rejected. Suddenly it is cast as little more than an artefact of the human imagination. Natural resources, it is argued, are not limited. How can they be when they are nothing but human constructs? Resources are not natural entities but the products of human creativity and invention. What is oil without the refinery and the automobile? Ultimately nature can enforce no limits, can represent no field of real and absolute necessity. Nature is nothing but what science and economic growth make of it (human ingenuity is infinite). Ironically then, ideas linked to radical criticism have been adapted to suit the purposes of corporate capitalism. Suspicion of the natural comes to justify environmental neglect and devastation.

The opposition between nature and culture, however tired and philosophically suspect, retains current critical value. As culture's capacity to subjugate and wreck non-human nature grows ever more extensive, it is crucial that we can still differentiate between the agent and the object of destruction, between the parasite and its host, between the toothpick and the tree.

The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which cast its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (Benjamin, 1973, pp.224-5)

Benjamin casts the contemplative relation to nature as the very model of auratic perception. The aura of nature is linked precisely to its aspect of irreducible otherness - its uniqueness, distance, and non-identity. It is this sense of a relation to otherness that the destruction of the aura overcomes. The modern media of mechanical reproduction appear as means of dialectical sublation, drawing things close and making everything equal. Benjamin emphasizes the positive implications of all this - the way in which the art work, for instance, comes to gain a new democratic and political potential - but ignores what is lost - concern and reverence for the other. The destruction of the aura has far more ambivalent consequences than is generally recognized.

Benjamin does insist, however, that the new media enable a more detailed investigation of the real. The concern for the world is not lost - it simply shifts from an attitude of distanced contemplation to one of active engagement (intervention) - but how genuine can this investigation be if the real is denied its alterity, if the photograph of nature endlessly overcomes and replaces the distanced and uncertain encounter?

Adorno adopts a different strategy than Benjamin. Rather than searching for signs of

salvation in the most apocalyptic tendencies of modernity, Adorno rejects modernity and embraces an alternate model. The non-conceptual character of the art work comes to represent the possibility of another relation to the world - one which escapes the systematic (totalizing) tendencies of instrumental rationality. Rather than dialectically obliterating the non-identical, art celebrates it, and hence serves as the model of a genuinely enlightened mode of reason. This is its political importance and Utopian promise. But what especially interests me is the crucial place that nature occupies within Adorno's aesthetic theory. In its silent appearance, natural beauty provides the model for human aesthetic practice. He regards natural beauty as a kind of mute language which affirms the non-identical against the ravages of totalization.

The beautiful in nature is the residue of non-identity in things, in an age when they are otherwise spellbound by universal identity. (Adorno, 1984, p. 108)

The task of art is "to make this muteness speak" but without compromising the otherness of things. Art's fundamental orientation, according to Adorno, is to "converge" with nature: "art aims at realizing the articulation of the non-human by human means" (Adorno, 1984, p.115). This conceptualization of art in terms of nature does not represent a withdrawal from issues of social critique. On the contrary, Adorno argues that natural beauty, however debased by modern efforts to commodify it, still serves as a crucial symbol of opposition to the forces of totalization:

The image of nature survives because its complete negation by artefacts would necessarily involve closing one's eyes to the possibility of a sphere beyond bourgeois work and commodity relations. In spite of its social mediatedness, the beautiful in nature remains an allegory of that beyond. (Adorno, 1984, p. 102)

The question then of our aesthetic relation to nature lies at the very heart of Adorno's critical project. Two features of his conception of the relation between natural beauty, art, and enlightened reason seem especially significant: firstly, that his notion of enlightened reason should depend upon positing an ethico-aesthetic relation to otherness (it is not an entirely intra-human, discursive phenomenon); and secondly, that it projects the importance of non-instrumental relations to nature (beyond material necessity there is also a sphere of ethico-aesthetic necessity). Adorno's position is important because it suggests a vital link between the issue of our relation to nature and questions of social critique.

In sum then, what am I suggesting? Cultural Studies needs to approach the question of nature anew, to recognize that the political and critical terrain has shifted - the naturalization of history is now less of an issue than the brutal historication (clear-felling) of nature. Very belatedly, Cultural Studies must acknowledge the value of the non-cultural. By exploring the modes of cultural engagement with nature it must learn to speak up for its silent other.

I will conclude with a problem.

There is a fence blocking an old trail down to the base of Belmore Falls (Morton National Park, NSW). The trail must have been built back in the 20s. It is beautifully made - steps

carefully sculpted in the sandstone, the path zig-zagging cunningly down the steep escarpment. It would require only minor repairs to be re-opened, but there seems to be little chance of this happening. The trail is out of keeping with modern notions of park management. It threatens the 'wilderness value' of the area, constituting an obvious sign of human culture and making the area far too accessible. So it has been fenced off and a new lookout has been built opposite the falls. Ample parking space has been provided. People can stop briefly, gaze out at the wilderness scene, then climb back in their cars and drive off, all in the space of a few minutes. This indicates a paradox: as we have come to value wilderness more we have been compelled to withdraw from it further. Wilderness beckons and excludes us at once. The dilemma of how we are to engage with it without automatically corrupting its alien integrity has produced a compromise solution - wilderness is reduced to a view, a photograph, an image. The engagement/disengagement of vision preserves the relation of distance but at the expense of rendering our relation to wilderness hopelessly flat, glib, and commodifiable. Here, it seems, the maintenance and the destruction of the aura have come to coincide.

References

1. Adorno, T.W. (1984) *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
2. Benjamin, W. (1973) *Illuminations*. Great Britain: Fontana.