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2012

Strange ecology

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Publication Details

Castree, N. (2012). Strange ecology. *New Formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 75 (Spring), 167-171. © Copyright 2012. *Lawrence & Wishart - reproduced with permission.*

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Strange ecology

Abstract

Book review: STRANGE ECOLOGY Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2010; 160pp, £29.95 hardcover.

Now and again a book is written that messes with your head. Timothy Morton, Professor of Literature and Environment at the University of California (Davis), has fast made a name for himself as an out-of-the-box thinker.¹ His *Ecology without nature* (2007) challenged readers to forget 'nature' - not, you understand, in the name of a brave new biotechnologised world in which capital entirely swallows-up the natural, but for another cause. The book attracted attention well beyond Morton's disciplinary home-base. In this 'prequel', as he styles it, Morton once again plays the role of 'the irritating Columbo-style guy at the back of the room . . . who asks the unanswerable question[s]' (p 15). Is he irritating, revelatory, or something else? It depends on where the reader is coming from, needless to say. Morton here writes for 'people who aren't members of the in-crowd of specialists familiar with the language of theory' because, he continues, '[h]umanities scholars have some very good and important ideas, if only they would let others read them' (p 13). Though the dust jacket refers to 'disciplines ranging from critical theory to Romanticism to cultural geography' (are any of these 'disciplines'? ... no matter), the contents suggest a broader intended readership, including earth, biomedical, environmental, engineering and life scientists.

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Strange ecology

Now and again a book is written that messes with your head. In ways thrilling or disturbing (or both), such a book goes against the grain, pulls the rug from under the reader's feet, or upsets the proverbial apple cart. Timothy Morton, Professor of Literature and Environment at the University of California (Davis), has fast made a name for himself as an out-of-the-box thinker.¹ His *Ecology without nature* (Morton, 2007), a critique of recent literary 'eco-criticism' (among other things), challenged readers to forget 'nature' – not, you understand, in the name of a brave new biotechnologised world in which capital entirely swallows up the natural, but for another cause. The book attracted attention well beyond Morton's disciplinary home-base. In this 'prequel', as he styles it, Morton once again plays the role of "... the irritating Columbo-style guy at the back of the room, the one who asks the unanswerable question[s]" (p. 115). Is he irritating, infuriating, revelatory, visionary or something else? It depends on where the reader is coming from, needless to say. Morton here writes for "...people who aren't members of the in-crowd of specialists familiar with the language of theory (and the kinds of things that are cool to say with it) ..." because, he continues, "...[h]umanities scholars have some very good and important ideas, if only they would let others read them" (p. 13). Though the dust jacket refers to "disciplines ranging from critical theory to Romanticism to cultural geography" (are any of these 'disciplines'? ... no matter), the contents suggest a broader intended readership, including earth, biomedical, environmental, engineering and life scientists.

Stylistically, Morton is not as successful as he might wish. Though very beautifully written indeed, his monograph is likely to be too linguistically elusive and allusive for readers not already *au fait* with the sort of 'theory' he wants to put to work for the benefit of non-specialists.² Style aside, some of the ideas are slippery – even if articulated in plain English they'd leave you scratching your head, intrigued yet

¹Morton's personal webpage at UCD contains links to his several blogs and to various audio and audio-visual recordings in which he shares his ideas. For those who don't already know his work, his webpage contains a short video in which he summarises *The ecological thought*.

²This said, it's all relative. Compared to the recent work of another literary theorist covering similar terrain to Morton (Cary Wolfe, 2010), *The ecological thought* is a model of accessibility for novice readers!

bemused. But, as a sometime-member of the ‘in-crowd’ to which Morton refers, I found *The ecological thought* a compulsive read. It set my pulse racing and it fired my neural networks. As I’ll explain, I’m not entirely sure it’s as original a contribution as it purports to be. Even so, those who’ve been inspired by the writings of Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold or Donna Haraway (to name just three germinal thinkers whose ideas resonate with Morton’s) will certainly want to read *The ecological thought*. Interestingly, Morton makes no mention of this trio or their fellow travellers, but I’ll come to that later. First, let me précis his remarkable monograph, even as I baulk at having to strip Morton’s intricate argument down to its bare essentials.

I begin with the book’s title and conceptual centre piece. “The ecological thought”, Morton writes “is the thinking of interconnectedness in the fullest and deepest sense” (p. 7). It implicates not only science, but also art, literature, music, poetry, social science, and more – it is totalising in its reach and implications. Accordingly, Morton explores it with reference to everything from Milton’s *Paradise lost* to *The origin of species* to Georg Cantor’s set theory to Philip K. Dick’s *Do androids dream of electric sheep?* to Disney-Pixar’s *WALL·E*. “The ecological thought”, he continues, “is about warmth and strangeness, infinity and proximity, tantalising ‘thereness’ and head-popping, wordless openness” (p. 12). As base, it is less a collection of thoughts condensed into a single meta-thought and more a *way of thinking*: it’s “... as much about opening our minds as it is about *knowing* something or other in particular” (p. 15). As I read Morton’s book, I imagined ‘the ecological thought’ to be an earth-bound equivalent of astronaut David Bowman’s mind-blowing experience of the universe at the end of Stanley Kubrik’s film *2001: A space odyssey* (1968). A scientist trained to control his environment, Bowman’s mental and somatic repertoire comes up short –but he’s briefly able to realise the unsettling, yet exhilarating, fact (not be entirely overwhelmed by it).

Morton elaborates ‘the ecological thought’ with reference to two concepts designed to challenge conventional ways of thinking. The first is ‘the mesh’ (explored in chapter 1, ‘Thinking big’), which denotes an ontology that stresses “... infinite connections and infinitesimal differences ... we can’t ... specify anything as irrelevant ... there is no

background and therefore no foreground ..." (p. 30). The mesh is not comprised of discrete parts, but nor is it a whole. It's not organised like a network, and nor is it structured like a web. It is fluid, excessive, and multi-dimensional, organic and inorganic, everywhere and nowhere in particular. If it's a 'totality' then it's not in any of the available Marxian senses of the word. Accordingly "If we think the ecological thought, two things happen. Our perspectives become very vast ... At the same time, our view becomes very profound. If everything is interconnected to everything, what exactly are the things that are connected? ... [W]e can't predict or anticipate ..." (p. 38). This brings us to Morton's second key concept, the 'strange stranger'. It describes all phenomena in the mesh – *including* those we think we already know extremely well. "This stranger isn't just strange", Morton writes, "[s]he or he or it – can we tell? how? – is strangely strange. Their strangeness is itself strange. We can never absolutely figure them out" (p. 41). Our habit – 'our' here means the West, though Morton never quite says so – is to routinely domesticate strange strangers: in our desire to understand, use or control them we lose all sense of their strangeness. In light of this, Morton valorises 'uncertainty' – the never-quite-knowing something, the ability to let strangers be strange. Despite our best efforts, he argues with reference to Freud's notion of the uncanny, we occasionally glimpse true strangeness in our daily lives (only to pass over it quickly as an anomaly rather than a revelation).

Morton's ecological thought is both critical and affirmative. He identifies several ways in which 'non-ecological thought' is writ-large in the modern world. I list them in no particular order because nor does Morton. First, there's the idea of Nature, and its bed-fellow 'the environment'. For Morton, these pervasive concepts invite us to imagine the world as something outside us possessed of a definite identity, structure, integrity or logic. They cleave the mesh epistemologically and, he argues (as he did in *Ecology without nature*), they need retiring from our discourse for good. Second, there's indifference – the sort that consumers display each time they buy a commodity whose manufacture implicates and affects so many and so much. For Morton, climate change deniers are similarly indifferent because they equate 'no climate change happening here' with 'don't worry about the climate, period'. Third, there's the antithesis of indifference: namely, the sort of ecological care and concern shown by environmental philosophers and practising environmentalists. Proponents of deep ecology are criticised for their super-organicism, ecocentrism and occasional

misanthropicism; Morton also takes issue with the rhetoric of eco-activists, which is (he believes) “...too strongly affirmative, extroverted and masculine ... [too] sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty and ‘healthy’” (p. 16). Fourth, and relatedly, there’s a certain aestheticisation of what we (wrongly) call ‘nature’ that’s all about sublimity, awesomeness and power. For Morton it renders us mute and incapacitates truly ethical action within the mesh-world. Finally, Morton distances his own position from that of certain ‘post-humanists’, the sort who write books as challenging as *The ecological thought* (he names no names but one can hazard an educated guess). Despite their best efforts, he maintains, these seeming iconoclasts render the strange far too familiar, and they also risk being too *post* the human (even as they rightly complicate our sense of what this term signifies).

In what does Morton’s ‘positive’ argument (if that’s the right word) consist? First, he commends ‘intimacy’: not the act of becoming intimate with things (since we already *are* up-close-and-personal, constantly and ineluctably), but the *proper recognition* of the fact of intimacy. Intimacy is not only about closeness, since closeness itself is implicated in the vastness of the mesh. Intimacy scales up and down, and it points in every direction at once. Second, Morton commends ‘negativity’. In chapter 2 (evocatively titled ‘Dark Thoughts’), he argues that strange strangeness will often be unpleasant, repulsive, even dangerous. We should not replace Nature with ‘post-Natural’ sensibilities that simply repeat the old habits of seeing the world as beautiful, awe-inspiring or in need of more sensitive ‘taming’ and ‘sustainable management’ plans. Third, he commends a form of ‘forward thinking’ that is resolutely anti-capitalist. Worrying about an apocalypse, as some environmentalists do, is what allows capitalism “... to keep reproducing and reinventing itself ...” (p. 125). This is an arresting thought. If we do nothing while waiting for the fateful day, Morton argues, then we sustain “The boring, rapacious reality we have constructed, with its familiar, furious, yet ultimately static whirl ...” (p. 3). Politically and ethically, we can do better than set our compasses towards either a ‘bright green’ future (capitalism’s next Kondratieff) or an avenging (yet cleansing) Nature (Lovelock’s Gaia). “The ecological society to come”, Morton writes, “will be much more pleasurable, far more sociable, and ever so much more reasonable than we can imagine” (p. 19).

The ecological thought makes you *think* (indeed, each of its three chapters has the *t*-word in the title). So many books fail in this regard that when you encounter one like Morton's you're reminded of how surprisingly unthinking academia can be. Morton sticks to the conventions of scholarly writing but his aim is to express unconventional thoughts. This work is avowedly cerebral, but – sensing the hands of 'practically minded' commentators on his neck – Morton provides a defence: "I've been accused of not wanting to help Katrina victims because I'm so busy theorizing with my head in the clouds ... 'Your ideas are all very well for a lazy Sunday afternoon, but out here in the real world, what are we actually going to do?'. Yet one thing we must do is precisely break down the distinction between Sunday afternoon and every other day, and in the direction of putting a bit of Sunday afternoon into Monday morning, rather than making Sunday a workday" (pp. 117-118). Morton's point is that we can't act without thinking, and if our thinking is 'damaged' (a phrase he uses on page 3) then so too will be our practices. Like all good philosophers, Morton's real concerns are concrete, everyday and empirical. As art historian Stephen Bann (1990: v) wisely observed, "one only gets to the centre of a problem by taking a[n apparent] detour".

Why take the detour now? Morton states his answer on page 1, in the book's first line: "The ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy – for some strangely or frighteningly easy – to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected". Yet this crisis – which Morton refers to repeatedly through his monograph – has not yet made the mesh and strange strangers significantly more apparent to us. We are still trapped in the past: "... since we have been addicted to Nature for so long, giving up will be painful. Giving up a fantasy is harder than giving up a reality" (p. 95). Even so, Morton metaphorizes the ecological thought to a virus that will run its course. It will eventually spread and multiply, he insists, unless we stymie it by reaching for the old vaccines and antidotes (Nature, indifference, environmentalism ...). We should not seek a cure, Morton argues, because the ecological thought is a virus that, by *changing* us, will make us *less* damaged not *more*. A Copernican Revolution thus awaits us, one that further decentres humanity by drastically expanding its experiential and ethical horizons.

This book makes particular demands upon readers, akin to those Hegel and Marx made when they wrote dialectically (against the grain of analytical reasoning). 'Normal' reading practices won't do for comprehending *The ecological thought*. 'Have I had, can I have, and will I (ever) have 'the ecological thought'?'. This is a question I asked myself as I tried to make sense of Morton's argument. I still don't know the answer after reading the book twice. Morton – like all grand philosophers – casts himself as a seer. Inspired by a smallish band of perspicuous others (Milton, Darwin, Emmanuel Levinas ...), he presents us with both a plenary critique of the present and an encompassing alternative. The latter, he argues, is immanent in the former and yet lies unseen – it's hidden in plain sight, real but latent.

Inevitably, an argument as sweeping and radical as Morton's begs some large questions. First, though *The ecological thought* is intended to be a work of 'applied philosophy' – it's abstract for the sake of the concrete – Morton's argument proceeds by way of some questionable 'empirical' moves. His treatment of environmentalism and environmentalists is a case in point: apparently, the green movement is – at base – held in the grip of 'anti-ecological' thinking. Where, then, does the germ of 'the ecological thought' lie? How might it be fertilised? Don't look to capitalists or even ethically minded consumers, so who might make Morton's argument flesh (perhaps a cadre of book-wielding, tenured academics?!). Second, and relatedly, for all his talk of ecological crisis, Morton does little more than gesture to its ability to unsettle existing habits of thought and practice. In his *Outline of a theory of practice*, Pierre Bourdieu said that "The critique which brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation, has as the condition of its possibility objective crisis, which in breaking the immediate fit between subjective structures and the objective structures, destroys self-evidence practically" (1977: 168). Morton seems to pull the rug from under himself here: on the one side, he appears to link the 'force' (his word) of the ecological thought to the perceived ecological crisis looming; but on the other hand, he downplays the crisis idea ("What if it's not a huge catastrophe worthy of a Spielberg movie but a real drag, one that goes on for centuries?", p. 118). Morton's equivocation led me to regard his argument as ultimately utopian (don't get me wrong here: utopias are good to think with, but best if there's a fighting chance of achieving them). His analysis lacks a sense that the ecological thought virus might not only have some specifiable hosts who hasten its spread, but some event that

might sets the hosts off running in the first place. Despite his best intentions, Morton may be culpable of Terry Eagleton's (2003) charge against most contemporary 'theorists' in the humanities – at least in one respect. Where 'theory' is not preoccupied with relatively trivial matters, Eagleton argued, it last lost its connection with any definite political movement. Morton's book discusses some deadly serious issues – but it feels politically and ethically free-floating, one man's thought-experiment conducted in a mostly unthinking world.

Thirdly, we might ask: is Morton guilty of one of those performative contradictions that so often attends truly radical thinking? He is very certain about what 'non-ecological' thinking looks like and about the various parties (most of us, it seems) who propagate it. But the ecological thought is all about uncertainty and strange strangeness. Is Morton using ecological thought to think about non-ecological thought? If so, he's giving it a poor advertisement. Non-ecological thought is no stranger to this author. If this makes Morton schizophrenic or else consistently inconsistent, the end result is the same. As a reader, I found it hard to know how or why I'd think the ecological thought (if I'm not, as I suspect, *already* thinking it). I can think of all sorts of reasons to criticise many elements of the current green movement and the omnivorous capitalism those elements oppose (where they're not being neo-Malthusian). But I can't see how these reasons would lead me to prefer uncertainty, strange strangers, and the mesh as my existential alternatives. How to cross the divide between Morton's non-ecological and ecological thinking when there's seemingly no bridge to span it?

Let me conclude by returning the issue of this book's readership. Despite weaving insightful discussions of Darwinian theory and fractal curves together with acute analyses of poems, movies and other creative works, *The ecological thought* only connects C.P. Snow's (1959) famous 'two cultures' by writing in a way that would baffle the average reader outside the humanities. So much for demonstrating the wider value of humanistic scholarship! What, though, of the cognoscenti who Morton is not expressly writing for in this monograph? As I said at the outset, these readers will be drawn to this book, and are likely to form the majority of its readers. What else are they (we) reading, apart from Morton? I'm hardly alone in having studied –

with enormous interest – Latour’s (2004) *Politics of nature*, Haraway’s (2008) *When species meet*, and Ingold’s newest book *Being alive* (2011). What does Morton’s work add to this remarkable trio of studies and others that share their broad sensibility (like geographer Nigel Clarke’s [2010] *Inhuman nature: sociable life on a dynamic planet* and political theorist Jane Bennett’s [2010] *Vibrant matter*)? Apart from some astute observations, alluring formulations and the occasional good joke (“What a fine mesh we’ve gotten ourselves into” [p. 61] was my favourite), I’d have to say ‘not a great deal’. I also confess some surprise that Morton apparently ignores these studies (despite discussing the figure of the Trickster, as Haraway has so richly, and despite favouring ‘ecology’ as a metaphor as Latour has done so subversively). Morton’s swift dismissal of ‘post-humanist’ writing creates a false sense of the difference between his own work and that of intellectual bed-fellows he’s kicking into the long grass by dint of omission.³ I presume his is a ‘post-humanist post-humanism’, to quote one of Morton’s literary theoretical peers (Wolfe, 2010: 125).

Perhaps if I were more capable of the ecological thought I might detect greater novelty in the pages of Morton’s book. As it is, I regard it as a rich, learned and highly stimulating addition to the growing literature which aims to think beyond ‘nature’. I’ll doubtless return to it in future in the hope of thinking more ecologically. In the meantime, I’ll continue to worry away about the important issues that preoccupy Morton: namely, the future of capitalism, the critical bases of environmental thinking, and the sort of world we can and should be making for generations to come.

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³Talking of missing links, Morton (p. 101) repeats the Fredric Jameson (or was it Slavoj Zizek?) line that ‘it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’ – but without attribution.

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