

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## GOTHIC NATURE 1

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**Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological***

(Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018)

Eric Heyne

For Timothy Morton ‘being ecological’ is an immersive experience. Luckily, it’s one that you’re already entirely immersed in. You don’t even have to try. In fact, trying is exactly what you *don’t* want to do. This slim little book might be subtitled, ‘How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bombardier Beetle’. Morton’s ecological consciousness is thoroughly Buddhist, a koan-ical attack on all pious assumptions and great expectations, fact-free and proud of it. This is the opposite of activist ecology; if your behaviour happens to change in any way after reading this book, it will be only a side effect of your consciousness having been altered subtly, of your ecological *style* having shifted.

For the first forty pages or so of *Being Ecological*, I was annoyed at Morton’s style and tired of being told things that I thought I already knew. Morton is always sure of himself, always in explanatory mode, and fond of his own lexicon: ‘possibility space’, ‘information dump’, ‘truthiness’, ‘object-oriented ontology (OOO)’, ‘blue marble photos’, ‘dark ecology’, ‘mouthfeel /thinkfeel’, and ‘Neolithic logistics’. He is ‘a proud (?) member of Generation X’ (p. 130), a friend of Bjork and frequent visitor to the Rothko Chapel, and a fan of *Dr. Who* and the Talking Heads who never passes up the opportunity to make a pop-culture reference. He uses jet lag as shorthand for a kind of universal human experience. It felt awkward to be preached to, even playfully, by someone whose text consisted primarily of ‘Don’t let them preach to you!’

But then something happened. My stiff resistance broke down. Somewhere around the discussion of converting the Uncanny Valley to a ‘Spectral Plain’, while exploring the linguistic roots of ‘environment’ in the verb ‘to veer’, among repeated assertions that art has its way with us and ‘free will is overrated’, I found myself thinking about how I was going to have to find a way to incorporate this book into my teaching. I’m not sure exactly what sort of ‘magic’ took place (and ‘magic’ is the term Morton would use for it), but maybe I started thinking like a Buddhist ecologist, sort of, in spurts. And it felt good.

Having an experience is exactly what Morton wants us to take away from this book, as opposed to learning some facts or drawing up a new agenda. I hope I'm not just making excuses when I say that conveying the experience of this book in a short review is difficult. I can give you some of his key terminology, as I've tried to, but not the way he weaves that vocabulary and a handful of key images together into a pattern that feels...promising. Whether that promise will be fulfilled remains to be seen, after I've spent time adjusting my ecological style.

Of course, style and behaviour are inextricably linked, and Morton not-so-secretly hopes that achieving 'awareness of the sensuous existence of other lifeforms' (p. 57) will result in incremental social change. But he steadfastly refuses to root for planned planetary-scale change. In fact, he strongly denounces ambitious techno-sociological solutions to climate change, which he considers the latest manifestation of 'agricultural religion', with scientists serving as priests and presidents as pharaohs. Such denunciations sometimes make him sound a bit like that wacky conspiracy theorist who delights in tracing secret societies from ancient Egypt through the Crusades and the founding fathers right up to the Kennedy assassination and the Trilateral Commission. Hierarchical structures and part/whole thinking are the principal villains in this revisionist history of the world, and the most pervasive and damaging hierarchical distinction is that between nonhuman and human (or, as Levi-Strauss synecdochised it, the raw and the cooked).

Exploring this distinction thoroughly is the project of Morton's previous book, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (2017). In fact, everything in *Being Ecological* has already been said by Morton elsewhere, in *Dark Ecology* (2016) or *Hyperobjects* (2013) or one of his other many books, but not always in such an engaging way. *Being Ecological* is a primer and a summation, a fun ride that takes us rapidly from zero (Kant) to futurity (OOO). Hence my sense of being lectured on the basics, and also my sense that this book might be very powerful in the classroom. Morton has been an almost absurdly prolific writer for the last two decades, beginning his career in English literary Romanticism and arriving at ecology through 'diet studies'. This is his seventh book of ecological theory, meant to bring those who haven't read his other books quickly and painlessly up to speed. I think Morton wants us to arrive at a position very similar to that held by thinkers such as Bruno Latour who come to ecology from a scientific background. But for a humanist like me, Morton's focus on art and 'the beauty experience' as a way into re-thinking the personhood of the nonhuman is more powerful than Latour's journey through biology towards the 'collective'. And of course Morton, with his

‘Neoplatonic retweets’ and suggestion that ‘maybe *everything is a TARDIS*’ (p. 109), is so much more Gen X than Latour, with his obsession with our never-achieved modernism. Morton wants us to be able to *enjoy* ecological thinking, make ecological jokes, pamper our pets, ‘navigate through a bad dream’ (p. 154), and relax into our already always ecological selves.

Relaxing is exactly what ecoGothic literature *doesn't* encourage, and although Morton talks about the current state of the world as ‘a bad dream’, as well as the huge amount of ‘trauma work’ it will require for us to recover, *Being Ecological* is about achieving a zen calm, not indulging in our fears. You’d think the author of a book titled *Dark Ecology* might be interested in the morbid or frightening ways that we conjure up nature’s revenge. But it’s good magic Morton is extolling, a kind of Transcendentalist optimism as opposed to the darker European Romantic pessimism. Because ‘it’s already the end of the “world” [...] [i]t’s like those horror movies in which the hero finds out that she or he is already dead. If you’re already dead, there’s nothing to be afraid of, is there?’ (p. 155). Cue the maniacal laugh.