

Opening Aesthetics

Posthumanism and the Crisis of Form in the Anthropocene

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The ongoing collapse of the Earth System's functionality is fundamentally reshaping our thinking about nature and the conditions of existence on Earth. As an era of ontological destabilisation, the Anthropocene can be described as a dark ecology that radically deforms our sensibilities, guiding multidisciplinary attempts to grasp a new naturecultural regime. Anthropocene aesthetics is an encounter with the more-than-human forces of the Earth System that goes beyond traditional art forms and aesthetic strategies. In our essay, we explore contemporary aesthetic approaches to the Anthropocene, highlighting the posthuman aspect of Anthropocene aesthetics. In our view, the defining aesthetic trends of the Anthropocene are determined by the post-anthropocentric or posthuman turn. Posthuman art is not about nonhumans creating art without us. Rather, it foregrounds the naturecultural forces that define and shape life on our planet. | *Keywords: Aesthetics, Anthropocene, Formless, Open Aesthetics, Posthumanism*

1. Introduction

The collapse of the functionality of the Earth System is reshaping our thinking about nature and the very conditions of terrestrial existence. As an era of ontological destabilisation, the Anthropocene can be described as a dark ecology that radically deforms our sensibilities, orienting multidisciplinary attempts to grasp the naturecultural changes taking place (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016, p. 53). Anthropocene aesthetics is an encounter with the more-than-human forces of the Earth System that goes beyond traditional art forms and aesthetic strategies. In our essay, our aim is to elaborate diverse contemporary aesthetic approaches to the Anthropocene, highlighting their posthuman aspects in particular. The defining aesthetic trends of the Anthropocene can be integrated into what has been described as the 'posthuman' or 'post-anthropocentric' turn.

At first glance, it may seem paradoxical to speak of posthuman art or more-than-human art. Indeed, even Graham Harman, a *par excellence* post-

anthropocentric philosopher, recognises that only humans can make art for humans (Harman, 2019). Posthuman art is not, therefore, about nonhumans creating art without us. Rather, thematically speaking, Anthropocene art foregrounds the naturecultural forces that define life on our planet. In this article, we describe the posthuman aesthetics of the Anthropocene as an ‘open aesthetics’, defined by three key characteristics, all of which relate to contemporary posthumanisms. The first component of open aesthetics is the crisis of aesthetic form; the second is Timothy Morton’s dark ecology, which connects to the Anthropocene sublime, or ‘eco-gothic’. The third is aesthetic planetarity, related to contemporary nonmodern interpretations of the Anthropocene condition. A genuinely ecological art, as Morton underlines, is based upon the recognition that “things are open” (Morton, 2021, p. 14). We shall discuss the open aesthetics of the Anthropocene based on the crisis of form, then indicate the new materialist and speculative realist aesthetic possibilities of planetary aesthetics, and finally explore the contemporary aesthetic conceptualisation of darkness in relation to dark ecology and the dark sublime. In our essay, in addition to Eva Horn’s work examining the crisis of aesthetic form, we rely on Susan Ballard’s planetary aesthetics and Morton’s dark ecology theory, while relating their insights to several canonical examples of Anthropocene art.

By open aesthetics we understand a speculative combination of this trinity of Anthropocene aesthetics, which, like the forces of nature, leads artistic gestures back to darkened ecology altered by the collapse of the functionality of the Earth System. The first step in this process is the breaking of classical aesthetic form, which can no longer be completely separated from the geological materiality of the planet and its planetary geomedial archive (Colebrook, 2015, p. 10). The posthuman turn envisioned by open aesthetics resituates art in a new, more-than-human framework, while deconstructing the green romanticism of traditional Romantic nature artforms, placing art in a planetary material framework beyond modernity and humanist anthropocentrism. Open posthuman aesthetic integrates more-than-human creativity and Anthropocene artistic endeavors within the geological forces of the Earth System. In the following, we seek to describe the open aesthetics generated by the crisis of form.

We may speak of a chaotic and – in geohistorical terms – unprecedentedly fast transformation of the biosphere and the ecosphere, profoundly altering the basic structures of life on Earth (Hamilton, 2017, p. 15). The scientific breakthrough of the Anthropocene determines what kind of narratives and knowledge we can share about the Anthropocene. After all, the Anthropocene as a scientific paradigm attempts to describe the planetary system of interconnections and relationships that also determine how humans perceive their home planet. What could an art of groundlessness, extinction and collapse look like? What defines the ecologically open art of the Anthropocene epoch? What forms may be associated with the suspension and failure of human perception? What new Gothic or darkened artistic language do we need to develop that can address the new geological era emerging

around us? Such questions are central concerns of ecologically open aesthetics. If „closure makes possible internal complexity; and internal complexity makes possible increased openness to the environment”, as Cary Wolfe claims (Wolfe, 2021, p. 60), then arguably today we are seeing a crisis of closure, endangering the very continuation of life on Earth, with societies globally losing their ability to regulate inputs and outputs. Dark ecology expresses this atmospheric and attitudinal rearrangement, which has serious aesthetic and ontological consequences.

The first defining element of ecologically open aesthetics is the crisis or breakage of aesthetic form. Open aesthetics relates the changes and collapses in the functionality of the Earth System to the crisis of form. However, it does not see this collapse as an apocalyptic, hopeless condition, but rather as an invitation to explore the nonhuman/posthuman potentials of a more-than-human aesthetic field that can contribute to creative adaptation in the Anthropocene as a new planetary state. After all, as Eva Horn emphasises, Anthropocene aesthetics is primarily a crisis and strange transformation of form (Horn, 2020).

The second trend we shall analyse is the darkening or ‘gothicization’ of ecology under which we do not understand traditional monstrous Gothic tropes such as vampires or werewolves (while of course we cannot ignore the renaissance of horror that has strongly permeated contemporary pop culture). Following Timothy Morton, we will call this damaged, destabilised ecological state that has become alien, terrifying, and haunting dark ecology, which represents a departure from the notion of nature as independent of humans, peaceful, stable, and orderly, a Romantic view of nature as ‘untouched wilderness’ that became consolidated during modernity (Morton, 2016). Darkening entails the deanthropomorphisation of the artistic gaze and a radical transformation of perception.

Thirdly, the duality of formlessness and darkened sensibility can lead to a planetary Anthropocene aesthetic. However, this eco-gothic, melancholic vision and post-anthropocentric perspective shift should not be accompanied by gestures of fatalism. The Anthropocene demands a new sensory openness, part of which lies in confronting the darkness of the climate crisis, making us strangely contemporaneous with the Anthropocene, despite the vast differences of scale involved. Only radical opening can lead to a fractured yet planetary aesthetic of the Anthropocene, joining together the changed functionality of the Earth System as an active geophysical force with naturecultural, more-than-human material dynamisms and an expanded and loosened framework of a planetary posthuman aesthetic. Indeed, the exemplars of Anthropocene art, from various fields we analyse in this article, connect these themes.

2. Anthropocene Aesthetics as the Crisis of Form

The Anthropocene can be grasped as an ungrounding, with considerable aesthetic consequences. Contemporary aesthetics and cultural studies can approach this epoch through the inversion, deformation and crisis of aesthetic

form. However, the Anthropocene is not only a period of human transformation, but as Travis Holloway emphasises, the collapse of the functionality of the Earth System has a destabilising effect on life itself, as an uncontrollable self-perturbation (Holloway, 2022). The posthuman turn of the Anthropocene entails that we must attempt to conceptualise in parallel the transformation of ecological relations and the problematic of artistic form(lessness). Open aesthetics seeks to grasp the stakes of the collapse of the Great Divides of modernity, especially the binary of nature and culture. As Wolfe explains, ecological art is about „experiments in how to think anew the relationship between nature and culture” (Wolfe, 2021, p. 43).

According to Eva Horn, the question of form is central to Anthropocene aesthetics (Horn, 2020, pp. 159–160). The emergence of geological time, the role of climate change, and the transition from human-centred linearity to geohistory together necessitate the transformation of form in the Anthropocene. In Horn’s view, the three hallmarks of Anthropocene aesthetics are latency, entanglement, and the clash of vast differences in scale (Horn, 2020, pp. 160–162). This trinity culminates in the crisis of form. It is important to emphasise that these features or challenges are both epistemic and aesthetic in nature, that is, they affect cognition and the nature of representation. One could claim that the aesthetic realm is only meaningful for living beings and therefore

[p]osthumanism cannot possibly develop a proper theory of aesthetics unless it upholds the self/environment distinction in the strict autopoietic sense of biotic systems. Absent a living organism that undergoes some kind of transformation due to environmental stimuli, all talk about aesthetics becomes meaningless. (Strathausen, 2022, p. 344)

Anthropocene aesthetics poses a challenge not only to human exceptionalism but also to modern aesthetic representation techniques, and even the environment/self distinction. Being ecological means recognising openness.¹ The Anthropocene affects not only the thematic content of art, but also its form. We must grasp the nature of planetary transformation, and the internal dynamism of form when we talk about ecologically open aesthetics. However, the internal dynamism of form is determined by the functioning of the Earth System and the various hybrid networks and assemblages that modify and distort it.

Such an approach is exemplified by conceptual artist Mark Dion’s New England Digs series. In Dion’s work, randomly assorted ‘cabinets of curiosities’ are assembled from excavations conducted in garbage tips. Instead of a moralising, excessively direct and literal ecopolitical commentary, Dion claims that “here objects are allowed to exist as what they are or were, without metaphor, noninterpretive, not even archaeological” (Winton, 2017). It is not a case

¹ This by no means entails that the self/environment distinction can always be abandoned. In an operative sense, each living thing, and even inorganic communication systems, need to maintain their boundaries, otherwise noise would make their functioning all but impossible. What open aesthetics takes into account is that, despite the local validity of inside/outside boundaries, our environment ‘is’ us.

of incriminating a collective humanity,² but rather of showcasing an alternative, non-consumerist, reverent attitude to everyday objects otherwise treated by Western culture as disposable. What this allows for is a deliberate decomposition of the separation between inside and outside, environment and culture, blurring the line between art gallery and rubbish tip.

Horn's emphasis on the crisis of form suggests why it is so difficult to give an adequate account of anthropogenic environmental change. After all, the various art forms and formal languages of yesterday's modernism were created at the same time as the economic structures and patterns of thought that caused the ecological crisis. It seems that the Anthropocene, as the crisis of modernity, cannot be approached with the aesthetic tools of the Moderns – their evaluative criteria are insufficient in relation to representing the global collapse of the functionality of the Earth System. This does not necessarily entail a dramatic form: Dion's installations are quiet, yet poignant. In Horn's view, anything that qualifies as Anthropocene art must reflect upon 'and' perform the crisis and radical transformation of form, which cannot be limited by thematic references alone. Indeed, the latter are all but absent from Dion's works, yet the latter are still notably 'ecological' in a functional sense, integrating literal garbage into the art system without thereby degrading art into 'mere' trash.

Because it is originally a natural science-based approach, the Anthropocene 'itself' has not attracted significant aesthetic reflection, decades of ecologically engaged art notwithstanding. Sensationalist media representations of spectacular catastrophes such as forest fires or melting ice caps rarely amount to a coherent aesthetic program. Rather, the media foregrounds certain preconceived beliefs and assumptions about the ecological crisis. Because of its bias and selectivity, the mass media cannot represent complex issues with nuance (Luhmann, 2000). Neither can superficial art capture the complexity of the Anthropocene condition, presenting us with only fragmentary apocalyptic visions at best, merely pedagogical calls to action at worst. While we do not wish to bracket or completely exclude works of art reflecting on apocalypse or politics, it is nevertheless worth drawing attention to how open aesthetics helps us cultivate care instead of moral panic or hysteria.

Regarding form, we can discover an interesting duality in Horn's discourse, since she simultaneously discusses the transformation of aesthetic form and the Anthropocene as a new mode of being in – and with – the world (Horn, 2020, p. 165–167). Anthropocene aesthetics must reflect on the cognitive and philosophical difficulties of perceiving ecological crisis through the crisis of form. The differences in scale that characterise the Anthropocene overshadow and rewrite the question of human agency (Woods, 2014; Dürbeck and Hüpkes, 2021). Analogously, one of Dion's later works, a plan for an 'Anthropocene Monument' would utilise the formlessness of asphalt

² Indeed, the Anthropocene is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. Its effects are wildly unevenly distributed, and taking into account such naturecultural differences is an important task for the aesthetics of the future (Henriksen, Creely and Mehta, 2022).

to erase traces of human activity via an artificial material (Dion, 2017). Here, the message is notably more explicit and even rather misanthropic: the implication is that we deserve erasure, and we ourselves are co-agents of our own demise, together with nonhuman forms of agency.³

The three challenges facing Anthropocene aesthetics lead to the crisis of form diagnosed by Horn. Firstly, latency or withdrawal is a consequence of form being difficult to decipher, for nonhuman agency is often hidden, or downright encrypted. Under ‘encryption’, we mean that the ecological crisis and the collapse of the Earth System cover a number of complex interconnected phenomena that are difficult to understand due to their scale, making epistemology difficult (Richardson, 2020). Latency entails the withdrawal or concealment of phenomena and things from each other and from representation and human perception.⁴ Secondly, entanglement means the blurring and confusion of boundaries, aesthetic structures, and contours. This necessitates attentiveness to the coexistence of humans and nonhumans, a key value for posthumanist thought. One minimal criterion of ‘posthuman’ art may be thematic and/or formal integration of, or reflection upon, “the intricacies of more/than/human entanglements, our co-being and co-becoming with the world and its materiality” (Stępień, 2022, p. 43). The formalism of modernist aesthetics and modern anthropocentric ontologies broadly have entered a terminal crisis, and are in the process of being replaced by a hybrid aesthetics emphasising the interconnections or assemblages of the Anthropocene. Entanglement questions the critical position of external observation, critique, or systematisation. The aesthetics of entanglement problematizes modern epistemologies, replacing dualistic categories with chimerical assemblages and hybrid relationships. Entanglement entails the radicalisation of the assembly of form, running the risk of formless plasticity.

The third feature of Anthropocene aesthetics is the intensification of scale shifts. According to Horn, in the Anthropocene we are experiencing a dramatic clash of scales, since the Anthropocene as a geological epoch foregrounds completely incommensurable temporal and spatial levels within and beyond human history. We inhabit a deformed, yet animate environment, where various transgressions, mutations, institutional distortions, and dysfunctions are nothing more than the shadows of climate change, the penultimate ‘hyper-object’ (Morton, 2013). It is not just a matter of different measures, but of incommensurability. Both micro and macroscale effects are present, which often remain undetectable to immediate human perception until it is too late.

³ By foregrounding the agency of nonhuman beings and things, the New Materialisms and New/Speculative Realisms redistribute agency, undoing the humanism of political modernity, while also demonstrating that the social imaginary can be conceptualised beyond critical methodologies (Skiveren, 2023). The accusation that New Materialism undermines modernity is correct, although in our normative view, this is not as problematic as advocates of modernity claim (Boysen, 2025, pp. 138–164).

⁴ This is a key component of Speculative Realist / Object-Oriented Ontology philosopher, Graham Harman’s system: “Object-oriented philosophy has a single basic tenet: the withdrawal of objects from all perceptual and causal relations” (Harman, 2005, p. 20; see also Ivanov, 2025; Dudek, 2025).

Aesthetic visualisations of the Anthropocene must account for geological deep time, which stretches our capacity for comprehension to breaking point.

3. The Dark Sublime and Dark Ecology

New aesthetic strategies are needed in the Anthropocene, as we encounter nature in radically new ways. However, it is not possible to return to an idealised Romantic nature. Something entirely different surrounds us, the emergence of withdrawn objects simultaneously reveals and encrypts ecological causal relationships. Shadows appear around us as we gaze from the abyss into the radiant darkness of Anthropocene contemporaneity. Timothy Morton's Speculative Realist/Object-Oriented Ontology-based philosophy proposes an ontology of the Anthropocene epoch, introducing concepts and perspectives that have proven fruitful in aesthetics too. The practice of philosophy, be it ontology, ethics or aesthetics, is, for Morton, inseparable from the naturecultural relations of the Anthropocene. The latter sees the Anthropocene as an overarching framework that defines our *Zeitgeist* (Morton, 2009, p. 142). Understanding the ontological status of things is central to Morton's aesthetic theory. If we are able to say something intelligible about the ecological crisis through new concepts and philosophical directions, the fundamental dynamics of our predicament may be revealed. True to realist philosophy, Morton, in the volume *Ecology Without Nature*, commits to an ecological aesthetics that seeks to take stock of the gravity of the ecological crisis while also refusing to accept nature-culture binaries – indeed, the very concept of nature is no longer applicable. Rather, entanglement implies that “there is not even nothing beyond inside and outside” (Morton, 2009, p. 78).

In their co-authored monograph on the Anthropocene, Horn and Hannes Bergthaller highlight that one of the defining elements of Anthropocene aesthetics is that nature cannot be taken for granted (Horn and Bergthaller, 2019, pp. 15–20). There can be no total objectification or universal mode of representation in the Anthropocene. At first glance, it may seem that Morton and others are expounding some holistic ontological doctrine that proclaims the indivisible unity of humanity and world, but this is not the case. A key ontological characteristic of the Anthropocene is ‘withdrawal and concealment’. Here, a strong parallel can be observed between Horn's eco-aesthetics and Morton's dark ecology, as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of ‘planetarity’ (to be addressed below). Our terrifying entanglement with an increasingly toxic ecology does not entail the anthropomorphisation of reality. Neither does entanglement reduce the otherness, hiddenness and weirdness of real objects. We must return to the things themselves while abandoning the illusion that we can ever exhaust their reality. Dark ecology is epistemological and ontological, deconstructing the concept of environment considered as an Outside or Other to human activity (the ‘Nature’ of Romanticism). It is not just a question of previous cultural images about nature becoming uncertain, but rather of the crisis of the critical observer as such. Dark ecology replaces nature with nature's ‘withdrawal’; the latter is neither an alterity outside culture, nor is it a completely objective scientific fact subject to scientific observation.

What is dark ecology really about? What does Morton mean by a ‘return’ to a dark ecology that leaves nature behind? (Morton, 2009, p. 180). The more we reflect on the environment and nature, the more we become alienated and distanced from ecological relations. Therefore, the classical aesthetics of nature, the Romantic depiction of nature and the classical sublime are replaced by new aesthetic strategies. However, to achieve this, we must reject prior concepts of environment and nature. One of the basic elements of dark ecology is the questioning of the Romantic idea of the environment as an outside, separate from society. A posthuman perspective is needed that can lead us back to changed ecological relations. Another characteristic of dark ecology is that it enacts a ‘return to place’, even if this place is grotesquely deformed and even uninhabitable, as is often the case in New Weird narratives (Dang, 2025; Turnbull, Platt and Searle, 2022).

According to Holloway, the functionality of the altered Earth System entails that encounters with nature are transformed, even disappearing, inviting creative responses different from the Romantics and their idea of a nonhuman natural wilderness outside our realm (Holloway, 2022, p. 24). We cannot reflect on sublime nature by immersing ourselves in our inner world or self, and neither can we hide behind moral categories from the threat of ecological crisis. In dark ecology, the destruction of nature is inevitable, but inevitability does not mean the deterministic-fatalistic exclusion or abandonment of all future aesthetic inquiry. We still have opportunities for radical ontological and artistic questioning, but this leads to the recognition of negativity.

What is the consequence of the desubjectification of aesthetic perception? How do we perceive dark ecology if we cannot rely on previous cultural patterns or romantic prefigurations? The crisis of form affects the observer’s position. Indeed, external observation becomes just as impossible as introspection. ‘What exists is unsustainable’, including the conceptual dualism of ‘subjectivity versus environment’. Instead of extended subjectivity, dark ecology must work with an impersonal, hybrid image of natureculture. According to Morton’s diagnosis, “something like an animism – an awareness of nonhuman agency, consciousness, affect, significance beyond the human—bursts out” of the crisis of modernity, “in addition to anthropocentric stories about the human subject, steam engines, and the Anthropocene, with its callous disregard of nonhumans, let alone consumerism with its ravenous desires to eat the world. And that, uncannily, white Western “moderns” have somehow backed into a position not unlike indigenous spiritualities despite and sometimes ironically because of our very attempts to leap out of the web of embodiment, indigeneity, dependence on a biosphere, and so on” (Morton, 2016, pp. 94–95).

In contrast to the classical, self-evident vision of external nature fixed during modernity and Romanticism, we need a new aesthetic capable of ontologizing changed naturecultural assemblages. It is not just about capturing or scientifically examining ‘natural’ beings and our ecological relationships: the Anthropocene has aesthetic consequences too. We are dealing with the revitalisation or weird necrovitality of ecology, since in the Anthropocene, dark

ecology continuously comes to the fore as a strange, unusual, surprising actor. Dark ecology is more than strange; it is weird: “coexisting, we are thinking future coexistence. Predicting it and more: keeping the unpredictable one open. Yet such a future, the open future, has become taboo. Because it is real, yet beyond concept. Because it is weird” (Morton, 2016, p. 1). We must proceed, in the ‘aftermath’ of nature, taking the end of the world (which has already happened) as our point of departure.

Entanglement means that dark ecology permeates and even sucks into itself, like a black hole, natural beings, whether living or inanimate. Nature in crisis and destruction have more to do with death, with living death, than with life as an exclusively positive term. Consequently, ecoaesthetic practice, and ecocriticism in general, as a political gesture, must join the dead. We must learn to love the disgusting, the insensitive, and the meaningless. The works of Alexis Rockman exemplify such an attitude. In his paintings, we see seascapes and landscapes that have been irreversibly altered by the unintended consequences of human activity. Yet even these damaged ecologies are not entirely lifeless: quite the opposite, they teem with mutant lifeforms that outlive human presence. Prehistory coagulates with posthumanity, for example, in Rockman’s famous *Manifest Destiny* (2004).⁵

As Neel Ahuja comments,

[A]nimality plays a central role in Rockman’s *Manifest Destiny*, which depicts pelicans, jellyfish, and cetaceans who appear in their future-evolved guises to return to prehistoric, prehuman biological form. A common technique in Rockman’s *oeuvre*, the out-of-time appearance of prehistoric animals indicates both the possibility that biotechnologies may repopulate extinct bodies and the potential that posthuman evolutionary processes will (re)generate curious bodily capacities to serve the needs of adaptation to an environment of extinction. (Ahuja, 2017, p. 47)

This vision of a ‘world-without-us’ is central to posthumanism. However, Ahuja also adds that „the vision of insurgent nonhuman life [...] may easily miss what exists elsewhere” throughout the Global South, namely “the existence of populations rendered debilitated surplus, who navigate and persist despite a necropolitical order that seeks their extinguishment” (Ahuja, 2017, p. 57). Dark ecology is sensitive to such concerns, as Morton indicates:

The planetary awareness vaguely imagined by white Western humans in fantasies about Spice Islands and global trade is now upon us, and it has nothing to do with the rush of deterritorialization, of finding oneself unbound and unhinged. It is almost the opposite. One finds oneself on the insides of much bigger places than those constituted by humans. Whose place is it anyway? (Morton, 2016, p. 11)

⁵ The title of this artwork is a reference to an (in)famous example of colonialist Americana Art, namely *American Progress* by John Gast (1873), in which *Manifest Destiny*, as a disembodied spirit of progress, leads American white settlers onward into the heartland of the North American continent, while chasing away the Native Americans who represent the dark, unenlightened past.

This question is indeed a salient concern in the case of the post-apocalyptic dark ecologies envisioned by Rockman: who owns these visions of a world-without-us?⁶

Darkness is also reflected in another important contemporary eco-aesthetic trend, in addition to dark ecology. The Anthropocene or dark sublime can be interpreted as a reworking of the classical concept of the sublime adapted to contemporary conditions and the planetary state of the Anthropocene. At first glance, the sublime may seem a trivial option, for the enormous ecological transformations and the superhuman power of unbridled nature are evident in the Anthropocene epoch. However, the applicability of the sublime is a complex issue. The problem with the classical, Burkean and Kantian ideas of the sublime is that they left untouched the great dividing lines of modernity, most notably the chasms separating objectified nature and subjectivity, nature and culture, or observed and observer (for an overview, see Haila, 2000). According to Horn, its modern dualism makes the applicability of the classical concept of the sublime problematic for the complex ecological conditions of the 21st century (Horn, 2018).

Therefore, the Anthropocene sublime, which we call the dark sublime, is generated by deconstructing or inverting the Kantian concept of the sublime. Although the essence of the sublime is an experience that stretches human senses, sensitivity, and comprehension, in Kant's philosophy of art, human reason can systematise and harness these elemental forces (Horn, 2018, p. 2). Indeed, the subject is still able to keep this excess of sensuality under control. Kant cites glaciers, snowy peaks, towering storm clouds, lightning, and imposing rocks as examples. As Jean-François Lyotard explains, in the Kantian view, "thinking grasped by the sublime feeling is faced, 'in' nature, with quantities capable only of suggesting a magnitude or a force that exceeds its power of presentation. This powerlessness makes thinking deaf or blind to natural beauty" (Lyotard, 1994, p. 52).

If we recall, based on Horn, that Anthropocene aesthetics emerges from the crisis of form, then Kant's sublime is more problematic. After all, it subordinates the sense of the perceiving subject to understanding, providing a safe distance that makes sublime aesthetic experience possible. The anthropocentric mechanism of perception not only leaves the great dividing line between subject and object intact but also removes the subject to a safe distance from nature. However, there is no outside in the Anthropocene. We are all embedded in the sticky, tentacular, lush conditions of dark ecology, in the „mesh, a sprawling network of interconnection without center or edge" (Morton, 2016, p. 81). Horn also points out that for Kant, the removal of the reflexive arc from the viewer is inevitable for sublime experience, i.e., reflection is made possible precisely by a relatively secure basis or point of perception (Horn, 2018, p. 3). These stable foundations are impossible. There is no safe distance in the mesh: dark ecology,

⁶ In an era of resurgent and often blatantly unapologetic speciesism, where governments legislate to exclude Artificial Intelligence from property ownership (is AI a new slave?), these issues are more relevant than ever (Staver, 2025)

as a precipitous hybrid existence, is the experience of the radiation of darkness, the contemporaneity of falling out of time. There is no stable ground here, no eternal foundation from which we could delight in contemplating the elemental forces of nature.

And yet, dark ecology is beautiful, in its very messiness. In Rockman's *Gowanus* (2013), we observe a blighted post-apocalyptic cityscape, full of pollution and mutant creatures. Yet life has manifestly 'not' ended: evolution continues, and artificial structures function here as sanctuaries for naturecultural hybrids, while even the water pollution is vividly colourful. In Rockman's works, submergence plays a key role: the observer too, is inundated, flooded by rising sea-levels characteristic of the 'disanthropic Earth' (Jonsson, 2025). Indeed, the classical concept of the sublime also included the flooding of our senses, in the sense of sensory 'overload' or intensification. If "imagination gives understanding 'the wealth of material' which overwhelms it", as Kant held (Lyotard, 1994, p. 222), then this will be even more pertinent in the case of a geohistorical and planetary imaginary, informed by the abundance of matter. This overwhelming is a salient feature of the ecological crisis. However, there is no inherent capacity in humans – be it mind or soul, rational understanding or sensory imagination – that could, in itself, fix or stabilise this ecstatic, subversive experience. The Anthropocene is an era of deterritorialization and groundlessness. In the Anthropocene dark sublime, it is precisely the impossibility or crisis of reflection that takes centre stage. The Anthropocene aesthetic, as a crisis of form, erases reflection. For Kant, the sublime overloads the senses, but reason dominates and reorganises this experience. In the Anthropocene, the distortion, inversion, or transformation of form into formlessness is the element that can help us grasp the dark sublime of the Anthropocene.

Lyotard's postmodern instrumentalisation of the sublime centres on inexpressibility and unattainability. In contrast to the Kantian sublime, the postmodern sublime does not seek to mitigate, reduce, or stabilise inaccessibility, but rather, through the distortion of form, it would reveal the unexplorable (Lyotard, 1985). Aesthetic practice here does not restrain the sublime, but rather, through presentation, intensifies it into incomprehensibility. For Lyotard, the sublime is a split in reality that is indescribable. There is no resolution, no containment, no stability. If anything, the postmodern sublime expresses, if only unintentionally, the groundlessness that has become key to Anthropocene aesthetics. In Horn's diagnosis, Anthropocene aesthetics can be interpreted as a continuation of Lyotard's postmodern sublime, in which the collapse of the functionality of the Earth System entails the resistance of the sublime object to any representation (precluding both science denialism and scientism alike).⁷ The distortion and inversion of form, through the three signs of Anthropocene aesthetics, precisely demonstrates the failure to show the unrepresentable, the Hidden, revealing the impossibility of full representation.

⁷ The presumption of knowledge and the preemption of non-knowledge depend upon one another.

The dark sublime or Anthropocene sublime is thus a presentation that actually refers to unrepresentability. Thus, it is not a real representation, but a presentation of alienation or withdrawal. Occularcentrism is part of the larger problem of anthropocentrism, for we are still straining to see differently, as if sight, in itself, as a quasi-divine agency of light, ‘matters’ (Saunders, 2019).

Horn emphasises that the Anthropocene sublime cannot fall back into a Kantian anthropocentric nature aesthetic, nor into discourses of alienation, nor Romantic nostalgia for a ‘lost wild’ nature (Horn, 2018, p. 6). The new hyperobjects represented by climate change or discrete nuclear catastrophe eliminate the possibility of an anthropocentrically understood inner life or personal sphere. Speculative realism or object-oriented ontology directs attention to the specific inner withdrawal of nonhuman beings and everyday objects (Young, 2021). Instead of the mysteries of the processes of the human soul, we should focus on the inner hidden magma-like withdrawal of various atmospheric conditions, microplastics, glass bottles, chewing gum and satellites. In the dark sublime, dark ecology is complemented by the inner hiddenness that characterises the things around us. The Hidden and the background come to the fore, while the anthropocentrically understood inner attunement foregrounded during modernity is suspended: we cannot psychoanalyse our way out of catastrophe.

The emergence of an Anthropocene sublime in contemporary aesthetics has been accompanied by some criticisms. Notable among these is Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, who sees it as an aestheticising and counter-productive celebration of anthropocentric modern control and domination of nature, even if it appears through images of apocalypse, destruction or catastrophe (Fressoz, 2021). Simply put, in Fressoz’s view, foregrounding the negative role of humanity is still synonymous with placing ourselves at the centre of a certain universalist planetary narrative. A strange, inverted demiurgic desire permeates the Anthropocene sublime, which sees the ever-increasing human impact evident in catastrophe. Fressoz designates the Anthropocene sublime as a technological sublime and divides it into two elements. On the one hand, he holds that a condensed, inverted or negative anthropocentrism is present in the iconography of destruction, while we may also identify human evolutionary and technological dominance at work behind the complex processes causing the ecological crisis. In Fressoz’s view, the duality of post-apocalyptic iconography and technological self-confidence constitutes the technological or Anthropocene sublime. Intensified images of disintegration, apolitical inaction and sinful, perverse joy meet, leaving intact the basic ideological structures of modernity. Simultaneously, the techno fetishistic attitude characteristic of much contemporary Anthropocene art also allows for abstraction and distance: satellite images, atmospheric data, and scientific experiments remove us from the actual experience of eco-apocalypse. The iconography of destruction allows for a distant, yet safe, pleasure similar to that of viewing horror films.

As David Lombard, Alison Sperling and Pieter Vermeulen state,

[t]he sublime *in* the Anthropocene seems not only time-tested but also time-worn: in the Anthropocene's "world of wounds" [...] sublime exaltation no longer adequately captures our affective disposition to the worlds – especially as postures of human superiority over a fungible natural environment (at times explicitly fostered through the sublime) have so destructively contributed to current environmental crises. (Lombard, Sperling and Vermeulen, 2025, p. 2)

However, if we recall how Horn deconstructed the Kantian concept of the sublime, we can see that precisely self- distancing is impossible. The crisis of form is also the crisis and dissolution of any external anthropocentric critical position. However, the Anthropocene, as a meta-crisis, also undermines the ideological basic structure of modernity. The collapse of the Earth System is a groundlessness that also undermines the central ideological framework of modernity. Anthropocene aesthetics, as a crisis of form, allows for a much more reflexive approach to the ecological crisis. Entanglement short-circuits the Great Divide between nature and culture. The alarming appearance of dark ecology, of ecology without/after nature, corresponds to the dark sublime.

4. Planetries: Planetary Aesthetics for Multiple Earths

The planetary scope of the ecological crisis can be expressed by new material aesthetics that can account for both the transformation of the Earth System and a changed aesthetic sphere. The posthuman planetary aesthetics emerging in the Anthropocene complements and even deepens the crisis of form, as well as dark ecology and the Anthropocene sublime. According to Susan Ballard, a planetary Anthropocene aesthetics must simultaneously speak of nature, the planet and people, while also carrying within it the idea of a new planetary future. Through the diversification of thought, planetary aesthetics also highlights the suggestion of radically new kinds of futures, moving away from the trajectory of modernity and the associated trope of the 'globe'. In this regard, Ballard follows the lead of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of 'planetarity'. For Ballard and Spivak, planetarity does not separate aesthetic experience into separable artistic zones or details, since aesthetics permeates all areas of reality. Planetarity is related to the crisis of aesthetic forms, the breaking up of traditional sets of forms, being "an order of relations through which the art object reveals its multispecies and geological frame" (Ballard, 2021, p. 160). Brokenness here does not mean the collapse or passing of something, but rather the creation of new posthuman and naturecultural connections, new Earths on this planet. Spheres, the curved plastic abundance of forms, play an important role in Ballard's planetary aesthetics. However, this planetary rearrangement or reconstruction not only extends the scope of form horizontally, as per conventional ideas about globalisation, but also vertically. It entails material submersion or absorption in the deep layers of the planet. The global geological body presupposes a new extensive material geoaesthetics that views humanity as a world-making and world-destroying force alongside rocks, the atmosphere and the ocean. The literature of the Anthropocene simultaneously naturalises humanity and

transforms culture into nature. This double movement, however, cannot divert attention from the fact that during the Anthropocene, humans are truly exerting planetary effects. Planetary aesthetics is thus a spherical, multidirectional dynamism, an active force that seeks to realise the aesthetic understanding of the planet from multiple directions. The changed planetary environment is explored as an active force by the vibrant aesthetics of planetary materiality, connected to the systems of the Earth and the various forces of the planet.

As co-active forces, Anthropocene artworks avoid being reactively instrumentalised or ideologically co-opted as means of presenting the terrible consequences of the ecological crisis. Beyond the crisis of form and modernist representational techniques, the broken Anthropocene aesthetic is a creative, active force that, joining the changed forces of the Earth System, explores this new geological era. After all, planetary transformation affects not only world society or individual countries and continents, but also the planet itself, material things: ice blocks, volcanoes, rock layers, caves, ravines, and the soil itself. Anthropocene aesthetics not only represents or reflects the change in the functionality of the Earth system, but also performs this complex process, vibrating together with this material, vibrating dynamism. The imprint, quasi-material archiving, accounts for planetary destruction and the transformation of the planet into *terra incognita*, but in a way that ungrounds and regrounds the aesthetic field. While situated and local experiences are important in the Anthropocene, planetary hyperobject-like scales beyond conventional human perspectives are also incorporated.

Planetary aesthetics, extending vertically and horizontally, spherical and networked at, challenges the existing world order by demonstrating the continuity of change. However, the awareness of change also means that it is possible to imagine reality differently from how it exists today. The destabilising, deterritorialising layers of the earth represent a new groundlessness in which it is possible to discover the material and natural-cultural novelties of reality. In the case of planetary aesthetics, it is not just a question of global extension. The crisis of form and planetary extension are interconnected on several levels, since the radical extension of planetary aesthetics, while inverting aesthetic concepts, also refers to the crisis of aesthetic representation.

Not only aesthetics, but also the human itself cannot be separated from the material structure of the planet, from the dark materiality of the planet. The material limits of existence can push thinking about existence to its limits. Planetary in Spivak's is not synonymous with globalization in the context of Anthropocene aesthetics – rather, it is a recognition of the irreducible mystery of the planet: for Spivak “the ‘planet’ is (...) a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right. Its alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous – an experience of the impossible” (Spivak, 2023, p. 102). Planetary displaces universalist European ‘history’ via the complication and localisation of narrative: „in our historical moment, we must try persistently to reverse and displace globalisation into

planetarity – an impossible figure and therefore calling on teleopoiesis rather than istoria” (Spivak, 2023, p. 97). The drilling machine of the Anthropocene aesthetics, functioning as a vast art system, recreates and rearranges the planet, thereby accelerating the changed functionality of the Earth system. The naturecultural, multi-species, posthumanist horizon is populated by, to use Spivak’s term, ‘planetary alterities’, quasi-subjects and quasi-objects. According to Ballard, in the Anthropocene, new aesthetic relationships are created between different plants, animals, the materiality of the planet, and humans. As she notes, instead of one universal grand narrative,

[a] planetary aesthetics pays attention to the continual allegorical transformations of art, not just how it feels but what it does. Art in the Anthropocene involves entering this world of affects and sensations, bringing together contemporary artistic practices with histories that enable us to experience the present in a way that is attuned to many potential futures. (Ballard, 2021, p. 160)

Multispecies becomings necessitate a multiplicity of geohistories. As we traverse the web of life, we realize that this is no longer one planet. The landing takes place on a strange, gothicized altered series of planets, or archipelagoes, that often appear collapsed, polluted, yet full of vitality. Anthropocene planetarity is about postcolonial islands in a sea of chaos, instead of a single, oppressive, imperial Globe (Pugh and Chandler, 2021). Of course, it could easily turn out that such islands are made of garbage – but does that detract from their value? Pinar Yoldas asks precisely this question precisely with her sculpture, *An Ecosystem of Excess* (2012). Her work incorporates the *topos* of environmental degradation and pollution, while exhibiting new, hybrid lifeforms that may evolve out of the Pacific Trash Vortex, a gyre of plastic debris circling in the Pacific Ocean. Here planetary aesthetics offers a dynamic conception of art and aesthetics, an allegorical and speculative mode in which the concepts and materialities of the world and art are no longer separated from each other. The represented world and representation are no longer divided. The planetary effects of the catastrophic changes of the Anthropocene also pull aesthetics into the depths, into deep layers of materiality. This multiple, divergent and dynamic planetary aesthetics represents a new formation of artistic and philosophical thought, in which thinking is no longer an idealisation separate from the world, but an inward bending of vibrating materiality and magical materiality of the planet. Yoldas’ sculptures are full of mystery, while reflecting upon the ecological crisis, they do not yield to a moralising temptation. The Anthropocene, despite its destructiveness, also opens up to various hyperobjects and spherical or planetary perspectives. Plastic Coke bottles, fish contaminated with microplastics, and apocalyptic garbage mountains floating on the surface of the oceans like artificial islands are all brought closer to home by the planetary aesthetics of the Anthropocene.

The rupture of different energies and forces brings to the surface a new politics of desire. Our emotions and desires, dynamized by the energies of the planet, erupt like dormant volcanoes. The quasi-subjects and quasi-objects of planetary alterity manifest themselves through a post-anthropocentric

affective horizon that is inseparable from the material processes of the planet. As Ballard observes, “in the Anthropocene, nature slips around, it is haunted by histories that have labelled it nonhuman, and extinct ghosts that populate its corners” (Ballard, 2021, p. 159). The planetary aesthetics of the Anthropocene thus includes not only works of art and creators but also the living and the inanimate, the attentive and the averse. Works of art not only reflect, but also participate in, and contribute to, shaping processes. The planetary aesthetics of the Anthropocene reveals a complex, posthuman composition, an extensive naturecultural networked rearrangement. In the energetic encounter with the movement of time, the dynamism of change, and ecology, aesthetics does not appear as a reactive force, but as an active, shaping, formation.

5. Conclusion: Breaking Aesthetics

While Horn’s theory primarily speaks of the insufficiency and deformation of aesthetic perception and human perception, Morton’s dark ecology is about atmospheric attunement to that which surrounds us. These two Anthropocene aesthetic directions are fundamentally connected at several points. Yet, if we wish to distinguish between the two eco-aesthetic directions, Horn emphasises what is ‘in here’ from a human perspective through the crisis of subjective perception and human, aesthetic formal language, while Morton focuses on what is ‘out there’. However, as we see, this outsideness actually defines and permeates the subject, due to the changed functionality of the Earth System. It is not an Outsideness that can be removed or outsourced, but an inherent ecological circumstance, the changing functioning of the Earth system. Horn’s theory of Anthropocene aesthetics is about the crisis of human sense and aesthetic perception challenged or deconstructed by ecological circumstances. Morton also indicates the connection and distance between the two directions when stating that dark ecology permeates everything as a disordered, restless non-holistic coexistence, while transgressively or subversively breaking down the boundaries between human and non-human, life and inanimate, old and new: “the uneasy nonholistic coexistence evoked here spells trouble for hard boundaries between human and nonhuman, life and nonlife, the Paleo and the Neo – let alone the concept of nature” (Morton, 2016, p. 81). Part of this deconstruction of boundaries is the dehumanisation of human sensitivity or aesthetic perception, while nature and nonhuman or inanimate beings are imbued with strange vibration or activity. Planetary aesthetics is the practical enactment of rematerialisation and aesthetic posthumanization.

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