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The Nature We Desire: A Lacanian Analysis of the Fantasy and Discourse of Nature and the Possibility of an Entangled Ecological Ethics

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The Nature We Desire

A Lacanian Analysis of the Fantasy and Discourse of Nature and the
Possibility of an Entangled Ecological Ethics

Master Thesis for *Philosophy (60 EC): Modern European Philosophy*

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Introduction

The climate crisis defines contemporary life in ways that are undeniable and increasingly difficult to integrate into our self-understanding. The world is already experiencing rising seas, accelerating biodiversity loss, and extreme weather events whose impacts fall most heavily on the communities least responsible for global emissions.¹ Scientific assessments warn that even in optimistic scenarios, surpassing 1.5°C of warming since pre-industrial times within the coming decade is now likely, with further increases risking irreversible transformations of Earth's systems.² These developments are no longer distant projections but present realities that undermine the stability of the societies that depend on them.

And yet, as the climate crisis becomes more visible, responses to it grow more contradictory. Calls for "restoration", "net-zero", and "living in balance with nature" increase alongside rising consumption, continued fossil-fuel expansion, and expanding infrastructures of global trade. Public attitudes mirror this split: awareness of human-driven climate change is high, and many believe that meaningful action remains possible, yet everyday behaviours continue to sustain the very systems driving ecological breakdown.³ The crisis is acknowledged, but patterns of action frequently continue as though ecological stability were still assured. As the following sections argue, this gap between knowledge and action does not simply reflect ignorance but a deeper libidinal organisation of subjectivity, sustained by a fantasy of stability and reconciliation.

This contradiction shapes how subjects experience, interpret, and respond to the ecological crisis. Rather than confronting ecological instability as an open and irreversible condition, this tension is often mediated through images that preserve the sense that order, balance, and control ultimately remain intact. Many individuals recognise the severity of the crisis yet remain affectively attached to an image of a coherent, harmonious "Nature" that promises stability, balance, but also a sense of control: the belief that ecological order can be restored through the right actions, technologies, or policies.

This imagined picture, which I refer to in this thesis as the fantasy of Nature, offers reassurance in the face of ecological instability but obscures the real conditions of ecological life:

¹ Intergovernmental Panel on climate Change (2023). Summary for Policymakers. A.2.2, p.5

² *Ibid.* B3.2, p.18

³ Representative research shows that 93% of Dutch citizens believe climate change exists, 62% see it as one of the biggest issues of our time, and 73% believe it can still (partly) be stopped. (CBS, 2023. *Klimaatverandering en energietransitie*. 2.1, 2.2)

entanglement, unpredictability, and mutual vulnerability of human and nonhuman processes. As a result, it also misrepresents the conditions under which meaningful ecological action could take place. In this thesis, I distinguish between “Nature” and “ecology”. “Nature”, capitalised, refers to the illusory image of harmony and externality, while “ecology” names the unstable web of human and nonhuman entanglements, which resists full symbolic coherence.

The climate crisis is not only a material and political problem, but also an existential one, unsettling the frameworks through which subjects imagine their place in the world. It raises questions that exceed the domains of science or policy alone: how can ecological action be meaningfully conceived when subjectivity itself is structured by fantasies of stability, control, and reconciliation? How can subjectivity be reconfigured once the belief in a stable natural order loses its grip? And, crucially, how might alternative modes of relating to the more-than-human world allow for responses that are not organised around denial, guilt, or fantasies of reconciliation?

These questions point to aspects of the climate crisis that lie beyond scientific or political solutions: the fantasies, desires, and meaning-structures that organise how ecological reality is perceived. While previous ecocritical thinkers have shown that “Nature” is not a neutral term but a cultural construct, such analyses often leave open why this construct remains so effectively compelling even in the face of its collapse.⁴ Understanding this persistence requires a framework capable of analysing how subjects cling to fantasies, why contradictory behaviours endure, and how desire is organised in relation to imagined sources of meaning and authority. Lacanian psychoanalysis provides such a framework by conceptualising subject formation through distinct but interrelated dimensions of subjectivity, allowing for an analysis of how meaning, desire, and impossibility structure responses to the ecological crisis.

This thesis therefore asks: *How does Lacanian psychoanalysis, through the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, explain the contradictory relation in which the desire for a sustainable future coincides with practices of ecological destruction, and what would it mean to traverse the fantasy of Nature that sustains this relation?*

Theoretical Framework and Structure

This thesis approaches the above-described contradiction through Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan’s account of subjectivity as structured by the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real provides a systematic framework for analysing how ecological meaning is formed, how

⁴ Examples of influential books on “Nature” as a cultural construct: Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology Without Nature*; Plumwood, V. (1993). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*; Haraway, D. (2008). *When Species Meet*.

desire shapes responses to environmental collapse, and why destructive behaviours persist despite widespread awareness. This approach reveals how imagined coherence (Imaginary), discursive organisation (Symbolic), and encounters with instability and loss (Real) together structure contemporary relations to the ecological crisis. Across the chapters, the three registers serve as tools for understanding how ecological subjectivity is produced, sustained and potentially transformed.

A central interlocutor for this thesis is Slavoj Žižek, whose work demonstrates the relevance of Lacanian psychoanalysis for ecological thought. Žižek compellingly shows how ecological discourse often relies on fantasies of harmony and ideology, sustained through mechanisms such as disavowal. His analysis illuminates why subjects may continue consuming even when they “know very well” the ecological consequences. However, Žižek’s approach also leaves important questions unresolved for the purposes of this thesis, concerning both the Real dimension of ecological entanglement and the possibility of subjective transformation.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 examines the Imaginary, analyzing how the fantasy of “pure” Nature functions as a misrecognised image of harmony and externality. Chapter 2 turns to the Symbolic, analysing how ecological discourse, ideology, and master-signifiers organise ecological desire through sustainability metrics, moral injunctions, and consumption practices. Chapter 3 explores the ecological Real as the unstable entanglement of human and non-human processes, how ecological collapse disrupts the fantasy of harmony, and develops a critique of Žižek’s approach to ecology. Chapter 4 synthesises these insights by drawing on Lacan’s account of the end of analysis and discourse theory to conceptualise what it would mean for the subject to traverse the fantasy of Nature. On this basis, the chapter advances *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement*, a proposal for reorienting ecological agency toward practices attuned to instability, interdependence, and the absence of symbolic guarantees.

Chapter 1: The Imaginary: “Nature” as Fantasmatic Mirror

Lacan’s theory of subjectivity distinguishes three interrelated registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary provides coherence through images of wholeness and identification; the Symbolic organises meaning through language, law, and social norms; and the Real names what escapes both representation and symbolisation.⁵ These registers do not function independently but are structurally intertwined, each holding the others in place.⁶ Because of this interdependence, Lacanian concepts cannot be neatly confined to a single register. Notions such as fantasy, desire, and *objet petit a* function as knots between registers, linking the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in different ways.

This chapter begins with the Imaginary because it is here that coherence and identification are first produced through images that promise unity and conceal division. In ecological terms, the Imaginary is decisive for understanding how “Nature” comes to appear as a coherent, harmonious whole, an image through which instability and dependence are rendered manageable. By clarifying the Imaginary logic at work in such projections, this chapter lays the groundwork for the analyses that follow, which will show how this image is articulated discursively in the Symbolic and disrupted by encounters with the Real.⁷

Section 1.1 reconstructs Lacan’s account of the Imaginary as the register of identification, coherence, and misrecognition, focusing on how the ego is formed through images of wholeness that conceal constitutive division. Section 1.2 then extends this logic to the ecological domain, showing how “Nature” functions as an Imaginary mirror: a privileged image of harmony through which the subject displaces its lack onto the world, sustaining ecological desire while concealing the Real of ecological instability and entanglement. This analysis lays the groundwork for the subsequent chapters, where the way in which this Imaginary structure is

⁵ Žižek (2014) *Event*, pp. 119-120; Žižek (2006), *How to read Lacan*, pp. 8-9

⁶ Lacan thoroughly explains their structure in *Seminar XXII: R.S.I.* (n.d.)

⁷ While Lacan insists that the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real emerge simultaneously and remain structurally inseparable, this thesis analyses them in the order Imaginary-Symbolic-Real. This ordering is methodological rather than developmental and reflects the movement of subjective positions in the analytic process, a movement from imaginary coherence, through symbolic mediation, toward encounters with the Real, reconstructed explicitly in Chapter 4. Throughout, it should be kept in mind that the three registers are always interdependent and simultaneously operative.

stabilised through discourse in the Symbolic and disrupted by encounters with the Real is examined.

The question that guides this chapter is: *How does the Imaginary attempt to conceal the constitutive lack of subjectivity through images of wholeness and how do projections of “Nature” function similarly?*

1.1 The Imaginary and the Formation of Illusory Coherence

The Imaginary is the register through which we experience reality as coherent. It is a necessary illusion which constructs harmonies, relationships of similarities and identity between persons and things, creating coherence in a world otherwise without structure and harmony. This register encompasses fundamental psychoanalytic ideas like transference, fantasy, and the ego.⁸ It is a constitutive dimension of subjectivity, without its illusions, the world would appear as unbearable fragmentation.

The Imaginary is central to Lacan’s account of ego-formation. Against traditional notions of the ego as an autonomous agent, Lacan argues that the ego is not the subject but an object of identification, an image through which the subject misrecognises itself as whole. He illustrates that with his theory of the “mirror stage”.⁹ The moment an infant first recognises its own reflection in the mirror, it identifies with the mirrored image as a coherent, whole body. This image produces a first sense of an “I”, what Lacan calls the “ideal-I”¹⁰, yet this recognition is already a misrecognition that conceals the infant’s actual experience of dependency and motor uncoordination. The ego thus originates in alienation, taking an external image to stand in for what is lacking in the self.

Later developments of Lacan’s theory¹¹, as Johnston (2024) notes, show that this process is from the start mediated by language and by others.¹² The infant identifies with the image only because another, typically the caregiver, confirms it, saying “That’s you!”. This scene reveals two key insights. First, the Imaginary is never isolated from the Symbolic: the image of selfhood is linguistically and socially constituted. Second, the image is infused with the desire of the Other.

⁸ Johnston, A. (2024). *Jacques Lacan*. 2.1.1

⁹ Lacan provides his most detailed and clear account of the mirror stage in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function”, in *Écrits: A Selection*, pp. 75-81

¹⁰ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, p.76

¹¹ Notably *Seminar IX: L’identification* (1961-1962) and *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964)

¹² Johnston, A. (2024). §2.2

Here it is useful to distinguish between Lacan's notions of the *other* and the *Other*. The *other* (lowercase) refers to an alter-ego within the Imaginary, someone with whom one's own ego identifies and relates with. The *Other* (capitalised), by contrast, designates the Symbolic order itself: the field of language, law, and norms that makes subjectivity possible.¹³ When the caregiver names the child, their words draw on this pre-existing Symbolic network: they speak through cultural signifiers that they identify with.¹⁴ From the beginning, then, the ego's image is saturated by the signifiers and desires of the Other. Lacan calls this "extimacy"¹⁵: the ego is "intimately external", formed from what is outside yet experienced as most inward. The "me" is always already the effect of the Other's desire.¹⁶

The mirror stage marks the subject's encounter with an image of coherence, but this coherence is inherently unstable, as the Imaginary is always already entangled with the Symbolic order of language. Language allows the subject to represent itself and others, but only by substituting words for things, presence for absence. Through this substitution, something is irreversibly lost: the immediacy of experience is replaced by signification. In gaining a place within language, the subject also loses the possibility of wholeness. Every word points to another in a metonymic chain, never capturing what it means to name, and this endless deferral installs a constitutive lack at the heart of subjectivity. It is this lack, opened by the Symbolic, that sets desire in motion.¹⁷

Fantasy as the Imaginary's structuring function

Fantasy arises as a response to the desire set in motion by this lack. If the mirror image offers a first illusion of coherence, fantasy provides the narrative frame that sustains it.¹⁸ Fantasy allows the subject to imagine that the loss introduced by language might be overcome, that somewhere, there exists an object or state that could restore what was lost. In Lacanian terms, fantasy structures the subject's relation to *objet petit a*¹⁹, the "object-cause" of desire: not an actual object that could be possessed, but the elusive remainder of what escapes symbolisation.²⁰

Lacan formalises this as $\$ \diamond a$, which expresses the structural link between the divided subject

¹³ Johnston, A. (2024). §2.3

¹⁴ Fink, B. (2014). *Object (a): Cause of Desire*, p. 87

¹⁵ Lacan, J. (1992) *Seminar VII: The ethics of psychoanalysis*, p. 139

¹⁶ Miller, J.A. (1994). *Extimité*. p.77

¹⁷ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, pp. 690-692

¹⁸ Evans, D (1996). *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. p. 61

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.128: "Lacan insisted that it should remain untranslated, 'thus acquiring, as it were, the status of an algebraic sign'"

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 61, pp. 128-129

(\$) and *objet petit a*.²¹ The lozenge (\diamond) signifies the mediating function of fantasy, the operation through which the subject sustains its relation to the lost object and gives desire a representable form. Through this structure, fantasy stages the illusion that the missing object could complete the subject, even though such completion is structurally impossible. In this way, fantasy both sustains desire and shields the subject from its fading as a desiring subject: it is, in Lacan's words, that "by which the subject sustains himself at the level of his vanishing desire"²², the frame that prevents collapse in the face of the impossibility of satisfaction. In this way, fantasy grants the Imaginary its organising power: just as the mirror image gives the ego a visible outline, fantasy offers a scenario through which the subject's division can be lived rather than endured.

Yet fantasy is never purely private. Like desire, fantasy is structured through the field of the Other: through language, culture, and the symbolic coordinates that give form to what can be imagined and desired.²³ The scenarios through which subjects find coherence are thus socially mediated. Each subject inhabits fantasy individually, but always within the frameworks that discourse and culture make available. These shared fantasmatic formations extend the Imaginary beyond the individual psyche, shaping how societies picture coherence, order, and loss.

Through such fantasmatic structures and mechanisms of identification, subjects come to imagine "Nature" as a site of balance and wholeness, projecting their desire for unity onto the world itself. The next section turns to this dynamic, to how the fantasy of "Nature" functions as an Imaginary mirror, offering the illusion of harmony that conceals structural instability it seeks to overcome.

1.2 From Ego to Ecology: Nature as Imaginary Mirror

If the mirror stage shows that the ego arises through a misrecognised image of wholeness, the same structure also shapes our relation to the world. The subject who encounters itself through the image of "Nature", which I term the *ecological subject*, can be understood as the Lacanian subject (\$) insofar as it locates its desire and coherence within ecological representations and fantasies. Just as the mirror image offers the infant a coherent body that conceals fragmentation,

²¹ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, pp. 431, 487, 653, 690-691

²² Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, p. 532

²³ *Ibid.* pp. 662, 690

“Nature” offers the subject an image of harmony that conceals ecological instability, entanglement, and loss. The subject sees in Nature what it lacks: unity, balance, and innocence, and projects these qualities outward, transforming the world into a mirror that reflects its own imagined coherence.

This projection of coherence onto Nature has been widely recognised in ecological thought, though articulated in different theoretical languages. Writers from diverse traditions have shown that Nature is not a neutral reality but a cultural construct that reflects particular fantasies, values, and power relations. Some, such as Kate Soper, emphasise its ideological function: Nature serves as an imagined outside that legitimates social norms and moral ideals.²⁴ Others, like Timothy Morton, describe it as a transcendental and empty signifier: a ghostly, inconsistent construct that operates at once as a moral norm, a placeholder for disparate objects, and, above all, a fantasy that organises desire and belief within ecological thought.²⁵ Building on this, Žižek reads ecology itself as an ideological formation structured by fantasy, sustained by images of harmony that conceal antagonism and instability.²⁶ From a Lacanian perspective, these accounts converge on a shared insight: that the appeal to “Nature” reproduces the logic of the Imaginary, offering an image of wholeness that conceals division and lack.

The fantasy of “Nature” thus functions as the imaginary frame through which ecological desire is structured. By “ecological desire”, I refer not to a biological impulse or a moral inclination, but to the form that Lacanian desire takes when organised around ecological representations: a longing for reconciliation between self and world, culture and nature. The fantasy of Nature gives form to this desire for harmony while concealing the impossibility of such unity. Following Žižek’s elaboration of Lacan, fantasy does not depict pre-existing desire but provides the narrative frame through which desire becomes possible and is sustained.²⁷ In this sense, ecological desire is not simply an instinctive wish to survive or to protect the planet, it is a desire mediated by images of balance, innocence, and restoration. These images promise to repair the loss introduced by the subject’s entry into language: the separation from immediacy, from a world imagined as whole and self-regulating. “Nature” becomes the screen through which this loss is made representable: it stages the illusion that unity might be regained, that a

²⁴ Soper, K. (1998). *What is Nature?* p. 249-253

²⁵ Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology without Nature*. p. 14

²⁶ Žižek, S. (2008). *Nature and its Discontents*, pp. 38, 44, 56

²⁷ Žižek, S. (1998). *The seven veils of fantasy*. pp. 191-192

fragmented relation to the world could be stitched together by “returning” to a natural order that was never whole to begin with.

Fantasy transforms structural antagonism into “the primordial form of narrative”²⁸: it translates irresolvable contradictions into stories of loss and restoration, making lack appear as something that once was whole and might be whole again. The fantasy of “Nature” follows this pattern: it stages a past when Nature was pure, a fall when human interference disrupted its balance, and a future when sustainability or technological mastery will restore it. This temporalisation gives the subject a stable place within an otherwise fragmented world. But the harmony it promises never existed; it is an effect of the fantasy itself. The ecological Real is entanglement, the fact that human and nonhuman life are co-constitutive, unstable, and without clear boundary. The subject can therefore sustain desire precisely because the goal it seeks is unattainable, because the fantasy continually reconstitutes the horizon of desire it can never fulfil.²⁹

Within this structure, “Nature” occupies the position of the Other that guarantees meaning and coherence. The subject, divided by its entry into the Symbolic, locates in “Nature” the supposed fullness that compensates for this loss. Nature becomes the site of the missing *objet petit a*, not the object itself, but the place where the subject situates the cause of its desire. Through this displacement, the subject relates to Nature as if it contained the secret of its own completion. The fantasy thus mediates the subject’s relation to lack: it allows the subject to continue desiring without confronting the impossibility of wholeness.³⁰

The persistence of the Fantasy of “Nature”

The fantasy of Nature has deep socio-historical roots. From Romanticism’s image of pastoral harmony to Enlightenment notions of a knowable, ordered Nature, modernity has repeatedly imagined the natural world as an external space of balance and renewal. It may seem like these fantasies no longer define contemporary ecological discourse, yet rather than disappearing, this fantasy has expanded and diversified. Earlier imaginaries that idealised a return to lost harmony now coexist with new signifiers of control and management, such as “sustainability”, “carbon neutrality”, “net zero”, and “resilience”.³¹ These discourses appear opposed: one romantic and retrospective, the other pragmatic and technocratic, but both share the same structural logic. Each responds to the subject’s constitutive lack by re-staging the separation between human and ecology, either by imagining its repair or by managing it through control

²⁸ Žižek, S. (1998). *The seven veils of fantasy*, p. 197

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 199

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 193

³¹ Though idealisations of Nature as harmonious and pristine still exist in media, such as cinematic nature documentaries and eco-tourism, where Nature appears as self-regulating totality

and optimisation. The fantasy of lost harmony projects wholeness into the past, imagining reconciliation as a return to balance; the technocratic fantasy displaces it into the future, promising that stability can be secured through calculation, innovation, or responsible governance. Both sustain the same defence mechanism: they transform the Real of ecological entanglement, instability, interdependence, and the impossibility of its complete mastery, into something representable and manageable, keeping the subject at a safe distance from it.

What ensures the persistence of this fantasy is not just cultural continuity but its psychic function. As Lacanian theory makes clear, fantasy endures because it provides the subject with a way to sustain desire in the face of lack. The fantasy of Nature translates the anxiety of ecological entanglement, the absence of any stable boundary between human and nonhuman, into a more bearable image of loss that appears repairable. It offers form to the formless, turning structural instability into something that can be imagined as manageable. In this sense, the fantasy persists because it is necessary: it allows desire to circulate while shielding the subject from the impossibility of true reconciliation. The fantasy of Nature therefore persists not in spite of environmental rationality but through it, its logic of imagined wholeness now distributed across an expanding field of ecological signifiers that continue to deny the instability and interdependence they seek to govern.

Yet the Imaginary coherence offered by the fantasy of Nature is never secure. The fantasy continually strives to maintain an image of harmony, but encounters with ecological disruption, pollution, extinction, climate breakdown, exceed what it can contain. These moments signal the pressure of the Real upon the Imaginary: they expose what the fantasy must exclude in order to appear whole. Nature, imagined as an external totality, reveals itself instead as an entangled field where human and nonhuman forces are already intertwined. What the fantasy presents as loss or corruption is thus the very structure of ecological being, dynamic, unstable, and without a final balance. The Real here is not some separate domain but the persistence of this instability that resists Imaginary coherence.

In this chapter, I showed how the Imaginary register produces coherence through images of wholeness that conceal constitutive division, from the formation of the ego to the projection of harmony onto "Nature". I argued that fantasy functions as the Imaginary's organising mechanism, translating symbolic lack into a coherent scene that sustains desire without resolving its impossibility. Extending this logic to the ecological domain, I showed how "Nature" operates as an Imaginary mirror through which subjects displace their lack onto the world, sustaining ecological desire through the illusion of harmony while concealing the Real of ecological instability and entanglement.

The next chapter builds on this analysis by showing how the Imaginary fantasy of “Nature” is sustained and reproduced in the Symbolic order through ecological discourse.

Chapter 2: The Symbolic: Ideology, Desire, and the Symbolisation of “Nature”

The Symbolic is the register of language, law, and social meaning. It is not simply a linguistic system, but the network of relations that determines what can be said, thought, and desired. Whereas the Imaginary gives the subject an image of coherence, the Symbolic establishes the conditions of intelligibility within which such coherence can even appear. Through the Symbolic, the subject becomes part of the social world, inscribed into the differential network of signifiers that precedes and exceeds it. This register is the locus of the big Other: language as a trans-individual structure that structures and positions the subject. To speak is already to be spoken, and to desire is to desire through the Other.

Having shown in Chapter 1 how the fantasy of “Nature” provides an Imaginary image of harmony that conceals lack, this chapter turns to the Symbolic register to examine how that fantasy is given linguistic, ideological, and libidinal form. Section 2.1 outlines the structural logic of the Symbolic: how language produces the divided subject (\$), organises desire through signifiers, and generates the remainder of *jouissance* that the Symbolic must both regulate and sustain. Section 2.2 then examines how this structure manifests discursively in ecological ideology, how Nature functions as a Symbolic construction that organises desire and *jouissance* through norms of responsibility and the superegoic injunction to enjoy sustainably. Finally, Section 2.3 analyzes “Nature” as a master signifier (S_1) that quilts the ecological field, stabilising meaning and enjoyment through secondary signifiers such as “sustainability” and “net zero”. Together, these sections reveal how the Symbolic order structures the very ways in which subjects desire, enjoy, and believe in Nature.

The question guiding this chapter is: *How does the Symbolic order organise ecological meaning, desire, and jouissance around the master signifier “Nature”?*

2.1 The Structure of Desire and *Jouissance* in the Symbolic

Signifiers, metonymy, and the structure of desire

The Symbolic register is composed of signifiers, differential elements whose meaning depends entirely on their relations to one another. A signifier does not signify by referring to a thing, but

through its position within a chain of substitutions.³² Meaning therefore arises only within a field, where each signifier refers to another in an open sequence of deferral. Lacan designates this chain as S_2 , the order of knowledge and linguistic articulation.³³ Because this movement has no inherent endpoint, meaning requires temporary points of anchoring. These are provided by master signifiers (S_1), which momentarily halt the sliding of signification by retroactively fixing meaning, while never eliminating structural instability.³⁴ In section 2.3, I show how such points of anchoring, particularly “Nature”, function ideologically to structure meaning and desire.

It is within this differential structure of language that desire takes form. Desire is not a biological instinct but a product of the Symbolic, emerging through Lacan’s distinction between need, demand, and desire. Needs concern biological survival; once articulated in language, however, they become demands addressed to the Other, carrying an appeal for recognition and love.³⁵ Every demand thus exceeds its material content: it tests the subject’s place in relation to the Other. Yet no response can ever fully satisfy what is at stake in demand.³⁶ This gap marks the first structural loss introduced by symbolisation.³⁷

Desire is what is left over once need has been articulated as demand. It is not organised around a satisfiable object but around the lack revealed in the Other, a lack that becomes constitutive of the subject itself. As Lacan writes, “the desire for recognition dominates the desire that is to be recognised”³⁸: desire is structured by the question of how the subject is positioned in relation to the Other’s desire, rather than by the attainment of any particular object.³⁹ In accepting this lack as structural rather than contingent, the subject becomes a *manque-à-être*, a lack-of-being sustained by the impossibility of completion.⁴⁰

Since desire arises through the lack introduced by the Symbolic, it is structured by the same differential logic that governs signification. Just as meaning depends on the differential play of signifiers, desire is sustained by displacement: each object or signifier substitutes for what another has failed to deliver. Lacan describes this as desire being “caught in the rails of

³² Lacan, J. (1993). *Seminar III*, p.167

³³ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, pp. 418, 420-421, 428,

³⁴ Lacan, J. (2007). *Seminar XVII*: pp. 188-189.

³⁵ Chiesa, L. (2007). *Subjectivity and otherness: A philosophical reading of Lacan*, p. 153; Johnston, A. (2024). §2.4.1; Lacan, J. (1998). *Seminar V*, pp. 403-404

³⁶ Lacan, J. (1998). *Seminar V*, pp. 361-362

³⁷ Chiesa, L. (2007). p. 153

³⁸ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, p. 359

³⁹ Lacan, J. (1978). *Seminar XI*, p. 235

⁴⁰ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, p. 428, 524 ; Chiesa, L. (2007). p. 153

metonymy"⁴¹: it moves from one signifier to another in endless deferral, seeking not a specific object but the continuation of desiring itself. Every apparent satisfaction merely reopens the gap that defines the subject's being as lack-of-being. Were this movement ever to reach its goal, the subject's constitutive division would collapse along with the very structure that makes subjectivity possible. If metonymy describes the lateral displacement of desire along the signifying chain, metaphor momentarily halts this movement by substituting one signifier for another, producing new meaning through condensation.⁴² These two operations structure the unconscious itself, whose formations in dreams, slips, and symptoms reveal the return of repressed desire in linguistic form. The unconscious is thus "structured like a language"⁴³ because desire circulates within signification, endlessly articulating what cannot be said. In Lacanian terms, this division between what can be represented and what is lost in representation constitutes the barred subject (\$): the speaking being who exists only through the gap opened by the signifier.

From Symbolic division to the nature/culture divide

At this point, the structural logic of symbolic loss can be translated into ecological terms. Although Lacan does not explicitly frame symbolic castration ecologically, his account of the subject's entry into language provides a compelling way to understand the persistence of the nature/culture divide. The subject's entry into language installs a constitutive separation at the heart of subjectivity: the loss of immediacy, wholeness, and unmediated relation to the Real. When read ecologically, this same operation appears as the division between human culture and an externalised "Nature."

The Real of ecological entanglement, as being unstable, co-constitutive, and without final boundaries, cannot be fully accommodated within the Symbolic. What comes to be named as "Nature" is precisely how this impossibility is organised within Imaginary-Symbolic reality: as an image of balance, purity, and externality that gives form to what resists symbolisation. In this sense, the nature/culture divide is not a contingent historical error but a structural effect of entry into the Symbolic itself. The fantasy of "Nature" offers a way of concealing lack rather than confronting it, producing an image of an external realm imagined as coherent, governable, and potentially restorable, thereby masking the instability and entanglement that resist symbolic integration.

⁴¹ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, p. 431

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 422, 428, 431, 519, 594

⁴³ Lacan, J. (1978). *Seminar XI*, p. 20

By reading the subject's entry into the Symbolic as the structural origin of the nature/culture divide, I aim to show how the subject's entry into language produces a mediated and partial relation to ecological reality, one in which ecological entanglement can only appear through Imaginary and Symbolic constructions rather than being directly apprehended

***Objet petit a* and the Symbolic organisation of desire**

Having established that the subject is constituted as divided (\$) by its insertion into the Symbolic, I now turn to what this division produces: the trace of the remainder that both sustains and causes desire, *objet petit a*.⁴⁴ It is not the substituted object that desire seeks, but the trace of what has been lost in the process of symbolisation.⁴⁵ *Objet petit a* designates this leftover, the fragment of the Real that resists symbolisation yet animates it from within.⁴⁶ It marks the point where the field of signifiers reaches its limit, where meaning falters and what cannot be represented comes to insist.⁴⁷ For this reason, *objet a* is the remainder produced by the very operation that bars the subject: as \$ names the subject's division by language, *objet a* names what that division leaves behind, thereby constituting the subject as a desiring subject. The objects that the subject consciously pursues, objects of love, consumption, or identification, are therefore never *objet a* itself, but its substitutes within the Symbolic and Imaginary registers. These empirical objects momentarily appear to promise satisfaction, but they only displace the absence that sustains desire. *Objet petit a* belongs to the Real precisely because it can never be attained, represented, or known; it is the void that both limits and sustains the Symbolic, the absent point around which meaning and desire continually circulate. In this sense, *objet petit a* is both the effect of the Symbolic's constitutive loss and the condition of its continued functioning: the remainder that keeps the signifying chain in motion, perpetually promising the recovery of what the signifier itself has foreclosed.

While fantasy was previously discussed as an Imaginary construction that offers the subject an image of coherence, it also has a crucial Symbolic function: it organises the subject's relation to desire through language and signification. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Lacan formulates fantasy with the matheme \$ \diamond a, the relation between the divided subject (\$) and *objet petit a*, the cause of desire. Fantasy provides a Symbolic framework that situates the subject within the field of the Other, giving linguistic form to the otherwise inarticulable gap between desire and its cause.

⁴⁴ Lacan, J. (1978). *Seminar XI*, p. 168

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 103, 105

⁴⁶ Lewis, M. (2008). *The real and the development of the imaginary*, p. 189

⁴⁷ Lacan, J. (1978). *Seminar XI*, pp. 53-54

Fantasy thus functions as a kind of narrative syntax of desire, a signifying structure that translates the Real remainder (*a*) into socially intelligible forms of meaning. It supplies the scenario through which the subject answers the enigmatic question of the Other's desire, *Che vuoi?*⁴⁸ ("What do you want?"), transforming an unspeakable lack into a communicable pattern of demand, guilt, or expectation.⁴⁹ In this sense, fantasy operates at the point where the Symbolic and the Imaginary intersect: while its content may appear as images or scenes, its logic is Symbolic, because it is not the images themselves but the signifying relations between them that give fantasy its structural coherence. The Symbolic institutionalises fantasy by translating them into shared discourses (moral, political, ideological) that prescribe how subjects should desire. In its Symbolic dimension, fantasy provides a framework through which desire can be expressed and understood; it gives form to the absence that drives the subject, translating it into the terms of shared meaning.

***Jouissance* and the limits of desire**

Lacan distinguishes desire, as the circling *objet a*, from *jouissance*⁵⁰, which emerges at the limit of the Symbolic. Lacan defines *jouissance* as an enjoyment that exceeds the limits imposed by the pleasure principle.⁵¹ The pleasure principle is a term introduced by Freud, which refers to how psychic life maintains homeostasis by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, ensuring the organism's survival by keeping excitation at tolerable levels. *Jouissance* names what happens when this balance is broken, when pleasure transgresses its own limit and turns into pain. *Jouissance* is therefore opposed to pleasure: beyond a certain limit, pleasure becomes pain, and

⁴⁸ Lacan, J. (1992). *Seminar VII*, p. 184; Lacan, J. (2006), *Écrits*, p. 690

⁴⁹ Lacan's use of the letter *a* evolves significantly over the course of his teaching. In his early work on the mirror stage, the little other (*autre*) refers to the Imaginary counterpart or alter ego through which the subject forms an image of coherence by identification with others. From the late 1950s onward, however, Lacan reformulates *a* as *objet petit a*: not another ego or image, but the leftover or remainder produced by symbolisation itself, which functions as the cause of desire rather than its object. Despite this conceptual shift, Lacan insists on a structural continuity between Imaginary identification and the later theory of fantasy. As Johnston (2024) observes, both ego-identification and fantasy articulate the subject's response to the same fundamental question: how to position oneself in relation to the desire of the Other. In this sense, fantasy mediates between the Imaginary and the Symbolic: it no longer promises wholeness through identification with an image, but stages the subject's relation to lack by situating *objet a* within a signifying framework that answers *Che vuoi?* See also Evans (1996, p. 128).

⁵⁰ *Jouissance* is left untranslated in most English editions of Lacan. It basically means 'enjoyment', but it has a sexual connotation, which is lacking in the English word 'enjoyment'. In this thesis I frequently refer to the French word, but I also sometimes use the words 'enjoyment' and 'satisfaction', to make certain parts more readable. (Evans, D. (1996), p. 93)

⁵¹ Lacan, J. (1978). *Seminar XI*; p. 184; Johnston, A. (2024) §2.4.2

this 'painful pleasure' is what Lacan calls *jouissance*.⁵² *Jouissance* is the excessive enjoyment derived from the very act of transgressing the limits that regulate pleasure.

When the subject enters language, it undergoes a loss: it loses the immediacy of bodily satisfaction, and it loses the sense of being whole or self-sufficient. Lacan calls this "symbolic castration"⁵³. From this loss, two correlated effects are produced. The first one is *objet petit a* as the cause of desire, the trace of what is left out by symbolisation. The second is *jouissance* as the name for what this loss excludes: an excessive, unmediated enjoyment that belongs to the Real precisely because it cannot be symbolised.⁵⁴ The subject never encounters this Real *jouissance* directly. It can only approach it through the Symbolic detours of desire, which circles around *objet petit a* as its structural limit.⁵⁵ In this metonymic movement, desire may draw near to what was lost, producing an affective disturbance that marks excessive proximity to the Real: an experience of anxiety that signals the collapse of symbolic distance. Because such contact is unbearable, the subject withdraws again into the safer circuit of symbolic substitutions. The Symbolic thus performs a paradoxical function: it both generates these fleeting manifestations of *jouissance* and protects the subject from their destructive intensity. Desire, as the circling of *objet a*, therefore sustains the pursuit of what must remain unattainable, allowing *jouissance* to appear only indirectly, as an excess produced at the limits of Symbolic mediation.

Yet the subject paradoxically finds satisfaction in this very tension: the pain of *jouissance* is also its proof of contact with what is otherwise unreachable. In pushing desire to its limit, the subject momentarily feels the Real of its lack, the impossible fullness that both torments and defines it. This brief encounter produces a satisfaction more intense than ordinary pleasure, even as it borders on suffering. It is not a direct access to Real *jouissance* but a surplus enjoyment extracted from the very impossibility of satisfaction, the only way the subject can "feel" what language has structurally precluded.⁵⁶

Although *jouissance* belongs to the Real, it never appears outside the mediation of the Symbolic. As soon as it is named, prohibited, or remembered, it is already translated into signifiers and bound by language. The prohibition of *jouissance*, the Law inscribed in the Symbolic, does not

⁵² Evans, D. (1996). p. 93

⁵³ Lacan, J. (2006). p. 616

⁵⁴ Lacan, J. (1992). *Seminar VII*, p. 189

⁵⁵ Žižek, S. (2007). *Enjoy Your Symptom!*. pp. 56-57

⁵⁶ Grosz, E. (2001). *The strange detours of sublimation: Psychoanalysis, homosexuality, and art*, p. 150

simply repress it but also gives it form.⁵⁷ By forbidding absolute satisfaction, the Law creates the fantasy of a lost enjoyment that could be recovered if the prohibition were lifted. At the same time this prohibition displaces *jouissance* onto the very practices through which the subject relates to the Law.

On the one hand, *jouissance* emerges in transgression: the subject tastes the forbidden *jouissance* that the Law itself calls into being.⁵⁸ On the other hand, *jouissance* also attaches to obedience itself. In renouncing enjoyment, in complying with the Law's demands, the subject extracts a modest satisfaction in self-restraint, the satisfaction of embodying the Law's demand.⁵⁹ In this respect, each act of renunciation leaves behind a residue of *jouissance* that attaches to the very effort of obeying or failing to obey. Lacan later formalises this residue as surplus-*jouissance* (*plus-de-jouir*⁶⁰): the structural excess of *jouissance* produced by the Law itself, analogous to Marx's notion of surplus value.⁶¹ Where *jouissance* in its Real form marks an excessive, even painful enjoyment that exceeds the pleasure principle, surplus-*jouissance* names its Symbolic transformation, the small, iterable remainder of enjoyment that persists within the limits imposed by the Law. This surplus is the circulating excess that fuels the symbolic economy of speech and desire, ensuring that prohibition and satisfaction remain intertwined. In this sense, the Symbolic both produces and regulates surplus-*jouissance*, transforming the unbearable excess of the Real into the circulating energy of speech, law, and desire. *Jouissance* thus, insofar as it is mediated by the Symbolic, manifests as surplus-*jouissance*: the remainder that language must continually manage, sustained by the very prohibitions that make absolute enjoyment impossible.

2.2 The Ideology of Nature and the Symbolic Organisation of *Jouissance*

Having established in the previous section how desire is structured by the chain of signifiers and sustained through lack, I now turn to its discursive articulation: how the Symbolic gives this structure social form through language, institutions, and ideology. This section examines how

⁵⁷ The "Law" as the prohibiting function of the Symbolic order, not law as in jurisdiction, but that which is excluded or scorned in a certain discourse. See Fink, B. (1997). *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. p. 45

⁵⁸ Lacan, J. (1992). *Seminar VII*, Ch. "XV: The jouissance of transgression" pp. 191-204

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 176-177, 316; Žižek, S. (2022), *The Vagaries of the Superego*. pp. 23-24

⁶⁰ The French word "plus" has a double meaning: plus can mean "surplus", but also "loss of"

⁶¹ Lacan, J. (1992). *Seminar VII*; p. 50; Dean, J (2007). *Why Žižek for Political Theory*, p. 24

ecological discourse translates the Imaginary fantasy of harmony into Symbolic norms of responsibility, channeling desire and *jouissance* into socially intelligible practices. In this context, “Nature” functions ideologically: it offers a shared social reality by organising desire and regulating *jouissance* while concealing the traumatic Real of ecological entanglement.⁶²

Because desire is mediated by language, it can only appear within discourse. Lacan defines discourse as a social link structured by signifiers that position subjects and regulate *jouissance*.⁶³ In order to conceal the structural and traumatic lack in the subject, the Symbolic offers norms and imperatives that promise coherence. In the ecological field, this takes form in imperatives of responsible action, such as reduce, recycle, offset, and restore. These translate the subject’s experience of lack into concrete norms of responsible action, transforming the indeterminate pressure of anxiety into meaningful participation.

Through this translation, the Imaginary fantasy of Nature becomes institutionalised. What appears in Chapter 1 as an Imaginary image of wholeness becomes, at the Symbolic level, a master-signifier that “quilts”⁶⁴ meaning and regulates *jouissance*. The longing for lost harmony is translated into technocratic language of sustainability, which promises balance through management and calculation. The Symbolic gives fantasy a syntax: the fantasy of restoration is rewritten as the policy of transition. Yet, as in all discourse, coherence is precarious. Each new slogan, green growth, carbon neutrality, net zero, briefly halts the sliding of meaning, only to displace the anxiety produced by structural lack onto another signifier. In this way, the Symbolic both conceals the impossibility of full satisfaction and reveals it in its very slippages, allowing desire to continue circulating within an ordered field.

The big Other of “Nature”

The authority that structures the Symbolic is what Lacan calls the big Other, the locus of signifiers that guarantees meaning and recognition. In the ecological discourse, the big Other takes institutional form through scientific expertise, governmental policy, corporate sustainability programmes, activist campaigns, etc. Each speaks “in the name of ecology”, yet what it produces is not access to the ecological Real but a Symbolic fantasy of “Nature”, a discursive mirror that promises coherence and control in place of the instability of ecological

⁶² Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. p. 45

⁶³ Lacan, J. (1972). *On Psychoanalytic Discourse*. p. 12

⁶⁴ Lacan often refers to quilting points, or *points de capiton*, as the points in which the “signifier and signified are knotted together” (Lacan, J. 1993, *Seminar III*, p. 268), describing the momentary fixing of meaning in the chain of signification. The master signifier often acts as the *point de capiton* in a particular discourse.

entanglement. This big Other thus offers symbolic reassurance that the world remains intelligible: that the loss of balance can be rectified if only the right measures are taken. To act “sustainably” is to seek recognition from this Other, to appear as a responsible subject in its gaze. As in Lacan’s account of demand, every act performed within the discourse of “Nature” also carries a plea for love and acknowledgement: “am I doing enough?”. Desire is thereby bound to the Other’s discourse, which defines the norms of responsibility and the metrics of moral worth.

Yet this big Other is never whole. Its discourse continually reveals contradictions that testify to its lack: ecological capitalism couples infinite growth with calls for restraint, and the very mechanisms that promise repair, such as carbon offsets, “green” products, sustainability pledges, depend on consumption and emissions, the very processes they claim to mitigate. What sustains the authority of this Symbolic order is not its coherence but the *jouissance* generated by navigating its contradictions. The subject remains invested in this system not only because it promises Imaginary wholeness, but because it organises *jouissance* within its own impossibility.

In Žižek’s terms, this is the operation of ideology: not a false consciousness that hides reality, but an Imaginary-Symbolic construction that gives form to desire and channels *jouissance*, offering social reality itself as an escape from the traumatic Real.⁶⁵ Here I extend Žižek’s general account of ideology to the field of ecological discourse.⁶⁶ My claim is that “Nature”, as Symbolic big Other, functions precisely as this site of contradictory *jouissance*: it sustains belief not through ignorance, but through the satisfaction derived from acting “as if” the system were coherent. Even when subjects are aware that individual actions alone cannot avert ecological catastrophe, practices such as buying carbon offsets or using reusable products continue to function as meaningful rituals within ecological discourse as symbolic acts through which subjects situate themselves as responsible and derive a surplus-*jouissance* from participating in a coherent moral order.

The Superegoic injunction to enjoy responsibly

⁶⁵ Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. p. 45

⁶⁶ Žižek himself explicitly applies his theory of ideology to ecology, describing contemporary environmentalism as an “ideology of fear” (*Nature and its Discontents*, 2008). I return to this argument in Chapter 3, where I discuss how the Real shapes this ideology. My focus here is narrower: I draw on Žižek’s general account of ideology as the Imaginary-Symbolic organisation of *jouissance*, without adopting his specific characterisation of ecology as ideological fear.

As established above, the Law does not merely prohibit *jouissance* but generates it in the form of surplus-*jouissance*, attaching enjoyment to both obedience and transgression. Žižek radicalises this Lacanian insight by showing how, under contemporary conditions, this paradox no longer operates primarily through prohibition but through a superegoic command to “Enjoy!”. In Lacan’s reformulation of Freud, the superego is the voice that sustains the link between the Law and *jouissance*.⁶⁷ It commands the subject to pursue *jouissance*, it organises how *jouissance* is distributed, and it feeds on surplus *jouissance* produced by the Law’s impossibility.⁶⁸ It embodies the point that both prohibits and demands *jouissance*: “You must enjoy!”, transforming guilt itself into a form of satisfaction.⁶⁹ For Žižek, this structure defines the contemporary form of authority that replaces the old paternal Law. Whereas the traditional Law imposed limits (“Thou shalt not”), the modern superego demands that we enjoy within them: to enjoy your office job, to optimise one’s lifestyle, to remain authentic.⁷⁰ The subject finds a surplus of enjoyment precisely in striving and failing to live up to these demands, such that guilt and inadequacy themselves become sources of *jouissance*. In this way, enjoyment remains bound to the Law that commands and withholds it.

I extend Žižek’s notion of the superegoic injunction to enjoy to the field of ecological discourse. Where the fantasy of “Nature” offers an Imaginary image of harmony that concealed lack, ecological discourse moralises this by translating it into an injunction to regulate *jouissance*: to consume sustainably, to enjoy restraint, and to take responsibility for one’s ecological footprint. In doing so, the Symbolic preserves the Imaginary ideal of balance while transforming it into a moral economy of guilt and virtue. The ecological subject is commanded not simply to renounce enjoyment, but to enjoy renunciation itself. Through this superegoic logic, the subject derives satisfaction from striving to be responsible and from failing to do so fully, sustaining both guilt and enjoyment within the same symbolic framework. The fantasy of reconciliation with Nature thus persists as a moralised demand to manage *jouissance*.

2.3 “Nature” as Master Signifier in Ecological Discourse

As stated earlier in the chapter, desire circulates through the chain of signifiers (S_2) without closure until a master signifier (S_1) temporarily halts its movement and retroactively organises

⁶⁷ Lacan, J. (1975). *Seminar XX*, p. 3

⁶⁸ Žižek, S. (1997). *The Plague of Fantasies*. p. 12-13

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 62, 148, 220

⁷⁰ Žižek, S. (1999). *The Ticklish Subject*, pp. 366-369

meaning.⁷¹ This act of “quilting” masks the field’s structural lack, creating the illusion of coherence and addressing the subject as if meaning were guaranteed.⁷² The S_1 does not contain meaning in itself; its power lies precisely in its emptiness, in its ability to appear as the source of meaning that it only retroactively produces. According to Lacan, the master signifier does not only stabilise meaning but determines symbolic castration itself, as it represents the subject and organises meaning.⁷³ By addressing S_2 , the field of knowledge and discourse, S_1 not only structures meaning but also structures the flow of *jouissance*. To be represented by a signifier is to be cut off from immediate *jouissance*: the subject gains symbolic coherence only by renouncing the traumatic fullness of the Real. In this sense, every master signifier introduces a libidinal economy: it regulates *jouissance* by transforming loss into meaning and lack into the motor of desire.

Žižek radicalises this Lacanian insight by reading it as the key to ideology’s operation. For him, ideology is the structuring of belief and *jouissance*, a way of organising how subjects make sense of and derive *jouissance* from social contradictions. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), he describes how a master signifier such as “Communism” provides ideological meaning to “floating signifiers” such as “freedom”, “state”, “justice”, “peace”.⁷⁴ The master signifier is “empty” because it only retroactively gains meaning by “quilting” these floating signifiers in a certain way, rendering its own inconsistencies invisible.⁷⁵ They are inherently self-referential, tautological, and performative.⁷⁶

Building on both Lacan and Žižek, I propose that “Nature” performs this quilting function in ecological discourse. It converges an otherwise fragmented set of signifiers, such as “balance”, “purity”, “sustainability”, “restoration”, into one ideological field in which science, policy, and activism refer to a single unified reality. This unity, however, is retroactively produced: “Nature” gives the impression of stability only by concealing the impossibility it names. The signifier thus operates as the Symbolic quilting point through which the subject situates its relation to ecological meaning and order. Whether invoked in calls to “protect Nature”, “work with Nature”, or “return to Nature”, the term implies that harmony once existed and can be restored through responsible action.

⁷¹ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, pp. 693-694; (1969-70); Lacan, J. (2007), *Seminar XVII*, pp. 120-121: “[the master signifier’s] function is to represent a subject for every other signifier

⁷² As Lacan says “there is no metalanguage” (*Seminar XVII*, 2007, p. 25)

⁷³ Lacan, J. (2007). *Seminar XVII*, p. 89

⁷⁴ Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. p. 113

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 95-96

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 109

This is the ideological dimension of Nature: its emptiness allows it to accommodate contradictory discourses: capitalist “green growth”, technocratic management, or spiritual reconnection. Because it names what cannot be symbolised, the Real of ecological entanglement, it can serve as a universal reference for incompatible discourses. Through this quilting, the Symbolic order conceals its own instability while providing subjects with a position within it: as caretakers, consumers, or defenders of Nature

While this structure shows how ideological coherence is sustained, Žižek’s analysis of ideological inversion clarifies the underlying mechanism of that coherence: how a signifier like “Nature” comes to generate meaning and *jouissance* from itself.⁷⁷ Initially, “Nature” appears to stand for properties such as natural order, harmony, or sustainability. Through repetition, this relation reverses: terms like responsibility, sustainability, and resilience acquire meaning only within this field because are understood as belonging to “Nature”. Meaning thus arises from the master signifier itself, rather than any external referent. This inversion produces a surplus of *jouissance* attached to the signifier, what Žižek calls the *objet petit a* as the “something more” in an object, “in Nature more than Nature”.⁷⁸ Derivative signifiers like “sustainability” and “net zero” condense this surplus: we desire them not for what they achieve but for the *jouissance* they promise.

Through this structure, “Nature” and the signifiers in its ideological field mediate the subject’s relation to lack. They allow the ecological subject (\$) to approach the lost object (a), the impossible fullness of ecological unity, through practices that symbolically promise its wholeness. Each failure to realise this promise reanimates desire, renewing the ideological circuit that sustains the Symbolic fantasy of “Nature”. In this way, ecological discourse transforms structural lack into an economy of *jouissance*: the pleasure of “doing one’s part”, consuming ethically, or pursuing sustainability becomes the very mechanism through which the fantasy of coherence endures.

This chapter has shown how the Symbolic register structures ecological desire and sustains the fantasy of “Nature”. First, I examined how the subject’s entry into language produces lack, organising desire and *jouissance* around what cannot be symbolised. The loss introduced by symbolic castration generates the very movement of desire that language continually displaces. Secondly, I traced how this structure manifests ideologically: “Nature” functions as the Symbolic mediation of this loss, translating the Real of ecological entanglement into a coherent field of

⁷⁷ Žižek illustrates this with an example of how the signifier “Coke” produces a field of meaning and surplus *jouissance*. (1989), *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 113

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 107

meaning. Through the big Other of ecological discourse and the superegoic injunction to enjoy responsibly, the subject's enjoyment is moralised and contained within rituals of responsibility. Finally, I showed how "Nature", as master signifier, quilts the ecological field, stabilising ecological meaning and enjoyment through chains of secondary signifiers such as "sustainability" and "net zero". Together, these mechanisms explain how ecological ideology organises both meaning and *jouissance* around an impossible reconciliation.

The next chapter turns to what this Symbolic organisation defends against: the ecological Real itself. It explores how ecological collapse might disrupt the fantasy of harmony and expose the traumatic instability that the Imaginary-Symbolic reality tries to conceal.

Chapter 3: The Real: Ecological Trauma, Disavowal and the Limits of Ideology

The Real names what resists symbolisation, the dimension of experience that escapes both the Imaginary's coherence of representation and the Symbolic's organisation of meaning. It is not simply what is unknown or not yet understood, but what cannot be integrated into the subject's Imaginary-Symbolic world at all.⁷⁹ Lacan therefore associates the Real with impossibility: it is encountered precisely where symbolisation fails, where distinctions collapse, and where no signifier can secure meaning. The Real is also not a pre-linguistic state, but a structural effect of language itself: it emerges precisely at the point where Symbolic mediation fails.⁸⁰ In this sense, the relation between the Symbolic and the Real is one of "circular causality": language produces the very gaps and impossibilities through which the Real returns.⁸¹

Having shown in Chapters 1 and 2 how the fantasy of "Nature" is sustained through Imaginary coherence and Symbolic mediation, this chapter turns to what these constructions defend against: the ecological Real. Section 3.1 examines the structure of the Real as the site of impossibility, focussing on how anxiety and trauma signal moments where the Symbolic fails to contain experience and how the climate crisis confronts subjects with such failures. Section 3.2 then analyzes fetishist disavowal as the primary ideological mechanism through which capitalist societies maintain stability in the face of the climate crisis. Section 3.3 critically engages with Žižek's account of ecology as an "ecology of fear", identifying its limits within a Lacanian framework.

The guiding question of this chapter is: *How does the encounter with the ecological Real disrupt the fantasies and symbolic structures that sustain ecological meaning, and how is this disruption managed through anxiety, trauma, and fetishist disavowal?*

⁷⁹ Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits*, p. 324

⁸⁰ Lacan, J. (2007). *Seminar XVII*, p. 123

⁸¹ Bracher, M. (1994). p. 1

3.1 The Real as the Limit of Symbolisation

Because the Real cannot be symbolised, it never appears directly but only where Imaginary coherence and Symbolic meaning break down. Lacan theorises this mode of presence through the notion of “extimacy” (*extimité*): the Real insists from within subjective experience while remaining structurally exterior to it, irreducible to representation or sense.⁸² For this reason Lacan says the Real “does not cease not to be written”⁸³: it continually persists as what escapes symbolisation, only showing itself only as a disruption, a gap, or a breakdown in the structures that normally organise experience. The Real is thus encountered precisely when Imaginary images fail and Symbolic categories collapse, when no signifier is available to hold an experience in place. The concepts *objet petit a* and *jouissance*, examined in previous chapter, mark these fault lines where the Real presses on the Symbolic. In this sense, the Real functions as the structural kernel around which Symbolic-Imaginary constructions form and as the source of the anxiety and trauma that arise whenever those constructions can no longer contain the subject’s experience.

This structural impossibility, however, should not be confused with mere ignorance or with what has not yet been known. As Alain Badiou insists, Lacan is not a Kantian: the Real is not the “unknowable” counterpart to knowable reality.⁸⁴ “Unknowable” remains a category internal to the regime of knowledge: it is simply the negative of what can be known. The Real, by contrast, is extrinsic to this whole knowable/unknowable binary: it is neither an object of cognition nor an ineffable beyond, but that which is indifferent to knowing as such. This is why Lacan can say that with regard to the Real “there’s no question of knowing about it, only of demonstrating it”⁸⁵: the Real is not accessed by a deficit of knowledge (ignorance, mystery), but by a different kind of operation, namely demonstration, act, or symptom, through which its insistence in existence becomes manifest without ever being captured as something “known” or “unknown”.⁸⁶ The Real thus appears precisely at the point where knowledge breaks down through an act through which the limits of significations become manifest.

⁸² Miller, J.-A. (1994). *Extimité*. p.75

⁸³ Lacan, J. (n.d.). *Seminar XXIV*. session of 10 May 1977, p. 117. Note: the reference cited here is Cormac Gallagher’s unpublished translation, since there is no published translation of this work.

⁸⁴ Badiou, A. (1994-95). *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*. p. 150

⁸⁵ Lacan, J. (1970). *Radiophonie*, p. 60

⁸⁶ Badiou, A. (1994-95). pp. 151-153

Anxiety, trauma, and the failure of signification

If the Real is encountered at the limits of the Symbolic, then anxiety and trauma are the subjective marks of that encounter. Lacan describes the Real as that before “which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence”⁸⁷. Anxiety thus signals the moment when the Symbolic no longer secures meaning, when the subject confronts something for which no signifier is available.

Lacan situates anxiety at the junction of the Imaginary and the Real: it is experienced (hence Imaginary) but cannot be symbolised (hence marked by the Real).⁸⁸ Unlike fear, which has a definite object, anxiety emerges precisely when the lack itself is lacking, when something occupies the place that should remain empty.⁸⁹ For this reason, anxiety is structurally tied to *objet petit a*, the cause of desire. Under ordinary conditions, desire protects the subject from anxiety by maintaining a symbolic distance from this cause: it “circles” *objet a* through a chain of substitutions that keep the Real at a distance. Anxiety arises when this mediation falters and something appears too directly in the place of *objet a*, something that cannot be absorbed into the Symbolic chain. In such moments, the subject encounters the Real as a breakdown of symbolic mediation, producing anxiety and causing the subject to recoil back into the Symbolic through renewed substitutions. Thus, desire shields the subject from anxiety by sustaining this distance, yet paradoxically, anxiety also sustains desire: it is the affect that signals that desire has a Real kernel, the reminder that there is a cause around which desire circulates.⁹⁰ In this way, anxiety functions both as the limit of desire and as the affect that binds it.

If anxiety marks the subject’s momentary proximity to the Real, trauma names those rare encounters in which this proximity overwhelms the Symbolic and cannot subsequently be reintegrated. Trauma is not simply intense anxiety; it occurs when an event exceeds the subject’s available signifiers and resists being woven into the network of meaning. Whereas anxiety is the immediate affective signal that the Symbolic is faltering, trauma is the lasting structural remainder of a failure of symbolisation.⁹¹ Because the event cannot be fully integrated, it returns in intrusive images, compulsions, or repetitive attempts at narration, efforts to symbolise what remains structurally impossible to symbolise. Trauma thus arises from the same structural logic as anxiety, but while anxiety signals the Real’s imminence, trauma is the enduring mark left when the Symbolic cannot re-establish consistency. In this

⁸⁷ Lacan, J. (1991). *Seminar II*, p. 164

⁸⁸ Lacan, J. (1956). *Fetishism: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real*. p. 273

⁸⁹ Evans, D. (1996). p. 11

⁹⁰ Lacan, J. (2015). *Seminar VIII*, p.370.

⁹¹ Lacan, J. (2014). *Seminar X*, pp. 324-327

way, trauma inscribes the Real into psychic life as a rupture that continually presses against symbolisation while simultaneously resisting it.

The climate crisis and the Real

If anxiety marks the moment when Symbolic mediation falters, the contemporary climate crisis provides one of the clearest sites in which this failure becomes visible. Anxiety arises when the ecological crisis appears too directly, when the fantasy of “Nature” as a harmonious, external Other can no longer maintain distance from the Real of ecological entanglement. Anxiety emerges when symbolic mediations momentarily collapse and something occupies the place where the lack should remain: wildfire smoke turning the sky orange, the sudden disappearance of a coastline, or scientific announcements that tipping points may already have been crossed. These moments confront the subject with an ecological Real that cannot be easily recoded into existing frames, revealing the instability, interdependence, and non-externality of human and non-human processes. Yet, as with all anxiety, this encounter is brief: the subject quickly retreats into new symbolic assurances, such as hopeful policies, technofixes, or narratives of eventual recovery, restoring the distance that makes the Real bearable and allowing desire to circulate once again.

Ecological trauma, by contrast, arises when events exceed the subject’s available narratives: the destruction of one’s home in fire or flood, the disappearance of a landscape which was bound to one’s identity, or the realisation that one’s descendants may face an uninhabitable world. Such events could rupture the fantasy of Nature as stable, repairable, or ultimately manageable, and confront the subject with a magnitude that resists symbolisation. This is why ecological trauma often returns in the form of intrusive images, compulsive monitoring of climate risks, or repetitive attempts to narrativise what cannot be fully integrated. Crucially, ecological trauma does not only stem from singular catastrophes: the cumulative degradation of one’s environment, what literature describes as *solastalgia* or ecological grief, can likewise erode the Symbolic coordinates through which place, continuity, and futurity are organised.⁹² Yet, trauma does not automatically dissolve the fantasy of Nature. On the contrary, subjects frequently respond by intensifying familiar Symbolic frameworks: attributing blame to political actors, doubling down on techno-optimism, or retreating into nationalist fantasies of protection and control. In this way, ecological trauma both exposes and reanimates the instability of the Symbolic, revealing how the Real can simultaneously shatter and reinforce the fantasies that shape ecological subjectivity.

⁹² Augustinavicius, J. L., et al. (2021). *Global climate change and trauma*. p. 6

Anxiety and trauma mark the moments when the Real breaks through the Symbolic-imaginary coordinates that sustain the fantasy of Nature, confronting the subject with the truth that ecological entanglement and instability is a constitutive condition of life. Yet, as the logic of anxiety shows, such encounters remain fleeting: the Real appears only to be recaptured by new narratives that restore distance. The next section examines how this recapture occurs through fetishist disavowal: the mechanism that allows subjects and institutions to “know very well” that ecological collapse is happening while continuing to sustain the fantasy of Nature by symbolically managing and neutralising the Real disruptions that threaten it. Understanding disavowal is essential for explaining why ecological anxiety and trauma rarely lead to transformation, and why the fantasy of Nature persists even in the face of imminent ecological crisis.

3.2 Fetishist Disavowal and the Defence Against the Real

If anxiety and trauma mark the points at which the Real disrupts the coherence of the Symbolic, fetishist disavowal is the mechanism that enables subjects to continue inhabiting Symbolic reality despite such ruptures. Drawing on Žižek’s reformulation of Freud’s theory of fetishism, fetishist disavowal describes the paradoxical stance captured in the formula: “I know very well, but nevertheless ...”⁹³. In contemporary society, as Žižek notes, ideology no longer functions by concealing the truth but by organising *jouissance* despite knowing the truth.⁹⁴ Unlike denial, which negates knowledge altogether, disavowal presupposes knowledge and simultaneously bars it from reorganising desire or conduct. In this way, disavowal is not a cognitive failure but a libidinal strategy: it protects the subject from the anxiety that would arise if knowledge were allowed to transform the coordinates of everyday life.

Disavowal shields the subject from moments when the Real intrudes too directly. Like the function of the fetish in Freud, which marks and masks the site of castration, ecological signifiers such as “sustainability”, “net-zero”, or “offsetting” acknowledge degradation while simultaneously providing symbolic substitutes that make this loss bearable. These signifiers give form to an impossible reconciliation with “Nature” and thereby restore symbolic stability. What is covered is not a literal lost harmony but, as argued in Chapter 2, the structural division introduced by symbolic castration.

To avoid psychologising individuals, the “ecological subject” discussed in the next section is not a universal psychological category but a structurally produced subject-position, generated

⁹³ Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p. 30

⁹⁴ Žižek, S. (1999). *The Ticklish Subject*, pp. 366-368

within late-capitalist consumer culture and addressed primarily through lifestyle adjustments, market choices, and moralised narratives of personal responsibility. Ecological disavowal is therefore not an individual pathology; it is a systemic mode through which capitalist societies manage climate anxiety while preserving existing forms of enjoyment, production, and consumption. Because this position is internally diverse, ecological disavowal manifests in multiple, sometimes contradictory, behavioural patterns. These variations differ empirically yet share a common structure: knowledge of ecological crisis coexists with practices that preserve the stability of everyday life, preventing true subjective transformation.

Different types of disavowal, same structuring mechanism

One common form of disavowal appears in the figure of the “green consumer”. In the Netherlands, about 21% of the food purchases are sustainably produced.⁹⁵ Green commodities can function as fetish-objects that reassure the subject that “Nature” remains manageable and reconcilable. They offer a surplus-*jouissance* tied to the fantasy of responsible consumption and to the superegoic injunction to “do one’s part”. The purchase becomes a ritual that both acknowledges the crisis and keeps its traumatic dimension at a distance by integrating responsibility into familiar consumer practices. This also explains why ecological awareness rarely leads to the renunciation of excessive consumption itself. Within capitalist consumer culture, *jouissance* is often organised through cycles of purchase, substitution, and repetition. Climate anxiety may modify what is consumed, “green” products instead of “wasteful” ones, but not the libidinal logic of consumption as such. What changes is not the form of enjoyment but its object: *jouissance* is reattached to responsible consumption, to the very gestures meant to mitigate excess. Crucially, this does not mean such practices are meaningless or futile. They are often materially valuable and express genuine ethical concern. The psychoanalytic point is simply that, within capitalist consumer culture, *jouissance* tends to be organised through cycles of purchase and substitution.

The majority of the Dutch population (93%) believe that climate change exists, of which a clear majority (62%) see it as one of the biggest issues of our time, meaning that most people that believe climate change poses a big issue, do not significantly alter their consumption patterns.⁹⁶ Here the structure of disavowal is fundamentally different from the “green consumer”: “I know very well that the climate crisis is serious, but nevertheless I continue as usual because the world appears unchanged around me”. This is not simply indifference or ignorance, but a way of maintaining the stability of everyday life by keeping the Real at a symbolic distance. Disavowal

⁹⁵ Logatcheva, K. & Hercegljić, N. (2024). *Monitor Duurzaam Voedsel 2024*

⁹⁶ CBS, 2023. *Klimaatverandering en energietransitie*. 2.1, 2.2

here is supported by infrastructural and ideological conditions: capitalist normality remains largely uninterrupted, ecological harm remains scattered globally, and responsibility is displaced onto industry, governments, or global actors. Even when a subject is faced with catastrophe, they often make sense of the event by placing it into narratives of blame, political mismanagement, or local incompetence, redirecting trauma into the Symbolic rather than forcing a reorganisation of desire or fantasy.

There are also those subjects who are convinced that collapse is inevitable: “I know very well that catastrophe is coming, but nevertheless nothing I do will matter”. This form channels anxiety into fatalism, which paradoxically reduces responsibility and stabilises the Symbolic by transforming the unbearable Real into a narrative of necessity. The structure remains disavowal: knowledge is acknowledged but fantasy stays intact.

These different manifestations illustrate how ecological disavowal operates as a defence against the Real of ecological entanglement. Despite diverse forms, they share a logic: knowledge of the crisis is sustained at the level of explicit belief but prevented from altering the fundamental structure of enjoyment and social organisation. Ecological disavowal thus marks the resilience of ideology at the point of its encounter with the Real: even as ecological instability increasingly intrudes, capitalist societies respond not by relinquishing the fantasy of Nature but by reinforcing it through substitutes that preserve the coherence of Symbolic reality.

3.3 Žižek’s “Ecology of fear” and its Limitations

The preceding sections have shown how ecological crisis confronts subjects with anxiety and trauma, the affective traces of the Real’s intrusion, while disavowal functions as the primary mechanism through which Symbolic meaning making is restored despite this intrusion. Yet disavowal never operates in a vacuum; it is always supported and structured by broader ideological formations that stabilise the social field. In this section I engage with Žižek’s account of ecology as ideology, which gives an account of how ecological discourse manages the Real by transforming it into a moralising narrative of fragility and catastrophe. Even though Žižek sharply diagnoses how ideology moralises and conceals the ecological Real, his account leaves three theoretical gaps that are essential in order to develop a more adequate account of ecological subjectivity.

Žižek’s most sustained reflection on ecology appears in *Nature and Its Discontents* (2008). Much of his analysis resonates strongly with the psychoanalytic framework developed in the first two chapters of this thesis. Like my own account, Žižek treats “Nature” not as an external,

harmonious substance but as a fantasy that organises desire and screens over the constitutive lack in the subject. In this sense, much of his diagnosis mirrors the trajectory of my argument so far: Chapter 1 analysed “Nature” as an Imaginary figure of wholeness, while Chapter 2 explored how the Symbolic provides the ideological and discursive framing for this fantasy. Žižek’s work similarly reads ecological discourse as a site where Imaginary and Symbolic mechanisms conspire to stabilise the subject’s relation to the Real.

At the same time, Žižek approaches ecology primarily from within his Marxist-Hegelian critique of capitalism rather than from a purely systematic Lacanian account. His claim that ecology has become the “predominant ideology of global capitalism” situates it within his broader theory of the four antagonisms that capitalism cannot resolve (ecology, biogenetics, intellectual property, and new forms of apartheid).⁹⁷ For Žižek, ecology is not defined by the Real of ecological relationality but a political-ideological formation: what he calls an “ecology of fear”. Ecological discourse, he argues, functions like a secularised religion. It moralises *jouissance* by warning of tipping points, collapse, and catastrophe; imposes limits; and frames human intervention as inherently dangerous. Although ecological discourse seems to demand radical change, Žižek insists that its dominant affect is caution, not transformation. By portraying the Earth as hyper-fragile and any collective intervention as potentially catastrophic, ecology aligns with a contemporary post-political suspicion of large-scale action. This is why, in Žižek’s reading, ecology becomes a useful ideology for global capitalism, an injunction to feel guilty and responsible while leaving structural conditions intact.⁹⁸

Žižek develops this critique further by saying that “Nature does not exist”. What we imagine as a balanced, self-regulating whole is a fantasmatic projection, while the scientific Real of ecology is chaotic, historically, contingent, and marked by ruptures. Natural history is a sequence of catastrophes rather than a harmonious cycle, and anthropogenic interventions have already been integrated in this system. The unsettling implication is that a return to pre-industrial “balance” is neither possible nor desirable: were industrial activity to cease suddenly, Žižek claims, the ecological systems, which are already adapted to human disturbance, would collapse.⁹⁹ Traversing the fantasy of Nature thus requires accepting the radical groundlessness of both natural and symbolic orders: there is no big Other in Nature and catastrophe is structurally woven into the Real. Žižek hints at two ways in which the subject can traverse the

⁹⁷ Žižek, S. (2010). *Living in the End Times*. p. x

⁹⁸ Žižek, S. (2008). *Nature and Its Discontents*. pp. 48-52

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 56

fantasy of Nature, either by accepting ecological collapse as a structural necessity¹⁰⁰, or by confronting the excessive waste that we produce, since it strips away the illusion of Nature as an Other that will absorb or balance our excess.¹⁰¹

While Žižek's analysis illuminates the ideological dimensions of ecological discourse, it has several limitations that become visible when placed in the broader psychoanalytic framework developed in this thesis. These critiques not only clarify the limits of Žižek's position but also motivate the need for an alternative account of ecological subjectivity oriented toward new forms of practice. I develop three central critiques of Žižek's "ecology of fear".

The limits of Žižek's ecological framework

1) Žižek is right to reject an idealised Nature and to emphasise that ecosystems are historically contingent and non-harmonious. However, by treating catastrophe as the ontological condition of the ecological Real, Žižek risks flattening the specificity of anthropogenic climate breakdown. The climate crisis is not simply another episode in a long geological history of ruptures. It is a systemic transformation driven by a particular socio-economic formation (fossil capitalism), unfolding on unprecedented temporal and spatial scales. To assimilate this crisis into a generic ontology of catastrophe obscures questions of responsibility, justice, interdependence, and agency. The ecological Real in this sense is not merely the "groundlessness" of nature but the material instability of an entangled system in which human and nonhuman processes are mutually implicated. Žižek's move thus unintentionally naturalises the climate crisis by placing it within an ontological continuity with past catastrophes.

2) Žižek tends to collapse ecology almost entirely into the domain of ideological fantasy. He uses the term "nature" to describe the fantasmatic idealised image of Nature, but at the same time he refers to ecology itself as the predominant ideology of global capitalism. Although he does acknowledge the "scientific Real"¹⁰² of ecological processes, he ultimately subordinates both ecology and nature to the domain of ideology and fantasy. Although Žižek acknowledges ecological catastrophe, he treats it primarily as a lesson about the nonexistence of the big Other and the inconsistency of symbolic authority, rather than as a material constraint imposed by ecological entanglement that demands new forms of practice and subjectivity. This move obscures the fact that humans are not only symbolically rooted but also materially and

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 65

¹⁰¹ Taylor, A., director (2008) *Examined Life*.

¹⁰² Žižek, S. (2008), *Nature and Its Discontents*, p. 52

biologically interdependent in nonhuman processes. Traversing the fantasy of Nature does not dissolve this entanglement, but only dissolves its Imaginary-Symbolic form.

3) Žižek proposes that we should accept ecological catastrophe as our unavoidable fate in order to accept that there is no big Other, but he offers no account of how subjects could arrive at this stance of acceptance. In Lacanian terms, recognising the nonexistence of the big Other is not an immediate or spontaneous act but the end point of a long analytic process in which fantasmatic bonds are weakened and *jouissance* is reoriented. Žižek provides no account of how subjects might traverse the fantasy of Nature or how to avoid falling back into familiar patterns of disavowal once the subject confronts the anxiety that accompanies the loss of symbolic support. Žižek thus only provides a negative politics that exposes that there is no big Other by confronting negativity and accepting groundlessness, but leaves unexplained the subjective process through which such a confrontation could occur. It also misses the positive constructive dimension of how institutional and collective practices might reorient ecological desire and *jouissance* once the fantasy of Nature is traversed. This is precisely the gap that my account of Adaptive Ecological Entanglement seeks to address in the next chapter.

This chapter has shown how the ecological crisis confronts subjects with the Real that the Imaginary fantasy of “Nature” and the Symbolic order of ecological discourse strive to contain. Anxiety and trauma mark the moments when these mediations fail, exposing the instability and entanglement that narratives of balance or green growth cannot fully symbolise. Yet, as the analysis of fetishist disavowal demonstrated, such encounters with the Real are quickly reabsorbed into practices that maintain Symbolic normality, whether through green consumerism, habitual continuation, or fatalistic withdrawal, revealing the limits of ecological ideology. My engagement with Žižek’s “ecology of fear” showed that, while his Lacanian critique of ecological ideology is indispensable for understanding how the Real disrupts Symbolic coherence, it also risks ontologising catastrophe and reducing ecological crisis to an ideological formation, thereby leaving traversal of the fantasy of Nature tied to abstract terror rather than to a mediated process of subjective or collective transformation.

The next chapter turns to this missing dimension, developing an account of how ecological subjects might traverse the fantasy of Nature and reorient desire and *jouissance* toward an ethics of adaptive ecological entanglement.

Chapter 4: Traversing the Fantasy of Nature

Building on the account of fantasy, discourse, and the ecological Real developed in the previous chapters, this final chapter examines how Lacanian psychoanalysis can illuminate not only the impasses of ecological subjectivity but also the possibility of its transformation. Whereas Chapters 1-3 analysed how the fantasy of Nature is formed, sustained, and defended against the Real of entanglement, this chapter turns to the question of what it would mean for the ecological subject to traverse this fantasy and to act without relying on the guarantees of a big Other. Section 4.1 reconstructs Lacan's account of the end of analysis and translates its three subject-positions into the ecological domain. Section 4.2 examines Lacan's theory of the four discourses, highlights how they structure contemporary ecological discourse and argues why an Analyst's discourse is needed in ecological discourse. Section 4.3 develops Adaptive Ecological Entanglement as a proposal for such a discourse and outlines its ethical implications.

The question that guides this chapter is: *What discursive and subjective transformation is required for the ecological subject to traverse the fantasy of Nature and act in engagement with the Real of ecological entanglement?*

4.1 The End of Analysis in Lacanian Theory

Lacan's early work places desire at the centre of psychoanalytic experience: the subject is constituted through the Symbolic order as barred, and desire emerges from this constitutive lack. As explored in Chapters 1 and 2, desire is articulated through the signifier and sustained by fantasy, with the Other serving as the locus from which desire is interpreted and through which the subject seeks recognition. Yet, in Lacan's later teaching, this model is no longer sufficient to account for the endpoint of analysis. The end of analysis aims at a separation from the Other, such that the subject can follow their own path without being governed by the desire of the internalised big Other.¹⁰³ In order to move beyond desire's impasse, later Lacan separates desire from drive. While desire is always dependent on the Other and stuck in an endless metonymic movement, drive embodies the activity that circles *objet a* and produces *jouissance* itself.¹⁰⁴ The drive is aimed at *jouissance* itself, without the influence of the Other. In this later framework, the end of analysis no longer concerns the development of a desire that is no longer swayed by the

¹⁰³ Fink, B. (1997). *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 207

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 208; Lacan, J. (2006). *Ecrits*, p. 724: "desire comes from the Other, and *jouissance* is located on the side of the Thing"

Other, but transforming the analysand's relation to *jouissance* and to the drive that produces it.¹⁰⁵

Bruce Fink (1997) provides a helpful schema of Lacan's later conception of the subject's transformation in the analytic process, which corresponds to the three registers and allows us to situate the analytic transformation of the subject within Lacan's broader topology:¹⁰⁶

(1): The subject as demand (Imaginary register). Here the analysand expects the analyst to satisfy or interpret demands, mirroring the infant's relation to the caregiver.

(2): The subject as desire (Symbolic register). Through the analytic refusal of demand by the analyst, the analysand encounters their desire in its subservience of the analyst's desire as Other.

(3): The subject as drive (Real register). By not commanding anything from the analysand and by acting only in the field of signifying intervention¹⁰⁷, the analyst moves from the position of the "subject supposed to know" to the position of *objet a*. By playing the role of *objet a* in the analysand's fundamental fantasy and demonstrating that the Other's desire is not what they assume it to be, the analyst helps reveal the underlying lack that sustains the analysand's desire.¹⁰⁸ Through this process, the drive comes to the foreground, marking a shift from the subject as governed by the Other's desire to the subject as true to the drive, oriented to *jouissance*.

This movement from demand → desire → drive is also a movement across the registers (Imaginary → Symbolic → Real), during which in each stage one register dominates the subjective position. The end of analysis is thus not just a cognitive insight but a change in libidinal economy: a reorientation from Imaginary fantasies and Symbolic desire towards Real *jouissance*.

¹⁰⁵ Fink, B. (1997), p. 206,

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p. 210

¹⁰⁷ Lacan, J. (n.d.). *Seminar XV*. Session of 17.01.1968, pp. 78-79. Note: the reference cited here is Cormac Gallagher's unpublished translation, since there is no published translation of this work

¹⁰⁸ Fink, B. (1997). pp. 213-214

The analytic task is, therefore, to traverse the fundamental fantasy: to call into question the way fantasy organises desire and conceals Real *jouissance*.¹⁰⁹ The analyst's function is to lay bare the analysand's true *jouissance*, by occupying the position of the cause of desire and making them question the Other's desire.¹¹⁰ Before this stage, the analysand assumes the analyst is the "subject supposed to know"¹¹¹: they are presumed to hold a hidden knowledge as the big Other. The analyst breaks this identification by refusing to answer to this demand: he/she no longer appears as the Other who knows, but as the cause around which the analysand's desire turns. The final step of analysis is separation of *objet a* from the analyst, meaning that the analysand has to come to terms with the fact that *objet a* is not an external object but a structural subjective lack that organises their *jouissance*.¹¹² This is a difficult process in which the analysand recognises themselves no longer represented by a signifier, as they realise that the analyst is nothing but a placeholder for that void, a process which Lacan calls "subjective destitution".¹¹³ This is the final transformation in analysis: the analysand realises that desire itself is produced by their constitutive lack and becomes capable of "living out the drive"¹¹⁴, without being subject to injunctions of the Other.

Traversing the fantasy of Nature

If Lacan's account of the end of analysis describes a transformation in the subject's relation to demand, desire, and drive, then Fink's schema can help illuminate how the ecological subject might traverse the fantasy of Nature and reorient themselves toward the Real of ecological entanglement. These positions also correspond to distinct forms of disavowal, each marking a different way of managing the intrusion of the Real and a different moment in the analytic trajectory from demand, through desire, to drive.

In the first position, the ecological subject relates to the world through demand, mirroring the analysand's initial relation to the analyst. Here, disavowal takes the form of assigning responsibility to the Other. In order to cover up the traumatic Real of entanglement, the subject demands that "Nature" be preserved or returned to equilibrium, and that institutions provide solutions capable of repairing ecological loss. This position remains bound to Imaginary

¹⁰⁹ "Note also that Lacan's French is *vivre la pulsion*, for which Fink proposes the more accurate translation: *to live out the drive*." Cited from: Hewitson, O. (2012). *What Does Lacan Say About... The End, And Ends, of a Psychoanalysis? (Part II)*

¹¹⁰ Fink, B. (1997). p. 214

¹¹¹ Lacan, J. (1964). *Seminar XI*. p. 267

¹¹² Dunand, A. (1995). *The End Of Analysis*. pp. 247, 255

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p. 248

¹¹⁴ Fink, B. (1997). p. 213

coherence and is defined by reliance on the fantasy of an external, stable Nature that could answer the subject's demand.

When such demands confront their limit, the ecological subject shifts into the second position, that of desire. Here the subject recognises that no Other can simply satisfy ecological demands, and instead attempts to decipher and follow the desire of the big Other, what "Nature", science, or ecological discourse appears to want from them. This is the position exemplified by the "green consumer": the subject who no longer demands that the Other fixes the crisis, but instead takes responsibility for responding correctly to the Other's desire. Ecological agency becomes oriented by Symbolic injunctions to be a responsible ecological actor, while remaining caught in the contradictions and impossibilities that structure ecological ideology. In this subjective position, desire circulates around substitutes that promise reconciliation, reproducing the fantasy of Nature, and concealing the ecological Real.

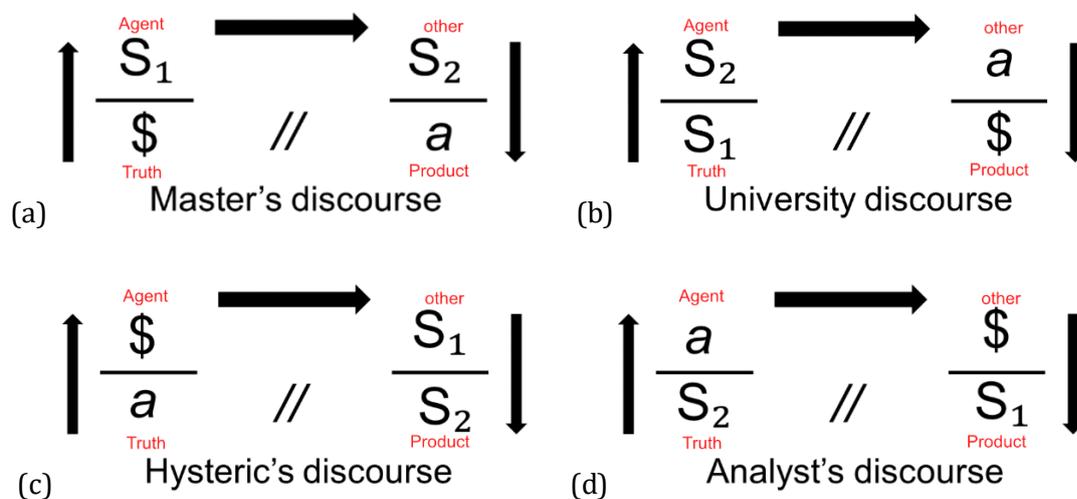
A more radical shift occurs in the third position: the ecological subject as drive, aligned with the Real register. Here, disavowal no longer structures the subject's relation to ecology. The subject no longer relates to ecology through the desire of the Other but confronts the ecological Real that fantasy and ideology obscure. The subject recognises the uncanniness of ecological entanglement as intrinsic to subjectivity itself rather than something to be mastered and eliminated. What emerges is an ecological subject that becomes capable of "living out the drive", meaning ecologically: (1) acting without the fantasy of restoration or purity, (2) accepting the impossibility of total ecological mastery, (3) reorienting *jouissance* toward ecological practices without seeking symbolic reassurance, (4) acting without guarantees, (5) engaging in ongoing, relational forms of ecological practice.

4.2 The Need for an Ecological Analyst's Discourse

The analytic trajectory makes clear that subjective transformation requires more than just insight: it depends on the discursive structure that positions the subject in relation to the Other and to *objet a*. This raises the question: if ecological subjectivity is shaped by Imaginary-Symbolic fantasies, what kind of discourse would be required in order for the subject to traverse these fantasies? Lacan's theory of the four discourses provides the framework for answering this question. It reveals that contemporary ecological discourse is constructed of the Master's, University, and Hysteric's discourses, each of which reproduces the fantasy of Nature and shields the subject from the ecological Real. Only the Analyst's discourse enables the subject to undergo subjective transformation toward the subject of the drive. These discourses do not

delineate concrete social institutions, but describe structural positions that can appear across different domains.

Lacan's theory of the four discourses describes the four fundamental relative positions of the subject (\$) to the master signifier (S_1), knowledge (S_2), and *objet petit a*, or surplus *jouissance* (a), each resulting in a particular social bond. In every type of discourse, each of these variables functions in a particular 'position' of the discourse: as agent (the speaker of the discourse), other (what the discourse is addressed to), product (what the discourse has created), and truth (what the discourse attempted to express).¹¹⁵ Besides these four positions there are two disjunctions: a disjunction of impossibility on the level of the agent and other, as the agent is always stuck with an impossible desire; and a disjunction of inability on the level of the product and the truth, since the product of a discourse has nothing to do with the truth of the agent.¹¹⁶ The interrelationships between the different positions can be seen in the following graphs, where the truth occupies the lower-left position, the agent the upper-left, the other the upper-right, and the product the lower-right position (see graph 1):



Graph 1: Positions and interrelations between \$, S_1 , S_2 , and a in Lacan's four discourses

In the discourse of the Master, which is foundational to the structuring of the Symbolic register, the Master signifier, pretending to be undivided, occupies the position of the agent and addresses knowledge in the place of the Other. The divided subject appears at the position of the truth because the hidden truth is that the master signifier only creates the illusion of coherence. The product is *objet a*, because the master signifier creates surplus *jouissance* attached to the signifier in the place of *objet a*. In the Master's discourse, the subject is

¹¹⁵ Verhaeghe, P. (1995). *From Impossibility to Inability: Lacan's Theory on the Four Discourses*, pp. 94-95

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 96

structurally incapable of recognising the fundamental fantasy in its very structure ($\$ \diamond a$), because *objet a* can never be brought into relation with the divided subject. Another interesting point is the relation between the master signifier as agent and knowledge as other, because this means that knowledge has to function to confirm the illusion that the master-signifier is an undivided whole, highlighting the ideological function of knowledge in the discourse of the Master.¹¹⁷ In Chapter 2.3, I have shown how, in contemporary ecological discourse, the Master signifier “Nature” retroactively produces stability by posing a narrative of an external, recoverable, and balanced “Nature”, obscuring the instability and entanglement of the ecological Real.

Perhaps the predominant social bond of contemporary society is University discourse, where knowledge (S_2) occupies the position of the agent, addressing *objet a* as its object, while the master signifier is in the position of hidden truth. Crucially, knowledge’s operation depends on the master-signifier as the truth, which secretly underpins the entire framework, hiding the ideological foundation of knowledge. Knowledge addresses *objet a* insofar as it seeks to master, rationalise, or optimise what is structurally unsymbolisable.¹¹⁸ As Zupančič argues, contemporary capitalism has shifted from a Master’s to a University discourse, in which surplus *jouissance* is converted into surplus value, a quantified object that fuels accumulation, meaning that enjoyment becomes something to be managed, optimised, and reintegrated into the circuit of value as “imitation surplus *jouissance*”¹¹⁹. Ecological governance mirrors this logic when emissions, waste, and even guilt are converted into measurable units (carbon credits, offsets, sustainable brands) that re-enter the economy as objects of management. Here the subject appears only as product: divided, responsible, yet powerless, caught between injunctions to consume and injunctions to reduce.

The third type of discourse Lacan identifies is the Hysteric’s discourse. Here the divided subject ($\$$) occupies the position of agent and interrogates the Master-signifier in the place of the Other, demanding from it an answer to their own structural lack. This discourse foregrounds the impossibility at the heart of desire and demands from the Other an answer to this impossibility. The hidden truth of this discourse is *objet a* as the cause of desire, and the product is general knowledge that never resolves the subject’s demand.¹²⁰ Applied to ecological subjectivity, the hysteric’s discourse captures a widespread structure in which the ecological subject, confronted with ecological anxiety, demands from the ecological big Other (“Nature”, science, governments)

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 99

¹¹⁸ Verhaeghe, P. (1995). p. 102

¹¹⁹ Zupančič, A. (2006). *When Surplus Enjoyment Meets Surplus Value*. pp. 170-171

¹²⁰ Verhaeghe, P. (1995). pp. 101-102

a definite answer about how to live sustainably or repair ecological rupture, only to receive expanding bodies of ecological knowledge, metrics, and prescriptions that fail to address their underlying division. This discourse reveals the impossibility of the ecological big Other to deliver the meaning or reassurance the subject seeks.

Taken together, the Master, University, and Hysteric discourses structure most political, economic, and personal responses to the ecological crisis. They all operate fantasmatically, though in distinct ways. In the Master's discourse, the appeal to a unifying S_1 "Nature" sustains the illusion of coherence, while excluding the ecological Real from the subject. In the University discourse, knowledge presents itself as neutral and self-grounding, addressing *objet a* as something that can be managed, measured, or optimised, masking the impossibility of fully mastering the Real. In the Hysteric's discourse, fantasy operates by sustaining the subject's illusion that the Other possesses the missing knowledge of their desire, prompting an endless cycle of demanding answers while disavowing every response as they can never answer to *objet a*.

The discourse of the Analyst is the structural inverse of the master's: here, *objet a* occupies the position of agent and addresses the divided subject. The analyst does not speak from the place of mastery or of established knowledge, but instead functions as the cause of the other's desire, bringing to the foreground the very relation that the master's discourse structurally precludes. The hidden truth of this discourse is knowledge, because the analyst's knowledge cannot be brought into analysis. The analyst should only function as a stepping stone to bring the analysand into the final subject of the drive. The product is the master-signifier which emerges from this subjective reconfiguration, which allows a different relation to the Real.¹²¹ The crucial difference between the Master's discourse and the discourse of the Analyst is that the master signifiers are produced by the subject rather than imposed from the outside.¹²²

Because Lacan's discourses are social structures, the Analyst's discourse can also appear outside the analytic setting, wherever fantasy is suspended and *objet a* is allowed to function as agent. Extending this discourse to the ecological field therefore means identifying a structural position that can interrupt the fantasies of harmony and mastery that dominate ecological discourse and open a new relation to the ecological Real of entanglement.

For these reasons, an analyst discourse is not merely another normative framework to be added to ecological discourse, but the only discursive position capable of shifting the subject's relation

¹²¹ Verhaeghe, P. (1995). pp. 102-103

¹²² Bracher, M. (1994). *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*. pp. 123-124

to the ecological Real. Whereas the Master's and University discourses stabilise ecological meaning through fantasies of harmony or technocratic control, the Analyst's discourse suspends these guarantees and returns the subject to the point of impossibility, *objet a* as the remainder of entanglement that neither image nor knowledge can domesticate. Only such a discourse can unsettle the fantasmatic reliance on "Nature", interrupt the cycles of responsibility and guilt that structure ecological desire, and create the conditions for a subject capable of acting without the support of symbolic reassurance. What is required, then, is a structural analogue of the analyst's function within ecological discourse: a mode of articulation that foregrounds entanglement, refuses the promise of coherence, and enables new master-signifiers to emerge from within the subject rather than being imposed upon them. The next section develops this by proposing *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement* as a possible form of analyst discourse for ecological thought.

4.3 Adaptive Ecological Entanglement as an Analyst's Discourse

If the Master's, University, and Hysteric's discourses sustain the fantasy of Nature by stabilising meaning, promising coherence, and demanding reconciliation, then a different discursive configuration capable of interrupting these fantasies and bringing the ecological subject into relation with the Real of entanglement is required. I propose *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement* (AEE) as a discursive position within ecological thought: an ecological analogue of Lacan's analyst's discourse. AEE should not be understood as a new ecological worldview or normative framework, but a structural position that reconfigures how ecological meaning is articulated: no longer as a guarantee of coherence or reconciliation, but as an orientation that remains exposed to the Real of ecological entanglement. The term "entanglement" designates the Real condition of ecological life: instability, interdependence, and mutual vulnerability that resists full symbolic coherence. The term "adaptive" signals a mode of response that does not seek reconciliation, mastery, or purity, but remains open to ongoing transformation within this Real. As a discursive position, AEE performs the structural operations of the analyst's discourse: it positions the remainder of ecological entanglement in the place of the agent, addresses the ecological subject in its division, suspends the authority of the ecological big Other, and reveals the libidinal attachments that sustain ecological fantasy.

To place entanglement in the agent position is to allow the remainder, *objet a*, to speak first. AEE does not attempt to integrate ecological entanglement into a coherent worldview; instead it allows ecological instability to remain unresolved, interrupting the symbolic demand that the ecological field be made coherent, intelligible, and reconcilable. Whereas the Master's discourse installs "Nature" as a unifying master-signifier and the University discourse privileges knowledge as a means of control, AEE refuses such guarantees. It creates spaces in which the

subject encounters the very limits that fantasy ordinarily conceals: the impossibility of ecological wholeness, the contradictions in ecological desire, and the instability of the ecological systems in which we are embedded. Through this shift in discursive position, AEE opens the possibility for new forms of ecological subjectivity that are not grounded in guilt, mastery, or reassurances from the big Other, but in a direct engagement with the Real conditions of ecological life.

Institutional and practical forms of AEE

For *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement* to function as an analogue of the analyst's discourse, it must appear in practices and institutions that allow subjects to encounter ecological entanglement without transforming it into a new ideal or master-signifier. Such practices create situations in which the subject confronts instability, uncertainty, and conflict that the fantasy of Nature ordinarily conceals.

One institutional setting in which AEE could be instantiated is the communicative and discursive framing of ecological science. AEE is not a scientific method or a normative guideline, but a structural position that an institution can occupy when it refuses to speak as the ecological big Other and instead allows the limits of knowledge to appear as such. Ecological science already investigates the complexity, nonlinearity, and uncertainty of ecosystems, and its insights are indispensable for any meaningful response to the ecological crisis. The problem arises in the translation of scientific results into ecological discourse, where uncertainty is often suppressed in favour of moral injunctions ("science tells us what we must do") or technocratic assurances ("models will determine the solution"). It is at this level that AEE should intervene. When scientific institutions communicate findings in a way that foregrounds uncertainty and systemic instability, without converting these features into authoritative prescriptions or narratives of coherence, they bring *objet a*, as the remainder of ecological entanglement to the foreground. This shift is not meant to alter scientific research itself, but to free scientific knowledge from the libidinal demand to function as the big Other, creating subjects who can act with scientific knowledge rather than hide behind it or against it as a big Other.

Another context in which *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement* can be instantiated is in deliberative and participatory forums, such as citizen's assemblies and community climate adaptation councils; and in collective practices where subjects confront their ecological entanglement materially. The analytic function of these practices lies in staging encounters that call for what Alenka Zupančič calls an "ethical act", which she contrasts to an "ethical action". An ethical action operates within the coordinates of the existing symbolic order: it expresses the subject's

commitments, values, and identities but leaves the underlying fantasy untouched. The ethical act, by contrast, “radically transforms its bearer”; it suspends the subject’s symbolic coordinates, traverses the fantasy that structures their desire, and reconfigures the field of possible agency.¹²³ In ecological terms, this distinction means that the purpose of these forums and practices is not simply to persuade subjects to recycle more, support greener policies, or adopt sustainable habits, but to organise situations in which the subject encounters the Real of ecological entanglement in a way that unsettles the fantasy of Nature and its associated injunctions, allowing them to act ethically. Such encounters may take place when subjects confront the material afterlife of consumption, like waste streams, ecological footprints, local pollution, or when community events engage with seasonal food cycles, water scarcity, or ecosystem vulnerability. These experiences should expose the subject to the contingency, conflict, and interdependence that the fantasy of Nature disavows.

Across these different applications, the unifying feature of *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement* is that it culminates in practices that confront the subject with the remainder, the *objet a*, of ecological entanglement, and reveal the contradictions and desires that shape the fantasy of Nature. In doing so, they shift the subject’s position within ecological discourse, enabling forms of ecological agency that do not rely on fantasy, moral purity, or technocratic certainty.

A hopeful ethics after the fantasy of Nature

If the task of *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement* is for the ecological subject to traverse the fantasy of Nature, its ethical significance lies in the form of subjectivity that becomes possible once the subject is no longer oriented by fantasies of coherence and mastery. To “live out the drive” ecologically is to act without seeking symbolic guarantees from a big Other, meaning to act without expecting that science, Nature, or moral injunctions can secure the meaning of one’s individual actions. Ecologically, this means that no individual act, such as recycling, green consumption, offsetting, etc., can deliver reconciliation with an imaged harmonious Nature. Yet, this recognition enables a more durable form of agency that is no longer paralysed by guilt or impossible demands, but capable of sustained engagement within the Real conditions of entanglement.

Such an ethics is hopeful precisely because it relocates ecological responsibility from the pursuit of the metonymic substitutions in the place of *objet a*, to the acceptance of entanglement itself. The ecological subject who has traversed the fantasy of Nature becomes capable of acting with vulnerability and dependency and is freed from the compulsive desire of enjoying responsibly.

¹²³ Zupančič, A. (2000). *Ethics of the Real*. p. 83

With this, AEE offers an ethics of the Real, one that accepts the Real of ecological entanglement, while insisting on the possibility and necessity of acting within it.

This chapter has shown how Lacan's account of the end of analysis can illuminate the impasses and impossibilities of ecological subjectivity. By translating Fink's three analytic subject-positions into the ecological field, I showed how the fantasy of Nature sustains the subject as demand and desire, and how traversal leads to an ecological subject as drive, capable of accepting the Real of entanglement without being subject to the Other's desire. Lacan's theory of the four discourses further revealed how the Master's, University, and Hysteric's discourses organise much of contemporary ecological meaning, while concealing the Real of ecological entanglement. Against this, the Analyst's discourse is able to confront the subject with their constitutive division, making the traversal of the fundamental fantasy possible. I proposed *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement* as a structural analogue of the Analyst's discourse that places the Real of ecological entanglement at the foreground, addresses the ecological subject in its division, and suspends the authority of the ecological big Other, allowing for the subject to traverse the fantasy of Nature. In doing so, AEE creates a space for a hopeful ecological ethics, where ecological action is no longer grounded in reconciliation and mastery, but in ongoing engagement with the Real conditions of ecological life.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explain why the widespread desire for ecological sustainability so persistently coincides with practices that maintain ecological destruction, and what it would mean to move beyond this contradiction. I argued that this contradiction cannot be resolved at the level of science or politics alone. It points instead to a subjective dimension of the ecological crisis: the ways in which ecological reality is apprehended, desired, and made meaningful. In this thesis, I used Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyse the psychic structures through which ecological reality is apprehended and through which contradictory patterns of behaviour are sustained. By analysing subjectivity as structured through the interrelation between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, I clarified how ecological meaning is formed, how contradictory modes of enjoyment are sustained, and why ecological knowledge so often fails to translate into transformed ecological agency.

In Chapter 1, I analysed how the Imaginary register organises coherence and identification through images of wholeness, shaping the fantasy of “Nature” as a privileged site of ecological meaning. In Section 1.1, I reconstructed Lacan’s account of the Imaginary as the register of identification, misrecognition, and illusory unity, showing how the ego is formed through images that conceal constitutive division and how fantasy functions as the Imaginary’s organising mechanism, translating lack into a coherent narrative that sustains desire. Section 1.2 extended this logic to the ecological domain, demonstrating how “Nature” functions as an Imaginary mirror: an image of harmony, balance, and innocence onto which the subject displaces its own lack, securing a sense of coherence while concealing the Real of ecological instability and entanglement. Together, these sections show that the fantasy of Nature fulfils a fundamental psychic function, sustaining ecological desire by masking both subjective division and the irreducible instability of ecological life.

In Chapter 2, I showed how the Symbolic order organises ecological meaning, desire, and *jouissance* around the master signifier “Nature”. In Section 2.1, I argued that the Symbolic constitutes the subject as divided (\$) through language, while simultaneously structuring desire as a metonymic movement along signifiers and regulating *jouissance* by producing it as a remainder that can never be fully symbolised. This structural logic explains why ecological engagement is always mediated by norms, injunctions, and signifying frameworks rather than direct relations to ecological reality. Section 2.2 demonstrated how this logic takes concrete form in ecological discourse, where “Nature” functions as a Symbolic construction that orients desire and enjoyment through norms of responsibility, sustainability, and moral obligation. Finally, Section 2.3 analysed “Nature” as a master signifier (S_1) that quilts the ecological field by

retroactively stabilising meaning and *jouissance* through chains of secondary signifiers such as “green”, “sustainable”, and “net zero”. Together, these analyses show that the Symbolic order actively structures the ways in which subjects desire, enjoy, and make sense of ecology, thereby laying the groundwork for the contradictions and impasses that emerge when this symbolic organisation confronts its limits.

In Chapter 3, I examined how the ecological Real disrupts the fantasies and symbolic structures that organise ecological meaning, and how this disruption is managed through anxiety, trauma, and fetishist disavowal. In Section 3.1, I argued that the Real emerges where ecological processes exceed symbolisation, as an experience of impossibility that appears through anxiety, breakdown, and the destabilisation of meaning. Climate collapse confronts subjects with precisely such failures, exposing the inconsistencies of the Symbolic frameworks that promise coherence, control, or restoration. Section 3.2 then showed how the subject reintegrates this encounter with the Real into meaning-making processes through fetishist disavowal, a structure in which subjects simultaneously acknowledge the ecological crisis and continue to act as if this crisis does not disrupt the symbolic coordinates that organise ecological action. In Section 3.3, I critically engaged with Žižek’s account of ecology as an “ecology of fear”, arguing that while his analysis is indispensable for understanding the ideological and libidinal mechanisms through which ecological discourse sustains belief and enjoyment, it remains limited by its tendency to collapse the ecological Real into ideological formations, to ignore the specificity of the anthropogenic climate breakdown, and to offer no account of how subjects might traverse the fantasy of Nature. Taken together, this chapter demonstrated that the ecological Real both destabilises ecological meaning and provokes defensive ideological responses, thereby clarifying why the exposure of catastrophe alone is insufficient to reorient ecological desire or agency.

In Chapter 4, I argued that moving beyond the fantasy of Nature requires a transformation in subject position, accompanied by a discursive structure capable of guiding such a transformation. In Section 4.1, I showed how Lacan’s account of the end of analysis, marked by a shift from demand, to desire, to the position of the drive, can be translated into ecological terms, revealing that ecological agency becomes possible only once the subject no longer depends on the Other’s desire and confronts the Real of entanglement. Section 4.2 then demonstrated that contemporary ecological discourse is largely structured by the Master’s, University, and Hysteric’s discourses, each of which reproduces the fantasy of Nature, while concealing the ecological Real. Against this, Section 4.3 proposed *Adaptive Ecological Entanglement* as an ecological analogue of the analyst’s discourse: a discursive position that suspends symbolic guarantees, exposes the libidinal economy sustaining ecological fantasy, and enables forms of

ecological action grounded in sustained engagement with instability, interdependence, and the Real conditions of ecological life.

The analysis developed in this thesis shows that the persistence of ecologically destructive practices despite widespread awareness is not primarily a failure of knowledge, motivation, or moral commitment, but a consequence of how ecological reality is fantasmatically organised. The fantasy of Nature sustains an image of stability, harmony, and control that allows subjects, through disavowal, to acknowledge ecological crisis while continuing to act as if this stability remains intact. By exposing the psychic and discursive functions of this fantasy, Lacanian psychoanalysis makes it possible to understand why contradictory patterns of action endure even as the material conditions of crisis intensify. From this perspective, the question is no longer how to reinforce ecological awareness or moral obligation, but what becomes possible once this fantasy is traversed. Importantly, traversing the fantasy of Nature does not entail indifference, but opens a different ethical orientation, one in which ecological action no longer seeks harmony, guarantees, or final balance, but proceeds from the recognition of entanglement, instability, and shared vulnerability as the conditions of ecological life. In this sense, the hope articulated in this thesis lies not in restoring a lost harmony, but in sustaining forms of ecological engagement that remain responsive to entanglement, instability, and shared vulnerability, acting without guarantees, yet without denial.

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