Zapf, Hubert. "Politicized Ecocriticism: From Nature Worship to Civilizational Critique." *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 51–60. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474274685.ch-007>>.

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Politicized Ecocriticism: From Nature Worship to Civilizational Critique

Along with a more pronounced awareness of the inescapable cultural conditions of our knowledge and experience of “nature,” a major shift in emphasis from earlier to more recent developments has been that the culture-critical, political, and global aspects of ecocriticism have become more prominent than the nature-affirming, personal, and local dimensions. Much of recent ecocritical work has been dedicated to documenting, analyzing, and interpreting environmental problems and their textual and medial representations in various areas and regions of the world, such as the effects of climate change, industrial waste, pollution of land, air, and water, disposal of toxic chemicals, destruction of rain forests, or species extinction, issues which are often combined with questions of environmental justice, class, gender, health, and poverty, and with the critique of a neoliberal free market ideology that is held responsible for the reckless exploitation of humans and of nonhuman nature alike. An important and influential contribution to the environmental justice debate has come with Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence, which makes us aware of the many invisible, often unspectacular and unnoticed, but nevertheless powerfully effective forms of violence exerted by those processes especially on the poorer parts of national and global populations (Nixon).

Already in the later twentieth century, the long-term effects of environmental disasters had begun to change public opinion and to prepare the way for a more widespread ecological consciousness by undermining confidence in the human manageability of progress, such as major accidents at nuclear power plants like Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and, as a more recent disaster, Fukushima. Other notorious manifestations of this dark side of a late-

modern “world risk society” (Beck), and of the interplay between political, economic, and social factors in its devastating blackouts, have been Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, which exposed the hidden wastelands of poverty in the backyards of US cities; the Deepwater Horizon oil spill with its massive damage to the ecosystem of the Gulf; or the destructive effects of Storm Sandy on poorer quarters of New York and New Jersey. Outside the United States, among the key events in historical ecocatastrophes have been the Seveso dioxin accident in Italy; the Bhopal accident in India with thousands of people dead or injured by toxic gas; oil spills poisoning large parts of the Niger valley in Africa; or recent cases of severe air pollution in Beijing and Tehran. The ineradicable mark that the influence of human civilization has left on the planet has meanwhile resulted in the introduction of a new category of geological eras, the Anthropocene, which is distinguished from the preceding eras up to the Holocene by the fact that the development of the Earth has for the first time become shaped in major ways by the impact of humanity on the planetary ecosystem (Crutzen and Stoermer, Zalasiewicz). The Anthropocene has quickly become another new discursive concept in current ecocriticism and the environmental humanities around which a growing number of publications and conference topics are emerging (Clark, 2015).

In some cases, there have been political consequences resulting from these disasters. Thus in Germany, the shock of the Chernobyl accident helped to strengthen popular resistance to the nuclear energy industry and to fuel the green movement and the rise of the Green Party, whose representation in the regional and federal parliaments had a considerable impact on the political scene in the country. Literary texts also contributed to this debate, such as Christa Wolf’s novel *Störfall* (*Accident*, 1987), Gudrun Pausewang’s *Die Wolke* (*The Cloud*, 1987), or, from a longer-term perspective, Merle Hilbk’s *Tschernobyl Baby. Wie wir lernten das Atom zu lieben* (*Chernobyl Baby. How We Learned to Love the Atom*, 2011); these fictional responses to the invisible effects of the Chernobyl nuclear cloud exposed the unsettling ambiguities of scientific-technological progress in relation to ordinary human lives. Such developments created a climate of public opinion which, after the Fukushima catastrophe of 2011, finally led to a broad political consensus that forced even Angela Merkel’s conservative party of the Christian Democrats to abandon its long-held belief in atomic energy and helped prepare the way for the opt out

decision of 2012 with the aim to end the use of nuclear power in Germany altogether by 2021 (Beck 2013).

In other cases, such consequences fail to materialize or remain only rhetorical. Most conspicuously, reaction of international politics has remained deplorably weak and inappropriate in the face of the escalating threat of climate change, as is evidenced in the paucity of results of the successive climate summits of the recent past. Among eco-activists and the green community, on the other hand, climate change has gained the status of an overriding concern and an environmental mega-problem, which at times eclipses other issues of contemporary green politics. While the vast majority of the scientific community agrees on the factual evidence of climate change, which has again been confirmed on an unprecedentedly broad data basis in the 2014 report of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), the debate on this issue has led to controversial responses in the wider public (Hulme, Soentgen and Bilandzic). The spectrum is illustrated, on the one hand, by apocalyptic end-of-the-world scenarios such as displayed in Roland Emmerich's opulent film spectacle *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), based on the novel *The Coming Global Superstorm* by Art Bell and Whitley Striebe, in which climate change leads to a new Ice Age devastating the North American continent, and, on the other hand, in bestseller novels like Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* of the same year, in which climate change is presented as a conspiracy of ideologues and eco-terrorists disguised as ethically concerned scientists. As Soentgen and Bilandzic have shown, such climate skeptical views have been widely spread especially in the form of nonfiction and popularized science books, arguing basically along similar lines as Crichton's novel (Soentgen and Bilandzic). At the same time, fictional treatments of the topic in novels and films, meanwhile subsumed under the label of cli-fi, and written in various combinations of documentary realism, science fiction, crime stories, ecothrillers, or eco-apocalypse, have also become highly popular contributions to discourse of climate change. From the early days of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Waterworld* (1995) up to *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and *The Age of Stupid* (2009), scenarios of future worlds illustrating the devastating consequences of climate change have found considerable public resonance as warning examples in film. In literature, the science fiction novels of J.G. Ballard anticipated a concern with climate change in the 1960s already, which informs later novels

such as Norman Spinrad's *Greenhouse Summer* (1999), T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013), Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital Series* (2004–2007), Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), Clive and Dirk Cussler's *Arctic Drift* (2008), Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010), Simon Rosser's *Tipping Point* (2010), or Ilija Trojanow's *EisTau* (*Melting Ice*, 2011). A contrastive, climate skeptical view which posits climate change science itself as a danger to the future of mankind on the planet is propagated in Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Michael Flynn's *Fallen Angels* (1991), Marcel Theroux's *Far North* (2009), or the Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013), in which, in contrast to Emmerich's *Day After Tomorrow*, a new Ice Age is not the consequence of global warming but of a global cooling caused by the failed experiment of an eco-dictatorship implementing all too radical measures against climate change.

While it is obvious that the neglect of the urgent realities of climate change plays into the hands of reactionary politics and powerful economic lobby groups, it is disconcerting to see that the apocalyptic dramatizing of climate change can likewise lend itself to unexpected and unholy alliances, such as between ecological scientists and the nuclear power industry. A well-known voice in this context is James Lovelock, the originator of the Gaia hypothesis, whose warnings of an imminent collapse of the planet's ecosystem as a consequence of uncontrollable carbon dioxide emissions have made him an advocate of nuclear energy as the preferred energy form that can save the planet from anthropogenic destruction (Lovelock 2004). He is joined in this view by US environmentalists such as Stewart Brand, who has called the opt out decision of Germany irresponsible in view of the short-term threat of climate change (Brand quoted in Beck 2013). In a less polemical but proclaimedly fact-oriented way, the recent IPCC report published in 2014 also contains a highly controversial paragraph endorsing nuclear power as a means of reducing CO₂ emissions and "a contribution to low-carbon energy supply." The report does mention various risks associated with nuclear energy: "operational risks, and the associated concerns, uranium mining risks, financial and regulatory risks, unresolved waste management issues, nuclear weapons proliferation concerns, and adverse public opinion" (IPCC, 23). But it downplays these risks, rendering it as of secondary concern to the problem of global warming, and also

inexplicably leaving out of the calculation the energy-intensive processes that nuclear power plants involve before and beyond their actual operation. With this position, the IPCC, like Lovelock and Brand, are taking an opposite stand to other, particularly continental, environmentalists and ecocritics, for whom nuclear energy represents one of the most dangerous cases of technological hubris, causing incalculable long-term risks that are being hazarded for short-term, basically economic, interests (Beck). Ulrich Beck's concept of a "world risk society," which has been a major influence on contemporary forms of globally oriented ecocriticism (Heise, Mauch and Mayer), was developed in response to the collective shock which the Chernobyl disaster had meant to Europe in the 1980s, and which continues to be a traumatic turning point in the collective cultural memory of the green movement.¹

Such disputes and controversies exacerbate the problem of consistent, scientifically grounded and ethically responsible environmental agency in the current situation. How reliable are the sciences as authoritative sources of truth, and how trustworthy are their findings in the light of the inevitable relativity of all projects of human knowledge? If ecological issues are inextricably intertwined with political and social issues, to which extent are they also tied to questions of democratic majority and legitimacy? Does their successful solution require well-functioning democratic institutions or do they follow ethical imperatives which are presumed to be above such questions and which would therefore have to be implemented in an autocratic way either from above—in the form of an eco-friendly dictatorship—or from below—in the form of eco-sabotage, eco-guerilla, or eco-terrorism? (Clark 2011: 214, fn 17). What, in other words, is the basis of legitimacy of such engagement for potentially radical environmental change, which necessarily concerns not merely individuals or groups but the social collective? And what exactly are the social and political goals of such an engagement? Does it aim at restoring a supposedly harmonious state of culture-nature-coexistence before

¹ Beck insists, however, that opposition to nuclear energy does not entail a wholesale rejection of modernity and science. On the contrary:

It would be utterly mistaken to imagine that Germany's political decision to phase out nuclear energy means that it is turning its back on the European concept of modernity in favour of the dark forests, the obscure roots of German intellectual history. This is not simply the latest outburst of Germany's proverbial love of the irrational, but rather proof of its faith in modernity's adaptability and creativity in its dealings with risks it has itself generated. (Beck 2013: I)

modernization and, in its radical version, at achieving a state of “Uncivilization” (cf. Dark Mountain Project) and the “elimination of technological society” (Kaufman); or does it rather aim at mending the damaged relationship of modern society to nature with the help of modernity itself, that is, of science and technology? If critical depictions of modern eco-disasters advocate a return to pre-modern states of a supposedly intact relationship of society to nature, can they not easily become a reactionary rather than a creative evolutionary force? On the other hand, if science and modernity are being recruited as allies rather than as opponents of ecological recovery, how can we distinguish between damaging and constructive forms of science, and what would be the basis of such a differentiation? Possible answers to such quandaries involve fundamental questions of how the relationship between culture and nature is conceived, and what views, values, and concepts of the nonhuman world, and of human civilization itself, it implies.

All of these questions and paradoxes need to be addressed in an adequately complex and self-reflexive form of ecocriticism. Ecology is a special and perhaps unprecedented challenge to thought and life, because it concerns small-scale issues and decisions of everyday individual existence but at the same time involves large-scale issues of collective social agency with potentially unforeseen and far-reaching consequences not only for humans but for the whole ecosystem of the earth. Ecology poses not only enormous complexities of thought in a multidisciplinary field of knowledge, but also an extraordinary ethical challenge of responsible action in a postmodern risk society. Such challenges should not, however, provoke an attitude of apocalyptic fatalism. It seems to me that an exaggerated tendency toward end-of-the-world ecocatastrophe theories can lead to the extremes of either cynical inactivity or undemocratic hyper-activity. Some of the developments of the recent past have shown instead that it is worth dealing with environmental problems in a pragmatic-democratic way, and that the state, if democratically legitimized, is not necessarily always an opponent but rather a potential ally in such constructive ecological change, even though concrete, decentralized personal, local, and communal activities are equally indispensable to achieve this larger aim.

In Germany, an instructive example is the so-called *Waldsterben*, the dying of the forests as an ancient nature symbol of German culture, which provoked

deeply pessimistic outlooks in the late twentieth century, as reflected in Günter Grass' *Totes Holz. Ein Nachruf* (*Dead Wood. An Obituary*), a narrative with drawings that responds to the massive dying of forests in the inner-German and the German-Czech border region before reunification. Germany's future was envisioned as a land that was losing its soul along with the woods, a wasteland of dead trees and surreal landscape of industrial hyperobjects bereft of all traces of health, vitality, and of that humane living space between the "nature that we ourselves are" and the "nature that we are not," that is necessary for the survival and well-being of human culture (Böhme 1989, quoted in Rigby 2012: 140). Several decades later, due to measures taken by the state under the pressure of the environmental movement and the Green Party, such as legislation on industrial smoke desulfurization and car catalysts, the effects of the *Waldsterben* did not turn out to be as fatal as feared (Schäfer and Metzger). While damage to trees remains a serious problem, it has not escalated in the way it had been predicted in the worst-case scenarios. Similarly, pollution of land, water, and air as a result of unregulated industrial production was extremely high in the 1980s and has since become substantially reduced, so that its threat to the health of human or nonhuman life has become notably less serious than a few decades ago. Such improvements have been reached due to environmental regulations that often enough had to be implemented by the state against the interests of powerful industries and lobby groups. These changes are especially visible in the regions of the former German Democratic Republic, where the communist variant of the modernist belief in technological progress had caused large-scale environmental devastation but which since reunification in 1990 has meanwhile reached similar levels of environmental recovery as the West of Germany.

This is not to say that environmental problems do not represent a severe and continued challenge to the future of a highly industrialized society as Germany, and that climate change especially does not necessitate far more serious public attention, along with large-scale preventive or at least mitigating measures. But it goes to show that if decisive political, economic, social, and personal action is taken, matters can be changed and developments can be influenced in positive or negative ways. It demonstrates that human agency and cultural evolution do not necessarily lead into the abyss of civilizational self-destruction but can and must involve the continuous, reflexive re-organization

of modern societies in response to the increasingly complex challenges that their own development brings about.

In this context, it is worth noting that Lovelock's prediction from 2004 about the irreplaceable role of nuclear energy and the insufficient capacity of renewable energies to replace it in the fight against global warming has not come true in the case of Germany. Since the opt out decision of 2010, carbon dioxide emissions have stayed about the same in spite of the shutting down of eight nuclear power plants (Bundsumweltamt), while the percentage of renewable energies in the overall energy consumption of the country has risen from 3 to 21.9 percent during the fifteen years between 1997 and 2012 (BDEW). It is true that the reactivation of coal plants, as well as the organizational problems and the considerable political-economic resistance to the *Energiewende* (the turn to renewable energies) threatens to slow down this trend. Nevertheless, new peak values have been recorded for 2013 for the share of renewable energies in the total energy supply in the country, for example, for June 16, 2013, on which no less than 61 percent of the required power plant energy production was provided by renewable energies (BDEW). This goes to show how much does indeed depend on the political, economic, and social will and determination to concretely implement such measures and that it is possible to act in the interest of a larger change of society and the economy toward environmental responsibility and sustainability.

Declarations of the imminent end of the world, such as in the Dark Mountain Project, an eco-fundamentalist community, which announces the inevitable collapse of the planetary ecosystem and advocates a stoic acceptance of the death of human civilization (cf. The Dark Mountain Project), are the defeatist counterpart of the fact-blind refusal to recognize the seriousness of the environmental crisis. Without some degree of belief in the capacity of humans and human civilization for self-correction in the interest of sustainable cultural evolution, no responsible ecological politics can be imagined. Without it, too, literature and the arts would just be useless exercises in narcissistic self-contemplation rather than an important contribution to the creative renewal and continued evolutionary development of society and culture in the direction of a more ecological form of existence.

Once more, however, a distinction between politics and literature, between pragmatic and de pragmatized forms of discourse appears unavoidable in

such debates. On the one hand, for a responsible translation of ecological thought into politics, a pragmatic-ethical attitude is required which combines scientific knowledge, civic engagement, and democratic institutions into a step by step, goal-oriented personal and collective agency. On the other hand, the radical-critical self-reflection of human civilization and the visionary actualization of unrealized ecocultural potentials, which are provided by the imaginative counterworlds of literature and art, are equally required for the long-term evolution of a sustainable and ecologically self-aware culture. The activation of this critical-creative potential, however, is enabled through the suspension of immediate pragmatic-political purposes in the explorative space of the aesthetic, which is vitally interrelated with but also functionally and semiotically distinct from, the domains of history and politics.

In the face of apodictic truth-claims and programmatic calls to arms of all sorts, literature and art have always been suspected to be an unnecessary luxury or, even worse, an escapist fantasy world that distracts from the urgent tasks of responsible political, social, and ethical engagement. I would like to propose a different view here: it is literature and the arts which, in their complex scenarios of counterdiscursive ecopoiesis, can contribute in unique ways to that sustained ecological evolution of consciousness and culture which is needed for imagining a livable future for human and nonhuman life on the planet. And it is precisely the indirect and indeterminate mode, the polyphonic complexity of literary works, which is essential for achieving this effect. This resistance to easy appropriation may, at times, complicate rather than facilitate immediate environmental activism and doctrinal certainties. As Ursula Heise among others has argued, techniques such as multiperspectival narration can become a source of ecological (meta-)knowledge by conveying not any prior environmental “truth” but instead the divergences and contradictions of attitudes to environmental issues. Heise shows how in postcolonial novels like Mayra Montero’s *In the Palm of Darkness* or Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, both of which revolve around the search for a rare and endangered animal species—a frog species in Haiti in Montero’s novel, and a river dolphin species in the Sundarban wetlands in India in Ghosh’s novel—western scientists are faced with indigenous guides who derive their “knowledge of nature” from their “familiarity and long-term residence in the local environment” (Heise 2010b: 98). The encounter between different

characters, cultures, and narrators implies a confrontation between “different kinds of knowledge” between modern ecological science and intuitive-experiential forms of knowledge based not on technocentric rationality but on oral and local forms of biocentric culture-nature-symbiosis. That way, the novels render a broad spectrum of current environmental issues in a pluri-voiced discourse that highlights “the kinds of cultural and epistemological synergies that...are necessary in an age of global ecological crisis” (Heise 2010b, 99). To be sure, such juxtapositions of heterogeneous views and values produce gaps, uncertainties, and indeterminacies in the texts, which may be seen to resist rather than support unidirectional ecological agency and political engagement. Yet it is these uncertainties and indeterminacies which create a textual space for otherness that alone can break up the sermonizing monologues of missionary (eco-) politics and open the text for the active participation of the reader in the continual co-creation of those relational complexities which constitute ecological awareness and existence.

If one tries to generalize the ecocultural functions of these aesthetically complex forms of environmental narratives, three distinct but interrelated functions emerge: the texts imply a *critical* impetus in exposing exploitative, hegemonic, and pathogenic structures of dominance and technocentric mastery over human and nonhuman nature; they imply a *counterdiscursive* impetus in activating marginalized forms of biophilic culture-nature-experience and human coexistence with nonhuman life as imaginative counterworlds; and they imply a *reintegrative* impetus in bringing together these different forms and forces in “cultural and epistemological synergies” (Heise 2010b: 99) that are necessary for adequately complex forms of ecocultural knowledge. I will come back to these three subfunctions later, because I think they do not only apply to explicit forms of ecological fiction but are inscribed into the evolutionary-functional profile of literature as the generative signature of imaginative texts within the overall process of literary and cultural evolution.