Connected: A Return to Ecological Awareness in Traditional and Modern Media

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CONNECTED: A RETURN TO ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN MEDIA

by

Jacob Reese

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Department of Humanities
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Advisor: Christopher Oscarson

Honors Coordinator: Michael J Call
ABSTRACT

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Jacob Reese

Humanities Department

Interdisciplinary Humanities

This thesis responds to the claim that traditional literary forms and narrative structures have contributed to the global climate crisis by perpetuating anthropocentric viewpoints and reinforcing the modern fixation on progress in industrial cultures. Ecocritics argue that by creating an unrealistic separation between humans and their environment in their narratives, artists are allowing the ecologies and spaces which create a cohesive world to become a mere setting for the social or psychological human drama rather than serving as an integral part of the narrative. With these criticisms in mind, this thesis provides an analysis of three pieces of traditional and modern media—The Overstory (a novel), Still Life (a film), and The Witness (a video game)—in an attempt to find ways in which media, rather than perpetuating this sense of separation between the human and the natural world, can use new and experimental methods to encourage those engaging with the media to be mindful of the ways in which they are linked with those non-human entities which share their physical space. Of specific interest is the use of sensory language, spatial logic (directing the attention of the reader toward systems and
connections in the larger spaces of the world rather than only focusing on the cause and effect in social aspects of narrative), non-linearity, and the blending of foreground and background within these works which bring space and ecology into focus alongside the typical human dramas of conflict and progress to emphasize the inseparable connection between the human and their environment.
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This project turned out to be much larger than I had at first imagined and I wouldn’t have been able to complete it without the support of the wonderful people around me. I owe my gratitude to my wife EmmaLee for being loving, supportive, and forgiving as I spent weeks on end locked in the office doing research and writing from sunup to sundown. I am also indebted to my advisor Professor Christopher Oscarson for his help in refining my research question and giving invaluable insights throughout this entire process, to Professor Mike Call for his support and advice regarding this project and my other pursuits alongside it, and to Professor George Handley for being a thorough reader and providing feedback on my drafts along the way. I’m grateful to my family for believing in me and for supporting me in taking on large projects like this. Thank you for always encouraging me to do my best in my academic pursuits.

When all is said and done, this thesis is the product of my research in conversation with the various people around me and their loving network of support. We are ecological beings who rely on each other, and the production of this thesis was no exception. “Existence is always coexistence. No man is an island.”

Thank you,

- Jacob Reese
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Introduction

Ecocritics such as Amitav Gosh, Timothy Morton, Ursula Heise, Jennifer Fay, and others have expressed concerns with the industrial concept of progress, its influence on the culture and media that this ideology produces, and the human disregard for the natural world and the neglect of its care which can arise from this mindset. Described by Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” this concept of progress makes economic growth paramount to all else, including the possible repercussions on the environment surrounding those societies, as well as the larger global environment. Literary ecocritics also argue that the advent of the novel and other narrative literary forms have caused the perspectives from which humans view the natural world around them to become increasingly anthropocentric because they focus primarily on human drama and the socioeconomic norms of daily life.1 Fay argues that this shift has become increasingly rapid with the advent of the Great Acceleration—the rise of human activity beginning in the 1950s which began to drive the earth beyond its normal systemic variability—and the increasing use of natural resources to further technological progress which has accompanied it.2 She and other critics point to the rise of the novel as both a catalyst for and product of these cultural and societal changes through which humankind has become increasingly more concerned about societal and individual success than the state of the ecological world which surrounds them.

This obsession with economic progress in modern societies, which frequently becomes the standard by which a nation or individual’s success is determined, has

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1 Ghosh 17, 19.
2 Fay 11.
inundated the West with societal expectations of exponential increase in production and technological improvement, no matter the cost. In reference to Fay’s work, Nicholas Baer cites Dipesh Chakrabarty who stated that “the very fossil fuels that granted greater freedom to the inhabitants of modern industrial civilization have also… result[ed] in climate change that is rendering the planet less habitable for humankind and other species.” 3 With a newly found sense of modernity, humans in industrial societies have come to see themselves as increasingly obligated by their status as citizens of industrial society to use the resources of the world for greater societal progress—to the development and perpetuation of industry which furthers economic revenue. This focus on societal success has created a new epicenter for human experience and interaction within modern societies, often causing people to become more focused on their relation to other people and socioeconomic systems than with their relationship with the physical, natural world around them. As progress and economic success becomes more of a priority, society becomes the main network in which one must survive and thrive while “Nature” becomes the fount of resources needed to reach the next rung of the ladder of socioeconomic success. As Morton states, these realities of industrial modernity create a mindset in which nature is “always ‘over yonder,’ alien and alienated… [as] a special kind of private property” to be used, but never considered to be a part of the same connected system. 4 In other words, the move toward human centrality in modern society creates a separation from the natural world which exists beyond the borders of those societies, both in ideology and physicality. With this mindset, society seeks to separate itself and exists as its own social ecosystem, one unconcerned with the workings of the

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3 Baer, 80.
4 Morton, 5.
physical world beyond its borders. Morton argues that society needs to become more aware of the ecological systems with which it is connected, but in order to do so must first be able to see the world as a connected mesh of systems and ecological belonging. Even before that, however, he believes that humans must first have a desire to understand the ecological nature of the world and break down arbitrary separations between the human and other forms of life.5

This shift in mindset has become increasingly difficult, however, as society has slowly replaced intimate interactions between humans and their environment with mediated avenues of societal interaction as the daily norm of modern life. The idea of progress and connection has driven western civilizations throughout history and the shift toward industrialization has particularly begun to immerse people within society wherever they go, pressing technology, entertainment, and socioeconomic success to the forefront of the human experience and allowing people less time to be intimately involved with the natural world around them. As an example, even travel, which used to be the idea of physically passing through spaces of the physical world to reach a destination, has itself become separated from those spaces of the natural world. Air travel, freeways, and subways often take people from one modernized station to another, submersed in advertisements, partitioned spaces, and technological barriers the whole way, purposefully keeping them from having a sense of connection to these spaces. These methods of travel through physical space which once allowed people to experience uninterrupted connection with the world around them have themselves become modernized and sterilized to the point that the space between places have become “non-

5 Morton 5-6.
These “non-places” act as a defined space which is designed for humans, but which is meant to be transitory and unimportant—spaces which purposefully seek to limit connection to themselves and create a sense of separation from the greater world around them. Because of this constant immersion in societal structures and spaces, the sense of connection between humans and the broader context of the earth beneath their feet has become, in many cases, less intimate and is often filtered more through the lens of societal and cultural activity than through a genuine sense connection to the physical earth beneath them.

One of the great ironies of globalization is that as the earth has become increasingly connected through technology, travel, and trade, there has been a widening ravine between people and their awareness of their environments. As modern societies focus on global networks of technology and trade, the ability to travel the globe and visit all corners of the earth—either physically or via technology—has not fostered a sense of connection to the planet on which we live, but a focus on expanding economic opportunities. Many western societies, and others seeking to follow suit in becoming competitive players in the global industrial market, have begun to see the earth as an ever-growing network of trade routes—the space between the supplier and customer solely acting as the home of exploitable resources for economic progress. Increasing modernization has insured that this network of societies is treated by many within these industrial societies as the real structure of the earth—the socioeconomic networks relying on the bits of nature between these nodes only for resources and recreation. The physical

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6 Augé 85.
environments between societies becomes part of the system only in that they provide the raw materials for the growing needs of industrial society.

Even the core concerns of survival have changed from an ecological focus to a societal focus. What was once about the personal work of gathering food and surviving in the harshness of the natural world is now about the ability to work for standardized money, tokens of abstract worth, needed to trade for sustenance or services provided by others. In the words of Heise, “From the food, clothes, and fuel we buy to the music and films we enjoy, the employer we work for, and the health risks we are exposed to, everyday routines for most people today are inconceivable without global networks of information and exchange.”7 The very act of surviving in the physical world has seemingly become disconnected from the earth itself and instead become dependent on one’s understanding on economic systems rather than of the climate and ecosystems which one inhabits. Though there is little chance of humanity coming back from these largescale changes, there is still an importance in encouraging a return to connectedness to the environment and ecological systems which surround us.

This connects back to Morton’s suggestion that in modern society the concept of “‘Nature’ [has become] a refined thing in the distance, under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener, preferably in the mountains, in the wild.”8 The ways in which nature has become associated with an escape from society, a place which is disconnected and pure from the stain of human influence, is misguided as it suggests a lack of understanding of the ecological systems which are at work within the broader

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7 Heise 54.
8 Morton, 3.
scope of the physical world. In her work on forms, Caroline Levine mentions the ways in which perceived, bounded wholes—such as the arbitrary distinction between nature and society—can be misleading when used to compartmentalize parts of a bigger picture. In reality, things often considered to be separate entities may be part of a more largely connected ecosystem with each individual part having a direct influence on the function of the other.

It is true that these distinctions have to be given a specific scope and definition, but the question is whether these boundaries are sometimes defined where none actually exist. For example, the perception of defined separations between cities, states, countries, and continents through the use of borders may make sense on a map or in cultural and societal discussions, but when viewed in the physical world or from a global perspective, those borders do not exist except where made by the human. In fact, no matter how defined the separation may be between the city and a forest at its edge may seem, there is an underlying connection to the ecosystem which the two inhabit. Morton argues that there is a need to embrace the “ecological thought,” to recognize the larger world as one which is directly connected with the human. He connects these ideas back into the thought of ecology by stating, and restating frequently, that “[e]cology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence,” and that “to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected… is the ecological thought… [and] the more we consider it, the more our world opens up.” No single entity can be completely defined by boundaries alone. Though those boundaries are useful for defining what is and is not

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9 Levine 24-27
10 Morton, 4.
11 Morton, 1.
part of the whole in question, it discounts the other wholes with which it may interact in a larger, systemic whole. Though many consider “Nature” to be a separate entity from the society in which big businesses churn, these two spheres are part of a larger, much more complex system which operates on a scale that, though hard to perceive from the eye-level, moment-to-moment perception of humankind, is ever changing and evolving. The ecological world changes as humans interact with it and those changes and outcomes, in turn, affect humans.

Ecological systems, because of their complexity, never equate to just the sum of their individual parts—in the study of systems, 1+1 equals not 2, but 3. Rather than nature and humanity existing in two separate realms—or as two separate entities in the same realm—their interactions weave together in an interconnected whole whose outcome produces a completely new whole, itself part of other systems both large and small, which must be considered through observation of their interactions and the implications of those interactions. In short, knowing that nature and humanity exist on the same globe is not enough—we must consider how those two entities work together to create entirely new outcomes of exploitation, climate change, and catastrophe. In the modern societal structure and the media that comes from it, these outcomes are seldom considered in the context of daily life. The repercussions and effects of these ecological interactions are often outright ignored by the individual or seem to be of such a macro scale that it will have little effect on their daily activity.

The narrative structure perpetuated throughout much of western tradition and other parts of the world often follow a linear, progressive structure—in the rhythms of beginning, middle, end; exposition, climax, denouement. The forward progress of these
narratives reflects the forward movement of human life and the perception of growth throughout that experience—the form itself mimicking the rhythms and temporal structure which its authors and readers would experience. The novel of the 18th century sought to tell the stories which were seen around them, to focus on the daily lives of the people which inhabited the society in which the novel would be published and, upon reading these stories, the people reading them would have reaffirmed to them the status of their life as normal within their societal context. As Franco Moretti says of novels, “they offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life.”12 This representation of normalcy in both content and form, however, may be the inherent problem which the novel may face in its struggle to accurately portray the realities of ecology in the physical world. Ghosh reminds us that in many cases, the lives of those both writing and consuming the novels were submersed in industrial culture and, without direct concern for the larger implications of their version of normal life, did not consider the larger connections around them within these novels. As a result, the events of the novel often portray a version of reality in which humanity is distinct and separate from their physical surroundings, the world only acting as a stage for their central drama.

As the human story is pressed into the foreground of these narratives, and consequently into the mind of the reader, this pattern of progress and perpetuation of the normal becomes the central focus of societal life. For critics like Ghosh, this is why these anthropocentric novels may someday be looked back on as perpetuators of the global climate crisis which actively avoid addressing the problems which surround them. He argues that the societally focused progress of novels is rarely concerned with or able to

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12 Ghosh, 19.
capture the nature of ecological connection and that when they do, they often come off as cliché or overdramatic.\textsuperscript{13} And so, many narratives dwell on themes, relationships, and characters which lie more comfortably within the uncontroversial realm of the typical modern experience—one portrayed as relatively normal with change happening only on the individual level, with no large-scale shifts or catastrophes involved.

As one who was often critical of the push for modern progress, Walter Benjamin argues that a societal focus on linear progress can be destructive in the larger scheme of the earth’s story. He explains that throughout history, civilizations have viewed the improvement and progression of their society as paramount over all else. This mentality became widespread with the advent of industrial society and has been perpetuated through many of parts of the developed world since then. Benjamin is critical of this mindset because it relies on three troublesome assumptions: 1) that this type of progress applies primarily to the progression of humankind 2) that progress is boundless because humans themselves are infinitely perfectible and 3) that progress inherently follows a straight course.\textsuperscript{14} These assumptions which Benjamin identifies can be dangerous in that they carry little regard to the consequences of that progress beyond the scope of human society. Placing humans as the central beneficiary of progress and assuming their ability to progress without bounds creates a mindset which can actively encourage the exploitation and destruction of the non-human to further the goals of a society, no matter the cost to the world around it. While the use of raw resources is an inevitable necessity in sustaining human life, the ever-growing desire for progress, and maintaining the

\textsuperscript{13} Ghosh, 24.
\textsuperscript{14} Benjamin, 260.
“normal” of daily modern life, which drives peoples to ignore the consequences of their actions upon the larger cycles and systems which exist in the world around them has the potential to inadvertently cause the abuse of those resources and, ultimately, endanger those natural systems. In other words, placing the cause of human progress into the central frame of societal concern allows for a certain amount of disregard for the well-being of the systems, cycles, and life which exists alongside humans in the larger ecosystem of the earth.

In her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, Ursula Heise discusses some of the approaches which ecologists, geologists, and environmentalists have used in the past in an attempt to amend this type of thinking in modern societies. Various types of reform have been used to call attention to the effects of industrial society upon the earth’s natural systems and other forms of life upon it, but there has been a fair amount of push and pull between these scholars and their suggested methods of reform. In the late 1900s, many environmentalists such as Wallace Stegner and Yi-Fu Tuan called for a return to a sense of place and the recognition that in modern society people tend to move through daily life so quickly that they never become connected to a particular place. As a result, they argue, the mentality of society is one of disconnection from place which could inevitably lead to a disregard for the earth and ignorance as to their effect upon it. This movement called for a return to the local, to focus on engendering a love of place and to resolve local problems and improve local treatment of the environment.

This is contrasted by other movements which instead sought to bring collective attention to the effects of one’s actions upon the larger global ecosystems at work. Heise
raises the example of the photograph “Blue Planet”, the first picture of the Earth captured from space in 1972, which was often used to remind people that every action affects the entire globe and that there is no escape from any effects which may follow. The globe, floating alone in the midst of space, was less an inexhaustible well of resources and more a small shuttle whose resources were dwindling ever more by the day, without any other place for humanity to turn to for replenishment when the well runs dry.

Heise instead calls for a middle-ground approach, one which seeks to establish a sense of place within a global context—to “Think globally, [and] act locally.”\(^\text{15}\) To exemplify the types of thinking which should be employed in modern technological societies, she uses the example of Google Earth and the new technological abilities afforded to modern societies to view detailed photographs of the buildings, trees, cars, streets, plants, rivers, etc. of “local” places which the viewer may never physically step foot, and then to zoom out to the perspective of the “Blue Planet” and see the greater context of that particular place.\(^\text{16}\) The use of technology to view the local and global in tandem with one another—to recognize it all without the artificial boundaries which have been placed between cities and nations, society and nature—affords a new type of thinking, one which need not be confined to one frame of reference. The ability to zoom in and out, to consider the greater effects of globalization and modernization on the climate and ecosystems of Earth is all the greater because of these tools which are available to the modern observer. These tools can allow us to avoid the detrimental effects of imagining that the effects of human action extend no further than the

\(^{15}\) Heise 20.

\(^{16}\) Heise 66-67.
boundaries of the society in which we reside and allow us to recognize the interwoven connection between the human and their environment in concrete, visual terms.

In addition to these technological and empirical approaches to ecological awareness however, this thesis will stand with Jennifer Fay who argues that “[c]ertainly, the Anthropocene brings humanities and sciences together around a new set of pressing questions. But rather than thinking of the humanities turning (or reluctantly returning) to the hard sciences, it may be that environmental science needs the humanities as never before,”17 and Timothy Morton who states that “[s]ince the ecological thought is so new and so open, and therefore so difficult, we should expect art to show us some of the way. The ecological thought supplies good reasons to study culture and philosophy. Ecology is a matter of human experience.”18 In the beginning of this introduction, several ecocritics were mentioned in their criticism of novels and narratives as a part of this move away from ecological awareness. This thesis will argue alongside Fay and Morton, however, that media can provide new ways to look at these problems and address these questions from a humanities perspective, utilizing the strengths of their formal structures to reposition our perspective and recontextualize our perception of the human in terms of their local and global ecologies, just as Google Earth has helped us recontextualize the geographical “local” in terms of the global.

The purpose of this thesis is to look at three pieces of media which recreate a sense of connection between human characters and the world around them and, in turn, remind the person interacting with the work that the nature of human existence is ever

17 Baer, 85.
18 Morton, 12.
connected with the physical world and the natural systems which define the world as we know it. The works which will be explored, The *Overstory* (a novel), *Still Life* (a film), and *The Witness* (a video game), have been selected because they represent three of the main narrative-driven mediums both in more traditional and modern forms. This multidisciplinary approach will allow the paper to explore the unique aspects of each medium separately and the way that, though each form conveys content differently, each can contribute to the same conversation with productive experiments and promising results.

Though society and media often imagine the human as separate from the natural world, this paper will argue that the use of non-traditional methods and devices such as non-linearity, omniscient perspective, temporal reframing, deep focus, and the blending of foreground and background, can direct the attention of the reader, the spectator, and the player toward the ways in which the ecological systems that exist between humans and the physical world around them are ever-present, both in narratives and in the physical world in which those stories exist. Much like the zooming in and out of Google Earth, the paper will explore the way in which various forms of media can use their individual strengths to capture aspects of ecology and connectedness which are often forgotten in anthropocentric narratives and, as a result, in society.
I. Form, Scope, and Sensory Language in Richard Power’s *The Overstory*

In his work on “Slow Violence,” Rob Nixon questions the ability of narratives to capture the realities of slowly unfolding catastrophes around the globe. He questions how authors can “devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects,” especially in a society that often ignores literary depictions of climate change or brushes them off as unrealistic or campy. Central to Nixon’s argument, as well as the arguments of many ecocritics, is the idea of anthropocentrism—that modern society has placed a disproportionate amount of focus upon the human while ignoring the non-human life around it—and its effect on the ways in which we treat the physical world and biological ecosystems which surround us.

Addressing these same themes, Amitav Ghosh argues that it is difficult to capture ecology and climate change in humanist literature because the Anthropocene “resists literary fiction [because of] its resistance to language itself…” and that “hybrid forms will emerge and the act of reading itself will arise once again.” This argument that the Anthropocene is resistant to the literary form comes from Ghosh’s suggestion that audio-visual/hybrid forms, rather than linguistic forms, are the avenues of communication through which issues of physicality in a—such as climate change and ecology—must be addressed because they encourage us to interpret sensory forms through filters of meaning. For example, Ghosh considers the acts of listening to the barks of a dog, the

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19 Nixon, 3.
20 Ghosh, 84.
21 Ghosh, 82.
chirps of a bird, or changes in the wind to be forms of communication because our brains still derive meaning from experiencing them, though the human brain often filters them into a separate category from human communication because it does not come from a linguistic base. \(^{22}\) Rather, these forms are those which require physical presence, human senses, and sensory reasoning—rather than the patterned causal reasoning used in language—to be found meaningful. These forms of communication are those which convey a sense of physicality and place to the person present and which call the participant into their physical surroundings.

Narratives, Ghosh argues, have the opposite effect. Rather than calling the reader into a sense of place and calling the reader’s mind to understand the natural phenomena of the story, the traditional character-driven novel hacks away any sense of physicality and geographical belonging to the point where the human characters are positioned in the center of the stage with no brush or thickets to get in the way of their story. The setting of a novel is like “that of a stage to a play” \(^{23}\) upon which “the imposition of… boundaries, in time and space” \(^{24}\) create a scene that allows the plot events to unfold neatly and with little distraction. The environmental details that are included have a purpose for the plot and “the rest of the landscape is pushed farther and farther into the background until at last we have a setting that can carry a narrative.” \(^{25}\) For Ghosh, the reliance of the novel upon language makes it nearly impossible to accurately capture a sense of true physicality and place, let alone one strong enough to call the reader into a full understanding of the systems at work within them. Though it is true that narratives and

\(^{22}\) Ghosh, 82.
\(^{23}\) Ghosh 58.
\(^{24}\) Ghosh 59.
\(^{25}\) Ghosh 60-61.
language have shortcomings with regard to the comprehensive representation of environmental ecosystems and an expanded sense of place, Ghosh’s general discreditation of the novel may undermine the potential of language driven narratives to capture these experiences through experimental means. This chapter will examine *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and the ways in which it can serve as a counterexample to Nixon and Ghosh’s beliefs that literature may be inadequate in addressing the physical, ecological, spatially concerned issues surrounding climate change.

Though the systems used in written language are not structured to convey the more sensory forms of communication which Ghosh references—barks of a dog, shifting of the wind, moving of shadows—which the human senses pick up on and interpret when inhabiting physical space, that does not mean that language cannot be used to attempt an attention to space and sensory experience. In forms such as poetry it is not uncommon for words to be placed on the page in a very specific manner to call attention to their positioning, to bring the reader into a connected space where the page is a conduit for a linguistic, rhythmic, and visual experience. The form of the poem has been used to accentuate particular words or to resemble a particular shape by taking advantage of the spatial capabilities of the page and to use it in ways that would not normally be seen within a novel. This can be done to take the communicative property of language and attempt to create a more physical and visual work on the page. These approaches can also take advantage of careful word choice to leverage the capacity which words have to call to mind ideas, feelings, sensations, and connotations, even when not placed in a way that humans regularly use to communicate with one another. Several relevant and poignant
examples exist,26 but it seems most beneficial to cite the two poems from *The Overstory* (figure 1.1).

The Gardener sees  
only the gardener’s garden.  
The eyes were not made  
for such groveling uses as they  
are now put to and worn out by,  
but to behold beauty now invisible.  
MAY  
WE  
NOT  
SEE  
GOD?  

Love is a tree  
with branches  
in forever  
with roots  
in eternity  
and a trunk  
nowhere at all

*Figure 1.1. Two poems from the text of The Overstory which portray the image of a tree and a tree trunk with the forms of their text. Left: p. 435. Right: p. 381.*

Both of these poems not only address themes which call attention to the form of the tree, but also create visual representations of trees through word placement on the page, creating symbols out of letters which themselves are signifiers for tangible ideas and objects. This use of language is interesting in that it brings an element of physicality back into the text and allows language to not only figuratively paint a picture for the reader, but to literally place the subject before the reader in image and spatiality. These experiments in language seek to create a hybrid form, one which is not only linguistic, but also visual and which call attention to the importance of spatiality, even in written language.

26 “War Symphony” by Chen Li is a ready example.
In reference to these experimental forms, Morton argues that “Ecocriticism has overlooked the way in which all art—not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its form. Ecological art and the ecological-ness of all art, isn’t just about something… [it] is something.” Poems can, he argues, make the reader aware of the spatial possibilities of the page itself and, if read aloud, the environment around them and that “[t]he shape of the stanzas and the length of the lines determine the way you appreciate the blank paper around them… The poem organizes space.” In this sense, the ecological potential of literary text extends beyond its narrative qualities and into the very qualities of its form. And though, as Morton states, poetry is one definite way to use language to re-instill this sense of physicality into text, there are other ways in which Richard Powers uses the form of the novel to recreate a sense of physical space as the reader follows the narrative.

In The Overstory, Powers begins this type of experimentation with the way in which he chooses to label and organize the sections of his book, which he deliberately refrains from calling “chapters.” Rather, the structure begins with a section labeled “Roots” which is separated into eight divisions, each dedicated to a specific character in the novel. After the “Roots” of the narrative have been identified, the remaining three sections are labeled “Trunk,” “Crown,” and “Seeds.” In considering the imagery which Powers calls upon in doing this, it is compelling to follow what this pattern suggests: rather than simply following a linear story with a beginning, middle, and end, the novel will mimic the form of a tree itself, one with “roots” which account for events which are

27 Morton, 11.
28 Morton 11.
foundational to the trajectory of the novel, going back even generations before the lives
of the characters which the reader will follow, and tracing the events within the novel that
will, in their endings, create the beginnings of a new cycle—the “seeds” which will
continue to grow after the book is finished. The framing of the novel suggests that the
larger context of this book’s story goes beyond that of the narrative contained within
itself, reaching into the past and persisting into the future, the history preceding the novel
setting in motion of the events of the novel, whose events in turn will serve as the
foundation for future stories which will grow into their own trees and branches. The title
of the novel itself suggests a similar message. In his review of the novel, J. Arec observes
that “[t]he title, The Overstory… works with… what we might call the big picture, the
story that holds together all the smaller stories, the sub-stories.”29 Rather than being sold
as a traditional “beginning-middle-end” novel—though it ultimately is when viewed from
a strictly narrative perspective—it is presented to the reader to observe one lifespan in the
cycle of a greater whole, from the budding of roots to the production of offspring, ready
to begin the cycle over again.

This theme of progression as taking place in cycles rather than in a linear fashion
follows throughout the novel and is perpetuated as Powers uses the cross-section of a tree
trunk in the “Trunk” section of the novel to divide events happening in different places to
different characters, a reminder that each story is taking place in a larger temporal world
in which all events happen simultaneously, though separated by space, and whose
temporal context will be recorded within the circular calendar of a tree’s rings (Figure
1.2). Just as the rings of a tree speak to all that happened around it, these stories unfold
simultaneously as if at different segments of the same ring rather than dots on a progressive timeline.

Figure 1.2.. The cross-section of a tree trunk acts as a section divider throughout the “Trunk” section of the novel.

Worth noting as well is that the sections specifically named after each of the characters are placed within the “Roots” of the novel, a choice which calls to mind the idea that the roots of a tree begin as different points, widely separated in space only to lead back into the main organism, blending and becoming one in the trunk and branching out again as they reach the crown of their form. Though sometimes seen as different entities, each root is part of the same organism which runs from root to branch, one single connected whole. If one were to cut into the ground and examine each root individually, one may not understand the whole, but with the proper knowledge of the larger anatomy of the tree, one knows that these separate branches all come together. If one chose to place a theoretical boundary between tree and root, they would seem to be two individual entities. Expanding the scope of these boundaries, however, reveals the interconnectedness of the roots all connected to the same system. Much like roots, these humans, though seemingly separate, are all intertwined in a larger system that readers may not recognize at first but will come to appreciate as they observe the ways in which
these individual lives feed into the larger perspective and overlap with and affect one another. Indeed, this sense of connection begins to connect the characters not only to other humans, but also to the trees and places around them as they recognize their involvement not only in social systems, but in the physical ecosystem which surrounds them.

This idea of interconnectedness is at the heart of how Powers approaches the narrative structure of the novel, as well. Having eight major human characters, and a few non-human ones, allows for the narrative to follow not one linear path of progression, but to instead weave in and out of specific frames of reference in order to view the larger world at play. Each story carries different people from different backgrounds and working toward different goals (often with greatly varying amounts of significance and consequence tied to their narrative thread) and places them in the same playing field. Arac notes, “The second section, ‘Trunk’, makes connections more explicit, but the nine major characters never converge in one place and do not all know each other, though much of the novel's middle focuses on an activist group protesting against logging in the American West, which joins five of them.”

Though not all characters in the novel meet one another personally or have plot details overlap those of the others, the ways in which the novel jumps between them allows the implications and lessons of each story to intermingle with one another and create a bigger picture of the world of the novel as a whole.

Though *The Overstory* is still a narrative driven by human conflict and drama, a particular attention to trees is present in nearly every page of the novel allowing a sense

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30 Arac.
of connection with the natural world not only for the characters, but for the reader as well. As readers encounter tree after tree in different stories, the novel creates the sense that the characters exist in one cohesive world. In fact, as characters visit various places, trees are used to define each area that they enter, even before human structures and institutions are mentioned. As a whole, places within *The Overstory* are characterized less by names and people than by the natural physicality of each place—the trees, the surroundings, and the life which exists therein. Rather than seeking to call to mind a stereotyped version of Silicone Valley by invoking its written name, for example, Powers places plants, animals, and landscapes on the pages to evoke the sense of place which a person in that environment would experience. As Patricia, a biologist, arrives on an unnamed university campus in California, “she finds a marvelous blue oak, regal California planes, incense cedars, a gnarled anarchical pepper tree, dozens of the seven hundred species of eucalyptus, kumquats in full fruit”\(^{31}\) and more as she examines the area. Rather than being taken by the architecture or the status of such an establishment in a prestigious location in California, she finds connection to the place by its possession of life and the defining organisms which exist there.

Although these stories are set in various locales throughout the United States, Powers compels the reader to recognize that each story takes place in the larger world in which the characters and the reader share. In doing this, the novel actively opposes the trend to push setting toward the “background”, as Ghosh mentions, and instead begins to drag those life forms and systems—often invisible to and ignored by humans—into the forefront of the novel to define the spaces in which its characters live.

\(^{31}\) Powers 446.
Along with expository elements of the text, the ways in which Powers encourages the characters themselves interact with their physical space calls the reader to recognize that each individual story would not be taking place without the specific places and spaces which the novel describes. Some of the most powerful examples of this happen when critical events take place in the lives of the characters. Rather than focusing solely on the person who has been affected in these moments, Powers often makes mention of a tree which was involved in the moment and its story leading to this critical junction between the human and the physical nature around them. For example, as Dorothy faces a turning point in her life and drives away from her lover—from having to make a decision about her commitment to their relationship—"she drives up onto the curb and wraps the car around a parkway linden wide enough to destroy her front grille."32 She is literally stopped in her tracks and forced to make a decision concerning her path moving forward. The accident could have very well just been a point of conflict ending in dramatic return to the arms of her lover. Instead, however, Powers pauses to explain the type of tree she has run into:

Now, the linden, it turns out is a radical tree, as different from an oak as a woman is from a man. It’s the bee tree, the tress of peace, whose tonics and teas can cure every kind of tension and anxiety—a tree that cannot be mistaken for any other, for alone in all the catalogue of a hundred thousand earthly species, its flowers and tiny hard fruit hand down from the surfboard bracts whose sole perverse purpose seems to be to state its own singularity.33

This passage completely stops the action happening with Dorothy and decides to take a detour, one which defines the plight of the tree—its characteristics, purposes, and

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32 Powers 72.
33 Powers 72.
intentions—in order to help the reader understand that the contact faced by the tree in its interaction with Dorothy was just as significant to it as it was for her and that it is now part of the tree’s story, forever written into its physical form. The tree was also a part of this interaction and very much deserves its own moment of respect—and yet, how often would another author fail to account for the tree’s perspective?

Several sections of the book take this same shift in pacing and focus for lengthy detours, from one or two paragraphs to entire pages, to showing crucial moments of the human characters from the perspective of their environment and the other life forms around them. One man falls from a plane in Vietnam and is caught by a fig tree—described at length, from its existence as a seed within a fruit, used as a nest for wasps, to being swallowed by a bird, excreted from the sky to a spot of ground and growing to be not one trunk, but three hundred trunks all connected to the same initial seed.\textsuperscript{34} In another instance, a girl named Olivia sits in a parking lot as the reader is told of the apple orchard which once existed on the ground beneath the asphalt, an orchard in which “[t]he trees have vanished and the town forgets. But not the land.”\textsuperscript{35} Another woman, Patricia, speaks of a series of trees which were present for important historical moments such as the American Revolution, Anne Frank’s hiding from the Nazis, and the moon landing, and which recorded those moments in time within the very fiber of their rings—and yet are forgotten to mankind.\textsuperscript{36} Truly, “places remember what people forget,”\textsuperscript{37} and Powers is seeking to remind the reader of that fact.

\textsuperscript{34} Powers 81.
\textsuperscript{35} Powers 161-162.
\textsuperscript{36} Powers 219.
\textsuperscript{37} Powers 161.
This multifaceted perspective helps give the novel deep focus in which foregrounds and background are both in focus. The events spoken of would have happened quite differently without the participation of the environment. This technique emphasizes, through a simple shift in perspective, just how much humans and the space around them are connected and it begs the reader to pay attention by interrupting the regularly scheduled entertainment with a newsflash as important as any: you, and the modern societal structure in which you exist, do not exist independently from the world around you!

This same sentiment is found in the ways that various characters have attached themselves with place not through buildings and vistas but specific trees and other forms of life which allow them to have a connection with the world. Mimi’s story begins with the family tree—their “breakfast tree”\(^{38}\) where they sit and talk as a family—and later focuses on her connection with the small group of pine trees outside of her workplace. As she spends her breaks with the trees and begins to smell their scent as the smell of home, she tells another that the trees are “*my park*”\(^{39}\) and when they are cut down and taken away from her unexpectedly, her connection with that place is severed. She ultimately decides to leave her town and her work behind to seek a greater place among people who are more appreciative of the non-human life around them. Similarly, when a character named Nicholas returns to his family farm after a few years away, he feels a sense of loss because his home was altered while he was gone. Growing up, his family farm had a tree which acted as a beacon, a visual signal as he approached the property that he was

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\(^{38}\) Powers 31.

\(^{39}\) Powers 207.
returning home. As he approaches the property after years away, “[h]e looks for the
horizon’s lone mast. But where the column of the Hoel Chestnut should be, there’s only
June’s annihilating blue.”\textsuperscript{40} With this important piece of his physical world taken away,
his connection with his home fades.

Powers also explicitly attempts to describe and capture the ways in which the
human senses of the characters in the novel are essential to recognizing the place around
them and truly becoming connected to it. Though this may seem obvious, it is interesting
to note how rarely many novels use the senses of listening for purposes other than
dialogue or special awareness important to the plot; smell for purposes other than the
smells of food, other people, or foul substances; touch for that other than interaction with
objects and other people; and sight for that other than looking for objects or people, with
the exception of the occasional observation of a vista to give the reader a sense of setting.
Powers, on the other hand, uses each of these senses repeatedly in his novel for instances
that are important not to the plot or interaction with other characters, but simply in
establishing a connection between the people and their environment.

In visiting the Memorial Court at Stanford, defined by the Rodin statue \textit{Burghers
of Calais}, Neelay, a programmer, goes to think and ponder on the changes he needs to
take in designing his next video game to be more like the real, natural world. As he goes
to this place, with architecture and sculpture to match its societal status and prestige, he
notices a tree which “he has rolled past… every evening for months, without once
seeing” and upon noticing “can’t decide what is more incredible: the tree, or the fact that

\textsuperscript{40} Powers 406.
he’s never noticed it.” From there, the courtyard becomes not a square of architecture, but an arboretum in which he begins to truly notice the amount of life all around him, to really see the world around him rather than just seeing the decorated paths which lead him toward his daily objectives. It is this same character who, later in the novel, laments that the players of his game will be unable to use their senses to truly experience the world of the game, the natural life, and connection that people have with their surroundings.

In another section, Patricia wanders through the forest and, in order to help the reader understand the extent to which she actively uses her senses to become connected with the world around her, Powers takes the time to describe everything that she is able to experience with her senses for more than a page. The trees, wood, understory, the clicking and chirping, the rain, birds, insects, light, the softness of the ground beneath her feet, the temperature, the seedlings scattered all around, moss, downed logs, bark, mushrooms, dead fish, fog, and the presence of death all flood her senses—and the pages of the novel—as she truly sees the world around her not just with her eyes, but with her sight, her mind, her smell, her hearing, her touch, and the totality of her physical presence. Scenes like these portray characters involved in active and engaged observation of the world in which they inhabit, and thus become more connected to it. Rather than simply reading about a character walking through a forest, the book allows the world of the novel to take the foreground and become its own cast of living, breathing, moving characters for the reader to experience through the lens of the character. Powers attempts

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41 Powers 109.
42 Powers 225.
to recreate the physical stimuli, and therefore a sense of presence, for the reader to understand through the descriptions which he offers.

Because Powers chooses to place so much emphasis on the human senses and the characters’ abilities to observe the world around them, there are also times where the characters’ senses are inadequate to observe what’s truly around them—times where the author must step in and remind the reader of the life unseen which lies beyond the surface that “a person could walk past for a lifetime and never notice.”\textsuperscript{43} As a child, a boy named Adam draws his family’s house on a piece of paper. He begins with a house “floating in the air”\textsuperscript{44} with the family members standing next to it. Recognizing that the place which he knows to be home is not his house alone, but also the space around it, he begins to add more detail. To add to the identity of the home, he places the four trees from his yard and draws his family standing by the house. He imagines to himself that his father asks him, “\textit{What are these—trees? Look outside! Is that what a tree looks like?}”\textsuperscript{45} In this moment, he realizes that just as his house is not his home without its connected surroundings, he begins to add to the surroundings of the trees and place all of the things which make them unique. In looking closer and truly observing the tree and the physical space which it inhabits, he begins to add a cat, then a toad, then snails, and moths, then helicopter seeds, then dozens of other things until he leaves no extra room on the page.\textsuperscript{46} In this scene the boy realizes that, much like Morton says, “Existence is always coexistence. No man is an island.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{43} Powers 217.
\textsuperscript{44} Powers 47.
\textsuperscript{45} Powers 47.
\textsuperscript{46} Powers 47.
\textsuperscript{47} Morton 4.
This scene takes place early in the novel and sets the stage for the ways in which the human conception of *Nature* is deeply flawed and lacks the nuance which truly exists in the world. One organism never exists in a space of its own, but is inhabited by other forms of life, internally and externally, with different levels and stages of interconnection. Like viewing an iceberg, a child drawing on a page may imagine a tree as its own entity visible on the surface level, but if he begins to use his senses to truly observe what is really happening, he will begin to see how much life actually inhabits a single space and see what a tree really looks like.

Though the perspective of the novel is often similar to that of the human, Powers steps in to speak when the characters’ perspective are unable to truly observe the full extent of the reality which surrounds them. As two characters finish making a film in the forest, he tells the reader, “The film cuts to black. No one sees what happens next between the two humans… No one, unless you count the countless invisible creatures burrowing beneath the soil, crawling under the bark, crouching in the branches, climbing and leaping and banking through the canopy. Even the giant trees breathe in the few molecules per billion of homecoming dispensed into the air.”48 From the human perspective there is often a conclusion that life only appears in moving things that can be seen within human perspective, but being an omniscient narrator, Powers is able to zoom in and out to direct the reader to see from new perspectives, to view the life which may be otherwise missed from the standard few feet off the ground—that which the human senses and perspective may actually prohibit them from observing. Powers’ omniscience as a narrator extends to all living players within the novel, not just the human ones.

48 Powers 255.
It is this broadened perspective that conveys the characters’ connectedness with their surroundings within the novel, simultaneously revealing to the reader ways in which they are connected to their world. The sheer amount of life in the dense spaces around the characters at all times is breathtaking and it encourages the reader to ponder the amount of life which surrounds them as they do something as simple as walking to their car. Citing again the scene where Patricia walks through the forest and observes the life around her, the reader is told that “[t]he sheer mass of ever-dying life packed into each single cubic foot, woven together with fungal filaments and dew-betrayed spiderweb leaves her woozy.”\(^\text{49}\) The dozens of life forms that exist in the space around Patricia are known to her because she is an expert in forest life, but even with her attuned senses there are so many life forms, even within a single cubic foot, that are invisible to the fallible human eye that she may never be able to fully comprehend it.

Powers’ approach to the amount of life which exists within an ecosystem brings to light that life goes far beyond the moving forms that the human eye can perceive. Morton suggests that “[t]he insides of organisms teem with aliens”\(^\text{50}\) and cites examples such as human stomachs which contain bacteria and amoeba, termites which rely on bacteria, and plant roots which consist of fibers of fungi and mycorrhizae to show that even what the eye sees as one individual specimen is really an ecosystem in and of itself.\(^\text{51}\) The scale at which one views the boundaries of a “whole organism” and the boundaries which one places on the existence of an individual within a system can change the nature of the observer’s conclusions about individuality. Though humans

\(^{49}\) Powers 134.  
\(^{50}\) Morton 36.  
\(^{51}\) Morton 34.
often consider plants, animals, and even themselves as distinct and individual entities, there are countless other living organisms which live within and around an individual that allow each systemic organism to exist as it does. So, as one views the natural world as Patricia does—and as Adam learns to do—the question begins to arise: where is the boundary? From a microscopic perspective, each cell and bacteria are a life form of their own which is divided from another. From the human perspective, the boundary exists between two organisms which can move and live independently of one another in their own, separate physical space. From the larger perspective of the earth, it is hard to say whether there would even be a separation because each single organism acts as part of a larger system which allows the world to live and exist as it does. Though the human perspective may dictate that humans and trees exist separately, taking both a narrower and broader approach to these two will reveal so much more about the ecosystem in which they really exist. There is always a larger system of which they are integrated parts.

This idea of scale and its inherent contribution to the idea of connectedness is one which Powers utilizes often in the novel. Though the scale of these defined entities is often shifted and given from different perspectives, he sometimes chooses to do away with the boundaries entirely and consider the world in terms of “networks” rather than independent wholes—an approach which may be more beneficial in considering the ecological connections between life forms. He often does this by taking a space that is inherently seen as non-living and revealing the network of life that exists within and around that space. Within the novel, a few ecologists joke about the mentality that the “human responsibility” is to clean up and burn away fallen trees to improve forest health
to get “the stagnant place producing again.” As they chuckle at the idea, Powers inserts the following: “Improve forest health. As if forests were waiting all these four hundred million years for us newcomers to come cure them… A person has only to look, to see that dead logs are far more alive than living ones.” Fallen trees, what many see as a dead organism—merely a piece of dead, unexploitable matter at this point—begin to decompose and give a habitat to other organisms who can benefit from their miraculously produced proteins. Within the form that once had life, more is produced and becomes, in and of itself, a new body of organized life. And yet, because it serves no purpose to the industry which looks to trees for resources, it is considered worthless and cast aside, the life inside unrecognized because it serves no economic purpose to the industry.

Later in the novel, one of these scientists questions “what good it does to save a species without all the epiphytes, fungi, pollinators, and other symbionts that, in the trenches of the day, give a species its real home.” Just as the tree can only exist as part of a system of organisms, which effectively act as its “home,” the fallen tree then becomes a home to a variety of other organisms and brings a further variety of life to the area, thus providing “home” to the other trees around it. The “sacrifice” of one brings the needed diversity to bring welfare to the others. As the tree itself degrades into dirt, it itself becomes “[a] microscopic forest, a hundred thousand species in a few… grams.” A place seen as unliving becomes its own living world, moving and teeming with drama and cycles of life and death as worthy of attention as the human drama around it. Power’s

52 Powers 138.
53 Powers 138.
54 Powers 392.
55 Powers 408.
“zoom lens” on these types of moments allows the reader to appreciate the deeper levels which lie in each individual scene of the novel.

Powers also addresses the idea that the human perception of time views non-human life as either short and insignificant—as would be the case with the variety of insects which live for only days or weeks—or slow and imperceptible and therefore is essentially nonliving because they cannot move or interact with us—as would be the case with trees whose pace is imperceptible to the human eye. There lies an inherent difference in the ways that the modern telling of human history and the timetable of trees are perceived. As Benjamin suggests, the human perception of history is that of a linear progression through a homogenous time, a destined path which moves unceasingly forward. The progression of trees, however, is circular and multidirectional. Powers uses the imagery of trees’ rings and branches to provide a counterargument to the modern ideal that progress must be linear and direct. As one character in Powers’ novels addresses, no matter how much time passes, a carving in the bark of a tree—if placed at four feet—will always remain at four feet, no matter how tall the tree grows. As the tree grows in height, there is change, but not only upward movement—the outward expansion of rings (themselves a circular calendar of all-encompassing time-telling), the reaching of roots, and the branching of appendages moves in all number of directions and refuses to follow a single linear form.

This difference in the view of progress is a foundational image for how Powers chooses to address the conception of time, both from the perspective of trees and humans.

56 Benjamin, 261.
57 Powers 113.
Humans “think [time is] a line, spinning out from three seconds behind them, then vanishing just as fast into the three seconds of fog just ahead. They can’t see that time is one spreading ring wrapped around another, outward and outward until the thinnest skin of *Now* depends for its being on the enormous mass of everything that has already died.”  

The short term perspective of the past, as well as the progressive future, thinks only of the changes of *now* needed to be made to make *then* more prosperous than the *used to be*. In the form of the novel, the events of each plot stack upon one another, referring to the past events and the ways in which those events will affect a group of characters through their narrative. The representation of a long-term, outward reaching effect on both humans and their environments is the rare exception in the typical novel, not the rule.

Powers fights this in his novel not only by jumping between timelines as if he simply were glancing at another section of the same temporal ring, but also by contrasting the temporal measurement of human events with the perspective of trees. Just nine pages into the novel, the Hoel family story is advanced by decades in less than half a page. Years of manual farm-work, the marriage of daughters, the careers of young men, the decline of their parents, and the introduction of new farming technology as the eldest son takes over the farm happen rapidly for the reader—and for the family chestnut for whom “all this happens in a couple of new fissures, and inch of added rings.”  

This pacing happens again with the Hoel family as the son reflects on the photo flip-book which has been passed through their family, each son taking a picture of the tree once per

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58 Powers 358.
59 Powers 9.
month as it grew. As the pages flip, the pictures show years of progress in the matter of seconds. In viewing the rapid growth of the tree, the human events around the tree rip by at an incomprehensible rate: The Depression, death in war, the destruction of their farm through pestilence and fire, dozens of weddings and adulteries and divorces, political campaigns, lawsuits, drugs, Agent Orange, surprise pregnancy, cancer, retirement, and more—“everything a human being might call the story happens outside his photos’ frame. Inside the frame… there is only that solo tree… growing at the speed of wood.” 60

This summary of human time shows that when humans try to view the life of a tree “sped up to the rate of human desire,” 61 the drama of our very existence disappears in the blink of an eye. For the tree which seems to grow ever so slowly, the daily struggles and important moments of humans are but a blip on the radar of time.

This temporal difference between man and trees, and the rates of progress, are summed up succinctly as Powers references an alien invasion in a short story that Neelay encounters in his readings. It speaks of an alien visitation to Earth of small organisms which “zip around like swarms of gnats, too fast to see—so fast that Earth seconds seem to them like years. To them, humans are nothing but sculptures of immobile meat.” 62

The aliens attempt to communicate, but when no response comes due to their different perception of time, they believe that humans contain no intelligent life and harvest their flesh as jerky for the ride home. This story shows that the rate at which one perceives time changes the way that they view their ecological environment—that basing the value of life solely on the speed and perceived intelligence of a lifeform leads to the

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60 Powers 16.
61 Powers 11.
62 Powers 97.
exploitation and destruction of life which, as humans know of themselves, is capable of more than simply existing as standing meat statues. As such, the human should see other forms of life, no matter their temporal frame, as an important part of the world and not just a source to which they turn for resources.

This temporal difference, and the obsession with the necessity of human-paced progress, causes a situation in which humans see fruit, nuts, woods, shade, ornaments, foliage, obstacles, and a cash crop, but “trees—trees are invisible.” The temporal divide which Powers displays in his novel, along with the spatial description and the connectedness of life within those living spaces, displays ways in which the world surrounding the human story can be actively involved in the narrative at hand and create a true sense of ecologically scaled perspective—and not only from the human point of view.

The problematic view of progress and its effects within novels—which then perpetuate throughout the societal mentality in the real world—can be addressed and corrected, even with simple words on a page. In her review of *The Overstory*, India Bourke states,

> Novels such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* have offered powerful warnings about the aftermath of disaster, yet few writers have grappled with how the journey towards catastrophe unfurls. Any agency the natural world might possess – its ability to feel, communicate and adapt – has rarely provided more than background to humanity’s self-centred toil."

Powers’ attempt to capture the current move toward catastrophe and place it within a story which spans centuries uses new perspectives to capture the unfolding events from a

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63 Powers 423.
64 Bourke.
larger perspective. By using language to recreate the perceptual stimuli which exist between mankind and their physical surroundings, Powers captures a sense of connectedness between these people and the world which they inhabit. The methods which he uses to slow down time, zoom in where the human eye cannot see, and use deep focus writing to bring the background into focus excel in creating a narrative reproduction of these natural forms of communication and meaning. In order to see the web in which humans are entangled, there must be a recognition that the things which humans designate to be the background may be a greater part of the foreground than we may at first imagine.
II. Moving Photography as Replication of Place and Space in Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*

In his work on the literary representations of climate change and ecology, Amitav Ghosh repeats time and time again the idea that “the Anthropocene resists literary fiction [because of] its resistance to language itself…” and that “hybrid forms will emerge...”\(^\text{65}\) to aid the ongoing discussion of the Anthropocene in media. Ghosh’s idea of the hybrid form which can embrace ideas and conditions beyond what is considered normal life by using narrative in tandem with spatial forms was explored in the previous chapter, but as this thesis moves into the realm of new media, the focus will turn from linguistic descriptions of spaces to the art of capturing those physical spaces in visual media.

The medium of cinema can be seen as a combination of literary, musical, and visual forms of art into one cohesive, moving piece which tells a story through narrative structure, visual representation, and musical cues. The camera is able to directly capture images of physical reality and portray it on the screen rather than recreating a sense of physicality through descriptive language and, as a result, the viewers themselves are able to see exactly what the camera wants them to see. The description of setting, space, and movement are shown more often than explained and take an entirely different approach in the ways that they choose to place their characters in the world which they have created. Just as a picture is worth a thousand words, the moving scenes of a film are more accurately able to capture a visual sense of physical space than words on a page.

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\(^{65}\) Ghosh 84.
Though film emerged as a visual form of art, it often acts as a hybrid between literary traditions and stationary visual art. The opportunities opened by movement take the depiction of still frames and subjects and allow them to move, capturing narrative rhythms that can be complex or simple, funny or tragic, relaxed or tense. The element of movement itself can present narratives in a temporal frame by allowing the viewer to see the events unfold as a bystander, rather than through the more obviously mediated narratives suggested in paintings. Moving pictures allow for stories to play out on screen as if they were real events, people moving, talking, and interacting to capture the scene as it would unfold, often in real time.

The nature of film, being a visual form that often borrows from literary methods of narratology, allows for a balance between linguistic and visual storytelling, though each film approaches this balance differently. Early film such as the cinema of attractions often sought to capture the very idea of moving photography while later directors such as Chaplin began to use visual cues to tell a light narrative alongside the more aesthetic aspects of the medium. As the medium progressed, an increasing number of creators began to rely on exposition and dialogue between characters to convey pieces of the narrative and have the story take center stage of the film, causing the medium to become an increasingly literary one, focused on providing visual spectacle to literary narratives. Wherever these films may fall on this scale of visual art to literary adaptation, it is often used primarily for the purpose of telling a specific story rather than capturing elements which are unique to moving photography. In effect, narrative film often unfolds in ways that feel like a visual adaptation of a literary narrative rather than a story which relies on visual depictions of motion, time, and physicality to create a fictional world for the
viewer to observe. *Still Life* by Jia Zhangke, however, negotiates this balance carefully to utilize the unique visual/temporal strengths of film of being able to capture moving images of the real world. The emphasis of the film is more on the visual aspects of the form than a narrative plot. The camera acts in such a way that it seems to capture the appearance of the world as it moves naturally, not needing the plot to affect the ways in which the camera moves or how the edits happen. The world of the film moves at its own pace.

The subject of *Still Life*, the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, arose from the real construction and subsequent exodus that affected the people of the valley. Because of the real source material which the cast and crew had to pull from, the director was most interested in capturing and examining the physical state of the valley during the construction of the dams including the displacement of over a million residents and the flooding which would occur.66 The film is primarily concerned with capturing the real circumstances which exist in this place with the plot as an excuse to have characters move through the physical world of the valley and have the camera follow them. This is quite the opposite approach than that taken by many mainstream films which generally go through a rigorous writing process to compose a literary plot with characters and action. Settings and locations are often found after the fact, if even filmed on location at all—there are many times when locations are recreated through sets and soundstages rather than in found locations. Speaking of this, Fay adds:

Filmmaking occasions the creation of artificial worlds, unnatural and inclement weather, and deadly environments produced as much for the sake of entertainment as for scientific study and military strategy. Cinema's dominant mode of aesthetic

66 Padovani.
world-making is often at odds with the very real human world it is meant to simulate.\textsuperscript{67}

This sense of artificiality, especially when portrayed as a form of reality, can give the audience a false sense of normalcy. She continues by saying that another way that these artificially crafted worlds can be misleading is in the way that they convey a sense of constancy, of being finished and complete. The real world, on the other hand, is everchanging and something that must be adapted to.\textsuperscript{68} There is a sense of irony in the fact that filmmakers, in wanting to capture something realistic, opt to create their own version of it rather than embracing the real itself. The elements which inconvenience filmmakers while filming in the real world are the very things which make it real.

With this foundational information for how the film was produced, it becomes apparent that the film rests on this foundation and, as a result, brings place into the foreground of the film—seeking to capture a true sense of place rather than just pursue a visual representation of a narrative work. Worth noting is that the title “\textit{Still Life}” is different from the original Chinese title “\textit{三峡好人}” which translates to “The Good people of the Three Gorges.” While this original title would again suggest that the film is intended to focus on the subject of the place and the changes which happen to it, there may also be merit in considering the chosen translation: “Still Life.” The name refers to a style of visual art which concerns itself with objects inhabiting a very defined space and attempts to capture things as they exist in relation to one another. In other words, this title suggests that the film will be primarily a visual experience which will concern itself with

\textsuperscript{67} Fay 4.
\textsuperscript{68} Fay 8.
space, the ways in which that physical space is inhabited, and how it is defined by the things viewed within the frame, albeit this time through the frame of the camera rather than a painting on a wall.

One advantage which the medium of film has in a project such as this is that rather than simply being a painting of a dam and the water level covering the land, the passage of time and the use of sound allow for visual, audible, and temporal explorations of the subject at hand. Zhangke takes immediate advantage of this in the opening sequence of the film by introducing the sustained sound of a boat foghorn followed by the sound of water, then the introduction of human chatter and ambient music—all before showing an image onscreen. This technique calls the audience to use not only their sense of sight, but also that of hearing to begin establishing a sense of place. As mentioned in the last chapter, the use of human senses is vital to establishing a sense of place and oftentimes, the role of hearing is emphasized with subtle cues or to give a sense of the unknown lurking in the shadows, as is the case in many horror movies. This use of free-standing sound, however, calls focused attention to the fact that even before seeing a single sequence of the film, the audience is already attempting to piece together the setting—the place—in which the film will take place.

When the first image appears, it is out of focus and takes several seconds to become clear enough to recognize several people sitting on a boat, all engaged in different activities. As the camera slowly tracks in a circle to show each person chaotically scattered around the deck of the tremendously small boat, the lack of focal point and specific characterization make it difficult for the eye to land on any particular person or object. This creates an opportunity for the viewer to create their own focus and
to be placed within the scene to observe as they would if they were physically present in that space. The entirety of feeling which the scene conveys is captured in the fact that so many people are crammed in such a small space, each both a piece of a larger scene while also being worth all of the viewer’s attention on their own—much like individual object within a still life. And yet, the camera keeps moving and does not stop until it lands upon the main character of the story, a man who looks no more spectacular than the rest of the crowd. The movement of the camera within this scene remains consistent through the remainder of the film, rarely deviating from horizontal pans and still shots which are more concerned with the horizontal space within the scene than following a character moving through space toward their next destination.

In fact, the film effectively follows the progression of three simultaneous stories all happening within the same space: the journeys of the two main characters, Han Sanming and Shen Hong, to find their estranged spouses and the imminent change which is progressively overtaking the valley. The way in which these stories are portrayed is anything but action-packed as the camera captures each story at a natural pace, one which flows by like the pace of a river toward its eventual destination. The film begins with Han who, having been away from this landscape for sixteen years, returns to discover that where his family once lived has been buried in water. This change of landscape means that he must deal with changes in the physical world which make his emotional journey all the more difficult. Between him and his destination, he must navigate torn landscapes made up of debris, waste, and flooded ruins as he attempts to reconcile what he once knew with the new reality which surrounds him—constant reminders to him and the viewer that this place which many now call home will soon be overcome as a result of
man’s interference with the forces of nature. Fay mentions the irony that the dam, built to mitigate the problems of global warming in the area, drives people from their homes all the same. Each step which Han takes toward his emotional catharsis is shrouded in very literal obstacles in the physical world which inhibit his progress and lead to stagnant waiting and reliance on information and help from other people to navigate the world around him. The audience is shown the world from the perspective of one who is very much at the whim of change and time, one who has little control in the outcomes of the world around him.

As a wanderer in a strange land, Han is often shown slowly traveling from place to place rather than cutting from one scene to the next, creating a more cohesive panorama of the world which he inhabits as a character. In the valley he observes that in preparation for the next phase of dam construction, red lines are painted on existing architecture to show where the new water level will reach to and just how far back human life will be pressed in the face of the river’s new course. Workers with sledgehammers destroy what were once neighborhoods of residences and shops (figure 2.1). The society which has once dominated the valley, planting themselves on the banks of a river and embedding themselves and their community within that ecosystem, likely thriving from the presence of the river, now face the consequences of further development. The achievement and progress which they had once achieved is now destroyed at the hand of a project which turns the river against them. Historic progress must make way for more progress, destroying the old to create the new, “better” reality—even if doing so disrupts the balance between humankind and the natural world.

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69 Fay 18-19.
The beauty of the landscape which Han inhabits is undercut time and time again by the realities of change which await it. The skeletons of progress lie in the form of hollow concrete and rebar, workers smashing their old homes bit by bit, only to eventually be buried underneath the current and forgotten to the boats which move above them. The view of the future is one which cannot be separated from the destruction of the past—the previous “future”—which drives everyday people from their homes. As the camera captures this changing landscape, it acts as Benjamin’s “angel of history” which views the forward momentum of progress not as a chain of improvements, but “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet… a storm is blowing from Paradise… This storm irresistibly propels [the angel] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.
This storm is what we call progress.\textsuperscript{70} This linear conception of history highlights the problem with linear progress as it pertains to the world. Progress often only looks forward, but the angel has the unfortunate advantage of being able to look backward, seeing the aftereffects of progress from more than a single direction. The consequences of human action must be considered from more directions than one, looking around rather than just looking forward. As for the valley, however, the “betterment” of society which is called for by the governments and corporations drive the common people from their communities and turn them into wanderers in a strange land, awaiting their imminent expulsion from the place which used to be their home.

The camerawork and editing of the film call special attention to the state of the valley by using an interesting combination of framing and editing techniques. As mentioned previously, the camera within the film is often still and unmoving, but when it needs to move, it almost always pans or tracks horizontally, revealing more of the space which exists around the key players on screen. Even in scenes when characters speak, the camera never becomes detached from its singular point of view. A few scenes take place in small rooms and the camera cannot keep all speaking characters in frame all at once because the placement of the camera itself respects the physical parameters of the space rather than editing together artificially composed windows to that world. Rather than using shot-reverse-shot editing to capture these moments, the camera focuses on half of the room for a while and slowly pans to the other half of the room later in the scene to reveal what the character has been seeing. The focus of the camera stays on its dedicated placement, even when characters off-screen are a major part of the conversation and

\textsuperscript{70} Benjamin 257-258.
speak several lines while not on camera. In essence, the camera never leaves its designated post just to capture a more aesthetically pleasing, or narratively productive angle. This also allows for sound design in the film to remind the viewer that the story is taking place in a three-dimensional space, one in which things are constantly moving and happening off-screen and that those things are just as important as the events on-screen—that the world of the film continually moves and exists beyond the screen’s frame.

This technique is also used often when capturing characters as they enter and leave scenes. There are often sequences within the film which allow the camera to expose the environment of the scene before any human characters enter. As they do, the camera pans to adopt a good view of them as they inhabit the space of the scene, but it never becomes specifically tied to them. Unlike many films which cut as characters leave a room and immediately shift to a new perspective thereby creating a narratively cohesive sequence in which a view of the character is never lost, the camera in Still Life, because it never leaves its singular post, often lingers for several seconds after characters leave the scene to either focus on the view of the river valley or even follow the movement of boats in the background which float by slowly. This allows the camera to accurately capture the idea that the space of the film exists long before and after the characters come into frame and that the existence of that world continues even when the characters do not directly interact with it. This effectively allows each moment of the film to feel closely connected to a larger, living space rather than simply capturing places only when they are relevant to the characters.

There is an intimate sense of physicality in every moment of the film, even combining moments of intimate human vulnerability with the vulnerability and fragility
Figure 2.2. Han and his wife share a piece of White Rabbit Toffee as they sit together in a dilapidated building.

Figure 2.3. A blast in the background calls them out of their quiet moment to look out and see the skyline, now missing a skyscraper (on the left).
of the world the characters inhabit. As characters crouch in the corner of a dilapidated building and share their first consoling and healing moment, the camera is placed so that a hole in the wall dominates most of the screen, framing the skeleton of a modern skyline. As the characters share a piece of candy and have an intimate moment (figure 2.2), an explosion rings from the background as one of the skyscrapers collapses and brings them back to their physical reality, to the unsure future which lies ahead (figure 2.3).

In another scene, Shen and her husband see each other for the first time in over two years and share a dance as they walk along the calm river. As the camera turns to follow them, the dam, still under construction, fills the background of the scene for its first appearance in the film, over an hour and ten minutes in (figure 2.4). As the dam comes into view and is revealed to the viewer for the first time, the characters enter a moment of disenchantment and break apart to discuss the circumstances which drive them apart—circumstances which will cause their separation from that moment on. The dam, with its dominant presence and appendages of cranes and machinery, acts as the

*Figure 2.4. Shen and her husband speak of divorce with the dam as their background.*
source of destruction within the film, the displacement of thousands of citizens and tons of concrete and the separation from people and their sense of place. Its symbol as a source of separation from comfort, place, and familiarity fits well into this scene in which two people who were once intimately connected become separated for good.

Both of these stories, though different in their context and resolution, capture a sense of intimacy and connection to place. While Han spends most of his time in the lower part of the river-valley, Shen travels to parts of the city which sit well above the water-level and are all but unaffected by the gradual destruction which takes place below them. As she travels into this place of wealth, there is a very distinct and physical separation between the place which Han experiences and the places which Shen visits, but they all show different angles of the same valley and the effects, or lack thereof, of these changes around them. And, although these two main characters never directly interact in the film, the camera records moments of simultaneity which capture their different perspectives of the same moment—capturing a moment in time from multiple perspectives within the valley (figure 2.5).

![Figure 2.5. Shen looks out of her window from her boat as Han looks down at the river and sees it as it passes by.](image-url)
Methods like these within the film create a cohesive sense of place and create a setting which not only becomes a setting for the narrative at hand, but also becomes part of the foreground itself and becomes a character which is just as affected by the constant movement of time as the humans within it are. The camera acts as a voice for the landscape and captures its various elements, both human and natural, and they intersect and combine within the physical space and create a place which, in due time, will change entirely. And yet, the camera feels married to the environment, clinging to it as people move through it, coming in and out as they please. The camera places the audience within this place and sees the people who are affected by it, who journey through it in search of closure and come out the other end different than they were before. As Han leaves the valley for the last time, never to return, the camera stays behind and captures a man walking a tightrope between two buildings—buildings soon to be submerged under water (figure 2.6). This man walks above the earth on a thin wire and he will always come back to the earth to step on solid ground. Even on solid ground, however, he will walk just as fragile of a line as the ever-changing world shifts beneath his feet.

The fragile balance between individuals and the environment they inhabit is a constant theme throughout the film, addressed constantly through the visual depiction of the “153.6 m” lines painted on buildings, the constant flow of the water, and the constant destruction of homes and businesses in the context of the landscape. Though these people had once claimed a place in this valley, the call for progress has impacted the natural world around them and begun to force them from the very place where they once stood immovable. It is notable that both main characters come to the valley in the beginning of
Figure 2.6. A man walks a tightrope between two buildings which are surrounded by demolition sites, already partly demolished themselves.

the film and depart it at the end—neither finds a new home there. In the same way, Jia “[p]opulates his film with migrant workers, refugees, tourists, visitors, and even aliens from outer space, none of whom are at home in this world.”

This grounded exploration of the human place in shifting landscapes is interrupted, however, by the appearance of two extraterrestrial encounters within the film. As the story shifts between Han and Shen, a flying saucer passes through the sky above the valley, rocketing past the mountains, never to touch the ground. Later in the film, a piece of architecture which looks to be a modern sculpture launches like a rocket ship and departs the decaying landscape never to be seen again. Though these two encounters seem alien when compared to the film as a whole, it may be worthwhile to ponder the

71 Fay 19.
fact that though these encounters come into close reach of the valley, they are able to leave when things begin to change. The humans in the film, however, cannot leave this earth. Even as Han and Shen leave the valley for the last time, they will never be disconnected from the valley—it will always be connected to the larger world to which they belong, no matter how far away, always affected in one way or another by the actions of mankind moving upon it.

And yet, even knowing that we cannot leave this earth which we inhabit, this film portrays that humans are willing to alter their ways, to shift their functions to fit the larger goal of societal progress. Even as people are driven from their homes, the dam continues to rise and take its place as the newest fixture of the landscape—the trade of human habitat for economics wins again and becomes the primary objective to which those who live beneath the looming stature of the dam must conform. Though the human stories continue to move in and around the Three Gorges Dam, these lives will never be disconnected from it.

*Still Life* captures expressions of space and place which bring the effects of human action upon the environment back to the forefront of the story. Rather than being tucked away or viewing the vistas from the most attractive angles, the camera captures the place as it stands and shows the cycle from human involvement to environmental change and to how it ultimately comes back around and affects human life. The story of *Still Life* is not a plot which exists within a static universe. Rather, the style of the film places the themes of action and consequence directly into the frame and allow the viewer to contemplate the larger systems at work within the world of the film. Ultimately, *Still Life* is a film which reminds its viewers that they live in a world that is ever-changing and
systematic, that does not simply move in a clean, linear fashion. For each move toward progress, things must be displaced and readjusted—life must change.

All of these lessons are those which are unspoken, captured only through the ways in which the camera shows the spaces of the Three Gorges Valley to the audience. Using spatial techniques and editing styles dedicated primarily not to characters and plot, but to place is one way in which film can call attention to the connectedness of people and the places which they inhabit. In another world, *Still Life* could have been a drama with dashing vistas, an emotional soundtrack, and romantic/tragic reunions with long-estranged loved ones. What the film captures, however, is the story of a place, the plight of those who live within the confines of the Three Gorges Valley and who will be affected by its change. The landscape and its constant motion toward change is front and center in this film and allows the scenery to become the focus while the human dramas which take place therein accent the reason that the dissolution of this human home is so devastating.
III. The Importance of Perspective: Sensory Design in Johnathon Blow’s *The Witness*

As has been established previously, there are elements of the human experience which interpretation through language alone cannot accurately capture. The previous chapters have explored how spatial description through literature and the visual portrayal of movement and spatiality in film can capture various aspects of the human sensory experience with relation to space. Though these mediums have inevitable layers of separation between the observer and the world which is being created or portrayed, there are still ways in which the form of a work can be used to replicate, or even enhance, the firsthand, eye-level observation of a human’s physical environment and emphasize the connected nature of the human and their involvement.

The aforementioned forms of film and literature, however, are passive forms in which the observation and imagination of worlds is delivered in a particular way with a particular order for the observer to interpret. Even considering the multi-level structure of *The Overstory* and the omniscient camera of *Still Life*, there are still limitations to their portrayal of place and experience in that they are experiences of place which will always unfold in the same way, which will always have more which hides beyond the bounds of the frame or page, just out of reach. Because this method of experiencing a sense of place is a scripted one, there are inherent shortcomings which arise from the inability of the observer to experience the world without doing so through the lens of the camera or narration. The nature of ecology is that world is in a never-constant state—it is always changing and morphing in reaction to various interactions which take place within it. The
scripted nature of the fictive worlds in these productions creates a disconnect between the observer and the created world in that they have no bearing on, or experience of, the changing of the world with their personal involvement. That is not to say in the least they are ineffective as mediums, even with regards to their ability to approach the Anthropocene—I would hope that the previous analysis of these works would show a wealth of confidence in the ability of these forms to reach a greater potential and provide a deep and meaningful look at the state of humankind and their environment. Rather, this statement is simply to acknowledge that even with the strengths of these forms and the experimentation which has allowed for such uses of the respective strengths of each, there is still room for other media to step up to the plate and offer other perspectives on this same question in ways that these traditionally respected forms may be unable to approach.

When Morton suggests that “the ecological thought is so new and so open, and therefore so difficult, [that] we should expect art to show us some of the way” and that “[e]cology is a matter of human experience,” there is a suggestion that the humanities can begin to approach these questions from a different angle than may be possible from merely a statistical or scientific angle. Indeed, the various forms of art have ways of capturing meaning and message that simple statistics may not be able to match in their relatability. One such medium which allows for a new perspective on this study of ecology and the effects on human interaction with natural systems is video games.

Due to the technological nature of video games, there is a fundamental interest in systems when approaching an analysis of their form. The various pieces of content within a video game—its visual artifacts, music, and narrative—could be portrayed individually,
but it is not until they are brought together in a singular interactive form, bound together by programmed systems of coding and animation, that they become what would be considered a video game. A completed film or novel contains elements which must have a scripted, sequential order to keep their prescribed form, but the form of video games exists not within a singularly coded sequence of events, but a bundle of systems which interact with one another, presenting the content of the game through a systematic form rather than a sequential one. Though many games have a narrative structure which can unfold in a sequential manner, even taking advantage of film-like sequences to tell the prescribed narrative, the moments of gameplay between these narrative segments take place in a virtual world that the player can interact with, control, and even change. No two players will ever have the identical moment-to-moment events in their games because their manner of interacting with the systems of the game will be unique. Though some may argue that the ability of the player to change and control the flow of the content may disqualify video gaming from being a meaningful art form, this chapter will seek to explore the ways in which system-based rhetoric may actually have an advantage when approaching the topic of ecology, which is intimately concerned with systems, interactions, and overlaps, none of which are necessarily prescriptive or linear in nature.

As an involved participant in the working of systems and the unfolding of the game’s content, players are involved in a direct feedback loop which teaches and enforces the rules of the world to the player as they interact with the game world. These systems, though liberating in the way that they allow the player a sense of freedom in how they observe and interact with the world, also place an amount of restraint on the player. Though even the most open of sandbox games like Grand Theft Auto allow
players to interact with the world at their own pace and take part in any number of activities including walking, jumping, swimming, biking, driving, flying, bowling, shooting, punching, stabbing, etc., there are still limitations on the player. Though the range of activities available for the player to take part in is diverse, the game will not allow them to engage in interactions which extend beyond the systems of the game’s design. Ian Bogost elaborates that a sense of freedom in games may not necessarily mean that the player can feasibly do anything that they want within the game. Games are always programmed with certain goals and play styles in mind and the interactions available to the player will reflect those. Much of Grand Theft Auto’s game design, for example, presses the player toward interactions which involve violence. Because these restrictions exist, references to freedom and interactivity in game systems mainly refers to fact that the pacing, sequence, and transitions between these activities are open for the player to manipulate freely without any scripted or sequential path they must follow.72

Players often refer to the cycle of gameplay systems and actions within the world of the game as a “gameplay loop.” This can refer to the ways in which the players specifically move about the physical areas of the game, the ways in which they interact with other NPCs (non-playable characters), or the ways they advance through the progression systems attached to their in-game character. These gameplay loops often create the bulk of the game’s experience in the moments between scripted moments. These cycles are designed to give players a sense of immersion within the world and to provide satisfying and fun ways for the player to truly become familiar with the ways in which each system within the game functions with one another and how they create

situations of difficulty and opportunities for creativity. Ultimately, the player becomes an integral part of these systems because their input controls much of the output. In other words, the player becomes integrated within the “ecosystem” of the game and becomes a crucial part of the experience. And while the general scope of activity will always be dictated by the systems which have been programmed into the world of the game, as will the consequences for the actions taken, the decision to interact with or utilize the effects of a particular system is generally controlled by the player.

Though much of the discussion thus far has focused primarily on the element of play and interactivity within video games, there is still an argument to be made for the role of systems and interactivity in video games becoming an effective medium of expression. Ian Bogost directly argues, “Videogames are an expressive medium. They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them.” The ability of the medium to express values, convey culture, and tell stories through interactivity rather than writing, images, or motion picture is what he terms “procedural rhetoric.” He argues that this medium is able to be effectively persuasive not only through its content, but also through its form, through the use of procedural rhetoric via systems, interactions, and manipulations of those systems. Throughout the history of video games, there have been a large number of games which have focused on the potential for play within the medium rather than using narrative to drive the experience forward. Games such as Pong, Tetris, and Mario are prominent examples in pop culture, but as the medium has grown, there have been an

74 Ibid ix.
increasing number of games which seek to convey a narrative, adopting many of the same methods as literature and film to explore their desired themes and plots and give flavor and context to the actions of the player within the game.

Many developers have begun to use this medium to tell stories that players can not only experience and interact with, but ultimately change the outcome of, reemphasizing the role of the player in these systems and narratives. Games such as *Mass Effect, Life is Strange*, and *The Walking Dead* have a strong reliance on decision making to drive the narrative forward with players reaching different plot moments and conclusions than others. Even among the most open-ended of games, however, the influence of both literary and film tradition have become increasingly present in gaming as more games have begun to use scripted narratives as alluring breadcrumbs in tandem with incentives and structures of progression to press the player forward into the world of the game, to make them feel as if the world of the game is centered on them and their story, even giving the illusion that they player caused the particular outcome as is the case with the games listed above. These moments, however, are always planned for and scripted, again limiting a true sense of experience between the player and the world they inhabit. While an interesting progression in the tradition of storytelling, this trend toward a reliance on an overall progression through a linear or branching narrative has made games like these subject to the same criticisms of narrative media discussed earlier.

Ghosh and others have stated that traditional narratives have a tendency to place the human-centric aspects of life, including human action and interaction, in the foreground with the narrative proceeding “through a series of successive exclusions…[until] the landscape is pushed farther and farther into the background” and the
characters’ surroundings no longer distract from the plot which is taking place.\textsuperscript{75} For Ghosh, it is often the case that the only purpose which the world serves is to house the characters’ actions in relation to the plot.\textsuperscript{76} It can be said that the same sentiment applies to video games which place all of the focus on the narrative motivations of the character while the world in which the gameplay happens, which would otherwise be an open sandbox to explore the interactions and implications of systems, serving only as an aesthetically pleasing set-dressing with some props and programmed encounters for the player to interact with. It is true that worlds within video games are often designed specifically with the movement and abilities of the player in mind, actually creating a sense of connection between the player and the world as each space, object, and angle are created specifically to allow the player and the world to be connected and work as a smoothly operating system, but critics like Ghosh believe that the almost uniform reliance on traditional narrative creates a climate in entertainment that will be unable to accommodate new ways of thinking about the natural world—or returning to the more interconnected way it used to be thought of from a less “modern, industrial” perspective.

Games which rely on both narratives and progression systems fall doubly deep into this position because of the implications that the only actions worth taking within the world of the game are those which either pertain to the progression of the narrative or which prompt rewards from the programmed systems of upgrades. Any action within these play spaces which is unrewarded or that does not further the narrative almost seem pointless and become merely a means to reach the next reward. The world which the

\textsuperscript{75} Ghosh 60.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid 59.
player inhabits becomes less a true recreation of a world in which systems produce consequences and interactions, and more about scripted moments which take place on the backdrop of a virtual world. This tendency can interrupt the connection between the player and the game world and sever that sense of connection, supplying scripted sequences as the “correct” way to play the game, rather than the ways in which the player would naturally advance themselves.

Many modern designers and programmers even lead players through this narrative funnel through the use of ever-present quest markers, GPS systems, and waypoints which direct the player through the world to the next plot-event. In sandbox games such as *Skyrim* and *Grand Theft Auto* which work endlessly to create a sense of world and place, these navigational systems, or fast-travel systems which effectively allow players to skip entire spaces within the world, create a world in which the only places of significance are those which pertain to the narrative or progressive elements of the game. These design elements help to reaffirm a mindset that exists in modern societies of which Wallace Stegner states that “at least to human perception, a place is not a place until people have been born in it, have grown up in it, lived in it, known it, died in it – have both experienced and shaped it.”.77 Though the spaces which a player interacts with are virtual and may not have presence in the physical world, the mindset of moving from place to place, only paying attention to the spaces which hold personal significance to their sense of progression, is a reflection of these attitudes in industrial societies. When a player is driven forward by waypoints, quest markers, or story objectives within a game, the spaces through which the players pass become window dressing, a placeholder

77 Stegner 2.
until the player reaches the next important “place” as mandated by the game itself. The spaces which were once sandboxes rife with possibilities for player exploration and experimentation are often turned into mere instances of backdrop through which the player has to travel to reach the “real” places within the game, the places where the developer has provided events which are important to the story. When such an interactive medium begins to rely on these devices to draw the player forward, the moments of connection and immersion begin to feel inauthentic and disjointed.

All of this is to say that, while the medium of video games have great potential for exploring ideas of connection, sense of place, and the human’s interactions with larger systems, there are often design decisions made which turn these interactive experiences into guided tours. There are many games, especially within the simulator genre, which seek to leave the world of systems more open and available to the player without narrative trappings to distract from those interactions. Titles such as Sim City, Civilization, and Minecraft deal intimately with natural systems, the reliance of humankind upon their environment, and the eventual effects of their progress on the larger natural and societal systems around them. A major trend, however, is that of narrative focused experiences.

To find a balance between these systematic sandboxes and the narrative driven adventures which define different ends of the medium, this chapter will instead find a game which is quite defined in the ways in which it allows the player to interact with its world, but free of narrative and progression systems to distract from the player’s experience within the game world. The Witness, a puzzle game designed by Jonathan Blow, places the player within a virtual world with no explanation and opens an island
for the player to explore, solving puzzles along the way. The only draw which compels the player forward is their own curiosity and the knowledge these panel puzzles are scattered throughout the world for the player to solve. Because of its non-narrative, open-ended game design and the use of puzzles that become increasingly intertwined with the environment, *The Witness* is a fitting piece to evaluate the potential of video games to explore ecology and the coexistence of man and nature. By blurring the lines between the typical “foreground and background” of a video game, much as *Still Life* did for film, and allowing the player to interact with the world in ways deeper than would be possible through traditional forms of narrative entertainment, the game calls attention to the importance of the human perspective—the ability to control the camera becoming a much more prominent mechanic than in many games—and its ability to recognize connections and overlaps between the human and the natural which exist all around the player.

Various aspects of *The Witness*’s design begin to blur some of the artificial boundaries which have arisen between players and their environment. From a macro perspective, the game opens with the player on an island which seems to be isolated in the middle of an ocean (figure 3.1). As the player begins to explore the island, they discover that there is are occasional statues around the island which portray people, but there is no other life to be found other than the plants which adorn the island.

Through their exploration, the player finds various line puzzles to be solved by interacting with grids on panels strewn about the island. Aside from the first area which serves as a tutorial of sorts and a final area which requires a knowledge of the various rules in each area of the game, the game never forces the player to approach any area before another so that the player is able to explore the island as they wish. Some
boundaries do exist in that certain parts of the island are themed with a certain type of puzzle—indicated by a particular symbol which appears on the panel (figures 3.2 and 3.3)—or that the final area of the game requires a knowledge of most puzzle types in the game, but the lessons learned about each symbol and the rules associated with it carry through different parts of the island and are used in tandem with other symbols to create complex puzzles which follow multiple sets of rules.

This blending of puzzles throughout the island is one of the first ways in which the game seeks to do away with a distinction between place and space and to have the player appreciate it all as one interconnected whole. Lawrence Buell defines “place” as
Figure 3.2. Three grid puzzles which contain different colored squares and an additional symbol to communicate the rules of the puzzle to the player.

Figure 3.3. A path made of puzzle grids which the player must solve by discovering the rule sets associated with the accompanying star symbol.
space which has been prescribed with meaning and given a value over other spaces,\textsuperscript{78} so rather than dividing the island into distinct sections, the game seeks to blend the places into spaces through which the player moves in their journey and making no one place more important than another. This distribution asks the player not to see one section of the island as less important than another because, in the end, they will all contribute to the player’s experience as a whole. This mixing of puzzle types and the way in which the player may learn their rules in any order creates a sense that the island is to be seen not as a jigsaw puzzle of entirely separate areas, but as a cohesive whole. This also helps to portray to the player that there is no singular path of progression, if there is any traditional “progression” at all. The only sense of progression which the player gets is the knowledge that they are learning and completing puzzles, but even this learning curve takes place at the pace of the player themselves, not by the dictation of the game.

Worth reiterating is that \textit{The Witness} does not have an underlying narrative thread, nor does it have progression systems built within the experience. There is a beginning and an ending, but there is little artificial framing inbetween. The identity of the player is never revealed, no narrative reason is given as to why the player happens to be on the island, and the completion of a puzzle yields no in-game reward or sense of feedback other than access to more puzzles. In fact, the world of the game opens itself to be discovered at the pace of the player’s curiosity and to be discovered in the order which the player wishes to discover it without placing restrictions or incentives to guide their experience, thus allowing the player to truly become immersed within it. Allowing the island to be discovered at the pace of the player’s curiosity opens the door for a genuine

\textsuperscript{78} Buell 59.
sense of discovery rather than crafted experience. Each player will likely discover the island in a different order, and though it is the same island as any other player will experience, their personal connection to the place around them will be created organically. This approach to world design helps the player organically discover the places and create significance within the environment for themselves rather than being given a story to give the place artificial significance. The discovery of the world and the satisfaction of learning rules and solving puzzles become rewards in and of themselves, all combining into one intertwined experience.

Further emphasizing the importance of the player’s individual perspective and their personal perception of the world, there are audio clips hidden throughout the world which the player can find and listen to as they play. These clips contain readings of quotes, ponderings, and writings of various philosophers and thinkers from various walks of life. Albert Einstein, Augustine, Wordsworth, Richard Feynman, Nicholas of Causa, Cezanne, and others are quoted with their thoughts on religion, philosophy, science, faith, existence, perspective, meaning, the role of art, etc. While the collection may seem eclectic and mismatched for a game about drawing lines on grid puzzles, there is a theme present within the game of the importance of perspective. The title itself, The Witness, suggests that the game wants the player to contemplate the importance of individual perspective and experience. These quotes, when taken as a whole, give a sense of the world that is not definite or objective, but dependent on personal experience, belief, and perspective. In a sense, this theme of witnessing encourages the player to pay closer attention to the world which they inhabit and take full advantage of their individual perspective—to become an active witness rather than a passive bystander.
In fact, the statues which scatter the island, as well as many other objects such as rock, twigs, branches, and reflections also suggest that different perspectives can offer a different view of the nature of the world around us. While several examples exist, the most prominent example would be that of what some players have come to call “The Juggler” (figure 3.4). This statue portrays a man who, when approached from a distance, seems to be juggling with his shadow. The stones on the ground align with his shadow perfectly so that he casts an image of playfulness and joy in the middle of this town.

When approached directly, however, the man seems to be mourning. With a sorrowful look on his face, he looks to the sky with his arms outstretched (figure 3.5). The source of his mourning can be seen when approaching the man from behind. As the player approaches the correct perspective, a dark cloud in the sky aligns with the crumbling tower of a gothic building (figure 3.6). His mourning seems to convey his sadness as the building succumbs to the forces of destruction and begin to crumble to the earth.

Figure 3.4. “The Juggler,” a statue whose shadow appears to be juggling stones scattered on the ground.
Figure 3.5. When viewed from a closer perspective, “The Juggler” appears to be mourning with his arms outstretched and a look of sorrow on his face.

Figure 3.6. When viewed from behind, “The Juggler” seems to be mourning the destruction of a building in the town.
The importance of perspective as conveyed in these perspective puzzles within the game addresses the subjectivity present in all aspects of life, the importance of perspective making itself present in all interactions which players have with the world around them. The human perspective takes center stage in *The Witness* and elevates the sense of its importance in that the player directly controls that perspective and is able to see a new perspective through their control of the game’s camera—itself assuming the role of the human’s eyes in this world. Even when pausing the game, an animation of darkness ascending on the screen takes the form of eyelids closing, further suggesting the player’s personal involvement and presence in the world. This emphasis on the human perspective and the gaze of the eye, along with walking and drawing lines on puzzles, itself becomes a central mechanic which is essential to playing the game.

As the player explores the world and discovers more panel puzzles, there are many panels which do not have symbols that indicate the rules needed to solve them. The player may be taken aback at first, but if they examine the world around them and adjust not only their perspective, but the focus of their gaze, they will begin to notice that natural phenomenon in the world such as symmetry (figure 3.7), reflection (figure 3.8), light and shadow (figure 3.9), color, obstruction (figures 3.10 and 3.11), sound, and spatial position will provide the answers to these panels, though they may not have symbols to indicate that that is the case. This second type of puzzle requires that the player be more observant of their environment, often requiring a change of perspective in order to see the environment from multiple angles to find the entire solution.

As the player begins to solve these puzzles, the forms of nature, the background and setting of the game, and the panel which once seemed entirely separate begin to
become one, revealing the world as one large system which works together to provide answers for the player. In a sense, there is a type of deep focus which the eye must utilize in placing the background and foreground on equal levels of importance, bringing both into clearer focus. As they have already been exploring the island and having genuine moments of discovery with their surroundings, these puzzles heighten this sense of being present within the world, of being in a place which requires the player’s attention and requires the player to no longer see the rules of the puzzles and the environment as two separate worlds separated by arbitrary boundaries. In a very literal way, the foreground and the background begin to blend together, the boundaries becoming increasingly imperceptible as the player is unsure whether the real puzzle is the line which must be drawn in the panel or the discovery of the solution within nature itself.

Figure 3.7. This puzzle type requires that the player recognize the way in which the background behind the puzzle aligns with the grid.
Figure 3.8. This type of puzzle requires the player to view the panel from the certain perspective. When viewed correctly, the reflection of light will reveal the correct solution of the puzzle.

Figure 3.9. This type of puzzle requires the player to recognize the solution of the puzzle within the shadows cast by tree branches and other objects in the world.
As is true in studying systems, 1 plus 1 does not necessarily equal 2—a third entity must be accounted for: the entity which arises when 1 and 1 meet and become a new system. In the intersection of the manmade and the environment, a system emerges which is more complex than simply the sum of its parts. Speaking to this idea, Timothy Morton claims that, “to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected. This is the ecological thought. And the more we consider it, the more our world opens up.”\(^79\) This new ability to see the world as a combined system allows the world to open itself to the player and for new possibilities to arise. The panels begin to allow room for the environment, which so often serves as only the background for player interaction in other games, to stand confidently in the foreground and become one (figures 3.10 and 3.11). In this way, the game now encourages the player, who has been discovering the island at their own pace and by their own curiosity, to be truly present in the environment and to be mindful of the ways in which the world around them is essential to their experience— to use spatial reasoning rather than logic and to think more laterally. This is when the player begins to think of the world as a system, in terms of 1+1=3.

Having learned these lessons organically in their explorations, the player begins to become more aware of the world and the intentional ways in which the panels have been placed to reveal their connection with the natural world around it—to bring the player to truly appreciate the phenomenon happening around them at all times. The player’s eyes will begin to recognize patterns and shapes which occur in the world and truly appreciate the shape and form which has made up the background of their experience so far, likely unnoticed until they chose to use their perspective and become truly present. And then, 

\(^79\) Morton 1.
Figure 3.10. This puzzle has no indication of what the solution will be until the player views the grid with certain objects in the foreground.

Figure 3.11. Solving this type of puzzle requires the background—parts of the world which would otherwise go unlooked—to become part of the foreground which the player actively observes in order to find solutions and get a greater sense of how the world functions.
they will see something that the game had not explicitly told them to look for, but had been slowly training them to see—they will begin to recognize the shapes of line puzzles appearing in the natural environment of the game (figures 3.12 and 3.13). Not only do they look like the puzzles which are central to the game, if the player attempt to interact with them, they can solve them just like any grid puzzle and it will light up in a similar way that other puzzles do. In this moment, the player discovers that the line puzzle was never bound to the panel as they thought, that the environment could not only serve as a solution to a puzzle, but even become a puzzle itself.

A thorough knowledge of the line puzzles presented on panels and the ways in which nature cleverly hides the solutions to puzzles slowly guides the player to be more mindful of the world around them, thus leading them to find this new type of puzzle. If the player had been distracted by narrative plot events or temporal constraints, the organic exploration and curiosity required to discover these things naturally may not have occurred at all. This revelation firmly plants the background in the foreground as the human-made puzzles and the natural world come together on the same plane of the world, becoming a form of true hybridity. Spaces through which the player has passed a dozen times now reveal secrets that were hiding in plain sight the whole time which the player could have easily noticed had they been truly present in the world rather than trying to get to the next “place” where puzzles were located (figures 3.12-3.17). In reality, the entire environment within the game is something to be interacted with, all containing its own importance as one cohesive space.
Figure 3.12. A section of the river that runs through the island from a ground-level perspective.

Figure 3.13. A segment of river which acts as part of the landscape itself becomes a puzzle when viewed from the correct perspective. Over 100 of these puzzles are hiding around the island waiting to be found.
Figure 3.14. Approaching a path into the forest, there is a gap in the crowns of the trees.

Figure 3.15. When viewed from the correct perspective, the gap in the leaves takes the form of an environmental puzzle.
Figure 3.16. A castle wall surrounded with clumps of flowers.

Figure 3.17. The flowers outside of the castle wall take the form of a puzzle when seen from the correct perspective. Places which the player has passed several times become puzzles themselves, places for the player to actively pay attention to to find puzzles hiding in plain sight.
The Witness is a game which serves as a celebration of space and which reflects on the role of the human perspective in becoming connected with the world around us, one which wants to teach player that the worlds of nature and man do not exist as separate planes of existence, but as a unified system in which we live. Rather than simply providing a world in which to solve panel puzzles, the world actively works to help players realize that there is no separation between the player and their surroundings—between humankind and their environment. Though players often become accustomed to the environment of the game serving as just a backdrop to the action and story, The Witness uses the form of interactive media to bring players into full interaction with their world and encourages them to recognize the ways in which artificial boundaries begin to blur and fall away if we look more closely at the ways in which we interact with the environment around us.

As Morton states, “Studying art is important, because art sometimes gives voice to what is unspeakable elsewhere, either temporally… or intrinsically… Since the ecological thought is so new and so open, and therefore so difficult, we should expect art to show us some of the way.”80 Without the interactivity which the form of video games allow for, The Witness would not work because it teaches something that has to be personally learned through experience—through being a “witness” to it. As Emerson argues, “Our age is retrospective… Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe… by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?” (Emerson 181). By letting go of narrative structure and planned progression, the game’s design is able to take full advantage of the player’s ability to interact with the world, not only through

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80 Morton 12.
programmed interactions, but also through the use of perspective and the ability to use the human senses. This provides for a level of interaction which invites the player to truly appreciate the spaces around them for themselves without need for arbitrary narrative incentives to do so.

In comparison with traditional narrative, such a framework allows the world of the game to help the player to recognize the ways in which they are connected with their surroundings and cannot be separated from it. Because of this, The Witness would not have worked as a novel or as a movie, nor would it have benefitted from a story. The simplicity of the system through which the player is able to directly interact with and discover these truths at their own pace is what allows a true sense of connection to become possible between the player and the world. The game provides an interactive way to achieve many of the same points of discussion which have been raised about The Overstory and Still Life about the importance of human interaction with the world around them. It serves as a reminder that ecology has to do not only with plants and animals, but also humans and the complex systems with which all forms of life interact and affect one another. The human perspective is one which humankind will never be able to abandon, nor will they necessarily be able to change the way that the senses observe the world around them. The Witness, however, asks the player to adjust their focus and utilize their perspective to see things from a new way and explores what new possibilities arise when this happens. The human perspective may be a tool that we can utilize to reestablish a sense of connectedness with the world around us rather than simply a hinderance to our ability to do so.
Conclusion

The works which have been explored in this project are all the product of human imagination, cultural belief, physical perspective, and human fallibility. Though none of these works is perfect and each has an inherent bias in approaching their respective goals, there is a reach for a new perspective in each work. The human perspective controls how much a human is able to physically observe and sense in their daily interactions with the world around them, but these works explore the potential of using those senses, that perspective, to attempt to adjust the focus of human trajectory. Many western societies, in their focus on improvement and progress have lost sight of the larger implications of their actions on the world around them. The systems at play in their environment are lost from focus while progression is placed firmly in the forefront of the cultural identity, as well as at the forefront of their artistic works. This thesis has sought to show, however, that there are strong exceptions to the rule which can raise a renewed awareness of these problems and seek to readjust the societal perspective regarding the effects of their actions—whether they directly address climate change or not.

Ghosh laments that the novel has been largely ineffective in bringing attention to the climate crisis happening around the globe and that when it addresses these themes, they are often considered radical or campy. This project has sought to call attention to the importance of recognizing the nature of ecological connection between man and nature in all forms of media. Though these works have used experimental methods and used the strengths of their respective mediums in different ways, they serve as examples of works which can provide a more nuanced lens through which to view the human perspective. The Overstory gives greater spatial awareness through its use of temporal shifting and
both microscopic and macroscopic views of the natural world in conjunction with mankind. The production of resources and the effects of mass lumber exploitation are explored from a perspective that often drifts beyond the societal perspective and into the natural world itself, the narrator taking moments to provide nature’s perspective on the matter. It seeks to reveal the various ecosystems at work behind each piece of the world, whether it be 10 feet or a hundred miles wide. In a similar manner, Still Life seeks to capture the valley surrounding the Three Gorges Dam in as much of a real scope as possible. The camera’s firm position in the world of the film, as well as its focus on the effects of human progression upon both the environment and the people within the environment, allows viewers to consider the world of the film in terms of real systems of cause and effect, not just an idealized landscape recreated on a soundstage. Finally, The Witness explores the value of the human perspective through creating an island which contains puzzles which are not only contained on panels, but with bleed into the larger world and which sometimes are unsolvable without considering the manmade in relation to the natural environment around it. Its interactive elements and the ways in which the perspective of the player are so essential call attention to the importance of the human perspective and invite the payer to consider the progress of the game in tandem with the spaces in which they take place.

In conclusion, the concerns of the various critics which have been referenced in this project are important to consider because they raise serious questions regarding our societal focus on progress and production—often without consideration of its effects on the environment—and the perpetuation of that mindset through the media which we consume in increasing quantities. However, this thesis stands with Timothy Morton and
Jennifer Fay in defense of the humanities and their potential to help people become reconnected to the natural world and environment around them. As the age which we enter become increasingly incomprehensible and raises an increasing abundance of questions and uncertainties, facts and statistics alone may be insufficient to awaken people to the realities of the systems at work around them. As has been true of ages past, the arts can serve as an important element in reconnecting people to the important events happening around them and make them aware of their part in it. In an increasingly technological age with exponentially expanding access to these various mediums, there has never been a better time to experiment with our forms of expression to reach audiences around the globe with messages that desperately need to be heard.
Bibliography


