

relative to waking experience which gaming ‘gets rid of’. Several pages later Bown responds to this question by stating that videogames are the experience of someone else’s dream *as one’s own*. Put simply, the video game has the capacity to instill the drives of another, disguised as our own wishes. While the same could be said for dreaming, gaming uniquely makes us feel in control of our environment and is therefore particularly effective not only in instilling political viewpoints but in preempting them. As such the ‘disturbing stimuli’ replaced by the hallucination instilled by gaming is none other than our resistance to a given ideological program, as we make it our own.

As this point – in ‘Level 2’, so halfway through the book’s theoretical gameplay – we are left at an impasse familiar to media theory: namely, we can identify what is happening but are without an adequate course of action to do anything about it. We know the media is run by elite forces in order to influence us, but, if we are being influenced, is it really likely that we will succeed in developing some incisive response? Yet, in this case, due to the particular configuration of gaming and psychology, Bown doesn’t really need to deliver a knockout blow, for if gaming is a dreamworld and the gamer is a voyager,

the analyst need only provide the gamer with the skills to recognise the dream for what it is. As Bown points out in Level 3, the awareness of the existence of a mechanism for constructing gamers’ desires may be enough to lift the veil on what he terms ‘the desire revolution’. In psychology, naming a mental illness goes part way to solving it. This would appear to be the strategy which *The Playstation Dreamworld* favours.

Later on in Level 3, Bown refers to the famous choice presented to Neo in *The Matrix* between a red and a blue pill. The former reveals ‘the painful truth of reality’, while the latter will leave him ‘within the blissful ignorance of illusion’. Bown goes on to recall Slavoj Žižek’s proposed third choice: a pill that would enable – to quote the Slovenian philosopher – a perception of ‘the reality in illusion itself’. It is this eyes-wide-open approach that Bown recommends in analysis of the problems confronting the gamer, and wider society today. It appears less as an attempt to convince the reader of gaming’s revolutionary potential than an argument for the consideration of the gaming subject as both object of reflection and serious political player.

Mike Watson

## Companion for a damaged world

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, eds, *Veer Ecology: Companion for Environmental Thinking* (Minneapolis; London: University Of Minnesota Press, 2017). 536pp., £83.72 hb., £20.93 pb., 978 1 5179 0076 2 hb., 978 1 51790 077 9 pb.

The resource depletion, environmental degradation and global climate change that characterise our present time warrant an urgent questioning of the ways that we frame our interactions with the world. Such evidence of ecological damage demands of us the development of positive alternatives regarding how we engage with our environment. This can best be undertaken with transdisciplinary thinking that momentarily slows down and resists temptations to hastily instrumentalise knowledge. The strength of *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking* is its proposition that, when we consider verbs in association with the environment, we should extend our thinking beyond describing the work that we can do to help the environment with words like *reduce*, *recycle*, *conserve* and *protect*. Instead, we might shift the

focus to ourselves in an attempt to understand how our self-conceptualisation informs our environmental engagement.

To this end, the contributors to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert’s collection consider words like *environ*, *curl*, *obsolesce* and *power down*, which they commonly relate to the verb chosen as the overarching theme of the book: *veer*. This task has a preventative aspect to it, because it seeks to harness a potential to restrict causing further environmental damage by improving our relations with the world. At the same time, it can also help us learn to flourish in the world that we have inherited. Prompted by Donna Haraway’s conception of companionship, whose etymological excavation of the word conjures up an image of breaking bread at a table, together



the authors encourage readers to embrace theoretical messiness in order to gain perspective, by slowing down, contemplating and playing. Moments of obscurity and lack of perspective occasionally mark the book, whose promise is significantly greater than its provision, yet the companion is nonetheless noteworthy for the type of thinking and ways of being that it instigates.

The central verb chosen to bind the work together, *veer*, is drawn from Nicholas Royle's book, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (2011), and denotes a movement of transportation towards the unexpected. As the editors explain, to veer 'is to gather (*anthologise*) unlikely but passionate companions, and in that sudden community to hope ... [T]o veer is to enlarge, to break closed circles into spirals, to collect for a while, to dwell in revolution'. The book is consequently presented as an anthology of reflections on verbs that are intended to awaken our imaginations and cultivate a way of thinking that encourages us to 'contemplate more in order to act better'. The editors describe the multifarious possibilities brought about

when we 'turn back to forge ahead'; something which is often done, throughout the book, against a literary backdrop. Vin Nardizzi's 'Environ', for example, turns back to reveal the violent history of the word *environment*, which he shows is represented as a dangerous force, used to denote matters of security and militarism, or the bestowal of a curse, in the writings of Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke. This leads him to argue that, in the sixteenth century, acts of environing can persist as hazardous enterprises, as they do today, though he neglects to explicate the full contemporary resonance of this. In her essay 'Curl', Lara Farina similarly embodies an eco-critical response to the task, looking to representations of the vegetal world in the works of Ursula Le Guin in a way that would de-centre the human.

Taken together, the essays encourage new ways of thinking that can spur action where it is needed and hesitancy where action has hitherto taken precedence, so exacerbating damage. Margaret Ronda's poignant

essay 'Obsolesce' encourages a historically and culturally situated examination of an increasingly significant ecological problem contributing to the Anthropocene. Her piece examining e-waste offers an example of the kind of connective and nuanced analysis that is required today and traces the problematic circulation of discarded laptops, tablets and cell phones that reverse the global itinerary of commodity production, returning to countries like China, India, Nigeria and Ghana where materials were originally sourced, causing havoc. Highlighting consequences of lack of care and infrastructure concerning e-waste, she sheds light on the economies of informal workers, including children, created in cities like Accra and Lagos, where people scavenge in dumps for material to sell to local scrap markets.

In doing so, Ronda also sheds light on a conspiracy of blindness generated by market stratagems that serve to maintain these socioecological activities, drawing connections between the problems of e-waste and the post-war economic growth that became an increasingly central organising principle of commodity production in the global economy by the late twentieth century. She examines how consumers were deterred from reusing goods that were 'legally dead' as a consequence of the thought of the economist Bernard London. According to Ronda, in 1932, London argued for the addition of expiration dates to products, initiating a mainstream culture of disposability that led to the manufacturing of products intended for limited use only, and designed to break down or lose functionality. By the early 1950s, she notes, the industrial designer Brooks Stevens could claim that our whole economy is built on planned obsolescence, and that 'we make good products, we induce people to buy them, and then next year we deliberately introduce something that will make those products old fashioned, out of date, obsolete.' Stevens' claim is instantly recognisable today with regard to electronic goods, as Ronda succeeds in showing.

The strength of Ronda's essay is not to be found in a suggestion that we might ourselves 'obsolesce', which is a direction that other authors follow but which appears to be resisted here. Instead it is the importance of the point illustrated throughout, evoked through her meditation on obsolescence, that there remain insufficient ecologically-sound means of disposal for products that are rendered obsolete in a culturally, economic and soci-

ologically embedded process, and there remains a lack of thought directed to addressing this issue.

Profitably read in conjunction with this is Jesse Oak Taylor's 'Globalise', which contains a comprehensive overview of three signal years, 1610, 1784 and 1945, each proposed as a candidate for the *golden spike* defining the origin of the Anthropocene. In Taylor's essay, he suggests that globalising our thinking, acting and seeing enables us to reimagine our modes of dwelling, and both he and Ronda demonstrate the requirement for a re-contextualisation of our position within an increasingly complex web of life that moves beyond the one-dimensional thinking that contributed to our current state of damage.

Joseph Campano's piece 'Power Down' examines the blackout that struck America's East Coast including New York City in 1965, and which recurred in New York in 1977, reflecting on the forms of community and mutual care that arise when energy is in abeyance. Campano's essay reads as a meditation on Adorno's concern about our lack of free time and an attempt to transform the sense of exhaustion that may derive from this into something positive. Campano describes his chosen phrase as a suggestion that, in addition to powering down our electronic devices, we might comparably monitor our affective states, and respond to sociological and ecological crises with an *aesthetics of exhaustion* in the place of fear, panic, anger or false empowerment.

As with other essays in the volume, the attempt to compact what needs to be a complex resolution to a complex crisis into the form of a soundbite can render the text obscure and diminishes some of the more interesting points raised, such as the relationship between vulnerability and collective precarity. Brian Thill's 'Shade', where he contends that we should fracture the spectacle's prominent connection with ecological thought, seems wrong-footed in this respect, and although one can recognise that he is suggesting that we do not rely on shocking images to prompt action that is already our responsibility, his means of expression detracts power from his point.

*Veer Ecology* is a valuable contribution to efforts to make sense of the extraordinary transitions put in place by drastic environmental change. Whilst its strength lies in the willingness displayed by the authors to re-examine the groundwork of our thinking, the book fails to take fully the opportunity to consider in detail the



overlooked societies which are most likely to be affected by rich countries' actions yet whose plight often remains hidden from their view. Examples of such valuable global thinking, which show how ecology and policy might intertwine, shine through when they appear, such as in Ronda's essay.

Additionally, the commitment to Royle's term *veer* and the necessity to commit to providing a verb that changes the way we conduct ourselves has the effect of limiting the content of some essays and extending themes in others whose purposes can be elusive, such as the word play with references to the *whirled* in Tim Ingold's contribution. If chosen terms were used more

as springboards, they might have been less restrictive.

It would be beneficial, in this regard, to read *Veer Ecology* in conjunction with other contemporary thinkers whose strengths supplement some of the book's weaknesses, such as Donna Haraway or the geologist and writer Jan Zalasiewicz. This would help us to extend and develop the notion introduced early on that the way we tell stories, the narratives that we consider ourselves through, are reflected in our engagement with the world around us, and therefore deserve careful attention on the part of any environmental thinking.

Alice Gibson

