Toxic Dwelling? Speculations on why transformations away from the ecocidal impacts of modern globalised consumer cultures of capitalism are proving so hard to make

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Abstract

Why does modern ('developed') society not only fail to strategically respond to the now glaringly obvious and existential global environmental crisis we face, but instead continue to rush headlong along trajectories of ecological destruction? This paper proposes that a key reason for this dire situation is that globalised capitalist consumer culture (GCCC) creates forms of individual and collective becoming which are termed toxic dwelling. Humans, as other related non-human animals, are evolved to dwell in lifeworlds which are rich in material, emotional, affective and (in human terms), narrativised experiences. Toxic dwelling is such becoming-in-the-world through practices of narrativised consumption created by GCCC. This modern life is, in many ways, experientially rich, absorbing, exciting and fulfilling to many people, but, at the same time, it is also pathological, and destructive of individual wellbeing and the ecological webs of life. The scale and impact of GCCC, in how it is produced, sold, consumed and disposed of, is driving the ecocide of the 'three ecologies' as outlined by Félix Guattari (1989) (the physical, cultural, and psychic realms of becoming). There are many forms of opposition to the forces that are causing ecocide across the earth, but at present, due the power and momentum of GCCC, and related forces, they are fighting a losing battle.

Keywords: capitalism; consumerism; dwelling; ecocide; three ecologies; toxic dwelling

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Barbara Kruger – I shop therefore I am, 1987, installation view, Hirshhorn Museum, photo: CC BY 2.0 by krossbow

Introduction

The terrible predicament that global society now faces is a global environmental crisis (GEC), in which capitalism, in its latest mode, globalised consumer culture (GCCC), in hand with other forces, is destroying the very fabric of the living biosphere it relies upon. The emerging era of the sixth mass extinction event, the unfolding of ecocide, has been obvious to some for decades. Yet despite this terrible predicament, and the rise of an ever-growing environmental consciousness in some quarters, since, for example, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), nothing has really changed in terms of the overall direction of travel of modern society. Rather, the 'great acceleration' continues; an acceleration towards global environmental transformation and thus societal breakdown.

Why, when long-standing warnings about the existential breakdown of the global environment become ever starker and are ever more evidenced by empirical confirmations of scientific predictions of climate change, species extinction and so on (e.g., Wallace-Wells 2019), has GCCC, and the political, social and cultural systems it is enmeshed in, shown very few signs of responding to, or being able to respond to, this ultimate existential crisis?

What are the deep powers and forces at work in current neoliberal-dominated forms of GCCC? What binds us to this model and keeps us heading on such tragic trajectories when others might be possible? How does the GCCC model sustain and defend itself against transformation? In answer, this paper seeks to consider the destructive energy which I see as the dark heart of GCCC, and how and why the bulk of modern society is held in its deadly embrace. This has, more or less, haunted me year by year, day by day and hour by hour, as I have lived my modern life and witnessed the lives around me, while also studying and teaching environmental politics since the early 1990s.

My core argument is that GCCC colonises how humans become-in-the-world by exploiting, re-engineering and distorting the human propensity to dwell-in-the-world. By dwelling I am drawing *broadly* on the concept of dwelling as famously developed by Martin Heidegger (1985) and subsequently by Tim Ingold (1993).

GCCC has created whole worlds of experience in which people become immersed, and through which individual and collective identities are created and performed. But these worlds are separated from (in terms of attention if not physical actuality), and mostly in conflict with, the ecological plains of becoming which all humans, and all living things, also dwell in. The fallout of this is toxic to human and non-human life and the ecological webs of the biosphere. These processes, which colonise through the body-mind nexus, through affect and emotion, are hugely powerful, energetic, and 'creative' in their own terms. They are systemically part of modern thought, politics, economy and culture, thus making modernity, in its current form, systemically *unsustainable and unredeemable for viable environmental futures*.

Others have also seen all this coming for some decades.

> Today we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups. […] We are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. […] I distrust their power. […] And it is an astonishing power: that of creating whole universes, universes of the mind. [E]lectronic hardware exists by which to deliver these pseudo-worlds right into the heads of the reader, the viewer, the listener. (Philip K. Dick, 1978, n.pag.)

But the dire consequences of this – such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, extinction, physical and mental health crises, the breakdown of social cohesion – which were looming horizons for decades, are now become our immediate landscapes. But even still, the required systemic change seems beyond reach.

> The conservative thrust of affect is strikingly evident in Western responses to the ecological crisis. The alarming effects of climate change are all over the media, and they can increasingly be felt. Still, the answers remain utterly inadequate. Even though there is a rising awareness

regarding climate issues, for instance in the discussions on policies for environmental protection or in the public discourse regarding CO2 emissions, this discursive change seems to be deadlocked in old and inadequate problem-solving approaches. So here we are, the sea levels are rising, the forests are burning, the soil is ravaged, and the air around us is polluted [...] Still, *Western society keeps on driving forward.* (Schütze et al. 2022: 5, emphasis added).

I seek to show how the maelstrom of dazzlingly vivid and powerful products, messages, images, narratives, desires and habits generated in ever-greater proliferations by GCCC to drive consumption, can *affectively* occupy the human body-mind in ways which are ruthlessly colonising, and thus hard to rebut and toxic to all life. Often, when meaningful collective responses to the GEC are considered, there are debates about the extent to which change is needed at the level of individual citizen/consumer behaviour and/or at the structural level of governments, corporations, and the related international governance nexus. The power and ubiquity of GCCC means that both are interdependently mired in the addictive habits of modern life.

In what follows I first fill out more fully (and justify) the key terms of GCCC, toxicity and dwelling. I then go on to explore the erosion and subversion of dwelling by GCCC, the resulting state of toxic dwelling, with brief examples; and then the ecocide of the three ecologies that Guattari (1989) sets out. Forms of resistance and lines of flight to alternative futures are then considered before a brief conclusion.

GCCC – capitalism's burnout finale?

Consumption and consumption cultures have always been integral parts of capitalism from its early development in the 15th century. And capitalism was deeply woven into the western enlightenment project of colonisation. The logics of exploration, military conquest, political domination, resource extraction for production and the creation of ever-expanding markets and consumer populations are writ large in the histories of early multi-national companies, for example the East India Company, and in trade conflicts such as the Chinese Opium Wars between 1839 and 1860.

But in differing eras and settings, capitalism has taken on differing forms – for example, in the change from Fordist to post-Fordist production systems, and from forms that sought to build systems, services and products which were designed to be of high quality and to last, to systems of production and consumption based upon 'built-in obsolescence' and disposability. These have come to the fore in recent decades and ushered in the 'era of waste' we are now in (Franklin-Wallace 2024). Obviously, for the latter to bloom a proliferation of both consumers and consumption was needed. In his startling account of the global waste industry, Franklin-Wallace states that 'today one third of what we throw away is something produced that same year. The modern economy is built on trash' (2024: 12).

The current era of capitalism is very much built upon mass globalised production and consumption networks and cultures of consumerism, and the 'vision' of spreading that as a means of 'development'. This is done in large part through the production of culture and identity expressed through consumption. And this is in fact the nub of the argument. By articulating consumer capitalism as culture this becomes toxic and hard to oppose.

We live in the era of the 'consumer society'. This is the basic form of civil society in the developed world. As Roberta Sassatelli puts it: 'to a large extent, to talk about consumer culture today is to talk about modernity

or late modernity' (2007: 193). Individual and collective identities are constructed in large part through consumption. Modern spaces are saturated with the processes of consumption. Allan Pred summarises, drawing upon Henri Lefebvre and Derek Gregory: 'virtually every nook and cranny of every day, every night life is subject to colonisation by the commodity form' (1998: 151).

Holt and Schor (2020) state that the 'literature on consumer society is vast' and this is because it is now one on the key driving dynamics of capitalism. They go on to state that the most important issue to confront in relation to corporate visions of global capitalism is the 'link between the spread of consumerism and the ongoing devastation of the natural environment. [...] As the planet warms up, so too must the debate about our consumption, the ultimate cause of climate change' (2020: x). There always have been, as still is the case, a very diverse range of types of companies which make up the collective that is capitalism and GCCC. These vary markedly in their scales, aims, practices and attitudes, but the logic of selling products or services, the logic of profit – the 'bottom line' – is innate in their makeup.

Competition, innovation and expansion are key dynamics of capitalism. Competition and expansion are entirely entwined with processes of marketing and branding. It's a tough world. There is an inevitable process of seeking to better understand how to sell to people – how to make them consumers, and how to make them loyal consumers. This is the point at which this argument turns to dwelling and then toxic dwelling. The impact of modern capitalism can clearly be seen everywhere on the planet. It is, in production, performance and consumption, global. The concept of 'ecocidal capitalism' is emerging in a range of political/ecological commentaries and critiques of the state of things (Corporate Watch 2020).

Dwelling

Dwelling is about the ecologies of individual and collective becoming; the richnesses of bodily becoming, in place, over time, with memory as a key process. It is comprised of social and material relationships in known places. Physiologically, humans, and in fact all non-human animals (to a greater or lesser degree), are hyper-complex sensing, reacting and remembering creatures – with a whole range of affective registers and processing capacities which are always 'on' and highly active and always seeking to make home. We are constantly woven into the world or, perhaps more accurately, constantly weaving the world around us (even in sleep, dreams, and the subconscious): a weaving of the events, objects, places, and times we encounter moment by moment, day by day, and on through lived time.

I broadly draw upon the concept of dwelling stemming from Heidegger (1985) and, latterly, Ingold (1993), which describes how humans (and non-humans) are becomings-in-and-of-the-world with all the processes therein entailed, such as relational materiality, encultured bodily practices, habits, affects and ecologies, in order to show how toxic colonisation of modern identities can function through dwelling, and also the implications of that colonisation.

It is clear that the evolved human body-mind assemblage has all manner of ubiquitous characteristics. These can be understood as needs (e.g., food, air and water) and desires (identity, sexuality, home), and are inherent through the processes of the body-mind. They play out in furtherly evolved forms in relation to cultures and environments. It is these inherent needs and desires that dwelling is an expression and fulfilment of. In the 'dwelling perspective', it is accepted that 'being and environment are mutually emergent, continuously brought into being together' (Pearson 2006: 12). It is these needs and desires in human becoming which are exploitable once they are exposed and understood by systems with interests in power

and control.

Heidegger's preoccupations were about how humans live in space, place, culture and time. The word 'dwell' implies a series of characteristics of becoming, notably becoming *with-in* place, time and environment (material relations), and in culture, narrative, spirituality and mortality; the latter two, possibly three, dividing human dwelling from that of non-human animals (at least for Heidegger). [1] He was concerned with how the ongoing emergence of life could, and should, be one of co-flourishing between the individual, community and environment; and environment as articulated in nature, places, landscapes, artefacts and skills. Dwelling, for Heidegger 'reaches so far as to encompass the nature of human beings as such – to say "I am" is to say that "I dwell"' (Malpas 2008: 268–269).

Dwelling is closely related to ideas of place (see Casey 1993; 1998), biophilia (Wilson 1984) and topophilia (Tuan 1974). Collectively, these explore ways in which humans are intrinsically drawn to and creatively bound into the world as place, landscape, and nature. Such theories stating that humans are innately in need of environments of immersive nature and in need of a sense of place in their everyday lives to flourish, are embedded not only in recent discussions of 'nature-deficit disorder', but also in new demands for government initiatives in the UK and, no doubt, elsewhere which seek to boost wellbeing in relation to both physical and mental health through attention to place and environment. [2]

It is clear, however, that there is not a simple correspondence between places of nature – pastoral and rural landscapes – and dwelling (as in both Heidegger and Ingold's examples). Urban lives are also, or can be, dwelt, and can draw richness from the textures, rhythms and temporalities of urbanity which arise from all manner of human and non-human entanglements. Dwelling is about being-in-the-world relationally, performatively and affectively though bodily capacities. A range of environments can deliver worlds-in-which-to-dwell.

Dwelling also relates to notions of ecological citizenship (Plumwood 2008) and ecological becoming, in relation to which it is argued that modern citizenship and becoming are currently violently separated, in ethical, political and practical terms, from the environmental exchanges all bodies are constantly in and depend upon. The perspective of dwelling takes an ecological view of how human and non-human animals make and inhabit lifeworlds though affective registers of specific bodily practices. It considers places and landscapes as temporal extensions and entanglements, whereby all manner of beings, things and processes come into specific relations, and settle out into the varied patterning that marks the world.

The ongoing organism-environment articulation that dwelling entails is one of the greatest complexity and richness, containing habit and novelty, the known and unknown, the haptic, the affective – and so on. This is the fabric of our very becoming. And this is what GCCC has understood and colonised by making other worlds for humans to immerse themselves in. As will be shown, Plumwood (2008) considers that in the era of GEC, environmental thinking requires 'an ecological re-conception of dwelling' (2008: 140).

The Erosion and Subversion of Dwelling by GCCC

Heidegger was concerned that modernity was unravelling dwelling as a process of good life and alienating humans from the conditions of their own flourishing. Indeed, his attention turned to the idea of dwelling because he concluded that it was these qualities of life that were being eroded. This was not simply through the separation of modern people from nature(s), but more an unravelling of the co-emergent dwellings of

people, natures and things in places – the despoilment of fulfilled lives, cultures and ecologies – an example being the replacement of skilled craft and artisan labour with repetitive, low-skilled labour in industrial production. What Heidegger was witnessing, and expressing concern for, were earlier waves in the storms of toxicity that modernity, industrialisation, and latterly GCCC, have washed over the world to the point of ecocide.

If dwelling is being at-home-in-the-world or, better, making the world home and vice versa, as Malpas puts it, Heidegger considered that '*homelessness has come to prevail as the almost universal condition of human being*' (2008: 281, emphasis added). Heidegger saw a metaphysical nihilism and alienation at the heart of modern industrial capitalism, in which our relationships with nature, craft, object, self and community – all articulated in a matrix of culture/place – have been rendered into reduced, impoverished or corrupted forms.

The two fundamental dimensions of dwelling, *lived space* and *lived time*, are unravelling in the face of technology and consumerism. The spatialities of relational life are corrupted: 'in the modern world, it seems, not only is nothing distant anymore, but neither is anything brought close – "everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness"' (Malpas 2008: 279).

And for the temporality of dwelt life, 'to dwell means to orientate oneself with regards to one's being and the historicity of being. Mindful merely of the modern or present, one forgets the true nature of one's being, and so one's dwelling' (Wolfreys 2016: 37). In Ingold's accounts of dwelling there is a sense of lost richness, texture and rhythm of particular lives lived with nature and time, for example:

> [T]he rhythmic structure of time emerges not only from the interweaving and mutual responsiveness of human movements, but also from the way these movements resonate to the cycles of the non-human environment. Traditionally, people had to *fall in* with rhythms of their environment: with the winds, the tides, the needs of domestic non-human animals, the alternations of day and night, of the seasons, and so on, in accordance with what the environment afforded for the conduct of their daily tasks. (2000: 325–326)

To emphasise the centrality of dwelling to the flourishing human and non-human life (and the consequences of its erosion and denial), it is instructive, and sobering, to consider the welfare of non-human animals kept in degraded, non-rich and/or non-appropriate environments. Unfortunately evidence of the consequences of the erosion of, and denial of animal dwelling is not hard to find, for example, in many intensive industrial agricultural systems, and in the wellbeing of domestic pets and zoo animals keep in inappropriate conditions. The denial of 'natural' behaviours leads to harm to mental and physical health and, at worst, to a complete collapse of wellbeing and flourishing.

Chickens, when allowed, will dwell-as-chickens. They want to scratch for food, have dust baths, know a territory with safe roosting spaces and live in a social structure. Pigs, when allowed, will dwell-as-pigs. They want to root for food with their snouts, bathe in mud and, similarly, know a territory and live in a social structure. Although clearly not wild non-human animals, such domesticated non-human animals are imbued with instinctive behaviour which they would always express given the chance to do so. In their given territory, they would build up local and specific knowledge and memories of where, when and how to do these things, and share these memories in the social networks of flock or herd. The affordances of the terrain – the complex interactions with others (of their own and other kinds) while competing for or sharing

space: this is animal dwelling. When these behaviours are restricted or denied, dwelling is denied. The rise of welfare ethics and welfare legislation based upon such notions as the 'Five Freedoms' seeks to ensure both ethical treatment of animals and welfare-derived economic benefits production (Latimer & Mierle 2013). [3]

There is much commonality between animal becoming and dwelling, and human becoming and dwelling (Jones 2023). This profound idea features strongly in Charles Darwin's third great, but less referred-to work, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Non-human Animals* (1872), which explores continuities between human and animal life. Darwin's work on the expression of emotions in humans and non-human animals is based upon the fact that both share many affective, emotional responses to situations which are 'hard-wired' into us.

What are 'natural' settings and behaviours for humans is of course a very complex question. But my conjecture is that modernity and GCCC, as Heidegger witnessed, has eroded the capacities for humans and non-humans to dwell, to become in everyday life, in ways suited to their wellbeing. But it is not a case of the world being emptied out of experience: new lifeworlds have been created – for both humans and non-humans – and these are the worlds of toxic dwelling.

Toxic Dwelling

The eras building up to GCCC – colonial conquest, industrialisation, ever-expanding human population and urbanisation, the advent of industrial food systems and so on – have resulted in many forms of global toxicity. The current settlement of Gaia (Lovelock and Margulis 1974; Lovelock 2016) (by which I mean the stable living earth systems of *this* era) is being unpicked by GCCC in a series of huge, interrelated crises, namely pollution, habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, extinction crisis and, of course, climate change. The causes of this trend are multiple, but *toxicity is central to it* – most obviously from pollution, less obviously through the changes in biosphere cycles and intensities such as ocean acidification, which are toxic to current oceanic populations. Land transformation and biodiversity degradation have created other forms of toxicity such as the spread of invasive species, and plant and animal disease. In their recent edited collection *Toxic Timescapes*, Müller and Nielsen (2023: 5) acknowledge the intersectionalities of time, space and bodies in toxic exposure. They state:

> Our species' excessive and expanding modes of extraction, production and disposal – necessary to support the perpetual economic growth inherent to the modern, [...] Western project – and the excessive use of synthetic chemicals in all sectors of life have fostered toxicity's ubiquity in our air, water and soil.

Within these overarching despoliations of the biosphere are processes of toxification of the human body through many means such as pollution ingestion, and harmful modern foods and medicines (Langston 2010).

The toxicity of GCCC is clearly evidenced by the prevalence of severe mental and physical health crises in modern life. In regard to the former, Hanset Lais (2017, n.pag.), reporting on the UK in the *Independent* newspaper, has recently suggested:

> Britain is in the grip of a mental health crisis. Millions are beset with anxiety and despair which statistics can confirm in depressing detail. Although the reasons for our inner turmoil are complicated, the Tory [Conservative Party] Manifesto which identified mental health as a burning injustice overlooks a key contributing factor: our spiritual vacuum and insatiable materialism.

Pred (1998: 151) states that Lefebvre emphasised the colonisation of everyday life by the commodity form as a defining characteristic of contemporary life. This 'colonisation' is not merely a figure of speech, but a term consciously employed so as to draw upon 'the implications of occupation, dispossession and territorialisation with which it is freighted'.

There are important questions to be asked about the politics and aesthetics of associated ideas of toxicity, for example about the contrast between the toxic body and the 'pure' body, but here the focus is on the central and direct sense of toxicity as poison, as harmful processes and/or substances, to bodies, ecologies and the earth's biosphere itself. This is about *harm*, to the point of death, and indeed ecocide, through the poisoning of bodies, habitats, species and cultures, which cannot be constructed in any other way than as tragic and undesirable, and which is to be opposed by all appropriate means.

Here the focus is on a more pervasive toxicity emanating from GCCC. The human need to dwell is instrumentalised in GCCC, and alternative toxic forms of dwelling colonise individual and collective becomings. The fact that GCCC can make whole worlds which people can apparently dwell in on a day-to-day and moment-to-moment basis, in which they construct identities through consumption, means that we are in the deepest trouble as a global society.

It is very hard for individuals and wider society to meaningfully engage with and respond to the GEC from within modern dwelling. Many people are, of course, either completely or partially outside GCCC as consumers. But they are very likely to still be implicated in its fallout through GCCC's impact on the environment in its extraction of resources and disposal of waste, and other toxic fallouts such as the exploitation of cheap labour.

The physical toxicities of resource extraction, pollution and waste disposal are utterly interwoven with the mental toxicities of marketing campaigns designed to play on people's fears (such as body image/size) and desires. There is an ecology of toxicity between hard (physical) pollution and the soft (mental-informational) pollution that Michel Serres (2010) considers. The toxic infection of the social through culture and politics means that individual and collective abilities to oppose the toxic infection of the environment are weakened to the point of failure.

The argument here is not simply that GCCC is eroding dwelling – though clearly it is in many ways – but also that it then generates new forms of worlds which apparently offer alternative landscapes of richness in which people can 'dwell' and build identity and everyday life. The problem is that the apparent richnesses-of-worlds which modernity has created are not founded on ecologically sustainable relations, and that their deeply negative impacts on selves and environment are, at least at first, concealed.

Once concepts such as wellbeing, sustainability and resilience are prominent in the public realm, and especially in governance and legislative discourses, it is a sure sign that things are going badly wrong. It can,

on the face of it, be thought that government policies seeking to promote human wellbeing and environmental protection are good things. But should society be functioning in such a way that the basic aspects of flourishing human and non-human life have to be engineered by the state?

In other words, there would not be a sustainability agenda if modern society was not a long way down a deeply unsustainable path. There would not be wellbeing agendas if we had not by now advanced deep into an era of un-wellness. Together, these mark an era of toxicity – and an ecology of toxicity poisoning and degrading the three ecologies. This echoes Heidegger's view on value – that once this concept has crystallised as a goal or a good, it is an indication that value has in fact died (Malpas 2008). Ecologically embedded and productive flourishing and wellbeing are innate to dwelt life. *It is only in their loss that they become grasped as concepts by modernity.*

Affective Colonisation

Older and more recent studies of the practices of advertising, marketing and branding (Packard 1957; Heath 2012; Garvey 2016) focus on the psychologically hidden, pervasive and corrosive powers of these processes. These techniques have developed over time to the point that they can be considered to be forms of 'cognitive hacking' (Cybenko et al. 2002), a term developed to address processes of market and news manipulation aimed at individual consumers, often through covert digital or media campaigns. My suggestion here is that these processes have, in effect, identified human propensities to dwell, to live affectively within known and rich (in experiential terms) worlds of needs and desires, and have colonised those spaces of life in order to create and capture people as consumers.

In his discussions of affect and non-representational theory, Nigel Thrift considers what can be termed 'the half-second delay' (2004; 2008). This is the lag between the processing of the emotive/affective subconscious brain, and of consciousness, thought, language and deliberative action. The latter is *always* lagging behind the former, as neuroscience definitively shows (Damasio 1999). That gap is 'raw life', and it is here that we mostly dwell and live affectively, the vast bulk of becoming taking place as sub/un/conscious processes. Thrift points out that this gap is a vulnerable window into people's becoming which the state, corporations, the military and organised theologies exploit. It is the way to 'hack' people's behaviour. This too is the window that GCCC seeks to exploit. Schütze at al (2022), reflecting on affect in relation to the lockdowns imposed as part of the response to the COVID pandemic, and the fleeting glimpses of possible change they offered, suggest that affect, in the forms of the relational habits and practices of everyday modern life, ensures that any hint of meaningful change melted away. They conclude that engrained affective habituation 'operates as a sluggish glue or even an iron grip that holds practices and social routines in place' (2022: 29).

Driving consumption is the focus of marketing and branding. In an online discussion of marketing, Pete Forester states: 'according to their own Fiscal Reports, Nike spent $3,031 *billion* on what they call "Demand Creation"' (2014: n.pag., emphasis added). If one stops to think of all the corporations and smaller companies competing in the hurly-burly of everyday GCCC, one can get a sense of the sheer energy – and often dazzlingly creative energy – pushing along consumer society. Brands seek to create worlds, create narratives and insinuate these into people's performed identities through repeated exposure and consumption.

The dangers of such an economic model for long-term human and environmental wellbeing are frequently

pointed out. For example, McLaren et al. (2013) argue that the use of consumption as a false satisfier for fundamental human needs such as identity and affiliation results in harm to consumers' own wellbeing. Beyond this core problem, there are many more specific facets of toxicity. One important example of this are the gendered dimensions of consumption, insofar as gender identities of various kinds are targeted and scripted in consumer discourses, with many problems of gendered body image/anxiety and the resulting rise of eating-related disorders.

We now seem to be living out the prophecies about the rise of modern consumer culture and its consequences made in the middle of the 20th century. In her article on 'shopping for subjectivity', Lauren Langman states that thinkers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno described the 'culture industry' as a compensatory realm for the impoverishment of life in a productionist industrial society:

> Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) noted how the legacy of the Enlightenment project would be fear and panic that would *lead people to embrace fervently the very world that is the source of their malaise.* Today, to assuage the horrors, to overcome the loneliness of modernity, people flock to malls where 'proto-communities of strangers seek clothes, cultural products and techno-gadgets that promise gratification or at least recognition through possession'.
> (Langman 1992: 74, emphasis added)

Langman (1992: 66) charts how, in the end, consumption-based identities and lifestyles extract a heavy toll on the self – offering 'no more than intermittent palliatives for underlying anxiety and appropriation of, if annihilation of, subjectivity'.

In their extensive work on consumerism, Imre Szeman and Paul James (2010: x) summarise:

> The global expansion of consumption [...] has raised concerns about the unsustainable pace at which global resources are being used up. Alongside advertisements to consume more, newspapers and magazines sound the alarm regularly about the impact of accelerated consumption on the environment, the nature of our connections to community and the ideals of citizenship that underpin democratic politics. Desires projected through consumption have become essential to what is perceived as 'the health' of our economies. In the almost complete absence of other sustained macro-political and social narratives [...] the pursuit of the 'good life' through practices of what is known as 'consumerism' has become one of the dominant global social forces, cutting across differences of religion, class, gender, ethnicity and nationality. The problems and possibilities associated with the emergence of a global consumerist ethos is one with which scholars have only just begun to come to grips.

As is indicated above, much concern about consumer culture and its impact on human wellbeing and the environment were being raised long before the advent of the world wide web, the digital age, the rise of accessible mobile phone technologies and ubiquitous social media platforms. These and related developments, particularly the spread of developed western-style economies and culture to the so-called 'emerging nations', have meant that despite concern and increasingly stark warnings about the impacts of GCCC, it continues to proliferate in reach and depth.

Proliferations

Ever-proliferating consumption lies at the very heart of the current model of GCCC. Many national economic strategies have economic growth built into them as an aim, a norm and a good. This growth is achieved through economic development, growing human populations and, most significantly, increased consumption of goods and services by individuals and organisations. In recent years, many sectors of GCCC have been going through periods of intense proliferation. These are proliferations of experience, and of products and services on offer to consumers.

Gaming and streaming services, and the vast resources of creativity and investment which go into their production, are two obvious examples. Professionalised and commercialised sport, for example football (soccer) and cricket, has hugely increased the amount of content (live, live-streamed, highlights) on offer to consumers. This is accompanied by oceans of expert analysis, media commentary and exchanges on social media. Riding on the back of this proliferation of sports culture and entertainment is a toxic froth of gambling promotion and participation, which is now attracting some attention due to its harmful impact on many people.

The fashion industry is a particularly striking example which has encouraged the proliferation of choice and consumption by changing styles and 'seasons' ever more frequently in what is termed 'fast fashion'. This is the turnover of cheap, affordable (for some at least) garments and the idea that items of clothing might be used only on a few occasions, then discarded for a new set of purchases. A dense ecology of brands, designers, promoters, producers, journalists, influencers, retailers, print and broadcast media, and photographers create a sea of images, brands and designs which constantly breaks in waves over people in their everyday lives. This is a perpetual ferment of changing designs and colours which people can be caught up in.

Bläse et al. (2023: 2), in their discussion of the rise of grossly unsustainable fast fashion point to 'the positive correlation between *extreme consumerism*' (emphasis added) and constant stream of massaging from branding, and 'influencers who share their consumption experience on social media'. They suggest that consumers are driven in ever-tighter cycles of purchase of new fashion items to fulfil their desires, and to counter FOMO (fear of missing out). In other words, fashion can become an engrossing and colonising narrative in which agency and richnesses is seemingly on offer. Choices, choices, choices; what suits my lifestyle, my sense of self?

The above 'arenas' of cultural life are overlain with ubiquitous social media platforms such as X, Facebook and Instagram. In these, billions of people express themselves about the modes of consumption they are bound into and express their identities. These platforms have the capacity to tailor huge streams of content to a detailed personal level. The colonisation of the modern self is now precisely and personally targeted.

These brief examples aim to show that GCCC, in all aspects of modern life, both in the provision of basic 'needs' and in the provision of entertainment and culture, weaves ever-denser ecologies of products, services, images and narratives as the fabric of GCCC. These are now utterly entangled with an ecology of digital communication and social media, as well as through the physical world of products, services and consumer spaces. The world of GCCC is an ever-deepening, bewildering array of richness of possible experiences. This is what many modern people, I think, are lost in. There is little room left in their emotional capacities for caring for, or about, the environment. And as many of the habits of GCCC are at odds with

environmental flourishing, to begin to even think about somehow stepping out of GCCC poses huge challenges and questions to any modern citizen.

Ecocide and The Three Ecologies

As set out by Guattari in 1989, the three ecologies are 1) biodiversity (as more or less understood in biological terms); 2) cultural diversity as in non-modern cultures (most obviously Indigenous cultures, but in many other forms too); 3) psychic ecology (the sheer richness of individual life and character). All, he felt, were falling under the onslaught of GCCC – or, his term, integrated world capitalism (IWC). This amounts to 'ecocide'; the term being used by the translators/introducers of the book (Pinder and Sutton 2000: 3) rather than Guattari himself.

Guattari's analysis of the state of things was depressingly prescient of current trends and the failure of mainstream politics and cultures to respond. Here is the opening paragraph of the main text:

> The Earth is undergoing a period of intense techno-scientific transformations. If no remedy is found, the ecological disequilibrium this has generated will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet's surface. Alongside these upheavals, human modes of life, both individual and collective, are progressively deteriorating. Kinship networks tend to be reduced to a bare minimum; domestic life is being *poisoned by the gangrene of mass-media consumption*; family and married life are frequently 'ossified' by a sort of standardisation of behaviour; and neighbourhood relations are generally reduced to their meanest expression [...] It is the relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority – be it social, animal, vegetable or Cosmic – that is compromised in this way, in a sort of general movement of implosion and regressive infantilisation. Otherness [*l'altérité*] tends to lose all its asperity. Tourism, for example, usually amounts to no more than a journey on the spot, with the same redundancies of images and behaviour. (2000: 27, emphasis added)

In their introduction, the translators squarely identify capitalism as *the* key driver of ecocide:

> There can be little doubt that around the world increased pollution, global warming, deforestation, desertification and the loss of biodiversity are anthropogenic, and that the motor of this generalised impoverishment of the biosphere is capitalism. (Pindar and Sutton 2000: 4)

They stress the sheer scale of the predicament in the 'diseased and toxic oceans with their oil slicks and giant algae blooms visible from space' (ibid.).

But we need to go beyond the idea of physical pollution and toxicity to grasp how the three ecologies are falling together. We need to grasp the ecologies of toxicity within GCCC, which weave between the realms of the three ecologies. There are webs of connections between consumerism, branding, marketing, mental and physical ill health, the despoliation of the environment through resource extraction and waste dispersal, and the obliteration of non-modern cultures. As an illustrative exercise, a 'heat map' of global biodiversity loss hotspots is depressingly congruent with a map of Indigenous language and culture loss.

Modern developed-world citizens face dense, impenetrable weaves of toxic ecology within and between

these systems wherein contamination of physical environments (ecosystems/habitats) goes hand-in-hand with social, cultural and economic toxicities. This could be illustrated in many ways by, say, modern food systems, or the extraction of minerals for the production of batteries for everyday artefacts such as mobile phones. If the full life-cycles of countless modern products which are sold globally in vast quantities were to be analysed, there would be revealed negative, toxic impacts of varying kinds all the way through the product life cycle from resource extraction to final disposal. Impacts stem from how the raw materials are grown or extracted; the labour of production; systems of distribution; product packaging; from how they are promoted and retailed to consumers; their impact on the consumer body when in use; and the waste, direct and indirect, that comes at the end of use. The physical toxicity of resource extraction and waste disposal is utterly interwoven with the mental toxicity of marketing campaigns designed to play on people's fears (such as body image/size) and desires.

The toxic infection of the social through modern culture and politics means that individual and collective abilities to oppose the toxic infection of the environment are weakened to the point of failure.

In a blog aimed at resisting what he actually terms 'toxic culture', Mica White (2013, n.pag.) asks:

> How do we fight back against the incessant flow of logos, brands, slogans and jingles that submerge our streets, invade our homes and flicker on our screens? We could wage a counteroffensive at the level of content: attacking individual advertisements when they cross the decency line and become deceptive, violent or overly sexual. But this approach is like using napkins to clean up an oil spill. It fails to confront the true danger of advertising – which is not in its individual messages but in the damage done to our mental ecology by the sheer volume of its flood.

White is drawing upon Serres' (2010) idea of soft pollution and suggests a 'mental environmentalism' that treats the ceaseless barrage of branding and marketing as:

> [a] kind of pollution. Think about the long-term mental consequences of seeing a Nike swoosh dozens of times a day from birth until death, for example. [...] Questions like these get at the heart of advertising and lead us to mental environmentalism. (White 2013, n.pag.)

As such, it is not enough to argue simply for environmental justice in terms of ecology; rather, pollution in the aesthetic sphere must also be tackled. White suggests that 'Serres has done something [...] profound. He has shown why one cannot be an environmentalist without also being a mental environmentalist. In closing the gap between *physical and mental toxins, Serres has closed the gap between physical and mental ecology*' (2013, emphasis added). The fundamental challenge of the ecology of toxicity we face is that soft or mental pollution, as it is being called here, the destruction of Guattari's otherness [l'altérité], of other cultures and of diversity, erodes both individual and collective capacities to resist ecocide, or to even register its unfolding.

While modern senses of ambition, success, happiness and fulfilment at the individual, family, community, organisational and even nation-state scale are not only divorced from their ecological foundations, but destructive to them, ecocide is the inevitable outcome. It is the modern individual and self which lies at the heart of the problem, both in how it is engineered and in how it is exploited. The Invisible Committee (2009:

16) make this point:

> two centuries of capitalism and market nihilism have bought us to the most extreme alienations – from ourselves, from others, from worlds. The fiction of the individual has decomposed at the same speed that it was becoming real. [...] It's with an entire anthropology that we are at war. With the very idea of man.

We (*all* humans) are, quite palpably, ecological beings. We are utterly woven into the meshworks of the world that both Ingold (2005) and Timothy Morton (2010) discuss. We are ecological through our very bodies; through our consumption of food, water and energy; through our breathing in and out; through all the things we use; through our waste (bodily and otherwise); through our ever-running, sensing, affective exchange with whatever place we are in. This is, in effect, dwelling – how we are in the world. There are countless variations of dwelling depending on culture, economy, environment and place. It is this affective, ecological nature of our being that is open to GCCC to colonise as toxic dwelling, by manipulating what we consume – by mediating *how* we are ecological.

Escaping Toxicity. Lines of Flight?

It is common, and reasonable, for texts such as this, which offer a pessimistic view of the state of things, to end with 'reasons for hope': a section on 'means of resistance and change'. However, in the face of ecocide, it is hard to be optimistic. One thing to say about this is that understanding the predicament we face is a basic precondition of hopeful change. Secondly, as an individual, a citizen, who wants to be suckered, taken for a ride, exploited, and unknowingly swept along in what the singer/poet Kae (formerly Kate) Tempest (2016) calls the 'greatest crime in history' without even knowing what is going on?

So what are possibilities of at least partly de-pathologising 'forms of dwelling' in GCCC? Where are the lines of flight? What are the possibilities to act, to subvert and resist GCCC? In the conclusion of their overview of consumerism and its literatures, where they turn to alternatives and resistances, Holt and Schor (2020: xxi) sum up a 'variety of stances from which to challenge consumer culture'. These offer 'a rough roadmap of most of the forces that are now arrayed in an emergent anticonsumerist movement: environmentalists, spiritualists engaged in lives of voluntary simplicity, cultural jammers, labour-oriented feminists, critics of capitalist production and advocates for a new quality of life politics'.

The notion of voluntary simplicity, or simply consuming less and, if possible, radically less, and also consuming ethically (for people of affluence in the developed world) seems an obvious response at the individual and household level. This does not have to be tied to any spirituality. It can be a source of healing for those who suffer from the ills and anxieties of GCCC. Disengaging as much as possible from the oceans of promotions and the froth of products and narratives bubbling out from screens, shops, printed material and the like seems like a start.

In 2014, it was reported that the Green Party mayor of Grenoble passed a bill that banned all advertising in the city's public spaces. Mayor Piolle (in Todd 2014: n.pag.) was quoted as saying:

> It's time to move forward in making Grenoble a gentler and more creative city. [...] We want a city which is less aggressive and less stressful to live in, that can carve out its own identity.

Freeing Grenoble of advertising billboards is a step in this direction.

Arwa Mahdawi (2015) recounts how other cities including São Paulo, Chennai, Tehran, Paris and New York have tried a similar policy. But of course, this depends on political will and power which is prepared to challenge the ubiquity of the capitalist fabric of modern cities and, at present, can only go so far. These are just small examples of at least beginning to resist mental pollution, colonisation of the self, of trying to 'detox' urban space from some of the worst excesses of GCCC in everyday space and life.

It also points to a fundamental step that individuals, communities and cultures can take. This is to move from (hyper-) individualised identities and becomings based primarily on consumption to more collective identities and becomings based upon ecologically creative shared lives between humans and non-humans. These collective creativities need to weave through and across the three ecologies and form drivers of ecological politics, as articulated by Bruno Latour (2004), for example.

I imagine anyone who reads this paper will be aware of, and quite likely be involved in, acts of creative production, both personal and through the work of a myriad of initiatives and organisations. These may often be grassroots and local, but on differing scales; and through alternative forms of economic, social, and cultural organisation. To witness forms and arenas of resistance *is* a source of comfort and, one could say, potential hope. Schütze et al. (2022: 44), while concluding that the status quo of modern society is affectively enforced and very difficult to meaningfully challenge, end by saying: 'we should [...] not underestimate the potential of affective interventions to disrupt the dominant affective milieus, even if the ramifications of affective disruptions seem miniscule initially'.

Through the long writing of this article, and in fact through all my career in environmentally-focused academic research and teaching, there has been evidence of larger-scale efforts to address the GEC. Obvious examples stand out, such as the Bruntland Report, the very extensive workings of the International Panel on Climate Change, and a whole number of Untied Nations initiatives. The most prominent, The COP programme, the decision-making body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, has run since it was signed in 1992 and then made 'effective' in 1994, originally with 165 nation-state signatories. From the landmark COP3 in Kyoto, Japan, 1997, to 2024's COP29 (Azerbaijan), it has become ever-more high stakes and high-profile in political and media terms as the GEC unfolds around it. Environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the World Wildlife Fund are now large and prominent international players with a least some dialogue with national and international governance processes.

But how governments can meaningfully respond and drive radically transformative change is hard to see, because the collective everyday life in the modern developed / developing world, is *systemically unsustainable.* The crisis is utterly embedded in the modern cultures and economies we all live in.

Calls for radical adjustments to modern society are being made by many groups and individuals, notably the Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil movements, and activists such as Greta Thunberg are now penetrating mainstream culture, media, and politics. But those penetrations are just fleeting flickerings of news items, books, documentaries, brief spates of social media content, within the maelstrom of all other narratives that comprise modern culture.

One example of successful global cooperation to address a global environmental crisis was The Montreal Protocol, finalised in 1987, which was an agreement to phase out industrial chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), commonly used in refrigeration systems. These were revealed to be breaking down the all-important ozone layer in the atmosphere that protects the biosphere from solar radiation. This is often held out to be a hopeful example of global cooperation in the face of existential environmental threat (e.g. Rapid Change Alliance 2019).

Why was this a successful response to this severe environmental challenge? Firstly, it was a very specific and precise problem to address, and, more importantly, it could be addressed without challenging, or seeking to reverse, the logics of production and consumption of GCCC in any serious way. Science and industry very quickly found new forms of production and new chemicals to replace CFCs, so processes of consumption could continue on uninterrupted.

There cannot be an overly sharp binary drawn between consumption and creativity. There clearly are elements of creativity in many forms of consumption and vice versa. But I argue that the principle is one of value. Your identity, community and lifestyle should not be generated primarily through the consumption of goods and services that are laid out before you by GCCC, but by other, more genuinely ecological and social affordances of nature-culture. I think it is reasonable to say that many non-modern, mostly First-Nation / Indigenous communities and cultures were and are creative in eco-social terms. They have been living, often over millennia, in close relation to their landscapes and environments, shaping local landscape and biodiversity over time in productive creative ways.

Caring for self, family, community, place and nature in more collective nurturing, creative ways have, as Karpf (2021) points out, long been central themes of feminist and ecofeminist thinking. These are just some examples of the many counter-ecocidal philosophies, politics and activisms at large, but their aggregate force remains, as Schütze et al. (2022), sum up, 'miniscule' in relation to the overpowering forces of ongoing GCCC.

We need to have senses of alternative forms of globalised meshworks of creative non-modern cultures, creativity and resistance. There are examples to be inspired by. The various alliances of Indigenous peoples are a good example, such as the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. Not only do such cultures offer a stand against the cultural toxicities of modernity, they are often bound up in fighting for the conservation of some of the key remaining areas of biodiverse wildlands remaining on earth. They are resisting the spread of toxic dwelling and the ecocide it entails. I will leave the last words of this section to another example, the Deep Commons Collective (2021: n.pag.), who are seeking 'to co-imagine and cultivate ecologies of solidarity and care beyond capitalism, anthroparchy, patriarchy, racism and the State'. Their recent mission statement chimes very much with what I have written above:

> We are living in the midst of an unprecedented planetary emergency. By far the greatest challenge that humanity has faced in its brief history. [...] The ferocity with which human beings are consuming resources is literally destroying our web of life, constructed over billions of years, upon which all of us, human and non-human, depend for survival. [...] *Our collective ability to co-imagine a rational and timely response to this threat is being undermined by the moment-to-moment siphoning and redirection of our attention through the processes of digital capitalism – with our thoughts, desires, and even our imaginations, being limited and shaped*

by this algorithmic conditioning. […] But it is not the entanglement itself that imprisons us. […] It is the seizure and control by the forces of capital – of the entangled systems and flows within which we continuously reproduce ourselves and the world that we must confront. It is here where our freedom can be won or lost. (2021: n.pag.)

Conclusion

The argument made in this paper is that the current era of capitalism, possibly the climatic burnout of capitalism I have termed GCCC, creates many dazzling worlds of images, products, information and narratives within which most modern people live, either as consumers or producers, or both. The depths and textures of these worlds become ever-greater through remorseless processes of proliferation. Modern people, to differing degrees and in differing ways, construct and practice their everyday lives and their very identities through engagement with these worlds.

The processes of consumer capitalism, which create and drive these ways of modern life exploit the innate human need to dwell in experientially rich lifeworlds. Processes of marketing and branding have been adapted to affectively colonise culture at the individual and collective level. Identities are performed through dwelling within the entangled worlds of material and narrative consumption. The collective modern life that GCCC has created is separated from the ecological weave of life and overwhelmingly toxic to it.

This toxicity proliferates not just in the processes of consumption and their impact on consumers, but also in the wider economic, industrial, cultural and political matrix which extracts resources and labour; produces goods and services; markets goods and services; and generates huge amounts of negative socio-environmental externalities along the way, as well as huge amounts of waste. This is not only the process that is driving the current, unimaginably serious, and ultimately tragic era of ecocide we are now deeply enmeshed in, but is also the process that stops alternative forms of sustainable social organisation from arising at a sufficient scale to change our destructive direction of travel. Ecologies of toxicity run through the three ecologies: between hard, physical pollution of the environment and 'soft', mental pollution of everyday becoming.

These processes currently entrap modern society on its destructive path, even as the deadly nature of that path becomes ever clearer. In many ways humans are remarkably resilient. This is evidenced by the very many situations where people still seek to live lives of some dignity and satisfaction, even in situations of extreme adversity created by modernity, capitalism and GCCC. This resilience of people enables GCCC to continue.

We are 'locked in' (Schütze et al. 2022: 29) because the modern world is so engrossing, exciting, beguiling and noisy, so that alternative narratives and practices of becoming, or dwelt life, have little chance of becoming cultural and politically dominant. It is not the case that ecological forms of citizenship and becoming can slowly grow within the fabrics of GCCC, as it is innately toxic to that good ecology. There are many examples of resistance and alternative practice, as touched upon above, but the collective energy and impact of all that is easily overwhelmed by the ongoing powers and momentums of GCCC.

Endnotes

[1] The genesis of the concept can be precisely located in Heidegger's essay 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking'. This is one of seven essays in the work *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971/1993), but the notion of dwelling captures much of the ambition in Heidegger's later work (see Malpas 2008 for a detailed account of Heidegger's engagements with space, place and dwelling).

[2] See Wildlife Trusts and RSPB (2016).

[3] See Mellor (2016) for a recent assessment of the impact of the Five Freedoms and recent developments of the approach.

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