

A Seagull Swoops

Anti-extractivist Assemblage of Matter and the Human in the Films of Oliver Ressler

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First scenes

The camera lingers on a large open-cast mine stretching as far as the eye can see. An endless plain, gigantic mining machines loom on the horizon. A voiceover begins to scan a few syllables: "Te, te, te... Terraforming. Te, te, Terror ...!" There are no humans in these early scenes, the landscape is man-made, but it is also car-

bonomorphic: the mine literally makes the landscape. It is the emergence of lignite that pushes the boundaries of the surrounding vegetation, whose presence is only suggested by the first shot, with the camera placed above the tip of a conifer. Then human bodies enter the scene, on tiptoe, introduced by a long shot of an encampment of tents. Dozens, then hundreds of bodies in white overalls swarm silently across the screen, in slow motion. Finally they occupy the loading station and the tracks connecting one of Europe's largest open-cast mines to the adjoining power station. We are in Lusatia, near Berlin. The voiceover provides information about the action, and also about the ownership of the mine and its destructive climatic impact.

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Oliver Ressler, *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: Venice Climate Camp*, 2020, 4K video, 21 min

Oliver Ressler, *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: Ende Gelände*, 2016, 4K video, 12 min
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Second scenes

Long sequences of still shots of sections of a forest, birds chirping, leaves rustling in the wind, rain pattering, insects buzzing, a yellow mushroom on green moss-covered bark, tangles of rushes. During the first 7minutes and 50 seconds of the film, no human bodies appear, voices are silent. Then, gradually, the images begin to include signs of human presence: DIY architecture suspended in the trees, slender wooden platforms and ladders, nets stretched between the foliage as if to create a second order of foliage. Someone (we don't see their face) climbs a spiral staircase





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Oliver Ressler, *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: Ende Gelände*, 2016, 4K video, 12 min

built around a trunk. A female voice, off-screen, informs us that we are in the Hambach forest, also in Germany, where a permanent occupation has been in place since 2012. The aim of the initiative is to prevent the felling of the forest for the expansion of the adjacent lignite mine. The voice, evidently that of an activist, dwells on the models of coexistence and organization of the occupying community: "We can learn a lot from an ecosystem, especially in forests. There are group structures, group dynamics we could copy, [...] the way the various plants work together even when they might look like they're working against each other. People here in the forest organize very organically, like the forest itself. There are no decision makers at the top. It's just like trees, standing next to each other on the same level. Standing where they are. Our organizational model might look chaotic at first glance, but if you look closer you notice a rhythm there, and our organizing follows that rhythm."

Third scenes

A man in a glow-in-the-dark work jacket, noise-cancelling headphones, goggles and helmet – a technician, perhaps an engineer – walks across the esplanade of what looks like a large plant, a power station. Rain pours down, seagulls screech. The man warns: "It's the mother seagull, she has just had a baby." The camera lingers on an adult seagull perched on top of a lamppost, or perhaps an antenna of the power station. On the ground, what is probably its young, grey livery streaked with brown veins. Increasingly insistent

Oliver Ressler, *Carbon and Captivity*, 2020, 4K video, 33 min
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screeching. The shot returns to the man about to begin a guided tour of the facility. In a flash reminiscent of Hitchcock, a swooping seagull, presumably the mother, cuts across the scene from above, diagonally towards the head of the man, who crouches instinctively. With a sharp jerk of its trajectory, the bird avoids the technician and disappears beyond the camera's field of vision. Nervous chuckle of relief from our guide.

The scene was shot at the Technology Centre Mongstad (TCM) near Bergen, Norway: Europe's largest CO₂ capture facility. In the course of a meticulous account of how the Centre operates, the technician is providentially interrupted by the swoop. Perhaps the seagull had other intentions, but in the film it performed an effective non-human intervention. An act that seems to allude to the need to decarbonize the economy rather than intervene with dubious technological solutions to perpetuate our lethal dependence on fossil fuels.

These three sequences appear in films by Oliver Ressler. The third comes from *Carbon and Captivity* (2020). The second is from *The Path is Never the Same* (2022). The first is seen in *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: Ende Gelände* (2016), part of a cycle produced from 2016 to 2020 under the same title, covering various actions of climate justice movements in Europe. Six films for as many expressions of ecological militancy: the marches against the COP in Paris in 2015 (a city in a state of emergency following the Bataclan attacks); an action involving some 4.000 activists to block a lignite quarry in Germany for forty-eight hours, organized by Ende Gelände (Here and no Further); the resistance of the incredible social laboratory called ZAD (*zone à défendre*), an occupied area born out of the opposition to the Notre-Dame-Des-Landes airport; a civil disobedience action by the Code Rood network at the port of Amsterdam (one of the main global hubs for coal, imported mainly from Colombia); the blockade of a coal mine in the Czech Republic, where most of the activists ended up in police custody; and last but not least, the Climate Camp at the Venice Lido, organized by Rise Up 4 Climate Justice and the No Grandi Navi Committee, which included the occupation of the red carpet at the Venice Film Festival.

Let's go back to the opening scenes. I chose them because they illuminate

a central aspect of Ressler's documentary practice, namely the rare ability to hold together two aspects that more often seem to be mutually exclusive. At least in the artworld, a faultline seems to run through the ecological perspective, despite the generalized campaign against binarism. Scholars, artists and curators tend to focus either on the agency of the non-human or on opposition to capitalism. On the one hand, a non-anthropocentric gaze that breaks with the belief in the passivity of matter; on the other, a stance against the capitalist model and its role in the dramatic acceleration of global warming.

This is not to say that new materialisms and dialectical materialism never meet. One example of this rare but possible association is provided by a transfeminist scholar, Ilenia Caleo, in a text addressing art workers' struggles for income. Caleo asks:

But what is the use of defending the vitality of matter? Why is it not just a merely theoretical thrust? This shift provides insights into feminist politics and opens up the prospect of new queer ecologies. The idea of dead, inert, passive matter may nourish and strengthen fantasies of conquest and domination. The idea that resources may be available for free is mirrored (a) on territories and natural resources where nature is conceived and described as outside of history; (b) on the bodies and on the free reproductive work done by women that, when naturalised, becomes like any other available resource. This narrative legitimises a devaluation (Silvia Federici) which we must read in parallel. The extractivist model is constitutively also a paradigm of domination and consumption, exploitation and violence, intimately connected to the colony system and to the division of sexual work.¹

These important considerations are reflected from an ecological standpoint in Ressler's films, which succeed where theory (and art) often fail. His documentaries manage simultaneously to mobilize elements of the new materialisms (including speculative realism) and historical materialism. We owe the Austrian artist much recognition for this. Immersed as we are in the condition of planetary warming, it is fundamental to acknowledge the agency of a forest, but as the activist in *The Path is Never the Same* tells us, it is not enough unless that agency inspires models of resistance against fossil capitalism. Conversely, opposition to extractive neo-liberalism (in which ecological, social, racial and gender dimensions intersect) is not enough

today unless grounded in an awareness of a vital material and as such resistant to the continuous extraction permitted by the supposed passivity of matter. Ressler's films linger on the landscape as a lively object, bringing into the foreground what usually serves as a backdrop to a human story: mine, a forest, a seabed. They implicitly reject the commonplace that the idea of consubstantiality between society and nature must lead to an indistinct hybrid of the two. Ressler accepts the consubstantiality but not the inferred conclusion: his documentary method is dialectical. Which is to say, capitalist society, with its extractive posture towards the thing we call nature here, produces the ecological devastation we live in. As we shall see, this position substantially corresponds to those of Andreas Malm and Marxist political ecology. However, the medium of film evidently allows Ressler greater freedom, letting him chart a crucial course through the storm of the present and the debate on the relationship between aesthetics and ecology.

Also part of this debate is the article *Unsublime Ecology* by Graham Harman, published in 2019 in *Flash Art*. Here the philosopher sets out to illustrate some of the repercussions of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) for art. In order even to start on this however, he must first clear the field of the misunderstanding that OOO amounts to a return to the Kantian theory of the sublime. For Harman, the sublime is one of the manifestations of that deep-seated Cartesian belief that reality is divided into two (and only two) spheres. On the one hand is the human (human thought), the realm of immanence and accessibility. On the other is the world ("everything else"), understood as an undifferentiated and unknowable zone of absolute otherness. The Kantian sublime bears witness to this unknowability. How, then, according to its critics, is speculative realism traceable to the sublime? For instance, through the concept of *allure*. An exhaustive examination of the idea of allure would exceed the scope of this article, but a short passage by Harman is helpful in clarifying the point: "What we find in allure are absent objects signaling from beyond – from a level of reality that we do not currently occupy and can never occupy, since it belongs to the object itself and not to any relation we could ever have with it."²

Although this sense of "allure" implies that the absent object signals its presence, the signal nonetheless comes from a level of reality that humans cannot occupy, a level that belongs entirely to the object, an autonomous space of existence independent of any relation we could ever share with it. In this radical oth-

erness, this plunge of the object into its own unattainable depths, some critics have discerned a return of the sublime, a return to a zone of unknowability and the vertigo this awareness provokes in the human.

What does this have to do with ecology and art? Let us start with ecology. In Kant, Harman continues, the sublime is linked exclusively to the “absolutely large” (the mathematical sublime) or the “absolutely powerful” (the dynamic sublime), both of which were central to the Romantic aesthetics of nature, which represented it primarily as vastness and power. From the standpoint of OOO, this characterization of absoluteness is problematic because the erasure of differences of intensity in the manifestations of the sublime relegates it to the background of a human-centric perspective. At the center is man, surrounded a region of inaccessibility reduced to indistinctness, to uniformity. Kant, writes Harman, “[...] treats the sublime solely by contrast with the human framework, and thereby effaces all difference in magnitude between various instances of the sublime.” If one of the challenges of contemporary ecology is to overcome the humanistic conception and anthropocentrism in order to make room for the non-human, matter, objects, non-human animals and so on, thereby overcoming the extractive relationship that descends from such beliefs, the sublime cannot be the answer.

Meanwhile, Harman also calls into question the formulations of Timothy Morton, the OOO theorist most concerned with ecology, aesthetics and their connections. “It was Timothy Morton,” he writes, “with his important concept of hyperobjects, who first placed OOO and the sublime at a permanent distance from each other. As Morton puts it: Infinity is far easier to cope with. Infinity brings to mind our cognitive powers ... But hyperobjects are not forever. What they offer instead is very large finitude. I can think infinity. But I can’t count up to one hundred thousand.”³

Having thus ruled out any return of the sublime (a concept which, it should be noted, influenced the aesthetic theory of many writers in the second half of the 20th

century, most prominently Jean-François Lyotard), Harman turns to the artistic and curatorial implications of OOO. The first of these is a dutiful attention to the “depths of the object”: it is no longer possible to represent what lies outside human experience, outside a direct relationship with the human, as a kind of indistinct and uniform zone. The second is the injunction to consider the relationships that bind objects in their indifference to the human. Now, I regard these as insights to be treasured, but the relationship between aesthetics and radical ecology as developed through OOO also poses a significant problem.

The concept of the sublime has already been discussed here. I do not intend to dwell further on its relationship



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Oliver Ressler, *Carbon and Captivity*, 2020,
4K video, 33 min



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Oliver Ressler, *The Path is Never the Same*, 2022, 4K video, 27 min

with hyperobjects, even assuming (without conceding) that the difficult “large finitudes” mentioned above are neither expressible nor representable (for example artistically) as new instances of the sublime.

In *All Art is Ecological* (2021) Morton argues that art conveys a general model of a radically ecological relationship between humans and non-humans. Central to this thesis is the concept of *attunement*, which is to say, the seductive action of work of art on the beholder. Attunement shifts the attention from the viewer to the work.⁴ The “free play” characteristic of aesthetic experience according to Friedrich Schiller is not played here by the human component (which surrenders to the mysterious substance flowing from the work), but by the non-human component of the work, which is recognized as having a certain agency.⁵ It is not, as in the case of Jacques Rancière’s emancipated spectator, a case of restoring an active role to spectatorship against the commonplace of activation, or even of the proletarian’s right to that spectatorship. Rather, it is a matter of looking at art as a sphere already capable of redeeming matter from its passivity: an allusion to the displacement of anthropocentrism required for the construction of forms of life able to meet the challenge of global warming. This position could be ascribed to the long and noble theoretical tradition (also a Marxist tradition, think of Theodor Adorno) which ever since Schiller has seen in the autonomy of art (i.e. in its extraneousness to the praxis of life, to the social datum) its inexhaustible political radicality.⁶ The problem, as Peter Bürger observed in his classic essay on the historical avant-gardes, is that the autonomy of art cannot be considered a universal character. It is itself a historical fact, imposed since the end of the 18th century to the general acclaim of the dominant bourgeois class. Its ascendancy coincided with that of the capitalist mode of production, whose ever-widening enclosures dramatically accelerated extractivism and consequently global warming. For Bürger, the purpose of bourgeois art was to provide the emerging class with a distinct space outside the instrumental rationality that otherwise ruled their life: a kind of purifying wash where they could cultivate a semblance of the disinterest already obliterated by capitalism.

Morton’s essay is entitled *All Art is Ecological*, but the problems begin with what the author decides to exclude. Attunement is not, in fact, a general prerogative of art. The London-born philosopher leaves out the many and widely diverse cases that directly address the contradiction between capital and life, for example through the manipulation of data and information

on climate change (data concerning those responsible, the victims, and those who oppose it). Derubricated to the rank of “factoids,” the information contained in these works (including Ressler’s, which is rich in it) would end up depriving them of the power of attunement.

Paradoxically, Morton finds himself taking the same positions as a well-known modernist critic, Michael Fried, the enemy par excellence of the reduction of the work to an object. For Fried, objecthood can be defined as that which forces a thing (a work of art in this case) to exist in a defined space and thus (also forcibly) to relate to that space and to those who pass through it. This condition of objecthood is typical of theatricality (art’s sworn enemy), by which the critic means a social destiny of the artistic fact, a destiny to which that work is condemned when it requires the presence of one or more spectators. For Fried, modernist painting (also an example used by Morton to support his theory of attunement), i.e. true art, has a mission: to escape objecthood, to annihilate theatricality, and thereby to avoid any commingling with the social. Modernist painting, Fried continues, is characterized by absorption. Already in the 19th century, some French painters such as Manet began to portray their characters as totally self-absorbed, thus heedless of the spectator.

To the extent that the painter succeeded in that aim, the beholder’s existence was effectively ignored or, put more strongly, denied; the figures in the painting appeared alone in the world (alternatively we may say that the world of the painting appeared self-sufficient, autonomous, a closed system independent of, in that sense blind to, the world of the beholder), though it was also true that only by making a painting that appeared to ignore or deny or be blind to the beholder in this way could the painter accomplish his ultimate purpose-bringing actual viewers to a halt in front of the painting and holding them there in a virtual trance of imaginative involvement.⁷

Although Fried is hardly an ante-litteram practitioner of OOO, given that “absorption” as he intends it descends from what the painter paints on the canvas and not from the canvas itself or the material of color, there is a strange agreement between his modernist position (the absorption of the painting into itself and of the viewer into the world of the painting) and Morton’s speculative realism. Although the former despises the object while the latter is oriented towards it, their idea of art coincides in that it excludes theatricality and fears the infiltration of the social. Fried is fixated on the

painter, Morton on the work, but both end up reinforcing a bourgeois notion of art's autonomy, one that fails to shelter it from reification and neoliberal capture.

On his way to a critique of anthropocentrism, Morton makes use of an aesthetically conservative maneuver. Paradoxically, it is precisely the bourgeois experience of art that turns out to be revolutionary. Ecologically radical art need not address the role of neoliberalism in the warming condition. Morton opposes to modern anthropocentrism a contemporary object-centrism which paradoxically restores to art the function and the modes of production and reception that emerged with the European bourgeoisie. Just like their 19th century counterparts, the contemporary bourgeoisie can experience aesthetic enjoyment as a temporary interruption of instrumentality, giving way for a while to a pleasurable game of seduction led by the work-object then later returning refreshed to their extractive tasks, about which art can say nothing. The disciplinary barriers between practices of art and life are thus reinforced. Art and life return to a regime of segregation, all critique of binarisms forgotten.

Personally, I do not think Morton is wrong in pointing to the experience of art as a model of a virtuous relationship between the human and non-human. Rather, I think he is wrong when, in order to unhinge subject-object dualism, he reinstates the dualism between the practices of life and art: specifically, in excluding art from any role in the dialectic between life and capital (which must be central in attempts to address global

warming today). If art has this power to express the profound ontology of objects (with meaningful consequences for the human), it must also consider its own autonomy from capital, from toxic philanthropy, from financialization, and from its reduction to status emblem, asset and symbolic shield for the class that wishes to go on warming the planet in the name of its own profit motive. In this sense, Andreas Malm has illuminated a certain blind alley of speculative realism, whereby the agency of objects and the discourse on the interweaving of nature and culture loses sight of human agency (i.e. the greatest single factor contributing to the warming of the planet) and the critique of capitalism (i.e. the mode of production or ecological regime most responsible for the ecological disaster). Malm argues that even after the consubstantiality of nature and society is assumed (and indeed, these can no longer be considered separate spheres today), the dialectic between the two remains fundamental to any understanding of the historical responsibilities of capitalism and colonialism in the imposition of an extractivist model and the warming of the globe. Morton, by contrast, allows art no say here: art expresses its radicality entirely on the side of the autonomy of the object-work (a fundamental aspect, of course), and it altogether renounces any claim to enact this radical potential on the side of the social (which would entail, among other things, autonomy from neoliberal valorization devices). Yet if the radicality of art is to be preserved, these two elements can and must work together.

For these reasons, the scope of Ressler's films is by no means limited to documentation (although they are also an extraordinary archive of contemporary social movements, including those struggling in and against the Capitalocene). Rather, these works bear witness to an exceptionally acute sensibility. They illuminate within the present world a potential space for aesthetics and politics where non-anthropocentric life and climate-social justice would meet.

Oliver Ressler, *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: Code Rood*, 2018, 4K video, 14 min
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Oliver Ressler, *Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: Code Road*, 2018, 4K video, 14 min



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Oliver Ressler, *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: The ZAD*, 2017, 4K video, 36 min



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Oliver Ressler, *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: COP21, 2016*, 4K video, 17 min



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Oliver Ressler, *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart: Limity jsme my*, 2019, 4K video, 10 min

▶ NOTES

1 ▶ Timothy B. Morton, *All Art is Ecological*, London: Penguin, 2021, pp. 83, 57.

2 ▶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

3 ▶ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London, New York: Verso, 2011.

4 ▶ Ilenia Caleo, "Smash the patriarchy: social reproduction and the invisibility of essential labor," in: *Art For UBI (Manifesto)*, ed. Marco Bara-

valle, Emanuele Braga and Gabriella Riccio, Venice: Bruno, 2022, p. 58.

5 ▶ Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and The Carpentry of Thing*, Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2005, pp. 245–246.

6 ▶ Graham Harman, "Unsublime Ecology," in: *Flash Art*, vol. 52, no. 326, 2019, p. 31.

7 ▶ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 48.