Deleuze/Guattari & Ecology
edited by Bernd Herzogenrath
290 pages

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There is a suggestively ecological quality to the writings of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Their concepts feel knotted and tangled, as if they are working their fingers through matted conceptual soils thick with philosophical roots and tubers, earthworms and fossils, that emerge in refrains and crescendos never reaching a unison chorus but, rather, bubbling up into temporary congealments, only to slide out into oozing bursts of liquid and foam, semen and spittle, organic pulsation and machinic propulsion, tremolo strings and cacophonous percussion. There are rhizomes threaded through their work, yes, but there are nomadic war machines too, allied against states and doctrines, but against nature as well, if nature be a domain set apart from society or, indeed, from the resonant machinery of matter. (Which, for Deleuze and Guattari, it isn’t.)

Earlier efforts to appropriate D&G for environmental theory—by phenomenologists like Edward Casey and Robert Mugerauer, anthropologists like Stephen Muecke, and ecophilosophers like Dolores LaChappelle—worked with individual conceptual threads, such as the rhizome or the nomadic spatialities of smoothness and striation, but a more complete accounting of D&G’s ‘ecologics’ has had wait for their works to be more fully translated and thoroughly digested. Such an ecologics
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has begun to be developed in the work of Mark Bonta and John Protevi, Manuel DeLanda, and others.

Over the last few years, three anthologies have appeared, one as a special issue of the on-line journal Rhizomes, and the other two collections both edited by German cultural theorist Bernd Herzogenrath, An (Un)Likely Alliance: Thinking Environment(s) with Deleuze/Guattari (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008) and the book being reviewed here. All three evince a similar multiplicity of orientations: some pieces labor to develop a Deleuzo-Guattarian ecology, with lesser or greater degrees of success, while others pick up a conceptual brick or two from De&G and send it on its own flight vector, for instance analyzing a cultural or political phenomenon in its terms, but without fully developing a contextual terrain for it. In each case also, the overall mix tends toward an uneven Babel of disparate voices than a convergent synthesis of approaches, though this may be a fact of life in Deleuzo-Guattarian studies. The strength of the three volumes, taken together, is that they place Deleuze/Guattari in communication with ecological theories of various kinds, and that they frequently perform this connective labor with the aid of conceptual tools already in motion, such as those provided by von Uexkull, Maturana and Varela, Bateson, Prigogine, Flusser, Luhmann, and others.

To the extent that a convergence appears on the horizon of Deleuze/Guattari and Ecology, it is around that ‘resonant machinery of matter’: the world, filtered through a Deleuzo-Guattarian sieve, is the lively and uncontrollable one of desiring-production, a world of becomings, connections, and organic-machinic-socio-psychic assemblages. Bernd Herzogenrath’s lucid introduction sets this theme up in terms of Guattari’s ‘generalized machinics’ and Deleuze’s ‘intelligent materialism,’ that is, the latter’s recognition of the autopoietic intelligence of matter. The next three chapters follow up with ambitious and challenging, if divergent, attempts to articulate such a machinic ecology.

Manuel DeLanda’s ‘Ecology and Realist Ontology’ is an odd selection to follow Herzogenrath’s introductory overview, as it immediately throws the reader into the full density of
mathematical, topological, and cybernetic concepts DeLanda has been developing for several years, albeit a little unanchored in a shared language. DeLanda makes a case for a materialist philosophy of ecology (as opposed to one ‘rooted in literary criticism, semiotics, or hermeneutics’), specifically a ‘philosophy of difference,’ and for a ‘realist ontology that does not depend on essences’ but instead grapples with the morphogenetic capacities of matter. Like a few of the other chapters here, however, DeLanda’s case remains very much his own, and it will not be clear to all readers where exactly it remains faithful to Deleuze and Guattari and where it veers away from them.

Ronald Bogue’s ‘A Thousand Ecologies’ would have been a better chapter to begin with, as it provides a useful overview of D/G’s main ecologically applicable concepts – the refrain, territorialization, machinic desiring-production, D/G’s ‘qualified’ and open holism, and their call, at the end of What is Philosophy?, to create ‘possibilities of life or modes of existence’ that would constitute a ‘new earth’ and a ‘people to come.’ Usefully, Bogue refers these back to Arne Naess’s definitions of ecology, ecophilosophy, and ecosophy, and concludes that D&G, while not ecologists, do promote a ‘view of nature as a complex of interactive organism-environment systems’; that they qualify as ecophilosophers only in a loose sense of the word; and that ‘they are ecosophers in that the ethics of their thought informs their views of the relationships of humans to the world,’ views which are complex with regard to technology and the valorization of wilderness and intrinsic value of organisms, but which are qualifiedly holistic, pluralistic, and anthropocentric (though I would question the latter, as it’s based on a single rather uncharacteristic definition of the term). In other words, they are ecosophists of a sort, though not the usual kind.

In the book’s longest chapter, ‘Structural couplings: Radical constructivism and a Deleuzian ecologies,’ Hanjo Berressem ambitiously attempts to push D&G further into the ‘radical constructivist’ systems-theoretical direction that implicitly underlies much of their work. The result, as Berressem lays
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it out, is an expansive conceptual alliance between Deleuze’s philosophy, Guattari’s ecopolitics, and the various systems theories of cognitive biologists Maturana and Varela, communication and social theorists Luhmann and Flusser, cyberneticists von Forster, von Glasersfeld, Bateson, and Wilden, and land artist Robert Smithson, among others. Berressem envisions the resulting assemblage as a ‘radical ecologics,’ a Haeckelian ‘systems theory of the living’ that is inclusive of the whole machinic world of social, economic, linguistic and biological ‘machines’ in addition to the virtual, the field of pure potentiality. He further characterizes it as a ‘radical haecology’ that, as a didactics, would aim to make ‘the operations of “structural couplings” conscious’; as a science, would ‘generate knowledge about structural couplings’ and develop ‘routines that allow for regulated responses to structural disequilibria’; as a practice, would implement ‘parameters within which the equilibrium between the autopoietic systems and their media can be kept, both locally and globally’; as an artform, would provide ‘blocks of sensation’; and as a philosophy, would create ‘concepts that radically link immaterial concepts and material movements’ (89). Despite its density, the chapter is a rich and rewarding theoretical treatment that emphasizes connections over tensions or potential incongruencies.

While less ambitious in their scope, the next handful of chapters (by Gary Genosko, Verena Andermatt Conley, Jonathan Maskit, and Dorothea Olkowski) explore a diversity of angles on theoretical themes. Genosko examines Guattari’s Three Ecologies in order to answer the question ‘why three?’ and answers it through a reduction to a single idea—subjectivity as a common principle, which he (rightly, I think) takes to be Guattari’s ‘most original contribution to the theorization of ecology’—that is expressed at three levels: the macro level of the biosphere, the intermediate level of social relations, and the micro or molecular level of human subjectivity. Guattari may indeed have had something like the macro-intermediate-micro in mind, but this does raise the objection that neither of his three ecologies need be purely macro or micro: environmental ecologies can be pretty fine-tuned and
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local, while subjective or mental ecologies can be global, and arguably are becoming ever more so. An alternative conceptualization of the three ecologies might have been to take the material and the social as complementary poles, in the sense that Whitehead perceived each act of experience to harbor its interior or ‘subjective’ pole and its exterior or ‘objective’ pole, and then to bring in the third element of ‘perceptual’ or ‘mental ecology’ as a kind of intermediate, ecosemiotic and intersubjective realm of material engagements and enactments from out of which the two other poles emerge. This kind of intermediary realm may be what Genosko has in mind in focusing on ‘subjectivity.’

Maskit, in ‘Subjectivity, Desire, and the Problem of Consumption,’ concurs with Genosko’s assessment of the importance of Guattari’s focus on subjectivity. If environmentalism can be defined as ‘there are too many people using up too much stuff too quickly for it to regenerate itself’ (129), and the best way to approach the problem is to focus on consumption (as opposed to population control or resource regeneration), and if the common strategies for doing this have been either ethical (personal responsibility, shame) or policy oriented (incentives and constraints), then Guattari’s approach has been distinctive in asking how we can restructure capitalist subjectivity. Maskit’s list of suggestions, unfortunately, is a little anticlimactic: ‘Don’t watch television. Question all assertions that a practice is impossible. Know the people who produce your food. Figure out how to get from point A to point B without driving or flying.’ (140). He notes, interestingly, that ‘some of these things look like ascetic practices’ (141), which perhaps is part of the problem: if capitalist subjectivity lures us with its promises of desires and pleasures available through the marketplace (138), how can such an ascetic counter-subjectivity attract the numbers it needs to make a significant environmental impact?

Most of the book’s remaining chapters provide case studies or readings of specific phenomena or artistic forms in light of Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts. John Protevi’s ‘Katrina’ is an exemplary study of Hurricane Katrina in terms underpinned
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by Deleuzian and Delandaesque complex-systems analysis (though the Deleuzo-Guattarian conceptual links are not explicitly articulated, which leaves the reader to judge these links for themselves).

Stephen Zepke’s ‘Eco-Aesthetics: Beyond Structure in the World of Robert Smithson, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’ traces parallel and roughly contemporaneous shifts or ‘breaks’ in Smithson’s artistic practice and Deleuze’s philosophy. Occurring roughly between 1967 and 1969, these shifts take both men from a ‘conceptual mapping of structures’ (which in Smithson was a concern with art institutions and conceptual interventions) to a more direct engagement with the ‘material machinery of production’, that is, the material and compositional forces of the Earth. The turning point for Smithson, according to Zepke, came in his encounter with Nature-as-entropy in Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey (1967), which was followed by a trip to the deserts of the southwest and an ostensible rediscovery of himself as a kind of ‘schizo-artist’ who composes matter, in Smithson’s words, ‘to give evidence of this experience...of the original unbounded state,’ a place where ‘words and rocks’ become ‘de-differentiated according to an entropic logic by which “mind and matter get endlessly confounded”’ (206). Deleuze, meanwhile, arrived at the same space, with the aid of Spinoza and Artaud, sometime between Difference and Repetition and his 1970s collaborations with Guattari. Zepke interprets both men’s shifts as breakthroughs marking an entry into the production and ‘emergence of Nature itself,’ by which art (and perhaps philosophy) ‘is transformed into eco-aesthetics, and the way in which eco-aesthetics can open for us a new future’ (213).

Bernd Herzogenrath traces a similar shift in musical composition from the musical representation of nature in eighteenth and nineteenth century classical music, as instanced in the work of American composer Charles Ives, to a ‘reproduction of the processes and dynamics of the weather as a system “on the edge of chaos”’ in the compositional practice of Thoreauvian composer-anarchist John Cage, and
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finally to an ‘ecology of music’ in the work of contemporary Alaska-based composer John Luther Adams. In Ives, both music and nature are metaphorical, with the ‘weather of music’ and nature itself representative of an Emersonian Over-soul, while in Cage music itself becomes ‘meteorological,’ with chance processes, including those representing the weather, dictating the performance of a musician. But Cage, for Herzogenrath, remained within a modernist frame of the artist making ‘clear-cut objects’ (228). Adams, on the other hand, comes closest to a pure ‘sonic geography’ in which music does not imitate nature, but rather ‘taps into nature’s dynamic processes *themselves* for the generation of sound and light’ (226). Like Zepke, Herzogenrath is making a case for a particular kind of compositional practice in which the machinery of nature and the machinery of music become one; but the objection can still be raised that each of these compositional practices involves some translation (in Latourian terms) from one domain to another, so that there isn’t a collapse of what were two domains into one, but the creation of something new through a productive process which, in all three cases, remains a form of compositional practice.

Mark Halsey’s ‘Deleuze and *Deliverance*: Body, Wildness, Ethics,’ reads John Boorman’s 1972 film *Deliverance* as a Deleuzo-Guattarian ‘descent,’ as Halsey puts it, of ‘rationality (the Cartesian subject), law (right), and the trappings and habits spawned by urbanity (sedentary life, the rise of the Urstaat),’ followed by a ‘return’ of ‘bodies (molecular), wildness, and the singular experience of an ethics.’ Halsey interprets the decision of Lewis and Ed—two of the Atlanta businessmen on a canoeing trip whose brutal wilderness encounter with two Appalachian mountain men results in the murder of one of the latter—to bury the murdered man’s body, rather than reporting it to the police, as a Nietzschian-Deleuzian ‘ethical act.’ This sets Lewis up as a prophet of Deleuzo-Guattarian ecological reckoning: ‘sooner, rather than later,’ Halsey writes, ‘the relative comfort’ of our ‘vessels (cars, jets, offices, mansions, yachts, time-share apartments) will encounter the bank of the river and the illusion of interiority will be forced center stage’
and then ‘everyone,’ ecological deniers and managers, ‘will be forced to play the game.’ In opting for this reading, however, Halsey ignores the critiques that have been made of Lewis’s, and author James Dickey’s, hypermasculinist survivalism as a libertarian denial of sociality and a proto-fascist critique of civilization’s ‘feminization’ of men, and of its depiction of ‘hillbillies’ as the very kind of urban stereotype that lays bare the hollowness at the core of the film’s romanticization of the wild. Halsey’s reading thus exemplifies one strain of Deleuzo-Guattarian critique, which places D&G’s ideas at the service of a kind of nature-culture dualism that the two theorists, at times at least, strove hard to overcome.

Chapters by Conley, Olkowski, Luciana Parisi, Yves Abrious, and Matthew Fuller, on topics ranging from bioinformatics and symbiosensation (Parisi) to art made ‘for animals,’ or at least intended to involve humans in interaction with non-human animals (Fuller), round out the anthology. Abrioux’s is a particularly engaging meditation on landscape, gardening, and land art (a topic that recurs in a few of the other chapters as well), read via D&G’s ‘eleventh plateau,’ ‘Of the refrain.’

As a whole, the collection is marked both by a welcome diversity of writing and expressive styles and by a tension between the more cohesive theoretical pieces, such as DeLanda’s and Berressem’s, which work toward establishing a complex and layered D&G-inspired theoretical framework, and the applications of Deleuzo-Guattarian themes to single instances or specific types of art, science, or politics. Along with the other two anthologies of Deleuzo-Guattarian ecological philosophy, this one can be considered as representative of an initial phase whereby Deleuzo-Guattarian ecological work remains exploratory and marked neither by a clear convergence nor a divergence into distinct ‘camps’ or ‘schools.’ Some of the authors, of course, are hard at work on their own synthetic eco/geophilosophical programs, which shows through in their chapters here. As a set of working reports on the possible directions of a Deleuzo-Guattarian ecologics, then, this anthology is a welcome addition to the literature.