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Author

Segura, Nathan

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Peer reviewed

The Future that Lies Beneath

a response by Nathan Segura

In “Revolution, Renewable: Political Ecologies of the Subsoil in Rivera’s *Song of the Earth*,” Grace Kuipers makes a refreshing contribution to the existing literature on Diego Rivera as she demonstrates how some of his work can help us see, and subsequently rethink, the relationships that exist between modern industry, environmental sustainability, and social justice.

Of course, the question of how to deal with nature in a way that sustains social and economic life has run through the course of human civilization. Though Kuiper does not address it, the eulogistic analogy between Michelangelo’s *Sistine Chapel* and Rivera’s *Song of the Earth* is both fitting and ironic as the muralist painted a fresco that offers solutions to a crisis that can be traced back to the Renaissance. As Martin Heidegger has pointed out, the invention of linear perspective that revolutionized Western visual culture both reflected and fueled a nascent critical distance between mankind and nature—a distance that lies at the root of capitalist epistemology.¹ Since then, our ability to reflect upon the causes and ramifications of our detachment from nature has not necessarily generated fruitful solutions. Though post-structuralism has been instrumental in identifying and combating social injustices, its deconstructive methodology is not suitable to theorize environmental sustainability. As a result, a call for a return to the sacred as emerged in the world of the humanities and beyond. This renewed interest for the spiritual, the supernatural,

¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture” in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, September 2002).

and the magic partly comes from a need to resist a digital neo-liberal regime that gradually empties out the spirituality imbued in prominent monotheistic religions, which, of course, have themselves oppressed pagan notions of the sacred.

Today, there is wide (though contested) consensus that a materialist vision of nature will likely lead to our collective demise.² Without sacrificing historical specificity, Kuipers provides timely insights on Rivera's animistic approach to geology, which, as she eloquently demonstrates, did more than pay tribute to indigenous myths. The economic practices Rivera depicted on the walls of the chapel at Chapingo's Autonomous University were, in his mind, not just functional activities, but social actions sustained by interrelations and spiritual significance. By situating the human rapport with nature within a metaphysical stream that irrigates cycles of life and death, he charted possibilities and opportunities that deserve our attention today.

If we should take cues from Rivera, we can also learn from his shortcomings. A *mise en scène* of economic practices stemming from indigenous system of collective ownership is praiseworthy, but actual empowerment needs to follow. Unfortunately, the indigenous populations of Mexico have historically been denied the means to contribute and shape the destiny of their respective regions—let alone of the country—on their own terms. Animating Mexico's geological makeup as an active character that impacts and is impacted by human life is commendable. But we must not forget that, too often, the men and women Rivera depicted have been deprived of the political agency required to take on outside powers avidly exploiting the resources upon which their livelihood depends.

It is true that environmental justice finally seems to be on the forefront of today's actualities as countries all around the world seek to transit to a "green" economy, which, they claim, will bring about a healthier world. This seducing and optimistic rhetoric praises a shift that, in reality, is anything but clean. The windmills, solar panels, and electric batteries we are encouraged to use all function thanks to semiconductors and energy-storing chips made of rare earth materials like lithium, gallium, and cobalt. These minerals are extracted at a dire environmental cost from the subsoils of Chile, Congo, and China, far away from the eyes of urban consumers. In this light, contemporary eco-artists like Richard Misrach and Betsy Damon who, like Rivera before them, use symbols and analogies to shed light on the interconnections that make up the biosphere, must remain open to alternative discourses coming from local communities who are directly impacted by "ecological" transitions.

² See Susan Kieffer, *The Dynamic of Disaster* (New York: Norton & Company, Incorporated, W.W, October 2014). John Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, November 2010).

At a time when “progress” involves moving from polluting the air with fossil fuels to contaminating the planet’s subsoil and groundwater tables, an alternative path must be charted. If Michelangelo and his contemporaries helped propel the medieval world into the Renaissance, let us hope that the production and the discourse on eco-art can also usher a new era. Such a shift will necessitate a new sense of the sacred. Not one that remains untouchable, but one that is relational, equitable, and profoundly felt. To be sure, the path to “reorient the evolution of the collective drama,” as French Martinican poet Édouard Glissant put it, will be long and arduous.³ We can start by encouraging lines of inquiry that probe how past and present artistic production can help us re-consider the way we deal with what lies beneath our feet. This should be a chief concern in the study of visual culture, and in any discipline interested in sustaining, let alone bettering, our time on this big geological formation we call Earth.

³ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Dash (University Press of Virginia, 1992), 79.