Ecocritical Theory and Practice
Douglas A. Vakoch, California Institute of Integral Studies, USA

itical Theory and Practice highlights innovative scholarship at the interface of liter-
ıltural studies and the environment, seeking to foster an ongoing dialogue between
mics and environmental activists. Works that explore environmental issues through
ures, oral traditions, and cultural/media practices around the world are welcome.
eries features books by established ecocritics that examine the intersection of theory
ractice, including both monographs and edited volumes. Proposals are invited in the
of topics relevant to ecocriticism, including but not limited to works informed by
cultural and transnational approaches; postcolonialism; posthumanism; ecofemi-
ecospirituality, ecotheology, and religious studies; film/media and visual cultural
:s; environmental aesthetics and arts; ecopoetics; ecophenomenology; ecopsycholo-
ıimal studies; and pedagogy.

Recent Titles

International Voices in Ecocriticism, by Serpil Oppermann
ıist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature, edited by Douglas A.
'akoch
mbiguity, Community, and Development: Toward a Politicized Ecocriticism, edited
y Scott Slovic, R. Swarnalatha, and Vidya Sarveswaran
sversal Ecocritical Praxis: Theoretical Arguments, Literary Analysis, and Cultural
'ritique, by Patrick D. Murphy
n Ecologies: City Space, Material Agency, and Environmental Politics in Contempo-
ary Culture, by Christopher Schliephake

New International Voices in Ecocriticism

Edited by
Serpil Oppermann
Foreword by Scott Slovic
Afterword by Greta Gaard

LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Thurston, John. *The Work of Words: The Writing of Susanna Strickland Moodie*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.

Chapter Seven

Against Ecological Kitsch

Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage Project

Guangchen Chen

Certain environmental discourse bases its critique of human beings' excessively destructive activities against nature on the idea that the latter is an inherently undisturbed, balanced, well-organized, and hence ideal state. Human activities deviate from this state, and returning to it is called for as a solution of environmental problems.

This basic assumption about nature has been challenged by some theorists as being purely constructed. With the slogan "ecology without nature," Timothy Morton asserts that the task of ecocritique is to "thoroughly [examine] how nature is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category. Ecocritique does not think that it is paradoxical to say, in the name of ecology itself: 'down with nature!'"[1] Žižek seems to have taken a step further, not only upholding the more radical banner "ecology against nature," but urging us to accept what he calls "second nature" that accommodates human intervention and even the potential massive ecological catastrophe as a basis, an *a priori* for future discussions and actions.[2] Queer ecocriticism, on the other hand, attempts to subvert any categorization that pins down the order of things. Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird define it as putting an emphasis "on fluidity, über-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable is an attempt to undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries."[3] In Greg Garrard's words, it "represents and encapsulates a kind of intellectual Maoism, a perpetual revolution of categories and types."[4] In a certain sense, Garrard's formulation captures a tendency not only in queer ecocriticism, but also common in these critics. For them "nature" is a conceptualization, an ideology, or at its worst a

distortion that misinterprets the real state of things and covers its own inner discontent. But this can potentially be much more than merely a misrepresentation of the true face of nature; it can be misappropriated to be a means of manipulation. For Žižek, the conceptualization of ecology is a form of ideology that directs our attention away from the real problem and ensures the perpetuation of nothing other than crimes against nature.[5]

In this sense, concepts like ecology and nature become a comfort zone for contemporary individuals who can no longer do away with the awareness of possible ecological catastrophes. They use these concepts as an excuse for not making any real change; they use them to shield themselves not just from the academic tendency toward perpetual deconstruction, but also some uncomfortable aspects of nature. Though I do not mean to justify these conceptualizations, I do want to stress that the aversion to these aspects arises from very basic needs, and are commonsensical. That is why intellectual (and indeed any other kind of) Maoism can never be put into practice without forcing people to give up their common sense.

I would like to suggest that some of these aversions can be defined as an ecological kitsch. It analyzes certain characteristics of kitsch as an aesthetic (and originally exclusively human) category, and by transferring it onto the sphere of ecology, demonstrates how it can also (mis)represent aspects of nature in the way it does to human experiences, so as to fulfill ideological agendas. I hope to show that the language of ecological kitsch mirrors tendencies in people's attitude toward his or her own body, and that this language affects human emotions in a similar way when one positions himself or herself in today's environmental issues. As a counterexample, I will discuss the British film director and artist Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage garden project. By analyzing his work, this chapter explains possible ways of overcoming ecological kitsch, how a more realistic image can be exposed, and how a candid but sensible, practical, and not too cruel attitude can be adopted. It also discusses the scope, affect, and limit of representation of today's environment, its nuanced relationship with its audience against the backdrop of wider social and political issues.

KITSCH AND ABJECTION

Kitsch is a tricky concept. It belongs to a curious family of elusive aesthetic categories (other examples include camp, cursilería, and even chic). Almost any discussion of such categories has to begin with a search for definition. What exactly do we mean by kitsch? *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition "art, objects, or design considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way"[6] follows the line of descriptive criticism but focuses on the intentions involved. Hermann Broch starts with analysis of kitsch's stylistic pretension but goes on to highlight its evil morality by comparing it to Anti-Christ, who "appears like Christ, acts and speaks like Christ but is nevertheless Lucifer" ("sieht wie der Christ aus, handelt und spricht wie der Christ und ist trotzdem Luzifer").[7] Theodor Adorno puts his emphasis on ideology and social function by declaring that kitsch "deceive people about their true situation, to transfigure their existence, to allow intentions that suit some powers or other to appear to them in a fairy-tale glow."[8] Many of these explanations direct us to different fields that do not always link to each other, and need at least as much explanation for themselves. The diversified ways of using the term show its exceptionally high degree of evasiveness in meaning. But people in general seem to understand what others are talking about when the term is mentioned. One seldom provides a distinct abstraction of it, but instead always enumerates endless examples that allegedly "represent" it. This fact perfectly fits into Ludwig Wittgenstein's later theory of language and meaning: "[f]or a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. . . . And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer."[9] In other words, the meaning is conditioned by its use. It is the signified of the name "kitsch" that shapes the meaning of the word, not the other way round. The word's intention is constantly redefined and enlarged, the development of its meaning a dynamic response to the development of reality, instead of a static reflection of a norm. In this sense, its etymology—even if one can ever discover it at all—does not matter anymore.

But one can certainly contradict this line of thinking and argue that in any case, there must be something immanent in the concept that justifies the many uses. In this paper I am restricting my use of the word to two meanings. The first one is the covering of corporeality and mortality, or a deliberate avoidance of representing the abject. The second is certain kinds of manipulation by the application not only of sensational effects, but also mechanisms that predict, control, and dictate the audience's reactions. These two aspects might not have a coherent, logical link between themselves under the rubric of kitsch, nor are they necessarily confined to kitsch. Kitsch can still designate products of consumerism, cheap miniatures of famous touristic sites, John Martin's dramatic landscape paintings, or even Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. After all, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."

The first trajectory, the abject, finds a powerful expression in Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: here the abject is represented by an object that is both intensely immediate and highly symbolic—excretion:

> Behind all the European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good. . . . Let us call this basic faith a categorical agreement with being. The fact that until recently the word "shit" appeared in print as s--- has nothing to do with moral considerations. You can't claim that shit is immoral, after all! The objection to shit is a metaphysical one. The daily defecation session is daily proof of the unacceptability of Creation. Either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don't lock yourself in the bathroom!) or we are created in an unacceptable manner. It follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch. [10]

Behind Kundera's ruthless irony and cruel humor (by juxtaposing religion, metaphysics and shit) is the emphasis on human beings' attitude toward the lower stratum of the body. By extension, the denial of shit as an aesthetic gesture basically follows the same track as the refusal to accept human mortality: "kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death."[11] This is an attitude James S. Hans rightly associates with Nietzsche's statement that "[w]e possess art lest we perish of the truth,"[12] whereas its opposite is the attitude to confront/embrace the unacceptable, which is again voiced by Nietzsche through the motto "amor fati."[13] Death, when bluntly *displayed* (as far as it can be displayed), unveils the abjectness of human existence just like excretion does; both are about corporeality and its gradual decay and ultimate decomposition. They point to a common state of human existence that one feels obliged to cover up in representation, and keep away from everyday life, so that one does not have to endure the daily reminder of his or her mortality.

The "denial of shit" makes perfect sense in the context of the abject. In her reading of Dostoyevsky in *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva provides another helpful clue. Both the characters in *The Idiot*, and Dostoyevsky himself, when viewing Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, experience a shock that leads to doubts as to Resurrection. In the writer's own words, "[e]verything thus depends on this: does one accept saying that everything depends on one's faith in Christ. If one believes in Christ one also believes in life eternal."[14] According to Kristeva, "[a]nd yet what forgiveness can there be, what salvation in the face of the irremediable void of the lifeless flesh, the absolute solitude of Holbein's picture? The writer is disturbed, as he was before the corpse of his first wife in 1864."[15] In this sense, excretion, the body and death all bear the same name—the "abject": "[t]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border."[16] The corpse is unapproachable because it is *sacred* and at the same time in need of being *separated* from our everyday life.

In this formulation, the beliefs in Christ and life eternal, namely, what Kundera calls "categorical agreement of being," have a fundamental incompatibility with the body. Religious beliefs need not concern us here, but when they are transformed into an aesthetic attitude, they become kitsch. It resonates not only in artistic judgment, but also on a social and political dimension which I will discuss later in the paper. But now I would like to transfer the abject as a trope to the sphere of nature by following the common practice of comparing the ecological system to the human body. If excretion poses a challenge to the philosophical, religious, political, and aesthetic values for human beings, then by analogy the problem of trash and recycling also causes a similar challenge for the values we have read into nature. It can serve as an effective attack on what Žižek calls the "ideological investment" of ecology.[17] One of the mechanisms he identifies in this investment is "the temptation of meaning." It is a tendency to make sense of natural events that are often cruel and chaotic, defying any possible rationale conceivable by humans. By so doing, we are forcefully bringing nature into our own system of signification.

Excretion is a powerful tool that helps disturb the universe of kitsch because of two reasons. First, it is devoid of meaning in any philosophical or religious system. Second, it causes a repulsive effect on us that is both physical and psychological, both having been explained by the idea of the abject. It is reminiscent of the sheer physicality and bodily decomposition. It tears an embarrassing hole in our ongoing quest for meaning. Analogously, trash can be regarded as excretion in the ecological system. Fossils that are turned into oil are themselves a result of inconceivable and meaningless natural catastrophe. Were it not because of industrialization, oil would have meant something totally different or nothing at all. Nature produces surplus and indigestible materials that do not necessarily fit into an overarching scheme sanctioned by an industrial society.

Were there an agency, a perceiving subject that governs the ecological system, it may or may not have a similar "abject" aversion to these natural excretions—this we do not know. Now thanks to capitalism as a driving force behind mass human intervention in the ecological system, the definition of nature is no longer what it used to be. Now we have to take into consideration the excessive production that disturbs the pre-industrial chain of distributions in nature. Trash is indigestible excess; even with its origin in human activities, it has become part of the updated version of nature. Being part of this system, we live side by side with nature's "excretion" as such.

Looking at trash as manmade objects that were once in our everyday life and that now become residues in the environment can produce an uncomfortably uncanny sensation. They are both familiar and strange. They used to be so much part of our lives that we paid barely any attention to them. Now what makes them seem uncanny is their being out of context. They still retain

their familiar appearances, but do not belong to anywhere, and cannot be assimilated by any system. Just like excretion for human beings, trash plays the embarrassing role in the environment that renders any quest for a meaning futile. It becomes the new reality of nature; thus Žižek rightly says that "[c]oming to terms with trash is our problem today."[18]

Despite Žižek's well-grounded pessimism in the unrepentant nature of capitalism, his proposal in the filmed interview *Ecology* might seem politically regressive. But his point is well taken in the realm of aesthetics, which does not always immediately turn to activism.

DEREK JARMAN AND HIS GARDEN

The practice of making art with ready-made objects goes back not only to Marcel Duchamp, but at least to cabinets of curiosities. More recent incarnations include Pop art and Bricolage. Derek Jarman's garden sculpture is another example. What makes it especially relevant in the present discussion is its ecological awareness and its mode of expression with which Jarman manages to elude a kitsch artistic language.

Jarman was born in 1942 in Northwood, Middlesex. He studied English, History, and History of Art at King's College London, then painting and stage design at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, in the 1960s. He started making films in the 1970s, debuting with the already mature masterpiece *Sebastiane*. His other feature films include *Jubilee* (1977), *The Tempest* (1979), *The Angelic Conversation* (1985), *Caravaggio* (1986), *The Last of England* (1988), *War Requiem* (1989), *The Garden* (1990), *Edward II* (1991), *Wittgenstein* (1993) (based on a script written by Terry Eagleton but heavily revised by Jarman), and *Blue* (1993). Besides his career as a film director, Jarman was also a painter, designer, writer, outspoken gay rights activist, and a diligent gardener.

Jarman's brilliant career as a filmmaker and designer was impaired by illness. In December 1986, he was diagnosed as HIV positive. In 1994, at the age of 52, he died of an AIDS-related illness in London. Around the time when he became aware of his illness, he purchased the Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, Kent, England, and began to cultivate the garden. The activity was to last until his death. In the meantime, he wrote journals documenting his public life as a prominent filmmaker, as well as intimate details of his private life. The journals from January 1, 1989, to September 3, 1990, are collectively published as *Modern Nature*. Alongside the chronicle of the author's painstaking efforts in building the garden was his acute and undisguised awareness of the ever developing illness and approaching death. Illness seems to have forced him to be unusually attentive to his corporeality, which in turn heightens, but never distorts, his experience of nature. The

growth of the garden and the deterioration his health unfold themselves vis-à-vis each other, in the very same intriguing setting. Just as one can read the book as an autobiography graced with nature writing, it is equally valid to read it as nature writing with constant intervention of the author's voice.

On the other hand, he also wrote a book entitled *Derek Jarman's Garden* with extensive illustrations alongside descriptions in diary style, concentrating on the garden and its plants. This book is mainly an account and commentary of his gardening experience. Illness is mentioned only in passing and almost euphemistically.

What heightens the ecological theme of these projects is Prospect Cottage's setting. Considering the fact that he lived here for eight years until his death, he obviously regarded the place as ideal. But we can only speculate the reason why Jarman chose this unlikely location. The fact that the journals are full of humor and gentle irony, as is typical of Jarman's style, makes it all the more ambiguous.

In Jarman's partner Keith Collins's account, the encounter between Jarman and Prospect Cottage was somewhat arbitrary and accidental. The account barely explains why the entire romance between the filmmaker and the garden happened at all. But the connection goes deeper than the seeming arbitrariness this narrative seems to suggest. The January 1, 1989, entry in the opening page of *Modern Nature* reads as follows,

> There are no walls or fences. My garden's boundaries are the horizon. In this desolate landscape the silence is only broken by the wind, and the gulls squabbling round the fishermen bringing in the afternoon catch.
> The view from my kitchen at the back of the house is bounded to the left by the old Dungeness lighthouse, and the iron grey bulk of the nuclear reactor—in front of which dark green broom and gorse, bright with yellow flowers, have formed little islands in the shingle, ending in a scrubby copse of sallow and ash dwarfed and blasted by the gales.
> In the middle of the copse is a barren pear tree that has struggled for a century to reach ten feet . . .[19]

It is clear from the start that he fully acknowledged the barrenness of the land and its starkly contrasting symbolism. These passages' opaque but objective tone, however, is somewhat in harmony with Jarman's description of Dungeness's environment. He tended to withhold his own opinion and feeling of the landscape. This is different from his often affectionate tone in which he talked about the plants he so carefully looked after in his garden. One could interpret such reservation and opaqueness as a well-disguised and articulated implication of ecophobia.

However, he later revealed a bit more about his intention to justify his decision:

> When I came to Dungeness in the mid-eighties, I had no thought of building a garden. It looked impossible: shingle with no soil supported a sparse vegetation . . .
> I decided to stop there; after all, the bleakness of Prospect Cottage was what had made me fall in love with it. At the back I planted a dog rose. Then I found a curious piece of driftwood and used this, and one of the necklaces of holey stones that I hung on the wall, to stake the rose. The garden had begun.[20]

Indeed, Jarman built his Arcadia on a wonderland with a strange combination that was possible only in modern time. Although seemingly barren, Dungeness is of enormous ecological significance. It has a large shingle beach, nourishing a remarkable variety of plants, birds, and insects. It is home to a diversity of plants, invertebrate communities, and birdlife. The flooded gravel pits provide an important refuge for many migratory and coastal bird species. But at the same time, the natural environment is supplemented by an industrial transformation on a very large scale to present an almost post-apocalyptic picture. Here is the site of two nuclear power stations, two experimental military defense structures, and the world's first submarine oil pipelines. As the Dungeness National Nature Reserve website puts it, "Dungeness, a strange land of extremes, one of the most valuable and yet vulnerable nature conservation sites in Great Britain."[21]

The location symbolizes a post-modern vision of nature. Perhaps the most ironical phenomenon in Dungeness is an area known as "the patch": the waste hot water and sewage from the Dungeness nuclear power stations are pumped into the sea through two outfall pipes, enriching the biological productivity of the sea bed and attracting seabirds from miles around. The two nuclear power stations were built in 1965 and 1983, respectively. They are now within a wildlife reserve that is declared a "Site of Special Scientific Interest."

It was against such a setting that Prospect Cottage flourished under Jarman's care. The deliberateness in his choice of the location seems to indicate that he wanted to make the unfriendly environment an integral part of the garden project. As his friend Howard Sooley notes, "You can't take life for granted in Dungeness: every bloom that flowers through the shingle is a miracle, a triumph of nature. Derek knew this more than anyone."[22] And in his own words, ". . . after all, the bleakness of Prospect Cottage was what had made me fall in love with it [...] I saw it as a therapy and a pharmacopoeia."[23]

Therefore, if anyone approaches Jarman's project expecting something like a Romantic version of nature, he or she would very likely be disappointed. This was made clear by Jarman in a conversation with the sculptor Maggi Hambling, from which the book derived its title:

> I was describing the garden to Maggi Hambling at a gallery opening. And said I intended to write a book about it.
> She said: "Oh, you've finally discovered nature, Derek."
> "I don't think it's really quite like that," I said, thinking of Constable and Samuel Palmer's Kent.
> "Ah, I understand completely. You've discovered modern nature."[24]

Jarman was ready to open up his garden to admit the larger environment into its picture, instead of taming, appropriating it, or fending it off. There is a difference between the two gardens locating in front of and behind the cottage, indicating a division of public and private life. The front garden was organized in a symmetric, formal style, while the back garden was designed in a free manner. Not having a fence, the back garden naturally fades into wilderness, including rather than excluding the nuclear power stations in its picture. This was indeed a highly realistic, albeit also symbolic, portrait of the environment in which Jarman was living.

Furthermore, Jarman seemed to have taken into account the aforementioned "abjectness" of this modern version of nature. He allowed the environment to determine the style of the garden, which was by no means classical or natural, but was unashamed of displaying its artificiality. Not without a sense of irony, he took casually whatever he chanced upon in the area and turned them into art, maybe as a tribute to Nietzsche's "amor fati." There was no judgment passed onto whatever he came across. Instead, one only notices humor and artistic sensitivity that dismantled the brutally apocalyptic image of Dungeness:

> In the Second World War they thought the Germans might land at Dungeness, so the area was mined and anti-tank fencing put up. One day I found one of the fence posts, its shaft curled into loops for threading barbed wire, with one end twisted into a giant corkscrew to penetrate the shingle. Then I began to find them all over. Turned upside-down and formed into pyramids, they make good climbing frames for the plants.[25]

Perhaps nothing better demonstrates how Jarman interpreted his modern nature than the sculptures in the garden. They were almost entirely made of recycled materials that he gathered from around the area. Rubbles, bricks, broken tiles were converted into garden arts. Jarman first noticed that rubble could become a friendly niche for the local plants: "[b]efore, the people who cared took their rubbish home—now it is left to blow everywhere. But the rubble and brick and broken tiles do introduce some flowers."[26] Then he began to weave them into the texture of his garden and make them an artistic whole. He collected stones of all shapes, many of which with holes, and threaded them into necklaces, or put them together with irons and woods. Christopher Lloyd notices the "[c]hains, anchors, a hook, wartime fence

posts, with one end in a spiral for the threading of barbed wire."[27] Jarman also erected obelisk-like stones on sands, assembled garden forks in unexpected ways. In this way, he seemed to try to contain the abject, unharmonizable and the fragmentary aspects of the environment.

These garden artifices also provided havens for all kinds of plants, which indulged themselves in occupying any possible space and flourished uninhibitedly. It was a strange mixture of the natural and the industrial, which now formed the most up-to-date version of "nature." These sculptures connected the garden with the landscape not only by integrating the plants that grew on it, but also through the use of objects that were almost exclusively found in the area. However, they also retained a sense of alienation in that these materials were produced, used, and then abandoned, a symptom of industrial society. They constantly reminded the viewer of the fact that nature had been irreversibly altered, and the boundary between the natural and the artificial was impossible to define, if not entirely dissolved. In this way Jarman put the plants in a dynamic dialogue to these industrial objects rather than surrendering one to another. To embrace the nature of modern time is to give up the binary opposition between the natural and the artificial; to acknowledge the true face of nature is to admit its very opposite—its negation.

On close examination, they displayed the very uncanny character that was typical of the abject. With its *objet trouvé* style, they had no pretense of covering up their materiality as used objects that had not been, or could not be, recycled; they were excrements of the environment. Looking at them would be like confronting, with disgust, some *memento mori* from our lives, full of dirt and signs of decay, stigma of mortality of the body. What contributed most to their disturbingly uncanny effect was perhaps the fact that these used objects had now lost all frames of reference. They were outcast that could not be appropriated in any system of meaning. What made it worse was that they helplessly remained in the environment, never having any hope of getting out.

Žižek talks about treating trash as an aesthetic object on an elementary level: "a true ecologist should not admire pure nature, trees and so on, which are there before we use them and that can still be part of our technological exploitative universe. The true spiritual change is to develop, if you want, a kind of emotional attachment to, or to find meaning in, useless objects."[28] The example he gives is the Romantic ruins. But Jarman's sculptures are better examples than Žižek could have envisioned.

CURIOSITY VS. KITSCH

At the beginning of this essay I spoke of two meanings of kitsch. Now I would like to turn to the second meaning: a mechanism that aims at manipulating the viewer's emotional reactions. I have interpreted Jarman's sculptures in the light of the abject. But there is a fundamental difference between the abject in itself and the artistic representation of it. The representation as such has a tendency to shock, upset, and offend the viewer. The offense can be either political or religious, and depends heavily on its context. For example, works like Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* that is (supposedly) made of tins filled with feces, aim at disgusting the viewer, whereas the use of human corpses and dead fetuses in artworks like Zhu Yu's *Pocket Theology* is considered not only degenerate, obscene, and cruel, but also politically threatening. On the other hand, Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a photograph depicting a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist's urine, targets religion. All these works share the common insulting language that produces an effect very close to the aesthetic category of the sublime. It can be understood as a reaction against another category—the beautiful.

In the classic formulation of these two concepts—Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, we learn that Burke defines the beautiful in relation to pleasure, and the sublime in relation to pain and fear. The sublime subordinates and overpowers the subject by a disproportionate vastness that far exceeds the subject's grasp, and excites fear. This also plays a key role in art that conveys an environmental concern, for example, Hollywood disaster movies, or artworks that bluntly expose environmental traumas caused by irresponsible human activities. And now we can also add artworks that focus on the abjectness of the ecological system.

The beautiful is the opposite. It is characterized by balanced proportion and scale between the perceiving subject and the object. The subject is in a somewhat privileged position where it can comfortably accommodate and appropriate the object within its own scale, and enjoy a familiar, homely, secure, and stable feeling. In environmental art, it comes close to that kind of touristic vignettes which reduce nature to cozy objects of commodification.

But the ecological sublime or abject approach may not be a better alternative. These artworks are not only deliberately shocking and disgusting, but also carry a very strong expression that directly engages the viewer on a psychological and even physical level; both are the most private aspect of one's experience. In this way the "appreciation" of these artworks becomes pathological. The viewer's reaction would be inevitably predictable. This is the sublime at its most abject moment. The artist who utilizes such a language occupies a position similar to the inspection house of a panopticon. He or she can observe and predict the viewer's feelings, then effectively direct him or her to a certain ideology; they are manipulators of feelings, inspectors of our private lives, and potentially dangerous tyrants. Kitsch is no stranger to totalitarianisms from Nazism to Communism, who are all great manipulators of this kind. And if we accept the fact that emotional manipulation is

another facet of kitsch, then these sublime and shocking artworks, by challenging the beautiful, fall from one type of kitsch into another.

A third alternative is found again in Burke's treatise. In the opening chapter, Burke picks up "novelty" and "curiosity" as a step toward what for him are obviously the more significant aesthetic categories. But I would like to contest the valorization of the beautiful and the sublime over the curious in the context of the abject—kitsch and environmental art.

In Burke's account,

> [t]he first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind, is Curiosity. By curiosity, I mean whatever desire we have for, or whatever pleasure we take in, novelty. [...] curiosity is the most superficial of all the affections; it changes its object perpetually, it has an appetite which is very sharp, but very easily satisfied; and it has always an appearance of giddiness, restlessness, and anxiety. Curiosity, from its nature, is a very active principle; it quickly runs over the greatest part of its objects, and soon exhausts the variety which is commonly to be met with in nature; the same things make frequent returns, and they return with less and less of any agreeable effect. In short, the occurrences of life, by the time we come to know it a little, would be incapable of affecting the mind with any other sensations than those of loathing and weariness, if many things were not adapted to affect the mind by means of other powers besides novelty in them, and of other passions besides curiosity in ourselves.[29]

This passage outlines some interesting characteristics of curiosity as a particular state of mind. Stumbling upon the ready-made curiosities in nature, our minds become active, exhaustive, indiscriminate, fleeting, changeable, giddy, and restless. When repeated, curious objects cease to be novel, and become their own negation. They would soon weary and ultimately numb our minds, thus exhausting its power. For Burke, curiosity is not only a preliminary step, but a primitive stage; we seek new types of curiosities for a while, but ultimately we will need to use pain or pleasure to sustain our passions.

But for me curiosity is a state of in-betweenness that we do not have to leave. It is suspension, undecidedness, middle ground. It is not quite graspable not because of its vastness, but because of its instability and elusiveness. It can be found in nature, but it either is in constant transition, or slightly deviates from the norm that one would expect of nature, thus making itself uncanny. In terms of emotional response, curious artworks make it possible for us to avoid the perils of both the beautiful and the sublime.

Here lies the significance of Jarman's sculptures and his garden project. There is a sense of arbitrariness, playfulness, and irony in these works. They defy both traps precisely by following the vein of curiosity. There is indeed abjectness here, but no strong expression that incites pathological disgust.

His project suspends judgment, and helps us do the same. His approach can be regarded as a combination of abject art and curiosity. Its abjectness bluntly exposes the reality of today's environment; but its language of curiosity eludes the temptation of emotional manipulation.

CONCLUSION: THE LIMIT OF REPRESENTATION

Art that aims at shocking the audience no longer retains the effect it used to have. A democratic, market-oriented society has picked all its thorns, and safely secured this type of art's place within its system. Ironically, the very fact that such a challenge as *Merda d'artista* and *Piss Christ* is possible at all, that such a provocative act is not banned, but allowed to come into being so as to cause controversy and be criticized, already diminishes its power. This is especially the case in today's democratic society: *Piss Christ* might indeed hurt certain people's feelings. But it is not dangerous; it would never lead to a *coup d'état* or any profound and radical change, no matter socially or politically because in a society that acknowledges free speech, art takes up far less burden than in a totalitarian society. The democratic society already has an effective built-in mechanism to ensure that certain "scandalous art" exists, yet poses no threat to the system, but actually contributes to the overall impression that this system really encourages free speech. We also should not forget that such artworks have a ruthless and persistent moral imperative that requires their viewers to *conceptually* leave the comfort zone. And by so doing they become as cruel and unrealistic as Maoism, and will end up being highbrow, idealizing, and narcissistic solipsism.

At worst, both a democratic and a totalitarian state would still be happy to make use of it for their own sake when necessary, because it always has its impacts that can help—to borrow Adorno's formulation again—"deceive people about their true situation, to transfigure their existence, to allow intentions that suit some powers or other to appear to them in a fairy-tale glow,"[30] and delay any real change in, for example, the way we deal with the environment.

This is at least one of the reasons why neither touristic miniatures of nature, nor disaster movies, nor abject art manages to stage a coup and cause real changes in environmental issues. The politics of representation becomes a problem that we need to consider before proceeding to talk about what kind of art can help us bring forth changes. Jarman's garden project certainly has not achieved this goal, either. No one would believe that his art can effect any practical change. And indeed it is highly unlikely that this was Jarman's intention. But at least it questions, unsettles, and dismantles the status quo in a gentle way, treats the viewers as individuals, respects their individual abilities to sense rather than imposing a predetermined stimulus-response struc-

ture, and leaves them with ample space to reflect. By refraining from manipulation, Jarman's work reminds us that even with good intention, environmental art should not allow itself to fall victim to kitsch.

NOTES

1. Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 436.
3. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, eds. *Queering the Non/Human* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 4.
4. Greg Garrard, "How Queer Is Green?" *Configurations* 18, no.1 (2010): 73-96.
5. Slavoj Žižek, "Ecology," in *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Astra Taylor (New York and London: The New Press, 2009), 167.
6. "Kitsch," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100039343 (accessed July 1, 2013).
7. Hermann Broch, "Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches: Ein Vortrag," in *Kitsch: Texte und Theorien*, eds. Ute Dettmar and Thomas Küpper (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007), 214–26.
8. Theodor W. Adorno, "Kitsch." In *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 501–5.
9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Ascombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 20–21.
10. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 248.
11. Ibid., 253.
12. James S. Hans, "Kundera's Laws of Beauty," in *Milan Kundera*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 75–92.
13. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 223.
14. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1989), 189.
15. Ibid., 189.
16. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.
17. Žižek, "Ecology," 157.
18. Ibid., 162.
19. Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman* (London: Vintage Books, 1992), 1–2.
20. Derek Jarman, *Derek Jarman's Garden, with Photographs by Howard Sooley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 12.
21. "Welcome." Dungeness National Nature Reserve. http://www.dungeness-nnr.co.uk/ (accessed July 1, 2013).
22. Howard Sooley, "Derek Jarman's Hideaway," *The Observer* 16 February 2008. http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/feb/17/gardens (accessed July 1, 2013).
23. Jarman, *Garden*, 12.
24. Jarman, *Modern Nature*, 8.
25. Jarman, *Garden*, 63.
26. Ibid., 61.
27. Christopher Lloyd, "The Jarman Garden Experience," in *Derek Jarman: A Portrait*, with introduction by Roger Wollen (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 152.
28. Žižek, *Examined Life*, 163.

29. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.
30. Adorno, "Kitsch," 501–5.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adorno, Theodor W. "Kitsch." In *Essays on Music*, translated by Susan H. Gillespie, 501–5. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Broch, Hermann. "Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches: Ein Vortrag." In *Kitsch: Texte und Theorien*, edited by Ute Dettmar and Thomas Küpper, 214–26. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007.

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Garrard, Greg. "How Queer Is Green?" *Configurations* 18, no.1 (2010): 73 –96.

Giffney, Noreen and Myra J. Hird, eds. *Queering the Non/Human*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008.

Hans, James S. "Kundera's Laws of Beauty." In *Milan Kundera*, edited by Harold Bloom, 75–92. Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.

Jarman, Derek. *Derek Jarman's Garden, with Photographs by Howard Sooley*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2009.

———. *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman*. London: Vintage Books, 1992.

"Kitsch." In *Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by Angus Stevenson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100039343 (accessed July 1, 2013).

Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1989.

———. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, translated by Michael Henry Heim. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.

Lloyd, Christopher. "The Jarman Garden Experience." In *Derek Jarman: A Portrait*, with introduction by Roger Wollen, 147–52. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.

Sooley, Howard. "Derek Jarman's Hideaway." *The Observer* 16 February 2008. http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/feb/17/gardens (accessed July 1, 2013) .

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Ascombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.

"Welcome." *Dungeness National Nature Reserve*. http://www.dungeness-nnr.co.uk/ (accessed July 1, 2013).

Žižek, Slavoj. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London and New York: Verso, 2008.

———. "Ecology." In *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*, edited by Astra Taylor, 155-183. New York and London: The New Press, 2009.