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When EcoMedia Gets Weird: Björk—Timothy Morton—Anthropocene

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“I believe art is a way to attune to what reality is, which is a weird reality.”
---Timothy Morton, *This Huge Sunlit Abyss from the Future Right Next to You...*

“smell of wool and jarm and volcanic mist from the eruption had finally arrived here in the west
so all was in soft focus but not lazy hazy style , but metallic w/definition!”
--- Björk, *This Huge Sunlit Abyss from the Future Right Next to You...*

Overview

One of the central aims of this unit is to encourage students to explore radical aesthetic means of representing such massive, practically unimaginable, ecological things as global climate change and the Anthropocene. To that end, the unit functions quite effectively amidst other units on the aesthetic, ideological, and rhetorical elements of more conventional EcoMedia texts such as documentary and fiction films as well as print and animated works by artists like Marina Zurkow (see *Heraldic Crests for Invasive Species* and *Mesocosm*, for example) and performance/public art pieces such as Olafur Eliasson’s *Ice Watch Paris*. To achieve the unit’s central aim, this plan combines writing assignments to prepare for class meetings with in-class small and large group discussion activities. Such a combination invites and requires students to work rigorously with the texts independently, in predetermined and focused ways, and as part of an open group thinking through them dialogically.

In this unit, the class engages with two core texts: Björk’s 2014 live-concert film *Biophilia Live* and the email dialogue between Björk and the well-known eco-philosopher Timothy Morton collected and published for her MoMA New York mid-career retrospective as *The Huge Sunlit Abyss From the Future Right There Next To You.... Biophilia Live* opens the space for productive and highly textured discussions because it combines, as a single text, complex lyrics, innovative instrumentation that ranges from low-tech percussion to elaborate electronica, stage performance, audience participation, and the elements of cinema. The print text contains accessible entryways to Timothy Morton’s concept of the hyperobject and the ethics and aesthetics involved with grasping, depicting, and analyzing hyperobjects such as the Anthropocene. What’s more, as a dialogue, this text frequently defines and applies hyperobject ideas to Björk’s music in particular, including some of the pieces included in the *Biophilia Live*.

Rationale

For readers unfamiliar with Morton’s work, he has been radically reshaping ecological aesthetics from his 2007 book *Ecology without Nature* through the present. In his 2013 book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Morton published a detailed articulation of the concept hyperobject and illustrated the work this concept can do in the aesthetic dimension. Put most simply, a hyperobject is an object so massively distributed in space and time that it requires us to recalibrate spatiotemporal identifications and definitions of objects. Global

warming is a key ecological hyperobject, and by categorizing it that way, Morton opens a weird alternative way of perceiving ecological crises and our era as marked, defined even, by these hyperobjects. If you wish to pursue the concept more, you could read the Introduction and/or full text of *Hyperobjects*, though for this lesson plan aimed at first-year undergraduate students, that level of expertise is unnecessary. The dialogical nature of the Morton-Björk text fleshes out hyperobjects in ways my own undergrads found approachable.

For readers unfamiliar with the term Anthropocene, there is currently a debate in the geology community about whether or not a new geological epoch has succeeded the Holocene—an epoch defined by anthropogenic forces depositing traces in the planet’s surface. Evidence to support the declaration of this new epoch may be tied to carbon dioxide intensifications linked to human agriculture or the Industrial Revolution or the Great Acceleration, and/or it might be tied to remainders of nuclear energy and weapon production and use. While this debate began in the field of geology, scholars and thinkers across the Humanities are using the concept of the Anthropocene to reframe and rethink ecological crisis, and the Anthropocene is increasingly appearing in mainstream works of speculative and other fiction. For an accessible and useful introduction to the Anthropocene see Robert Macfarlane’s “Generation Anthropocene: How Humans Have Altered the Planet for Ever” in *The Guardian*.

By the time I teach this unit, students have had at least ten class meetings. They’ve screened, discussed, and written about a range of documentary and fiction films with ecological concerns, and I’ve introduced them to some of the histories and data of specific concerns, crises, catastrophes such as coffee production, cetacean harvests, and global warming. For global warming, the 2012 documentary film *Chasing Ice* is especially compelling (even though, as I warn my students, it’s a film for watching ice melt) and it is a useful reference point in this unit as several sequences of it were filmed in Iceland, Björk’s home country of which she writes in her exchanges with Morton.

As a final note, before presenting the details of assignments and classroom activities it’s good to anticipate that the initial encounter with the film is very likely to perplex even the students who are artistically-oriented, open-minded, and/or earnest about their studies. A common sentiment immediately following our collective screening can be summed up in one student’s articulation: “I think I’ll go for a walk and come back later to scoop my melted brain off the floor.” And yet, I unreservedly will teach this unit again and recommend it because the weird aesthetics and ideas that Björk conjures through music and then extends through conversation with Morton can convince students that radically new ways of thinking ecology and therefore of thinking our way into a better Anthropocene future are out there. They are out there if we can slip some of the creative and critical restraints that have enabled the ideological and economic structures behind global warming to persist.

Timeline

This unit on EcoMedia and the Anthropocene originated in an intensive 3.5-week January-term seminar for first-year undergraduate students I taught in 2016. While the material proved productive for students new to college and to studying ecologically-oriented film, music, and other non-print media arts, it is sufficiently sophisticated to support scaling up through senior

seminars. Likewise, the plan presented here could easily be reduced by 1-2 days by omitting discrete parts or be extended by 1-2 days using ideas I provide below and/or ideas of your own.

Lesson Plan and Assignment Details

Class Day 1

Screen *Biophilia Live* together as a class. Typically I assign screenings outside of class meetings to preserve class time for interactive work and because self-screening offers students the control to pause to study still-shot mise-en-scene or make notes and/or to re-watch selections multiple times.

For this unit I make the exception because screening Björk’s concert film together echoes the concert experience and perhaps more compellingly because students can bond over the experience of trying to keep up with its multi-media multi-sensory gorgeousness and deep weirdness.

That said, I could imagine an alternate structure to the unit that would start by introducing several songs so that students are already familiar with lyrics, vocal performance, and instrumentation when they watch *Biophilia Live*. With partial orientation in place, they would be freer to attend more to the visual and cinematographic elements. So, consider your scaffolding structure based on your own approach to new and particularly challenging texts and on your perception of student openness to dive into the weird.

Homework: Before the next class meeting, students are assigned an informal 400-500-word screening journal.¹ The prompt provides four categories and asks students to write a short paragraph for each: (1) Wardrobe & Makeup, (2) Lyrics & Vocal Performance, (3) Instrumentation, and (4) Visuals. This is geared specifically to preparing them for day two.

Class Day 2

This class day takes a form some we might refer to as the “chalk talk.” At the very start of class, or ideally just before it starts, write up the four categories from the journal assignment (Wardrobe & Makeup, Lyrics & Vocal Performance, Instrumentation, Visuals), distributing them

¹ Throughout this course my key objective with screening journals is to get students to think through writing about the interaction of Form and Content in each text. By this point of the term, they have acquired cinema technique terminology for visual and audio elements, and I ask them to deploy those terms as they engage with the four categories I list here. Journals are submitted online the night before class convenes to ensure student preparation and to enable me to see what grasped their attention and where I need to direct their attention—all of which are especially crucial with *Biophilia Live* as it diverges not only from the other texts in the course but really from anything they’ve encountered before. As this journal aims at breadth rather than depth, students are asked only to write the four paragraphs, no thesis or conclusion; this positions the classroom activities to do the work of synthesizing what they see in the separate categories.

equally across the full span of the white/chalk board. Next, randomly number of students into four separate groups and send each group up to one category on the board. Explain that they have three-to-five minutes to write up ideas from their journals for that category and continue brainstorming together if time permits.² This writing up may extend beyond words; encourage students to draw, map, graph, tree, diagram, etc. as they articulate their ideas—remember, this unit is about creative approaches. Next, rotate each group one category to the left and give another three-to-five minutes. Repeat until each group has been to each category. Now, have the class stand in a line at a distance from the board so they can see it all and tell them you and they will stand totally silently for five minutes while looking for patterns, surprises, omissions. After this stage, give students five more minutes to return individually to the board and indicate connections across categories or add in things they feel are missing.

Finally, use all this board-work to generate class discussion (I often have those who are able remain standing for this discussion and keep the markers on the board trays so we can modify the board when really good insights arise). I solicit from students first what surprised them—what had they not noticed that others did and what connections did this help them make? I also intervene as needed or join after students have sustained productive work to add what I observe in the volume of impressions and associations they recorded together.

The very last step of the class day is to reframe the discreet elements of the discussion into a unifying big question about how Björk synthesizes all of these elements to wage an aesthetic manifesto about life (human and non-) in a time of global warming, of the Anthropocene. How, for just one example, do students interpret her ultra-plastic outfit and wig within these big ecological frameworks? Why might Björk opt for these instead of, say, natural, perhaps even vegan, wardrobe materials.³

Homework: Before the next class meeting, students are assigned a reading journal of 400-500 words. Half of the journal should attend to Björk’s lyrics of the song “Virus” and the other half to the lyrics of “Cosmogony.” More specifically, students are to write about one-to-two elements of each song that seems like a recognizable aesthetic relationship with the non-human world and one-to-two elements that seem like a weird, different aesthetic relationship with the non-human world.

² When I first used the chalk talk, I prepared in advance so I’d have material in case students didn’t generate much and/or useful material. But after one implementation, I have tried to enter the class with key points I want to make, yet with confidence that their initial work will open the way for my agenda while especially opening up ideas and connections that take us in productive directions I hadn’t anticipated.

³ When time permits, I finish class with a meta-cognitive suggestion that students take this method away from class for use, individually or with colleagues, in responding to texts and to generating essay ideas and theses.

Class Day 3

Open the class with two music videos on Youtube. First is Miley Cyrus’s song “[Wake Up, America](#)” from her 2008 album *Breakout*. Second is “[We’ve Got to Do Something](#),” the spoof video by the band Infant Sorrow, lead by Russell Brand—a video featured in the 2008 comedy film *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*. I suggest showing Cyrus first and discussing it before showing Infant Sorrow.

You may direct discussion to analyze the anticipated moves of pop music aspiring to activism. With “Wake Up, America” you can help students consider the generation gap discourse the song leverages in its appeal to young listeners, the nationalistic aspect (in this case, “America”) of the lyrical appeal despite the global scale of climate change, the weirdly dismissive attitude towards climate change science/data that seems connected to the retrograde idea that science may be too challenging for girls, the absolute vagueness about what to do, and the ideological language of waking up to ecological crises (something we see in Melissa Etheridge’s closing credits song “I Need to Wake Up” for Al Gore’s 2006 milestone climate change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*).

With the shift to “We’ve Got to Do Something,” lead students’ attention to the very contradictions in ecological and other social issue discourses at which the video pokes fun. Visually, students will likely recognize the attitudes towards police, clergy, and the interactions between Orthodox Jews and Arab Muslims that place the film in the genre of social/political music videos—the U2 factor. Likewise, the hand-written signs Russell Brand brandishes unsettlingly point out contradictions at the core of the song’s activist message: “Sodomize Intolerance” “Don’t Consume / Buy Green” and so on. Note as students take in this video their responses to these signs—each time I’ve taught this unit, these signs generated awkward laughter, and in the discussion phase I invited students to unpack their reactions. This is an especially valuable part of the lesson as we have to think hard together to explain and justify positions such as tolerance and pluralism. In this era of mass immigrations and Islamophobia, we can help students explore the ideological contradictions Brand points out and see how they connect those issues to ecological concerns and the stumbling blocks that prevent us from making significant changes.

From analysis of these two videos, transition the discussion towards Björk by pulling back to the potentials and pitfalls of celebrities leveraging their fame and/or their art itself to inform and inspire. In my experience, students have a lot to say on different celebrities’ activism, or its appearance—George Clooney, BrAngelina, etc.⁴

⁴ I have used some of these same videos and prompts for a standalone unit on Celebrity Eco Activism. Leonardo DiCaprio presents a rich, complicated figure for such a unit as you can include his 2007 film *The 11th Hour* as well as the profile pieces on his eco-activism in venues like *Vanity Fair*. I’ve used debate formats for such standalone units as students can get quite impassioned about whether they see celebrity ecoactivism as feel-good self-promotion bought very cheaply or as authentic and high-impact use of their social platform to promote the common good.

As a pivot to Björk, I give a mini-lecture at this point on perspectives towards eco-cynicism and cynicism in the social imaginary today more broadly. To do this, I help students consider the prospect that programs like *The Daily Show* are, despite appearances to the contrary, very conservative because they foster a sense of superior perception that can actually lead away from trying to enact change, including prospects of organization and unity toward ecological change. After all, it's not that difficult to feel superior to a category of other people who don't grasp ecological and other issues as clearly as producers and consumers of liberal news satire media. But the rush of this superiority can lull us into the pleasures of cynicism about all the people who don't get it, and this cynicism comes much easier than working toward collaboration and change. I finish the lecture by asking them to consider Björk as an alternative to the cynicism embedded in Russell Brand's spoof music video. Instead of thumbing her nose at others, Björk embraces her piercing alternative perspective while sharing it as an offering to unite humanity, to unite the collective of Earth really. This pivot helps students consider Björk as a celebrity positioned quite differently from most of those that will have occurred to them in the earlier part of this lesson.

Explore her celebrity activism as long or little as you like before moving to the assigned songs: "Virus" and "Cosmogony." Here you can draw upon the preparatory work students have done to spark conversation. In fact, I try to make the first part of this class day rather concentrated so that I can go around the classroom and hear a little something from everyone in the class. This is a great chance to validate student input as you draw out their ideas and get them to connect their insights with more general nature writing conventions and/or song lyric conventions. For example, there aren't a lot of love songs out there, or nature writing for that matter, that casts the virus in a positive light, or that deploys the figure of mushrooms growing on tree trunks to articulate romantic love.

Finish this class day by putting students in small groups and asking them to articulate Björk's definitions of Nature and of Biophilia. Collect these collaboratively-written paragraphs to give you ideas for the last day of the unit.

Homework: Students are assigned to read the email exchange between Björk and Timothy Morton. The full set of correspondence is available online. In addition to the reading, students are required to have 4 quotes ready to share with the class: two from each author—one quote that made them say "WOW!" and one quote that made them say "WHAT?"

Class Day 4

Start the class meeting by dividing the class into two groups: one to share their selected Björk quotes and one to share their Timothy Morton quotes. Ask them to share and then to identify patterns that connect several of the quotes individuals selected. Solicit these patterns and based on what they are, screen one song performance from the film. Guide students to see how their "WOW!" quotes apply to the aesthetic choices and affects of the song; then guide them to explore how the song might help them hazard answers to their own "WHAT?" quotes.

Even though the classroom dynamic will be responsive to what students initiate, you can prepare by attending to themes in the correspondence:

- Sex and Gender
- Loops as opposed to other geometric models/representations/thoughts
- Weirdness
- Morton's concept of the Hyperobject
- Cultural attitudes towards eco apocalypse
- Particular geological formations, waterways, etc.
- Visual verbs (sometimes as they describe thought or feeling)—sparkly, crystalline...
- Family
- Philosophy and Art

Finish this last day of the unit with an in-class writing on *Biophilia Live*, prompting them to include ideas about the components you analyzed via the chalk talk, its participation within the genealogy of nature writing and song, and from the dialogue you've just finished discussing. You can give very precise prompts, perhaps requiring one-to-two direct quotes from the dialogue, as this is a perfect time to revisit the question of ultra-plastic outfits and wigs in light of what Björk and Morton have written back and forth.

Post- or Extended-Unit Possibilities

You might design the course so that this unit leads to a formal writing. After all, they've done significant informal writing and sustained critical thinking, so they're primed to create substantial essays. You might design the course so that this unit contributes to groups creating multi-media projects of their own, whether live or recorded. You might combine these creative and formal written exercises.

There is a \$12.99 app available for Apple and Android devices called *Björk: Biophilia*. If you want to budget for this in the course materials, students can purchase this app and explore this set of texts with it. The app offers a wide array of interactions with the music and visuals of *Biophilia Live*, encouraging users to experiment with multiple media channels simultaneously and to consider the essays and navigation options as invitations to reflect on *Biophilia Live* as a living media ecosystem.

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Biography

Andy Hageman is Assistant Professor of English at Luther College, where he teaches courses in film, American literature, ecocriticism, and speculative fiction. His research explores intersections of techno-culture and ecology, and his 20+ published essays range across media and subjects from films by David Lynch and Lou Ye to an archive-based analysis of Gary Snyder's intercultural poetics, and he is currently co-editing the December 2016 issue of the journal *Paradoxa* with the theme "Global Weirding."