Taking a Glance at the Environment: Prolegomena to an Ethics of the Environment

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ABSTRACT
It is remarkable how much we can understand about an environmental problem at a mere glance. By means of a glance—at once quick and comprehensive—we can detect that something is going wrong in a given environmental circumstance, and we can even begin to suspect what needs to be done to rectify the situation. In this paper I explore the unsuspected power of the glance in environmental thought and practice, drawing special lessons for an ethics of the environment. Specific examples are analyzed, and authors as diverse as John Dewey and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are invoked in an effort to develop a coherent vision of how the human glance helps to locate and remedy environmental crises.

Everything that happens and everything that is said happens or is said at the surface.

—Gilles Deleuze, The Logic of Sense

The surface is where most of the action is.

—J. J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception

Can things have a face?

—Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”

We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.

—Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic”
I

An ethics of the environment must begin with the sheer and simple fact of being struck by something wrong happening in the environment. It is by noticing that something is out of joint—that does not fit or function well—that a response is elicited and an action induced. Responsive action begins with what John Dewey called the "problematic situation." Unless this situation is apprehended in its very problematicity, it will remain noxious, troublesome, harmful. People will go on being persecuted and tortured, chemicals will circulate freely in the air, and food and water will be poisoned—unless attention is given to what is awry in these circumstances. Not that notice is enough; the full force of ethical action requires reflection and consultation: in a word, follow-through. But the first moment of noticing is indispensable; without this, nothing will happen, nothing will ensue.

In what follows I will examine this first moment of ethical responsiveness: the moment of the glance. My claim is that the human glance, meager as it seems to be, is indispensable for consequential ethical action. This is so despite the fact of its almost complete neglect by ethical theorists, who tend to find in it something merely trivial—at most, a predecessor to significant action but not part of this action itself. And yet it is of enormous significance, both in delimited interhuman settings and in the broader field of environmental ethics.

Beyond its special virtue as the opening moment of ethical action, there are several other contributions of the glance to ethical life:

(i) The glance provides direct access to the other person: to his or her mood, thought, interest, attitude at the moment: what the other feels right now; this is crucial for ethics, since (as Scheler has argued) ethical values are conveyed by emotions as their "bearers" (Träger): to get a glimpse of a particular emotion is to get a concrete sense of what ethical issue is at stake.

(ii) The glance catches a sense of less manifest aspects of the other, e.g., her darker thoughts; as when I glancingly realize that the other person is far more disturbed at a deeper level than her previous behavior may have indicated. Here the glance exercises its penetrating power, its ability to go under the manifest phenomenon—yet without any interpretative activity on my part.

(iii) This is not to mention certain telltale signs that the glance picks up instantly and that may be pertinent to ethical activity: class, gender, race, way of dressing (betokening niche within class), even educational level; these are external indicators of the other person's identity, history, and present milieu; they are often (I do not say always) evident in a glance. When they are, they are immediately present to me in their delimited but sharp signification.

(iv) Not to mention, either, the exchange of glances that may be extremely relevant to ethical matters; in this dense dialectic the Other shows herself only insofar as she engages my glance with hers; and it is the engagement itself, its
duration and quality and direction, that becomes significant for ethical thought and action.

In these four ways—of which I here give only the most cursory descriptions—the glance can be said to give witness to the other: to testify to her or his compelling and demanding presence in the ethical field. It also welcomes that other into the same field of interpersonal relations.

Witnessing and welcoming are in effect the twin pillars of the ethical relation in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Despite his discerning discussions of this relation, Levinas nowhere attempts to spell out the exact ways by which these two basic actions are accomplished. I submit that they are realized in the fourfold way I have just outlined—the way of the glance. The glance fills the void left by Levinas' refusal to consider the precise means by which the ethical relation occurs. It is the missing member of any complete description of this relation.

II

The reason for Levinas' conspicuous neglect of the glance is not far to seek. It arises from his critique of perception as a form of knowledge, that is, as an act that takes a comprehensive and synoptic view of a given situation. Ethics, however, is not a matter of knowledge; no amount of knowledge of the Other (Autre) will help one to become ethical in relation to that Other. Instead, the ethical is a matter of desire, and desire bears on what transcends the known or knowable. "Ethical witnessing," Levinas insists, "is a revelation that is not [a matter of] knowledge."

If this is the case, then any approach to the Other as an object of knowledge, as something thematized or thematizable, is bound to miss the ethical mark.

I do not know if one can speak of a 'phenomenology' of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. By the same token, I wonder if one can speak of a look [un regard] turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think, rather, that the access to the face is ethical straight off. Levinas adds that "the best way to encounter the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes"—or, for that matter, his nose, forehead, or chin. Any such perceived feature of the face takes us down the primrose path of the knowable and the representable, and thus away from the true path of ethics, for "the Infinite does not show itself." This is a moment of double crisis. On the one hand, Levinas here departs from phenomenology—his discipline of origin—while, on the other hand, he denies any relevance of perception to the ethical relation as this is embodied in the face-to-face encounter. In short, he rejects a phenomenology of perception
as playing any significant role in ethics. I hold, on the contrary, that such a phenomenology (and thus all phenomenology, as Derrida argues: “phenomenology . . . is always phenomenology of perception”\(^5\)) remains not just relevant to ethics but essential to it, both in its specifically human format and in its more extended sense as environmental ethics. And I will make my case on the basis of the unsuspected strength of the mere glance, which is as pivotal to the ethical dimension of the nonhuman environment as it is to that of the interpersonal situation.

Despite his outright denial of any place for perception (and thus for the glance as the vanguard act of perception), Levinas cannot consistently maintain this denial and ends by conceding a role for a certain form of perception. This concession is important: if perception can be seen to be integral and not adventitious to ethics even within a Levinasian framework, then the way would be much more open to a more comprehensive ethics of the environment that is perceptually based. To this end, I want to trace a revealing line of thought that emerges spontaneously in Levinas’ discussions with Philippe Nemo.

In these conversations, Levinas speaks of the face as “a signification without a context,” as “uncontainable” within the bounds of perception, as a “rupture” with perception, etc.\(^6\) It follows that “one can say that the face is not ‘seen’ [vu].”\(^7\) Yet later in the same interview, Levinas admits that “there is in the appearance of the face a commandment, as if a master spoke to me!”\(^8\) How can there be an “appearance” (apparition) without a perception of that appearance? Perhaps perception, after all, is ingredient in the relation to the face. But what kind of perception would this be — granting that “access to the face is not of the order of perception pure and simple, of intentionality that aims at adequation”?\(^9\)

Let us call this impure and nonsimple perception (after Leibniz) apperception, i.e., a subtle perception, a “petite perception” that precedes and in any case undoes the otherwise inveterate tendency of full-blown perception to objectify — to be a matter of knowledge, of comprehension and synopsis. My claim is that in our relations with the Other apperception is always already at work and that the primary form it takes is the glance, which in its mobile entrainment on surfaces does not consolidate into robust perception. Indeed, it deconsolidates obdurate objects; it no longer takes them to be well-formed substances with determinate edges and sides, definite volumes and weights, etc.

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III

The most insistent question now confronting us is this: Where is the ethical imperative? I am not questioning that there must be such imperativity, such a “sense of oughness” (in Wes Jackson’s phrase), for without it we would not be moved to act ethically in the first place. Ethics would be merely customary action: what most of us do for the most part. But ethics requires a sanction that
is not reducible to commonalities of behavior or to established normativities of conduct. Since this sanction is not determinable by sociological analysis — since it exceeds, and may go quite contrary to, what most people think is right on a given occasion, including the aptly named “moral majority” (in truth a distinct minority that would like to make itself the statistical majority) — it must be found somewhere else. But where is this?

Just as Heidegger posed the leading question “Where is the work of art?” (in “The Origin of the Work of Art”), so we must ask the same locatory question of ethics, especially an ethics of the environment. The Where precedes the What of determinate content — i.e., what one should do in order to be ethical — as well as the How of how to apply the What: how to make it work or stick in a given circumstance. Even if it is true that the What and the How come first in the order of ethical conduct — we must know what to do and how to do it if we are to get anywhere at all in the moral life — a phenomenology of ethics must first ask where the source of the compelling power of the ethical is to be found.

In the history of Western ethics, there have been at least four major coherent answers to this primary question. The sanction or source of the ethical has been located in the Good, in God, in the spiritual Self, and in the Face. These in turn divide into two sets of answers: the source of the ethical lies either in something transcendent to the human — in the Good, as the ultimate object of knowledge, or in God as the final metaphysical or theological force — or in something intrinsically human: whether this be the spiritual self or the face. I set aside here the ancient and medieval moves to locate the seat of the ethical in the extrahuman: not because they are invalid or inconsequential but because they take us too far afield from finding an appropriate purchase for an environmentally based ethics. And I pass over Kant’s effort to find the source of the ethical in the deep self which is as invisible as God or the Good.

The face, in contrast, is visible and thus directly accessible. As Levinas puts it in his 1951 essay “Is Ontology Fundamental?”:

It is not a matter of opposing one essence to another [e.g., freedom as opposed to determinism: whether in Kant or in Sartre]. It is above all a question of finding the place from where human beings cease to concern us exclusively on the basis of the horizon of being [as in Heidegger], that is, to offer themselves to our powers. The human existent [l’être] as such (and not as an incarnation of universal being) can only exist in a relation where it is invoked [i.e., not just named]. The human existent is the human being, and it is as a fellow being [prochain] that human being is accessible. As a face.

Significant here is Levinas’ express effort to find a “place from where” (la place d’où) ethics can become possible without having to rely on the encompassing horizon of Being at stake in Being and Time, yet still be fully “accessible” to human beings in the course of everyday life. The point of access is found in
the face — the face of the other, my "fellow being" or "neighbor" (as prochain may also be translated). The face punctures a hole in the Heideggerian horizon just as it penetrates the imposing edifice of the Kantian metaphysics of the spiritual subject. It has the right cutting edge for ethics to find its fulcrum in something very particular about the other person.

Levinas' achievement is to have located the force of the ethical in a feature of the actuality of the human subject, in its presence here and now in the ethical relation. The compellingness of the ethical, its where, is found in the face.

IV

If we are to pursue an ethics of the environment in the wake of Levinas, the pivotal question becomes: where are we to find the equivalent of the face in the environing world? Just where is there a sense of outhness that solicits, indeed compels, ethical comportment? Without this solicitation, we would not be drawn to do anything ethically efficacious. Human beings rarely if ever act from abstract principles, not from Kant's categorical imperative in its three formulations and not even from the Ten Commandments! (Which themselves, let us remember, were revealed to Moses at a particular place in the wilderness.) Where can we find in the other-than-human world the imperativity that being ethical requires? Is there anything like a face that commands us in the presence of nature?

It is quite remarkable that Levinas, who says very little about an ethics of the environment at any point, raises this very question in his 1951 essay: "Can things assume a face?" He rejects the idea that such a face would be merely "relative to an environing plenitude." The face must be grasped on its own terms, not in those of a surrounding context. Yet, as Heidegger insisted, the very word for "environment" (Umgebung in German) emphasizes precisely the idea of something surrounding us, thanks to the fact that the prefix signifies 'around' in English as well as German. Yet in such a highly ramified surrounding scene, it is difficult to locate anything with the force, much less the authority, of a face. It seems that either there is nothing like a face in the environment — as Levinas himself would doubtless have to conclude upon further reflection, given his stringent conditions of selfhood — or the face is all over the place: in which case, its meaning will be so diluted as to risk losing any ethical urgency. This is the kind of dilemma into which Levinas puts us, no less than Kant before him: either the face is strictly human (and then no ethics of the larger environment is possible) or it is part of a decidedly nonethical totality called "life" or "nature." Otherwise put: ethics is human or does not exist at all. But this rigid choice gets us nowhere when we want to consider right and good action in the other-than-human world that includes much of value.
What to do, then, in confronting this dilemma? One tempting move is to give up any search for a literal human face but still look for something human or humanlike in the environment as the hook on which to put the hat of ethics. Levinas would be only too happy to comply with this search insofar as he rejects the literal face to start with — this is the very basis of his critique of the perception of the face as part of ethics — and insofar as he himself does not wish to confine the "face" to the front of the head.¹⁴

Could we not say that the whole natural world is like a body, the "world's body" (in John Crowe Ransom's memorable phrase), and that it is therefore capable of presenting a face to us? Perhaps — we shall explore a model not too distant from this later on — and yet this formulation involves the fatal flaw of anthropocentrism. The world's body thus conceived is parasitic on the human body. To generalize the human body, starting with its peculiar face, over the entire environment is only to indulge in an unremitting extension of humanism, making man indeed "the measure of all things." It is also to invite the insoluble problems occasioned by the analogizing called for in any such generalization, whereby we must effect a "pairing" (in Husserl's term) between our body and natural objects. Just as this act of Paarung is foredoomed as a model of how we know others to be similar to ourselves, so it is futile when it (or any other kind of analogical inference) is invoked to explain how the world as a whole is similar to our own body, including its face.¹⁵

V

We need to make a new start to find the equivalent of the face in the environment. Instead of trying to locate this in a particular feature of that environment — its body or its mind, its sentience or its feeling (as in Buddhism or Whitehead) — we are better advised to look to a larger framework that does not borrow any of its basic traits from human beings. I refer to the environing world and, more particularly, to what I like to call the place-world. It is axiomatic that every entity of the environment, both human and nonhuman, belongs to the natural world, and it belongs there in virtue of the particular place it inhabits. Thinking this way avoids invidious searching among species for priority in the ethical realm; it focuses on what all natural entities, including unspeciated ones, share: belongingness to the place-world. Every entity, living or not, is part of this world, and therefore the ultimate ground of ethical force in the environment belongs properly to this world as a complicated nexus of places.

A concrete clue points to the rightness of this line of thought. Faced with the choice as to whether we would destroy a given member of a species or its habitat, we might well prefer to save the habitat even if it meant sacrificing the animal. The value accrues not just to the larger whole but to the place-world in which certain animals flourish. Or to put the same point somewhat
differently: whereas we value human animals primarily for what they are in each individual case (we can be face-to-face with only one Other at a time), we value other animals not only for themselves (this we certainly do as well, as we know from the case of beloved pets) but also and ultimately for their belongingness to the place-world that they co-inhabit. The source of the ethical commitment they inspire in us stems in good measure from our appreciation of the places to which they belong as coordinate members of the same habitat or territory.\textsuperscript{16}

Another clue, this time from the history of language: ἔθος, the Greek word that lies at the origin of “ethics” and that signified ‘character’ in Attic Greek, first of all meant (in Homer’s time) ‘animal habitat’, for example, the place where wild horses go when they settle down at night. There is, then, a long line of thought that ties together ethics and place in the West.

Even if you will grant that place-worlds are the ultimate source of ethical force in the environmental field, you will rightly want something more specific to anchor the ethicity of the environmental imperative. Needed here is what Lacan would have called a point de capiton, an ‘upholstery button’ that serves to pin down otherwise loosely fitting material. In the psychoanalytic field, a symptom plays this pivotal role; in it are condensed the repressed and repressing forces whose compromised conjunction constitutes a nodal point in the psychic field. Some such focal point, some concrete crux, is needed as well in the field of the environment if we are to locate not just the encompassing arc of environmental interpellation but the specific gravity of that same compellingness, its maxillary bite as it were. Where is this?

If we meditate upon the place-world and look for its most characteristic and specific embodiment, we soon reach the landscape by means of which the place-world appears. Construing “landscape” to include cityscape, seascape, plainscape, mountainscape, skyscape, etc. — any form of “placescape” — we find that it has two primary features: “layout” and “surface.” Layout is J. J. Gibson’s term for any coherent congeries of surfaces in the environment; in his own definition it is “the persisting arrangement of surfaces relative to one another and to the ground.”\textsuperscript{17} It is the way in which various visual (and other) phenomena co-constitute an environment, its very extendedness. Layout also connotes the way in which a given environment provides opportunities to its inhabitants — opportunities which Gibson terms “affordances,” remarking that “different layouts [offer] different affordances for animals.”\textsuperscript{18}

The place-world, then, comes across to us in terms of particular landscapes, and these, in turn, as layouts in our perceptual field — extended regions in which natural entities are not only located but afforded the chance to do various things, whether this be to build houses, pursue prey, or just to “vegetate” and stay put. But still more specifically the layout of the place-world, that is to say, the whole environment, is composed of surfaces. Not only is layout a matter of the arrangement of surfaces in relation to each other, but the very ground
to which each of these surfaces relate is itself a surface: it is "the basic persisting surface of the environment."19

"Environment" itself, the most encompassing term of all, is in effect a concatenation of surfaces, since the "substances" of which it is composed present themselves only through surfaces, and the "medium" of the environment is imperceptible except in terms of particular surfaces (e.g., the edge of the wind as it moves across the Great Plains). Since a surface can be regarded as "the interface between a substance and [a] medium,"20 it is the indispensable mediator between everything of import in the environment; it is never not present in the particular combinations of entities that make up the surrounding world. Everywhere we look, everywhere we feel and sense, we are confronted by surfaces: by their phenomenal properties (e.g., shape, color, size, etc.), their intersection, and finally their layout. They are the constituent units of every environment, starting with the animal Umwelt: "Animals," observes Gibson, "perceive surfaces and their properties, since animal behavior must be controlled by what the surfaces and their substances afford."21 All the more is this true of plants and stones, which are even more fully affected, indeed dominated, by the surfaces around them. In their capacity to figure and set forth any given occupant of any given environment, surfaces act as sheaths for that environment, showing and specifying what would be otherwise mere perceptual flotsam and jetsam.

VI

Gibson says suggestively in a late essay on surfaces that "the perception of the [surface] properties of the persisting substances of the habitat is necessary if we are to know what they afford, what they are good for."22 This points in the direction of the ethical, which allows us as well as commands us to be and do good in terms of what the surfaces of our immediate environment afford — what they are "good for." Although we are surrounded by surfaces,23 we rarely pause to take note of what is special about them, especially not with regard to their role in ethical life. Yet if the glance is to play a central role in ethics, then the perception of surfaces will be central in this life. For surfaces are precisely where glances alight: we glance at appealing or threatening, beckoning or off-putting surfaces. But what is it about surfaces that makes them so well suited for presenting ethical imperatives that concern the environment? Two things mainly: expressivity and simplicity.

At one level of analysis, surfaces show themselves to be eminently capable of expressivity: which is indispensable to those imperatives that call to us and stay with us. It is not just the face, or the whole body, that is expressive but surface as such. This is due to the fact that surfaces are capable of the kinds of variation that are important to expressivity. I think here of variations in pliability,
elasticity, edgedness, extendedness, coloration, texture, and doubtless others: all of which, once coordinated, bring about expressivity in a given instance.\textsuperscript{24} It is just because of this multiplicity of covariant factors that the full range of expressivity is possible, whether it is displayed in a face or a landscape. All the more so when it is a question — as it always is a question in an environmental layout — of several surfaces acting at once. Then we perceive their continual reconfiguration as surfaces meet and mingle, overlap and occlude each other, thereby increasing exponentially the possibilities for expressivity in the environment.

At a second level, a surface is able to hold together and present these diverse parameters precisely because of its own comparative \textit{simplicity}. Consider the surface of a mirror or that of a window pane. It is its very smoothness, the lack of qualitative complication in such a surface, its transparency or its sheer reflecting power, that allows it to hold within its frame very complex objects and scenes. It is like a complementary law of what Gisbon would call "ecological optics": the less complex the surface, the more complex the contents it can set forth, on the surface in the case of the mirror, through the surface in the case of the window pane.\textsuperscript{25}

Given that surfaces facilitate expressiveness and that their very simplicity allows for the conveyance of environmental complexity, we have at hand a ready basis for their presentation of that which impels an ethics of the environment. This is \textit{the direct presentation of environmental distress}. When I glimpse clearcutting on a mountain slope or the dumping of waste in a swamp or the ruination of soil on a farm, I am witnessing disorder in the environment. I am also witnessing \textit{to} it: bearing witness already.\textsuperscript{26}

When surfaces express environmental disruption, the natural order of things is not just complicated but trespassed and undermined. We witness a \textit{corpus contra naturam}. By this, I do not mean merely a "freak of nature" — though this can be environmentally telling too, as in the case of birth defects caused by chemical pollution of underground water — but any feature of the layout that goes contrary to the natural order. Then, instead of an optical array that is well ordered with regard to being and well-being, we are confronted with manifest disarray. What I have just called "distress" refers to any kind of environmental turpitude that is registered — expressively — in the surfaces of the layout inhabited by a given group of natural entities. This is not to deny that appearances on this surface may be misleading — especially when their full virulence is still masked — but it is to emphasize that there is a great deal we can trust in our perception of environmental disorder: we can by and large rely on our "perceptual faith," as Merleau-Ponty calls it, or our "animal faith" in Santayana's term.\textsuperscript{27} The signs of such disorder are telling something to us; they are expressing a wound to the ecosystem, a tear in its fabric, an illness in the landscape. To those who had eyes to see, the early effects of nineteenth-
century industrialism in England and America were manifest in the country as well as in the city — as acute observers from Blake and Dickens, Thomas Cole and Thoreau all saw so poignantly.

Or let us say that these sensitive souls — ecologists of perception before there was any science of the subject — apperceived the destruction that was billowing in the air and poisoning the ground. So we, too, at the beginning of this New Millenium can apperceive the initial effects of global warming in such expressive elemental phenomena as changing weather patterns, whose persistently hotter surfaces we sense in our skins, and whose deadly effects are visible in the massive losses of sea otters and seals in the Pacific Ocean. I say “apperceive” in deference to our earlier discussion of glancing at the face of the Other. When I apperceive dis-ease in the environment, I attend to where it is located, in what place, and especially on which surfaces of that place. This is why the glance is so aptly invoked in this very circumstance: its pointed penetrating power allows it to go straight to where the problem is, like a hawk zeroing in on its prey. Or like a lance launched at its pinpointed target: Ort, the German word for “place,” derives ultimately from ‘tip of a spear’: the glance, like a lance, is typically thrown at its target (as the French say, when we glance we ‘throw a blow of the eye’: jeter un coup d’œil). The target in landscape apperceive takes the form of a particular place in the environment, a set of surfaces that betrays instantly the state of its health.

Analogues to this situation abound: the practiced medical doctor knows by a mere glance what her patient is suffering from, the painter knows by the briefest of looks what has to be added or substracted from his work, the poet to her text, the cook to the dish being prepared. The person familiar with his or her local environment — the farmer, the gardner, the landscape architect — can tell with similar swiftness if this environment is in trouble, and even if it is only starting to head for trouble. The place-world shows itself in its surfaces, as existing within its own normative parameters, geomorphic or evolutionary, agricultural or wild — or else as exceeding or undermining these parameters, as ill at ease with itself. The glance takes all this in without needing judgment or reflection. A bare apperceision, a mere moment of attention, is enough: a glance suffices.29

VII

A glance suffices not just to see distress and disorder. It also picks up the imperative to do something about that disarray. Here we take the crucial step from being noticeable to being compelling. Certain surfaces of the environment are noticeably in trouble, and we see this at a glance; but what about the ethical demand that we find a way out of that trouble? How can anything so stringent, so uncompromising, as this demand be a matter of mere surfaces and thus
something that calls for mere glances? We might grant that the glance apperceives environmental problems quickly and accurately. But does it suffice to grasp the imperative to remedy the earth’s maladies?

It does, but only if we single out one more factor in the distressed surfaces we notice. To be expressive and to be a comparatively simple foil to the complexities of the environment are both essential to conveying difficulties happening in a place. But a certain intensity is also required: an intensity on and of the very surfaces that draw our attention in the first place. A pleasant and healthy landscape lacks intensity; it lulls us into the pleasure of the beautiful. Only when a landscape is sublime does tension arise. In this case (and in Kant’s terms), the tension is between an imagination not able to comprehend the complexity of the scene and a reason that claims to go far beyond it. In an environmental trauma, a different but equally powerful tension arises: a tension whose intensity calls us to act and not just to spectate.

I once beheld the devastation wrought upon an entire slope of a mountain to the east as I hiked up Cottonwood Canyon in the Crazy Mountains in central Montana. My companion, David Strong, confirmed my apperception: there had indeed been extensive clearcutting up there for some time. In fact, he and others had filed suit with the United States Forest Service for laxly allowing the sale of the land, without adequate preliminary inspection, to the logging company that had effected the depredations I was witnessing. From my bare glance at this scene of destruction, I sensed the rightness of such concerted legal action, along with another still more ambitious move to have most of the Crazies permanently protected from logging. Nor did I need to have further evidence: the decisive and compelling evidence was there before me, etched in the distress of the land. The imperative for ecological action stemmed from the intensity of the scene itself, its damaged surfaces speaking dramatically to my bare apperception: whole groves of trees had lost their rightful place in an aboriginal biotic life-world.

The clear-cut mountain slope was like a festering wound; it was a scene of concentrated affliction. It presented itself as a symptom that draws attention to itself rather than signalling something else in the manner of a sign or symbol. As Freud said of symptoms in the context of psychoanalysis, “the symptom is on the agenda all the time.” It is always on the agenda because it is at once painful and puzzling. In each of these ways, a symptom is literally in-tensive, infecting the subject even as it conceals its origins from this same subject. Of course, a symptom is also “overdetermined”; it has at least several causes; it is part of a larger trans-subjective context. To interpret a symptom — and to relieve the patient’s suffering from it — is to advert to a more encompassing set of factors than are presented in the symptom itself.

Just so the clear cut forest in central Montana was symptomatic on both counts. On the one hand, it compelled attention on the basis of its sheer dis-
array: not just the ugly stumps of cut down trees but the even more ugly access roads that crisscrossed the landscape like so many razor slashes on its upturned face. My glance was drawn into the heart of its darkness. This is the moment of pain that calls for alleviation by the appropriate action. On the other hand, the same symptomatic suffering brings with it a profound puzzlement: why this destruction? Why here? Why now? In pursuing this puzzlement, I look to the larger picture. I become an ecoanalyst who wonders about the genealogy of the situation — not just its causes but also its reasons. I consider history, social and political forces, and metaphysics. (Metaphysics, if Heidegger is right that the Age of Technology is a certain era of Western metaphysical thought in which the earth has come to be regarded as “standing reserve” in a massive enframing action that regards the earth as nothing but a resource to be exploited.) In this second moment, I move away from the apperception of the immediate environmental trauma; I engage in reflection and other cognitive and judgmental operations: my glance, which has catalyzed the entire experience, no longer suffices. The lambent lightness of the glance, combined with its compelling disclosure, here gives rise to the spirit of gravity. An environmental imperative has precipitated reflective and responsible ecoanalysis, and perhaps also (as in the case of my friend) effective political action.

I have been driven (again) to the idea of symptom in an effort to understand the peculiar intensity embedded in the clear-cut destruction of an entire mountainside in Montana — an intensity that not just appalled and angered me but that called out for action of the sort that my friend, more forthright and knowledgeable than I, had taken: where I took in the interpellation, he acted on it in his overt conduct. But both of us started with the same dismaying experience of a damaged landscape whose intense call was located in the environment — not in “the moral law within” (in Kant’s celebrated phrase). The disruption and associated intensity were out there in the land. They had their symptomatic existence in a disturbed place-world — they drew our chagrined glances to themselves there — even if the larger causality lay elsewhere in the home offices of the great paper companies of the Northwest and across the country in the endless and mindless paper consumption of millions of ordinary American citizens.

VIII

I have just been suggesting that intensity is the thin red line that links glance, surface, and the ethics of the environment. It fuels the compellingness of environmental imperatives. But we still have to grasp more fully what such intensity consists in. Granting that it cannot be measured by extensive magnitude, it nonetheless appears on surfaces that possess such magnitude. This means that it reflects the primary and especially the secondary qualities of extended
surfaces.\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, the intensity with which an environmental problem expresses itself is not just a matter of "too much," even if this can be a valuable indicative red flag: e.g., too much sewage flowing straight into the marshland. In the presence of such undeniable givens, one stares the problem itself in the face; but even here what one grasps is the qualitative configuration of something with specific quantitative dimensions: one sees the discoloration of the marshland water caused by the leakage of the sewage. One reads the problematic situation on its surface, and is a direct witness to the distress: a glance suffices to take in the qualitatively distorted surfaces of the damaged marsh.

The appropriate response to the environmental imperative aims (in Deleuze's phrase) to "liberate the singularities of the surface."\textsuperscript{31} For if "the accomplished action [in this case, the detrimental action] is projected on a surface"\textsuperscript{32} — there for all to read at a glance — the remedial action must also bear on that same diseased surface. It must somehow re-endow it with distinctive and singular potentialities of health and growth so as to counter the detrimentality of environmental disruption and to rectify it: if not to make a "clean slate" (for such disruption often leaves permanent traces), then to reinstate a significant vestige of ecological health. Just as the apperception of eco-dystrophy arises from a glance cast upon a distressed surface, so the answering action also takes place upon the same surface — upon what Deleuze and Guattari call the "pl-anomenon."\textsuperscript{33} The intensity of distress is addressed by the concertedness of the remedial action.

But what precisely is intense about the ecological via rupta that induces or instills an environmental imperative? It is a step in the right direction to say that the intensity is qualitative: this is important as a corrective to geomorphic or econometric models of ecological disorder, models that stay within the realm of extensive magnitude. It keeps the situation in the phenomenological register — in the realm of first-person experience where the disruption is first registered and where any imperative for change must first take root. In fact, the alarming character of the disturbed environmental surface often takes the form of being presented with contrary qualities on that surface: for example, in the way in which the blatantly artificial colors of industrial sludge contrast with the mellow marshland into which they have seeped. The metallic colors of the sludge seem to subvert the earth tones of the wetland; they constitute a different spectral scene, one whose lines of force move contrary to that of the natural world. All of this occurs on the sheer surface of what is visible, where the drama, the clash, is manifest.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{IX}

There is one quite unanticipated effect of this last line of thought: thanks to the intensity registered on surfaces of the environment, there is room, after all and
once again, for the face, allowing us to return to our point of departure. This can only happen, however, if the face is no longer considered strictly human, something that is revealed in an existential encounter — in an ethical “relation” that is interhuman only. If the face is to play a role in an ecological ethics, it must be dehumanized. Levinas gestures in this direction when he allows the face to extend from the front of the head to the whole body as well as in his brief discussion of the surfaces of the elemental world. But if it is to be an effective agent of an ethics of the other-than-human, the face must have a place in the environing world as a whole. How can this be? What would it look like?

Here we need to borrow an idea from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Thousand Plateaus*, where the authors take the extra step Levinas failed to make. Agreeing with him that the whole body can be considered — “not only the mouth but also the breast, hand, the entire body, even the tool, are ‘facialized’” — they add the crucial rider that facialization does not stop at the limits of the body: it includes the full environment, the landscape in which that body is implanted. What they call the faciality machine, i.e., “the social production of [the] face,” is such that it “forms the facialization of the entire body and all its surroundings and objects, and the landscapification of all worlds and milieux.” The result is what the authors call a “face-landscape,” in which landscape is facial and a face landscapelike. Just because the face is no longer human in its primary significance — thereby sidestepping the problem of analogy and anthropocentrism — it is able to join up with landscape in a very close alliance. Precisely as “detrimental,” that is, taken out of its humanized role, the face merges with landscape:

Now the face has a correlate of great importance: the landscape, which is not just a milieu but a deterritorialized world. There are a number of face-landscape correlations, ... What face has not called upon the landscapes it amalgamated, sea and hill; what landscape has not evoked the face that would have completed it, providing an unexpected complement for its lines and traits.

Whereas the “head” of human beings refers to other animals and to a shared environment, the face as such is linked mainly to landscape. And it is in landscape that the face of the place-world shows itself — shows itself to be amenable and settled, or else distressed and disrupted. And we read all this in a glance that detects, or at least suspects, its wellness or illness instantly.

\[X\]

I have been pursuing phenomenological prolegomena to an ethics of the environment, keeping in mind that “pro-legomenon” means in its root “before the saying is said” (before the dire is dit as Levinas might prefer to put it). Before anything is said — either explicitly among interlocutors or implicitly as in the
invocation of a categorical imperative — there is the moment of ethical engagement. I began by noting how often and how effectively the glance serves to initiate this first moment of engagement. Its ability to go straight to the heart of the matter, to grasp a situation quickly and yet accurately, to take in the look of the other (who may or may not glance back): all these powers of the glance help us to discern the compelling character of the circumstance — that which calls for responsiveness on my part. Traditional ethical theory has rarely if ever made room for this inaugural moment of the glance, focusing as it has on reasons and rules, persons and norms, sanctions and justifications.

Traditional ethical theory has also neglected the environment and its special set of demands and needs. Yet here, too, the glance can be of crucial consequence in alerting human subjects to things that need to be done to address and rectify environmental distress. In this context, the sweeping glance is of particular value: again, in keeping with the fact that we are literally surrounded by environmental layouts. The comprehensive character of the glance — its gift for taking in so much in so little time — is aptly deployed vis-à-vis the environment. Thanks to its characteristic acumen and comprehensiveness, the glance can be considered the leading edge of the ethical; it is in the pre-monitory position.

I would certainly admit that one is hard pressed to find in the natural environment any exact analogue of the human face. This difficulty persists when one allows for the facialization of landscape: for Deleuze and Guattari, this is only a penultimate step that calls for further deterritorialization, and Levinas allows for it only as an aside when he says suddenly that “the human face is the face of the world itself.” Even after taking this final expansive step, one continues to need a compelling source, a “call to action” — or else one will have no strong motive for responding to environmental problems. This call has to come from somewhere that is located (albeit not simply located) in the place-world.

The compelling point, the sense of oughtness, is something I apprehend by the glance in its vanguard role. This sense is to be apperceived on the surfaces of the environment — surfaces that constitute its accessibility, its very perceptibility. I endorse Gibson’s axiom that “the surface is where most of the action is” — not only the perceptual action but the ethical action as well. If the tell-tale symptom of environmental disturbance appears anywhere, it must appear on the surface of things — not in some hidden depth (that is the concern of the environmental scientist or the metaphysician, who are in this regard closely allied). It must be there to be seen — at a glance. And what do we then see? We see distress, which can be variously construed as incongruity, discordance, contrariness, tension — but above all as intensity. Following Kant and Deleuze, I would interpret intensity as qualitative, thus as something we feel as well as apperceive. Differential in character, it presents itself by degrees — building to a point where it not only draws our attention but demands it. And when we do
attend to it (often by a concerted series of glances), we find something compelling us, telling us, to act so as to alter the disturbed circumstance: to "set it right." In the end, the natural world indeed presents a face to us—but only as belonging to the layout of expressive surfaces inherent in the perceived world as a whole. The environment turns a face to us from within its many surfaces: not the infinite and transcendent enigmatic Other's face of such high priority for Levinas, but an immanent, intense faciality of its own, one in which we can discern distress without having to make it analogous to human suffering. That face is the face of a nonhuman nonsubject—a landscape whose singularity belongs properly to the natural realm. It is the face of the environment calling out to us to address the distress, if not (yet) to cure the disease.

Skeptics will respond: what guarantees that I (or anyone) will respond sensibly to this intensity? What of all those who do not respond, either from self-interest (the logging companies, the paper companies, the chemical companies) or from cynicism or indifference? Does not response to environmental detrimentality require a certain education or sophistication? Is this not a social or political matter rather than an ethical one? Notice that these are all questions that can be posed just as well to the Levinasian model of ethical relation, in which a high level of responsiveness is no less presumed. And I would have to give a Levinasian answer as well: even if human subjects fail to pick up the ethical command, even if they are oblivious to its force, this does not mean that they are not subject to its call to responsible action. As Levinas remarks:

The tie with the Other is realized only as responsibility, whether this [responsibility] be accepted or refused, whether one knows how to assume it or not, or whether one can or cannot do something concrete for the Other. To say: here I am [me voici]. To do something for the Other. To give... The face [of the Other] orders and commands me.44

Notice that much the same obtains for other ways of justifying an ethics of the environment: say, the Buddhist doctrine of the interdependency of all natural beings, or Hans Jonas' point that I am responsible for future generations. I may not be consciously aware of any of these imperatives, much less endorse them, and yet I am no less under their sway. True, a certain kind of education or certain benevolent influences from enlightened others will help to make me aware—and thus more likely to embrace an environmental imperative and to act accordingly. But even if I am naïve or unappercceptive, I am still in the presence of intense commands to respond. My failure to do so stems not just from self-interest or indifference or lack of ecological enlightenment but also from a deeper failure, which is not my own alone: the failure to link vision with the lived world around me, due doubtless to the detached Cartesian eye that bespeaks a massive cultural disconnection between human beings and their environments.45 Then my (and everyone's) glance falls short; it barely notices, if it notices at all; it glances off the ecological surface but fails to take in
the intensity on that surface, quickly sliding off the glabrous back of the place-world. This situation is not so much unethical or immoral; it is a-ethical: I have missed the message, failed to respond, even though I still stand under the imperative to be responsible. The intensity of disturbance is there, but I am not able to say me voici: here I am for you, I will make some difference, I will do something to save your symptomatic surface, something to put you back in the right place, to restitute your distressed layout in a more halcyon landscape.

In other words: if there is indeed an ethical relation between human beings, there is also an equally (but differently) ethical relation among all members of the natural environment — to which Levinas’ ethical posture remains relevant even if it calls for revision and expansion. In both cases, we stand “incumbered.”46 And if glancing is important in the first case — more important than Levinas allows — it is just as crucial in the second. Glancing makes the difference between indifference and concern. Environmentally uncaring people look away even before they glance; or if they glance, they see little if anything of the suffering in the scarified face of the natural world. Unless we can catch the discordance and the pain, the affliction and the damage, we shall be in no position to act and reflect — to do something that makes a real difference to a diseased or traumatized environment. Glancing in the right way, we shall finally begin to own up to our unending responsibility to the place-worlds in which we live and move and have our being.

NOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas, Éthique et infini: dialogues avec Philippe Nemo (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 114. (Hereafter EI.) He adds that “the relation to the Infinite is not [a form of] knowledge, but of Desire” (EI, 97).
2. EI, 89. Compare this statement: the Infinite “does not appear, since it is not thematized, at least not originally” (112).
3. See ibid., 89. I am grateful to Peter Atterton of the Philosophy Department, San Diego State University, for drawing my attention to this and related passages on the problematic perception of the face.
4. EI, 113. He adds: “It is by this witnessing, whose truth is not that of representation or of perception, that the revelation of the Infinite is produced” (ibid.).
6. EI, 90, 91. Elsewhere, Levinas ties perception to the tendency to be comprehensive and synoptic: “The experience of morality does not proceed from [eschatological] vision — it consummates this vision; ethics is an optics. But it is a ‘vision’ without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing capability, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type” (Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. A. Lingis [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969], 23; hereafter TE; Levinas underlines “consummates”).
7. EI, 91.
8. Ibid., 93. My italics.
9. Ibid., 102. Cf. also Levinas' claim that "the relation with the face can certainly be dominated by perception [indeed, he is conceding that it is so dominated], but that which is specifically face is that which cannot be reduced to it" (91).
11. Ibid., 22. But Levinas immediately diverts this question into the question of whether "art is an activity that lends faces to things," perhaps through "the impersonal allure of rhythm" (ibid.).
12. Ibid.
13. "The living being (le vivant) in totality exists as a totality, as if he occupied the center of being and were its source" (E. Levinas, "Le Moi et la totalité," in *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser — à l'autre* [Paris: Grasset, 1991], 23).
14. As Levinas remarks in passing to Nemo: "I analyze the inter-human relation as if, in proximity to the Other — beyond the image I make of the other person [i.e., in perception] — his face, that which is expressive in the Other (and the whole human body is, in this sense, more or less, face), were that which orders me to serve him." (EJ, 104; my italics; Levinas underlines "orders").
15. I am referring here to Hume's celebrated Fifth *Cartesian Meditation*.
16. John Findlay once remarked in conversation that animals — especially dogs — should be regarded as "associate members of the kingdom of ends." This *bon mot* got it half-way right. Animals are associate members of the animal kingdom (as we revealingly call it, echoing Kant's "Kingdom of Ends"). More generally, all natural entities are associate members of the place-worlds to which they commonly belong. I put "place-world" in the plural here to indicate that a given entity may belong to more than one place-world, as we see in complex natural environments such as rain forests or border line ecosystems.
18. Ibid. I would add: not just for animals but for all natural things in a given environment, where "environment" (in Gibson’s own description) "consists of a medium, substances, and the surfaces that separate the substances from the medium" (ibid.).
19. Ibid. Cf. p. 10: "The literal basis of the terrestrial environment is the ground, the underlying surface of support that tends to be on the average flat — that is to say, a plane — and also level, or perpendicular to gravity." (My italics; Gibson underlines "basis").
21. Ibid., 112.
22. Ibid., 110.
23. "Animals [including human animals]," says Gibson, "see their environment chiefly [as] illuminated surfaces" ("Ecological Optics," in *Reasons for Realism*, 75.)
24. Conditions for being indicative are characteristically both more austere — e.g., as in the case of being a bare sign — and more sophisticated: to grasp an indicative sign is to have to understand the larger context within which it functions.
25. This has special relevance for ecological optics, if it is truly the case that the elemental is "non-possessable" in Levinas' word; if the various elements cannot be possessed as objects, they can at least be held as images in mirrors, framed for view in windows, and depicted on photographs: all of these being surfaces that gather the elemental for display. As Levinas says, "Every relation or possession is situated within the non-possessable which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped. We shall call it the elemental" (77, 131). Levinas also emphasizes the indeterminate character of the elemental: 77, 132.
26. The disorder may be more subtle, of course — in which case, however, a trained ecologist will then be able to detect it in a glance. This is especially important in the case of early warning signs of environmental distress, say, the perception of the larvae of what will become an
insect destructive of trees once it is fully developed. It has been pointed out to me by a veteran ecologist that rather than seeing such educated perception as merely a matter of specialization, it in fact approximates to what many human beings would be capable of were they to live more fully in the natural environment—as was the case for many millennia before the advent of city-based inhabitation. E-mail remark of L. L. Woolbright, Siena College, February 18, 2000).


28. Here the glance is strangely the counterpart of the earth, which as Levinas says also suffices in its own way: "The earth upon which I find myself and from which I welcome sensible objects or make my way to them suffices for me. The earth which upholds me does so without my troubling myself about knowing what upholds the earth" (TI, 137). This last sentence could well be a statement about surfaces, about whose support we also do not often concern ourselves; even the ground to which they ultimately relate is itself, as Gibson avers, a surface of its own.


30. As Deleuze puts it, "we know intensity only as already developed within an extensity, and as covered over by qualities" (Difference and Repetition, trans. P. Patton [New York: Columbia, 1994], 223; hereafter DR). See also this statement: "Intensity itself is subordinated to the qualities which fill extensity... Intensity is difference, but this difference tends to deny or to cancel itself out in extensity and underneath quality" (Ibid.). I am arguing, however, that in the case of environmental trauma, the qualitative aspect is not buried beneath the quantitative dimensions.


32. Ibid., 207.

33. G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); hereafter TP, p. 70: "The plane of consistency, or planenomen, is in no way an undifferentiated aggregate of unformed matters, but neither is it a chaos of formed matters of every kind." At p. 252 the authors assimilate the planenomen to the "Rhizosphere"—hence to a non-arborescent, non-stratified, immanent form of becoming.

34. "From all points of view, whether of quantity, quality, relation, or modality, contraries appear connected at the surface as much as in depth" (LS, 175).

35. For this discussion, see TI, 130–34.

36. TP, 174–75. Cf. also 170, 181. The authors nonetheless do not refer explicitly to Levinas in these passages.

37. Ibid., 181. Because of this social origin of the face, "the face is not a universal" (Ibid., 176).

38. Ibid., 181. My italics.

39. Ibid., 172–73. See also chapter seven, "Year Zero: Faciality," esp. 181, 190.

40. Just as earlier I had to denaturalize the glance—by dephenomenalizing and reducing it—to make it consonant with the human face as conceived by Levinas, so Deleuze and Guattari similarly withdraw the face from its fate as an anatomical head among other features of the natural world. The human head is only relatively different from the heads of other animals. But the face requires a radical withdrawal—thanks to the very traits that Levinas would ascribe to it: its ability to bear and express meaning (its "significance") as well as its status as a subject (its "subjectification"); both of which make it incommensurate with all other natural phenomena, enigmatic in relation to them, absolutely deterritorialized. But the face is incongruous with natural phenomena for Levinas because it is transcendent to them—at once ethical and religious, "metaphysical"—whereas for Deleuze and Guattari it is discontinuous with such phe-
nomens because it is a social construct. This is why they insist that its correlate is not the natural world or "milieu" but landscape, itself a social construct. With landscape, it forms a close binary pair called "face-landscape," within which there is not just deterritorialization (relative or absolute) but continual reterritorialization of one term upon the other.


42. This is the title of a section of "Phenomenon and Enigma."


44. Levinas, *EI*, 101–4. The expression "Here I am" is traced back by Levinas to the Old Testament: "To the voice that calls from the burning bush, Moses answers 'Here I am', but does not dare to lift up his eyes" ("Phenomenon and Enigma," 68).


46. "As soon as the Other looks at me (me regarde), I am responsible for him, without having to take responsibility for him; this responsibility *encumbers* me" (*EI*, 102; his italics).