Stirring the Geopolitical Unconscious: Towards a Jamesonian Ecocriticism

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In the introduction to his celebrated *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson called postmodernism what we have 'when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good'.[1] Just a year earlier, journalist Bill McKibben had written a book entitled *The End of Nature*, in which he lamented that with the appearance of the 'ozone hole,' evidence of an impending global extinction crisis, and especially the possibility of catastrophic global climate change caused by human activities, nature, at least as we used to know it, has 'ended'.[2] While Jameson's book has been among the most influential ever published in cultural studies, McKibben's became an environmental bestseller. But despite their declarations, nature, if by that we mean the ecological and biological fabric of life on this planet, has neither ended nor gone away: that fabric is still largely intact, even if increasingly modified and interlaced with human activities.

In popular culture and in everyday life, however, nature often does seem to be somewhere outside the picture. McKibben has more recently lamented the lack of good art portraying the ecological facts of our time. 'One species, ours,' he writes, 'has by itself in the course of a couple of generations managed to powerfully raise the temperature of an entire planet, to knock its most basic systems out of kilter. But oddly, though we know about it, we don't *know* about it. It hasn't registered in our gut; it isn't part of our culture. Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas?'[3] One could respond to this exhortatory challenge by naming the many artists who are addressing environmental issues in their work in one way or another: earth and land artists like Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long; ecologically minded conceptualists and performance artists such as Robert and Shana Parke Harrison, Mary Beth Edelson, and the late Joseph Beuys; the eco-restoration/reclamation art of Alan Sonfist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison; the environmental films of independent filmmakers like James Benning, as well as popular fare such as *March of the Penguins*, *Happy Feet*, and the recent spate of global warming related documentaries; the nuclear and post-industrial landscape photography of Richard Misrach, Peter Goin, and Edward Burtynsky; environmental themes in theatre, music, dance, and so on.[4] At the level of popular culture, however, McKibben's point is fair enough, at least insofar as ecological topics easily get lost in the din, and even when not - when they make a brief appearance in the arts news of the BBC or National Public Radio or even on the big screen, say, with the 2004 global warming blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* - they tend to be

1. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1991, pix.

2. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, New York, Anchor/Doubleday, 1990.

3. Bill McKibben, 'Imagine that: What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art,' *Grist Magazine*, 21/04/05, http://www.grist.org/comments/soapbox/2005/04/21/mckibben-imagine

4. 'The Nature Issue,' *ARTNews*, June 2004; 'Art and the Environment,' Special Section, *ArtReview* 2 (August 2006); Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, London, Reaktion, 2000; John Grande, *Balance: Art and Nature*, revised edition, Montreal, Black Rose, 2003; Jeffrey Kastner, *Land and Environmental Art*, Phaidon Press, 1998; Lucy R. Lippard, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, New Press, 1998; Max Andrews, Land, Art: *A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, London, RSA 2006; Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*, University of Georgia Press, 2003; Alan Sonfist, *Nature, the End of Art: Environmental Landscapes*, Rome, Gli Ori, 2004; Sue Spaid, *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*, Contemporary Arts Center, 2002; Scott MacDonald,

easily trivialised and rendered impotent toward any project of raising the environmental consciousness of the public at large.

My goal in this article will be to approach this dilemma from a different angle. I will examine a series of instances in North American cinema of the 1990s in which nature, in an unruly and threatening guise, returns to disrupt the everyday texture of human social life. These are not films about global warming, or about anything particularly 'environmental'; in fact, they are focused almost entirely on the social world. And yet that *almost* is the operative word. I would like to read these reappearances of nature - these returns of the repressed - as expressions of what Jameson has called the 'geopolitical unconscious,' a term that combines the method of a kind of psychoanalysis with Jameson's Marxian historicism.

Jameson introduced the term 'geopolitical unconscious' as a variation of his earlier 'political unconscious' in his second collection of writings on cinema, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*.[5] What he means by it is that 'all thinking today is *also*, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such'[6] and that cultural texts can therefore be read as forms of 'political fantasy which in contradictory fashion articulate […] both the actual and potential social relations which constitute individuals within a specific political economy'.[7] Culture, by this reading, 'conflates ontology with geography and endlessly processes images of the unmappable system' of advanced industrial capitalism.[8] According to Jameson, the historical evolution of capitalism, marked by discontinuous bursts in its power to penetrate and colonise heretofore uncommodified spaces, generates its own social spaces and artistic responses, which have included realism, modernism, and now postmodernism. The originality of Jameson's postmodernism thesis lies in his reading of various products of culture as heralding, reflecting, and responding to the latest stage in the development of capitalism, that is, the shift in the second half of the twentieth century to a post-Fordist, media-saturated and transnational form of capitalism, one in which the modernisation process has made its way around the globe and commodification has been extended, albeit unevenly, to all levels of social and biological life.

In what follows, I would like to thicken Jameson's premise by taking the world system to be not only a political-economic one, in which social relations and psychic realities are predominantly shaped by the uneven economics of global capitalism, but also a political-*ecological* one, in which the warp and woof of uneven development and global inequality are directly related to the ways advanced industrial capitalism both commodifies and thoroughly transforms the natural world and our relationship with it. Jameson's and McKibben's proclamations about nature's demise, both from the beginning of the 1990s, provide an apt historical conjuncture from which to begin this examination. My argument is that the contemporary world system can hardly be thought today without reference to the larger - and until recently unthinkable - totality of the ecological system which both sustains and interpenetrates with the political-economic system.[9] A recognition of large-scale human impact on the

The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place, Berkeley, University of California PRess, 2001; Sean Cubitt, *EcoMedia*, Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi, 2005; Pat Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*, Bristol, Intellect, 2005.

5. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992; Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London, Routledge, 1981.

6. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, op. cit., p4, emphasis in original.

7. Colin McCabe, 'Preface' in Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, op. cit., pxi.

8. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, op. cit., p4.

9. Immanuel Wallerstein, the founder of world-systems theory (on which Jameson draws alongside other neo-Marxist historians and sociologists), has argued that the ecological crisis is a consequence of the process of capital-accumulation that is inherent to the modern world-system ('Ecology and Capitalist Costs of Production: No Exit,' in *The End of the World*

environment registered widely as far back as the 1960s with the publication of such books as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle*, and Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*, but the idea that humans are reshaping and altering the very foundations of something called 'the global ecology' did not really come to widespread popular attention until the late 1980s. The hypothesis of anthropogenic global climate change had been expressed here and there among scientists for several decades, and radical environmentalists pursued it in what Jameson might call a 'paranoid' vein for some years, but it was only in the late 1980s that it was authoritatively announced to the world. On a swelteringly hot day in late June, 1988, James Hansen, director of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, testified before a US Congressional committee that he could state 'with 99 per cent confidence' that a long-term climate warming trend was occurring, and added that he was virtually certain that the 'greenhouse effect' was its cause. While Hansen's statements were not always accurately reported, their front-page newspaper and radio and television talk show coverage was unprecedented. Later that year, *Time Magazine* named the Earth 'Planet of the Year' in place of its customary 'Man of the Year.' Planetary nature, it seems, had emerged as an actor on the global stage at the same time as Jameson and McKibben were writing its epitaph.

The late 1980s and beginning of the 1990s saw the creation of the Intercontinental Panel on Climate Change, the release of the Brundtland Commission Report *Our Common Future*, the popularisation of the term 'sustainable development,' and the high-profile international mega-event in Rio de Janeiro which came to be known as the Earth Summit. These were followed, in 1993, with the election of a US president whose running mate had written an environmentalist manifesto, *Earth in the Balance,* the title of which was meant to suggest how precariously poised we were on the cusp of dramatic, if not catastrophic, change. In the world of North American academe, this feverish five- or six-year period saw the second major wave of creation of environmental studies programs.[10] Coming at the end of the Reagan-Thatcher-Mulroney era, and competing with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the impending rush of 'globalization', this topicality of global ecology was in itself somewhat remarkable. And yet, by the middle of the decade, it was all but eclipsed by the economic rush of post-Cold War Clinton-era globalisation. A question that has not been answered decisively enough is why and how this disappearance came about.

The films I want to look at come from that extended moment in the mid to late 1990s when ecology was once again overshadowed by everyday life - which was also a moment in which the apparent liberal hegemony of Clintonism (and Chretienism in Canada, and ultimately Blairism in the UK) seemed to provide, if not satisfaction, at least a bit of breathing space for the moderate/liberal left, between the struggles of the Reaganite 1980s and the era of George W. Bush. It was the age of 'globalization,' so the 'world system' was as active as ever, but the loss of an obvious geopolitical enemy to the

As We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-first Century, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 76-86). See Jason W. Moore, '*The Modern World System* as environmental history? Ecology and the rise of capitalism,' *Theory and Society* 32 (2003): 307-377, for an insightful elaboration of an ecologised world-systems theory. Others writing in a Marxist vein, such as James O'Connor and various contributors to the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, have developed analogous arguments about the 'second,' i.e. ecological, 'contradiction' of capitalism.

10. Aldemaro Romero and Christian Jones, 'Not All Are Created Equal: An Analysis of the Environmental Programs/ Departments in U.S. Academic Institutions Until May 2003', *Macalester Environmental Review*, posted on May 29, 2003, http://www.macalester.edu/environmentalstudies/MacEnvReview/equalarticle2003.htm, accessed 24/08/05.

West provided the North American cultural industries a new opportunity to look inward. In the spirit of a possible 'Jamesonian ecocriticism,' or a kind of global-meteoreological reading practice, I will examine how this inward gaze - at interpersonal relations in the social fabric of the US and Canada - hides, or contains, a veiled recognition of the 'strange weather'[11] transparing outside, at the point where society meets that unmappable and uncanny Other of global nature.

11. Andrew Ross, 'The drought this time,' *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits*, New York, Verso, 1991, pp193-249.

UNRULY VISITATIONS

Robert Altman's loose cinematic adaptation of Raymond Carver's *Short Cuts* (1993) opens with images of helicopters, looking like giant bugs against the night skies, spraying entire Los Angeles neighbourhoods with insecticide against medflies and their larvae, the terror of the California fruit industry. Over the course of the film's first fourteen minutes, as we are introduced to the eight or nine overlapping narratives that make up the film's polyphonic patchwork quilt, the helicopters continue to fly over the city as a television commentator editorialises about the spraying, comparing it to other 'wars' being fought in recent memory - against Iraq, against terrorists, against drugs, and so on. But the war on the medfly is simply a war against something that is just there, an intrusion of nature disrupting the wheels of industry and the workings of the social fabric. Some two hours and a handful of deaths, suicides, and marital breakups later, the film comes to a close, as incongruously as it began, with a 7.4-magnitude earthquake rumbling across the Greater Los Angeles area. As the tremor begins, one of the characters explodes in a mindless rage and murders a cyclist with a rock blow to the head, while rocks begin to fall from a cliff behind them; the local news reports the girl's death as the earthquake's single fatality, while a weather expert muses aloud about how wonderful it is to live in LA. These allusions to nature's disruptive force frame the panoramic set of stories that make up the film's loosely connected, non-linear narrative.

With its swirling juxtaposition of interpersonal and emotional predicaments, *Short Cuts* served as an obvious model for Paul Thomas Anderson's equally epic, equally decentred 1999 film *Magnolia*. Like Altman, Anderson weaves in an undercurrent of weather references - weather reports punctuate the film, a lot of rain falls, and at least three characters are heard to say, at different points in the film, 'it's raining cats and dogs' - and that's before the climax, where Anderson ups the ante a notch higher than Altman had: where an earthquake would have been too obvious and derivative (for a film in and about Southern California), *Magnolia* concludes with a biblically-proportioned rain of frogs pounding on windshields, splattering onto wet roads, and plopping into spot-lit San Fernando Valley swimming pools. The film makes explicit what other films to be examined here leave more implicit, but, in the course of its three-hour length, it remains the social landscape that is the central actor. As for the frogs, Anderson explains them this way:

> [A]s far back as the Romans, people have been able to judge the health of a society by the health of its frogs: the health of a frog, the vibe of a frog, the texture of the frog, its looks, how much wetness is on it, everything. The frogs are a barometer for who we are as a people. We're polluting ourselves, we're killing ourselves, and the frogs are telling us so, because they're all getting sick and deformed.[12]

12. Paul Thomas Anderson, *Magnolia: The Shooting Script,* New York, Newmarket. 2000, p207. A relevant question for an ecocritic is whether any frogs were harmed during the production; the answer, apparently, is no: over 7,900 rubber frogs were made for the film, the rest were created by computer graphics.

In both of these films, acts of real or Hollywood nature interrupt the narrative, acting as a kind of Freudian uncanny or Lacanian Real, an excessive remainder that invades the representational frame, jarring and dislocating the social worlds portrayed, but remaining outside those relations and in some way fundamentally inassimilable by them. These are events that simply happen, out of nowhere. Their effect on the lives of the characters is one that, for the most part, cannot be resisted (the exception is the medfly infestation, though here it is the spraying of the insecticide that is more invasive and irresistible). More than anything else that happens in these films, these acts of unruly nature unify the otherwise disparate stories in both films by putting the characters 'in the same boat' in relation to them.[13] What I would like to suggest is that these uncanny visitations of nature displace, threaten, and solidify a certain post-Cold War but pre-9-11 reimagination of *community*, setting off strange rumblings at levels ranging from that of the family unit to that of the global human ecumene. But let me develop this thesis with a few more examples.

13. Jonathan Romney, 'In the time of earthquakes,' *Sight and Sound,* March 1994, p9.

NUCLEAR (FAMILY) FALLOUT

Unruly visitations of a vaguely threatening ecology appear not only in films that take place in and around Los Angeles. (And in a certain obvious sense both *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* are more about California, and specifically Los Angeles, if not self-referentially mostly about Hollywood, than about anything else.)[14] The 1990s were a particularly fruitful decade for what I would like to call the 'post-nuclear' genre of filmmaking: I use this word in a double sense, where the nucleus that had been decentred (if not exploded) was in part that of the bomb, the technological threat which held together the bipolar geopolitics of the Cold War world, but even more so that of the patriarchal family and the traditionally ordered set of social relations for which it served as the formative, cellular kernel. With the disappearance of the West's nuclear adversary (and preceding the appearance of the global terrorist threat), these films take place mostly in a safely middle-class North American world, one in which global reference points are obscured or nonexistent, and in which family and interpersonal relations are central. Films like *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia*, Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997), Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), and Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999) work out the tensions inherent in the nuclear family by portraying the underbelly of a certain mainly suburban

14. That LA leads the pack in the imagination of natural catastrophe is demonstrated in Mike Davis, *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster,* New York, Vintage/Random House, 1998.

idyll, its fabric torn asunder by the centrifugal forces underlying its smooth but emotionally paralysed exterior. And almost without exception in these films, natural disasters, or accidents caused by 'nature,' act as the framing signifiers within which their post-catastrophic aftermaths unfold.

In Ang Lee's evocation of a middle-class, exurban 1973 Connecticut, a deadly but chillingly beautiful ice storm, during which a boy dies by electrocution from a fallen power line, serves as a metaphor representing the ostensible 'big chill' that followed the overindulgence and socially and politically fragmenting fallout of the sixties: messy affairs, spouse-swapping parties, toxic discontent and chronic miscommunication among adults, children, and everyone concerned. Snow and ice are responsible for another collective trauma, in *The Sweet Hereafter*, when a school bus skids off a road and tumbles down into a lake, killing most of the children on board. The film charts the painful unravelling of familial (and incestuous) ties that follow. And in *American Beauty*, the single moment of calm epiphany within the figurative storm of social and familial dysfunctionality occurs when the lead character's daughter watches an extended fragment of a silent video made by the neighbour's spookily self-possessed son, in which an empty plastic bag whirls about in a delirious windblown dance. Set against the parallel currents of family turbulence and the droning white noise of media culture, these appearances of disorderly, uncanny nature - or, in Mendes's film even the barest cypher of nature, the invisible wind allusively gestured to by the performance of an inanimate piece of trash (and the dead animals the teenaged boy also videotapes) - invoke an alternative, *un*human order, whose very incommensurability sets up a jarring moral counter-oscillation to the social realities portrayed. And yet, like the 'airborne toxic event' in Don DeLillo's paradigmatically postmodern novel *White Noise*, these unnatural appearances of nature seem more like allusions to a scrambling of the boundaries presumed to exist between nature and humanity, a scrambling in which we ourselves are implicated. Like the threat of global warming, they hover, with a quietly reptilian stare, on the horizon of collective consciousness. In a traditionally Jamesonian 'geopolitical' reading, these nuclear family tensions would be more than mere family tensions; they would be read, rather, as conflations/reflections/refractions of the tensions inherent in the bipolar cold war nuclear system and the military-industrial economy underpinning it. But a political-ecological rendering suggests that something larger may be askew.

There is an interesting parallel here between the post-Reaganite and post-Cold War 1990s and the post-civil rights and counterculture decade of the 1970s. For the liberal left, both were decades which offered breathing room, either from the struggles of the 1960s or the conservative onslaught of the Reagan era. The left may not have been in the ascendant, but on some level liberal culture, especially *cultural* liberalism, had become integrated into the mainstream. In the 1970s, this seemed fresh and new, but it was

tempered by the recognition (on the left) that the anti-war left had failed to galvanize the nation (in the case of the US) and that the generation portrayed in *The Big Chill* (1983) was satisfied to take the partial gains of the Sixties and integrate them into the liberal-capitalist consensus of the time, thus opting for short-term fulfilment over any long-term systemic change. In the 1990s, an analogous recognition on the left may have been that the *global* left had failed - the Soviet Union collapsed and now there was little desire on the part of the masses to critique the seemingly victorious capitalist system. Yet, in the mainstream, it was the decade of Reaganism, with its wars on 'welfare mothers' and other public scapegoats, that could be forgotten, and, with Bill Clinton's ascendancy to the presidency, liberal Americans could feel confident that 'one of us', at least in a cultural sense, was now at the helm of the nation.

THE REAL AND THE SUBLIME

Reading these appearances of nature as signifiers of some out-of-kilter global eco-social system, or of a psychic guilt 'we' (humanity) feel for our treatment of nature, risks both essentialising the human and making too much out of cinematic details that could be explained more parsimoniously otherwise. Ice storms, unstoppable rains, and other acts of nature punctuating a film narrative are forms of what literary critics used to call 'pathetic fallacy,' the creative misattribution of human characteristics to natural objects, or the use of nature to express human psychological states. In this understanding, an earthquake or ice storm is not *about* the earthquake or ice storm at all. To this charge, an ecocritic would respond by saying that a river may be just a river, a textual ice storm may in fact be *about ice* as well, not just a comment on human miscommunication - in other words, the signifier could in fact also be pointing back at a natural signified, not only at a human one.

In any case, *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia* are arguably about California more than anything (with California itself being a signifier of the promise and future of America and the West), Ang Lee's *Ice Storm* is about the 1970s, and all these films are about social or familial relations more than they are about political or ecological systems. But Jameson's model of wide-angle, big-picture interpretation nudges us to read such things for their resonance at deeper and disparate levels. His geopolitical unconscious is unconscious, after all, and for a species that has become the world's dominant, it seems reasonable that the unconscious might be thought of as global or becoming so. *Magnolia*'s rain of frogs and *Short Cuts'* medflies and earthquake can be references to Biblical pestilences and apocalypses, but they are also about those things that happen of their own accord, those weird, freaky acts of nature that Californians, as much as anyone, live with a persistent, low-level and generally unacknowledged fear of. There is an indication, a kind of promise, in these films of there being something *beyond* the state of incessant motion, the frenzied desires and

clashing emotions, insecurities, miscommunications and roiling chaos of these characters' personal and interpersonal lives - a something around which, or in relation to which, the vortex of everyday life turns without ever being able to face squarely, something unrepresentable except as it breaks through in such spurious, random acts of (violent) nature. In a Lacanian reading, they represent the trauma of the Real - the excessive, excluded, and incommensurate remainder of reality, which resists symbolic capture and always threatens to return and intrude, revealing the essential fragility of the nuclear bonds that make up the social. They constitute tears in the fabric of social meanings - the fabric into which we are incorporated as we become social and linguistic beings - which point to the gap at the centre of human identity, the inassimilable 'outside,' yet which simultaneously offer what Slavoj Zizek (1989) calls an 'undergrowth of enjoyment'.[15] To an ecocritic, this phrase of Zizek's suggests more than even he may have intended: the verticality being ascribed here to desire evokes the genital 'bush' and the 'lower' animal realms, which subsist beneath the civilised veneer of the self, providing an obscure enjoyment even as they provoke anxiety and elicit repression, denial, or sublimation into other, presumably 'higher' forms of expression.[16]

The vertical semiotics of 'sublimation' and the 'sublime' warrant further examination here. The discourse of the sublime is frequently invoked in discussions of the visual depiction of nature, and it is one that has been resurrected within a torrent of recent writing on postmodern culture. At the same time, Freud's notion of sublimation suggests a sceptical stance towards anything that warrants being raised to the level of a genuinely transcendent 'sublime.' As figured by Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke, and other modern thinkers, the sublime was thought of as that which confronts us with the limitations of our representations, but also of our ability to control the world. For Burke and the nineteenth-century Romantics, the sublime was experienced in encounters with an overpowering and monumental Nature. Inspiring awe and astonishment, pleasure alongside pain, it was marked by a radical ambivalence, in which the desire to be inundated by the sublime coexisted with a fear of being annihilated by it. For Kant, the sublime took on a form more to do with the limits of representation: forever inaccessible to the categories of reason, it marked the inherent threshold of our knowledge and signified the cleavage between the conceived and the presentable. For both Kant and Burke, the sublime represented the 'incommensurability between Nature and the human'.[17]

In advanced industrial capitalism, where nature has been effectively tamed and eclipsed, the sublime has taken other forms: the technological sublime, marvelling in the grandiose and monumental works of an alienating technology;[18] the apocalyptic sublime, represented by Auschwitz, or the 'nuclear sublime' of Hiroshima and Alamagordo;[19] and the everyday sublime alluded to in Surrealist art or in Freud's notion of the 'uncanny,' the 'sense of strangeness confronting us in familiarity' and 'the excessive material

15. Slavoj Zizek, 'The undergrowth of enjoyment,' *New Frontiers* 9.7 (1989): 29.

16. I am indebted to Wendy Wheeler for pointing out these resonances undergirding Zizek's phrase.

17. Stephen Helmling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: Writing, the Sublime, and the Dialectic of Critique*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2001, p13. See also Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, A. Phillips (ed), new edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, L.W. Beck (trans), New York, Macmillan, 1993; Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

18. David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996.

19. Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

presence of the object'.[20] The discourse of the sublime has been conspicuously resuscitated within postmodernist and poststructuralist writing as an indeterminate, ineffable alterity which hovers over against human attempts at comprehension: as Lacan's Real, Derrida's *différance*, Kristeva's *signifiance*, Baudrillard's inhuman system of objects, and Lyotard's and Jameson's differently inflected renditions of the postmodern sublime. Lyotard has returned to the theme repeatedly, presenting it as an excess of indeterminacy which invades and dislocates the effort to create meaning.[21] Manifesting the unresolved tension between presentability and unpresentability, the sublime 'allows the unpresentable to become perceptible' through allusion.[22] Nicoletta Pireddu reads this postmodern retrieval of the sublime as paradoxically both an impossibility - or the recognition of an impossibility, that of reversing time - and 'an attempt to reconstruct a "beyond" of any kind,' a new hope for overstepping the limitations of the postmodern condition.[23] It is a 'longing for stimuli, even in the form of "shock," that might reawaken responses that have been "numbed" by overhabituation'.[24]

For Jameson, technology now serves as a source of the sublime; it mesmerises and fascinates, holding out the promise of a representational shorthand for grasping the global network of power and control. But the repressed, for Jameson, is not a capital-n Nature forgotten or ravaged by technology, but historicity, the ability to make narrative sense of the whole system. The information-saturated postmodern media universe, with its ubiquitous eye in the sky of satellite surveillance, confers a paranoid modality to postmodern life, and Jameson reads the high-tech paranoia of the cyberpunk and conspiracy genres more generally as 'degraded' attempts 'to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system'.[25] His readings of conspiracy films in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* show a prescient sense for the decade of the *X-Files*, a series which only first appeared a year after that book was published. *X-Files* is perhaps the best example of the argument I have been making: as a political fantasy about the labyrinthine workings of an unmappable and highly secretive system of global domination, it makes a tight fit with Jameson's argument; but the role of nature throughout the series - as unexplainable goo coming from the ground, uncanny biological hybrid, mysterious residue or side effect of creepy shadow-government experiments, as both alien and very deep inside us, in our brains and bodies - is a telling indicator of how ecology at every level had gotten woven into the paranoid fantasies of power and powerlessness in pre-millennial America. The show could also be read as a serial compendium of the kinds of 'monstrous natures' noted by feminist ecocritic Stacy Alaimo, who argues that while some of these entail a form of 'border work' which attempts to elevate humanity onto a transcendent perch above and superior to the natural world, others provide a space for reimagining our corporeal identification with the animal, the organic, and the messily and monstrously hybrid.[26]

In the libidinal and imaginal economy of emergent globality - the globalisation that constituted the main sign of the world system throughout

20. Jerry Aline Flieger, 'The listening eye: Postmodernism, paranoia, and the hypervisible,' *Diacritics* 26.1 (1996): 99. See also J. A. Flieger, 'Postmodern perspective: The paranoid eye,' *New Literary History* 28. 1 (1989): 87-109.

21. Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The sublime and the avant-garde,' *Paragraph* 6 (1985): 1-18; Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, G. Bennington and B. Massumi (trans), Manchester University Press, 1986; Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (trans), Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991; Lyotard, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, J. Librett (trans), Albany, SUNY Press, 1993.

22. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, op. cit., p80ff.

23. Nicoletta Pireddu, 'Beyond figuration, below the threshold: some observations on postmodernism and the sublime,' *Negations* 1 (1996), http://www.datawranglers.com/negations/issues/96w/96w_pireddu.html

24. Helmling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson*, op. cit., p112, though I am told this point was made by William Wordsworth in his 1805 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

25. Jameson,

the 1990s - these viral and monstrous excrescences can be taken as reminders that sociality, however orderly or unruly, is always contaminated by an unencompassable foreign element. But the repressed other, I am suggesting, is not historicity, as Jameson argues, but something more like the recognition of our complicity with and responsibility for the ecological crisis - arguably the hidden collective trauma of postmodernity - and of the colonial (ontological and epistemological) incursions with which this crisis is historically bound. Where the Cartesian modernist project had repressed the entire network of biological interdependencies and corporeal confraternities that shape and structure our material existence, it is these that erupt fitfully at a time when collective responsibility for eco-social collapse beckons at our consciousness. It is not that such sentiments haven't erupted fitfully throughout the modern era - in Gothic tales and horror stories from Mary Shelley to Kafka to the films of David Cronenberg - but that their eruption has taken particular forms associated with technological experimentation and political conspiracy during the millennial 1990s. At the same time, in the body politic of North American culture, they can be taken as indicators of a liberal guilt driven inward, onto the socially conservative terrain of the late Clinton years: of moral character as against moral ambiguity, of chastity and its desecration, and so on. Recall that these filmmakers (Altman, Egoyan, Anderson, Lee, Mendes) are upfront or implicit social liberals; but in the temporal bubble of the Clinton 1990s, they somehow felt compelled to examine the moral sloppiness of the middle (and upper) class America that surrounded them on all sides.

CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS IMAGES OF ECOLOGY

But let me get back to my thesis, which is that representations of connectedness (or lack of it), communication and miscommunication, the threads that tie together the most elemental, cellular level of social life (the family), can be read as saying something about the most global level, that which we are calling 'political ecology' - at least when they are framed by disruptive acts of nature, which, like a flash of lightning, throw those social facts into stark visibility. This thesis has something to do with the embryonic field of ecopsychology, particularly Theodore Roszak's poorly developed but evocative conception of an 'ecological unconscious'. Roszak calls this unconscious 'the core of the mind,' representing the 'record of cosmic evolution.' The goal of ecopsychology, as he puts it, 'is to awaken the inherent sense of environmental reciprocity that lies within' that unconscious.[27] Roszak's notion assumes a quasi-Jungian essentialism about the mind which we need not swallow;[28] it is enough to make the historical argument that global ecology and a skewed relationship between humanity and the Earth had become thinkable ideas, socio-psychological facts, by the late 1980s, and that by the mid-1990s these facts had undergone a kind of repression, with opinion polls showing the environment had fallen off the public radar, displaced by the economy or by moral and cultural politics.

Postmodernism, op. cit., p38; cf. Flieger, 'The listening eye' and 'Postmodern perspective'.

26. Stacy Alaimo, 'Discomforting creatures: Monstrous natures in recent films,' in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism,* K. Armbruster and K.R. Wallace (eds), Charlottesville, VA, University Press of Virginia, p201.

27. Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology,* Phanes Press, 2001, p320.

28. This is not to suggest that the mind is a blank slate, but rather that whatever propensities humans are born with vary from individual to individual and co-evolve with their environments from the first moments of embryonic development to the final breaths of mature adulthood. They do not represent a unified and clearly demarcated 'species being', whether it be that of Jung's archetypal unconscious or the genetic templates proposed by sociobiologists or evolutionary psychologists. On the utter intertwining of nature and culture, see, for example, Susan Oyama's brilliant *The Ontogeny of Information: Developmental Systems and Evolution,* 2d rev. and exp. ed., Duke University Press, 2000.

These cinematic moments can be read, in Andrew Ross's terms, as 'images of ecology,' alongside 'belching smokestacks, seabirds mired in petrochemical sludge, fish floating belly-up,' and so on, with the difference that the images I've examined are not quite conscious or intended as such; they require a kind of psychoanalytic retrieval for their ecological significance to be articulated.[29] They are similar to the genre of horror film which portrays monstrous natures in the guise of threatening biological phenomena or of human-natural hybrids (a genre that dates back at least to Shelley's *Frankenstein*). But while the latter have been richly explored for their articulations of gender, race, class, and nature,[30] these more recent and 'latent' or 'decentered' appearances of uncanny nature have not been much analysed by critics. They provide a contrast to the consciously environmental messages of *The Day After Tomorrow* and its eco-dystopian predecessors such as *Silent Running* (1972), *Soylent Green* (1973), the *Mad Max* series, or the big-budget Kevin Costner flop *Waterworld* (1995). Disaster, coming (in the case of *The Day After Tomorrow*) in the form of rapid global warming precipitating a shutdown of the transatlantic gulfstream current and resulting in the almost immediate onset of an ice age, is what these films are about, so the characters are poorly developed and the storylines predictable. By making such films explicitly about ecocatastrophe and environmental hubris, they arguably become easy to refute, critique, or ignore; they become disaster (if not disastrous) movies, 1970s-style kitsch plus the latest digital effects.

The virtue of the 'unconscious' eruptions, storms, quakes and freezes examined above is that they have not been tamed. They remain inassimilable, hovering uneasily at the edges of our awareness. A Jamesonian ecocriticism might lead us to ask: How is it that these irruptions appear, and where and when do they cluster in popular culture and media? How do they resonate with, supplement, or disrupt the social worlds portrayed? Is there a way we can retrieve the wild, untamed core, the 'kernel' or 'undergrowth of enjoyment' in these representations to keep a certain wildness in play through times in which the ecological or eco-geopolitical unconscious seems *especially* unconscious?

I am suggesting that a geopoliticised ecocriticism, or an ecologised cultural-political criticism - one that examines ecopolitics not in its explicit forms but in its latent and indirect manifestations - can provide a useful means for thinking through the relations between culture and ecology in our time of uncertain and turbulent globalities. If this brief examination of some of the possible meanings of such uncanny eruptions remains only suggestive, the latter part of the second Bush II administration remains an appropriate time to consider how they might be interacting with current imagistic discourses of the global and neo-imperial war on terror, the creeping securitisation of the state, the political and ecological marasmus of Iraq (its oil fields, the ecological devastation of the Mesopotamian marshlands) and the global hunt for oil everywhere, the spreading new Gulag of Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and the rest, with all the ecological 'unconscionisation' - the rendering unconscious of the ecological destruction both allowed and conducted by the

29. Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society*, London, Verso, 1994, p171.

30. For example, Alaimo, 'Discomforting creatures: Monstrous natures in recent films' op. cit; Fatimah Tobing Rony, 'King Kong and the Monster in Ethnographic Cinema,' in *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1997, pp157-191.

31. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, op. cit., p298.

32. Critiques of ecocriticism make these and other points; see, for instance Dana Phillips' *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*, Oxford University Press, 2003. For a fertile encounter between ecocriticism and some deeply textual, if not poststructural, swamps, see Rod Giblett's *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology*, Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

33. See Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow (eds), *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature*, London, MIT Press, 2003; D.D. Winter and S.M. Koger, *The Psychology of Environmental Problems*, second ed., Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum; and the contributions to *Human Ecology Review*, 10.2 (2003).

military on behalf of us - that goes along with it. If film criticism is meant in part to promote certain ways of reading films against the popular grain - or as Jameson puts it, 'the investigation of the historical conditions of possibility of specific forms' and the attempt 'to keep alive (or to reinvent) assessments of a sociopolitical kind that interrogate the quality of social life itself by way of the text or individual work of art'[31] - then ecocriticism could also indulge in asking questions that would direct our attention to the absences as well as the uncanny sightings of the iceberg of political-ecological consciousness as it bobs up and down at the horizons of public awareness. While such an approach is unlikely to provide a satisfactory response to Bill McKibben's challenge, it may at least suggest that addressing environmental issues *directly* may not be the only way of presenting them, but that indirection, coupled with an effective reading strategy, can itself be a means of fruitful engagement.

Where would such a strategy leave ecocriticism? If nothing else, it nudges it a little closer to the fetid but fertile swamps of contemporary theory, swamps that ecocritics (especially of the American school) have too often avoided.[32] Ecocriticism has much to gain from a deeper engagement with Marxist historical materialism (with Raymond Williams and John Berger pointing the way some years ago), with psychoanalysis and the beginnings of an ecologically informed social psychology (as evident in such embryonic fields as ecopsychology and conservation psychology[33]), with poststructuralism and feminism (as my references to Deleuze and Guattari, Alaimo, and others have suggested), queer theory, postcolonialism, and related strategies extant in cultural theory today; and these have much to gain in turn from ecocriticism. 'Nature,' as Williams and others have consistently reminded us, is an idea and a trope with a complex array of meanings that have featured centrally in discourses about humanity and animality, masculinity and femininity, race and class, politics and economics.[34] The illusion that nature in this sense is a social (and exclusively human) construction, while the real world of nature 'out there' remains meaningless and free of any communication, with a boundary line clearly separating these two realms, can no longer be sustained. Recent extensions of semiotics to the biological, ecological, and more-than-human worlds[35] suggest that the world is better thought of as significatory and communicative 'all the way down,' with that 'way' reaching well into the 'undergrowth of enjoyment' that Zizek, Bakhtin before him,[36] and others have directed our attention to. In that undergrowth may lurk clues that could serve as reminders of our own interdependence and inter-engagement with a larger world of relata that our political and economic systems and practices are affecting and being affected by. The signs and signals reaching us from that turbulent undergrowth can be thought of as semiotic indices of a wilder, more untamed set of relations that are political (because they are power-laden), ecological (because they concern material-bodily metabolisms and extra-human relationalities), and communicative through and through. And any milieu in which communication happens, or fails to happen, is one which criticism, and in this case an expanded ecocriticism, ought to inhabit and investigate from within.

34. Raymond Williams, 'Nature,' in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition, London, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp219-224; Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-human*, Cambridge, MA, Blackwell, 1995; John Urry and Phil Macnaghten, *Contested Natures*, London, Sage, 1996; Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992; Adrian Franklin, *Nature and Social Theory*, London, SAGE, 2001.

35. See Thomas A. Sebeok, *Global Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001; Alf Hornborg, 'Vital signs: An ecosemiotic perspective on the human ecology of Amazonia,' *Sign Systems Studies* 29.1 (2001): 121-152; Wendy Wheeler, 'Figures in a landscape: Biosemiotics and the ecological evolution of cultural creativity,' *L'Esprit createur* 46. 2 (2006): 100-110; Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics, and the Evolution of Culture*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2006; Sean Cubitt, *EcoMedia*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2005.

36. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, H. Iswolsky (trans), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.