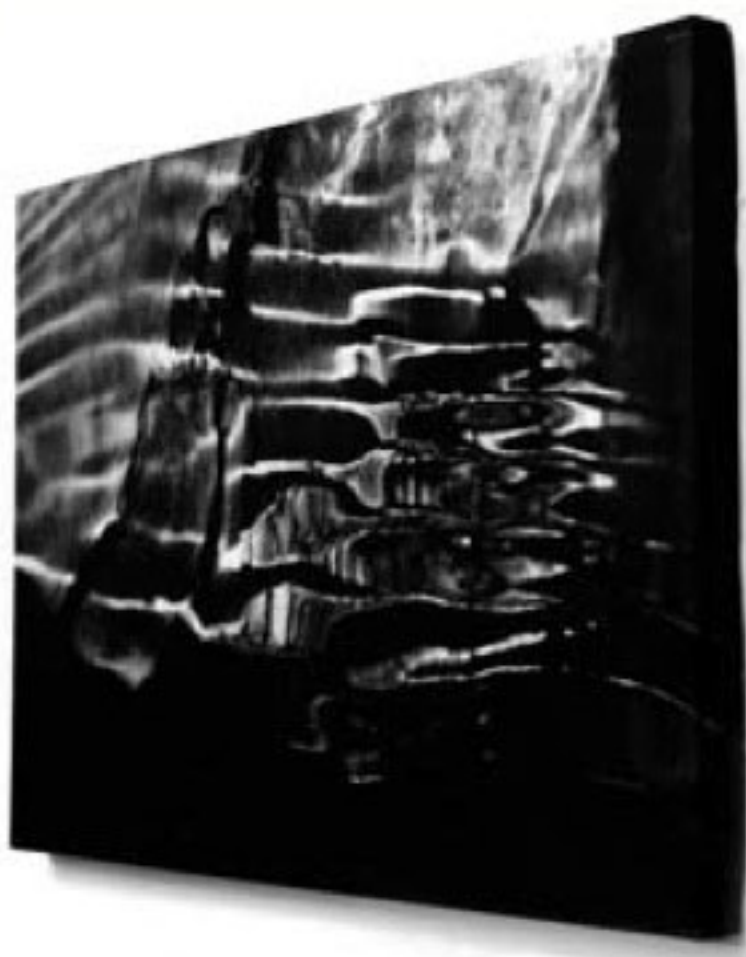


Ecology on the path to crossing the Postmodern divide

Interfacing Postmodernism and radical environmental philosophy – a different world too far? Michael Zimmerman finds grounds for new hybrids within *Reinventing Nature*



Reinventing Nature: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction
ed. Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease,
Washington DC, Island Press, 1995,
186pp, \$U.S. 17.95 paperback

The environmental movement is passing through difficult times, not only because of changed political fortunes, but because of challenges to prevailing views about 'truth', 'reality' and 'nature'. In part, these challenges arise from the complex phenomenon called 'postmodernism'. At first glance, environmentalism would seem to have something in common with postmodernism, since the latter questions modernity's doctrines of progress and anthropocentric humanism, which have justified the ecologically destructive practices of industrial societies. With the

apparent decline of human-centred ideologies, some environmentalists hope that ecologically-oriented worldviews will arise that may dramatically limit future damage to the planet, or at least that liberal capitalism will transform its currently destructive practices. There are promising signs favouring such scenarios, but there is no assurance that they will come to pass.

It was concern about the potentially *negative* environmental consequences of postmodernism, however, that led to the publication of the volume. According to co-editor Michael Soulé, postmodernism may signal not the rise of an affirmative humanity-nature relationship, but rather the global diffusion of a consumerist mentality that lacks effective ideological opposition. Environmentalists hope that their movement will provide the critical alternative necessary to slow liberal capitalism, the major political ideology remaining after the collapse of communism. Postmodernism, however, challenges the concepts in terms of which supporters of modernity and environmentalists alike define and experience 'nature'. In its anthropocentric political ideologies, modernity made clear that 'man' not only differs from, but is superior to nature.¹ Though environmentalists deny that humankind is exceptional in any way that justifies exploitative treatment of nature, they retain a version of the nature-humankind distinction. According to this version, 'real' nature refers primarily to wilderness areas, such as 'old growth' forests, which have not been sullied by human activity. To protect the virgin 'natural' status of wilderness, it must be sealed off from human intervention. But postmodernism seems to say that there is no reality independent of human experience, while contemporary science maintains that there are no 'wildlands' untouched by humankind. If the nature worth protecting is *pristine* nature, and if there is no pristine nature on earth, environmentalists would seem to have no basis for objecting to what humans have been doing all along – dramatically altering nature to promote human well-being.