

The Dammed of the Earth: Reading the Mega-Dam for the Political Unconscious of Globalization

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Abstract

This chapter reads the dam, specifically the “mega-dam” as a cultural text. Given that ecologically and socially violent hydroelectric projects have been pivotal to the remaking of the world over the past century of Western- (and corporate-) led globalization, we can understand mega-dams as liminal and archetypal figures looming within the “political unconscious” of our global moment. Just as physical dams reshape and harness the flows of water, so too do dams operate in the flow of social imagination: they reshape the way we think about the world and our relationships. I begin by elaborating the way dams and culture intersect: dams are both “cultural edifices” (the product of cultural processes) and profound shapers of culture (in terms of the circulation of social meanings, representations, and relationships). They harness and redirect social cooperation and generate cultural and material power. For this reason, we can “read” representations of the mega-dam in popular texts as “haunted” by larger cultural trends and patterns. Tracing the theme through blockbuster films including *The Dam Busters* (1955), *Superman* (1978), *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002) and *X2: X-Men United* (2003), I suggest that dams have come to occupy an ambivalent place in the political unconscious of globalization, and images of their failure or collapse preoccupy us today. While these catastrophic imaginings offer a release of tensions bound up in the figure of the dam, I argue that these moments of cinematic catharsis are far from transformative. Instead, I conclude by turning to Thomas King’s 1999 novel *Green Grass, Running Water* for hints as to how a different cultural politics of the dam might emerge.

I typed these words on a windy day in Hamilton, Ontario, an industrial city, once powered only by Niagara Falls, today by a grid that harnesses power from hundreds of rivers across the Province of Ontario, connected to dams at James Bay, Quebec (which flooded an area roughly the size of France, protested by the Cree and the Inuit),¹ at Churchill Falls in Labrador (under claim from the Innu of Sheshatshiu and Natuashish),² at Wuskwatim, Manitoba (where the Nisichawayasihk Cree blocked construction),³ at The Oldman River in Alberta (protested by the Peigan Lonefighters),⁴ and at the Gardner Dam near Saskatoon on the South Saskatchewan River (where I was taken most years of grade school to bear witness to the wonders of modern engineering, the serenity and scientific value of man-made lakes, and the basic principles of power).

As a settler on these lands, my existence is a materialization of flows harnessed by dams on stolen rivers. My ancestors flowed in from Europe and, like so many today, met the dam of the border, pooled, got lucky, and proceeded to lend their lives to the dynamo of Canadian capitalist modernity. I reproduce this body with domestic foodstuffs grown on dam-irrigated lands and with imported food traded on unequal footing for the dam-powered products of Canadian industry. The early Canadian establishment chose the beaver as the icon of this colonial-settler state, a creature whose instinct to dam is so strong it literally changed the topography of the land; a creature whose pelt, oiled by glands deep in its body, made for fine hats and boots in Europe. Wars were fought for this skin; multiple attempted genocides were powered by the fur trade. Whole civilizations drowned in the floodplain of imperial commerce. Pelts sold in the same currency and flowed in the same financial current as spices and slaves, opium, and rubber.

The power that courses through my damming device, my computer and its word-processor, the means by which I arrest my flow of thinking and the associated currents of knowing and acting of which I am a small part, is a haunted power. Its circuitry is produced in Chinese factories where the world's largest dams, including the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze, displaced millions of peasants and townspeople to empower massive industrial growth in the production of export-oriented consumer goods.⁵ The lowest estimates of the quantity of purified water consumed in the production of a personal computer is about 1,500 litres, about twice what an adult should drink in a year.⁶ Presently, the power that courses through the keyboard stems in part from dams here in Canada.

The university, the intimate master (my under-employer) under which I write this paper, is a dam of knowing.⁷ Its disciplinary turbines spin out articles and books, "research," and "excellence" by harnessing the power of inquiry, curiosity, and the organic, day-to-day production of knowledge. Of dams and universities we must ask: to what powers do these concretizations of authority answer? Whose magnanimity or acumen, seduction or coercion brought together the epic flows of human cooperation to make such mega-projects possible? Whom do mega-dams and universities em-power; whom do they dis-place? Whom do they enlighten and whom do they drown? Dams force us to attend to the interconnectivity of power,

the way sources of energy are converted into one another: from hydrokinetic to direct-current to alternating-current to thermodynamic; or between cultural, economic, historical, and material forms of power.

Damming rivers and streams has been a part of countless human societies. Damming practices have been and continue to be a crucial and sustainable part of many Indigenous and non-Western engagements with nature, and small run-of-the-river dams have been built and mobilized by communities to make relatively sustainable interventions into their habitat to control flooding, provide irrigation, or generate modest quantities of electricity. But dams have taken on a different significance and scale in the last century of Western capitalism and its attendant histories of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression and exploitation.

While the industrial revolution may have been driven largely by energy derived from coal, it is critical to recall that, even in the age of the steam engine, industrial economies and their colonial orders were facilitated by waterways, canals, and locks, all of which demanded new technologies for attenuating rivers and creating artificial hydrostructures and hydrographies. The rise of urbanization was in its turn facilitated by “advances” in water management and the damming of rivers to mitigate flooding and provide irrigation for intensive, industrialized agriculture. Public waterworks not only brought running water to the growing urban working-class populations of Europe and North America but they also gave firefighters access to water, thereby offering significant insurance relief to factories and landlords, and facilitating larger industrial investments.⁸ A critical aspect of steam power is, of course, water. Dams and other forms of water-redirection were necessary to fill the water towers that fed the infernal boilers of sweatshops, locomotives, and other parts of the modern industrial apparatus. Much is made of the importance of water to a maritime mercantilist economy; but the industrial revolution floated on water and was an era of massive improvements in the civil engineering and management of waterways that also birthed modern dam-building in the nineteenth century.

The dam’s fullest moment in the history of capitalism was concurrent with the widespread adaptation of electricity and the birth of hydroelectric power (among the first and still most effective and widespread means of generating electricity). By the turn of the twentieth century, dam-building had become a near obsession for Western powers. Today, some forty-five thousand dams provide about 16% of the world’s electricity, 69% of global energy from so-called “renewable” resources.⁹ But beyond this, the hydroelectric dam has become an icon of a century of electrification consonant with imperialist themes of modern progress and enlightenment, national uplift, and the triumph of man over nature.¹⁰ By the Great Depression, projects like the Hoover Dam in the United States were key sites in the renegotiation of nature and nation; dams were presented as evidence of industry, providence, and ingenuity.¹¹ In them,

massive public investment and privatized proficiency came together not merely as make-work infrastructure projects but as massive and shared symbols that represented the modern conquest of fate and the weaving of a national imaginary around the myth that the causes and consequences of life were no longer subject to nature's whims but could be directed by the will of a people. Nor was this mythology absent from non-capitalist societies: the Soviet Union and China also highlighted their dam construction as evidence of the benevolence of the state and the ability of communist regimes to best mobilize the flows of human energy toward the common good.¹²

Today, in a global age, dams continue to animate the imagination. China's purportedly insatiable appetite for reckless industrialization and urbanization has made that country's recent mega-dam-building spree a topic of global concern. But this concern is shaped less by deep ecological and humanitarian worries than by the cut and thrust of geopolitics: in the imaginary of the West, as xenophobic and colonial tropes are clothed in environmentalist robes, China's mega-dams have come to symbolize the monolithic economic and cultural juggernaut of a coming "Chinese century." While there is much to concern us about the enthusiasm of so-called emerging economies for ecologically disastrous mega-projects, without a focus on the way global capitalism drives these processes (and is, in part, driven by Western capital), these concerns easily slide into pernicious nationalisms or ignorant globalisms.

Dams are built to generate, harness, and shift the circulation of *power*. Not merely do they convert kinetic-aquatic power into electrical energy but they also fundamentally reshape the flows of social and economic power. In their planning and their construction, dams both draw on and reproduce social power relations. They depend on and serve to generate certain types of social, cultural, political, and economic relationships, and in particular, historical and locally specific configurations.¹³ The building of a mega-dam is an almost sublime intervention into what John Holloway calls the "social flow of doing"; that is, into the way social cooperation is constantly in the process of organizing itself.¹⁴ Through their ability to harness and produce, materialize, and symbolize power, dams are a *concretization* of power relations. As such, they empower some and disempower others. While they are very real material manifestations of political, economic, and social power, dams are fundamentally *cultural* edifices: not only do they organize waters but they organize meanings and relationships.

I use the term "mega-dams" to refer to dams typical of large-scale hydroelectric projects, as distinct from ancient and community-scale damming projects or smaller-scale modern dams.¹⁵ Beyond their importance as nationalist icons or modernist fetishes, mega-dams are megalithic nodes in networks of cultural power. They are both the product and the producers of cultures of modernity. Mega-dams are, for instance, manifestations of a highly complex convergence of modern, capitalist, and patriarchal institutional cultures – the training of civil and electrical engineers; the institutional cultures of state bureaucracies that both approve and finance mega-dams and carry out (more and less genuine) environmental and social impact assessments;

the legal and bureaucratic cultures necessary to facilitate the control of land and resources; the private and international finance that must first see the mega-dam as a worthy investment and then organize the capital required to bankroll these massive projects. At the same time, these institutional cultures mobilize narratives of epistemic superiority that allow them to ignore or dismiss the concerns of the people who will be displaced or dispossessed by mega-dams, thus giving them a sense that the cultures of soon-to-be-flooded areas are worthless in comparison to a dream of nationalist, technocratic progress, “the greater good,”¹⁶ or the austere logic of economic imperatives. Mega-dams concretize these cultural politics, mobilizing a vast array of material and labour resources.¹⁷

But as much as mega-dams are manifestations of cultures, they also *transform* cultures; they do a profound work *on* culture. Perhaps most important is their contribution to electrification, without which we would not have electric lights, microprocessors, advanced robotics, contemporary pharmaceuticals and medicine, the advanced refinement of chemicals – let alone radio, television, and other mass media, or the world of cheap consumer plastics we enjoy today and which have dramatically reshaped lived and material culture around the world. But the arrival of dams in an area also fundamentally transforms local cultures. Boyce Richardson, for instance, notes the decimation of the Cree traditions in Northern Quebec in the wake of the James Bay hydroelectric project.¹⁸ Similarly, Sanjeev Khagram documents the ways in which peasant, Indigenous, and rural cultures around the world are radically transformed by their proximity to the sites of dam construction and by the dramatic ecological changes that follow in the wake of these dams.¹⁹ As might be expected, some of these changes tend toward the spread of consumer capitalism, possessive individualism, social drift, and Westernized/colonial forms of modernization. Above all, though, dams fundamentally transform the cultural relationship of people to the forces we have come to call nature and, in particular, our relation to water. By providing consistent irrigation, easy and seemingly consequence-free electricity, and security against flooding, mega-dams reorganize our relationship to one of the Earth’s (and our bodies’) most elemental substances – water – and they do so on a global scale.

Mega-dams represent sites where cultural energies and histories pool; they are turbines of subdued and churning meaning-making. This is in part because dams are such massive interventions in “causality,” in the way we imagine that the world fits together, the way we imagine cause and effect (and the causes of causes, and the effects of effects). By causality, here, I do not mean the great cosmic ordering of reality, but rather the dense, necessary web of collective fictions that we weave to explain why and how things occur, and especially to explain our own individual and collective agency to ourselves.²⁰ Within the history of Western modernity, our sense of causality has generally narrowed to a highly technocratic explanatory framework that ecofeminist Vandana Shiva likens to a “monoculture of the mind.”²¹ This framework fundamentally excludes a consideration of more-than-human agency (or, more properly, the way any notion of human “agency” is always already implicated beyond the human) and tends toward a sequential and linear logic. Within this framework, humans are seen

as “cultural” and agentful, in contrast to “nature,” considered passive and reactionary.²² Dams are a product of this cultural logic of causality in the sense that they manifest a technocratic and reductionist worldview. But they also (re)produce and reconstitute that worldview and help install the form of global capitalism under which we live. A massive array of global forces must convene to manifest in a mega-dam; and, in turn, the mega-dam becomes a generator and reorganizer of global material and power relations.

As a result, despite their relative remoteness from densely populated areas, mega-dams are particularly revealing of cultural politics and power relations. While dams appear in relatively few cultural works, I suggest that they “haunt” the cultural imagination and cultural production in the present moment. At a time of globalization characterized by the increasing liquidity of social, political, and economic relations, a time when a language of “flows” speaks of the complex and frenetic interplay of cultural, financial, social, religious, and ecological forces,²³ the hydroelectric mega-dam is a spectral presence – a critical historical factor in the constitution of our present condition as well as a vital nexus of contemporary relations of power and struggle.²⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, Western colonial administrations touted dam construction as an example of their paternalistic benevolence and intellectual and technological superiority (hence their right to rule).²⁵ By improving water supplies and preventing floods, administrators sought to demonstrate the supremacy of Western science, industry, and management of labour and society. Even today, Canada’s “signature project” for a reconstructed Afghanistan is the rehabilitation of a large dam in Khandahar that, it is promised, will improve the health of urban populations and facilitate the agricultural transition from opium poppies to more acceptable forms of export-oriented cash-crops.²⁶

Following decolonization, the mega-dam became a critical icon of post-colonial nation-building, the royal road to an autonomous modernity that promised electrical power for civil infrastructure and industrial use, better irrigation and access to intensive agricultural practices, and more stable water transportation and water supplies.²⁷ But dams were also to provide massive collective projects thought capable of unifying diverse and factionalized post-colonial polities. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, famously called major hydroelectric dams “the temples of modern India,” demonstrating his faith in the power of the dam to transform Indian society and generate new forms of collective economic agency.²⁸ Gamal Abdel Nasser, the iconic president of Egypt, was to make that country’s decisive break with the imperialist powers by opting to finance the Aswan dam of the Nile without Western backing. This nationalist decision was an act of independence that led directly to the 1956 Suez crisis, to new cultures of Western internationalist imperialism, though the construction of the dam still led to the displacement of some fifty thousand Nubian villagers.²⁹ Indeed, as Vijay Prashad notes, the Suez crisis was a critical turning point in neocolonial strategy, spurring Imperialist powers to develop new techniques of harnessing and reorienting the “third-world” and its threats of economic independence, cartelization, and Soviet affinity – a new politics of coercive international debt and compulsory dependency enforced (primarily) by the “disinterested” hand

of the market.³⁰ Mega-dams soon became signature projects for “structural adjustment” and a fetish of the World Bank and its associated “economic hit-men,” who promised third-world nations around the world that hydroelectricity was the key to modernization and economic uplift, at the same time compelling or coercing these nations to borrow billions of dollars from Western donors to spend, ironically, on Western materials and expertise for their construction.³¹ The latter half of the twentieth century may have been publicly characterized by the shadow of “The Bomb”; however, mega-dams must be held responsible for the massive liquidation or dislocation of whole civilizations, from the Amazon to Northern Quebec, from India to Indonesia. Dams have both concretized and facilitated the flows of power that course into our present moment. In this sense, hydroelectric mega-dams haunt the current global economy as almost no other single manifestation of global forces.

Indeed, the money invested in mega-dams has been a crucial outlet for the over-accumulated capital of the Global North and, more recently, for the petro-dollars and sovereign wealth of oil-rich nation-states. Debt for mega-dam construction represents a relatively stable investment because it is backed not only by the promise of the indebted dam-building nation-state in question but also by transnational lending institutions with access to state treasuries in the “developed” world.³² In an age when speculative investments penetrate economies and societies around the world, and when these financial flows are continually being deconstructed and reconstructed by sublimely complex digitized risk vehicles,³³ the financial ghost of the mega-dam lurks in almost every major financial institution, bank, mutual fund, pension program, and investment portfolio, including the endowments and investments of universities. We cannot escape its shadow. The mega-dam is the icon, manifestation, and generator of complex and intertwined forms of global violence: ecological, social, economic, and epistemic.

A major source of dam failure is sedimentation: the gradual build-up of infinitesimal silt and grit from the rivers that are blocked, redirected, or harnessed. Gradually, the particulate gums up the turbines and accumulates in the riverbed and flood plain, rendering the dam less effective and often unusable, if not at risk of breach. In the same way, dams build up a sedimentation of meanings, cultural resonances, and ideological dissonances. As such, dams are singular sites that help us to read the cultural politics of their day and, what is more important, to bear witness to the ways cultural politics flow into and out of material power relations. For this reason, I suggest that we “read” the dam as a “cultural text,” a liminal site hovering at the cusp of the cultural and the material that manifests hopes, dreams, desires, nightmares, perils, and possibilities.

Key to water as a critical heuristic and material/cultural problem is its unimaginable *causality*. There is something fundamentally sublime about how water “works,” something beyond the human imagination, beyond even the metaphorical powers of science. While there have been major advances in the scientific study of water systems and hydrodynamics over the past hundred and fifty years, especially where they have been aided by computer-modelling

technology, the full cyclical nature of water systems remains elusive because there are simply *too many factors* to consider. This is the case, for instance, in predicting the possible ecological impacts of large dams.³⁴ Water defies our ability to fully chart how one thing affects another, or the way the chain of causal events leads to a predictable conclusion – it exceeds our capacity for narrative. The irony is that water is always already all around us, always already in us, but we do not (and perhaps cannot) understand fully how it works.

On the one hand, this situation speaks to the terrible hubris materialized in the mega-dam – the tragic and devastating arrogance of humans in presuming to command the flow of so elemental and unpredictable a force as water, and the broader arrogance of a society that believes it can master causality. But it also implies that dams are a cultural problem, a loaded and ambiguous signifier or icon of the imagination. Dams are both metaphors and materializations of deep cultural patterns and contradictions. For this reason, I want to identify the dam as an archetype of the “political unconscious” of neoliberal capitalist globalization which recurs again and again as the symbolic and physical manifestations of the mega-dam both haunt the hopes, fears, desires, and revulsions of this global moment.

The association of dams with the unconscious was pioneered by Sigmund Freud in his development of a theory of sublimation, which alludes to the way primal sexual drives are channelled into socially acceptable behaviour, and the way subjects of analysis come to develop themselves through this work of redirection. For Freud, the cultivation of “civilized” subjectivity was akin to the erection of mental “dams” to hold back or harness unconscious energies.³⁵ He was particularly concerned with the constitutive forms of psychological anxiety born of a constant fear of the “return of the repressed” in potential explosion or collapse of the mental dam and the consequent bursting forth of unmediated primal drives. Later psychoanalytic thinkers like Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek were to suggest that the ongoing work of worrying about the “return of the repressed” was critical to the constitution of the subject, and that our psychic life is a constant, frantic effort to convince ourselves that we are more than merely the drives we have sought so hard to sublimate, an effort that leads us to draw on a pool of social meanings and significations and common imaginaries to fortify our ego.³⁶ For Freud and others, pent-up anxiety over the repressed is the source of the urge towards self-abnegation, the “death drive” that fills us with fantasies of self-harm, suicide, and disappearance as a final escape from the war in our minds between what we take to be “natural” drives and the “cultural” work of sublimation.

In his influential book *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson seeks to wed these Freudian metaphors with an understanding of the conditions of cultural production under capitalism.³⁷ For Jameson, the capitalist system is an accumulation of the repressions and sublimations of the contradictions, crises, and unanswered injustices inherent in a complex system of exploitation. The history of economic violence and other forms of violence necessary to create the capitalist order, as well as the perverse threat of total revolution (the possibility that things could be radically different), is always repressed and sublimated within capitalism’s

political unconscious. The system is haunted both by the ghosts of the violences that brought us to this moment and the ghostly presences of what-might-have-been and what-could-be. For Jameson, cultural texts can offer theoreticians the opportunity to “psychoanalyze” the underlying material conditions of a cultural moment because they not only speak to the particular themes and preoccupations of their creators’ intent but also emerge, circulate, and gain currency in a particular historical moment. In other words, cultural production both symptomatizes the political unconscious at the moment of its emergence (or the moment of its reception and decoding) and helps contribute to or reproduce this moment (although the exact form, politics, and potential of this reproduction are far from certain).

It is important to note, as Jameson makes clear in later work, that the ideological work of cultural texts is to provide a “causal map” of social reality: both the forms and the content of fiction, film, and other mediations offer their user a sense of “the way things work” and the causes and consequences of social life and action. But for Jameson, social life and the systems of power that structure it are “sublime” – too massive in scope and complexity for the imagination to fathom. This is especially the case in an age of globalization when those former containers of the causal imagination (for instance, the nation, ethnicity, or religion) have been fundamentally ruptured and provincialized.³⁸ Thus, all texts (but especially fictional ones) are ideological in the sense that, by necessity, they all offer a coherent sense of a causality that masks and reduces the complexity and scope of life. Without this deceptive “ideological” coherence, such narratives would seem implausible or disjunctive. In order to make sense to their audiences, all texts draw on the reservoir of the “political unconscious” and succeed to the extent that they are able to speak to shared archetypes, tropes, and dominant notions of social causality.³⁹

It is in this sense that I read the mega-dam as a cultural text and as a quintessential liminal site in the political unconscious. In the language of psychoanalytic theory, “liminal” sites are thresholds⁴⁰ between the conscious and unconscious mind. Liminal figures are those that offer a unique moment to witness the play of signification and sublimation, an eerie border between worlds. Because mega-dams are such dense sites of intention and consequence, and because their career over the past century has been so influential and violent on the global stage, their ascendancy stands out as a poetic and potent moment in the political unconscious. The mega-dam is perhaps the signature icon of Western modernity’s drive to conquer causality and to convince the “natural” world to conform to the dictates of “progress.”

In what follows, I chart the presence of the mega-dam in several filmic “blockbusters” over a period of roughly seventy years, to uncover some of their cultural meanings. I am interested in the ways these films play off, express, and, in many ways, anticipate deeply seated anxieties in the political unconscious, a role that blockbuster films enact particularly well by virtue of their location within the political economy of culture (they are extremely expensive productions that must be surefire hits to buoy the finances of major studios). But I also suspect that the more recent blockbusters are popular in part because, they incorporate and seduce us

with an invitation to a vague critical reading, usually in the form of a juvenile and contradictory environmentalism, an “untransformative catharsis” for the sublimated violence of the dam that haunts our existence. In general, while early cinematic representations of mega-dams are filled with triumphant optimism, more recent appearances betray deep anxieties about the world that created mega-dams and has been shaped in their shadow.

The first major cinematic appearances of mega-dams were newsreels featuring the construction of the century’s iconic dams in the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s.⁴¹ What is notable about these early newsreels is that the majesty of the dam and the miracle of the moving picture are made to complement each other. Not only do such films glorify the mega-dam as an almost sublime mobilization of labour and ingenuity, but mega-dams, in their massive scale and scope, glorify the emerging medium of film. The transitions between wide, establishing shots, close-ups of workers laying cement, and even aerial shots of dammed river gorges lionize the cinema as the new sensory organ of the mega-dam–empowered polis. Indeed, film proclaims itself the medium for capturing the full magnitude of the mega-dam’s intervention in causality: we are offered not only a visual panorama of titanic, concrete edifices but a full explanation of the forces at work in their design and construction (interiors of laboratories, close-ups of cement mixers) and what the dams will produce or make possible (crude animations mapping the flow of electricity to cities and water to fields, images of electrified homes and factories, of bustling cities). Their filmic portraits illustrate the process by which mega-dams became fused with the promise of a bountiful modernity, constant progress, and a taming of waters – and, therefore, of causality.

Both the medium of film and the mega-dam were iconic of an age where superpowers competed to fulfill the promises of modernity. Indeed, films and dams are both products and producers of mass publics, sites of phenomenal investment, and the coming together of particular constellations of economic and cultural power. Susan Buck-Morss has expanded on Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities” to map the emergence, during this time, of mass political imaginaries and utopian visions of collective possibility in both the United States and the Soviet Union.⁴² She documents the ways in which the emerging medium of film and the construction of major public works became critical sites of struggle over how mass publics might imagine themselves and their future. In her reading, collective imaginaries are characterized as flow-like – always shifting, changing, and evolving. Films and major infrastructure projects operate as dams in these flows, attenuating, harnessing, redirecting, and channelling the power of mass public imaginaries in particular ways. I further suggest that they are concretizations of the imagination that, in turn, shape the imagination – acute sites of the intersection of the cultural and the material. It is for this reason that we can read dams as cultural texts. They help conscript us into a shared imaginary or collective fiction through which we explain causality and agency to ourselves.

By the postwar period, however, early cinematic valorizations of the dam were slowly to give way to a more ambivalent and anxious signification. The 1955 British film *The Dam Busters* celebrates the real-world scientists and pilots who developed innovative “bouncing bombs” and flew them deep into Nazi territory during the Second World War to destroy mega-dams and thus disrupt German industry and agriculture. Despite being among the most popular films of its day,⁴³ this film is marked by masculinized sobriety, and its jingoism is moderated (although in some ways consummated) by a melancholic note: the force of human ingenuity and courage must be applied to building and delivering bombs to destroy dams. Here, the breach of the dam represents the violent liberation of modernity from the shackles of German fascism, pictured as an unnatural dam both on the European landscape and on history, a blockage that could be cleared only by the combination of tireless British ingenuity and stiff-upper-lipped aerial heroism. And while the mass national imaginary of British valour here is far from ambivalent, the location of the dam is. The closing moments of the film follow the pilots as they land after a successful sortie and retire to their quarters. While the narration calmly and authoritatively notes the triumphant place of the dambusters in history, the eye is drawn to the evidence of the high human cost of these missions: haunting photographs of downed pilots, empty cots, and vacant seats in the mess hall. These visual cues quietly register sacrifices to the dam, troubling the more celebratory voice-over and closing the film on a somber note. No longer a symbol of unproblematic progress and modernity, the dam here begins to emerge as a dangerous Promethean gift, accessible to enemy and ally alike.

While such pageantry was possible in 1955, by the time of the production of the first *Superman* film in 1978, matters were considerably more complex. The Oil Crisis of 1973 had stemmed from a problematic act of economic resistance to an emerging neocolonial world order, and represented the first substantial threat to the postwar economic supremacy of the United States. Further, it instigated the earliest widespread inklings that a culture dependent on oil to maintain its domestic prosperity and its international military hegemony was fundamentally unstable, that its own empowerment relied on the disempowerment of others, and that the ability to generate and acquire its needed energy was altogether uncertain. The “energy crisis,” as it came to be known, ushered in a new age of concern for the future. The celebratory vision of the mega-dam as the icon of the national command of causality gave way to a sense that things had slipped beyond control.

Superman drew on and contributed to a cultural zeitgeist in the shadow of U.S. president Nixon’s revolutionary severing of the hegemonic U.S. dollar from the gold-standard in 1973, a move that entailed entrusting the fate of the nation and the global economy to the fabled power of the free market. In addition, as David Harvey points out, it ushered in an age of economic and financial uncertainty that had its cultural expression in the rise of postmodernism.⁴⁴ Inklings of a postmodern skepticism about the metanarratives of industrial modernity and its attendant euphoric national imaginaries creep into the film’s epic climax in which Superman, the American icon and champion, fails to prevent one of his enemy Lex Luthor’s two terrorist

missiles from striking the precarious San Andreas Fault. Tellingly, Luthor's plan is an act of terrifying speculative investment: he anticipates the sinking of California into the Pacific Ocean, leading to a boom in the value of his property investments in the (soon-to-be-coastal) states of Nevada and New Mexico. The unstoppable missile causes a massive earthquake and widespread havoc, including the breach of the iconic Hoover Dam (washing away houses and farms) and the death of our hero's beloved Lois Lane. Bereaved beyond reason, this all-American hero from outer space chooses to breach intergalactic rules and test the limits of his powers by altering the flow of time, (implausibly) flying backward around the world, stopping the second missile, and saving the day.

In *Superman*, the dam is a site of anxious and vulnerable disenchantment. The breach of the Hoover Dam, once the site of national hope, aspiration, collectivity, and modernity, betrays a profound fear of being swept away by the flood of events triggered by the psychotic excesses of Luthor's capitalist greed if taken to their grotesque conclusion. Superman's inability to save the dam in time resonates with an interpretation of a superpower experiencing the "return of the repressed," a sense that global violence, which was once kept in check, threatens now to inundate the national imaginary – a sense of belatedness and the speeding up of events beyond rational control. Luthor's act of financial terrorism echoes the sense, already gaining momentum in the late 1970s, that American capital had betrayed American society. Businesses could no longer be trusted to be motivated by civic responsibility.⁴⁵ Instead, immaterial speculation was evolving into a period of neo-liberal callousness.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Superman's humanitarian justification for breaking the interstellar taboo against intervening in the flow of time eerily foreshadows and normalizes more recent American imperial adventures that have flaunted international agreements and covenants in the name of "human rights" and a unilaterally defined "greater good."

That Superman ultimately saves the dam and the woman he loves betrays an aspirational nostalgia for a time when things seemed to flow properly and a deep-seated desire for a strong, superhuman force to put the world back to rights. This nostalgia would become a key affective resource for the neo-conservative movements of the 1980s and 1990s, which mobilized the fears of a coming flood of internal and external social "evils" (migration, feminism, greedy unionized workers, and ungodly academics, for example) to reinforce the power of the free market and the repressive and punitive power of the state. That Superman alone is able to take command of causality (turning the clock back to an incisive point where "it all went wrong" and redirecting the flow of events) is less an articulation of hope than a manifestation of a recognition that only some sort of superhuman force can rescue us from our own creations.

The anxiety, ambivalence, and disenchantment associated with dams has persisted through the rise to supremacy of global neo-liberalism and the dawn of a largely disenchanted twenty-first century. Dams today are understood as part of an industrial modernity gone terribly wrong. In more recent films, the mega-dam resonates with anxieties that rarely achieve coherent

articulation in mainstream discourse beyond the movie theatre: industrialized warfare, entrenched poverty, the breakdown of society in the solvent of the free-market, and a vague ethos of resigned helplessness in the face of imminent ecological and social collapse. Indeed, the dam has emerged as an archetype of the anxieties of globalization precisely because of the development of a neo-liberal cultural politics that (as critics like Henry Giroux, Zygmunt Bauman, and Jean and John Comaroff note) has engendered a culture of fatalism, disenchantment, and fear.⁴⁷ Where the consolidation of media power has severely limited public discourse and where people's lives are more and more dominated by the harsh imperatives of the unfettered free market, political agency is increasingly reduced to spectacle and neo-conservative reaction. In this context, ever-more dramatic representations of dams swing between exposing the repressed violences of globalization on the one hand, and revealing and throwing into relief a sense of political impotence and pointlessness on the other. The films to which we now turn both seize and capitalize upon this contradiction.

In the second of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, *The Two Towers* (2002), among the highest-grossing films of all time,⁴⁸ “nature” literally uproots itself in anger to destroy a dam. Motivated by fatalism (the “end of history” in the form of the feared “inevitable” triumph of the evil warlord Sauron), a once nature-loving wizard has betrayed his alliance with the forest and is razing it in order to power a magical forge in which he is bioengineering a hybrid race of super-soldiers for world domination. Through most of the film, “nature” is represented by sentient walking trees (“Ents” or tree-shepherds) who stoically declare their neutrality in the looming war, explaining that “men” will eventually wipe themselves out and that “nature” need only wait. However, upon seeing the rampant destruction of the forest at the hands of the now-evil wizard, “nature” awakens and seeks revenge, tearing apart a dam, which releases a river that floods the wizard's tower and its satanic mill.

We can read here an allegory of humanity's hubris in its perceived mastery over nature, which will eventually overtake us, drowning us in calamity. The film comes at a time when ecological crises of global warming, air and water pollution, drought, and famine seem increasingly uncontrollable and a spirit of confusion and fatalism descends on public discourse.⁴⁹ These environmentalist themes are clearly director Peter Jackson's preferred interpretation, but we must wonder why this image would gain such currency at the present moment, when ecological issues otherwise remain woefully underaddressed. Some might see this as a rather hopeful image, insofar as nature's (feminized) passivity and withdrawal give way to insurgent (masculinized) rage. But what is missing here is a sense of a transformative mobilization of agency and possibility. “Nature” here comes alive as a discrete and separate phenomenon to wreak retributive justice on “culture,” reinforcing the same untenable dualism that gave rise to our ecocidal system in the first place. The response to the dam here is not so much revolutionary as apocalyptic, echoing Frederick Jameson's suggestion that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of the present global capitalist order.⁵⁰ There is a millennial logic to the closure that the Ents' destruction of the dam brings to *The Two Towers*, something more of

the cleansing wrath of God (for which we must merely wait and pray) than an image of revolutionary transformation. What we have here is not an image of resistance but a cathartic and titillating glimpse of the “return of the repressed,” a cinematic gesture to a systemic death drive. This climactic destruction of the dam capitalizes on and reinforces deep-seated anxieties and their accompanying political paralysis, rather than offering new perspectives toward a more substantive ecological politics.

A year later, in *X2: X-Men United* (2003), the second in the extremely popular adaptation of the classic X-Men comic books, the dam harnessed and generated similar anxieties. The series imagines that our world is shared by mutants with superhuman powers. The mutants are at war among themselves: between those (antagonists) who believe in mutant superiority and supremacy and those (protagonists) who believe their powers should be used to help humanity. The latter are led by the wise, just, and paternal “Professor X” who, although confined to a wheelchair, wields acute telekinetic, telepathic, and psychic powers and has founded a school to help mutants control their gifts and put them to the service of humanity. In *X2*, the professor is kidnapped by a ruthless mutant-hating military contractor, William Stryker, and secreted into a remote hydroelectric dam where Stryker plans to use the professor’s powers, amplified by the dam’s massive generating capacity, to launch a global genocidal psychic attack on the world’s mutants. But at the eleventh hour, the chauvinistic mutants arrive and reverse this weapon, targeting all non-mutant humans on the planet. The day is saved not through any dramatic acts of heroism but by a breach in the dam caused by a “domestic dispute” between the professor’s psychic protégé, Jean Grey, and her husband (at the time under mind-control but, we are given to understand, generally displeased with his wife’s sexual feelings for another mutant hero, the inestimable Wolverine). Their powers run amok within the brittle shell of the dam, and the final third of the film is a dramatic race against time as the edifice crumbles and the once-arrested river breaks through. Wolverine discovers the dam is his own “primal scene” where, years before, Stryker had transformed him from a near-feral mutant into an indestructible super-soldier, through genetic and surgical manipulation. Our heroes manage to stop the genocidal plot, rescue the professor, and escape the dam just moments before it breaks, but Grey must pay for her infidelities and sacrifice her life to hold back the flood while her comrades escape. She, Stryker, and the remnants of the dam and its genocidal machinery, are swept away in the ensuing flood.

Once again, we find the dam as a site of ambivalence, apprehension, degeneration, and catastrophe. In *X2* the spectre of genetic engineering and the fear of military experimentation identify the dam as the site of a gathering darkness, its power being harnessed to the most anti-human causes with potentially genocidal implications. The ultimate breach of the dam resonates with concern over the impotence of modernist institutions of containment such as the cohesive nation-state, the patriarchal nuclear family, the psychological labour of sublimation, and the postwar compact of state, capital, and labour. The mega-dam here becomes quite literally a site that harnesses and amplifies psychic desires and antagonisms; it is the political unconscious

concretized, which risks being overcome by that which it increasingly fails to repress, literally emanating the death drive as it amplifies the primal powers of the professor (that paragon of control and civility) toward irrational genocidal ends.

We might read the collapse of the dam in *X2* as a critical commentary on the evils of industrial modernity, capitalism, and globalization. But it is once again important to recognize that the destruction of the dam in this film is framed only as a catastrophe, albeit ultimately a cleansing one. While Stryker and the dam are washed away, the antagonism between mutants and humanity remains. While the film may provide a catharsis for a political unconscious haunted by the dam and offer a release for the pent-up psychic energies bound up with this liminal edifice, these images are far from transformative. The film thrives on something like a cultural death drive that expresses itself through our desire to see the dam collapse. While we fear the breach of the mega-dam at the core of the economic, cultural, and social ontology of the present global moment, we also desire, perversely, to see this final scene, this unspeakable catastrophe, replayed and replayed.

In the 2007 blockbuster *Transformers* we revisit the Hoover Dam. This time the massive power plant is portrayed as a secret government military facility that both masks the presence of a giant evil extraterrestrial robot and maintain its frozen stasis. The dam does not break (though it does crack) but the film's denouement reveals that the U.S. government built the dam solely to hide this alien danger that they exploited both for its advanced technology and for its potential for gaining military supremacy. Inevitably, the robotic menace escapes to wreak havoc on Californian cities. Here, the Hoover Dam, once a site of state benevolence, national aspiration, and a Keynesian care of the population, reveals that it harbours a potentially massively destructive alien presence, with a potential for a reckless abuse of national trust that strikes deep into any sense of national cohesion: the merciless alien is truly at the heart of the national project. As in the other recent blockbusters, there is a sense that technology has overstepped itself, in this case releasing near-indestructible artificial intelligences to destroy America. And, while we might be tempted to laud this criticism of modernist hubris, once again the scenes of destruction echo a general sense of resignation and desperation. The transformers who emerge from the dam are unstoppable by any human agency, and we can do nothing but sit back and enjoy the strangely "just" destruction they mete out to civilization.

What accounts for the commercial and cultural success of the imagery of the collapse of the mega-dam in these blockbuster films? We comprehend that we are trapped within a modern, capitalist worldview of causality of which the mega-dam is both an instance and an engine. We are witness to the ecological and human violence of the mega-dam and this entire system – to the causes and effects of our collective behaviour. But we cannot imagine our way clear of this worldview or system. Hence, we are addicted to images of our own annihilation.

Mega-dams have occasionally featured in films and literature with a more critical orientation. Documentaries such as the popular *Up the Yangtze* (2007)⁵¹ have highlighted the human and ecological costs of dam-building and garnered worldwide sympathy for anti-dam movements.⁵² Ahrunthati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) mobilizes rivers as a key literary trope, foreshadowing the author's own widely publicized anti-dam activism against the Narmada Valley project in India.⁵³ And popular non-fiction books such as *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*⁵⁴ have highlighted the way the World Bank and other transnational financial institutions promoted dam construction as a means of recolonizing the postcolonial through a politics of foreign ownership and control, debt and, in many cases, "regime change."⁵⁵

But I want to conclude by considering Canadian/Cherokee author Thomas King's now-classic *Green Grass, Running Water*. The narrative of this novel, based on a composite of indigenous experiences and hydroelectric construction in Canada, takes place in the actual shadow of a mega-dam.⁵⁶ King's fictional Blackfoot community in Southern Alberta has lost the political battle against the "Great Baleen" dam, whose construction has fundamentally disrupted local ecology and further circumscribed traditional Blackfoot lifeways. Yet before the dam can be opened (leading to the flooding of a large area), Eli, a retired literature professor, returns to his childhood home on the reserve and refuses to leave his mother's cottage in the dam's prospective floodplain, gaining an injunction to block the opening of the floodgates. While the dam functions as a literary device to announce a fundamental impasse or tension that shapes the novel, it also highlights indigenous experiences of the imposition and false promise of hydroelectric development in Canada and the imposition of colonial-settler "development" more generally. Further, the dam represents a historical blockage and comes to represent the hubris of Western capitalist modernity. As numerous commentators on the novel have observed, King mobilizes tropes and signs of liquidity, fluidity, and water as a playful counterpoint to the rigidity of colonial-settler culture as well to the formal strictures of the novel form: water lubricates, erodes, and bursts through the liminality of written and oral storytelling, linear and cyclical temporalities, and Euclidian and metaphysical space.⁵⁷ Indeed, the very "causality" of the story – the ability of the narrative to proceed in the expected canonical Western arc of conflict, climax, and resolution (as is so faithfully repeated by the Hollywood blockbuster) – is constantly interrupted by the refrain "First, there was only water." With this refrain, the narrator attempts to tell a creation story to the metafictional trickster figure Coyote but is stymied (diverted) each time by the course of events and Coyote's antics.

At the climax of the novel, the dam is (inadvertently?) broken by the actions of Coyote, leading to Eli's death in the resulting flood. Indeed, the destruction of the dam is represented as the culmination of the contradictions, confusions, injustices, and ironies of indigenous-settler relations that animate the novel. Specifically, the cars of three of the key characters are magically transported into the river and crash into the dam, causing a fatal breach. But unlike the previously examined Hollywood narratives, the collapse of the dam is far from cataclysmic.

While Eli dies and while the collapse of the dam results in temporary ecological havoc, King highlights the intertwined resilience of the human and non-human community. The destruction of the dam is featured neither as an apocalyptic fantasy of totally cleansing destruction nor as a “return” to a pre-colonial time. Instead, just as the metaphors of water tease and chide any desire for clear causality (and erode the hubris of controlling water emblemized in the mega-dam), so too King’s narrative offers no clear or simple closure but opens instead to multiple possibilities. The Blackfoot community and the individual characters are, we understand, stronger and more united by the end of the novel. The Blackfoot Sundance gathering, which is threatened in various ways throughout the novel, continues and thrives. And the novel concludes on a note of playful optimism with the mercurial Coyote unchastened by his actions and the narrator continuing his efforts to tell the story of creation whose opening refrain is always “First, there was only water.”⁵⁸

Unlike the cataclysmic parables of the Hollywood mega-dam narratives, King’s conclusion does not offer us easy answers. Rather, it asks us to imagine the before and the after of the mega-dam with a sort of revolutionary patience – revolutionary at least within a society addicted to simplified maps of causality. His playful evasion of clear distinctions between heroes and villains, between written and oral culture, between “natural” and “human” forms of agency, or indigenous and settler culture – in short, the subversive fluidity of his intervention – highlights an alternative approach to the mega-dam.⁵⁹ King seeks to tease open the knotted roots of a culture that fetishizes mastery and control of causality. While far from writing a neo-primitivist rejection of all technology or a postmodern rejection of all literary form, King teases out the knots of a Western worldview that spawned both the dam and the novel. Rather than offering an alternative, post-apocalyptic vision, however, he seeks to remind us of the power of relationships and possibility, a power emblemized in the run of a river or the sublime interconnectivity of a watershed.

While numerous narratives and cultural productions celebrate the collapse of mega-dams or criticize mega-dams for a great many admirable reasons, King’s novel is perhaps unique in its perception of the way the dam concretizes global power relations and its sensitivity to the roots of the relations deep in the dense intersection of spirituality, community, epistemology, and economics. In this sense, King intimates a vision of life beyond the dam, and beyond the dam of the present, a vision that is neither atavistic nor apocalyptic nor techno-utopian, but which hints at a healthier approach to causality. King’s work, mischievous in both form and content, subtly offers a foil to the mega-dam and all that the mega-dam imposes, represents, and insists upon. He makes a playfully light yet genuine and mature gesture toward a revolutionary *patience* and *compassion* for our selves as watery bodies⁶⁰ that can never be fully aware of or control all our causes and consequences.

¹ Richardson, *Strangers Devour the Land*.

² Samson, *A Way of Life That Does Not Exist*, 102–6.

³ “Native protesters blockade Manitoba dam project”; Kulchyski, *È-nakàskàkowaàhk (A Step Back)*; Yan, “Canada’s Hydro Partnerships No Panacea for First Nations.”

⁴ Glenn, *Once Upon an Oldman*.

⁵ Qing, Thibodeau, and Williams, *The River Dragon Has Come!*; Chetham, *Before the Deluge*.

⁶ Grossman, *High Tech Trash*, 73–5.

⁷ For a cogent collection of analyses of the current state of higher education, see The Edu-Factory Collective, *Towards a Global Autonomous University*.

⁸ Grossman, *Watershed*; Nelles, *The Politics of Development*, 215–55.

⁹ Lucky, “Global Hydropower”; *Renewables 2011*, 73.

¹⁰ Froschauer, *White Gold*; Nelles, *The Politics of Development*, 215–55.

¹¹ Stevens, *Hoover Dam*.

¹² Josephson, *Industrialized Nature*, 1–5.

¹³ Strang, *The Meaning of Water*, 113–28.

¹⁴ Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*, 27.

¹⁵ The distinction is far from exact or scientific, although the literature in development studies almost always makes one. On the devastating social and ecological ramifications of these, see Dorsey et al., *Large Dams*; Froschauer, *White Gold*; Goldsmith and Hildyard, *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams*; Grossman, *Watershed*; Josephson, *Industrialized Nature*; Khagram, *Dams and Development*; Leslie, *Deep Water*; McCully, *Silenced Rivers*; Pearce, *The Dammed*; Qing, Thibodeau, and Williams, *The River Dragon Has Come!*; Scudder, *The Future of Large Dams*.

¹⁶ Roy, “The Greater Common Good.”

¹⁷ On “industries” as both products and producers of “culture,” see Mato, “All Industries Are Cultural.”

¹⁸ Richardson, *Strangers Devour the Land*; Carlson, *Home Is the Hunter*.

¹⁹ Khagram, *Dams and Development*; Goldsmith and Hildyard, *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams*; Leslie, *Deep Water*.

²⁰ Graeber, *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*, 49–90.

²¹ Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind*, 9–17;

²² On modes of knowledge and experience beyond/against this colonizing worldview, see Christian and Wong, this volume; also Coulthard, “Place Against Empire”; and Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*.

²³ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 27–47; also MacLeod, this volume.

²⁴ On this notion of spectrality, see Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 10.

²⁵ “The Great Dam as Assuan” from the *Times* of London (1902) for a vivid example of the rhetoric of imperial benevolence and European ingenuity.

²⁶ Potter, “Security standoff stalls Canadian dam project in Kandahar”; Government of Canada, “Signature project: Dahla Dam and Irrigation System.”

²⁷ On the cultural politics and political economy of dams, see Benjamin, *Invested Interests*, 107.

²⁸ Scudder, *The Future of Large Dams*, 5.

²⁹ Fahim, *Dams, People and Development*, 43.

³⁰ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*.

³¹ Khagram, *Dams and Development*; Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*.

³² Worm, Dros, and van Gelder, *Policies and Practices in Financing Large Dams*; Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*; McCully, *Silenced Rivers*.

³³ LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives*, especially 141–60; on “flows” and capital, see MacLeod this volume.

³⁴ See, for instance, Dorcey and Others, *Large Dams*; World Commission on Dams, *Dams and Development: A New Framework*.

³⁵ Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 43, 54.

³⁶ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage”; Žižek and Daly, *Conversations*, 65–72.

³⁷ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*; see also Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx*.

³⁸ Jameson, “Postmodernism”; Jameson, “Notes on Globalization.”

³⁹ Jameson, for instance, is primarily concerned with the way the novel’s narrative form is consonant with a pattern of expectations germane to capitalist modernity.

⁴⁰ The Latin root word *liminus* literally means “threshold.”

⁴¹ Josephson, *Industrialized Nature*, 15–40.

⁴² Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*. On a related note regarding the importance of control over water to the imagining of the nation, see Biro, this volume.

⁴³ Ramsden, *The Dam Busters*.

⁴⁴ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

⁴⁵ Billington and Jackson, *Big Dams of the New Deal Era*.

⁴⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

⁴⁷ Bauman, *Liquid Fear*; Giroux, *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism*; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Millennial Capitalism*.

⁴⁸ In November 2010, this film was the twelfth-highest grossing film worldwide. See “All Time Box Office: Worldwide Grosses.”

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Žižek, *Living in the End Times*.

⁵⁰ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 199.

⁵¹ *Up the Yangtze*, directed by Yung Chang. See also Chetham, *Before the Deluge*; Qing, Thibodeau and Williams, *The River Dragon has Come!*

⁵² See, for instance, the International Rivers website.

⁵³ Roy, “The Greater Common Good”; *The God of Small Things*.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*.

⁵⁵ See also Grossman, *Watershed*; Khagram, *Dams and Development*; Pearce, *The Dammed*.

⁵⁶ King, *Green Grass, Running Water*.

⁵⁷ Bailey, “The Arbitrary Nature of the Story”; Cox, “All this Water Imagery”; Fee and Flick “Coyote Pedagogy”; Lousley, “Hosanna Da, Our Home on Natives’ Land.”

⁵⁸ Fee and Flick, “Coyote Pedagogy”; Goldman, “Mapping and Dreaming.”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Neimanis and Chandler, this volume.