Thoroughly Modern Greens

Peter Christoff responds to McKenzie Wark's article in our October issue.

Postmodern greens? For a moment I hoped that I'd stumbled across Correct Line Cooking. Another of Penelope Cottier's exquisite excursions into the ideologically sound and gastronomically satisfying. A rapier-sharp shafting of the cultural confusion inherent in mixed salads. A piercing expose of myths mistaken for signs.

But no, McKenzie Wark's "Greens in the Post" (ALR, October) is serious, and in it are some serious issues to be examined and challenges to be accepted. For he trivialises the importance of the green movement and reveals a fundamental ignorance of the sources, history and strength of the environment movement in Australia.

Wark's superficial analysis of the environment movement essentially flows from his definition of postmodernism—"it appears as a set of descriptions of surface details"—and his over-emphasis of the power of "media vectors" which bear these descriptions to shape experience, memory and cultural identity.

He comments: "people react to green issues because they have seen them on TV. The green movement has had influence out of all proportion to its actual organisational size in large part because of TV". As a result, for him, "the green movement is a postmodern movement in that it relies on its power within the sphere of popular media culture". From this, it is but a short step to some disturbing conclusions.

Wark argues that "the green movement is 'really' a small dedicated band of people organised in grassroots organisations". And he concludes, given the small size of the movement, "the organisational form of green politics is only part of the picture, and in the long run not as important as its media politics". So "why not develop a more diverse and sophisticated linkage of green issues with a much more widespread range of cultural styles...the more of them that green politics can be wrapped in, the better".

Wark's position is predicated on the assumption that the postmodern world is so complete, so seamless, that everyday experience is supplanted by mediated experience. Ecology, for Wark, has literally become media ecology. This is not merely smart talk. Underlying his argument is a significant shift of perspective. It is only by reduc ing this real world to one which depends for its reality on "mediation", that one can blithely talk of "an oil tanker or a nuclear reactor cracking up" as an "effect" and a "propaganda coup" for the green movement. It reduces to one-dimensionality the social and ecological impact of an event like Chernobyl—the effect of which will continue to reverberate long after the media hype has passed.

Wark, then, has done two things. He has reduced the deep psychological undertows and cross currents which are major sources of energy for social movements to a description of surface details, the twenty second grab. He dispenses with the foundations of oppositional opinion and activity. To imply that media images shape the green movement is to go too far.

This perspective displaces the lived experience which forms the basis of environmental awareness for the mass of the Australian population, and for much of the rest of the industrialised world. These include daily confrontations with shabby transport systems, grotesquely designed city buildings, chemical storage near residential suburbs, vast bush-consuming suburbs, and the burial of the remembered Past beneath the concrete New. Such losses and abuses, along with the myth of the Bush, fuel concern for unseen, diminishing values such as wilderness, native forests and rare species.

Wark also operates with a peculiarly constricted definition of the green movement, one reduced to the group of key activists he calls the "small, dedicated band", with disproportionate influence gained through the staging of spectacular effects for media benefit. It is an astonishing trick which causes a diverse social movement to disappear so successfully. He ignores the over 200,000 people who are members of over 350 environment organisations throughout Australia as well as the broader sympathetic social base to which I have referred.

But to what extent is the green movement postmodern? Has it been colonised by postmodernists? Postmodernists may dream of a postmodern culture based purely on the "unstoppable mediation of signs by other signs". They may also believe, as Lyotard conceives it, that the postmodern is an assault on the nineteenth century's transcendental illusion of totality: it is a fundamental challenge to meta-narrative, whether they are of science or history or politics.

For postmodernists, the project becomes one of deconstruction, of dismantling the illusions of the Enlightenment, of Progress. At least, in this sense, there are certainly elements in common with "postmodernist critique" running through the radical scepticisms which inform the green movement.

Yet while the transformation and commodification of cultural transmission may make the interplay of texts and acts more self-conscious, this doesn't mean that the larger project of modernity has been displaced, that postmodernity is the next stage in global cultural development, or that the natural world will remain a subtle backdrop to semantic games. Instead, it is more likely that postmodernity remains a self-aggrandising feature of modern Western culture, one with its own peculiarly imperial yet self-limit-
When you look closely at the real environment movement you see a spectrum of historical influences interacting synchronically. These range from premodern communalism, through Romantic anti-industrialism to distinctly modern attempts to integrate the latest revolutions in industrial and communications technologies to subvert science and restore a damaged global ecology. Of course, this abundance of interwoven ideological strains may be said to reflect precisely the new cultural complexity of a postmodern age. But is its diversity any greater—or its self-consciousness any sharper—than for previous (including premodern) times?

Yes, McKenzie, there is an environment movement, with its myriad networks, newsletters, meetings, marches and bush camps. It is not 'postmodern'. It is predominantly a social movement—unco-ordinated and sprawling, often volubly self-contradictory, generally naive in its self-quotation.

A modern and anti-modern phenomenon, in many ways successfully resistant to the formative touch and gaze of the media which it sometimes uses well. And intelligently sceptical of the "mediated terrain of postmodern culture".

Finally, the stratagems for shaping regulatory control of the environment and a sustainable economy, for effective conservation and for consumer education, all have different and subtle organisational requirements. These battles generally occur well away from the eye of the camera and the snout of the microphone. The organisational forms of the green movement are more important to achieving its gains than Wark believes: media games are only one relatively small part of these larger manoeuvres, and not to be over-emphasised.

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Whoops!

It has come to our attention that the Red Cross emblem appears prominently on the front cover of the November issue of ALR.

You should be aware that the use of this emblem is protected by the Geneva Conventions Act of 1957. As stated in the act, the use for any purpose whatsoever of "the emblem of the Red Cross with vertical and horizontal arms of the same length on and completely surrounded by a white background..." is prohibited without consent in writing of the Minister for Defence. Perhaps in your next issue you could include a short article on the correct first aid symbol (a white cross on a green background) and the special status of the Red Cross emblem. This could correct the message your readers would have received that the red cross is a symbol for first aid.

Alan McLean
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Hmmm. Maybe not... (ed.)

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