The Apotheosis of Montage: The Videomosaic Gaze of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* as Postmodern Ecological Sublime

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> The postmodern viewer . . . is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference; such a viewer is asked to follow the evolutionary mutation of David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* . . . and to rise somehow to a level at which the vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the word *collage* is still only a very feeble name.
>
> —Fredric Jameson (1991: 31)

> Modern visual technologies (TV, cinema, binoculars), rather than encouraging specular, voyeuristic distancing, can help breach the historical, evolutionary, and geographical distances between man and other species, creating an uncanny and disturbing proximity, producing dramatic images that call for ethical understanding and behavior.
>
> —Nick Kaldis (2007: 94)

> And the scene in each of the tiny ommatidia that compose every compound eye is completely different with each passing instant. Watching carefully, the man's mind is helplessly

mesmerized by the instantaneous images playing in each ommatidium: could be an erupting undersea volcano, might be a falcon's-eye view of a landscape, perhaps just a leaf about to fall. Each seems to be playing a kind of documentary.

—Wu Ming-Yi (2013: 276)

Introduction: Agency, Objectivity, and Subjectivity in Anthropocene Era Ecocriticism

Wu Ming-Yi's (2011*a*) *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (Fuyanren) is the first Taiwanese novel to be published in English translation by a major trade publisher, by Random House under the Vintage Pantheon imprint in the United States and under the Harvill Secker imprint in Great Britain. The translation has made a modest splash. It was reviewed for *The Guardian* (Aw 2013) and *National Public Radio Books* (Sheehan 2014). It was blurbed by Ursula Le Guin and Hugh Howie. Margaret Atwood tweeted. Corey Byrnes (2014) has brought it to the attention of the Chinese sinological community with his review of my translation (Wu 2013).

The novel is essentially about a collective response to environmental disaster. The plastic in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, also known as the Pacific Trash Vortex, forms a floating trash mountain, part of which crashes on Taiwan's east coast in several giant waves. One of the waves throws Atile'i, a young man from the island of Wayo Wayo who has been expelled from his home in a Polynesian form of population control and taken sanctuary on the garbage vortex, onto the shore of Haven County, modeled on Hua-lien County in eastern Taiwan.[1] There he meets Alice, a Taiwanese professor of literature who, metafictionally, is named after Lewis Carroll's heroine. Atile'i guides Alice on a journey through a pristine wilderness to a sheer mountain wall in the center of the island in search of her Danish husband, Thom, and their son, Toto, who have disappeared. Meanwhile, in the wake of the disaster, Alice's aboriginal friends, Hafay and Dahu (and Dahu's daughter, Umav), have thrown themselves into the effort to clean the trash off the shore. Two foreign friends, Detlef and Sara,

[1] In the original the place is called H County (H *xian*). The decision to call it Haven in translation was my own.

join the cleanup effort. Detlef is a German tunneling expert who helped build the largest tunnel in Taiwan's history (modeled on the Hsueh Shan Tunnel from Taipei to Ilan). Sara, Detlef's girlfriend, is a Norwegian marine biologist who has come to Taiwan to study the effects of the garbage on local flora and fauna.

Three of the characters, Hafay, Dahu, and Thom, meet a man with compound eyes, who represents not only a total view of nature that integrates the limited views of individuals but also, as I argue in this essay, technological mediation. Similarly, as a multistranded narrative, *The Man with the Compound Eyes* integrates all the limited, individual narratives that comprise it. In my reading of the novel, the reader's ability to reframe at the global level and to recontextualize individual narratives into a collective narrative are preconditions for the kind of collective ecological action in which Dahu, Hafay, Detlef, Sara, and others engage. Further, by writing a novel with such a convoluted plot, which begins with limited, seemingly unrelated perspectives and narratives and ends by incorporating them into a larger whole, Wu Ming-Yi is testing the reader's ability to reframe and recontextualize ecologically.

In Taiwan and around the world, the novel's success represents a change in the taste of the reading public, which has "discovered (or rediscovered) nature," to adapt Robert Weller's term from his *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*. As an anthropologist, Weller focuses on the multicultural contexts of human–nature relations, including representations. A Wellerian reading of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* would discuss the novel's multicultural inspirations. Three articles by local ecocritics, in fact, have approached it as a work in which the vernacular or local blends with the cosmopolitan or global (Chou 2014; Juan 2016; Chang 2016). These ecocritics note in particular Wu Ming-Yi's appropriation of Taiwanese indigenous culture into the environmental cause. In contrast to Corey Byrnes, who sees in Wu's appropriation "a primitive romanticism so retrograde as to seem almost

ironic" (Byrnes 2014; cf. Chou 2014: 2–3), Kathryn Chang (2016: 102–106) believes that Wu is sincere, and that what he is appropriating is not just a modern fantasy but a fact of contemporary indigenous experience in Taiwan. Indigenous experience invests the novel with a sense of nature's agency, because "mountain caves, earthquakes, waves, the sea, and all of nature are full of agency in Wu's writing."[2] Wu's sense of nature's agency is also stylistic, as seen in the mountain that makes, as if on purpose, an immense but distant sound (Wu 2013: 9). Indeed, the mountain is the subject of the first sentence of the novel and seems to be an agent, in both a semantic and a philosophical sense, not just the cause or the source of the sound. Narratively and stylistically, then, Wu is challenging the Western philosophical assumption that only humans are agents.

[2] Chang 2016: 96. Although it is not my purpose here to discuss whether Wu's representation is primitivist, I would like to note that he includes Enlightenment-style skepticism in his narrative, in the character of Dahu. With his graduate degree in forest ecology, Dahu doubts his hunter father's animist beliefs, without going so far as to discount them (Wu 2013: 100–101). At the same time, the scientist Detlef comes to doubt his objective view of nature, partly as a result of engagement with people like Dahu.

Timothy Morton (2013) has launched another challenge to the same assumption. Gwennaël Gaffric (2014*a*) was the first to interpret *The Man with the Compound Eyes* in Morton's terms, taking the Pacific trash vortex, the gyre into which nature sucks the garbage thrown into the ocean, as a "hyperobject" par excellence. Massively extended in space and time, Morton's hyperobjects are unwieldy, resistant to human knowledge and manipulation. The hyperobjects are also a means by which Morton slights subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Morton (2013: 81) writes: "What is called *intersubjectivity*—a shared space in which human meaning resonates—is a small region of a much larger interobjective configuration space. Hyperobjects disclose *interobjectivity.*"[3] Morton does not collapse the distinction between subject and object; instead, he emphasizes how insignificant the realm of subjectivity is compared with the object world. To every object, which, as Morton pronounces two hundred pages into his monograph, is also a hyperobject (201), Morton extends the capacity to act, which Western philosophy has reserved for human subjects: "hyperobjects are agents" (29), he claims. Either we now have to join Timothy Morton and ascribe agency to objects, or we can try to expand the circle of subjectivity, and with it agency, to include things previously regarded as mere objects.

[3] I am grateful to one of the blind peer reviewers for drawing my attention to this quotation.

Which alternative best characterizes *The Man with the Compound Eyes*? In his doctoral dissertation, Gwennaël Gaffric, Wu Ming-Yi's French translator, argues that Wu enlarges the circle of subjectivity to at least include animals. Gaffric invokes the pan-faunal semiotics of Jakob Von Uexküll, who claims every animal to be a subject that interprets signs after its own fashion in its objective world (Gaffric 2014*b*: 304). Rather than simply as objects, animals should also be seen as fellow subjects, each with its own subjective world.

Von Uexküll extends subjectivity to nonhuman animals, but Wu Ming-Yi, in my view, goes much further, including all living and all nonliving things within the sphere of subjectivity. Kathryn Chang (2016: 104) understands this when she writes that Wu ascribes subjectivity to fig trees. In a passage I discuss in more detail later in the essay, Wu Ming-Yi describes a cloud in the novel as having a gaze and by implication subjectivity (Wu 2013: 96). Obviously, not all subjects are created equal. We cannot very well expect a cloud to be the same kind of subject, or ethical agent, as a human being, but by assigning a gaze, and by implication a subjectivity, to a cloud, Wu Ming-Yi is including clouds in his circle of ethical concern. The gaze, according to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, is the reason why we enter an ethical relation with the other (see Bergo 2015). For Levinas, the prototypical other is helpless, at the mercy of the person who gazes upon him or her. In *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, however, the cloud may not be so helpless. Wu Ming-Yi (2013: 54) writes of nature fighting back, implying that a cloud is an agent in however archaic an ethical system, archaic because it is based solely on the principle of revenge: if people dump garbage in the ocean, eventually the ocean will take revenge and dump the garbage back into places where people live. Whatever Wu Ming-Yi's attitude to the idea of nature fighting back, its presence in his novel complicates the Anthropocene, a geochronological label that reflects the assumption that human activity now constitutes *the* most significant geological force. For proponents of the Anthropocene, the effects of human activity are ubiquitous. Although there may be compelling arguments for

the new label, humanity in Wu's novel remains within nature, which itself remains actively resistant to humanity.[4] Instead of all-powerful human beings constructing an all-encompassing context for nature, turning all of nature into a park or a mine, nature remains for Wu the larger context for human activity. Nature is no longer simply the object world, manipulated by humans, it is also subjective. A human encounter with anything in nature is therefore intersubjective. The man with the compound eyes, who symbolizes the subjectivity of nature as a whole, can therefore be described as a hypersubject.[5] Hypersubjectivity includes intersubjectivity (the relation between, for instance, a man looking up at a cloud and the cloud that is gazing back at him), as well as a leap to a higher ("hyper") level of analysis, an ecosystemic level at which all subjects are looking at one another at once in a sort of holistic gaze that does not cancel out the gazes of individuals.

As a man (*ren*), the man with the compound eyes is an anthropomorphization of nature (Chang 2016: 95). He also symbolizes a composite vision of nature, a "mosaic vision" in Serena Chou's (2014: 7) suggestive turn of phrase. What critics seem to have missed is that he is also a technologically mediated vision of nature. Rose Juan (2016: 85–90) is quite right to contrast the imaginary island of Wayo Wayo and Taiwan's east coast with "techno-capitalist Taiwan," but we should also realize that the man with the compound eyes is a product of techno-capitalism. This is so because his eyes are described as television screens or liquid crystal displays. Liou Liang-ya (2008: 104), the only critic to my knowledge to draw attention to the man's eyes as metaphors for technological mediation, writes about "how modern technologies such as camera and film revive or transform human beings' mimetic power" in her essay on Wu Ming-Yi's untranslated novella "The Man with the Compound Eyes" (Fuyanren, 2002). By way of explanation, Liou cites Walter Benjamin's classic essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," on how the snapshot, the close-up shot, and the slow motion shot transform our experience of

[4] The politics behind this interrogation of the idea of the Anthropocene should not be misunderstood. Wu Ming-Yi is not saying that nature can take whatever we throw at it, and that environmental policy is hence unnecessary. He acknowledges that to some extent we do dominate nature and, to that extent, we should try to set nature free, as made explicit in title of Wu's three-volume work of nature writing, *Writing to Liberate Nature*.

[5] Not surprisingly, Morton has thought of the term "hypersubjectivity" already, but he defines it differently than I do: Donald Trump is his typical hypersubject, as compared with the heroic hyposubject, who stays below the radar and lives on his or her own terms (Boyer/Morton 2016).

space-time, revealing "entirely new structural formations of the subject" (Liou 2008: 117; Benjamin 1968: 236). However, Liou does not elaborate on these new structural formations, and neither does Benjamin in this essay. Nor does Liou apply Benjamin's inchoate theory of technologically mediated subjectivity to a close reading of descriptions of the man with the compound eyes, which might shed light on the point of the thought experiment Wu Ming-Yi is asking us to conduct: to imagine that a cloud can have its own perspective, and that there is a postmodern technological means of reframing all perspectives into a total view. In addition to performing such a close reading, in this essay I sketch out a video editing, particularly montage, model of subjectivity.

The kind of video montage that plays in each ommatidium, each mini-eye, in the eyes of the man with the compound eyes could be produced on PC-based nonlinear editing software. However, myriad montages are playing simultaneously, a scene stretching to infinity the powers of the human imagination and certainly the capabilities of any nonlinear editing setup. For the benefit of beings of finite imagination, the man with the compound eyes recursively integrates or reframes the montages into a composite image in which the individual images do not get pixilated. He displays a videomosaic montage, at which one gazes at the same time as one is gazed at, as is the case in any intersubjective encounter. By combining myriad perspectives in his hypersubjectivity, the man with the compound eyes is the apotheosis—meaning both deified personification and ultimate example—of montage.

I imagine that this montage model of subjectivity might appeal to the author, Wu Ming-Yi. Wu's undergraduate degree was in mass communications, with a specialization in advertising. Graduating in the early 1990s, he would likely have received training in the first nonlinear video editing software. My montage model might also appeal to one of Wu's indigenous characters, the adolescent Umav, who seems to her father, Dahu, "a new breed of Bunun" (Wu 2013: 120) because she spends so much

of her time on the Internet. By going online Umav might lose herself in virtual worlds, but she can also connect through the Internet to the real world, and go out to explore it with a smartphone or tablet, like the tablet the character Sara uses to call up information about the Clearwater Cliffs, located just north of Haven (Wu 2013: 232) (as the Clearwater Cliffs are located just north of Hua-lien in real life).. In his treatment of the ecologically embedded dimension of contemporary postmodern life, then, Wu's primitivism is anything but retrograde. Whatever premodern cultural inspirations one may cite for the man with the compound eyes, he is most importantly a symbol of the audiovisual technologies that mediate our relationship with nature. Although the technologies themselves, and the images they display, are objects, they can serve as vehicles of subjectivity, of the gaze, including the gazes of individuals and of the ecosystems they inhabit. The arresting gazes of nature draw the reader into an ethical relationship; the ecological gaze of Wu's man with the compound eyes reinscribes the reader into ecology. Judging from the reactions of Hafay, Dahu, and Thom, the characters in the novel who encounter the man with the compound eyes, the ecological gaze is overwhelming. To account for the man with the compound eyes as an awe-inspiring figure and to situate him in postmodern technological terms (Jameson 1991: 37), I invoke the sublime, which in the following section I trace from Immanuel Kant to Fredric Jameson to ecology.

The Subjective Sublime from Kant to Jameson and Ecology

In the Western tradition, the awesome power of nature—and works of art that evoke it—has long been described as sublime. "The sublime" became a keyword in Western aesthetic theorization in the eighteenth century. In reaction to the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on elegance and order, the romantics valorized wilderness: they found the sublime in an alpine forest, not a classical garden. The first major modern theorist of the sublime was Edmund Burke, who offered a psychological explanation in his *Philosophical*

Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) for why we find the sublime in stunning natural landscapes. According to Burke (2008: 36), the sublime "operates in a manner analogous to terror," akin to the terror of God. Burke's most important critic with respect to his views on the sublime was Immanuel Kant, who launched a project he called Copernican, which was a revolution of perspective: he reoriented his philosophy around the human subject, bracketing God. In the last of his critiques of the constitution of human subjectivity, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant theorized aesthetic judgment. Like Burke, Kant contrasted the sublime and the beautiful, claiming that the beautiful, by appearing purposively formed, provokes a harmonious play of the imagination and understanding, whereas the sublime, seemingly formless, causes psychic tension. The experience of a sublime object so vast or powerful that the human mind cannot contain it humiliates the subject; the subject resolves this sense of humiliation through an inward turn leading to the discovery of an all-encompassing concept—infinity—that contains any putatively sublime object of experience. The true sublime cannot be "contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason" (Kant 2007: 76), reason being the faculty in Kant's philosophy with control over the idea of infinity. What is truly sublime is the mind's own power to comprehend when "the straining of the imagination" (95) falls short. Kant's account of the sublime intimates an inward turn, a turn away from nature.

Kant wrote at the cusp of the industrial revolution, when it became increasingly easy to turn away from nature by mining nature's materials to build artificial environments for human dwelling. Modern industry has vastly expanded the human capacity to transform nature; this transformation has been described as sublime (Wilson 1991), the aesthetic of the innovation by which nature's forces are brought under control. The sublime can be experienced through direct encounter, but scholars tend to study representations, the sublime aesthetic in works of literary and visual art—in other words, a mediated sublime. Scholars also tend to be

interested in the effects of mediated sublime. For instance, ecocritics hope that sublime images, such as the first Earthview—the first photograph of the earth from outer space—will inspire people *with* a sense of planetary belonging and *to* collective ecological action. To Fredric Jameson, the most influential theorist of the mediated sublime, however, the postmodern condition undermines the agency political participation depends on. If the modern condition was alienation, the postmodern condition is the fragmentation of the individual subject. Each subject fragment is an image addict. Jameson invokes Jacques Lacan, who described schizophrenia as "a breakdown in the signifying chain" (Jameson 1991: 26) that resulted in fragmentation. The fragmented subject's submergence in the flow of fragmented images and texts is, according to Jameson, "something like a camp or 'hysterical' sublime" (34). This sublime is campy partly in the sense of being superficial; and the subject fragment drowns in image fragments as a hysteric is engulfed by emotions.

Yet there is hope: the fragment can still try to understand its relationship to the whole and act on it. The fragment's image addiction, according to Jameson, is "a tangible symptom of an omnipresent, omnivorous, and well-nigh libidinal historicism" (18). The superficial subject fragment longs for a sense of history that would restore depth and context. Just as nineteenth-century writers and artists, such as William Wordsworth and Caspar David Friedrich, and their twentieth-century successors, such as Hart Crane and Ernest Lawson (see Legro 2014), represented the romantic and modern sublimes in alpine and urban scenes, respectively, Jameson saw in certain works of contemporary postmodern literary and visual art attempts to represent the postmodern mediatized sublime via an aesthetic of "schizoprenic fragmentation" (28). One literary example Jameson gives is a poem titled "China," by Bob Perelman, part of which reads:

> The landscape is motorized.
> The train takes you where it goes.

> Bridges among water.
> Folks straggling along vast stretches of concrete, heading into the plane. (quoted in Jameson 1991: 28)

The lines in the poem are randomly juxtaposed, each corresponding to a reproduction of a photograph in a book of images of faraway China that Perelman apparently picked up in Chinatown in San Francisco. Unlike the sublimes of Wordsworth and Crane, there is no obvious *grand récit* here, no collective narrative of a return to nature or a triumphant overcoming of nature. There is not even a clear narrative. What plane, one wonders? No answer is forthcoming, because it was some plane in a photograph we readers will never see, a photograph of a place Perelman never visited or never will visit. There is no obvious connection between the lines (or the photographs) except for the common theme of industrialization as a fait accompli. Grammatically, the presentation is strikingly paratactic, in contrast to the narrative hypotaxis of Perelman's sublime poet predecessors.

Perelman's poem was inspired by visual media, and Jameson also gives visual, both film and video, examples of the postmodern sublime that were produced, like the Perelman poem, by a paratactic principle of seemingly random juxtaposition. A film example Jameson cites is *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (dir. Nicolas Roeg, 1976):

> The postmodern viewer, however, is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference; such a viewer is asked to follow the evolutionary mutation of David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (who watches fifty-seven [sic] television screens simultaneously) and to rise somehow to a level at which the vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the word *collage* is still only a very feeble name. (Jameson 1991: 31)

In the scene Jameson refers to, David Bowie, who plays a space alien on a visit to earth, sits watching twelve television sets at the same time, intending

thereby to understand (and exploit) the world he has come to. All he ends up experiencing, however, is "a camp or 'hysterical' sublime" (Jameson 1991: 34).

Via the shot/reverse shot setup, which cuts back and forth between the television screens and the David Bowie character watching them, the spectator is invited to adopt the character's perspective of a mind-blowing montage of images (figs. 1 and 2). The director Nicolas Roeg cuts to pairs

Figure 1: Shot of David Bowie experiencing a mediatized sublime. DVD still.

Figure 2: Reverse shot of what Bowie sees, a television wall. DVD still.

of screens, first to a kiss in a romance film juxtaposed with a man welding something; then to a two-shot from *Mutiny on the Bounty* juxtaposed with an over-the-shoulder shot of a black man chanting to a white interlocutor, while "Blue Bayou" plays and gunfire rings in the background. And so on. The objects of sublime experience are now randomly juxtaposed Baudrillardian simulacra, concocted in the imaginations of unknown screenwriters. The juxtapositions may suggest something to the thoughtful viewer who has the luxury of hitting pause—an ironic contrast between the lover who has leisure to love and the worker who must work, a narrative of resistance against racist imperialism—but they can mean little to most viewers, not to mention the deracinated David Bowie character. Without any sense of the history of or cultural context for the screen images, the alien's mind strains helplessly to make sense of what he sees, but instead of an appeal to Kantian infinity, the only response seems to be: this is incoherent to me.

Another example Jameson gives of the visual sublime is by Nam June Paik (Jameson 1991: 31), the Korean-American experimental video pioneer, who gave the world the first videomosaics, bank of video screens set up as installation art. In the still presented here, a bird flies across a wall of televisions (fig. 3). As a videomosaic, it is a composite image, unlike the most famous television wall in recent film history: the Architect scene in *Matrix Reloaded* (dir. Wachowski/Wachowski, 2003), in which the screens on a wall show either Neo or scenes from his childhood (or scenes from unrelated [and probably imaginary] people's lives). But like Nicolas Roeg and the Wachowskis, Nam June Paik seems interested in human–nature relations, particularly in the way in which the natural world is still nostalgically inscribed in the radically artificial space of the video screen, a space in which postmodern subjects are often confined.

For Fredric Jameson, the cause of the postmodern condition was a loss of memory of nature specifically and of history in general (Jameson 1991: ix). The way out would presumably include a recovery of a body of collective memory that would put everything into context. Context might not lead

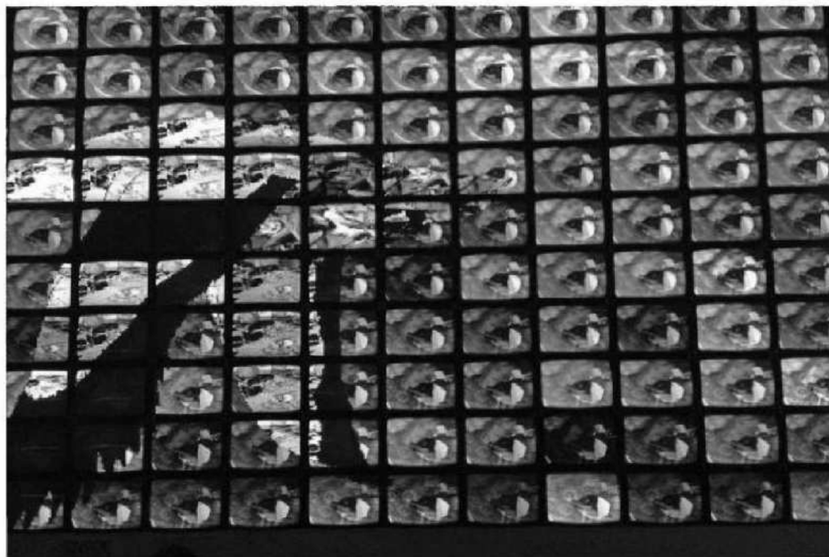

Figure 3: A still from Nam June Paik's Megaton/Matrix (1995). URL (accessed 2/2/15): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuaJAgx0x_4

denizens of concrete worlds and liquid crystal worlds back to nature, but as ecologically concerned citizens we might try to ecologize Jameson. Ecocritics have indeed ecologized the sage of Cleveland, proposing the geopolitical unconscious (Ivakhiv 2008) or biopolitical unconscious (Medovoi 2009) as well as slogans such as "Always Ecologize!" (Grusin 2002: 651), a riff on "Always historicize!" (Jameson 1981: 9). Jameson's political master narrative is thereby recontextualized in a larger narrative of ecology. By recontextualizing Jameson, ecocritics suggest that while we "wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (Jameson 1981: 19), we should also consider what the environment, Jameson's (and Marx's) "realm of Necessity," might have to contribute to politics. To my knowledge, no one has articulated an ecological reading of Jameson's postmodern sublime.

There have certainly been proposals for an ecological sublime. Lee Rozelle (2006: 1) explains that the subject of the "ecosublime," a term he appears to have coined, would experience "awe and terror of a heightened

awareness of the ecological home," and points out that the "eco" in "ecological" means "home." For Christopher Hitt (1999: 617), "an ecological sublime would offer a new kind of transcendence which would resist the traditional reinscription of humankind's supremacy over nature" and "jolt us momentarily out of a perspective constructed by reason and language, a perspective that, in modern Western culture, has rendered nature mute."

Hitt implies that an ecological sublime would give nature voice, which is precisely what we find in *The Man with the Compound Eyes*. For instance, in the description of the vortex hitting the shore, the resulting wave "spoke with a cosmic voice, as if the risen moon had been silently storing up sound ever since time began and now let it out, all at once, in one great burst" (Wu 2013: 130; cf. Chang 2016: 95). In this scene, nature has a voice but not a gaze. The gaze is assigned to the media crews camped out on the coast, waiting to record the big moment; when it finally arrives, the reporters are all "transfixed, as if their feet were shackled to the road" (Wu 2013: 130), so that none of them gets a good shot of the wave as it hits the shore (let alone a shot from the wave's perspective). Wu Ming-Yi shows us how the for-profit news media also fail to convey a sense of the gravity of the scene, in that the audience at home finds the jerky video "at once shocking and hilarious" (130).

But Wu Ming-Yi does not despair over the possibility of an ecological postmodern sublime; in fact, he personifies it in the figure of a man with compound eyes.[5] Serena Chou (2014: 2) mentions *Avatar* as a possible inspiration for *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, claiming that like James Cameron's 2009 film, Wu's novel has a (gender bending) Pocahontas plot, but she does not mention what seems to me the most interesting commonality: an avatar is an alter ego inside an MMORPG, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Cameron's film appeals to gamers and other virtual-reality enthusiasts who also happen to be environmentalists. Similarly, Wu's novel appeals to ecologically concerned media-savvy citizens, using a metaphor of videomosiac montage that "gives gaze" to nature.

[5] See Moore 2008 for a history of ecological personifications, none of which anticipate Wu Ming-Yi's.

Wu Ming-Yi's Postmodern Ecological Sublime as Figure and Narrative

In this section, I discuss the unsettling or overwhelming environmental gaze as figured by a man with compound eyes and place it in narrative context to draw out its political implications. I begin with Wu's first story about a man with compound eyes, the novella he published in 2002, and then I proceed to the 2011 novel.

"Fuyanren" (2002)

This novella, henceforth "The Man with the Compound Eyes," is about a researcher who wants to know the destination of a swarm of migratory butterflies. In the year 2002, the researcher is hired by a tour company to help develop a digital nature preserve, a virtual representation of an actual preserve that is a composite of video assembled from live feeds from the preserve. The cameras are like ommatidia, the video assemblage an artificial compound eye. While walking in the actual preserve, however, the researcher meets an actual man with compound eyes. The man asks him why he never thought to place a camera in a way that could present the world from a butterfly's perspective:

> "Haven't you . . . ever wondered how milkweed butterflies see?"
> "How they see?"
> "Yes. See. Haven't you tried? Like a butterfly, to see." (Wu 2016*b*: 383)

Which prompts the researcher to reflect:

> "I suddenly realized that none of the . . . cameras I had placed captured the world seen with the gaze of a milkweed butterfly." (385)

What does the world look like through the compound eyes of a butterfly? As it is impossible to show this through language, we have to be content

with Wu's descriptions of the eyes of the man with the compound eyes:

> If I can believe my vision and memory, his eyes were actually composed of countless tiny units, but they were not regular, honeycomb-esque compound eyes, but like the eyes of many different animals assembled together. I forgot my manners and stared, so deeply attracted was I by that pair of eyes. It was like I was staring at a row of windmills in the countryside of Holland, unable to resist the heartfelt appeal of a certain landscape in my own mind. In every ommatidium was flickering a seemingly familiar but also strange scene. A camphor leaf so caterpillar-eaten it had turned burnt brown; a milkweed, its capsules exploding, its apparently winged achenes blown swiftly out of sight; the track of some mammalian beast hidden by elephant grass and silvergrass; a blue so pure it seemed packaged in blue air; a snowy ground so resplendent it seemed to shine with its own light; and a water surface on which various beams flowed, as if carrying out a performance of light. (388–389)

To state the obvious, this is not a realistic description of compound eyes; the man's eyes appear to be a metaphor for a vision of both man-made and natural worlds. The windmills in the Dutch countryside recall early modern Dutch landscape painting, perhaps one by Jacob van Ruisdael evoking a quaint scene of humankind more or less in harmony with the natural world; it is a scene the researcher finds immensely appealing. But this scene also recalls the importance of the windmill in the Dutch transformation of the environment, including its role in reclaiming wetlands for human use, such as the Beemster Polder. The images of nature he sees in the ommatidia, notable for the beauty and precision with which the author describes them, seem randomly edited into a montage the narrator creates by looking, metaphorically, from screen to screen. Is this montage any easier to make sense of for the researcher than the one in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was for the David Bowie character? Perhaps, although he never volunteers an interpretation. If we look carefully, we can see a kind of progression. From the camphor leaf on, the first few images are biological, implying relations

among plants, insects, and mammals; by contrast, the final few images suggest the nonliving material (air, snow, water) and energetic aspects (light) of an ecosystem. But unless the reader is a life scientist, any attempt to understand the implied connections among these things is bound to fail. The author's aim seems at this point to be aesthetic appreciation, not ecological understanding. The aesthetic appreciation is of images, displayed in the screenlike eyes of the man with the compound eyes. His eyes are screenlike because they flicker, as a pair of actual compound eyes would not. Wu (2016*b*: 378) described the man, in English, as having "flicker fusion" vision, as if he represents a kind of technology.

As the conversation continues, however, the purpose of the flicker fusion technology is revealed. Rather than aesthetic appreciation, its purpose is to induce ecological anxiety:

> The man with the compound eyes said he was less and less able to clearly see this world. As he spoke, the swiftly moving pigments in the tens of thousands of ommatidia clearly conveyed the changes in the spirit inside the body. Those small eyes seemed not to be looking at you, but rather to be displaying the complicated world. A closer look showed that a few of the ommatidia in the compound eyes of the man with the compound eyes had lost their radiance, like shut off lightbulbs, like a world that has closed shop. No, looking close, you saw it wasn't just a few, but tens or hundreds or thousands, and in the moment of the moment in which I looked on, several more went out. (389)

In the second sentence, the eyes seem to evoke the soul, as if the eyes are portals to spirit. But the next line, with the word "display," again suggests that the ommatidia are screens. There is thus a disorienting play in the description between gaze and display. Similarly, the composite image displayed for the viewing pleasure of tourists is called the "Watcher" (the original Chinese uses the English word) (379), as if the machine might be watching the tourists. Moreover, the term "complicated world" is syntactically and semantically ambiguous in the original Chinese: it could

be plural or singular, subjective or objective, definite or indefinite. Is this *the* objective world we can all more or less agree on? Or is this a set of mutually exclusive subjective worlds, my world, not yours or someone else's? Wu Ming-Yi leaves us unsure. What is certain is that the last two sentences represent a kind of mass extinction event. Perhaps "closed shop" (*dayang*) foretells the extinction that will bring an end to the capitalist system, such as is behind the digital nature preserve. At any rate, the only way to stop the extinction is understanding: "If the gazes with which living things regard this world are not understood, everything will come to an end" (390). In other words, it is not that we must understand objects of knowledge, but rather that we must understand how they see, their visual subjectivity, so to speak. In her article on "The Man with the Compound Eyes," Liou Liang-ya (2008: 118) sees the placement of cameras in the nature preserve as an invasive "surveillance" of nature, but the butterflies and other creatures of nature, trees included, observe each other and any human being who takes a walk in the woods. Wu Ming-Yi is asking the reader to be aware of nature's surveillance of people, with a view to transcending it in an intersubjective understanding. This intersubjective understanding is implicitly related to the survival of all life. The interlocutor—the butterfly scientist who has sold out—presumably hears this message on behalf of the entire human race. The message is, moreover, expressed in strikingly coherent, even somewhat hypotactic description and narration, each clause a part of a story with a clear message.

At the end of the story, there is a concrete example of the importance of what one might call narrative understanding. Wu Ming-Yi suddenly effects a cognitive revolution of narrative perspective, revealing that the present time of the story is actually 2022, twenty years after the reader thought the story was set, on the occasion of the deliberate destruction of the moon by nuclear warhead. At some point between 2002 and 2022, scientists discovered that the moon, which guides the butterflies the researcher is studying on the migrations that constitute their life cycle, is

actually the source of many human ills, and that once the moon is destroyed tropical fruits will grow in Siberia. Alas, many tropical fruits are pollinated by butterflies, so the novella suggests that by interfering too drastically in the processes of nature without adequate understanding, we harm "nature," and, because we are part of nature, ourselves.

Fuyanren (2011)

In the 2011 novel, Wu Ming-Yi's compound eye metaphor is more obviously related to narrative structure and narrative understanding. But as with my discussion of the novella, I begin this discussion with passages that depict the environmental gaze and how sublime it can be.

In the novel, Wu explores the gazes of mammals, which we assume to be closer to our own gaze than to that of a milkweed butterfly. Ohiyo, Alice's pet cat, is one example. Ohiyo has one green and one blue eye. Displaying an interest in animal experience, Umav wonders, "do different coloured eyes see the world the same way?" (Wu 2013: 71). The novel ends with Ohiyo looking back at her owner, suggesting the importance of intersubjectivity across species to the interpretation of the novel.

But the most striking example of a mammalian gaze in the novel is the gaze of the sperm whales that commit collective suicide on a beach in Chile. Unlike regular sperm whales, these whales shed tears, because they are the avatars of the second sons of the imaginary island of Wayo Wayo, who were forced to leave home at the age of sixteen on a voyage of almost certain death. They swim for Chile after their home gets destroyed, perhaps in a botched attempt to eliminate other pieces of the trash vortex, perhaps in a nuclear test, such as the French conducted at the Mururoa Atoll.[7] Everyone on the beach where the whales hurl themselves is struck by the sad gazes in their eyes, until the whales die, rot, and explode. Rather than sublime, the spectacle of hundreds of exploding sperm whales seems aesthetically excessive, self-consciously "overwrought" (130). An aesthetic contrast to this kind of depiction can be found in Taiwan nature writer Liu

[7] One second son of Wayo Wayo, Atile'i, is not among the whales. According to the cultural anthropologist David Blundell (private communication), the name "Atile'i" is based on a word in a Polynesian language that means "atoll."

Kexiang's description of a dying whale's gaze. In his article on Liu, Nick Kaldis cites a passage in which Liu gazes "across the distance" at a black whale "in its death throes" (Liu 2003: 123; Kaldis 2007: 94); Liu believes the whale's fate is connected to his own. This scene, which may have been one inspiration for the climax of *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, is rather more understated and therefore less likely to seem ridiculous.

Wu Ming-Yi treats other instances of the environmental gaze with a lighter touch. He describes, for instance, a multiple gaze effect in the protective ocelli, the eyespots, some species of butterfly and moth display on their wings.

> Alice looked away to avoid awkwardness, only to find the window covered in moths, moths of all different colours, many of them with eyespots of different shapes and sizes on their wings. It was as if they were staring at something. (Wu 2013: 98)

> And there were still other moths with eyespots on their wings, like innumerable eyes staring at [Dahu]. Moths like that were usually giant silkworm moths. They don't fly around much, just stick quietly to tree trunks, like they're part of the bark. (110)

> Suddenly a giant silkworm moth flew over and stopped on the map, like a mark, or like a symbol, like an interjection. It opened the eyes on its wings and stared at [Alice]. (245)

The scientific theory of the evolution of ocelli is that they scare potential predators away. We do not have to, as Jacques Lacan does (1978: 73–74) in his *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, deny this scientific theory to entertain other interpretations of the meaning of eyespots in Wu's novel. Inspired by Lacan, I see the eyespots here as metaphors for the intersubjectivity of the gaze, a recognition of the subjectivity of the object. The object-that-becomes-a-subject is unsettling because it makes us aware of our own objectivity. The more such objects, the more unsettling. Multiple eyes cannot be taken in in one glance; this recalls Lacan's (1978: 72)

remark that "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides." An awareness of the ubiquity of the ecological gaze might undermine our sense of the sovereignty of our own individual gaze. The ecological gaze here is literally ubiquitous because it is not limited to the eye. An eyespot is not an eye, after all, but Wu asks us to imagine seeing it as if it were. (Of course, this is the point of an ocellus: potential predators are supposed to think it is an eye.) In this way, the gaze is no longer limited to the eye of a living being but is an agency of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as quoted by Lacan, called "the flesh of the world."[8] The gaze of the flesh of the world is everywhere, or rather there are gazes everywhere, each unique and separate. The man with the compound eyes integrates all the gazes into a single hypersubjective representation.

[8] Lacan 1978: 82. The work by Merleau-Ponty Lacan was referring to is the posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible.*

The reader of the original novel in Chinese first meets the man on the cover (fig. 4): the earth on which a lone figure stands during the hailstorm that immediately precedes the arrival of the tidal wave of refuse in chapter 12 appears to be a compound eye. In fact, Wu Ming-Yi designed the cover using an image of a compound eye from Wikipedia (fig. 5). The man with the compound eyes first appears as a character in the novel to Alice's indigenous friend Hafay, who relates to Alice how she witnessed Kawas, the ancestral spirit of the Amis people, with her own eyes one night when she saw her Ina—her mother—talking to someone:

> I saw someone standing in front of Ina. It was a man. That man was big and tall, and though I couldn't see him clearly I felt he must be a young man, but he also seemed kind of middle-aged and youthful at the same time. He was just like a shadow, one moment big, the next moment small. I heard them, and they seemed to be talking about something. For a moment his eyes met mine, and those eyes were . . . how shall I put it? Ah, it's hard to say. It was like a tiger, a butterfly, a tree and a cloud looking at you all at once. *Aiya*, I know it sounds crazy. (Wu 2013: 96)

Kawas is a shapeshifter that distorts the forms of perception and thought.

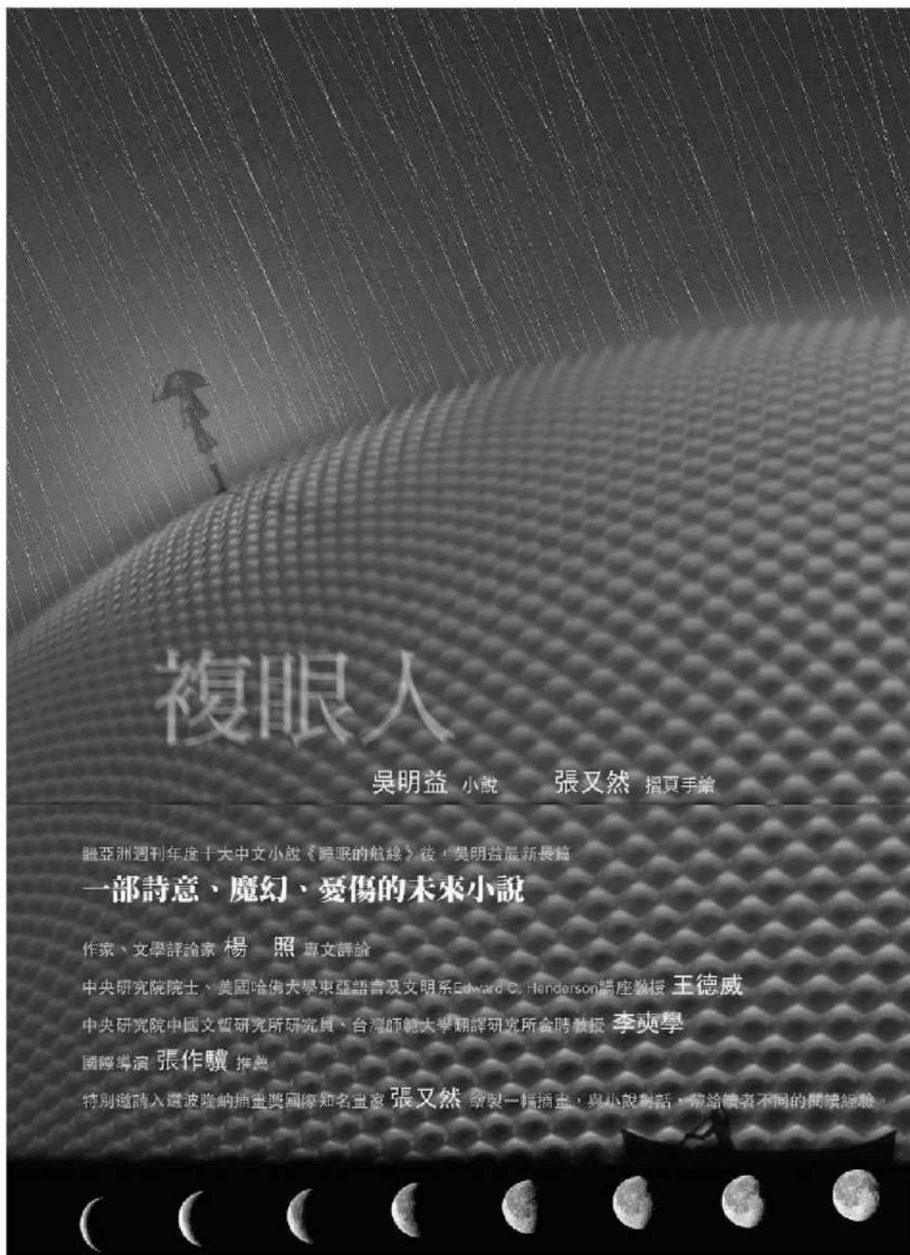

Figure 4: The cover of the original Chinese edition. URL (accessed 2/2/15): http://pic.pimg.tw/biforst01/1371661334-3411110421.jpg

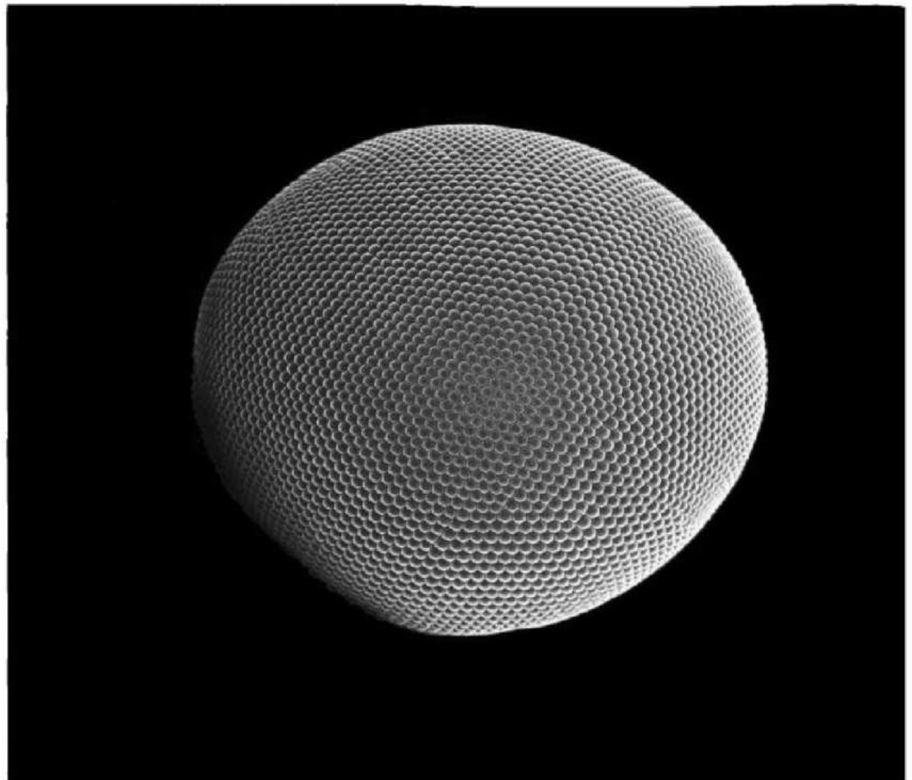

Figure 5: A krill eye. URL (accessed 2/2/15): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye#mediaviewer/File:Krilleyekils.jpg

The gaze of Kawas transcends the animal–plant divide and even th distinction between the living and the nonliving. The gaze of Kawa includes the gazes of a mammal, an insect, a plant, and even a cloud, whic recalls an essay by Aldo Leopold (1949*b*), Wu Ming-Yi's intellectual hero entitled "Thinking Like a Mountain." Rather than a mountain, Wu give us a "cloud" with a gaze and with thoughts. In fact, he gives us the gaz of everything all at once. The superimposition or juxtaposition of gaze "all at the same time" would be impossible to perceive; there needs to b some sort of integration before we can perceive the totality.

One such moment of integration occurs when the man with th compound eyes appears to Dahu, Umav's father, on a hunting expedition

> "I discovered his eyes weren't like human eyes. They were more like compound eyes composed of countless single eyes, the eyes of clouds, mountains, streams, meadowlarks and muntjacs, all arranged together. As I gazed, each little eye seemed to contain a different scene, and those scenes arranged to form a vast panorama the likes of which I had never seen." (Wu 2013: 186)

Here the gazes of nonliving beings, clouds, mountains and streams, come first. What is most notable about this passage, however, is an integration of viewpoints into a "panorama," literally a total view, presumably of an ecosystem.

The man's final appearance is to Thom Jakobsen, Alice's Danish husband. Thom is a thrill-seeker, a mountain climber, who is drawn to a precipice in the depths of the Taiwan wilderness. The description of the precipice recalls John Muir's writings about Yosemite, a stunning, mysterious, religious landscape (Wu 2011*b*: 1: 391). But Wu has specifically cited the "scattered perspective" (*sandian toushi*) of Fan Kuan's landscape painting *Traveler among Mountains and Streams* (Xishan xinglü tu) as another source of inspiration for the depiction of the landscape and the multiperspective vision of the man with the compound eyes.[9] At any rate, Thom dies trying to climb down the precipice at night without any gear, as if seeking the ultimate ecstatic experience of loss of self in death. He slips and falls to the base of the precipice, but does not die immediately. Before he dies, he has a conversation with a man with compound eyes:

> [Thom] notices his counterpart is looking at him, but when their eyes meet it is less like he is looking at someone else and more like he is looking at himself. He closes his eyes again but finds himself haunted by the other's eyes. What amazing eyes the fellow has, as if innumerable tiny ponds have converged into an immense lake. (Wu 2013: 254–255)

Why would Thom be looking at himself? Perhaps he is projecting; perhaps he sees himself mirrored in the man's eyes, seeming himself as the man sees

[9] **Wu made this remark in a talk he gave at the Taipei International Book Fair in 2012.**

him; or perhaps he sees another, global aspect of himself. In this regard, the reflections in the ponds represent individual perspectives, whereas the reflection in the immense lake offers a total vision of nature. With small amounts of water combining to form a larger body, the metaphor also suggests a dissolution of individuality and individual agency, lending support to Serena Chou's (2014: 7) view that Wu's man with the compound eyes "entails an overall teleology of the superorganism, one in which individual agency, rather than hybridity, is sacrificed." In my reading of the novel, however, the only being whose agency is sacrificed is Thom, whose craving for ecstasy leads him to the edge and over. For the living, agency is of course constrained by interactions with others, but the same interactions empower, because it is only through interaction that we have individual agency in the first place. In interacting with the man with the compound eyes, the characters Hafay and Dahu, and even the reader for that matter, are empowered. The man with the compound eyes is a Gaia-like metaphor for a material totality and a corresponding perspective, a total view individuals may adopt to complement their limited views.

In describing the gaze of the man with the compound eyes in terms of an audiovisual technology, Wu Ming-Yi suggests that postmodern media technology might serve as a method for visualizing such a total view:

> In despair [Thom] looks at the man with the compound eyes, as if to use every last ounce of strength to appeal for assistance, but all he sees is the man's compound eyes, which seem to change from moment to moment in hallucinatory permutations and combinations. And the scene in each of the tiny ommatidia that compose every compound eye is completely different with each passing instant. Watching carefully, the man's mind is helplessly mesmerized by the instantaneous images playing in each ommatidium: could be an erupting undersea volcano, might be a falcon's-eye view of a landscape, perhaps just a leaf about to fall. Each seems to be playing a kind of documentary. (Wu 2013: 276)

Each of these eye-screens—"far smaller than [a pinpoint]" (286), completely different with each passing instant—is playing a montage, and each compound eye contains myriad eye-screens. The image the eye-screens are playing together, in their various permutations and combinations, constitutes a videomosaic montage.

In montage editing (Rohdie 2006), images of different provenance are presented sequentially. In the days of celluloid and acetate, they were arranged side by side, literally paratactically. The viewer of a montage is asked to make connections between the images. In early experimental montage, there were connections the director intended the audience to make; in Sergei Eisenstein's *The Strike* (1925), for instance, clips of striking workers are followed by clips of cows going to the slaughter. If there were a narrative connection between the clips, and the workers and animals were part of the same story, the animals would be involved in some way in the strike or the workers in the slaughter. But in this case, the connection is "intellectual," to use the English translation of Eisenstein's term, and metaphorical: the workers are akin to animals going to the slaughter. What kind of connections can we find among the shots in the "documentary" video playing in each ommatidium in Wu's novel? They do not on the face of it seem to be narratively related to each other or to the narrative of *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, in the way that all fragments of film are in the continuity editing developed by D. W. Griffith in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916). A volcano erupting on the ocean floor, a falcon's eye view of a plain, a leaf about to fall—these are not obviously a part of a linear narrative. One could certainly conjure up connections—perhaps the eruption somehow caused the leaf to fall, attracting the attention of the falcon—but there is no prioritizing any particular story. Rather than narratively, the clips seem intellectually related. Unlike an Animal Planet or Discovery Channel episode, which might feature some sort of developmental story taking place within a defined space, the images in the nature montages in the eyes of the man with the compound eyes are

related by a principle of similarity. The similarity seems to be simply that each of these images is a gaze of nature, deserving of acknowledgment and respect.

To make sure the reader gets the point, Wu Ming-Yi offers an elaborate intellectual interpretation through the mouth of the man with the compound eyes, who serves as experimental video critic, explaining what the montages in his eyes mean, for much of chapter 29. Part of the point is the same as in the novella—that survival depends on understanding of the gazes of nature. But, more than his predecessor in the novella, the man with the compound eyes in the novel stresses that nature's perspectives are dynamic, not static. Nature's perspectives are continually changing, just as individual human perspectives are continually changing. Moreover, perceptions, regardless of the perspective, are not projected onto a blank slate, but rather are informed by memory. In fact, any perspective, according to Wu's man, depends on ecosystemic memory. All creatures in an ecosystem therefore depend on each other not just materially but also mentally, mnemonically. Ecosystemic degradation partly involves the extirpation of memories necessary both for survival *in* an ecosystem and for the survival *of* an ecosystem. As the man with the compound eyes puts it:

> "Human existence involves the wilful destruction of the existential memories of other creatures and of your own memories as well. No life can survive without other lives, without the ecological memories other living creatures have, memories of the environments in which they live. People don't realize they need to rely on the memories of other organisms to survive." (281)

The man with the compound eyes has been summarizing the research of Nobel Prize–winning neuropsychiatrist Eric Richard Kandel, mentioned in the novel by name (278), on the physiological bases of memory in sea snails, which are not fundamentally different in human beings. As the man with the compound eyes explains (279), Kandel's (2007) research stresses the commonalities in the mechanisms of human and nonhuman memory and

by implication subjectivity. The man with the compound eyes even claims that nonhuman creatures might have something like narrative memory: "Migratory birds remember the seacoast, whales remember the boat that harpooned them, and seal pups that manage to avoid annihilation will remember the murderous coat-clad, club-carrying creature that chased them" (279). In *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, the incorporation of Kandel's research enriches the concept of ecology, making it experiential and even narratable. The mention of Kandel's theory makes a reinterpretation of the video clips playing in each ommatidium possible: instead of live feeds, they may be seen as recordings, or memories. Perhaps it was a memory that made the protagonist of the novella respond so strongly to the Dutch landscape with the windmills. Memories are stored in any creature's mind, but only human beings may preserve memory technologically, in visual or textual form. The man with the compound eyes is a figure representing a visual technology for the storage of collective memory, and *The Man with the Compound Eyes* is a symbol of a corresponding textual technology.

A translation between the visual and the textual is provided by the foldout artwork in the original Chinese edition of the novel (Wu 2011*a*) (fig. 6). Atile'i provides another such translation. After he meets Alice on

Figure 6: Artist Zhang You-ran's manga-esque visualization of the events of the novel.

the shore of Haven County, he tells her his story by narrating the pictures he has painted (and repainted) on the palimpsest of his skin: "The picture on the left side of my belly is of the day Alice saved me. I used the pen she gave to me to draw her reflection in my eyes when I was held fast in the earth. And the trees behind her, too" (Wu 2013: 164). Atile'i describes, rather unrealistically, a painting of a person in whose eyes another person's reflection can be seen. Even more unrealistically, we might try to imagine a reflection of Atile'i in Alice's eyes in the painting, creating an intersubjective *mise en abyme*. At any rate, when Atile'i explains the pictures, he tells Alice his story, establishing an ekphrastic interface between visual symbols, such as the man with the compound eyes, and narratives, such as *The Man with the Compound Eyes*.

The most important feature the man and the novel share is integration. Wu Ming-Yi suggests in the structure of his novel a narrative analogue to the collective perspective of the man with the compound eyes. Chapters are narrated from various perspectives, first person or third person: of the literature professor Alice, who tells a story of loss in love and midlife crisis; Atile'i, who tells a story of displacement due to local tradition and the detritus of industrial civilization; and Alice's two aboriginal friends, Hafay and Dahu, both of whom reject wage work in the city, Hafay as a masseuse, Dahu as a taxi driver, to return to the tribal village to live a traditional lifestyle. That tribal village is tightknit, but open to outsiders like Detlef and Sara, who each has a story to tell. There is even a chapter from the perspective of Sara's father. But in the final chapter, Alice, like the narrator of the novella, effects a revolution of narrative perspective when she divulges to Atile'i, in a stunning metafictional flourish, that she has been working on a story and a novel entitled "The Man with the Compound Eyes" and *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, respectively. Although Alice never has the chance to meet the man with the compound eyes, it turns out that she is his creator.

What she has created is partly a metaphor for the memorialization of

ecological sublimity. Although in its sublimity, reality is beyond the human mind, we may comprehend it, not just in terms of a concept of infinity, as in Kant's account of the sublime, but also in spatial (visual) form and in temporal (narrative) form. A videomosaic that centers a novel with a multistranded narrative recalls Kant's comment, cited earlier, about "the straining of the imagination." In Kant, the imagination strains to take in a sublime experience until reason comes to the rescue with the concept of infinity. The reader of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* strains to imagine the integration of all perspectives in the eyes of the man with the compound eyes until the narrative understanding sets to work, turning the visual into the textual to tell a story. That story may be individual, but that individual story may be woven into a collective ecological fabric, a total story that includes the undersea volcano, the falcon's eye view, and the leaf about to fall.[10]

The individual story, or the total story of which it is a part, is informed by but not confined to memory. The fabulating agency that has allowed us to detach ourselves from reality, creating virtual realities for us to dwell in, can also imagine possible worlds. Wu Ming-Yi's novella and novel are, after all, invented. They are also set in the near future, a future that is in the former catastrophically bleak, and the latter somewhat more hopeful. The larger story that the novel promotes is of a postmodern return to nature, a temporary respite from the concrete, plastic, air-conditioned, mechanized, and mediatized reality in which we spend most of our lives.

The main characters of the novel end up living in Dahu's home village on a mountaintop in Taitung County in southeastern Taiwan. A conglomerate had wanted to buy the mountaintop and build a columbarium on it, but Anu, the village leader, borrowed money from the bank to buy it first, preempting the conglomerate. In buying the land, Anu plays the rules of the capitalist game, seemingly with the aim of changing the system. He certainly rejects a conventional definition of development, because he does not cut down the trees or build anything. Instead, he consecrates nature,

[10] It is hard to know how, because Wu Ming-Yi never tells a story from their perspective. In his most recent novel (Wu 2016*b*), though, he does include a chapter, Chapter 9, from the perspective of an elephant.

by christening a swath of it the Forest Church. At the gate of the Forest Church is a pair of albino banyan trees that form the Gate of Heaven. The local Bunun aborigines call this kind of tree a walking tree, because, like many banyans, it grows by sending down aerial roots, which harden and turn into prop roots when they touch the ground. Over time, in a metaphor of material multicentered connectedness reminiscent of the rhizomes of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 3–25), the tree appears to walk along, an image of collective action.[11] The man with the compound eyes tells Thom that he can "merely observe, not intervene" (282), but on the basis of a grand narrative about a postmodern return to nature, which in Taiwan indigenous circles is typically termed a return to the tribal village (*huigui buluo*), Anu, the members of his community, and perhaps their guests, have managed to act.

[11] The butterfly journey in "The Man with the Compound Eyes" is also a metaphor for collective endeavor. The butterflies fly toward a destination, a dot on a cognitive map of the butterfly collective unconscious, without knowing what they are doing as individuals.

What they have managed to do may not seem especially revolutionary. Anu's preserve does not ultimately represent a rejection of the "late capitalist" metropole: he gives ecological cultural tours to people from the city, and not for free. Anu and the others must use the money they earn to interact with others economically, via the market. The problem for Wu Ming-Yi, unlike for Fredric Jameson, is not the capitalist system per se. Anu, after all, is a kind of petty capitalist, and as such he has to take good care of his capital. He is represented as a good steward of the mountaintop, certainly better than a conglomerate would have been. He takes care of it for a community that, as an ecosystem, includes the nonhuman. He conveys his respect for the mountain to the people who take his ecotours, inviting them to pay their respects to the spirit of the mountain and to imagine the mountain gazing at them as if it were a fellow subject. Although the novel does not mention it, the reader can imagine that after returning to the city, these ecotourists will be able to live more ecologically within the capitalist economy. Two decades after the publication of Jameson's *Postmodernism*, Anu's mountain puts urban experience, mediated both by technology and money, into ecological perspective.

Conclusion: Breaching Distances Technologically

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson discusses examples of art by Perelman, Roeg, and Paik that induce what he describes as a postmodern sublime, in which everything is schizophrenically fragmented: subject fragments consume technologically mediated fabricated image fragments in a continuous paratactic flow, paratactic because the images seem randomly juxtaposed and incoherent. Yet Jameson also mentions attempts at postmodern hypotaxis, at integrating the images and the stories behind them into a coherent whole. Works such as *Neuromancer*, by William Gibson, offer a "representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp . . . through the figuration of advanced technology."[12] As the totality of the network remains impossible to grasp in the end, we presumably remain trapped in a fragmented state within the supposedly all-encompassing system of global capitalism. Wu Ming-Yi's man with the compound eyes is, similarly, a figure of advanced technology and a representational shorthand for a larger system, but the system Wu's man gestures at is ecological, as is the sublime aesthetic he inspires.

[12] Jameson 1991: 38. I am indebted to one of the external reviewers for drawing my attention to this quotation.

But it seems to me *The Man with the Compound Eyes* gestures rather more fruitfully toward the ecological system and that the sublime sensibility the novel induces is conducive to social and ecological integration. We do not know what Alice and her indigenous and German and Norwegian friends on Anu's mountain are going to do, but we do know what they are up to, what their values are, what kind of personal and collective projects they are formulating in their imaginations and promoting in reality, ecological projects that Wu Ming-Yi, in writing the novel, is trying to make persuasive to the reader. As characters, then, Alice and Atile'i and the others seem rather old-fashioned in being self-directed subjects, ethical agents, not postmodern schizophrenics, at least not by the end of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Alice is contemplating suicide, and has repressed the fact that her son Toto died four years previously.

The novel suggests that she may have made up Atile'i's story, because she is the only person in Taiwan who ever sees him. Alice would appear to be a textbook schizophrenic. But by the time she has finished writing "The Man with the Compound Eyes" and *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, she has gotten her act together. Moreover, the metafictional moment, at which Alice reveals to the reader she is the author of the novel the reader has been reading, does not cast doubt on the status of all the individual first- and third-person narratives. It is instead as if Alice has written her friends and herself into a wonderland that is at the same time clearly a representation of contemporary Taiwan in its social, economic, political, and, of course, ecological aspects, a setting for stories about individuals who are not completely alienated from themselves, from the products of their labor, from each other, from nature. On the contrary, their lives are woven together in many ways, most importantly by ties of friendship that are established and maintained by what could be called a gift economy coexisting with the capitalist economy. It appears they will embark on collective, ecological projects together, with the help of nonhuman friends. Who knows if this is what Jameson would consider a transcendence of the modern or postmodern, but it certainly seems like a new model, which I described as a montage model of subjectivity, in which the individuals can adopt different perspectives with a view to integrating themselves into some larger whole without compromising subjectivity and agency. This new model has grown out of postmodern daily life, postmodern because the lives of the characters, including Anu, are partly mediated by audiovisual technologies developed in the past few decades.

The man with the compound eyes is a symbol of postmodern mediation as lived by the smartphone generation. Unlike members of the TV generation, who watched stationary television sets, the man with the compound eyes, like a personal device, offers mobility. A metaphor for mediation, he also reminds us that we are out in the world with the rest of human and nonhuman lives, a host of subjectivities that occupy nested

ecologies and might get involved in collective projects. What is the nature of these collective projects? For Fredric Jameson, whether he was reading modern or postmodern artworks, there is a Marxist master narrative hidden in the works' political unconscious. For an environmentalist, perhaps there is an environmental master narrative in the ecological unconscious, no doubt with incidents of environmental catastrophe like Wu's trash mountain crashing on Taiwan's shores to remind us that our garbage does not magically disappear just because it is free, or effectively free, to toss out. To the extent that Wu would insist on a single all-encompassing perspective, it would be ecological, the vehicle of an imperative to take nature's perspectives seriously, to practice what Aldo Leopold (1949*a*) called the "land ethic." But surely Wu is not saying that Anu's partly-off-the-grid lifestyle is the only way to live. Part of the virtue of living in a pluralist society like Taiwan is that people are relatively free to live as they wish and to express their different points of view. Part of Wu Ming-Yi's point of view is that postmodern AV technologies are not just about indulging in narcissism and reducing attention spans, but can help, to borrow Kaldis's (2007: 94) words, "breach the historical, evolutionary, and geographical distances between man and other species, creating an uncanny and disturbing proximity, producing dramatic images that call for ethical understanding and behavior," images that represent nonhuman perspectives. By integrating different perspectives, not by force but rhetorically, through the heartfelt appeal of a man with compound eyes, Wu suggests that, if contextualized by narrative understanding, the sublime montage of postmodern mediation can have ecopolitical significance.

Glossary

Alice (Alisi)	阿莉思
Amis	阿美
Anu	阿努
Atile'i (Atelie)	阿特烈
Bunun	布農
Dahu (Dahe)	達赫
dayang	打烊
Detlef (Bodafu)	薄達夫
Fan Kuan	范寬
Fuyanren, "Fuyanren," and fuyanren	複眼人
Hafay (Hafan)	哈凡
Haven (H xian)	H縣
Hsueh Shan (xueshan) Tunnel	雪山隧道
Hualian	花蓮
huigui buluo	回歸部落
Ilan (Yilan)	宜蘭
Ina (Yina)	伊娜
Kanjian Taiwan	看見台灣
ren	人
sandian toushi	散點透視
sanwen	散文
Sara (Shala)	莎拉
Taipei (Taibei)	台北
Taitung (Taidong)	台東
Thom Jakobsen (Jiekesen)	傑克森
Toto (Tuotuo)	托托
Umav (Wumafu)	鄔瑪芙
Wayo Wayo (Wayou Wayou)	瓦憂瓦憂
Xishan xinglü tu	谿山行旅圖
zhutixing	主體性

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