

Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2010. ISBN: 0674049209.

Timothy Chandler

Approaches to cultural studies informed by critical theory or continental philosophy seem for the most part to have had little to say about the environment, even less about environmentalism. Dismissed as regressive, essentialist, scientific, environmentalism has seemed nowhere near as cool as the political philosophies of the Badiou and Žižeks. *The Ecological Thought (TET)* by Timothy Morton suggests that this need not be the case. Billed as a prequel to Morton's previous book, the remarkable tour de force *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics (EWN)*, *TET* presents similar ideas to its predecessor but in a self-consciously more accessible manner. Where *EWN* raced frenetically through a vast forest of art and philosophy, mentioning pretty much every major thinker in the Continental tradition, *TET* is more generous in its provision of time and space to the ideas that Morton thinks are most important in our present situation and which he gathers under the name of the ecological thought.

In short, the ecological thought is the thinking of interconnectedness. Morton correctly takes interconnectedness as the governing concept of ecology. As he convincingly argued in *EWN*, ecology should have nothing to do with nature, environment, organicism, authenticity or holism. Ecology is total ontological interconnectedness. The ecological thought reveals that "thinking itself is an ecological event" (8), which means that there is no position outside of ecology, outside of thought, or outside of the universe from which to think it. The deconstructive force of problems such as climate change has been well noted by theorists such as Morton, David Wood and Timothy Clark. If there is no longer an outside whither all our waste and rubbish can disappear, the distinction between inside and outside becomes

untenable. Morton's ecological thought describes this situation elegantly and precisely: everything is interconnected.

Morton unfolds the ecological thought in his three chapters: "Thinking Big," "Dark Thoughts" and "Forward Thinking." The first of these outlines some of the fundamental ideas that comprise the ecological thought. Here Morton critiques the small-is-beautiful, place-centred thinking of much environmentalism, the kind of thinking that also includes localism, NIMBYism and Heideggerian authenticity. Such thinking is not ecological because it imagines a world somehow separate from the universe. Indeed, to be able to think the ecological thought, we must attempt the impossible task of thinking the universe – not abstract infinity (which is easy), but mind-bogglingly large finitude. And to think in terms of the universe requires letting go of the idea of world. In a presentation to the Melbourne Law School in May 2011, Morton directly addressed the problematic nature of worlds, which he sees as aesthetic effects which have been traumatically destabilised by growing ecological awareness. Instead of a world, the ecological thought gives us the *mesh*, an ontology of interconnectedness without foreground/background or inside/outside. In such an ontology, the concept of an external environment also becomes unstable: living organisms have no environment separate from their relations with other living organisms, which are not necessarily outside of them (actually).

In chapter two, Morton brings his negative critical technique to bear on contemporary environmentalism ("a work of mourning for a mother we never had" [95]), bringing in Darwin's theory of evolution and discussing a number of artworks. Morton's approach can be called negative in two ways. Firstly, he is forthright about his rejection of feel-good politics, opting instead for a melancholic (his term) political ecology; secondly, being steeped in the work of philosophers such as Derrida and Levinas, he is concerned with the ethical implications of outlining the negative limits of knowledge. What Darwin in the end shows, Morton argues, is that there are no species as such and they have no origins. Rather than humans, animals or species, we find ourselves surrounded by strange strangers – ultimately unknowable beings who may or may not be us and with whom we are intimately involved: "Ecology is not about relating to Nature but to aliens and ghosts" (100).

Morton's final chapter presents possibilities for properly ecological art and politics, once again informed by the strong critique of nature initiated in *EWN*. The chapter starts with the argument that we are responsible for global climate change regardless of whether or not we caused it, simply because we are aware of it. Without a concept of nature, which Morton presents as a fantasy of capitalism, responsibility for what occurs on this

planet becomes everybody's: we (human and other beings) are in this together. Ecological politics involves care for the beings of the mesh: strange strangers and what Morton calls hyperobjects (objects that exist on vast scales of time or space). By contrast, Morton sees three directions for ecological art: the use of automatic techniques generating unpredictable outcomes, a concern with consciousness as ecological, and an interest in mathematical modelling of supposedly organic entities and processes. This seems a little prescriptive, but these are all interesting avenues for art. A striking feature of *EWN* was Morton's use of an impressive array of literary and other cultural texts and in *TET* he similarly brings a diverse and interesting range of artworks into play.

The style of *TET* is typically Mortonian – energetic and polemical throughout. Unlike *EWN*, however, this work has a clarity and restraint that makes it much more readable. Morton often indulges in the Latourian litany (a list of seemingly random objects that aims to show the ontological equality of those objects), a rhetorical device beloved of object-oriented philosophers such as Morton and Graham Harman. Morton's fascination with the results of scientific inquiry frequently takes over, with at times rhapsodic accounts of the weird and wonderful presented in order to blast apart concepts such as nature, consciousness, human and animal. In this way, *TET* is as much a presentation of scientific knowledge as it is a work of textual analysis and philosophical argumentation.

The literary and filmic examples discussed in the book are interesting, but for me they add little to Morton's arguments. At times while reading the book I wondered what the point would be of introducing literary texts if they only served to illustrate the critic's preconceived ideas, interesting as these may be. Morton does not seem to notice that a poem is also a hyperobject. What would a literary criticism that recognises texts as ecological hyperobjects have to say about (for example) Homer's *Odyssey* or the Voyager Golden Records? What traces might we find of other hyperobjects in these texts and how do the texts reveal their own "hyperobjectivity"? This is just one potential line of flight that Morton's ideas make possible – and it may not be the most interesting one.

Which brings me to a burning question: What kind of book is this? It is not a traditionally academic book, and interdisciplinarity, which seems to have degenerated into an administrative buzzword, does not adequately contain it. While *EWN* sat reasonably comfortably in the field of cultural studies and critical theory, *TET* is far less easily placed. Rather than interdisciplinary, I almost want to say that *TET* is adisciplinary: it stands outside all disciplines, peering into them with an insatiable curiosity. This is ultimately the book's strength; and without the relentless negativity of *EWN*,

Morton's enthusiasm is infectious. I hope this book finds the wide readership that it aims for: its approach to what is indubitably the most important issue of our times is highly original and lucidly communicated.

Monash University
tschandler@gmail.com