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Interconnectedness, Complicity and Ambiguity:

Reading with Dark Ecology

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Interconnectedness, Complicity and Ambiguity: Reading with Dark Ecology

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There are many aspects of ecological thinking. When reading texts through a lens of dark ecology, certain conflicts that arise from the imposition of human expectations on natural systems are revealed. These include interconnectedness, complicity, and ambiguities. Within a system, boundaries are contingent and transitory. Beginnings and ends are gradual, not definite. Ecological systems change over time, but it is a category error to imagine that change represents progress or to assume a teleological purpose. While there are hierarchies of power, and different roles, no species is, ecologically speaking, more advanced than another.

Ecological criticism focuses on interconnectedness, complicity, and ambiguity in art and literature, and is well suited to texts that deal with destructive processes like degradation and decay. Noir serves as a good example of a genre that can be read as an ecological system. Graphic novels, which already defy easy categorization are also ripe for ecological study..

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* the boundary between natural and artificial is blurred, not just through the exploration of empathy, but in human artifacts. *Watchmen* uses many techniques, including a fractured narrative, simultaneous scenes on a single page, and the visual unity space and time to undermine the idea of clear beginnings and endings and critique teleology. A third work, *Beautiful Darkness*, probes how natural forces of disintegrations overcome temporary human constructs, including civilization.

A dark ecological reading yields a sense of humility, instead of certainty, about human capacity for knowledge regarding ecological systems. It fosters respect for the unknowable that lies in shadow and the complicated natural systems that defy attempts at reduction. Disruptive events in narratives, when read ecologically, remind us of the unpredictable results that manipulation of components of the system can have for humanity, as well as on the functioning and balance of the system as a whole.

Keywords: dark ecology, graphic novels, noir, ecological criticism

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Introduction: Ecological Thinking and Criticism

Ecology is a paradigm for understanding the complicated, entangled system, of which humankind is but a small part. It is a scientific description of interdependent relationships between biotic and abiotic components that recycle the sun's energy through various forms, living and dead. Nature (a human concept that only has meaning in opposition to the equally hard to define concept of culture) is utterly indifferent to everything, to itself and its various components. Nature does not have a goal (it is not teleological), nor does it have regrets (no morality). The strongest arguments for the indifference of nature are death and extinction. Death of individuals, extinctions of entire classes of species are of no matter. Death is inherent in everything, and almost every kind of thing that has lived has also gone extinct. In the end, *homo sapiens* too will pass away from this earth. As Charles Darwin wrote, "Species very rarely endure for more than one geologic period" (Darwin 155), and humankind is entering a new geologic epoch, the Anthropocene, which we may not survive.

Ecology is an exploration of the networks that humans are a part of, ones filled with organisms and entities that move and change. It has always had a dark component because this is not just a shiny circle of life, an idealized version of transcendental purity: this system is fueled by excess, death and decay. It is energy recycling through endless forms, living and dying anew, fueled by the balance between extinctions and gross fecundity. As Darwin wrote in the *Origin of Species*,

We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we

forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year. (61-62)

Darwin was a child of Romanticism. It is no wonder then that he sees in nature beauty and darkness, and that man is a product of natural processes and subject to the same forces and pressures as the rest of the living world. Humans and human culture are fundamentally part of ecology. We arose out of nature and are still a part of nature, even with all of our thinking and building. When it comes to the demands of life and death, the human population must pay the same toll, play the same competitive game as every other creature. Every individual is inextricably interconnected with other people and the life of the world around them. An ecological model reveals that just as nature is bright and dark, so too people are dark, destructive and wasteful, as well as beautiful and creative, prolific and profligate.

Ecology also has a political component, as one of the keywords of the environmental movement that criticizes how mankind has used (or abused) this system in which they live by seeing the earth as a resource to be exploited as fully as possible. The most overtly political use of ecology may have been with the advocacy of Arne Næss and the proponents of deep ecology who moved Aldo Leopold's egalitarian environmental community and land ethic into a strong criticism of human structures such as economies and technologies that have significantly changed the biosphere. The condemnation of human activity and the extreme changes advocated to human societies on every scale from international conglomerates to the nuclear family in order to rebalance the ecosystem were unpalatable to the point of being offensive to most people who

encountered them. Ecological thought continues to evolve, and in more recent years it has tended to attempt to correct the anti-human aspects of deep ecology, while retaining a respect for both the integrity of ecosystems as well as the human role within those systems. It recognizes that nature is powerful and indifferent, and that humans, though individually insignificant, have a significant collective effect. Our greatest distinguishing attributes from the apathetic systems of which we are a part are our deeply pathetic character and our drive to impose rational order through narrative and abstraction. It is our responsibility to use our particular attributes to benefit ourselves within the ecological system, not to pretend that the human is separate from it.

In literary criticism, ecology becomes a metaphor drawn from science, and is understood as a necessarily incomplete model of our interconnectedness with place and systems of energy conversion. It is concerned with particularity and power seen in living systems. The natural world for the ecocritic is in a constant state of struggle for limited resources, and is fundamentally composed of uneven hierarchies of power and dependency. Ecological criticism looks for these kinds of struggles and forces at play within a text, and in this way owes a debt of thanks to criticisms that explore relations of power and materialism such as systems theory, feminist studies, postcolonial criticism, Marxist dialectical materialism, and phenomenology. The critique of imbalances of power and the peculiar contingencies of embodiment in human economies have opened a path for thinking about texts more broadly in an ecological fashion.

Dark ecology takes ecocriticism a step further by exploring the heart of the conflict between the indifference and amorality of nature and the rational, self-

importance of man. Stephen Crane's epigram is a succinct statement of the basic conflict between humanity and nature:

A man said to the universe:

“Sir, I exist!:

“However,” replied the universe,

“The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation.”

It is hard to realize that, much as we care about ourselves and each other, the world just does not give a damn. Dark ecological thought recognizes this both sides of this conflict and situates it in the inescapable interconnectedness between man and nature, and man's impulse to impose order, such as narrative, and morality on everything, including nature. Man so desperately wants a sense of control, an ordered universe (of which she is the center), that there will inevitably be conflicts between this drive and the reality around him.

It is worth noting that even ecology, from which dark ecology derives its way of seeing, is a human generated model, an incomplete and imperfect description. Dark ecology recognizes that there is no such thing as a natural system/structure as all scientific explanations are models—metaphors contingent on human understanding, observation, and articulation. These models are incredibly useful, and make it possible to manipulate elements of the environment to better suit human needs and desires, but people run into trouble when they forget that these descriptions are limited metaphors and mistake them for the entirety of reality itself. The “law of unintended consequences” is an articulation of the unknowability of the full consequences that will result from the

manipulation of one part of a system; it is an acknowledgement of the insufficient knowledge gained through controlled, reductionistic experiments when applied to real world conditions.

Because even ecological thought is limited and contingent, the criticism that is derived from it will be as well. Even ecocritically inspired analysis will only ever be an incomplete reading, one approach of many. This limitation does not reduce its validity or usefulness, but it does de-privilege the idea that any hermeneutic is decisive. Different ways of interpreting texts interact within a system of conversation and social capital, just as different species coexist in an ecological network. While ecological criticisms may allow people to see certain aspects things more clearly, such as our mutual dependency and inadequacy, as well as the limitedness of human systems of morality and how inappropriate it is to apply those standards to the amoral natural world around us, it does not and cannot illuminate absolute knowledge. As it celebrates the necessity of the ambiguity and unknowability of what passes in darkness and shadow, it cannot claim to present a comprehensive picture of the world. After all, revelation need not be comprehensive to be valuable, and a truth is no less true for being one of many. On the contrary, recognizing the limitedness or contingency of a truth is more expansive than fidelity to one way of seeing the world that ignores other realities.

Because the paradigms we use, both scientific models and hermeneutic approaches, are things that we have constructed, and it is useful to occasionally reevaluate our reliance on customary ways of seeing the world. This can be done through deliberate disruption, by seeing ways in which the models fail. This is an anti-Enlightenment move away from a belief in the possibility of absolute clarity and order

toward an embrace of the chaotic and irrational that is similar to the Romantic rejection of the Enlightenment in favor of the experience of the sublime and fascination with intuitive folk wisdom, irrational folklore, and necrophilia, which lead to Gothic novels, vampire stories, detective and crime fiction, and horror fiction. It is a dissolution of the illusion of order. When dark ecology criticism, with its emphasis on interconnectedness, complicity, and ambiguity, is used as a lens to approach texts, it reveals the contingency of our paradigms, the insufficiency of the stories we tell about ourselves, and of old, comfortable assumptions about the indifferent world that surrounds and includes humankind.

Dark ecological literary criticism is concerned primarily about our human relationships to each other and the world around us. It continues the Romantic exploration of the interconnectedness of man and nature. The English Romantics were proto-ecological; they didn't have access to modern ecological theory, but they intuited the connection between mankind and the environment, and explored how those connections affected mood, action, and politics. Modern ecological criticism reveals our not only our interconnectedness, but how our complicity is revealed in violence and weakness as we use others for our own ends and find ourselves insufficient to realize our own ideals. It probes the ambiguity of definitions and boundaries that we try to impose on living systems, including the fuzziness of beginnings and ends.

Dark ecology honors the search for knowledge of those connections as well as the impossibility of fully describing them. The unknown, that which remains in shadow, is as crucial to developing a sense of where we are in relation to this earth as is that which we have learned to manipulate and that which we think we can control. Regarding dark

ecology, Timothy Morton wrote: “Dark ecology puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking” (*The Ecological Thought* 16). It includes “negativity and irony, ugliness and horror” (*The Ecological Thought* 17). Note that Morton’s descriptions of dark ecology as ironic, horrific, or dark are anthropomorphic. Dark ecology is *not* detached and scientific; its primary concern is the human in the world, and so it seeks to dissolve the artificial divide between the human animal and the surrounding environment. The deep ecology movement of the early 1970s valorized the biocentric over the anthropocentric to the point that many felt there was no place for humanity in the natural world. The reaction against deep ecology hurt the environmental movement and made questions of resource use, pollution regulation, and birth control entrenched and divisive political items. By refocusing on the human and human limitations, dark ecology acts as a corrective to deep ecology in environmental discourse.

Although Morton has helped popularize the term dark ecology, the ideas he articulates are not exclusively his and have, in some cases, deep historical precedents. For example, William Jordan’s anthropological exploration of existential shame and environmental restoration in *The Sunflower Forest* is centered on the idea of complicity and the debts we owe to the natural world because of the violence we do it. Jordan also critiqued Leopold's land ethic; ecosystems have natural hierarchies, and the human concept of egalitarianism is not applicable to them. Andy Fisher’s *Radical Ecopsychology* acknowledges the relation between our environment and the health of our psyche, in a psychologist's take on both complicity and interconnectedness. Just as we need healthy relationships with other people to be mentally whole, so too we need a healthy relationship with the non-human members of our environment. Karl Kroeber’s

exploration of the proto-ecological thinking of the English Romantic poets in *Ecological Literary Criticism* dips into some dark waters as he considers the conflicted response to industrialization and the scientific discoveries stemming from the Enlightenment, such as Lord Byron's use of Cuvierian notions of mass extinction. Annie Dillard's classic *The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a clear exploration of dark ecology in the style of a *via negativa*, a moving account that blends first person narrative with extensive scientific and anthropological research to revel in mystical sensations of wonder and horror of this teeming, insensate world. Dark ecology is also akin to the philosophy of cosmic indifference identified in the work of H.P. Lovecraft. The unsettled atmosphere of Lovecraft's weird fiction, the way it defamiliarizes the world, is akin to the way in which dark ecology upsets false notions of an ideal, peaceful nature full of spiritual goodness or of nature as a pool of resources designed for human exploitation and development. Both the greatest flaws and strengths of a dark ecology perspective is that it recognizes the complexity and indifference of nature and openly accepts human nature and the destruction we cause. By reading with a dark ecological lens, we find narratives about the limitations of the human, the unknowability of the non-human other, and the complete and utter indifference of the cosmos to human life, ambition, and morality.

The term dark ecology has been used by other scholars and writers, such as Paul Kingsnorth, David Morris, and Marcus Poetzsch. Poetzsch and Morton have both written about dark ecology in connection with the Romantic poet John Clare, and Morris applied it to the work of William Blake. In this way, these scholars are all following the lead of Kroeber and his ecological criticism of the Romantics. This new iteration of Romanticism is relevant because there is still a struggle against the artificial limitation

resulting of the view of the world as rational, orderly, and completely knowable which we inherited from the Enlightenment. We are continuing the grapple with the same concerns that animated the Romantics, but now we do so at a different time, after a couple of world wars, with a history of environmental activism and, ironically, advances gained through reductionistic science. Because of this, ecological criticism is applicable beyond the works of the English Romantic poets. It lends itself well to readings of noir fiction. Noir has Romantic roots, from the dark romanticism of Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Noir is an atmospheric genre that implicitly casts doubt on the viability of the clear, linear thinking of the Enlightenment when cast as a detective story. Noir is an inversion of the expectations of the detective story: instead of a linear story concerned with discovering discreet clues that lead to a clear answer, the structure of noir subverts the narrative of the mystery story, turning it into one with no complete resolution. It questions ontology as well as epistemology. In no other genre are themes of complicity and failure so dominant, shaping both character and environment.

In the following sections, I'll briefly map out the correspondence between dark ecology and noir generally, and then I'll look at two noir texts: the science fiction noir novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, in which not only is the complicity of the main character is apparent, but a new dimension is added to the philosophical question of the novel regarding empathy and artificial intelligence, and the comic book *Watchmen*, which explores not only the thematic questions of morality and teleology, but at the relationship between image, text and reader.. But ecological literary criticism is flexible enough to go beyond Romanticism and noir. To prove this, I will consider *Jolies Ténèbres* [*Beautiful Darkness*], a French graphic novel that is in many ways anti-noir, but

functions as an ecological text. It defies easy categorization, but lends itself well to an ecological reading through its integration of image and idea, fragmented narratives, and the exploration of how the natural forces of disintegration overcome temporary human constructs such as civilization.

A Brief Overview of Ecological Overtones in Noir

Noir is a good example for how a dark ecological aesthetic applies to fiction that is not explicitly environmental. The metaphor of dark ecology maps neatly onto the structure and characters of the noir detective story because the interconnectedness of character, action, and environment are integral to the genre. It doesn't address the science of ecology, but it allows us to *feel* these connections as the detective attempts to untangle the snarled knot of deceit, discovering connections disguised as coincidences at every turn. The term "noir" comes from cinema, where the style uses dramatic lighting and strong shadows to create a mood of fatalistic despair, cynicism, and moral ambiguity, but it can be applied to other works that create a similar mood, whether they have a visual component or not. *Electric Sheep* is noir through theme, description of environment and atmosphere, whereas *Watchmen*, being a visual work, uses the cinematic elements of noir in structural elements such as shadow and composition.

In a noir story, there are no innocent characters, not the dame in distress nor the detective who attempts to find order and impose reason on the mess of intertwined relationships. Each character is flawed and complicit, either corrupted or corruptible, a nice comparison to ecological concepts of decay and erosion, as well as William Jordan's idea of existential shame provoked by a realization of our own violence against and dependence on others. "Shame," writes Jordan, "is the emotional register of our natural,

radical, existential dependency and a debt for which we are not responsible and which we cannot repay" (47). This description aptly summarizes the situation and conflict of the noir characters: they are connected to and dependent on others, in a situation not entirely of their own making, and from which they cannot extract themselves. The introspective PI, like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, is aware of this shame, as well as the futility of struggling against it as he tries to earn his pay or drink his way into an abeyance of that awareness. The characters are all guilty, and they are looking for something, be it connection and redemption or oblivion. The investigator is looking to understand, to make something right, and failing more often than he is able to succeed in correcting some injustice.

Noir also highlights the failings of the law and the impossibility of achieving universal justice. The law, a human institution, is insufficient to address the needs of the players bound by the law, so it must be violated. The law attempts to approach justice, but fails: justice is always in excess of the law. And so, in the search for this more fundamental concept, our hero subverts the artificial law in favor of this quest. It is an attempt to restore balance to a system by discarding artificial constructs that are not binding on all players. Because of this, noir fiction offers an ethos, a sense of responsibility in the face of self-doubt and near certain failure, a defiant challenge against external circumstances which includes chance happenings and other actors whose motivations are opaque. It is a grim world, and though the hero is involved in a likely futile struggle against himself and that world, the labor (he is too jaded to give it the noble name of a quest) is one that he cannot abandon. His role is a given, just as are the

particularities of embodiment and the functions that organisms fulfill within an ecosystem.

Milieu, in noir, is usually a character in its own right, and the story functions, in a sense, as an ecosystem. The complicated webs of plot, the loose ends at the “end” of the story, have a feel of truth about them. After all, a neat, tidy story is a lie by its simplicity. As Marlowe reflects, “It seemed a little too pat. It had the austere simplicity of fiction rather than the tangled woof of fact” (Chandler 169). Even oversimplification is a kind of falsehood. No simple story is completely true. The ecological reading of these defining elements of noir become even richer when applied to particular noir texts. While both *Electric Sheep* and *Watchmen* have all of these general elements, they explore different concerns such as the distinction between natural and artificial or the morality of teleological thinking that provide fertile material for ecological readings.

The post-human issues Philip K. Dick raises the noir science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* concern both culture and nature as he blurs the boundary between natural and artificial at every point and in many ways is more overtly environmental than the older noir stories of Raymond Chandler. The earth is wasted by dust and radioactive fallout from "World War Terminus." Mutagens and the destruction of individual bodies reflect the destruction of the planet, and man is forced to flee the earth, and in so doing, create and encounter new problems with their off-world colonization efforts. In this system, there is no Noah's ark: animals and insects have been destroyed by man's action, even though the basic human need for a stewardship connection to the natural world remains. Animal husbandry is now the highest and all but unattainable ambition in a world that finally values nature more than man-made

approximates. The protagonist, android bounty hunter Richard Deckerd, desperately wants to own a real animal, not just because of the social status he will claim through that stewardship, but also because he wants to feel a sense of wonder and connection with another living creature. Dick has taken the dark tone and theme of a noir detective story and turned it to the exploration of the hypothetical question: what does it mean to be human after we have destroyed nature? As Deckerd winds his way through the story, he contemplates his own complicity in a society that has destroyed so much, as well as the value of the new things that come to fill those emptied niches. Even an ecosystem that has been drastically manipulated by man is still an ecosystem, its components continue to evolve and interact with man in surprising ways.

In noir fashion, Dick has created a tangled cast of characters, in which the identities of the players keep shifting; their nature is ambiguous. At the end of the novel, a major question remains: Is Deckerd human or android? This is one example of the primary question, Does the distinction between naturally created and artificially generated matter? We know that creature, creation, and creator are related categories, but Dick blurs the distinctions between them through his exploration of empathy, and reveals the label “artificial” to be false. The novel is an exploration of uncertainty, both through these philosophical questions about humanity and empathy and the deliberate blurring of the boundaries between natural and artificial on multiple levels, from the junk that accumulates in abandoned spaces, to the electric sheep that is the book's mascot, to the uneasy relationship between human and android.

The first example of this play between natural and artificial is found in the behavior of man-made trash, called kipple, which is one of the frequently overlooked

aspects of *Electric Sheep*. It is true that the clutter adds to the atmosphere of the novel, creating a mood of wastedness, but it allows the background environment to mirror the central theme of the novel.. With kipple, even “artificial” refuse products that humans have made and abandoned carelessly, reveal natural tendencies. Collectively this detritus flows and reproduces. Kipple accumulates around people at all of the different scales of habitation. Humans are retreating from the planet, leaving ever more of these neglected border spaces where the detritus takes up the place of human habitation, choking out any chance for a viable life just as invasive weeds overtake a neglected garden.

John Isidore, a simple man known as a “chickenhead” who is not allowed to reproduce or to immigrate, explained kipple to the girl who had just taken up residence in his apartment building, which had long been abandoned by all regular humans:

“Kipple is useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers or yesterday’s homeopape. When nobody’s around, kipple reproduces itself. For instance, if you go to bed leaving any kipple around your apartment, when you wake up the next morning there’s twice as much of it. It always gets more and more...There’s the First Law of Kipple...‘Kipple drives out nonkipple.’ Like Greshman’s law about bad money. And in these apartments there’s been nobody there to fight the kipple. (Dick 65)

As the once useful and beautiful accouterment of life become kipple, they represent the loss of order and meaning, even though Isidore presents this process in terms of a scientific law: "The kipple will again take over. It's a universal principle operating throughout the universe; the entire universe is moving toward a final state of total, absolute kippleization" (Dick 65). Even discarded junk acts according to natural forces,

ones that are out of human control. The distinction between natural and artificial is blurred as human artifacts behave in ways unanticipated by their creators. The result of this phenomena is that those who are left behind are at risk of being buried in artifacts of meaninglessness because there are no longer enough people to use them and imbue them with meaning.

Man has, in effect, created a new ecosystem. His actions have so drastically changed the world that it, in effect, no longer exists. But the memory of the old earth and its plants and animals persist, and so man attempts to recreate it. Just as the poets romanticized the pastoral life into a bucolic idyll, a sterilized representation of a lost past, so too the humans in *Electric Sheep* idealize the now gone animal life. Their attempt to recreate it is through electric simulacra rather than poesy, but the motivation is the same. In both cases, man is mourning his broken relationship to the natural world, and that nostalgia prevents him from comfortably inhabiting the new world which he has helped create.

The nostalgia for the world man has destroyed pervades *Electric Sheep*, and its people cling to the distinction between real and electric (an electric sheep is a machine that looks and acts much like a sheep and needs similar care) to the point of devaluing the artificial, even when it acts “naturally” and the natural is no longer accessible. Deckerd is obsessed with animals, and even though he is constantly thinking and reading about them, he is tricked more than once into thinking an electric animal is "real." The electric animals are an additional way in which Dick confuses the boundary between natural and artificial.

This confusion between electric and real animals continues in the central concern of the book, the difference between human and android. The escaped androids that Deckerd much “retire” have a desperate urge to live, show an aesthetic sensibility, and display a social nature. In some ways, they are more human than Deckerd, the realization of which, in addition to blurring boundaries, evokes a sense of self-doubt and guilt. The turning point for Deckerd is during his conversation with opera singer Luba Luft, an android who doesn’t seem to realize that she is an android:

“An android,” he said, “doesn’t care what happens to another android. That’s one of the indications we look for.”

“Then,” Miss Luft said, “you must be an android.”

That stopped him; he stared at her.

“Because,” she continued, “your job is to kill them, isn’t it?” (Dick 101)

This thought, that Deckerd might be an android made to kill other androids, programmed with false memories to obscure his true nature from himself, haunts him. In the end, he concludes “The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are” (Dick 241). At this moment in the text, he is ostensibly talking about the toad he found outside of the city. He thought it was real until his wife flipped it over and opened its control panel. But this sentiment has the feel of a self-judgment; they apply to his job, his passionless marriage, his humdrum life. With these words, Deckerd accepts both the ambiguity of his own nature (whether he is an android or not, his recent experiences have complicated his view of the distinction between android and human) and the genuineness of the feelings he experiences, whether they are manipulated or arise organically. The ability to live productively in the world requires an acceptance of the world as it is and the roles we

play in it. So Deckerd's acknowledgment that "Electric things have their lives, too" is a necessary act of resignation that may allow Deckerd to dwell in his broken world.

Resignation and fatalism are common themes in noir fiction. Ecological reading of this particular noir story takes us beyond Romantic nostalgia to a pragmatic compromise.

A Dark Take on Teleology: Means and Ends

The integrity of ecosystems subject to human manipulation is explored in a different way in *Watchmen*. Alan Moore (author) and Dave Gibbons (illustrator) mined noir for character types and themes for this graphic novel, although like *Electric Sheep*, the ecological reading of the work goes far beyond the noir elements. One of the watchmen, Rorschach, is very much like the detective noir gumshoe. Visually he evokes Chandler's Marlowe: a man dressed in trench coat and fedora, haunting dirty alleyways, pelted by the rain. His shifting mask has the definite ambiguity of a Rorschach ink blot: in its shifting nature, it is both contextually defined and absolutely undefineable. He is a damaged man, driven by the strict moral code which he has constructed for himself, although he has no illusions that others would choose to be bound by his personal standards. In this way, he is an ambiguous figure who nevertheless plays a clear role.

Watchmen was published serially in 1986 and 1987, written during the last decade of the Cold War. As a serialized story, like the superhero comic books it superficially resembles, *Watchmen* emphasizes that all beginnings and end are provisional. *Watchmen* was originally published serially in single magazine form, and through the different chapters of the compiled volume, the reader can feel the artificiality of the beginnings and the unsatisfactory nature of the endings. The nonlinear aspects are evoked visually throughout the graphic novel. Certain images are echoed again and again, such as the

blood splatter shape and the smiley face. Although *Watchmen* uses a strict nine panel format, Moore and Gibbons did some radical experimentation within that form. As Jan Baetens explains, *Watchmen* confuses the distinction between strip and page with its “checkerboard” pages: “the rows and panels of these pages are meant to be read both one next to another and all at once, in order to highlight the underlying grid” (106), which is also a good metaphor for ecological thinking that attempts to look at both proximate causes and an overall system of networks. It is a visual approximation of the tension between action and stasis, and it resists a straightforward, linear reading. The “checkerboard” is a way of playing out simultaneous scenes in different locations, as on page 44, as well as to show the same scene from different perspectives, as on pages 264 and 265, or to create a sense of rhythm and movement as on pages 64 and 65 and 171 and 172. The text on 172 refers to balance and quotes William Blake’s “Tyger, Tyger,” an explicit nod to the relationship between the balanced checkerboard form and the content, and is one of several explicit references to the English Romanticists. This visual strategy undermines the idea of a single linear story. It shows interaction between different characters across time and spaces, in an approximation of unseen ties, connections hidden in the gutters. The materiality of the graphic novel and the interaction between image, text and reader work with theme and narrative to make powerful statements about interdependence, human capacity and limitation.

The first example of manipulation and complicity is found in the basic plot that underpins the entire tangle of linked narratives in *Watchman*. Adrian Veidt, the former superhero Ozymandias and the kind of self-made corporate man who would like to think that he made Nietzsche proud, saw the destructive and petty squabbling of humanity and

decided to save them from themselves. He created a monster and unleashed it, destroying New York City (of course), and then saved the world from it. The threat unified mankind; Veidt gave them a common enemy and a common savior. It effectively ended political conflicts, cutting through natural complexity with one single, carefully orchestrated message. But was Veidt's destruction of the city justified? This incredibly unnatural simplification disrupted all existing systems, natural and social, supplanting them with a new story in which Veidt has power. Two members of the second generation of watchmen, Dan Drieberg, the second Nite Owl, and Laurie Juspecky, the second Silk Spectre, both compromised their own sense of morality by allowing what Veidt had done to stand unchallenged. It is telling that in the end, both of them have changed their appearances; they have blonde hair and are dressed like WASPs heading off to the tennis club (410). Rorschach refused such a compromise. His Javert-like sense of uncomplicated right and wrong overcame the pragmatic concerns, both personal and communal, that motivated Veidt, Drieberg and Juspecky.

Perhaps the most interesting reaction to Veidt comes from Dr. Manhattan. Dr. Manhattan exists outside of time and scale, shown by his changing size and fractured timeline. He is a clear type of the kind of dark and weird loops that intrigue Morton in most recent book *Dark Ecology*. Dr. Manhattan can see what will be because all things are present to him. As man has harnessed the power of God and nature through manipulation of the atom, Dr. Manhattan exists in a state outside of time. Godlike, all things are present to him. Moore and Gibbons show this in Chapter IV, where Dr. Manhattan exists in the present at multiple points simultaneously. For example, on page 128, he is both in 1966 and 1959. His past is present before him, and events swirl around

him, in his words, “while I’m standing still” (127). But even against that knowledge of inevitability, Dr. Manhattan still has enough spark of humanity to value chance and contingency, the irrational and unknowable that is all the more precious when juxtaposed against absolute certainty.

What we learn through Dr. Manhattan is that because time is not linear, *there is no end*. Things are always in a state of flux, and there is no actual end to anything. Ends to stories are just artificial stopping points we create and impose in order to make us feel better about the chaotic world that surrounds us. Veidt stops Dr. Manhattan before he leaves, asking “Jon, wait, before you **leave**, I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end.” Dr. Manhattan responds, “In the end? **Nothing** ends, Adrian. Nothing **ever** ends” (409). Moore plays on the idea of an end (*telos*) being both a purpose and a final point. We may not be able to control the events around us, but we can control the story we tell about them and close it off with “The end.” We like to think of the end justifying the means taken to accomplish it, but if there is no end, then *there is no justification for the means*. Although the world is full of hard stops: extinctions are ends, they are not an indication of plan or purpose; there is no final “end game” in the real world. Evolution happens without a plan, and the idea that some organisms are more advanced or evolved, or to think that anything, such as *homo sapiens*, are the pinnacle of creation, is a categorical mistake. Humans need a story of the past and a vision of the future in order to make sense of the present, but such constructs are human impositions on the world around them, *telos* is not feature of the natural world itself. To imagine that there is some end is the highest of human conceit.

Watchmen, in addition this criticism of teleology, is populated with characters who are marked by ambiguity, irony, and self-doubt, all hallmarks of dark ecology. Each of the main characters has multiple identities that they construct, pass on, or inherit in an attempt to find their place within the world. The interconnectedness of characters and events transcend time. And Dr. Manhattan shows that when man identifies himself too completely with an abstraction, such as unadulterated power, he finds himself removed from human and environmental connections. He thinks himself to be outside of the ecological mesh of physical and emotional relationships. At this remove, Dr. Manhattan is an embodiment of cosmic indifference, the answer of “So what?” to the entire human project. As such, he is a powerful and destructive force, not a creative power. He is neither a model for morality nor an example of how real people can interact with the world around them.

Noir, be it a science fiction post-apocalyptic detective story, or a post-super hero alternate world graphic novel, lends itself well to dark ecological reading. Fundamental to these stories are the dense interconnections of actors with shifting or ill-defined identities. Vying with this ambiguity is the sense of complicity, the burden of failure and guilt that the protagonists carry. The setting or environment is almost a character in its own right and is intimately connected to character development and narrative action. For *Electric Sheep*, this is the ruined, kipple filled city, and for *Watchmen*, it is in the visual presentation, the use of sharp, inky shadows and the creative juxtaposition of images that shapes the reader’s experience of the story. The state of the environment is linked to character mood, and for noir, this is generally grim and desperate, a wasted place of hopelessness. The law has failed in both of these stories, but the protagonists Deckerd

and Rorschach are still driven by some innate human compulsion to seek justice and restitution. Both stories tell the reader that she lives in a grim world, and her lot is to struggle through it, drinking in each weak ray of light before it is extinguished, like every other glimmer of hope the failed heroes tried to cultivate.

Anti-Noir: An Ecology of Decay and Dissolution

Noir is black. It is the chiaroscuro of cinema. It creates an unsettled mood that allows us to feel connections as well as human frailty, so it is natural that noir stories would lend themselves well to dark ecological readings. But ecological criticisms, even dark ones, can fit well with works that lack these noir elements. One such work is the graphic novel *Beautiful Darkness*, published in 2009 in French and translated for English language publication in 2014. *Beautiful Darkness* defies categorization. It is drawn in the *bandes dessinées* style, in bright watercolors with soft pencil lines. At first glance, it looks like a children's book. Visually, it could not be farther from noir.

Beautiful Darkness is the opposite of noir thematically as well. While there is a mysterious corpse, no character undertakes the role of detective or attempts to suss out the chain of events leading to the girl's death. And while the reader may have questions about what happened and whodunit, the work itself defies her attempts to create a coherent narrative and deliberately does not provide enough information to answer those questions. But *Beautiful Darkness* is ecological in a different way than were the noir works discussed earlier. After all, at its core, all environmental criticism is a criticism of humanity and civilization, and dark ecological criticism is no different.

Beautiful Darkness illustrates the futile struggles of civilization against the backdrop of the dark side of nature: death, decay and dissolution. Perhaps the darkest

aspect is way the insouciance of most of the characters matches the utter indifference of the natural environment around them. There is no empathy, the great concern in *Electric Sheep*. There is no real sorrow, disappointment or outrage to mark the increasingly common and casual deaths of the little characters. But these feelings are fundamental to our sense of justice, and Thomas Nagel argues that feelings of revenge and retribution caused by injury are related to our ability to act prudently and altruistically (Nagel 46). In *Beautiful Darkness*, even these selfish feelings are artificial or human constructs that fail when civilization fails. They are luxuries that exist only in the security of a certain kind of system, and become irrelevant when we enter a Hobbesian struggle for survival. *Beautiful Darkness* does not offer solutions to avoid a crisis, nor does it posit an optimistic rebuilding of new society. This is the message of *Beautiful Darkness*: when we realize that some things cannot be fixed, that we are not capable of repairing our society or restoring our world, the only answer left to us is a retreat to a cold, lonely isolationism, to abdicate responsibility for the collective problems of society and the environment.

Like the fairy tales collected by the Romantic scholars, *Beautiful Darkness* takes place in the dark of the forest, an untamed setting rife with destructive forces. The forest, although the beautiful provenience of the raw materials necessary to sustain life, is very dangerous. The first human we see is the dead girl on the forest floor. Her body shows no sign of violence, but image of her body lying on the ground evokes Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. It is the sight of this inanimate girl, with Lilliputian characters crawling out of her (mouth, nose, ears) and congregating on the grass near her abandoned school satchel that forces the reader's first double take. It is unclear exactly what these characters are. They may be embodied aspects of the girl's

personality that always existed within her. They may be aspects of her personality that fractured into being at the moment of her death, the split of a coherent person into competing interests, or they may represent humanoid versions of the fauna of the human body ecosystem, forced to leave their habitat when the host died. The little characters resemble wee folk or fairies in size and their amoral, mischievous attitude (a connection strengthened by Zelig's dress of flies' wings), although none of them displays supernatural powers. Because of the natural priority people give to their actions, emotions and insights, they often tend to forget that nothing else in the physical world around us cares a whit for human morality, ambition, or even existence, with the possible exception of some life forms that have evolved in a mutually dependent relationship with *homo sapiens*. The indifference of even those life forms that live on human hosts is alluded to in the graphic novel *Beautiful Darkness*. They would be affected if the human species ceased to exist, but their capacity to care about humanity or mourn its loss is undetermined, and likely indeterminable, especially for the many bacteria, viruses, mites and worms that live on or within the human body.

Beautiful Darkness is an ecological text in the same way that Jonathan Bate identifies Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'The Moose' as an ecological poem (Bate 200). The language and text of the graphic novel together do ecological work; it is a system of integrity and economy. This is not to say that it has an explicit environmental message like "Save the Whales!" *Beautiful Darkness* is ecological because the natural setting is integral to the development of the characters and the unfolding of the action, even more so than the role of the physical backdrop in noir detective tales. *Beautiful Darkness* is ecological because of the way natural process of decay acts as an extended allegory for

the breakdown of social ties. The focus is not on how nature surrounds and is interconnected with the characters; instead it is on the indifferent or destructive aspects of nature and the dissolution of all manner of connections and assumptions. The decadence of society mirrors the decomposition of the girl's body in the woods. Forces of decay are prominent, and the trappings of civilization, from cooperation to morality, fall away until we are left with just Aurora's solitary struggle for survival. It is a return to the primal state of nature, which resembles Hobbes' vision much more than Rousseau's, told in the bright watercolors of a children's picture book, with a dark sensibility on par with the early editions of folk tales collected by the Brothers Grimm.

Although almost every character has died by the end of the story, this is no tragedy. In a summary of Joseph Meeker's work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, Bate explains,

For Meeker, tragedy is a quest for transcendence. In the moment of death, the tragic hero somehow goes beyond the material world, rises to a plane of spiritual reconciliation. Comedy on the other hand, is about survival. It grants us our animal being, relishes the materiality of the everyday world, concerns itself with the business of living and reproducing. (180)

There is no transcendence in *Beautiful Darkness*, just the grim descent into the material present, stripped of all ideals but the will to survive. Aurora, the tiny protagonist, goes from being a cultured princess sipping tea with her suitor to an exile, wrapped in the fur of the mouse friend she blinded and whose bones she chewed. We don't get to the business of reproducing in *Beautiful Darkness*; this story is a dead end, set from the

beginning when we first realized the girl was dead in the woods. As a comedy, then, *Beautiful Darkness* is as black as it gets.

The main character, a small blonde girl with a blue dress reminiscent seems to be a small cartoon version of the dead girl. When one of the other characters asks about the name “Aurora” on a composition book from the satchel, this character claims the name and identity of Aurora as her own. The name is ironic: although Aurora is the goddess of dawn, associated with light and beginnings, in this book, it is associated with endings, both through the death of the human girl Aurora, and the loss of tiny Aurora’s sense of community and optimism. It may be that all of the characters are aspects of the girl from whom they emerged, and that Aurora is the most like the dead girl, that she shares the dispositions that the girl would have most identified with as her core self. There are three significant blonde-haired, blue-eyed little characters: Aurora, Zelig and the unnamed wild-eyed girl. Aurora thinks of herself as good and helpful. She is cooperative, friendly and outgoing, but also immature and unrealistic. Zelig is Aurora's foil: she is a vain, selfish and powerful mean girl. Wild-eyes is the character who stays closest to the body. She is feral and inarticulate, and very possessive of the girl's mortal remains. In the end, Aurora sloughs off enough of her sweetness to be hard enough to survive: she kills Zelig who has slowly taken away everything from her: princess status, suitor, friends, and home. But Wild-eyes remains in the woods, haunting the corpse.

Wild-eyes is not the only unnamed character. We get to know the characters in *Beautiful Darkness* visually, but there are so many of them that they are easy to confuse and conflate. Some are easier to trace, especially the ones with names: Plim, Jane, Zelig, Aurora, Hector, but the revelation of the name often lags behind the introduction of the

character. For example, we don't learn Jane's name until we're more than three quarters of the way through the book. It's as though she doesn't have a name until after Aurora, our most social character, starts to live with her in the shadowy crevices of the tinkerer man's house like Mary Norton's *Borrowers*. Before that time, Jane was alone and nameless. She was unbound by any obligation to the other characters; because she had no relationships, she had no name. Because Jane's name is withheld, she seems stronger, more independent and mysterious.

In addition, there are several instances when names are mentioned that the reader is unable to connect with any of the characters. Most of the names are for characters that have already died. In one of the early scenes, a large doll-like girl in a blue dress, whose eyes, lips, and hair are reminiscent of Betty Boop, is sitting on the hand of the dead girl, talking with two much smaller characters about their hunger and others who have gone missing. The smallest, a yellow-clad thing with reddish pink hair who is about the size of the doll-like girl's hand, says "No, we said no more mushrooms, remember? Some of them are dead-ly" (26). The third character, wearing a green dress, responds, "Oh, right, that's true. Poor Josephine, Margo, and Agatha. I liked them." Pink hair and green dress continue the litany: "And poor Sweetie, Adelaide, and Mimi." "And Juju and Astrid, Tubby, Celeste, and Stinker." "...And Wilson." The scene ends on the facing page, when doll-like girl pops pink hair into her mouth, and green dress accepts it as a game, in which doll-like girl pretends she's pregnant in an oblique reference to Swift's *Modest Proposal*. We don't know the names of any of the three characters in this scene, nor do we know who the twelve named characters were. Later, we see the backside of the doll-like girl poking out of a hole like Winnie-the-Pooh (51). Bystanders are conversing: "Still

stuck?” “It’s been six days.” “I told her it was too small.” “I know, but she really wanted to have tea with Nadine and Pippa.” Again, the reader doesn’t know who Nadine and Pippa are, and no name is given for the doll-like girl, who we can assume is now dead as well. Another example comes when two of the anonymous characters are poking at a puddle with a stick. One says “I can’t see Natalie...the hole filled up with water last night” (35). A brown blob in the mud is identified as Natalie (“There she is...”), but there are no identifying features that can connect it to any of the little people we’ve seen before.

By disconnecting most of the characters from their names, *Beautiful Darkness* forces its reader to think about the majority of its large cast of characters in a couple of very specific ways. After all, a name functions as shorthand for the character. An appellation is a dense signifier that accrues additional associations as events unfold and the reader comes to know the character. So when there is no name given, the reader must think of the character with descriptive terms, either their physical characteristics, such as the wild-eyed girl or the marching boy in the pink bunny suit or the triplets in blue and white or the little red riding hood lookout, or their relationships, like being a member of Zelig’s entourage, which changes over the course of the story or the lost boys/lord of the flies brigade, or their appearance in certain scenes, such as the conversation/cannibalism scene with the doll-like girl described earlier. Arguably, the most important unnamed figure in *Beautiful Darkness* is the man. Readers can only refer to him by what he does in his scenes: the walker in the woods, the tinkerer in the shed, the hunter skinning the rabbit. Without names, the characters exist, not abstract concepts, but concrete relationships and physical entities that may be described but not encapsulated. Even then,

the relationships may be unclear, such as the possible relationship between the man and dead girl, the only two humans in this book.

This means, that without names, the reader is actively constructing a narrative of relationships for the characters, but that narrative is fragmentary and there are many competing narratives within the text. The narrative is disjointed, despite the reader's attempt to impose continuity, which is appropriate for a text about disintegration. The book begins with a conventional tea party, with characters in easily recognizable roles, but all of that false stability is lost when they exit the body and enter a natural environment that is entirely inhospitable to those formal constructs.

As the scenes shift between different characters over time, the only cohesive theme that emerges is that everyone dies and no one mourns. The only constant in the book is that of decomposition, the relentless forces of decay. Instead of stable boundaries or definitions there are messy, arbitrary, and evolving categories. In *Beautiful Darkness*, there is no Platonic ideal, only a multiplicity of particulars. *Beautiful Darkness* argues in effect that we cannot imagine that "good" exists as a stable category. An ecological way of thinking forces the reader to realize that she must reevaluate the linear, stable, Linnaean worldview upon which civilization has been built. Just as organic matter is broken down through putrefaction, so too the categories we create are corrupted through the course of time and changing interactions.

As an ecological metaphor, *Beautiful Darkness* explores the explosion of a population into a new area, and that population's subsequent winnowing as it encounters limiting factors, such as lack of food, suitable habitation, and predators. But it is an incomplete picture: there are only the destructive, forces of atrophy at play and none of

the generative ones. It is, in effect, only one side of an argument. For example, while there is evidence for cooperation in non-human nature, the viability of such cooperation is denied in this book through Aurora's series of failures. *Beautiful Darkness* does a good job exploring the "negative or destructive principle that is at the heart of creation itself" (Jordan 37), but an ecological reading shows that it fails to account for the existence of altruism, as the book seems to condemn such inclinations as impractical human conceits.

Aurora wanders through the scene interested in being helpful, inasmuch as being helpful only involves telling others what ought to be done. Aurora assumes that everyone else is as interested as cooperating as she is, and things seem to work well at first. But she doesn't stay around to see that her system is sound, to do the work or even to supervise. She trusts too much in others, and doesn't dedicate enough consistent attention to keep her little civilization going—or to notice as it falls apart at the seams, seen especially in the tergiversation of her one-time helper, Plim. Aurora's good intentions are not sufficient to overcome the circumstances in which they all find themselves: the dangerous, deadly woods, the natural laziness and greed of the population, and the destructive, capricious, and selfish manipulations of her rival, Zelig. Aurora is so caught up with her own desires that she is oblivious to the real need and suffering around her and, so, inadvertently, makes things worse for other characters. She had, in effect, ignored the reality of her new ecosystem and the particularities of its other inhabitants.

The clearest example of this destructive inattention is in Aurora's interaction with Timothy.

Timothy is a shy, willowy character. We see her hidden away, watching Aurora on the first day (20). Her hair covers half of her face, with only one eye visible. She

found a baby, and hid away in the woods, setting up a little homestead far from the other characters. When Aurora finds Timothy, she greets her in the same buoyant manner that she uses with everyone (33). Aurora speaks boldly, with exclamation points. She leans in, gently touching Timothy, encouraging and comforting her. But although Timothy smiles shyly and waves as Aurora leaves, throughout the conversation she is withdrawn. Her body is curled up, afraid and sad, and her words are written in small, thin strokes, emphasizing her quiet hesitancy. Unfortunately, Aurora does not actually listen to Timothy's justified fears that "The others scare me... I'm different from the others. I feel like something bad could happen" (33).

Aurora's jaunty encouragement and later invitation to join her party inadvertently lure Timothy into the company of Zelig and her sycophants. Zelig immediately starts to shame Timothy about her appearance, and as she roughly combs Timothy's hair, discovers Timothy's secret defect: she has only one eye. Zelig gives the baby to one of her followers, who soon forgets and abandons it, and shames Timothy to death. They zip her into a pencil case, a nice analog to a body bag, and bury her. Later, when he has retrieved the pencil case to bury Hector, Plim says "I emptied it. Except for some small scratches inside, it's like new" (72). Timothy's death is like the fate assigned to Sophocles' Antigone: she is entombed alive in such a way that no blood guilt rebounds upon the one who ordered her death. But unlike Creon, Zelig never shows signs of remorse. Aurora doesn't even seem to notice that Timothy is gone. She is simply frustrated that no one showed up for her party.

Aurora's failed party is a turning point for her. Now she must begin to face the fact that things are falling apart, that she no longer has power or the goodwill of the other characters. She doesn't understand why this is until the next day when she sees her prince, Hector, marry Zelig with all of the remaining characters in attendance. She has been supplanted in the role of "princess," and the shock of that revelation, combined with the disappointment of her failed party--her attempt to reconcile their little civilization with the natural world around them--primes her for the murderous rage that Zelig's crew provoke and direct against her friend, the mouse.

The violent attack against the bound mouse is the completion of this pivotal moment for Aurora and the narrative. This act is not the casual, indifferent and amoral destruction that has claimed the lives of most of the characters thus far: this is personal and immoral. The sinfulness is emphasized by the use of the word "wicked" that Aurora unjustly hurls at the mouse as she attacks him and abandons her sense of unfounded, optimistic morality. It is important to realize that the mouse has not done anything wicked; as a part of nature, he is amoral. He was just a mouse being a mouse when he peeped on Aurora's table. But Aurora does have a sense of morality, and in her failure, she projected her shortcomings onto the mouse. Her attack on him is a condemnation of herself, and through this process, she abandons her insufficient morality and becomes more indifferent to the plight of others.

The murder of the mouse and consumption of its body is the violent, ugly act that finally destroys the veneer of civilization that Aurora had hoped still existed. After this point, Aurora is much stronger because she no longer is wasting her energy on the futile effort of community building. She wears the mouse's hide as a cloak for the rest of the

story. It serves as a practical protection against the cold of winter, a disguise (she does look like a little mouse scurrying around), and a tangible reminder of her complicity in the mouse's death. It is symbolic of her emerging savagery and will to survive. By putting on the skin of the wild animal, she has shed her last connection with the little girl decaying in the woods, as well as her hope for a peaceful, cooperative society. When she encounters Jane again and starts to live with her in the man's cabin, it is a relationship of equals. Both, through violence, have asserted their control over nature and left the others to live or die as they will.

Size matters in this story, and the relative sizes of the characters shifts to reflect their changing relative importance. Aurora, who began the story small enough to crawl out of a young girl's ear ends about the size of a forest mouse. Larger characters eat smaller ones. In scene after scene, the larger boss around the smaller and weaker. When we first meet Zelig, she is crumpled on the ground, a suppliant. Not only does her status rise when she stands up and is revealed to be taller than the others around her, she continues to grow relative to Aurora throughout the book. This hierarchy of scale is analogous to an eltonian pyramid. Not only do the mass of little people vary greatly in size, their size relative to the man in the woods makes him several orders of magnitude more powerful and dangerous than any of them. This relative size difference is emphasized when Aurora has been bathing in a puddle on the ground. She is clad only in pink underpants, vulnerable and exposed (43). The man comes stomping through the woods, his heavy treaded boots nearly crushing Aurora. He does not see her, but she looks up at him. He is a massive black silhouette, looming over her, the sun directly above him whiting out his head and face in a blinding burst of light. That he is headless

makes him a more ominous figure, like the headless horseman. It also makes him, in this scene, an irrational force, pushing through the woods like a storm. The use of scale, both among the little characters and between the characters and the man illustrates the idea of a natural pecking order and further denies Leopold's vision of an egalitarian community in nature.

In the end, *Beautiful Darkness* leaves the reader unsettled, holding questions in hands like thrums cut from a loom. There aren't many loose ends: most of the characters have been killed off. Instead we are left asking fundamental questions, like "Who?" and "Why?" The events of these colorful woods make Chandler's Los Angeles seem orderly and predictable in comparison. For example, who is the man in the woods, the hunter, the tinkerer? Does he have some relationship to the dead girl in the woods? We see him tramping through the scene a couple of times, but we never see him interact with the body, which decays undisturbed. Did they know each other? Did he lose her? Did kill her? One critic, Zainab Akhtar, makes a compelling argument for reading the man as the girl's killer.

Jane sees the man as dangerous and stinky and wants to leave the shelter of his home (77), but Aurora finds him attractive. Is he like the Giant in Jack and the Beanstalk? Or is he the good woodcutter/hunter from Red Riding Hood who has failed to save the girl? Or is he the big bad wolf? Whoever he is, he is well integrated into this place. His colors blend with the background. The ambiguity about his role, his potential connections to the dead girl, and the simultaneous threat and security that he represents to the small characters make him, the only live human in this story, a good dark ecological player. His

work as a tinkerer evokes both God and science. He is big and powerful, but unengaged from the drama of the smaller characters, and of no help to anyone.

Beautiful Darkness matches well the vision of dark ecology that Timothy Morton used in both the 2008 article "John Clare's Dark Ecology" and his book, *Ecology without Nature*.

At the limits of subjectivity, we find closeness to the earth. It is quite the opposite of what we might expect: that environment as theory, as wonder, as doubt, does not achieve escape velocity from the earth, but, in fact, is a sinking down into it further than any wishful thinking, any naive concept of interconnectedness could push us. This is the place reached in Shelley's extraordinary essay "On Love," where the very feelings of loneliness and separation, rather than narcissistic fantasies of interconnectedness, put us in touch with a surrounding environment. I am calling it dark ecology, after Frost ("The woods are lovely dark and deep"), but also after Gothic culture, from *Frankenstein* to *The Cure*, a reminder that we can't escape our minds. Far from giving us a liturgy for how to get out of our guilty minds, how to stick our heads in nature and lose them, Clare actually helps us to stay right here, in the poisoned mud. Which is just where we need to be, right now. ("John Clare" 193, with the first part also quoted in *Ecology* 200-201).

This is exactly where Aurora ends. She is closer to the earth, more animalistic and savage, than she was in the beginning when she emerged from the girl's body. Aurora's story is a descent, a "sinking down," away from fantasies of a cooperative society to her new, solitary existence. She has no more peers. She is content to live in the house of the giant tinkerer, observing him from the shadows. He does not know about her existence,

so any connection between the two of them is asymmetrical at best and a “narcissistic fantasy of interconnectedness” on her part at the worst. But she is not discontented in her new loneliness: instead, there seems to be relief, a peaceful end to a dark story. On the penultimate page, Aurora is thinking “I’ll need to rebuild my little nest...It’s all right. I’ve got plenty of time. That meal you’re making for us smells good” as she watches the man at his work bench from the cuckoo clock, high up on the shelf. She is completely integrated into this new environment, settled into a warm little niche.

The final scene is a single, full-page panel. It shows the exterior of the man’s cabin in the snowy woods in blue and grey, smoke curling out of the chimney, soft yellow light coming through the window. It is a lovely picture of a harmonious dwelling, a visual approximation of Heidegger’s German peasant house in the woods. Words, likely Aurora’s thoughts continuing from the previous page, are in a square: “My sweet prince.” With this brief reference to Hamlet, the entire story comes crashing back at the reader, recalling all of the deaths and betrayals, the absurdity and the drama, and the peace of the scene is unsettled.

In *Beautiful Darkness*, we encounter a series of lulls and shocks, a set of disorienting blows that discomfit us and make all of the relationships seem strange. *Beautiful Darkness* posits that civilization is already dead and failed; most people just haven’t quite realized that it is over, and the process of coming to that knowledge involves a painful series of disenchantments. It, in effect, denies the possibility of hope for the future of humanity. It is analogous to the most pessimistic predictions regarding the anthropocene: the beginning of that epoch marks the end of the from which human

civilization first arose, just as the death of the girl as the first, unseen event of the book, marks the end of the comfortable, stable society for the small characters.

Conclusion

So what common threads do we find as we look at these very different stories with dark ecology in mind? All of them deal with interconnected relationships. The noir stories attempt to map out those relationships through the detective's investigation, whereas *Beautiful Darkness* requires the reader to infer connections between characters and scenes. Some of these intersections are discoverable, but others remain hidden and incomprehensible, even as they bind the characters and action. What we feel but don't see clearly is ambiguity: it lurks in the unanswered questions, the provisional identities, the loose ends. What is unknown is as important to the stories as what can be understood. And in all of these works, we find human guilt and complicity. Guilt and morality affect all of our protagonists: the detective, the android, the survivors. Aurora overcomes the pull of shame by fully embracing her role in the natural world. Dan and Laurie deny their complicity and change their identities, and Decker resigns himself to life such as it is in his world. In all of these texts, natural processes of decay and entropy are at odds with human endeavor, from the dust and kipple in Dick's no longer hospitable earth, to the dissolution of time and order around Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen*, to the decaying remnants of civilization that match the decomposition of the girl's body in *Beautiful Darkness*. These are all dark natural processes, and we are bound by them, even when we try to ignore or seek to overcome them. The world is always being rebuilt around us, and the miracle of death is as much as relief as the miracle of life.

What happens when we look at the stories that we tell to and about ourselves through a dark ecological lens that considers interconnectedness with the natural world in all of its glorious, messy complexity? We see how interdependent the human is on the systems in which she lives: humans exist in relation to others, including other humans and non-humans: animals, plants, machines, technologies and processes, and the environment. These interconnections are often dense and tangled, poorly understood feedback loops, rather than simple and linear interactions described by a clear casual chain that extends only from a nicely defined beginning to a decisive end. The ecological revelation of human interconnectedness also reveals the lie that is the myth of man's independence.

We see that humans are small and cosmically insignificant. They are vulnerable, weak creatures able to be broken in body and spirit. They are excessively violent: not only do they consume to live just as every other creature on this earth, they consume for diversion in societies where there is an economy of abundance. These truths about human nature are an often unarticulated and unacknowledged source of a sense of shame and complicity. Humans are dependent on others in both cooperative and exploitative ways. They consume and destroy, acts which are necessary to live. This dependence causes what William Jordan calls "existential shame" with regard to the environment. The violence humans do also leads to a sense of guilt or complicity, which puts the natural, embodied aspect of man in conflict with the more abstract rational and moral aspect. Humans do not exist as some pure, set-apart category, separate from the rest of nature; they are blood and dirt, just like every other animal, and dark ecology is a tool to explore

these liminal categories identified by Mary Douglas: vomit, shit, blood, decay and bodily matter.

This is the conflict dark ecology describes, distilled to its basic elements: Nature is indifferent, chaotic, and amoral, but mankind, although part of nature, has an inherent need to impose order and structure on the everything through narrative, ethical rules, and moral judgments. Failure to impose this order is a source of disappointment and conflict, and failure to live up to moral expectations regarding the environment is another. These failures instill in us an uncomfortable sense of complicity, which may not be consciously recognized. The boundaries and definitions that humans apply to the world around them are falsely simple; the more they are examined, the more they blur and break down. The anxiety from these issues permeates our culture and the stories we tell about and for ourselves.

Ecological thinking also reveals deep ambiguities. Within a system, boundaries are contingent and transitory. Beginnings and ends are gradual, not definite. Ecological systems change over time, but it is a category error to imagine that change represents progress or to assume a teleological purpose. While there are hierarchies of power, and different roles, it is wrong to assume that some species are “more advanced” than others. Ecological thinking, by looking at systems of interconnectedness, can even question the validity of hermeneutics, acts of interpretation that impose order on a text in order to draw meaning out of it.

As such, ecological literary criticism offers an interpretation of the text that is aware that it is but one interpretation, a particular and necessarily incomplete reading. If value is found in the novel take it offers, then it will continue to be used, just as

adaptations derived through random mutation not harmful to the fitness of an organism may remain in subsequent evolved forms. Although these are useful insights, their utility decreases if their provisional nature is ignored. Just as ecology is one scientific model among many, so too dark ecology is one critical way of reading among many. It is limited by its focus on dark processes, decay and violence. In the case of a book like *Beautiful Darkness*, this narrow focus can cause the reader to miss how unbalanced the book is as an ecological system; it shows only one side of nature instead of a complete picture.

Although dark ecology is a limited tool, it is powerful as the use of it yields a sense of humility in place of certainty about the human capacity for knowledge regarding the systems of which we are a part. It recalls a sense of respect for the unknowable and that which remains in shadow, and acts as a warning to be responsible as man advances in technical knowledge and ability to manipulate components of the ecological systems of which he is a part. It acknowledges human limitation and sense of failure, even as it affirms the value of the human perspective. Insignificant as he may be, man is at the center of his universe, and he will best find his place within it as he accepts that his capacity for control is matched by his predilection for destructiveness. The bleakness of weakness and failure correct an overly ebullient optimism about the manipulability of the world and its connected components, and can lead to the small comfort of resignation.

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