piece on space and "corporeity," which suggests that it is the task of architecture and urban programmation to reterritorialize the modern, deterritorialized human subject - and to keep pace with the wild growth of a techno-scientific world where "interactions btwn the body & constructed space unfold through a field of virtuality whose complexity verges on chaos." The projects in *Semiotext(e)/Architecture* attempt, in Guattari's terms, "to think both the complexity and the chaos along new lines," but ultimately they *represent* such an attempt, or some of the conditions for its possibility, rather than enact it. In this sense, the volume lacks the new praxis demanded by its premises. Guattari's call for the return to architecture of an "animist" conception of the world is nowhere (else) in evidence.

Although it may seem that *Semiotext(e)/ Architecture* speaks only obliquely to "real" architects, it must be pointed out that the intent of the volume is to enlarge the list of concerns proper to "architecture," to push architecture beyond the limits of the built project. This effects a critique of current architectural theory/practice at the same time as it appropriates architectural models for other domains and discourses. It is the palpable and unresolved tension between these two aims - which of these, after all, has priority? - which generates confusion and raises hackles.

Because of this double movement, however, there is much here of interest - occasioned of course *by* architecture - to the theorist-at-large. For at stake is the age-old problem of representation, returning in the essentially Derridean question of the *writing* of architecture. The conventions and assumptions governing the presentation of architectural and design projects are explored and exploded, and why not? Deconstructive architectural strategies, looking more like the liberal tradition it ought to have devastated, suggests that this should be a creative process. This issue's editor, Hraztan Zeitlian, writes that the representational modes of architecture and design are "contaminating," "infecting," and, in keeping with new movements in the technology of the image, the projects in *Semiotext(e)/Architecture* are said to be "less representative & more manipulated in a positive sense." Indeed, the point pursued throughout this volume is the exploitation of new possibilities for design presented by technology. I imagine that, from the point of view of the contributors to *Semiotext(e)/Architecture*, most current design practice - and certainly its conceptualization of its task and its limits - lags far behind in this respect.

A rather obvious example of this positive manipulation in action is "x...stasis," a project directed by Catherine Ingraham, which stages mutations of the line - occasioning an "ex-siting" of the line from straight (orthos), into another realm. It charts the progress of a simple, "figural conceit": x,X, as mathematical symbol, as turnstyle, as chiasmus, as sign of erasure, as indicator on a map. Pithy "cites" - quotations, reflections - are arranged in boxes along with CADD-generated images ("x"s turned on three axes) against a backdrop of line formations progressively blown-up and focussed into greater and greater surface detail. The implied aim is to relax "oppressive" linearity which, in terms borrowed from Derrida, "is not loss or absence but the repression of pluri-dimensional thought." Architectural design ought not to be linear in a repressive sense, but must be able to represent pluri-dimensional spatial conceptions. Since this is already what architectural renderings are supposed to accomplish (despite their paradoxical dependence on line and detail), this does not seem to be such a radical program for architecture *per se*.

Part of the difficulty *Semiotext(e)/Architecture* sets out to engage is with the term "design." As Avital Ronell and Albert Liu point out in "The Inexact Essence of Design," an insubstantial piece at the end of the volume (its brevity thinly disguised by twice repeating it in various states of overlay and compression), design is not object or function but a morphological process (formation rather than form). As such, it demands a theory of morphogenesis - but in "a non-romantic, non-absolutist mode of self-production." One of their topics is technological self-representation ("cybernetic corpo-reality") in which the prototype exemplifies the design process (and its necessary relationship to "testing"). The prototype is a "singular simulacrum" before the existence of the original: it allows the beginning to begin. Neither, then, a medium of agency nor communication, "the prototype serves as a pure medium...." The importance of design as experimental and inexact - its status as medium rather than matter - is clearly underscored by the positioning of such reflections in a volume whose success depends on the viability and currency of these very ideas.

In *Semiotext(e)/Architecture*, the problematics of the representation of architecture - the movement from building to (written) image - are often suggestively articulated by analogy with another discipline. Two pieces, for example, deal with film. In an interview with Atom Egoyan, Deborah Esch discusses his interest in the transition from room to screen in film - a passage formulated as "the moment of mediation, of the medium." Eve Laure Moros investigates the films of Maria Brooke Dammkoehler for the construction of "woman" in classic Hollywood cinema. Other moments, other media engage with the architecture of the image. James Derderian's video essay on the Gulf War and another short piece by Ronell (also on the Gulf War) foreground the problematics of technology: Virtual Reality, Baudrillard's simulations, and so forth. Architecture, technology and design theory must "commingle."

It would be easy to criticise this volume for its casual borrowings from "other" disciplines - especially philosophy and critical theory. Although such borrowings are often used effectively to shed new light on old problems (and indeed to create some new ones), they usually offer little in return. Daniel Tiffany's "Unbridled Space" (thoughts on architecture, mass media and death - on cryptic spaces, dwelling and memory) infects architecture with a provocative, if opportunistic, conflation of Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno et al., but, from the point of view of the specialist, perhaps finesses crucial issues in those authors' relevant works. The point is clearly to enhance the concerns proper to architecture rather than the other way around.

Oddly enough, then, for the general reader (by now as fictional a figure as the architect-reader invoked here at the outset), the most successful projects are finally those which are the most architectural, that is, those which engage most fully with the problematics of the representation and design of "building," and those which extend architecture to reach other strata of human habitation - those which attempt, in a meaningful way, to force open the whole package.

Sophie Thomas is a member of the Border/Lines collective.

Deconstructing Nature

BY Richard Ashby

Alexander Wilson, **The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez**
Toronto: Between The Lines, 1991.

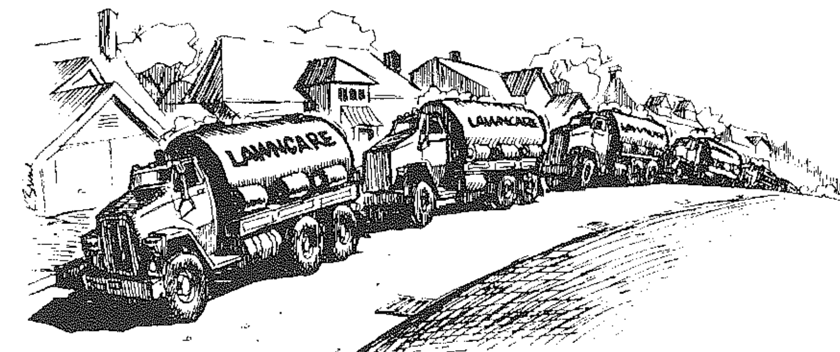

Illustration from *The Culture of Nature.*

Over the past thirty-five years, nature has come to occupy an increasingly important place on public agendas and in the popular imagination throughout the world. Though its current manifestation is peculiar to our times, there is nothing particularly unique about interest in nature as such. As analytic concept and regulative principle, nature - and especially the nature-human nexus - has always been an important, if ever-shifting, fragmentary and often contested, site of social and cultural articulation. Neither fully a positive entity nor an unmediated object of knowledge and experience, "nature," notwithstanding its noumenal substrate, is first and foremost a political and epistemological category, a vector for interpenetrating regimes of power/knowledge: science, religion, economics and industry, technology, morality, gender, nation and so on. It is, moreover, neither simple nor single but a multiplicity of objects, a multiplicity of sites: body, earth, other-than-human life, environment, or a less material (but no less materially effective) natural order of things. Generally speaking, the power to name and define nature (and by extension what is and what is not natural) has always been more or less coextensive with the power to define how things ought to be. As construct or plurality of constructs, however, both "nature" and nature are always the products of particular cultural and social formations, serving at once to legitimate certain social relations over others, and to normalize what could loosely be termed an attendant environmental praxis.

Interestingly, the increasingly widespread acceptance of the foregoing remarks is itself due in good measure to the specificity of current preoccupations with nature. It is the result of an encounter with two natures: the real one, so to speak, and the culturally constructed one. On the one hand, there was an alarming realization that nature's continued capacity to sustain life as we know it can no long be taken for granted, that, in effect, we are in the throes of an ecological crisis of no small proportions. On the other, many began to recognize that 1) "nature" is indeed a cultural construct; and 2) the conceptual vocabularies with which we apprehend and inscribe nature are intimately bound up with the way we treat it. Not surprisingly, both nature and "nature" quickly emerged as focal points for an environmentally informed social and cultural critique.

Crudely stated, and without reference to their many differences, advocates of this critique argue that Western societies have placed themselves outside of and above nature, thereby rupturing the mutually nurturing relations with nature characteristic of agrarian and hunter-gatherer societies. The vocabulary of nature is saturated with the language of conquest, domination and mastery. It has been constructed as an inert object of manipulation and an expendable trove of resources existing for the satisfaction of human wants and needs. This conception legitimates and encourages exploitive environmental practices, strips nature of any intrinsic worth, and assigns it value only for and in the service of human beings. This critique's project is to speak for nature, to recuperate and reconceive it as a moral subject, to reintegrate humans into nature, and to promote an environmental praxis predicated on ecologically harmonious cohabitation.

It is against this hastily sketched background that *The Culture of Nature* should be read. It is a cultural history of nature in twentieth-century North America that is not only situated within environmentalism, but also attempts to move beyond what Wilson views as the tendency to reduce the nature-civilization relation to a simple good versus evil opposition. By strategically placed references to aboriginal peoples and rural agrarian societies, Wison's rhetoric constantly seeks to evoke a pastoral sense of nature which has all but disappeared in North America. On the other hand, Wilson is acutely aware that nature is not a positive entity preceding representation; it is and always will be a cultural construct. As such, nature is lived and fashioned as, say, parks, roads, farms, backyards, indoor gardens, cities, etc. In effect, nature is a collection of landscapes. In the context of his discussion, these are treated as historical texts structured and inscribed by the discursive economies of industrial capitalism. His project is to deconstruct nature-as-landscape, to put it at the centre of cultural debate, and to urge an aesthetics of nature which would allow us to live on and with the land - that is, to intervene in nature without dominating it. Such a project can yield an understanding of what our constructed landscapes have to do with the 'nature' of environmental crisis. It is only with this kind of understanding that we can "be mobilized to restore nature and to assure it, and ourselves, a future" (291).

Though informed by environmentalism's recognition that our various ideas about nature operate to circumscribe and normalize particular appropriative and/or exploitive practices, Wilson's discussion largely surpasses by now familiar ideographical analyses of modern discourse on nature. (They are one point of departure for an illuminating account of industrial technologies of representation and knowledge of nature in contemporary North America.) Moreover, he extends his examination of representational

practices beyond the limits of film, advertising, television, etc. to include a vast array of sites, technologies and institutions, such as suburbs, shopping centres, automobiles and highways, trains, RV parks, theme parks, interior and exterior landscape design, industrial complexes (James Bay, Hibernia, nuclear power stations...), tourism, education, and so on. In sum, the book is a literal *tour d'horizon*, a meticulous and wide ranging first-person survey/narration of the multiple landscapes (their histories and their logics) comprising the North American experience of nature. Indeed, the book itself does not contain a single linearly developed argument. Its theme is reproduced in each chapter, each a specific site or class of sites constructing nature and our experience of it. Far from dulling the book's effect, this serial reproduction actually enhances it. A single chapter or extended essay would likely fail to capture the extent to which the experience of nature has been fragmented and compartmentalized as so many objects of attention, appreciation and consumption. Throughout, he argues that, individually and collectively, these lived landscapes simultaneously disclose and impose distant, singular and transitory natures.

The point here as elsewhere in the book is that nature, considered as a dynamic whole of which humans are inescapably a part, has both disappeared and is effectively unattainable. At bottom, *The Culture of Nature* is about boundaries, enclosures and exclusions, that is, the regulation of the exchanges between humans and nature. The blurring of constructed tourist space with that of 'authentic' memory is but an aspect of a larger re-inscription/fragmentation of natural surroundings. Be it the manicured foliage lining parkways, the packaged seclusion of a singles cross-country weekend, or a seven-minute jungle cruise at Disneyworld, nature is re-presented in terms that disallow the experience of it as a whole, "as the total environment that for centuries has been our *home*" (28, emphasis in original).

The experience of nature-as-scenery - as object of aesthetic appreciation - through a car window, for example, limits it to the visual dimension alone. It removes or at the very least inhibits the possibility of an integrative exchange with nature. This experience is private inasmuch as the car itself is less a vehicle of community and communalism than an enclosure separating viewer and viewed. Nature becomes something static to the extent that its re-inscription by tourism industries is necessarily governed by a logic of commodity production. The imposition of the commodity form on nature - the production of tourist landscapes - both pluralizes and singularizes it as specific objects of particular modes or forms of tourist consumption. At the same time, this commodification of nature imposes a logic of sameness, predictability and reproducibility. In other words, much like the food in restaurant chains or the mechanical animals in amusement parks such as Disneyworld, nature, in its myriad transformations as objects of tourist consumption, is everywhere and always the same. It is made to conform to specific expectations, always guaranteed to fulfill or correspond to a previously evoked desire. All that is contingent in nature, that is, all that might disappoint or blemish the experience of it, is removed.

Both the novelty and acuity of Wilson's insight reside less in his discussion of the various forms of the commodification and industrialization of nature as such. This and the discursive modalities of nature's subjugation have been extensively treated by a variety of authors. At one level, as I mentioned above, the book's force derives from the sheer scope of his investigations, and his discovery that pristine, technologically unmediated landscapes have almost become a thing of the past. At another level, however, what is perhaps his most interesting contribution lies in his recognition of the cumulative representational effects (and their implications for the environment) of the interpenetrating deployments and practices of technology itself. He argues that "in the late twentieth century, technology is not merely a collection of tools or machines or a representation of power. It is also a sensorium, a field of perception" (258). In short, technology is a way of life, a logic that produces and structures its own environment.

In removing all traces of contingency, in constructing a collection of environments which are all things to all consumers, nature is not only re-presented as cornucopia. It is quite literally made over into a cornucopia, a vast and infinitely varied site for satisfaction of desire. As such, it becomes increasingly difficult to view nature as having its own exigencies and imperatives. That is, it is difficult to view nature as something having limits that we have learned to transgress in the practice of everyday life on the one hand, and in the fulfillment of our selves on the other.

In this connection, consider one of the many examples Wilson offers. Advances in agricultural, transportation and refrigeration technology, combined with (or driven by) free enterprise economies, have made it possible and require that we have out of season fruits and vegetables on our tables. Indeed, the very meaning of "out of season" has been reduced to variations in the prices we pay for these items. This leads to an effective homogenization of the seasons on the one hand, and to a very profound restructuring of our relations with nature on the other. It produces misleading conceptions of what nature is, of what its limits and possibilities are, and of what we should expect from it. There occurs a dislocation of nature within our daily lives, the communication of an idea of nature which is false.

The 'nature' of environmental crisis is not only the one of global warming, felled rain forests and ozone depletion. It is also, and perhaps more fundamentally, the one that is always there when we turn on a light switch, peel an orange or open a book. It is the basis of our daily wants and needs, and which for all intents and purposes have become invisible and therefore infinitely distant. In this conceptual space, nature is a kind of distant presence. That is, the perceived limits of nature are forever receding precisely because it is seemingly always there waiting to be turned on. Such a nature cannot be anything other than bountiful; its only limit is access to it, access mediated by our power to purchase it and our willingness to work to acquire that power. As a kind of implicit environmental rhetoric, this conceptual framework locates the 'nature' of environmental crisis as always being somewhere else, as only being the one of large-scale imminent and visible catastrophes. Environmental crisis is thus constituted as a political problem and not also a cultural one.

Terms do not define relations; they are articulated by the relations themselves. Out of season fruits and the mouths they feed articulate a social relation that produces consumer and consumed alike. Nature is fragmented into singular landscapes fashioned to correspond to - be the satisfaction or fulfillment of - constructed needs, wants, desires, pleasures and dreams, which are then sold back to an equally variegated self which validates them as its own. In sum, the technological mediation of nature is co-extensive with a socio-cultural dynamic initiated during the industrial revolution and which has reached its apogee in consumer society.

But there is no question here of technological determinism. Wilson is very much concerned with the history and the historicity of the current techno-sensorium regulating exchanges with nature. In the spirit of Raymond Williams, whose thinking about technology informs much of the book, Wilson recognizes that both technological innovations and their subsequent applications are socially and culturally mediated. That is, technologies and their uses are embedded in a web of historical relations; they are responses to socially perceived needs, constitutive of a socially determined means-ends continuum. The 'natures' of tourism, for example, emerge out of and reinforce the consolidation of the historical separation between work and leisure. Cars, trailers, highways, campgrounds, Rocky Mountain resorts, ski weekends, Club Med beaches are all so many sites and/or vehicles. They, that is, the tourism industry, literally re-construct and re-present nature as get-away, freedom or repose. Moreover, they articulate the idea of, say, freedom, an articulation not only of nature but of leisure and the leisure-seeking, working individual.

Reading *The Culture of Nature*, one is both caught up with its deconstructive project and troubled by its redemptive mood. Wilson has made an important contribution to our understanding of the production and conceptual falsification of nature under consumer capitalism. His argument marks a significant improvement over those condemning a nature-hating modern world. Less clear, however, are his remarks concerning the restoration of nature. Inasmuch as he is arguing that we need to develop a particular idea of nature as total environment of which we in all our actions are a part, there is little problem. Clearly, the placing of landscape at the centre of cultural debate entails a commitment to a politico-historical understanding of the interpenetrating political, economic and culture factors mediating our experience both of nature and ourselves.

On the other hand, his references to aboriginal peoples, though intuitively appealing, tend at times to sound the same false notes as *Dances With Wolves*. His employment of the aboriginal experience of the land is clearly intended to give meaning to the senses of nature, self and community he wishes to restore and to cast our own environmental practices in sharp relief. Yet even supposing that pre-industrial societies represent harmonious cohabitation with nature (and the historical record is far from unambiguous on this point), how could this inform or alter the environmental praxis of inner-city populations? Neither *Dances With Wolves* nor two decades of nature education seem to have made much difference thus far. This 'public,' however, is precisely the bed of consciousness needing not only to be informed, but, more importantly, to be empowered as a political public. Clearly, "we [do] need to tell new stories about settlement and work on this Earth" (297), but we need to do so with a language and with strategies belonging to the present, not a romanticized past. All too often this past must itself be wrestled from the same logics that produce a nature for weekend expeditions.

In this respect, I would nuance Wilson's claim that we must restore a sense of nature and its limits by suggesting that we must acquire one that is consonant with our own lived separation from nature. This entails not only, as Wilson argues, new practices and a new aesthetics of nature, but equally and at the same time a new (political) praxis of the self. For a knowledge of nature's limits, it seems to me, must be accompanied by a politics of the limits of public and private experience.

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