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## The Severed Ocean and Humanity: A Review of *Blue Ecocriticism* and *Shadowing the Anthropocene*

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**Abstract:** This article juxtaposes Dobrin’s *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative* and Ivakhiv’s *Shadowing the Anthropocene* to examine the cultural diagnosis and philosophical foundations of ecocriticism’s “blue turn.” Dobrin reframes the ocean’s absence as a structural symptom, showing how “land-based prejudice” operates through “cultural memory apparatuses” to obscure the sea; Ivakhiv’s “process-relational ontology” traces this absence to its ontological roots, arguing that the capitalist logic of “disconnectibles” severs dynamic relational processes into static objects. Together they form a double-layered framework: Dobrin addresses how absence is culturally constructed; Ivakhiv interrogates why it is structurally necessary. The article also identifies key limitations: Dobrin’s analysis stays at the level of representation; Ivakhiv’s systematic theorization of the “ungraspable” paradoxically reinstates the possessive cognition his shadowing posture resists. The article concludes by proposing the *Wangchuan* ritual as a corrective, calling for an oceanic ethics premised on coexistence rather than mastery.

**Keywords:** blue ecocriticism; process-relational ontology; oceanic ethics; disconnectibles

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**题目:** 切割的海洋与人类：评《蓝色生态批评》与《影随人类世》

**摘要:** 本文并置评述 Dobrin 的《蓝色生态批评与海洋律令》与 Ivakhiv 的《影随人类世》，探讨生态批评“蓝色转向”的文化诊断与哲学基础。Dobrin 将海洋的缺席重新定

性为结构性症状，揭示“陆地偏见”如何通过“文化记忆装置”遮蔽海洋；Ivakhiv的“过程-关系本体论”则从本体层面追溯其根源，指出资本主义“断联物”逻辑如何将动态关系世界切割为静态对象。两书构成双层阐释框架：前者揭示缺席如何被建构，后者追问为何缺席。本文亦指出其局限：Dobrin对结构性成因着墨不足；Ivakhiv以系统性框架把握“不可把握”，已然复归其所警惕的占有式认知。最后以“送王船”为例，呼吁建立不以“把握”为前提的海洋伦理。

**关键词：**蓝色生态批评；过程-关系本体论；海洋伦理；断联物

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### 1.0 The Absence of the Ocean: Blue Silence in Human Discourse

Land has always been the eternal mother of human civilization; the attachment to the soil spans every culture and time. Yet the ocean—that companion of the land, a treasury of water resources covering seven-tenths of the Earth’s surface—has equally sustained human survival and reproduction, while long failing to receive the same depth of attention as its terrestrial counterpart. That we call this planet “Earth” rather than “Ocean Orb” may itself betray a deep-seated bias within human civilization. On the cognitive map of humanity, land is center and ocean is periphery—a pattern strikingly evident in cartographic history; land is stable reality, ocean is the ungraspable Other. This bias pervades the details of cultural history. In *The Little Prince*, Saint-Exupéry has the geographer declare that the books recording “choses éternelles” (eternal beings), like mountains and plains, are “les livres les plus précieux de tous les livres.” (the most valuable books of all) (Saint-Exupéry 62). The ocean, with its tides and ceaseless transformations, is excluded from what the geographer deems worth recording. Though these are but a few lines in a work of “children’s literature,” they reveal the deep preference within human civilization for stability and graspability. The ocean, because it is always changing, always refusing to be named or grasped, has long been absent from humanity’s intellectual landscape.

Yet today, this “Other” encroaches upon the terrain of human cognition with the utmost urgency. Ecocriticism, as the humanities’ primary response to environmental crisis, now exposes a structural gap: from Thoreau’s *Walden* to Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, the canonical texts of ecocriticism are almost uniformly rooted in terrestrial writing. In the age of globalization, however, the ecological crisis can no longer be understood at a single scale. Global warming, sea-level rise, species migration, ecological extinction—these problems transcend national borders, transcend the scale of any single landmass, and transcend the scale of any single species. When the epicenter of crisis has shifted, the critical gaze has yet to follow.

### 2.0 A Framework for Dialogue: Tensions and Complementarities between Eco-Realism and the Blue Turn

It is against the background mentioned above that Sydney I. Dobrin’s “blue turn” acquires its historical urgency. Today, ecocriticism’s shift from land to ocean is not a sign that terrestrial critique has been exhausted; on the contrary, it supplements what traditional land-based critique could not perceive by turning toward

oceanic chaos. Orienting within the blue ocean deepens the geographic and spiritual breadth of human civilization, breaking through the psychological dependence on “terrestrial stasis” that has long characterized traditional humanities, and opening a new critical and cultural path toward a hitherto unimagined mode of existence. *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative* (2021), read alongside Adrian Ivakhiv’s *Shadowing the Anthropocene: Eco-Realism for Turbulent Times* (2018), constitutes an essential ontological and epistemological exploration. Dobrin’s work is a systematic diagnosis, revealing the structural causes of “land-based prejudice” in traditional ecocriticism and asking why the ocean has been so long absent. Ivakhiv supplies a perspective tracing the origin. His “process-relational ontology” erects the modern philosophical foundations for understanding the ocean, revealing how the capitalist logic of “disconnectibles”<sup>①</sup> severs a dynamic relational world into static objects that can be possessed, exchanged, and discarded. Together, the two books point toward a core proposition: a crucial dimension of the ecological crisis is not the scarcity of resources but the rupture of relations.

Dobrin’s and Ivakhiv’s theories are not naturally compatible. Each attends to a different scale: the former concerns representation and belongs to the path of cultural studies; the latter probes ontology, emphasizing events, relations, and becoming, and belongs to the path of philosophical ontology. Yet juxtaposing the two books reveals a double-layered structure underlying the mechanism of the ocean’s absence: Dobrin’s “ungraspable” ocean and Ivakhiv’s “process-relational ontology,”<sup>②</sup> “scale literacy” and “hyper-event,” “cultural memory apparatus”<sup>③</sup> and “iconophilia” share deep connections—namely, “why the absence exists” and “how absence is constructed.” The ocean’s absence is, in fact, an inevitable product of the capitalist “disconnectibles” logic that severs relational networks. These concepts will be elaborated in the sections that follow.

The two books also exhibit an internal methodological tension: Dobrin attends to “the constructedness of representation”; Ivakhiv explores “the generativity of the world.” Dobrin’s “submersive epistemology” finds ontological grounding in Ivakhiv’s philosophical system: if the world is constituted fundamentally by events rather than static objects, then “submersion” is not merely an epistemological posture but a response to how reality itself operates. Only within such an ontological framework is it impossible for cognition to maintain exteriority; it must occur through participation and immersion. The “scale literacy” argued in Chapter Two—a call to cultivate the cognitive capacity to move between multiple scales—resonates with Chapter Three’s use of Timothy Morton’s “hyperobject”<sup>④</sup> concept to redefine the ocean: the ocean is at once a perceivable object and a “hyperobject” that vastly exceeds the scale of human perception. This directly echoes Ivakhiv’s “hyper-event”: “an event that triggered chain reactions, which in turn rearranged agential relations operating on multiple spatial and temporal scales” (Ivakhiv 216). The two are expressions of the same phenomenon within different ontological frameworks: the former, taking “object” as its unit, emphasizes trans-scalar distribution; the latter, taking “event” as its unit, emphasizes generativity and relational networks. Dobrin, by tracing the transformations of oceanic imagery across different media, advances the concept of the “cultural memory apparatus” (Dobrin xiii). Ivakhiv, drawing on Latour’s “iconophilia,” articulates a philosophical framework for understanding the movement of the image—respecting the image’s propagation,

transformation, and reinterpretation across different contexts, rather than worshipping or possessing the image itself. It is within this tensely complementary framework that the present analysis unfolds, treating the theoretical dialogue between the two books as a productive foundation for understanding the philosophy of ecocriticism's "blue turn."

### 3.0 Dobrin's Blue Reboot: The Mechanism of Oceanic Representation in Culture

Dobrin's chief contribution lies in recasting the ocean's absence from ecocriticism not as an accidental oversight but as a structural symptom. Greg Garrard's observation that ecocritics adopt "green"—a term grounded in terrestrial ecological features—as the symbol of environmental politics (Dobrin 3), and Glotfelty's critique of how the word "landmark" is deeply embedded in ecocritical thought (Dobrin 5)—these details collectively expose the disciplinary unconscious of traditional ecocriticism: from its very inception, ecocriticism took land as its self-evident ontological center and suspended the ocean beyond its horizon. Steve Mentz identifies the fundamental challenge: "The basic challenge the ocean always poses: to know an ungraspable thing" (Dobrin 11). The ocean's ungraspability is both the cause of its absence and the truth that its absence conceals: the human knowledge system has long evaded everything that cannot be measured, named, or fixed.

Through six progressively layered chapters, Dobrin constructs a conceptual apparatus for revealing this mechanism of absence. The "cultural memory apparatus" stands at its core: from Herman Melville to Rachel Carson, from Jacques-Yves Cousteau to contemporary ocean documentaries, these texts and images are not neutral representations of the ocean but media that shape the way humans perceive it. The "cultural memory apparatus" determines how the ocean is constructed, distorted, or obscured in literature, art, film, and technological representations such as Google Ocean. The "submersive epistemology" overturns the pursuit of solidity and certainty characteristic of land-based thinking, emphasizing instead a fluid, corrosive mode of thought that dissolves terrestrial thinking's solidity—"a neologism that compounds submersible and subversive to suggest not merely fluidity and depth but also the corrosive potentials of thinking" (Dobrin 11). "Scale literacy," echoing Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge* and its discussion of "derangement of scale," reveals that the ocean is the paradigmatic site of such derangement: humans struggle to forge effective connections between individual actions and global consequences (Dobrin 91). The introduction of the "hyperobject" concept redefines the ocean as simultaneously a perceivable object and a hyperobject that vastly exceeds the scale of human perception. Chapter Five's "protein economy," using shrimp as its case study, discloses how marine organisms are absorbed into global capitalism's protein supply chain, grounding abstract epistemological critique in concrete political-economic analysis. Yet Dobrin's diagnostic power runs parallel to the limitations of his analysis. His discussion remains primarily at the level of cultural representation and media criticism, with insufficient attention to the structural reasons behind the ocean's absence. Why does the modern human mind structurally exclude the "ungraspable"? Why can the logic of "disconnection" so thoroughly sever humanity's perceptual bond with the ocean?

#### 4.0 Ontological Roots: Ivakhiv's Process-Relational Framework

Ivakhiv's philosophical thought provides a structural perspective for understanding the ocean's absence. In *Shadowing the Anthropocene*, Ivakhiv follows Peirce's triadic categories to organize the book into three progressively deepening themes: "objects/events," "body-mind action," and "images/common worlds." These are not isolated chapters but a complete "logo-ethico-aesthetics" system that moves from ontology, through perception, to the reconstruction of action and ethics. At the heart of his ontology is a critical transcendence of object-oriented ontology (OOO). Ivakhiv argues that the fundamental unit of the world is not the static "object" but the dynamic "event," contending that reality is essentially a relational process of becoming. The "realness" of a thing lies not in its isolated existence but in its connections with countless other events. Ivakhiv synthesizes Whitehead's concept of "prehension" with Peirce's triadic categories to form a "process-relational ontology" capable of grasping both "being" and "becoming" simultaneously. The critical edge of this ontology is uniquely valuable in an era when plastic waste and electronic refuse permeate the globe. Ivakhiv astutely observes that treating things as "disconnectible" (Ivakhiv 27) is the philosophical projection of capitalist commodity logic—commodities are designed to be exchangeable, possessable, and disposable "disconnectibles," while the production processes, labor relations, and ecological costs behind them are deliberately obscured (Ivakhiv 27–29). Descartes treated animals as "machines"; Newton treated the universe as a "clock." This tradition of mechanical materialism sought to disassemble the world into independently analyzable parts, furnishing the philosophical foundation for capital's logic of "universal resource-ification," yet it cannot address the problem of "relationality": the interdependencies within ecosystems, the feedback loops within climate systems—these are invisible within a mechanical framework, just as the ocean is absent from traditional ecocriticism. For understanding the ocean, this ontology possesses formidable interpretive power: the ocean is not a static, mappable "object" but a "relational field" woven from countless "events." What is called modern thinking has yet to free itself from the tradition of mechanical materialism and still habitually severs the world into "disconnectibles." The ocean—an existence that refuses to be severed and cannot be grasped in isolation—thereby becomes a blind spot in the human cognitive system.

Building on his ontology, Ivakhiv proposes a path from philosophical cognition to bodily event. The second part introduces the Buddhist mindfulness tradition (Shinzen Young's system), translating abstract philosophical ontology into an actionable "body-mind" practice: training the capacity to perceive dynamic events through the three sensory fields of "seeing, hearing, and feeling." In traditional epistemology, the senses are often regarded as passive channels for acquiring knowledge; for Ivakhiv, however, they are the primary means by which humans actively participate in the world's "prehensive" activity. This shift is particularly important for oceanic perception—the ocean's essence can only be experienced dynamically and bodily, never captured through static conceptualization. The third part draws on Latour's "iconophilia" to address multicultural conflict and construct a "common world" capable of accommodating nonhuman actors and plural claims. Within this framework, the ocean is both a wellspring of "images"—appearing across cultures as "pathway of life," "dwelling of deities," "treasury of resources," "bridge of communication," "destination of the dead"—and a site where meaning is continuously reproduced through the movement of images, becoming

a bridge that connects the divergences among human civilizations.

Ivakhiv names this system “shadowing”—a cognitive posture of perpetually approaching but never possessing. By turning “ocean” into a crossed-out “ocean,” one acknowledges the limitations of human language and of humanity itself: human cognition is forever “approaching” rather than “possessing” the “events” embedded in complex relations; what humans perceive as “ocean” is a “shadow” glimpsed through the gaps, not “ocean” itself. This article, too, deliberately adopts this epistemological humility: the inquiry into the ocean’s absence does not terminate here in a closed conclusion. What we can do, perhaps, is only this: to continue approaching, and to honestly acknowledge that perpetual distance.

From the perspective of eco-realism, the ocean is not merely a flowing physical space but a dynamic field of relational processes. The ocean should not be viewed as a passive backdrop or resource repository; rather, it is an agential “actor” that participates in shaping human civilization and the Earth’s ecosystems. The ocean’s ungraspability is, on one hand, the cause of its absence, and on the other, it exposes humanity’s severed attitude toward its own relationship with the environment. Compared to the direct, visible changes on land, oceanic changes are far less intuitive, and the consequences of ecological destruction often reach humans only after a significant delay. Yet humans have selectively forgotten: through the chain reactions of ecosystems, foundational damage to the ocean ultimately punishes humanity itself through progressive bioaccumulation. This is precisely what Ivakhiv calls a “hyper-event”: the Fukushima nuclear disaster’s destruction of marine ecology, for instance, will travel through ocean currents and the water cycle to affect the entire planet’s aquatic ecosystem, and in turn the humans who depend on water for survival. This event reveals the ocean’s “relational essence” in the most brutal fashion: humans believed they could “disconnect” nuclear waste from the ocean—seal it in containers, sink it to the deep sea, affix “Do Not Touch” labels. But the ocean responds through its currents: nothing is truly “disconnected.” The Fukushima event is not an isolated “object” but a convergence of countless “events”—earthquake, tsunami, technological failure, political maneuvering, media narrative, and more. Dobrin, drawing on Clark’s “derangement of scale,” provides a powerful explanation for this phenomenon.

### **5.0 Limitations and New Horizons: Casting Off from Two Theories**

Both books, to be sure, have certain limitations. Dobrin acknowledges that “I cannot provide ‘indigenous methodologies’ in this project” (Dobrin 51); his text primarily explores ecocriticism from a North American and Western perspective, leaving itself open to the charge of overlooking how colonial maritime history has shaped the construction of oceanic meaning. His analysis largely remains at the concrete level of cultural representation, with insufficient treatment of the structural causes—the ontological and epistemological reasons—for the ocean’s prolonged neglect. Ivakhiv’s “process-relational ontology,” while emphasizing relational generativity, risks neglecting the ocean’s materiality and politicality. To view the “ocean” purely as a “relational field” weakens the explanatory power of the blood and fire of imperial expansion, the slave trade, and colonial violence. His emphasis on body–mind cultivation can easily slide toward a “personalized ecological ethics,” attenuating both the political character of the ecological crisis and the organizational

dimension of responses to it. Indeed, one cannot ignore the internal tension between Ivakhiv's theory and the ocean's "ungraspability": is deploying a theoretical system to grasp the "ungraspable" ocean not itself a paradox? When Ivakhiv's theory is used to redefine the ocean as a "dynamic field of relational processes," that very redefinition constitutes a form of possession. The possessive cognitive impulse that the humble posture of "shadowing" guards against returns, shadow-like, in the very process of theoretical construction. This is not a rhetorical problem that can be dissolved by saying "theory is only a shadow"; rather, it points to a substantive predicament rooted in humanity's own limitations: any attempt to furnish a systematic framework for the "ungraspable" is internally contradictory with its own epistemological premises.

Capturing depictions of the ocean from a diversity of civilizational perspectives is the first step toward fundamentally altering humanity's longstanding neglect of the sea: this is also the methodological expression of oceanic studies' intrinsic commitment to connection, fluidity, and cultural pluralism. When Western oceanic scholarship encounters the limits of its perspective, Chinese scholars gain a distinctive space for intervention: Zheng He's maritime voyages, the oceanic economic traditions of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian, the literary imagination of overseas realms in *Flowers in the Mirror*, the transoceanic spread of the Mazu faith—these accumulated resources constitute a cultural repository distinct from the Western "conquest of the ocean" narrative, awaiting incorporation into the horizon of blue ecocriticism. Take the folk custom of *Song Wangchuan* ("Sending Off the Royal Vessel") in the Minnan region as an example. In *Wangchuan* culture, the ocean is at once the source of livelihood, the sacred abode of deities, a perilous domain of the unknown, and the necessary passage homeward. This complex "oceanic imagery" cannot be reduced to "resource" or "threat"—it simultaneously accommodates awe, gratitude, supplication, and farewell. The core logic of this ritual is neither "utilizing" the ocean nor "worshipping" it, but establishing a sustained relationship with it on the premise of acknowledging the ocean's ungraspability. This is at once what Dobrin identifies as a "cultural memory apparatus" and a practical enactment of Ivakhiv's "iconophilia": neither worshipping the ocean nor conquering it, but learning, through long cohabitation with the sea, to respect its ungraspable "movement." This is perhaps precisely what Western blue ecocriticism still lacks: an oceanic ethics not premised on "grasping."

Despite these limitations, the scholarly contributions of both books cannot be overlooked. In the interactive dialogue between Dobrin's "blue ecocriticism" and Ivakhiv's "process-relational ontology," a new paradigm capable of grasping fluidity and relationality is constructed. This paradigm reveals that a critical driver of the ecological crisis is not the "resource scarcity" or "environmental pollution" of the conventional view, but "the rupture of relations"—the rupture between humans, the rupture between humans and nonhumans, the rupture between humans and environment, the rupture between humans and the future. The key to solving the problem lies in "the repair and reconstruction of relations." Through "body–mind cultivation" one rebuilds the capacity for perception; through "iconophilia" one rebuilds multicultural dialogue; through the broadly connected "common world" one rebuilds an ethics of action—grounded in the intimate solidarity of every person, every life, and every nonliving entity—to establish a more inclusive, non-anthropocentric ecological regime capable of addressing the systemic predicaments confronting the entire ecosystem. In this sense, the framework resonates with the concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind."

When, then, will ecocriticism truly meet its own ocean? Through this juxtaposed examination of the two books, this article has excavated a philosophical framework for oceanic ecocriticism: Dobrin tells us that the ocean is absent from ecocriticism, while Ivakhiv reveals the deep reasons for that absence, constructing a three-layered interpretive framework that moves from cultural phenomenon to ontological positioning, from representation to becoming, thereby elevating ecocriticism's "blue turn" from empirical critique to a philosophical reorientation of ecological epistemology. Dobrin writes at the end of his book: "My intent here, then, is to urge ecocriticism to take to the sea" (Dobrin 229). When should we do so? Ivakhiv, too, supplies an answer: "There is no better time for action than now" (Ivakhiv 229). When ecocriticism encounters the ocean, this will be not merely a disciplinary turn but a harbinger of human thought's liberation from isolated, fragmented mechanical conceptions toward a more mature systemic vision.

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#### Notes

①For the term "disconnectibles," Ivakhiv offers a definition grounded in his critique of "object": "In other words, there is value in distinguishing between disconnectibles—which this book will call objects—and the processes out of which those disconnectibles arise, within which they move, and to which they return" (Ivakhiv 27). The crux of the disconnectible lies in those entities that present themselves as "things" detached from relational networks—object-forms that enter new contexts and are manipulated as independent units.

②Process-relational ontology holds that reality is constituted by continuously productive relational processes; existence is not static substance but a dynamic process of perpetual becoming through relational interaction. As Ivakhiv writes: "The tools I apply are those from the philosophical tradition I identify as 'process-relational' . . . a view that takes reality to be ceaselessly creative, semiotic, and 'morphogenetic' in the sense that its forms are perpetually being generated through the relational acts of its constituent members" (Ivakhiv 18).

③Cultural memory apparatus refers to those culturally produced texts and media that exist in material form; they not only carry memory but themselves participate, as memory, in the generation and circulation of cultural imagination (Dobrin xiii).

④"Hyperobjects are things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans," according to Timothy Morton.

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