



A PELICAN
BOOK

Being Ecological

Timothy Morton

'I have been reading Tim's books for
a while and I like them a lot' BJÖRK

Contents

INTRODUCTION:

[Not Another Information Dump](#)

CHAPTER 1

[And You May Find Yourself Living in an Age of Mass Extinction](#)

CHAPTER 2

[... And the Leg Bone's Connected to the Toxic Waste Dump Bone](#)

CHAPTER 3

[Tuning](#)

CHAPTER 4

[A Brief History of Ecological Thought](#)

NOTES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOLLOW PENGUIN

For Lindsay Bloxam and Paul Johnson

'Grass is hard and lumpy and damp,
and full of dreadful black insects.'

OSCAR WILDE

INTRODUCTION

Not Another Information Dump

Don't care about ecology? You might think you don't, but you might all the same. Don't read ecology books? This book is for you.

It's understandable: ecology books can be confusing information dumps that are out of date by the time they drop on you. Slapping you upside the head to make you feel bad. Shaking your lapels while yelling disturbing facts. Handwringing in agony about 'What are we going to do?' Horseshoe-in-a-boxing-glove propaganda. This book has none of that. *Being Ecological* doesn't preach to the eco-choir. It's for you: maybe you're in the choir but only sometimes, or maybe you have no idea what choirs are, or maybe you don't care at all. Rest assured this book is not going to preach at you. It also contains no ecological facts, no shocking revelations about our world, no ethical or political advice, and no grand tour of ecological thinking. This is a pretty useless ecology book, in fact. But why write something so 'useless' in such urgent times? Have I never heard of global warming? Why are you even reading this? Well, the truth is you might already be ecological, you just didn't know it. How, you might ask? Let's begin and find out.

What This Book is About

In this Introduction, I'll set out the general approach of the book. In the first chapter, I will finger-paint a way of feeling ourselves around the age we live in, which is one of mass extinction caused by global warming. In the second chapter, we'll get on with considering the object of ecological awareness and ecological thinking: the biosphere and its interconnections. In the third chapter, we'll look at what sorts of actions count as ecological. And in the fourth, we'll be exploring a number of current styles of being ecological.

Along the way I'm going to make you familiar with my style of doing philosophy. If that style were a movie directed by me, its producer would be Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (more on that soon), and its executive producers would be the philosophers Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger.

For now, in this Introduction, I'm going to show how this is not an ordinary book about ecology, because it's trying very hard to avoid a seductive rhetorical mode: the guilt-inducing sermon. How? Let's begin with the fact that this book is largely free of facts. I just thought I'd put that in up front myself, before the critics do it.

When you write a book about ecology, whether or not you are a scientist talking about ecological issues, you seem to have to put a lot of facts in. It feels like a requirement of the genre – a genre being like a kind of horizon, a horizon of expectation. We expect tragedies to make us feel certain emotions (Aristotle thought these were fear and pity), and comedies are supposed to make you smile. There is a genre of the kind of writing you find in your passport. And there is definitely a genre of ecological speech – several genres in fact.

Big Other is Watching You

A genre is a sort of world or *possibility space*. You can make certain moves within that space, and as long as you stay in the space, you are performing something in that generic mode. For example, you probably have a certain way of being at a party, and this might be different from your way of being at a company meeting. You might have a certain way of reading the news, and you definitely have certain ways of following (or ignoring) the latest clothing fashions.

Genres are slippery animals. They have to do with what some philosophy calls *the Other* – and when you try to point directly at the other, it (or she or he, or they) disappears. The other – my idea of your idea of her idea of their idea of his idea of my idea of their idea ... If you've ever been in a band you will know what a perilous concept this is. If you write music tailored to what you think people want in the record store, you might end up paralysed by indecision. This is because the realm of the other is like a network or web of assumptions, prejudices, and preformatted concepts.

Now there are preformatted concepts that are obvious to all of us, or at least they can easily become so. If you want to know the kind of ravioli they make in Florence, then you're going to be able to look that up. 'Florentine ravioli mode' is something you can find out about – indeed, nowadays you can just Google it. *To Google* has at least one meaning to do with this idea of genre. When we Google something, we are often trying to see what the 'other' thinks about it. Google is like the other, some kind of tangled spider web of expectations lurking just out of the corner of our eye, or just on the other side of all those links we don't have time to click. We *never* have enough time to click all the links (as Google gets bigger, this becomes more obvious). Another way of saying this is that this weird thing, the other, is somehow *structural*: it doesn't matter how you sidle up to it, you will never be able to grasp it directly. Its job seems to be to disappear whenever you look directly at it, but to feel like it's surrounding you when you don't – sometimes this feeling can be pretty creepy.

Who are We?

I'm going to be saying *we* a lot in this book. It's not fashionable to say *we* in my line of work (humanistic scholarship). It's fashionable to be very explicit about how different people are, and it's considered to be passing over or even erasing those significant differences to say *we*. In addition, pronouns are complicated things in an ecological age: how many beings does *we* gather together and are they all human? I'm going to be using *we* as someone thoroughly informed by the politics of difference, and by the identity politics that distorts it. I'm going to be using *we* in part to highlight how the beings responsible for global warming are not seahorses: they are humans, beings like me. It's about time we

figured out how to talk about the human species, while at the same time not acting as if the last few decades of thought and politics had never happened. We surely can't go back to imagining some vanilla essence of 'Man' underneath our differences. But if we don't figure out how to say *we*, someone else will. And as the Romantic poet William Blake said, 'I must create my own system or be enslaved by another man's.'

Facing Facts

We all know that ecological writing – especially the sort that delivers scientific information, maybe the kind you often find in a newspaper, but definitely the kind you also find in books with titles like this one – needs lots of facts. Lots of *data*. You would be right to think that this data is usually delivered in a certain mode, once you stop to think about it – but no one is stopping to think about it very much. 'Ecological information delivery mode' has a certain flavour, a certain style – it happens in a certain *possibility space*. One of my jobs as a Humanities scholar is to try to feel out these possibility spaces, especially if/when we're not very aware of them. Possibility spaces that aren't very obvious to us can exert all kinds of control over us, and we may not want these kinds of control – or at any rate, it might be nice to get a sense of what the coordinates are. Just think about the long history of sexism or racism: they have affected our behaviour in all kinds of ways we may not be aware of – and it has taken a lot of time and effort from a lot of different people to make obvious the types of patterns of thought, assumptions and behaviour that underlie prejudice and even make people think it's OK.

What are the laws of gravity in the possibility space? Which way is up, which way is down? What counts as wrong, what counts as right? How far can you venture within the space before you cross over into another space? For example, how far can you distort ecological information mode before it turns into something else? That might actually be a good way of finding out what a possibility space is, just like it's a good idea to find out what a metal is by heating it, freezing it, firing pulses of energy at it, putting it in a magnetic field and so on – the old image of biting into a gold coin comes to mind. It's the same with art. You can find out what a play is like by imagining how far you could distort it before it really does become something quite different. How many crazy costumes can

you get away with – if you staged Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* on Jupiter using people dressed as hamsters, would we still recognize it as *Hamlet*?

Perhaps my intentions might be more obvious if I put it this way: this book is free of *factoids*. A factoid is a fact that we know something about – we know that it has been coloured or flavoured a certain way, that it’s supposed to look and quack like a fact. Perhaps it’s even true, at least from one or more points of view. But still, it has a strange quality. It seems to be shouting at us – *Look. I’m a fact. You can’t ignore me. I dropped out of the sky on your head.* That’s interesting – a fact that was designed to look like it dropped out of the sky. Factoids are designed to look like what we think facts should be – we think they should look like they are not designed. When people use factoids, we feel like we are being manipulated by little bits of truth that have been broken off some larger, truer edifice, as if they were small chunks of cake. Consider for example the *factoid* that ‘there is a gene for’ some trait. Most people take this to mean that a part of your DNA code will cause you to have this trait. But when you study evolution and genetics, you will find out the *fact* that *there are no ‘genes for’ anything*. The *fact* is that traits emerge through complex reactions between DNA expressing itself and the environment in which the DNA is doing the expressing. Just because you have some DNA that is associated with a certain cancer, it doesn’t mean you will get it. But we go around repeating the factoid that ‘there is a gene for this or that cancer’.

How We Talk to Ourselves about Ecology

Ecological information delivery mode in the media seems most often to consist of what we could call an *information dump*. At least one factoid – and often a whole plateful – seems to be falling on to our heads. And this falling has an authoritative quality: the delivery mode seems to be saying *Don’t question this*, or even *You should feel very bad if you question this*. In particular, ‘global warming information mode’ seems to be about dumping massive platefuls of facts on to us. Why? This is another way of saying *What are the moves we can make in the possibility space of global warming information mode?* Which is a rather complex way of saying *What is the genre of global warming information mode?*

Which way is up? How are we supposed to feel? What kind of information delivery would destroy this mode? And so on.

Our not having a ready answer for this question, unless we are global warming deniers, should make us pause. Deniers are quite clear: this mode is trying to convince me of something I don't want to believe. I am having a belief forced down my throat. Why don't we all feel like that? And if we feel ecologically righteous, we shun people who think they are being dumped on to make them feel something – crude guilt leading to crude belief, maybe. This is not a war of beliefs – this is the truth. Damn it, Mr Denier, why can't you see that?

Despite what factoids would have us believe, no fact just plops out of the sky. There is a whole environment in which the fact can appear – otherwise you can't see it at all. Consider something you might not regularly say if you grew up in the West: *My ancestral spirits are unhappy that I'm writing this book.* In what world does this statement make sense? What do you need to know, what do you need to expect? What counts as right and wrong in this world? We need all kinds of assumptions about what reality is, about what counts as real, what counts as existing, what counts as correct and incorrect. Thinking about these kinds of assumptions can take different forms, in philosophy one is called *ontology*, another is called *epistemology*. Ontology is the study of how things exist. Epistemology is the study of how we know things.

In addition to the idea that facts are meaningful within certain contexts of interpretation, there are questions you can answer quite easily if you study art, music or literature. These are questions such as *How does the mode want you to read this information? How do you look like you received it 'right'?* You don't look at a Renaissance perspective painting from the side. You have to stand pretty much right in front of the vanishing point, at a certain distance – then the 3D illusion makes sense. The picture positions you in a certain way, the poem asks to be read a certain way – just like a Coca-Cola bottle 'wants' you to hold it a certain way, a hammer seems to fit your hand just so when you handle it ... A whole lot of what is sometimes called ideology theory is about how you are coerced into handling a poem, a painting, a political speech, a concept in a certain way.

All kinds of ontology and epistemology (and ideology) are implied by ecological information dump mode, but we rarely pause

to figure out what they are. We are too keen on dumping, or being dumped on. Why? Why don't we even seem to want to pause and figure it out? Are we scared we might find something? What are we scared we might find? Why do we wring our hands and go *Why don't these deniers get it?* or *Why doesn't my neighbour care about all this as much as I do?* Ecological information dump mode is a symptom of something much bigger than feelings about stuff you read in the newspaper.

One way to zoom out and ask these sorts of question again would be to say something like *How are we living ecological data? Do we like it? If not, what do we want to do about that?* This book, *Being Ecological*, is about how to *live* ecological knowledge. It seems to be not enough just to know stuff. In fact, it seems like 'just knowing stuff' is never just knowing stuff, according to what I've been trying to argue. 'Just knowing stuff' is a way of living things too. And knowing that there is a way of living things implies there could be other ways too. If you have tragedy, you can imagine something like comedy. If you live in New York, you can imagine living in not-New York.

There seem to be plenty of ways of living ecological knowledge. Just think about being a hippy, something with which I am vaguely familiar. Being a hippy is a whole way of life, a whole style. But is being a hippy compulsory as a way to live ecological information? Think about the internet. Before a huge number of people had access to it, there were two or three ways of living with the internet. For instance, there was the amused, playful, experimental, anarchic or libertarian slacker mode in which the internet was supposed to make us feel like our identities were malleable or liquid. Then something strange happened. Loads more people got the internet, and a whole lot of the internet became a really coercive, authoritarian space where you had to have one of about three acceptable opinions or risk being attacked by a mob of judgemental twitterers like the flock descending on the gas station in Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds*. I'm not going to go into why and how this happened, but you get the point.

Being Ecological is starting by peering under the hood of the ways in which we talk to ourselves about ecology. I think the main way – just dumping data on ourselves – is actually *inhibiting* a more genuine way of handling ecological knowledge. There are better ways of living all of this than we have now, and we don't

image

not

available

what to do. Why aren't we doing it? There are great ways to let yourself off the hook here. For example, you can argue that neoliberal capitalism is so oppressive and all-pervasive that it would require a major global revolution to dismantle the structures that are polluting the biosphere with carbon emissions: the big corporations. So there should be a gigantic social revolution first, then once we have the right way of relating with one another, we can get down to the business of curbing our emissions. Isn't this weirdly the same as the argument India made at the climate negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009? India argued that it couldn't limit emissions, because first it needed to go through exactly the same kind of 'development' as the West. Once it had achieved the right kind of society, it could think about curbing its harmful ways.

Assuming that this strategy actually works, by the time you have achieved what you wanted, Earth will have melted anyway.

Things versus Thing-Data

The 'What are we going to do?' question is weird: there is a very accurate description of what to do, yet it will never, ever feel as if we are doing it exactly right, even if we try. Here is the paradox: we know what to do *and* we won't be able to get high up enough above the world to see exactly what that looks like. And it's very strange, because these two facts go together: we have accurate data and accurate solutions, yet – *and* – this goes along with being unable to see the wood for the trees. There always appears to be too many trees.

By the way, the problem is much more 'interesting' (aka worse) than I've just described. This is because *any action at all* will suffer from this paradox. Say for example you 'know what to do' and that involves individuals or small groups limiting their emissions, rather than dismantling global capitalism or sidestepping the polluting aspects of modern modes of production. You will never be able to check in advance as to whether your actions are having the desired effect, and in particular you know that Earth is so large that your small action won't count for much, if anything. In fact, your own personal emissions are probably statistically meaningless. But billions of them are exactly what is causing global warming. This is what the data is telling you. Yet doing nothing at all is exactly the problem, so just feeling smug and powerless won't work either.

stops being a nice neutral box that you just live in and forget about, waiting for the alarm or the calendar to remind you of what to do and when. Time stops being what it actually isn't – namely, a human interpretation of time. 'Interpretation' doesn't just mean 'mental description'. It means the whole panoply of ways in which you access and use a thing. How you access an apple gives you apple data, remember, not apples in themselves. Even eating the apple gives you apple bites, not the entire apple in all its manifold glory. Think of how we like to talk about 'interpretations' of music. That doesn't mean simply thinking about the music – it also means actually *playing* the music: executing the music. The conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra 'interprets' a musical score by waving her arms in the air, causing musicians to 'interpret' the lines of music in certain ways. When you put it that way, it becomes quite obvious. *An execution of a thing is not the thing.*

So, there you are with your geologist's hammer and your special camera, and you have come up against the fact that hammerings and photographings of things aren't those things. Your picturesque world was so consistent that you forgot that this picturesque-ing was also an execution of things like lakes and trees and mountains. You thought you were seeing something directly: you probably call it *nature*. Nature sort of means something you forget about because it's just functioning. We talk about 'human nature' this way. 'It's in my nature, I can't help it.' 'Doing what comes naturally.' And we talk about nonhuman 'nature' this way: that's the whole point of the 'weather conversation' you have with a stranger at a bus stop. You are able to find common ground in something that appears neutral, something that just functions and therefore creates a background for your interaction. But global warming takes that supposed neutrality away from us, like too-eager stage hands removing all the scenery while the play is still in progress.

So your scientific view of things, up close with a hammer and a camera, doesn't mean you're 'seeing' nature; you are still interpreting it with human tools and a human's touch. Thinking in an ecological way means letting go of this idea of nature – it sounds incredible, but that's only because we're so habituated to certain ways of accessing and executing and otherwise 'interpreting' things such as lakes, trees, cows, snow, sunshine and wheat.

violence goes into sustaining this view, precisely because it isn't accurate. Once again what we think and how we think it are deeply connected.

In Western philosophy, it was the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl who started us off thinking in this 'manifold' way. The years right around 1900 were very significant for developments in science (just think of relativity theory). Yet it was also the moment when an earthquake happened in Western philosophy. Husserl reasoned that ideas don't just float around in space, but are instead what are called *phenomena*: they always have some kind of colour or flavour, and this colour or flavour isn't a decoration or an optional extra, but intrinsic to what an idea is. Among other things, Husserl was reacting to a movement in logic in the nineteenth century called *psychologism*. Psychologism argued that logical sentences were symptoms of a healthy brain. In other words, making logical sense was derived from a brain that was functioning properly (whatever 'proper' means). Logical sentences are sentences such as *If p, and if p then q, then q*: given the fact that there are bananas, and since if there are bananas then there are banana trees, in that case there are banana trees. They make sense, says psychologism, because healthy brains make them. But what is a healthy brain? Well, it's a thing that can make a logical sentence. And what is a logical sentence? Well, it's a thing that comes out of a healthy brain. And what is a healthy brain? We will need some kind of science to verify what a healthy brain is to break this vicious circle. But science relies on logical sentences. And what is a logical sentence? It's a symptom of ... and so on. There is an infinite regress at work and we haven't actually said anything at all.

So, reasoned Husserl, this just can't be how things are. Logical sentences can't be just symptoms of something.³ We can't *reduce* them to being the output of healthy brains. They have a reality all their own. Instead of being evidence of proper mental functioning or, to extend this thought, even of proper human DNA, whatever that is, logical sentences have their own building blocks, their own DNA. And they can manage on their own. A logical sentence is like a Tweet or a meme: it has its own sort of life, which means that it's distinct and unique – it has a colour and a flavour and a texture. Like a hammer, you have to handle it this way, not that way.

Husserl's understanding was like finding that an ocean, far from being vast and empty and bleak, was swarming with fish. What was the ocean? The ocean of reason that Kant had established slightly more than a hundred years earlier. Kant upheld that it doesn't matter to what he called pure reason that little me, Tim Morton with his specific size, shape, colour and gender, wishes and hopes and so on, is thinking reasonable things. There is something *transcendental* about reason. You can't point to it, but it's real. This ocean of reason sort of floats just a little bit behind my head. It's a rather cold, uninhabited, eerily clear ocean, because it just does one thing: it mathematizes, measuring things and telling me that this galaxy is *this* big and has lasted *that* long and has *this* kind of movement through the universe. But Husserl showed that because logical sentences have a reality all their own, other types of sentences do too, such as hopeful sentences, wishing sentences, hating sentences ... It was as if Husserl had discovered that the Kantian ocean had all kinds of differently coloured fish swimming in it, fish with their own DNA structure independent of little Tim and Tim characteristics such as having reddish facial hair. Kant had shown that there was a very significant part of reality that you couldn't point to – the ocean of reason – and Husserl then showed that this ocean is inhabited after all, and that the fish that swim in this ocean are entities in their own right, with their own DNA.

And these fish aren't just restricted to propositions that look logical to the untrained eye. There are all sorts of logical fish, as well as hoping fish, loving fish, hating fish, imagining fish. These are all *intentional objects*, *intentional* meaning that they are contained within this thought-ocean ('intentional' here means 'held within the mind', not the usual sense of 'pointing at some external goal via some mental act'). Just as there's a certain way to handle a shark, there's a certain way to handle a feeling of disgust – there is a mode of having that feeling that goes along with the feeling. And like a magnet, the shark and shark-handling mode are two poles of a phenomenon: they go together, in an inextricable way. Which means that it's not quite true to say that 'I' am 'having' a 'thought'. It's more like this: 'I' is something I sort of deduce or abstract from the phenomenon of this particular thought, just as what the thought is about is also part of that phenomenon.

We are so used to thinking in a dualistic way, that the implications of the fact that thoughts are independent of the mind

sound unbelievable. But it's pretty hard to push Husserl's insight over, because just as in Kant, it doesn't depend upon believing something external to the argument; there is no other ecology outside of the one you're currently in, examining this argument. Phenomena don't just happen, then you perceive them. The phenomenon *includes* the act of having it, hammering it, measuring them, mathematizing it, feeling it.

And in turn this means something rather amazing about activities like hammering. A hammer is a certain something, a very specific something – and yet it's not a hammer exactly. It's all kinds of things to all kinds of beings. It's a landing strip for a fly. It's a surface for dust to collect on. It's a hammer when I start using it for my hammering project. But a hammer doesn't just wait around in outer space for someone to grab it. Hammers happen when you grab a metal-and-wooden thing for hammering in a picture hook. In this way a hammer is like a poem. A poem isn't the squiggles on the page. It's how I orchestrate those squiggles when I read them, how an editor interprets the poem by putting it next to some other poems in an anthology, how the poem is taught in a poetry class.

The World is Full of Holes

Hammering is a very vivid, specific thing with its own DNA, which includes me and my wish to hammer in this picture hook, a metal-and-wood thing called 'hammer', the wall, the hook ... the hammer bone's connected to the wall bone ... So the full-on, twelve-inch remix of Husserl is full-on object-oriented ontology, in which things are not exhausted by how you use them; they don't hang around in outer space waiting for someone to use them, interpret them, hammer with them. Things are not *underneath* how they appear, where 'appear' means something really general that includes being part of phenomena such as *eating, hammering, interpreting, reading ...*

There is always some kind of truthy interpretation space in which your thoughts and ideas and actions are taking place, and the thing to remember about this space is that (1) it's not optional and (2) it's not totally sealed off, it's perforated. What does that mean? First of all, it means that not only the mental but also the physical (and psychic and social) ways we 'interpret' things are in that space. A violinist interprets Berg's violin concerto when she

CHAPTER 1: AND YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF LIVING IN AN AGE OF MASS EXTINCTION

1. W. D. Richter, dir., *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai across the Eighth Dimension* (20th Century Fox, 1984).
2. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter, 2009), 197–222.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 59–80.
4. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 17.
5. Talking Heads, 'Once in a Lifetime', *Remain in Light* (Sire Records, 1980).
6. John Keats, 'In Drear-Nighted December', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin, 1987), line 21.
7. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
8. *Doctor Who*, 'Blink', dir. Hettie MacDonald, written by Steven Moffat (BBC, 2007).
9. John Cage, '2 Pages, 122 Words on Music and Dance', in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2011), 96–7 (96).
10. For a full discussion of this, see the end of Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 111–74.
11. John Carpenter, dir., *The Thing* (Universal Studios, 1982).
12. Davis Guggenheim, dir., *An Inconvenient Truth* (Paramount Classics, 2006).