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8 Music and Environmentalism in Iceland

Nicola Dibben

How much would we accept for a mountain? Two billion? Twenty billion?ⁱ

At the end of the trailer for the television eco-documentary *Draumalandið* (2007), an interviewee questions the monetary value placed on landscape. The question encapsulates ongoing controversies over ownership, valuation and use of the natural environment in the Nordic region and beyond. It presents an implicit opposition between, on the one hand, economic valuation of the natural environment, epitomised by natural capital accounting (measurement and incorporation into markets of natural resources and ecosystems), and on the other hand, the idea that nature is, and should remain, in the realm of the “beyond-human”. My argument is that music, as with other cultural practices and products, has a role in environmentalism as a means by which people experience the natural world vicariously, and through which alternative meanings and valuations of nature are asserted.

What notions of the natural world does music help construct, given a situation in which the environment can be both a particular place to which music might pertain (with implicit connotations of ownership), and an “ecological commons” (the natural resources shared by humans)? While popular music studies, and musicology more generally, has a long history of investigating representations of and relationships with landscape, especially in the Nordic region (Grimley 2005, 2011; Korsgaard 2011; Mitchell 2009; Richardson 2012), it has only recently begun to explore the relationship with the natural world from an environmental perspective (Dibben 2009a, Pedelty 2011). Where this chapter differs from other approaches in nordic popular music studies, is in understanding the environmental crisis as a failure of culture as much as it is a failure of engineering, science and politics (Allen 2011a).

The history of environmental thinking and action differs across the Nordic region (Jamison, Eyerman, Cramer and Læsøe, 1990) so in order to understand music’s role in environmentalism I investigate it through a case study of Icelandic popular music and the contested Icelandic Highlands. Investigating the transnational

dynamics of this Icelandic example allows a detailed unpacking of some of the issues at stake. Indeed, it quickly becomes clear that both environmental degradation and protection, and the apparent national origins of the music discussed here, have to be considered transnationally. As I will go on to argue, narratives surrounding the development and protection of the Icelandic Highlands speak of the Highlands variously as an ecological commons (or natural resource to be exploited) which surpasses national and regional boundaries, of the global interests of multinational corporations, and of Iceland's national economic interests, depending on the speaker and audience. Environmental protestors form communities of action bounded by ideals and actions rather than national or regional borders, just as 'Icelandic' music finds its audience globally. I argue that in order to fully realise music's role in environmental thinking we need to move beyond the place-bound perspective on music.

Rethinking “place” in music

The relationship between music and place has a long history in scholarly research. There are persuasive accounts of how music enables people to form attachments to particular locations which become imbued with meaning as “places”, how these bonds are maintained over time as part of particular identities, and the ideological purposes these serve (Bohlman 2011; Leyshon, Matless and Revill 1998; Stokes 1994; Stokes and Bohlman 2003; Whiteley, Bennett and Hawkins 2004). Recently, musicological research has taken on a more explicitly environmental focus. This ecomusicological approach investigates music's relationship to ecology and the environment, addressing the way that musicians and composers react to and communicate about environmental issues in their work, how listeners respond to these experiences, and how musical practices and sound-worlds reflect, inform and structure society (Allen 2011b). Yet, with a few notable exceptions (Guy 2009; Pedelty 2011), the current ecological crisis is hardly evident within ecomusicological scholarship on music, nature and place. This is despite the fact that the focus on place in musicological research would seem to fit well with environmental perspectives that have been equally committed to notions of place. As argued by Heise (2008, 28), American environmentalist discourse posits that “in order to reconnect with the natural world, individuals need to develop a ‘sense of place’ by getting to know the details of the ecosystems that immediately surround them.” This “ethics of proximity” assumes that a sensory experience of place is necessary to environmental awareness and activism, and is further characterised by an association between “spatial closeness, cognitive understanding, emotional

attachment, and an ethic of responsibility and ‘care’” (33). Musicological research attends to the way music constructs and maintains attachments to particular locations and is therefore commensurate with such thinking.

However, it is my contention that for all its many strengths, a place-based approach is inadequate to the current situation: excessively place-focused musicological research and environmentalist thinking sometimes ignores the ramifications of increased interconnectedness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In its most extreme formulation, some take the resultant “phantasmagoric” separation of place from space (Giddens 1990, 19, 108-9), and increasing “de-territorialization” (Deleuze and Guattari 1977) to argue that place is less important in popular music than it used to be (Pedelty 2011; Guy 2009): “Distant places, mobile lifestyles, and a general sense of placelessness preside over much of the world’s musical imagination.” (Pedelty 2011, 201).ⁱⁱ Meanwhile, others point to the persistence of place as a focus for musical identification.

The defining phenomena in this scenario are transnationalism and music’s part in our experience of “mediated commonality” – (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 130). Greater interconnectedness due to reduced cost and increased ease of transportation, and the availability of wireless and internet technologies, mean individuals may be more connected to distant places than to those nearby. Consequently, our identities are not confined to the local or national but may be marked by different types of belonging. Turino (2003), along with other scholars (Stokes 2007; Regev 2007), points to the way that framing music in terms of cosmopolitanism, instead of globalisation, enables more precise investigation of the way that musical ideas, behaviours, sounds and technologies circulate and tie together people culturally who are otherwise unrelated by place or heritage. “Cosmopolitanism”, in the vernacular sense, acknowledges the way that cultural forms, and people, may not be grounded in a single place, in contrast, for example, to immigrant communities and diasporas who are characterised by an emphasis on a homeland; and in its philosophical sense (c.f. Hesmondhalgh 2013, 151), denotes a moral stance on the equality of all individuals and groups.

Cosmopolitanism is helpful to environmental thinking in that it recognises that transnational cultural flows and social formations provide a different route for environmental awareness. The discourse around environmental protection tends to view the natural environment as the responsibility of everyone, by appealing to

appreciation of the beauty of natural landscapes, to the need for biodiversity, and to the inter-species dependencies of ecosystems. The challenge, as argued by Heise (2008, 10) in her critique of American environmentalist discourse,

is to envision how ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the human world as well as on behalf of greater socioenvironmental justice might be formulated in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole.

This type of environmental world citizenship which is premised on a sense of planet as opposed to a sense of place is what she terms “eco-cosmopolitanism”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Scholars have not yet examined how recorded popular music, a transnational phenomena, can help people see themselves as part of a global biosphere. The transnational perspective opens our eyes to the circulation of popular music between groups who may be at a distance geographically yet have close social and environmental ties. It also highlights music’s role in seeing ourselves as planetary citizens who can care about degradation to environments we have not witnessed first-hand. So, while music may help construct a “sense of place”, one question is whether it may also be able to create a “sense of planet” (c.f. Heise 2008). In an article on the international flow of media Jenkins claims that “transcultural flows of popular culture inspire new forms of global consciousness” (2004, 117). Can one such global consciousness be a heightened environmental awareness?

The various ways in which music may help people to see themselves as part of a global biosphere have yet to be codified, but I identify and examine two routes here: first, the creation of bonds to far distant places that have never been experienced at first hand by that individual, and second, by expressing meanings and values which are not about specific places but about the planet and the “ecological commons” - those aspects of the natural world which are common to humans. In order to examine these routes in more detail I focus on a case study of a particular site of intervention into the natural environment within the Nordic region - the Hydroelectric development of the Icelandic Highlands - and associated musical artefacts and practices.

The case of Iceland

HYDROPOWER IN THE ICELANDIC HIGHLANDS

Iceland sits on the mid-Atlantic Ridge between the North Atlantic and Arctic oceans. It is geologically active and characterized by lava fields, glaciers and mountains. According to the World Bank, it is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, with a population of only 326,000 people, two thirds of whom live in the capital Reykjavik (the most northern European capital city) and the rest in scattered coastal villages.^{iv} Iceland underwent rapid modernisation in the twentieth century which transformed it from a colony dependent on subsistence farming and fishing, to the twenty-first richest nation in the World measured by GDP per capita in 2012 (a fall after the collapse of Iceland's banking system in 2008).^v Iceland's economy is now based on fishing, manufacturing, service industries and an expanding eco-tourist industry marketed in terms of Iceland's unique and beautiful landscape, which brings in over twice as many visitors a year as the island's population (Óladóttir 2013). It also has the highest number of internet users in the world.^{vi} Notably, all Iceland's electricity is produced from hydropower and other renewable energies (including geothermal),^{vii} and it is also the world's largest producer of electricity per capita,^{viii} with major hydroelectric projects built and more planned in largely uninhabited areas.

The Icelandic nation's relationship to the natural environment shares with other Nordic nations a tradition of respect for the environment and environmental issues: Iceland is party to many international environmental agreements (e.g. the Kyoto Protocol), is nuclear-free, and proud of its self-sustainability in green energies. However, the development of hydroelectric power in Iceland has been contentious. Construction of the Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Project in East Iceland created huge controversy and conflict between wilderness conservation and economic development. The project involved rerouting and damming two glacial rivers through 45 miles of tunnels and nine dams, erecting 32 miles of overland transmission lines through uninhabited highlands, and the building of a large aluminium smelter. Unlike environmental movements in the other Nordic countries the Icelandic environmental movement is relatively young^{ix} and operates at a grass roots level (Newson 2010; Jamison, Eyerman, Cramer and Læsøe 1990): internal environmental movements and protests are a relatively new phenomena, previously having been restricted to environmental protests against Iceland (in the form of opposition to Iceland's whale hunting and fishing practices) (Newson 2010).

Rather than simply accept that human intervention in the landscape is automatically and always a form of degradation, it is worth considering the factors contributing to the controversy over development of the Highlands. First, conservation of nature is a particularly emotive topic in the Icelandic context since it encroaches on the very idea of what it means to be Icelandic in a context where nationalism is still a potent force (Dibben 2009a; Newson 2010).^x After settlement in the late ninth century Iceland came under the rule of Norway and then Denmark until the emergence of an independence movement in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in home rule in 1918 and Republic status in 1944. One way in which nation states are bound to particular territories is by conceiving of nature as land and landscape, and so, unsurprisingly, nature has been particularly important in defining social movements and giving people a sense of national identity in Iceland in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Jóhannesson 2001).^{xi}

Second, Iceland is typified by a local community perspective (as opposed to Sweden and Denmark's technocratic and in some cases countercultural approach), which valorises the idea of local communities' rootedness in an organic way of life which is linked to nature through their use of natural resources. The dominant environmental ideology of living in harmony with nature, yet taking a pragmatic and potentially unsentimental view towards natural resources, leads to internal conflicts which are exacerbated by the social and political disjunction in Iceland between urban core and rural periphery and their associated perspectives (Newson 2010). Perceptions of centre and periphery also operate at national level where different sides of the debate conceive of Iceland's natural resources as a way the nation can contribute internationally, either through the unique aesthetic beauty of "Europe's last wilderness" and biodiversity (the environmental protection lobby), or through provision of cheap "clean" energy to other nations (the energy lobby). The view of the place of Iceland as national territory contrasts with an environmentalist perspective that sees it as a bioregion defined by ecosystems rather than political geography. From this transnational perspective the development of the Highlands is contentious due to its status as part of the arctic ecosystem, and as one the last uninhabited areas in Europe.

Describing uninhabited Highlands as "wilderness" is already an ideological act: the very idea of "wilderness" is a construction resulting from historical and cultural processes (Nash 2014). As Sæþórsdóttir *et al* point out (2011), the physical

characteristics of the place (deforestation, transportation routes) and the idea of wilderness as embodied in the Icelandic landscape have changed over time: from a landscape feared (with connotations of uninhabited and uninhabitable wasteland, outlaws and supernatural beings), to a Romantic sublime Highland wilderness, to commodified tourist attraction. Today the idea of the Highland wilderness, regardless of its empirical reality, is an important part of the cultural economy, especially for tourism, but also film and music.

ICELANDIC POP AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

From an eco-musicological perspective music forms part of the discourse and experience of environmentalism in Iceland, both explicitly through direct involvement of musicians and audiences in environmental action and advocacy, and, from an eco-critical perspective, implicitly via musical practices and products.

Icelandic musicians and music events have been prominent in environmental action, advocacy and fund raising. Music and musicians featured prominently in protest activities about the Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Project, including concerts (Stop the Dams, 2006; Náttúra, 2008; Stopp 2014, all in Reykjavik), a karaoke marathon, a single release (Björk, 'Náttúra', 2008), music within solidarity meetings, and carnivalesque direct action to disrupt activities in Iceland and numerous other countries.^{xii} Many of these activities enable the community to come together and “appear to itself” (Stokes 1994). Internationally renowned artists, both nationals and non-nationals, spoke against the development: post-rock band Sigur Rós performed at the protest camp itself, and lead singer Jónsi was reported on the SavingIceland website as having been arrested in Reykjavik City Hall for his part in protests; the musician Björk was vociferous in her protests against the project, most notably in a series of open letters exchanged with the CEO of Magma Energy, Ross Beaty, which drew international attention to the energy rights granted to this company.^{xiii} The actions went beyond protest and included a search for alternatives: for example, a venture fund, BJÖRK, was co-founded by Björk to “invest in sustainable businesses that create value through leveraging Iceland’s unique resources, spectacular nature, vibrant culture and green energy” (audur 2008).

In addition to direct action and advocacy, music creates meanings and values for the Icelandic landscape; it is one of the cultural practices by which the very idea of what we take to be “natural” and warranting protection is established and maintained (Dibben 2009b). The neglect of the environmental perspective in musicology and

beyond has been attributed to a suspicion towards and avoidance of environmental materiality whose basis in scientific realism is at odds with the prevailing focus on “nature” as a social-cultural construct (Heise 2008; Guy 2009; Titon 2013). Yet I would argue that admitting that nature is a construct does not mean it does not exist or can’t be protected; it requires an acknowledgement that we are simultaneously defining what it is that needs protection. This is not a regression into reification of Nature (c.f. Morton’s *Ecology without nature*) but a recognition of the natural world as relational.

Popular music’s construction of the Icelandic landscape, and the way this relates to and helps construct Icelandic national identity have been discussed elsewhere (Dibben 2009a, 2009b; Grimley 2005; Korsgaard 2011; Mitchell 2009; Richardson 2012; Webb 2010). That scholarship shows how musical material and its reception inside and outside Iceland and the Nordic region, is inspired by and expresses particular views about the natural environment as “pure wilderness” through its visual, sonic and linguistic representation.^{xiv} Moreover, music, particularly in its audio-visual forms such as music video and film, offers a way to experience nature vicariously. Benediktsson (2007) notes the role of visual aesthetics in mobilising resistance to the Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Project (Benediktsson 2007, 2008, 2010). He argues that documentary photography was a particularly powerful force in creating Kárahnjúkar for those who had never have been there, describing a three-part photographic essay by Ragnar Axelsson (journalist for *Morganbladið*, Iceland’s main newspaper) which showed the beauty of the landscape that was about to be flooded by dams, the way these photographs were linked to natural history, mythology and nationalism, and their powerful ability to “activate moral sentiments of care” (2007, 213). Music is also a means by which people encounter the Icelandic landscape and through which individuals form affinities with it. Music criticism, internet blogs and personal testimonials evidence the way popular music from Iceland is heard in terms of its landscape often by non-nationals who have never been to Iceland, and often associated with strong attachments.^{xv}

However, my aim is to go beyond identifying the meanings and values constructed by popular music for the natural landscape, and the affective bonds to particular places that music may afford, and instead to examine the way in which music affords a sense of place and a sense of planet following Heise’s (2008) distinction. The two examples I present illustrate contrasting conceptions of the human relationship with the natural environment: topophilic sentiment towards a particular place as afforded

by Icelandic post-rock band Sigur Rós' music documentary *Heima* (2007) and biophilic tendencies expressed by Icelandic musician Björk's *Biophilia* (2011).

TOPOPHILIA: THE CASE OF HEIMA BY SIGUR RÓS

The documentary film *Heima* (trans: 'At Home' or 'Homeland') (2007) tracks a free, unannounced concert tour given by Sigur Rós^{xvi} in Iceland in 2006. The tour travels the rural communities and links music to specific landscapes and their history of settlement. Unusually for modern rock, each track on *Heima* is performed in a different, named location to small local audiences, and the tour diary and other surrounding discourse make explicit connections to local landscapes and people.

One track, "Vaka" (aka Untitled #1), has an explicitly ecological interpretation: director Floria Sigismunidi's music video elaborates the simplicity of the song's harmonically and texturally sparse repeating 5-bar sequence with a linear narrative of school children playing in a post-apocalyptic world - a vision of our children's inheritance if we don't look after the planet; and text accompanying the documentary describes "Vaka" as "the song that started it all", explicitly linking it to the Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Project (Figure 8.1):

when sigur rós decided, on the spur of the moment, to take a detour from their filmed tour of iceland to go and play at the protest camp at the karahnjúkar dam - which would soon flood many square kms of pristine icelandic wilderness close to the east fjords they took almost nothing with them. [...] a small generator had been dug into a shallow hole to provide minimal power for the performance, but since the protest was against a dam built to provide electricity for an american aluminium smelting plant, the band decided to go unplugged for the first time in their career. [...] they played to a hardy audience, numbered in the tens, performing the few songs they had worked out acoustically, but it was watching the lone camera recording of 'vaka', with mountain wind whistling in the mic, that decided them on the acoustic route for this project. (Sigur Rós, 2014).^{xvii}

A number of scholars have noted the nostalgic character of Sigur Rós' *Heima* (Dibben 2009a; Hall 2013; Richardson 2012). Hall's critique focuses on nostalgia for the rural: interpreting the signs of Iceland's rural past (disused buildings and past industries) and traditions (rimur, feasts), and musical aspects of the album as a lamentation for lost culture and a "going back to nature," as a response to Iceland's

rapid transition from rural agrarian to urban capitalist economy. Making a slightly different reading, Fletcher (2012) argues that Sigur Rós' performances do not simply dwell in this imagined past but draw attention to the damage done to it as a way of providing critique of the present. He notes that the sequence of performances, which link the ghost community of Djúpavík and its disused Herring factory oil silos, now a long-defunct industrial site due to over-fishing, to the Snæfellsskála protest camp against the Kárahnjúkar dam, and a future potential site of environmental degradation:

what *Heima* clarifies is the specific narrative of spatial memory, or nostalgia, operative within post-rock, one that is not so much a conservative reiteration of or regression into what is inevitably a lost origin, but an implicit critique of modernity as perpetual progress, which draws attention to those experiences, locations and traditions that are otherwise forgotten or destroyed by it. (Fletcher, 2012).

The distinctive treatment of time and space in Sigur Rós' music has been alluded to as engendering a particular kind of listening phenomenology; the idea that the music offers space for reflection, contemplation or reverie (a spaciousness which is both temporal and physical) (Dibben 2009a; Hall 2013; Richardson 2012). Richardson notes of the filmed performance of "Heysátan" on *Heima*, that it

can be understood as representing the cessation of the mechanized flow of media, the ubiquitous discourses of the digital age, and a second silence that flows into and out of an ecological discursive space. In the digital age, we are never truly at one with Nature, but rather with an idea of what Nature has become in an age of media flow and digital surround sound. (Richardson 2012, 281).

In similar vein, but in relation to the visual arts and immersive nature walking tours, Benediktsson argues that what these kind of experiences can do is offer an experience of the natural world which is of the sublime, or enchantment which is useful as a "counter-narrative to technological hyperbole"; an aesthetic of enchantment characterised as "an emotional state frequently and rather easily afforded by the sublime and grandiose, but also by less spectacular landscapes, once one allows oneself to dwell therein." (Benediktsson 2007, 214).

This vicarious encounter with the natural environment reached a wide international community of fans of Sigur Rós due to the transnational networks of recorded music circulation. The transnational identities it affords are those of eco-cosmopolitan environmentalist, and / or Icelandic (alternative) nationalist identity. Music's role here might be understood as "sociable publicness" (Hesmondhalgh 2013) – a way of participating in particular values and identifications afforded by the music in its social contexts.

The fact that there is a focus on the local seems inevitable and necessary, given that a particular environmental threat (in this case the building of a dam) is located in a particular place (the Icelandic Highlands). Yet, we should question this seeming inevitability. The building of a dam is both local (the destruction of a particular habitat or ecosystem) and global (that ecosystem is part of a larger transnational bioregion and ecosystem), and could conceivably be responded to in different ways. An alternative is to reconceive the Icelandic Highlands ecosystem as part of the "global commons", as natural resources whose management lies beyond the remit of a single state, such as the oceans or the atmosphere, and it is to an example of this approach that I turn next.

BIOPHILIA BY BJÖRK

Compared to the title of Sigur Rós' album *Heima*, with its implication of a particular place, Björk's *Biophilia* suggests something more global – literally, a love of the natural world.^{xviii} *Biophilia* is a multimedia album project that includes audio and app albums (2011), a world tour of a live show with residencies, and a pop-up music school (2011-13).

The album project coincided with the height of Björk's engagement in the Icelandic environmental movement. Björk's rhetoric around the Hydropower projects stressed its transnational significance: in media coverage of the campaign she pointed out the similarities between Iceland and other countries, notably how to grow the economy yet "stay sustainable and in harmony with nature". Her stated intention with the release of the track "Náttúra", which predated the album *Biophilia*, was to "spread out the message" that it is possible to work with nature in sustainable ways rather than by continuing to build megaprojects which change the natural landscape (ITN Consulting 2008). Significantly, the "Náttúra" single was released on the digi pack

edition of the *Biophilia* album, indicating the continuity between the *Biophilia* project and Björk's consciousness of environmentalism.

The *Biophilia* project was described by Björk as “a meeting point of music, nature and technology”, in which the idea was not to go back to some idealised romanticised past but to use new technology to go “forward to nature”:

What I want to do is not go, 'Okay, let's have it how it used to be — all nostalgic and nationalistic.' I want to use this energy... I want to use it to go high-tech, and so do a lot of people, not just me. I don't want to do what England or what Europe had to do — 200 years of building factories. We don't have to do that. We can go straight into high-tech, solar power, wind farms... and then we can come into the 21st century.
(Bjork, interviewed in Turner 2011)

In *Biophilia* Björk embodies nature using similar techniques to those in her previous work (Dibben 2009a), but the treatment of the natural world differs in two important respects. First, the natural world is more explicitly foregrounded as the thematic content of the album in *Biophilia* than in other albums. Natural phenomena become the instruments and interfaces for musical creativity: in the *Biophilia* live show nature is theatricalised in the custom-built instruments that harness features of the natural world to make musical sound (gravity harp – gravity; teslacoil – electricity/lightning; organ - air). In the case of the *Biophilia* software, the graphical user interfaces of the app are styled as natural world phenomena, and naturally-occurring patterns are conceived as algorithms structuring music. Even the interface for track selection (and the “Cosmogony” app) is a representation of an aspect of the natural world – a stellar constellation (Figure 8.2).

Second, the natural phenomena explored are global, in the sense that they affect all humans, and are (thus far) beyond human ownership: viruses, lightning, DNA, Dark Matter, the moon and tides. In this sense, *Biophilia* marked something of a departure for Björk in that the celebration of the natural world focuses on nature conceived as fundamental elements and forces rather than topographical features of the Icelandic landscape. Potentially, this shift of emphasis calls on a broader understanding of the natural world as something we are all part of, and therefore all have responsibility for. The absence of specifically Icelandic markers (with the exception of “Mutual Core”'s implicit reference to the mid-Atlantic ridge) also means there is less romanticisation

of a specifically Icelandic landscape and its nationalist affordances. *Biophilia* constructs the natural world not as particular geographies (and therefore property or resources to be owned) but as universal natural forces and elements.

Biophilia also embodies a particular view of the relationship between the natural environment and technology. Underlying some ecopolitics is the tenet that technologies are instrumental; that is, they are seen as tools for domination of others and of nature. The spoken introduction to the *Biophilia* app and live show, written by Björk and poet Sjón, and performed by the natural history broadcaster David Attenborough, is explicit that *Biophilia*'s aim is to use technology to go "forward to nature". This relationship between nature and technology manifested itself in *Biophilia* in a variety of ways, not least of which was realisation of the album as an interactive app, on what in 2010 during the album's making, was state of the art tablet technology (the Apple iPad), and creation of instrument technologies to sonify nature (e.g. harnessing gravity in the pendulum harp, and electricity in the tesla coil). Both these examples embody the idea that technological innovation is not just compatible with nature, but is a way we can access the beyond-human world, thereby bringing humans to a more productive relationship with it. As Sean Cubbitt points out in his analysis of the television series *Blue Planet*,^{xix} "both scientific and entertainment media rely on technologies to communicate between human and natural worlds." (2005, 4). Technology is therefore a mediator, an aid, rather than 'evil force' of some ideological position towards the environment (2005, 59).

Nonetheless, there is a seeming contradiction between ecopolitics and the technological means to celebrate "pure" nature in the case of both the examples from Sigur Rós and Björk. Sigur Rós went to a remote part of Iceland to protest against the building of a Hydroelectric dam, but needed a generator for their amplified sound. Their solution was an acoustic album, but this of course needed electricity for its production and distribution (a criticism often levelled against the material impact of rock and pop tours which claim to be about sustainability yet which make excessive use of resources, and are polluting (Pedelty 2012)). In addition, Björk's *Biophilia* has a rhetoric of sustainability yet was initially made for Apple iPad, a company renowned for encouraging unsustainable consumption practices and for contributing to environmental degradation (Maxwell and Miller 2012).

In defence of such contradictions Cubbitt (2005) takes the position that (despite their complicity in environmental degradation) technologies provide a means to experience

enchantment as a counter to instrumentalist conceptualisations of the natural world. He argues that the *Blue Planet* series provides “the necessary Temporary Autonomous Zone which we need,... because without some experience of liberation, the struggle to achieve it would be abstract and empty.” (2005, 50). Björk’s *Biophilia* shares with Attenborough’s *Blue Planet* a sense of wonder at the beauty of the natural world and its ecosystems; both rarely make direct mention of rarity or endangerment. Thus the naivety and sentimentality which characterises Björk’s artistic output for some can be seen as an alternative valuation of the natural environment. This is not confined to Björk but can be seen as an aesthetic stance common to the Krútt generation of musicians. It is perhaps no coincidence, for example, that the soundtrack to the trailer for the BBC *Planet Earth* TV series (2006) was Sigur Rós’ “Hoppipolla” (*Takk...*, 2005).

From place to planet

My analysis of two high profile proponents of Icelandic popular music illustrates two different perspectives on the environment: I argued that Sigur Rós’ *Heima* offers critique of the present by highlighting failures of the industrial past in a particular place, whereas Björk’s *Biophilia* celebrates the beauty of the natural world conceived as an interconnected system common to all humans. What the case of *Heima* also illustrates is how people (both the musicians themselves, as articulated in interviews, and audiences) may long for a sense of place and emplacement in the face of deterritorialisation – a longing affirmed by marketing strategies of the music industry in which place-based identities are a means of market differentiation. Even so, the sense of place is hardly secure, destabilised as it is by music’s mediation, partly as simulacra and partly by virtue of its global circulation. The examples also differ in their sense of mobilisation: *Biophilia* (re)frames technology as a means to work with nature, rather than merely opposing despoliation. *Biophilia*’s use of the natural world as the algorithms and interface for music-making structure the user’s relationship with the natural world as something pragmatic, dynamic, and interactive (Dibben 2013), whereas *Heima*’s camera work and sound suggest a place to be looked at and listened to rather than acted upon, albeit in critical reflection (Dibben 2009b; Fletcher 2012).

These examples raise a question regarding the mechanism by which music entails a particular idea of and relationship to nature. Taking the perspective of human geography (c.f. Benediktsson), we could argue that the affective and immersive experience of music, provides a particularly effective means to disturb dualist

boundaries to productive ends.^{xx} According to this perspective, immersion and affect enable the experience of enchantment with nature and rejection of the natural capital agenda as it manifests in 'commonsense', techno-scientific valuations (Brosius 1999, 281). However, this line of reasoning is not without its problems. Human geographers' turn to affect can be seen as part of an (unproblematized) acceptance of romanticism in which we are seduced by the idea of nature and its associated aesthetic experience in cultural forms.^{xxi} Hence, too, Sigur Ros and Björk are sometimes criticized for the perceived sentimentalism and nostalgia of their music, and essentialist, romantic visual images of the natural world.

According to Morton (2007, 194), art which is ecological would be so "not because it compels us to care for a pre-existing notion of nature but because it questions the very idea of nature...". He draws attention to the cultural turn towards aesthetic *experience* of the natural world which is predicated on the idea that "If we could not merely figure out but actually experience the fact that we were embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it" (63-64). Arguably, both musical examples discussed above could be viewed as downplaying the Romantic notion of "nature", and presenting nature as a human category, albeit in different ways: *Heima* provides a space for critical reflection on, rather than immersion in, a historicised natural environment; *Biophilia* frames nature as human discovery and knowledge.^{xxii} Analysing the means by which music affords particular ideas of and relationships with the environment continues to be an important avenue for future work.

By arguing for a transnational perspective on popular music and its relevance for environmentalism I am suggesting a reorientation of disciplinary perspectives. Critical musicology's focus on social formations of gender, race, and sexuality need to be supplemented by a focus on the environment in order to show the way in which music participates in environmentalist beliefs and practices. I have also highlighted limitations of ecomusicology's focus on place-bound musics and an associated "ethics of proximity", arguing that human geographers' focus on the affective dimension of music is not the only means by which music may counter the techno-scientific capital agenda. In the realm of international politics the analysis shows how music can express political worldviews through non-verbal means as part of a broader post-institutional and post-national politics (Franke and Schiltz 2013).

For reasons of space and argumentation I have not included close analyses of musical texts here, although the argument is dependent upon music analyses referenced above. My primary focus has been on ideological-political readings of musical artefacts but (c.f. Gustafsson and Kääpä (2013, 6) on ecocinema) is one comment amongst many generated by a given music. The routes by which music is relevant to environmental thinking remain to be explored through empirical work which looks at its actions in the world. To what extent and how does transnational music enable people to develop a sense of environmental world citizenship? This exploratory analysis highlights the potential role of music in shaping our fantasies and realities of the natural world – and, to return to my start, how music may be complicit in how we value a mountain.

Notes

ⁱ *Draumalandið* (Dreamland) documentary trailer, 2007.

ⁱⁱ However, the importance of transnational connections to cultural traditions and practices does not exclude the possibility that people will continue to subscribe to territorially based identifications, whether those of state, nation, or region.

ⁱⁱⁱ The power of an eco-cosmopolitan perspective, Heise argues, is that it can help us see a local problem as part of a global one, as when a struggle for power over natural resources in one locale can be seen as part of a larger, transnational debate over climate change and nature protection in the global biosphere, and it can get individuals to think “beyond the boundaries of their own cultures, ethnicities, or nations” and consider the health of the world beyond the human (2008, 60).

^{iv} “Population density.” The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/>, Accessed 24 April 2014.

^v “GDP per capita (current US\$).” The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/>, Accessed 24 April 2014.

^{vi} “Internet users per 100 people.” The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/>, Accessed 24 April 2014.

^{vii} “World development indicators: electricity Production, sources, and access.” The World Bank, <http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/3.7>, Accessed 24 April 2014.

^{viii} “Electricity production.” World by Map, <http://world.bymap.org/ElectricityProduction.html>, Accessed 24 April 2014

^{ix} Landvern, Icelandic Environment Association, a national non-governmental organisation with an emphasis on environmental protection, established 1969;

Icelandic Nature Conservation Association, established 1997; Saving Iceland, who describe themselves as a “a network of people of different nationalities” and direct action group, website established 2004; plus a number of separate campaigns, including Náttúra which was co-founded by Icelandic musician Björk in 2008.

^x Contrary to claims that nationalism is ‘past its peak’ (Hobsbawm 1990, 192) due to the internationalisation of economic, information and cultural networks, we can see the resilience of nationalism in Iceland as an example of the broader European and Nordic resurgence in nationalism noted by Andersson and Hilson (2009) which they claim is mobilised by perceived threats. In the case of Iceland, I argue, the perceived threats come from globalisation (the prevalence of English and perceived threat to the Icelandic language), industrialisation (the development of Iceland’s natural resources and perceived threat to its landscape), and economics (a perceived influx of foreign companies and the threat to indigenous, local economies particularly salient in the aftermath of the 2008 banking collapse).

^{xi} This contrasts with Danish and Swedish environmental movements, for example, which were mobilised by the anti-nuclear movement (Jamison *et al* 1990, 70).

^{xii} The protests were transnational in character, happening beyond as well as within Iceland, and linking geographically distant campaigns: for example, in 2006 a protest was held in London against the same company’s actions in two nations; the call to participate in what was described as an “interactive funeral march to mark the murder of Kárahnjúkar, Iceland, and the impending murder of the Cedros Peninsular, Trinidad, at the bloody hands of Alcoa and heavy industry” included the request to “please bring musical instruments” (Saving Iceland 2006).

^{xiii} The series of open letters in the free English language magazine *The Reykjavik Grapevine* ran during 2010: Björk. 21 May 2010. “Bjork on Magma Energy”; Ross Beaty. 16 July 2010, “Ross answers Bjork’s questions.”; Björk. 19 July 2010. “Energy Source Goes Pop: An Exclusive Björk Interview on Geothermal Power.” *The Financial Times*; “Björk raises questions.”; Ross Beaty. 19 July 2010. “Ross Beaty’s got a proposal.”; Björk. 20 July 2010. “You totally miss my point”; Björk. 22 July 2010. “We shouldn’t complete this deal.”

^{xiv} The exact genesis of the association between Icelandic popular music and landscape has yet to be detailed, but likely arises from the confluence of musical representations of Icelandic landscape with nationalist ideologies of the natural landscape as “pure” and “wild”, the marketing of Icelandic eco-tourism in terms of its natural landscape (Einarsson 1996) and music, and the promotion and reception of popular music from Iceland in terms of its Icelandic origin as a means of

differentiation in the capitalist free market.

^{xv} In many cases encounters with the music become a motivating force for eco-tourism. For an example see “Heima – the inspiration for our trip to Iceland” http://www.last.fm/group/sigur+ros/forum/25557/_/2201547. Last modified 7 Feb 2013.

^{xvi} Sigur Rós are one of the most famous exponents of Icelandic popular music and are widely perceived as representing qualities of the Icelandic landscape in their music. Their particular version of post-rock is characterised by an instrumental palette of rock guitar and kit, plus strings, piano and falsetto voice singing in Icelandic, or sometimes “Hopelandic” (glossolalia), with minimalist and classical stylistic elements. From an Icelandic perspective they can be seen as part of the “Krútt” generation of musicians (English translation, “Cutesy” or “Twee”), characterised as sharing a certain child-like innocence. The Krútt ideology has variously been criticised for its failure to engage with the political process, and celebrated for the alternative it offers to consumerist lifestyles, and for the time and space its music offers for reflection (Hall 2014).

^{xvii} The commentary goes on to point out that the recorded version is “not, in fact, the raw, karanhjúkar recording, but another exterior version made outside the band's studio in april 2007.”

^{xviii} The idea of the “global commons” appears earlier in Björk’s work, most notably in the track “Oceania” (2004) written for the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympic Games. In this track Björk personifies the beyond-human unity of the oceans that surround the separate nation states on which the Games are predicated, and who (in the lyrics) is the maternal evolutionary source from which all humans ultimately evolved (Dibben 2009b, 64).

^{xix} The treatment of the technological in *Biophilia* has an interesting and perhaps not entirely coincidental association with that in David Attenborough TV series *Blue Planet* given that Björk had watched numerous eco- documentaries in the course of researching this album, and was a long-time fan of Attenborough (personal communication to author).

^{xx} Elsewhere I have argued that Björk’s artistic output is predicated on unity between dualities (Dibben 2009b).

^{xxi} He claims that our current idea of nature derives from the Romantic reaction to the despoliation of mid eighteenth century European Capitalism and industrialisation, and that this myth is perpetuated in ecomimetic visual art and writing whose aim is to “reconnect” us to the non-human world.

^{xxii} Speaking of the Blue Planet series, but in a way applicable to Biophilia, Cubbitt argues: "Its portrayal of nature is of an innocent world, a world of intrinsic values like food and reproduction, whose beauty arises from its interconnected and systemic order. But it is beautiful rather than sublime to the extent that nature arises as knowledge and therefore as something which is also simultaneously deeply, indeed intrinsically human." (Cubbitt, 2007, 58) It is in this regard that Biophilia treats nature as human knowledge and therefore neither entirely separate from nor identical with the human, even if ultimately it accepts rather than questions the idea of a pre-existing nature.

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Figure 8.1: Sigur Rós at Snaefell, near Kárahjúkar, Iceland (*Heima* tour photos, 'On the road (july-august 2006)' <http://www.sigur-ros.co.uk/band/disco/heima-photos.php>)

Figure 8.2: Graphical User Interface for song (app-track) selection in Björk *Biophilia* (2011) app, iOS software. Screenshot by the author.