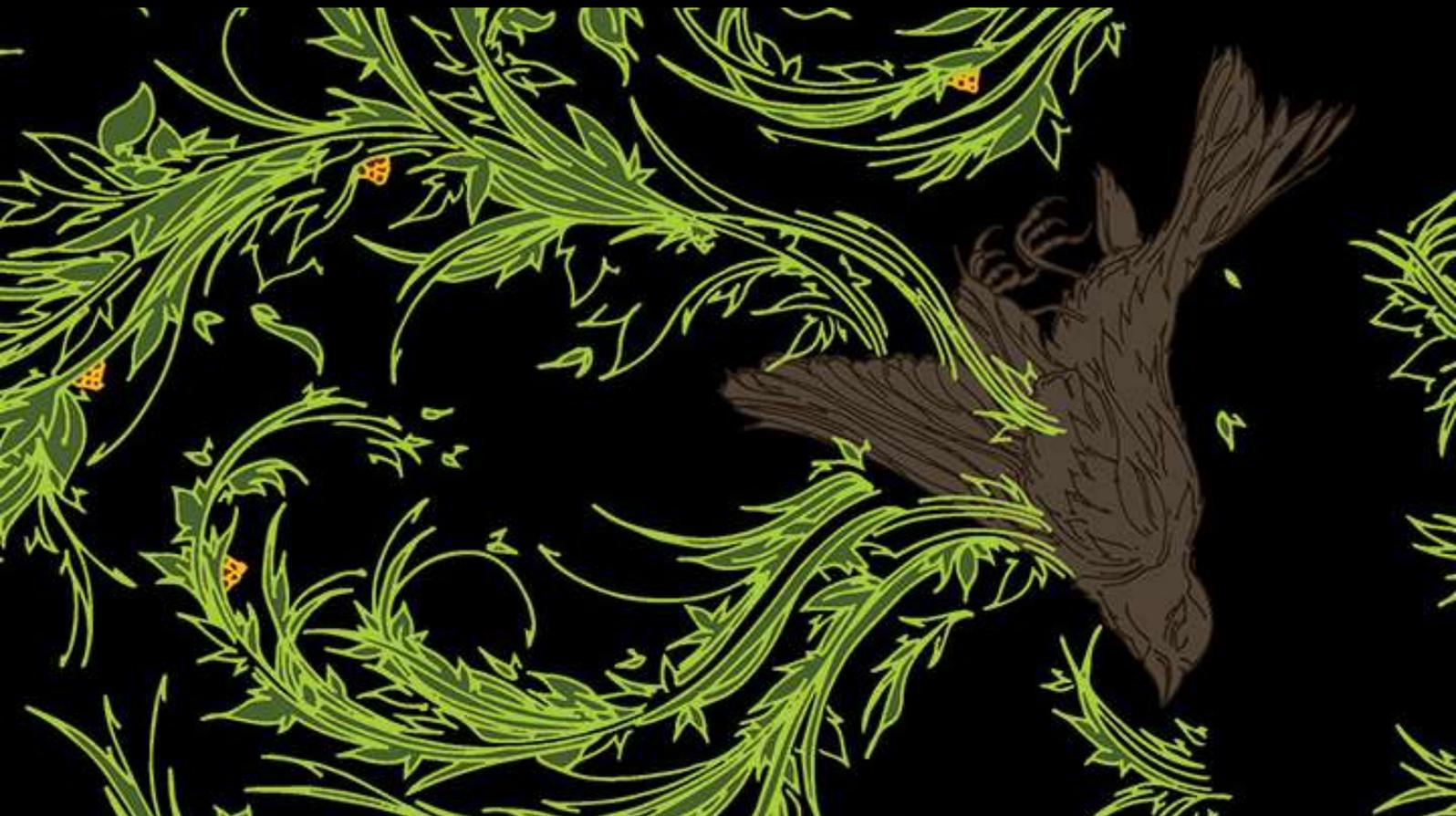




Product Design & Dark Ecology

What do Plastics, Dark Ecology and Agrilogistics mean for Product Design and Visual Culture in the 21st Century?



Product Design & Dark Ecology

An Essay by Nikki Vieler

What do Plastics, Dark ecology and Agrilogistics mean for Product Design and Visual Culture in the 21st century? A short essay concerning the relations of Product Design, Visual Culture, Plastics, Dark Ecology and Agrilogistics

Visual culture is everywhere⁽¹⁾. For Product Designers who participate in visual culture, this implies that planet earth is a space in which Visual Culture takes place. It would thus be important for Product Designers to question their relationships with the Planet's ecology.

The Anthropocene, the proposed geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on the earth's geology and ecosystems⁽²⁾, is the term with which scholars and thinkers are currently using to define the evolution of Earth's Ecology. This word has already been used by scholars in the fields of geology, literature, philosophy and the arts and by scientists, politicians, philosophers and many more contemporary thinkers⁽³⁾. One scholar in particular, Timothy Morton, has caught my gaze. I believe that his writing should have an influence upon how Product Designers engage within Visual Culture.

Morton has coined new terms with which we can understand and cope with the Anthropocene. He has written extensively about the Anthropocene and the philosophies concerned with it. Two of his books in particular take this topic as their main theme, *Ecology without Nature & Dark Ecology*^(4,5). These books assist our understanding of the Anthropocene, which is important, as we need to try and understand it. I shall highlight what Dark Ecology, Agrilogistics, Plastic and a particular insight into what Nature mean for Visual Culture & Product Design.

Dark Ecology and Agrilogistics are two terms Morton uses to explain the situation we are in (Dark Ecology) and the program that caused it (Agrilogistics/Agricultural Logistics)⁽⁴⁾. Morton is saying that we need to rethink our understanding of the world and ecology in order to deal with the Anthropocene. From his perspective, the Anthropocene is the result of a 12,000 year old project called Agrilogistics. It is a program we are all deeply involved in. Morton states that it is virtually impossible to break out of this program, as we need to eat (the primary drive of Agrilogistics) to survive⁽⁴⁾. He therefore proposes that we come up with a new type of thinking to deal with the Anthropocene.

Nature is, according to Morton, an old concept that predominantly is used to define some old romanticised view of our ecology⁽⁶⁾:

'There are objects: cinnamon, microwaves, interstellar particles and scarecrows. There is nothing underneath objects. Or, better, there is not even nothing underneath them. There is no such thing as space independent of objects (happily contemporary physics agrees). What is called Universe is a large object that contains objects such as black holes and racing pigeons. Likewise there is no such thing as an environment: wherever we look for it, we find all kinds of objects—biomes, ecosystems, hedges, gutters and human flesh. In a similar sense, there is no such thing as Nature. I've seen penguins, plutonium, pollution and pollen. But I've never seen Nature (I capitalize the word to reinforce a sense of its deceptive artificiality).'

Nature is not us, the human being, but that "big thing" containing trees, bees, bears and hares. It is merely an abstraction. Furthermore what he also wishes to point out, that

nothing really is “natural” anymore. The plastic in the oceans is part of our “Nature” now, therefore we must start seeing it as “Nature”.

Sonic Acts is a collective of artists who initiated the Dark Ecology project in 2014⁽⁷⁾. The group went to Nickel (a town in Russia) to create artworks that explored the concept of Dark Ecology in a real life situation. Nickel is a town that typifies the qualities of the Dark Ecology that Morton writes about, as it is a quite desolate town with a destroyed local ecology. This was noted by Arie Altena⁽⁷⁾. Together with the Sonic Acts he decided to go there to explore it and see how this experience could be translated into artworks that could help us deal with the Dark Ecology of the Anthropocene. Altena and Sonic Acts are a group that seek engagement with the Dark Ecology, not by solving it, but by making people rethink the way they relate to their ecology⁽⁷⁾. According to Altena, Product Designers should look not to solve the problem of Dark Ecology, but to look to communicate this term through designed media⁽⁸⁾.

Heather Davis is a writer editor and researcher who has written extensively and lectured about plastics⁽⁹⁾. Heather considers plastic to be a part of our ecology, as it is so commonly found in our ecology that one could now call it natural. She and Timothy Morton tell us to neglect the binary thinking of “Nature”, within the discourse concerning ecology and plastics, by approaching plastic through a Queer⁽¹⁰⁾ understanding of the material^(7,11,12).

What is important to note is that many synthetic plastics are oil based derivatives⁽¹³⁾. Considering the fact that crude oil is usually black, Product Designers can also engage with plastic to try to rethink the relationship between Dark Ecology & Product Design.

In the end I propose that Product Designers use craft to create products that help us understand the terms Dark Ecology & Agrilogistics, as craft has an intimate understanding of plastic through touching and seeing (aesthetic & kin-aesthetic experience). I believe that by crafting products Product Designers can engage, within the realm of Visual Culture, with Dark Ecology, Agrilogistics and Plastics.

Bibliography & Notes:

- 1) Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Visual Culture Reader*. 3rd edition. Oxon: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- 2) Multiple. "Anthropocene" Wikipedia, Wikipedia, N.d., Web. 07-02-2017
- 3) Manse, Sander. "The Thin Dictionary of Design." *Dutch Design Jaarboek 2015*, edited by Timo de Rijk, NAI010 publishers, 2015, 22-29.
- 4) Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Print. The Wellek Library Lectures.
- 5) Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.
- 6) Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2013. Print. The Posthumanities series.
- 7) *Living Earth, Field Notes from the Dark Ecology Project 2014-2016*. Amsterdam: Sonic Acts Press, 2016. Print.
- 8) I had a short discussion with Arie Altena during the Agents in the Anthropocene symposium organised by the Piet Zwart institute and he told me that Product Designers traditionally try to solve problems by designing products. He agreed with me that if Product Designers saw that our problem is our attitude to our ecology and tried to solve that by designing products that engaged in that manner, then that would be a way for Product Designers to design products.
- 9) Davis, Heather and Etienne Turpin. *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. London: Open Humanities Press, 2015. Print.
- 10) Oxford English Dictionary, "queer", n. i.a., i.b., 2.a., <http://www.oed.com> (accessed February 6, 2017)
- 11) Morton, Timothy. "'Queer Ecology'". PMLA, Editor Unknown, The Modern Language Association of America, 2010, 272-282.
- 12) Heather Davis "Heather Davis the Queer Futurity of Plastic" *Vimeo*, 28-02-2009, <https://vimeo.com/158044006>
- 13) Multiple. "Plastic" Wikipedia, Wikipedia, N.d., Web. 07-02-2017