David Maggs and John Robinson, Sustainability in an Imaginary World

Apr 16, 2014

At the climax of *Lord of the Flies* all hell has broken loose. Piggy is frantic, shouting at everyone that he has the conch and they must listen to him. Pardon the spoiler, but they don’t. Piggy is killed as the island goes up in flames around him. When we read this passage, do we ever think the boys might see the conch and do as Piggy says? Or is this scene more a meditation on the futility of old symbols in a new world? Watching frustrated scientists cling to their climate data, it is hard to get poor Piggy out of our minds. For that the boys might have listened to him, or we to our scientists, is never how the story goes. Why? Because such crises are never problems for the conch to solve; they are problems *about* the conch as a way of solving problems.

Let’s put this another way: *Is the challenge of sustainability a challenge to prove the world real or a challenge to prove the world imaginary?* Though we never ask it, this question gets answered all the time: *to prove the world real*. Count the hectares, calculate the parts-per-million, add the fish, and tell people what to do. When we ‘prove the world real’ however, we harden the dichotomies of Modernity. We separate facts from values, objects from subjects, nature from culture, all in search of the world without us, the way it is when we aren’t there. But beyond the deeply disenchanting and alienating effects of this approach, to miss its incoherence is to miss the more fundamental implications of environmental instability. Is not the goal of climate activism to demonstrate the *anthropogenic* nature of the climate? That what *we* do shapes the skies overhead?

Addressing sustainability by trying to establish and communicate objective, absolute descriptions of the natural world may amount to little more than conch-foisting on a burning island. Given our industrial reach, human meanings and agency have gone from creating the world at symbolic levels, to creating the world at material levels as well. *How we value the climate has more sway over what facts can be told about it than the other way around*. Unwittingly, we have stumbled into the anthropocene, plunged ourselves into the imaginary world. Here, sustainability is not a challenge to eradicate the impacts of humanity, but to offer everything we have. Here there is no future for us to choose, only many to make.

This we seek in the crucible of our realities, the arts, where tired rationalities melt into new ways of conceiving of self, world, and other. Through the agency of the aesthetic, that is, a meditation in the properties of form, pattern, colour, imagery, metaphor, story, etc., we aim to make existential work of sustainability. To pursue it as a question of human opportunity, potential, and purpose, a challenge to find sensibilities fit for the imaginary world, and worlds fit for a confluence of interests held by humans and non-humans alike.