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# *Ecocriticism*

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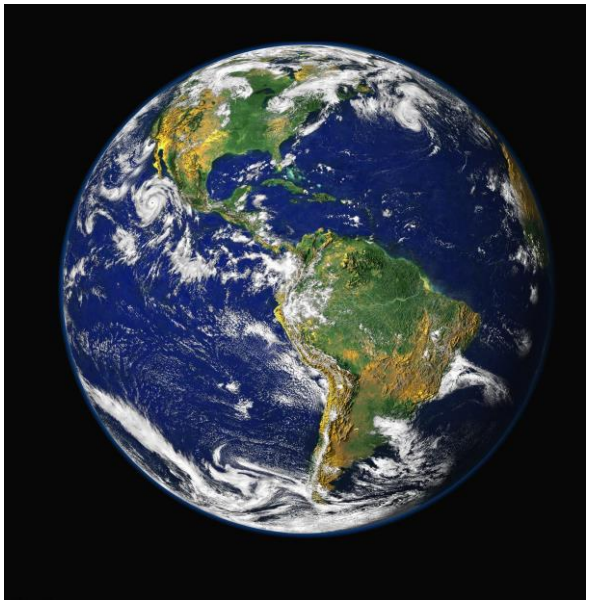

Fig. 1. NASA Blue Marble, 2000. NASA/ GSFC/ NOAA/ USGS

Ecocriticism, let's admit, is not a word that sings. It is a bristly mouthful, a dozen letters that take too long to say. Nor is it a word that yields its meaning easily. When my institution mounted an exhibition using ecocriticism to approach American art (*Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*, cocurated with Alan C. Braddock), we conducted an advance survey to gauge perceptions of the term—and a significant sample understood it to mean the practice of criticizing the environment. In fact, there is a kind of truth in both the unmelodious sound of the word and its contrary associations. It is a discordant word for a discordant time and situation. No wonder some might take "ecocriticism" at face value, considering the relentless onslaught of dire environmental news. We have lost the smooth functioning, as Timothy Morton calls it, of global ecological systems, humming along silently in the background throughout human history and presumed impervious to change. The systems have broken down—and we, as the agents of that change, are left to struggle to make sense of the crisis and offer some redress. This is where ecocriticism, whatever its phonetic and connotative challenges, becomes a necessary term, and practice. Indeed, it always has been, considering the vast compass of life on earth, but it is only now, at a time of existential duress, that we are coming to recognize it.

How, then, to define ecocriticism? At the outset of a conference held in conjunction with *Nature's Nation* to capture some of the wider temporal, geographical, and methodological range of the practice in visual culture (*Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*, to be published in 2020), I offered what seems, in retrospect, a rather inadequate definition: ecocriticism is cultural analysis that, against the usual anthropocentric mode of the humanities, attends more broadly to environmental history and conditions and to considerations of ecology—the study of living beings in relation to their surroundings. It also engages how humans have differently construed and been inflected by these things across time and cultures. This may seem a lot—another mouthful—

but what was missing, as the succeeding papers made clear, was acknowledgment of the centrality of social politics, particularly environmental justice, to the practice, as well as an admission of ecocriticism's inherent complexity and contingency—the way it recapitulates its essential subject, ecology, in the radical interconnectedness of its operations and concerns.

A more satisfying definition therefore entails important ethical and often activist dimensions relating to both human and other-than-human life. We all know the world is hurtling toward heat and hell, and we know that the nation-state of our common interest has had more to do with it than any other. Four collectively devastating books chart this path: Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014) lays out the unprecedented scope of the changes; Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: A Recent History* (2019) articulates how much we—US Americans—might have done to forestall them; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) explores environmental justice within a necessary transnational frame; and David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (2019) offers a terrifying glimpse of futures to come. Only Nixon's book is ecocritical per se, yet together these texts limn the horizon that makes ecocriticism so relevant. From our own disciplinary perch, approaching art ecocritically affords distinctive insight into current and previous worldviews, allowing us to contextualize and contend with the troubled epistemologies and ideologies that informed our path to the present, while encouraging more enlightened—just, ecumenical, and sustainable—ways forward. But hurry. Even the redoubtable Sir David Attenborough, ninety-three and until now no outspoken radical, ends the first episode of *Our Planet* (2019), the first environmentally woke nature series, with the astonishing statement, "What we do in the next twenty years will determine the future for all life on earth." However dissonant the word, ecocriticism in all its complex, interrelated dimensions, seems undeniably *critical* to our future.[1]

The variety of contributions that follow, by art practitioners and scholars, Americanist and otherwise, consider a range of ecocritical approaches and issues. What unifies them is a shared commitment to approaching environmental criticism in ethical terms—to exploring not just how an ecological perspective might help us newly understand visual culture, and culture itself, but why it matters in moral, and increasingly practical, ways that both engage and extend beyond the cultural, temporal, and species-specific focus of art's makers and subjects.

## Notes

[1] For the latest in a series of definitive apocalyptic reports, see, on biodiversity, https://www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment and https://www.ipbes.net/news/ipbes-global-assessment-summary-policymakers-pdf; and on climate, https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15.