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Black, Jack and Jim Cherrington. 2021. "Temporal Ontology in Ecology: Developing an ecological awareness through time, temporality and the past-present parallax." *Environmental Philosophy*. Online First.

Temporal Ontology in Ecology: Developing an ecological awareness through time, temporality and the past-present parallax

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Temporal Ontology in Ecology: Developing an ecological awareness through time, temporality and the past-present parallax

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Abstract
Theoretical applications of time and temporality remain a key consideration for both climate scientists and the humanities. By way of extending this importance, we critically examine Timothy Morton's proposed "ecological awareness" alongside Slavoj Žižek's "parallax view". In doing so, the article introduces a "past-present parallax" in order to contest that, while conceptions of the past are marked by "lack", equally, our conceptions of and relations to Nature remain grounded in an ontological incompleteness, marked by contingency. This novel approach presents an ecological awareness that remains temporally attuned to the impasses and inconsistencies which frame our relations in/with Nature.

Keywords
Time; temporality; nature; ecology; dirt; melancholy

Introduction

A major theme within the literature on ecology, environmentalism and climate change stems, in part, from the relations and tensions between humanity and "Nature" (Harris 2016; Lever-Tracy 2010; Perreault et al. 2015). Viewed through a nature-culture dialectic, Nature is typically conceived as "everything" *outside* of what is traditionally referred to as "human". Indeed, such thinking underscores definitions of the Anthropocene. Referring to our current geological epoch, the Anthropocene defines a geological time scale that denotes the impact of human activity on the Earth's geology and ecosystems. What remains key to such definitions, however, is the extent to which our current geological age is perceived as linearly following former geological ages

(the Holocene), whereby the hubristic activity of human beings did not dramatically disturb the planet's ecology and climate. While we do not contest the scientific rationale behind such definitions, we do wish to draw attention to their temporal significance, as well as to the ecological assumptions that they can presume. In fact, what becomes clear from our current ecological crisis is that there never was, nor has there ever been, a harmonious relationship between humanity and Nature; instead, human existence has always been marked by contingency – and so has Nature (Black and Cherrington 2020; Taylor 2009; Žižek 2010).

By way of exploring this contingency, the following analysis will seek to draw upon the work of both Slavoj Žižek and Timothy Morton in order to outline an "ecological awareness" that pays consideration to the importance of an ontology of time (Morton 2007, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2018; Žižek 1992, 2006, 2008b, 2012, 2016). In particular, we contest that Žižek's (1992, 2012) philosophy – a Lacanian interpretation of the work of Hegel – can provide a novel approach to developing what Morton (2017, 2018) has referred to as our "ecological awareness". We argue that in order to better comprehend our current ecological malaise, critical examinations and theoretical applications of time and temporality remain a key consideration for both climate scientists and the humanities. Accordingly, this article will seek to develop an ecological awareness grounded in a Žižekian approach to Nature, from which the inherent divisions *within* Nature can be approached and understood through a temporal ontology.

In developing this approach, we will draw upon a body of research which has examined the unique way that Mountain Bike Trail Builders relate to and with Nature (Black and Cherrington 2020; Cherrington and Black 2020a, 2020b). Specifically, we elucidate on the temporal significance of their comments on Nature and the locations in which they build and ride mountain bike trails. Mountain bike trail builders use organic and/or inorganic materials to construct and maintain a rideable network of trails to suit a range of different interests and abilities. As such, trails are always part of larger social, cultural and political systems (see Brown et al. 2013 for a comprehensive overview) that require careful and diligent planning and collaboration on behalf of the builder. For instance, some trail builders may work for large contractors who specialise in the development and management of multi-purpose trail centres, creating features not found readily on so called "natural" trails (Gibbs and Holloway 2018, 250). Others may be involved in "guerilla" activities, creating "unmapped trails or obstacles …

alongside the formally sanctionned routes" (Gibbs and Holloway 2018, 254). In either case, mountain bike trail building is indicative of a unique geographical imagination in which landscapes are both brought into being, and, disrupted by, the emergent relationships between a range of objects and artefacts (Gibbs and Holloway 2018).

We argue that the practice of mountain bike trail building offers a novel approach to exploring our practical engagements with Nature, ecology and time. It is through critically examining the trail builders' involvement in/with Nature, that an important point of distinction between both Žižek (1992, 2010) and Morton's (2007, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2018) approaches can be made. Indeed, while the following discussion will critically consider the underlying distinctions between Žižek's (2012) dialectical materialism and Morton's (2017, 2018) object-oriented ontology (OOO), we can, briefly, locate these distinctions in accordance with their definitions of Nature. For Žižek (2008b, 2012), Nature is inherently "split" and "antagonistic", and, thus, it is from this division that our various definitions of Nature emerge; for Morton (2013), it is Nature's inherent "emptiness", which is subsequently "filled in" by humans, and thus, predicated on their own desires and needs. Notably, Morton's (2013) contention is not to "promote" such emptiness, but, rather, to draw attention to its symbiotic significance – delineating an approach that does not value "subject" over "object". Consequently, though we do not disagree with the underlying merits behind Morton's (2017, 2018) ecological awareness, we do perceive an extension of this "awareness" through a closer consideration on temporality, linearity and the past-present parallax. It is in regard to this latter concept that our Žižekian approach will be underscored.

An "infinite futurality": Object-Oriented Ontology, temporality and the Kantian "gap"

The linearity of time – past, present, future – remains a widely debated and contentious issue in both the sciences and social sciences. While linear time and spatial demarcation are obviously used by humans as a form of temporal orientation, disruptions to and disavowals of linear temporality are not simply irrational processes but, instead, are frequently used in cultural and analytical approaches to time, culture and society (Gafijczuk 2017). As Stewart (2016, 87) asserts, "[Though] Western historicism, … derives its ideas of linearity and irreversibility from the cosmology of classical physics, … in daily life people do entertain multiple historicities, themselves possibly grounded

in alternative temporalities". This is, perhaps, best reflected in discussions on climate change and environmentalism, which implicitly assume a level of "increasing foresight" *in the present*, from which human action is perceived as having a "long-term" – and future orientated – impact (Rohloff 2011).

Equally, Morton's (2017) work is not immune to an ecological understanding of temporality, with his advocation for an ecological position that remains grounded in an expanded temporality. In outlining this position, Morton (2017, 38) avers a form of existence which "embraces a haunting, uncanny, spectral dimension". This "spectral" temporality is revealed by the fact that:

> past and future are artifacts of the structure of entities as such, and are to be found nowhere outside of them. The form of a thing, its appearance, is the *past*. My face is a map of everything that happened to my face. A beehive is a story about what happened when some bees chewed some wax. There is a contextual abyss about appearance: we can't draw the line decisively as to when the face stops and its explanatory context – all the things that happened to give it this exact appearance – begins. This provides the basis for the "nightmare" quality of past states of humankind that weigh on us: there might be no end to the "weight of dead traditions" (Morton 2017, 78).

This "'nightmare' quality", which is attributed to the "past", underlies Morton's (2017) aversion to relying on "explanatory contexts", whereby the futility of drawing a clearly demarcated "context" to explain a particular phenomenon serves only to pronounce the importance of our "ecological awareness". Morton (2018, 88) asserts:

> The amazing conclusion is that no neat circle of context will ever fully explain the thing you're trying to explain. Ecological awareness gives you a world in which everything is relevant to everything else, but is also really unique and vivid and distinct at the very same time. In this world, everything you think and feel is relevant.

The failure to "ever fully explain the thing you're trying to explain", lays bare Morton's (2017, 2018) OOO approach to ecology. This philosophical orientation denounces the subject in favour of a conception of reality, from which objects (including humans)

continually withdraw from other objects in their interaction (Harman 2016). As highlighted by Morton (2018), the inability to ever fully explain the "thing" echoes the object's withdrawal from any epistemological assertion. It is on these grounds that OOO refocuses attention to the primacy of "ontology" in philosophical debates (Black and Cherrington 2020, 2021; Cherrington and Black 2020b). Moreover, this primacy reveals a temporal significance.

For example, when Morton (2017, 78) asserts that "The form of a thing, its appearance, is the *past*", it is apparent that such an appearance – and moreover the *understanding* of this appearance – is one marked by a relevance that can never fully be understood. In effect, our relation to the past is one that can never be rationally comprehended in its entirety. Instead, temporality is inherently processual – there is "no present"; and, though an object's "appearance" denotes its past, its "essence" relies on an "infinite futurality" (Morton 2017). Such "futurality" is underscored by OOO's contention that the object's "withdrawal" can, like the future, be neither "pinned-down" nor determined (Harman 2016).

In part, Morton's (2017) temporal assertions refocuses attention to the Kantian tensions between ontology and epistemology, and, specifically, the location of the "gap" between "subject" and "object". Accordingly, for Morton (2017, 63):

> Kant limited the gap he had discovered to the gap between human beings and everything else. It is time to release the copyright control on this gap. The name of this release is ecological awareness. Ecological awareness is coexisting, in through and in practice, with the ghostly host of nonhumans.

It is on these grounds that we can further elucidate upon the important philosophical – and, to this extent, temporal – distinctions which underscore Morton's (2017) as well as Žižek's (2015) work. Rather than problematising the Kantian "gap", as per Morton, Žižek's (2012, 2015) dialectical materialism locates this "gap" in ontology itself.

The location of this "gap" highlights a number of important contentions in developing our ecological awareness. Instead of delineating an ecological awareness, grounded in the release of this "gap" we, over the coming sections, will outline a decidedly temporal approach to ecology that predicates its awareness on the inherent inconsistences and antagonisms – i.e. the gap – in both Nature and temporality. To do so, we introduce and apply Žižek's (2006) "parallax view".

The parallax view: Assuming the "gap"

Though the term "parallax" was introduced in Žižek's (2006) "*The Parallax View*", the term has become a fundamental feature of his dialectical materialism (Žižek 2012, 2015). Importantly, Žižek's (2012, 2016) work proposes a counterintuitive approach to materialism, whereby matter does not exist, or, at least, not in any "rational" or "realist" form. Instead, Žižek's (2006, 17) "Materialism means that the reality I see is never 'whole' – not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it". It is this "blind spot" which asserts "a gap [… that is] irreducible and insurmountable, a gap which posits a limit to the field of reality" (Žižek 2006, 10). What is key to such a parallaxical understanding, is the realization that there is neither a "neutral" view on reality (inevitably, held by a subject), nor a path from which the inherent incompleteness and inconsistency of reality can be overcome; instead, it is "ontology" itself which is incomplete, inconsistent and, thus, epistemologically limited (Wood 2012).

Clearly, Žižek's (2012) Hegelian influences are brought to bear in the above contentions; a Hegelianism that does not favour the mediation of "thesis" and "anti-thesis" with "synthesis", but, instead, posits that "the antithesis is in itself already the synthesis, yet seen from another perspective" (Pfaller 2017, 74). This reasserts "a subjective position which finally accepts 'contradiction' as an in internal condition of every identity" (Žižek 2008a, 1).[1] It is on this basis that Žižek's (para-)ontology encourages us "to think the parallax gap itself, without introducing any imaginary sense of completeness" (Wood 2012, 244). A "parallax view", therefore, is not merely a "subjective" shift, but "an 'epistemological' shift", from which "the subject's point of view always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself" (Žižek 2006, 17).

As previously noted, while Morton (2017) seeks to "release" the gap between subject and object, thus privileging the ontology of the "(inter-)object*ive*"; according to Žižek (2012), it is the location of this "gap" in both subject *and* object which redirects attention to the inseparability of an epistemology, that is always speculative, and an

[1] Notably, Žižek (2012, 2016) considers this 'contradiction' as central to Hegel's original work.

ontology, which "is Real and negative" (Vighi 2014, 134).[2] Moreover, this "gap" bears a central significance in approaching our current "ecological crisis", where it becomes apparent that:

> All attempt to regain a new balance between man and nature, to eliminate from human activity its excessive character and to include it in the regular circuit of life, are nothing but a series of subsequent endeavors to suture an original and irredeemable gap. (Žižek 1992, 37).

Instead, "The only proper attitude is that which fully assumes this gap as something that defines our very *condition humaine*" (Žižek 1992, 36). It is on this ground, that we present our ecological awareness as one predicated upon a "knowledge of impossibility" (Bonic 2011, 105). In accordance with Žižek's (2006, 7) parallax view, such "impossibility" neither confers nor promotes the mediation of an opposition, but, rather, "Take[s] a step further and reach[es] beneath the dualism itself, into a 'minimal difference' that generates it".

Following this process, we wish to draw attention to the ontological significance of the "gap", and how such a "gap" can be temporally applied to the relation between, as well as our relation to, "past and present". In what follows, we pay specific attention to linking this with wider philosophical discussions on time and temporality and its relevance in expanding and elaborating a temporally significant ecology.

Ontological inconsistencies in time and Nature

According to Secor (2008, 2623), "it is Žižek's insistence on the ontological primacy *of the gap between the virtual and the actual* that marks an important contribution to rethinking spatial ontology dialectically". We echo this concern but add that such a gap can prove beneficial to rethinking past-present linearities. For example, while echoing Walter Benjamin's critique of historicism, Žižek (2006) draws attention to the "radical

[2] Here, "the 'Real' is not the inaccessible X, it is the very cause or obstacle that distorts our view on reality, that prevents our direct access to it. The real difficulty is to think the subjective perspective as inscribed in 'reality' itself." (Žižek 2012, 907).

continuity" (Löwy, 2005) that Benjamin's past-orientation affords. Rejecting history's natural progression, Benjamin asserts a form of temporality which declares that in order to reshape the present, certain moments from the past require appropriation (or, "saving") (Löwy 2005; Žižek 2006).[3] Accordingly, while "The past as we know it from history is depicted as the only possible one because this serves to justify the present order", what remains important is that "this arrangement is never entirely stable" (Molden 2016, 127). Instead, such "instability" points to and reveals a "past" where the "present" could have been different (Black 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Ultimately, history and the past are never "fixed" but inherently incomplete and, therefore, open to radical interpretation (Žižek 2006). Žižek (2006, 228-229) gives this account an "ecological" reflection when he mentions how "the famous aeroplane 'resting place' in the Mojave Desert" underscores "Benjamin's insight [… that] we encounter historicity proper precisely when we observe cultural artifacts in decay, in the process of being reclaimed by nature".

In the work of Derrida (2012), such fluidity is itself approached via an ontological reorientation of past and present, conceived as "hauntology". Here, Derrida draws attention to "those bits of the past that haunt us" and which "undercut the narratives of the present" (Silva 2014, 191). Fisher (2014, 17-18) explains:

> Hauntology was the successor to previous concepts of Derrida's such as the trace and *différance*; like those earlier terms, it referred to the way in which nothing enjoys a purely positive existence. Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which preceded and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does. In the famous example, any particular linguistic term gains its meaning not from its own positive qualities but from its difference from other terms.

Evidence of this can be found in Morton's (2017, 77) assertion that "You can't be a lifeform unless you have this spectral double, this mutant shadow. Being alive means

[3] Notably, Benjamin's critique is levelled at Marx's historical materialism (Löwy 2005).

being supernatural".[4] Accordingly, while Derrida (2012), and Morton (2017), seek to redefine ontology through a temporal disjunction; for Derrida (2012), it is ontology itself which is effectively "haunted" by the past, resulting in an unstable and paradoxical present. Here, "traces" of the past remain "our only access to the past, but any trace is both a conservation and a loss of meaning: it provides incomplete information about the past to which it refers" (Bouton 2016, 170). According to Žižek (2012), Derrida's (2012) "hauntology" reveals a more fundamental contention: that is, it is reality's "inconsistency" which requires an ontology that is always-already marked by a spectral dimension that bears some consistency. In effect, reality can never simply be "itself", and, thus, must rely upon some form of spectrality in order to "appear".

Ultimately, what these discussions draw attention to is the *inherent tensions* in how we conceive and relate to the past *in the present*. In each instance, and to varying degrees, our understandings of temporality remain tied to forms of temporal orientation that seek to pay homage to the "past", while also reflecting on the relative impact that such a past can have on both the present and the future. In part, these attempts work to assume an atemporality that either disrupts, expands or even removes our relation to time.

By way of approaching these debates, we propose a parallax view of past and present, conceived as a "past-present parallax" (Black 2019a, 2020). In short, this requires locating the primacy of the ontological gap *within* past and present: the very gap that undermines a clear and total understanding of either past *or* present. Indeed, this impotence in the face of achieving a pure "past" or "present" is echoed by De Groot (2011, 273), who highlights that if "'Then' is clearly part of 'Now', … the ontological experience of being 'Now' must also at some point (although not necessarily in the individual's experience) involve 'Then'". This crisscrossing of "Then" and "Now" bears a notable resemblance to the Žižekian contention that what at first "appears as the impotence or limitation of our knowledge" – i.e. the impotence of epistemologically asserting a clear distinction between *Then/Now* – "is effectively the impotence of nature

[4] Morton (2017, 79) elaborates: "Everything is a railway junction where past and future are sliding over one another, not touching. … [A]ppearance is the past; being is the future; newness is the relative motion of future over past, not touching. A thing is a junction of two abyssal movements".

itself" – an impotence which is echoed in the ontological inconsistency of both past and present (Žižek 2015, 108).

To this end, we consider that if "Letting go of a degree of absolute certainty and preservation allows for an equal engagement with the possibilities of uncertainty and omission as part of a balanced tension around the constitution of knowledges of the past" (Russell 2012, 253); then, it is in the context of building an ecological awareness, that such inconsistency (such "uncertainty and omission") *in the past* can be ontologically applied to the impasses and inconsistencies *in Nature*. In fact, we would go as far as to suggest that this "ontological" appreciation does not necessarily need to be applied, but, rather, is constitutive of both "reality" and the "subject" (Žižek 2000, 2016); a constitution which requires a minimal level of consistency (conceptions of "Nature"; conceptions of "time") in order to "appear".

This (in)consistency is one that can be brought to light via a parallaxical approach to past and present. In effect, it is in our relation to time and temporality that our conceptions of the past can be preserved, but also, simultaneously lost. This permits a relation to time that is akin to that which occurs when one remembers and forgets. Following Huang (2009, 128), we posit therefore that the significance of the ontological gap in temporality – the division between past and present – reveals how "nature, as well as the subject, is from its very beginning split in itself and never identical with itself". Ultimately, it is this inherent split and non-identity which is brought to light in our experiences of past and present. In what follows, we will consider how such experiences can be allied with an ecological awareness.

Developing an ecological awareness: Nature, time and temporality

In sum, the above sections have sought to draw attention to the realization that, much like our understandings of Nature (which is forever contingent, incomplete and elusive), the past affords a similar (dis)orientation (Žižek 2020). As Haider (2018) asserts:

> There is a multiplicity of causes beyond our ability to perceive: at a basic level, purely physical things that affect us without our conscious awareness, and at the most complex level, all the historical factors that have determined us as social beings. We can form a partial, incomplete awareness of this in our imaginations,

> but at this level, *a full understanding of the history of our selves will remain elusive*.

Instead, such elusivity posits, in our approach, a "productive impasse", echoed by the fact that while the past is "here" (historical sites; artifacts; objects of personal significance from one's past; family heirlooms etc.), it remains present in its absence. In other words, this absence denotes how conceptions of the past are always marked by a "present" which *maintains* the elusivity of the "past" – that which is no longer here (Žižek 2006). Furthermore, if we assert that the past, quite literally, occupies the place of the "parallax object" – "being accessible but not directly, … accessed only through the mediation of an endless plurality of interpretations" (Elerick 2014, 210-211) – then, these interpretations are always made from a position of "lack". Here, our access to the past and our ability to interpret and understand this past, remains marked by the inherent limitations that ontologically underscore our temporal reality.

In the same way that our conceptions of the past are forever marked by a "lack", equally, our conceptions of and relations to Nature are themselves grounded in an ontological incompleteness, marked by contingency. We do not follow this path in order to promote an "abstract idealization", which simply philosophizes contemporary problems in ecology, but, rather perceive it as procuring "an acceptance of the world with all its failures and flaws – a way of seeing perfection in imperfection itself – a parallax view of something where flaw and virtue are one and the same" (Russell 2012, 260).

Therefore, in what follows, we will show how a temporal awareness was clearly reflected in interviews with Mountain Bike Trail Builders. While we supplement our past-present parallax by critically drawing upon Morton's (2018) "spectral futurality" and "hyperobject" (2013), as well as work on "deep time" (Wood, 2019) and "double historicity" (Nagel and Wood 2010), we endeavor to outline this approach in accordance with examples that demonstrate the trail builders' relations to dirt, Nature and time itself. Neither fixed nor static, these relations exposed the inherent incompleteness of the past in the present; an approach that, we believe, can be incorporated into an ecological awareness that remains open to the inconsistencies inherent to Nature, time and temporality (Black and Cherrington 2020). It is in examining this awareness that we now turn.

Approaching our temporal contingency: Historical "knowledge", temporal melancholy and the "spectral futurality" of dirt

In part, our focus on Mountain Bike Trail Builders was inspired by their desire to actively, but also sustainably, build with a natural environment. Yet, these relations to/with Nature were not simply practical, in the sense of merely producing a decent trail, enjoyed by mountain bikers, but also temporal. Here, the trail builders frequently referred to temporal distinctions throughout their reflections. We believe that these reflections posit a more general, but, perhaps, largely ignored, sense of temporality in which we are not only involved in creating and rejecting our interpretations of past events, but that such involvement can posit and even influence a more focused appreciation of the present. Note the following example from Paul:

> As a trail builder you HAVE to have that. You have to be able to look at the ground, know what's there naturally and know what you're able to do in shaping it. There's a difference between building at X (location) and looking at something that's going to last for 10 years and will take 40,000 people a year doing laps. … So yeah, you've got to look at the ground and look after the dirt. (Paul's emphasis)

While Paul's reflections offer a more focused consideration on the significance of "dirt", we are drawn to the temporality that underscores such assertions (Cherrington and Black 2020a). Notably, Paul's "shaping" of the landscape was one predicated on a temporal assessment ("last for 10 years") of both the ground and the environment.

Following this, knowing "where" to build trails served to reveal a form of knowledge that was intimately tied to the history of local areas. This knowledge would often hold a personal significance for the trail builders, with Barry referring to well-known locations that were previously tied to the area's coal mining history, alluded to via references to "the pit". The historical locality of these areas meant that despite "the pit" being closed for "'50 years", its history allowed Barry to see the location's unique "potential", stating that "*we* can see it". In other instances, Jason referred to a particular location where he "used to ride around … as a kid". Despite the fact that the area would, to an outsider, be perceived as a naturally "untainted" environment, Jason was clear to point out that the location in question was "outcasted in the '70s" with "the whole hill

[… being] manmade and that's why it's all clay, it's all the stuff that has come out of the pit". Equally, Harry referred to a "pond", which was located around a former mine, "where the miners used to wash". Together, these assessments reveal how the trail builders' actions were not simply concerned with "producing" a long-lasting trail but were also tied to an intimate knowledge of the area (it's mining past), which revealed a largely unknown, yet "man-made", suitability for constructing "natural" trails (Black and Cherrington 2020; Cherrington and Black 2020a).

What is more, this knowledge was supported with a consideration of the degeneration of the trail through "natural" wear and tear as well as unexpected occurrences from the environment (adverse weather conditions etc.). Here, Duncan's remarks on getting dirty, help to elaborate upon this significance:

> Getting dirty is an interesting one… I feel it is all about connection. I suppose it is all about responsibility, and by this I mean they feel that they have some sort of ownership of the space they are in; leading to an increased likelihood that they will look after it – not drop litter, engage with folk who are dropping litter/leaving dog poo bags around and so on. I mean, we all end up as dirt in the end, right?

We consider Duncan's remarks to openly acknowledge a temporal melancholy. Žižek's (2014) comments on melancholy stand in contrast to traditional (Freudian) conceptions, whereby, the failure to effectively mourn the lost object, permits a lasting attachment to the object. Instead, Žižek (2014) presents melancholy with a radical significance, affected when one *anticipates* the lost object.[5] In this sense, melancholy presumes and accepts the inconsistency of our "fantasmatic gaze". Indeed, accepting this inconsistency is, in part, exactly what our temporal ecological awareness seeks to afford. Accordingly, when Žižek (2014, 23) asserts that "the only way to possess an object that we never had, which was from the very outset lost, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost", we see this same "acceptance" reflected in Duncan's open acknowledgement that "we all end up as dirt". Importantly,

[5] Žižek (2014) relates these comments in his analysis of the character, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), in Lars von Trier's, *Melancholia*.

the temporal significance of Duncan's remarks – one which openly acknowledges his/our immortality – is redirected to ensuring that one "looks after" the environment they encompass. Consequently, for Duncan, dirt and the natural environment are transformed into something that is both banal, but also, strangely, life-affirming (Cherrington and Black 2020a). At its most basic, we can consider Duncan's remarks as presenting an intimate – and *temporal* – co-dependence between himself and the natural environment.

Elsewhere, it was evident that the temporal framing adopted by the trail builders was one which required an appreciation of the quality of dirt (Cherrington and Black 2020a). Here, an attitude of patience and care that accounted for the messy, contingent and temporally diverse aspects of dirt's biotic growth and development was presented:

> When it comes to dirt it poses so many problems. But on a good day when it's dry and you're digging in *Autumn*, kicking some fresh leaf mulch after the snow has compacted it through the *Winter*, it's fantastic! But you can't rush these things. You have to really wait to get the nice stuff (Andy, italics added)

> When you're looking at what sort of trail will work, a lot of it does come down to water in this country. We're not in Utah or somewhere, we do have to be realistic that we are in a wet country. If you go somewhere in the *Summer* when it's nice and sunny then it might not work all year-round. So, it's important to understand what the ground is capable of and to take the time to appreciate that (Paul, italics added)

In attuning themselves to the temporal (seasonal) durations of dirt, Paul and Andy are able to skillfully acknowledge the temporal possibilities of which they are a part. Rather than fixating entirely on the immediate goal of building a functional trail, their assessments included seasonal considerations, such as the climatic rhythms of the earth and various regional weather patterns, as well as recognition of the partiality of human involvement in the development of such rich, organic building matter (Black and Cherrington 2020; Cherrington and Black 2020a, 2020b). In doing so, both Andy and Paul demonstrated a temporal (and spatial) arrangement, attuned to a "realistic" appreciation of the contingency of dirt. In these instances, the present moment collapses and trail builders are left with an uncertain "spectral futurality", reflected in Morton's

(2018, 131) previously referred to concerns that, "how it looks, how it feels, where it is sitting, its mass, its shape – all that, which we could call appearance, is the past".

Importantly, such an "appearance" is neither fixed nor stable but conceived through a subject-object relation that is radically incomplete (Black and Cherrington 2020; Žižek 2006). In the above examples, this "incompleteness" is marked by the open acknowledgement that seasonal and temporal changes will, inevitably, affect (even destroy) the trail and, thus, the trail builders' own actions. This "temporal contingency" radically underscores the trail builders' ecological awareness, providing an open dialectic between the subject and their *object*ive environments.

Following a parallax view, we seek neither to subsume subject and object in this contention, but rather draw attention to the "cut" or "split" – the inherent inconsistency – which underscores them. This poses an important significant in our ecological awareness, whereby:

> radical emancipatory politics should aim neither at complete mastery over nature nor at humanity's humble acceptance of the predominance of Mother Earth. Rather, nature should be exposed in all its catastrophic contingency and indeterminacy, and human agency should assume the whole unpredictability of the consequences of its activity (Žižek 2017, 237).

We will return to the significance of these remarks in the conclusion; for now, we wish to highlight how it is in our inability to ascertain the effects of our interventions, that a level of temporal uncertainty in our ecological awareness can be averred. Indeed, while our ecological predicament cannot be "guarantee[d] … precisely because we cannot account in advance for the way our present acts will affect our future retrospective view" (Žižek 2006, 48), we remain open to the temporal acknowledgement that such uncertainty assumes. To help elaborate upon this temporal uncertainty, the following section will critically consider the effects of our temporal contingency in the "hyperobject" (Morton 2013).

History as hyperobject: Deep time and "double historicity"

The stratified layers through which the trail builders dig visibly mark the moment when historical processes or the passage of time are turned into solid deposits of soil and

debris. In alluding to a recent trail development project that was set within an ancient woodland, Connor and Scott give an indication of how this might help the participants to develop a broader appreciation of "deep time" (Wood 2019). Deep time is a way of thinking that expands human historicity to include the geological time scales of rocks, earth and other organic matter (Woods 2019). When time is experienced in this way, it can serve to disturb the participants' spatio-temporal awareness. This was shown in the way that Conor and Scott described the sense of angst derived from positioning themselves within this expanded time frame: they are "insignificant" in a way that "really messes with your head".

> It's quite interesting to see different geological times through your digging. I have to dig through everything such as glaciers formed the ice ages. It is quite nice to work with, but it depends what you've got in your area and how you use it differently. We find the odd fossil in there as well, which is always a nice little bonus. It's an important reminder of how insignificant you, and these trails we're making, really are. (Conor)

> Imagine how much time and energy would have been expended to make the dirt that you build with. I bet it took thousands of years to create that one patch of dirt that I use build that berm. It really messes with your head! (Scott)

This expanded time frame draws attention to Morton's (2013) notion of the hyperobject, whose characteristic feature is that they are everywhere, yet cannot be touched (Black and Cherrington 2021; Cherrington and Black 2020b; Salleh 2016). Echoing this, we extrapolate Morton's (2013) hyperobject characteristics in relation to how the trail builders see history as: *viscous*, via the ways that it (both figuratively and literally) "sticks" to them through the act of digging; *nonlocal*, to the extent that dirt extends across time and space; *phased*, due to the ways in which history can only be grasped in parts, not wholes; and, *inter-objective*, in that they can be made up of objects such as fossils and different types of dirt, but they are not reducible to these objects.

However, in view of these characteristics, we propose a consideration of the importance of temporality in the hyperobject, akin to what Nagel and Wood (2010) refer to as a "double historicity". Referring to their work, Perovic (2012, 314, italics added) asserts that "Understanding how artifacts substitute for one another requires us

to *think* 'doubly' about historical time, for artifacts can reference a distant past at the same time as they stand as a visual presence of it". Notably, in accordance with Morton's (2013) hyperobjects, Perovic's (2012) assessment brings to light the "understanding" and "thinking" that such a "double historicity" – a "distant past" *and* "a visual presence of it" – requires on behalf of the subject. It is on these grounds that we consider this "double historicity" as central to the temporal orientation that it provides for the subject, and, more importantly, how the "appearance" of "past objects" serves to locate the subject *in* the object (Žižek 2000).

Here, our relationship to hyperobjects and the "deep time" they temporally confer, provides an "admission of the subjectivity of the supposed object and a holistic acceptance of the multiple ontic possibilities for the object and its epistemic expression" (Russell 2012, 255). Indeed, the finding of an "odd fossil" and the "interesting" way that "different geological times" were engaged with by Conor, as well as the "time and energy" made in "building" the dirt that Scott works with, all revealed an "epistemic expression" grounded in the "ontic possibilities" afforded by their locations. Echoing Žižek (Taylor 2009), we do not suggest that one merely admires these objects and their "deep time" environments, but, rather, draw attention to the very way that they aver a temporal meaning far beyond the present moment – a history as hyperobject; or, a history that remains absent in its presence.

It is in this way that we supplement our understanding of the hyperobject with the temporality it affords. That is, where the trail builders' relation to the past – a past as hyperobject – revealed a contingency in their framing of and approach to Nature, it was only by constructing a consistent framework of meaning and knowledge that this awareness could be forged. If, according to Vighi (2014, 139), "A landscape, a face, a film are what they are for us (they make sense) because we have always-already determined their basic epistemological coordinates, embedding them into an at least minimally familiar symbolic framework"; then, rather than deriding such frameworks as universally insignificant, we draw attention to the temporal coordinates they can provide. Indeed, though experiencing the past as hyperobject means that "we can only experience somewhat constrained slices of [… it] at any one time" (i.e. the "odd fossil") (Morton 2013, 74), it is in realizing and appreciating such constrainment that the past can "open up" a field of possibility – one that can be approached via a past-present parallax.

Adopting a past-present parallax

Whilst cultivating an earthly connection through the skillful craft of trail building, many participants spoke of the disruptions caused when unearthing historical artifacts, often referred to by interviewees through the formal vernacular of "SSSIs" (Sites of Special Scientific Interest). These sites were supplemented with a consideration of the unique geological history of their location and the logistical challenges that these locations could pose:

> Because of the nature of X [location] there are loads of charcoal halves which we do our best to avoid. They used to burn a hell of a lot of timber to make charcoal, and when they'd finished you end up with these 3-foot-deep beds of black soot that is slowly decomposing. If you accidentally hit one of those it's best to try and find the edge of it and build the track around it because you are never going to build a track through it (Robert)

> So, X [location] is built with alluvium, which is sand washed with gravel. But that's a water-bound surface, so if you get the water content just right it's cracking, but when it gets to dry it just powders up and they've got quite big river cobbles in there that are huge that can come out. If it gets too wet, it gets sloppy. So, it's a combination of the water content and the amount of riders. So what they do now is because it's a historic heathland they get gritstone and mix it fifty-fifty with the local sand and gravel and that gives you a wearing surface that won't last forever, but it's better than having a ribbon of gritstone going through the place because it's all to do with whether it's a SSSI and all that. There are lots of planning issues that most builders are completely unaware of. Like X [location] is littered with WW1 trenches, so we have to be careful where we go. You have to be aware of the past. (John)

Notably, while Robert's awareness of a particular location's history (a location used for charcoal production), and John's reference to carefully being "aware of the past", is one that echoes the contingency in which the trail builder's relations to/with Nature are formed; equally, both assessments revealed a level "contingency" in how this past was engaged with (Auhors 2020). Echoing the previous section's use of the hyperobject,

which is visible, but not accessible, John's engagement with Nature, and his subsequent actions in the discussed location, were framed in accordance with a past that was present ("littered with WW1 trenches"), but, at the same time, either absent or unknown ("unaware of"; "careful where we go").

Indeed, as evident in both Robert and John's comments, their accounts of the past were always steered towards and, thus managed through, a detailed symbolic framework that revealed an assessment of the location, its history, its geological make-up and its natural significance (Vighi 2014). Robert noted:

> I suppose we're always looking not just for a line to ride through and what's going to be fun but also 'what's going to be interesting on the trail?' If I find an ancient old gnarly tree, then I will purposely take the track close by it because it's just something cool to see while you're going around a track. If we can go down an old bomb hole it may be an old mine shaft so we can't build through it but it's still an interesting piece of the history of the area, so we'll take the track around the lip of it and turn off. So, I'm always looking for more interesting areas to go through or trees that or of more interest that I know are going to grow over and create a nice dark area to give you a change of scenery.

Coalescing in an ecological awareness that remains temporally and ecologically defined, Robert's remarks reveal what we believe is a parallaxical appreciation of how the past ("an ancient old gnarly tree"; "an old bomb hole"; "an old mine shaft") is dialectically approached, mediated and arranged in the present ("something cool to see"; "always looking for more interesting areas"). Here, "The epistemic stance of adopting a structure of interpretation" – evident in the very ways in which the above examples *use* the past to interpret the history and enjoyment of each location – serves to "effec[t] an ontological categorization in the appearance of the objects of enquiry" (Russell 2012, 255). This "subjection of the object", which Russell (2012, 254) considers in the work of archaeology, helps to elaborate on the concern that "the way to be a consequent materialist is not to directly include subject into reality, as an object among objects, but to bring out the Real of the subject, the way the emergence of subjectivity functions as a cut in the Real" (Žižek 2016, 70). To this extent, it is the presence of the subject – of the "trail builder" – which avers an ontological gap in the

assumed purpose of an unearthed object/historical site, resulting in the various ways in which it is interpreted and framed in the present (Black, 2019a).

Such a form of hermeneutics – conceived in the above examples as a past-present parallax – helps to add further clarification to the concern "that [while] reality cannot be reproduced in history, … the concentrated act of reproducing some of reality's dynamics can" (Blackshaw 2017, 52). Moreover, it is these dynamics which are postulated through an inherent inconsistency – a parallax gap – in reality itself; a position that was articulated in the trail builder's concern that no amount of thinking, or repurposing, will ever help them to realise the essence of a "great trail" or the "art" it required. Instead, for Paul:

> ...my favourite trail to in the world is over in Slovenia in a place called Velika Planina, which roughly translates as 'big mountain' … The way up to the top has been trodden for hundreds and hundreds of years, so long that it's just part of the hillside … It's not built for bikes, it was built for those goat herders 400, 800 years ago – I don't know exactly, but it's a long time – and it's just part of that mountain and it uses the shape of the mountain because they were all walking up and down with their cheeses to get back down the hill to sell them to market or whatever they were carrying back up. It didn't need to go straight up, it needed to twist and turn so that they could walk up it, and that is just brilliant. I've worked on it in autumn when the leaves are there, I've worked on it in spring when the snow's gone and it's fresh, I've worked on it in the middle of summer. Even in the different seasons it changes but it's always part of that mountain.

Paul's comments reveal how his perception of history plays a distinctive role in the design and development of a trail. At the same time, he recognizes that, though this is an impartial history, he, nonetheless, serves to supplement such "impartiality" with a symbolic framework that temporally employs – and ontologically categorizes – his awareness of the location, its seasonal variations and his "love/enjoyment" for the location.

More importantly, in these remarks we conceive a tangible sense of tension between what is deemed to be real (i.e. the lives of the goat herders as they moved to and from the market, but also the role of the seasons and the mountain) and the manner

in which this is grasped through sensuous activity (i.e. how they think about and act upon this when building trails). These tensions are not perceived as weaknesses in their perception, or deficiencies in their craft, but are in fact the very means by which the trail builders comprehend the objects of their labour and bring them into being within a past-present parallax. There is a sense that their building sites are of special significance based on "what is there now, what used to be there and what happened in between" (Wallace 2004, 25). Within this fissuring of time and place, there emerges a certain freedom and authenticity in the "betweenness" it affords – a "gap" that brings to light what was past, but now present.

In an analogous way, we see this reflected in Braedder et al.'s (2017, 178) account of how "During the summer season and autumn vacations some modern Danish families choose to spend their holiday living as families in the past in the archaeological open-air museum *Sagnlandet Lejre* (Land of Legends)". They add:

> Life as an Iron Age family unfolds in a duality of set schedules and free play. The physical and material environment – houses, tools, clothes, crockery and cutlery and other objects – is based upon archaeological knowledge but historical knowledge about the social relations or cultural life among ordinary people in the Iron Age is limited. Hence the families enjoy extensive freedom to fill this gap. The lack of certainty about these social and cultural aspects stimulates reflection and discussions about the historical continuity or mutability of emotions and socio-cultural norms and rules. … Yet it is still crucial to the commitment of the families to relive the past in what they consider to be an authentic manner that the framework and rules of the game are set by a scientific institution. (Braedder et al. 2017, 180).

The "authentic manner" in which these holidays are framed bears a notable comparison to the ecological authenticity of the above examples; most notable in how such authenticity is temporally defined. In what follows, we will provide a final precis of the significance of a past-present parallax and its unique role in developing an ecological awareness for the future.

Final Thoughts: Building an ecological awareness through a past-present parallax – the benefit of an ecological melancholy

Over the course of this article we have endeavored to develop a form of ecological awareness that looks specifically towards the affordances that are provided by a past-present temporality. By considering "a new approach to how we deal with and use time as an *analytical asset* that can match how duration is lived and manipulated" (Gafijczuk 2017, 597), we have presented an ecological awareness that is open to and framed by a past-present parallax.

Set against our present ecological crisis, it is apparent that our dramatic ecological deviations reveal the inherent inconsistency that frames both ourselves and Nature. Such inconsistency emphatically dislodges any simple, easy to apply answers (Morton 2018). As a result, we offer a decidedly *partial* answer, made from a "parallax position". Indeed, according to Mangold (2014, 8), when "Arguing from a parallax position, [… one] should be in a position to ask the right questions; questions which are posed from the perspective of two incommensurable points of view". For us, this incommensurability is one conceived in our relation to a past that is forever (in)accessible to the present.

More importantly, we supplement this position by drawing attention to the various ways in which our interviewees temporally arranged their comments on and relations to/with Nature. We see these examples as offering a unique insight to our present ecological malaise – one that effectively echoes broader criticisms of the melancholic attitude of the Left in recent decades. In his account of Wendy Brown's influential essay, *Resisting Left Melancholy* (1999), Fisher (2014) draws upon Dean's (2012) Lacanian psychoanalysis to assert that:

> the shift that Brown describes – from a left that confidently assumed the future belonged to it, to a left that makes a virtue of its own incapacity to act – seems to exemplify the transition from desire (which in Lacanian terms is the desire to desire) to drive (an enjoyment through failure) (Fisher 2014, 24).

In contrast, Fisher (2014, 24) proposes that the kind of "melancholia" we require:

> consists not in giving up on desire but in refusing to yield. It consists, that is to say, in a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call "reality" – even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time…

Notably, this future-orientated perspective, drawn from the melancholy of the present, is one that can be re-approached through a past-present parallax that neither confines nor reduces our present ecological crisis to a dramatic sense of inevitable doom and ecological catastrophe. Instead, our adoption of the past-present parallax serves to reveal how, in clear distortion of linear temporality, there remains "a choice/act which retroactively opens up its own possibility" (Žižek 2006, 203, italics removed). Such "choices" and "acts" were routinely adopted in the trail builders' responses, from which their ecological awareness remained parallaxically located in the inconsistencies of a present that was framed, located and managed by the inconsistencies of the past.

These inconsistencies echo Fuggle's (2018) assessment of "historical time", where, while drawing upon the work of Dupuy (2004), she asserts:

> Instead of thinking time as linear progression in which action is endlessly deferred and disaster just a vague possibility in our collective consciousness or as a cycle from which we cannot break free, Dupuy suggests we envisage time in terms of a loop in which the present aligns itself with the aftermath of major catastrophe, the moment when disaster has already occurred. Hence, it becomes possible to excavate the ruins of the future and subsequently decide on the 'retrospective' action needed to circumvent a catastrophic event before it has occurred. According to Dupuy, it is only by fully recognizing future widespread disaster as fore-gone conclusion that we have any chance of acting effectively to prevent the event from ever actually occurring. (Fuggle 2018, 804).

For us, the task is simpler: *Our future ecological destruction is already here*. Accordingly, if we are to change the future (a future ecological catastrophe, for example), by retroactively changing, redefining and reinterpreting our past (Dupuy 2004; Fuggle 2018; Löwy 2005; Žižek 2006, 2014); then, it is in accordance with a past-present parallax, that the absences, inconsistencies and incompleteness of the *past* can help to re-orientate our *present* ecological awareness. In effect, it is through engaging with what is lost in the past that "we can, … be woken up to … the appearance of the loss as such" and to a revised acknowledgement of "the insecurity and incompleteness of the whole (of life)" (Zupančič 2017/18, 29). It is exactly this level of insecurity and incompleteness which we believe is reflected in the trail builders'

responses and in the unique way that they revealed an ecological awareness that was temporally open to the significance of a past-present parallax.

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