

Culture



Alexander WILSON, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991; 335 pages. \$24.95 (paper)

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macy of other ways of life. The questions and criticisms he raises certainly need to be aired. I just wish there were more answers. In the debate on the future of museums, we run the real risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water. It seems clear, certainly in North America and Australia at least, that while being sharply critical of museums past and present, indigenous peoples are clamouring to gain control of collections and develop exhibitions and other similar programs themselves. In short, they want museums of their own. The implications of this are largely unexplored, both in this book and in the museum profession in general. Whether museums have any future at all may in part be determined by how we handle the necessary shifts in perspective and the blurring of the categories of 'Us' and 'Them' which this requires.

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Frederic Jameson, on the dust jacket, calls this "a beautiful book about ugliness." It is an accurate phrase to describe this compellingly written and aptly illustrated series of essays on tourism and recreation, national parks and zoos, world's fairs and theme parks, suburban landscapes and gardens, nature films and television programming, and the changing discourses of environmental education and advertising. The threads that knit together the author's reflections on these apparently disparate topics, several of which have developed out of earlier articles in journals like *Massachusetts Review* and *Border/Lines*, seek to make conceptual connections between postwar transformations in the North American landscape, changes which have made many kinds of ugliness now so familiar as to seem unremarkable, and successive mutations in our dominant ways of thinking and talking about nature. In Wilson's view, the environmental crisis is also a crisis of culture which reveals itself in our cottage country and our atrium malls as well as in the languages we have developed for "recreation resource management" and tourist promotion. Indeed for Wilson, "The war at Oka was in part a war over

the meaning of the earth. The earth as home or habitat, as resource, as refuge and inspiration . . . as laboratory, as playground" (p. 12).

Two of the most novel and interesting essays explore the ripple effects of socioeconomic developments which have meant that most of us now encounter nature primarily in our leisure. The consumer affluence and the new mobility that were part and parcel of the postwar boom produced, among other things, apparently insatiable demands for new kinds of leisure spaces, as well as for greater accessibility (in every sense) to established forms of recreation. The outcome has been the creation of many new public parks (national and, especially, provincial and state parks) and the transformation of many more rural regions — in the Maritime provinces, in the Ottawa Valley and Collingwood regions of Ontario, in the Okanagan — into holiday home economies. Ski hills and golf courses have burgeoned, both as leisure industries in their own right and as the magnets for up-market property developments. Farms have developed new sources of income as dude ranches or bed-and-breakfast operations, while resource towns like Telluride and Kimberley have sought to reposition themselves as recreational destinations. All of these, for Wilson, are instances of the multiple ways in which rural spaces have become appended to urban culture and integrated into a post-modern service economy. However it is not only the economic transformations that are significant here, or even the environmental effects of shifts from resource extractive industries into tourism. It is equally important, Wilson insists, that we understand the cultural effects of these and other developments — most ubiquitously of all, perhaps, pleasure driving and 'sightseeing' — that collectively construct nature for us as entertainment and as scenery.

An endemic tension between the projects of education and entertainment is brought into sharper relief in subsequent essays on nature movies and television, and theme parks and world's fairs. The first of these offers an interesting reprise of the ideologies and technical virtuosity that informed early Disney movies as well as the Cousteau films and other National Geographic and Time/Life productions. All these films pretended to realism; but they presented reality in attractive packages featuring majestic predators and cuddly fawns. They also relied heavily on action narratives and anthropomorphism, to 'bring nature to life'. How do you film

the environment of a fish? If you're Disney . . . you film some fish chasing each other and have the voiceover comment: "Here drama is everywhere. These waters have their full share of life's problems and conflicts". (p. 125)

Recent years have of course seen much more sophisticated and critical science telejournalism. The author praises the CBC and David Suzuki's "The Nature of Things" and "A Planet for the Taking" for their success in making complex ecological relationships accessible and their willingness to connect ecological problems to North American consumption levels. He also lauds the 1992 independent co-production "Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern world" for its treatments of North-South issues, indigenous cultures, and the debates about 'cultural survival'.

Meanwhile, though, the familiar Disney narratives of romanticized nature, bad anthropology, and adventure continue to be box office magic. Disneyland's Jungle Cruise "compacts into ten minutes the highlights, mystique, fun and excitement of an adventure that could only be duplicated through weeks on safari. Best of all, it has none of the mosquitoes, monsoons or other misadventures of the 'not always so great' outdoors" (cited on p. 161). Ideologically similar discourses and representations — of nature as adventure, but celebrating Western ingenuity at 'improving' on it, indeed celebrating the excitement and beneficence of technology — recur throughout Disney theme parks. Yet they are not confined to there; they can be found in many popular films and games, and even in World's Fairs. Indeed among the most provocative sections of this book, for some Canadians, will be its readings of the two Canadian Expositions, in Montreal and Vancouver. The author suggests that today we have all heard too much about pollution and famine for Expo 67's uncritical optimism about new kinds of consumption and universal freedom through technology to have succeeded. Yet though this can be read as a testament to the spread if not the depth of environmental awareness, he also suggests that Expo 86 succeeded, without too much irony, in reworking many of the same themes as a celebration of 'globalization'. The appropriate political questions, both global and local, were either not asked or were largely obscured in the festive atmosphere.

Other essays offer thought provoking discussions of gardens and zoos as cultural artifacts, of the promotional discourses of the energy industries, of

the emergence of cultural as well as natural history into parks policy debates, and of tensions between the interests of indigenous peoples and the agendas of parks and environmental lobbyists. All these essays come with comprehensive subject bibliographies even though frequently, the observations and proposals challenge received wisdom. However the concern that runs through the book is to get us to think freshly about the most familiar ways in which we encounter 'nature' (both directly and via the media) in a culture that is now largely urbanized, even in its rural regions. Wilson's contention is that despite apparently increased levels of environmental awareness, our environmental politics remains naive and fragmented because few of us have much direct understanding of the relationships between our own practices — domestic and recreational practices, as well as economic practices — and the biotic environments that are our home, both locally and globally. He argues in favour of community based approaches to environmental education and land management and offers some encouraging examples. More provocatively, he argues that an environmental politics that focusses on exotic species and 'wilderness' preservation, rather than on nurturing the more familiar landscapes that most of us live in the midst of, is always likely to be limited, both in its environmental effects and its political reach. Especially he argues that environmentalist discourse that says 'Nature good, Humans bad' is destined for permanent and well deserved marginality. Deep ecologists will clearly take issue.

Regardless of disagreements, this is a book that makes us think. It takes debates familiar in the environmental literature into new territories by making novel and illuminating connections between environmental issues and popular culture. It invites us to recognize that our ways of thinking about and looking at the land (and animals) are social and historical constructs that are themselves part of the environmental crisis. They are therefore proper objects for careful cultural analysis and Wilson's book will be a provocative catalyst to this important task. It should be read by anyone interested in North American popular culture as well as the fate of our common environment.