

Planned Obsolescence, Nature and the Self in American Literature

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Conference on “Planned Obsolescence: Texts, theory and technology”
Université de Liège (Belgium) – December 8th and 9th, 2016

Abstract

On the cusp of the 1980s, when it became increasingly apparent that humanity had left its mark on every inch of the surface of the earth and altered its atmosphere, the idea of a strictly natural world became obsolete and needed to be reimagined. As a result, American environmentalist Bill McKibben presented in his essay *The End of Nature* (1989) the hypothesis of a postnatural world, a world in which nature has ended ‘both as a discrete biophysical entity and as a meaningful concept’ (McKibben, 1989). This presentation will aim at demonstrating how American civilisation ‘planned’ the obsolescence of both nature and the self through its yearning for progress, production and for the accumulation of manufactured products and wealth. Besides commenting on McKibben’s essay, I will draw parallels between other works such as Henry David Thoreau’s memoir *Walden* (1854) and Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* (1985) in order to illustrate how the evolution of the American process of self-realisation that was originally connected to the natural landscape led to the fragmentation of the self in the postmodern landscape as expressed, for instance, in Fredric Jameson’s book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). I will also argue that Thoreau anticipated the notion that a construction of an identity based on a transcendental relationship with sublime nature was soon to be replaced by a transcendental experience with objects of consumption—or waste—or, more largely, with the postmodern sublime landscape. I will show that American literature may be at odds with Bernard London’s representation of consumer capitalism and with his description of planned obsolescence as a means of ‘salvation’ for the American people (London, 1932).