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Essay
STS300, “The environmental context”
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Science, Technology & Society
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Comment by Brian Martin, subject coordinator for STS300

A number of bloggers have criticised this essay, many of them feeling free to pass judgement on the quality of the essay and how this reflects on standards at the University of Wollongong.

Few of these commentators appear to have read the subject outline for STS300, which is readily available on the web. The subject outline reveals how the essay relates to the overall objectives for the subject and how it relates to prior assessment tasks. The outline also spells out the assessment criteria for the essay.

A playwright does not necessarily speak like the characters in a play nor necessarily agree with sentiments expressed by those characters. The same can be said concerning the students in STS300 in writing dialogues for the essay assignment.

I stand by my judgement that this is one of the top STS300 essays in 2005.

Gaia an environmental anarchist discusses global warming
and solutions to environmental problems with
John Howard the Australian Liberal Prime Minister.

IN

'The Elevator'

An STS 300 Essay

By

Lisa Bridges.

Dramatis Personae.

John Howard: *The Prime Minister of Australia.*

Gaia: *A green anarchist from an intentional community.*

Tony Abbott:

Peter Costello: *Two Liberal Cabinet Ministers.*

Scene 1. - A large group of protestors has gathered, outside the Sydney Conference Building, hosting the Kyoto Protocol convention on global warming and sustainable solutions.¹

John Howard is traveling to the convention in his limousine with two of his cabinet ministers; his car passes the conference building, where a large, diverse crowd has gathered in a non-violent protest to Howard's environmental policies.

John Howard: I don't think I can face this crowd today they look potentially violent, and I am wearing Armani. Eggs and wool suits... well it's not a good look... (Laughs). They use children and the elderly as a front for their so called peaceful protest, as if they really care about the environment. I'm only doing what's best for Australia, as any good father would.² I'm ensuring a healthy economic basis for them, so they can all have a chance at prosperity, if a few trees and a bit of pollution is the price we pay, well so be it... This mob is a bunch of no good anarchists, no better than terrorists. We'll use our decoy at the front today I think, and I'll nip in the back door. Pull up at the back of the building please, driver.

¹ The Kyoto Protocol began in 1997, in Japan. It is an international treaty which requires countries to cut their greenhouse gas emissions, which are causing global warming. Roarty, M., *The Kyoto Protocol*, 2002, [online] URL: <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SCI/kyoto.htm#response>, accessed 12th May 2005.

² The Howard government expounds a patriarchal dominated society and develops policies based on strengthening the traditional family unit. Jamrozik, A., *Social Policy in the Post-Welfare State: Australians on the Threshold of the 21st Century*, Pearson Education Australia, Frenchs Forest, 2001.

Scene 2. - At the back of the building, the tradesman's entrance has been left unattended and ajar. Gaia,³ one of the protestors has infiltrated the building, intent on being a grass roots presence at the convention. Being of an anarchist persuasion she is not deterred by signs which emphatically state 'No Unauthorized Entry', she slips through the open door and into a lift, closely followed by Mr. Howard.

Gaia: (Softly singing) "Amazon, You had so much and now so much is gone...la la...A natural beauty should be preserved like a monument to nature..."⁴

John Howard: (Panting slightly), Ah, hello... I was under the impression that I had sole access to this entry today, are you with security, or a young liberal perhaps (Looks somewhat annoyed and a little anxious).

Gaia: No, my name is Gaia.⁵ I'm with the protest group you obviously managed to dodge out the front, and as a citizen of Australia and an environmental anarchist, I have conscientiously decided that I have a right to be a part of the environmental discussions today...which let's face it, affects my life as well as every other citizen on planet Earth, Mr. Howard.

Gaia offers her hand to Mr. Howard to shake, which he reluctantly takes.

John Howard: Well you obviously have no compunction about illegally entering buildings uninvited. An anarchist...ha... chaos, disorder, revolutions and violence! (He

³ The unpredictable and disorderly nature of chaos reflects the nature of Gaia and the environment, untamable and unpredictable, but it also reflects the degradation and destruction of nature that man has created, which has resulted in global warming and the changing climate. Greek creation mythology states that the void of space known as Chaos gave birth to the earth known as Gaia. Saunders, C., *Greek Mythology: Gaia*, 2004, [online] URL: <http://www.godchecker.com>, accessed 12th May 2005.

⁴ Neil Young wrote many anti-establishment and anti-war protest songs, which reflect grass roots, anarchistic philosophy. Currently he is focusing on environmental issues. Young, N, 'Natural Beauty', [CD] *Harvest Moon*, Reprise Records, 1992.

⁵ James Lovelock coined the concept of Gaia, the Earth to be a self regulating organism which has been thrown into chaos by humans. Palmer, J. A.,(Ed), *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*, Routledge, London, 2001, p.225.

rolls his eyes)...God knows what else you are capable of... when we reach the conference level you will be escorted out of the building, and most likely arrested.

Gaia: The door was open. I've done nothing wrong. Anarchism has been much maligned, as with all political movements there are always extremists whose fanatical, often violent activities are portrayed as the model for the whole movement. Many Australian citizens consider your capitalist based environmental policies to be extreme and destructive.

John Howard: Well that's just nonsense!

Gaia: Fundamentally as an anarchist I believe that any form of government is oppressive, whatever their ideology. Humans should be free to run their lives, governed only by their own conscience; you only have to read some of Henry Thoreau's works to get an understanding of how governments and their policies enslave nature and the people (with dramatic, thespian like gestures Gaia exclaims) "Government is best which governs not at all".⁶

John Howard: Thoreau was a disillusioned tax cheat who was bitter at being rightly punished.⁷

Gaia: No, he was enlightened to the tricks of government and the importance of nature and our environment, which he sought to preserve; he was not frightened to serve his conscience.⁸ I am also deeply concerned about environmental issues, hence my visit to the conference today. I do not believe that humans have a divine right to exploit nature;

⁶ Thoreau, H., D., *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, Penguin Books Ltd., New York, 1983, p. 385.

⁷ Henry Thoreau was imprisoned for a night for tax evasion; he said the taxes funded war and slavery which he protested against. He wrote *Civil Disobedience* which reflects his anarchistic ideology. He believed governments enslave the people, who he claims "lead lives of quiet desperation". Thoreau, H. D., *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, Penguin Books Ltd., New York, 1983, p.50.

⁸ Henry Thoreau was an American writer and activist, whose writing inspired the environmental movement. For two years he lived in a wilderness cabin and wrote his ideals in the book *Walden*, he saw the value in saving nature for its own sake. Palmer, J. A., (Ed), *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 106 -113.

we are not masters of nature, only another one of its tenants. We should be living harmoniously within our environment, as animals ourselves we are intrinsically bound to the ecological web... if we were to lose our natural environment, and lets face it this seems to be a distinct possibility...I don't... I can't even bear to think about it (Buries her head despairingly in her hands). We need immediate action to implement sustainable ways to live... we need to be ruled by our conscience not by a government.⁹

John Howard: As a growing nation we have to be realistic, your egalitarian, altruistic, utopian ideals are impractical, if we had no government, there would be only be chaos, civilization would cease to exist... the people need to be led, they can't make the real decisions for themselves... without government rules and regulations who would protect the environment? Your precious forests and rivers would be polluted by anybody and everybody ... (Nervously he watches the lift's progress up the building and thinks to himself) ...thank God were nearly there, soon be rid of this miscreant, I don't know why I've even bothered to entertain her.

Gaia: Look, I know that you do not agree with my ideals, but I truly believe your policies are destroying our environment. Capitalism is thriving under your economic rationalist hegemony; the environment is primarily another resource to be exploited for short term, economic gains.¹⁰ This capitalist global economy which you advocate is depleting the planet of trees, fresh water sources and in its wake it leaves pollution and destruction. The never ending cycle of consumption, which you encourage is like a rampaging, starving beast, constantly relying on cheap natural resources, it is never satisfied... it is devouring the environment, and leaving us nothing but shit!

⁹ Anarchists support a stateless society, where all individuals are free to run their lives without imposed or oppressive laws which tell them what they must do; anarchist's feel they should be able to follow their own consciences, they also believe that humans are instinctively moral and rational. Heywood, A., *Political Ideologies: an introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003, p.188.

¹⁰ The Howard Government focuses on policies which support a growing economy, for example deregulating the market and cutting taxes, they also reduce spending on social welfare policies, and especially environmental funding. Jamrozik, A., *Social Policy in the Post-Welfare State: Australians on the Threshold of the 21st Century*, Pearson Education Australia, Frenchs Forest, 2001, p. 6.

John Howard: Consumerism is vital to our economy it creates a healthy GDP.¹¹

Gaia: (Sighing) I almost feel sorry for you. (Aloud) Your values promote greed and competition in the guise of individualism and privatization, old community values such as mutual co-operation, along with the environment are sadly being destroyed.¹² It's not just the carbon emissions that are causing global warming; it's compounded by many factors such as consumerism.¹³ Humans are consuming above and beyond the average human needs, encouraged by your policies, which feeds on natural resources like fossil fuels. (Becoming increasingly upset) It makes me sick; all of you in parliament who supposedly represent the people... well let me tell you... YOU don't represent me... It is your capitalist policies which are throwing the environment into CHAOS!

John Howard: Look, I've just about had enough of listening to your foolish ideals. As the Prime Minister of Australia I don't need to justify myself to you, besides it is my duty to create a strong economy, get Australia back on its feet after the debacle of the 1990's and Keating's "the recession we had to have".¹⁴ (He continues his tirade, almost parrot fashion) We need a strong economy to compete in the growing global economy; we need to associate with others of like mind, such as my good friend Mr. Bush. If a little air quality has to be sacrificed along the way, then I'm sorry, but that's life!

¹¹ The current Australian Liberal Government reflects a capitalist, neo-liberalism hegemony which is commonly referred to in Australia as economic rationalism. One of the dominant ideals which underpin this theory is the paramount importance of a healthy, growing economy driven by the capitalist free market and consumerism which is reflected by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Mendes, P., *Australia's Welfare Wars*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2003, p.4.

¹² The Howard government's policies encourage Australians to be more productive and participate fully in the free market economy, as they state their primary aims are the "facilitation of wealth so all may enjoy the highest possible standards of living". Australian Liberal Party: policies website, *Our Beliefs*, [online] URL: <http://liberal.org.au>, accessed 12th May 2005.

Intentional communities based on anarchist principles seek to foster old community values like mutual aid and support, co-operation and consensus governing. An-ok, I., *Why Intentional Communities People Should Support Anarchism*, [online] URL: <http://anarchistcommunitarian.net>, accessed on 5th May 2005.

¹³ Many scientist believe that narrowing the causes of global warming down to carbon emissions and how to deal with these, when global warming is compounded by many factors, for example the growth in population leading to more consumption, hampers finding wider solutions to the problem. Action needs to be taken to curtail the compounding factors of global warming, which would further help reduce the many risk factors. Shellenberger & Nordhaus, *The death of Environmentalism*, 2004, [online] URL: <http://www.thebreakthrough.org/>, accessed on 5th May 2005.

¹⁴ The Howard government used the recession which happened during the previous Labor party as a platform to launch its capitalist based economic policies. *Howard as Prime Minister*, [online] URL: <http://www.politicalinformation.net>, accessed on 12th May 2005.

Throughout this somewhat heated conversation, the lift our two strange bed fellows have been traveling in, has developed a curious shuddering motion and a strange rasping noise is coming from the cables which suspend it. Suddenly all the lights go out, and they plummet down a few floors, before coming to a grinding halt... the two occupants are thrown to the floor in darkness.

Scene 3. – In the motionless, gloom of the lift. A somewhat dazed Mr. Howard appears to be having some problems breathing

Gaia: (Singing happily) “...to see the Earth before it touched his hand, la la, a greedy man never knows what he’s done... la la, a natural beauty should be...”¹⁵ Mr. Howard, are you OK.

John Howard: Yes I’m fine, just a little bruised, I’m a bit claustrophobic, but I’ll live... (Somewhat perplexed by Gaia, he thinks to himself) I’ve never really got this close to one of those ‘hippie types’ before. She seems surprisingly relaxed and unperturbed by our precarious situation, I’m sure I heard one of those cables snap... (Out loud he says) The emergency phone does not appear to be working, and it’s getting very hot and stuffy. Do you think these cable will hold our weight for long?

Gaia: Don’t worry it’ll hold our physical weight, but the weight of your conscience and your environmental crimes, now that’s another matter...and you may as well get use to the hot stuffy air conditions Mr. Howard, because that’s how it’s going to be everyday on planet Earth when the effects of global warming really take a hold.¹⁶

¹⁵ Young, N, ‘Natural Beauty’, [CD] *Harvest Moon*, Reprise Records, 1992.

¹⁶ Global warming is caused by carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses accumulating within the Earth’s atmosphere and trapping heat, which results in a rise in climatic temperatures. These gases are largely a resulted of human activity such as burning fossil fuels. World temperatures are estimated to rise by five degrees Celsius, but we are already seeing record temperatures worldwide every year. Gordon, A., & Suzuki, D., *It’s a matter of survival*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 11.

John Howard: (Exasperated) can't you think of anything else... I've just saved 170,000 hectares of Tasmanian old growth forest from logging.¹⁷

Gaia: Were not easily fooled, those areas were considered economically unsuitable for logging by the woodchip industry, irreplaceable ecosystems and old growth forests are still going under the chainsaw.¹⁸

John Howard: (Ignoring the rebuttal he continues) and our excellent new initiatives to bury the ozone depleting gases, Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) it's leading edge technology and a real solution to global warming.¹⁹

Gaia: It's expensive and untried. Yes it's a solution alright... a solution so that the fossil fuel industry can still thrive.

John Howard: And we are solving Sydney's water shortages by diverting water from areas with an over abundance ...²⁰

Gaia: Well, with all due respect, that's the most idiotic plan yet, economically unsound and will without a doubt create another environmental disaster ...

¹⁷ Koutsoukis, J., *Howard Trades Trees for Jobs*, 2004, [online] URL:<http://theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/06/1096949589167.html?oneclick=true#>, accessed on 19th May 2005.

¹⁸ Deforestation has a major impact on global warming, not only are trees responsible for cleansing the air by absorbing carbon dioxide. The clearing and burning of world forests produces 25% of yearly carbon emissions. Mirabile, J., *Causes of Global Warming*, [online] URL: http://ecobridge.org/content/g_cse.htm, accessed 24th May 2005.

¹⁹ The Australian Government funded a research program into options for the disposal of greenhouse gases. One proposal is to burying the gases, termed Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS). Mr. Howard reportedly said this was a "long term solution to greenhouse issues". Burying the gases means that the eighty percent of Australia's energy derived from fossil fuels can be continue with out reduction and economic loss. Burton, B., *Plans to Bury Greenhouse Gases a Fantasy*, 2004, [online] URL: <http://www.ipsnews.net/africa/interna.asp?idnews=25631>, accessed 19th May 2005.

²⁰ Many of the water shortages we are experiencing in Australia and worldwide are heavily compounded by Global warming. The Earth's changing climate is resulting in reduced rainfall and droughts; therefore seasonal rainfall is failing. Gordon, A., & Suzuki, D., *It's a matter of survival*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 80.

John Howard: You're just like the mass of Australians, they love to talk politics over the kitchen table, but when it comes down to real action, they run to the comfort of their couch, watch TV, maybe dabble in a little organic gardening... Everyone talks about saving the environment, but they still enjoy the fruits of capitalism, they wouldn't give it up. (Condescendingly) I suppose you also have all the answers, where so many well educated, civil servants have apparently failed?

Gaia: Well Mr. Howard I think I do. For a start you can ratify the Kyoto agreement, really start cutting down on carbon emissions and implement some radical, environmentally sustainable alternatives to energy.²¹ But as I said before, real change and real solutions are going to come from the people, from a grass roots level, a bottom up approach.²² Consumer patterns are starting to change, people are demanding more environmentally friendly products, and moving away from using harmful products like chemicals and plastic bags.²³ They are reusing and recycling ...

John Howard: They are just swapping one consumer brand for another...

Gaia: I don't buy it so to speak (Laughs)... there's a real revolution taking place... mindsets are changing and people are consciously thinking about their buying habits and how these might negatively impact on the environment. As I said before, global warming is caused by a combination of factors, the way the western civilization lives today is a major one. Real solutions to solving environmental problems are through direct, radical

²¹ In June 2002, Mr. Howard refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol claiming it "would cost [Australia] jobs and damage our industry". Roarty, M., *The Kyoto Commitment*, 2002, [online], URL: <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SCI/kyoto.htm#response>, assessed 19th May 2005.

²² Anarchists believe that solutions to environmental sustainability will come from the people, a bottom up approach. They believe that the top down, government solutions are those which consider the environment secondarily and are ultimately oppressive and aimed at keeping the particular government and their hegemony in power. An-ok, I., *Why Intentional Communities People Should Support Anarchism*, [online] Available URL: <http://anarchistcommunitarian.net>, accessed on 5th May 2005.

²³ There is a growing demand for more environmental products, such as paper products like toilet paper which is 100% recycled. The more the people demand such products the less need there will be for wood from old growth forests. At a grass roots level locally, Huskisson and Kangaroo Valley have become plastic bag free zones, as they are concerned about the huge quantities of plastic bags as waste in the environment. Dee, J., *First Australian Mainland Towns to Ban Plastic Check-out Bags*, 2005, [online] <http://www.planetark.com/plasticbags/kangahuskimr.pdf>, accessed 26th May 2005.

action. We have taken this approach by establishing environmentally sustainable communities, based on anarchistic principles of shared values and mutual co-operation.²⁴ Our main aim is to live peacefully in harmony with nature not at its expense.

John Howard: (Yawns), (aside) My God she's incessant. I should have taken the stairs!

Gaia: We have turned our backs on mass consumerism, and endeavor to supply all our own basic needs; we produce our own food, grown without the use of chemicals or use the L.E.T.S bartering system.²⁵ Our homes are designed to be energy and water efficient; they have minimal impact upon the natural environment.²⁶ We car pool, cycle or walk to reduce carbon emissions and try to be mostly vegetarian, eating only indigenous meats like kangaroo.²⁷ We are re-establishing the native forests and try to live by nature's rhythms.

John Howard: ...and free love, I've heard it all before...a minority of 'alternative' people turn their back on society, but they soon grow sick of living without the basic commodities like leaf blowers and TV's... your efforts won't make much of an impact globally.

Gaia: It's just basic stuff... it may appear to be a drop in the ocean, but it's a real environmental solution. The tiniest seeds have the potential to produce a huge tree. We

²⁴ Mandala, a Queensland intentional community is run on anarchist principles of mutual co-operation. The co-founder Bill Smale reflects that by their nature "intentional communities resist the oppressive, criminal and environmentally disastrous values and practices of state power and bourgeois individualism". Metcalf, B., *Co-operative Lifestyles in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 114.

²⁵ Local Exchange and Trading System (L.E.T.S) is a non-profit community based co-operative, where basic goods; services and skills are exchanged instead of money. Purchase, G., *Anarchism and Ecology*, Black Rose Books Ltd, Montreal, 1997, p. 85.

²⁶ Environmentally sustainable homes are made from local mud brick, and recycled materials. They are orientated to maximize the use of the sun to warm and light homes, as well as to catch solar energy, which powers the homes. Water tanks and water saving devices are used in the homes, such as shower heads, reuse of grey water and composting toilets. Smith, I., & Thomas, A., (Eds), *The Australian Self-Sufficiency Handbook*, Penguin Books Australia Ltd., Ringwood, 1992, pp. 3-55.

²⁷ Cattle are a major economic resource and food source for the western world; their introduction worldwide not only destroys fragile ecosystems but produces huge amounts of methane in the Earth's atmosphere, contributing to global warming. Gordon, A., & Suzuki, D., *It's a matter of survival*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 12.

are a working example of how people can change from a consumer lifestyle to sustainable lifestyle, we are helping to spread the message, along with the working education centre we have established; I know we are making a difference.²⁸

John Howard: You are very optimistic I'll give you that.

Gaia: Well Mr. Howard I invite you and all your ministers to join us and find out for yourself, if you experience our way of sustainable living, you may be more open to initiating such practices in your policies. We believe it's possible for a city to be run like a self sustaining eco-system, that's not parasitic on its surroundings. Sydney could become more sustainable by collecting storm water and recycling its waste water, it seems so easy; it's not that we haven't got the technology... Singapore is a big, modern city; it has already taken the steps towards water sustainability.²⁹

John Howard: You'd have us all wearing home-made, rainbow clothing, honestly a sustainable city. (Laughs)

Gaia: It may sound rather out there... but... I think that cities should somehow be contained under a huge clear, semi-permeable bubble. This would mean that they would be forced to find some way of becoming environmentally sustainable communities, co-operating amongst themselves and using clean energy sources like solar which would benefit them all, otherwise they would all die within their self-created, toxic atmosphere. (Laughs)...but seriously on a more plausible level... buildings within the city and maybe industrial complexes could be constructed within glass domes or pyramids, these would

²⁸ Extensive education programs for adults and children are necessary to create awareness about environmental problems and in order to implement solutions and changes from a grass roots level. The intentional community, Mandala runs an Environmental Education Centre as a shared community project, their aims are to educate and mentor the wider community about sustainable living practices. Metcalf, B., *Co-operative Lifestyles in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 114.

²⁹ Sydney has been piping water hundreds of kilometers from the Shoalhaven River to subsidize its water shortage. Until recently Singapore has also largely relied on water piped from Malaysia. It now realizes the benefits both economically and environmentally in using more sustainable solutions to its water problems and has implemented initiatives towards this, for example collecting water from storm drains, recycling waste water for human consumption and industrial use. These sustainable initiatives are hoped to result in Singapore no longer being dependant on Malaysia for water. Ruey, J., *Singapore Malaysia and the Water Issue*, 2001, [online] <http://www.reuters.com/>, accessed 4th April 2005.

be like mini biospheres with plants and trees which would help to clean the air along with using cleaner energy sources; filtration systems would further monitor and reduce toxic emissions. Cities should be car free zones, cars could be parked at various car parks on the outskirts, and then everyone would have to catch buses or trains, further reducing pollution. Trees and parks should be in abundance...

John Howard: Well it sounds like a bad sci-fi novel, to me!

Gaia: We don't think it's an impossible dream; Australia has the perfect climate for solar energy, now there's an immediate solution...

John Howard: I could look into the Singapore idea... but I really haven't got time to spend waiting around. When is someone coming, (Loosens his tie), it's becoming increasingly hot and the air... (Almost in a panic he slips to the floor).

Gaia: Mr. Howard I think you should try and relax...

John Howard: I'm finding it increasingly harder to breath in here and my heart seems to be racing...

Gaia: You might be having a panic attack, OK, take a deep breath, relax... that's it... forget you are in a lift and instead see yourself in a forest, full of birds, cool clean air, at one with nature, peaceful, relaxed...

Scene 4. - The solitude is soon broken by a loud tapping noise on the roof of the lift. Bright torch light momentarily blinds the occupants.

Tony Abbott and Peter Costello: (In unison) Mr. Howard, are you there, are you OK?

John Howard: Yes, I'm fine, just get me the hell out of here, where have you been, I've been stuck here for ages ...bloody technology you can't rely on it!

Gaia: (Quietly laughs) Abbott and Costello those two clowns!

Within minutes the lift doors open and Mr. Howard emerges somewhat disheveled and bruised; he brushes off the attempts of his ministers to help him...

John Howard: (Quietly singing to himself) “A natural beauty should be, preserved like a monument to nature...”³⁰

Tony Abbott: Crikey, I think Mr. Howard must have hit his head pretty badly when the lift fell...

Peter Costello: Might be a good idea to take him to hospital for a quick check up (Aside) if we can find a bed for him...

In all the excitement Gaia slips quietly past, and takes the stairs to the conference.

³⁰ Young, N, ‘Natural Beauty’, [CD] *Harvest Moon*, Reprise Records, 1992.

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