

Utopianism and Fascist Aesthetics: An Appreciation of “Nature” in Documentary/Fiction Film

By Pat Brereton

1. Introduction

There continues to be a dominant and negative ideological critique of “nature” in fiction film and to a lesser extent documentary, with many cultural histories predicating their analysis on Fredric Jameson’s assertion that “mass culture” articulates social conflicts, contemporary fears and utopian hopes and (more contentiously) attempts at ideological containment and reassurance. Much less academic effort is given over to understanding and appreciating rather than dismissing the utopic “feel good” spatial aesthetic, which permeates Hollywood film. Cultural criticism should analyze both the social hopes and fantasies, as well as the ideological ways in which fantasies are presented, conflicts are resolved, and potentially disruptive hopes and anxieties are managed. It is from within this inclusive strategy that representations of nature can most fruitfully be analyzed from a utopian perspective.

Particularly at the turn of the millennium there has been a detectable wishful, utopian fantasy to find some “new” meta-narrative as an antidote to the so-called postmodernist worldview. Within mainstream blockbuster Hollywood cinema in particular, I have detected a renewed expression of “sublime spectacle” — which encompasses a heightened technological spin on Tom Gunning’s articulation of the so-called “primitive cinema” at the beginning of the century. This recent aesthetic predisposition often privileges a romanticized form of land/skyscape (as in *Grand Canyon*, *Emerald Forest*, *Event Horizon* and *Blade Runner*) and an excessive visualization of all the primary natural

elements (as codified by the ancient philosopher Heraclitus: earth, air, fire and water) — at their most turbulent and “magnificent” (as in *Deep Impact*, *Titanic*, *Waterworld*, and *Twister*)¹ This article will sketch the meaning(s) of natural landscape through conventional romantic and utopic filmic closures which have for some become tainted through German nature-fascism.

2. Literary Antecedents

At a thematic level, the Western utopianism/dystopian cultural phenomenon, which predicates this appreciation of nature, can be understood in the light of a small number of seminal literary texts. In particular Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* described an imaginary totalitarian society where the ruling party retained almost complete control of its population through constant surveillance, continuous indoctrination, behavioral modification, manipulation of language, and the general exercise of naked power. “Only the proles, in their tenements with their cheap gin and slovenly ways were left more or less alone. It was a world, Orwell said, which might happen.”²

Alternatively, Huxley’s *Brave New World* envisioned a far more efficient system of control than that of Orwell’s, one based on the reinforcement of desired behavior by reward rather than by punishment.³ The denizens of this “brave new world” were officially encouraged to take the soma drug, to go with their feelings, and to enjoy promiscuous sex in order to give them a stake in an ongoing life of pleasure — all seductions which captured their attention and deflected it from sustained critical thought about the organization of society.

According to Marxist principles in particular, the predominant preoccupation within American culture continues to be those commodities and practices of consumption which act as forms of “discipline and soma,” entrenching bourgeois democracy’s promise of abundance.

Citizens were promised various economic and political rights, but they were also offered punitive access to the

¹These are addressed in great detail in my Ph.D, *Ecological Utopianism and Hollywood Cinema*, University of Luton, UK, 2001.

²Stephen M. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder, CO: West View Press, 1992), p. 2.

³As Gramsci’s notion of hegemony teaches us — structures of power reproduce themselves best when humans control themselves, spontaneously acting “correctly” because it is the right, normal, sane thing to do. Repressive sanctions need only come into play when there is a problem. Most of the time people do what they are programmed to do.

good material things of life....One's energy was [completely] directed towards fulfillment as a consumer.⁴

The utopian Disney empire, in particular, with over 30 million visits annually and a growing franchise of media products (especially film), remains most clearly correlated with the zenith of such material cultural capitalism. Not surprisingly Walt Disney originally envisaged the “Epcot” center theme park to be similar to a permanent world fair. Ideally, he also imagined it as a utopian type of (natural) city, with people actually residing there, an idea dismissed after Walt's death by his brother Roy.⁵

The science fiction future film *Logan's Run* (1976) overtly exhibits and dramatizes the vacuousness of such sterile material and sexual fulfillment, opposing it to the “pure” pleasures of nature which incorporate growth as well as old age and renewal — unlike the scientifically systematized population control in the hermetically sealed environment beneath the natural world above. *Soylent Green* (1973) is even more explicit in foregrounding the therapeutic pleasures of “raw (simulated) nature,” which is used to allay fears of the impending death of the aged protagonist played by Edward G. Robinson. The audience is privileged in viewing an audiovisual display of “stock images” of nature which are valorized and counterpoised with the dystopian future world presented throughout the film. This potent evocation of nature continues specifically within recent narratives (alongside more explicit nature documentaries) as seen in the final reading of *Gladiator*.

3. Nature Idolatry: Roots of a Fascist Aesthetic

Fredric Jameson perceptively suggests that the culture of late capitalism has seen the spread of commodification into perhaps the last two available domains — “the unconscious (pornography, psychotherapy, fantasy) and nature (wilderness, parks, zoos, and anthropology).”⁶ He speaks of the evolution of spatial utopias in particular from the 1960s “in which the transformation of social relations and political institutions are projected onto the vision of place and landscape, including the human body.”⁷ Such commodifying body fetishism

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 399. Nevertheless these utopian ideals continue to live on in the Disney school of films, and I argue in my Ph.D, *op cit.*, have become more comprehensively refracted within the Spielberg oeuvre in particular.

⁶Cited in Fjellman, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁷See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 160. Nevertheless in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson affirms that there is

alongside the displacement of nature romanticism for ideological rather than philosophical purposes is evidenced most blatantly in the rise of Nazism in the 1930s.

There remains an ever-present danger with much unadulterated “nature” idolatry which became predicated on a utopian wish-fulfilling fantasy. While “classic” romantic poets like William Wordsworth sought to “ennoble and spiritualize nature” and even “derive a transcendent nature from an ecological nature,”⁸ German Romanticism and its glorification of nature has been often critiqued as a philosophical and aesthetic seed-bed for the evolution of Nazism.⁹ Adolf Hitler built his twisted ideology on a glorification of “nature” and “natural values.” He even promoted the German nationalist (mythic) wish to return to a pre-industrial nature, the *heimat*.¹⁰ Following his model of natural

always the possibility of discerning utopian elements in every work of mass culture. “Ideology and utopia are of course virtually inextricable.” Yet surprisingly he almost succumbs to the ever present “false consciousness” trap, by appearing to dismiss mass audiences and popular cultural pleasure as: “the shallow fantasies of mass culture [which] can justly claim to provide their audiences with approximate conceptualizations of hopes of escape” (cited in Paul Coates, *Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 6). Jameson finally turns to Bloch for consolation as he validates:

(the)...luminous recovery of the Utopian impulses at work in that most degraded of all mass cultural texts, advertising slogans — visions of external life, of the transfigured body, of preternatural sexual gratification — may serve as the model for an analysis of the dependence of the crudest form of manipulation on the oldest Utopian longings of humankind, Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

⁸See Greg Garrard’s essay, “Radical Pastoral?” in Jonathan Bate, ed., *Studies in Romanticism* (Special issue: Green Romanticism), 35, 3, Autumn 1996, p. 427, Graduate School Boston University.

⁹“Germans were in search for a mysterious wholeness that would restore them to primeval happiness, destroying the hostile milieu of urban industrial civilization that the Jewish conspiracy had foisted on them,” see Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *EcoFascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: A.K. Press, 1995), p. 6.

¹⁰E. Reitz’s *Heimat* (1984) is about conserving culture and identity. As such it appears to point solely to an exclusionary politics of Nationalism and communitarianism precisely because memories built around place cannot easily be shared with the outsider.

But memory of the past is also about hope for the future, as Mary Gordon puts it: “There is a link between hope and memory, remembering nothing one cannot hope for anything. And so time means nothing,” cited

eugenics, the handicapped, gypsies and Jews could be lumped together as “imperfect,” pre-determined by his Aryan code of perfection, and simply exterminated. Yet such a mass murderer at the same time also espoused a healthy respect for animals, remaining a strict vegetarian all his life. Consequently “nature” per se and its glorification does not de facto predetermine or legitimate a humanist ethical position.¹¹ Nature can forever be used to “legitimize and normalize actions and behavior which we choose to impose on each other.”¹²

Russian despotism, on the other hand, used an opposing symbolic value structure to promote their ideology. The petit bourgeoisie farmers, “the Kulaks,” were soon recognized as the enemy of the people, for their abuse of natural (and by extension national) resources. However, it was not land and nature that was used as a beacon of solidarity with the new regime, but rather the Russian socialist image of the city. Stalin’s favorite image or metaphor of society remained a machine. He often referred to human beings as small cogs necessary to constitute the grand machine of state.¹³ The planned utopia which Stalin designed involved everything being controlled from the center. “Nature,” was regarded as peripheral and so must conform to the greater good of the “center.” The Bolsheviks pushed the rationality behind the Industrial Revolution developed in the West to its ultimate conclusion, by transforming people into scientific beings, using extensive time and motion studies to teach the proletariat to behave as “rational” beings.¹⁴

in David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Press, 1996), p. 305.

¹¹In spite of his espousal of ecological values, Hitler succumbed to the lure of economic progress by devising extensive works program, which helped to build road networks throughout the German countryside. Such productive creation of a modern infrastructure, became both a symbol of German prowess and was essential towards the mobilization of a successful war machine. Consequently the idea of “progress” can be even more pernicious than “nature” ever can. Thankfully such despotism was overcome, helped in no small measure by nature’s power over man, especially if they believe they are invincible supermen.

¹²Neil Evenden, “Nature in Industrial Society,” in Ian Angus and Jut Jhally, eds., *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 164.

¹³Ironically, Eisenstein, the master Propagandist for the regime often used the metaphor of the machine as symbolic of human oppression, for example, in *Strike*.

¹⁴Gosplan, the centralized plan to be followed by all Russians, was produced by a massive central computer system. Faith in technology

The great Russian film maker Sergi Eisenstein, in particular, created a film aesthetic, which served to endorse this ideology. Avoiding heroic and character identification, he created a form and style of cinema which glorified mass action and concentrated on narratives that dramatized mass desires to work together, like a machine to fight oppression. Nature as an existential force was not invoked, (except in his later films); instead, human power came from social even conformist unity.

Eric Voegelin recognized both strands of totalitarianism as an “expression of the last phase in a process during which ‘science’ became an idol that would magically cure the evils of existence and transform the nature of man.”¹⁵ The collectivism of the masses was welcomed by those who hoped for the appearance of “natural” laws of historical development which would eliminate the unpredictability of the individual’s action and behavior. This perverted form of collective utopianism was predicted by one critic who foresaw:

The time approaching when the art of moving the masses will be so perfectly developed that the painter, the musician, and even the poet will possess the power to please and to move with the same certainty as the mathematician solves a geometric problem or the chemist’s analysis of any substance.¹⁶

especially computers and central plans was complete and can be seen to have lead to the final breakdown of the entire system.

See *Pandora’s Box* review in *New Statesman and Society*, 33, June 12, 1992. Romantic art which glorified rural arcadia as emblematic of man’s nature, did not fit into such a mechanized world view and was virtually outlawed by the Russian state.

¹⁵Cited in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973), p. 346.

¹⁶B.P. Infantain pinpoints the central tenants of totalitar-ianism in her evocative treatise, by arguing that totalitarian movements use socialism and racism by emptying them of their utilitarian content, to serve the so-called interests of a class or a nation. “The form of infallible predication in which these concepts were presented” became more important than their content. The chief qualification of such a mass leader became his unending infallibility — he could never admit an error....The language of prophetic science corresponds to the needs of the masses who had lost their home in the world and now were prepared to be re-integrated into eternal, all dominating forces which by themselves would bear man, the “swimmer on the waves of adversity to the shores of safety,” see *ibid.*, pp. 348-350.

Such colourful nature imagery ironically also seems to highlight the propagandistic success of totalitarianism in its quest to connect its specific

While two-dimensional arts may not have developed the capacity to “move the masses,” the romantic medium of film in particular served to develop an effective form of modern propaganda. Nature is continuously and potently invoked within the films of the great propagandist of the Third Reich, Leni Riefenstahl. In the opening sequence of *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a plane, the symbol of technological hope and optimism, flies low over the land, creating shadows on the landscape and leaving its imprint on the buildings as the moving camera captures its trajectory. Soon the plane’s journey reaches its destination, leaving the tremendous crowds at the Nuremberg rally cheering the arrival of their “God” from the sky. Sky and landscape are not simply displayed as background for audience pleasure, but are co-opted to counterpoint and dramatize Hitler’s grand entrance.¹⁷

Later, for her documentary on the 1936 Olympics, Riefenstahl arranged for holes to be dug in sports arenas allowing (super)athletes to be filmed against the majesty of the skyscape. This glorification, even fetishization of the body in action, with every muscle taut and glistening in sunlight and shadow, is orchestrated to serve a patriotic goal as well as (re)presenting the “essence” of human nature, while also fulfilling the dramatic potential of sport. Such idealization of “man-in-nature” certainly served to promote the Fatherland while the fetishistic glorification of bodies also promoted the universal cult of the “perfect body.”

Susan Sontag’s influential criticism of Riefenstahl’s aesthetic even extends into the latter’s post-war period when she filmed “primitive” tribes in their natural habitat on remote islands. Sontag argued that the director continued to promote a form of “aesthetic fascism” through her documentaries by her continuing glorification of ahistorical romanticized human bodies. While presenting a provocative polemical argument, I would contend that Sontag’s vitriol is designed primarily to ensure Riefenstahl’s reputation remains tarnished. This erstwhile “universal” romantic artistic convention which seeks to promote individualism and individualization within a harmonious eco-system is

ideology with the purifying and apparently homogeneity of nature which draws its inspiration, in the case of Nazism, from Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, to justify racial genocide.

¹⁷Her aesthetic served to conform to Hitler’s, who hated modern art with a passion, because, he claimed, it was totally “perverted.” Instead he wished to promote the ancient romantic art, which represented powerful men and beautiful women against an idyllic landscape whose art served to inspire and unify people, unlike modern art which only “confused” and “disgusted” the populace!

simply co-opted alongside fascism, which incidentally replays the 1970's "screen debate" and the predetermination of form over content.¹⁸

If Riefenstahl's aesthetic is de facto fascistic, then it follows that many other "romantic documentary artists," such as the so-called father of documentary romanticism, Robert Flaherty, who made similar studies of "primitive" people, like *Nanook of the North* (1922) and the more contentious *Man of Aran* (1934), should have similar criticism leveled against them.¹⁹ Documentary anthropologists felt it was their duty to record native cultures who were vanishing "from the pictorial point-of-view," especially through scenes of ritual, dance and food preparation uninfluenced by "Western civilization." Fatimah Tobing Ront suggests that this "Rousseauesque study of surviving primitive peoples" continued up to the 1960s and reflected a "taxidermic mode of ethnographic cinema."²⁰

4. Utopianism as a Rationale for Art

Utopianism has a long and distinguished pedigree and has informed thinkers from the Frankfurt School to Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson. One analyst begins his study on this topic with a plea: "I wish to defend that unrealistic, irrational, naive, self-indulgent, unscientific, escapist, elitist, activity known as Utopianism."²¹ Utopianism can broadly be defined as the desire for a "better" way of living expressed in the "description of a different kind of society that makes possible an alternative way of life."²²

Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School was most optimistic with regards to the potency of the utopian impulse, regarding art as a socially

¹⁸When "artists" seek to share such power, majesty and beauty with its audience, outside of drawing direct analogies with political ideologies, should they be continuously accused and mistrusted for (re)attempting to promote a fascist aesthetic? Reifenstahl, in her twilight years, as she scuba dives and films the majesty and exotic nature of the unknown under the oceans: must she *still* be considered a fascist! Can she now be appreciated as eco-auteur glorifying nature for *all* to appreciate with her nature texts serving to promote a universal "green" aesthetic? There is no easy answer.

¹⁹John Grierson, espousing the great "social realist tradition" did just this in his criticism of Flaherty, see Ian Aitken's *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁰Fatimah Tobing Ront, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 78.

²¹Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism* (New York: Methuen Press, 1987), p. 1.

²²Levitas in Jon Bird, et al., eds., *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 257.

sanctioned realm of fantasy and the bearer of utopia. In the *Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse stated that “art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciences and drives of men and women who change the world.”²³ He abandoned the conventional Marxist agency of transformation because (he argued) capitalism and consumerism tainted the working classes.²⁴ Consequently “art” remained the only hope for social salvation. Marcuse’s ideas were extensively transformed in his later writings, however, particularly in *Counter Revolution and Revolt*.²⁵ In a fascinating and critical interview with Irish academic Richard Kearney, Marcuse reveals much regarding his changing ideas concerning the function and evolution of art and utopian ideals.

Art can never and never should become directly and immediately a factor of political praxis. It can only have effect indirectly, by its impact on the consciousness and on the subconscious(ness) of human beings. Marcuse goes on to assert that all authentic art is negative, in the sense

²³Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 32.

²⁴Unlike Marcuse, Adorno was consistently much less optimistic and considered art as only offering glimpses of a utopia, which in any case was unobtainable, see *ibid.*, p. 262. Karl Popper continues in this pessimistic vein, by discounting utopias in general as leading to totalitarianism. Such a theoretical position was realized for example by the Poet and (ex) President of the “new” Czech republic, Vaclav Haval. He asserted that the “death of utopian ideals” are essentially good, since he and many others equate these ideals with Marxism and Stalinism, which served to keep his people suppressed for so long. Such outright rejection effectively promotes the current orthodoxy, which affirms that there is little alternative to free market capitalism.

Thomas More’s *Utopia* in keeping with the travellers tales of the time, on which it is modeled, is like much earlier utopias, especially the Celtic ones which are located elsewhere in space rather than time. Many earlier utopian visions were not designed to promote change at all. According to Levitas it is “only with the advent of progress and the belief in some degree of human control over social organization that the location of Utopia in the future (coupled) with human action — became a possibility,” see *ibid.*, p. 259.

²⁵Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

that it refuses to obey the established reality, its language, its order, its conventions and its images.²⁶

After further questioning, Marcuse accepts that he would not agree with his former colleague, Walter Benjamin, and concludes that:

any attempt to use art to affect a “mass” conversion of sensibility and consciousness is inevitably an abuse of its true function....

- 1) to negate our present society
- 2) to anticipate the trends of future society
- 3) to criticize destructive or alienated trends
- 4) to suggest “images” of creative and unalienating zones.²⁷

Many popular cultural critics have suggested that even the commercially driven mass cultural industry of Hollywood can also serve to address at least some of these functions. Science-fiction popular texts most especially encode these “true” functions of art, while at the same time dismissing the high cultural requirement that art must be “alienating” to remain “authentic.”²⁸

Ernst Bloch’s great work, *The Principle of Hope*,²⁹ affirms that radical cultural criticism should always seek out those utopian moments, those projections of a better world, which he claimed are found in a wide range of texts. While not always recognized as such, Bloch’s work provides a systematic examination of the ways that

²⁶Richard Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1995), p. 203.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁸For Marcuse “art” is finally:

more than a code or puzzle, art is not just a mirror...(it) leads beyond the present, preserves values no longer found and it points to another possible society in which these values may be realized. Art is a code only in that it acts as a mediated critique of society. But it cannot as such be a direct or immediate indictment of society — that is the work of theory and politics, see *ibid.*, p. 205.

Finally, he agrees with Brecht, Beckett and Kafka, that “art must be negative (estranged) and alienating if it is to remain authentic,” see *ibid.*, p. 209. This is similar to the position adapted in the 1970’s *Screen Theory*, which also valorized avant-garde aesthetics as opposed to the often pejoratively described “Classic Narrative” structure of Hollywood cinema. Many of Marcuse’s ideas regarding the potency and relevance of art, can successfully be co-opted, in spite of his almost innate repugnance towards the medium to valorize much popular (post)modern cultural texts.

²⁹Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

daydreams, popular culture, great literature, politics and social utopias, philosophy and religion — often dismissed out of hand as ideology by some Marxist ideological critique — contain emancipatory moments which project visions of a better life that question the organization and structure of life under capitalism (or state socialism).

For Bloch, ideology was “Janus-faced,” since it simultaneously contained errors, mystifications, and techniques of manipulation and domination, while also containing a utopian residue or surplus that can be used for social critique to advance political emancipation. Bloch believed that all ideological artifacts contain expressions of desire and articulations of needs that socialist theory and politics should heed in order to provide programs and discourses which appeal to the deep-seated desires for a better life within everyone. Ideologies thus provide clues to possibilities for future development and contain a surplus or “excess” that is not exhausted in mystification or legitimization. Ideologies may contain normative ideals whereby the existing society can be criticized and from which models of and for an alternative society can be developed.

These debates can be appreciated by a reading of *Grand Canyon* (1991) which appears to negate ideological issues around class and race in particular, for a utopic closure that effects a sublime trip/pilgrimage to the Grand Canyon to overcome such difficulties. The dominant group of protagonists have long learned the anti-materialist message that acquisitiveness and greed does not bring happiness, but have also apparently out-used the American nationalistic egalitarian meta-narrative of “equality, truth and justice,” which has little efficacy for them in their post-industrial and post-colonial world. The rhetoric of these constitutionally inscribed humanist values have effected little change over the traditional social ills of poverty and racism. At least metaphorically, like Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*, they crave a progressive philosophy of agency, which would overcome their feelings of national and global impotence and attempt to find it within a utopic/sublime natural space.

Critical consensus of *Grand Canyon* is effectively represented by Toby Young in *The Guardian* (May 1, 1992). Young regards the film as a “guilt-ridden parable of our conservative age.” The film was hailed as capturing the 1990’s zeitgeist. “After yesterday’s rioting (sparked by the police beating of Rodney King, captured on an amateur video

tape)³⁰ it had the added authority of being prophetic.” In general most critics were worried about its “soft-centered” liberal agenda.³¹

Like many Hollywood narratives, the meaning and power of the film finally depends on interpretations of the closing sequence at the real but also symbolic Grand Canyon. A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbol-izing surroundings.³² If we are to appreciate nature aesthetically, Allen Carlson argues, “we must appreciate it as natural, not as an

³⁰Joost van Loon in an essay on the televisualization of the 1992 LA riots contrasts LA as a place where dreams come through, versus its “present” embodiment as a “nightmare of civil disorder.” While the first “myth” places the picture of LA as a “heteropolis” (using Charles Jenck’s terminology) which epitomizes the American dream and limitless opportunity, the other evokes with the “dark side” and “ghetto” where the order of everyday life is the rule of tribal warlords and gangs like the Crips and the Bloods, see “Chronotopes: of/on the Televisualisation of 1992 Los Angeles Riots,” in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 14, 2, 1997.

³¹Robin Wood in his provocative and accessible *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) dismisses populist generic “nature” films as enlist(ing) the 1970’s family horror film’s “potential radicalism, but perverts it into 1980’s conservatism.” The project of critiquing “bad capitalism” has a long history in American cinema and according to Wood becomes reduced to a blatant example of what Barthes calls “inoculation,” “where ideology acknowledges a minor, local, reformable evil in order to divert attention from the fundamental ones,” see Robin Wood in John Belton, ed., *Movies and Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 221-22. To this end, Timothy Morton affirms that “to remain robust” criticism should “become reflexive, developing appropriate technologies of reading which could use words like ‘appropriate’ alongside words like ‘critique’;” in other words to register both the problems and the pleasures of [ideological/utopian] discourses, in Bate, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 427.

Terry Eagleton also falls into the same trap as Wood when he contends that: “The role of the contemporary critic is to resist that dominance (of market ideology within the mass-mediated public sphere) by re-connecting the symbolic to the political, engaging through both discourse and practice with the process by which repressed needs, interests desires assume the cultural form which would weld them into a collective political force,” in Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso Press, 1984), p. 123.

³²Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1993), p. 90.

isolated 'object' or piece of scenery, but as a dynamic and organic whole which we, the appreciators, are a part."³³

Bloch distinguishes two types of utopias: abstract and concrete, which can also correspond with how to interpret the Grand Canyon which also reconnects assumed differences between high and low culture. In the first, images are purely escapist, compensatory and wishful thinking, whereas in the second they are "transformative," with images driving forward action to a (real) transformed future. My reading of *Grand Canyon* and many other Hollywood films, corresponds with Bloch's "higher order" utopian dreams. Hollywood and its "dream factory," while never good at forthright polemics — which in any case can lead to disaster as mentioned by Popper and others — can nonetheless sow the seeds of utopian ideals and values. This is demonstrated even by more vitriolic critics like Jameson,³⁴ who asserts that mass culture "articulates social conflicts, contemporary fears and utopian hopes, and attempts at ideological containment and reassurance."

The works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be manipulated.³⁵

Blade Runner (1982) is an important critical example, which has become the ur-text for postmodernist analysis, yet critics frequently dismiss the otherwise romantic/nature closure of the film as an aberration. I would counter, however, that the narrative's evocative escape from the dystopic and ecocidal nightmare of a postmodern pollution-ridden environment is a necessary antidote within the

³³Cited in John O'Neill, *The Poverty of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 124.

³⁴Jameson analyzed in Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 110. In his reading of *Jaws*, for instance, the shark stands in for a variety of fears (uncontrollable organic nature threatening the artificial society, big business corrupting and endangering community, disruptive sexuality threatening disintegration of the family and traditional values and so on) which the film tries to contain through the reassuring defeat of evil by representatives of the current class structure. Yet the film also contains utopian images of family, male bonding, and adventure, as well as socially critical visions of capitalism which articulate fears that unrestrained big business would inexorably destroy the environment and community.

³⁵*Ibid.*

dominant nature/culture opposition in the film — calling on conventional representations of nature to provide hope for the future.

The therapeutic closing moments in the film “(re)-mediating” a form of sublime raw nature is totally at odds with the dominant “excessive” urban future corrupted by “acid rain,” decaying infrastructure and environmental pollution generally, as expressed through the claustrophobic noirish aesthetic. The use of conventional representations of an idyllic environment helps to construct “nature” as fulfilling the psychological function of mediator and exemplar, for its protagonists who have finally accepted the ephemeral nature of their existence and the strength to experience such transformation. The excessive dys-functionalism of the dystopian *mise-en-scène* which dominates the film, becomes displaced by this sublime evocation of “pure nature.” The otherwise conventional airborne tracking long shot, focusing on the rugged “unmediated” beauty of nature, provides the climatic “space” (literally and metaphorically) to contemplate the importance of the earth’s holistic beauty, while also affirming its benevolent ethical eco-systems.³⁶

The protagonists have finally reached a potentially Edenic sanctuary whose formal visualization is consciously echoed and counterpointed in many closures within recent successful blockbusters; particularly across nature/disaster (for example *Jurassic Park*) and road movies (like the enigmatic closure of *Thelma and Louise* and *Grand Canyon*) to so-called postmodernist science fiction films. Reminiscent of a form of classic Gaian ethics, such closures reiterate the message “life finds a way.” These essentially “feel good” endings are not necessarily an ideological and aesthetic cop-out, but instead signal a form of affirmation of the duality of human and inanimate nature and their striving for ecological/utopian harmony.

5. Utopian Space versus Ideological Place

David Harvey asserts that all classic utopias propose a fixed spatial order that ensures social stability by destroying the possibility of history while containing all processes within a fixed spatial frame.

The antidote to such spatial determinism is not to abandon all talk of the city (or even the possibility of utopia) as a whole, as is the penchant of postmodern-ist critique, but

³⁶Cited from my final Ph.D chapter, *op. cit.*

to return to the level of urbanization processes as being fundamental to the construction of the things that contain them. A utopianism of pro-cess looks very different from a utopianism of fixed spatial form.³⁷

Harvey goes so far as to argue that Utopianism “of pure process” as he describes it, “can liberate the human spirit into a dematerialized world” — a virtual reality. This spatial phenomenon can be appreciated by a historical reading of the Industrial Revolution through Thomas Hardy’s/Roman Polanski’s *Tess* (1979). The dominant ideology, which incorporates a predisposition towards scientific materialism at the expense of the total environment, can be traced most specifically to the Industrial Revolution. In the late 17th century, when the creation was deemed by many to have occurred in 4000 BC, a grand conception of nature as a divinely created order for the well being of all life was formulated. Men and women were seen to be caretakers, stewards of God and their task was thought to be to improve the primeval aspect of the earth through tillage.³⁸

The Industrial Revolution as an new economic and ethical manifestation mapping out how humans should relate to their environment was underpinned by notions developed by thinkers such as Francis Bacon, who foresaw, for instance, the need to combine knowledge with invention to give humankind control of nature. Bacon spoke of “victory” over nature, which was incomplete and corrupt. But most significantly Darwin’s core theory of natural selection was transformed by Herbert Spencer into the doctrine of the survival of the fittest,³⁹ which in many ways, in today’s neoliberal globalist world, has become the new orthodoxy for human survival.

This transformation can be illustrated by Hardy’s novels which explore the Enclosure movement and transformation of English culture from an agrarian economic social structure towards a more urbanized mass production-based work force. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) affords an interesting case study of this phenomenon. In the film version directed by Polanski and set in France for legal reasons, Tess’s journey away from her roots and her rural values, has placed her in a bed and breakfast on the outskirts of a “new” town, after her ill-fated forced marriage to Alec — a man who epitomizes much of the worst attributes of industrial progression.

³⁷Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

³⁸Andrew Goudie, *The Human Impact: Man’s Role in Environmental Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p. 324.

³⁹*Ibid.*

As the *mise-en-scene* is set, milk is being delivered to the guest house. The married couple have now become part of the consumer culture, instead of remaining tied into the more “natural” production cycle, where she belonged. He becomes preoccupied with cutting red meat on a silver platter as he spews out his patriarchal vitriol against her. This form of food consumption is strongly contrasted with earlier representations of eating in the film; be it communally around a large table, or in “nature,” on the farm fields where a sense of shared communitarian values are strongly endorsed.

An even more significant structural opposition in the scene occurs as we hear and see in passing, a hedge clippers which symbolically, at least, signifies the “controlling” nature of the newly created urban bourgeoisie. Just as the fence outside is being clipped, Alec is also trying to control Tess’s nature. “Nature” is being manicured to conform to the restrictive aesthetic demands of capitalist society. But the romantic individualist nature of all heroines demands that she must fight such commodification of her free spirit, which she does by slaying her oppressor.⁴⁰

6. Romanticism and Hollywood Cinema

The lost natural innocence celebrated by the romantic poets as a reproach to industrial society has thus metamorphosed into a late twentieth-century dream of renewing that innocence and thereby evading the twin nightmares of being swallowed up by either an unappreciated past or an unknown future.⁴¹

Over 150 years ago in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson felt so strongly the need to appreciate and understand nature that he urged his fellow Americans against the intellectual dependency of books which could make them into “bibliomaniacs.” Instead he urged others to use nature as their dictionary.⁴² A romantic thinker, he articulated the polarity between nature (the green world, the actual earth of value) and culture (the print world and the mind of Europe) and threw his support behind the former, with the hope of redressing the emerging “Industrial era’s

⁴⁰The potent use of a hedge clippers as a diegetic signifier, (which is not in the book) is, I would suggest, an inspired device, demonstrating the primary opposition between these opposing forces.

⁴¹Leo Braudy in Nick Browne, ed., *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 294.

⁴²Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1973), p. 156.

radical bias towards the abstract symbolization of thought and knowledge.”⁴³ This romantic aesthetic agenda has remained prevalent ever since. Emerson never tired of asserting that Americans were and ought to be “nature’s nation.”⁴⁴

Leo Braudy affirms that especially since the 1980s, the myths, metaphors and motifs of nature stand out and concludes that with:

their dystopian gloom or utopian optimism, these films similarly assert the need for a reconnection to what is vital in nature in order that we might escape from the dilemmas history has forced upon us. Whether their settings are the primitive world of the past, the natural world of the present, or the unexplored world of the future, their common impulse is to begin again, to have a second chance at creation.⁴⁵

While Hollywood could never be accused of suffering from “bibliomania,” nature, to all appearances, remain remarkably “popular” in America and elsewhere. It is part of everyone’s vocabulary, something we all have knowledge and opinions about, and something many are moved to defend. Nature is very much a part of “popular culture” but the difficult question remains: which “nature?”⁴⁶

However, as many critics appear to imply, “good” criticism involves moral/ideological superiority/understanding over the mass spectator together with the illusion of clarity and unambiguity. This is a dangerous and often counterproductive project, which attempts to “control” and sometimes predetermine critical and theoretical discourse. The critics’ “pearls of wisdom” in the process of developing a theoretical methodology should (I suggest) always be tempered by a measure of humility and critical openness if it is to become useful and proactive. While not over-confident of grasping the myriad of nuances, it must at least be recognized that little critical currency is afforded to nature’s utopic potential in film and instead remains subsumed, like the Sontag criticism discussed earlier, within predictable narrative/ideological analysis. In spite of the explicit commercial imperative controlling the Hollywood aesthetic, with a growing non-homogeneous audience, nature myths and texts, I conclude, have almost become more (excessively) utopic in the way they communicate with their audience(s).

⁴³David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1992), p. 157.

⁴⁴Cited in Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁴⁶Evenden, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

7. Closure: Gladiator

Environments are not passive wrappings, but active processes which work up over completely, massaging the ratio of the senses and imposing their silent assumptions.⁴⁷

Ridley Scott was so dismissive of the “romantic” closure in the cult *Blade Runner* that he insisted on re-cutting the film to provide a more coherent and nihilistic ending for the “Director’s cut.” Yet he had little difficulty in endorsing his more recent biblical epic *Gladiator* (2000) and its unashamed romanticism. Both the opening sequence and the extended closure of the film legitimize a heightened romantic utopic evocation of an afterlife, which is predicated on and visualized through the evocative portrayal of vegetation growing in the breeze. The fighting Roman hero at last finds peace having served his duty for his country and returns both literally and metaphorically to the bosom of his family and the land he has nurtured as a farmer in his civilian life. While many of his erstwhile military fraternity find it hard to appreciate his drive to re-embrace such a quiet life, he finds true transcendence and selfhood within his “natural” environment thereby provoking a modern nature-myth.

The simulacra of the amphitheater provides the excessive spectacle that literally encapsulates the “bread and circuses” cultural-relief for the masses (including the media audience). But our hero’s private redemption can only be achieved within a more ecologically resonant space/place, which for him is equivalent to the pre-Christian afterlife. Like the aged Sol in *Soylent Green*, who is provided with the more “authentic” simulacra of picaresque nirvana — the dying hero in *Gladiator* is also afforded such sensory solitude for real. Miracles do happen and faith is rewarded.

Apparently empty special effects-driven films — emulating a reassertion of Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” alongside an affirmation of a “nature” aesthetic — can continue to remain potent. While reaffirming the mythic heroism of conventional humans, *Gladiator* (like *Titanic* and other so-called “feel-good” special effects-driven films already mentioned) nonetheless also supports an ancient romantic myth which uses nature to relieve and console its needy protagonists and by extension its audiences.

⁴⁷Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (New York: Bantam, 1967), p. 68.