De-humanize!

Reflection on Psychological and Ethical Limits of More-than-human Aesthetics

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This paper examines contemporary artistic critiques of anthropocentrism by focusing on two claims: (1) that aesthetic experience can temporarily displace human perceptual frameworks, and (2) that such displacement carries ethical value. I draw on a selection of Czech, Slovak, and international artworks that seek a nonhuman standpoint. I situate these practices within a longer debate about the limits and significance of entering into alien perspectives – ranging from David Hume's remarks on ancient artworks that espouse moral outlooks radically different from our own to Thomas Nagel's scepticism about the very possibility to adopt nonhuman points of view. I argue that, although aesthetic experience may prompt a departure from the human perspective, we should neither pursue nor valorise that departure. The connection between more-than-human ethics and more-than-human aesthetics, I suggest, does not proceed via empathy into a nonhuman perspective. | *Keywords: Contemporary Art, David Hume, Posthumanism, Imaginative Resistance, Science and Art*

> Art education is the education of feeling, and a society that neglects it gives itself up to formless emotion.
> Susanne K. Langer (1964, p. 84)

1. Introduction

Many would agree that the world feels unlike it once did: more fragile, less hopeful, less available to us – less 'there' at our disposal. Our position in it has shifted as well. From distant observers and explorers, we are becoming fully immersed participants, increasingly subject to its forces, many of which we ourselves have set in motion but can no longer regulate or stop. Has art registered this change? Can it help us absorb it, come to terms with it, and see ourselves more clearly?

According to Susanne K. Langer (1964, p. 76), art – "the practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feeling" – is particularly significant when

feeling itself, on a grand, societal scale, is undergoing change. By "feeling," she does not mean everyday emotions but the deeper currents beneath them – what she calls "self-consciousness" and "world-consciousness" (Langer, 1964, p. 81). And by "expressive" she does not mean "evoking," but rather "conceiving" or "articulating". If she is right, the transformations in how the world is sensed, palpable for some time now, should be reflected in contemporary art. Which forms does art give to recent shifts in human sensibility? What insights into the structures of feeling does it formulate and offer for reflection and understanding?

This paper undertakes a Langer-inspired exploration of what is at stake in current reconfigurations of human feeling and the insights contemporary art affords. I discuss – and, in the end, criticize – one type of artistic response to the contemporary situation, often framed as the end of anthropocentrism. Shorthand for this response is the call for de-humanization. I develop this demand through examples from Czech, Slovak, and international artistic and aesthetic practices, distinguishing two claims that underlie it – one aesthetic and the other ethical. I situate these claims within debates surrounding David Hume's (1760, ST 32) observation about ancient artworks that espouse alien moral views, focusing, in particular, on his claim that one "cannot, nor is it proper [one] should, enter into such sentiments". I ask whether art can displace human perceptual framework at all. Ultimately, I argue that, even if one *can* enter into nonhuman sentiments, one *should not* do so.

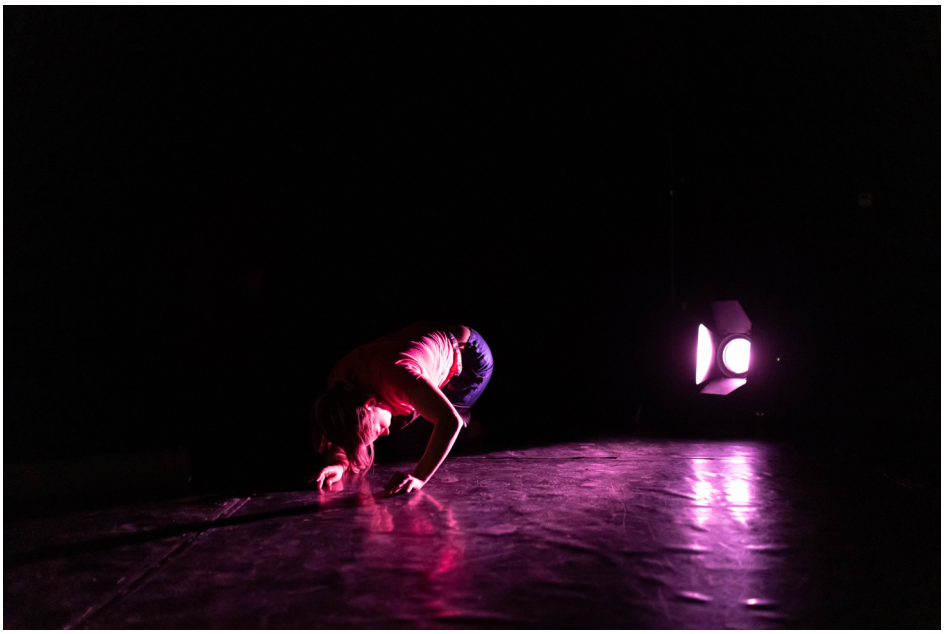
2. More-than-human Aesthetics

Let me begin with a handful of examples. The works I am about to discuss aim to depict – and, perhaps, to impart – a nonhuman perspective. I intend to use these works – admittedly somewhat forcefully – as instruments for critically examining the assumptions that underwrite them. This is not meant as a critique of the works themselves, whose ambitions are broader and more nuanced than can be considered here. Nor do I mean to ascribe to their authors the views I will examine; rather, my interest lies in the conceptual grounds that, I believe, render these works resonant and intelligible within our culture.

The term 'more-than-human', which I use throughout this paper to describe attempts by humans to enter nonhuman perspectives, was coined by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996). In that book, Abram draws on his early engagement with shamanism in non-Western cultures, characterizing the shaman as one who can "readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture [...] in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land, [...] the larger, more-than-human field" (Abram, 1996, p. 9) – a description that is somewhat similar to the discourse surrounding certain contemporary Western artistic practices discussed below.[1]

[1] 'More-than-human' in Abram's sense, as adopted here, does not mean technologically enhanced. On the contrary, Abram (1996, p. 22) argues that "human-made technologies [...] only reflect us back to ourselves" and, as a result, "it is all too easy to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities". Abram uses at places 'nonhuman' and 'more-than-human' interchangeably, however, it seems consistent with his intention to use 'more-than-human' to emphasize that this is a perspective that the human can enter, provided that he or she sheds some specifically human perceptual, cognitive, or conceptual limitations. See also section 2.5 below.

2.1 First Example: *Terra Incognita*



Hana Kokšálová: *Terra Incognita* (27 August 2024), A4 – Space for Contemporary Culture, Bratislava (Slovak Republic). Photo: Amélie Pret. Courtesy of Amélie Pret.

In *Terra Incognita*, the young performance artist Hana Kokšálová invites – or, perhaps more aptly, challenges – the audience to embark on an imaginative descent into the depths of the earth.[2] Through her evocative texts and a subtle parody of the guided manipulation of imagination during meditation, the participants gradually become a variety of underground creatures: they are cave people telling fables about a long-ago life on the surface; they slip into the skin of a mole, sense the earth's vibrations, and, at a pace of five meters per hour, carve out narrow tunnels. They let a several-kilometre-long line cut across their shoulders and expand into vast, earth-sized bodies. The audience shift between underground forms, recalibrate their senses, and ultimately transform their desires. By the end of the performance – much like after a successful meditation – the participants return to their own bodies, now transformed into 'good gardeners', ready to care for those 'great intestines' that, beneath our feet and at the threshold of our earthly imagination, in unknown territory, perform their universally vital work.

2.2 Second Example: *Flora*

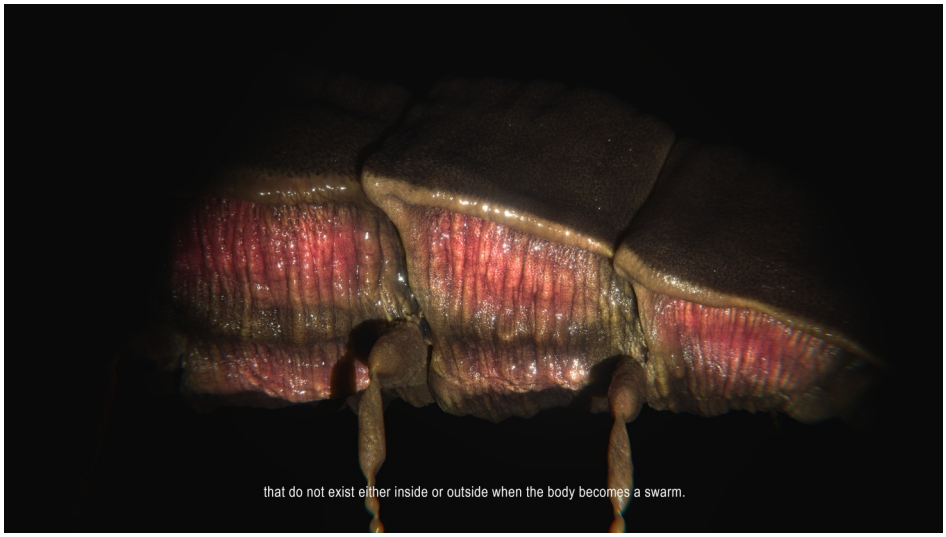
A transformation that could be described as a weakening of the humanness also marks Sára, the protagonist of *Flora* (2024), the debut novel by the poet Jonáš Zbořil. In a postindustrial landscape known as the Steppe, where

[2] I first encountered the performance *Terra Incognita* at its presentation in Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic) in the autumn of 2025. The work was created in 2024 during the artist's residency at A4 in Bratislava (Slovak Republic).

> [t]he discarded things are cast out from the electrical circuits of households, from the cycles of activity, from civilization itself. They wait endlessly to dissolve into toxic slag. Or they fuse with the flesh of the Steppe to become something new. (Zbořil, 2024, p. 24)

Sára discovers a strange creature and becomes its devoted – or, perhaps more accurately, self-sacrificing – caretaker. Her transformation is seen through the empathetic gaze of her partner, Adam, who, in the novel's final pages, mercilessly throws Flora – a creature-monster, a living tangle of wires, a phantom child born in an age of human infertility – back into the bushes. Yet by that point, the boundaries and distinctions that define the human have already begun to crumble.

2.3 Third Example: *Flickers of a Dawn*



Branching Light and the Flickers of a Dawn (2024). Courtesy of Paula Malinowska.

By contrast, the narrator of the short 3D animated film *Branching Light and the Flickers of a Dawn* (2024), directed by Paula Malinowska – the Oskár Čepan Award laureate – is enchanted by nonhuman forms of life. In this scientific mockumentary, fireflies appear as guardians of the threshold between the knowable yet, ultimately, plain – even primitive – human world and an incomprehensible, mysterious realm of more-than-human structures whose life rhythms and forms "do not exist either inside or outside, when the body becomes a swarm" (Malinowska, 2024, 5'35''). The steadily increasing artificiality of the voice-over – the decomposition of a supposedly human voice into an overtly nonhuman, composite, synthetic polyphony – creates an acoustic image of the gradual dissolution of the inside/outside distinction, staging a departure from the human frame: a becoming-swarm.

2.4 Fourth Example: Screensavers

My final example is a distant relative – or, if you will, a parasite – of the visual arts: the procrastinatory vistas my computer's operating system serves up whenever my fingers fall silent for a few minutes. This idle screen imagery

presents breathtaking landscapes – typically captured from a nonhuman perspective, commonly called bird's-eye but more accurately a drone's-eye view – including alpine massifs, deep forests, ocean cliffs, underwater worlds, and even urban landscapes, technological or transport nodes, and large cities. What these images have in common is the absence of any visible human presence.

Looking at them, I feel what I imagine to be the old pathos – the exclamation that accompanies a gaze cast upon a corner of the Earth never before seen by human eyes. There is, however, a striking difference: the 'never before' is substituted by 'no longer' – a landscape no-longer-seen-by-human-eyes, a world the human has left behind. The dangerous beauty of this artificial-intelligence daydream – these posthuman *vanitas* – frightens and fascinates me at once.

2.5 Common Threads

Although the examples of artworks are somewhat randomly chosen and span different art forms, they share several features. First, all display a fascination with a nonhuman perspective; moreover, this perspective is envisioned as mixed or hybrid, transgressing established human categories and familiar human concepts. Beneath the surface of the earth in Hana Kokšálová's performance, organic and inorganic sensitivities merge; Jonáš Zbořil's *Flora* presents an incomprehensible intertwining of the vegetal and the technological; and the rhythmic formations of Paula Malinowska's swarming fireflies ultimately resonate with advanced forms of artificial intelligence.

Another common thread is that each of these work, in its own way, foregrounds the inaccessibility of a nonhuman perspective to human cognition. Kokšálová designates the underground realm as *terra incognita* – an unknown and, as she emphasizes in her monologues, ultimately unknowable world lying beyond both human cognitive and physical reach. In the first weeks after discovering Flora, the narrator of Zbořil's book repeatedly seeks to situate the creature within the bounds of the knowable, restlessly searching the internet for information, but each attempt ends in failure – until he finally gives up.

> Awed by that vocabulary – of things themselves –
> i am illiterate, dumb before them.
> (Zbořil, 2024, p. 62; Hippolyte, n.d.)

Adam quotes a passage from the Jamaican poet Kendel Hippolyte's poem, relating it to the Steppe's semantic abundance: here, not only new forms of life but also new meanings of life arise and exceed human understanding. The limits of the knowable are highlighted in Malinowska's video as well, where the voice-over admits that the scientific team cannot decipher the rhythms of the firefly formations. "Even though the light signals resemble binary computational logic, we are unable to decode the information. Something unknown lies beyond the human perception of light" (Malinowska, 2024, 3'05'').

And finally, to counter deep cognitive scepticism, all three works offer an alternative path – an imaginative descent in Kokšálová's performance, intuitive care (and contagion) in Zbořil's novel, and resonance in Malinowska's video. Shedding a human skin and taking up a more-than-human perspective bring friction and resistance, generating a tension that each work treats differently – through gentle irony in Kokšálová, with horror undertones in Zbořil, and via the narrator's unsettling ambiguity in Malinowska. Only in the final case decribed above, it is left wholly unthematized. The screensavers simply entice me. "Let yourself drift," they whisper.

2.6 Further Evidence

How representative is this selection from my personal collection of recent aesthetic experiences, located – as I am – on the periphery of the Western artistic centers? Even a cursory glance at statements by curators and other art-world agents active in major contemporary art institutions shows that I have my finger on the pulse of the time – and so do the Czech and Slovak artists referenced here. The weakening and transgressing of the human perspective – whether to underscore the end of human dominance or to challenge anthropocentric fantasies – has become de rigueur in contemporary art. Let me offer a few examples.

Curator Susanne Pfeffer introduced the exhibition *Inhuman*, which she organised in Kassel in 2015, as a negative answer to the question: "Is the humanistic concept of the human being as the 'measure of all things' still tenable?" She described the works she assembled as "a substantial contribution to the debate surrounding a new concept of humankind" (Kulturstiftung des Bundes, n.d.).

In 2022, the chief curator Cecilia Alemani introduced the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale with the following remark:

> Many contemporary artists are imagining a posthuman condition that challenges the modern Western vision of the human being – and especially the presumed universal ideal of the white, male "Man of Reason" – as fixed centre of the universe and measure of all things. […] In this climate, many artists envision the end of anthropocentrism, celebrating a new communion with the non-human, with the animal world, and with the Earth; they cultivate a sense of kinship between species and between the organic and inorganic, the animate and inanimate. (Alemani, 2022)

At the occasion of a group exhibition *femmes volcans forêts torrents*, held at the Museum of contemporary art in Montreal in 2024, an interdisciplinary symposium titled *More than Human, More than Nature: Beyond the Living Being* took place. The organizers of the event noted that

> many philosophical projects […] deplore the anthropocentrism of notions of "non-human" or "more than human," prompting us to find new ways to "make" Earth (faire terre) – to live and make meaning in a world beyond our comprehension. [The Symposium] proposes to further deconstruct these concepts and take up fresh semantic, philosophical, and artistic paths. (Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, 2024)

And finally, Stefan Herbrechter, a leading figure in critical posthumanism, conceives posthumanism not only as a theoretical discourse but also as a domain developed above all through art. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles and others, he argues that "a posthumanist aesthetic, or an aesthetic of the posthuman, remains necessarily 'speculative' in that it aims to escape and undo a human perspective" (Herbrechter, n.d., p. 12). He underscores that this more-than-human perspective "remains inaccessible to (human) knowledge", yet "may nevertheless be open to speculation and to art" (Herbrechter, n.d., p. 13).

In these instances of theoretical discourse surrounding works that seek to transgress human perspective, one can discern a shared distrust of reason and the human science, coupled with a hope invested in art as a domain that affords more direct access to more-than-human perspectives. Ultimately, they place their trust in the arts as the site where – if anywhere –humans might come to terms with a reconfigured sense of the human and a posthuman condition.

3. Entering into Nonhuman Sentiments

The theoretical underpinning of the artworks, curatorial projects, and insights of the kind considered here rests, I believe, on two independent assumptions:

1. Art enables humans to step beyond their own – that is, the human – perspective.

2. Stepping out of the human perspective is, at present, desirable.

These two claims are then conjoined into an implicit supporting thesis, that exceeding the human perspective is a task of contemporary art, or, put differently,

3. contemporary art should transgress the human perspective.

In what follows, I examine an opposing thesis:

4. One cannot – and should not – abandon the human perspective.

The way I have formulated this thesis has to do with a fragment from the history of aesthetics that has stuck with me:

> I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments. (Hume, 1760, ST 32)

Many readers will surely recall the broader context. In section 32 of his essay *Of the Standard of Taste* (1760), Hume responds to the Western European 'culture war' of his day – the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. He criticizes the extremism of both the defenders of ancient perfection and the proponents of modern progress. Rather than taking sides, he turns to the question of how we interpret and evaluate older works of art, especially when they embody attitudes and values different from our own. He rejects the claim that a work bearing the marks of another culture necessarily is unintelligible or obsolete; yet, he also denies that, in the name of art, one should renounce one's own deep sentiments and values and – however tentatively and temporarily – adopt attitudes regarded as indecent or corrupt.

The relation between ethics and aesthetics is more alive today than ever, and section 32 of the essay is among the most frequently cited passages. Usually, however, a longer excerpt is quoted, not just this fragment. Why have I truncated it?

The phrasing "I cannot, nor is it proper I should" has always provoked me. At first glance it sounds redundant: if one truly cannot enter into 'strange' manners and sentiments, there should be no need to warn that one ought not to do so. The sentence might seem smoother if it read, 'I can, but I should not enter into such sentiments', or perhaps, 'I should, but I cannot'. When 'cannot' and 'should not' are joined, we expect tension between them; without such tension, their coupling appears superfluous.

And yet I build my thesis around Hume's fragment. Against the view that art can – and should – cultivate a more-than-human perspective, I take as my starting point the claim that art cannot, and should not, enter into such sentiments.

3.1 Missing Tension

How is the missing tension in Hume's sentence – a distant cousin of the 'missing shade of blue' – accounted for? To address this, I consider the imaginative resistance debate. Sections 32 and 33 of Hume's essay are commonly taken as the earliest statement of the puzzle, seeding, as it were, the gamut of its solutions.

The imaginative resistance is understood as a psychological phenomenon consisting of "difficulties otherwise competent imaginers experience when engaging in particular imaginative activities prompted by works of fiction" (Tuna, 2024). The activities in question typically involve morally laden scenarios that invite us to imagine, as Hume puts it, "vicious manners [...] without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation" (Hume 1760, ST 32), that is, as if they were right and desirable.

Interestingly, there are two camps being distinguished in the imaginative-resistance debate, the so-called 'cantians' and 'wontians'.[3]

> Cantians claim that imaginative resistance occurs when we *can't* engage in the prompted imaginative activity. Wontians, by contrast take the phenomenon to involve *unwillingness* (rather than inability) to engage on the part of the reader or the audience. (Tuna, 2024)

Although they do no directly interpret the fragment I have quoted – that one cannot, and should not, enter into these sentiments – the scholars in the debate seem to split neatly along its two clauses: the so-called 'cantians' privilege 'cannot', while the 'wontians' prioritize 'should not'.

The 'cantian' camp considers certain scenarios simply unimaginable: One may, for instance, compose a factual, or even celebratory, description of immoral

[3] I ignore the so-called 'eliminativists' who do not consider 'imaginative resistance' as a real phenomenon. For discussion, see Tuna (2024).

events, yet the reader is just unable to 'see' them in a matter-of-fact or approving way. Not being able to do what the work demands is, as those who would incline towards cantian interpretation emphasize, a "real deformity" (Hume, 1760, ST 32). Under this interpretation, the 'cannot' in Hume's fragment does all the work; 'should not' drops out. Only if one were to maintain that despite 'cannot', we should enter into these sentiments, would the tension in the sentence be restored – a claim, though, only a handful of immoralists would venture.

For the 'wontian' camp, on the other hand, it is important that the difference between 'innocent', non-moral demands made by fiction and those that require deeper moral adaptation is only one of degree. Accordingly, they would highlight Hume's claim that "it is not without some effort that we reconcile ourselves to the simplicity of ancient manners" (Hume, 1760, ST 32), indeed that a "very violent effort" (Hume, 1760, ST 33) is required for an imaginative adaptation to an alien morality. In other words, with greater or lesser exertion on the part of the viewer or reader, a work of art can temporarily induce us to adopt attitudes and values that we find deeply foreign, or even perverse. The resistance, in this case, lies with 'should not': one ought to refrain from entering into these sentiments, although one is capable of feeling them.

Let us now pursue these two interpretive pathways outlined here – the 'cantian' and the 'wontian' – into the domain under examination, namely that of nonhuman perception. Clearly, there is an important difference. Whereas the debate on imaginative resistance traditionally concerns difficulties in imaginatively adopting other manners and values – perhaps immoral, but still human – the question posed by nonhuman perception is whether we can set aside the human perspective as such.

3.2 A Cantian Account of Nonhuman Perception

Since its publication in 1974, Thomas Nagel's *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* has been the standard reference for what is philosophically at stake in attempts to suspend the human perspective. Rendered in terms commensurate with Hume's debate, Nagel's claim is that humans simply cannot enter into nonhuman – specifically, a bat's – sentiments. As he argues:

> It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. (Nagel, 1974, p. 439)

This is not, however, a deficiency of human imagination – nor of Nagel's own. Every such attempt, he argues, merely transforms our own experience to a greater or lesser extent: it adds some elements, subtracts others, but it never becomes the experience of a bat.

> Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications. (Nagel, 1974, p. 439)

No matter how extensively the human perspective is transformed, we remain – on Nagel's account – incarcerated within it for life. The imaginative resistance we encounter is to be construed as an impossibility, not a mere difficulty. Its overcoming is unthinkable.

If Nagel is right, then the 'cantian' route is the only viable stance on imaginative resistance to the nonhuman perspective. If one cannot empathize with nonhuman feelings, then such empathy does not constitute a possibility that we ought to fear for moral reasons, nor does it represent an artistic challenge that we might admire for aesthetic ones. If Nagel is right, then, the tension in Hume's sentence can be restored only by strengthening its affirmative ethical force: by translating it into 'we cannot, but we should'.

This is precisely what happens in Jonáš Zbořil's *Flora*. Although the book is far from a manifesto of posthumanist ethics, it can be read as a fable built on its foundations. The reason why Sára and Adam take Flora in is not explicitly stated in the novel, yet the moral stance of both protagonists is unmistakable. They cannot ignore the life they encounter in a desolate steppe, a landscape devastated by human activity. "I grab the thing by the legs – if that's what they are. I feel that I'm touching a body. It isn't warmth or movement, nothing of the sort, yet one simply knows: I'm holding a living thing" (Zbořil, 2024, p. 13).

This respect for life – in whatever form it appears – and the claim that its 'discovery' places upon the human is particularly striking against the backdrop of the Steppe, a place where human action, driven solely by human interests, has caused destruction and extinction. Adam and Sára are unassuming pioneers of a posthumanist ethos – by practice, not by manifesto. Their actions are guided by a maxim of responsibility toward life as such, rather than toward human interests alone.

How then does such an ethos manifest itself in practice? Caring for something into which one can project oneself only partially – more through self-projection and self-deception than through genuine empathy – and which exceeds human understanding, proves to be deeply problematic and ultimately dangerous. Sára exemplifies a 'cantian', tension-preserving reading of Hume's sentence: she is a character who, for moral reasons, stubbornly attempts to enter into nonhuman feelings, despite the fact that one cannot do so. And if, in the end, she succeeds, it is at the cost of surrendering her own humanity. By the close of the story, she is a "different Sára," (Zbořil, 2024, p. 161) as opaque and enigmatic to Adam as Flora was at the beginning – an object of observation. Nagel's verdict – life incarceration within human experience – is thus fulfilled almost literally in Sára, who, for the sake of empathizing with a nonhuman organism, is willing to sacrifice her human existence.

3.3 What If We Can?

So far, I have asked how to restore the tension in Hume's sentence on the assumption that Nagel is right and that one simply cannot inhabit nonhuman feeling. But what if Nagel is wrong? Critics of his essay have noted that he underestimates the extent to which scientific findings and insights can

expand the capacities of human imagination. A signal example of such a critical response – though ultimately framed as a question – is Kathleen Akins's study *What Is It Like to Be Boring and Myopic?* (1993). It demonstrates how powerful and creative imagination can be, when guided by careful, reflective attention to empirical knowledge – well beyond the picture of bats as creatures that spend their days hanging upside down in attics – and enriched by devices familiar from artistic practice.

In her paper, Akins goes into fine-grained nuances concerning not only bat physiology, including their neurophysiology, but also the physical peculiarities of sound and the properties of audition that come to the fore in comparison with light and visibility. She thus manages, at least in broad outline, to describe the general features of a bat's auditory field and to speculate on how, for the bat, the world might emerge. Here is a brief sample. Note how she deploys metaphors and analogies.

> **Intensity and object size** As the bat closes in on its target, the echo becomes louder and louder. Not only do the sound waves have less distance to travel (hence suffer less absorption), but the subtended angle of the target increases (the target surface area looms larger). (Think of playing a trumpet against a wall.) One might imagine then that the bat has an auditory analogue of visual looming. In vision, the closer you get, the larger the object appears; perhaps in echo location, the closer the bat gets, the louder the echo sounds. This is not, however, how it is for the bat: target size and target range are disambiguated. Remember that after the bat emits its cry, there is a period of 5–8 ms during which the contracted middle-ear muscles relax. During this time – before the muscles have fully relaxed – echoes from nearby objects will return. The cries bouncing back from objects at a distance of about 2 meters will take about 8 ms to return, so they will arrive when the muscles are almost entirely relaxed. Echoes from nearby objects, on the other hand, return sooner – they will make it home around the 5 ms mark or when the muscles are still almost fully contracted. The net effect, then, is that the muscles are more contracted – admit less sound – for the echoes of near objects and are less contracted – admit more sound – for the echoes of far objects. Hence, closeness of the object alone will not affect the loudness of the echo. Increased volume is accounted for only by object size, or subtended angle. (Akins, 1993, p. 141)

Human sensory experience is, for understandable reasons, a frequent frame of reference for Akins, though not in its simplified, decontextualized form. The images she uses to illuminate particular aspects of bat experience are inventive and involve not only 'seeing' or 'hearing', but more or less complex situations: the trumpet played toward a wall, which evokes how an echo swells as a surface approaches; miners in a shaft with helmet lamps, recalling the narrow beam of a sonar; or cars that vanish the instant they pass the observer – an analogy to echoes that suddenly drop below the threshold of sensitivity. At the same time, she continually corrects our experience: her analysis of the bat's world is guided above all by a feel for difference, not by a desire to stamp bat experience with a human character.

But hold on: a bat's experience of the surrounding world? As Akins argues, an even deeper doubt is in order than the one voiced by Nagel. What if, for the bat, there simply is no surrounding world in our sense? Auditory information

from primary cortex is translated into motor commands without delay – there is no temporal window in which an acoustic image of the world could be constructed. Or, perhaps better: the bat's movement – its turns, accelerations, evasions – is that image. We can "see" such an image only from the outside; the bat itself does not need an image – it needs to catch dinner. Akins once more:

> [W]hat science suggests is that the sonar system of the bat is probably not concerned with the representation of three-dimensional objective particulars. But if this is true, it makes little sense to attribute to the bat a phenomenal point of view, conscious mental states which are about objects and their properties. There being, that is, no particulars for it, we should not ascribe to the bat perceptions of those particulars: a perception of this moth, or of this moth as a certain type, or of the bat's favorite landing place, or of the layout of its cave. Because there are no objects that the bat perceives, there are no objects for the bat to perceive in a certain bat-like way. So to attribute a point of view to the bat – a species-specific perspective from which to view the world – only imposes an ontology where there is little evidence that one exists. (Akins, 1993, p. 151)

If Nagel warns against anthropomorphising our ideas of an animal's experience of the world, Akins extends that doubt to his warning itself. The danger of anthropomorphising the nonhuman mind runs deeper: it reaches the very way Nagel poses his questions – the assumption that a bat has a 'point of view', for instance. At the same time, she shows that Nagel's objection, even in its deepened form, need not lead to scepticism or resignation. It can be read instead as a caution: imagining the nonhuman is possible precisely to the extent that we resist projecting human categories into an alien frame. To reconstruct it, however, we must draw on scientific knowledge – and also on fiction, metaphor, and analogy.

I discussed Kathleen Akins's essay not only because it demonstrates the crucial role scientific knowledge can play in investigating nonhuman experience, but also as a practical example that philosophical–scientific writing can handle language in ways whose evocative force stimulates and guides the imagination much as art does.

4. Conclusion: A Wontian Account?

Let me now, in conclusion, return to the artworks introduced at the outset. I noted that they all manifest deep cognitive scepticism: in one way or another, their authors voice doubts about the knowability of the nonhuman and about whether it is, or will ever be, susceptible to scientific explanation.

I also noted that the artists nevertheless offer an alternative path. Although Kokšálová declares that the world beneath the surface remains unknown, she keeps us in its depths for seventy minutes – poetically, acoustically, and through light manipulation – mediating what it is like to undergo, from a human standpoint, a limit-experience. And although Malinowska's voiceover underscores the insufficiency of scientific knowledge, the film simultaneously – through its soundtrack and imagery – articulates the possibility of immersing oneself in the more-than-human logic of swarms.

However, an interpretation that draws too sharp a contrast between scientific and artistic knowledge would be misleading in the case of these particular works. In both Kokšálová and Malinowska, one can trace a curiosity about and, indeed, engagement with, scientific inquiry. The most compelling part of Kokšálová's performance is her detailed account of mole physiology. In Malinowska, the visual and acoustic fantasia on swarms of light grow out of a fascination with scientific discoveries about the synchronous behaviour of fireflies.

With this revision of my earlier claims, I suggest that, in both science and art, one encounters works that treat imaginative resistance to nonhuman experience not as a sheer impossibility but as an obstacle – or better, a challenge. On this basis, I can return to the 'wontian' way of resolving the missing tension in Hume's 'cannot and should not' and finally ask: if, after all, one *can* adopt a nonhuman perspective, are there any reasons why one nevertheless *should not*?

Hume himself offers only few remarks on why we ought to have moral reservations about imagining immoral ways of life as moral. He merely notes that the 'very violent effort' such works demand of our imagination is not without consequences: it may affect our most intimate notions of good and evil. This is likely tied to Hume's own view of moral sentiment as a matter of habit. From this, it follows that his warning does not primarily concern a single exposure to immoral fantasies, but rather their repeated consumption. Over time, such exposure may shift the boundaries of our moral landscape and seep into the reasons guiding our moral actions.

Earlier, I linked contemporary more-than-human aesthetics to an implicit conviction that stepping out of the human perspective is ethically desirable today. I inferred this thesis from curatorial statements, such as those of Cecilia Alemani, which suggest that artworks inviting 'new communion with the nonhuman' and celebrating 'a sense of kinship between species' represent an artistic response to the crisis of anthropocentric imagination and point toward an ethical way out. Alemani is far from alone in linking more-than-human aesthetics to more-than-human ethics that stresses care, responsibility, and interspecies solidarity.

But the assumption that temporarily setting aside the human standpoint will, by itself, bring us to a morally improved position is, in my view, a false hope. Based on the discussion above, I argue that it severely underestimates what such a shift entails.

Kathleen Akins's reconstruction of bat experience ultimately led us to a conception of a non-retentive consciousness in which experience is translated not into representations and symbols but into immediate, pre-set, 'boring' action. Such mechanistic reactivity hardly resembles the stance of a reflective ethical subject.

Nor does more-than-human ethics fare much better in Jonáš Zbořil's *Flora*. By the novel's end, the new, posthuman Sára embodies not an ethical advance

but rather a profound disregard for her own life, shedding along the way any commitments to members of her own species – including the closest one, her partner.

And finally, in Paula Malinowska's film, I ultimately sensed a similarly unsettling tone: the closing long shot, in which the camera slowly pulls back from a firefly perched on a tree trunk – shifting from close-up to wide frame until the creature slips from sight – suggested to me that other species quietly, indifferently, and without compassion watch the final act of humanity's struggle for survival.

These stories bring us back to the original, ethical frame of the debate. They seem to suggest that the more successfully we inhabit a nonhuman perspective, the more insistently the wish for our own – human – extinction emerges. Importantly, the works discussed here do not *produce* this desire; they render it visible through their artistic means – thereby in keeping with Susanne K. Langer's claim that to express feeling is to articulate it rather than to induce it. Play with nonhuman perspectives and the weakening of the humanity does not yield an unequivocal affirmation in these artworks: the images they bring about are ambivalent, unsettling visions.

This, however, does not apply to my screensavers. The algorithm-driven program regularly serves up posthuman landscapes designed simply to seduce. As these computer-generated fantasies of abandoned places seep under my skin, I feel no resistance. 'How beautiful the world is without us', I catch myself thinking – and the paradox does not unsettle me. Perhaps this is because the one watching these screensavers is no longer 'me' but my own 'consciousness-saver', a dehumanised, artificial doppelgänger, ever close at hand – especially in front of a computer screen. These visions celebrate and induce, to borrow Hume's phrase, "the want of humanity" (Hume, 1760, ST 32). And it is not proper that we should enter into such sentiments.

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