

## Surface Tensions Environmental Narcissism in the Age of Man

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As relayed by Ovid in *The Metamorphoses*, the myth of Narcissus is that of a beautiful young demigod who is destined to live a long life, unless—as the prophet Tiresias mysteriously augurs—“he discovers himself.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, Narcissus meets his fateful end after scorning the nymph Echo and instead falling madly in love with his own watery reflection. In Ovid’s version, Narcissus wastes away by a clear fountain, in others a spring, stream, or woodland pond, but in most accounts he is eventually transformed into a narcissus flower (what we know commonly as the daffodil) by suddenly merciful gods. Disheartening as it might be, there is much in this ancient story for those of us contemplating the mediation of our current environmental crises. It is as if, on its voyage of adolescent self-discovery, humankind has wrought its own destruction by belittling the affections and attachments of the surrounding world. We should be pleased that the idea of the age of man, the Anthropocene, has become a heady rallying cry for scholars, artists, and environmentalists concerned about the massive changes that humans have wrought on the planet we call home. At the same time, however, the story of Narcissus helps articulate an important potential objection—that the Anthropocene is inherently contaminated by that very thing against which it rails: *anthropos*, humans, us. The danger is that the Anthropocene will serve as that still water in which we see only ourselves, to the exclusion of the spirits and bodies beside and beyond us. For similar

reasons, some thinkers have chosen to buck the term Anthropocene in favor of other nomenclature, from Donna Haraway's Chthulucene (tentacular entanglement with multispecies others) to Jason Moore's Capitalocene (nature-mastering capitalism as the master framework of our age) to Jussi Parikka's Anthroscene (part of his ongoing work on the gross material impacts of digital devices and the geological nature of media, particularly "new" media).<sup>2</sup>

Put plainly, is all this talk of the Anthropocene inevitably a narcissistic (or collectively, speciesist) enterprise? Is there something suspect about professing concern for the world through a term that begins and ends with people? Furthermore, is all this just a way for already privileged academics, myself included, to feel better about our predicament, despite the fact that "airmile-for-airmile, many academics engage in far more environmentally reckless activities than poorer and less mobile groups"?<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to grapple with these questions, let us detour through some of the psychological literature on narcissism and more mythological exegesis, before taking as case studies a few exemplary contemporary media objects—video games and their platforms. What these will suggest is some slim hope in what new materialist thinker Jane Bennett has called "strategic anthropomorphism."<sup>4</sup>

Much ink has already been spilled about Narcissus as the defining myth of modernity, even more so now that we publicly flog supposedly self-obsessed, social media-crazed millennials for their entitlement issues. Understandably, feminist scholars have preferred to sidestep Narcissus in favor of Echo, the once garrulous water nymph who was punished for her gift of gab by having her own voice taken away, so that all she could do was echo the words of others. Prior to Narcissus's untimely end, Echo falls in love with him, experiences cruel rejection, then retreats to the woods where she dwindles away into nothing but bones and sound. As it turns out, most diagnosed narcissists are men, so maybe turning to the absent Echo, like Spivak, makes a great deal of sense.<sup>5</sup> Yet there is also a risk here of lapsing into the bumper-sticker dreaminess of "if women ruled the world" memes. We are all in this together, like it or not.

In our present confounding political moment, many have also eagerly classified President Donald Trump as a quintessential narcissist.<sup>6</sup> Yet *Atlantic* writer Elizabeth Lunbeck warns that armchair psychiatry does little to explicate the clear "upsides" to Trump's narcissism, or in other words, why his megalomaniacal behavior works to his advantage.<sup>7</sup> For Lunbeck, Trump

excels at performing intimacy and exacting devotion from his followers, for whom his self-absorption fulfills a need. But we should be more concerned that the ongoing debate over Trump's psyche adversely draws our attention away from other matters, especially environmental ones, the arena in which Trump has "undone" the most.<sup>8</sup> Although Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accord received substantial media attention, far fewer minutes and column inches have been devoted to his systematic rollback of Obama-era limitations on the fossil fuel industry and protections for public lands and waterways.

Most interesting for this meditation on the Anthropocene and narcissism is Wendy Shaw and Alastair Bonnett's recent recuperation of narcissism as part of the work of grief in a time of environmental degradation.<sup>9</sup> Shaw and Bonnett take issue with our tendency to pathologize narcissism, particularly in relation to today's purportedly selfie-crazed and entitled youth. While they are responding primarily to psychologist Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell's *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* and clinical psychologist Susan Bodnar's "Wasted and Bombed: Clinical Enactments of a Changing Relationship to the Earth," the critical literature on contemporary narcissism is considerable, spanning monographs like Jeffrey Kluger's *The Narcissist Next Door* as well as the many scientific findings related to narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI).<sup>10</sup> Shaw and Bonnett tack against the prevailing wind by arguing that narcissism may be natural and even productive in the face of our daunting environmental challenges, as a means of coping through the compartmentalization of knowledge (known as "splitting"), or grieving for what has been and will be lost. Rather than mourning and moving on, the narcissist's grief manifests as an ongoing, yet creative melancholia. This is a more fluid model of grief than the classic five-stage model proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.<sup>11</sup> Their emphasis on the work of Anthropocenic grief provides a reassuring centrifugal impetus out of the centripetal threat of environmental narcissism. It also recalls the growing inclination amongst animal studies scholars towards multispecies ethnography, the mourning of nonhuman others, and disanthropic forms of empathy.<sup>12</sup>

Where does this leave us with this issue's fundamental preoccupation with mediation? How does narcissism intertwine with the increasing ubiquity of electronic screens, which has led to anxiety-provoking proclamations that we are growing dumber, less intellectually independent, and lonelier even in the presence of others?<sup>13</sup> The long representational and rhetorical history of

seeing screens as watery thresholds is beyond the scope of this present essay, but I might instructively confess that I have composed these words on a Surface laptop descended from early experiments in digital immersion. Back in 2007 and 2008, when Microsoft first introduced its Surface technology for interactive tabletops and touchscreen devices, one of the showcase "attract" apps allowed branded devices to mimic limpid pools of water. In promotional videos and demos from the time, paid actors and Microsoft evangelists repeatedly tap and run their hands over liquid Surfaces, generating digital currents over what looks to be a bed of shapely river rocks. In one trailer, a male narrator initially intones, "The possibilities seem endless as the line between the virtual world and the physical world becomes increasingly thin," and concludes the video with the poolside exhortation "Everybody in" as a man's disembodied hand creates circular ripples in luminously blue Surface waters with the tap of one finger.<sup>14</sup> Such congratulatory announcements imply that if only Narcissus had accidentally trailed his digits through the water below his face, his myth would have ended much more happily.

Although Microsoft's marketing hyperbole may well cause eye rolls, whether or not screens set the stage for liminal interactions does seem to me one basis for differentiating between attitudes of absorption and *self*-absorption. In fact, the Surface conveniently leads me to some of my favorite examples of environmental mediation, from the realm of video games. As I have argued elsewhere, while the bulk of video games replicate rather than reimagine real-world modes of environmental use and abuse, there is ethical and educational value in both destructive and constructive forms of environmental play.<sup>15</sup> Even as many of our most savvy media pundits warn against the rapturous power of the media screen, I am cautiously optimistic that games can render environmental injustice tangible by enticing us into manipulating, exploiting, nurturing, breaking, questioning, rejecting, and otherwise relating to imagined worlds in ways that can prove powerful. Take these video portraits of people playing video games (figure 1) that were displayed in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's 2012 exhibit on *The Art of Video Games*, curated by Chris Melissinos:





Figure 1. “Gamers” exhibit at The Smithsonian Museum of American Art’s *The Art of Video Games* exhibit in 2012. Author photograph.

Mounted as a triptych of screens, this exhibit entitled “Gamers” cycled through various recordings of Smithsonian staff members and their relatives playing unseen games, with a brief caption remarking that games “trigger a range of emotional responses.” We could compare this to the “Gamers” (2002) portrait series by photographer Phillip Toledano, often referenced by alternate-reality game designer Jane McGonigal as capturing players’ deep and complex involvement in traditionally demonized modes of play. While journalists and social critics have long bemoaned the behavior of media consumers—just think of the perceived “telebugeye” threat to children glued to the first television sets,<sup>16</sup> or related epithets like “boob tube” and “couch potato”—I see in these faces less zombie brainwashing than puzzlement, humor, frustration, delight, dawning comprehension, and even disgust. The screen is always both window and canvas, mirror and portal. Whereas Narcissus gazed longingly at the surface of the water without testing its depth, human and nonhuman game players stare but also swipe, swat, tap, click, and mash their respective screens and touchscreens. In Valve’s *Portal* puzzle games (2007, 2011), players can transform nearly any surface into the opening of a passage; in *Abzû* (Giant Squid Studios, 2016), you play as The Diver, swimming through vast underwater worlds and using meditation statues to inhabit the perspectives of their residents; and in companion-species games like *Cat Fishing 2* (Nestle Purina PetCare Company, 2015; figure 2) or *Pocket Ponds* (TriggerWave, 2017), our domestic felines are

invited to play with our smartphones and tablets by turning our device screens into fish-filled waters.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 2. *Cat Fishing 2* was designed for feline enjoyment, according to Nestlé (maker of Purina Friskies® cat food).

In many respects, games are narcissistic, in the sense that they are designed to give players an inflated sense of self-worth and efficacy through mastery of game environments, artificially intelligent creatures, and sometimes other players. But as the games listed above demonstrate, games often puckishly draw attention to their mediation, and some even suggest the subjectivity of other species. The most compelling games of environmental mediation dramatize interconnection, cause and consequence, and counterfactual thinking in simplified but not less meaningful ways.

Games and their platforms also help us to reconsider the mediation offered by the Anthropocene as a concept. When surface becomes interface, we learn to communicate across a boundary, and we become attentive to a range of nonhuman responses. By all means let us continue to use the Anthropocene as a framing, but let us not treat it as a still pool, reflecting only our sins, our valiant efforts, and our bereavement. These days, when I think of Narcissus

pinning away at the water's edge, I can only wonder that no animals stopped to drink while he lay there. How could he ignore all the lively critters swimming, buzzing, flying, and creeping over, on, and under the water? Even children know very well the buoyant animism of the world's denizens, one reason why Judith Halberstam has effusively praised Dory of *Finding Nemo* fame and SpongeBob SquarePants.<sup>18</sup> The Narcissus myth becomes even more puzzling if we consider that he may have lived somewhere in the environs of Mount Olympus, today a Greek national park and biosphere reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere program, and noted for its species diversity. Let us strive to mold the Anthropocene into something more like Darwin's entangled riverbank or even the Surface's infrared-light-bouncing multi-touch technology instead of Narcissus's sterile fountain.<sup>19</sup> This seems a vastly preferable alternative to hoping that some sympathetic higher power will transform us all into flowers in the end, whether daffodils or forget-me-nots.



Figure 3. The gift of a spring daffodil can lead to romance in the environmentally shrewd farm game *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016). Credit: Katzeus, Stardew Valley Wiki, 7 February 2016.

## Notes

- 1 Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* Book III, trans. Anthony S. Kline, 2000, accessed 1 September 2017, [ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph3.htm#476975712](http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph3.htm#476975712).
- 2 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015); and Jussi Parikka, *The Anthroscene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- 3 Wendy S. Shaw and Alastair Bonnett, "Environmental crisis, narcissism and the work of grief," *cultural geographies* 23, no. 4 (2016): 565–79, doi: 10.1177/1474474016638042. Writing another essay may ultimately matter less than choosing not to go to yet another international conference. The University of California, Santa Barbara, has fortunately broken new ground with "net-carbon-neutral" or NCN conferences. For one model, see the recorded talks and associated white paper for "The World in 2050: Creating/Imagining Just Climate Futures," [ehc.english.ucsb.edu/?page\\_id=14895](http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/?page_id=14895).
- 4 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Echo," *New Literary History* 24, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 17–43, [www.jstor.org/stable/469267](http://www.jstor.org/stable/469267).
- 6 References to Trump's alleged narcissism have been frequent in the press and political commentary, showing up in the pages of major newspapers as well as popular

- magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Newsweek* (see, for instance, economist Paul Krugman's September 2017 op-ed in the *New York Times*). Trump has also been labeled a narcissist by diverse constituencies, not only journalists and career politicians, but also mental health professionals, many of whom took it upon themselves to write to Congress and petition for the President's removal from office on the grounds of being psychologically unfit for service.
- 7 Elizabeth Lunbeck, "The Allure of Trump's Narcissism," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 1 August 2017, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-allure-of-trumps-narcissism/#!](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-allure-of-trumps-narcissism/#!).
  - 8 Philip Bump, "What Trump has undone," *Washington Post*, 24 August 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/08/24/what-trump-has-undone/?utm\\_term=.d481bcbcc1b1](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/08/24/what-trump-has-undone/?utm_term=.d481bcbcc1b1). According to Bump's cataloguing, Trump has assiduously reversed, rescinded, or otherwise stymied almost twenty different environmental policies or protections, more discrete actions than in any other category, including economy, education, and foreign policy.
  - 9 Shaw and Bonnett, "Environmental crisis, narcissism and the work of grief."
  - 10 Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009); Susan Bodnar. "Wasted and Bombed: Clinical Enactments of a Changing Relationship to the Earth," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 18, no. 4 (2008): 484–512; Jeffrey Kluger, *The Narcissist Next Door: Understanding the Monster in Your Family, in Your Office, in Your Bed—in Your World* (New York: Penguin, 2014). Some of the scientific literature on narcissism as a personality disorder or the narcissistic personality inventory can be found in *The Journal of Personality Disorders* or the PsyArXiv preprint archive offered by the Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science.
  - 11 Kübler-Ross famously proposed the five-stage model of grieving in her book *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), the stages being denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.
  - 12 See work by Stefan Helmreich, Thom van Dooren, Vinciane Despret, Ursula Heise, and Greg Garrard, among many others.
  - 13 Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008); Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); and Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
  - 14 See "Microsoft Surface – The Possibilities," YouTube.com, posted by rluhecke3, 29 May 2007, [www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=6VfpVYYQzHs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=6VfpVYYQzHs), and "Microsoft Surface Demo @ CES 2008," YouTube.com, posted by BotJunkie, 8 January 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zxk\\_WywMTzc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zxk_WywMTzc). Microsoft's promotional ads for Surface are notably reminiscent of Apple's early iPhone "touching is believing" ads, themselves a play on Leonardo da Vinci's famed Creation of Adam fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.
  - 15 Alenda Y. Chang, "Games as Environmental Texts," *qui parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 57–84.
  - 16 Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
  - 17 In truth, TriggerWave's various *Pocket Pond* games are not marketed as cat toys, but *Wired* magazine reviewed them as such and users frequently put them to such a purpose.
  - 18 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

- 19 For a useful history of touchscreen technology, see Florence Ion's "From touch displays to the Surface: A brief history of touchscreen technology," *Ars Technica*, 4 April 2013, [arstechnica.com/gadgets/2013/04/from-touch-displays-to-the-surface-a-brief-history-of-touchscreen-technology/3/](http://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2013/04/from-touch-displays-to-the-surface-a-brief-history-of-touchscreen-technology/3/). For more on the long tradition of painted versions of the Narcissus myth (by the likes of Caravaggio, Salvador Dalí, Nicolas Poussin, and John William Waterhouse), see Dora Panofsky's "Narcissus and Echo; Notes on Poussin's Birth of Bacchus in the Fogg Museum of Art," *The Art Bulletin* 31, no. 2 (1949): 112–20. As Panofsky notes, at times Narcissus's pool has been interpreted as a natural one, and at other times as a fountain, well, or even a jug of water held out by Echo.

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