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Kind of Blue; or, the Infinite Melancholy of the Whale

What happens to beasts can happen to man. All things are connected. If the great beasts are gone, men would merely die of a great loneliness of spirit.

Indian Chief Seattle, quoted in Frank Stewart,
The Presence of Whales

Whales tend to lodge in the breasts of people – sometimes they lodge crosswise, where they stick for life.

Cetologist Roger Payne, quoted in Frank Stewart,
The Presence of Whales

Whale/Fall

Whales' eyes have no tear ducts: we do their crying for them. Marine biologists are sometimes moved to tears at the sight of a whale, creative writers and historians by the thought of one. Why is that whales have the capacity to

move us so, pitching us between alternating states of hopelessness and elation? The answer I will give in this chapter is that whales are compound figures for *melancholy*, itself a plural state that has historically been construed as veering between the two extremes of despair and exaltation, conjuring up utopian possibilities of transcendence but also spiralling down into agonized reconfirmations of the inevitability of death and loss. Whales – as already examined in Chapter 1 – have historically served as reversible signifiers of salvation and perdition; long associated with human stories of planetary annihilation, they are also standard bearers for the promise of human survival and the possibility of a ‘better’, more ecologically harmonious life.

It is this very possibility that connects whales with melancholy, making the destructive history of human encounters with whales that much more poignant. In a similar spirit, this last chapter will circle back to the first, offering some scattered reflections on whales as projection screens for human desires and interests, but also as spectral figures whose literal as well as figurative elusiveness ends up troubling the process of representation itself. For, as previously argued, it is the *spectrality* of the whale – simultaneously substantial and insubstantial – that helps turn it, not just into a quintessentially unsettling figure, but also into an all-purpose symbol for entangled histories of disappearance and loss.

Furthering this argument, my main contention in this chapter will be that the attribution of melancholy to the figure of the whale is less an effect of observable animal behaviour (ethology) than the projection of a human mood (sadness) together with an overriding guilt based on historical knowledge of the human exploitation of whales (see also Preface). A finer-grained version of this contention will need to account for melancholy as at once a composite of associations relating to loss and fear and a broad-based cultural symptomatology of conflicting emotions whose outwards signs are made manifest in the visible grandeur of the whale. Whales, in this last sense, can be seen to operate under the sign of *excess*: they are not just bodies but gigantic bodies, not just signs but a plethora of signs; and insofar as the long history of their material destruction and industrial disassembly – which Nicole Shukin (2009) ingeniously associates with the double meaning of the verb to ‘render’¹ – has been accompanied by the proliferation of images that surround them, whales also become figures for *allegoresis*: not just a profusion of allegories, but the making of allegory itself.

To put this differently, whales are associated with the knowledge of loss, but also with wider social and cultural perceptions of loss tied in with the depredations of imperialism and industrial capitalism. Whales, in other words, are spectral or uncanny figures in the broad sense that their fleeting, potentially fateful appearances, replicated today in the more ostensibly benign practices of whale watching, operate as a kind of filter for the return of the repressed. Or, to phrase it differently again, it is the limited visibility of whales to the human eye that invites speculation on the scale – the enormity – of the losses that surround them; these losses are then translated into the representational codes of allegory, dolefully defined by Richard Stamelman as ‘the language of fragmentation, decay, and erosion which death speaks or writes’ (Stamelman, quoted in Pick 2011: 76).

For Stamelman, allegory represents the symbolic yoking of ‘an absent and unrecoverable meaning’ to ‘an excessive and overdetermined language’ (quoted in Pick 2011: 76). This – I want to argue here – is at one and the same time the language of *melancholy*, which as Max Pensky among others suggests has less to do with the experience (real or imagined) of loss than with a paralysing perception of the impossibility of recovery (Pensky 1993: 17–18; see also Radden 2000, Santner 2006). Melancholy, for Pensky, is a dialectical ‘way of seeing’ (Berger 2008) in which the inevitable price paid for penetrative insight is pain or anguish; it is also a debilitating habit of thought in which contemplative reflection effectively preys upon itself (19). Pensky links this self-destructive ‘way of seeing’ to an antiquarian perception of history as a repeating series of catastrophes that reaches back into the ancient past (18).

Meanwhile, Eric Santner – taking his cue, as Pensky does, from Walter Benjamin – links it further to the folding of *human* history into *natural* history, interpreting the latter in terms of ‘the ceaseless repetition of [...] cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning [that] are always connected to violence’, and to the inherent vulnerability of what he calls, again closely following Benjamin, ‘creaturely life’ (Santner 2006: 17). The figure of the melancholy whale is closely associated with the idea of creaturely life, which homes in not just on the intense vulnerability of the victimized human/animal body but on what Patricia Lopez and Kathryn Gillespie chillingly call the ‘economic logics of killable life’ (Lopez and Gillespie 2015; see Armstrong 2008, Butler 2010, Pick 2011). The figure of the melancholy whale is also linked to its status as an *affective animal*: an involuntarily public creature, both unsolicited object of

media attention and opportunistic catalyst for media-generated activist and/or advocacy work. Affective animals are so named because they are able to elicit public sympathy, for example through what the Swedish media theorist Birgitta Höijer calls those forms of ‘emotional anchoring’ that activate the ‘recognition of “our” complicity in “their” plight’ (Höijer 2010: 719, 723–724; see also Nyman and Schuurman 2016). In Höijer’s own words, ‘emotional anchoring’ refers to ‘those communicative processes by which a new phenomenon is attached to well-known positive or negative emotions: for example fear or hope’ (79). These anchoring processes are complicated, however, by the uncertain relationship between sympathy and understanding in affective animals. For instance, the capacity of animals to affect us isn’t necessarily dependent on how much we understand them; indeed, our sympathy may be the greater the *less* we know about them. In this context, melancholy might be seen as registering the split between sympathy and knowledge, which reinforces a sense of the separation between us and other living creatures. In the case of whales, this separation is merely increased by our historical awareness of the suffering caused to these creatures, which involves a degree of personal identification that counteracts what Lauren Berlant calls the ‘political soothing’ of pain (Berlant, quoted in Nyman and Schuurman 2016: 67).

This personal identification may be experienced subjectively or projected onto something/someone else; similarly, it may be historically based or future-oriented, as in the apprehension of vulnerability as the imaginative foreshadowing of future pain. Whatever the case, it is the co-existence of sympathy and separation that is key to the social construction of the melancholy animal. Here, Laura Brown is quite right to see the melancholy animal as the by-product of socially, culturally, and historically differentiated instincts of sympathy and compassion, together with a deep sadness at the apparently degenerated state of the world (2010: 29). She is wrong, though, to claim that animals are ‘either absolutely alien or intimately familiar’ (16) to humans; for in the case of the whale – and the same is largely the case for other affective animals – it is clear that attributed melancholy is the joint effect of *both*. Thus, whales and other cetaceans may be perceived at the same time as being like us – ‘the humans of the ocean’, in Kalland’s sardonic phrase (2012: 19) – and profoundly unlike us; as inhabiting our world and as living in a radically different, and indeed ontologically incommensurable, realm. Similarly, imaginative attempts

to represent whales often widen the very gap they wish to narrow, reconfirming the distance that separates them from humans, so that what we are left with is a series of (1) tantalizing glimpses and (2) equally partial traces of ‘actual animals within human texts’ (Brown 2010: 24).

To sum up my argument so far, through the figure of the melancholy whale, melancholy can be understood as an *affect* rather than an *emotion* produced by instinctive feelings of sympathy accompanied by the painful recognition of separation.² This then shifts into full-blown melancholia – melancholy’s pathological state – when these feelings become more permanent, and when separation anxiety transforms into a kind of precognitive state of mourning for originary loss. As Jennifer Radden argues, melancholia is the afflictive condition under which melancholy ways of seeing and thinking are normalized even as they take on pathological effects and characteristics: when our perception of our separation from others – be they human or animal – turns into a paralysing apprehension of our separation from ourselves (Radden 2000: 17–18).

As I argued earlier (see Chapter 1), this overriding sense of loss is bound up with the threat of species extinction. However, while it is true that some varieties of cetaceans have disappeared for good, the vast majority of them are still with us; and if, as Dan Bortolotti puts it, the figure of the melancholy whale registers, not just mourning for previous death, but guilty recognition in face of the apparently dying, then that presumed death sentence has turned out to be premature (2009: 91). Perhaps it might be better, in the current context, to speak of whales in terms of *pseudo-extinction* rather than *extinction* narratives. In the classic extinction narrative, there is mourning for actual loss, although that mourning may take several different forms, each suffused with cultural meaning (Heise 2016; Van Dooren 2014). In the pseudo-extinction narrative, by contrast, species may be *imagined* as being lost even though the science tells us otherwise.³ The much-debated Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia comes to mind here. Whereas mourning is predicated upon the identification of a lost object, melancholia is unable to locate it; is uncertain in fact whether the object is actually lost or not. The temporal dimension of melancholia is equally unclear, for whereas mourning is by definition projected onto the past, melancholia may just as easily be projected onto the future, anticipating a future state that not only assumes the worst but also narcissistically accepts responsibility for it (Radden 2000).

One possible analogy to this is the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of the Fall, the original state of sin from which mankind may eventually be delivered, but which may paradoxically involve some form of ultimate and/or irreversible judgement, for example the total destruction of the world. As is well known, there is a long-standing mythological connection between the figure of Leviathan and the presentiment of the End, in which the utopian promise of a new order already contains within it the seeds of its own destruction (see also Chapter 1). In the melancholic imaginary, the next rise is but the beginning of the next fall, confirming the hopelessness of messianic promise. This may be seen in political as well as religious terms; as Pensky puts it, 'Melancholy infects any political cause that it seeks to support, for the melancholic's support is always tinged with the atmosphere of meaninglessness. [...] A melancholy politics thus glides into a secret, half-willing collaboration with the forces it seeks to oppose' (1993: 11).

A remarkable literary demonstration of melancholy politics is László Krasznahorkai's award-winning novel *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1998), set in a provincial town in an unstable eastern European country (which both is and is not the author's native Hungary) subject to the absurd violence that routinely accompanies autocratic power. Loosely based on Robert Burton's seventeenth-century treatise *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the novel plays out a series of mock-apocalyptic rehearsals, as the town's beleaguered citizens anxiously anticipate a triumphant deliverance that never comes. Instead, the novel cynically confirms its protagonist Valuska's vision of history as an endless repetition of errors and failures: bad things happen, worse things happen, and then they happen all over again (1998: 80–81, 104). At the centre of it all is a travelling circus and its prime exhibit, 'the biggest whale in the world' (26), a tawdry throwback to nineteenth-century spectacles presided over by the equally unprepossessing figure of the Director, himself 'an enormous behemoth of a man' (85). The giant stuffed whale comes across in the novel as an essentially incomprehensible figure: 'It was just too big and too long: Valuska simply couldn't see it all at once, and failed even to get a proper look at its dead eyes' (88). The creature is significantly less interesting than the promise it holds – typically, either salvation or perdition (see Chapter 1) – but above all, it comes to demonstrate 'an infection of the imagination whose susceptibility to its own terrors might eventually lead to an actual catastrophe'

(96): a combination of the preposterous and the monstrous, it embodies the affliction of melancholy itself. A suitably dingy signifier of apocalypse, the whale is a melancholic figure in a novel stuffed full of melancholic figures whose resistance to authority turns out to be as senseless as the wanton exercise of authority itself.

Krasznahorkai's melancholy whale is a good working example of Pensky's view of melancholy as an expression of political frustration as well as personal unhappiness – an expression he sees as being exemplified in Walter Benjamin's work. For Pensky, Benjamin is the epitome of the melancholy thinker, gifted with profound insight but tortuously aware that 'misery is the force that drives the contemplative mind onward' (Pensky 1993: 17). He is also a melancholy writer insofar as melancholy writing operates 'under the sign of its own impossibility to achieve what it needs' (1993: 5; see also Chambers 1987). Last but not least, he is an eagle-eyed analyst of the capacity for self-delusion that accompanies even the most worked through of revolutionary politics, and of the temptation to lapse into a pessimism so extreme that it effectively impedes the possibility of political change (1993: 9). In this context, *The Melancholy of Resistance* offers a set of wry reflections on the irresistible tendency of melancholy towards self-parody, its self-destructive privileging of thought over action, and its signal inability to resist – and secret complicity with – the very totalitarian forces of authority it confronts.

Krasznahorkai's most obvious targets here are the socialist regimes of twentieth-century eastern Europe, which he views as replicating the fascism they oppose, but his novel opens up to other, still more general interpretations, implying the whale-like hollowness of all political credos as well as the equally whale-like invitation to be swallowed by visions of an alternative order that proves to be just as corrupt and self-serving as the one it promises to supplant. All grand ideas, Krasznahorkai tacitly suggests, run the risk of turning into something like their opposites, or of degenerating into mere shells of themselves that demonstrate the one true melancholic principle: the certainty of decay. Hence the extraordinary ending to the novel, which consists of an extended, meticulously technical account of the *post mortem* process of bodily putrefaction (in this case, the body belongs to another of the novel's hapless victims, Mrs József Plauf). This account out-Flauberts Flaubert in its rapt attention to the brute physiology of decomposition, offering one last,

supremely ironic example of the futility of resistance as the rotting corpse, now ground down into ‘infinitesimal pieces’, returns to the chaos from whence it came (Krasznahorkai 1998: 314).

An equally arresting example of this process can be found in Rebecca Giggs’s short 2015 piece in *Granta*, ‘Whale Fall’, which documents – in excruciating detail – the final agonies of a beached whale. The whale, a Western Australian humpback, takes a full three days to die, during which time it becomes a public spectacle. The initial festivities, however, give way to a stunned contemplation of the prolonged death process, in which the author and a steadily diminishing circle of other interested bystanders both witness the whale’s obvious suffering and transfer it, in classic melancholic fashion, onto themselves. Apocalyptic rumours attach themselves like limpets to the body of the dying whale:

Spectators on the beach that day had their suspicions. A comet had flared icily over Rottnest Island the previous week. The much-adored Antarctic Blue whale skeleton in the Western Australian Museum in Perth was set to be lifted out of the roof on a crane and dismantled. (At long last, would it be returned to the sea?) Someone’s sister talked of significant and recent naval operations. And wasn’t the weather undeniably weird all the time now? An El Niño year. Bitter mention was made by many of ‘The Japanese’; of the trauma and exhaustion of whales chased by harpoons. Almost certainly, it was said by one man, the Nynungar elders predicted the humpback – that’s why they weren’t there. What was happening was something sour, something dark. A bad business for the land. (2015: 5)

Meanwhile, the whale itself begins to disintegrate as some organs fail, others move alarmingly from inside to outside the body, and the starving organism, ‘breaking down blubber into energy in the absence of food, [...] reverts to ketosis’, effectively poisoning itself from within (3, 7). There is still time, though, for Giggs to imagine one more whale death, way out to sea, where the whale body, sinking and decaying as it sinks, ‘reaches a point where the buoyancy of its meat and organs is only tethered down by the force of its falling bones’ (8). The description that follows is as emotionally draining as it is scientifically accurate:

Methane is released in the miniscule bubbles. It scatters skin and sodden flesh below it, upon which grows a carpet of white worms (grass on its grave). Then, sometimes, the entire whale skeleton will suddenly burst through the

cloud of its carcass. For a time, the skeleton might stay hitched jerkily at the spine to its parachute of muscle; a macabre marionette dangling in the slight currents. Then it drops, falls quickly to the sea floor, into the plush cemetery of the worms. Gusts of billowing silt roll away. The mantle of the whale's pulpier parts settles over it. Marine snow (anonymous matter, ground to a salt in the lighter layers of the sea) beats down ceaselessly. Rat-tails, devouring snails and more polychaetes appear. The bones are stripped and then fluff up with silver-white bacteria, so that it appears as if the skeleton is draped in metres of downy towelling. Years may pass, decades even, before there is nothing left except a dent that holds the dark darker. (8–9)

Giggs's is an accomplished piece of melancholy writing, in which the multiple associations of the Fall – both literal and figurative, both physical and metaphysical – are used to contemplate the mysteries of creation as well as the natural histories of destruction (natural history *as* destruction) that link terrestrial human beings to their alternately familiar and alien marine counterparts, whales. In Giggs's work, we see melancholy writing's putting into effect of a 'burden of remorse' as well as its working through of a 'perturbed consciousness'; we also see the melancholy state as a kind of 'eternalization of pensiveness' in which the melancholy thinker/writer is forever 'propelled forward, never ceasing [his/her] mulling over of things' (Chambers 1987: 31, 169, 173). Above all, though, we see these thoughts and their written expressions projected onto the figure of the dying (or deceased) *whale*, the literal dissolution of which makes way for a plurality of figurative associations that come together in the simultaneous recognition of sympathy and separation, the self-perpetuating contemplation of loss and the dizzying imaginative possibilities of what Judith Butler (2010) calls 'grievable life'.⁴

These associations, for Giggs as for Krasznahorkai, are mainly in the visual realm, although – as might be expected with the spectral figure of the whale – they continually play between the visible and the invisible, revealing what Pensky calls the 'structural ambiguity [...] between meaning and meaninglessness, life and death, exaltation and despair [that lies] at the heart of [melancholic] allegoresis as nothing other than an insight into the very structure of imagination itself' (1993: 28). However, the melancholic imaginary is stimulated as much by sounds as by sights, by auditory as by visual impulses; and in the next section of this chapter, I will go on to explore what

probably remains the most popular association of whales with melancholy: the haunting music of humpback song.

Whale/song

Few sounds are more iconic than those of humpback song, which, to many of those who first heard it in the 1960s, confirmed that '[n]ot only were the whales on their way to extinction, they were singing their own dirge' (Ellis 1991: 436; also quoted in Bortolotti 2009: 88–89). As we now know, the extinction of cetacean species has largely been forestalled, although several varieties remain listed as threatened, but the haunting sounds of humpback song still continue to have a strong hold on the public consciousness, gracing many a nature documentary and forming the principal subject of several popular-science books, notably the American musician and philosopher David Rothenberg's acclaimed 2008 monograph, *Thousand Mile Song: Whale Music in a Sea of Sound*. For Rothenberg among others, the smash-hit record *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, first released in 1970 and later re-released as a 'sound page' in a 1979 issue of *National Geographic*, would do more than anything or anyone else to bring the plight of whales to public notice: 'We would never have been inspired to save the whale', he says unequivocally, 'without [having been] touched by its song' (Rothenberg 2008: 3). And if whale song was key, in the late twentieth century, to kick-starting a 'Save the Whales' campaign that would later become metonymic for the global environmental movement, it is increasingly acknowledged that acoustic research, in the early twenty-first, 'may turn out to be the single most useful tool for understanding the world's [largest] animal', although difficulties still obtain, such as knowing which animals are making which sounds, as 'the vocalizations are often made by animals that are never seen at all' (Bortolotti 2009: 161, 165).

The melancholy of whale song, in this last sense, is contingent on whales not being seen; on their being heard but not necessarily deciphered; and, in some more extreme cases, such as the low-frequency infrasonic rumblings of the blue whale, on their not being able to be heard (at least by human ears) at all. Its plaintive call, which is capable of covering hundreds, potentially even thousands of miles without a corresponding whale to answer it, has

helped carve out the popular view of the blue whale as an ‘image of loneliness’ (Bortolotti 2009: 89) in the deep ocean, a melancholy effect reinforced by the perception of temporal as well as spatial distance, for whales are ancient beings that both bridge and show the gulf between distinct and incommensurable worlds. Further melancholy effects are produced by the attribution of mystical or religious dimensions to creatures that are clearly of this world, but are also seen as messengers between worlds, as in lofty New Age pronouncements on ‘telepathic’ whales and ‘angelic’ dolphins; and in the association of these creatures with water, itself a melancholic element: dream-bound, meditation-oriented, alternately enticing and alienating, as in the further New Age correlation of the deep oceans with outer space.

While these melancholy effects arguably accrue to all whales, it is the humpback that is most closely associated with song, and Rothenberg accordingly sees humpback song as a kind of musical language, refractory to human understanding but perhaps still analysable in musical terms. Humpback songs, Rothenberg suggests, are never the same, continuously changing during the breeding season, which strongly suggests – though this is still far from proven – that their main purpose may be to stimulate female receptivity, making them, as the Harvard-based zoologist E.O. Wilson puts it more confidently, ‘the most elaborate single [mating] display known in any animal species’ in the world (Wilson, quoted in Whitehead and Rendell 2015: 83). While the motivations for song are unclear, the structure of the songs themselves has been subject to rigorous scientific study. Humpback song, Rothenberg states, is a ‘true composition’ (11) consisting of patterned and interconnected sounds that are regular, rhythmic, and above all aesthetically satisfying to listen to, offering at once a ‘wide frequency range’ and a ‘variability in harmonic structure’ that are intensely beautiful in their own ethereal terms (146). As the marine biologists Hal Whitehead and Luke Rendell describe them, songs are typically arranged in cycles containing about eight ‘themes’, with each theme consisting of a patterned series of nearly identical ‘phrases’ (Whitehead and Rendell 2015: 77). However, while songs follow general rules, they tend to be characterized by a wide variety of possible permutations, featuring both ‘different content and distinct trajectories of change’ (2015: 79).

The sophistication of whale song has been used by scientists to support the increasingly accepted view that whales have culture, and to open up fresh

debates on the moral standing of cetaceans, which many now see as being entitled to the personhood that human beings tend to reserve for themselves (see, for example, Whitehead and Rendell 2015; also White 2007 and Chapter 2 of this book). Carrying these debates forward, Rothenberg asks whether whales have an *aesthetic* sense, and whether whale song may be less an instrument of information than a register of aesthetic ‘rightness’ connected, in turn, with the ways in which ‘evolution produces a sense of “rightness”, from each species’ perspective, about how animals should look and how they should behave’ (2008: 149). This squares with Rothenberg’s own view of music as a vehicle of affect, an ‘emotive repertoire of sounds’ (158) which he uses, via the work of the archaeologist Steven Mithen, to suggest that ‘music meant much more to our ancestors than it could ever mean to us – as music might mean more to whales than we can ever know’ (159). Whale song, for Rothenberg, thus emerges as a kind of ambient music, an emotional support mechanism that whales use to navigate their way through what he melodramatically calls ‘a dark, lightless, foggy world’ (190). Unsurprisingly, Rothenberg picks out the blue whale as a denizen of this world, seeing the repertoire of low sounds that it emits, which carry vast distances across the ocean, as adding its own musical arrangements to what in effect, and in contrast to Cousteau’s now-discredited ‘silent world’ paradigm, is a vast sea of sound (205).⁵ Blue whale sounds carry the distances they do, Rothenberg suggests, because at lower frequencies there is a relative lack of ‘sonic interruption’ (205). However, the increasing kinds and amounts of sound produced by humans and the machines they create contribute to a very different sound world in which whales and other ocean-going animals find it difficult to communicate. Rothenberg duly cites the American oceanographer Peter Tyack, who states that:

The deepest whale songs used to carry hundreds of kilometers. Now it turns out that the thing that dominates the frequency range down there is shipping noise. This is where we put the most acoustic energy in the ocean. If that increased low-frequency din is preventing a male and female from finding each other, it is important. It’s not as visible as a dead whale on a beach, but it might be much more prevalent. (Quoted in Rothenberg 2008: 209)

Rothenberg echoes Tyack’s pragmatic view that more acoustic research is required, but what arguably interests him most is that whales are affective

animals capable of inspiring us even if the technology we use to understand them creates an illusion of direct access to animal worlds which remain essentially separate from us. This argument is carried forward by Donna Haraway, who suggests that the flip side of the excitement produced by technologically mediated encounters with non-human animals is regret—that is, the worlds they inhabit aren't actually accessible to us—and by Akira Lippit, who sees our separation from non-human animals as being *represented* technologically, in spectral (e.g. telekinetic) form (Haraway 2008; Lippit 2010; see also Berger 2009).⁶ As I have been arguing in this chapter, melancholy is the affect most obviously created by our multisensory encounters with whales, not just in the sense that whales remind us of a multifaceted history of loss, but also in the sense that they come to *embody* these losses: in Pensky's terms, they are the melancholy objects that melancholy subjects must produce in order to validate themselves (1993: 15–16).

In Rothenberg's case, this melancholy 'way of seeing' is routed through what might best be described as a New Age environmentalist ethic that posits the urgent need for greater understanding and communication between human and non-human species while remaining aware of the barriers that continue to stand in the way of such understanding and communication – barriers that cannot be overcome by empathy alone (Heelas 1996; see also Huggan 2013).⁷ Such New Age moments are replicated in Rothenberg's text by nostalgic references to the Green idealism of the 1970s: 'No one imagined great whales could make such great sounds, and this was an age when new experience was especially treasured, sought out, and blended with a rush of sensory possibilities. We dreamed of a better, more joyful world, and singing whales would be part of it' (Rothenberg 2008: 19). Rothenberg's own jazzy experiments in 'interspecies music' (75) hark back to this now largely bygone age, one witheringly described by the historian of science D. Graham Burnett (2012: 599) as an era of 'peaceniks, freaks, and ecoterrorists' in which, in the environmental anthropologist Arne Kalland's equally dismissive language, caring for whales came to be a 'metaphor for being good' and whale society a complementary 'metaphor for the lost human paradise or utopian world' (Kalland 2012: 41).

To be fair to Rothenberg, *Thousand Mile Song* is too playfully eccentric to fully affiliate itself with the New Age or any other quasi-spiritual movement, while at times the text is notably disabused of its own New Age predilections,

for example in the epilogue when Rothenberg joins other pleasure-seeking tourists on a boat off the Hawaiʻian coast, communing mainly with each other while claiming to be celebrating the ‘passion and beauty of [the] giant sirens of the ocean depths’ (2008: 221). The following passage sums up the hedonistic atmosphere perfectly:

‘Come Join the Spirit Sailing Journey to the Cetacean Nation,’ says the e-mail invite, full of tiny print listing all the fabulous love and music that will be on board. ‘Leave your shoes on the beach, swim out to our catamaran, drums and shakers will be on board. Our guest musicians will play cellos, harps, and guitars. We’ll have flippers, you can dive in with our giant friends.’ As soon as we leave the harbor, clothes tend to come off. A woman called Mahana, who was once called Lauren, waves and shouts the old Hawaiian word for humpback out to the sea. ‘*Kohola, koholaa*, we love you, come close to us, we’re waiting.’ The passengers start to sing and dance, the warm sun beats down on us, and we see the first great humpbacks cavorting in the bay. It’s prime mating and calving season, and they’re everywhere. A few hundred yards offshore and we’re mostly naked, trying to tune in to that great whale energy. (222)

Rothenberg’s positioning of himself as a tourist rather than a scientist, albeit one who is sceptical of the antics of would-be cetacean tourists and the opportunism of ‘rogue whale watchers’ (235) who will do whatever it takes to get close to whales, offsets his own maverick efforts to make music with them – itself an opportunistic pursuit if also one tinged with a sobering awareness that the recent history of human reception of whale song reveals a story of beauty under pressure, melancholic in both its acoustic intensity and its conservationist intent. Notwithstanding, whale watching – in all its myriad forms – represents the best chance most people have to see whales in their natural state, if few among them have the further opportunity of listening to them underwater. As Kalland says, prior to the exponential growth of the whale-watching industry, now a two-billion-dollar global concern, very few people indeed had experienced direct engagement with cetaceans. Instead, most of us met whales ‘only through their representations, and our knowledge about [them was] mostly built on representations presented through books, photos and movies’ (2012: 28). If this still remains the case for many today, whale watching has become part of the reality of experiencing whales for

millions of people. But how ‘real’ is this experience, and what emotions does it bring to the fore? Is it merely a pleasurable pursuit, or are there underlying motives? And, in the still incomplete transition from whale hunting to whale watching, is there a melancholic residue – a buried understanding that yesterday’s losses may not necessarily translate into today’s gains? These are some of the questions that the next section of this chapter seeks to address, taking its cue from the Scottish poet and nature writer Kathleen Jamie’s only partly tongue-in-cheek observation that whale watching ‘proceeds like a kind of theology – by glimpses, sightings, a dorsal fin, a rolling back’; and that, as such, it is best understood as ‘a pursuit for the regretful; all might-have-beens and what-did-we-miss?’ (2005: 145).

Whale/watch

Since its modest beginnings in 1950s’ California, whale watching has evolved into one of the most significant and commercially lucrative forms of contemporary global marine ecotourism – ostensibly a conservation-oriented mode of tourism which, in the Caters’ definition, ‘takes place in coastal and marine settings; is designed to help conserve the local environment while also benefiting local communities; and aims to educate visitors about this environment while also motivating them to re-examine how their activities impact upon the Earth’ (Cater and Cater 2007: 9; see also Garrod and Wilson 2003). Recent research on whale watching, however, has complicated the too-easy view that it represents an authentic alternative to watching animals in captivity; and that, motivated as it apparently is by conservationist imperatives, it marks the transition from a brazenly exploitative age of industrial-capitalist extraction, embodied in the destructive practices of whale hunting, to a more sustainable era in which education trumps exploitation, and the safety and well-being of the whales themselves are of paramount concern. A good recent example here is James Higham, Lars Bejder, and Rob Williams’s state-of-the-art 2014 study on the social practices and cultural politics of whale watching, which marshals substantial evidence that whale watching is by no means always educationally sound or environmentally friendly, while the anthropologist Adrian Peace claims that it is ‘as emblematic of mankind’s early

twenty-first century hubris as whale slaughter was expressive of its arrogance in the twentieth century', not least by taking it for granted that 'the worth of whales is to be determined by our consumption-fixated world-view alone' (Peace 2005: 206–207).

Still, it would seem as unwise to dismiss whale watching's conservationist potential as it would be to assume it; similarly, sustainable ecotourism should neither be considered as a naïve tautology nor as a flagrant contradiction in terms. More research is needed, Higham et al. insist, on how and to what extent whale watching can be harnessed to local community understandings as well as to broader conservationist initiatives, while more is also required on how and to what extent different individuals and groups of people interact with their environment, as well as on how they interact with whales (Higham, Bejder, and Williams 2014; see also Corkeron 2004). While acknowledging the need for updated empirical work of this kind, my own approach in this chapter (as elsewhere in this book) is somewhat different: more philosophically inclined if also more historically inscribed. Broadly speaking, the argument I want to make here is that whale watching, while clearly motivated in different ways that are influenced by a variety of social and cultural factors, is a largely *compensatory* activity in which the pleasure gained from looking at animals is counterbalanced by the melancholic awareness of their loss or disappearance. This argument follows John Berger's view – expressed in his famous 1980 essay 'Why Look at Animals?' – that when we look at animals we do so in order (1) to confirm our own presence in face of them, and (2) to compensate for their loss. Berger's essay is paradigmatically melancholic in its mournful view that animals have mostly disappeared from our lives, and that as a result we have become a quintessentially lonely species, confirmed in our loneliness by the modern capitalist system that governs our relations to other people, animals, and things (Berger 2009 [1980]: 11). What Berger means by this is not that animals have *actually* disappeared (although many species certainly have), but that they have become supplementary rather than integral to our existence (11). Modifying this slightly, I would suggest that they are still integral, but that many of us have chosen to forget this, just as most of us are increasingly blind to the wildlife which – in some cases in alarmingly diminishing numbers – continues to surround us, and upon which we depend far more than we might imagine in our daily lives (Louv 2010).⁸

Berger's work remains influential despite the criticism it has received for privileging the visual (for human encounters with animals are nothing if not a multisensory experience); for lapsing into the nostalgic (an effect of the fundamentally melancholic sensibility that drives it); and, perhaps most tellingly, for not answering the question it poses. For, as Garry Marvin among others suggests, it isn't clear from the essay what actually motivates people to look at animals even though it *is* clear that the global capitalist system into which they are incorporated tends to reduce animals themselves to commodities within a symbolic economy of spectacle that converts 'their' bodies into 'our' images, and 'their' real or imagined disappearances into 'our' narcissistic feelings of loss (see Marvin 2005; also Baker 2001, Lippit 2010). While I agree with all of these criticisms, I would add that the larger question of why we look at animals needs to be seen alongside the narrower issue of why (also how) we look at *particular* animals, for as Marvin argues, albeit stating the obvious, 'a peasant does not look at his pig in the same way that a zoo visitor looks at a lion, nor does the hunter look at a deer in the same way that a companion animal guardian looks at his dog or cat' (2005: 4).

This lack of species differentiation can be seen even in the more sophisticated work that is a product of the so-called 'animal turn,'⁹ at least some strands of which make the category mistake of seeing all animals as companionate creatures, or which offer sweeping, unwittingly sentimental distinctions between an *objectifying* gaze that confirms our power and imagined superiority over animals and a *reciprocating* gaze that acknowledges our kinship with them in what eco-philosophers and animal theorists have increasingly taken to calling a 'multispecies' world (Woodward 2001: 3; see also Haraway 2008, Kirksey 2014). The idea of the reciprocating gaze tends to assume that animals are as interested in us as we are in them, and that all animal species – humans included – form part of what Donna Haraway calls a grand planetary 'subject-and-object-shaping dance of encounters' in which 'actual encounters are what make [lively] beings' in the first place, and a technologically enhanced mixture of 'commerce and consciousness, evolution and bioengineering, and ethics and utilities' comes into play (Haraway 2008: 4, 67, 46). How 'actual', however, are our encounters with other animals? This depends of course on linked sets of particularities (particular conditions, particular humans, particular animals). But it also depends, as Haraway recognizes, on multiple levels of

mediation in which the animals we *look at*, which are increasingly shaped by modern technologies as well by longer histories of symbolic correspondence and association, are simultaneously *looked for* in terms of what we think, and what others have persuaded us into thinking, they represent (Haraway 2008; see also Baker 2001).

This entanglement of human/animal bodies and technology is most evident in the history of nature documentary and wildlife film. This history brings together *the look* (how we see or would like to see ourselves) and *the gaze* (how we are positioned socially and culturally). These in turn constitute a visual regime, apprehended primarily via the camera, in which the play of human/animal identities is framed and fashioned through 'an irreducibly exterior image which intervenes between it and the subject', and where even the most reciprocally oriented of human/animal imaginaries is filtered back to the subject via the controlling mechanisms of an objectifying gaze (Silverman 1996: 135; see also Brower 2011, Burt 2002, Woodward 2001). I would argue, however, that these mechanisms are also at work in more ostensibly 'direct' encounters with animals, such as those experienced in whale watching. Whale watching, after all, is nothing if not a staged spectacle in which our reactions to the whales we (wish to) see are partly conditioned by the second-hand knowledge we already have about them. These reactions are then further shaped and influenced by the suspenseful atmosphere created around them, which often depends on the carefully manufactured production of authenticity and on a technology-enabled, performance-oriented interpretation of cetacean behaviour which, if not necessarily inaccurate, is designed to please (Kalland 2012; Peace 2005).

Commercial whale watching is mostly family entertainment these days, and while it has the capacity to generate considerable excitement among young and old alike, its feature elements of surprise and anticipation, while these can never be monitored completely, are carefully rationed out. There is thus a continuum from the idea of *whales on demand*, which are only as far away as the next television screen, to the idea of *whales on display*, where captive animals are made available to be looked at, to the freer idea of *cetacean encounters*, where whale sightings are subject to the law of probabilities, but sightings are still probable, and there is less emphasis on orchestrated performance, but there is performance nonetheless. All the evidence suggests that whale watching

is a 'high-satisfaction' industry (Higham, Bejder, and Williams 2014; Orams 2000). Still, the possibility of disappointment is built in to whale-watching tours. In this and other respects, these tours match the structural conditions that obtain within the mass-tourism industry, which is designed in part to frustrate the expectations of its paying customers, just as it offers opportunities to sample new experiences that brush off old disappointments, feeding off regret, possibly even recrimination, but providing (for a fee) the chance to start all over again (MacCannell 1976).

It is still worth asking what it is about *whale watching*, in particular, that creates a disappointment that goes well beyond whether one tour or another lives up to its expectations, and that has relatively little to do with specific experiences, for example whether whales 'in the wild' are actually seen or not. Here it might be useful to come back to Jamie's aforementioned claim that modern-day whale watching 'proceeds like a theology' (2005: 145). Jamie is referring, I think, not so much to the arcane notion of hidden gods or the faith-bound possibility of our transcending our earthly existences, but to what I would see as being a *dialectics of appearance and disappearance* that is integral to human-cetacean encounters – one in which we are continually made aware of our own lack of vision, and in which it is ultimately the whale rather than the viewer that decides when, where, and how much to display. It is not for nothing that the iconic photographic image of the whale is that of the flukes, the last trace of a creature that is about to escape, possibly never to be seen again, from our restricted field of vision (Brower 2011; see also cover image). Similarly, sightings of whole whales – occasional jumps and breaches notwithstanding – are relatively rare in whale-watching tours; it is much more usual to see parts of animals that allow for, and indeed stimulate, an *imagination* of the whole. Such tours remind us, in other words – as do whales themselves – of the singular limitations of our vision. These limitations also pertain to our knowledge and understanding of creatures that have become 'ethically, spiritually, and ecologically important to us' (Stewart 1995: 13), but that even experts admit are much more talked about than seen, and much more readily imagined than scientifically known.

My own experience of watching whales is similarly limited. I haven't watched an orca display and probably wouldn't own up if I had, but I *have* seen orcas twice in their natural state, once – wholly unexpected, and thrillingly

close – off the coast of Salt Spring Island in south-west Canada, and once on an official whale-watching tour in the same region, departing from Vancouver and threading its way through the American-owned San Juan Islands, across the Canadian–US border to the city's south. The following is a brief narrative distillation of that tour, which is largely reliant on memory, as when the tour was taken I had no intention of using it in my academic work.

It's a beautiful sunny day and my companion and I are careful to take hats and water; as I discover once we've left the harbour, it's just as well I brought a rain jacket as well, as though there's no trace of rain, the wind soon gets up. I have a camera of course, but old-fashioned technophobe that I am, I'm ambivalent about using it; it seems a shame to agitate about capturing things on camera when there's so much to experience first-hand. There are about a dozen of us on board: all ages, all shapes and sizes, all nationalities. It's a good-humoured bunch on the whole, though a few openly complain about the noise of the boat's engine, while others – myself included – wonder what effect this is likely to have on the whales.

After about an hour at sea with not a whale in sight, things get uneasy. One Spanish woman, who has been intermittently sick since the start, has since gone to sleep inside the boat and seems no longer inclined to participate, while a young British boy, quickly hushed by his embarrassed-looking parents, says he now wishes he hadn't come and why is everyone wasting his time. The boy peers angrily at his phone instead; most of the rest of us are anxiously scanning the water. The scenery is great, and it strikes me that the pleasures of whale watching aren't necessarily tied to whales at all, but rather to the experience of being out on the water. Then I correct myself: I'm getting cross too that I haven't seen a whale.

I needn't have worried: a pod of orcas has just been spotted further on up the bay, and the boat accelerates towards it. As I've heard is frequently the case, especially in high season, other commercial boats have been given the same information, and one in particular seems destined to become our rival, first tailing in our wake then cheekily moving past. The anxiety mounts: what if this boat gets there first, and what if they get a better view? What if we miss out entirely? The anxieties are allayed somewhat by the first sighting: three whales – two adults and a calf – making serene progress in the coastal waters of the bay. There's a certain jostling for prime viewing position in the boat; one small German group has planned ahead by shoehorning themselves into the available space on the upper deck, which is relatively unobstructed, but soon there are pointing cameras everywhere. Mayhem ensues when the

whales suddenly change direction, speeding up as they do so. The boat clumsily manoeuvres round to tag them, and eventually catches up. Alas, the whales seem more interested in our rival boat than ours: they seem to be cavorting around it. The Germans are miffed; one large American tourist curses. Again we needn't have worried though: the whales are starting to move back in our direction; and before we know it, thrillingly, all three have passed right under the boat. They move effortlessly, their black-and-white backs sliding in and out of the water, sparkling in the sun. I am taken aback by their size, though they certainly appear to be placid. Killer whales are known for their ferocity, but they rarely attack boats and are mostly indifferent to human presence. This seems to be the case here, as the pod plays cat and mouse with the two skirmishing tourist boats that inelegantly trail it. Our boat seems to have the upper hand, but then the whales veer off again, seeming more agitated. They're on the hunt, our captain cheerfully says, and suddenly the waters are churning; we get partial views of diving and what looks like a jump, but damn it the main scene of the action is closer to the other boat. The Germans are miffed again, but the excitement is largely shared between us. Eventually the other boat moves off and we move in, but it seems that feeding time is over; the whales are on the move again, and quickly, heading out to sea.

One last glimpse or two and they're gone, but our time is up anyway, and the journey back in is as uneventful as the journey out. I manage to clamber onto the upper deck, where I sunbathe; my companion, who is Peruvian and doesn't like the sun much, has moved inside the boat in search of shade. An hour later, we're back on land, trying to remember where we parked the car and hoping we're not going to get a ticket; Canada is a country of permits and licences, though I'm grateful that its whale-watching industry is also reasonably well controlled. Maybe I should have been worried though: just a few weeks after our trip, there's a horrendous accident off the west coast of Vancouver Island when a whale-watching boat crashes into the rocks in bad weather and several people are killed. Apparently the boat got too close in tracking a pod of whales and was caught by a rogue wave, though other, more openly accusatory interpretations of events are offered. I'm reminded that whale watching, though largely safe, is an exercise in risk management, both for the people who participate in it and, of course, for the whales.

Recounting these events reminds me why I'm neither a creative writer nor a social anthropologist: I lack the descriptive and narrative skills to be the first and the facility with people to be the second. Still, it also confirms to me

that whale watching is largely an anticipatory activity that puts patience to the test, although certainly no more so than other marine leisure activities – fishing for example – which, like whale watching, are probably more about soaking up atmosphere and charting changing mood patterns than they are about the human–animal encounter itself. I’m struck too that ‘melancholy’ is perhaps the wrong term to use after all, although whale watching, like other supposed relaxation pursuits, is paradoxically anxiety-inducing, motivated less by the painful awareness of past and present loss than by the more selfish fear of missing something: of losing out. Theorizing whales is always likely to be challenged when encountering them in practice; perhaps all the more so when those encounters are simultaneously recognized as being elaborately staged. Still, at some level the experience of watching whales gives us pause for thought on how we thirst for the authenticity of natural things even as we acknowledge the gap between what we see and what we want to see, and even though we recognize that there is no such thing as unmediated access to the natural world (Brower 2011: 86, 197). Melancholy may yet describe this gap and the conflicting emotions which surround it. Meanwhile, as previously argued, the trope of the ‘melancholy whale’ operates as a symbolic figure, not just for a circumscribed existence but for the effective incommensurability of worlds that we humans clearly influence, but that we struggle – wilfully at times, involuntarily at others – to comprehend. The final section of this chapter looks more closely at the composition and meaning of these ‘worlds’, assessing to what extent whales, and other animals, are encircled within separate realms of their own making, or whether these realms are drawn together, each bounded in the other, and each part of a larger network of relations that continually composes and recomposes itself (Buchanan 2008: 161).

Whale/world

As I have been arguing throughout this book, whales are subject to a wide variety of different ‘ways of seeing’ in which our understanding of them is inseparable from our knowledge of their cultural representations, and in which these representations are both constructions of a wider culture and work towards constructing that culture themselves (Baker 2001: 25; see also Fudge

2005). To put this in another way, whales belong to a 'society of the spectacle' (Debord 1994) characterized by the density of images that surround us, and by the conversion of these images into commodities that function within a global economy of symbolic exchange. This implies that, however much they are predicated on experiencing the real, human–cetacean encounters are always mediated to some degree, and that a full account of these encounters requires *both* updated empirical work on whale watching, for which the most reliable methods are those provided by tourism anthropology, *and* a broad-based historical understanding of how whales have been made subject to a symbolic politics the far-reaching effects and consequences of which can still be seen today.

This suggests in turn that whales are, as Donna Haraway (2008) might put it, 'material-semiotic' entities, both living creatures attached to material histories and bundles of multivalent – frequently allegorized – signs. In this final section of the chapter, I want to explore the material-semiotic status of whales one last time by associating it with different, multiply interconnected *worlds*. These include the world of *empire*, which, as previously argued, is closely interwoven with the history of whaling (see Preface; also Chapter 1 and Chapter 2); the mutually informing worlds of *global commerce* and *industrial capitalism*; and the world of *human–animal relations*, itself a material-semiotic entity in which animal bodies, exploitable for commercial purposes, are also rendered 'symbolically available' as multifunctional signs (Baker 2001: 5). Nicole Shukin puts this well when she suggests that animals have both material and metaphorical currency, and are thus manipulated in the interests of capital in both a literal and a figurative sense (2009: 5). In the case of the whale, one of the common denominators for both forms of manipulation is *violence*. Hence the particular relevance of her term 'rendering', which, in bringing together the 'carnal presence' of the animal and the various cultural meanings that are mapped onto it, also joins the violence done to animals to the violence of representation itself (2009: 23). Nor is this violence consigned to the past; for even the protected New Age whale is subject to other renderings, whether it functions materially/symbolically as museum exhibit or as aquarium display item. There are other assailants, too, such as marine pollution, climate change, and not least international political intrigue; for the goal of protecting whales plays out in a fraught cultural–political arena in which the global currency of

cetaceans as conservationist icons is manipulated at national level, with some countries vying to be seen as more ‘environmentally friendly’ than others – with much more than just national pride at stake (Burnett 2012; see also Chapter 1).

Another common denominator, I have been suggesting more closely in this chapter, is *melancholy*. The figure of the melancholy whale is linked to a history of loss that, like melancholy itself, becomes inexorably personalized; or, perhaps better, it is linked to a compound history of external losses – some real, others imagined – that become destructively embedded within the individual self. The spectrality of the whale plays an important role here. For Philip Hoare, the trademark elusiveness of the whale is tied in with memories of loss, but also with premonitions of future disappearance; as he says after going on a whale-watching tour, ‘It was hard to look on these huge creatures and think of a time when they might not be there’ (2009: 214). Here as elsewhere in his work, Hoare has difficulty controlling emotions that are influenced, to some degree, by a ‘cetacean imaginary’ characterized by myth-saturated spectral and/or apocalyptic visions: whales as apparitions, surfacing momentarily only to return to the deep ocean; whales as fated creatures, destined to die out (2009: 214; see also Chapter 1). More theoretically minded critics like Shukin and Lippit interpret the spectrality of the animal more generally by pointing out that animal signs function simultaneously as *fetishes*. Although neither mentions whales specifically, Shukin’s analysis of the fetish is particularly relevant to both the ‘real’ and ‘represented’ histories of human encounters with whales. Animal signs, she says,

function fetishistically in both Marxian and psychoanalytic senses: that is, they endow the historical products of social labor to which they are articulated with an appearance of innate, spontaneous being, and they serve as powerful substitutes or ‘partial objects’ filling in for a lost object of desire or imaginary wholeness that never did or can exist, save phantasmatically. (2009: 3; see also Lippit 2010)

Extrapolating from this, we might say that whales are both *commodity* fetishes in the Marxian sense that the history of their commercial use hides the exploitative labour (as well as the considerable violence) that produces it, and *nostalgic* fetishes in the psychoanalytic sense that they operate as

substitutes for a lost ‘wholeness’ that never existed in the first place. Needless to say, both functions are deeply anthropocentric. In the first case, whales are literally rendered down for human use (as lighting, soap, margarine, etc.); in the second, they are figuratively deployed as ‘powerful metaphors for a world that modern human beings [have] allegedly lost’ (Kalland 2012: 29). The second function, in particular, reminds us why whales not only bring together different worlds but also become metonymic stand-ins for the world itself. Again, there are both literal and figurative understandings of this. On a literal level, whales are rarely seen whole; rather, their wholeness must be imagined. On a figurative level, the invisible or only partly visible body of the whale is rhetorically inflated through cetacean iconography, such that whales – already huge – become even bigger than themselves, expanding in the imagination to become worlds of their own, or even to fill the entire world itself (Hoare 2009).

It seems worth asking what these worlds are, which requires a brief excursus into ethology. The question of what constitutes an animal world is usually traced back to the early twentieth-century ethological work of the Estonian scientist Jakob von Uexküll, for whom each and every animal effectively creates and inhabits its own experiential world (*Umwelt*). This relates to von Uexküll’s phenomenological view – usefully glossed by the philosopher Brett Buchanan – that ‘there is no objective reality in the form of objects, things, or [indeed] the world; there is nothing outside of the individually subjective experiences that create a world as meaningful’ (Buchanan 2008: 13). The crucial question, for von Uexküll, is to what extent animals are contained within their own worlds and are able to appreciate and interact with other worlds beyond them. Buchanan takes up this question in relation to twentieth-century Western philosophy, scanning Heidegger’s, Merleau-Ponty’s and, finally, Deleuze’s work for the insight it provides into both the observable study of animal behaviour (ethology) and more notional understandings of the relationship between humans and other animals. In brief, Buchanan sees Heidegger as confirming von Uexküll’s view that animals remain largely ‘immured within their own captivity’ (Buchanan 2008: 113). Deleuze, on the other hand, gestures towards an alternative understanding of the human–animal relation in which the connection between all living beings (whether designated as ‘human’ or ‘animal’) is measured in terms of their mutual capacity to affect one another, making ethology less a study of animal behaviour than a kind

of affective registration of 'the continual becomings that compose different bodies' and of the different ways in which human/animal bodies undergo transitions, continually creating and recreating themselves (Buchanan 2008: 158–159). As Buchanan notes, Deleuze's idea of a mesh or network assembled through different 'rhizomatic' conjunctions and associations (170), within which 'everything is in a process of becoming' (172), is a long way from von Uexküll's circumscribed, soap-bubble-like animal worlds. Instead, Buchanan says, the 'soap bubble has burst, with various repercussions' (175), not least among them the transition from what he calls 'a biology of the organism' to 'an ethology of affects' in which continual process and movement belie the idea of a single, achieved state (182). Here, Buchanan himself traces a transition from von Uexküll's view that 'there are as many worlds as there are living beings' (187) to Deleuze's post-Heideggerean conviction that 'being-in-the-world' is less important than 'the becoming of the world' (189).

More recently, eco-philosophers such as Timothy Morton have gone further still to shatter the very idea of 'world' as a contained space with definable boundaries. For Morton, 'World is more or less a container in which objectified things float or stand' (2013: 99); it is also a human-centred concept designed to convey the illusion of human mastery and control. We would do well, Morton suggests, to let go of 'world' and, in so doing, develop a greater sense of our entanglement with others, which might in turn guide our ethics. 'World,' says Morton in his characteristically breezy way, is no more than a blurry 'aesthetic effect' based on a false sense of distance; it is neither more nor less than a framing device, a 'world picture' that we could all do without (2013: 104, 106).

While there is scientific support for Morton's Deleuzian vision of the porosity of existence on both a planetary and, indeed, a cosmic scale, I find his views too extreme. This applies as well to his earlier work on 'nature,' which, much like 'world,' is prematurely dismissed as an objectifying concept that separates humans from the other material agents, both organic and non-organic, with which they continually interact (Morton 2007).¹⁰ Both 'world' and 'nature,' I would argue instead, retain considerable rhetorical if not descriptive power as discursive tools for environmentalist calls to action, which are not particularly well served by melancholy thought. Morton's thought, I would argue further, eventually succumbs to its own melancholy inclinations: hence his wavering – probably most evident in his recent work on 'dark ecology' (Morton 2016) –

between utopian visions of planetary flourishing and an involuntary fatalism in which such visions, if not recognized as meaningless, are impregnated with despair.

It seems only appropriate then that, in his influential 2013 book *Hyperobjects*, Morton makes several references to whales, using the parable of Jonah and the Whale in particular to make the case that the whale that Jonah is trapped inside is itself a hyperobject, 'a higher-dimensional being than ourselves' (2013: 133). Global warming, the ostensible subject of Morton's book, is likened to being inside the belly of the whale: in other words, it is a grand-scale, potentially intractable problem, 'an ecological emergency inside of which we have now woken up' (2013: 201). In the parable itself, Jonah is eventually saved; Morton gives us little indication that fortune will again favour us. At the same time, Morton's is the last example in this book of the double-edged nature of cetacean allegoresis, which I have been associating in this chapter with melancholy. Over millennia, cetacean allegories have served a wide variety of different purposes, by no means all of them debilitating or destructive, and by no means all of them, to recall Stamelman's earlier assertion, associated with the degenerative languages that 'death speaks or writes' (quoted in Pick 2011: 76). However, such allegories, which revolve obsessively around the figure of the whale, tend to be 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'. And, as Hamlet once similarly recognized, clouds may be 'very like' whales, but they are emphatically not whales – reminding us that the melancholy condition, in confronting loss, is also adept at displacing that loss onto something else.

Notes

- 1 Shukin defines 'rendering' in terms of a *double entendre*, signifying both 'the mimetic act of making a copy, that is, reproducing or interpreting an object in linguistic, painterly, musical, filmic or other media', and 'the industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains' (2009: 20). Although Shukin uses this dual function to show the general representational and economic workings of what she calls 'animal capital', its more specific relevance to whales should be obvious here.
- 2 There is no hard-and-fast way of differentiating between affects and feelings or emotions, although one view, closely associated with Deleuze's philosophy, is that

affects refer less to recognizable emotions, which are socially structured, than to more amorphous precognitive states. Perhaps the best distinction I've come across is in Sissy Helff's essay in Jopi Nyman and Nora Schuurman's 2016 collection *Affect, Space and Animals*. As Helff explains in distinctly Deleuzian terms, 'Where *feeling* is often used to refer to phenomenological or subjective experiences, *affect* is often taken to refer to a force or intensity that can belie the movement of the subject who is always in a process of becoming. [...] Affects do not refer to a "thing" or substance, but rather [to] the processes that produce bodies as always open to others, human and nonhuman, and as unfinished rather than stable entities. [...] Emotions, in contrast, are those patterned brain/body responses that are culturally recognisable and provide some unity, stability and coherence to the felt dimensions of our relational encounters' (Helff, in Nyman and Schuurman 2016: 97).

- 3 Thanks to Kate Marshall for pointing out the term 'pseudo-extinction' to me.
- 4 In her book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler distinguishes between 'grievable' and 'ungrievable' lives in the context of war, where the former concept refers to lives considered worth mourning because they function in defence of some collective idea, for example the community or the nation, whereas the latter refers to lives not considered worth mourning because they are not considered to be lives at all. Extending Butler's work to the animal domain, Anat Pick suggests that the idea of vulnerability embedded within 'grievable life' crosses over between human and non-human histories: naming this idea, she speaks of the 'creaturely', which she sees in terms of the vulnerable body which, whether human or animal, serves as an example of 'bare life' – 'bare in the sense of being susceptible to the interventions of power' (Pick 2011: 15). Whales clearly belong to the category of 'grievable life', which is often expressed in melancholy terms, and even the most avid of whale hunters – like hunters in general – tend to mourn the very animals they (wish to) destroy. Consider Melville's Ahab, a man consumed by rage but also haunted by a kind of timeless remorse: "Swim away from me, do ye?" murmured Ahab, gazing over into the water. There seemed but little in the words, but the tone conveyed more of deep helpless sadness than the insane old man had ever before evinced.'
- 5 Jacques-Yves Cousteau's book *The Silent World*, first published in 1953, is probably best known today for the award-winning documentary of the same name, which was released three years later. The idea of the subaquatic realm as a 'silent world', which would become further popularized with Cousteau's numerous films and television series, has since been comprehensively overturned by marine biologists and oceanographers, whose acoustic research has revealed the same world to be positively garrulous with all manner of underwater conversations and animate/inanimate sounds.

- 6 The central thesis of Lippit's Derrida-inspired book *Electric Animal*, originally published in 2000, is that – in his own words – ‘Modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity’s habitat and by the reappearance of the same in humanity’s reflection of itself: in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and technological media such as the telephone, film, and radio’ (Lippit 2010: 2–3; see also Chapter 1). This leads him, in turn, to explore the figure of the ‘spectral animal’, which he sees as having become part of a technological sphere that exists as ‘the afterlife of language’ (161), and to liken animals to films as ‘project[ing] from a place that is not a place, a world that is not a world’ (195). As previously argued (see Chapter 1), it is one thing to say that the *idea* of the animal disappears, but another to say that animals *physically* vanish. Shukin probably says it best, warning that figures of animal spectrality risk ‘draining historical materiality out of the sign of animal life’ (2009: 36).
- 7 See my 2013 book *Nature’s Saviours* for a detailed examination of New Age environmentalism, which (as the ironic title of the book implies) often draws on the rhetoric of salvation to confer a spiritual dimension on earth-bound conservationist work. An uncritical use of empathy to cross human and animal divides is a feature of New Age environmentalist thought, which, despite the undoubted silliness around its fringes, is by no means as frivolous or wrong-headed as it is often made out to be. For balanced analyses of New Age philosophies and world views, see Heelas 1996 and Ross 1991.
- 8 An interesting variant of this is the American journalist Richard Louv’s concept of ‘nature-deficit disorder’, a condition with varying physiological and psychological symptoms that he attributes to the increasing lack of outdoor activity of today’s adults and children alike. While Louv’s views, encapsulated in his book *The Last Child in the Woods* (a melancholic title if ever there was one), are unsubstantiated at best and at worst exemplify the kind of cod psychology that continues to hover at the edges of the Green movement, they are useful nonetheless in giving a more popular flavour to Berger’s more sophisticated but, in its own way, no less sentimental work.
- 9 The ‘animal turn’ is the general descriptive term given to a recent cross-disciplinary movement, closely associated with the work of ‘posthumanist’ thinkers such as Cary Wolfe and Donna Haraway, which encompasses broad questions of signification and communication (including the representation of animals in literature and the media); new considerations of ethology, ethics, and epistemology; and a radical rethinking of the human–animal relationship (including a critical interrogation of the different meanings embedded within

the categories of 'human' and 'animal' themselves). For a useful summary of the main components of the 'animal turn', see Weil 2010.

- 10 While Morton would be unlikely to label himself in this way, his thought is sometimes associated with the 'new materialism'. The 'new materialism' is probably best understood as a loose amalgam of theoretical approaches revolving around the idea that all matter – whether animate or not – possesses agency, and that material objects interact with and imprint themselves on one another in ways that demand a rethinking of social and political relations informed by what Morton calls, rather mysteriously including the definite article, 'the ecological thought' (Morton 2010). While 'new materialists' insist that their work is political to the core, the abstruseness of some of their ideas is not particularly conducive to political action, while the salutary recognition that all matter possesses agency begs the question of how *much* agency, and in relation to *what*. Similarly, while 'new materialists' are quite right to stress the limitations of human control, this begs the further question of how to exercise due responsibility in environmental matters that require a considerable degree of human management, even if 'management' isn't always the answer, and even if there are high-level problems (like climate change) that require urgent attention without necessarily being 'solved'. For useful introductions to some of the main concepts informing 'new materialist' thought, see Bennett 2010; also Coole and Frost 2010.

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