

# Manufactured Landscapes: An Introduction

**Xinmin Liu**

Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Washington State University

101 B Thompson Hall, Pullman WA, 99163, USA

Email: xinmin.liu@wsu.edu

Amidst the sound and fury of climate change today, we as a group want to address not just how men created the climate crisis, but how men help create nature as well. Of course, by nature, we mean a particular type of nature, man-made landscapes, to be more exact. *Manufactured Landscapes* is an ecocritical term that refers primarily to those industrial and urbanizing constructions that are *disturbingly* massive and sublime and have over time infused their presence in the human subconscious as part of the natural landscape. The term has gained rapid traction among scholars of ecocriticism in their study of ecology and literature worldwide as it heralds the advent of naming our current phase of earthly existence *Anthropocene* — the recent geological testimony to the dominance of human-led alterations across the face of Planet Earth. Alongside this rising awareness has emerged the act of our awakening to a couple of key notions related to man-made landscapes:

(1) Nature with a capital N we used to long for as humanity's root of innocence and harmony is fading, if not faded already; there is nothing we can do now to return us to that imagined origin of pristine and undeveloped nature; nor should we indulge ourselves unduly in pining for the loss of a spiritual home in such landscapes even though we once wrote passionately about them as symbols of nostalgic pasts and idyllic innocence and simplicity. What is most important is for us to be more inquisitive and vigilant about the way nature has morphed into manufactured habitats at humans' behest, and how we humans should hold back, offset and remediate our own unchallenged authority and privilege in altering the non-human world.

(2) The multitudes of life forms that exist in the biotic sphere all around humanity are not, indiscriminately, all dumb brutes; we now know that it is wrong to regard them as totally passive and powerless, thinking that they have barely survived at the mercy of the superior intelligence of humans during the prolonged evolution of the earth. The truth is: as humans have developed incrementally by virtue of technological advance and social evolution, so have the multitudes other than us humans; we need to reckon with the fact that, along with the humans, these a-human

multitudes have never simply bowed to human domination, but have slowly yet surely adapted to the humans' incessant, callous and mostly disruptive alteration of their habitats. In a sense, their evolution has resulted in a host of offsetting reactions and repercussions that are as yet unknown to human knowledge and have reached a point that, when merged into some *brainless* coordination, the trans-human forces can diffuse, displace and even offset humans' mastery of natural elements. As many recent discoveries have shown us, there are so many ways for the a-human multitudes to form "assemblages" or "fields of forces" that can trigger malfunctions, disruptions and total stoppages against human design and endeavor. One most effective way is for them to work through man-made systems and networks from inside out — bringing to halt the designed operation of devices, instruments and constructions by the humans. We only need to turn around to look at the many abandoned industrial sites and the defunct hydraulic dams to remind us of that.

As evidenced in our writings below, we are wary of the vast inroads such landscapes have made into our mode of life, and we focus intensely on their erosion by revealing how they have wrought confusion, displacement and alterations on what has hitherto bonded humanity with the land for a sustained livelihood — *interdependence* between humans and the land. One way to study manufactured landscapes is, we believe, to expose the lopsided and ever-deteriorating relationships between us and the land, explore the altered yet potent forms of biotic, corporeal and terrestrial materiality, and bring into play our positive, vital and interactive energy, care and wisdom towards the a-human world. To that end, the four contributors of this cluster of articles explore recent literary, photographic and filmic works that seek to reclaim, foster and nurture a renewed alliance of the human and the landscapes. Taking cue from the animating notion of "new materialism," we attest to the *relational* perspective on a trans-human materiality that relies decisively on assemblage, network and flow of agential forces, resists and dispels the deterministic model of mechanically mastering and consuming resources as if they were merely trite, static, and robotically responsive. In the same vein, we seek out those trans-human material aspects that are self-directing, suspensory and distributive, and non-deterministic with an eye on shaping a continuum of *becomings* — states of material development that reveal alteration, congealment and dissolution *contra* human design and beyond human control in relation to landscapes, both wild and reclaimed. By way of our critical reflections, we hope to tease out the dysfunctional command by human consciousness over a-human matter, enhance an informed awareness of the relational and autonomic (non-deterministic) efficacies evolving through our affective encounters of the landscapes; we stress ties of interstitial affinity between human and natural environs, and foster a deepening understanding of aspects of *interdependence*

between humans and the land such as *efficacy*, *trajectory* and *causality*.

**Karen Thornber** works in the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University as its Chair and Director of Graduate Studies. She leads off this cluster of articles with a brilliant reading of two texts of contemporary fiction: Hu Fayun's *Ru Yan (Such Is This World, 2006)* and Yan Lianke's *Ding Zhuang meng (Dream of Ding Village, 2006)*. Setting as the backdrop the fate of the urban and rural communities when they are struck by SARS and HIV outbreaks (based on real-life occurrences in China's Guangdong and Henan earlier in the last decade), Thornber sheds light on the authors' deep anxiety towards culpability and vulnerability of the humans in their frantic drive for wealth and pleasure; with a discerning eye, she gathers unnerving details from both works and creates an apocalyptic "ambience" — the kind that Timothy Morton theorizes (Morton 79); she pinpoints the root cause of the plague-like spread of fatal diseases as human "hubris," cautioning us against the probable futile and brutal ends that can wreck our very essence as human when our desire is allowed to be overblown and our resources overspent. In a convincing way, her critical reading makes a connection between fatal diseases and the human-led reshaping of landscapes, whether urban or rural; she also delivers an unequivocal message about the importance of being committed to the interdependence of people and landscapes.

**Hua Li** is from the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Montana State University. Her contribution to this cluster focuses on what Lawrence Buell famously defines as "speculative" literature on environment, whose mission it is to forecast the future in order to shock the present (Buell 102-103). Enlightened by the knowledge and analytical wisdom she gained from her past research on the sci-fi narratives in China, Li takes the reader to the still more erratic times of *overdevelopment* — when humans are confronted by the *overly* manufactured landscape. She examines Liu Cixin's three novellas *Di huo (Underground Fire, 2000)*, *Di qiu da pao (Cannon of Earth, 2003)* and *Yuanyuan de feizao pao (Soap Bubbles, 2004)*. Her emphasis on how the sci-fi cognitive estrangement can be applied to environmental literature is especially original and effective: it helps access analogical modes of thinking about the harsh reality China faces today due to its overuse of water, fossil fuel and vegetation. It raises readers' vigilance against the acute consequences of excessive development in their own times, which leaves all but little prospects of interdependencies between human and nonhuman and within human society.

**Yuehong Chen** contributes to this cluster as a newly minted Ph.D from the Department of Studies of Literature in the University of Texas at Dallas. Since her academic affiliation is with the China Three Gorges University, it is no surprise that she takes the issue of hydraulic damming in China to task in her writing, and her

approach is to revisit the award-winning filmmaker Jia Zhangke's two films, *Shi jie* (*The World*, 2004) and *San xia hao ren* (*Still Life*, 2006), in the context of Space vs. Place debate. Following Yi-fu Tuan's place-space framework, Chen dissects the key protagonists' experience of drifting away from *place* (a locale of ancestral and spiritual roots) to *space* (free-roaming chases of better jobs and life values). She links their frequent plight of being spatially displaced to the flux of migrating laborers from the rural to the urban and industrial; she discloses their gradual "hollowing out" of moral judgment and spiritual faith; she also critiques the fractured social fabric that used to bond *the relational* with *the instrumental* aspects of human relationship as a result of the State's headlong plunge into the global market economy.

**Xinmin Liu** is from the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Washington State University. As the editor of this cluster of articles, he takes the opportunity to elaborate his own take on "manufactured landscape" as an ecocritical concept and applies it to his review of the still photography of the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky in *Manufactured Landscapes* (2007) and the Chinese documentary filmmaker Hu Jie in his *The Silent Nu River* (2006). Prompted by his ontological interest, Liu explores the cognitive complexity in studying the disruptive impact of these man-made landscapes, and he conducts his study by comparing the two artists' shooting techniques from the viewpoint of "affective intervention." He focuses intensely on how the affective abilities assist the viewer in diffusing the binary order in perceiving the human and the land, and in transferring aesthetic impressions to ethical judgment while affectively embracing interactive feedback from the ahuman world.

### Works Cited

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
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