

David LOMBARD, *Techno-Thoreau. Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene*, Quodlibet, 2019, ISBN 978-88-229-0370-9, 96 p.

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Ecocriticism and ecophilosophy have become important fields of study in the last few decades, especially in the context of the Anthropocene (and, implicitly, climate change), a period of crisis, instability and vulnerability. The human impact on both the ecosystems and the geology of Earth has not only become a much-discussed topic in recent academic research but also a powerful and dominant theme in fiction, cinematography, and many other art forms. Thus, a new interdisciplinary field of study emerged in the last few years: environmental aesthetics. David Lombard's *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene* precisely investigates this subject matter, examining the aesthetic dimensions of Henry David Thoreau's environmental philosophy, a philosophy that tries to break down the boundaries between the natural and the technological landscape.

Lombard's book pleads for a reconciliation between these two dimensions by regarding Thoreau as a "techno-author" that embraces the (sometimes-drastic) technological changes that took place in the Romantic period, investing in the development of that which Lombard calls in the abstract of the volume an "alternative, proto-ecocritical form of the aesthetic of the sublime." The notion of the *sublime* is further discussed throughout the book from various perspectives, as the book aims to understand the *natural sublime* and the *technological sublime* not as two opposed, antithetical discourses but as two mutually-dependent, intertwined, and connected elements.

The first chapter, "Thoreau and the Techno-Natural Landscape," is an introduction of three subchapters that explain the nature of the study. Aesthetics "shape our understanding of the environment we inhabit or experience" (9), as the self, the world we live in, and the senses we use to perceive it are three interconnected and interdependent elements of the same system. Lombard works with both human and nonhuman, natural and technological landscapes, while also analysing representations

of the “toxic sublime,” a term used for places, objects, or situations that, although toxic and contaminated, still can inspire awe through their magnificence and grandiosity. The toxic sublime, located at the convergence of the natural and the technological, contradicts the binary Cartesian thinking (dualisms such as “nature/society,” “human/nature,” or “individual/community”) and the pastoral, idealistic Romantic belief that sees nature a separate, ungraspable dimension.

The second chapter, “Deconstructing the Natural Sublime,” introduces the concept of the “natural (or Burkean) sublime,” which is understood as “a manifestation of the vastness, the power, and the terror of God” (12). Nature is, therefore, regarded as pure, perfect, divine, and completely beyond one’s grasp and understanding, as it follows separate, autonomous rules that humankind could not possibly comprehend. Nevertheless, this perspective fails to take into consideration the fact that “the natural world is interpreted by the humankind, defined in human terms, therefore not neutral, therefore partly human” (24); the identity of both human and non-human environment is created through interaction.

This assumption is also characteristic of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism. For Emerson, nature is, indeed, a sacred and absolute realm, but it is no longer unreachable or ungraspable, as the environment and humanity are both just pieces of a greater “whole” that encompasses everything; the human and the non-human become interconnected parts of the same system, always influencing and transforming one another.

Walt Whitman’s epic poem *Song of Myself* also embraces the premise that every aspect of our Universe (be it human or non-human, natural or man-made/technological) is part of this complex, interconnected structure. Whitman makes no aesthetic distinction between the “bustle of growing wheat” and the “the whirr of swift-streaking engines” (33), thus reinforcing the idea that both natural, organic, and fabricated, manufactured sounds belong to the same sphere of existence.

The third chapter, titled “Thoreau, Capitalism and the Technological Sublime,” takes us back to Thoreau, introducing the notion of the “technological sublime.” Lombard offers here an example from Thoreau’s autobiography, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in which the American author describes the sound made by the telegraph as “the first lyre or shell heard on the seashore, that vibrating cord high in the air over the shores of earth” This comparison integrates man-made, technological artefacts into the natural world, as

Thoreau develops an aesthetic that does not dodge early forms of human technology such as the “railroad” or the “telegraph.” Technology is not rejected for itself, on account of its man-made and therefore “impure” essence but, rather, for what it symbolizes, namely commercial exchanges and market ideology (40).

The disruption created by technology in nature is called by Thoreau a “machine.” That is the case of the steam train described by Thoreau as an “iron horse” that breathes fire and smoke and makes the earth tremble. This representation is, to quote Lombard, “an apocalyptic and mythological illustration” (44) which completely dehumanizes technology and even depicts it as zoomorphic. Thoreau’s “machine” becomes, on the other hand, a symbol of capitalism, of cheap, dehumanizing labour, easy-made wealth and global commerce, which changes and reconstructs the structure of both the environment and of social relationships.

In the fourth chapter, “Toxic Mechanization: Senses and the Environment,” the author discusses Aldo Leopold’s nonfiction work *A Sand County Almanac*, which “displays a number of attempts to anthropomorphize the realm of nature” (53). The purpose behind this anthropomorphization is to demonstrate the importance of the balance between human and non-human beings in maintaining the ecosystems healthy. In this context, Leopold gives the example of his dog, which is a much more skilled hunter than his master is, and, therefore, unequivocally superior in this respect. The author thus deconstructs the idea that humans are originally better, more valuable members of the ecosystem than other nonhuman beings.

Leopold also brings to the reader’s attention that, even though technological progress has greatly helped humans, it has also made them insensible and oblivious to the needs of the natural environment. We are no longer able to connect to the physical world around us, as this “excessive mechanization” (56) of our surroundings has become deeply toxic to our capacity to *sense* and *perceive*.

Another important idea that Leopold underscores in his work is that the modern man seems to be in a constant rush to attain that which he calls “comfort at any cost” (56), striving for things like safety and prosperity. But this race towards stability and comfort is extremely harmful for non-human beings and for the environment:

Relationships between humans and nonhumans become unstable because capitalist mechanization gives the human species the power to lead an unfair “fight” against the

environment on a global scale, just like the hunter would unfairly hunt animals with cutting-edge weapons (60).

Consequently, this “well-being” we as human beings seek reinforces both the causes and the effects of the Capitalocene, claims Lombard, and, maybe even more importantly, destabilizes the relationship we have with other nonhuman beings.

If for Thoreau and Aldo Leopold the capitalist mechanization constitutes a concerning matter for the environment, the next part of Lombard’s work brings forth the issue of how toxicity affects and alters the human *self* in the context of the Capitalocene. The next chapter, “Toxic Waste: Self and Environment,” discusses Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*. In “A Fable for Tomorrow,” a short dystopian fable from Carson’s book, the author describes a landscape governed by “evil spell[s]” and “shadow[s] of death” where the sounds of nature have completely disappeared, causing a “global silence.” Here, we come across the notion of the *toxic sublime*. Unlike the *technological sublime*, which, to cite Lombard, “celebrates the ‘potential omnipotence of humanity’” and its capacity to control, dominate, and manipulate the environment as it wishes, the *toxic sublime* primarily affects the human self and the relationships established between the self and the environment (65). The excessive use of pesticides and insecticides create, so to say, a barrier between individual and the surroundings he/she lives in, disconnecting the two elements of the (eco)system. This disruption could result, as Carson puts it, in irreversible damage. Moreover, this becomes even more dangerous, as this form of toxicity is invisible to the eye, and, therefore, hard to detect and locate.

Another important aspect investigated here by Lombard is Timothy Morton’s concept of “the mesh.” Similar to Emerson’s transcendentalism which claims that everything (human or nonhuman) is interconnected, creating a complex network in which every element plays its part in securing the well-being of the *whole*, Morton’s “mesh” bears great “ecological potential,” as it can reconnect everything that is disconnected by pollution and the use of pesticides (65).

The second book analyzed by Lombard in this chapter is Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, which also brings to one’s attention the way the human self and the relationships that it develops (with other human or nonhuman beings) become eroded or “poisoned” by the consumerist culture (74). In the novel, the Gladney family is directly exposed to a “sharp and bitter stink,” as DeLillo describes the toxic smell produced by a burning

building; therefore, the toxic sublime is here experienced through the characters' sense of smell. This powerful, toxic smell, "which invades [the characters'] minds and bodies," makes them also ponder upon the idea of death, a death that is not just physical but also spiritual, as the noxious substance that they inhale contaminates both the bodily, visceral dimension of the self and the immaterial, spiritual one (70).

This constant contact with toxicity creates, as Lombard points out, a kind of "toxic anxiety": the persistent, continuous danger of the harmful smell that spreads around is a constant reminder of death, demise, and perhaps annihilation of the connection the human self establishes with the environment or with other human beings (73). This perpetual fear and uneasiness noticeable in DeLillo's characters makes them once again realize how important "the mesh" is: if one single piece of the system is corrupted (here, contaminated), the whole structure becomes damaged and destabilized.

The last chapter of Lombard's study, "Post-Thoreauvianism and Ecocriticism," focuses on contemporary Thoreauvian literature. The first work that Lombard brings to the reader's attention is Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. Chris McCandless, the protagonist, chooses to leave his home and family behind and live a quiet, "natural" life in the wilderness of Alaska, far away from the capitalist society and consumerist ideologies he despises. However, McCandless' ideal, idyllic "wilderness" will eventually turn out to be too *toxic* for him: the toxic sublime is represented here exactly by this suffocation and (in the end), lethal loneliness. This destructive solitude that is supposed to *cure* and *heal* the character from the negative effects of the Capitalocene ultimately represents his demise: human beings are unable to find the "happiness" McCandless strives for without social interaction because we are all (human or nonhuman) part of this interconnected network.

The second book discussed by Lombard in his study is Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, which follows a similar pattern. After completing her journey and overcoming "the obstacles of the raw and dangerous nature," Strayed comes to the same conclusion as McCandless did: she belongs to civilization, not to the (toxic) wilderness, since she is a social being for whom social contact is vital (77). These two works

remind the reader of the complexity of dwelling and maintaining sustainable relationships with human and nonhuman species. In doing so, they revalue the social dimension of ecology insofar as retreating into nature and avoiding social contact does

not appear to be a lasting and effective alternative to the psychological effects of environmental and consumerist toxicity (77).

The last book examined by Lombard is Ken Ilgunas's *Walden on Wheels*, a memoir that criticizes capitalism and the system of student debts in the United States, as these two promote envy, social distress, and endless needs that are never satisfied, when in fact the only things that people need are a sense of belonging and a community.

David Lombard's study succeeds in creating a broad, complex analysis of Thoreauvian and post-Thoreauvian literature, which "attempt[s] to break down the barriers between the idealistic or natural and the empirical or technological" (79). The works mentioned by Lombard in his volume show us that Cartesian dualisms between the human and the non-human, nature and culture are questionable, and perhaps already undermined, as nature can be "technological" or "mechanical" inasmuch as technology or human nature can be wild and untamed.

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