



Ecocriticism, Ecomimesis, and the Romantic Roots of Modern Ethical Consumption

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Abstract

Increased awareness of the topic of environmental sustainability has prompted development in literary studies of the research area known as ecocriticism, which studies the relationship of literature and the environment. One of the prime areas of ecocritical research is the British Romantic period and its embrace of nature. This research is also known as green Romanticism or Romantic ecology. Timothy Morton's 2007 book *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* is a noteworthy critical analysis of the field. This article reviews Morton's analysis, especially his concept of ecomimesis and the vocabulary he employs to outline its attributes. It also situates ecomimesis in the larger field of media studies. Finally, the article takes up Morton's critique of the relationship between Romanticism and consumerism to suggest another area of research: the Romantic roots of modern ethical consumption.

Introduction

Growing public awareness in recent years of the importance of global ecological sustainability has opened up new research areas for a broad range of academic disciplines. One of the most robust is ecocriticism, the study of literature and its relation to the environment. British Romanticism has been especially fertile ground for ecocritical investigation, where it is also known as 'green Romanticism' or 'Romantic ecology'. Kevin Hutchings surveys the ecocritical field, its primary authors, and historical and contemporary issues as they pertain to British Romantic studies in a 2007 review article published in *Literature Compass* that is required reading on the subject. Besides providing a general description of the concept of ecocriticism and its Romantic context, Hutchings maps out current research areas such as recent scientific discourses on nature, ecofeminist philosophy, animal welfare ethics, and various aspects of ecopolitics. He also discusses emerging trends.

A primary topic of green Romanticism is the representation in poetry and other texts of humankind's position vis-à-vis the natural world. This is generally expressed in meditations on 'Nature' as found, for example, in the work of William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and other writers

of the period, particularly as it serves as a respite from burgeoning industrialization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Great Britain and the perceived concomitant harmful effects on individuals, society, and the environment. These examples have been used to ground critical analysis in the present, although as Hutchings notes, there is the risk of anachronism in presupposing evidence of ecological thinking, properly called, before the historical fact, especially in scientific discourse (176). Timothy Morton's book *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* engages Romantic ecocriticism with an eye toward exposing its assumptions and more importantly its shortcomings, and to thereby strengthen its usefulness in the long run. This essay offers an exegesis of Morton's often complex, though relatively compact, narrative.¹ It also extends the debate into an area where ecocriticism has sometimes been seen as wanting: the modern concern for human social justice that also has origins in Romanticism.

Reading Ecology without Nature

The thesis of *Ecology without Nature* is clearly stated at the outset: 'the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art' (1). Of particular concern is the conception of nature found in many primary-source texts around which green Romanticism has arisen, although it can be argued that it is the contemporary interpretations of these texts that are more at issue than the original expressions themselves. The 'problem' of ecocriticism is its putting nature on a pedestal, casting it as the pristine other of modern civilization and of the autonomous individual self, as something that exists 'over there' and away from the supposed contaminating effects of humankind, collective and individual. This view of nature is shot through with the picturesque, Morton claims; it is an inauthentic postcard beauty that is all too easily commoditized (in ecotourism, for example). For Morton, the aestheticization of nature is similar to how patriarchy claims to admire the feminine and yet controls it by circumscribing its field of action. It is not nature per se, but the aestheticizing of it, i.e., the keeping it at a remove, which needs reevaluation.

The first step is to recognize the aesthetic forms that underlie much historical and contemporary ecological writing. Morton proposes the notion of 'ecomimesis' to describe the repertoire of techniques that attempts to provide a transparent, which is to say an unmediated, view of nature. Ecomimesis is problematic in that it is essentially a form of denial. It is not unlike what Raymond Williams intends by the term 'the green language' of the Romantic pastoral, the evocations of 'birds, trees, effects of weather and light', etc. that are at once objectively generalized and subjectively particular, paeans to an eternal nature that are in truth elegies for a once-grounded way of life melting into air (127–41). Deconstructing the different strategies of ecomimesis is *Ecology without Nature's* principal aim. A major inspiration is Theodor W. Adorno's negative dialectics, though Morton extends

it into areas where the Frankfurt School high modernist would no doubt demur. Morton calls upon Adorno to expose the ideological position of the natural in ecocriticism as well as of the ideal self that apprehends it. In particular, Morton takes up the critique of what Adorno calls 'identity thinking', the internal subject's rule over the external object, in the Cartesian split between mind and body, which proceeds through reifying concepts of instrumental reason. In this case, it is the abstract construction of nature as something distinct from culture, rather than its ineffable enveloping totality, that according to Adorno set Enlightenment positivism down the ill-fated road to nature domination and ultimately fascism. In addition to literature, the book considers a wide range of creative production from the Romantic period to the present, including installation and performance art, the ambient and techno forms of popular music, and Hollywood film.

To accomplish the deconstruction, Morton examines ecomimesis from both its objective and subjective sides. The book's first chapter sets out to do the former by analyzing methods of signifying Transcendental Nature, the virgin 'over there' of the objective as typically constructed through ecological writing. In its attempts to capture the objective natural other, ecomimesis continually relies on subjectively constructed erasures. The second chapter addresses the Transcendental Ego, which in *Ecology without Nature* takes the form, appropriately enough, of the 'beautiful soul', the melding of beauty and morality in the ideal of unsullied subjectivity protected from debasement of the profane world, whose expressive apogee is found in Romantic texts, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Nowelle Héloïse* and Goethe's *Willhelm Meister*. Ecomimesis seeks refuge in a virtuosic ideal of selfhood, but it cannot escape the corporeal and communal relations of being-in-the-world. Against the bad faith of much current ecocriticism, Morton proposes what he terms a 'dark ecology', or what I might term 'brown Romanticism', as a way of more authentically practicing environmental aesthetics, politics, and ethics that embrace the actually existing world in all its toxicity.

As Morton notes, the Romantic concept of natural beauty emerged in Western culture around the same time as the aesthetic category of art in the modern sense (22). Both were seen, and are still seen, as ways of healing that which modernity has damaged. In addition to despoliation of the environment under spreading industrial production was the perceived loss of traditional bonds of community and rising alienation with the division of labor and separation of the spheres of production and consumption as the mercantile system evolved into global market capitalism. Many of these disruptions were experienced significantly and early on in Great Britain, with many of them foreshadowing conditions that now extend worldwide (R. Williams 2). This helps explain the continued resonance of British Romanticism and contemporary interest in ecocritical interpretation. Where much ecocriticism focuses on content analysis, with significant work

delving into social history and identity politics, Morton adopts a more formalist approach.

The central feature of ecomimesis, according to Morton, is the 'poetics of ambience', constructions of environment purporting to efface the aesthetic frame that in fact depend upon it (33). On the one hand is what Morton terms 'strong' ecomimesis, evoking the here-and-now of writing through conceits such as the phrase 'as I write this' that acknowledge textuality as the environment of authorial expression. On the other hand is 'weak' ecomimesis, which conjures the environment outside the text, through detailed descriptions of locality, climate, time, and suchlike, to illustrate a direct link between writing and what it signifies. Ambient poetics can be found in other artistic mediums besides writing: Ludwig von Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony*, the 'Pastoral', literally translates *Sturm und Drang* into the tonal roiling of the Thunderstorm movement, which is resolved in the return to the F major home key as bucolic harmony reemerges in the finale. Strong or weak, through the poetics of ambience, ecomimesis conveys a sense of 'atmosphere' that permeates almost all nature writing and its ecocritical forms of analysis (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 34).

Representing the Objective

Ambient poetics gestures toward the surrounding world through six primary elements, usually in some combination. Morton terms the foremost of these 'rendering', following composer and theorist Michel Chion (*Ecology without Nature* 35). As with continuity techniques that ensure consistent lighting, mis-en-scene, and characterization throughout a cinematic production, rendering imbues ecomimesis with a sense of organic unity, a verisimilitude (i.e., an *appearance* of reality) that glosses over the material truth of the text as a construction of diverse parts. The second, the 'medial', reworks Roman Jakobson's formalist linguistic analysis of the sign's phatic function, the way in which the medium of a particular signification sets up the relationship between addresser and addressee, establishing the point of contact between subjective expression and objective perception (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 37). The medial functions, according to Morton, 'to reinforce the illusion that the dimension of reading is the same as inscription: that reader and writer inhabit the same dimension, the same *place*' (38, original italics). But as elementary semiotics teaches, signification is in essence a process of displacement: the presence of the sign marks the absence of the thing to which refers, including the writer's encoded thoughts. Similarly, like the musical term from which it is derived, the third, the 'timbral' seeks to disclose a material correspondence between signifier and signified, the inherent dankness of peat, for example. The problem in this case is also semiotic, that the relationship between signifier and signified is both abstract and arbitrary. Moreover, it exists only in the mind and is therefore subjective, not an intrinsically objective attribute.

Where the first three elements of ambience emphasize environmental qualities that diminish authorial presence, the fourth, the 'Aeolian', seemingly eliminates it altogether. Like the ancient Greek harp that registers the wind passing over its strings, the Aeolian is embedded in the very form of ecomimesis – in the meter and typographical arrangements that determine the structure of a poem on the page, in the unintended background noise, such as tape hiss, of recorded music, or in the acoustic effects in a film, the sources of which are not visible on screen. It is in some sense the uncanny, that which is familiar yet strange. But more so, it is the suspension of disbelief with respect to the material effects of rendering, an illusion that the sign is indeed the thing itself (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 41–3).

'Tone' is what 'accounts materially for that slippery word *atmosphere*' (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 43). Tone is taken in the conventional literary sense, what Raymond Williams terms a structure of feeling. It also denotes the musical sense, the quality of sound an instrument creates through vibration. Tone is further a characteristic of setting, i.e., an environment. Besides space, tone factors time into ecomimesis by opening up narrative ambience in the broadest sense, in what Adorno terms the 'immanent processual quality' of art, the technical apparatus by which the aesthetic transmigrates into living experience (175–6). It also references the body, as in muscle tone, the awareness of which environmental art is often concerned to heighten. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of chiasm – the fleshly interface of subjective consciousness and objective world – is philosophically related to this aspect of tone. The precursor of Romanticism, Sentimentalism, reveals the black hole of subjectivity that tone attempts to escape. But like the Kantian sublime, deliberations on tone drive perception of the external world inward (46).

The final ecomimetic element, the 're-mark', is taken from Jacques Derrida (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 48). The re-mark is a gesture that presents itself as such and in so doing announces the distinction between background and foreground upon which ambience (and consequently ecomimesis) depends. The letters on a page distinguish the significant from the paper substrate in a way that a random smudge does not. 'A re-mark differentiates between *space* and *place*', Morton writes (49, original italics). It does this by adding subjective value to otherwise inanimate objective materiality. And as Adorno notes, attempts to comprehend the nonidentical (material reality outside Enlightenment rationality) always collapse back into identity, thus keeping it ever beyond control (168–9).

The elements of ecomimesis operate in two modes: ecorhapsody and ecodidacticism (Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 54–63). Ecorhapsody is basically Plato's notion of mimesis as a form of divinely inspired madness (as opposed to the rational thought of philosophy) that in this instance channels the natural environment, rendering the medium transparent. As with the green language, ecorhapsody makes the generalized particular. Take the opening lines of Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude*:

Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze,
 A visitant that while it fans my cheek
 Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
 From the green fields, and yon azure sky. (495)

It is in 'this gentle breeze' that 'blessing' resides and not another, though joy is a universal structure of feeling. The environmental tone is experienced bodily but at the same time it is transcendent; it is not simply the object of perception but an agent. The poet renders himself as the Aeolian, a self-effaced medium in both the mystical and the aesthetic sense. Ecorhapsody is hence a form of weak ecomimesis, a denial of aesthetic distance.

Ecodidacticism is ecomimesis in an instrumental capacity. If ecorhapsody takes its cue from Plato's conception of mimesis (which he denigrates as deceptive vis-à-vis the truth of Ideal Form), then ecodidacticism takes up Aristotle's response to his teacher by defending its ameliorative purpose. Imitation, Aristotle notes in *Poetics*, is the mechanism by which humankind learns the value of the true and the good. Similarly, ecodidacticism presents 'lessons' to be found in nature. One of the paradoxes of ecodidacticism is that it takes the noninstrumental essence of true, i.e., unadulterated, nature as instructive, that is, as an extrinsic value. This mirrors the purposeless purpose of the aesthetic, returning the object lesson as it were to the subject.

In all these ways, ecomimesis professes to undo subject/object duality, the foundation in identity thinking of the subject's desire to control nature that has had disastrous environmental and social results. And yet by its myriad strategies of transparency, its attempts to dissolve representation and return to the thing itself, ecomimesis lays the ground for its own deconstruction. The thing, nature, is a fiction. It functions as a sign, the semiotic other of society and in particular of modern capitalist society. It is always already the absence of that to which it refers. It is in Morton's terms an 'ideological fantasy' (*Ecology without Nature* 67).

Positioning the Subject

If the objective construction of nature by ecomimesis is just that: a construction, then so too might its subjective side be similarly created. This is particularly relevant to the goal of rethinking environmental aesthetics in that artworks, as human-made things, presume a creator-subject. (Even the readymade – Marcel Duchamp's urinal, John Cage's four minutes and 33 seconds of silence – depends on the claim 'This is art' put forth by an artist-subject.) Morton's analysis peels back form and content to expose the subject position of contemporary ecological thought, which bears the residue of Romanticism, as do so many aspects of modern Western culture.

Environmental subjectivity cannot be understood without recognizing the formative effects of global capitalism on relations of space and time. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams outlines the stresses on life in

Great Britain of enclosing the rural commons, turning once open space into private property, and rising urban industrialization, transforming autonomous craft work into alienated wage labor, as reflected in Romantic poetry and other period literature. Contemporary Romantic ecology, in Morton's view, romanticizes the historical resistance to nascent global capital and then uses this mythology to perpetuate identity thinking, often in the form of particularisms of space and, to a lesser extent, time (*Ecology without Nature* 92–4). This can be seen in preservationist myopia that wants to keep certain theoretically pristine wildernesses perpetually isolated 'over there', hence deferring the need to confront more pervasive capitalist exploitation of land and labor (which go hand-in-hand) in the here and now. Moreover, recapping an earlier work, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic*, Morton establishes the link, often overlooked in ecocriticism, between the emerging global economy and modern consumerism ushered in during the Romantic period, in which ambient poetics prominently figures in the form of vivid descriptions of imported aromas and suchlike.

To see how contemporary ecocriticism adapts Romantic ideals into its conception of subjectivity, Morton develops an inventory of environments that provide contexts for the individual within the generally dissembled form of global capital. As with ecomimetic constructions of the objective, these subjective backgrounds also propose to operate on transparency but rely on aesthetic distance, in this case to keep the Ideal subject self-contained. A primary concept in need of deconstruction in this regard is holism, which is ambience in another guise (*Ecology without Nature* 96). The five environmental concepts Morton analyzes – world, state, system, field, and body – seem to propose the means for dissolving subjectivity but are instead means of phenomenologically bracketing it and keeping it at a remove.

An existential sense of holistic environment is embedded in the concept 'world'. As experienced, world is the plenitude of being down to the minutest self-awareness of the surrounding environment. In art, world is what a work discloses, the structural whole of existential possibility. As Martin Heidegger writes, 'To be a work means to set up a world' (170). That is, it opens up the broad horizon of metaphysical being. Yet as Morton points out, Romantic art and its ecological heirs often focus on a particular place, a particular moment, and a particular people in constructing the notion of world. In Heidegger's essay on the origin of the work of art, it is the peasant earth disclosed by the work shoes in a painting by Van Gogh (162–4). From that soil grew the seeds of German nationalism as represented in Werner Peiner's 1933 painting, *German Earth*, influenced by Romantic landscape artist Caspar David Friedrich and one of the most broadly circulated images of National Socialist art. And as Morton notes: 'Nationalism has always appealed to the sensory world, generating a specific national tone' (*Ecology without Nature* 96). In this way, the particularism that runs through much of conventional ecological thought risks giving way to fascism, capitalism's most regressive form. It is also a deferral in that a creator-subject

in fact sets up the work that sets up the world and is thus the true driving force of it.

In positioning the subject in a more political sense, particularism finds a venue in the nation-state. As Benedict Anderson shows, nationalism is an implicitly subjective condition. What he terms the 'imagined community' of the nation-state is a mediated effect originally of 'print capitalism', the standardizing of language, discourse, and institutions as a result of technological reproducibility, which situates holistic identity within individual subjectivity. Romantic literature was an important tool in expanding the imagined community of Great Britain, as it was the consumerism Morton identifies as also emerging during the period (*Ecology without Nature; Poetics of Spice*; see also Campbell; Sussman). During the Romantic period there was much anxiety over the threat to domestic purity, both of the nation and the home, as Great Britain became increasingly enmeshed in the global market (Sussman). Ecological reality has since transcended national boundaries, following the logic of capital mobility.

The concepts of 'system' and 'field' are related in their presumption of scientific objectivity. Hence they would appear less susceptible to the more Romantic pitfalls of conventional ecocriticism. The former casts nature as working like classical economics, a network of exchanges seeking equilibrium in which humanity is simply one, arguably expendable, node. The latter operates under rules of physics, an array of vectors that renders the subjective all but inconceivable. However, neither resolves the subject/object problem of identity thinking, Morton argues, they simply obscure it (*Ecology without Nature* 103, 105).

In recent years the body has emerged as a mediating factor in its own right, in some respects supplanting the aesthetic in negotiating between internal and external, psychological and physical, subjective and objective. The relatively new discipline of somaesthetics (Greek *soma*, body + *aisthesis*, sensory perception), for example, proposes to augment subject-centered aesthetic judgment with the cultivation of bodily faculties (Shusterman). The effect is to reduce the experiential environment to an 'in-between' place that provides subjectivity with a gateway into world/state/system/field. And as with other holistic constructions, the body as a concept is a fallacy, Morton asserts: there is no such thing as 'the body', a generalized something not marked by gender, race, or physical capacity (*Ecology without Nature* 107, original italics). (To this list should be added, at the very least, the category of class and, in the eyes of some contemporary perspectives, species.) Specific bodies, not all of them human, are threatened by pollution and with exploitation, bound by physical and mental limitations, also comprising other bodies in the form of microorganisms, and not distinct from nature but part of it, so that there is no in-between per se but a multiplicity of relationships. It is against this background that ecological subjectivity must be examined. The model Morton proposes is the 'beautiful soul' of Romanticism.

Morton appropriates the concept of the beautiful soul from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, although its lineage can be traced to the ancient Greeks, who equated the beautiful and the good as inherent, natural qualities of noble things and noble people (Norton). The concept of moral beauty persists in medieval Scholasticism with the incorporation of Neoplatonic philosophy in reconciling the 'truths' of church theology and scientific knowledge. With the stirrings of free market capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, moral beauty participates in the rejection of radical Enlightenment of which Romanticism is another manifestation. Robert Norton identifies three stages in the genealogy of the beautiful soul: the English moral philosophy of Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, and the Cambridge Platonists, German Pietism (where the term 'beauty of the soul' initially appears), and finally Romanticism itself (see also Campbell; Taylor). Modern aesthetics separates judgments of beauty and morality, although even Immanuel Kant, in privileging natural beauty over art beauty as the genuine mark of moral distinction in *Critique of Judgment*, retains at least some residue of the beautiful soul in his thinking (§59).

Taking his cue from Hegel's critique, Morton equates the beautiful soul with the modern consumerism he elsewhere demonstrates Romanticism helped integrate into the capitalist system (*Poetics of Spice*; see also Campbell).² The beautiful soul is the inverse of beautiful nature, which green Romanticism reifies as the ambient 'over there'. In truth, the beautiful soul constructs beautiful nature as part of realizing its own autonomous perfection. The seeming contradiction of holding satisfaction at bay as elemental to consumer desire is central to sociologist Colin Campbell's idea of autonomous, self-illusory imaginative hedonism – beautiful soul syndrome by another if less poetic name. It is not *having* but *wanting* that is the animating spirit of modern consumerism, originating in the Romantic period. Taste is the guiding force of consumer desire as it is the aesthetic, a faculty Kant defines as residing within the subject. Beautiful nature is the beautiful soul window-shopping, seeing its reflection in the medial translucence separating it from the object of desire.

Toward a New Environmental Aesthetics

Morton explores avenues for escaping the beautiful soul's recursivity in the concluding chapter of *Ecology without Nature*. It is art, specifically green Romanticism and its progeny, that initially presented the problem and art is best positioned to point the way forward. Throughout the book, Morton takes ecomimesis to task for erasures that defer subject-object dualism. The alternate tack, highlighting disjuncture and difference, thus becomes an effective strategy for a recombinant, that is to say genuine, environmental aesthetics. Specifically, techniques of juxtaposition – collage, montage, and what in popular music is known as the 'mash up' – incorporate fragments of empirical reality into works that embody the fragile and contingent character

of the ruined, polluted world. But even more important than engaging in simple indexical signification, pointing to trash as the trace of a trashed environment, is keeping the sutures visible, focusing attention on the gaping wounds that have yet to be healed, maintaining the gap between subject and object to foreclose on identity thinking. The true ecocritical artwork is a cyborg, a Frankenstein's monster of form and content, of dead material and cognitive meaning, which refuses the organic unity of seamless rendering.

By the same token, the aesthetic convention of good taste must also be abandoned. On one level, this means embracing the abject as part of the artistic environment as much as the sublime and the picturesque, brown ecology as a rejoinder to green Romanticism. As Morton writes: 'Ecological art is duty bound to hold the slimy in view' (*Ecology without Nature* 159). Toxic effluent, airborne particulates, and global warming do not recognize boundaries between civilized development and nature preserve. But it further relates to aesthetic hierarchies as they emerged from the Romantic period and subsequently morphed into the Modernist distinction between avant-garde and kitsch that Adorno, among others, helped define. In addition to the avant-garde's spirit as understood by Adorno, namely spleen, the bilious melancholy that makes art indigestible according to precepts of good taste, Morton advocates the excess of kitsch, the accursed share of the culture industry with which capitalism has littered the physical and mental environment (*Ecology without Nature* 150–60). Here, Morton's insight is twofold: revealing the Romantic residue in Adorno and recognizing that both avant-garde and kitsch are united as alienated forms under the rule of capital.

Finally is the question of immanence, the recognition of subjectivity as situated within the objective and as constituting the opening through which to comprehend it, however circumspectly. In this regard, place, i.e., the environment, is revealed as indeterminate, an ambience that is carried along with rather than moved through. Surprisingly, it is Descartes who provides the model in Morton's eyes for best understanding the self in relation to place: the cogito – 'I think therefore I am [here, now]' – presents subject and object as simultaneously co-present. The conundrum arises in that there is no apparent reason why it should be so and not otherwise. Cartesian doubt is the kernel from which all critical theory originates, including ecocriticism as Morton would have it.

Ecomimesis and Transparency

'Ecomimesis aims for immediacy', Morton observes (*Ecology without Nature* 151). That is, it seeks to disintermediate the mechanisms of representation in order to return to the thing itself, nature in this case. A presumption of media transparency – looking through the sign to the referent, taking content as the 'real', and seeing the conveying apparatus as distortion to be mitigated if not eliminated – underlies much media theory up to Marshall McLuhan. It is implicit in discussions of the public sphere from the Enlightenment

pamphleteers to John Stuart Mill to Jürgen Habermas, for example. While ecomimesis is endemic to Romantic media production, including visual art, music, and literature, it actually preexists it.

Immediacy as a representational form, 'looking through' vs. 'looking at', has its origins in Western culture in the Renaissance with the development of linear and atmospheric perspective (Bolter and Grusin; Panofsky). Before these inventions, representation was, to use the terminology of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, 'hypermediated', that is, imbued with awareness of form as a material construction.³ The culmination of ecomimesis in visual art is arguably Impressionist painting, in which the artist is rendered as the Aeolian, a conduit for recording the instant of pure perception, the threshold between subject and object. It is around this moment historically that painting begins its turn back to hypermediation, resulting in Cubism and the invention of collage. It is Cubism that subsequently provides McLuhan's initial insight that the medium is the message (13). Ecomimesis continues to hold sway in Hollywood's fetish for special effects and in new media in areas such as virtual reality and immersive environments. All of this does not take away from Morton's deconstruction of ecomimesis so much as suggest opportunities to extend it into other areas of art and culture, as *Ecology without Nature* begins to do.

Romanticism and Ethical Consumption

A thread that runs throughout Morton's book is the critique of modern consumerism. Studying the Romantic origins of these practices offers avenues for expanding on issues *Ecology without Nature* raises and for potentially amending misanthropic impulses sometimes associated with contemporary ecological thinking. As exemplified by the green language, one aspect of British Romanticism resisted the encroachments of industrial capitalism, including burgeoning consumerism. Yet other elements, in some cases inadvertently, helped set the stage for the capitalist market system and thus consumer society to ultimately prevail. Morton has written about the luxury commodity trade in particular in this regard (*Poetics of Spice*; see also Sombart). An area that has been fairly well studied by others is the position of women in the expansion of market culture during the Romantic period in Great Britain, especially as consumers of mass-market fiction and as dreamers of mass-consumer desire (Campbell; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb). More recent research, generally from a feminist perspective, examines women's use of these means at hand to assert self-determination by managing consumption to express ethical concerns at a time when what E. P. Thompson terms the localized 'moral economy of provision' in England was declining and the global market system rising in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Micheletti; Sussman).

Most prominent of these efforts is the sugar boycott, which from the late 1700s to the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1833 protested

the integration of domestic economies, both national and household, into the system of global exchange and serves as a precursor to present-day forms of ethical consumption. Charlotte Sussman notes the moral and emotional influence of Sentimentalist, Gothic, and Romantic literature on female compassion for the oppressed and the consequences for consumption practices during the period in England. Detailed descriptions of the cruelties of slave existence in far-off colonies and its contaminating effects on produce imported into England fueled anxiety over and consumer resistance to food 'sweetened with Brother's Blood' (Coleridge 139). Among the literature are writings of Tobias Smollet, William Cowper, and Mary Wollstonecraft, in addition to narratives of ex-slaves such as Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince. More sublimated but inflected with anti-colonial sentiment nonetheless are novels by Sophia Lee, Charlotte Smith, and Jane Austen. All of these can be termed expressions of 'negative' ethical consumption, i.e., action in the form of refusal. Positive ethical consumption is found most notably in Josiah Wedgwood's ceramic medallion bearing the Antislavery Society motto 'Am I not a man? Am I not a brother?' that sold some 200,000 units in the form of pendants, brooches, music-box ornaments, and other bric-a-brac, from its initial issuance in 1787 to the abolition.

While the sugar boycott can be credited with fostering favorable public opinion for eliminating an especially abhorrent form of human oppression, there are those who assert the irony of its helping to usher in another form of inequality: the international system of exploitative wage labor. Eric Williams and C. L. R. James both claim that the abolition of British slavery is more directly attributable to the logic of capital than moral sentiment. According to this view, the development of global free trade dictated a mobile labor force and malleable environment more responsive to the needs of international flows of investment and commodities as part of the evolution of the modern world-system, rendering the slave plantation obsolete. Sussman identifies the market for sentimental literature depicting colonial exploitation as a type of consumer voyeurism, in essence an expression of beautiful soul syndrome, in lieu of direct political and economic engagement, and she takes note of its production as a different form of exploitation, in this case of female authors (184–7). Racist tendencies survived abolitionism to be transcribed from sentiment to genetics with the appearance of social Darwinism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Similarly, present-day green and blue consumerism, that is, consumption informed by ethical considerations of environmental consciousness and fair trade inspired by Romantic notions of beautiful nature and individual rights, make it possible to accommodate capitalist logic while maintaining a semblance of the self-contained purity of the beautiful soul. Rainforest Alliance, Ten Thousand Villages, Equal Exchange, SERRV, and other eco-friendly and fair trade organizations position, albeit unintentionally, the generally first-world consumer as the privileged other of the generally third-world producer in the same way that the subject is privileged over the object in

the identity thinking at the root of the environmental crisis. In truth, they are two sides of the same coin. As Morton writes: 'The immiseration of the worker is in parallel with ecological devastation' (*Ecology without Nature* 91). Indeed, it is unlikely that the problems of the exploitation of either people or the environment will be solved until the problems of capital are.

Short Biography

Vince Carducci works in cultural sociology, media studies, cultural criticism, and art criticism. His research interests include consumerism and the global system; visual culture; subjectivity, mediation, and public spheres; and hierarchies and distinctions of cultural production. He is currently studying the effects of morality and information on exchange relationships, historically and in contemporary society. Recent publications include entries on culture jamming for the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*, edited by Dale Southerton, and fair trade for *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by George Ritzer, 'Culture Jamming: A Sociological Perspective' in *Contemporary Readings in Sociology* (Pine Forge, 2008), and an essay on Tom Otterness in *A Sculpture Reader: Contemporary Sculpture Since 1980* (ISC, 2006). His essays and reviews have appeared in scholarly publications, such as *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *Logos*, and *Radical Society*, and many periodicals, including *Art & Australia*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Eye*, *Pop-Matters*, and *Sculpture*. He is an adjunct faculty member in liberal arts at College for Creative Studies in Detroit. He also coordinated the Cranbrook Academy of Art Critical Studies/Humanities Program for 2007–2008. He received a B.F.A. in art practice from Michigan State University and an M.A. in liberal studies from the New School for Social Research. He is completing a dissertation in sociology from the New School.

Notes

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¹ *Ecology without Nature* has been criticized for being too ready a bricolage of its sources (see, for example, Wilson), and it is true that it contains a dizzying array of theoretical perspectives and examples of cultural production in a scant 205 pages of main text, plus references. The discussion of the beautiful soul in particular deserves expanded treatment given the author's claim to its importance for his argument. On that topic, see Norton in the bibliography. However, the purpose of this essay is to help interested readers negotiate Morton's admittedly erudite text and suggest areas for further research. The reader may well appreciate that Morton's virtuosic proclivity for connecting disparate intellectual phenomena is, paradoxically enough, a transparent effect of the author's own thinking processes.

² This appropriation is somewhat of a gloss. Hegel's statement that the beautiful soul, mindful of its internal contradictions, 'pines away in consumption' refers to self-immolation not shopping (407). Hegel reverses Kant's privileging of nature over art as the site of pure aesthetic judgment in *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, asserting art's superiority to nature in its capacity to reveal Absolute

Spirit. Hegel's critique of the beautiful soul is similarly motivated. However, Morton's use of the beautiful soul as the ur-consumerist subjectivity is valid in connecting it with Sentimentalism and what Colin Campbell terms the Romantic ethic that informs the spirit of modern consumerism.³ Immediacy, in the sense used by Morton, is the exact term used by Bolter and Grusin as the opposite of hypermediacy in their dialectic of remediation, which tracks the development of media from the Renaissance to the present. Remediation is the process of one medium succeeding another, many times by making a claim of superior immediacy over its predecessor. Thus painting as a representation of nature refines the technique of perspective to a point where it is overtaken by photography, which claims superior immediacy through the removal of the artist's hand and its replacement by the mechanisms of lens, aperture, and film that more directly capture the image of a particular scene. According to Bolter and Grusin, immediacy is the prevalent media form of Western culture since the Renaissance. Hypermediacy openly acknowledges its mediated state, as evidenced in collage, montage, and the multiple frames and windows of a computer desktop or webpage. Ironically, this is actually a more immediate media experience than immediacy, which often requires substantial effort to sustain the illusion of reality.

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