

# **Ecological Impressionism**

**Envisioning a New Framework of Ecological  
Aesthetic Politics**



**Utrecht  
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an RMA Thesis by David ten Cate

Ecological Impressionism: Envisioning a New Framework of Ecological Aesthetic Politics

A Research Master Thesis by David ten Cate (student no. 6294294), as part of the Research Master's Program Media, Art and Performance Studies, 2020-2022

Supervisor and First Reader: prof. dr. Joost Raessens

Second Reader: dr. Stefan Werning

Department of Media and Culture Studies

Faculty of Humanities

Utrecht University

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Images on the cover: (left) John Singer Sargent, *Claude Monet Painting by the Edge of a Wood* (1885); and (right) still from Hayao Miyazaki's THE WIND RISES (2013).

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# Abstract

In times of climate crisis, the question of reimagining society ecologically is more urgent than ever. The response to the ecological crisis remains inadequate, and global climate change mitigation goals are increasingly considered unrealistic. To break through the limitations of contemporary politics to tackle the crisis, this thesis considers an ecological aesthetic politics – that is to say, an aesthetically conceived framework for reimagining politics ecologically. In order to do so, this thesis discusses what Jacques Rancière calls *the sensible*, that which can be perceived and thought in a particular configuration of reality. In contemporary western society, this sensibility falls short in perceiving and thinking a way out of ecological disequilibrium. Therefore, it must be reimagined, for which aesthetic politics provide fecund ground. In this thesis, as it is situated in media studies, such an aesthetic-political imaginary is first historically traced, and then adapted to contemporary medial forms. It is argued that an ecological sensibility can be negotiated when medial forms go through an aesthetic-political transformation.

Historically, this transition is identified in the art movement of Impressionism. The Impressionists changed academic painting by leaving the studio for the outdoors, dismantling the stability of perception and blending it with natural inspiration. This transformation was taken a step further by the literary impressionists, who conceived of the nonhuman objects of human perception as having a subjectivity of their own. With this precedent, this thesis examines contemporary media of animation film and videogames to bolster contemporary understandings of an ecological aesthetic politics based on shared principles of instable perception and nonhuman subjectivity. Their interpretations exemplify how animation film is continuous with Impressionism's strategies of pictorial redefinition, and also envision how such a framework would prospectively apply in the medium of videogames, by constructing an ecological aesthetic politics model from the ground up. Because of the origin of the principles of ecological aesthetic politics, this framework may be referred to as *ecological impressionism*.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is the outcome of predominantly studying from home for a period of two years. Having started MAPS in September 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was still a significant factor of restriction, I have since been looking forward to the day where I could again enjoy being an unassuming student wandering the many hallways of Utrecht University. Alas, when the most severe restrictions lifted, I was confined to my house yet again, to commit myself to writing my thesis.

Still, however, the experience has been very valuable, and I have many people to thank for making it functional and memorable. These involve all the university staff who have put in extra effort to make the pandemic bearable, my supervisor Joost Raessens and second reader Stefan Werning for their feedback and support throughout the thesis process, my amazing peers and friends of MAPS, especially Naomi Tidball, Danny Steur, Tara Huisman, Bernice Ong, Wenhan Tang and Mia Roncati, and my family for their support throughout the pandemic and beyond.

## I. Introduction

### Envisioning an Ecological Aesthetic Politics of Media

Only if the essence of Impressionism can be found in the process of artistic creation in every era and in every country, only then can the essence of Impressionism be considered an eternal moment of art and therefore an aesthetic value. The coincidence between that value and historical Impressionism signifies that the Impressionistic moment in the creation of a work of art was the entire art created by the Impressionists.

- Lionello Venturi, "The Aesthetic Idea of Impressionism"

The discipline called art does not have a monopoly on creative composition. And the domain called politics does not have a monopoly on real existential change. There is no less an aesthetic side to politics than there is a political side to art. Practices we call doing politics and practices we call doing art are all integrally aesthetico-political (...).

- Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event*

In the particular is contained the universal.

- James Joyce (quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*)

The prospects of global warming mitigation have become increasingly precarious. As The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) remarks: “Without a strengthening of policies beyond those that are implemented by the end of 2020, [greenhouse gas] emissions are projected to rise beyond 2025, leading to a median global warming of 3.2 (2.2 to 3.5) °C by 2100” (IPCC 2022, 21). Unless the political response is radically improved, the Paris Agreement’s minimum goal of staying within 2°C (or preferably 1.5°C) of global temperature increase cannot be realized. This may be regarded as the status quo of the ecological crisis: contemporary politics are not adequately equipped to meet the challenges of global warming and related crises. The projected consequences involve a further increase in extreme weather effects, significantly impacting living conditions, with the potential culmination into Earth’s Sixth Mass Extinction event (Ceballos et al. 2015), in which humankind’s existence is threatened alongside that of many nonhuman species.

The potential extinction of humankind is such a daunting prospect that many may fall to objectionable narratives to avoid tackling its severity earnestly. These narratives, as Donna Haraway points out, have accordingly been both an inexhaustible belief in technofixes spurred by ingenious engineers and scientists who would invent the crisis’ resolution, and the belief that no solution whatsoever is possible anymore, and therefore humanity and a plethora of coexistent species are doomed (Haraway 2016, 3-4). Aside from notable variations on these lines of thought, such as *ecomodernism*’s blend of publicly directed technological solutionism and minimized emissions (Symons 2019, 8), such positions may ultimately tend to regard the ecological crisis fatalistically, as either being resolved without the need to actively change human behavior, or simply doomed to fail.

As Haraway puts it, to eschew fatalism is to embrace that humankind needs “to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth” (Haraway 2016, 2). *Response-ability*, like responsibility, requires that destructive human-nature relationalities are ecologically reconfigured. This objective goes beyond solving climate change, although it remains the most urgent task. Rather than hypothetically celebrating a limitation of global warming to 1.9°C, ecological crisis requires a more holistic ecological transition.<sup>1</sup> One precondition to ecological thought embraces the all-encompassing meaning of coexistence, that is to say that

natural concerns are intertwined with sociocultural concerns (Morton 2010, 4). It is therefore arguably necessary to simultaneously question humanity's exploitative relation to natural environments and exploitative tendencies within societal relations. As Timothy Morton has asserted, "everything is connected. This is the *ecological thought*. And the more we consider it, the more our world opens up" (Morton 2010, 1). This would mean that to responsibly respond to the challenges of the present climate crisis provides both an opportunity (and necessity) to rethink the totality of how humanity lives, both within nature and within their societies. Within this quest resides both the effective resolution of the climate crisis and a systemic change of human culture. Because this is such a tremendous task, requiring multifarious changes, there is no straightforward answer to all its issues.

Accordingly, this thesis cannot provide definitive solutions to the present ecological crisis. Instead, it seeks to offer a philosophical approach through which ecological futurity is opened up for negotiation; that is to say it constructs the fecund ground from which ecological futures can be articulated, a key part among them sustainable future imaginaries which may directly correspond to eventual solutions to the climate crisis. As a thesis situated in media studies, it is primarily concerned with the role of media "to translate ecological ideas in ways meaningful to people's everyday lives" (Parham 2016, xviii). It follows John Parham, the composer of this quote, further, by acknowledging that all media are entangled with ecological thinking. Because every media artifact represents sociopolitical reality, they all construct interpretations of dominant social and political structures – the status quo. When media texts actively seek to communicate ecological values and potentialities, Parham argues, they are to some extent limited by this status quo. His approach therefore emphasizes the relation of political potentialities to limitations (Parham 2016, xvi-xvii). Herein, Parham follows Sean Cubitt's (2005) approach to the ecological study of media. In his later work, Cubitt proposes that to break through sociopolitical limitations requires "[that] there is a radical change in how we conceive of and pursue politics," which entails "[rebuilding politics] on aesthetic principles" (Cubitt 2017, 151). This idea of an aesthetic politics to break through the sociopolitical limitations of the present is the proposition of this thesis for the negotiation of sustainable, ecological futurity.

Understanding aesthetic politics productively invokes Jacques Rancière's (2013 [2000]) original theory pertaining to the concept. Rancière regards aesthetics as that which essentially (re)distributes the *sensible*. The sensible implies dual meanings. It indicates both that which presents itself to sense perception and involves the judgment of taste, and that which is conjured in the mind, involving the judgment of (moral) reason (a 'sensible decision', for example). This can be illustrated through Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (2012 [1811]). In this novel, the unmarried Marianne Dashwood desires in a husband the alignment of sensibility in the sense of perceptual taste: "He must enter into all my feelings; the same books, the same music must charm us both" (Austen 2012, 17). She falls in love with John Willoughby, a handsome gentleman providing exactly this shared sensibility. Yet she soon finds out that he is a man of ill sense in the second meaning: he is a libertine and abandons his connection with her without proper notice, on account of financial prospects. Thus, he lacks sense in the second meaning, and is therefore unfit to be Marianne's lover. Love, as the novel instructs, rests upon alignment in both senses of the sensible. This is true for Marianne's eventual husband, but the allegory could be understood in an ecological sense. To fall in love with an ecological sensibility is in equal terms a matter of taste and of (moral) reason. Thus, the sensible comprises both feeling and thought. Thus, when an ecological sensibility is formed, sustainable futurity can be felt and thought.

Aesthetics (re)form the boundaries of what can be felt and thought, and art accordingly exists to challenge the limits of sensibility and thus to redistribute what is sensible. Rancière reflects this assertion on aesthetics in a claim on politics, namely that "[politics] exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999 [1995], 11). Like the function of art to challenge the limits of feeling and thinking, politics exists to question the boundaries of governance. The goal of politics is to include previously excluded voices – such as ecologists' – and previously excluded topics – such as sustainability. It can now be inferred that aesthetic politics means granting a political voice by means of aesthetics: the sensible is translated to the political realm and ultimately, to effective action.<sup>2</sup> An *ecological aesthetic politics* can be conceived as an aesthetic politics' effective application for ecological thought.

This thesis constructs what an ecological aesthetic politics of media can look like. The framework of this construction is developed from the historical example of Impressionism. Impressionism arguably initiated an ecological aesthetic-political revolution in medial form, particularly in its origins in painting and later adaptation to literature. As an ecological aesthetic politics provides a way of reimagining the sensible ecologically, the translation of such a historical framework to the present would help envision how such a reimagination can possibly surface today, when it is so urgently needed because of the rapidly accelerating climate crisis. The possibility of translation rests on the continuity of principles of ecological aesthetic politics. This thesis examines two contemporary media forms, animation film and videogames, to make the principal consistency of this translation conceivable. Hence the research question: *what can the ecological aesthetic-political revolutions of Impressionist painting and literature provide to the contemporary understanding of ecological aesthetic politics in animation film and videogames?* To answer this question, these four media will each be independently explored from the ecological aesthetic-political vantage point first established in Impressionism, and is accordingly articulated as *ecological impressionism*.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, chapter II discusses the fundament of Impressionist painting and explores how its aesthetic politics convey that sense perception is instable, allowing for the opening up of sensibility toward ecological concerns. Chapter III adds with a study of (Post-)Impressionist literature what these ecological concerns concretely entail: the consideration of subjectivity in objectified (non)human nature. Together, these two chapters constitute the historical part of an ecological aesthetic politics of Impressionism. Chapter IV translates historical Impressionism to contemporary media by studying animation film, establishing that its potential ecological aesthetic politics can be understood as an extension of ecologically impressionist principles. From this, chapter V speculates on an ecological aesthetic politics in the medium of videogames, in which its specific ecological aesthetic-political model is constructed. Finally, chapter VI concludes and reflects on the study's implications.

The remainder of chapter I discusses the thesis' theoretical framework (section I.1) and methodology (section I.2). In section I.1, conventional sensibilities in the present negotiation of climate crises will be illustrated by means of the notions of

the *Anthropocene* and *Capitalocene*. Viewing these notions as sides of the same coin, or co-constituents of a conservative sensibility counterproductive to meet the climate crisis' demands, an understanding of *ecological philosophy* is advocated as the basis on which a proposed ecological sensibility should be constructed. This ecological philosophy is centered around two axes: the (bio)diversification of both natural environments and human society – for these are argued to be interrelated –, and the subjectification of objectified nonhumanity to respect both the volatility and the inherent value of cherished natural environments. An ecological aesthetic politics advocates these considerations by means of aesthetic innovation. Its objective is to allow for different sensibilities (of feeling and thinking) to arise, from which sustainable future imaginaries can be conceived. Media, it is argued, are a potential catalyst of such reimaginings. With that in mind, this section closes by returning to ecological impressionist principles in order to clarify why Impressionism is invoked as a precedent, and how this invocation should be understood – not as a call to make medial forms impressionistic, but to identify in the evolution of new medial forms similar ecological aesthetic-political principles.

Section I.2 establishes the inter-/multidisciplinary methodological framework that is capable of meeting the extensive demands of discussing and comparing four medial forms of ecological impressionism. The methodology of choice is Mieke Bal's *cultural analysis*, which provides the advantage of being transdisciplinary in application, and embraces the fluidity of concepts across historical and academic contexts. As such, it allows this thesis to take ecological aesthetic politics as what Bal (2002) calls a 'travelling concept' that is enhanced based on its analytical context (here: the different medial forms and chapters). While Bal's methodology provides the basis of this thesis' approach, it may fall short in providing medium-specific understandings of cultural texts as situated within their particular media traditions. Therefore, this section also explicitly offers medium-specific methods for the analyses performed in later chapters – all (variations of) *formal* or *textual analyses*. The final consideration of this section turns to Cubitt's *anecdotal method*, reviewing it as a bridge between medium-specific particularities and the medium-transcending concept of ecological aesthetic politics. It considers this thesis' media text anecdotes as constitutive of the framework of ecological impressionism.

## I.1 Theoretical Framework: The Principles of Ecological Impressionism

This section sketches the conceptual frameworks at the root of ecological crises before articulating an alternative of ecological philosophy. From there, this section turns to how an aesthetic politics of media can effectively make this philosophy sensible – as ecological impressionism. Two oft-named terms that are viewed as describing the sensibilities perpetuating ecological crises are the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. The chemist Paul J. Crutzen (2006) designated the Anthropocene as a geological epoch signifying humanity's impact on Earth and its atmospheres. However, issue has been taken with the implication of attributing the to the whole of humanity. An alternative concept, the Capitalocene, centers the issue on the human system of operation which causes today's ecological crises – capitalism (Moore 2017). Thus, the latter term more specifically signifies “the *economic determination of our geological present*” (Demos 2017, 55).

The advantage of the Capitalocene as a descriptor is that it points to the selective system causing ecological crises rather than to the essence of humanity. The cause is then both identifiable and assumedly changeable. Still, it may be suggested that it is even more productive to take these descriptors together. It is conceivable that both address the same underlying issue. This point may be exemplified if it is considered how lingering ideas of humanity and capitalism mutually perpetuate the disequilibrium at the root of global warming. Sylvia Wynter, for example, describes the capitalist system as embedded in the very conception of humanity. She argues that the human is described as inevitably relying on a capitalistic mode of thinking – namely that of *homo oeconomicus* – the human of absolute capitalism wherein increasing capital accumulation is the only conventionally sensible goal (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 22). In Wynter's argument, humanity is constrained to capitalism, the reality of capitalism being so thoroughly integrated that it is blended with the conceptualization of being human on Earth. Rather than having any term take precedence, then, it is arguably more productive to see the Anthropocene and Capitalocene as jointly contributing to the sensibility central to destructive environmental tendencies – both humanity's exceptionalism over the natural world and neoliberal capitalism's exploitative dynamics.

An ecological aesthetic politics has the objective of overturning these conventional sensibilities, and to make a sustainable transition perceivable and thinkable. To do so, however, requires that the ecological philosophy of this transition is explained – indeed, this entails the ecological part of aesthetic politics. To this end, this thesis proposes an understanding of ecological philosophy that emphasizes the interconnections of (non)human subjectivity, sociopolitical cultures, and natural environments. Thus, it follows what Félix Guattari meant by *ecosophy* – an ethical-political articulation between the ecological registers of the environment, social relations and human subjectivity (Guattari 2000 [1989], 28). Indeed, for Guattari, the ecological question is one of interrelations – to identify how environmental, social and mental ecologies all need to be transformed, and also lean on each other's developments. Crucial to Guattari's ecological philosophy is that it opposes plain environmentalism by extending its reach to social and mental ecologies. *Social ecology*, as explained by Murray Bookchin, is:

the conviction that the very concept of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human, indeed, of women by men, of the young by their elders, of one ethnic group by another, of society by the state, of the individual by bureaucracy, as well as of one economic class by another or a colonized people by a colonial power. (Bookchin 1980, 76)

Accordingly, Guattari speaks of “the increasing deterioration of human relations within the *socius*” (Guattari 2000, 41). With the concept of *mental ecology*, Guattari signifies the individual's capability to run counter to the dominant order of things, an idea of *singularization* (Guattari 2000, 45). Individual subjectivity must be cherished in the face of the oppressive forces of capitalism, which Guattari believes constitutes an environment which obstructs dissensus. For Guattari, then, social and mental ecologies reciprocate – society determines the degree of singularization, and singularization allows society to be reimagined. But they also intertwine with the environmental question. Tentatively, Guattari refers to unfolding “non-human temporalities” (Guattari 2000, 38) as part of singularization efforts. Accordingly, subjectivity must also be found in nonhuman environments. To further specify what this implies, ecological philosophy must be extended with an *object-oriented ontology* (Harman 2017), an interpretation of nonhuman objects

as having their own subjectivities, independent from human categorization. This is a crucial framework for moving beyond the view of human exceptionalism of the Anthropocene, and its particular advantage here is that its philosophy is aesthetic-focused – it acknowledges the volatility of nonhuman nature and the relevance of aesthetics to form a non-exploitative relation toward nonhuman life. Taken together, the objective of ecological philosophy is to move beyond confirmative sensibilities of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, and toward singularization.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis negotiates this challenge by means of ecological aesthetic politics. Guattari focuses on aesthetic potentialities when he considers the need for artistic creation to articulate new human subjectivities which “will get out of their homogenic ‘entrapment’ [in Capitalocene regimes] only if creative objectives appear within their reach,” calling for an “individual and collective reappropriation of the production of subjectivity” (Guattari 1995 [1992] 133). Guattari’s call for singularization and dissensus within capitalism’s order of “stupefying and [infantilizing] consensus” (Guattari 2000, 50) is reflected in Rancière’s designation of the essence of politics as-such in dissensus, which represents “a gap in the sensible itself” (Rancière 2010, 38). The sensible, as discussed, signifies what can be perceived and thought. Aesthetic politics therefore arises when things are felt and thought which were deemed imperceptible and unthinkable.<sup>5</sup> An aesthetic politics becomes an ecological aesthetic politics when this new sensibility facilitates a new kind of negotiation – one which celebrates the singularization of perspectives, and within this singularization recognizes the subjectivity of nonhuman entities.

Now, the role of media in this task can be discussed. As Cubitt argues, an aesthetic politics is articulated through popular media and fine art. In his introduction to *EcoMedia* (2005), Cubitt motivates this position, arguing that:

Fine art and popular media alike can, at their best, be far more than symptoms of their age. They can voice its contradictions in ways few more self-conscious activities do, because both want to appeal directly to the senses, the emotions and the tastes of the hour, because both will sacrifice linear reason for rhetoric or affect, and because both have the option of abandoning the given world in [favor] of the image of something other than what, otherwise, we might feel we had no choice but to inhabit. (Cubitt 2005, 1-2).

Referring to the senses, emotions and tastes of the hour, and rhetoric or affect, Cubitt suggests how media are inherently caught up in exploring the sensible. Furthermore, by his illustration of a potential abandoning of the given world in favor of a new image, Cubitt foregrounds the ability of media to propagate *social imaginaries*. As introduced by Charles Taylor (2004), a social imaginary is a (previously) imaginary vision of a moral order of society, which may later come to actually shape society. Taylor embraces that a social imaginary is customarily an imaginary understanding of sociopolitical practices on a holistic scale; not limited to any practice per se, but rather the whole of “how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups, and so on” (Taylor 2004, 25). Considering this, social imaginaries may also develop ecological imaginaries.

In Anthropocene and Capitalocene sensibilities, sustainable imaginaries appear unrealistic. Studying the possibility of interactive media to contribute to the quest for ecological imaginaries, Roy Bendor has argued that a “crisis of the imagination” (cf. Haiven 2014), the inability of both individual and collective actors “to imagine what a sustainable future may look like” (Bendor 2018, 132), is a foremost issue to tackle. He calls for the unfinishedness and open-endedness of media to trigger the imagination – “[we] complete our media, and they complete us” (Bendor 2018, 147). This aligns with the goal of ecological aesthetic politics, as it intends to open up senses previously constrained. Yet, imaginaries are only part of the story: they are concrete (albeit fictional) images of how society can be, and can therefore play a major part in imagining alternative futures to those prophesied by Anthropocene and Capitalocene mentalities. Aesthetic politics precedes this kind of futurity thinking, because its objective is to actively rethink the boundaries of perception and thought – hence also the boundaries of the imagination. Indeed, aesthetic politics works not on concretizing a variety of imaginations, but on creating the conditions to escape current crises of the imagination. Thus, an aesthetic politics is about laying the foundations for imaginaries to possibly arise. Therefore, social imaginaries are a logical follow-up to a successful aesthetic politics, and it is a critical goal of ecological aesthetic politics to facilitate sustainable imaginaries.

The question that remains is why Impressionism is taken to establish a precedent of ecological aesthetic politics. As explained, an ecological aesthetic

politics is a redistribution of the sensible – what is perceivable and thinkable – that opens up ecological negotiation beyond the constraints of the present sensible (i.e. of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene). The question of identifying an ecological aesthetic politics requires both that an aesthetic-political (r)evolution of a medial form is recognized, and then to show that this transition allows for a new form of ecological negotiation – one that emphasizes the discussed principles of ecological philosophy, which revolves around singularization in society as the possibility to dissent and as biodiversity in nature, particularly the extent to which nonhuman entities are treated as subjects. By identifying Impressionism as a historical precedent, ecological aesthetic-political principles could be formulated which help to understand contemporary medial form evolutions in a similar manner.

This is why this framework of ecological aesthetic politics can be referred to as *ecological impressionism* – it is a particular interpretation of what ecological aesthetic politics could look like, and what principles it advances. This view comes with several nuances. Most importantly: ecological impressionism should not imply that all associated medial forms are impressionistic in form, and therefore any application should not simply identify impressionistic techniques. The essence of ecological impressionism is nothing impressionistic – rather, it involves how a particular form of politics is aesthetically proposed, allowing for the kind of ecological negotiation correspondent to what this thesis considered as ecological philosophy. In other words, Impressionism is a movement in which such an ecological aesthetic politics is emblemized, and contemporary (r)evolutions of medial form may develop likewise, but with their own medial specificity – although similarities in (aesthetic) principles can be identified, especially if they similarly stimulate an ecological negotiation of politics. Hence, ecological impressionism should not be misidentified as a call to make contemporary media impressionistic, so that they can be ecological. Rather, Impressionism helps identify aesthetic-political changes in medial form which may differently arise in other media, but inspire ecological negotiation based on the same ecological principles – singularization and nonhuman subjectivity. An important limitation is therefore that ecological impressionism is not the only form of ecological aesthetic politics conceivable – it simply suits what this thesis identified as an ecological sensibility.

## I.2 Methodology: Operationalizing Cultural and Medium-Specific Analyses

This thesis develops a framework of ecological aesthetic politics through four medial forms, both historical and contemporary. Operationalizing such an extensive framework requires a robust methodology, that may support both its scope and the specificity of each of its medial forms. Therefore, this thesis combines Mieke Bal's (2002) cultural analysis methodology with medium-specific textual analysis methods, and considers Sean Cubitt's (2020) anecdotal method as a stepping stone to juxtapose their implications and relevance for ecocriticism.

Bal's cultural analysis methodology is a valuable building block for this thesis, because it allows the analysis to conceive of a framework of ecological aesthetic politics across the disciplines associated with each of the medial forms. This will become clear after explaining the methodology. For Bal, cultural analysis "does not *study culture*," but instead suggests "a distinction from traditional disciplinary practice within the humanities, namely, that the various objects gleaned from the cultural world for closer scrutiny are [analyzed] *in view of* their existence in culture" (Bal 2002, 9). Cultural objects are inherently situated within cultural debates. Objects of study exude cultural relevance in the interaction between object and researcher, an interaction bridged with a third factor: concepts (Bal 2002, 18). In fact, Bal favors a concept-based methodological fundament over rigid disciplinary research methods (Bal 2002, 5). In practice, this would mean that cultural objects are analyzed through a conceptual lens: "The counterpart of any given concept is the cultural text or work or 'thing' that constitutes the *object* of analysis. No concept is meaningful for cultural analysis unless it helps us to understand the object *on its – the object's – own terms*" (Bal 2002, 8). Accordingly, the concept and object mutually inspire – cultural analysis means a concept's confrontation with rather than application to objects, an interaction between concepts and objects with the result that both are more extensively scrutinized (Bal 2002, 24). This likewise means that concepts themselves are not fixed – they change, or 'travel' – that is to say, "their meaning, reach, and operational value differ [between disciplines,] processes of differing [which] need to be assessed before, during, and after each 'trip'" (Bal 2002, 24). A concept-based methodology thus allows for both

the questioning of cultural objects and conversely the vantage point of the concept.

The value of Bal's methodology for this thesis' analyses is straightforward: if ecological aesthetic politics is taken to be the traveling concept, its interaction with each analyzed object of the four medial forms both envisions a new understanding of these objects and medial forms through the lens of ecological aesthetic politics, and in return each of these conceptual objects analyses questions and modifies how an ecological aesthetic politics can itself be understood. This is especially relevant because concepts also travel between historical periods, and Bal has accordingly argued that "cultural analysis seeks to understand the past as *part of the present*" (Bal 1999a, 1). Indeed, this thesis' invocation of Impressionism as part of a contemporary conceptualization of ecological aesthetic politics does exactly that – it imbues Impressionism with an ecological-philosophical view articulated in the present, and in return Impressionism provides the aesthetic-political principles which inform an ecological aesthetic politics in the contemporary media of animation film and videogames. These contemporary media may then again inform the concept in new ways. Concepts and objects are thus mutually assessed in their travel throughout this thesis. Now, it must be illustrated how this works.

One example is Bal's (2006) conceptual trip to Caravaggio's religious paintings through the concept of *performance*. Performance is employed as a contemporary understanding of the dependence of Caravaggio's bodily relations on the viewer's context – "[as] it happens, contemporary – postmodern – conceptions of art are also more invested in art's relational potential, its performativity, than in its iconography" (Bal 2006, 396). True to cultural analysis, a historical object of culture is understood through a contemporary framework. Conceptual travel allows Bal to bring postmodern thought in touch with the religious motifs of Caravaggio's paintings, establishing that Caravaggio mixes homosexual sensuality with religious motifs. The concept of performance in particular allows Bal to see that "each viewer is given the opportunity of playing a part in an erotic relationality clearly homosexual in kind" (Bal 2006, 402), but it is not limited to this performativity, as "the second performativity enables the once-seduced viewer to relate to the bodies in the images in any way he or she wishes (...). The point is to offer a different experience of bodiliness and relationality through the encounter with vision" (Bal

2006, 403). In other words, the confrontation of performativity with Caravaggio's paintings reveals both more about these objects and about how performance as a concept facilitates a radically new vision of painting, enhancing the concept itself.

This thesis operates similarly – having defined ecological aesthetic politics, it identifies how each of the medial forms may be understood according to this concept. The analyses logically follow as confrontations of concept and objects, and meander between the concept's exemplification and modification. Here, however, a limitation of this interdisciplinary methodology presents itself for the purposes of this thesis, because it sketches an ecological aesthetic politics as pertaining to each medial form's specificity. Medial forms differ: they each contain different modalities – materially, sensorially, spatiotemporally, and semiotically (Elleström 2010, 36), which is to say they comprise different kinds of artifacts and are experienced in distinctive ways, and therefore also communicate in disparate manners. This means that an ecological aesthetic politics – in fact, any conceptual lens that converses with a multitude of medial forms – is differently conceivable because of these diverging modalities. Indeed, this is somewhat paradoxical in Bal's own analysis of Caravaggio's paintings, which she starts by questioning the dogma's of art history and constructs from a visual-analytical lens comfortable with the disciplinary approach to studying painting. As much as concepts could be seen as the driving factor of object analysis, the medium-specificity of objects to some extent require the analyst to account for disciplinary considerations and concerns. Even if Bal convincingly argues for the destabilization of methodology for the benefit of interdisciplinary conceptual travel, and thus facilitates the approach of this thesis, it is implicit that medium-specific methodological concerns are taken into account in each of the travel's medium destinations. Because methodologies are simultaneously about operationalizing the approach of analytical research, and about accounting for the biases and limitations embedded in any such approach, it is paramount to establish the medium-specific methods complementary to the cultural analysis. Hence these methodological implications shall be made explicit.

Each of this thesis' medial forms can be situated in a medium-specific method of analysis, while constituting part of the cultural analysis. Because these methods correspond to ecological aesthetic politics, they necessarily follow the aesthetic-

political specificities of these medial forms. Hence, in its evaluation of Impressionist painting, this thesis adopts a *formal analysis* method, an analytical approach focused on the visual representation of the painting, pertaining to its compositional, formal and stylistic features, and their combination (Newall and Pooke 2021, 43). In this combination, an ecological aesthetic politics is conceived.

Regarding Impressionist literature, the chosen method is *close reading*, the scrutinization of how literary writing evokes meaning. Close reading can function on different scales, from the scrutiny of individual words to the correspondence of textual meaning with cultural contexts (Greenham 2019, 7). This thesis does not confine itself to one scale, as it analyzes individual passages, overarching plot structures and the personal contexts of the authors. However, as mandated by the ecological aesthetic-political approach, the objective of close reading is the negotiation of an ecological theme, hence the *thematic context* (Greenham 2019, 48) and how the analyzed literary texts explore ecological ideas in particular will be the focus of the analysis. The analysis of the disparate scales are thus embedded within this thematic context of close reading – any reference to individual passages or plot structures is motivated from the ecological vantage point.

The analysis of animation film considers both film *form* (the overall patterning of the film) and *style* (the film's use of cinematic techniques) in how films embody meaning (Bordwell et al. 2017, 3). Regarding film form, this thesis' analysis is mainly concerned with the major branch of a film's *narrative form* (Bordwell et al. 2017, 72-73) – how the film tells a particular story, and what this story symbolizes when it is scrutinized. Here, the narrative form invokes a reading of *symptomatic meaning* (Bordwell et al. 2017, 60) – that is to say, an ideological allegory to a question beyond the film's strictly fictional plot, which is considered from an ecological perspective. Regarding film style, the analysis considers a particular element for animation film – how the animation is aesthetically shaped. Whereas cinematography arguably fulfills this role in live action film, in animation film, the style is actively crafted. “Animation provides a convenient way of showing things that are normally not visible” (Bordwell et al. 2017, 387) because it goes beyond photographic capture, and this allows the analysis to consider how the aesthetics of animation style actively relate to the ecological themes identified in the film

form. In the construction of this analysis, stills of animation film are utilized to illustrate the connection between narrative form elements and animation style.

Before the analysis of videogames commences, this thesis will propose a new model for an ecological aesthetic politics of videogame form. In confronting games through this new conceptual model, the method of *textual game analysis* is employed. In textual game analysis, the reading is actualized through playing, and adopting a researcher-specific reading formation in the process of gameplay (Carr 2009, 3-4). It is important to specify that a focal point in this game analysis will be the formal aspects of games, where the study of audiovisuals and narrative are combined with specific gameplay elements (Fernández-Vara 2019, 17-18). The aesthetic-political mode specifies what elements of presentation and gameplay are especially noteworthy in an analysis if ecological themes are to be ascertained.

Thus, the conceptual analysis of ecological aesthetic politics is medium-specifically adapted to each medial form to allow for analytical rigor. Yet this leaves the question how they can meaningfully say something about – let alone change – the overarching concept of ecological aesthetic politics. To understand how they still can, this methodology likewise considers what Cubitt (2020) terms anecdotal method. Cubitt reimagines the derogatory view of ‘anecdotal evidence’ as inferior to data information through an ecological consideration: there is no outside to anecdotal evidence, no selective abstraction of data (Cubitt 2020, 2). Anecdotes seek their knowledge in the actual, lived experience, internal to its research environment. “The term ‘anecdotal evidence’ proposes that [anecdotes], small or large, can convey truths: that the events and situations we experience are not just statistically typical or the result of the operation of invisible laws that are more important than what we see, feel, and understand in them” (Cubitt 2020, 13). Anecdotal evidence reinterprets the practice of textual analysis: “Our findings are not truths about universals but problems of the particular” (Cubitt 2020, 19), thus they are bound by the researcher’s spatiotemporal particularities. Cultural analysis adds to anecdotal method the subsequent reflection on the universal. Cultural objects speak back, that is to say, “the theory will not get away with overruling the object, nor with obscuring its own contributions, impositions, and control” (Bal 1999b, 138). Cultural objects, however anecdotally encountered, necessarily convey

a situated knowledge of the universal – here, ecological aesthetic politics. In the final analysis, this means that cultural objects are the most straightforward entry points to the universal: this is what the objects in this thesis' argumentation aspire to. This is the case for the Impressionist paintings at La Grenouillère (chapter II), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (chapter III), Studio Ghibli's POM POKO (chapter IV), and the videogames UNTITLED GOOSE GAME and BACKBONE (chapter V). These are not merely applications of an ecological aesthetic politics: the very understanding of an ecological aesthetic politics is derived from how they inform the continually developing concept. As such, each singular object is co-constitutive of the universality of this thesis' argument.

Arguing anecdotally, this thesis travels through four medial forms of ecological aesthetic politics. Chapter II discusses Impressionist painting, advancing the argument that the Impressionists destabilized perception, believing the artwork to be an amalgamation of human subjectivity and natural inspiration. This is demonstrated through Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir's La Grenouillère paintings. Furthermore, the chapter ecologically reconsiders Monet's assimilation of industry and nature, discussing their critical examination by Nicholas Mirzoeff. Impressionism's chaos of perception and its inspiration by volatile nature are taken as principles for subsequent considerations of ecological aesthetic politics.

Chapter III turns to literary impressionism. First, it establishes Joseph Conrad's radical aesthetics of literature, as readers are emancipated, and the oppressed of his stories are granted a voice to speak back. Conrad's vision preludes an ecological negotiation of an object-oriented ontology, where subjectivity is extended to nonhuman beings. Literary impressionism aesthetically develops the Impressionist principle of volatile nature by considering nonhuman beings as embodying their own subjectivity. This emancipation of objects beyond objecthood is emphasized in the literary oeuvre of Virginia Woolf. The theme of making nonhuman objects considered as subjects is consolidated when translated to contemporary media.

The translation to contemporary media is initiated in chapter IV, by considering the discourse on animation film. This chapter recognizes the potential of Studio Ghibli films to construct an ecological aesthetic politics of animation film, which contrasts Disney's conservative realism. Through a case study of POM POKO, it is

argued that animation can effectively reimagine human-nature relationalities by means of recognizing subjectivity in nonhuman objects and confusing the boundaries of perception by means of animation aesthetics.

Chapter V turns to videogames. It discusses what an aesthetic politics of games could look like, and how this could correspond to ecological philosophy. It produces an ecological aesthetic politics model for games based on the triad relationality of game system, player, and environment. Prototypically, games which are effective in negotiating these relations are coined impressionist games, especially because they succeed in blending notions of player and environment, as Impressionist painters did with the artist and natural inspiration, and because they allow players to embody bodies objectified by the game system, thus actively making players aware of the subjectivity residing within objecthood.

The challenges and developments identified in each of these media must be viewed as issues of their particular medial form. However, they all refer back to the overarching framework of ecological impressionism, employing aesthetic politics for an ecological sensibility. Assembling the ensemble of ecological impressionist analyses, chapter VI's conclusion discusses the implications of this thesis' research.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, as pointed out in Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence* (2011), efficient environmental solutions often disproportionately damage poorer parts of the world, with effects of unforeseeable calamity over time. Therefore, 'solutions' never tell the whole story, and may create even more severe issues in their wake.

<sup>2</sup> This position is shared by political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who regards artistic practices as capable of producing new subjectivities and meanings. By effectively changing worldviews and values in its participants, art facilitates a subversion of political boundaries (Mouffe 2013, 87).

<sup>3</sup> Ecological impressionism is stylized in lowercase, as it denotes the evaluation of (contemporary) media through its lens. The historical forms of Impressionist painting and literature start with a capitalized letter because of their common (though not universal) spelling in art history scholarship as such.

<sup>4</sup> This task closely resembles the more popular environmentalist goal, as advocated by David Attenborough in a recent documentary (Hughes 2020), to 're-wild' nature, cultivating a sustainable biodiversity. Indeed, the task of a multifaceted ecological philosophy is likewise to cultivate this, but it adds the idea that society and human subjectivities also need to be re-wilded – that is to say, singularized.

<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, climate activists like George Monbiot point to the paradoxical reality that "only 'unrealistic' proposals – the repurposing of economic life, with immediate effect – now have a realistic chance of stopping the planetary death spiral" (Monbiot 2021, 38). Indeed, it points to the need for a new distribution of the sensible to be able to effectively halt looming ecological catastrophe.

## II. Feeling Sensibility, Singularizing Perception

### Establishing an Aesthetic Fundament of Ecological Politics

Modernist art does not offer theoretical demonstrations. It could be said, rather, that it converts all theoretical possibilities into empirical ones, and in doing so tests, inadvertently, all theories about art for their relevance to the actual practice and experience of art.

- Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting"

Non-objective art need not be understood or judged. It must be felt and it will influence those who have eyes for the loveliness of forms and colors. Though we all enjoy sunshine, neither this joy nor the sun's shine have a meaning unless our intellect invents one. Neither a flower nor the moon can be criticized. They would never change themselves. The seed of the flower will continue to produce exactly the same kind despite criticism. It follows the intuitive order of creation. So does the non-objective masterpiece of art. It can be liked or disliked, but its existence is final and its perfection is beautiful.

- Hilla Rebay, "The Beauty of Non-Objectivity"

Consciousness does justice to the experience of nature only when, like impressionist art, it incorporates nature's wounds.

- Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The Impressionist painting movement challenged established principles in the technique and practice of art. Impressionists introduced technical innovations by flattening tonal contrasts of color, painting with natural lighting, and individualizing brush strokes through variations of direction and measure. These innovations redefined pictorial art. At the time, visual arts revolved around representation, a dedication to *mimesis* (imitation) – of which Socrates already spoke (Plato 2004 [~375BC]). Instead of a precise pictorial representation of reality, Impressionist painting was optical (Eisenman et al. 2019, 379). Accordingly, Impressionism is often contextualized as an aesthetic response to the technological development of photography. As the poet Charles Baudelaire (2018 [1859]) warned only years before the first Impressionist drawings, the identity of art was threatened by the photographic favor of the True over the Beautiful. The Impressionists, seemingly reversing this development, dovetailed their technical innovations with a radically different outlook on artistic practice. The academic studio, the typical workplace where aesthetics were contemplated into representative existence, was rejected by these painters, who instead sought a more naturally inspired immediacy in their observations, or ‘impressions’, which they believed could be captured without translation (Brodskaïa 2018, 11-12). The Impressionists left the studio for outdoor painting (*en plein-air*), at least in the early stages of the painting process, which characterized their anti-academic stance of a naturally inspired aesthetics (Bomford et al. 1990, 23-27).<sup>1</sup> The group, calling themselves ‘intransigents’, “dreamt of a new Renaissance” (Brodskaïa 2018, 12).

In this short introduction to Impressionist painting, the foremost elements of an aesthetic politics are already apparent. The aesthetic revolution of pictorial strategies is paralleled in the political rebuttal of predominant aesthetic practices. To further this understanding, these two transitions must be integrated, before they are contextualized within the Impressionists’ historical circumstances. The aesthetic-political intransigence of the Impressionists began by depicting only the sensation produced by the depicted object, or as an early critic noted: “They are *Impressionists* in the sense that they render not the landscape but the sensation produced by the landscape” (Castagnary 1874; original quoted in Berson 1996, 17; translation quoted in Young 2021, 15). Often, critics took a disapproving attitude

toward the Impressionists, at times even taking the form of ridicule (Rewald 1961, 328-334). However, with this tension, the Impressionists achieved something similar to Edouard Manet, who, with his thematically provocative paintings such as *Olympia* (1863) and *The Luncheon on the Grass [Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe]* (1863), shocked his contemporary critics. Pierre Bourdieu (2017 [2013]) has referred to Manet's art as a revolution of the *symbolic order* at the time. A symbolic order, Bourdieu explains, is the self-evident order of perception which rules out alternatives, because "it supposes an almost perfect concordance between the objective structures of the world – what we perceive – and the cognitive structures through which we perceive it" (Bourdieu 2017, 5). Naturally, the shock of critics reveals their tacit adherence to the established symbolic order, and this can similarly be seen in the critics' offended response to the First Impressionist Exhibition. Essentially, the contours of the Impressionists' symbolic revolution can be conceived as a radical break in the relation between viewer and depiction in academic painting. The depicted was traditionally considered an exact given, precisely depicted in the painting. In Impressionism, however, a painting denotes a malleability in the signification of the object, and questions its own pictorial boundaries (Dombrowski 2021, 3-4). The stability of academic painting was thus questioned through Impressionist painting's pictorial instability.

Bourdieu's notion of symbolic order can be paralleled to Rancière's idea of the sensible. The sensible, as discussed in chapter I, indicates both what can be felt and thought in a particular system. Bourdieu's description of the symbolic order as "what we perceive" and "the cognitive structures through which we perceive it" is strikingly similar. This similarity facilitates a bridge from the symbolic revolution of Manet and the Impressionists to Rancière's idea of aesthetic politics as "the way in which the aesthetic experience – as a refiguration of the forms of visibility and intelligibility of artistic practice and reception – intervenes in the distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2009, 5). If Impressionism's aesthetic politics are indeed as politically transformative as Rancière's term would suggest, then what warranted change in the Impressionists' political circumstances?

Here, it is important to amalgamate the politics of Impressionist practice with the politics of their societal context. Impressionism, as André Dombrowski notes,

“opened a view onto some of the most vexing and crucial questions of the late nineteenth century” (Dombrowski 2021, 2). He explains:

Impressionism poked at ontological certainties and epistemological givens, questioning the nature of materiality, experience, time, and even being itself. In an age when so much that was solid melted into air, when both political and industrial revolutions as well as the arrogance of empire wreaked havoc on social life, Impressionism made nothing matter much. It prettified the world even as it knew it to be sullied by coal dust and expendable bodies; it eased the tensions of the late nineteenth century even while exposing them. (Dombrowski 2021, 5)

As Dombrowski illustrates, particularly the industrial revolution and daunting arrival of modernity constituted a major political consideration of Impressionism. The industrial revolution, which initiated the most severe transition toward the planetary disequilibrium at the heart of ecological crisis, was effectively answered by Impressionist aesthetics. Dombrowski indicates two directions of this answer: that of questioning ontology and epistemology; and that of prettifying the world. These two considerations form the basis for this chapter’s analytical procedure.

The analytical procedure is shaped by this thesis’ methodology, and therefore follows Bal’s (2002) cultural analysis in combination with medium-specific analysis methods. For Bal, concepts are the basis of analysis; they are confronted with cultural objects, and in this interactive process both understandings of the concept and object are enhanced. In this case, the concept is ecological aesthetic politics, and in this chapter, it travels to Impressionist painting. This means that the discussion is formed by what is identified as the aesthetic-political characteristic of Impressionism, and how they provide the negotiation of an ecological sensibility. As identified, this characteristic is the redefinition of the pictorial and the academic painting practice – which lead to an ecological negotiation of the uncertainties caused by the Industrial Revolution, rejecting any universal reality in favor of the instability of perception. This will then be the guideline for the analysis: how did Impressionist painting destabilize sense perception as a manner of opening up ecological negotiation? For this approach to account for the biases of the formal analyses of paintings (Newall and Pooke, 43), which ascertain the combination of compositional, formal, and stylistic features, here the questions of

approach are: how is the painting compositionally ordered (which elements receive more or less attention, what is the focal point)? And how do the use of color and detail enhance the composition's effects – that is to say, what catches the eye? With these questions in mind, the analysis is performed, but with the eventual objective of inspiring reflection on the overarching concept of ecological aesthetic politics. These analytical observations invoke a change in the concept's designation, and make conceivable a first characteristic of ecological impressionism: the instability of perception which is reflected in and inspired by volatile nature.

Thus, this chapter analyzes the aesthetic-political (r)evolution initiated by Impressionism, before turning to how its implications could be read ecologically. Section II.1 commences this inquiry by reflecting on the arguable foundation of the painting movement, when Monet and Renoir painted alongside each other at 'La Grenouillère'. Their paintings are compared, revealing how they made visible the instability of perception by attempting to capture the exact same scene. Moreover, the volatility of nonhuman nature is paralleled to this instability, thus blurring the distinctions between natural inspiration and cultural aestheticization.

Section II.2 discusses how this confusion of perceptual stability corresponds to the idea of aesthetic politics, referring to Bruno Latour's idea of compositionism, which conveys that reality itself must be considered as a volatile construct that is continuously evolving in the eyes of the perceiver. To exemplify this dynamic in Impressionism, this section discusses how Impressionism diverged from Realist and photographic aesthetics, and thus constructs a potential redistribution of the sensible by not conforming to their dominant modes of capturing natural scenes.

Finally, section II.3 discusses Nicholas Mirzoeff's ecological critique of Monet as an aestheticization of the effects of the Anthropocene and the assimilation of industry and nature, as if their combination is a logical and desirable phenomenon. It is acknowledged that the Impressionists prettified the world, even as symptoms of industrialization permeated their landscapes. However, Mirzoeff's critique is reconsidered by invoking its interpretation as an aesthetic politics, and therefore shows that instead of simply making observers adore the Anthropocene, Impressionism could be regarded as an opening up of negotiating its meanings.

## II.1 The Birth of Impressionist Painting at ‘La Grenouillère’

At the end of the 1860s, Monet and Renoir would paint together around a recreational Parisian bathing place in the Seine, ‘La Grenouillère’. Monet was in a desolate state. He struggled financially and was at odds with Parisian life (Rewald 1961, 189-190). In these challenging times, he desired to paint with Renoir at La Grenouillère. The scenery proved fertile ground for capturing the water’s reflections, the bather’s attitudes, the vibrations of light, and the atmosphere’s hues (Rewald 1961, 226-230). The place brimmed with motifs observable in Impressionist technique. It has therefore been said that Monet and Renoir co-constructed the fundamentals of Impressionist painting here (Wildenstein 2019 [1996], 96-97). While landmarks of technical innovation, an ensuing remark must be made pertaining to the perspective of these paintings, which exhibits an abiding pattern throughout Impressionist history. Their themes are informal and spontaneous, relating to an impulsive experimentation with painting (Bomford et al. 1990, 120-123).<sup>2</sup> If the paintings at La Grenouillère indeed reflect formative experiments with Impressionism, they equally convey expressions of technique and philosophy. The philosophical component was the concession of the fundamental instability of perspective, which will come to light from a comparison between one sample of Monet (figure 1) and Renoir’s (figure 2) paintings.

A comparison of both paintings reveals different impressions of the same scene. Whereas Renoir pays most attention to the dominance of a Parisian crowd visiting the scene, with dresses and hats vividly captured in a wide array of colors which shimmer in their reflections in the rippling water, Monet’s people are more one-dimensionally drawn, often featuring a single color each. In contrast to Renoir’s painting, Monet regards his humans as an aspect rather than the focus of the composition (Wilson et al. 1981, 17). Renoir’s Parisians are depicted as crowding the banks of the river to the point where one might wonder whether someone had fallen in by accident. The bridge, which constitutes a horizontal axis in both paintings, evidently leads onto the island of the Parisian ensemble at the right end. The dense crowd on the island draws the eye of the viewer and in a sense, could be interpreted as the focal point of Renoir’s painting.



**Figure 1.** Claude Monet, *Bathers at La Grenouillère*, 1869. Oil on canvas, National Gallery, London, United Kingdom.

With the bathers of Monet, the story is utterly different. His perspective emerges a little closer to the bridge, and therefore does not even include the island to the right. However, this does not contribute to a crystallized perception of the bathers at Monet's opposite side of the bridge. In fact, they are minimally portrayed, with little more than dots and tiny strokes stipulating their existence. If anything, the Parisian bathers are increasingly obscured the more they are engaged in bathing.<sup>3</sup> Arguably the most colorful and expressive of Monet's Parisians are the two figures on the left side of the bridge, who decisively walk away from the water. Therefore, the question that emerges concerns what is actually meant with the inclusion of 'bathers' in the title of Monet's painting. Considering both the position and disposition of the boats, which claim the lower half of the frame and decisively face the painter's perspective, one understanding is that Monet is speaking of and to them as bathers. Contrastingly, Renoir has these boats turned away, out of the



Figure 2. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Grenouillère*, 1869. Oil on canvas, Oskar Reinhart Foundation, Winterthur, Switzerland.

way from the island of Parisians. He seems interested in the people, their behaviors and attires, whereas Monet turns away from them, conversing with everything else.

Altogether, aside from stylistic differences, both painters show a remarkably divergent interpretation of an otherwise near identical scene. Therefore, Monet and Renoir's work at La Grenouillère arguably constitutes more than just a technical foundation of Impressionist painting. Simultaneously, it announces a philosophical transition of perception. This transition can be taken to entail an aesthetic-political effort to destabilize the truthfulness of perception, emphasizing how the assumedly objective capture of the scene is always situated in the subjective individual's sensibility. This is an aesthetic-political intervention, as its break with the mimetic ideal of academic art parallels a break with established sense perception. Indeed, as Dombrowski noted, the ontological and epistemological certainties of the time were effectively being rethought. What, then, did the Impressionists envision as an alternative mode of perception? This question will be explored in the next section.

## II.2 An Impressionist Manifesto: The Singular Composition of Reality

The experimental efforts of Monet and Renoir at La Grenouillère reveal how the aesthetic scene provides vastly different perceptions from an initially similar outlook. Two ecological observations can be made from this conclusion. Firstly, Monet and Renoir both appear to paint from within nature rather than from without – they do not lay claim to a perfect capture of the scene, but highlight how their perspectives are necessarily twisted in one way or another because of their differing impressions of the scene. Today (and also then, following the industrial revolution), natural environments are increasingly alienated and enclosed from humanity, rendering humans strangers in their own world (Cubitt 2017, 159). Arguably, Monet and Renoir reconnect themselves with nature: they lay no claim to grasping it fully, but they both provide their idiosyncratic ways of engaging with(in) it rather than from an externalized (and implicitly superior) position.

Secondly, the instability foundational to both compositions says something about the volatility of perceiving reality at large. The total truth of La Grenouillère is missing from Monet and Renoir's paintings, as they have merely provided two versions of their own reality. Here, Impressionism's characteristic assessment of reality is established as an aesthetic practice. Maria Kronegger elaborates:

Reality is a subject which cannot be analyzed, according to the impressionists, but only seized intuitively. Reality is a synthesis of pure sensations, modulated by consciousness and changed into impressions. (...) [The] impressionist writer or painter does not form impressions from solid reality but from the appearance of reality. This, of course, is the essential condition in art without which there can be no art. With the impressionists, however, the act of seeing is painted: this means that they do not render the object itself but their way of seeing an object by a sensation. (Kronegger 1973, 36-37).

Impressionism does not proclaim any capture of reality, but rather produces a particular configuration of reality originating from the artist's singular perception of reality. It composes a negotiation of its own construct of reality, rather than seeking a holistic capture of absolute truth. Such tacit philosophies of painting become implicated in ecological philosophy's quest for singularization – that of

dissenting individual painters, but at the same time it is capable of advancing political implications in the instable painting act. To explain this, Bruno Latour's "Compositionist Manifesto" (2010) could be invoked here. *Compositionism*, as he calls it, involves the construction of reality by the assemblage of ideas and knowledges. For compositionism, knowledge of reality is possible because it is instable. It can be recomposed, so to say. It positions itself in-between the extremes of universality and relativism, because it tries to find universal meaning without believing that it is inert, simply waiting to be discovered – it is rather diffusive, fragile and revisable. "It thus draws attention away from the irrelevant difference between what is constructed and what is not constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is *well* or *badly* constructed, *well* or *badly* composed" (Latour 2010, 474). This entails the need "to connect the *disputability* of politics with the *disputability* of science" (Latour 2010, 478). If politics and science are disputable,<sup>4</sup> they are likewise negotiable, allowing for the subsequent composition of an ecological politics. Indeed, compositionism can be interpreted as delineating the boundaries within which politics are possible: to compose what can be seen and known gives form to what opinions can arise – a new sensibility. To take the next step: what if compositionism is taken at its literal, and a political composition is performed by those who habitually compose, who create new compositions – artists and especially painters? Is not compositionism, as the construction of political possibilities, a direct product of aesthetics as the redistribution of the sensible? Impressionism in particular answers these questions in the affirmative.

Whenever one inquires about the conceptual fundament of Impressionism, one may find surprisingly little definition. Often, descriptions of Impressionism are limited to technical innovations and artistic practices, as highlighted at the outset of this chapter. Compositionism allows for a rereading of this tendency – its is not that Impressionism does not convey any political philosophy, it is rather that this philosophy is contained within the aesthetic practice. The aesthetic idea of perceptual instability is likewise the political philosophy. To exemplify, consider how Impressionism toyed with the pictorial rigidity of Realist painting and photography. Both Realism and photography laid claim to grasping the truth of the capture, but Impressionism proved that truth is in the eye of the beholder –

exemplified by Monet and Renoir's *La Grenouillère* paintings. The stale and 'slow' pictures of Realism and photography were contrasted with the 'fugitive image' of Impressionism, inspired by the increased speed of the modern age (Young 2015, 8-9). What was considered fixed in Realism was destabilized in the Impressionist picture. With the emergence of photography as a medium which was capable of capturing the moment 'accurately', the aesthetics of Realism were jeopardized, leaving Impressionism as the dominant aesthetic alternative (Young 2015, 84).<sup>5</sup> As Beverly Jean Gibbs argues, the significant change could be seen as perspectival:

In realism, the whole object is carefully observed in all its detail, and, if the artist succeeds, the result will be an exact replica of the original. In impressionism, the observation is, shall we say, of shorter duration – it is a "vistazo," a flash perception of an outstanding aspect of the object, and the sensation gained from this instantaneous perception is reproduced just as carefully and in just as great detail as is the total object of the realist. Therefore, contrary to realism, in impressionism, there is an element which is entirely subjective, and this element is the sensation itself. (Gibbs 1952, 175-176)

Thus, Impressionism is as methodologically rigorous as Realism, but has its philosophical distinction residing in the embrace of the subjective which naturally emerges from the attempt at capturing the objective. The poet Stéphane Mallarmé described Impressionist painting adequately as a way of "recreating nature touch by touch", constituting "the only authentic and certain merit of nature – the Aspect" (Mallarmé 2018 [1876], 44). Indeed, nature is no longer externalized in Impressionism – its volatility is embraced, and the Impressionists showed that how nature presents itself depends on singular modes of perception, rather than an objective totality. The approach to nature is open-ended rather than abstracted – a disclosure of sensations rather than the enclosure of capture. It is composed but never defined. In the wake of Impressionist composition, the artist's singularity meets with nature's volatility. Nature, no longer separate from cultural life, typified by its volatile nonhuman processes, becomes an active co-constituent of the painting. It is activated as an actor, and in turn, it activates human perception by means of the impressions it communicates. The next section discusses how this aesthetic politics facilitates the negotiation of proper ecological issues.

## II.3 Reconsidering Impressionism's Aestheticization of the Anthropocene

As discussed in the previous section, Impressionism can be considered as an ecological aesthetic-political movement because it facilitates an ecological politics by means of aesthetic form and practice – nonhuman, natural environments are appreciated for how their volatile processes are voiced by means of the painter's perception. The question of this section is how this more specifically translates to actual ecological themes, such as pollution, industrialization and the cultures perpetuated by Anthropocene (human exceptionalism) and Capitalocene (neoliberal capitalism's exploitation). An intuitive misinterpretation would say that Impressionism is an ecological movement because of the outlined aesthetic practices that reconnect painters to nature. A more productive way to understand the ecology of Impressionism – and in fact, all forms of ecological aesthetic politics – is as constructive of the sensible boundaries within which ecological thought and sustainable imaginaries can surface. In fact, if one would attempt to read explicit political themes in Impressionist painting, it could very well be the case that they would point to ideas in dissonance with ecological philosophy. For example, it is easy to be persuaded, or even hypnotized, by the prettifying style in which Impressionists depicted nature. As Dombrowski wrote: “[Impressionism] prettified the world even as it knew it to be sullied by coal dust and expendable bodies” (Dombrowski 2021, 5). Thus, they made the ugliness of increasing human-nature disequilibrium beautiful. This is already apparent in Monet and Renoir's *La Grenouillère* paintings, which stressed in their proper subject matter a distraction from modern Paris in favor of the ‘natural’ outskirts, indeed a recurring ‘ecological’ theme in Impressionism (House 2010, 38). However, these depictions also reveal a contradiction in Impressionism’s identity. Bringing the cultural, bourgeois attitude into the natural world inscribed the image of modernity into what was formerly safe from it. While the Impressionists made nature a part of culture, blurring their boundaries, this culture is permeated with the attitudes of Anthropocene and Capitalocene sensibility. This section illustrates this by discussing an ecological critique of two Monet paintings by Nicholas Mirzoeff. After establishing his gripe, it is considered how it corresponds to the idea of ecological aesthetic politics.

Nicholas Mirzoeff (2014) reflects on two of Monet's early Impressionist paintings: *Impression, sunrise* [*Impression, soleil levant*] (1872, figure 3); and *Coal Dockers* [*Les Déchargeurs de charbon*] (1875, figure 4). Mirzoeff argues that *Impression, sunrise* "at once reveals and aestheticizes anthropogenic environmental destruction" (Mirzoeff 2014, 221). The painting depicts an industrial harbor saturated in smog, the product of the Industrial Revolution in France. Although shock followed this revelation of damage captured in Monet's impression, the fact remains that observers looked at a beautifully composed artwork. Accordingly, "this modern aesthetic countered [the depicted smog] by transforming the very perception of its difference into a sign of human superiority and the continuing conquest of nature" (Mirzoeff 2014, 222). Mirzoeff has a similar understanding of *Coal Dockers*. To him, the painting represents industrial production on the lower level of the scene, with the workers in the front and industry terrain at the back of the painting, whereas the bridge represents the sphere of consumption as evidenced by the commodity carts, an obscure gaslight, and hypothetically, the train Monet is painting the scene from. Again, Mirzoeff argues that industrialization is approached by Monet with a tone of praise – the air shows signs of being natural and right, rather than polluted and potentially dangerous. The viewer perceives the dockers from above, looking down on them. They "cannot be distinguished individually, precisely because as individuals they do not matter" (Mirzoeff 2014, 222). Nor does the work's aesthetic give reason for the importance of their subjectivities. The painting's prettiness is antipodal to any ecological or sociopolitical critique, and rather placates its audience's view.

Mirzoeff's analysis echoes established critiques of Impressionism as obscuring the everyday labors of local inhabitants in favor of formal sophistication (Eisenman et al. 2019, 381-382). Furthermore, Impressionists focused on landscape painting, a genre seeking to portray the land as observed by tourists, rather than by local inhabitants (as in *La Grenouillère*). Often, local concerns of landscape were shoved to the side in favor of commercially appealing sights (House 2010, 39-41). In other words, Impressionist painters regarded the landscape in externality, not tied to the matters of survival and life inherent to it (Zimmermann 2010, 109). To exacerbate matters, the Impressionists assimilated industry and nature by depicting factories



**Figure 3.** Claude Monet, *Impression, sunrise* [*Impression, soleil levant*], 1872. Oil on canvas, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris, France.

and bridges next to farmlands and rivers, aesthetically unifying the revered past with the industrial future (Thomas 2010, 49–51). In later paintings, Monet would seek reclusion from industrial society in his garden at Giverny. In direct contact with his ‘natural’ inspiration (Eisenman 2010, 27–32), this was his final artistic phase.

Mirzoeff’s argument resonates with both critiques of touristic externality and industry-nature assimilation, with the addition that aestheticizing these insults infuriates them. In reconsidering Mirzoeff’s critique, both his idea of aesthetics and the assimilation critiques should correspond to ecological sensibilities. Mirzoeff’s idea of aesthetics as hypnosis is encapsulated in his assertion that “the conquest of nature, having been aestheticized, leads to a loss of perception (aesthesia), which is to say, it becomes an anaesthetics” (Mirzoeff 2014, 220). Anaesthetics, Mirzoeff argues, paralyzes the cultivation of sensibility and instead ties the observer to a predetermined viewpoint. Thus, Impressionism could be viewed as an aesthetics

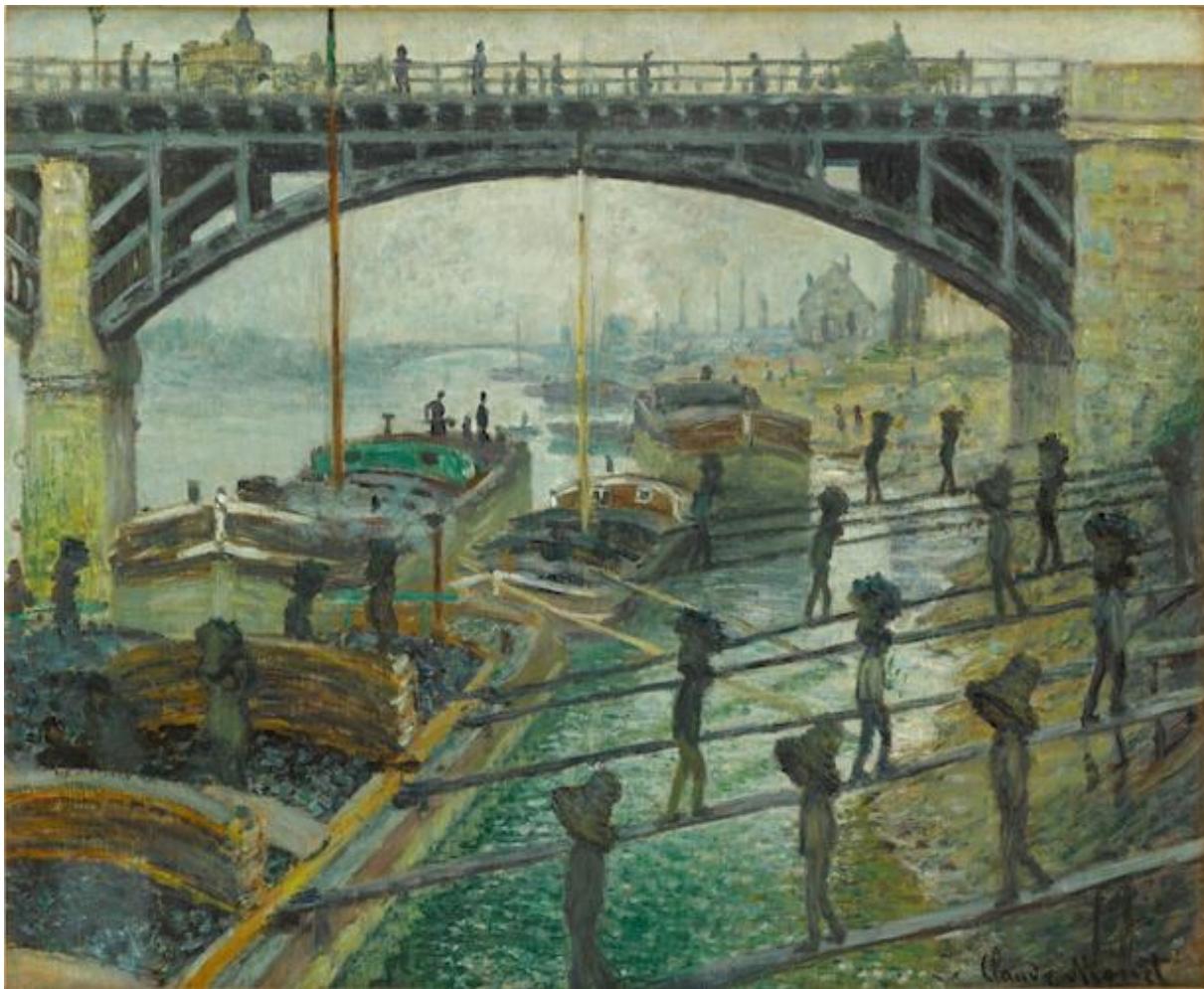


Figure 4. Claude Monet, *Coal Dockers [Les Déchargeurs de charbon]*, 1875. Oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

that naturalizes the destructive views of nature accelerated since the Industrial Revolution. This is in contrast with the potential of aesthetics to create new subjectivities that do not conform to this naturalization, but rather open up possibilities of new configurations of the sensible, the goal of an aesthetic politics.

In reconsidering this critique, it must be emphasized that Mirzoeff essentially has a different idea of the relation between aesthetics and politics. To him, aesthetics can hypnotize and make anesthetic, paralyze their observers to conform to established (Anthropocene or Capitalocene) sensibilities, rather than redistribute sensibility. His analysis thus reverberates Walter Benjamin's seminal analysis of the aestheticization of politics, which Benjamin regarded as a preeminent instrument of Fascism to render their destructive agenda of warfare and totalitarian society as a beautiful ideal (2015 [1955], 234-235). However, an immediate problem with such a view of aesthetics is

that it fails to account for contingencies of context. The idea of aesthetic politics as hypnosis is widely, and therefore haphazardly, applicable. Martin Jay reveals a number of discourses on the aestheticization of politics when he writes on “The Aesthetic Ideology” (1992), but most of them differ significantly from Benjamin’s predominantly historical remark on Fascism (Jay 1992, 45). The totalization of politics through aesthetic ideology is thought one-dimensionally, by paralleling the objectification of art to that of society, but this view presupposes a totalizing, homogenic view of aesthetics itself (Jay 1992, 56). Indeed, Nazi Germany had such a totalizing view in which modern art was censored and classical Greek or Roman art, with their bodily perfections, celebrated – their aesthetic-political use of art was to hypnotize observers within this sensibility. However, an opposite interpretation is possible, and Cubitt initiates this reversal of Benjamin’s argument, as “[the] politics with neoliberalism have become anesthetic” (Cubitt 2017, 152), and are therefore *in need* of aestheticization. Considering early critic responses to Impressionism, and its aesthetic innovations, this interpretation appears more applicable to the movement.

The critique of industry-nature assimilation appears to be built on the aesthetic-political divergence, as it assumes that Impressionism supports a particular narrative. Notably, it is acknowledged that the Impressionists created the movement without a firmly established philosophy (Pool 1967). There was no universal disposition to a certain point of view, and the Impressionists had widely diverging backgrounds and beliefs. In fact, the instability of perception captured in Impressionism opened up the subsequent negotiation of its meaning in the eye of the beholder – this is itself the precondition to Mirzoeff’s gripping critique. Indeed, by portraying an ecological issue aesthetically, Monet makes its viewers sensitive to the existence of these issues. Monet’s later paintings, composed in isolation from industry-nature assimilation, are not the ecological alternative. Rather, it is arguable that they censure the wound in nature inflicted by modernity. Monet, reconnected to nature in isolation, is no longer sentient in his aesthetic politics to the exacerbation of industry-nature relationality. Thus, it is more convincing that the paintings revealing such tensions between nature and industry, commodity culture and the individual, open up the possibility of an ecological sensibility. However, this sensibility lacks a more concrete definition. This is a task taken up by Post-Impressionist literature, discussed in the next chapter.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Even so, the Impressionists were not the first artists desiring to reflect on the effects of nature on their perception – the Barbizon artists started conceptualizing similar practices (Eisenman 2010, 18).

<sup>2</sup> This claim seems a bit exaggerated. It is suggested that Monet's work cannot be confined to immediate impressions in open air. He was also influenced with rather Romanticist imaginaries (Desmarais 2021).

<sup>3</sup> This is notwithstanding the bathers' literal spotlighing by means of sunlight, again indicating that Monet was both inspired and at odds with nature's direction of impression. The glistening sky in Renoir's painting, however, does clearly emphasize the subject matter he seemed most interested in: the Parisians.

<sup>4</sup> The avenue of (modern) science and how a compositionist Impressionism may challenge it is opened up here, but to adequately study it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Still, the Impressionist alternative appeared inspired by the emergence of technological and natural sciences, exploring the intertwinement of scientific progress and traditional life, and the effects of nature in general (Brettell 2010).

### III. Thinking Sensibility, Aestheticizing Things

#### Envisioning an Aesthetic-Political Object-Oriented Ontology

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were – no, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. (...) [What] thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly.

- Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

People think they live more intensely than animals, than plants, and especially than things. Animals sense that they live more intensely than plants and things. Plants dream that they live more intensely than things. But things last, and this lasting is more alive than anything else.

- Olga Tokarczuk, *Primeval and Other Times*

Every moment is the centre and meeting place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it.

- Virginia Woolf, "Poetry, Fiction and the Future"

As chapter II discussed, the Impressionist painters opened up an aesthetic-political practice that redefined sense perception, making ecological negotiation possible. However, in their aesthetics of natural impression, they left little to their own political position – they facilitated politics which they did not themselves fill in. The subsequent Post-Impressionist movements took issue with the fleetingness of Impressionist painting. The Post-Impressionists have been typified as “[having] devoted their attention, not so much to the means of producing ‘effects’, which always have about them an element of instability and transience, as to the means of fixing a type or symbol” (Ogden 1912, 193-194). Thus, the Post-Impressionists sought to define what the Impressionists made perceivable. Another aesthetic transformation was in place: the perception of natural inspiration was now also to be understood (Ogden 1912, 196). Hence, Post-Impressionism added the thoughtful to the perceptual, that is to say the second facet of the sensible to the first. In a sense, Post-Impressionism was a more refined redistribution of the sensible because it combines both facets of the sensible, although the singularization of perception initiated by Impressionism remained a kernel of Post-Impressionism.

Like Impressionism, Post-Impressionism is a vastly divergent movement. The focus of this chapter is on its literary movement, which is arguably more adamant in its medial form to give Impressionist aesthetics understanding. This movement has been referred to as *literary impressionism*, with authors ranging from Impressionist painting contemporaries to those writing their work in the decades after the first Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1910. As this chapter will illustrate, impressionist writers married a more literal translation of Impressionist painting to writing style with advancing new writing forms. This chapter’s focus is on two later writers of the bunch that share the impressionist label, Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf, because they effectively integrated the full range of literary impressionist characteristics, and in doing so negotiated an ecological philosophy. Conrad can be credited with establishing the fundament of literary impressionism, while also touching upon themes of social ecology. He gives an aesthetic-political vantage point for ecological considerations. However, Woolf goes even deeper into refining ecological aesthetics, by emphasizing human existence within natural reality, and confusing the boundaries of fiction and reality, human and nonhuman.

To initiate an idea of literary impressionism, consider Conrad's oft-cited preface to his early work *The N-Word of the "Narcissus"* (2006 [1897]):

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. That – and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm – all you demand – and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask. (Conrad 2006, 1888)

Literary impressionism, as Conrad writes, seeks to open up seeing, to open up perceiving – that is, to create a condition from which truth may arise. Herein can be discerned an amalgamation of the two categories of the sensible – perceptual and cognitive, in a play of perspective. Perspective, following Conrad's preface, is both how a subject sees literally (a question extensively explored in the aesthetic practice of Impressionist painters), and how a point of view – a stance, an opinion, a paradigm of considering things – is established figuratively. John Peters therefore locates in Conrad a link between perception and knowledge systems, advancing questions “about the nature of human existence and the nature of western civilization” (Peters 2004 [2001], 35). Here, Conrad goes further in his inquiry of sensibility where the Impressionist painters stopped: they showed that knowledge is singularly composed rather than universally established, but they did not themselves disclose how they thought, or how their civilization thought. This endeavor is taken up by Conrad, who mediates between the two types of sensibility. As Jesse Matz writes, this was a total aspiration going beyond stylistic concerns:

The literary Impressionists meant that fiction should locate itself where we “have an impression”: not in sense, nor in thought, but in the feeling that comes between; not in the moment that passes, nor in the decision that lasts, but in the intuition that lingers. If “fiction is an impression” it *meditates* opposite perceptual moments. It does not choose surfaces and fragments over depths and wholes but makes surfaces show depths, make fragments suggest wholes, and devotes itself to the undoing of such distinctions. (Matz 2003 [2001], 1)

Subjective perception opens to natural inspiration, maintains its impression and develops it – it extends it with subjective negotiation, adding depth to the surface.

Yet, this points to a contradiction of impressionist sensibility. At once, the objective world is taken in empirically, and subjectively constructed with unreliable fictions. As Tamara Katz suggests, “[Impressionism], far from simply claiming inwardness or refusing it – as critics have in turn suggested – instead both offers and retracts it” (Katz 2000, 9). The Impressionist painters alluded to this when they made the approach of the objective scene reveal its subjective construction. But they did not question the boundaries and constructs of their own subjectivities beyond demonstrating that it actively exists. This changed with Post-Impressionism, where artists realized this tension of sensibility, and “the need for self-expression, or the expression of personality, became allies to the concern for form” (Tillyard 1988, 90). What this means is that Post-Impressionists confused which is natural inspiration and what is subjective contemplation, or, even better, what belongs to the inward construction of the world and what is external to it.

This is a major consideration in the aesthetic-political redistribution of the sensible. As Rancière explains, sensibility determines who can perceive and who can think. In the separation of nonhumans from humans, and of working classes from intellectual classes, the question is one of limited versus developed sensibility (Rancière and Engelmann 2019 [2016], 64–67). This is a selective and flawed ideal that keeps the oppressed (non)human in check as being naturally inferior beings. The Impressionist transition in thinking facilitates going beyond human, bourgeois perception, and taking things into a more extensive ecological direction – by considering the subjectivity of the oppressed, and in particular that of the nonhuman. This chapter argues that this is the merit of literary impressionism in particular, preluding an ecological philosophy of nonhuman subjectivity.

This argument is constructed through Bal’s (2002) cultural analysis methodology, which entails a concept-based analytical method, although it is here elaborated on through the medium-specific method of close reading. As Bal argues, concepts can serve the analytical function of interaction with the cultural objects of study, with the result that both concepts and objects gain advanced understanding. It is necessary to reiterate that the concept of this analysis is ecological aesthetic politics. As the introduction to this chapter has already shown, an ecological aesthetic politics was constructed in Impressionist painting (see also

chapter II) and further developed by literary impressionists. Thus, an ecological aesthetic politics conceptually travels to literary impressionism, and here a new element is added: the consideration of subjectivity in the objects of perception, which is argued to be an aesthetic politics of *object-oriented ontology* (OOO), which, as will become clear, is a contemporary branch of ecological philosophy. The close reading of the literary texts therefore has this in mind – and thus the close reading is *thematic* (Greenham 2019, 48), which means it looks for how this idea in particular is explored throughout the closely read texts, regardless of the scale. This means that the theme can be traced in the individual passage as well as in the overall plot structure, or even in considerations of the author's writing context. Simply put, the close readings are initiated with the question: what are the objects of the literary text, and how is the subjectivity of these objects aesthetically constructed? These analyses will then serve as anecdotal examples (Cubitt 2020) to identify transitions in the concept of ecological aesthetic politics.

Section III.1 initiates this cultural analysis by continuing with Conrad's literary impressionist aesthetics. Establishing first how he conceived literary impressionist aesthetics in *The Secret Agent*, by emancipating the reader to actively recompose a disjointed narrative, it develops a close reading of *Heart of Darkness* where these considerations are ecologically manifested, by overturning the preconceived image of Africa as an object of western study. In this novella, Conrad grants the African object potent subjectivity, dismantling the preconceptions of western civilization. While he does not yet reimagine these relations, he opens them up for negotiation.

Section III.2 builds on the analysis of Conrad's work by conceptualizing the versatility of nonhuman objects that raise beyond objecthood and are attributed subjectivity. This aligns with the ecological philosophy of OOO (Harman 2017), which directs attention to the equal subjectivities of human and nonhuman things, thereby advocating an inclusion of nonhuman considerations in ecological politics. The section poses that while to know this nonhuman subjectivity is impossible, it can be approximated by means of an aesthetically constructed relationality.

Section III.3 discusses Woolf's work as a refinement of this vision of aesthetic relationality toward nonhuman things. It argues that she developed a literary impressionism that succeeded in writing an aesthetic relation between human

sensibility and that of nonhuman objects – such as animals, inert things, and deceased people. Reading her works “The Mark on the Wall” (2014 [1917]) and *To the Lighthouse* (2017 [1927]) therefore relates literary impressionism to OOO.

### **III.1 Joseph Conrad’s Aesthetic Bombs of Literary Impressionism**

Conrad was a Polish writer whose literary works were conceived in English, his fourth language – next to Polish, French, and the occasional German. This is important, because he introduced into nineteenth-century English literature a distinctly foreign sound that opened up the stylistic boundaries of English fiction (Ray 1983). Hence, Conrad himself symbolizes a break with an established sensibility. It is only fitting that he developed an aesthetic-political body of literary impressionist work that did something similar. Starting with a brief analysis of *The Secret Agent* (2020 [1907]), which establishes his aesthetic vision, the subsequent study of *Heart of Darkness* (2015 [1899]) shows its ecological application.

While a bit counterintuitive to start with his later work *The Secret Agent*, it is crucial upon considering its value for an introduction to Conrad’s literary impressionism. The novel’s main character, Adolf Verloc, is a communist anarchist by desire and foreign agent by financial necessity. In order to prove his worth to the foreign London embassy which provides for him and his family, he is ordered to carry out a terroristic strike. It is greatly detailed what the target of such a strike must be through Verloc’s superior, who concludes that only an attack on the foremost institution of science, the Greenwich Observatory,<sup>2</sup> will be an attack having “all shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy” (Conrad 2020, 32). Much like Conrad was himself, a foreign agent is about to shake up western culture. But the attack also resonates with Conrad’s disruption of the perceived stability of modern science, which he rejected throughout his work (Peters 2004 [2001], 5). In *The Secret Agent*, the attack is on the uniformity of measured time, which Conrad contrasts with the subjectivity of human-experienced time. Herein, Conrad mediates between the objective and the subjective, establishing an attack on the

division between the objective perception and subjective construction of time.

The bomb of the terroristic attack never goes off, at least for the reader. It only has gone off, as in retrospect, or has yet to go off, prospectively, as it is indirectly learned or foreshadowed that the attack has failed, killing only the bomb's carrier. What follows is a posterior ascertainment of the identity and circumstances of the 'victim' through the fragments of their body, reassembled in a hospital room where it is studied by a police inspector. Eventually, it is possible to conclude that Verloc's autistic brother-in-law, Stevie, had died in the accident by an unfortunate stumble, prematurely detonating the bomb he was ordered to wield. The fictional attack had failed, but aesthetically it succeeded: the bomb ruptured the structure of the novel, leaving the reader to reassemble the pieces after the blast and make sense of it.<sup>3</sup> Conrad hereby invites the reader to read as the novel as the detective had to read Stevie's body: to retroactively acquire coherence of fundamental disorientation.

Therefore, Conrad's bomb is aesthetic, an explosion of a nonchronological form of narration. As elaborated by Peters, it is a transition toward representing how things are being perceived subjectively, rather than narrated objectively, rendering impressions of the narrative rather than narrating *per se* (Peters 2004, 24). The reader is ascribed the agency of figuring out the novel on its own accord, and is thus attributed the role of mediating between the objective events of the novel and the subjective experience of them. Accordingly, the ambiguity of the title, *The Secret Agent*, which can easily be attributed to both Mr. Verloc for his occupation, and Stevie for his undisclosed involvement, may aesthetically refer to the agency provided to the reader to complete an at first glance incomplete novel. How different is the situation of Mr. Verloc's wife, who "was rather confirmed in her belief that things did not stand being looked into" (Conrad 2020, 156), and therefore does not notice her beloved brother's impending demise. Having emancipated the reader as a secret agent of the novel rather than just its passive recipient, Conrad expounds a view where a presumed object is granted subjectivity.

Taking this view of emancipating an object toward agency, it could be inferred that *Heart of Darkness* turns such an aesthetic politics ecological. In *Heart of Darkness*, the sailor Charles Marlow, preparing for a voyage with his colleagues, narrates to them his tale of commanding a steamboat for a Belgian ivory trading

company which sails along the Congo River.<sup>4</sup> It was a horrifying experience for Marlow, after an encounter with the innermost parts of the land and its peoples confronted him with the realities of colonial rule. This is evidenced by the fact that Marlow had a passion for maps in his youth, referring to areas and continents he has not yet explored as “blank spaces on the earth” (Conrad 2015, 8). Yet this attitude mightily changed because of his Congo experiences. “It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness” (Conrad 2015, 8). Michael Fried, discussing this passage, argues that an analogy exists between the blank space and the blank page of the novel, both being blank canvases on which the western subject projects their boundless imagination for bourgeois self-realization. The blankness of the map facilitates its ‘coloring’ with an imperialist attitude (Fried 2018, 52–53). Accordingly, the darkness retroactively realized by Marlow can be read as the pre-existence of culture in these blank spaces, the writing on the wall (or page) that is simply unaccounted for by the western subject. This interpretation recalls the critique of Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, who argued that the novella – and by extent, Conrad himself – was thoroughly racist for its typification of African people as barbarous. Moreover, the novel’s depiction of the setting in which the European would encounter the horrors of western imperialism as an inhuman entity, rather than a human subject in its own right, was greatly problematic (Achebe 2018 [1975], 2713). Likewise, Achebe identified a problem in the plot. Marlow connects with a ‘gone native’ ivory trader, Kurtz, who mentally disintegrates because of the horrors he encountered in Africa. Yet both the idea that kinship between western and African man causes horror, and that this horror is manifested in the dissolution of one bourgeois westerner rather than any of the numerous African subjects being exploited throughout the novel, is disturbing. One may understand the title of Achebe’s critique, “An Image of Africa”, as that which Conrad suggests through Marlow’s tale: Africa only exists as an object of the western man’s experience.

Here, however, the potentialities are opened up for a subversive, profoundly ecocritical reading of the novel. It has been suggested that Kurtz’ (dis)integration within the African peoples is reflected in the threat of the obscure environments of Congo, which in themselves constitute a threat of darkness to their western

conqueror (McCarthy 2009, 643). Taken one step further, what the story signifies is that the Anthropocene mindset of exploitation of everything that is deemed nonhuman (here: both African nature and its indigenous peoples) eventually comes back to bite its conqueror.<sup>5</sup> The white pages of the map or novel are to be filled with a perceived inexhaustible source of new content (the resources of African land, the labor of African peoples),<sup>6</sup> but are overwhelmed by the sheer force of what they encounter (militant tribes, disease, instable environments). As if white pages become wholly covered in ink, the ‘open’ mind of the subject is consumed by the excess of shock experienced. Thus, Conrad endows Africa with a secret agency, a potent force to overwhelm western civilization’s prejudices.

Again, Conrad blew open what was taken for granted in modern western civilization, a topic censored in its cultural context. This censorship is hinted at in the final scene of Marlow’s narration, in which he tells the lie to Kurtz’ lover that Kurtz’ final words before death consisted of her name, whereas they actually involved the traumatic phrase “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 2015, 76). What was internally the outcry of a desperate man representing his fatal conquest of Africa, is turned into an heroically romantic sacrifice; an endearing tale of passion.

Conrad breaks open this romanticist attitude of literature and instead reveals the horrors of reality as it actually presents itself to the subject. His literary impressionist manifest to make the reader see is here applied most literally to see the nonhuman as agential. However, the lack of refinement in this view is that Africa still exists in antagonism. Questioning this ecology, Jeffrey Myers argues:

A contemporary ecological consciousness may have needed to face “the horror” before coming to terms with humanity’s lack of priority in the natural world. (...) For although Conrad calls into question the metaphysical underpinnings of human and ecological oppression, he nonetheless flinches from facing the implications of this interrogation, which would entail his reimagining as benevolent and liberating a reincorporation of the self into the “wilderness” – a reincorporation that this story imagines as powerfully threatening. (Myers 2001, 106-107).

Essentially, Conrad opens up the enclosed relationalities embedded in the modern western mindset by expounding their contradictions and dangers, but takes no transformative effort to transcend these modes of thinking and create a new vision.

Even if one believes his racist stereotyping is instrumentalized for purposes of revelatory critique, it is still questionable that he undertook no effort to change the nature of these stereotypes themselves. Conrad enters in an ecological negotiation of western civilizations' relationality with indigenous lands and peoples, but does not yet reimagine them. The important implication of his aesthetic politics, however, is that it allows for a consideration of unknown objects, like the African environment and inhabitants in *Heart of Darkness*, to overcome their own objecthood with a potent subjectivity. This provides an aesthetic-political entry point into an ecological philosophy of object-oriented ontology, which will be contextualized in the next section.

### **III.2 An Aesthetic Politics of Object-Oriented Ontology**

This section proceeds by establishing the fundamentals of OOO with references to *Heart of Darkness*, before considering how OOO can be developed through an aesthetic politics as a potent ecological philosophy subverting Anthropocene and Capitalocene sensibilities. To start an inquiry with OOO begets reference to its historical precedent, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger established the concept of *thing* as different from object, because things exist in an experience that is not premediated by the human description of the encounter (Heidegger 2009 [1971], 120). Objects become things when they lose their common functionality, when the instrumental inclination toward them malfunctions. This conceptualization is a bit more subtle than attributing agency to objects. It is, rather, as 'thing theorist' Bill Brown has since elaborated, a renewal and rejection of subject-object relationality, initiated from the side of the object. The object speaks back, changing the predispositions of the (human) subject toward it (Brown 2009, 140). It becomes thing by no longer being objectified in human perception.

*Heart of Darkness* metaphorically exemplifies this idea. Marlow and Kurtz are subjects with a predisposition toward Africa, following their treatment of the continent and its peoples as a manipulable, exploitable mass of nonhuman matter.

Their tendencies are quickly disturbed and overhauled once in touch with the ‘object matter’, leading to a redesignation of the European-African relationality initiated by the African response, rather than arising from western experience. To remain with the aforementioned metaphor: the relation is written by the object.

The value of OOO is that (nonhuman) objects lose their defined prefiguration. Read ecologically, as Timothy Morton argues, it offers “a world in which things can’t ever be completely irradiated by the ultraviolet light of thought, a world in which being a badger, nosing past whatever it is that you, a human being, are looking at thoughtfully, is just as validly accessing that thing as you are” (Morton 2018, xli).<sup>7</sup> Things, in other words, are deemed worthy both of employing perceptual modes of their own, and of eluding a kind of perception that predetermines their existence by categorial rigidity. As the founder of OOO, Graham Harman expands on the implications of such a bold philosophical vantage point. His book *Tool-Being* (2002), in which OOO was first established, radically positions Heidegger as assembling an ontology of objects on their own accord. Harman presents the idea that Heidegger did not only ascribe being to things, he also attributed ‘tool-being’ to non-things; that is to say every entity exists in a continuous exchange between subjective being and objectified being depending on their relationality (Harman 2002, 4). As Harman would clarify in his next work, the very existence of relationalities therefore threatens the ontology of objects as things; they essentially presuppose an existence of things that is not maintained outside of their confrontation with subjects (Harman 2005, 74). Harman thus proposes a view of object-realities that elude human instrumentalization completely, to establish that objects cannot ever be grasped: “The important thing is that any object, at any level of the world, has a reality that can be endlessly explored and viewed from numberless perspectives without ever being exhausted by the sum of these perspectives” (Harman 2005, 76). Herein, Harman echoes the Impressionist perspective (see chapter II) of incomplete and partial perception. Moreover, he argues that perceived things inevitably exist beyond this perception.

To make another analogy with *Heart of Darkness*, it is apparent from the novella that African man and land only exist insofar as they instrumentally relate to the western-imposed trade in the region. Hence the critique of Achebe, that Africa

only exists in the stereotypical image of it in western subjectivity, also translates to the shortcomings of subject-object dichotomies. The solution to this issue from an OOO simply entails that what existed only in the appraisal of western subjects actually has a subjectivity beyond this relationality. This stretches even further, with the core principle of OOO being: “All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, nonhuman, natural, cultural, real or fictional” (Harman 2017, 9). The question that instinctively arises is: how can this be achieved?

The answer proposed here is from an aesthetic politics. To grant objects equal consideration (as far as imaginable), this aesthetic politics rests on an interrelation of political and aesthetic concerns. Underlying these concerns is the perspectival change advocated by Impressionism, to embrace the volatility of nonhuman being and to blend it with human perception, to constitute a mutual mode of sensibility. Indeed, for Impressionist painters, nonhuman agents communicated impressions to the painter’s consciousness to inspire the artwork in the process of making. They are in this sense already a co-constitutive agent in the shaping of human culture.

The political question that naturally follows is: if nonhuman things can be agents, how could they play a part in actual (ecological) politics? Bruno Latour speculates on this question in his book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993 [1991]) in a section on “The Parliament of Things”. His argument was that representational democracy must no longer be the separate realm of specialized politicians, but rather a hybrid realm where the different ways of encountering things are shared and related to one another (Latour 1993, 144-145). In other words, (nonhuman) things can be voiced by the humans who know them best. The natural scientist, artist, business(wo)man, and industrial laborer, each with their idiosyncratic and situated encounters with things, should then be blended in a new political sphere. Latour further developed this train of thought in an article (2009 [2005]) in which he metaphorically asks: “What would an object-oriented democracy look like?” (Latour 2009, 154). For Latour, the answer is twofold, and rests in both ways on the issue of how objects can be represented.

Firstly, representative democracy should include actors from beyond those traditionally restricted to political expertise, as in his idea of a parliament of things (Latour 2009, 156-157). Secondly, there must be a greater focus on the debate

concerning which matters matter, which to him is a more profound debate than that of what matters factually consist of. Latour reiterates his view that political debate must follow from the subject matter that its practitioners consider important, regardless of stance, rather than being based on a presupposed ultimate and exhaustive knowledge of the matter of discussion (Latour 2009, 157-159). In other words, what is relevant is not so much what the facts are, but what the concerns related to these facts are, and how they are actively negotiated (cf. Latour 2004). This follows a metaphorical consideration of OOO: instead of treating (political) matter as a designated object with a logical and inevitable conclusion, it is unknowable, subjectively encountered and publicly negotiated. Accordingly, Latour speaks of “[bringing] the *res* [literally: things] back to the *res publica* [literally: public things; i.e. state]” (Latour 2009, 160). In other words: nonhuman things should be accordingly represented by people in closest connection with them, and the political debate that springs from their consideration should be focused not merely on assumedly exhaustive knowledge about them, but about what the concerns surrounding them are. Indeed, nonhuman things should not be considered as how they could instrumentally benefit human society, but also how they could benefit most optimally from politics on their own terms.

To concretize how Latour’s abstract (though provocative) advocacy of a parliament of things can be considered in actual political practice, Jane Bennett argues that an exclusion of nonhuman things is mirrored in the exclusion of human voices (Bennett 2010, 104). Bennett works through Rancière’s idea of a redistribution of the sensible to envision how, just as previously subordinated human forces can become (part of) a new public by means of a redistribution of the sensible, such a redistribution should also be able to redistribute the public in such a way that nonhuman factors are granted their voice within human society (Bennett 2010, 106-108). Naturally, this does not mean that nonhuman things can literally play the same role as human actors in democracy. It rather means that politics are henceforth inclusive of nonhuman existence, which would be extensively incorporated in sociopolitical concerns (Bennett 2010, 108-109). Ecological politics are therefore about more than effective adaptation to climate change effects on human society: nonhuman beings and the threats that face them

should be considered as an intrinsically important complementary concern.

Following Bennett's line of thought to Rancière, it becomes conceivable how his idea of aesthetic politics as a redistribution of the sensible could benefit the emancipation of nonhuman beings. Aesthetics, as Rancière argues, constitute the access mode of politics, because they determine who is allowed to speak and to be heard, based on who is capable of feeling and thinking sensibly. Rancière explains:

the process of emancipation is the verification of the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being. It is always enacted in the name of a category denied either the principle or the consequences of that equality: workers, women, people of color, or others. (Rancière 1992, 59)

These others could prospectively be extended to include nonhuman things – hence an ecological aesthetic politics may be tasked with making the nonhuman thing a speaking subject. The question remains how this could be conceivable. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the unexpected agency of the African object (both its land and indigenous peoples) already seems to prelude this, when the shocking idea is brought up that there may be a very human kinship between western and African man. Arguably, the shortcoming of the novella is that Conrad disturbs the preconceived objecthood of Africa by presenting it as a horrifying shock to Kurtz and Marlow, rather than as a burgeoning relationship built on shared principles of respect and empathy. However, the primary objective – to give the nonhuman object a voice, is surely realized, allowing for thorough subsequent negotiation.

Conrad's work therefore seems to prelude the aesthetic concern of equality in OOO, because it is in the aesthetic relationality with things that (nonhuman) objects can become speaking subjects. Harman illustrates this by his claims that aesthetics is the root of all philosophy in an OOO, "precisely because neither theoretical nor practical work can ever give us the inwardness of things" (Harman 2017, 78). In other words: things cannot be exhaustively known from the outside, and the best way to approximate what they (can) innately mean comes from an aesthetic approach to them. Because OOO advances the position that objects exist autonomously and therefore beyond mere human perception, any knowledge or experience of them is created only in the complementary imposition made on them

by their observer – the truth of things, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Aesthetics are therefore a mode of approaching an inward knowledge of things. Arguably, even in Conrad's racist description in *Heart of Darkness*, the novella grants the African a voice within western colonial orders. Even though they are still approached from the perspective of European men, in the streams of consciousness of these men, speculative knowledges about the humanity of African people are already suggested. For the nineteenth-century European, this fictional relationality is the closest manner to adequately understand the peril of African peoples. Thus, art has the ability to aesthetically conjure the emancipation of things beyond their objecthood. Literature in particular may fulfill this role, as Rita Felski writes:

Poetic description [circumvents] the schism of subject and object that fuels traditional epistemologies, to elicit and to expand on our involvement in the world. We rediscover things as we know them to be, yet reordered and redescribed, shimmering in a transformed light. (...) To really see a thing, it turns out, may require an absence rather than an abundance of words; a few salient details, artfully ordered, rather than an exhaustive summation or encyclopedic description. [Knowing] is shaped as much by what is left out as by what is kept in. (Felski 2008, 102)

For Felski, the task of literature is to configure by means of aesthetic devices the range of possibilities and permutations expounded in the aesthetic encounter with the thing. Indeed, recalling Conrad's manifest of wanting to make the reader *see*, it appears this is what literary impressionism can strive for par excellence. In the work of Virginia Woolf, discussed in this chapter's final section, these aesthetic relationalities are further developed, and nonhuman presence is found permeative of human subjectivity in both the most trivial and existential matters of life. Hence, her aesthetics epitomize the potentialities of an ecological aesthetic politics of OOO as an ecological philosophy.

### III.3 Virginia Woolf's Aesthetic Relationality with Things

This section argues that Woolf's literary impressionist aesthetics expounds relationalities between humans and nonhuman entities. After situating Woolf within (Post-)Impressionist literature, this section turns to close readings of her short story "The Mark on the Wall" and novel *To the Lighthouse*, both developed through the framework of OOO. The implication of the argument of this section is that an aesthetic approximation of nonhuman things is a valuable asset in an ecological sensibility which harmonizes human-nonhuman relationality.

When Woolf first visited the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1910, "Manet and the Post-Impressionists", she concluded that all human relations had changed, and with it, change was immanent in religion, conduct, politics, and literature as well (Woolf 1924, 4-5). Inspired by Post-Impressionist aesthetics, she distanced herself from her Realist critics by renouncing their preference for solid and realistic characters, for "what is reality" and "who are the judges of reality" (Woolf 1924, 10)? Woolf situated herself within a group of writers who came to see the instability of perception paralleled in the instability of aesthetics. Without any designation of how a work of literature must be, Woolf speaks of literature as fragmentary in its execution: "We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition" (Woolf 1924, 22). Truth and reality, for Woolf, did not arise from predetermined modes of engagement, but in the spontaneous encounters of life.

Therefore, Woolf's aesthetic politics rebutted philosophical regimes. Woolf did not so much reject any philosophical direction underlying writing, but rather embraced the instability of subjectivity within which it forms. As Matz explains:

It is less a philosophy of flux than a belief that some selves are flux-philosophers and some are not – that some see empirically, some are phenomenological, and that they alternate according to moods, which are in turn basic to life. Woolf's philosophical affiliations change with the moods of her characters, which is why no philosophical affiliation can define her vague theory of fiction. It is also why the impression suits her so well: in its indeterminacy, the impression responds well to differences in mood, seeming sometimes to place an empiricist emphasis on the primacy of perception, but

able also to stand for phenomenological combination and less theoretical feelings. (Matz 2003, 175-176)

There is a personal component to this flexibility of character moods, as Woolf herself appeared to struggle with a manic-depressive illness (i.e. bipolarity) and therefore did not find consistency in her own application to life (Dalsimer 2001, 177). Still, Woolf's embrace of aesthetic instability could itself be called an embodied philosophy. The aesthetic idea of this philosophy is inspired by Post-Impressionist aesthetics. The Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1910 was organized by the painter and Woolf's friend Roger Fry, who discussed the fundament and coined the term of Post-Impressionism in his essays. In "An Essay in Aesthetics" (1998 [1920]), Fry articulated his new sense of aesthetic judgement, with which he distinguished the artistic object from the instrumental object. Fry argues against the idea that contemplation can be satisfied in the aesthetic object – rather, the object must awaken a heightened power of perception that the observer at first did not realize was there (Fry 1998, 80). For Fry, this could mean a disavowal of standardized beauty and the emancipation of the observer's sensations beyond restrictive criteria of judgement – exactly why abstract art is more than 'ugly'. Thus, the aesthetic object's formal characteristics elicit the transformation of perception.

This aesthetic transformation may productively parallel the realization of the object as a thing. The function of aesthetics is not to express a state of being (beautiful, true, provocative etc.), but to question the extent to which this being exists beyond the primary association of this being as such, a question explored in the aesthetic relation between observer and object. Woolf translated such a view to her writing, in which she highlighted the parallel of instability in both the observer's consciousness and the object's perceptuality. In her short story "The Mark on the Wall" she appeared to explore this question when she wrote about the inward reflection of a person staring at a mark residing on an interior wall of their house. The peculiarity of the mark evokes a series of interior monologues which designate a 'stream of consciousness' motif – they follow the narrator's evolving speculation and associative ideas: "How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object" (Woolf 2014, 69), the narrator acknowledges. A reductionist, measured

description of the mark is given early on: “a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece” (Woolf 2014, 69). Yet this knowledge does not satisfy the narrator. Moreover, the narrator reveals humility in the face of further ascertaining the mark. The narrator fails to put a sudden stop to their reflection, even as they realize the steam of reflection is at odds with nature’s will:

Here is Nature once more at her old game of self-preservation. This train of thought, she perceives, is mere waste of energy, even some collision with reality (...) I understand Nature’s game – her prompting to take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or to pain. (Woolf 2014, 78)

The stream of consciousness is an act contrary to efficiency and instrumentality, a counterintuition against natural inclination. In a way, the unnatural of thinking to excite or to pain the mind is par excellence a function of aesthetic politics – to reach the limits of the sensible. Accordingly, the narrator’s pursuit of knowledge over the mark ends with the mark overwhelming the former with ideas: “Everything’s moving, falling, slipping, vanishing... There is a vast upheaval of matter” (Woolf 2014, 80). Then comes the revelation that this mark on the wall was actually a snail: a living thing rather than an inert object. It is as if the stale mark has been willed to life through the aesthetic encounter of the narrator’s reflection.

In Jonathan Quick’s analysis of the story, staleness and aesthetics are opposed:

The “reality” of the mark on the wall is (...) expressed as a series of acute but always tentative exploratory observations, its deepest interest arising not from any sense of complacent generalization about the external “historical” world which it might be thought to confirm (...), but rather from its very concreteness as an object existing in the ordinary universe – “something definite, something real” which expresses an intrinsically satisfying sense of reality to the “patient, watchful” observer. Far from being a withdrawal into the sterile self-indulgence of aestheticism, such a rejection of “history” promises an “intoxicating sense of freedom” allowing both writer and reader to expand their constricted consciousness of “standard things” to the point of “worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is a proof of some existence other than ours. (Quick 1985, 558)

Quick appears to say that, if only a human perceives its everyday objects long and patiently enough, they live to see it take on its rightful existence. Naturally, this is not to see that a drawer will start walking if it is perceived long enough, but the point is that instead of regarding the nonhuman object as a designated, inert entity that cannot become alive enough, it is a matter of expanding human sensibility to the degree where this is possible. This is how Woolf's aesthetic politics entail a co-constituted sense of reality between observer and object. Aesthetic form, for Woolf, acts upon the observer's emotions regardless of any preconceived meaning attributed to the artwork's subject matter. Thus, the mark's measured facts are irrelevant to the way in which they make the narrator reflect. This indicates the purest synthesis of form and meaning in accord with Post-Impressionism, where the observer's experience of an artwork's form is a pure experience of life and should therefore not rely on considerations external to this experience (Roberts 1946, 843). Woolf translated this aesthetic ideal to her literary work, and would explicate her stance accordingly in the essay "Modern Fiction" (1994 [1925]):

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (Woolf 1994, 160-161)

Hence, Woolf's modern approach rebuts the externality of realistic designation. The novel is meant to propose an inward reflection on life. This Post-Impressionist aesthetic politics facilitates a transition of human-thing relationality, because rather than approaching objects externally, an inward connection – though not realistically palpable – is made possible by aesthetic means. Fiction, for Woolf, is the possibility to achieve relationality with the "unknown and uncircumscribed spirit[s]" residing outside of conventional human sensibility. These spirits could align with nonhuman things. It is no surprise that Brown picked up on Woolf's writing as a fundament of his thing theory, writing that Woolf's work insists on "dislodging objects from a history of their proximity to subjects, from liberating artifacts out of their status as determinate signs, from rendering a life of things that

is irreducible to the history of human subjects” (Brown 1999, 13). Things, for Woolf, live beyond their tool-being to humankind, because in their aesthetic relation to human subjects they take on an existence beyond their instrumental use. The mark in “The Mark on the Wall” is an object of aesthetic interest, not a worry for keeping the mantelpiece in order.

The scale of Woolf’s OOO is expanded in her novel *To the Lighthouse*. The work features a semi-autobiographical background of an island in the Hebrides, on which Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay host guests of the higher British social classes in their summer home. Here, they discuss arts, science and politics, and reflect on their own lives, families and relations. Events are narrated chronologically, albeit in a rather fragmented manner. The novel exists in three parts. Part I, “The Window,” and part III, “The Lighthouse,” feature little narrated time (i.e. the span of a few days), but much more narrative time (i.e. relatively many pages), whereas part II, “Time Passes,” does the polar opposite: years go by in the span of about twenty pages. The British intellectuals are featured in the first and third part of the novel, and are replaced in the second part by the abandoned house they visited before and after, now inhabited habitually by its caretaker. While “Time Passes” separates the fragments of character studies, it also connects them; it signifies the relation between the two parts which were otherwise pure fragments (Banfield 2003, 503).

The novel composes this connection both philosophically and formally. Philosophically, it shows the vast contrast between the ‘higher’ ordering of knowledge by the human subject and the power of uninhabited matter when it is allowed to speak. In the first part, during a dinner party, the characters discuss the value of an eternal legacy. Particularly Mr. Ramsay, as a philosophy professor, is concerned with his academic legacy: “How long would he be read – he would think at once” (Woolf 2017, 99). Earlier, during this same dinner party, Mr. Ramsay is frustrated by a guest wallowing in his food and ordering a second serving of soup: “He hated everything dragging on for hours like this” (Woolf 2017, 88). Woolf evokes one of her characters’ most existential questions with one of the most minor intrusions of circumstance, in scenes which perceptibly match each other in emotional impact, exemplifying her renunciation of categorical distinction in favor of a mood-based constitution of reality. It signifies a grander theme of the novel’s

structure, namely that human experience is intricately tied to the moment and has no true sense of eternity beyond that. Eternity is only experienced as such in the world of things, which live outside of human experience, as in “Time Passes.”

Formally, this relationality is exemplified in the character Lily Briscoe, a female novice painter who, throughout the novel, is working on a painting. This painting depicts the house with Mrs. Ramsay reading to her youngest son James, both visible through a window. Initially, Lily struggles and is admonished by another (male) guest, who asserts that women cannot paint or write. After part II, in which Mrs. Ramsay and some of her children had died, and after Mr. Ramsay and some of his remaining children leave the island to visit the neighboring island’s lighthouse, she realizes her vision on the canvas.<sup>8</sup> “With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (Woolf 2017, 194). Lily’s battle with her aesthetic form is mirrored in that of the novel’s task to bring unity to an otherwise fragmentary story; her line in the center of the painting could be interpreted as the decision to bring the second part in-between the first and third parts of the novel.<sup>9</sup> For John Hawley Roberts, it is moreover the parallel between the order of aesthetic form and life itself that is negotiated. By reviving the image of Mrs. Ramsay through the painting, Lily reconnects what time has disentangled: Mrs. Ramsay’s life, and the manner in which she ordered relationships to those around her (family and guests) (Roberts 1946, 846–847).<sup>10</sup> If human subjectivity only exists in the momentary, and it is admitted that things last and beyond such limitations, aesthetics serve a fundamental role in the reconnection of human relations after the decay of time.

*To the Lighthouse* parallels the aesthetic ordering of form to the relational ordering of life. Through the above incidents, it may be understood what Woolf meant when she asserted that human relations changed upon the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition. However, this assertion should be taken further in her work, to mean that all human-nonhuman relations have changed due to her aesthetic politics. Michael Whitworth exemplifies this when he writes about *To the Lighthouse* that there is a parallel between thinking about people when they are no longer there and about objects when they are no longer in vision (when they

are no longer objects predesignated by subjective human construction). Instead of active perception, Whitworth draws attention to how “in the moment of recollection, [subjective] memories are as vivid as present perceptions of the objective world” (Whitworth 2005, 117). Following Whitworth, her aesthetic imaginary breathes life into that which seems inert beyond active human perception in the present; it gives objects the quality of things, this can be as easily a mark on the wall as a dead Mrs Ramsay. Thereby, it renounces the stability predesignated conceptualization gives to objects and focuses on the chaos of the encounter between perceiver and perceived. Whitworth summarizes Woolf’s aesthetic philosophy accordingly:

The essence of Woolf’s argument is that if we free ourselves from the tyranny of fictional convention, and attend to the actual ‘impressions’, we can see that modern life does not follow the patterns employed by realist writers (...). Her argument is concerned primarily with the structural conventions of the novel, but it extends down to the conventions of language and the way that it filters experience. (Whitworth 2005, 118)

Woolf’s proposition is clear: to escape the tyranny of convention and embrace an instable impressionism. Her work gives a voice to things rather than preconceived objects, to let the chaos of impressions speak rather than stable conventions. There is no top access mode to reality, a stance she shares with OOO (Morton 2018, xl-xli). Woolf’s writing instead resembles Morton’s idea of *ecomimesis*, an aesthetics of nature writing which displays the situatedness of experiencing the here and now rather than the historical conventions embodied in the perceiver. It is especially striking that Morton gave ecomimesis the characteristic of ambience, the capture of the environmental atmosphere (Morton 2007, 32-34), whereas Woolf speaks of moods. Woolf’s literary impressionism emphasizes the flexibility of perception as destabilizing reality, constituted by an aesthetic human-environment relationality.

Woolf’s literary writings most emblematically represent an ecological aesthetic politics as it comprises the interrelations of aesthetics and politics. Through the emergent chaos of impressions, Woolf negotiates who is allowed to speak (the dead, demarcated objects, animals) and how thought runs counter to predesignated conventions. Thus, she embraces the volatility of life and how

sensibility is object-oriented. This is literary impressionism's concretization of Impressionist painting's opening up of ecological negotiation as the singularization of perception mirrored in the volatility of natural environments. It not only openly captures the objects of perception in their subjective relationalities, it also inscribes these objects with life, by means of constructing an aesthetic relation to them. Thus defined, ecological impressionism makes an ecological philosophy palpable through aesthetic politics by reinventing the sensible. The remainder of this thesis seeks to establish ecological impressionism as a framework to interpret the contemporary media of animation film and videogames, applying and evaluating these two aesthetic-political characteristics of Impressionist painting and literature: the singularization of perception as influenced by the volatility of nature, and the aesthetic consideration of subjectivity in nonhuman bodies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The N-Word was spelled out in the original title, but is now more commonly censored.

<sup>2</sup> As argued by Stephen Kern, “Conrad could not have picked a more appropriate anarchist objective, a more graphic symbol of centralized political authority” (Kern 1983, 16).

<sup>3</sup> This making of sense can likewise be read metaphorically. The attack is supposed to shock London because it is ‘senseless’, and the bomb’s wielder is autistic in that he is not confirmative to the normalized idea of a ‘sensible’ person – especially in Conrad’s context. It could be inferred that the bomb is an attack on the sensible as such, and that through reading as a detective, the reader composes a new sensibility.

<sup>4</sup> While the exact name of the river is not specified, it is easily assumed that Conrad speaks of the Congo River, as he reflects on a Belgian trading company and is inspired by his own commandeering of a riverboat on the Congo River, as evidenced by his Congo Diary (2015 [1978-1988]).

<sup>5</sup> This view is elaborated on in Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), where she traces the exploitation of indigenous peoples and their environments in their conception of inhumanity.

<sup>6</sup> It is therefore especially thought-provoking that the novella centers around ivory trade, a most literal extraction of the nonhuman (Hojjat and Daronkolae 2013, 9-10). Crucially, there is talk of ivory, but not of elephants, further signifying the externalization of the human from the animal (McCarthy 2009, 621-622).

<sup>7</sup> Morton takes this argument one step further with his concept of *hyperobjects* (2013), objects that not only transcend the human boundaries of thought and spatiotemporal specificity, but impact the world beyond humanity’s influence and control, such as global warming.

<sup>8</sup> Keeping the feminist dimension of Woolf’s oeuvre in mind (2019 [1929]), it could be argued that Lily succeeds in finishing her painting exactly because she has the island as an artistic space of her own.

<sup>9</sup> This conclusion is likewise implied by Woolf’s own resemblance of painting through writing. Linda Nicole Blair takes this widely made point a step further when she writes: “In her fiction, Woolf gives voice to her search for language that could indeed compete with, and perhaps surpass, the language of painting in its ability to cut through to the essence of experience” (Blair 2010, 15).

<sup>10</sup> Whitworth similarly interprets this connection between Lily’s artistic concerns and Mrs Ramsay’s concerns as a hostess. In fact, Whitworth suggests that “the dinner party is an artistic composition” (Whitworth 2005, 114) and that “By extending the language of aesthetics into the domestic sphere (...), Woolf is able to suggest that (...) Mrs Ramsay gave ‘form’ to the chaos of her family and friends” (Whitworth 2005, 115).

## IV. Animating Animals, Drawing Relationalities

### Considering an Ecological Aesthetic Politics of Animation Film

[Thinking] concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking.

- Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)"

Our customary visible order is not the only one: it coexists with other orders. Stories of fairies, sprites, ogres were a human attempt to come to terms with this coexistence. Hunters are continually aware of it and so can read signs we do not see. Children feel it intuitively, because they have the habit of hiding behind things. There they discover the interstices between different sets of the visible.

- John Berger, "Opening a Gate"

The animal is first and foremost an aesthetic deity: a model for the immediacy of sense as a challenge to the culture's privileging of the abstractions of mind, such as interpretation; for beauty before utility, for the raw before the cooked.

- Alan Bleakley, *The Animalizing Imagination*

This chapter conceives how ecological impressionism can effectively travel from its historical context to contemporary media. To recap: ecological impressionism is this thesis' interpretation of ecological aesthetic politics. An aesthetic politics revolves around the reimagination of the sensible – what can be perceived and thought, by means of an aesthetic transition of medial forms. An ecological aesthetic politics promotes ecological sensibility. Ecological impressionism refers to how Impressionism exemplifies the principles of how an ecological sensibility can be aesthetic-politically advanced. Impressionist painting rendered perception instable, allowing natural inspiration to blend with the subjective contemplation of aesthetics. Literary impressionism expanded on this condition by revealing how preconceived objects could be granted subjectivities of their own in aesthetic consideration. The contention of this chapter is that such an ecological aesthetic politics can be identified in Studio Ghibli's divergence from realist animation.

Animation film is a most potent medium of ecological impressionism, ostensibly because of its optical similarity to Impressionist painting. Similar to how Impressionists rebutted the capture of reality as both Realism and photography claimed it, animation principally favors the composition of reality over a (photo)realistic representation of reality. As such, animation both acknowledges that perceptual reality is constructed, and actively “resists any predetermined social and cultural construction, constantly pointing up (...) its engagement with pre-constituted formulations and its interpretation of them” (Wells 2009, 17). Animation's aesthetic ideal could therefore be to question the conventional perception of reality. However, this ideal is not unequivocally embodied. Especially Disney, the most successful animation studio, restrains aesthetic change by employing realist aesthetics – that is to say, aesthetic adherence to physical laws of the ‘real’ world. Contrary to Disney's approach, the Japanese Studio Ghibli has been credited with realizing the potential of going beyond realism (Parham 2016, 241).

This chapter situates animation aesthetics within ecological impressionism, arguing that the Ghibli approach could be conceived as the ecological aesthetic-political revolution of animation film. The previous chapters have identified two Impressionist principles which could be considered in an ecological aesthetic politics. The first, stemming from Impressionist painting, is that perception is

singular, and can be influenced by volatile nonhuman agents of the natural world in the aesthetic process. The second, taken from Conrad and Woolf's literary works, is that aesthetics could be utilized to consider yet unrealistic subjectivity in objectified (nonhuman) bodies. Section IV.1 explores the Disney-Ghibli debate, arguing that Disney films depict nonhuman environments as existing in conformation to a conventional human idea of their realistic existence. Ghibli films contrast Disney by blurring fantasy and realism to effectively reanimate ecological human-environment relationalities, employing fiction to give nonhumans a voice.<sup>1</sup> Section IV.2 elaborates on this through a case study of Ghibli's POM POKO. The film uses the folkloric myth of shapeshifting raccoon dogs and their loss of habitat as an allegory for ecological crisis, juxtaposing the loss of nature with that of culture.

Here, Bal's (2002) cultural analysis methodology, which involves the conceptual approach to cultural object analyses, entails the confrontation of ecological aesthetic politics as a concept with the case study of POM POKO as the object. As an ecological aesthetic politics of animation film will be identified as pertaining to the manner in which nonhuman animals are aesthetically animated with a life that is only conceivable as existing outside of human society, the framework of the analysis is identifying this characteristic. However, this approach is complemented by specific film-analytical considerations. It focuses on POM POKO's narrative form – how the film tells its story (Bordwell et al. 2017, 72–73), and draws from this form a symptomatic meaning – what the film's plot allegorizes (Bordwell et al. 2017, 60). This constitutes the first part of the analysis, which identifies the ecological themes of the film, and is substantiated with still images of film shots to bridge to the second part of the analysis, dedicated to the film's style, especially the identified aesthetics of animating animal life beyond human conceivability – which may be considered a consideration specific to animation film (Bordwell et al. 2017, 387). In this second part, the aesthetic politics of POM POKO's animation style is connected to the ecological theme – thus film style is also connected to form. In other words, the central question of the analysis is: how do the aesthetics of POM POKO's animation style allow for the negotiation of its eco-political themes? The findings of this analysis will be used to interrogate the concept of ecological aesthetic politics, and how it can be understood as a framework for contemporary media.

#### **IV.1 Going Beyond Realist Animation Aesthetics: Disney versus Ghibli**

Animation film is potently equipped for an ecological aesthetic politics. Essentially, animation exists in making statically drawn images on paper move. To animate therefore means to give life to what is itself inert, subverting the spectator's conventional perception. Paul Wells accordingly writes that "animation can defy the laws of gravity, challenge our perceived view of space and time, and endow lifeless things with dynamic and vibrant properties" (Wells 1998, 11). Thus, animation is by means of its form a reimagination of perceptual reality. The idea that lifeless things can be endowed with vividness is thereby responsive to an object-oriented ontology (OOO) perspective. In OOO, the objects of human consciousness are ascribed their own subjectivity. In animation, this drawn, lively animated object is often an animal. As Sean Cubitt argues, drawing resembles the demarcation of territory by an animal, confining space within a vast area, differing only by the ability to separate the image from the paper (for example by copying it on a different surface), whereas territory remains owed to its material existence. This dynamic, Cubitt continues, means drawing redefines a particular relation of the human to environments and their human-animal boundaries (Cubitt 2005, 29). Animation film therefore aesthetically reimagines human-nature relationalities.

Because of this, animation is by its aesthetic nature a manner of (re)distributing the sensible – its dynamics are about bringing to life a fictional spatiotemporal reality within which relationalities are reimaged. Its advantage is that it can do so without invoking heated sociopolitical discourse: Disney films provide a safe space where fiction can be enjoyed without this stress (Whitley 2008, 2-3). The 'tragedy' of Disney animation, however, is that it gradually started focusing on the accurate capture of animal physiology and behavior within vivid animation aesthetics, in a style inspired by live-action filmmaking (Wells 1998, 23-24). Animation aesthetics under Disney became like redrawing a photograph using loose brushstrokes and calling it Impressionism – using animation to mimic rather than redraw the construction from which to perceive the real world. Animation thus lost a potential ecological aesthetic idea, favoring a representation of reality over an active reconstruction of how nonhuman environments can be perceived.

Hence the relevance of exploring aesthetic alternatives. If the goal of ecological aesthetic politics is to employ aesthetics to reimagine politics ecologically, this necessitates moving away from Disney's conventional realism. John Parham argues that once it does, animation "has great potential in terms of developing aesthetic models that accord with the complexity and dialecticism of an ecological perspective" (Parham 2016, 241). Indeed, animation aesthetics could be effectively employed to redraw human-nature relationalities based on equal subjectivities, rather than remaining in a framework which limits the nonhuman to what humans believe they realistically are. Typical Disney films portray nonhuman worlds as functioning according to assumptions enveloped in human society. They give spectators a look inside natural worlds, but always in composition from a standard human viewpoint. The magical phenomena of these films are often ascribed to humans and products of human culture, whereas animals are their companions sticking to their biological function. Contrary to OOO's idea that nonhuman objects have subjectivities beyond human conceptualization, Disney's animals live predestined lives. *THE LION KING* (1994) is a case in point.<sup>2</sup> What both the film's plot and realist aesthetics communicate is that social hierarchies are naturally ordained, and that 'natural' hierarchies are socially ordained. The king is destined to rule and the weaker species, looking up at their ruler, have to obey him or perish. When hyena's, the film's failure of evolution and social outcasts, take over, this inexplicably leads to the ecosystem's ruin. As Dan Hassler-Forest (2019) has so provocatively argued, *THE LION KING* represents a fascistic rather than an ecological ideal, as the idea of nature only exists to serve the persistence of social hierarchies.

*THE LION KING*'s realist aesthetics make a natural law of hierarchy – the lion rules the ecosystem – an acceptable reality. This contrasts the idea of aesthetic politics, which draws attention to such hierarchical politics. Animals are thereby useful to draw allegories with human society. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (2013 [1945]), where a farm represents the Soviet Union, is an example. Here, an allegorical connection is pursued rather than omitted. The animals of *Animal Farm* are carefully composed precisely because they imply how human relations function or have functioned. The same would be appropriate for animation film. Rather than convincing audiences of the beauty of the natural world outside of humanity, it

may look for the wounds of human-nature relationality. Rather than making the natural and animal domains naturally confirmative to societal law, it could effectively allegorize the faults of certain societal tendencies. Additionally, it may positively redraw human-nature relationality by utilizing the imaginary qualities of animation aesthetics to breath life into the externalized entity of the nonhuman.

Disney's reluctance to effectively politicize its animation aesthetics ecologically explains the aversion to realist animation. Disney tries to serve off animation's essential quality of reimagining environmental relations in favor of making environments prettier and obedient to reality. If animation can be visionary, Disney is happy with a status quo of subordination. By animating animals as confirmative to preconceived notions of physical realism, animals take on a role already ascribed to them. As John Berger noted, “[in all the animal productions of the Disney industry] the pettiness of current social practices is *universalized* by being projected on to the animal kingdom” (Berger 2009 [1980], 25-26). Following Berger's analysis, Disney films draw a human-animal relationality similar to that of the zoo. They provide the window from which to view animal behavior and wonder at their magnificence. However, as John Berger asserted, there is something lacking about the zoo experience, as spectators come to see beings that exist as a mere token of its species, rather than as a creature of its own in their rightful environment. This is in spite of the zoo's attempt to simulate habitats as realistically as possible. Disney thus animates a quite literal enclosure through which to appreciate the beauty of animal life – as distinct from yet shaped by human culture. It is clear that these conservative animation aesthetics need to be reimaged to ecologically reinvent human-nature relationalities.

Studio Ghibli offers an avenue for this. Instead of realistically representing animals according to sociocultural conceptions, Ghibli films actively look for present tensions underlying human-nature relationalities.<sup>3</sup> Ghibli does so through an aesthetic politics originating from the philosophy of its two main directors, Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata. Parham describes this philosophy as follows:

Miyazaki's films, in contrast to the realist aesthetic of Disney, aim both to blur surface realism and to uncover the ecological interconnections that

underlie human existence. These films are, as Takahata has described them, fictional creations of ‘ideal’ worlds that interact with a recognizable ‘reality’. (Parham 2016, 253)

Accordingly, both auteurs make films where environments have spiritual qualities, invoking supernatural elements. Through this spirituality, environments are granted a voice with which to converse with humanity. For instance, in Miyazaki’s PRINCESS MONONOKE (1997), a forest threatened by neighboring human societies is inhabited by spirits and ruled by a god. To control the forest, these societies desire to kill this forest god, symbolizing a transition from worshipping the spirituality of nonhuman environments to their exploitation for industrial purposes (Mumcu and Yilmaz 2018, 11). When they succeed, the forest god responds with a wave of destructive pollution. Through the fictional conception of the forest god, the recognizable reality of exploited forestland is given a voice to speak back with.

By giving nature a voice, dialogue with humanity can finally be envisioned. This is a recurring strategy of Ghibli films which recomposes human-environment relationality. Naturally, it is impossible to know the inwardness of nonhuman life, and thus presumptuous to ascribe any fundamental quality to it, even if based on worship. But the attempt is to effectively negotiate an ecological relation through aesthetics by recognizing that the natural world has a subjectivity beyond human conception. POM POKO, analyzed in the next section, further specifies this strategy, as it renders ecological crises negotiable through folklore.

#### **IV.2 POM POKO’s Folkloric Ecological Crisis as an Aesthetic Politics**

This section provides a case study analysis of Takahata’s POM POKO (1994). The objective of this analysis is to showcase how this Ghibli film subtly captures the studio’s reconstruction of human-nature relationalities by expounding on the fiction-reality interaction of Ghibli’s aesthetic politics. The film centers around a society of *tanuki* (Japanese raccoon dogs) living on the Tama Hills neighboring Tokyo. Within Japanese folklore, tanuki are mythical creatures capable of

shapeshifting and transformation. While folkloric tales about tanuki have a lengthy history (Ortabasi 2013), POM POKO translates this mythical origin to a modern Japanese context and in the process, reveals shifting relationalities between human and tanuki, as well as human and environmental mythology. On the surface, POM POKO is a whimsical interpretation of folklore. The tanuki are shown to be decadent, lazy and intellectually underdeveloped characters, not adept at making rational decisions amongst themselves. True to their folklore, they are depicted with augmented scrotums during their shapeshifting. The title of POM POKO also refers to the sound of tanuki using their belly as a drum – a fact equally established in myth. All in all, the film seems to aspire to cartoonish comedy.

This, however, is a façade that eases the viewer into much more serious questions of human-environment relationality. As in Impressionist painting and literature, it can be observed in this film that both a confusion of perception and an inscription of subjectivity in (nonhuman) objects is accounted for. The latter is evident from the film's adherence to folklore, wherein tanuki are realized as vivid creatures with distinct personalities. The former is achieved by the prominent metaphor of transformation: it is not wholly clear whether humans or tanuki are constructing the narrative, and this is especially evident from the fact that the tanuki's ecological crisis feels strikingly similar to that of humanity's climate crisis, both in terms of increasing exacerbation and poorly conceived responsive action.

An early scene in the film already indicates the precarious of the tanuki's habitual environment, as "the greatest urban development project in history" plans to replace the tanuki habitat of the Tama Hills forest with a Tokyo neighborhood district to house 300.000 humans. With their local living resources in the environment rapidly decreasing, the tanuki begin to struggle for the remains of the forest. Alliances develop between the tanukis which eventually culminates in an all-out military engagement of two factions, red and blue, where the magical ability to transform is employed where possible to manifest weaponry and armor (figure 5). In this early scene, the viewer witnesses the three perpetually shifting animation styles of the tanuki: as realistic raccoon dogs (figure 6), as their habitual form of anthropomorphic shapeshifting animals with clearly demarcated scrotums (figure 5), and as more simplistic, cartoonish raccoon dogs (figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The red tanuki army (left) ambushes the blue army (middle), both in anthropomorphic form, after the blue army pushed an isolated, cartoonishly animated group of red army tanuki to surrender (right). In the background, a crane signifies the rapidly disappearing forest habitat.

In the heat of battle, a tanuki elder mediates and disrupts the armies' fight over resources, reminding them humans are the reason for the destruction of the forest. Rather than fight among themselves, then, the necessity of dealing with the structural issue of deforestation is advocated. This becomes the central conflict of the film. The tanuki negotiate the various ways with which to deal with their grim situation's perspective of ecological doom. Here, the film covers a metaphorical allegory to humanity's notice and response to the global warming crisis. Immediately, the tanuki publicly assemble and adopt motions to effectively deal with the crisis, for example with the measure to outlaw midday naps to pay attention to the construction work instead. The film's narrator explains: "Despite the fact that [tanuki] have trouble taking anything seriously, they managed to agree to stop the development." The elders are left to develop a five-year plan which includes learning more about the human ways to effectively counter them, and to revive and improve transformation skills to be able to defend and adapt. When the question is posed who among the elders will make a journey to seek the guidance of the masters of transformation in a different part of Japan, "all the elders pretended to be asleep", because tanuki are "notoriously lazy".



**Figure 6. The tanuki as ‘realistic’ raccoon dogs upon initiating their military engagement.**

Indeed, just as with humanity’s actual response to global warming, the necessity of action is directly admitted, and the burden of taking responsibility recognized. In human history, the threat of global warming was widely acknowledged as a problem of the capitalist status quo at the end of the 1980s, but when the Berlin Wall fell, the triumphant narrative of western capitalism crushed any ecological concerns that contrasted the desirability of its system (Klein 2015 [2014], 74-75). This dynamic is complemented by capitalism’s effective lures away from action. When the tanuki, upon studying human behavior, encounter a television set and install it in their temple, it results in “dozens of [tanuki], crowded into the temple, [watching] TV all day, and [losing] all desire to accomplish anything else.” The TV scene (figure 7) is symptomatic of the pro-capitalist story heralded by CEOs of giant corporations and right-wing politicians, that capitalism is the cause so many people have access to the newest technological modifications to make life more comfortable. This argument is both factually contestable and malevolent in its censorship of the negative effects of technology in capitalism (Gilbert 2020, 22-23). Enjoying addictive gadgets deactivates the user from taking action. Indeed, the tanuki appear to be stuck within Capitalocene sensibility: immediate gratification over long-term strategizing hinder their negotiation of ecological crisis.



**Figure 7. The tanuki's addiction to their acquired television set on display.**

The hitherto analyzed scenes only cover the first ten minutes of a two hour-long film, but it is sufficient material to draw a striking allegory to humanity's response to the climate crisis. This allegory further develops when the swiftness of the human advance in Tama Hills soon requires a change of strategy. Gonta, the original red army leader, upon seeing his childhood habitat demolished, proposes a "change of plans: we begin attacking the humans *now*." Using their developed transformation skills, the tanuki ambush construction workers, killing three, and a TV broadcast the following morning hints at the discontinuation of the project due to the enigmatic circumstances of the deaths. The tanuki celebrate this victory, but not without questioning whether they should wipe out all humans, or keep some living at their side as in old times. In this undecided debate, humans are both considered overpopulated roaches, and the reason the decadent tanuki can indulge in delights like popcorn and tempura. Then, a new broadcast shakes up the tanuki by announcing that "the new development project will *not* be delayed despite today's tragic accidents." Amid the resulting tumult, Gonta suffers a severe injury, and the efforts to disturb construction work are compromised enough to make the topic disappear from mainstream media coverage, in spite of the tanuki using their transformation skills to enhance the narrative of spiritual presence (figure 8).



**Figure 8. To encourage fear of forest spirits, the tanuki transform into spiritual statues upon an interested party's visit, communicating that the forest is potently equipped with spiritual force.**

Again, an allegorical comparison is warranted, now to the lack of media coverage on the climate emergency. In POM POKO, these allegories stack to communicate the increasing precarity of the situation. In winter, scarcity of food makes the tanuki unable to carry out any anti-construction operations due to lack of energy. After winter, the increased use of traps and human occupation of the hills forces the tanuki to use their transformation skills adaptively instead, by having to blend in with human society to gather new resources from there. The two responses to climate crisis, mitigation (limiting of the causes) and adaptation (limiting of the effects), are, in concord with recent research (Lee et al. 2020), proven to be simultaneously motioned. The human advancement in the forest not only impacts how much the tanuki must adapt to their worsened conditions, but it also means that they can no longer put as much energy into mitigating the crisis. Like building a dam using coal power, the tanuki use their limited transformation energy out of necessity for current survival. As time is ticking, the ideological differences within tanuki society culminate when the recovered Gonta violently takes over, briefly transforming the tanuki society in a totalitarian state where all should obey his commands and be prepared to die to save the habitat (figure 9).



**Figure 9. Gonta violently seizes command of the united effort to stop the construction project.**

Gonta's coup, while not sustained, shows how societal tensions mount in the face of ecological catastrophe. When the transformation masters arrive, they decide on a definitive attempt to scare off the humans by organizing a massive parade of supernatural imagery in town. The parade is a grand success, astonishing everyone, but soon after it is claimed by a local theme park owner as a publicity stunt, nullifying the actual effect. This was the final straw for the tanuki: since, they split up in factions with their own response to the advanced crisis. Gonta leads a guerilla warfare effort; experts of transformation skills experiment with blending in with human society; and others stick around purposelessly engaging in religious dances. The disintegration of tanuki society matches their habitat's destruction.

Gonta's militant effort uses the tanuki's shapeshifting skills – particularly their inflatable testicles – to engage in a form of “carnivalesque ecoterrorism” (Borlik 2015). Yet valiant as their effort is, they are eventually no match for riot police upon confrontation, and are all killed. This leaves the tanuki with the alternative of blending in with human society. While the robust transformers take on human forms, the less gifted live off rubbish and the kindness of some individual humans to feed them. Only a margin of the tanuki community survives, depicted in the film’s bittersweet ending of a rare reunion of a group of tanuki dancing together.

As illustrated, POM POKO's plot provides a plethora of allegories to the climate crisis and the difficulties of negotiating an effective response. The next step shows how these ecological politics are communicated in an aesthetically innovative manner. This argument rests on two observations: the animation of the tanuki, and the film's use of folklore. Attention has been paid to the three forms of tanuki animation (figure 5 and 6). The film's fluid transition between these styles led Ursula Heise to argue that "animation itself becomes implicated in the art of shape-shifting, as well as in the inauthentic and highly plasmatic culture it portrays" (Heise 2014, 314). Indeed, POM POKO appears aware of what animation means as a method of breathing life into the unknown by means of the fictional. This would explain why the tanuki are most often seen anthropomorphically when in their own habitat – an emblematic example of Cubitt's comparison between drawing and demarcating animal territory – and realistically when on the margins of encounter with human society. Their existence as realistic creatures corresponds to their basal activity, such as foraging. This mode reveals the life of raccoon dogs as they exist to humans (the zoo life), whereas the anthropomorphic forms represent the life they live for themselves. The latter animation style gives the tanuki an existence beyond human sensibility. POM POKO aesthetically envisions this life. Thus, animation animates the tanuki, supported herein by tanuki folklore.

In Japanese folklore, tanuki are magical creatures capable of wonders. The myth conveys a more primal form of connection with the natural world, based on respect and humility. The mythical power ascribed to tanuki grants them a spiritual agency which makes their existence aesthetically imaginable. Yet, as Heise opines, POM POKO implies a transition of this relation, exemplified through the theme park owner's laying claim of the supernatural transformation parade:

[Present-day] urban Japanese society, with its heavy cultural investment in visual narrative, theme parks, and artificial simulations of all kinds, turns out to absorb quite easily what in earlier periods might have appeared to be clear manifestations of supernatural power. (...) Humans' creative abilities, however destructive they may be, are mirror images of those attributed to other species such as foxes and tanuki in the past. (Heise 2014, 313-314)

For the tanuki in the film, this revelation comes as a shock. In an early scene, it is narrated that “in the past, we [tanuki] had always thought that humans were animals just like us, but now we realize that those guys are powerful, maybe as powerful as the gods.” The supernatural quality originally attributed to tanuki by humanity is now, from the tanuki perspective, attributed to human society. Thus human-nature relationalities have changed. However, the tanuki’s absorption into modern life conveys that by clearing nature for enterprise, both human and nonhuman history is erased. Because tanuki folklore is a cultural embrace of nature and thus symbol of nature-culture synthesis, the construction destroys them both. The tanuki’s demise means the sedimentation of marginalized nature and history. With the absorption of the tanuki in human society, change can only come from within. In *POM POKO*, this change is hinted at when some tanuki eventually reveal their magic to media, and their livelihood is thenceforth taken into account, with humans conserving parts of forest to make humans and tanuki peacefully coexist.

This ending is prospective and not wholly satisfactory, for it comes too late for many of the tanuki society. Yet it is not without meaning: the ending’s revelation of the tanuki’s sacred existence parallels the film’s actual revelation of ecological crisis to its spectators. And as one tanuki’s fourth wall-breaking message reveals, what about animals that do not possess mythical skills? Their story is interwoven with that of the tanuki. *POM POKO* calls for this subsequent negotiation to start.

As illustrated through *POM POKO*, aesthetic and political concerns interrelate in its strategy of negotiating ecological crisis, evidenced by both an allegorical plot and instable animation style. The film is therefore an emblematic example of an ecological aesthetic politics that moves beyond preconceptions of nonhuman beings, and animates their lives as vividly lived. Herein, two continuities with Impressionist aesthetic-political principles are observable. Firstly, Ghibli films realize an aesthetic transition from realist to fiction-imbued animation, claiming perceptual instability of nonhuman life rather than preordained reality. Secondly, through this instability, Ghibli films conceive nonhuman life as embodying their own vivid subjectivities. Indeed, what this chapter’s analysis shows is that an ecological aesthetic politics surfaces in medial forms with these principles in mind. In the next chapter, these principles will be shown in the medium of videogames.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A necessary nuance is that this chapter is concerned with animation film in particular. This may therefore not solely be an animation characteristic of Studio Ghibli, as it may be embodied in anime series as well, but discussing those other possibilities is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This is in spite of its emphasis on an entangled ‘circle of life’, which may intuitively herald it as a cornerstone of ecological philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Ghibli films don’t necessarily achieve this by reimagining human-animal relationalities. Some films are mainly focused on human characters, such as *ONLY YESTERDAY* (1991). Yet even this film negotiates an ecological aesthetic through human-environment relationality by intertwining the recovery of the main character’s mental and social condition through an environmentally friendly farming engagement (cf. Hecht 2015).

## V. Playing Systems, Activating Environments

### Establishing an Ecological Aesthetic Politics of Videogames

I will admit that discussing the art of video games conjures up comic images: tuxedo-clad and jewel-bedecked patrons admiring the latest *Streetfighter*, middle-aged academics pontificating on the impact of Cubism on *Tetris*, bleeps and zaps disrupting our silent contemplation at the Guggenheim. Such images tell us more about our contemporary notion of art – as arid and stuffy, as the property of an educated and economic elite, as cut off from everyday experience – than they tell us about games.

- Henry Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art”

To play videogames in an emancipated way is not either to observe or to inhabit, it is the amalgamation of both, which enables their creative force to influence the discourse as a form of cultural ecology.

- Alexander Lehner, “Videogames as Cultural Ecology”

An independent gaming movement has yet to flourish, something that comes as no surprise, since it took decades for one to appear in the cinema. But when it does, there will appear a whole language of play, radical and new, that will transform the countergaming movement, just as Godard did to the cinema (...). The countergaming movement should aspire to a similar goal, redefining play itself and thereby realizing its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde.

- Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*

In a highly debated TED Talk titled “Gaming can make a better world” (2010), videogame designer Jane McGonigal argued that the world’s most urgent issues and crises, such as global warming, could be resolved if the time put into gaming would be increased and harnessed effectively. Indeed, McGonigal stresses that cooperative skills, increased hand-eye coordination, and strategical thinking, combined with the mindset of being on the precipice of an ‘epic win’ and facing all obstacles head-on, are possibly vital. Her audience responded with laughter.

The response to McGonigal’s talk is indicative of a greater stereotype attributed to the medium and industry of videogames.<sup>1</sup> This image mostly consists of the public assertion, exacerbated by mass media emphasis on the issue, that there could be a link between gaming and violent behavior in players,<sup>2</sup> although the science on this issue is not univocal (cf. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2016, 163–168). Next to violence, issues of stereotypical and offensive (or simply a complete lack of) gender and race representation have also surfaced as popular industry critiques (cf. Glaubke et al. 2001). Finally, the industry is notorious for the capitalist exploitation of labor and misleading of consumers (cf. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009).<sup>3</sup>

The argument of this chapter is that an aesthetic politics for videogames could effectively provide an alternative to these seemingly endless debates between the potentialities and shortcomings of the game industry, and is therefore the most prominent method to garner insight of how games can be a beneficial medium for the negotiation of the contemporary ecological crisis. An aesthetic politics, as established, reimagines sensibilities of feeling and thought by transforming medial forms. As it is necessary to do so ecologically, there is the need for an ecological aesthetic politics. Hence, the objective of this chapter is to map the way in which videogames can be aesthetic-politically reimagined to subsequently be capable to reimagine ecological sensibility. Thus, this chapter reviews aesthetic-political ways of viewing videogames, and advances its own ecological aesthetic politics model.

The considerations preliminary to such a model follow the principles first established in Impressionism (and already adapted to Ghibli film). Thus, it considers both how videogames could be considered as instable rather than stable artifacts. This entails that the player co-constitutes videogame aesthetics alongside nonhuman factors, which will be identified as the procedural game system and the

nonhuman environments encountered in games. Furthermore, the instability of this co-constituted aesthetics allows for the realization that games are based on objectifying relations between these human and nonhuman agents. The aesthetic question is therefore once again about establishing subjectivity within objecthood.

In this construction of an ecological aesthetic politics of videogames, this chapter likewise employs Bal's (2002) cultural analysis methodology – a conceptual approach to object analyses, with the outcome that both understandings of concept and object are enhanced through their confrontation. Here, the prelude to this confrontation is more extensive, as this chapter does not draw the definition of ecological aesthetic politics from existing discourse; it rather has to construct a model from the ground up. In the process of doing this, the analysis already exchanges conceptual theorization with object analysis – thus objects are employed as anecdotal evidence (Cubitt 2020) to develop this model. These object analyses follow the textual game analysis method in the sense that they focus on the formal aspects of games. These have been identified as gameplay on one side, and audiovisual and narrative presentation on the other (Féرنandez-Vara 2019, 17–18), but especially of interest is how they relate to one another. Herein, two focal points lead the analysis: how does the player relate to the game system's oppressive rulesets, and how do the game environments interact with the player? These are later elaborated as major pillars in the model of a videogame-specific ecological aesthetic politics. Hence, the biases of this chapter's analyses lie in the ecological aesthetic-political lens that determines the interpretative method. In return, the object analyses inform the ecological aesthetic-political model, and eventually, the objective is to identify case studies emblematic of its characteristics.

As the goal of this chapter is to envision an ecological aesthetic politics of games, the sections each reflect on one aspect: section V.1 on aesthetic politics, section V.2 on their ecological adaptation, and section V.3 on the games that exemplify them.

Thus, section V.1 establishes an aesthetic politics of videogames, which means it focuses on the aesthetics specific to games, rather than applying traditional notions of aesthetics. Furthermore, this rebukes linear approaches to videogame aesthetics – games are rather argued to be chaotic systems from which players have to interpret meaning themselves. Because players are necessarily constrained by

game systems, games are always political, as they parallel the constraints of society.

Section V.2 makes these insights relevant for the ecological study of games, starting with Alenda Chang's work. Her revocation of the fictionality of videogame environments enhances an aesthetic-political approach of game environments. Next to players dealing with game systems, environments become a third actor in gameplay, and herein the aesthetic-political consideration of games is expounded with an ecological dimension. It is inspired by object-oriented ontology (OOO), which argues that the preconceived objects of human perception have an existence beyond this preconception. Typically, game systems treat players as preconceived objects, and the environment is conceived by the player as its object to be exploited. An ecological aesthetic politics of videogames should therefore be concerned with how these subject-object relationalities of system-player and player-environment can be confused and negotiated.

Section V.3 closes by presenting a prototype of videogames that follows from an effective application of an ecological aesthetic politics. The label *impressionist games* is ascribed to games which reveal and emphasize the politics of system-player and player-environment relationalities by invoking ecologically impressionist principles of confusing human and environmental actors, and by considering objects as embodying subjectivity. The case studies involve UNTITLED GOOSE GAME (2019) and BACKBONE (2021). However, this exemplification of an ecological aesthetic politics of games is still considered prospective and unfinished.

## V.1 Toward the Integration of Aesthetics and Politics in Videogames

To establish an aesthetic politics is to consider aesthetics and politics as sides of the same coin. Their questions are intertwined: aesthetics provide a contestation of conventional sensibility, whereas politics are about voicing underrepresented concerns of new sensibilities into the domain of public policy and debate. As such, this section begins with an aesthetic discussion of videogames, before demonstrating how political concerns naturally arise from aesthetic questions. The

objective of this section is to show both sides of the coin as an interrelated whole.

To start with an oft-cited agitator of aesthetic considerations of games, film critic Roger Ebert once (2010a) stated that videogames could never be an art form – a thesis he eventually withdrew (2010b) when admitting that he would rather not play through a series of games to falsify his theory. Ebert’s eventual withdrawal from his argument was celebrated by gaming communities as a victory in the cultural legitimation of games (Parker 2018, 84). However, there is a significant issue with this line of reasoning, which is represented by a plethora of scholarship on whether and to what extent videogames constitute an art form (cf. Tavinor 2009; Martin 2013; Parker 2014). Consider what Walter Benjamin once wrote of photography: “much futile thought had been devoted to the question whether photography is an art. The primary question – whether the invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art – was not raised” (Benjamin 2015, 220). By extension, this question is productive for videogames as well. Instead of asking if and how videogames can be considered an art form, the question should be how they have unique aesthetic-political means of negotiating sensibility. Therefore, this inquiry necessarily starts by further defining the aesthetic-political specificity of videogames.

The first aesthetic-political consideration is that games are often defined as rule-based systems. Jesper Juul (2003) provided an influential definition of games as including rules, variable outcomes, and the player’s (emotional) involvement in reaching and negotiating outcomes. Removing any of these features would put the ‘gameness’ of a game in doubt (Juul 2003, 35-40). A game is thus a rule-based system completed (or not) by the player’s actions. The degree of player agency is necessarily limited by the game’s boundaries. A player functions in *possibility spaces*, as Ian Bogost called them: “This is really what we do when we *play* videogames: we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the game’s controls” (Bogost 2007, 43). Rules afford the possibility space, and the player explores this space, generating *gameplay* (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 303). Primarily lacking in Juul’s definition are the representational elements of games – in storytelling, audiovisual presentation, or otherwise. He mended this omission when he wrote *Half-Real* (2005), which essentially argued that playing videogames

is “to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world” (Juul 2005, 1). He explained the omission as the transformation of the form of videogames since he had provided his first model (Juul 2005, 6-7). These forms, and their corresponsive models, must therefore be conceived as continuously evolving.

The second consideration concerns what this definition of games allows them to do. Certainly, games entertain players, but the ambivalence of fun in games is that it makes the industry appear trivial and uncultivated (Sharp and Thomas 2019, 41-43). Scholars have accordingly attempted to establish more productive functions of games, such as their ability to author arguments. Bogost considered games as persuasive media that embody a *procedural rhetoric*, an argumentation naturally deriving from the dynamic processes of gameplay. This, for Bogost, is the medium-specific manner in which games embody a persuasive, pedagogical function. Specifically, videogames could model how societal processes work, and through their modelling tacitly advocate or critique a certain process of contemporary society (Bogost 2007, 28-29). Hence, possibility spaces allow players to negotiate the politics of how social systems work through the videogame system.

Bogost’s work on proceduralism has been a mainstay in game studies, and many objectives, such as ecology, have made effective use of the framework. Chang, for example, applied *environmental procedural rhetoric* to discuss how certain games model existing relations to the environment, and how such an approach could make insightful how such relations can be critiqued or reimagined (Chang 2009, 2-3). McGonigal, while not explicitly mentioning procedural rhetoric, follows a similar trajectory in her work (2011) when she writes that the fictional worlds of games already procure fixes for the physically real world, and that the translation of videogame fixes to reality is therefore a desirable political objective.

The effective use of procedural rhetoric could imply that games can have a considerable pedagogical impact on players. This view meets multiple limitations, however. Firstly, the player’s interpretation of game insights is ambiguous. Miguel Sicart (2011) critiques proceduralism precisely because it suggests that the meaning of games precedes the play activity. He argues that “proceduralism is a determinist, perhaps even totalitarian approach to play; an approach that defines the action prior to its existence, and denies the importance of anything that was not

determined before the act of play, in the system design of the game” (Sicart 2011). While this critique is arguably excessive, because Bogost does stress that games are possibility spaces where arguments are authored interactively,<sup>4</sup> its merit lies in the consideration that arguments are not linearly communicated.<sup>5</sup>

A second limitation is that this linear communication is often contradictory on its own terms (cf. Ten Cate 2020). Consider *STARDEW VALLEY* (2016). The game’s premise has the player-character leave urban society due to struggles with modern office life, seeking to reconnect to nature in a rural community, having inherited their grandfather’s farm. The farm may host animals but is necessarily vegetarian; the local people each idiosyncratically struggle with modern life; and the community is threatened by corporate takeover. On the outset, *STARDEW VALLEY* is therefore about the negotiation of ecological life in the problematic contemporary world. Yet upon playing the game, it becomes clear that the game’s ecological alternatives actually present the opposite. The player is incentivized to speed up farming processes by clearing forestland for agriculture to chemically fertilize and mechanically irrigate; human relationships are most profoundly influenced by materialistic gifting; and worst of all, the game features locations with ‘monsters’ to slaughter, as well as fishes which can be caught and eaten (Van Ooijen 2018).

Both identified issues are ultimately retractable to the instability of games and how games are played. Procedural rhetoric is therefore a somewhat unfortunate term, referring to a univocal means of political communication through games whereas they are essentially chaotic.<sup>6</sup> However, if more attention is paid to Bogost’s notion of possibility spaces, a more robust aesthetic-political alternative presents itself. Just as the sensible denotes what can be felt and thought, possibility spaces delineate what can be done and contemplated in videogames – this term therefore provides access into aesthetic-political negotiation. From here, then, it is possible to sketch an alternative composition of an aesthetic politics of videogames.

Graeme Kirkpatrick’s monograph on the aesthetic theory of games (2015 [2011]) presents a starting point for this discussion. Kirkpatrick begins by focusing the question of videogame aesthetics on formal qualities, and he tacitly connects the idea of possibility spaces to them when he argues that “form produces a subjective sensibility and an objective delineation of space and time so that experience

coheres and makes sense" (Kirkpatrick 2015, 14). This construction of sensibility, Kirkpatrick argues in accord with Rancière, conditions the potentiality of meaning (Kirkpatrick 2015, 32-33). This aligns with the aesthetic-political perspective, from which he distinguishes between traditional artworks and videogames, with the former being static entities viewable in its whole upfront and the latter necessitating "the player [to find] the rhythmic associations necessary to reveal its possibilities" (Kirkpatrick 2015, 37). With his use of rhythmic, Kirkpatrick refers to dance, with the player as the dancer. Two Impressionist continuities could be inferred from this analysis. There is the instable perception of the artwork, wherein volatile possibilities of the encounter with art are acknowledged. Additionally, it may be inferred that instead of a dancer, the player is like Conrad's detective reader, who assembles the pieces of the artwork which are presented to them in a chaotic state. Games do not instruct what meaning is taken from it; rather, the player is emancipated (cf. Farca 2016) to look for this meaning on their own account. An aesthetic politics of videogames can then be articulated as the manner in which games provide the volatile possibility spaces from which players can come to their own negotiation of political (and other) latent meanings.

The prototype of games that achieve this combination effectively is *THE STANLEY PARABLE* (2013). *THE STANLEY PARABLE* is about office worker Stanley, who responds to computer inputs for a living. One day, all his co-workers are gone, and Stanley starts wandering the office building. The player-controlled Stanley is accompanied by an invisible narrator who guides the player's choice of navigation. The player, however, can choose which path to actually take, and can thus act in conformation or resistance to the imposed path. The narrator's dialogue and tone change accordingly, and a battle for authorial control ensues. If the narrator's instructions are fully obeyed to, Stanley is freed from the office and the game is 'won', but otherwise, he cannot escape the office. Paradoxically, any attempt to flee from *THE STANLEY PARABLE*'s predetermined path keeps the player at its mercy, whereas a linear way of following the narrator's instructions sets the player free. Therefore, the game could be interpreted as establishing that the player is always within the game's control, and true player agency is a constructed myth (Beyvers 2020).

This argument is retrieved through the player's exploration of the game's formal

characteristics. THE STANLEY PARABLE's paradox is understood only by players who have experienced it. The player, whether by themselves or through the game's direction, is liberated from a preconceived attitude to gameplay. Inevitably, the player is confronted with the confines of player agency within the game's system. THE STANLEY PARABLE also renounces any clear objective that can be strategically achieved. There is no clear idea of winning. THE STANLEY PARABLE rather suggests that victory exists in not playing the game (anymore) at all.<sup>7</sup> In this impossibility of victory, the game questions its own gameness. Thereby, it opens up a new perspective on videogame aesthetics, revealing the game system's domination.

To play a videogame is to accept hierarchy: no one is above the law, as no one is above the rules. With videogames, these rules are technically sedimented and unbreakable, unless the game malfunctions. One understanding of videogame aesthetics would indicate this limitation as an advantage as player obedience allows for immersive storytelling. The associated genre of this dynamic, *walking simulators*<sup>8</sup> – linear videogames which are not mechanically complex –, have been named as one of the emerging videogame art forms. Juul (2019) likewise admits that this genre is a straightforward answer to the question of game aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> Yet, walking simulators are simultaneously the genre that is often denounced for not being a 'real game' genre (Consalvo and Paul 2019). With walking simulators, gameness is to be sacrificed for artistry. While their unconventional gameness makes walking simulators important additions to the debate of videogame aesthetics, they simultaneously say that games should adhere to traditional notions of aesthetics rather than reinvent them (Juul 2019, 209-210). However, aesthetic politics are about going beyond these traditional boundaries of conceptualization.

THE STANLEY PARABLE mediates between walking simulator aesthetics and such a transcendence. The game is mechanically restrictive, and story-centered, but the goal of this design is not to immerse the player in the experience: rather, the player is emancipated to negotiate the heavily embedded meanings the game facilitates through play. One reading could parallel Stanley's predicament of working a reproductive office job to the player's crisis of obediently playing games. Stanley's story serves a metaphorical quality in which the preordainment of modern office life is critiqued – albeit not in a pedagogical tone. Thus, both linear persuasion and

linear narrative immersion are renounced. In this manner, THE STANLEY PARABLE reiterates the discussion of videogame politics that Bogost may actually have alluded to when he paralleled the game system to the model of society – with the necessary distinction that this should be an aesthetically rather than rhetorically established allegory. Bogost appears aware of this in his definition of *artgames*:

In artgames (...), a procedural rhetoric does not argue a position but rather characterizes an idea. These games say something about how an experience of the world works, how it feels to experience or to be subjected to some sort of situation: marriage, mortality, regret, confusion and so forth.

Proceduralist games are oriented toward introspection over both immediate gratification, as is usually the case in entertainment games, and external action, whether immediate or deferred, as is usually the case in [educational or training-based] serious games. The goal of the procedural designer is to cause the player to reflect on one or more themes during or after play, without a concern for resolution or effect. The use of identifiably human yet still abstract roles in these games underscores the invitation to project one's own experiences and ideas on them. (Bogost 2011, 14)

Here, Bogost reclaims proceduralism beyond its original (somewhat unjustified) stigma of instructive argumentation and embraces its necessary component of the game system-player relationality's possibility space. If artgames are about translating how an experience of the world works to the gameplay experience of the player, then this opens up an aesthetic politics of games. Aesthetically, the preconceived system-player relation is cast into unfamiliar territory. It opens up reflection on the aesthetic dynamics of the game. Politically, these unfamiliar aesthetics are inferred as analogous to a real world situation. The possibility space of videogames thus becomes a formal representation of the sensible.

The aforementioned examples of THE STANLEY PARABLE and STARDEW VALLEY signify the difference between effectively applying these aesthetic-political devices and succumbing to a rhetoric-based and contradictory application. Both games straightforwardly criticize contemporary office life. In THE STANLEY PARABLE, the oppression of game systems is metaphorically paralleled to the linearity of office life by making its inescapable tedium felt in the game's endless corridors, and in its subtle argument that the only way to win the game is to escape it. In STARDEW VALLEY, the gripe with office life precedes the gameplay, and throughout the game

the influence of a massive corporation (the player-character's previous employer) is witnessed, but hardly reflected on in play. The player is even coerced into running their farm like a corporation, built from the extraction of natural resources like trees and different kinds of ore, which can only be acquired by killing the local 'monster' population. Hence, the underlying gameplay dynamics reinforce, rather than negotiate, the politics the game assumes to combat. *STARDEW VALLEY* elucidates its gripe with corporate capitalism without proper elaboration in the actual possibility space, and therefore risks having the opposite meaning extracted from it. The juxtaposition of these games shows the necessity of integrating formal and representational devices in order for a game to articulate its 'point' effectively.

The importance of an aesthetic-political approach to videogames therefore entails that form and meaning should be considered in their interrelations. These interrelations hinge on the relationality of the game system, representing the fabric of society, with the player, the citizen. A game's possibility space is therefore always a model of what is possible under a particular sensibility.

## V.2 Constructing an Ecological Aesthetic Politics Model of Videogames

Having established an aesthetic politics of videogames, it is now a question of translating its takeaways to the ecological study of games. This entails adding to the established system-player relationality an ecological consideration of game environments. For this concern, this chapter turns to Alenda Chang's recent monograph on ecology in videogames, *Playing Nature* (2019), which is an "attempt to bridge the nature-culture divide in the study of games" (Chang 2019, 2). For Chang, the videogame is a potent mediation of human and natural ecosystems which have been disturbed by the domination of one over the other. However, while "we humans may have crept inexorably into all aspects of the world around us, (...) the world has also inevitably permeated into our technical artifacts, including games" (Chang 2019, 11). Chang elaborates on this idea with the concept of *mesocosm*. Mesocosms are miniature ecosystems which model circumstances of

physical environments in isolation, to make them subjectable to (laboratory) experimentation. Chang applies the concept of mesocosm to videogames, as they too model bounded ecosystems, allowing for experimentation with its functions. This leads her to invert Juul's thesis that videogames are amalgamations of real rules within fictional worlds, arguing rather, that they are real worlds orchestrated by fictional rules (Chang 2019, 19-20). It is not that environments themselves are fictional in games, but rather the ways in which the player can interact with them. For example, characters in combat games may survive otherwise lethal wounds by applying freshly picked medicinal herbs without due preparation, or they can exterminate local animal populations which naturally respawn according to the player's need for their skins. In *STARDEW VALLEY*, for example, bundles of hardwood respawn every day if the player so chooses to harvest them the day before. The hardwood represents the real thing, but its dynamics are fictionally implemented.

In games, it is typically the case that the natural world is impotent and external to the player. In light of this, Chang proposes a turnover of this position into an environmental approach which "might dethrone the reigning player- or designer-centered paradigms in order to acknowledge game environments as determining components of player experience, with the potential to edify and spark curiosity about the out-of-game world" (Chang 2019, 24-25). Chang is inspired in this argument by Morton's concept of *ecomimesis*, or nature writing, which emphasizes the compositional environment of the artistic text – that is, when context comprises the text. Herein lies a possibility for games to make their environmental worlds the authors of their aesthetics. While not pragmatically straightforward, theoretically the task to achieve this is simple. By granting game environments interactive agency, the game gets composed by nature-play rather than a human author. The videogame is thus a promising form of environmental textuality:<sup>10</sup>

Above all, the ideal environmental text produces involvement. It brings the nonhuman world into equal prominence with the human, exposes humanity's moral responsibility to and participation in the natural world, and portrays the environment as fluid process, not static representation. While not all games can satisfy these criteria, games seem especially well suited to the last – they are, after all, inherently processual, requiring rule-based, procedural interaction between a player or players and multiple

environments. And in theory, games could use their ability to model environmental change to bring [humanity's implication in and responsibility for nonhuman nature] into play in instructive ways as well, for instance by tying environmental change to player action or inaction. (Chang 2019, 32-33)

With her description of environmental textuality as corresponsive to the player's interaction with reality-modelling environments and its reliance on the procedural qualities of games, Chang invokes the aesthetic-political reading of Bogost's possibility spaces for the ecological study of videogames. Because games employ the fluidity of environments rather than their stable subordination to the player's and system's impact, Chang actually expands on the player's cooperative role in constructing the artwork by adding real environments as an agent in the process. Here, the aesthetic model of games has three interactive agents: the game system's designer, the player, and the 'real' environment. Chang gives this aesthetic orientation form when discussing walking simulators, by claiming that "the very qualities of walking simulators that upset conservative gamers – their slowness, their lack of action, the absence of people, their spatial storytelling – indirectly indicate a path forward (pun intended) for more environmentally sophisticated game design" (Chang 2019, 43). This is in part because player agency is diminished, contrasting the anthropocentric power fantasy of gaming culture (cf. Jansen 2020, 96-105). Just as in science fiction, where mainstream literature's dedication to character and plot development was subordinated to imaginary world design, Chang argues that walking simulators reinvented their medium by focusing on world-building qualities rather than player empowerment. World-building emancipates environments beyond background scenery (Chang 2019, 44).

This invokes a rereading of the narratological consideration articulated by Henry Jenkins in his influential article "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" (2006 [2004]). Jenkins argues for a specific approach to videogame narratology, which he calls *environmental storytelling*. Jenkins explains that videogames "may more fully realize the spatiality of [world-building], giving a much more immersive and compelling representation of their narrative worlds" (Jenkins 2006, 676). Jenkins operationalizes environmental storytelling by introducing four conditions. He states:

Spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations [(*evocative spaces*)]; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted [(*enacting stories*)]; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene [(*embedded narratives*)]; or they provide resources for [*emergent narratives*]. (Jenkins 2006, 676-677, added emphasis)

A preliminary analysis of Jenkins' framework suggests an aesthetic-narratological liberation of the player: evocative spaces account for the player's historical context and experience; enacting stories entail the player's performative role of delivering the prescribed story to its realization; embedded narratives suggest that the scope of narrative is always up to the player's intention to explore; and emergent narratives, as a category that indicates games with no prescribed narrative at all, wholly hands over the reins of authorship to the player.

Hence, Jenkins' framework suggests that games emancipate the player's role in constructing narrative experience. However, his considerations also simultaneously indicate an anthropocentric view of game environments. For example, embedded narratives suggest a relation of the player toward their environment as based on the extraction of information. An effective embedded narrative would involve an excess of interactable objects, with the player scavenging game environments as effectively as possible, and valuing environments for their information resources. With emergent narratives, the implications are more severe, because they meticulously give the player the control over how environments can be shaped as an instrument to their authorial self-realization. This explains the tendency of creative MINECRAFT (2011) players to build fantastical constructions out of materials directly provided by the game's 'natural' environments.<sup>11</sup> Jenkins' model therefore tacitly suggests the dominance of player over nonhuman environments.

This anthropocentric interpretation of Jenkins' framework could ultimately be inferred from his contention that "[game] worlds, ultimately, are not real worlds" (Jenkins 2006, 684). Because they are fictional, players can use games like a canvas on which to draw their own aesthetic fulfillment in the form of environmental storytelling. Herein resides the potential for a rethinking of environmental storytelling in ecological terms. What if environmental storytelling is taken at its

most literal – as environments being the agent rather than the means of videogame narration? What if, as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the player, like Marlow, first treats a game like a bunch of blank pages to fill with self-realization, only to discover the overwhelming force of the explored world, and its horrors? Such an experiment has been conducted in the Conrad novella-inspired shooter game SPEC OPS: THE LINE (2012). In SPEC OPS, the player enters the story as army Captain Walker, accompanied by his two subordinate squad members in the middle of a disastrous US military operation in a war-torn Dubai. Amidst the confusion of the situation, the squad finds itself in conflict with both local factions and the US army – every living being in the area is an enemy if the game so dictates. The conflict's savagery culminates in a scene where progression depends on the squad's use of white phosphorous on dozens of people, which Brendan Keogh analyzes at length:

There truly is no choice. (...) Within the game, there is no way to advance but to use the mortar – and what is there to do if not advance? (...) Of course, the *real* choice Walker has is to turn around and leave Dubai, and the real choice the player has is to not play a military shooter that asks you to drop white phosphorous on people. (...) [But] Walker is choosing to be in a situation where he has no choice, and so am I. *The Line* doesn't really want players to stop playing at this point. It simply wants us to accept responsibility for the situations we allow ourselves to be in. (Keogh 2012, 79)

Progression in SPEC OPS relies on the destruction brought upon people by the player. This is typical of military games, but in SPEC OPS, the player is confronted (even overwhelmed) by how this environment responds by emphasizing its horror. Furthermore, like THE STANLEY PARABLE, SPEC OPS' fictional rules communicate the message that to play a game is to be subjected to an hierarchical, unfair system that puts players in inescapable situations where only moral transgression provides an outcome. But there is a significant difference: whereas THE STANLEY PARABLE reflects on modern office life symbolically, through a satirical comedy, SPEC OPS establishes a world that is perceived as real – at least by the many players in shock upon first playing through this particular scene. The player may engage SPEC OPS in search for self-gratification, but procedurally realizes the horror of their naivete.

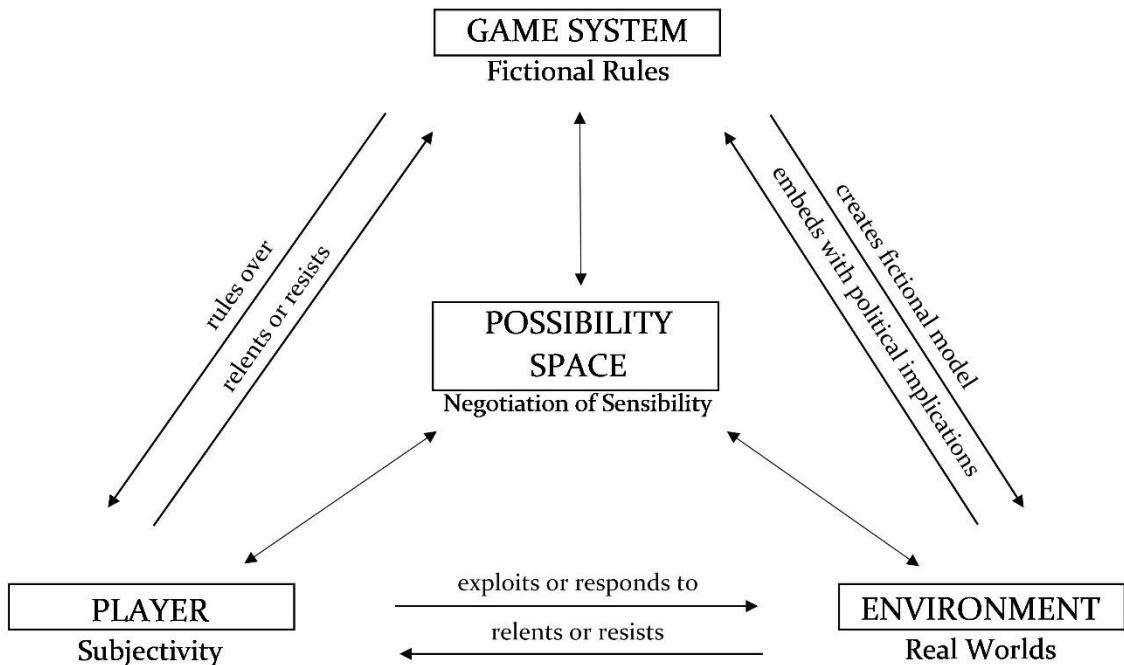
In terms of environmental storytelling, SPEC OPS could be regarded as an enacted story. Yet the player is not a willing performer in this narrative. In fact, the

deaths of dozens of soldiers – and as is revealed in the aftermath, dozens of refugees – retroactively ascribes the narrative to the player. It is not for the player to enact it in advance, only to have enacted it in retrospect, after the damage is done. The game’s objectified environment speaks back to the playing subject, just as Africa spoke back to Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. It therefore also harks back to the banalized image of the Middle East in mainstream videogames as an antagonistic sphere where violence is justified because it is deemed necessary for the greater good of humankind (cf. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, 105-106).

Hitherto, two interactive relations have been revealed that could be explained from an OOO perspective as essential qualities of videogames. To recap, an OOO considers the objects of human perception to equally have a subjective existence outside of human perception, which mostly pertains to nonhuman beings. This OOO view could be translated to the aforementioned agents of game design. Firstly, the player, in the eyes of the game system, is the object of game design. For the system, the player is already accounted for, and every possible route already planned. An aesthetic politics of videogames is accordingly one that allows the player to become aware of this subordination. However, when games allow the player to roam free, the player is caught in a predetermined power fantasy of increasing domination over the game’s environments. For an aesthetic politics to work ecologically, then, is to embrace a second OOO, that of game environments, which do not abide by the player’s exploitative approach without reprimand. Environments will then be emancipated. An effective ecological aesthetic politics of videogames thus emphasizes both the player’s attempted liberation from the game system and the environment’s liberation from the player’s domination.

An ecological aesthetic politics deemphasizes the linear pedagogy of explicitly persuasive games, favoring experiments in system-player and player-environment relationalities. Effective games can emphasize the boundaries of possibility spaces, allowing for the negotiation of political potentialities in seemingly inescapable Anthropocene and Capitalocene sensibilities. This is visualized in a new model (figure 10). The three actors of game system, player and environment are envisioned in a triangular relation, centrally connected by the possibility space in which the game’s (and thereby: society’s) sensibility can be negotiated. The game

system can be seen imposing rules over the player, and a model of reality over real environments. Players can respond on a spectrum of obeying rulesets or resisting them in gameplay, whereas environments can imply political meaning in the model the game establishes. Finally, players and environments have a more volatile relation: players may exploit environments, but these may either remain inert or respond to the player's actions, in the latter case with the possibility to overwhelm the player's subjectivity. This model, with the hierarchical factor of the game system, conveys that every player, like every human being, lives within a system that is oppressive and confining with no proper means of escape. Every nonhuman environmental entity is subordinated within this oppressive system. These oppressions are interrelated, and thus the emancipation of the one is connected to emancipating the other. The next section exemplifies this in a prototypical form of videogames, following the aesthetic-political principles seen in Impressionism.



**Figure 10. The ecological aesthetic politics model of videogames. The three agents of gameplay correlate to create possibility spaces, wherein sensibility is negotiated.**

### V.3 Impressionist Games: A New Prototype of Videogames

Hitherto it has been established that an ecological aesthetic politics of videogames entails a focus on the interactive relations of player and system, and environments and player. This diverges from established notions of ecological games, such as games effectively employing their procedural rhetoric to communicate about environmental issues (Chang 2009) or games that are sustainably produced (Abraham 2022, 82). Indeed, an aesthetic-political approach of videogames relies on the negotiation of ecological issues by means of negotiating system-player and player-environment relations effectively. Because the measure of effectivity is hard to designate, the previously identified principles of ecological impressionism help delineate in what directions such an ecological aesthetic politics can be taken. The player-environment relation may follow Impressionist painting's confusion of the human agent of the artwork with its environment –a confusion possibly witnessed between player and realistic environments in games. The system-player relation may resultingly follow the literary impressionist principle of giving objects (players and environments) a subjectivity within their objectified lives. An *impressionist game*, then, is one which embodies these characteristics. This section exemplifies the category with divergent case studies of UNTITLED GOOSE GAME and BACKBONE. Both help establish an emblematic image of what impressionist games could be.

UNTITLED GOOSE GAME (UGG) is an indie game about an unnamed domestic goose wreaking havoc on a British middle-class village. The game was released to critical acclaim and financial success, spawning a series of popular culture memes, particularly revolving around the ludicrous premise of the game. The goose, conceived as the playable character of UGG by way of an office communication joke, achieved its internet fame by its unexplained antagonistic position toward human society. This is most perceivable in the phrase since associated with the goose, “peace was never an option” (Know Your Meme 2019). While actual physical violence is not on display in UGG, the goose can hold a knife in its beak, struggle with villagers over house and garden objects, steal and abuse items, and indirectly cause harm to the villagers. In other words, the goose can engage in all sorts of activities to make life in the village a living hell. This, then, drew at least one million

players so far to buy a copy of (and more to become accustomed with) the game.

After learning the basic controls of the game, such as honking, using the beak interactively with objects, and general movement, the player-goose is set free to explore the village neighborhood while a soundtrack adapted from Impressionist composer Claude Debussy's *Préludes* captures the spirit of this activity. The village comprises a series of areas, most of them involving gardens. The player receives a task list for each of these areas (figure 11) which they have to partially complete to open up a final task that allows advancement to the next area. These tasks are themselves comical: the first area includes tasks like "have a picnic" by stealing ingredients from a garden, and the now-(in)famous "rake in the lake", where the groundkeeper's hoe is to be secured. While such objectives indicate a clear path for the player to follow, their approach necessarily begets creative instinct and thinking outside of the box to make all the mischief succeed. Human characters generally beat the goose in a direct struggle for an item, making the player-goose reliant upon stealth and intensive strategizing. In this sense, the game mixes tactical puzzling with mechanical coordination.

At this point, it could be asked what oppression emerges between the player's free play instinct and the game system's tasks for progression. The game does not suggest any sequence of action, nor does it give straightforward paths for success. Instead, the player-goose is completely free to do as they please. However, this freedom is necessarily bound by the fulfillment of tasks, both in terms of what areas are accessible and what actions can be performed. Crucially, the question of the goose's freedom reflects on the player's embodiment of a nonhuman being. The game's major premise is the goose's empowerment at the cost of humanity, and the freedom of interacting with objects from a goose's perspective is an unorthodox experience itself. The list of objectives, however, represented in handwriting on a notebook-stylized piece of paper, is a human dictation of the goose's actions. As Bogost wrote: "The goose isn't really wreaking havoc, it turns out. The goose is running errands" (Bogost 2019). The player is made thoroughly aware that the goose of UGG is, in the final analysis, a human-embodied vessel. The game therefore blurs the relation between player and environment by obscuring whether humans or nonhumans are in control, and which is part of the environment.

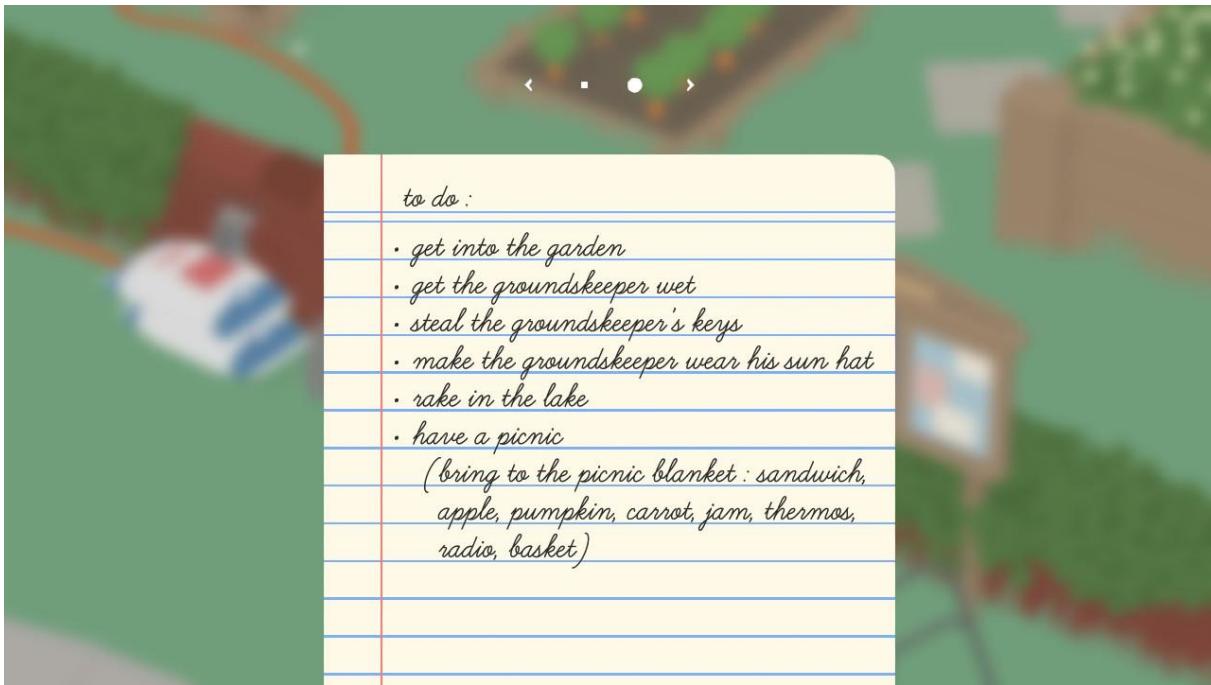


Figure 11. The notebook-style instructions for the player-goose's mischief.

Indeed, UGG actively combines system-player and player-environment relations. As Marco Caracciolo (2021) argues in his analysis of the game, the game effectively constitutes a form of human-nonhuman collaboration. Much of the player-goose's successes rely on the stupidity of the human characters in response to unprecedented action. For instance, in the task of replacing a villager's goose statue, the relevant inhabitant will not notice the difference and eagerly put the statue's ribbon on the replacement. For Caracciolo, the complacency of human characters comments on human-nonhuman relationality at two levels:

First, the human characters' [behavior] reveals their foolishness and gullibility. Second, and less trivially, it emphasizes their blindness to nonhuman agency and intentionality; their dismissing animal minds as merely capable of short-term or instinctual thinking. In their coupling with the nonhuman avatar, players are in a privileged position: they have access to the bird's devious mind *and* they can see through the human characters' indifference to it. (Caracciolo 2021)

For Caracciolo, this means that human-nonhuman distinctions are turned inside out. Arguably, UGG completely reverses the dominant species of society. Humanity, which is typically the only species granted subjectivity, generally perceives animals as functioning according to preordained logics owed to survival

instincts and generic feedback loops. This (lack of) quality ascribed to animals is similar to that of artificial intelligence in games. No matter how much non-player characters (NPCs) respond to the actions of players, there is no denying their artificial nature. It is easier to program realistic animals than people, because animals already exist for humans as one-dimensional, linearly acting creatures. With human NPCs, there is a constant effort to improve them as approximate to the real thing as possible (cf. Chang et al. 2011). In UGG, this design philosophy is decisively discarded: human NPCs are especially linear in their behavior, and they are short-term, instinctual thinkers. For the player-goose, humans take the role of animals; each of them is confined to their natural habitat, limiting their activity to the most generic loops, and not learning from the goose's activity around them.

This theme is strengthened by UGG's environmental setting: a British middle-class village. This environment could be characterized as the human world as opposed to the natural world, but the game suggests such a binary no longer holds, especially because a goose appears to dominate it. The player-goose takes a stance toward it as the human typically does toward nonhuman environments; taking note of its inhabitants, studying their basic behavior, to then find the most effective way to exploit them using their products. This reversal of roles suggests that UGG experiments with a misanthropic premise. However, this is not necessarily the case. What it shows is how non-goose species present themselves to the goose. Subjectivity is necessarily restrained in that it can only ascertain the consciousness of the self, and encounter other objects only in their outputs, like a black box of both physical life and NPCs. UGG is also about how any kind of relation between beings is necessarily constituted from an asymmetrical viewpoint, which tends to be translated to a power hierarchy with the subject as an all-knowing being and the object as a predictable, calculable entity. By tacitly advancing this argument, the game is in accord with OOO, which conveys that there is no hierarchy of being: even if beings do not exist equally, they all equally exist (Bogost 2012, 22). Even if geese and humans are fundamentally different species, the individual goose, just like the individual human, has a subjective experience that is self-centered, and is capable of conceiving of its non-goose surroundings instrumentally. The object of human vision has a life beyond this objecthood, and every being can exist as an

object for another. Ecological thinking starts when this possibility is acknowledged, and UGG centers it in its experience. Basically, it is a testament to the potential tool-being (Harman 2002) of every creature – that is to say, in the eyes of every subjectivity other subjectivities can be perceived as objects, and the realization that this is the case acknowledges that every object is equally subject.

In UGG's premise, a parallel can be drawn to the famous Alfred Hitchcock film *THE BIRDS* (1963), which is likewise centered around a bird species wreaking havoc on an unassuming local village. In Hitchcock's film, birds attack suddenly, culminating in horrifying, mass offensives the locals cannot properly defend against. An intuitive ecological reading of the film would say that this is the story of "animal retribution" for the subordination of animal by humans (cf. Lachazette 2021). Yet, this reading presupposes an affirmation of animal existence as bound to their (instrumental) relation to humans. Revenge and retribution themselves are merely romantic themes ascribed to nonhuman beings by humans; they are truths imposed upon the birds, just as much as the scientific explanation that birds do not randomly attack. Looking for reason behind the birds' attack inevitably conforms to anthropocentric logic. A more palpable explanation of the ecological quality of the film and game are then a transversal of this logic. It is not a question of why animals act in violation of human society, but that they can, whenever. Nonhuman processes are typified by volatility, and thus beyond human control.

UGG qualifies as a prototypical impressionist game, because it confuses the agent of the videogame as both player and (non)human environment: by making the player's actions antagonistic to a domestic human environment, the player-goose's perspective of human environments represents the human view of nonhuman environments. At the same time, the task-focused nature of gameplay suggests that even this transcendence is orchestrated by a human individual.

BACKBONE, like UGG, is an indie game that drew players by its own outlandish main character: a raccoon. Contrary to UGG, however, this raccoon named Howard Lotor is anthropomorphic, like all other creatures in this game of animals set in a fictional, dystopian version of Vancouver, Canada. While Lotor, like UGG's goose, lends itself perfectly well for internet memes – as evidenced by the game's Twitter page – the tone of the actual game is not frivolous. Lotor is a detective, but he's not

a particularly refined one. Contrary to typical detective genre games, where players embody detectives of supernatural allure like Sherlock Holmes, Lotor cannot solve complex crimes with mysteriously advanced insights. The beginning of BACKBONE sets the tone, with a distressed housewife complaining to Lotor of her husband's wanderings at unruly times in unknown places – a typical case of adultery, as Lotor is set to confirm. The seeming triviality of this case sets the precedent of Lotor's skill. The game's Steam page typifies the player's embodiment of Lotor accordingly:

You're not special. You're not a hero. Thrust into unfortunate circumstances, you find yourself with no other option than to unravel what might be your biggest case yet.

There is no choice. We change, but we change nothing. Get to work, detective. (Steam, n.d.)

As a dialogue choice-driven adventure game, BACKBONE offers the player few gameplay mechanics. But even dialogue interrogations offer no straightforward solutions to the mysteries the game generates. Lotor's mind, like the player's, is allowed to wander, and this is reflected in the player's freedom to roam dialogue options. But these options do not allow for a correct path to be chosen; they inevitably result in the same outcome. The idea of success is illusional; regardless of the path chosen, it is simply never good enough. Nor is BACKBONE the common videogame narrative of a progressively empowered player-character; instead, Lotor becomes increasingly desperate and weak as the plot progresses.

The grimness of the eventual outcome is established at a very early stage, when Lotor tries to catch the housewife's husband in the act. Instead, he discovers the man about to be cut to pieces, stored and preserved for transportation. Tracking the transport chain, Lotor arrives at a wealthy family's residence and sees them rejoicing in the delight of the fresh meat. Thus, the rich literally eat the poor. Although an interrogation of one of the chain's commanding forces reveals that only 'bad' people will be considered – such as the cheating husband, the discovery makes Lotor realize that Vancouver is generally run on corruption, (animal) class segregation, and illegal meat production and trade. Lotor becomes sensible to the interrelations of everything in the production of oppression and senses his own powerlessness in obstructing this chain.

BACKBONE's rendition of Vancouver gives ample munition to an ecological exploration of the story's themes. The city is bound off from the rest of the world with a wall, and throughout the game's narrative there is speculation with regards to whether life is possible outside of the city. The city itself also clearly indicates a segregation of different neighborhoods (figure 12). On one end of the city reside the greenhouses, industrial districts, and lower-class residential areas. These areas are mostly inhabited by typically believed 'weaker' species – raccoons, rabbits, dogs, mice, rats, beavers, and the like. On the other end, neighborhoods feature gated communities where lesser citizens are not allowed entry, high class shopping areas, scientific research centers and laboratories, and governmental buildings. These areas are inhabited by the 'strong' species such as lions and gorillas. While all animals are equal in their denomination as citizens, the Orwellian proverb that some are more equal than others applies here. Lotor fights off his own situatedness on the weaker end of the animal spectrum in his attempt to discover the secret plots to exacerbate the power inequalities. The fact that he struggles to succeed, then, retroactively confirms the lesser being ascribed to him in the first place. This representational aspect of portraying social classes as different species of animal shows how socially instituted differences are naturally converted to some more fundamental beliefs about what distinguishes kinds of people and species of animal from one another. Lotor's failure to fully understand and fight these plots is owed as much to social as to natural standing. It results in a thoroughly melancholy view of his place in the world. This is a plot device often embodied in Impressionist literature, as Kronegger writes: "Impressionist literature deals with the psychology of the individual who is not only estranged from his social environment, but also alienated from himself. The individual's urge to live life at its fullest, paradoxically, ends in emptiness and destruction of the self" (Kronegger 1973, 88-89). Indeed, this is the fate that Lotor, after engaging on his heroic mission, inevitably befalls him. But it also signifies an inversion of the typical structure of videogames: instead of gradual empowerment, there is inevitable decay and doom. The player participates in the narrative by enacting it, and being able to reflect on it, but any attempted change of the outcome is in vain. The player is blended with the environment in the sense that it is made as exploitable as coexisting beings, as a part of the whole.



**Figure 12.** BACKBONE's fictional version of Vancouver, with the poor areas of the Labor District, West End, Village and Docks, and the wealthy districts of Valetown, Gastown and Tops.

Lotor's failure signifies the feeling of how doomed the world feels as an oppressed object of the system. This is BACKBONE's unique way of revealing the object's subjectivity: it is by placing the player in a subject-position which in retrospect is revealed to be merely an object incapable of change; the player recognizes the subjectivity within objecthood in their own player-character. It is only fitting that BACKBONE's plot offers the prospective escape of objecthood through refuge out of Vancouver's great walls, outside of the system. The moment Lotor escapes these walls (and dies), the game ends. The game system's environment of oppression is thus reflected in the world's actual oppression of natural and social environments.

BACKBONE's environment is both a natural and social phenomenon, because their causes are intertwined. The question of BACKBONE is as much if the player-raccoon is indeed playing a raccoon's situation in ecological chains as whether the player is playing an exploited worker in a predetermined system where the rich feed on the poor. The society of BACKBONE is as much nature as it is culture; its separation is put in fundamental ambivalence. As such, it tackles sensibilities of both the Capitalocene and Anthropocene at the same time, making explicit both the social hierarchies of a neoliberal system and the natural hierarchies imposed on the nonhuman world by humankind.

*BACKBONE* provides a first-hand negotiation of these sensibilities by putting the player in the middle of an environment in which their detrimental effects are maximized. The sheer (and emphasized) powerlessness of player-character Lotor effectively combines both principles of impressionist games: the objectified player is blended with the likewise objectified creatures of their environment, and this objecthood of the player is realized from a perspective of their subjectivity. Unlike UGG, which was a frivolous experiment, *BACKBONE* provides a dark, narratively driven example of the directions in which impressionist games may be taken.

*UNTITLED GOOSE GAME* and *BACKBONE*, while in disparate ways, both effectively consider system-player and player-environment relations to be productive for the negotiation of ecological issues. In both games, player-environment distinctions are blurred, with the player potentially being as much part of the environment as acting upon and within it. Furthermore, the oppression of the player ‘s subjectivity as an object of the game system is explored in both cases, with UGG implying an illusion of player-goose freedom by means of a human task list, and *BACKBONE* emphasizing the impossibility of escaping objecthood in a thoroughly oppressive system. As these are the principles similarly identified in ecological impressionism, this analysis has exemplified prototypical impressionist games. However, the full extent of impressionist games remains undefined, and this chapter calls for a new strand of games to build and develop on the preliminary dynamics these games bring to the fore. Impressionist games have yet to truly emerge, but the possible form of an ecological aesthetic politics of videogames has been established.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This thesis follows the spelling of videogames as one word, and occasionally simplifies the term as ‘games’, denoting only the videogame branch of the larger set of artifacts known as games.

<sup>2</sup> This thesis prefers to refer to gameplayers as players rather than ‘gamers’, especially because the latter term signifies a (masculine) culture of gameplayers that is exclusory of a variety of identities (Shaw 2011).

<sup>3</sup> To make matters worse, developers shy away from acknowledging the politics in their games, claiming apolitical intent and refusing to facilitate a fertile ground for discussion (cf. Ruch 2021).

<sup>4</sup> This is also evident from Bogost grounding his theory of procedural rhetoric in the Socratic method of rhetoric, which requires a dialogic interaction similar to that of game system-player (Bogost 2007, 15-19).

<sup>5</sup> Recently, Bogost agreed that his theory relied too linearly on the logics of procedural argumentation, whereas the situated realities of players often do not correspond to such reasoning (Bogost 2021, 33-34).

<sup>6</sup> Procedural rhetoric could be more effectively conceptualized as *procedural subjectivity*, an idea owed to Rosa van Opheusden, because “procedurality invites the player to take up a certain subject-position from which the game gains a certain meaning” (Van Opheusden 2020, 9). Remarkably, Bogost labeled a significant part of his preceding book *Unit Operations* (2006) as such, but did not expand on the term.

<sup>7</sup> Which is substantiated by an achievement unlocked after not playing the game for 5 years, titled “Go outside”. However, this achievement may also signify the game’s pervasive authority outside of gameplay.

<sup>8</sup> An originally derogatory term for the genre, its developers preferred reference to it as *story-exploration games* (Game Developer 2017). Today, however, the label is more positively accepted at large.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, if Impressionism serves as the inspiration for an ecological aesthetic politics, walking simulators, characterized by more organically progressing storylines, give players more time to reflect on their and their characters’ consciousness and to “stop and smell the roses” (Juul 2019, 201). This is a potential most literal application of Impressionism to videogames. However, it does not necessarily serve the ecological impressionist objective advanced in this thesis to utilize medium-specific aesthetics for political purposes.

<sup>10</sup> In her consideration of environmental textuality in videogames, Chang is inspired by Lawrence Buell’s original categorization of their characteristics (Buell 1995, 7-8).

<sup>11</sup> Often, in MINECRAFT such constructions are blended with evocative spaces, as players attempt to build familiar fictional constructions such as STAR WARS’ *Death Star* or THE LORD OF THE RINGS’ mythic city of Minas Tirith.

## VI. Conclusion

### The Transformation of Ecological Aesthetic Politics

The central argument advanced in this thesis is that an aesthetic politics of medial form is prolific in reimagining the sensibility of what is perceivable and thinkable. In times of increasingly daunting ecological catastrophe, reimagining natural equilibrium is increasingly unrealistic, that is to say, beyond contemporary sensibility. Hence the need to feel and think in ecological-philosophical ways not yet presenting themselves to customary sensibility to be able to imagine meeting the demands of such an equilibrium. When the Industrial Revolution, as the ecological crisis' godfather, changed western society beyond recognition, the intransigent movement of Impressionism responded by revolutionizing the rules of aesthetics – revealing the instability of human perception and its potential amalgamation with environmental inspiration. Thus, Impressionism established a burgeoning sensibility capable of negotiating the new questions presented in the Industrial Revolution's wake. The Post-Impressionist development of literary impressionism refined this transition by putting it into language, and conceived new relationalities between human and nonhuman subjectivities. This thesis has argued that a contemporary ecological aesthetic politics could build on these principles and identify them in contemporary media. Indeed, in animation film, an aesthetic politics centered around instable perception can negotiate ecological issues. Furthermore, videogames, which have no widely explored aesthetic-political precedent, can use these principles in the construction of such a model.

The Impressionist precedent of ecological aesthetic politics shows historical consistencies and divergences. Primarily, the concern of ecological impressionism is that ecological politics are constructed by means of aesthetic experimentation, rather than by rhetoric or other linear ways of practicing politics. The aesthetics themselves are what determines the boundaries of the sensible, and thus allow for

an ecological sensibility to take shape. Specifically, this means that similarities of ecological aesthetic politics rest on the same confusion of boundaries of sensibility. These are the confusion of fiction and reality, and of subjectivity and objecthood.

Reality is at once the concern of ecological aesthetic politics and its condition. Reality denotes everything that exists, and everything that is deemed realistic. This is the conventional reality of the sensible. Everything that can be sensed, or conjured up in the mind is reality. The power of aesthetic fiction is to present the unrealistic, the yet unimaginable. The ecological impressionist framework asks essential questions about the fundamentals of sensibility – revealing its perpetual instability and compositional construction. Thus, while the answer to ecological concerns resides in reality, speculative answers are articulated in fictionality. In the aesthetic-political considerations of all four medial forms, then, reality is assembled only to be negotiated, and negotiated only to be potently reimagined.

Reality exists as that which a subjectivity perceives as the objective world. As the Impressionists showed, objectivity cannot be externalized from subjectivity – nor can natural environments be separated from the humans that correspond and live with(in) them. This is taken a step further by literary impressionism, which adds that through the aesthetic composition of objective reality, objective reality can be inscribed with a subjectivity of its own. Indeed, the authors of Impressionist works are always a collision of human and nonhuman subjectivities.

Fictional-real and subject-object confusion unite in ecological impressionism. The fictional consideration of reality is crucial to consider subjectivity in objects, because fiction transcends conventional considerations of objects in objecthood. The Impressionists preluded this philosophy by blending natural inspiration with subjective sensibilities. Literary impressionism refined it by making premeasured objects speak back to human subjectivity in unorthodox manners. Animation film animates fictional life into unrealistic drawings, thereby redrawing environmental relationalities. Videogames grant their players and environments with a potent yet necessarily restrained subjectivity, so their amalgamations can be negotiated.

Still, the contemporary media of animation film and videogame diverge from historical Impressionism. With intensive ecological crisis contextually present, its negotiation is much more explicit. In Impressionism, the feeling of pollution

caused by industrialization and the acceleration of modern life was already seen and reviewed (as in Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* or Conrad's *The Secret Agent*) – however, without knowledge of the catastrophe that waits at the end of the process if unrestrained. Contemporary media are situated in a time where intensifying climate crisis is a reality: the disappearing Tama Hills forest in POM POKO, or the disintegrating society of BACKBONE, already show the exacerbated effects in play.

This may explain another divergence: nonhuman subjectivity increasingly takes the form of the animal. Anthropomorphism was not a topic in Impressionism. In animation film and videogames, an ecological aesthetic politics is hardly conceivable without anthropomorphism. Nor is it an undesirable trend, for it further specifies the nonhuman's potent subjectivity. Furthermore, animal life is often introduced with humor, as in POM POKO's use of inflated tanuki testicles, and UNTITLED GOOSE GAME's use of a rampant goose as a promotional meme. This humor helps ease viewers and players into the experience, and could make these medial forms more easily spreadable in the contemporary media landscape.

The framework of ecological impressionism is yet to be expounded within and beyond animation film and videogames. This limited reach likewise rests on a methodological limitation: cultural analysis necessarily compromises detailed accounts of medial form within their traditional disciplines, in favor of a boundary-crossing conceptual analysis. In the singularity of a few examples, then, this thesis has pursued a framework of principles for understanding ecological impressionism as a historically continuous idea of ecological aesthetic politics. Further elaboration is possible both in terms of conceptualization and exemplification.

Finally, next to analytical and methodological limitations, there is the theoretical restriction of this thesis to a particular strand of ecological philosophy, and its employment of object-oriented ontology as part of its articulation. This is not the only, nor an uncontested interpretation of ecological sensibility. This thesis is therefore selective in its interpretation of ecological philosophy, albeit unavoidably so because of its scope. It would be a productive prospect to see an ecological aesthetic politics articulated from a different vantage point – what aesthetic-political precedents and potentialities would arise then? These are speculations this thesis cannot answer, but invites future research to consider.

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