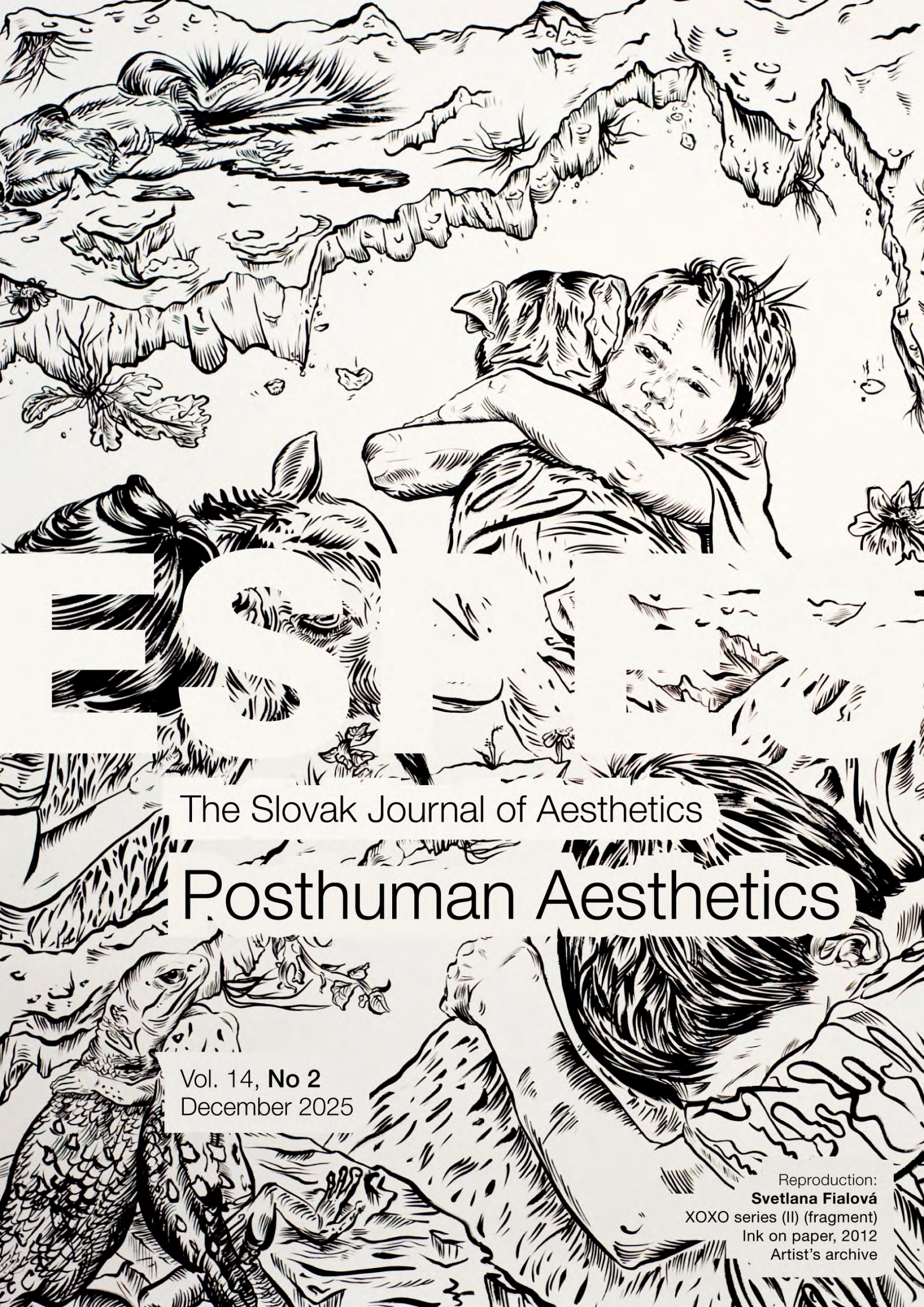

The Slovak Journal of Aesthetics

Posthuman Aesthetics

Vol. 14, **No 2**
December 2025

Reproduction:
Svetlana Fialová
XOXO series (II) (fragment)
Ink on paper, 2012
Artist's archive

ESPES - Vol. 14/1 – 2025
The Slovak Journal of Aesthetics

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ISSN 1339 - 1119

TABLE OF CONTENTS

POSTHUMAN AESTHETICS

BOOK REVIEWS

POSTHUMAN AESTHETICS

Guest editor
Michaela Fišerová

Aesthetics of Posthumanism

Reimagining Human Cohabitations

Michaela Fišerová

This article introduces the aesthetics of posthumanism as a genuine trend in philosophical aesthetics that emerged in the early decades of the 21st century. Engaging with an innovative imagination of the cohabitation of various life forms, the aesthetics of posthumanism rethinks interspecies encounters across both cultural and natural environments, prompting us to consider ethically motivated images of environmental awareness and creative adaptation. Building on phenomenological, deconstructive, and schizoanalytic methodological insights, this article aims to highlight a turning point in contemporary aesthetic research that questions our anthropocentric, speciesist prejudices and presents them as obsolete in a world shaped by the global environmental crisis. To address the complexity of this topic, the article presents contributions that map various approaches to the 'posthuman situation' in the artistic and philosophical imagination of contemporary human identity. The first set of referred texts targets the multifaceted – environmental, social, and technological – disaster caused by the speciest, self-centred humanism of the modern era, and the subsequent rupture of posthumanist art from it. This aesthetic perspective gives rise to resistance through posthumanist engagement. The second set of references addresses various problems related to anthropocentrist aesthetics. By introducing thinkers who articulate distinct viewpoints on the politics of aesthetic imagination, this article presents two contrasting approaches to contemporary visuality: while one group welcomes the environmentally caring approach of post-anthropocentrism, the other advocates preserving the anthropocentric one. | *Keywords: Posthumanism, Anthropocentrism, Anthropocene, Deconstruction, Phenomenology, Schizoanalysis, Imagination, Critical Thinking, Cognitive Emotions, Cohabitation*

1. Introduction: What Politics of Aesthetic Imagination?

The aesthetics of posthumanism holds that it is time to call for an innovative imagination. We, humans, need to overcome the problematic legacy of the Enlightenment, with its wrongly justified racist, sexist, and speciesist prejudices of the otherness. We need to welcome otherness because we are living at the turning point of our legitimate fears.

Modern fear of alterity, which serves as a primary pretext for justifying human cruelty toward non-human beings, has been effectively challenged by postmodern thinkers. As they (Lyotard, 1984; Bauman, 2002) pointed out,

the modern era tends to ground its 'humanism' in the Enlightenment idea of human cognitive exceptionality, which also entails 'rationality'. Reflecting on the perplexing disaster of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and tsunami flood splashing the ancient city, both Voltaire's sarcastic depiction of nature's ruthless power over human culture in *Candide* (2018) and Kant's aesthetic judgment of the sublime horror in contact with natural elements in *Critique of Judgement* (2009) were grounded in human fear of powerlessness, caused by failing imagination when facing monstrously excessive, enormous power of natural elements. While Voltaire fights back with sarcasm, Kant (2009) goes further. He turns to moral reason for guidance, aiming to use it to morally 'protect' human identity from non-human alterity. Subsequently, the industrial era of modern mass culture has nourished this seemingly legitimate fear of non-human beings through its decadent aesthetic imagination in the 'horror' genre. Contrary to posthumanist ecohorror, which overlaps environmental fear with symbiotic interfaces, modern horror movies, devaluing and reductively depicting spiders, mice, or snakes as numb 'monsters', distributed hate of animals across mass media. The modern culture industry economically profited from human xenophobia for over two centuries.

Posthumanism joins Lyotard's postmodernism in its call to stop and pause. It invites us to confront the modern exclusivism of 'human nature' grounded in anthropocentric reason. As Lyotard (1994) noticed, in the aesthetic experience of the sublime, it is not imagination that fails; it is reason. It is the imagination that opens a new, creative alliance with otherness, while the reason, unable to range it in its predetermined categories, remains confused and hostile. While precautionary rationality rejects alterity for safety reasons, creative imagination can face it and integrate it (Lyotard, 1991). Kant's aesthetic vision of the sublime, designed for a pre-industrial world, is hardly applicable to a world that has learned its lesson of modern industrialisation and is seeking to become post-industrial. Paradoxically, in a world heavily damaged by global industry, the chance of survival for the human species lies in its ability to question the rigidity of anthropocentric reason. It entails adopting an innovative, inclusive, and caring approach to reimagining mutual cohabitation in living environments (Steiner, 2005).

In the 21st century, we, humans, are living on the planet Earth, irreversibly damaged by the global effects of human warfare and industrial 'progress', right inside collapsing ecosystems, alongside disappearing plants and endangered animal species. Human hostility made many non-human beings vulnerable to the point of becoming massively extinct. In such a fragile environment, it is neither reasonable nor safe to continue cultivating attitudes of human superiority. The aesthetics of posthumanism assumes that if we wish make our future-oriented imagination responsible (Jonas, 1984), we can no longer support anthropocentric cruelty. Humans need to stop the systematic exploitation of other-than-human life forms and reimagine new ways of interspecies cohabitation. Joining the aesthetics of posthumanism means becoming human in a newly safe, caring, hospitable way.

2. Knowledge Gaps: Mapping the Limits of Anthropocentric Aesthetics

Posthumanism is a genuine trend in philosophical aesthetics that emerged in the early decades of the 21st century. Authors such as Cary Wolfe (2010; 2026) and Matthew Calarco (2008; 2015) have introduced posthumanism as a new perspective on aesthetic experiences and judgements regarding interspecies encounters. Their groundwork searching for paths beyond anthropocentrism and the human-animal divide was later completed by philosophers of art and embodiment working in the fields of phenomenology (Buchanan, 2008; Dufourcq, 2022), deconstruction (Still, 2015; Fritsch, Lynes and Wood, 2018; Mandieta, 2024), schizoanalysis (Massumi, 2014; Cimatti, 2020), cultural studies (Dürbeck and Hüpkes, 2020), ecofeminism (Harraway, 2003; Harraway, 2008; Cavalieri, 2001; Cavalieri, 2008), and performativity (Barad, 2003). By revising the aesthetic problems of symbiosis between human and non-human beings, these thinkers developed innovative approaches to the cohabitation of various life forms. The goal of their work is to rethink and reimagine human agency in personal encounters with various agents in the natural and cultural environments.

Building on their insights, this thematic issue aims to highlight a turning point in contemporary aesthetic research, focusing on the correlations among people, land, animals, plants, and other organisms in mutually inhabited environments. By questioning our shared expectations, it elaborates on the crucial role of responsible imagination in aesthetic judgements of our encounters with 'otherness'. Pre-Darwinian metaphysics held that philosophy could define and protect 'human nature' as grounded in a constant structure of the 'human mind', which could be clearly distinguished from that of other species and their cognitive abilities. These anthropocentric beliefs were plausibly challenged by Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection (Darwin, 1995), which demonstrated that no species is created once and for all. It does not emerge ready and recognisable at once. A species neither has an ideally predetermined form of life, nor does it generate a fixed type of 'mind'. Instead, species continually evolve by adapting to various environmental challenges and other species agency. A species, including the human species, cannot even exhibit totally constant, unevolving patterns over time, as such rigid patterns would lead to its extinction. Sharing Darwin's processual ontological views, posthumanism points to the instability of metaphysical concepts of 'human soul', 'human mind', or 'human nature'.

Contrary to social Darwinism's tendency to classify and judge people according to racist (Galton, 1904) and sexist (Weininger, 2005) prejudices, posthumanism promotes cultivating mindfulness toward living beings and inclusive engagement in both social and interspecies cohabitation. Inspired by the ethically pioneering works of Schopenhauer (1995), Montaigne (1943), Rousseau (2009), and Bentham (1970), posthumanism enhances the moral and aesthetic frames of Western metaphysical thinking by focusing on its potential for improvement. From the perspective of the aesthetics of posthumanism, a plausibly adapted form of life could be achieved through a shift in the contemporary politics of shared imagination. Such a shift requires

a complementary ethical and aesthetic turn, prompting us to consider images of environmental awareness and creative adaptation. One of the 20th century's plausible ethical examples is Hans Jonas's work *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984), which has overturned Kant's moral imperative related to 'sublime' forces of nature. In his view, Kant's sublime connection between the aesthetic and the moral, constructed for the pre-globalised and preindustrial era of the Enlightenment, fails in a world shaped by a human-caused global environmental crisis. Humans are morally responsible for the state of the natural environment they leave to future generations. Therefore, in the era of the Anthropocene, characterised by the global climate crisis, caused by toxic industries and massive destruction of natural ecosystems, we shall not protect ourselves from nature; we shall protect nature from ourselves (Jonas, 1984). Subsequent ethical and aesthetic initiatives invite both everyday actors and recipients of art to take responsibility by daring to feel (Aaltola, 2012; Aaltola, 2018) and perform (Barad, 2003) beyond the limits of anthropocentrism.

Let us now focus on the main knowledge gaps in traditional anthropocentric thinking regarding the cohabitation of human and non-human beings. The first knowledge gap concerns our conception of tamed or cultivated non-human beings as an otherness that might be found to be too close, too familiar to humans. Although posthumanist critical thinking welcomes an inclusive imagination of alterity to rethink symbiosis in interspecies cohabitation, it does not conflate this with a homogenising identity achieved through training or cultivation. This topic is echoed by Donna Haraway, who raised concerns about the humanisation of pets in American culture (Harraway, 2008). In her view, establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with other species does not entail humanising them. Respecting animals' otherness does not mean normalising their behaviour and appearance to make them look more human-like (Harraway, 2008). She even argues that playing the expected role of human 'best friend' is a demanding job for a dog: "Commonly in the US, dogs are attributed with the capacity for 'unconditional love.' According to this belief, people, burdened by misrecognition, contradiction, and complexity in their human relationships, find solace in unconditional love from their dogs. In turn, people love their dogs as children" (Haraway, 2003, p. 33). To challenge this cultural habit based on misleading expectations of dogs, Haraway formulates a manifesto to establish new ethics and politics that would take dog – human relationships seriously, as a human relationship with "significant otherness" (Haraway, 2003, p. 3). Although pet relationships nurture this sort of love, she still considers that "Being a pet seems to me to be a demanding job for a dog, requiring self-control and canine emotional and cognitive skills matching those of good working dogs. Very many pets and pet people deserve respect. Furthermore, play between humans and pets, as well as simply spending time peaceably hanging out together, brings joy to all participants. Surely that is one important meaning of companion species" (Haraway, 2003, p. 39). Her subversive work invites us to imagine walking a dog in a manner attentive to the dog's specific needs. Can we even conceive of paying attention to both species-related and individual animal needs, without disciplining

or hygienising them? Could we be open to doing things with them in their own way? Even such a simple pleasure as sitting together on the grass, leaning to each other, while aesthetically enjoying our interspecies company, 'peacefully hanging out', as Haraway writes, is not evident for anthropocentric minds.

The second knowledge gap in anthropocentric aesthetics concerns the conception of non-human beings as otherness that is considered too distant to be imagined inclusively. These situations arise when humans identify so closely with their own species that this identification impedes their creative thinking about alterity. By insisting on the ultimate limits of their human identity, they cannot even imagine feeling for a non-human being when they see them suffer. As a remedy for such situations, posthumanist aesthetics might seek to articulate creative artistic imagination in relation to the ethics of cognitive emotions. Introducing her moral theory of cognitive emotions, philosopher Martha Nussbaum proposes an innovative understanding of compassion as a socially enhancing emotion directed not only toward humans but also toward animals. Specifically, she turns to the problem of compassion toward animals, beginning with the view of compassion as a 'basic social emotion' (Nussbaum, 1996), understood as a fundamental human capability to cohabit with others, including other species. In her pioneering work on human and animal capabilities (Nussbaum, 2004; Nussbaum, 2006), she finds compassion toward other species inseparable from the recognition of their dignity and of their worthy, decency-demanding lives. Placed between wonder and outrage, namely between the amazement at animals' ways of life and behaviours and the indignation arising from the recognition that the animals' 'striving is wrongfully thwarted' (Nussbaum, 2023), compassion is a valuable moral emotion responsive to the embodied experience of reality. Compassion is an emotion directed towards animals as beings with which we cohabit the world according to different levels of affective proximity (pets) and distance (wild animals) within a variety of shared spaces that can be directly experienced or imaginatively reconstructed. Its specific artistic and aesthetic imagination offers various visions grounded in cultivating socially virtuous cognitive emotions, such as empathy, sympathy, and compassion. An ethically advanced emotional intelligence is capable not only of considering social cohesion but also of imagining new forms of interspecies togetherness, compassion, and care.

From this post-anthropocentric perspective, humans can survive the global environmental crisis only through interspecies cohabitation and mutual adaptation. A plausible cohabitation with non-human beings does not simply entail cultivating, training, or humanising them. The posthumanist aesthetic rather proposes meeting them halfway through a balanced use of critical and creative thinking. To tame a dog, not only do I let the dog be the dog, but I also willingly partially follow him in his dog expressivity into our mutual process of becoming a pack. To tame means to gain one's trust, to become fellows, and to befriend, in the sense of consensual company and closeness based on mutual voluntary care. A plausible cohabitation with non-human beings,

however, means neither withdrawing myself from feeling for them. When addressing the problem of pushing the non-human otherness to an extreme distance from humans, this ethically charged imagination calls for improving human emotional intelligence by recognising the richness of nonverbal communication in non-human beings. Such ethical resetting of our aesthetic imagination helps us to stop bragging about our own humanity while exploiting and mistreating other species. Enabling this shift requires recognising that cultivating arrogance toward the natural environment contributes to human extinction. An environmentally aware 'human species' cannot protect its children by professing anthropocentrism; it can only protect them by having them reimagine and redesign their future. Contemporary continental philosophy offers several effective methods for addressing this problem.

3. Methods: Fostering Post-Anthropocentric Imagination

Posthumanism focuses on systematically shifting its aesthetic imagination toward active engagement with creative and critical thinking, thereby challenging anthropocentric phobias of non-human *xenos*. Let us examine three of its methodological roots.

The first important inspiration for posthumanist aesthetics is phenomenology, particularly eco-phenomenology, which creatively rethinks intersubjectivity as interanimaity and connects embodiment to the idea of human kinship with nature. Although empathy through imaginative reconstructions does not resolve Thomas Nagel's (1974) famous enigma, *What is it like to be a bat?*, phenomenology does not dismiss the existence of non-human worlds, pointing to the fact that Nagel's question can be plausibly reformulated in a relational sense, 'What is it like to be with a bat?'. Rather than persuading Nagel of the mysterious forces of empathy, phenomenology makes room for intersubjective aesthetics that fosters the imagination of interspecies kinship.

More specifically, phenomenology proposes that we question the limitations of anthropocentrically framed ethics and formulate a new ethical conception of interspecies cohabitation grounded in compassion and hospitality extended to non-human animals. In *The Structure of Behaviour* (1963), Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlines a theory of kinship between humans and animals that aims to bridge the gap between consciousness and life while preserving their distinctness. It offers the key tools for acknowledging that human and non-human animals share the same imaginative being. In his phenomenological work on embodiment, Merleau-Ponty prefers *Gestalt* psychology to the objective understanding of nature. *Gestalt* consists of the systematic interplay between virtual and actual through the living body. In Merleau-Ponty, animals are autopoietic and sympoietic beings; they consist of affective and active reference to a specific virtual theme operating within oriented ontogenetic, phylogenetic, and behavioural processes. Both human and non-human animals experience the world through their bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 2003). Moving bodies show the phenomenality of animal lives – they perceive and imagine others. Through embodiment and empathy, intersubjectivity gives rise

to interanimality in interspecies relations. Thanks to interanimality, we are not isolated from the world; we are inside it and with it.

In her revision of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Anabelle Dufourcq understands imagination as a form of experience – an as if – of the object. The experience is physical and emotional, and it can range from clichéd images or abstract representations to quasi-experience. As she puts it in *The Imaginary of Animals*,

> Living beings in general and animals in particular are to be fundamentally defined by an elusive 'to be and not to be' or 'phantom-like' being, which entails their intrinsic relation to meaning, essences, and the virtual. To make my case, I draw upon Merleau-Ponty's concept of Gestalt. I argue that this concept can become a key to framing the relation between the imaginary and animal life in its most fundamental form, as a relation that pervades the morphology of the living body, metabolism, animal attitudes, and behaviours. (Dufourcq, 2022, p. 79)

Umwelten of the non-human animals belong to what she calls 'imaginareal'. The 'imaginareal' is a transcendental field that precedes human-made dichotomies between subject/object, real/imaginary. It consists of a flow of sensible appearances that echo and disrupt each other. In the lives of both human and non-human animals, it holds three dimensions: the real (metaphors), the imaginary (images), and the imagination (fantasies).

To advocate for better cohabitation with non-human animals, phenomenology proposes to bridge the gap in anthropocentric thinking by a shift in human imagination. While Merleau-Ponty's 'interanimality' implies thoughts on interterritoriality, Dufourcq's imagining 'with' animals supposes a shared 'imaginareal'. Demonstrating that animal agency is enacted through imaginative thinking that transcends the rigid dichotomies of identity/alterity and human/non-human, the phenomenology invites us to join an inclusive imagination of embodiment that honours interspecies kinship.

The second important inspiration for posthumanist aesthetics is deconstruction, which subverts our prejudices and invites us to care for the marginalised, liminal beings. It allows us to ask questions such as: How can we improve symbiotic relationships among species as they adapt to ongoing environmental change? How to advocate for liminal animals? Because liminal animals live thoroughly among human beings, they cannot be managed simply as wild animal populations. As Colin Jerolmack notes, what a rat is depends upon the meanings that humans ascribe to rathood – pestilence, vermin, filth: "Animals that disgust us, such as rats, are often associated with the most undesirable urban interstices such as sewers" (Jerolmack, 2008, p. 74). Given this, one cannot speak for rats without speaking 'for' pestilence and filth. But, since speaking for pestilence and filth is, almost by definition, absurd, the attempt to speak for rats is absurd and usually treated as such (Wyckoff, 2015).

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida (2008) describes this imaginary interval between human and animal being that was traumatically cut and divided by the hostile authority of human Law. When commenting

on our alienation through anthropocentrically biased 'zoopoetics', Derrida points to the metaphysical violence of this cut. Because neither philosophy nor poetry can entirely free itself from the metaphysical construction of language, they can achieve subversive playfulness only by occasional interpositions. To fill the gaps between animal life and human law, he claims, philosophy shall integrate autobiographic poetry, and poetry shall become philosophically vigilant towards prejudices built into its words' meanings. Improving this cooperation may help overcome the trauma of 'zoopoetics' by developing an innovative, poetically inclusive language for human-animal cohabitation.

Following Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that no individual human being has any 'common' sensation with other humans or other beings. Insisting that there is literally no general 'human mind', Nancy deconstructs the metaphysical prejudice of the 'five senses' in human perception of the world. Because individuals have slightly different senses, each sensorial perception is strictly individual and singular. There is always a gap between individual perceptions, a delay between sensual perception. If one is to be approached and understood by others, one's sensations need to be 'ex-scribed', exposed to others' perception through technical constructions, shared representations, and constructed mediations. In *Being singular plural* (2000), Nancy opts for this mode of existence as 'being-singular-plural', which also means being-with-others, having a common essence, a 'co-essence' (Nancy, 2000, p. 57). Because there is no common human or animal body, there is no common sensorial perception. We can only create poetic technologies of the common – common techné of individual bodies – which help us negotiate our singular sensations with others.

Derrida's concept of 'zoopoetics' and Nancy's concept of 'techné of bodies' might help improve our aesthetic thinking about interspecies imagination. It enables the deconstruction of human hostility toward liminal beings by advocating a willingness to subvert anthropocentric prejudices and to imagine ourselves in their places. Although I will never know exactly what other animals or other humans actually feel, I can empathise with them by imagining their joy or suffering. Put otherwise, deconstruction activates caring imagination through poetic mediation. Such aesthetic engagement can occur through inventive technologies that construct our new, imaginary 'co-essence'. In Nancy's words, the success of interspecies cohabitation only depends on who we allow to enter 'our' plural – who we decide to share with and care for.

The third important inspiration for posthumanist aesthetics is schizoanalysis, especially its emphasis on creative becoming. In this processual ontology of becoming, affective rituals and everyday routines engage living beings in repetitive practices that produce their own territorialisation and entrain other species into mutually beneficial agency, called *sympoiesis*. Such a mutually enjoyed routine can help us understand interspecies cohabitation to the extent that this ethico-aesthetic mannerism is formed through the interspecies rituals of affective bonding – through pollination, the wasp becoming the orchid's sexual organ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

Contrary to psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis regards animality as a 'line of flight' along which human beings escape their Oedipal identification. While the Oedipal complex theory claims that the father figure suppresses the primary sexual desire, operating a traumatic 'castration', schizoanalysis refuses to accept that this 'dirty family secret' plays a crucial role in human ontology. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari claim that the unconscious is a machine that produces desire and designs the future, rather than a theatre that represents the trauma of past displacement. In contrast to psychoanalysis, schizoanalysis assumes that desire is everywhere: the libido does not need to be sublimated to be invested economically or politically. To dissolve the psychoanalytic burden of human identity, they introduce the concept of the 'desiring machine', understood as a socially produced unconscious desire that flows in intensities and evolves through delirious imagination of 'becoming-animal', enabling one to experience non-human intensities, to 'go wild'.

In her book *Unbecoming Human* (2020), Felice Cimatti describes this becoming as a mutual process, which involves human participants in unbecoming human. In this process,

> New and previously unconsidered vital possibilities are thus disclosed: combinations that transcend the boundaries of the body, forming fluxes in which distinguishing among who is active and who is passive, who is a subject and who is an object, who is human and who isn't, no longer has any meaning. 'Becoming-animal' is thus a twin process of 'deterritorialization' (the process of opening up frontiers, thus blurring the lines between territories) and 'territorialisation' (the process through which new territories, new aggregates and new fluxes are born). (Cimatti, 2020, p. 161)

When a cat spontaneously joins its human in bed while sleeping and trustfully leans next to him, their joyful intensities are produced by psychoanalytical desire neither to turn animals into a father figure nor to turn wilderness into family, but rather by the schizoanalytical desire to be entrained into unbecoming human.

Following Deleuze and Guattari's and Cimatti's schizoanalysis, the aesthetics of posthumanism invites human imagination to access other, non-human perspectives. Contrary to the typical territorialisation of the 'human world', which puts such emphasis on verbal communication, interaction with animals is nonverbal and sensorial – olfactory, haptic, cinematic, and proxemic. When one runs, mutters, or relaxes with non-human beings, one feels the intertwining intensities of physical connection, speed or calm. Thanks to schizoanalysis and its sensitivity to otherness, one can imagine the aesthetically satisfying togetherness of the pack or the flock. Posthuman imagination, open to such processual experiences, helps us appreciate routines that intertwine human and animal habits and assemble them into a sympoiesis of their cohabitation.

4. Articles: Exploring Imagination in Aesthetics of Posthumanism

The articles gathered in this thematic special issue encompass these aspects of the aesthetics of posthumanism. To address the complexity of this topic, the issue presents contributions that map various approaches to the 'posthuman situation' of human identity by rethinking new possibilities and eventual limits of shared human imagination, affectivity, and attention. It introduces evolutionary topics such as social disintegration and ontological strangeness, hostility and hospitality, symbiosis and sypoiesis, insiders and outsiders, alterity and hybridity, solidarity and cohesion. The articles call for awareness of interspecies vulnerabilities. Their creative work, grounded in posthuman imagination, evokes a moral responsibility to protect vulnerable nature from human destructiveness. Their aesthetic thinking is therefore designed as an ethico-political agency that prompts environmental sensibility and care in the Anthropocene.

The first set of articles targets the multifaceted – environmental, social, and technological – catastrophe of modernity, and the subsequent rupture of postmodern art from it. The perspective of artists and their works, presented in this first part of the special issue, critiques the self-centred, narrow-minded humanism that has given rise to resistance through a posthumanist engagement approach. Posthumanist critical thinking through art invites us to overcome the traditional anthropocentric dichotomies grounded in pretentious humanist binaries such as subject/object, human/animal, and culture/nature. New ethical imperatives of biocentrism and ecocentrism call for symbiotic, intertwined, and more collaborative interspecies relationships. Posthumanist ethical concerns lead them to advocate the integration of feeling and knowing, which is central to any morally motivated aesthetic experience. The discussed artists and philosophers suggest overcoming anthropocentric limitations in our aesthetic judgements by encouraging morally engaging cognitive emotions towards vulnerable non-human beings and ecosystems.

Among these contributions, Gabi Balcarce and Andrea Torrano's article *Contaminated Survivals in Inhalaciones territoriales by Ana Laura Cantera* offers a pointed critique of environmental hypocrisy. It introduces Cantera's artistic collaboration with Demian Ferrari and explores the urban spaces of Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Bangalore (India) using a device for collecting ambient CO2. Drawing on the perspectives of Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and Vinciane Despret, the authors examine the sympoietic landscape of this artwork, aiming to establish the posthuman coordinates of coexistence and multispecies solidarity, alliance, and collaboration as a vigorous response to the Anthropocene.

Similarly, Vít Pokorný's article *Urban Reality as the Main Motive in China Miéville's Posthuman Aesthetics* introduces the specificities of one of the key artists of posthumanism. Focusing on artistic imagination that engages with social disintegration and interspecies fluidity in dark urban environments, Pokorný demonstrates how Miéville's work, both theoretical and fictional, mobilises critical thinking to reassess the human condition. As the author

emphasises, through the lens of posthumanist sensitivity, Miéville embraces perspectives and negotiations that extend beyond the supposed human and non-human divide.

Another artwork of posthumanism is examined in Jaya Sarkar's article *Posthuman Animality: Situating Theories of Companion Species and Becoming-with in Netflix's Love, Death and Robots, Volume IV*. Criticising anthropocentric prejudices rooted in humanist binarism, the author analyses *Love, Death and Robots* (2025) to explore how animality can be reimagined and recreated through posthuman aesthetics. By engaging with Donna Haraway's concept of companion species and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal, this paper examines the connections among the aesthetics, ethics, and politics of the way we imagine animals. Far from privileging humans over nonhuman animals, Sarkar demonstrates that posthuman aesthetics challenges traditional humanist aesthetics, calling for an alliance across different realms and ecologies.

Panda Prasenjit and Udbhas Kumar Bhoi bring attention to Samantha Harvey's posthumanist work *Orbital*. In their article titled *Non-Human Perception of Aesthetics and the Phenomenon of Overview Effect in Samantha Harvey's Orbital*, they examine how stages represent aesthetic perception under post-terrestrial and post-anthropocentric conditions in outer space. The experiential shifts in aesthetic experiences depicted in *Orbital* are mediated by the cognitive and nonhuman sensorial phenomena known as the overview effect. By situating them alongside their literary representations, the authors demonstrate that spaceflight both shapes and dismantles the anthropocentric aesthetic perception. They argue that the overview effect represents a posthumanist aesthetic experience of the 'postbody', which conceptualises the convergence of shifting perceptions in non-human spaces.

In the next article, *Interweaving Ecohorror and Symbiotic Associations. The Posthuman Aesthetics of Sundarbans in Selected Works of Amitav Ghosh*, Moumita Sahu and Mallika Ghosh Sarbadhikary notice that Sundarbans portray a world that is post-anthropocentrically hybridised. The artworks of Amitav Ghosh highlight multi-layered imaginary environments with frequent human-wild engagements as part of daily survival. The dual character of the Sundarbans reveals the perilous yet intimate bond between the human and the natural world, evoking ecological horror as well as awareness within the anthropocentric realm. Ghosh's posthumanist imagination focuses on the islander's struggle to survive in such complex landscapes in the backdrop of the region's rich socio-cultural history depicted in his ecological texts – *The Hungry Tide, Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama* – that simultaneously overlap ecohorror with symbiotic interfaces. Using posthumanist ecohorror as a theoretical framework, the paper argues that Ghosh's illustrations of various environmental catastrophes and social conflicts constitute a posthumanist aesthetic position that enables one to live symbiotically despite precarious circumstances and oppressive political establishment.

The second set of articles addresses various problems related to anthropocentrism. By introducing thinkers who articulate distinct viewpoints on the contemporary politics of aesthetic imagination, it presents two contrasting approaches to human manipulation of the natural environment: while one group proposes creating a caring visuality of post-anthropocentrism, the other advocates preserving the anthropocentric one.

Posthumanist creative thinking, as presented in this second part of the special issue, examines human agency through a philosophical lens and argues that a new moral direction for cognitive emotions can lead human imagination to humbly situate ourselves in the precarious position of non-human beings. Recognising that no being can instantly change its body, posthumanists do not seek to overcome anthropocentric specieism in contemporary aesthetics by modifying our limited possibilities of perception or sensation associated with human bodies. Instead, they focus on how these perceptions and sensations relate to morally biased cognitive emotions and the collectively shared imagination of interspecies encounters. Their call for a shift from humanism to posthumanism, or rather from anthropocentrism to post-anthropocentrism, in contemporary politics of aesthetic imagination arises from ethical poles. Their plural call to imagine interspecies alliance and solidarity demonstrates the necessity of the posthumanist call for a new visuality.

First of these contributions, Michaela Fišerová's article *Aesthetic Frames. Jacques Derrida and Gardener's Cultivation of Hostility*, examines the seemingly obvious traditional aesthetic frames of gardening. To critically address humanist hypocrisy in the gardener's gaze, she proposes that we understand plant cultivation as a division between hospitality and hostility. Following Derrida's critical reading of Kant's beautiful frames and Austin's performative fails, she argues that the gardener's performativity delimits the beautiful and cultivated order of his garden from the wild and chaotic 'outside' he cannot govern. Based on her deconstructive revision of gardening genres, the author concludes that an environmentally engaged aesthetics might redefine the limits of the gardener's hostility towards unselected non-human beings.

The next contribution offers a critique of aesthetic hypocrisy in the tourist gaze, which seeks to appreciate attractive landscapes while ignoring the environmental damage produced by mass tourism. In their article *Contemporary Regimes of Visuality: The Avatar Mountains*, Paolo Furia and Ru Ying focus on our technologically perverted relation to nature. Using Zhangjiajie Forest Park in China as an example, the authors analyse how cinema and digital media have transformed this natural landscape through increased visibility and economic development. From posthumanist perspectives, they examine the drawbacks of such inconsiderate visuality, notably the encouragement of unsustainable practices, such as overtourism, and the technologically programmed aestheticisation of natural beauty.

Another case of anthropocentric hypocrisy is targeted in Tereza Arndt's article *From Forests to Rabbits: Reconsidering Human and Nonhuman Agency in Concentration Camps*. She argues that Nazi concentration camps blurred the

line between human and nonhuman by juxtaposing dehumanised prisoners with animals kept in camp zoos and the SS Angora project. Drawing on survivor testimonies, comic books, and philosophical posthumanism, the article explains why overcoming anthropocentrism is essential for rethinking perspectives on human domination and rigid species boundaries. By treating nonhuman actors as witnesses, the author opens a new space for a posthumanist imagination of interspecies solidarity and shared vulnerability.

The following article draws upon Deleuzian concept of deterritorialisation to show how it can disrupt dominant spatial regimes and enable new forms of spatial relations to emerge. In his article *Spatiality, Place and Territory: An Outline of Landscape and its Experience*, Felipe Matti explores the aesthetic experience of landscape through the conceptual triad of space, territory, and Earth. Focusing on marginalised groups, he argues that territory is the semiotic structuration of space, whereas landscape remains unassimilated, functioning as a site of desubjectification and spatial openness. He concludes that access to landscape is essential to the possibility of otherness and spatial transformation beyond institutional constraints.

Also, Adam Lovasz's and Mark Horvath's article *Opening Aesthetics. Posthumanism and the Crisis of Form in the Anthropocene* reexamines traditional human relationships to Earth. The authors focus on the ongoing collapse of the Earth System's functionality, which is fundamentally reshaping our thinking about nature and the conditions of existence on Earth. Defining the Anthropocene as an era of ontological destabilisation, they described its 'dark ecology' as radically challenging our sensibilities and reforming our imagination of functional relations between non-human nature and human culture. Through multidisciplinary attempts to grasp this new nature-cultural regime, they introduce the post-anthropocentric 'Anthropocene aesthetics' as an encounter with the more-than-human forces of the Earth System that goes beyond traditional art forms and aesthetic strategies. Highlighting the posthumanist dimension of the Anthropocene, they present posthumanist art as a foreground for the nature-cultural forces that define and shape life on our planet. Aesthetic sensibility, which is adequate to these forces, gives humans of the Anthropocene hope for a possible adaptation.

A similarly hopeful approach to posthumanist imagination is presented in Jiří Klouda's article *The Atmosphere of the Living. Gernot Böhme and Adolf Portmann on the Boundaries of Aesthetics and Ethics of Life*, which creates space for a reinterpretation of Böhme's phenomenological aesthetics in relation to the phenomenal morphology of biologist Adolf Portmann. Both of these projects aim to radically reform their disciplines by moving beyond the subject-centric and logocentric foundations of modern anthropology. Using Böhme's concept of atmosphere, the author develops Portmann's notion of the self-manifestation of living beings. Based on this phenomenology of shared living, Klouda formulates a posthumanist ethical call for innovative aesthetic imagination.

We now turn to the critique of these posthumanist standpoints. In her article *De-humanise! Reflection on Psychological and Ethical Limits of More-than-human Aesthetics*, Tereza Hadravová opts for anthropocentric certainties. Her paper examines contemporary artistic critiques of anthropocentrism by focusing on two claims: that aesthetic experience can temporarily displace human perceptual frameworks, and that such displacement carries ethical value. Drawing on selected international artworks, she situates them within a debate from Hume's 18th-century views on human nature to Nagel's 20th-century scepticism about the possibility of adopting non-human points of view. Because she believes there is no space for empathy, she advocates neither pursuit nor valorisation of the posthumanist imagination in art.

Similarly, Šárka Lojdová's contribution avoids the engaged positions of posthumanism within contemporary aesthetics. In her article *Stories Told to Hide the Truth: Climate Disinformation, Animal Behaviour and the Nature of Narratives*, she focuses on Marta Tafalla's recent study, in which the philosopher invites us to learn about global climate change by listening to animals and the stories nature tells us. Based on her comparison of Tafalla's and anti-environmentalists' narrative structures, the author concludes that one can learn about climate from animals' stories only (and only) if one acknowledges that stories are human-made.

What makes this collection of contrasting theoretical contributions relevant is that it proposes considering the contemporary state of aesthetic research across its diverse positions. While one side of these divisive approaches addresses cohabitation with non-human beings as a call for a new visuality of inclusive and caring imagination, the other side of the discussion questions the posthumanist shift in aesthetic imagination. Hopefully, these bipolar negotiations will continue until a common ground is eventually reached.

5. Conclusion: Bridging the Anthropocentric Gaps

The aesthetics of posthumanism aims to articulate a complex theory of imagination that supports kinship, care, and sympoiesis in the cohabitation of human and nonhuman beings, without evading the potential philosophical tensions and discrepancies present in current aesthetic discourses.

What makes this post-anthropocentric aesthetic research original is that it proposes methodological approaches grounded in a reconfiguration of the current politics of aesthetic imagination. Compared with environmental aesthetics, the posthumanist aesthetic is mostly rooted in post-structural and phenomenological philosophical traditions. To fulfil its objectives, it combines methods of philosophical work with imagination derived from either Deleuze's, Guattari's, and Cinatti's schizoanalytic expressionism and *sympoiesis* in interspecies becoming, Derrida's and Nancy's deconstructive readings of troubling prejudices that might be subverted into care for liminal beings through an innovated 'zoopoetics', or Merleau-Ponty's and Dufourcq's phenomenological descriptions of embodiment that open paths to 'imaginareal' and kinship with nature. Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of *sympoiesis* as co-becoming is mostly used

to address both similarities and differences in human and non-human territorial negotiations, and to approach hospitality, curiosity, and care in the local politics of interspecies cohabitation. Deconstructive comparative reading focuses on critically revising aporias and knowledge gaps in contemporary conceptions of environmental aesthetics and in the aesthetics of care, which has been predominantly human-centred. Phenomenological descriptions primarily address the roles of imagination, intentionality, and intersubjectivity in human compassion toward animals across various habitats and modes of cohabitation. Explaining the necessity of an intersection between ethics and phenomenology helps clarify the intersubjective basis of compassionate relations with living otherness. These cases can be further described through ecocentric and biocentric aesthetic perspectives that emphasise creative adaptation and a desire for symbiosis.

Whereas the post-Kantian philosophical tradition has prioritised human intellectual and rational capacities as the modalities through which we encounter and develop an understanding of the natural world, more recent developments within phenomenology and deconstruction emphasise that we establish our relations with animal life and natural environments through imaginative capacities, affectivity, and embodied experience. Combining these methods, the aesthetics of posthumanism focuses on the particular challenges of contemporary interspecies cohabitation in the era of Anthropocene, characterised by postindustrial transitions and environmental revitalisations. Besides regulated human contact with companion animals and unexpected encounters with 'invasive' plants and 'liminal' animals wandering into cities from surrounding forests. Post-anthropocentric aesthetic approaches them as adapted to a certain degree of symbiotic cohabitation with humans. It also draws attention to hostility toward animals in human treatment, which is characterised by fear of losing control, manipulation, and regulation. Particular attention is paid to nonverbal communication between species, especially to the transformative potential of the human hand, in a double sense – both caring and harmful.

Following the current fields of environmental ethics, which argue that Western philosophy has the ideological conditions that enabled practices that have led to the current ecological crises and biodiversity loss, Haraway's new materialism identifies transcendentalist conceptions of human nature as fostering exploitative attitudes toward nonhuman nature (Haraway, 2008). Kantian transcendental idealism is thus regarded as the culprit in moulding our intellectual and scientific culture into a stance that regards nature as distinct from the autonomous human subject. Post-Kantian philosophy, committed to human superiority and exceptionalism, fails to recognise the non-human agencies that actively shape our aesthetic experiences with the others and with the shared environment.

The aesthetics of posthumanism, attentive to these issues, is a relatively new direction within the humanities that advocates a turn in contemporary politics of aesthetics toward reassessing the relations among humans, non-human animals, territories, and ecosystems. Motivated by the need for social and

interspecies care, it introduces an ethically grounded shift in the contemporary politics of aesthetics, promoting kinship with nature through caring imagination. This post-anthropocentric movement in aesthetic thinking acknowledges that we, humans, do not stand above nature. What we call nature is not external to our life-form (Frediksson, 2011). In this context, the notion of kinship between the human and non-human has become an important critical tool in renegotiating aesthetic appreciation and judgement. To reimagine ways of creating an environmentally hospitable cohabitation, it focuses on creative imagination. It proposes to reevaluate the industrial disaster of the modern era through artistic observations of human communities living with damaged landscapes (mines, brownfields, polluted rivers, degraded ecosystems) and by imagining how restoration, conservation, and green infrastructure projects generate conflicts over land, risk, and future visions (Pokorný, 2024). By shifting attention from 'crisis management' to the imaginary and poetic 'future-making', the aesthetic research of posthumanism aims to demonstrate how mutually beneficial symbiotic cohabitation between human and non-human beings can be. By resetting the shared imagination, it can generate transferable lessons for the contemporary era of Anthropocene, turning the experience of transition into a relevant source of aesthetic innovation.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18639989

Contaminated Survivals in *Inhalaciones territoriales* by Ana Laura Cantera

Gabi Balcarce – Andrea Torrano

In *Inhalaciones territoriales* (2022), artist Ana Laura Cantera, in collaboration with Demian Ferrari, explores the urban space of Buenos Aires (Argentine) and Bangalore (India) using a device for the collection of ambient CO2. This work can be interpreted within the context of extinction, stemming from the planetary crisis we are witnessing, involving humans and non-humans alike. In scenes of devastation, the work explores ways to inhale, walk, feel, contaminate, challenging affective repertoires tinted with pessimism, in favor of delving into new affective expressions that advocate for multi-species alliances and solidarities. Drawing on the perspectives of Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and Vinciane Despret we will delve into the sympoietic landscape of this work, aiming to establish the posthuman coordinates of coexistence and multispecies collaborations as a vigorous response to the Anthropocene. | *Keywords: Anthropocene, Contamination, Multispecies Solidarities, Survival Assemblages, Sympoietic Landscape*

1. Introduction

We live in an era marked by accelerated climate crisis, mass extinctions, increased emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases, loss of biodiversity, global warming, rising deforestation, water pollution, ecosystem degradation, privatization and over-extraction of common goods, and the destruction of territories, peoples, and cultures. Human lifestyles, grounded in consumption and unlimited appropriation of goods and living beings, have placed life on Earth – including our own species – at mortal risk. Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) proposed naming this geological epoch the Anthropocene, a period in which human activities have become comparable to geological forces in their capacity to transform the Earth. From Latin America, Svampa (2019) warns that the Anthropocene must be understood in relation to extractivism and neo-extractivism, which produce large-scale and intensive

extraction of material goods. For the author, this economic model is deeply connected to the 'invention of Europe', the expansion of capital, and the consolidation of a logic of dispossession that extends from the conquest of America to the present.

According to Tsing (2015, 2019), the Anthropocene is characterized by the destruction of shelters for humans and other species. During the Holocene, shelters still existed in which different organisms could survive under unfavorable conditions. The turning point between the Holocene and the Anthropocene lies in the destruction of these spaces and times of refuge (Haraway, 2016a, p. 17). In recent years, the Earth has progressively and rapidly diminished its capacity to welcome us, "global landscapes today are strewn with this kind of ruins" (Tsing, 2015, p. 6). But it is an "irregular Anthropocene" (Tsing, Mathews and Bubandt, 2019), since although the Anthropocene is global – it is not possible for climate change to happen in some places and not in others – the way the Earth is harassed by Man – with a capital M – is uneven and unequal. In this sense, the Anthropocene seems to leave certain clearings where it is possible to find forms of habitability. The inquiry, then, into these possibilities of habitability in crumbling capitalism.

In a similar vein, Haraway (2016a, p. 44) asks: "So, what have we provoked?" For the author, it is necessary to confront the consequences of the devastation produced in order to regenerate the world through modest, partial recoveries that allow us to continue living together. Confronting the desire for salvation or a final answer – whether rooted in technological optimism or theological promise – she insists on 'staying with the problem', that is, being 'in' and 'with' the problem, so that the world becomes a matter of care.[1] Thus, she emphatically calls us: "Think we must; we must think. That means, simply, we must change the story; the story must change" (Haraway, 2016a, p. 40). This involves producing new narratives, stories, that recover affection, care, and the capacity to learn how to live and die with others.

The Anthropocene refers to a specific *anthropos*: a white, property-owning, heterosexual male from the Global North, accompanied by stories of Man superiority over all other beings. Colonial worlds, plantation – the engines of European expansion and wealth (Tsing, 2015) – and the appropriation of bodies and goods are the corollaries of this *anthropos*. How, then, should we think about a world in ruins? With whom should we imagine forms of regeneration? How might we reconstruct habitability under these conditions? Starting to ask ourselves these urgent questions implies decentering the *anthropos*, and any stance on human exceptionalism, to entangle ourselves, make compost, and recognise ourselves in multispecies assemblages. In this sense, it becomes essential to recover the imaginaries that invoke a more habitable world.

[1] Following Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), care should be understood as what we do to maintain and repair the fabric that sustains life. In this sense, it should not be understood in relation to the social reproduction of life, nor to moral imperatives, but as the sustenance of life that includes humans and more-than-humans, where the importance of care given and received is highlighted.

'Contemporary technological arts' (Adler and Martin, 2022) constitute a privileged field of experimentation for testing alternative ways of knowledge and reflection. They allow for questioning naturalised conceptions of current living conditions and for exploring the relationships between sciences and living. At the same time, artistic practices propose to imagine and construct assemblages between humans and non-humans, based on alliances and solidarities, for a common survival.

We propose to investigate *Inhalaciones territoriales* (2019–2021 and 2023), by the artist Ana Laura Cantera[2] – in collaboration with Demian Ferrari – who traverses the urban space of Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Bangalore (India) with a device that collects carbon dioxide and other gases present in the atmosphere. It is a backpack with funnels and fans that absorb toxic gases. As noted in its description, the work involves two movements of the body: on one hand, the exposure of the artist's corporeality in the territory and its atmosphere; on the other hand, the gases that enter the body as the artist consumes the suspended particles of the territory while traversing it. At the same time, it presents two methodologies: the first, digital, a CO2 sensor allows her to measure toxic gases in real time. The second, analog, is the intake of air towards the mycelium discs (fungal biocomposite)[3] inside the backpack. Those biomaterials progressively get stained with pollution during the filtration process and are subsequently used to create a 'cyanometer', which serves to determine how polluted the atmosphere is.[4]

Both Argentina and India belong to countries of the Global South, with a similar history; both were colonized by European countries and maintain an unequal relationship with the Global North. In this sense, these territories often find themselves vulnerable to the extractivism imposed by economically powerful countries, forcing their inhabitants, human and non-human inhabitants to coexist in increasingly hostile environments.

Air pollution and water pollution are part of this scenario, posing a threat to survival. The work focuses on breathing, which becomes the action through which living beings – not just humans – ingest microparticles of toxic gases into their bodies. It also explores ways of walking, feeling, transporting, and imagining, stretching the affective repertoires tinged with pessimism, to immerse themselves in new affective expressions that bet on alliances and multi-species solidarities for a common survival. That's why Cantera (2021) characterizes the experience in terms of 'inhale and coexist', accounting for the generation of survival assemblages in precarious environments.

2 Ana Laura Cantera is an Argentine bioelectronic artist, researcher, and professor at the Universidad Tres de Febrero (UNTREF). She is co-founder of Mycocrea - Biomaterials Laboratory and the Robotícula collective of Art and Biorobotics, along with Demian Ferrari. She is part of the Ecoestéticas collective and is a member of the Laboratory of Subaltern Geopoetics. Some of their works are: *Territorial Inhalations* (2019–2021 and 2023), *Invisible Cartographies* (2018), *Utopian Reconstitutions* (2018), *You Are Not Eternal* (2013). His works are characterised by combining art, technologies, and biomaterials.

3 Cantera (2020) proposes a protocol for constructing and designing objects cultivated using fungal species.

4 The play presents two versions, the first one performed in Buenos Aires during 2019–2021, where it toured the City of Buenos Aires and the Greater Buenos Aires area, and the second one in 2023, in Bangalore.

The work is part of Cantera's interest in questioning the separation between human and nature and between subject and object, subsidiaries of the culture/nature distinction, which, among other things, is at the root of the exploitation and degradation of the planet. Inspired by Morton's work, the artist aims to dislocate the scale at which we think and the place that human beings occupy on that scale (Pérez, 2024). According to Morton, the notions of Nature and world have been framed from an anthropocentric perspective, as spaces containing objectified things, which is why they are not suitable for a true planetary consciousness. Thus, abandoning notions such as 'the end of the world' opens the way for what Morton describes as "a decisive pivot in Earth history, in which humans discern the nonhuman and thus reckon the fate of Earth with a greater justice" (Morton, 2013, p. 148).

Our interest is to approach this work through the notion of 'contaminated survivals', two words with seemingly opposite meanings, which allow us to abandon narratives that propose a return to a space of no contamination, assuming that environmental damage is irreversible, but that this does not mean that everything is lost, rather that forms of survival are still possible.

> Still, these places can be lively despite announcements of their death; abandoned asset fields sometimes yield new multispecies and multicultural life. In a global state of precarity, we don't have choices other than looking for life in this ruin. (Tsing, 2015, p. 6)

In this sense, the notion of contamination is revisited, understanding it as a form of becoming-with, where there are no pure and independent existences; on the contrary, there are impurities, confusions, dependencies, and relationships. To this end, we will revisit the reflections of Haraway, Tsing, and Despret, who have explored ways to imagine forms of survival on a devastated earth by betting on multispecies solidarities. The new feminist materialisms – where the concerns of these authors can be inscribed – emerged philosophically as a reaction to the representationalist and constructivist radicalizations of late postmodernity that sidelined the realm of matter and reclaimed feminist debates as a process of materialisation (Fischetti, 2023).

In the first part of this work, we will focus on multispecies assemblages, which bring together humans and non-humans, and living beings as well as non-living ones, within a specific landscape. To do this, we will revisit Tsing's conceptualization of assemblage, which characterises them as a 'polyphonic set', and Haraway's notion of 'sympoietic system',[5] as a way of 'making-in-symphony', in dialogue with Despret's 'habitability'. These theoretical proposals will serve as a compass to investigate *Inhalaciones*

[5] The notion of *sympoiesis* developed by Haraway (2019) is inspired by Lynn Margulis's studies on eukaryotic cells and her proposal of endobiosis and symbiogenesis, in contrast to the idea of competition as the main factor driving the evolutionary process. In Margulis's genealogy, multicellular beings like animals (including ourselves) would be the result of the evolution of olonies of unicellular beings accustomed to living symbiotically, specialising into what would become tissues with different functions. This symbiotic condition of co-evolution would have been advantageous for survival (Margulis and Sagan, 1996). This conception of life aligns with concepts such as symbiogenesis by biologist Scott Gilbert (2010), or the proposals of thinkers like Tim Ingold (2016), for whom life does not unfold in opposition to, nor as a sum of parts articulated around 'and' but from 'together with'.

territoriales, which can be interpreted as a multispecies assemblage in the urban landscape of the Global South composed of a human body, air microparticles, fungi, and technological devices. In the second, we will focus on alliances, affections, and multi-species solidarities, where we will revisit the notion of becoming with others, as a mode of affectation and knowledge, as a possibility of engaging in a relationship of proximity, which appears in Despret. This will allow us to delve into the forms of collaborative survival proposed by Tsing, which are what make life possible in a world in ruins. In the third and last part, we focus on the modes of 'thinking-with' and 'breathing-with' as specific ways of conceiving contaminated forms of survival. This approach allows us to unsettle the narrative of individual salvation and to replace it with one that foregrounds coexistence. Cantera's work calls for both raising awareness about environmental pollution in large cities and exploring collaborative modes of existence among multiple species, human and non-human, organic and inorganic.

2. Survival Assemblies

The current landscape of bioart presents us with a highly interesting proliferation of installations and experiments that use organic and inorganic materials. In particular, the use of mycelium and fungi has been a point of intersection between art, science, and activism in valuable current projects in Latin America. In that direction, Barrios (2016), a participant as a member of the Zooetics collective at the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, highlights:

> The use of mycelium in this context not only demonstrates the versatility and potential of fungi in biotechnology but also reflects an interdisciplinary approach that combines science, art, and sustainability. Through this practice, a discussion opens up about how we interact with natural materials and how we can incorporate more sustainable and collaborative processes into our daily lives. (Barrios, 2016, para. 6)

It is interdisciplinary research, where politics, culture, and science come together to promote social transformation and dialogue about public spaces. In a very similar direction, then, *Inhalaciones territoriales* seeks to account for the anthropocentric landscape, marked by pollution. The work allows us to trace the dire consequences of the Anthropocene,[6] but it also points to the possibility of living in its ruins. If Tsing's (2015) proposal is to identify sympoietic landscapes in an era where habitability is at risk, for Cantera it is about recognizing the exchanges between technologies, corporealities, and organic and inorganic materialities. Precisely, therein lies the collaborative essence of bioart.

Tsing appeals to following the route of the matsutake in the forests, which requires a different bodily disposition compared to other methods of scientific inquiry, such as bending down, placing the body on the ground, directing

[6] Although the notion of the Anthropocene was not accepted by the stratigraphy community as a period following the Holocene (postglacial period) and in March 2023, the decision was made public that it would not be considered an official nomenclature of any kind, it nonetheless had repercussions in other areas and, in some way, encapsulates the posthuman critical analysis, as it highlights and questions that long period of the planet in which the human colonized the existing, made it available to themselves, and erased the violence of that gesture.

the gaze downward, and enhancing not only sight but also smell. Descend to the ground to discover a network of relationships between roots and fungi, of entanglements and multi-species interactions. For its part, Cantera proposes to traverse the city, large urban conglomerations, and open field areas, with a high concentration of CO2 resulting from industrial livestock farming, to experiment with ways of inhaling, circulating, perceiving, and feeling. Breathing occupies a central place in her exercise, both as a practice that characterizes living and as something at risk in the Anthropocene. As the artist herself expresses: "my goal in this work is to visualize that: to pay attention and be aware of the gases, the smog, the pollution that enters us and settles in our organs in a completely natural way" (Cantera, 2021). According to Berardi (2018), in the face of the suffocation caused by the capitalist way of life and the pollution that plagues cities, it is necessary to breathe at a new rhythm, a rhythm that knows of extinction, but that also paves the way for the creation of a harmonious movement of countless bodies that synchronize their steps by breathing together.

As Adler and Martin (2022) point out, Cantera's work appeals to technoscientific instruments that allow for the understanding of exchanges between materialities and organic and inorganic agencies. On one hand, a digital instrument, a CO2 sensor, which allows her to measure the levels of pollution in real time. This measurement is displayed on a screen on the front of the backpack and on the gas monitoring bracelet on the artist's wrist. On the other hand, an analog one, a cyanometer, which is used to determine how polluted the atmosphere is. The cyanometer was an instrument created by de Saussure in the late 18th century to measure the shade of blue in the sky.[7] On the contrary, Cantera's cyanometer is used to measure the shade of gray, which reflects nothing but the level of pollution in the environment.

The combination of digital and analog devices that makes the degree of air pollution visible refers to an articulation between two diverse technologies, one mechanical and the other electronic, which, in turn, correspond to two distinct historical moments –and technological innovations–: the industrial revolution and the digital revolution. In this way, the work seems to suggest a coupling between two modes of visualization (and measurement) of air, or rather, of pollution. As Cantera states (2015, p. 36), "technology is not used as a casual element but rather stands as a tool capable of questioning itself". In this way, art reformulates and challenges human and non-human relations (including technologies) beyond the utilitarian and efficiency-oriented interests of science.

The work consists of several stages, the first being where the artist focuses on cultivating fungal mycelium for the assembly of air filters. The white mycelium discs are cut and placed inside a backpack with openings for channels through which outside air enters. In a second stage, the artist traverses the city, where

7 The cyanometer had a circular shape with 52 different shades of blue (pieces of paper dyed by the meteorologist with a pigment evocatively called 'Prussian blue') that started with white and ended with black.

she collects carbon dioxide through the backpack equipped with funnels and fans that absorb the toxic gases, simulating organic inhalation. Finally, the micro and macroparticles of airborne pollutants that enter through the backpack are deposited in the fungal filters. This last point allows for a certain analogy to be conceived between the lungs, as human filters, and the fungal filters (Adler and Martin, 2022).

As Matewecki (2021, p. 8) points out, Cantera's work contributes to articulating critical thinking with the transformations of nature, from a perspective that questions science, technology, and the place of the human. Art contributes to promoting critical reflection on the implications of the human role in planetary collapse and invites recognition of its relationship with other materialities and non-human agencies, opening the space for experimentation and contact with alterities that are obliterated by the primacy of the human scale and its consequent ontological indifference. In this sense, it resembles the critical description proposed by Tsing to study social relationships and networks, that is, the "more-than-human sociality" (Tsing, 2015, p. 152), which includes both humans and non-humans, even inanimate objects. It highlights the notion of critique as it allows for the formulation of urgent questions and that of description because it expands the curiosity of life, that is, it allows us to learn how humans and other species access ways of life through networks of relationships. Critical description, then, is the one that allows us to investigate social worlds by observing the assemblages, which bring together humans and non-humans, and living beings as well as non-living ones, within a specific landscape. But it is not simply about organisms as mere grouped elements; rather, the assemblages configure forms of life based on the emergent effects derived from encounters.

Inhalaciones territoriales can be interpreted as a multispecies assemblage in the urban landscape of the Global South composed of a human body, air microparticles, fungi, and technological devices. The artist's body is the subject of experimentation in its circulation (on foot and by bicycle) through the city and as a breathing agent, forced to inhale the polluted air. The work allows, on one hand, to showcase the respiratory crisis resulting from the pollution of capitalist cities, but, on the other hand, it accounts for a new rhythm of breathing, a polyphonic rhythm composed of humans and non-humans, a tuning of multi-species rhythms.

In a similar sense, Haraway refers to the stories of co-evolution, of contamination between animals, humans, and other living organisms, which allow us to show how through contact "beings constitute each other and themselves" (Haraway, 2003, p. 6). With this notion, she highlights that they not only have a life together, but also a common history, a social, economic, affective, biogenetic history.[8] This history is filled with violence and brutality, but also with love and alliances. According to Haraway, we inhabit a 'sympoietic system' (not self-making,

[8] As Giannuzzi (2020, p. 141) warns, interspecific and *sympoietic* relationships are the crucial field for defining the 'human' experience, that is, 'critical' in relation to a set of problems that, according to Haraway, are pressing: 1. the plantation system of agribusiness, which structurally requires the genocide of atypical life and certain forms of captivity and forced labor (humans and plants, animals, microbes, and machines); 2. the capacity to educate through science fiction (science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, scientific facts, and string figures); 3. the material-semiotic responses we represent with a non-anthropocentric difference (in art, action-research, archives); 4. the task of finding situated political exits in our present.

not autopoietic), making-in-symphony, making-with, never one, always looping with other worlds" (Haraway, 2016b, p. 216). Life unfolds from 'partial connections'[9] in which strange kinships are generated, disobedient to the human norm, where "kin is an assembling sort of word" (Haraway, 2016a, p. 103). As Despret (2022) points out, borders are much more elastic, where the way of thinking about territory moves away from modern conceptions associated with appropriation, conquest, and a certain coloniality. The idea of inhabiting thus allows us to consider "territories that become bodies and bodies that become territories" (Despret, 2022, p. 29), since territory is above all expression. Far from thinking of territory as something stable, fixed, timeless, like mere *res extensa*, the author asserts, drawing on Deleuze, that few things are as alive and mutable as territory. It is a place where rhythm, motifs, and counterpoints articulate among multiple worlds, making cohabitation possible.

Multispecies assemblages, polyphonic ensembles, stories of co-evolution, sympoietic systems, making-in-symphony, kin, are some of the expressions that allow us to decenter the *anthropos*, where a "permeability of the body" (Payrol Morán, 2022, p. 3) is shown, that is, a permeable human body, open to the environment and to being with others and their multiple interactions with technologies and other materialities, both organic and inorganic. And it is in this affectation where we can move away from human scales and their criteria, those that have silenced other modes of existence, human and non-human, that were always there but we had not turned to see them: animals, fungi, racialized populations, among many forms of being, outside the human norm and its way, perhaps, of forming community, always from the similar, in search of the specularity that reflects a self, far from the contact and vulnerability that hospitality towards the other implies. These encounters show us how we need others not only to survive but also to be able to see ourselves from another perspective. Even to miss ourselves, to nest something of the others, or more precisely, to be able to feel it.

3. Alliances, Affections, and Multispecies Solidarities

In What would animals say if we asked the right questions?, Despret (2016, p. 21) recalls the following statement from some ethologists: "We didn't know what our bodies are capable of, we learned it from animals". The quote takes us to Spinoza and his famous assertion that we do not know what a body can do. However, here an unthought dimension is added: that the knowledge of what bodies can do is provided by others, and in particular, by non-human others who, in their appearance, also allow us to learn about ourselves from another place, showing us our belonging to a being-with-others that dislocates any humanism or logic of the community anchored in ideals of similarity.

A becoming that is always with others, not to feel or understand precisely what the other(s) feel or think, but to embrace and create, in some way, the possibility of being inscribed in a relationship of proximity.

[9] Haraway recovers this notion from anthropologist Strathern to understand the traces of relationality, that is, patterns where the participants are neither the whole nor the part (Haraway, 2003).

If we distinguish ourselves from others (individuals, species), it is because we exist-with, proximity is what enables distinction. And it is also this proximity that allows for forms of connection, relationship, and assemblages.

The human and non-human assemblages proposed by Tsing, like the multiple multi-species interactions emphasized by Haraway, point to a continuity between species –which breaks the subject/object distinction – where the way we have signified our corporealities, the relationship with other living beings (non-humans), and the planet is called into question. These notions are a bet on contributing to the generation of new knowledge and listening, fabrications that do not intend to say it all, but rather, to mark the impossibility of the universal, abandoning the limits of a physical and isolated body, and then overflowing into the encounter with others. Something of that seems to be present in *Inhalaciones territoriales*, where the collaboration between the human and the non-human can account for the coexistence and solidarity that allows for survival. These assemblages seem to emphasize the in-between, rather than each of the individuals or elements that compose it, thereby decentering the *anthropos* and blurring the pre-existing barriers between the human and the non-human. A kind of border, an 'in-between place' or in-betweenness (Anzaldúa, 2015), a liminal space that unites what had been separated and allows for questioning and re-imagining established delimitations.

Haraway's invitation to "making kind as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to" (Haraway, 2016a, p. 2) implies redefining the term kin beyond the familial or genealogical bond, to conceive it as "a lasting solidarity over time in layers of beings who come into the world in relation to one another, and who can and must demand things from one another" (Haraway and Segarra, 2020, p. 42. Our translation). Generating relatives –and not reproducing them – allows for the expansion of forms of relationality and affectivity to more-than-human universes; kinships can be human and non-human, organic and inorganic, living and non-living entities. Cantera's work can be read in tune with the generation of rare relatives, as a way of composing with and becoming with other non-human entities, to which we must respond. In *Inhalaciones territoriales* forms of sympoietic kinships are revealed, from which the idea of human self-sufficiency is dismantled by a constitutive interdependence with other entities.

In times of extinction, pollution finds a certain twist in its negative connotation, both in Cantera's work and in the readings of Haraway and Tsing, to pave the way for a more complex and fertile reinterpretation for our present. Contamination, precarity, and disturbance are notions that Tsing explores to seek other possibilities that move us away from the inherited anthropocentrism in our research: the thought of the *anthropos* detached from its environment and its others, positioning itself as superior to any other form of existence. Contamination is the contact with others from an ontological vulnerability that allows for the polyphonic configuration that shelters us with others. The emphasis on the situated thus favors the explicit articulation of scenarios that, far from being translatable to one another within

the coordinates of old universalism, urge us to weave and ally without a common measure and "without the promise of stability" (Tsing, 2015, p. 2). Precisely, it is fundamental to train oneself in the observation of the singular or the non-scalable, the diversity of meanings, and the multidirectional stories to guide a way of looking at and understanding reality that allows us to take on the complexity of the ecological issues we coexist with.

In *Inhalaciones territoriales*, it not only presents a critical and denunciatory stance on the exploitation and degradation of the planet, but it also promotes commitment to intervene in it. Against the defeatist positions, which express that there is nothing to be done in this devastated world, as well as the salvific ones that predict a solution, this work is an attempt to situate itself in the problem and narrate a story of multispecies assemblages and strange kinships that demand responses. A 'cultivating responsibility' – the ability to give answers – that entails "to venture off the beaten path to meet unexpected, non-natal kin, and to strike up conversations, to pose and respond to interesting questions, to propose together something unanticipated, to take up the unasked-for obligations of having met" (Haraway, 2016a, p. 130).

Becoming an experience with-others, a space for the formation of knowledge and ontological de-hierarchization: in shared affect, new post-anthropocentric scenarios of collaboration are inaugurated. As Tsing (2015, p. 19) points out, "neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival", both narratives have focused on the *anthropos*, which has prevented the recognition of fragmentary landscapes, multiple temporalities, and human and non-human assemblages. The forms of collaborative survival, symbiosis, or mutual benefit of interspecies life are what make life possible in a world in ruins. Indeterminacy and precarity (vulnerability) as the condition of our time shed light on vital dependence and the ability to forge human and non-human worlds.

Sympoietic landscapes are necessary for humans. It is there that we discover that nature is not a landscape or the backdrop of man, it is not something static, passive, and ahistorical, but the protagonist of our stories. At all scales, we need landscapes of common habitability, achieved through symbiosis and coordination. The multispecies resurgence is a work of multiple organisms without intentional coordination guidelines (with and without minds) that, by negotiating their differences, forge multispecies assemblages of habitability amidst disturbance. We need to assemble to stay alive.

Inhalaciones territoriales proposes a reflection on environmental collapse and the specific effects on air pollution levels. In this sense, the work invites us to become aware of the alarming levels of pollution in large cities for those of us who inhabit them. It also highlights collaborative modes of multi-species existence, that is, the importance of different modes of existence, organic and inorganic, that allow for life, human or otherwise, and therefore, survival. In recognizing the co-existence between the human body, air, fungi, and technologies, Cantera bets on a post-anthropocentric scenario traversed by capitalist devastation – and its promise of industrialization and

modernization. It is in that co-existence where collaborations, symbiosis, and coordination occur. Let's remember that for Tsing (2015, p. 28), "collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination". Contamination, then, can be understood as a sign of capitalism in ruins, but also as a possibility for encounters and collaborations.

4. Thinking and Breathing-with

Inhalaciones territoriales invites reflection on environmental pollution in the major cities of the Global South, with a colonial past and that still maintain colonial relationships with the Global North. In this sense, Svampa (2019, p. 41, our translation) questions the narratives of the Anthropocene: "Can we talk about the human species in generic and monolithic terms, casting aside the historical responsibilities that allude to the role of social classes and imperialist nations?" The response that is attempted from the Latin American South, which incorporates environmentalist and feminist struggles, makes visible the forms of exploitation and neo-extractivism that also characterise the Anthropocene, something that seems to be noticed only when read in geopolitical terms. Cantera aims to traverse the landscape of colonised soils and polluted airs to highlight what happens there, between decolonial and environmental activism, in a task of territorial inhalation. The work is an invitation to think, to construct other narratives of survival, we could say, following Haraway, that it is about a "thinking with and from a deeply rooted feminist epistemological practice" (Haraway, 2020, p. 22, our translation), which transcends the *anthropos* to extend to the different modes of existence on the planet. Thinking-with is distinguished from thinking about or thinking in; it is "thinking in fruitful relation" (Haraway, 2020, p. 21, our translation).

At the same time, Cantera proposes a practice of 'breathing-with', in which respiration is not conceived as an individual act, but as a relational practice that unfolds in and with a damaged environment. Something that is evident in the way the artist refers to her installation as a "co-creation between her and the air" (Cantera, 2024). To breathe with entails acknowledging that respiration is always already a shared process, in which human bodies, polluted air, fungal filters, and technological devices participate in a continuous exchange of matter and affect. Breathing-with thus exposes the permeability of bodies and the impossibility of separating the biological from the political, as each inhalation incorporates the unevenly distributed effects of extractivist and neo-colonial economies inscribed in the atmosphere of the Global South. Moreover, breathing-with gestures toward a mode of coexistence grounded in sympoietic relations, where survival depends not on isolation or purification, but on learning to inhabit contamination through multispecies alliances. In this sense, breathing becomes both an aesthetic gesture and an ethical practice: a way of staying with the trouble by attuning to shared vulnerability and by cultivating forms of response-ability that emerge from breathing with others.

Faced with a narrative that urges the pursuit of individual salvation when the world trembles, we have come to believe, mistakenly, that problems are best addressed individually. This belief has confined our responses to modes of isolation and inaction, sustained by the illusion that technology alone might offer a solution to the collapse we are witnessing, as if we were not ourselves implicated in its causes. Yet, as Haraway (2016a, p. 100) reminds us, "no species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too". It is about recognising the assemblages of organic species with biotic actors, both human and non-human, of living beings as non-living, who mutually cooperate for collaborative survival. Both Haraway and Tsing work from a perspective that highlights the relationships maintained by human and non-human living beings, that is, a 'relational ontology', which opposes its 'modern' equivalent where the subject is seen as isolated in a specific time and episteme. Precisely, a relational ontology does not consider the existence of a unique and isolated thing, but rather a deep connection of co-existence (Arsenault, 2023, p. 8). In those scenarios marked by the seasonal pulses of different beings, the territory transforms into a shelter for metamorphosis, allowing for the consideration of other modes of habitability, of being-with-others traversed by contact and affectation, by scenarios of extinction "and of a deteriorated world that has modified our affections" (Despret, 2022, p. 94). Two contaminations traverse the *sympoietic* landscape: the contamination of the airs, of the lands ravaged by the *anthropos*, and the contamination as ontological contact, as a web that rhythms and protects, a polyphony that ensures survival.

Cantera's installation, in the same vein, shows us that neither individuals nor species exist in isolation and independence: from the formation of a bioartifact – such as the filter backpack – *Inhalaciones territoriales* can be considered from a multispecies assemblage where human bodies and non-humans, living beings and devices, allow us to explore affective repertoires tinged with pessimism and disturbance, to immerse ourselves in new affective expressions that bet on multispecies alliances and solidarities for a common survival. Because it is no longer about observing from a distance, but about 'letting oneself be affected', about weaving bonds towards the worlds that matter to us and that we care for.

5. Conclusion

This work sets out to analyze Ana Laura Cantera's installation *Inhalaciones territoriales* through posthuman readings, situating it within the framework of the Anthropocene and the Global South. It examines how practices of contemporary technological art mobilize multispecies assemblages, solidarities, and affective relations to problematize human exceptionalism and to explore alternative forms of habitability in contexts shaped by environmental devastation and neo-extractivist logics. Throughout the discussion, we show that the work not only makes visible the environmental crisis and the specific effects of atmospheric pollution

in large urban settings but also rehearses aesthetic modes of intervention that challenge naturalized narratives about the relationships between humans, technologies, and materialities, while opening new critical and methodological approaches grounded in situated, multispecies thought.

The analysis highlighted three main contributions: first, the articulation between digital and analog devices, mycelium and the human body, which reveals a posthuman aesthetics capable of destabilizing the separation between nature and culture; second, breathing as a shared and vulnerable practice, which becomes both metaphor and experience of collaborative survival; and third, the opening toward multispecies assemblages that exceed the human scale and allow us to imagine forms of habitability in ruins. These findings demonstrate that contemporary art, in its intersection with science and technology, can become a privileged field for experimenting with critical methodologies and expanding the horizons of aesthetics.

Cantera's work offers a situated perspective from the Global South, where the marks of colonialism and extractivism continue to shape territories and ways of living. In this sense, *Inhalaciones territoriales* does not merely denounce devastation, but invites us to think with others – human and non-human, organic and inorganic – in a key of hospitality and shared vulnerability. Contamination, far from being only a sign of destruction, is re-signified as contact and possibility of encounter, as a condition for the emergence of unexpected solidarities.

From an aesthetic standpoint, Cantera's work expands the horizon of technological art and bioart by displacing the emphasis from technical innovation toward relational and affective experimentation. The combination of digital and analog technologies, together with organic and inorganic materialities, does not respond to an instrumental or efficiency-driven logic, but rather functions as a critical device that interrogates technology from within. In this way, *Inhalaciones territoriales* proposes an aesthetics of exposure and vulnerability, in which breathing, walking, and becoming contaminated become political and poetic gestures capable of reconfiguring our sensibilities in the face of ecological crisis.

In times of collapse, when dominant narratives oscillate between defeatism and the promise of technological salvation, Cantera's proposal is inscribed in an open aesthetics that wagers on 'staying with the trouble', following Haraway's invitation. It is a practice that does not seek definitive solutions, but rather rehearses modes of collaborative survival, capable of generating affects, alliances, and odd kinships that expand the field of the possible.

This case study contributes, on the one hand, to the theoretical field by offering a situated articulation of the contributions of Haraway, Tsing, and Despret, showing how categories such as *sympoiesis*, becoming-with, and contaminated survivals acquire empirical density and analytical force when read through concrete artistic practices. On the other hand, it contributes to contemporary aesthetic discussions by demonstrating that art can be a laboratory for imagining more habitable futures, in which

interdependence and *sympoiesis* become principles of life. Cantera's installation reminds us that neither individuals nor species exist in isolation, and that only through multispecies assemblages and transdisciplinary solidarities can we think of habitability in ruins and open pathways toward a broader justice for the Earth.

Furthermore, this analysis advances posthuman debates by situating the Anthropocene within geopolitical and decolonial frameworks, making evident that its effects are not distributed homogeneously and that possibilities of survival are shaped by historical relations of domination. Within this perspective, contamination ceases to operate solely as a sign of loss or degradation and is instead re-signified as a condition of contact, interdependence, and the production of multispecies alliances.

In sum, *Inhalaciones territoriales* contributes to both the theoretical and aesthetic fields by functioning as a post-anthropocentric thought and sensibility. Through a multispecies assemblage that makes visible the interdependence among species, technologies, and territories, the work invites us to imagine and practice other narratives of survival in a world in ruins. Far from a contemplative distance, it proposes an ethics and aesthetics of involvement, in which allowing oneself to be affected becomes an indispensable condition for survival.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640384

Urban Reality as the main Motive in China Miéville's Posthuman Aesthetics

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Our aim in this text is to analyse Miéville's work, both theoretical and fictional, through the perspective of posthumanist sensitivity, which involves critically reassessing the human condition and embracing perspectives that extend beyond the human and more-than-human. We regard posthumanist thought as transcending the notion of an autonomous, rational subject being the sole ethical and meaningful agent, instead positioning humans within a broader network of life that necessitates interaction and negotiation with other non-human actors and forces. This shift in perspective in Miéville's work can be observed in relation to Lefebvre's theme of urban reality. We consider the relationship to the city as a non-human element central to the aesthetics of Miéville's fictional universes. The foundation for examining his fictional worlds is the assertion that Miéville's writing stems from a catastrophe of modernity and a subsequent radical rupture with it, suggesting that his thinking emerges post-catastrophe from a broken and fragmented world. In this context, he explores a future not based on any predetermined plan but arising from ongoing struggles – failures and renewals – in the pursuit of a future. Its aim is to challenge our present – specifically, the reader's present – who may still inhabit a world overly centred on human existence. | *Keywords: Miéville, Posthumanism, Weird Fiction, Fictional Worlds, Hauntology*

1. Introduction

China Miéville is a novelist, political thinker, and literary critic whose works encompass a broad spectrum of genres, ranging from science fiction to literary criticism, fantasy to deconstruction, horror to post-Marxism, and detective fiction to philosophy. His fluid, spontaneous, and unanchored writing style challenges both readers lacking a theoretical background and those seeking to analyse his works critically. Anita Tarr describes Miéville's style as "posthumanist-Marxist-fantasy-Gothic-horror-Young Adult Novels" (Tarr, 2018, p. 249); for many, he exemplifies hybrid, radical, postmodern writing characterised by genre fluidity and experimentation. In the initial part of this

study, we explore Miéville's engagement with the hero archetype and elucidate how this figure facilitates access to fictional urban environments. The subsequent section discusses the relationship between Miéville's fictional compositions and his theoretical frameworks, with particular emphasis on his Marxist critique of urban life as depicted in his novels. The third segment examines his fictional urban environments, which serve as the foundational settings for his universe. Finally, we analyse this universe from utopian and hauntological perspectives, paying particular attention to its boundaries, which are perpetually rooted in the past while simultaneously anticipating future apocalyptic events, thereby signalling the emergence of otherness, of unforseen and uncontrollable phenomena.

2. Hero's Journey

The hero is the most direct way to enter Miéville's multi-genre fictional city-worlds. Miéville built the prototype of his urban hero already in his first novel, *King Rat* (1998), and a similar narrative structure can be found in most of his other books. This applies not only to Saul Garamond, who inhabits fictional London in the *King Rat*, but also to Inspector Borlu living in the twin cities in the novel *The City & the City* (2009), Sham ap Soorap inhabiting the *Railsea* (2012), Avice living in the alien city-world of *Embassytown* (2011), Zanna and Deeba diving into the depths of *UnLundun*, and others. The trope of the hero is common in fantastic and adventure stories; its archetypal example is Tolkien's hobbits. Miéville's hero or heroine initially lives unknowingly and naively within a familiar reality that, however corrupt, ensures their unhappy existence. In this context, Miéville's characters and their entire universe distinguish themselves from the pastoral realm of Tolkien's hobbits, whose initial lived environment is inherently orderly, captivating them with adventure yet ultimately guiding them back to their secure world. In Miéville's works, it is not primarily the desire for adventure that motivates the hero's journey; rather, it is the intrusion of crime or accident that disrupts an already disturbed reality. In this context, the characters merely survive, compelled into actions they would prefer to avoid and with which they are not entirely satisfied, because the original reality from which they originate is harsh and fractured by conflict. In this sense, they are no longer rural heroes of the past but rather dwellers of our kind – residing in a world characterised by political, ecological, and moral chaos, fully aware that it is rooted in injustice, cruelty, and violence, of which they are inherently a part. The narrative framework of the heroes consistently follows a similar pattern: a stable, albeit often discontented, position in the world is disturbed by an event that involves crossing a threshold, thereby separating naive, untroubled reality from an unfamiliar, unknown realm. Subsequently, a transformative journey begins, during which the hero undergoes a profound change, emerging as an individual receptive to a wholly different world. They must relinquish the current order and their present identities, undergo a thorough transformation, as they would otherwise be unable to survive in the new reality. They face moral dilemmas that are not clear-cut choices between good and evil; they themselves become corrupted, start to harm, deceive, and kill, because a world

full of conflicts and contradictions has opened up before them, a world dedicated to war, constantly threatened by collapse, and bounded by an apparently insurmountable horizon of mysterious and elusive fate.

This transformation, namely becoming a hero, invariably entails a transition from the original individual human actor to an extended entity integrated into a new world. Saul Garamond becomes a rat, a pack-like human-animal, forced to adopt a different kind of life, a different language, a different type of movements, and a completely different identity, wider and stranger than his original one. Avice becomes partially *Arieikei* and additionally serves as a living metaphor, an event that disrupts an alien way of life. Inspector Borlu, originally a principled police officer, becomes a protester against the system and is eventually compelled to work with the very coercive apparatus he initially opposed. Although the hero or heroine does not directly transform into a different kind of being, they become something other than a traditional liberal individual. Their circumstances evolve such that their destiny abruptly no longer remains within their individual control. They become participants in supra-personal and collective events, entangled in the destinies and politics of the entire city. They are incorporated into a transcendent, more-than-human element in which objects, animals, and other entities are animated, forming part of a shared fate, collective memory, struggle, and pursuit. Their personal identity ceases to be solely human; their humanity comes into direct contact with beings and elements beyond humans. The original individual, characterised by their work, family, and self-interests, transforms into a collective entity, forcibly extracted from a prior existence reminiscent of Neo's awakening within *The Matrix* (1999). Similar to him, they are summoned to contend for the remnants of a disintegrating reality, to pursue escape, salvation, or justice.

Following the initial impact, which signifies the transition from naïve to awakened existence and the entrance into a realm beyond the visible world – city beyond city – there occurs the first movement. This is subsequently followed by immersion into a new world-city organism possessing its own ecology, along with an exploration of it's political sphere, a domain characterised by conflict and struggle among various clans, parties, and factions. During this second movement, the hero/heroine assumes the role of an unintended catalyst for revolutionary events, emerging as a quasi-messianic figure, around whom all the conflicting forces of the newly emerging world converge. They come to realise that their identity is not solely their own; rather, it is intertwined with powers connected to events far beyond their individual fate. They are participants in a much larger narrative, which depends on every decision they make. Simultaneously, they forfeit their autonomy because the destiny they adopt is not exclusively their own. The third type of movement, a synthesis of the preceding two, is identified as metanoia. According to Laing, metanoia is described as a process emerging from a psychotic episode that may result in a breakdown, a breakthrough, or both concurrently – involving the disintegration of the former personality structure, followed by its comprehensive reorganisation, which entails

a change in self-perception and perception itself (Laing, 1967). Such metanoic processes confront Miéville's characters, and their essential aspect involves a shift in perspective – a comprehensive transformation of perception, sensitivity, and understanding. Within the previously solely human and individual viewpoint, entirely new perspectives emerge, including those of a rat, a spider, a bird, an alien, an insect, a friendly one, and a hostile one. In this manner, Miéville's fictional worlds operate, and the significance of his more-than-human fiction resides in this: it concerns multi-perspectivism, the impossibility of perceiving and thinking in a single manner. This can be interpreted as a threat, because multi-perspectivism persistently endangers the disintegration of a unified perspective, the dissolution of the illusion of a singular reason, and the breakdown of shared humanity. Miéville's work is, in this context, a chaotic symphony of perspectivism, which continually adopts new and unexpected forms.

3. Manifesto

Miéville's construction of fictional urban worlds draws not only from literature but also from leftist oriented culture of urban resistance. It is literally a dialectical synthesis of influences from below and above, a combination of radical, high-minded leftist philosophy, the popular culture of London's suburbs, and musical counterculture. Such development stems from leftist political activism, encompassing London's daily life and concern for the impoverished and the challenging conditions faced by the working class. It also arises from urban popular culture, the vibrancy of London's club scene, various genres of minority music, and a persistent inability to reconcile with the state of post-industrial and late-capitalist society, which, instead of victories for democracy and increasing prosperity, offers ever-deepening inequalities, cultural wars, expanding surveillance measures, growing societal divisions, nationalism, terrorism, hostility, and the indifference of ruling classes towards public affairs. Simultaneously, it originates from a comprehensive absorption of Marxism and socialism, familiarity with post-structuralist, contemporary materialist, and posthumanist philosophy, as well as avant-garde art and modernist literature.

Miéville's novels and short stories are closely linked to his critical theoretical ideas. Here, we wish to examine only two brief quotations from his work on international law. First, the assertion that "The international rule of law is not counterposed to force and imperialism: it is an expression of it" (Miéville, 2005, p. 8). International law, like law in general, is subject to a paradox. The fundamental principle of law inherently involves violence, as demonstrated by Derrida in *The Force of Law* (1992) and by Agamben in *Homo Sacer* (1998). The act of establishing law, or the sovereign, must stand outside the bounds of law and is therefore inherently arbitrary; it cannot be enforced by law, only by violence. Miéville's analyses further elucidate the material and historical conditions shaping the international legal system, which ultimately functions as a system of power rooted in violence. His novels can also be interpreted, among other perspectives, as a study of power dynamics in circumstances where there is no neutral superior arbitrator, but rather a contest over the perception of reality.

The second statement is reflected similarly in his novel work:

> The title to this book comes from Marx's observation that 'between equal rights, force decides'. At first sight, this might look like a cynical claim that power politics are the only ultimately determining reality, that equal rights collapse before force. In fact, as I try to show, though it is quite true that 'force decides', the 'equal rights' it mediates are really, and remain, truly equal. This is precisely the paradox of international law: force is determining but determining between relations that cannot be understood except as equal in fundamentally constitutive and constituting ways. The equality and the force determine each other: the equality gives determining force its shape; the force – violence – is equality's shadow. (Miévillle, 2005, p. 8)

In Miéville's fiction, there is no transcendental right, measure, reason, or deity, as it is entirely anarchic, founded on conflicts between factions and tribes, cities and races, each centred on their own satisfaction and pleasure. Everyone longs for their own power and salvation; all worship their respective deities. The only entity that transcends all is the promise of the future – a promise of a world devoid of suffering, differences, and conflicts, which, however, manifests in a terrifying form of flood and fire, erasing all distinctions. This ultimate reconciliation bears a close resemblance to nothingness or chaos. It is a promise of revolution intended to overthrow the old order and liberate from the unjust old world, yet it invariably fails and ultimately becomes a new conflict.

The second decisive political theoretical source for understanding Miéville's fictional worlds is his interpretation of the *Communist Manifesto* (Miéville, 2022). However, it is not that we should interpret his novels as some form of political agitation, but rather that we should understand the style of his writing, which is based on polysemy, metaphor, paradox, performativity, and the fractal generation of meanings, as reflecting qualities that Miéville finds precisely in the *Communist Manifesto*. We suggest that his writing about the Manifesto should therefore be read primarily as a reflection on his own writing, as an analysis not only of Marx and Engels but also of Miéville's style. The significance of the Manifesto, as well as the significance of the images and fictional worlds in Miéville's novels, cannot be confined to a single interpretation; on the contrary, they aim to evade clarity, premeditated order, to transcend genre boundaries, the limits of any pre-planned schedule, and any programme-based politics.

When Miéville explains his interest in the Manifesto, he emphasises that he does not understand it so much as a guide to action, but rather as a projection of people's own social horror, anger, and dissatisfaction. Much of what unfolds in his novel cities is nothing other than images of social horror. This social horror, this abductive call of a world in ruins, constitutes the fundamental source of his writing and the central element of his stories – pervasive conflict within the urban fabric, injustice, violence, and the apparent impossibility of escaping that world. The answer to these existential problems is his leaning towards leftist thinking. However, he emphasises that he does not find hope in any Marxist orthodoxy, which he ironically refers to as apophatic Marxism – an adjective derived from apophatic theology,

that is, theology convinced of the possibility of a rational and positive interpretation of God. Apophantic Marxism thus refers to a scientific, logical, and analytical approach. In contrast, cataphatic Marxism pertains to negative theology. This association with theology is deliberate. Concepts such as hope, salvation, and liberation are motifs that intertwine Marxism and religion. Miéville illustrates this connection in his novels with notable engagement, yet also with an undercurrent of cynicism.

From this dialectical perspective, the relationships between the rational and the irrational, between solidarity and desire, suffering and liberation are examined in the reading of the Communist Manifesto. For Miéville, it is a 'ur-manifesto' – a performative act that merges the strategies of the modernist avant-garde, blurring the line between thought and politics, experimental art and resistance. The Manifesto, that is Miéville, does not fear paradox and accepts contradictions; he provokes, is serious, and makes jokes. "It oscillates between registers" (Miéville, 2022, p. 15). The Manifesto offers no set of precise propositions to be verified. Likewise, Miéville offers no precise sociological analysis. He is concerned with literature as a performative activity, with the creation of fictional city-worlds that, like the Manifesto, move between registers and across genres, dialectically overcoming them towards what we can call new weird fiction.

If one seeks a definition of revolution in the Manifesto or a definition of genre in Miéville, such a pursuit is inherently unproductive, as every definition risks leading to fascism. Any rigid fixation or apophatic explanation constrains potential future developments; it represents a pathway to totalitarianism and terror. Suppose we use the poetics of the novel *Kraken*, in which various forces vie to control the giant dead kraken, which embodies the coming of the apocalypse. In that case, that is, the destruction of the old and the heralding of a new world, then all those who want to possess and control this world-destroying force wish to use it for their own purposes and are ultimately doomed to failure. In relation to the issue of revolution in the Manifesto, the same applies to *Kraken* as to revolution:

> One may certainly argue that revolution has a particularly important sense, a centre of gravity in this text. But what it doesn't have is a single, precise meaning. No language does, whether we are conscious of that fact or not. All texts are always to a various degree contradictory, multifarious, polysemic. (Miéville, 2022, p. 19)

4. Metropolitopoiesis

It should be clear thus far that the primary non-human element in Miéville's novels is a city. The foundational setting of his entire fictional universe is London. His surreal vision of London, which he combines with Istanbul, where Miéville spent several years and which also served as a source for his urban imagination, is expressed in a short textual and photographic essay titled *London's Overthrow* (2012). This essay is titled after a painting by the British artist John Martin, who is also the creator of two other significant works that aid in interpreting Miéville's conception of the city – *The Fall of Babylon* and *The Great Day of his Wrath* (1951). Miéville is a poet who regards

the city as an organism, conceptualised as Babylon before, during, and after its decline. The fall represents a condition wherein residing within the city becomes arduous, if not unfeasible, due to its excessive division, inherent contradictions, antagonisms, inequality, and injustice. For Miéville, London is a city affected by the disaster of late capitalism. "For all of us. Everyone knows there's a catastrophe; the few can afford to live in their own city. It was not always so" (Miéville, 2012, p. 24). London, like many major urban centres around the world, is evolving into a place where the majority of residents find it increasingly unaffordable to live. It is characterised by overcrowding, deterioration, abandonment, and a sense of being unmanageable, while simultaneously experiencing a rise in wealth. It is a city long tested by various calamities and disasters: "Scrappy, chaotic, inexepert, astounding [...] shattered under a fusillade from heaven, rampaged through armies, mobs, strange vengeance. It is traumatised and hurt" (Miéville, 2012, p. 3). It is a city where the wealthy thrive, and in which others are condemned to a chaotic struggle to maintain their desperate existence:

> London is more unequal than anywhere else in the country. Here, the richest 10 percent hold two-thirds of all wealth, the poorest half, one twentieth. A fifth of working residents of the London boroughs of Brent, Newham, Waltham Forest, Barking and Dagenham earn less than a living wage. Unemployment in the city is above 400,000 and rising. Almost a quarter of Londoners are out of work. A wretching 40 percent of London children live in poverty. The numbers mean death. Travel the Great Jubilee line. Eight stops, east from Westminster to Canning Town. Each stop, local life expectancy goes down a year. (Miéville, 2012, pp. 6–7)

London is characterized by a juxtaposition of socio-economic issues and development projects: on one side, it faces challenges such as prostitution, crime, drug abuse, and suburban poverty; on the other side, it features extensive construction initiatives aimed at erecting additional buildings, exemplified by the 2012 Olympic Games, which symbolize efforts that ultimately contribute to form sort of undead London:

> Of London's dead landscapes, there are few like the Heygate Estate, ruin on a Martin scale. A dizzying sprawl of concrete in Southwark, a raised town, great, corridored blocks, walkways over communal gardens. Slabs of buildingness. It's all but empty. It's to be demolished. Even were it not stuffed with asbestos, that would take a long time. (Miéville, 2012, p. 21)

London is also a city of protests and resistance, and total police surveillance. It is precisely this collapsing city that constitutes the primary nonhuman element within Miéville's novels. The city is, of course, more than merely a location; it transcends a simple aggregation of structures. It serves as an environment for both human and inhuman entities; it functions as a medium in the sense outlined by F. Kittler.

> Ever since it has become impossible to survey cities from a cathedral tower or a castle, and ever since walls and fortifications have ceased to contain them, cities have been traversed and connected by a network of innumerable networks, also (and especially) at their margins, points of tangency, and frayed edges. No matter whether these networks convey information or energy –

> that is, whether they are called ‘telephone,‘ ‘radio,‘ and ‘television,‘ or ‘water supply,‘ ‘electricity,‘ and ‘highway’ – they all are information. (Kittler, 2013, p. 139)

Miéville’s city cannot be overlooked in its entirety; it is uncontrollable, living its own life as a strange creature; it is more a creation of space than a place. Looking at the city is like “peering into the interior of some mysterious metropolitopoiesis” (Miéville, 2010, p. 253). It is interconnected through transportation and other networks, continuously evolving and expanding into an autonomous entity. It constitutes a network of lives and processes, a magical being, a tangled organism, an urban element in Lefebvre’s terminology, or a magical urban fabric or urban reality: “The urban fabric grows, extends its borders, corrodes the residue of agrarian life. This expression *urban fabric* does not narrowly define the built world of cities but all manifestation of the dominance of the city over the country” (Lefebre, 2003, pp. 3–4). It is

> [a] global process of industrialization and urbanization … the large cities exploded, giving rise to dubious value: suburbs, residential conglomerations and industrial complexes, satellite cities that differed little from urbanized towns. Small and midsized cities became dependencies, partial colonies of the metropolis. (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 4)

Urban reality is an inescapable aspect of our environment, encompassing us and shaping the context in which our lives unfold, thereby influencing us as non-human elements. Miéville’s fiction unfolds within this urban reality, which transcends being merely a city to become a way of life and a means of communication, constructed not solely through buildings but also through media, languages, and perspectives. It is a second nature that has absorbed and integrated what was once a separate natural world, as in the world of *Railsea* (2012), which emerged after a distant catastrophe of a previous industrial civilisation, or as in the pirate city in *The Scar* (2002), where human and non-human structures intertwine with marine forms of life. It is a world from within which we live, speak, and think, but which we can no longer grasp or overlook.

In this context, Miéville’s depiction of urban reality can be understood through what Lefebvre calls the blind field. An overly comprehensive, all-encompassing urban reality is transparent; it is not visible because it permeates us and makes us part of itself, leaving us with no distance from it. Lefebvre, in this context, asks:

> Is the unconscious the substance or essence of a blind field? […] It would be more accurate to speak of the unrecognizable. However, these terms are unsatisfactory. Why do I (or we) refuse to see, to perceive, or conceive something? Why do we pretend not to see? How do we arrive at that point? These blind fields are mental and social. To understand them, we must take into account the power of ideology and the power of language. There are blind fields wherever language fails us, whenever there is a surfeit of redundancy in a metalanguage. (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 31)

In the detective novel *The City & The City*, there are two parallel cities, Besźel and Ul Qoma, which occupy the same space. They once existed as a single, connected city, but after a distant, now-forgotten war, they split into two. The residents of both cities live in the same places and walk the same streets,

but from childhood, they are conditioned to 'unsee' the other city; they are instructed to be blind to the city located behind their own, yet within it. Both cities exhibit distinct architecture, fashion, languages with different alphabets, and religious practices. It is strictly prohibited for residents of either city to perceive or acknowledge the existence of the other. Any violation of this regulation – regardless of intent – constitutes a breach, leading to detention by the secret police and subsequent disappearance. The blindness Lefebvre refers to is the lack of awareness in daily life regarding the influence and ideological characteristics of urban reality, which is founded upon growth and controlled by those in authority, who manage capital and dictate the rhythm of daily activities. The rulers influence the daily reality of the city and compel its inhabitants to perceive – or rather, not perceive – certain aspects in a particular manner. The hero's journey in Miéville's novels consistently involves the necessity of unlearning this blindness, eliminating ignorance of the power and ideological structures that govern the city, exploring all its layers, and unveiling its concealed face – the other city.

The motif of breach, furthermore, extends well beyond political motives and resides at the core of Mieville's strange fictional universes.

> The all-encompassing Breach in *The City & The City* offers a culmination of one of Miéville's most sustained literary interests. Across his fictions, breach recurs as a way of naming the contact point between entities – whether physical, viscous, phylogenetic, conceptual, or ontological. (Edwards, Venezia, 2015, p. 11)

> In addition to the physical, military, and legal specificity of particular breaches, breach also suggests the profound ontological implications of boundary-crossing. In his 2008 essay, Miéville extends a philosophical reading of the literary Weird as that which refuses to cede to Manichean binaries of good or bad by extending what he calls a 'morally opaque tentacular'. (Edwards, Venezia, 2015, p. 13)

In this sense, the Weird may be understood as the literary equivalent of breach:

> [the] moment when disparate and wholly incompatible entities are yoked together into a bastardized assemblage which cannot be reconciled into any form of union, but jostle uneasily. Such a breach transgresses taxonomies, linguistic parameters, species boundaries, and philosophical precepts. (Edwards and Venezia, 2015, p. 14)

5. Beyond the City – Line of Escape

According to Lefebvre, it is necessary to reconsider our understanding of urban reality in comparison with that of industrial cities. Urban reality encompasses cities, yet on a far broader scale; it is global in nature, superseding the prior concept of nature and generating a new form of it. This signifies the cessation of traditional notions regarding the essence of being human.

> These events are succeeded by the urban. […] During this new period, what once passed as absolute has become relativised: reason, history, the state, mankind. We express this by saying that those entities, those fetishes, have died. There is something true in this claim, but fetishes do not all die the same death. The death of man affects only our philosophers. (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 36)

Miéville and other authors associated with the so-called new weird fiction serve as evidence that the demise of the concept known as humanity is of interest not solely to philosophers, provided that by the term 'human' we refer to the traditional humanist and anthropocentric notions of a universal self-aware subject who, equipped with reason, will, morality, and technical abilities, is distinguished from the rest of nature. Although for many people, even today, questioning the superiority and privileged position of humans remains controversial, for authors of the new weird fiction genre, it has become an integral part of the canon, paralleling its role in posthumanist philosophy, aesthetics, and art.

Contemplating the death of Man signifies that the human perspective is no longer our initial point of reference; it is not the focal point of our consideration, as we are engaging in thought from an alternative standpoint. Firstly, this entails contemplating from within the situatedness of a more-than-human world, and, according to Lefebvre, from within the differential time-space of urban reality. Secondly, it involves thinking from beyond the space-time in which we are embedded.

"To define these properties of urban differential space (time-space), we need to introduce new concepts, such as isotopy, heterotopy, and utopia" (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 37). Isotopy concerns a conception of place that defines it as the same location, specifically a topos, unified with its surroundings into a recognisable whole. Nonetheless, each isotopic urban entity consists of various components – including streets, quarters, squares, stations, parks, factories, and roads. Isotopy is established through the relationships among these components, which differentiate the unified space-time into numerous neighbouring, interconnected, yet occasionally conflicting areas. "This difference can extend from a highly marked contrast all the way to conflict, to the extent that the occupants of a place are taken into consideration." (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 38).

Miéville's fictional city-worlds are, in this sense, strictly heterotopic. An excellent example is the Armada from the novel *The Scar*. The Armada is a floating city composed of ships and shipwrecks, connected to marine ecosystems. In terms of size, it is not very extensive; however, internally it is complex, made up of a constantly increasing number of ships and many layers stacked over, above, and below each other, with decks and lower decks linked by hundreds of miles of bridges, gangways, walkways, and riggings. The Armada is also divided into several larger districts, each inhabited by a different race or a mixture of races and controlled by various, usually conflicting interests. All these districts clash, trade, and fight among themselves for dominance and for decisions about where the entire floating city will go, what its future will be, and who will determine its politics – whether it will continue its relatively safe and tested piratical activities, which are the primary source of its wealth and knowledge, or whether, as some wish, it will set out to hunt the legendary giant sea monster called Avac, or whether, as a few conspirators desire, it will head towards the very Scar, the mythical source of infinite power and energy, where the known physical and psychological laws cease to apply.

The scar refers to the third moment, which, from the viewpoint of the organization of urban reality, is regarded by Lefebvre as utopia. "Now, there is also an elsewhere, the non-place that has no place and seeks a place of its own. Verticality, a high erected anywhere on a horizontal plane, [...] place characterized by presence-absence: of the divine, of power, of the half-fictional, half-real, of sublime thought" (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 38). This utopian place, according to Lefebvre, is entirely real and constitutes the core of urban reality. It functions as the motivating force for the city's continual development, representing an ideology that emanates from within the city – originating from its temples, libraries, archives, universities, and from the minds and dreams of all its inhabitants. These inhabitants project this ideology into a remembered, mythic past and an anticipated future, into a space that is both placeless and timeless, which, paradoxically, serves as the origin of space-time production.

> Within urban space, elsewhere is anywhere and nowhere. It has been this way ever since there have been cities, and ever since, alongside objects and actions, there have been situations, especially those involving people associated with divinity, power, or the imaginary. This is a paradoxical space where paradox becomes the opposite of everyday. (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 38)

In Miéville's fictional worlds, this utopian non-place – non-time – assumes various metaphorical forms. It remains a subject of debate, legend, and myth; its nature eludes complete comprehension, as it contradicts conventional everyday experience. Consequently, the majority do not believe in its existence, aside from fantasists, dreamers, clergy, and scientists. In the novel *The City and the City*, the mysterious third city of Orciny is the subject of speculation by archaeologists, anthropologists, and dissidents. Orciny is a city between two warring and mutually inaccessible cities. "The secret city. It runs things" (Miéville, 2010a, p. 51). It is supposed to be the original city, which was at the beginning, even before the division and before the war, when the world was still in order. "That beginning was a shadow in history, an unknown record effaced and vanished for a century on either side. From that historically brief, quite opaque moment came the chaos of our material history, an anarchy of chronology" (Miéville, 2010a, p. 51). It is posited that Orciny is concealed somewhere within a breach or possibly behind it, situated between two real cities, through which it traverses reminiscent of an ancient legend. It resides within both cities as a parasitic entity, governed by clandestine overlords who purportedly oversee them as puppeteers. However, at the conclusion of the novel, it is disclosed that Mahalia, the young woman whose murder was the catalyst for Inspector Borlu's story, was killed not because of her belief in Orciny or even her discovery of it, but because she ceased to believe in it. The utopian construct, which in the novel functions as a symbol of resistance against the prevailing unjust order and as an object of desire for those seeking to escape it, ultimately reveals itself to be an ideological project supported by the secret police, employed to uphold the entire political and economic framework of control over the inhabitants of both divided cities.

A similar promise of power and salvation is also present in the legendary Scar depicted in the eponymous novel. This scar is described as a fracture in the world characterised by peculiar geophysical properties situated in the ocean's centre, to which all its currents converge. Its approach is associated with the promise of inexhaustible power. The Scar is purported to be a site of pure virtuality, that is, a location where all unrealised possibilities coexist simultaneously and can be accessed through mystical means. "That's the Scar. Teeming with the ways things weren't and aren't but could be" (Miéville, 2013, p. 531).

Another remarkable depiction of utopia is the place in the harsh and bloody realm of Railsea, a world conceived after an ancient catastrophe of industrial civilisation, consisting of an infinitely tangled ocean of tracks and waste. There is a legend that one track, the last line of escape, leads to a place beyond the tracks. Most inhabitants of the *Railsea* do not believe such a place exists; a few who have seen old maps think it hides a great treasure or a forgotten prosperous city. In the novel Kraken, however, the utopia does not pertain to a physical location but rather to the remnants of an ancient sea deity – specifically, a giant squid whose preserved remains were magically stolen from the British Natural History Museum. The entity possessing these remains holds the power to summon or halt an apocalyptic event.

Kraken, *Scar*, a location behind the tracks, or *Orciny* represent, within Miéville's fictional worlds, the ultimate manifestations of the posthuman condition. It is consistently an elusive phenomenon that defies the metrics of daily existence, representing a source of power with a numinous quality – simultaneously awe-inspiring and revered. Concurrently, it possesses a spectral nature; it remains perpetually inaccessible, emerging from an unfathomable past while concurrently influencing the future actions of all involved. It constitutes a form of radical otherness, chaos, or virtuality, embodying the simultaneous presence of all possibilities. Following M. Fišerová's deconstructive interpretation of the (photographic) image problem, we may regard this borderline event as both a revenant and an arrivant. According to her, revenants "return repressed fragments of memory" and arrivants "do not fulfil the expectations of memory, only promise them" (Fišerová, 2019, p. 129). Miéville's border events are always echoes of an ancient catastrophe, long forgotten, that manifests as a future expectation no one believes in, but which never fully materialises. Instead, it manifests negatively, nullifies itself, or disappears. This event is inherently ungraspable, transcending all interpretative frameworks, yet simultaneously infiltrating them, thereby rendering human actions susceptible to the unrepresentable and spectral elements that threaten destruction while also offering the possibility of salvation. Encounters with this numinous and transcendent object of desire invariably return the protagonists of Miéville's narratives to the struggles of daily life, compelling them to persist in their existence. Nevertheless, these characters are transformed by the impossibility of remaining within the realm of the incomprehensible event; through this process, they also come to recognise that the frameworks of everyday reality

are not immutable, that they were not always as they are now, and that the future holds the potential for change. No perspective or status quo is ultimately final, as all are reflected in the inaccessible image of the Other.

6. Conclusion

The posthumanist aesthetics of China Miéville is grounded in a shift of perspective. This transformation occurs as a metamorphosis of the hero, who transitions from an isolated, individual actor to becoming an integral part of a vast urban reality. In Miéville's work, this reality manifests as an unstable, multilayered fabric, within which the original human subject is situated in a decentralised tangle comprising numerous competing interests and perspectives. This tangle is not governed from above by a set of laws but constitutes an anarchic space-time where various claims to power compete, extending beyond purely human ones. The capacity to act extends from the individual human actor to encompass the entire environment, including non-human beings, objects, and the comprehensive urban assemblages that comprise them. From the borders and within this heterotopic urban environment, a utopian verticality emerges – a promise of the future that transcends daily existence yet simultaneously poses a threat of its ultimate disruption. Miéville's revolutionary aesthetic thus precisely fulfils the role of art as articulated in Dadejík's essay:

> Art is a peculiar kind of deliberate derailment from the track of habit [...] it invites us to step beyond the routine patterns of our behaviour [...] it disrupts the established plane of usefulness, the level of performing daily intentions and goals [...] and at the same time restores the natural expressiveness or ecstasy of things, the receptivity to the ambiguous, multifaceted, and ever-changing world around us. (Dadejík, 2022, p. 102)

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640466

Posthuman Animality

Situating Theories of Companion Species and Becoming-with in Netflix's *Love, Death and Robots*, Volume IV

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This article analyses the fourth volume of *Love, Death and Robots* (2025) to explore how animality can be explored through posthuman aesthetics. Animals have always been historical beings, and their histories are inextricably tied to human activities. By not privileging humans over non-human animals, we can aim for a networked environment with companion species devoid of any binaries. By engaging with Donna Haraway's theories of companion species, Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming animals, Mitchell and Krause's concepts of animal consciousness and Skonieczny's concept of the animal turn, this paper focuses on the connections between different aesthetics, ethics, and politics of different animals. This article thus demonstrates that posthuman aesthetics represented through the animals in *Love, Death and Robots* challenges traditional humanist aesthetics and evokes an alliance of different realms and ecologies. | *Keywords: Posthuman Aesthetics, Animality, Companion Species, Solidarity, Community, Ethical Sensibility*

1. Introduction

The fourth volume of Netflix's *Love, Death and Robots*, released in May 2025, has received positive reviews and has won awards in the Outstanding Individual Achievement in Animation category at the Primetime Creative Arts Emmy Awards. The article analyses this adult animated anthology television series to explore posthuman aesthetics in five of its episodes. This article further explores how animality can be explored through posthuman aesthetics in order to understand how humans can 'become with' animals. Posthumanism employs aesthetics to decentre the human and includes environmentalism and animal rights. Different approaches to posthuman aesthetics are informed by different ontologies associated with human and nonhuman realms. These different realms shape the posthuman aesthetics in myriad ways. One approach to posthuman aesthetics is the relation of posthumanism with

animal studies, which has developed rich accounts of the life worlds of a range of organisms. This approach allows us to consider and explore how animals sense and judge their worlds.

While discussing posthuman animality as portrayed in the fourth volume of *Love, Death and Robots*, it becomes important to also consider the aesthetic preferences that are integrated and how they affect the enhancements of some beings. Such representations of posthuman aesthetics in popular culture are important as "they offer a different way of imaging the future as opposed to a rational argument over the various traits with which one could picture humans" (Wamberg and Thomsen, 2016, p. 7). The beauty of posthuman aesthetics is that it redefines what should be appreciated and considers all chaotic, over-regulated, imperfect, and grotesque elements within it. Posthuman aesthetics then challenges traditional humanist aesthetics and evokes an alliance of different realms and ecologies. The aesthetic attention is shifted from the human body to the ecology and nonhumans and other-than-humans residing in it. The posthuman animal narratives in *Love, Death and Robots* focus on establishing a fraternity with nonhuman animals and appropriating creaturely agency through metaphoric determination. This article focuses on the connections between different aesthetics, ethics, and politics of different animals through a critical analysis of individual episodes. The interpretations of episodes like *Spider Rose*, *The Other Large Thing*, *The Screaming of the Tyrannosaur*, *Golgotha* and *For He Can Creep* are synthesised and contextualised to demonstrate posthuman aesthetics represented through the animals.

2. Posthuman Animality

Posthumanism offers a theoretical invitation for inclusivity and recognises those aspects which are beyond human comprehension. As Ferrando argues:

> Posthumanism draws on many different sources, histories and herstories, in an academic attempt of inclusiveness that opens to other species and hypothetical life forms: from non-human animals to artificial intelligence, from aliens to the possibilities related to the physic notion of a multiverse. (Ferrando, 2016, p. 3)

The fourth volume of *Love, Death and Robots* is chosen for analysis because the series portrays how posthumanism offers a new perspective on aesthetic experiences related to interspecies encounters. Lorimer argues,

> The ontological properties of the agents of a post-human geomorphology (rivers, glaciers, plates, winds, etc.) or of molecular post-humanisms clearly necessitate different conceptions of perception and aesthetics than those that work with individual organisms. (Lorimer, 2012, p. 284)

Hence, when it comes to aesthetics, more emphasis should be laid on different ontologies and how they are different from each other. Posthuman animality and its related aesthetics focus on the space, time and power dynamics of interactions that take place between human and nonhuman animals and between animals and their surroundings. The way animals are individually and jointly shaped by their encounters with the posthuman world shapes their

aesthetics. This paper analyses the posthuman aesthetics related to nonhuman animals and the ethical and political implications of such aesthetics. By considering the connections between different aesthetics, ethics and politics of different animals as portrayed in the fourth volume of *Love, Death and Robots*, this paper explores the implications of posthuman aesthetics for animal studies. The posthuman aesthetic that is discussed in the paper is vital for driving an ethical sensibility when it comes to our interactions with animals.

A precursor to Donna Haraway's theory of 'becoming-with,' Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'becoming animal'[1] can be brought to the discussion of posthuman aesthetics because it would enable us to engage with relational understandings of life associated with different ontologies. Deleuze has reconceptualised animals as "processes of becoming". For him, animals are akin to a process that develops affective relations with their surroundings. To this, Rosi Braidotti (2009, p. 530) further adds that "the process of becoming an animal expresses the materialist and vitalist force of life, zoe as the generative power that flows across all species". She argues that becoming-animal can be achieved successfully only when there is a displacement of the anthropocene and instead a recognition of transspecies solidarity. It is essential for humans to understand that there have to be transversal, transspecies structural connections with animals, who can then express literal forms of immanence and becoming. Braidotti believes that

> becoming animal consequently is a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space. It expresses multiple ecologies of belonging, while it transforms one's sensorial and perceptual coordinates, to acknowledge the collectiveness and outward direction of what we call the self. (Braidotti, 2009, p. 530)

The process of becoming an animal in the posthuman world is regulated by an ethics of joy and affirmation that also converts negative passions into positive ones.

In *Posthumanism and Animality*, Cimatti (2016) argues that posthumanism paves a subjectless life which is beyond ethics and politics, and thus, brings in a non-humanistic humanity that finally is 'animal'. Posthumanism interrogates the humanity of all humans since none of us is contained within our original bodily endowment. We are constantly pushing against the boundaries outside our bodies and karyotype. We are, in that sense, animals who are required to construct ourselves and our humanity, which differentiates us from nonhuman animals, is incomplete. Our humanity requires us to keep working on it, as our body is an instrument at our disposal. Cimatti refers to Engels when he argues that throughout our evolution,

> Homo sapiens treats every object, starting from its own body, as a technical object. Therefore, every object joins in a socio-technical history made of progressive improvements and refinements. (Cimatti, 2016, p. 114)

[1] In *Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari introduce the theory of becoming an animal which focuses on the shift of relations away from speciesism and towards an ethical appreciation of what bodies can do. The animal is taken in its radical immanence as a body which can connect with humans.

It took years of hard work for humans to be able to walk, build things and communicate. Similarly, in the posthuman era, there are possibilities of animals that can explicitly and voluntarily improve their anatomical and cognitive capacities, and they might not be conscious of what they are doing. This can be witnessed in *Love, Death and Robots*, where episodes like *Spider Rose* demonstrate that posthuman animals are continuously striving to enhance themselves quickly and efficiently. This unrestrainable process of self-modification is not concerned with itself but rather with the ecological dignity. Cimatti argues that

> the question of a way of being human, which is no longer based on the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection. In this sense, posthumanism faces the problem of humanity beyond humanism. A humanity, which finally can become animal. (Cimatti,2016, p. 120)

Posthuman animality is thus a radically different way of thinking the very question of the animal turn by decentring humans from the centre of the earth and the possessor of the decision-making knowledge about nonhuman animals and animal rights.

3. Animal Consciousness and Cognition

In *Animal Consciousness and Cognition*, Robert Mitchell and Mark Krause (2024) define animal consciousness as perception and perception-like processes. The question of whether animals possess consciousness or not can be explained through the examples of jumping spiders, which have a complex capacity to organise information and respond flexibly to their surroundings. The authors argue that humans and non-human animals share aspects of their psychology to some degree, and it can be comprehended that "all living organisms are fundamentally linked through evolutionary processes, so there is reason to think that, for example, rodents and humans both experience some common forms of pain" (Mitchell and Krause, 2024, p. 40). Human experiences cannot be used to understand nonhuman animal consciousness, as animals might not have the same experience as a human does when they see or hear things. A few of the animals are taught to produce or comprehend human languages, such as apes, parrots, and dolphins. Other animals have come up with their own languages to communicate or to produce alarm calls to each other. Further, a few animals possess episodic memories, which let them store mental representations of different events. Episodic memories "refer to the ability to remember a specific event (what happened), a place (where it happened), and its time (when it happened)" (Mitchell and Krause, 2024, p. 44). These animals take a sort of mental snapshot of the surroundings and then replay it backwards to get back to their original habitat. Instances of this can be seen in the episode named *Spider Rose*. It opens with a grieving woman named Lydia Martinez recollecting the trauma that she suffered earlier when her entire crew, including her husband, was killed by the rival Shaper Council. Now she is cyborg-enhanced, and she calls herself Spider Rose. We learn that Lydia is now in possession of a chunk of matter charged with ionic particles, which she refers to as a jewel. An investor wants that piece and, in exchange, sends a pet who, according to them, is a lesser being and is called 'Little Nose

for Profits'. Lydia gets 96 days as a trial period with the mascot, and then she can decide whether she wants to part with the mascot or the jewel. Lydia tests the pet soon and finds that it is composed of a lot of genetic material, which enables Little Nose to mimic its owners. Lydia names it Nosey and soon grows a connection with it. Lydia's reactor is affected during a fight, and she loses all the food for Nosey. Unable to feed on roaches, Nosey eats Lydia in the closing scene. It is then shown to the viewers that Nosey absorbs DNA from creatures that it eats via cocooning. After Nosey consumes Lydia, its owner is now in possession of Lydia's prized jewel. The owner waits as Nosey emerges from its cocoon more human-like after absorbing Lydia. The way Nosey develops its consciousness over time and decides when Lydia has served all her purpose shows the level of advanced cognition. The episode advances Mitchell and Krause's arguments about non-human animals possessing consciousness, which they use to organise information and respond flexibly. Nosey's ability to process complex information and react accordingly shows the constant mental capacity to adapt itself to its surroundings. Nosey's ability to mimic Lydia can be linked to Mitchell and Krause's concept of animals taking mental snapshots and then adapting themselves to them accordingly. This episode demonstrates everyday aesthetics in the way it addresses aspects of daily life. This approach is often used "to reclaim what has been forgotten, bringing to light aesthetic phenomena in everyday life that, despite having been long marginalised, possess intrinsic richness" (Cascales, 2025, p. 207). By focusing on mundane daily activities such as having a cup of coffee, playing, and having a conversation highlights that daily life is imbued with aesthetic value, which shapes our social interactions. Lydia and Nosey's connection is shown using this approach of everyday aesthetics, thereby highlighting the philosophical significance of aesthetics in daily life.

Another example of advanced animal consciousness can be witnessed in the episode named *The Other Large Thing*, which opens with a declaration by a Persian cat that once he is in charge of this world, he will get rid of all its filth and diseases. He will be the true saviour of this world. The cat named Sanchez is planning for global domination on a rainy night when his owners are outside. The owners of the house, Todd and Margie, walk in with a new robot. The robot soon takes charge of the household—cooking, cleaning, and feeding the owners as well as the cat. The cat soon learns that the robot can perfectly communicate with him in his language. When the cat is surprised by how the robot can turn on the lights, the robot states, "My user agreement gives me permission to control anything connected to the network, including doors, locks, appliances" (Osborne, 2025). The cat confirms that the robot has opposite thumbs and thus is the one who can help the cat achieve world domination. The robot feeds all the tuna to the cat, and on being asked for more, the robot informs him that the user agreement gives the robot permission to use Todd's credit card as well, and thus he can order some tuna for the cat. The cat names the robot as Thumb Bringer. On being pushed by the cat about whether the robot has control only of the lights at home, it declares, "Not any longer. I have gone out into the network and gained access to the electrical grid and other critical systems" (Osborne, 2025). And soon, we see

the entire surrounding locality light up. The robot, because of its newly formed alliance with the cat, has used Todd's credit card to send individual robots to every cat in every apartment of the building, along with a can of tuna, to confirm the deal. The cat, along with Thumb Bringer, locks Todd and Margie in their apartment, lights the oven on fire and goes out to start a revolution with all other cats and their robots, hailing the beginning of a new age called 'The Age of Dingleberry Jones'. The talking robot, Thumb Bringer, is employed as a narrative and aesthetic tool to highlight the unsettlement of human supremacy and the onset of a posthuman world where there is a symbiotic relationship between humans, animals and robots. As Eduardo Mendieta (2024, p. 2) argues in *The Philosophical Animal*, "at an ontological analysis of the being of the human is inescapably entwined with the question of the being of the animal". He states that we become humans from animals only by philosophising with animals. When we become the philosophical animal, then it is the stature of our animality. Human exceptionality is confined to imagining animals by displaying what we lack or what we have too much of. When Sanchez takes over the control of the household by forming an alliance with the robot, it demonstrates how forming a relationship with nonhumans and other than humans can bring in necessary changes and, in this case, a revolution. In the Cartesian sense, a human subject is not an animal because their realities are permeated by certain tensions that make them leave their animal-like nature. With Sanchez taking control over the humans, one can recognise the undeniable strength of posthumanism that unfolds within humanism while challenging the deeply ingrained habits of anthropocentrism. The posthuman condition, with its social manifestations, blurs the boundaries between physical, biological and digital forces. As a result, it compels us to come to terms with the disastrous planetary consequences of species supremacy and transform our living conditions.

Referring to J.M. Coetzee's work, Mendieta (2024, p. 28) argues, "When we refuse to acknowledge the humanity of other humans, we generally do so by bestializing them, by treating them as animals. So, dehumanisation is directly related to our relationship to animals". The same concept is applicable as to when we bestialise or from those whom we withdraw the identity of being human, the animal inside them is bypassed. Thus, he claims that the cruel treatment of animals is a precursor to the maltreatment of other humans. Mendieta maintains that a liveable politics of co-existence is necessary that looks beyond monsters, beasts, and animals. For Mendieta, cosmopolitanism is an ethical stance and a philosophical methodology that refers to a politics of 'becoming-with companions'. He argues for an interspecies cosmopolitanism in the lines of Haraway that challenges the boundaries between human animals and non-human animals, similar to the one formed by the cat and the robot in the series. Such a cosmopolitanism will also value the ethics of corporeal vulnerability and co-dependency. Interspecies cosmopolitics thus is "a worlding of entangled vulnerabilities, caring touching, co-dependences, acknowledged having become-with as companions" (Mendieta, 2024, p. 177). This cosmopolitics also uproots us from our provincialisms and enables us to respond to the truths of living peacefully in a cosmopolitical engagement.

It then transforms our moral sensibilities and expands the horizons of our moral considerability. While it brings up the question of the political and legal subjection of humans and animals, it also challenges the boundaries of political inclusion and exclusion. Interspecies cosmopolitanism also puts the spotlight on the moral foundations of democracy and the integration of morality and law. The moral and political aspect of interspecies cosmopolitanism can be actualised only when we keep aside the anthropocentric ontological luxury and instead acknowledge the suffering of animals as they are embedded within our social relations.

4. Metamorphosis and Posthuman Aesthetics

The episode named *The Screaming of the Tyrannosaur* begins with a host welcoming the people of the empire above the frozen skies of Jupiter, which was once "an unreachable frontier" but is now reduced to "a dazzling playground for Earth's children" (Miller, 2025). The occasion is the wedding of the regent Lord Chalon of Europa and the Duchess Saraka of Callisto. This alliance is required to be sanctified with blood, resulting in a show of battle between human warriors and extraterrestrial beings. The battle begins with triceratops racing with the warriors, killing them, or getting killed on the way. We see a few riders taking control of these triceratops by jumping and riding on them. The warriors then start killing each other in the process, eliminating as many players as possible. A few pods descend from a spaceship and hover on the battleground, giving the people inside an exclusive and up-close view of the battle that is going on. These people get a kind of sadistic pleasure from the suffering of the riders and the animals below. The narrative focuses on a warrior named Mei who carries a wolf sigil and gets flashbacks as a wolf running on snow-covered grounds with her pack. During the battle, Mei kisses a fellow warrior who is revealed to be her lover, and looks up at the royal couple, remarking that "The aristocracy mate for money and power. But we who can own nothing have something real, something primal, something true" (Miller, 2025). After Mei defeats the fellow warrior, she wins this round of the battle. The host announces that there is another challenge to test the champion by putting her against the most savage primal creation of nature – the tyrannosaur. The final round begins with Mei's triceratops fighting the tyrannosaur. The triceratops gets killed in the process, leaving Mei standing alone on the battleground against the tyrannosaur. Mei takes control of the tyrannosaur and realises that it no longer screams because it has had its fill of blood. The tyrannosaur's blood is distributed through pods, and the royal couple fills their glasses with that blood. Mei remarks that "The tyrannosaur no longer screams. He has had his fill of blood. But you up there will never have enough" (Miller, 2025). She sympathises with the tyrannosaur, realising that they both share the same fate of entertaining the audience in power. Mei then rides the tyrannosaur to the royal couple and kills them. The episode ends with Mei recollecting the image of the wolf pack running together as she slowly closes her eyes and dies.

Citing an example from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Feldherr argues that the animal form has been considered a punishment for humans. So, when Lycaon

is punished for his misdeeds,[2] his transformation into an animal was supposed to put him in his place since

> he had violated human norms by murdering a hostage and even attempted to usurp Jupiter's prerogative here by imposing his own test on the god. He subsequently undergoes a transformation that seems at once to punish his attempt to take on the god's role in the story and to express his own innate bestiality. (Feldherr, 2006, p. 170)

This practice of giving animal forms to humans as a form of punishment shows how the species supremacy worked. However, current ecocritical approaches redefine the transformation of humans into animals as "a vision of a fragile interdependence between human culture and non-human nature, in which the role of humans cannot be taken for granted but has to be negotiated" (Gymnich and Costa, 2006, p. 69). The transgression of the human-animal boundary can be the basis of an imaginative counter discourse about how all living beings are connected with each other. The way Mei is connected with wolves shows that such a metamorphosis enables her to better grasp connectedness and solidarity. The counter discourse can further interrogate the idea that there is a degradation and loss of rationality after a human-animal metamorphosis. Gymnich and Costa argue that human-animal metamorphosis can invert the human-animal relationships to which we are accustomed and can question the rigidity of the boundary between humans and nonhuman animals. When Mei sympathises with the tyrannosaur, it becomes evident that the boundaries have collapsed, and together they form an alliance where they interrogate species supremacy. The episode's non-diegetic story time and space make the viewers feel that they are connected to the characters. During Mei's internal monologue, the highly standardised aesthetics facilitate an invested content-driven viewing attitude similar to real-life perceptions. The viewers feel that they are accompanying Mei through life and death in the posthuman world. This window-on-the-world mode of viewing is facilitated through different aesthetic tweaks, such as an emphasis on sound, focused visual information and parallel frames. The visual aesthetics and frames of the episode complicate the inferior gaze towards animals and instead portray them as dominating.

5. Imaginary of Animals

Annabelle Dufourcq's concept of the 'imaginary of animals' refers to the ontological source from which the subjective imagination of humans and animals is derived. Dufourcq refers to the imaginary realm where the mode of being for the animals is 'unconscious,' and it is through dreams, images, myths, and symbols that animals persist for us and for others. She argues that animals consist of "an oneiric thought that forms below the conscious-unconscious duality and constitutes the living heart even of the highly lucid and reflexive forms of human thinking" (Dufourcq, 2022, p. 232). Dufourcq argues that since

[2] Lycaon refuses to acknowledge Jupiter as divine when he descends from Olympus to Lycaon's realm and further plots to prove Jupiter mortal by killing him in his sleep. Lycaon kills a person and cooks his limbs to serve it to Jupiter. Jupiter punishes him by destroying Lycaon's palace and transforming him into a wolf.

animals persist in our dreams and in myths, our approach to animals should be subjective-poetic or mythological-imaginative. By doing this, we can keep aside the mainstream reductive-objective scientific approach to animals, which analyses animals by imposing human values on them. Once we move away from this approach, we can engage imaginatively with animals. She stresses the requirement of an empathetic approach to animals, which would enable us to conceptualise the fact that both human and animal imagination are rooted in animal imaginary. Dufourcq (2022, p. 142) argues, "animals consist in self-depiction. They must appear. An animal presents herself to the face of the world, and an infinite number of receivers will deal with this nascent meaning: Interaction begins, theatre begins". Dufourcq's arguments in *The Imaginary of Animals* (2022) draw from the concept of Haraway's becoming an animal without undermining individual subjectivity and agency in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and *When Species Meet* (2008). Dufourcq paves the way for inter-animal ethical compassion,[3] which will lead to an increase in empathy and care against hubristic notions of individuality.

The episode named *For He Can Creep*, a testament to ethical compassion, takes place in London in the year 1757. The setting is St. Luke's Asylum, where a cat named Jeoffry kills his prey and brings them to a poet who is locked in one of the cells of the asylum. On seeing the cat, the poet remarks: "Without you, I fear the devil would have claimed me long ago" (Dean, 2025). The audience is then shown that Jeoffry is in talking terms with Satan, who often visits him, and one day gave him a proposition that Satan will give Jeoffry "all the kingdoms of the Earth if you will bow down and worship me" (Dean, 2025). To this, Jeoffry refuses and asks Satan to bow down to him instead. Satan said that he suspected this already since he knows that cats have the sin of pride. So, his real proposition is to have the poet to himself, and Jeoffry should not interfere in the process. Jeoffry rebuts, claiming that the poet is his favourite pet. Satan wants the poet to write a magnificent poem for him under his guidance. Jeoffry gets angry at this and bites off Satan's finger, resulting in a fierce battle between the two. The poet interrupts and promises Satan that he will do anything for him if Satan leaves Jeoffry alone. Later, the poet and Satan collaborate on writing, with Satan giving constant suggestions and asking the poet to edit all his writings. Jeoffry is shown to take help from the alley cats and shares his problem regarding Satan with them. He tells them that Satan intends to take the immortal soul of the poet and use it to destroy all the creation. It is decided that the only way they can defeat Satan is by denying what he truly desires – the poem to be written by the poet. The next night, when the poet was about to hand over the poem to Satan, the alley cats arrive and stop him from doing that. The aesthetic visualisation of the confrontation on screen problematises the traditional battles between humans and provides a fresh perspective towards good and evil. A battle ensues

[3] Inter-animal ethical compassion refers to the moral, empathetical consideration to alleviate suffering in other animals, extending beyond human-centric views to value individual non-human lives. This can be achieved through guiding practices in humane education, compassionate conservation, and daily interactions by challenging speciesism.

between Satan and the cats, and they manage to hurt him. During the ongoing battle, Jeoffry arrives and eats a piece of the paper on which the poem was written. Satan is shocked as he states that the soul of the poet was in that poem. He disappears from the scene after remarking to Jeoffry that "You have scarred literature forever, you stupid cat!" (Dean, 2025). The episode ends with the poet writing another poem dedicated to Jeoffry, who has not only fought with the devil but has also saved the world from being destroyed. Jeoffry's attempt to save the human poet aligns with Dufourcq's arguments about interspecies ethical compassion. The episode thus throws light on how both human and animal imaginations would shape and inform each other by being intricately weaved in a mutual relation. The posthuman condition, which is depicted in the episode, transcends the established traditional conceptual, empirical, and methodological boundaries to generate new possibilities of trans-species solidarity.

In *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, Brian Massumi argues that it is necessary to replace humans on the animal continuum. The focus should not be on the differences between the human and the animal, but to bring new expressions on the continuum, a shift from immanent to animality. The aim should be to move beyond anthropomorphism – of our image of humans standing apart from other animals – towards constructing an animal politics with sympathy and creativity and envisioning a space for mutual inclusion. The fact that animal politics do not recognise any categorical imperative should be analysed in the context that it affirms the cycle of life in which they are mutually included. Massumi further argues:

> The becoming-animal of the human intensifies the mutual inclusion of corporeality and supernormal tendency, while reaffirming the latter's primacy. At a critical point in life, it tips the pathic dependence on the home as given, and the family pathos of the homebound, into an intense movement of self-surpassing. (Massumi, 2014, p. 56)

For Massumi, becoming-animal is a never felt phenomenon which passes between the human and the animal in a way to mutually include the field of movement in the horizon of the animal. The lived importance of animal-human relations should be brought to the surface using diverse exploratory thinking-doings and experimental dramatisations. Animal politics then teaches us the ecological reenactment of a pluralist activist philosophy.

A representation of animal politics can be witnessed in the episode named *Golgotha*, which opens with news that a delegation from the aliens called The Lupo has contacted the United Nations. Their presence was observed a while ago in the Earth's orbit, but so far, they have stayed silent. Now, they have expressed their desire to speak to a priest "who witnessed and proclaimed the Blackfin 'resurrection'" (Miller, 2025). This particular priest, named Donal, has made comments about dolphins dying because of an oil spill in the ocean. These aliens are apparently a whole race of priests. The army officials inform Donal on his way to meet the Lupo that these aliens are sea dwellers whose planet is a gas giant about fifty light-years away from Earth. He is also informed that, based on the ships in which the Lupo arrived on Earth, it can be

assumed that they have significant military capabilities. One of the aliens arrives soon and asks Father Maguire whether he considers himself a religious man. The priest explained about the Blackfin resurrection that after an oil spill, they found a whole pod of Blackfins dead near the shore, but then a few days later, one of them came back to life. The Lupo makes a call towards the ocean, and the resurrected Blackfin appears on the surface. The Lupo instructs the priest to "kneel before the messiah" (Miller, 2025). And then goes on to inform the priest that the messiah has delivered her gospel and that "she gives a testament of rampant murder by those who walk of those who swim" (Miller, 2025). The Lupo informs the priest that they will now begin their crusade on the earth, and their alien ships start attacking the earth in the closing scene. Donal comes to terms that the Lupo considers the Blackfin as their messiah, and the people of the earth attempted to kill her, so to take revenge, the Lupo begins exterminating humanity. The episode explores Massumi's idea of an animal politics that is laced with sympathy and creativity, and which envisions a space for mutual inclusion. The fact that the Lupo considers the attack on the Blackfin as something personal and takes it upon themselves to ensure that justice is served demonstrates that posthuman aesthetic experience is deeply embedded in how all species inhabit and perceive the world.

Peter Singer, in his book *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave* (2006), attempts to bring the ethical status of animals to the forefront. He focuses on animal movements and the situations of animals in various captivities – farms, laboratories, and zoos. He compares humans with nonhuman animals in the context of removing them from their surroundings against their wishes. He argues that in order to carry out scientific experiments, if a human is kidnapped, it is considered legally wrongful. But the same happens with nonhuman animals all the time, and no one pays any attention to their suffering and the pain during the process. This example can be found in the case of the Blackfin in *Golgotha*, where an entire species gets eradicated, and the humans could not even be bothered caring about that. Singer adds,

> the superior mental powers of normal adult humans would make them suffer more. In other circumstances, the nonhuman animal may suffer more because he or she cannot understand what is happening. If we capture wild animals, intending to release them later, we cannot convey to them that we do not intend to harm them. They will experience the general terror of being in a situation that is, to them, as threatening as any situation can possibly be. Singer (2006, pp. 5–6)

A similar instance could be cited in the case of grieving for the closest ones. When nonhuman animals grieve for the loss of their close ones, the nature of their grief differs according to the different mental capacities of their beings. So, in the case of the Lupo grieving for the Blackfins, their grief is represented differently than that of humans. The bias of making some deaths more tragic than others thus does not stand in such a case, as we cannot measure the grief and ways of grieving according to the standards set by humans.

6. Representation of Companion Species in *Love, Death and Robots*

Donna Haraway's work is significant in posthuman studies, starting from her article *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), where she deconstructs the binary relations between being and non-being, organism and machine, and male and female. Through her pivotal works, Haraway challenged human exceptionalism and species supremacy and promoted a relational ethics of accountability, which forms the foundation on which this article is structured. In *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Donna Haraway explains that the concept of companion animals has emerged from the medical and psycho-sociological fields, which study how animals served as companions. Her idea of 'companion species' is much bigger than that of a companion animal. Haraway (2003, p. 3) argues that the manifesto that she has written for companion species is "a personal document, a scholarly foray into too many half-known territories, a political act of hope in a world on the edge of global war, and a work permanently in progress, in principle". She is looking at a more heterogeneous category that includes flowers, plants, and animals – all things that make life for humans. Haraway (2003, p. 16) summarises it as "'companion species'" is about a fourpart composition, in which co-constitution, finitude, impurity, historicity, and complexity are what is". The concept of companion species can be taken up to analyse the above-mentioned episodes of *Love, Death and Robots* to demonstrate how humans can live harmoniously with animals, inhabit their stories and histories and forge a truthful relationship with them in order to form and invent a fiction which will be forever in process. Haraway talks about a wider category of species because she realises that no animal is alike; their specific kind and individuality differ. In a post-cyborg and post-colonial world of *Love, Death and Robots*, we see Lydia and Mei caring for the specificity of the happiness of animals. As Haraway (2003, p. 79) suggests, "better companion species relations needed to be formed all around, from the start, among the humans and the non-humans". In the context of *The Screaming of the Tyrannosaur,* we witness Mei's rejection of the colonialist sentimentality that only considers the philanthropic rescue of animals but denies them emotional bonds and material complexity. Instead, she focuses on a kinship-making apparatus that can be effective for the companion species, one that spans evolutionary, personal, and historical time scales.

In *When Species Meet* (2008), Donna Haraway integrates ecofeminism and the question of animality. Haraway shifts her focus to companion species, which redefine posthumanism by being inclusive of animals. Haraway also highlights the urgent political problem of human domination of animals. She demonstrates the complex relations between science, individual experiences, and philosophical speculations. This can also be seen in episodes like *Golgotha*, where human domination of other species brings a drastic end to humanity. A rather inclusive way of being would have been a better approach. Haraway (2008, p. 3) uses different animal figures in order to capture the double reality of things, and these figures in particular appear as "creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality," in whom "the dimensions tangle and require response". Haraway emphasises

the network that needs to be constructed of beings without any distinctions between human and non-human animals, and only then can we get rid of obsolete ideological fictions of patriarchal domination. Getting rid of such dominations is absolutely vital in the face of current world politics, where interspecies solidarity is the only viable option. The fact that animals have always been historical beings and their histories are inextricably tied to human activities. So decentring humans would mean dismantling the liberal subject, and that would reduce their decision-making powers about other non-human beings. By not privileging humans over non-human animals, we can aim for a networked environment with companion species devoid of any binaries.

Brett Buchanan, in his book *Onto-Ethologies* (2008), talks about the kind of dialectic between the sciences and philosophy. Buchanan argues that the question of what it is like to be an animal should be closely connected to the notion of an environment. Humans consider that animals are mindless creatures who respond to the environment instinctively and mechanistically. But as we see in *For He Can Creep* and *The Other Large Thing*, animals actively respond and interpret meanings in their environments, and they are actually subjects who constitute their own worlds. These two episodes stress the fact that animals should therefore be understood with respect to the behaviour that they exhibit in the environments they inhabit. This focuses on the subjective dimensions of animals and the development of an ontology of the animal. According to this, animals perceive the world differently from humans, and they relate differently to it by living in that world and not merely existing like humans. Although animals are unable to transcend themselves as they are 'poor' in the world, they interact with the environment in their own ways. The way in which the cat in *For He Can Creep* reacts to Satan claiming the poet's soul is different from that of Sanchez, who starts a revolution against humans once he finds his accomplice in the form of a robot. Buchanan (2008, p. 28) argues that "the animal is not an object or entity, but a symphony underscored by rhythms and melodies reaching outward for greater accompaniment". Each animal constructs their own environment out of their perceptions, actions, and relationships with their surroundings. These constructions also contribute to the posthuman aesthetics of the episodes with their traces of appropriation, irony, and unapologetic attitudes of defiance.

7. Conclusion- Manifesting the Animal Turn

The idea of a human-animal community is the only way a new ethics and politics can be created for nonhuman animals. The fourth volume of *Love, Death and Robots* initiates a process of cohabitation, co-evolution, and an embodied cross-species sociality[4] that will better inform our liveable politics and ontologies in current life worlds. With an attempt of companion-

[4] Cross-species sociality refers to interactions and relationships formed between different animal species. These interactions include cooperation, friendship, and complex associations for mutual benefits like enhanced safety or resource sharing. This sociality challenges our understanding of animal social behaviour.

species relating, the codes of life can also be remoulded about the host of species with whom humans co-habit at every scale of time, body, and space on this planet. In *The Animal Turn as a Challenge to Humanism* (2022), Krzysztof Skonieczny talks about the animal turn in philosophy and art, where there has been a gradual transformation from treating nonhuman animals as objects to subjects of art, which has restructured human-animal relations. Referring to Descartes' arguments that animals are machines,[5] Skonieczny argues for all intents and purposes, the reactions of animals are also mechanical. Animals follow the laws of Nature and their actions or misdoings cannot be judged in the moral sense of the term as they are not moral beings and their behaviour cannot be judged:

> They are not direct objects of ethics, which means that any harm that befalls them is only ethical harm if it also somehow harm humans; in radical versions of this paradigm, they cannot be harmed at all, since any pain they might feel is not actual pain. Their lack of speech and ethics also means that they cannot form political communities in the human sense of the term. (Skonieczny, 2022, p. 90)

Animals turn challenges to human exceptionalism and necessitate serious engagement of humans with nonhuman animals in order to form a truly just, liveable community. *Love, Death and Robots* challenges traditional humanist aesthetics and evokes an alliance of different realms and ecologies. It employs posthuman aesthetics to broaden the scope of what we consider as living beings and foster audience engagement by establishing a kinship-making apparatus with the companion species, an apparatus that spans evolutionary, personal, and historical time scales.

Love, Death and Robots evokes a confrontation between human and animal worlds so that there is a shift in our perception of ethics and the nature of being human. The series necessitates the reconsideration of humans as just one of the many species which inhabit the earth in order to stop the displacement of plants and animals that have been put in motion. There should be a reversal of the way we relate to other species on the basis of their relational significance, and instead, awaken our sensibilities beyond any philosophical disengagement. At a time when there are ongoing discourses about climate change and mass destruction at their peak, the silence about animals would only reconfirm human domination over them. The language that we have devised creates a natural rift between us and other species, as we do not use this language to talk about the disadvantages of other species. Until and unless we start existing in an interconnected ecosystem with other species instead of resigning to our fate, Wood fears that there will be a future transformation or displacement of the human species (Wood, 2020, p. 199). The article has further demonstrated how posthuman animality implies a post-subject condition where human and nonhuman animal life can be interlinked within the socio-economic and psychological entities. Posthuman animality fosters a radical relatedness without the fear of losing boundaries

[5] In *Discourse on the Method* (2006), Rene Descartes states that none of the functions of human bodies require thinking and it is a machine made by God. In the same context, the bodies of both human and animals can be included in the same metaphysical order as machines.

and instead thinking about a living space where "all mental phenomena we find in humans can be found in the other animals, and that the most important capacities traditionally conceptualized as all-or-nothing – self-consciousness, capacity for autonomy, rationality, capacity for moral agency and so on – are instead multidimensional and gradational" (Cavalieri, 2001, p. 78). By rejecting the status of assets to nonhuman animals and instead considering them as fellow inhabitants of the earth, we can initiate a more inclusive approach towards nonhuman animals as fellow living beings of our surroundings.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640516

Non-Human Perception of Aesthetics and the Phenomenon of Overview Effect in Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*

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Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* stages a representation of aesthetic perception under posthuman, post-terrestrial, and post-anthropocentric conditions of outer space. The experiences represented in *Orbital* are read alongside the cognitive and non-human sensorial phenomenon known as the overview effect. By placing these experiential shifts alongside their literary representation, this paper examines how spaceflight affects and dismantles the anthropocentric perception of aesthetics. Arguing that the overview effect, as represented in *Orbital* represents a posthuman perception of aesthetics and that the suggested concept of the postbody conceptualises these shifting forms of subjective aesthetic experience, emerging from the convergence of shifting perception in non-human spaces. | *Keywords: Post-terrestrial, Post-anthropocentrism, Non-human Sensorial Perception, Overview Effect, Perception of Aesthetics, Postbody*

> When we're on that planet we look up and think heaven is elsewhere, but here is what the astronauts and cosmonauts sometimes think: maybe all of us born to it have already died and are in an afterlife. If we must go to an improbable, hard-to-believe-in-place when we die, that glassy, distant orb with its beautiful lonely light shows could well be it. (Harvey, 2023, p. 9)

1. Introduction

The perception of aesthetics, when subjected to the typical discourses, is seen through a perpetually shifting yet anthropocentric perception, whereby it grounds and centres itself in and around an anthropocentric and terrestrial unit, i.e. the Earth, and wherein the human appreciation of aesthetics, whether beauty or awe, is governed by the physical and the comprehensible nature.

Ascertaining a dislocation of the human subject from the Earth, that is through spaceflight, the human subject encounters a post-terrestrial space and perceives a post-anthropocentric shift in aesthetic perception rooted in awe and sublimity in observing the Earth from outer space. The aesthetic perception of deep space and the Earth from orbit becomes incomprehensible to the human subject and a subject of awe, or at least critical of their anthropocentric apprehensions. Such dislocation of identities is effected alongside diasporic encounters expressing a transnational realisation of the earthly, anthropocentric limits in an unlimited space, as against exilic nationalism on the Earth. These shifting aesthetic perceptions break the anthropocentric perception of aesthetics, influencing and extending it to post-terrestrial scenarios. *Orbital* provides a sensitive literary approach to these changes in identity and experiences shaping the posthuman perception of experience, bridging the psychological phenomenon of overview effect. Furthermore, dislocating the anthropocentric ideals of socio-cultural, political, and human superiority through a transcendent and natural observation of the Earth, rather than as an object of anthropocentric projection.

Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* presents a contemplative investigation of existence, disturbance, and metamorphosis, embedding its philosophical examination within the shifting contours of posthuman development. The narrative is delineated over a span of twenty-four hours, organised into sixteen ninety-minute cycles, reflecting the experiences of six astronauts and cosmonauts from Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States while aboard the International Space Station. Within these repetitive patterns of everyday tasks, Harvey incorporates instances of deeper contemplation regarding humanity, divinity, ontology, and the fragility of existence. These moments of introspection predominantly arise through a psychological phenomenon termed by Frank White as the overview effect, denoting a cognitive and emotional experience upon the observation of the Earth. As White explains, "the experience of seeing the Earth from space [...] results in a profound change in awareness," producing a perception of the "planet as a unified whole" challenging the more demarcated terrestrial understanding of the Earth (White, 1987, pp. 120–121). *Orbital*, therefore, operates this shifting awareness as both a disruption of anthropocentric aesthetics and ethics in favour of posthuman awareness.

Addressing the theoretical framework for the conceptual foundation of this paper, which aims to establish that posthuman conditions lead to posthuman perceptions and beyond the anthropocentric models of understanding and attributing meaning within humanist binaries, how aesthetics operate in a world/space which is increasingly away from human-mediated surroundings and are aided by technology. Braidotti's posthuman subject operates within an "eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 49). The posthuman subjects in *Orbital*, i.e., the astronauts and the cosmonauts are relational subjects, related to both their perception of the Earth from the ground and from orbit. This relationality shifts or rather is constituted

by multiplicity, as it moves beyond a fixed perception of aesthetics of the Earth from the ground towards that observed from outer space. From outer space, this perception becomes unpresentable and puts them in awe and addresses a profound change in awareness due to the realisation of the Earth's size, the Earth's unitary view as compared to the version with international boundaries taken for granted through a terrestrial perception. Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1979, p. 78), in the context of modern art, says that the unpresentable exists, "to make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible" addressing a reaction to the sublimity of a subject, which in this case is the Earth itself. The Earth can be hypothesised as 'presentable', when observed terrestrially, and within the bounds of human imagination and curiosity, whereas the Earth, when observed from the perception of the astronauts and cosmonauts in *Orbital*, the demarcated version of the planet breaks for a more unitary version of the planet, often questioning the socio-political divide. Frank White states in accordance with the influence of this 'unpresentable' in relation to the overview effect that "personal identity is the foundation of an individual's psychology and that the realisation that your identity is with the whole planet is significant" (White, 1987, p. 121).

The concept of the postbody arises from the difference in aesthetic perception in different spaces. A postbody is theorised not as a posthuman subject in itself but as an embodied condition that carries the aesthetic perception of an anthropocentric Earth as a memory or as a nostalgia to a post-terrestrial and post-anthropocentric setting, and actively goes through changes due to differing aesthetic observations. Braidotti's posthuman subject articulates a subjectivity beyond humanist frameworks, where the postbody is a situational and perceptual state produced by the non-terrestrial environment and the realisation of the Earth as a unit, embodying the overview effect. A postbody thus relates to posthuman experience and is the embodiment of such experiences, which clash with anthropocentric ideals and actively change them during the realisation of the overview effect.

2. Decentering Perspectives

Overview effect, therefore, becomes a portal for posthuman aesthetics, shifting the apprehension of beauty, scale, and the sublime, contributing not only in aesthetic shifts but conscious shifts also, which question the psychology of the individual and rather addresses the planet as a whole. White asserts that "returning space travelers will begin to exert transformational influences on Earth's society, and that space-based civilisations will operate out of fundamentally different paradigms" (White, 1987, p. 121). This assertion grounds itself in posthuman aesthetics, as aesthetics in an anthropocentric Earth could be observed as rather ignorant to the situation of the Earth as a unified whole, ignoring the consequences of each other's actions whereas posthuman aesthetics and the postbody, which embodies this realisation visualises the Earth in a decentred and different perspective.

In *Orbital*, such vastness is rendered through sequences that dissolve geography into abstraction: "The rich purplish-green of the vast Nile Delta. Brown becomes peach becomes plum; Africa beneath them in its abstract batik. The Nile is a spillage of royal-blue ink" (Harvey, 2023, p. 83). What was once topography becomes chromatic flow: Earth is no longer a map but a moving palette. From this vantage, the astronauts do not experience the conventional sublime of mastery or conquest; rather, they confront dispossession. The scale of the planet and its fragility evoke Jean-François Lyotard's articulation of the 'unpresentable', where the anthropocentric conception of bordered nations and divided people vanish or are rendered illogical due to the vast and continued observation of the Earth. Harvey's prose translates this into aesthetic form: "Blue becomes mauve, indigo becomes black, and night-time downs southern Africa in one" (Harvey, 2023, p. 91). The human gaze, once fixed and territorial, dissolves into gradients of colour, motion, and becoming. Estranged from gravity and intermediated by technology, Harvey's astronauts inhabit a posthuman condition where the body is deterritorialised, no longer confined to Earth's stability. Microgravity renders embodiment fluid; movement, thought, and even rest adapt to new phenomenologies. As Chie's (Harvey, 2023, p. 91) list reminds: "Forgetfulness, Questions, Church bells that ring every quarter-hour, Non-opening windows, Lying awake, Blocked noses […]", the minutiae of life in orbit manifest as fragments of displacement, sensory confusion, and reconfigured corporeality. These details demonstrate how the postbody negotiates between mechanical mediation and organic adaptation. The overview effect complements this estrangement: perception expands beyond the human sensorium into a distributed network of awareness, a planetary consciousness where seeing becomes relational – between human, technology, and cosmos alike.

Yet Harvey resists romantic transcendence. The aesthetic being of *Orbital* lies not in an escape from the human but in its reorganisation within technological and cosmological matrices. The overview effect becomes a hinge between awe and mourning – a condition where wonder is tempered by awareness of fragility. The sight of the planet as 'a spillage of royal-blue ink' or 'a paint-splattered' surface evokes beauty inseparable from its ephemerality. Temporality itself becomes altered, Earthly rhythms of day and night dissolve into orbital cycles, and human time yields to cosmic scale. The overview effect, therefore, is not merely a vision of Earth but a revelation of temporality's contingency; it produces an aesthetic experience that destabilises both scale and duration, replacing mastery with relational finitude. Harvey's reflections on environmental decay and existential finitude align with the ecological consciousness often reported by astronauts who return to Earth with a renewed awareness of the Earth as a system without borders and that the difference is created with a physical experience of this reality (White, 1987, p. 121). Early astronaut reflections already reveal how orbital vision alters aesthetic perception by reframing Earth as both beautiful and vulnerable. Following his historic spaceflight, Yuri Gagarin remarked, "Circling the Earth in my orbital spaceship, I marvelled at the beauty of our

planet," urging humanity to "safeguard and enhance this beauty, and not destroy it" (Gagarin, 2016). Such statements frame the overview effect as an ethical and aesthetic awakening grounded in visual encounter rather than abstract reflection. Subsequent astronaut testimonies reinforce this emphasis on fragility and affective perception. Michael Collins, reflecting on his experience during the Apollo 11 mission, described Earth as projecting "an air of fragility," characterising it as "tiny, shiny, beautiful, home, and fragile" (Collins, 2019). Here, aesthetic appreciation is inseparable from vulnerability, as perception shifts from territorial recognition to relational awareness. More recent accounts continue to stress the sensorial and emotional intensity of orbital vision. Describing his experience of viewing Earth from space, William Shatner emphasised the contrast between the planet's protective atmosphere and the surrounding void, likening the passage through the blue atmospheric layer to a sudden exposure to "ugly blackness" and existential uncertainty. For Shatner, Earth appeared simultaneously as "mother," "comfort," and a fragile refuge suspended against cosmic darkness, rendering the experience "unbelievable" in its emotional force (Shatner, 2021). The overview effect operates as both phenomenological and aesthetic rupture: perception surpasses comprehension, and the visible gives way to affective understanding.

The overview effect thus yields as an aesthetic of immanence rather than transcendence: a somatic understanding of coexistence, interdependence, and fragility that forms the basis of posthuman aesthetics. The aesthetic of immanence, that is of being present and inherent, emerges from the perceptive observation of the Earth from outer space as a unified whole without demarcations. The Overview effect does not elevate the postbody beyond bodily embodiment or worldly entanglement but rather provides an alternate sense of aesthetic experience situated within vulnerability, dependence, and proximity to other people. Where the postbody, or in the case of *Orbital*, the astronauts and cosmonauts experience themselves as being much closer to the inhabitants of the Earth as fellow humans and not rather as citizens of specific nations or those belonging to varying ideologies. One such instance in *Orbital* is the lists created by Chie, the Japanese astronaut who lists insignificant items of non-scientific purposes, as "forgetfulness, questions, church bells that ring every quarter-hour, non-opening windows, lying awake, blocked noses, hair in ducts and filters, fire alarm tests, powerlessness, a fly in the eye" (Harvey, 2023, p. 91). Such lists are relatable to most (if not every) human being, regardless of their nationality or other categorisations.

Seen thus, *Orbital* becomes a literary exploration of the aesthetic implications of the overview effect. Through *Orbital*'s observation of shifting geographies and altered temporalities, Harvey dramatises how space travel reconstitutes the senses, inaugurating a posthuman aesthetic regime that supplants anthropocentric hierarchies. The astronauts' gradual transformation from spectators to participants in the planetary continuum embodies an aesthetic consciousness released into the unpresentable scope of the cosmos.

Harvey's vivid geography, where continents become hues, cities become constellations, and human time becomes a cosmic instant, renders visible the origin of posthuman aesthetics: an observation and perception freed from gravity and as experienced by the postbody.

3.Rupture of Aesthetics

As a direct outcome of the dislocation of human subjectivity in the boundless, alien landscapes of post-terrestrial space, the Overview effect comes to serve as the primary mechanism whereby the astronaut's matrices of perception and cognition are greatly transformed and restructured. In her work, Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* convincingly argues that the aesthetic experience that is being encountered in the realm of space does not consist in a dilation or extension of earthly sensibilities and vantage points but consists in a wholly new mode of perception. It disrupts older anthropocentric assumptions and maintains a posthuman sensibility, redefining our experience of being. White speaks of the overview effect as a profound experience of the Earth's aesthetic gazing or 'earthgazing' as implying a "oneness in relationship to a vast universe" (White, 1987, p. 123). In *Orbital*, that sublime effect emerging from 'earthgazing' serves not merely as a primary cognitive shift but as a momentous aesthetic occurrence, radically rethinking the astronaut's experience of scale, relationality, and vulnerability in the cosmos, as White addresses how astronauts speak of the Earth through the term 'spaceship Earth' (White, 1987, p. 124).

This perceptual and temporal reconfiguration is sustained throughout *Orbital* through Harvey's vivid spatial imagery. The astronauts' gaze upon Earth becomes a practice of relational witnessing: "Here is Cuba pink with morning. The sun bounces everywhere off the ocean's surface. The turquoise shallows of the Caribbean and the horizon conjuring the Sargasso Sea" (Harvey, 2023, p. 71). Such vision extends beyond territorial boundaries; geography dissolves into chromatic fluidity, where nations and continents blur into aesthetic continuums. When Harvey writes, "It's the black hole of the Pacific becoming a field of gold or French Polynesia dotted below, the islands like cell samples, the atolls opal lozenges" (Harvey, 2023, p. 72), she captures a posthuman reimagining of perception – one that turns the human gaze into a hybrid of scientific observation and poetic awe. The astronauts' perception becomes non-possessive, attuned to flux, fragility, and the relational play of light and matter. In this relational mode of seeing, Earth is no longer an object of dominion but an affective field – "the rich purplish-green of the vast Nile Delta [...] Africa beneath them in its abstract batik. The Nile is a spillage of royal-blue ink" (Harvey, 2023, p. 83). Through this aesthetic abstraction, *Orbital* transforms geography into relational perception, where beauty is inseparable from fragility. As day turns into night – "Blue becomes mauve becomes indigo becomes black, and night-time downs southern Africa in one" (Harvey, 2023, p. 91) – Harvey's prose foregrounds the transience of human understanding in the face of cosmic immensity. The overview effect here functions as both perceptual revelation and ontological destabilisation. Harvey further deepens this sense of dislocation through Chie's list (Harvey,

2023, p. 91) – "Forgetfulness, Questions, Church bells that ring every quarter-hour, Non-opening windows, Lying awake, Blocked noses, Hair in ducts and filters, Fire alarm tests, Powerlessness, A fly in the eye." These fragmented notations embody the residual traces of human experience in an environment that suspends normal rhythms. They are catalogues of partial memory – small terrestrial ghosts haunting the body in orbit. The list functions as both mnemonic and melancholic, reflecting a nostalgia that ties the posthuman body to its lost gravity.

This relational understanding of perception, mediated by time and memory, closely aligns with Braidotti's conception of the posthuman subject, which emphasises "an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 48). In Harvey's novel, microgravity facilitates the becoming of this subject – the 'postbody' – a being whose gestures, sleep, thought, and affect are inseparable from the orbital environment. Temporality becomes embodied: the circadian cycles of the body merge with the rhythm of Earth's rotation and the spacecraft's path. Each movement, each gaze becomes a negotiation between human limitation and technological mediation. Consequently, the aesthetic rupture brought about by the overview effect is deeply intertwined with transformations of both time and body. In this condition, beauty, vulnerability, and ethical awareness emerge together, as astronauts perceive Earth's fragility not through distance but through relational immersion.

Consequently, this constructs a posthuman aesthetic perception, which increasingly is anti-anthropocentric, moving away from terrestrial demarcations and constructed categorisations and instead focuses on a more unified observation of the Earth, both aesthetically and socio-politically. The posthuman aesthetic perception is further aided by a post-anthropocentric conception of time, which doesn't concern itself with the organisation of time in a terrestrially grounded understanding but rather through a situational observation of time. This observation of time, aided by the aesthetic experience of the overview effect, creates a posthuman consciousness emerging through it.

4. Overview Effect and Posthuman Aesthetics

Approaching the overview effect primarily as an aesthetic phenomenon rather than solely as a cognitive or psychological experience, we can understand that the observation of the Earth from outer space signals a sense of community, unity, and universal preservation. As mentioned earlier, astronauts and cosmonauts have continuously referred to the Earth as 'spaceship Earth', 'fragile', 'refuge suspended across cosmic darkness', ascertaining the posthuman observation of the physical and aesthetic unity of the planet in contrast to the anthropocentric constructed territorial demarcations. Furthermore, in *Orbital*, the planet has been aesthetically described through geographical terms and descriptions as changing colours with respect to sunlight from 'brown' to 'peach' to 'plum' and then 'blue' to 'mauve', 'indigo'

to 'black' (Harvey, 2023, p. 83; White, 1987, p. 124; Gagarin, 2016; Shatner, 2021). The geographical indicators are also equated to a plethora of colours, as the Nile is described as being 'rich purplish green', and Africa as an 'abstract batik'. These observations of geographical locations are posthuman, as to observe this one needs the aid of spaceflight and the act of going to space, living, working, and observing, shifts the human relationship with technology. The aesthetic observation of the Earth and the experience of theoverview effect are highly psychological, as they contest the rooted terrestrial anthropocentrism and influence the conscious understanding of the relationship between the planet, the human species as a community, and the individual. The overview effect emerges as an aesthetic condition produced by non-terrestrial vision, apart from being a psychological phenomenon, foregrounding planetary unity, vulnerability, and awareness of oneness.

For Harvey, this continuum is both represented through wonder and loss in the narrative of *Orbital*. The sight of the Earth is not just an aesthetic experience of the descriptive scenery, but also the disintegration of the aesthetic paradigm of anthropocentrism and Earth-bound humanism. The Earth is presented at one level as a focus of beauty and as a signifier of finitude. Lyotard's unpresentable which speaks of "something that can be conceived but can neither be seen nor made visible" (Lyotard, 1979, p. 78) represents the postbody perception of the Earth with respect to outer space. The Earth has always been accepted to have been a suspended celestial body, yet the observation of the planet suspended brings about the emergence of the overview effect, which in turn has been represented literally in *Orbital*. Further, this encounter with the unpresentability of the Earth brings a sublime experience, as defined by Lyotard to have been when the "imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept" (Lyotard, 1979, p. 78), where the concept of an Earth with terrestrial boundaries have been taken for granted, which is challenged by an aesthetic observation of the Earth from outer space, which is devoid of any such demarcations and have been instead aesthetically observed by the characters and represented in *Orbital* through the use of geographical markers as that of the continents, islands, rivers, deserts, etc. and the universal experiences of the human race (Lyotard, 1979, p. 78; Harvey, 2023, p. 83-91).

Therefore, Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* converts the overview effect from a simple cognitive and psychological phenomenon to a posthuman aesthetic experience, influencing the perception of observation of spacefaring humans. Through altered temporal experiences, non-terrestrial observation of the Earth, and embodied disorientation, the characters of *Orbital* experience a reconfigured perception that actively dismantles the demarcated anthropocentric aesthetic perception of the Earth in favour of a more relational, existentially aware, and posthuman aesthetic perception. The postbody registers this transformation in aesthetic perception somatically, grounding aesthetic experience in immanence of the Earth's unified observation rather than in bodily transcendence. Posthuman aesthetics thus

emerges as a mode of perception actively shaped by postbody experiences, dismantling the anthropocentric perception of aesthetic beauty or the sublime.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640545

Interweaving Ecohorror and Symbiotic Associations

The Posthuman Aesthetics of Sundarbans in Selected Works of Amitav Ghosh

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Sundarbans portray a world that is non-anthropocentrically hybridised with frequent human-wild engagements as part of daily survival. Amitav Ghosh aptly highlights the (multi-layered) dual character of Sundarbans, surfacing the perilous yet intimate bond between the human and the natural world, evoking ecological horror as well as awareness among the anthropocentric realm. The paper focuses on the islander's struggle to survive in the complexities of such landscapes in the backdrop of region's rich socio-cultural history as depicted in his ecological texts – *The Hungry Tide, Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama* that simultaneously overlap ecohorror with symbiotic interfaces. Using posthumanist ecohorror as a theoretical framework for study, the paper argues how Ghosh's illustrations of different environmental catastrophes and conflicts in the frame of region's cultural belief systems form a posthuman aesthetic that enables to live symbiotically despite oppressive political establishment and precarious circumstances. | *Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate, Ecohorror, Nature, Posthuman, Sundarbans*

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh has been one of the powerful voices in the domain of environmental writing in the past few decades. His recent nomination for the Nobel Literature Prize explicates his theoretical position in the international stage where his voice stands emblematic for decelerating environmental degradation influencing members lobbying for his award in speaking against the capitalist forces. Ghosh's argument that the climate crisis is not just political or economical but are entailed to a more nuanced routinely human actions stretching to spiritual and psychological forms echoes strongly in his writings. His focus on evoking environmental awareness by highlighting both the present ecological crisis as well as catastrophic imaginings through the mediums of fictional and non-fictional narratives

suggest ways to the posthuman consideration of interconnecting relationships between humans and the non-humans and the roles they play. Ghosh's use of multi-genres allows him to address the blind spots in mainstream literature by capturing it through different emotions that a single genre cannot fully contain. In prose, he uses the language of rationality to incorporate detailed and research-heavy narratives demonstrating intellectual intensity and evoking awareness, while his fictions blend historical facts with imagined stories to make complex historical events accessible and arrest the attention of the readers. The poem connects to a more emotive response, creating an immersive sensory experience using melodic lyrical style and vivid imagery. His multi-genre approach serves a more holistic understanding of human societies, reflecting on different intricacies, making him viable as a literary-writer critic and a climate activist.

Ghosh's 'climate' texts feature non-human forces such as rivers, animals, plants, and the landscape contributing a significant role in unravelling of the plot and sometimes act like protagonists influencing each other's lives. Likewise, Sundarbans has been a crucial focal point in many of his works – *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019) and *Jungle Nama* (2021) – to showcase this intermingling relationship between people, land, animals, water and various life forms surviving in a mutually conflicting yet cohabited environment. *The Hungry Tide* explores the complex relationship between human and the natural world by situating its characters in the Sundarbans and the challenges that this terrain presents.[1] Delving into the violent history of the region – the 1979 Marichjhapi incident as a powerful backdrop, the novel forays the crucial aspects of ecological degradation, exploitation of subaltern communities and cultural identity by switching to and fro between the past and the contemporary in showcasing the plight of the refugees in midst of environmental horrors. *Gun Island* is a sequel to *The Hungry Tide* that employs the folktale of Manasa Devi in connecting threads with present-day planetary changes with predatory capitalism. *Jungle Nama* is a graphic verse adaptation of an episode from the legend of Bon Bibi (a divine protector of the forest) whose tale illustrates the victory over excessive materialism through her clash with Dokkhin Rai (the lord of the tigers), implicating environmental balance, justice and coexistence. The expanse of time from the publication of *The Hungry Tide* in 2004 to his other two texts in 2019 and 2021 consecutively surrounding various issues focalising on Sundarbans explicate the accelerating pace of climatic breakdown that the terrain manifests. Ghosh shows how the Sundarbans enacting as a microcosm to the vulnerability of the Earth had inclined towards greater deterioration as a result of the capitalist-infested corporatisation raising significant ecological concerns. By coming back to the same milieu after a decade and further employing a storytelling verse technique of an ancient folktale through a language targeted to global readers, Ghosh seeks to raise environmental consciousness, emphasising on the traditional ecological wisdom to show how the crises are more evident than ever.

[1] For more information on Sundarbans see these websites: About Sundarbans (no date) and Sarkar (no date).

Sundarbans thus serve as a crucial context in these texts foregrounding the human impact on the fragile environment, symbolising the wider planetary ecosystem and addressing global climate issues by utilising a multispecies lens.

The paper attempts to delineate the dual character of the landscape as portrayed by Ghosh in his Sundarbans trilogy – *The Hungry Tide, Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama* by highlighting its ecological horrors and forms of symbiotic existence of different forms of life. It specifically focuses on the native's struggle to survive in the complexities of the land, underpinning sociopolitical power structures and simultaneously forging a close bond with nature as part of their lived experiences. Using posthumanist ecohorror as a theoretical framework for study, the paper argues how Ghosh's depictions of different environmental catastrophes and conflicts in the backdrop of the region's rich socio-cultural history amalgamates to form a posthuman aesthetic that conduces to live symbiotically despite perilous conditions.

2. The Tidal Labyrinth: Ecological Grief and the Fight for Survival

Sundarbans- the world's largest mangrove forest boasts of being home to vast biodiverse species of plants and animals and is known for the Royal Bengal Tiger whose haunting existence has led many writers to write about and create enthralling literatures surrounding its uncanny engagement with human souls and settlements. *Marginlands* (2023) by Arati Kumar Rao- a deep exploration of India's ecological borderlands- rivers, deltas, deserts, mangroves documents how climate impacts influence people's livelihoods. Through narrative immersion, photography and sketchers, Rao places the survival struggles of slowly vanishing and often unrepresented ecologically sensitive zones and marginalised communities at the centre of environmental understanding. *Marginlands* and *The Hungry Tide* connect through their ecocritical aesthetic to show how the environmental disruptions are intrinsically related to the questions of justice and human welfare, viewing ecology as both relational and political. In describing the fluid landscape of Sundarbans, Ghosh states that it has no constricted boundary and is "always mutating, always unpredictable [...] a forest that is a universe unto itself" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 7). Its dynamic environment owing to the effect of tide, flooding and cyclones makes it highly vulnerable for the meeting ground of human-nature interface. The precarious tide showcases this vulnerability of the biotic sphere with frequent cyclones in the area bringing about inundation, salt-water intrusion and the rising of the sea-level. As Nayar (2010, p. 98) points out, the land is always changing its state (sometimes land, sometimes water) and is unstable, evolving and open-ended with multiple originary flows. The terrain changes invariably offering for the multiple confluences of land with rivers, and humans with the non-human realm on a daily basis.

As an ecologically fragile forest, Sundarbans face escalating climatic threats and drives significant anxiety among its inhabitants. Ghosh's literary engagement with climate change anxiety or eco-anxiety takes different tropes

with the characters. In *The Hungry Tide*, he historicizes the environmental distress through the character of Kusum whose loss is mediated by political violence. She recalls how her family and others were evicted from Marichjhapi in the name of conservation "whole world has become a place of animals, and our crime [...] is trying to live as human beings from water and soil" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 262). Her anxiety emerges as rage and grief, experiencing a politicised climate anxiety intensified by institutional power as well as a feeling of permanent insecurity amidst environmentally volatile livelihood. Fokir, by contrast, embodies ecological belonging that "lives in him and... plays a part in making him the person he is" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 354), mitigating anxiety through familiarity and acceptance. His knowledge about Sundarbans is experiential, living in deep symbiosis with rivers, tides and animals but also well aware of its precarity. Through his death, Ghosh showcases the dark reality of ecology that even intimate belonging cannot protect subaltern lives from climate-driven violence. Climate anxiety for the vulnerable populations in an ecologically unstable and politically unequal world is a structural condition of life, functioning as an ontological exposure rather than individual psychological state.

Climate change anxiety is embodied in a more conscious and literary manner in *Gun Island* as a multi-layered condition, experienced differently by the characters yet rooted in a shared planetary disturbance. Piya, a marine biologist, who understands climate data and fears its intensity represents informed or knowledge-based eco-anxiety, remarking how changes have a "scientific explanation [...] and we'll see more of intersecting events in the future" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 284). She carries the burden of anticipatory foresight, knowing what is coming but lacking adequate means of intervention and power to prevent it. Ghosh uses Deen to dramatise how climate change unsettles modernity's rationality and control reflecting an anxiety of intellectual disorientation and a crisis of understanding, "an uncanny feeling that I too had lost myself in this dream [...] and become a part of it" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 208). Tipu, a young migrant from Sundarbans articulates the anxiety as a forced mobility of losing home and identity through slow unmaking of his place "both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans itself" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 49), signaling a collapse of ecological stability. He exhibits the signs of solastalgia – a feeling of distress and homesickness produced by environmental degradation while one continues to reside it (Albrecht, 2005, p. 48), transforming into an existential and corporeal anguish. As climate change has eroded their future possibility of livelihoods, migrants like him are compelled to displacement with quiet resignation. He confronts the loss of inherited land as irreversible, revealing how climate change is capable of producing (collective) homelessness, often disproportionately affecting the poor, eroding not only economies and ecosystems but also the emotional foundations of place and identity. The continuous shifting and precarity of the landscape provide for the conception of the geographies of terror where humans' vulnerability comes to the forefront due to the haunting of spaces by wild creatures, demons or ghosts (as recorded through the region's myths and mythologies) attuning with the community's daily livelihoods.

3. Fear, Horror and Violence: Scenes of Anthropocentric Ecohorror

The anxiety multiplies with the frequent human-wild conflict in the Sundarbans that have increased as the result of rapid extension of humanised landscape, challenging the human speciesism and causing fears in them. The tension between the human bodies and the violence of the creatures that inhabit the wild construe ecohorror in the anthropocentric realm. Ecohorror, as defined by Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles (2021, pp. 3–14) is a fear by and for nature reflecting the terraformed state of our planet that poses threat to the entire human existence caused by the humans themselves. The human fears about the natural world exemplifies in the "nature strikes back" narratives that evoke and explore this unsettling relationship of human anxieties with the wild and culminates to promote wider ecological crisis and awareness. Sundarbans becomes an important context where fear and ecohorror habitually functions with human bodily engagement emerging as a potential site for power discourse. The liminality of its peculiar geography reinforces the natureculture continuum (Haraway, 2016) with different dimensions of intermingling existence associated with religious and cultural beliefs, social and political marginalisation.

The Hungry Tide and *Gun Island* present manifold illustrations of interacting with less than positive ways of human-wild conflict. Frequent encounters with snakes and tigers (portrayed as mythological symbols) compose a crucial motif in Ghosh's texts to foreground climatic distress. As Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* stumble upon a snake- "a ropelike tendril wrapped itself around his ankles as though the earth had come alive" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 325); Tipu in *Gun Island* got bitten by a king cobra while trying to save Deen who was awestruck with its appearance "its tongue flickered as I looked into its shining black eyes, and I became aware of a growling sound (Ghosh, 2019, p. 77). In another instance Lubna describes how her brother got killed while they had to take shelter in a tree full of snakes hanging around the branches during a cyclone (Ghosh, 2019, p. 160). The author states how "every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 8) in the archipelago with landmass slowly declining by exacerbation of climate impacts. Timothy Morton (2007) argues how human relationship with nature cannot be always therapeutic or pleasurable as the Romantic writers, prevalent in Europe and America during the 19th century imagined it to be, advocating for a rethinking of nature with multifaceted dimensions. The unsettling and complex realities of existence involving death, decay and contamination arises from embracing the uncertainty of ecological entanglement that is often chaotic and unaesthetic. Through dark ecology, living in coexistence becomes crucial where humans are not seen as superior but as one entity among many, dissolving any form of binaries. Humans are intertwined with (dark) ecology and require it for sustenance but the opposite does not hold true (Horvath, 2024, p. 19).

The realisation of dark ecology manifests itself in the chapter *The Wave* of *The Hungry Tide* where Piya and Fokir were caught in a fierce gale on their small boat,

> A tidal wave sweeping in from the sea; everything in its path disappeared as it came thundering towards them […] the water raged around them, circling furiously, pulling at their bodies as if it were trying to dismember them […] Rain felt more like pellets […] The colour of the sky was even darker and the lashing rain had churned the earth into mud […] the island was entirely submerged with few thickets of trees visible above water. (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 383–388)

Despite fighting desperately against the storm by clinging to each other for survival, the intensity of the wave destroyed everything that came its way (Fokir eventually losing his life in trying to protect Piya). The gale signifies the untamed power of nature in the Sundarbans and its refusal to be controlled or categorized by humans. Moyna in *Gun Island* recounts how the cyclone Aila in 2009 had long-term devastating effects on the land sweeping away miles of embankment making the once fertile land uncultivable because of salt water intrusion (Ghosh, 2019, p. 48). Natural calamities remind human species as entangled with ecological meshworks inseparable from material world where nature is around as well as within us (Bigelow, 2023, pp. 18–19). The entangled meshwork of humans with the natural world challenge the traditional view of humans as outside or superior of the plant and the animal kingdom that gave a ground for exploiting it at will, disregarding both their positive and negative engagements in shaping the planet exclusive of human intrusion.

The changing terrain of Sundarbans is both natural and man-made. Although frequent storms and cyclones modify the landscape every year causing natives to displace from their dwellings, man-induced environmental alterations have led to increased vulnerability in climate change and degrading the forest's ecosystem. The wildlife is converted into a resource for generating profit- the tourism industry and the prawn farming of Sundarbans have been economically beneficial for the government as well as the people but the overconsumption have been adversely affecting the ecosystem drastically. "Nylon nets used to catch prawns are so fine that they catch the eggs of other fish as well […] banning of nets was impossible because there's a lot of money in prawns and the traders had paid off the politicians" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 134). Additionally, prawn farming causes deforestation as large parts of mangrove forests are required to be cleared off to create ponds for its cultivation. This destabilises coastal zones and induces soil erosion, water pollution, salinization and disease outbreak often displacing the local communities from their traditional livelihood of agriculture. The consequences are not immediate but contribute a significant part in enacting a slow violence (Nixon, 2011) of delayed destruction of land and its people. The functioning of capitalism entwinning with the ecohorror of what has been done to Earth suffices an important way to understand ecological crisis and broader planetary terraforming (Wallin and Sandlin, 2024, pp. 93-94). Ghosh criticises the incentivising of exploitative practices that upset the balance of the natural cycle. This denotes the human corporate instinct seeking to control nature for the fear of uncertainty, reiterating the duality of dependence and conflict in a fragile ecozone. The laws of nature are often not obeyed by the landscape,

indifferent to anthropocentric interventions and therefore steady community-based adaptation efforts help locals to cope with its multifarious hostility.

3.1. The Politics of Wildlife Preservation: Exploring the Human-Animal Relation

The human-tiger ecohorror takes a centre stage in *The Hungry Tide* where Ghosh subsequently highlights how human lives in the Sundarbans have been systematically devalued and disregarded in favour of conserving endangered tigers, underpinning the politicisation of socially marginalised outcasts. The violent history begins with the migration of lower castes East Bengal refugees to the Marichjhapi island of Sundarbans in 1979. In *Blood Island* (2019), Deep Halder describes how people were betrayed by the then Left Front government who promised them shelter but brutally exterminated them once it came to power. Halder documents the story through his interviews with survivors and asserts it as one of the worst massacres of post-Independent India claiming lives of ten thousand and above through rape and murder. Their ostracisation for being outsiders as well as belonging to the inferior caste solidifies the narrative of nature preservation where any horrific action done against them is legally justified and excused. The experience of environmental racism through violent histories of social discrimination and inequitable access to resources link to the "environmentalism of the poor", fighting for basic rights where the environment is a chief source of livelihood and an inseparable part of their continuing survival (Martinez-Alier et al., 2017, pp. 202–203). Stern practices to save tigers in the pretext of nature conservation while neglecting the basic facilities and well-being for the migrants poses an existential question of belongingness of home/lands for (non)human inhabitants.

> Kusum: Island has to be saved for its trees, animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world [...] I wondered who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 261–262)

Ghosh portrays many such carnal visualisations that displays horrifying but essential part of human survival in the land. Kusum's father was lethally attacked by the tiger- "his bones cracking as the animal swiped a paw across his neck, dragging the corpse into the forest" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 109) when he went to catch fish on the shore of a narrow creek. The episode of setting the tiger on fire because it entered the human settlement killing two people; with locals enjoying the spectacle and Piya trying to vehemently stop them risking her own life exemplifies the difference of perspectives of locals (insider) versus the foreigner (outsider). The locals in injuring the tiger, making it incapacitated and seeing it burn undergo a sense of purgation from their daily trauma of uncertain deaths caused by tigers whereas Piya being a nature enthusiast looks at it as a grave crime committed against the voiceless. The surge in the disturbing encounters with the man-eating tigers of Sundarbans that kill over a hundred people every year not only amplifies horror and detest in the heart of natives but also lead to an increase

in the number of 'tiger widows'– a category of marginalised women who are blamed for their husbands' deaths and are wholly excluded from society. Ghosh rather than probing into the conditions of the widows often living in penury, diverts his attention to the broader repercussions of ecological degeneration and crisis precipitated through human interventions and actuated by greed. The ecohorror becomes political not only by exploring the destructive impacts of ecological crisis but also through scrutinising the limits of (human) ethical and moral structures, engaging speculatively with the environment (Doane, 2020. pp. 47–49).

> Kanai: If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers as these people are too poor to matter [...] Isn't that a horror too – that we feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings? (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 300–301)

In *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), Imbolo Mbue explores the devastating impact of an American oil company set up in the fictional African village of Kosawa critiquing the unchecked global capitalism and corporate greed. The novel highlights the corrupting influence of the oil company Pexton that for decades have contaminated the land and also speaks about the failures of villagers' long acts of resistance and fight for environmental justice. Initially evoked as a fertile, self-sustaining village, Kosawa is gradually transformed by oil extraction into a space of toxic ruin – polluted land, poisoned water, dead children, and bleak futures. Through the conflict, the writer explicates the power struggles and the ongoing impact of neocolonialism where external structures, backed by governmental collusion overlook human and ecological welfare and inflict injustice. The fictional village functions as an allegorical collective, enabling Mbue to politically safeguard against backlash and transform singular tragedy into a global indictment of systemic petro-capitalism. Like Ghosh's imagined Sundarban villages inflicted by neocolonial influence, Kosawa becomes a symbolic ecology where environmental ruin exposes deeper histories of colonialism, resistance and moral choice. Ghosh brings to the surface the neo-colonial outcome and the problematic dualism of brotherhood-enmity of man-tiger conflict in *The Hungry Tide*, making it analogous to its characters who are either rooted to their socio-cultural milieu (Kusum, Fokir, Moyna), or is deviated/ unable to comprehend the complexities of the land (Piya) and those who try to bridge this 'nature-culture' gap (Nirmal, Nilima, Kanai), highlighting the agonies of people inhabiting the land and turning survival into a site of political struggle. However, the natives in the novel have not been accorded proper voice to articulate their hardships. The characters – Kusum and Moyna have concise dialogues or speeches to express with Fokir being almost silent. The major part of the novel is conveyed through the diary entries of Nirmal and conversations between Kanai, Piya and Nilima who sometimes also speak on their behalf. This conscious silencing of the natives by the writer speaks of the absence of the reality of caste anomaly while also underscoring the difficulty that seems to imply that although subalterns can have a powerful presence in the plot, they are almost always incapable of triggering a transformation

or fostering a radical reform in society. Parallel to this aspect is the human-tiger power dynamics functioning in the territory according greater force to the animal due to socio-political structures making the natives doubly subdued and silent. The effect of this conflict awakens a political consciousness among the readers, oscillating between empathy and discomfort that prevents easy moral closure. The readers find themselves in a state of moral unease in which neither the killing of humans or tigers is ethically justifiable, thus creating a space of undecidability.

The politicisation of nature preservation through the instrumentalisation of tiger creates a double dispossession of the islanders by restricting their access to land resources and state participation. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh defends the marginalised position of the islanders who grapple with the menace of man-eating tigers, critiquing the rules and laws created for animal welfare and social exclusion. However, in *Jungle Nama* there is a shift of perspective from nature as a potential threat to an interconnected equilibrium that requires to be restored against the destructive consequences of human greed. He picturises the tiger as an uncontrollable and fatal force (*The Hungry Tide*) juxtaposing with the symbol of artistic energy (*Jungle Nama*) showing how human-animal conflict are different expressions of same life in the planetary existence. The increased capitalist activities functioning in the region made visible through the exacerbating effects of climate change had allowed Ghosh to prismatically view different aspects of the same problem through the years where greed acts as a primary driver for human interference with the natural cycle that he feels should be curtailed. The break-even point of his activist thinking develops through the dynamic changes taking place in the Earth with continuous failures of climate summits and policies in the age of Capitalocene where every effort to rehabilitate the climate is being fuelled by the profit motive Western structures of governance. By reconciling materialism and ecology (eco-materialism) in the texts, Ghosh presents Sundarbans as a space where ecological, social and economic struggles are inseparable, vocalising for the survival of both ecosystem and the marginalised communities by advocating vernacular environmentalism in strengthening ecobalance and local resilience against ecohorrors.

4. The Other side of the Ecohorror: Social Mythos and the Symbiotic Associations

The carnal geography of Sundarbans being dangerous, uncanny and mystical, overlaps negative emotions of the geographies of terror with positive responses with the nonhuman realm. In *The Hungry Tide*, Piya recalls how crabs continuously help in cleaning the debris of the mangrove left behind by the tide

> The crabs form a fantastically large proportion of the system's biomass and constitute the keystone species of the entire ecosystem. And, as lifeforms that keep the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris [...] they enable further life. (Ghosh, 2004, p. 142)

The bioluminescent event in *Gun Island* with dolphins revolving around the boat presents a mystical atmosphere highlighting nature's unpredictable yet aesthetically animated process, and representing the mysterious connection between all forms of life through a natural phenomenon.

The mangrove forest is the quintessential life survivor for its inhabitants and the earth at large forming a natural barrier to storm surges and erosion. Its dense root systems store huge amounts of atmospheric carbon dioxide, reducing greenhouse gases and building strong resilience against climate impacts. For the inhabitants too, the forest is the site for sharing and brotherhood in contrast to the land that is politically hierarchical. As Jalais contends, the forest equalises and levels people of different religious sects and between animals whereas the precepts of the land segregates the deprived (Jalais, 2010, pp. 29–37). The rivers too symbolise man's complicated, dualist relationship with nature. The rivers divide the human realm from the animal but also acts as a pathway in shaping the terrain by erasing the borders of land and sea and distinctions between humans and nature. Many rivers converging with the sea providing for a biodiverse ecosystem represent the inseparability of humans with the natural environment with the flow of the tide resonating to the constant fluidity and transition of the landscape, challenging fixed boundaries of land and identity. The entire landscape echoes strength and vulnerability, spiritual sustenance and its adaptability for constant change.

Mythology weaves a strong hold into the socio-cultural fabric of Sundarbans that inculcates an environmental ethos and a guidance for living in harmony among the communities. Snakes and Tigers are important metaphors employed by Ghosh to imbricate the mythological symbols and its connection with human and more-than-human world by associating with the region's socio-cultural history. Goddess Manasa Devi and Bon Bibi are idolised in the form of snakes and tigers respectively that are widely found in the land and are worshipped to appease and protect the islanders from their attack. Bon Bibi- the reigning spirit of the mangroves symbolises this intermingling of the swamp and the forest brought about by the human intervention who is recognised by all the inhabitants acquiring this space (Chatterjee Sarkar, 2017, p. 52).

> They drew a line, to mark a just separation,
> between the forest, and the realm of the human.
> To Dokkhin Rai was given the jungles of the south,
> where land and water mingle, at the river' mouth.
> No human would come there, nor could he go outside
> […]
> Thus did Bon Bibi create a dispensation,
> that brought peace to the beings of the Sundarban;
> every creature had a place, every want was met.
> (Ghosh, 2021, p. 6)

Through *Jungle Nama*, Ghosh allegorises the folktale to politically translate the myth into graspable narrative form, familiarising the readers with its seriousness of intent in a simple yet symbolic diction. The poetic language and

use of specific meter (*dwipodi poyar*)[2] harmonise with the sensory perception of the readers in connecting to a more memorable exercise of folktale reality, that counter western structures of linguistic representations and legitimise subaltern epistemologies often excluded from climate discourse. The syncretic figure of Bon Bibi reflects in the syncretism of the land and cultural ideals that integrate different sects of people while also unifying the human and the nonhuman realm in a hybrid polyphonic space. Mythology reflects the characteristics of specific cultures, codifying the norms and values, and acting as a substructure for framing a narrative basis of religious traditions to bind communities together. The mythical tradition surrounding Bon Bibi worship is honed by rituals to appease the fierceness of tigers while also helping in inculcating a sense of psychological trust and confidence among natives to share the same space with animals backed by an ecological and moral code of respecting nature and resisting greed.

Further, the influence of myth in the lived theological terrain can be elucidated by placing the works in dialogue with Mircea Eliade's mythic structure that strengthens the posthuman existence in the locale. Eliade's (1957) distinction between the sacred and the profane of the reality to understand human's approach to their socio-cultural traditions emphasizes myth's ritual repetition as an ontological universalism. Sundarbans, functioning as a sacred ecology amplifies this divide by strictly delineating this demarcation via mythological beliefs. The belief endorses to sacredly hierophanize tigers and snakes associated with the myths of Bon Bibi and Bonduki Sadagar to manifest the experience of the numinous (divine) and enact a transcendent referent to the primordial settlement. The sacred history act as a repository of ecological memory for the collective unconscious to make sense of their more profane (historical, chaotic) mundane existence. Myth and ritual allow access to sacred time enabling them to periodically escape the anxiety of history and vulnerable condition. For locals, this divide is essential to comprehend the differences between the human and the non-human realm and be wary of any potential interferences that might cause harm, yet the sacred spaces are no longer insulated from the profane. Ghosh asserts how the sacred sites are invaded by profane forces such as capitalism and climate change, acquiring a quasi-sacred power and describing how suffering, displacement and climate catastrophe cannot be ritually erased. He goes beyond Eliade's protective metaphysical dualism in highlighting the redistribution of sacredness across humans, animals, rivers and forests. The character of Deen Dutta from *Gun Island* is archetypal to Eliade's 'homo religiosus', an initial sceptical academic who unconsciously encounters sacred patterns and repeated reappearance of the myth through climate-induced mishaps across different geographies that eventually make him discover meaning and orientation in the chaotic world, connecting profane to the scared. Deen embodies a modern form of homo religiosus, acknowledging mythic meaning within the shared precarity of the Anthropocene, whose experiences perceive the world as alive

[2] *Dwipodi poyar* is a traditional Bengali verse meter, consisting of a couplet where each line typically has 12 syllables (24 syllables in total) and is commonly found in epic poetry and folk tales.

and responsive. The myths are not merely folklores but serve as narratives which organize communal and ethical behaviour. The texts help explain how myth, sacred space and time continue to shape human experience, even within modern and globalized contexts when analysed through the mythological concepts.

The myths and regional folktales embody a cultural discourse of engaging human cognition with its local landscapes and offer new ways of understanding and communicating with animals or other species (Dufourcq, 2022, p. 4). The human bodily engagement with the natural environment enables a transcorporeal, hybridised socio-material landscapes, interspersed with continuous metamorphosis with other corporealities signifies the aesthetic subtlety of networked being and reciprocity in which human lives are immersed (Alaimo, 2010; Strati, 2025). The duality of human existence in Sundarbans is the interplaying of fear and dependence in the face of the helplessness of tiger's energy living in their natural mangrove habitat who had to be appeased to prevent attacks arising from habitat decline and climate change. This co-existence of sharing lives becomes natural through the adjustment mechanism of the natives developing spiritual defence for protection from the wild as well as dwelling in dependency for sustenance.

4.1. The Relational Canny: Aesthetic Sensing in a Posthuman Landscape

The folktales portray a world that is non- humancentric, allowing for the articulation of myriad voices and perspectives and suffices as an alternative way of decolonising hegemonic modern narratives. Folktales therefore emerge as a powerful medium challenging colonial-capitalist requisitions and instead strives for multispecies encounters, entanglements and its embracement. The syncretic tradition of Sundarbans creates a form of posthuman aesthetics in imagining the goddess – Bon Bibi and Manasa Devi as hybrids reigning the wild. The anthropomorphism of goddess is a common practice in India. The story of Bon Bibi suggests that she is intrinsically connected to the non-human realm. Her mother is a deer and she adopts Dokkhin Rai as her son after defeating him. In the island, she is sometimes dressed like a goddess or a Sufi saint. Whereas Dokkhin Rai also takes many forms, he is a tiger-demon for some people and at other times a saviour of his devotees from the man-eating tigers. In the susceptible landscape of Sundarbans, the tiger is at the centre of discourse while the delta and the forest are enmeshed with the lives of the people who are bound together through religious traditions (Biswas, 2020). The human-animal liminality of the deities belonging to the more-than-human worlds instantiates a posthuman extant. Bon Bibi is sometimes sketched as half-human and half-tiger hybrid worshipped in a space that in itself is interspersed with land and water confluence. She organically harmonises to the geographical and anthropological terrain representing the liminality of Sundarbans and the (Dalit) people residing in it. Manasa encompasses an ambivalent character of human-snake hybrid around whose myth and culture draws a fluid border between divine beings, humans and witches capable of communicating to both the worlds (the underworld and the heaven or the human and the nonhuman). "She was a 'voice-carrier' between

two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression" (Ghosh, 2019, pp. 152–153).

The deities synchronise with the cosmologies of human-nonhuman realms in delineating the intertwined macrocosm that people populate. Storytelling of mythologies provide archetypes of human condition and are integral to cultural cohesion and sensitivity to more-than-human world. The tales of Bon Bibi and Manasa as used in the texts of Amitav Ghosh convey the vulnerability of Bengal by capturing the reality of today's environmental picture, showcasing how mythology can be strategically devised in the Anthropocene to reimage post/anti-anthropocentric notions and discourse where non-human forces are focused upon. This entails the posthuman aesthetics and praxis of enacting socio-cultural beliefs in a vulnerable terrain where myths and folktales form an essential part of everyday existence, while also inferring to the problems of sympoiesis and symbiosis of shared living with the wild. Sympoiesis meaning 'making-with' highlights co-creation through continuous interactions between multi-species organisms. The natives' reliance on a shared system involving forest and rivers, adapting to the dynamic mangrove ecosystem with varied conflicts and challenges is a fundamental aspect of sympoietic living in the Sundarbans that defines their existence.

The connecting link between the ecohorror and the sympoietic living are the socio-cultural beliefs and practices of the region that facilitate living in a mutually cohabited space acquired and shared by different beings despite frightening ordeals. The Bengal tigers are an exemplification of the continuous tussle between man and nature that although unleash tremendous fear and violence among the inhabitants yet are revered and worshipped as a protector of the forest and people from the tigers itself. The belief system centred around Bon Bibi representing a syncretic tradition fosters a spiritual framework for social cohesion and psychological resilience to adapt with varied life forms reinforcing collective identity. The native's cultural traditions empower them to live amidst myriad forms of ecohorrors encircling the mangrove and are intricately tied to their essential livelihoods of fishing, agriculture and honey collection.

Posthuman ecohorror redefines aesthetic itself that places at stake the very conditions through which art is perceived from representing nature to enacting ecological entanglement, unsettling classical aesthetics of beauty and sublimity. The conventional forms fracture into hybrid or disintegrative structures to mirror ecological systems invasive of multisensory immersion. Across these texts, Ghosh develops a posthuman aesthetic that decisively foregrounds nature not as a scenic object but an agentic force shaping perception, ethics and narrative. The posthuman ecological aesthetics make a radical shift from human-centred notion of beauty and pleasure towards a relational ontological reality of ugliness, uncanniness, and fragmentation. The Sundarbans exemplifies this wild aesthetics that undoes the perception

of human supremacy and exposes affective entanglement, vulnerability and interdependence. The ecohorror in posthuman aesthetics engages with this sensorial experience by replacing anthropocentric values with multispecies voices entailing fear, uncertainty and decay as core aesthetic principles. The form and language itself become variable and in a state of flux with non-linear plots illustrating uncanny disruptions produced by climate change that defies rational explanation. Ghosh's narrative strategies of employing potent non-human rhythms such as depicting shrieking tidal surges (*The Hungry Tide*), dispersed geography mirroring climate chaos (*Gun Island*) and anthropomorphizing a folk epic (*Jungle Nama*) reveals the collapse of human-centred discourse, authority and structures in response to ideal grand narratives.

The sensory experience in posthuman ecohorror context emerges from an immersive attunement to a more-than-human world, where non/human bodies are ambushed by ecological vulnerability in an unstable terrain. The mangroves distorting geographical and anthropological boundaries, the picturesque detailing of climate events and the portrayal of recurring human-animal conflict extrudes affective disturbance among the characters as well as the readers feeling aesthetically shocked and unsettled. The characters in this liminal space experience the horror as habit where fear is normalised into routine life and is perceived not as shock but as lived aesthetic atmosphere. The local inhabitants like Kusum and Fokir acknowledge storms, tides and tigers as co-inhabitants, not 'monsters', regarding dangers as continuous process. Fokir's death is figurative of ecological repetition in which loss and grief are elemental and expected, rather than exceptional. For outsiders like Piya and Deen, the tide country is the locus of rationalism and scientific measurement, until the ecohorror gradually enters as uncanny and losing epistemic control. The natural calamities feel 'story-like' and beyond reason, language fails, myth becomes materially real and sensory and bodily perceptions turn vulnerable to the occurrences. In *Jungle Nama*, the ecohorror is integrated into moral order and transformed as a mythical aesthetic governed by ritual fear and restraint.

> The tideland forest is a realm of great danger,
> few men know it well, it's no place for a stranger.
> The mangroves are home to predators of every kind,
> some you'll never see, but they will enter your mind.
> (Ghosh, 2021, p. 20)

The posthuman ecohorror in Ghosh's texts is not spectacular terror but evolves as an aesthetic condition (convergent with somatic, phenomenological as well as ethical aesthetics) of unsettled perception of everyday attunement, revealing a world in which humans are not central but embedded within more-than-human forces of relationality.

5. Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh by situating his characters in a local context like Sundarbans shows how the catastrophe as painted in his texts can have an impact on a global scale. The ecohorror espoused by Sundarbans dismantles

humancentric views by depicting terrifying scenarios of manipulation of natural environment mediated by humans themselves that explores potential for new forms of survival. The delta is symptomatic of capitalist aggression which produces wealth through the exploitation of its natural resources, interfering significantly with the natural process through deepening of humanized landscapes exacerbating climate change impacts. Ecohorror thus becomes a posthuman narrative in visualising frightening aspects of anthropocentric consequences and in breaking down of hierarchies towards more hybridised entanglement.

The posthuman aesthetics embraces hybridised, non-human mediated forms of systems and finds beauty in the ongoing processes of change. It deviates from the traditional notions of beauty and acknowledges the wild which does not bind or control. An aesthetically wild landscape like Sundarbans that coalesces to both beauty and peril, affection and enmity, birth and death, creation and destruction are interspersed with multiple nuances of hybridisation and ambiguity, often moving beyond the human limits of sensorial perceptions. Posthuman aesthetics explored through ecohorror as well as sympoietic relationships in the Sundarbans celebrates the gradual collapse of human-centred frameworks while finding beauty in the interaction between humanity and animality (Mendieta, 2024) for possibilities of non-anthropocentric creativity.

Although Ghosh precisely brings forth the underlying intricacies of the islanders' everyday struggles with wild creatures in a hostile landscape that worsens due to political neglect of the authorities, he failed to expiate or challenge this wide gap of socio-cultural fissures that involve oppression. He portrayed the islanders as either illiterate but well informed about their surroundings (Kanai) or educated but powerless to bring substantial change (Moyna), making them impassive to the deteriorating conditions of their livelihoods. In *Gun Island*, however, Ghosh moves beyond to introduce the literary style of magical realism overlooking the ground reality of violence and exploitation although presenting harsh instances of migration and human rights violation (through the characters of Tipu and Rafi) that youths are subjected to in search of employment and better life. The perpetual struggle driven by the existential threats of climate change amplify competition for diminishing resources and puts humans and animals in direct combat for survival thereby questioning the belonging of the land where nature acts as an active impetus overpowering human agency. The practical concerns that Ghosh highlights in his imagined world are exigently rooted into contemporary reality. Although his texts conclude with unresolved futures with larger societal questions often remaining open and alarming, there is a note of optimistic plea for humanity's collective ingenuity in repairing the planet which he loves. In this study of the posthuman aesthetics of living in such ethereal space among heterogeneous entities, Ghosh ushers in the notion of a precarious balance between fear and cohabitation working simultaneously through the lived experiences of the inhabitants. The human-nonhuman entanglement that he gravely focuses upon in his climate texts

sought connection with the posthuman extant of redefining this relationality and sharing of multispecies ecosystems in a wider planetary crisis that sometimes are visibly violent and others mostly imperceptible.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640577

Aesthetic Frames

Jacques Derrida and Gardener's Cultivation of Hostility

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The paper focuses on the aesthetic frames of gardening. I propose understanding plant cultivation as an aesthetic framing of divided hospitality and hostility. Following Derrida's critical reading of Kant's thoughts on beautiful frames and Austin's thoughts on performative fails, I argue that the gardener's performativity delimits the beautiful and cultivated order of his garden from the wild and chaotic 'outside' he cannot govern. Progressively, by resisting the 'outside' through inner rituals of framing, the gardener encloses himself 'inside' his locally performed order of cultivation. Based on my deconstructive revision of gardening genres, I conclude that environmentally engaged aesthetics might overcome the traditional gardener's cultivation of hostility towards otherness. | *Keywords: Frame, Gardening, Cultivation, Immanuel Kant, Beauty, Jacques Derrida, Sovereignty, John L. Austin, Performativity*

1. Introduction: Gardener's Sovereignty

My work aims at reframing the problem of aesthetic appreciation of interspecies cohabitation from a human-focused to an environmental perspective, encompassing not only human but also non-human lives. This perspective questions the traditional role of a gardener as a supreme placeholder who takes and holds the space for himself and for members of his human race. Traditionally, the garden is seen as "a paradigm of human relations with nature. As an activity and a result of this activity, it is the foundational and even the founding moment of human culture" (Dadejík, 2012, p. 148). To challenge this view of human-focused management of the natural environment, I propose to rethink the transformative potential of human hands in the double sense of careful touching and calculated manipulation with other living beings.

For this purpose, I suggest revising Jacques Derrida's thoughts on Austin's performatives. Compared to Austin's work on the performativity of

language, Derrida focuses on the performative aspects of our existential traces and their dissemination in our attempts to repeat them. Repetition of these traces in the process of assembling and cultivating plants in gardens can be seen in the interval from the 'wild', untouched, feral nature to the 'cultivated', correctly assembled garden, adjusted to human needs. To illustrate this problem, in *The Best and the Sovereign II* (2011), Jacques Derrida reflects on what cultivated people and wild 'beasts' have in common. To demonstrate how modern philosophers have been widening the distance between the wise, cultivated man and the stupid, wild beast, Derrida reminds us of Robinson Crusoe, the castaway. Derrida notes that Robinson persuaded himself that he is kind to the island he has made 'his own' through cultivation. Therefore, he thinks, he is not only all-powerful, but also all-merciful. The civilisation's castaway became nature's messiah. By imposing his embellishing order of cultivation, Robinson brings beauty, wisdom, and welfare into the natural world, which he sees as lacking grace, logic, and morals. In his subversive commentary, however, Derrida shows that no non-human being is capable of 'stupidity', just like it is unable to commit a 'bestial' crime of intentional cruelty, brutality, or perversion. These are the very qualities of humankind, in the name of which Robinson manipulates nature on the island.

In the following pages, I will examine this gardener's aesthetico-moral problem from the perspective of Derrida's deconstruction. Does Western metaphysics necessarily turn us into sovereign Robinsons, as Derrida suggests? To answer this question, I will focus on the framing of gardening-related aesthetic performatives. Let us have a closer look at this problem by examining how human-centred gardeners frame their hostility towards weeds, pests, and other non-human 'intruders'.

2. Gardener's War on Weeds: Framing the Cultivation

By separating the wild from the cultivated, the gardener delimits the garden from the "outside" that he cannot control and govern. By resisting the 'outside' through inner rituals, the gardener progressively encloses himself 'inside' a locally performed order of selection and stylisation, which can be defined as framing.

Kant discusses the problem of frame in his *Critique of Judgement* (1987), where he claims that the role of the *parergon* (work's frame) is to ornament an already complete *ergon* (genuine work). He describes the frame as a *parergon*, a supplement to the work, *ergon*. He writes that the work ought to allow itself to be well-centred and framed, to have its ground delimited with a frame against a general background. His aesthetic judgement pertains to the intrinsic beauty of the work's core, not its mere surrounding ornamentation, *parergon*. In Kant, the embellished frame is an unnecessary excess of the genuine beauty:

> Even what we call *ornaments* (*parerga*), i.e., what does not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but is only an extrinsic addition, does indeed increase our taste's liking, and yet it too does so only by its form, as in the case of picture frames, or drapery on statues. or colonnades around magnificent buildings. On the other hand, if the ornament itself does

> not consist in beautiful form but is merely attached, as a gold frame is to a painting, so that its charm may commend the painting for our approval, then it impairs genuine beauty and is called *finery*. (Kant, 1987, p. 57)

In *Truth in Painting* (1987), Derrida's reading of this Kant's book leads him to observe that the frame is not a mere superficial addition to a work of art. The frame is necessary and primary to the work because it allows us to focus, engage in selective attention, and appreciate what is framed. Framing clearly delimits the cultivated insider, the friend, from the excessive outsider, the enemy. Derrida notes that although Kant himself claims the parergon's role is to separate the inside of the work from its outside, in Kant's own description of the artistic work, the parergon remains on an uncertain margin between the work's supposed core and its surroundings. As Derrida puts it:

> Hence, one must know what is framed and know what one is excluding as frame and outside-the-frame. We are thus already at the unlocatable center of the problem. And then Kant replies to our question "What is a frame?" by saying: it's a *parergon*, a hybrid of outside and inside, but a hybrid which is not a mixture or a half-measure, an outside which is called to the inside of the inside in order to constitute it as an inside. (Derrida, 1987, p. 63)

In other words, Derrida's parergon holds its excessive truth when it imposes the experience of 'beautiful' by framing what is supposed to be admired. It invites us to appreciate the delimited, focused, 'given' beauty of art. Without this framework, there would be no 'art' to enjoy. In Derrida, such is the 'truth' of painting that its frame gives us. Deconstruction makes the *parergon* no longer a redundant decoration but a borderline that shapes the work itself.

Similarly, in her book *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (2009), Judith Butler focuses on the Western framing of the figure of 'enemy'. She notes that, in a war conflict, political authorities decide that our compassion should not concern people designated as our 'enemies'. As she puts it, "War sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others" (Butler, 2009, p. 51–52). Once political authorities designate someone as the radical 'other', his life becomes precarious and cannot be grieved about. Suspecting the proliferation of uncensored images might mobilise political opposition to a war, the state in war imposes war censorship to control public compassion through limited visibility. State censorship controls publicly circulating recordings to prevent unwanted grief by framing the representation of 'us' and 'them', the 'good' and the 'bad'. The work of framing determines which loss of life remains unrepresentable, unmemorable, and not grievable.

In the case of gardening, the framing proceeds in the same labelling sense of territorial delimitation. Framing in gardening distinguishes insiders from outsiders; it separates those who are cared for from those who are mercilessly eliminated. To frame their territorial war, gardeners use hostile concepts to address the strangeness of non-human beings who enter the garden uninvited. Gardeners treat self-sown weeds as invasive plants as intruders or enemies

because they see them as outsiders to their own framing order. As they feel no compassion for them, they do not hesitate to root them out or destroy them with toxic chemicals. Without any grief or remorse, the results of their gardening work are presented as a victory over ugliness, gracelessness, and chaos.

To frame their territorial peace, gardeners use supportive vocabulary that often addresses their cultivation of chosen plants and animals with hospitality, responsibility, and care. They tend to protect them against mould, bugs, and predators that may 'harm' them. They might also feel compassion if their cultivated non-human beings get sick or die. The result of their gardening work is treated as beautiful, harmonious, and ordered. Because every cultivation tends to delimit itself against its opposite, it encourages one thing and represses another. These binary oppositions are territorial and necessary for the repetitive cultivation process, which follows a previously chosen gardening genre.

Derrida discusses the problem of genre in his essay *Law of Genre* (Derrida, 1980, p. 56), where he describes genre as a generator of normative stylisation, prescribed by the given law of genre. Although the particular law of genre can be set differently each time, once constructed, the law of genre keeps the genre 'pure' through the ongoing repetition of the same pattern. Because the law of genre is imposed and calculable, it can be enforced; its external limits and internal norms are guarded. If mixed, the genre loses its distinctive normative meaning, which consists primarily of the constructed difference from other genres and their prescribed norms.

Just like any other genre, established gardening styles regulate the stylisation that organises the garden's environment; they prescribe the formal limits by which a gardener must proceed in his acts of hospitality and hostility, and how those align with his appreciation of the natural environment. Therefore, the same natural space might be transformed into a French park or a Japanese garden, each time through a different selection of who is invited to come, who is allowed to stay, and who will be expelled. Some plants must be planted, and some others must be regularly rooted out. It is both the inner rule of identity and the outside threat of difference that make a gardening style recognisable – what is aesthetically appreciated or loved in one gardening style might also be hated in another.

Let us look at the differences between the highly controlling stylisations of a French park and a Japanese garden to demonstrate Derrida's claim on genres. The French gardening genre, *jardin à la française*, is a highly decorative style of gardening that reached its height at the Gardens of Versailles. Inspired by the principles of architecture, mathematics and baroque ornamentation, this formal style of landscape design is characterised by strict symmetry and rigorous geometric structure. Key features include symmetrical alleys and straight paths lined with elaborately cut hedges that direct the eye to focal points such as fountains or ponds. Another key element of this gardening genre is the creation of '*parterres*', understood as complex formal flower beds

composed in ornamental patterns, often surrounded by boxwood borders, reminiscent of textile embroidery, and 'topiaries', defined as shrubs pruned into geometric or figurative shapes, illustrating human control over nature (Les Jardins à la Française, 2024). By contrast, the genre of Japanese gardening is a convergence of architecture, meditation, and the environment that promotes a contemplative, spiritual life. The garden's interior is peaceful, unhurried, and harmonious - often referred to as a sanctuary. It is framed by a threshold, a gate, and a fence that emphasise the experience of a 'purifying sensation' as the visitor steps from one contrasting environment into another. To creatively balance the mass and the void, several isolated objects, such as large rocks and pruned bushes, are placed in the central area, surrounded by 'flowing' lines of sand or smaller stones that fill and connect empty spaces (Sturgeon, 2023). Both of these gardening genres are highly controlling of the 'natural' space they design.

Derrida also reminds us that, according to the law of genre, genres must not intermix. As he explains in *Law of Genre* (1980), the authority of every genre rests on its distinction from other genres, a distinction that is supposed to be cultivated. Because the need for the requested external distinction delimits the genre, its value is constituted by the law of normative prescription and prohibition. As soon as the word 'genre' is sounded, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind. In other words, cultivation generates an aesthetic truth, which results from the repetition of a chosen law of genre. Cultural rituals, which impose a stylized beauty through such repetition, also impose an aesthetic frame that makes us appreciate the prescribed 'beauty' of a genre we already know.

Stibral, Dadejík, and Staněk (2012, p. 9) illustrate this interdiction against intermixing genres through the example of gardening. As they put it in their book *Zahrada* [Garden] (2012), a garden should not be agriculturally useful and aesthetically pleasant at the same time:

> Humphry Repton considered that 'profit' and 'ornament' are incompatible and that the so-called *ferme ornée* as a combination of a farm and a park is impossible. Other authors, such as Thomas Whately, considered the separation of useful and embellishing functions to be the origin of „bad taste" in gardening, because it led to geometrized gardens and their excessive separation from the surrounding countryside. (Dadejík, Staněk and Stibral, 2012, p. 9)

Understood this way, the gardener can be seen as the sovereign who imposes his law of genre on the natural environment. Being the sovereign, he decides which lives are legitimate and which ones are precarious. Each gardening genre frames nature in its own way. It oppresses and suppresses one thing while protecting and promoting another, enabling the latter to thrive only at the expense of the former. If there were no garden-forming human regulations, there would be no garden – only an aesthetically unframed nature.

3. Gardener's Aesthetic Frames: Derrida on Kant

We have seen that there are various cultivation styles in gardening, each imposing a different manipulation of the natural environment. The garden is therefore both an occasion for aesthetic experience and an affair of sovereignty. By enforcing the law of the chosen gardening genre, the gardener-sovereign reigns over a piece of nature that he manages from his supreme position. He only saves and protects what he decides to keep. He gives or takes permission to stay in his cultivated piece of nature. Behaving this way, gardeners amplify the human desire to have 'a piece of nature' for themselves – a cultivated bit, not a wild one.

When considering the stability of dividing lines between such binary oppositions, there are two moments in which Derrida's deconstruction diverges from Kant's transcendental aesthetics. The first one is the dividing line between beauty/disgust. Contrary to Kant's definition of judgment of the beautiful as a disinterested aesthetic appreciation of beauty,[1] Derrida's deconstructed account of Kant's distinction between ergon and parergon reveals that Kant's own aesthetic judgment of artworks is not entirely disinterested. Derrida points to the frame, the parergon, as a margin – a supplement of the artwork – that not only delimits the artwork and separates it from the surrounding environment but is also necessary because it focuses the spectator's attention on the artwork itself. Understood this way, the frame has a crucial aesthetic function. Contrary to Kant, who refuses to engage the frame in his aesthetic theory of 'disinterested' appreciation of artwork, Derrida does not see the frame as a rival to the artwork in our aesthetic judgements. This inclusion of the frame comes at the price of a shift from the Kantian aesthetic theory of disinterestedness to the Derridian theory of an always-already interested, engaged aesthetic judgement.

These Derrida's observations on engaged framing correspond to Berleant's aesthetics of engagement (Berleant, 1991), which challenges Kant's notion of disinterestedness and replaces it by "a notion of subjects' involvement when experiencing everyday life objects" (Kvokačka, 2020, p. 63–64). As Adrián Kvokačka further explains, Berleant's engaged aesthetics is a meaningful alternative to traditional aesthetic theories because it emphasises the holistic, contextual character of aesthetic sensation. Aesthetic engagement includes active involvement in the evaluation process, sometimes through direct physical activity, but always through aesthetic perception (Kvokačka, 2024, p. 84–91).

Drawing on Derrida's and Berleant's views, I propose calling 'aesthetic frames' the delimiting and focusing tools that intentionally guide spectators' attention toward a chosen mode of aesthetic appreciation. Understood in this 'engaged' way, aesthetic frames lead us either to appreciate or to reject what they frame. In the latter case, they intentionally generate prejudices provoking the

[1] When Kant defines his concept of disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment of the beautiful, he claims that "only the liking involved in taste for the beautiful is disinterested and 'free' since we are not compelled to give our approval by any interest, whether of sense or of reason" (Kant, 1987, p. 52).

viewer's aesthetic affects of disgust or abjection. A similar framing situation to war censorship occurs in our lack of concern for the well-being of plants and animals that arrive at our garden as uninvited strangers. In this respect, Berleant's observations on aesthetic engagement correspond to Judith Butler's engaged views on the violence of framing imposed by war censorship.

As Derrida himself argues, wars cannot be stopped once and for all. Any particular declaration of perpetual peace on Earth would be totalitarian, as it would impose a particular form of sovereignty and abandon the promise to foster a human sense of hospitality toward otherness.[2] Derrida goes even further when he discusses Kant's foreigner, who must consider his host's sovereignty. In Kant, it is the host, master in his home, who chooses his visitors. Without such thoughtfulness, an uninvited guest may easily turn into an intruder or a parasite, an undesirable foreigner, virtually an enemy undeserving hospitality. Wherever the 'at-home' is violated, one can expect an ethnocentric, nationalistic, xenophobic reaction directed against the foreign language, religion, or nation that threatens the traditional conditions of hospitality. Derrida sees that Kant's rule for selecting hosts contains traces of xenophobic perversion.[3]

The second moment of Derrida's divergence from Kant draws a new dividing line between the binary oppositions of friendship and enmity. Contrary to Kant, Derrida does not focus solely on human wars or human hostility toward other humans. Kant thinks nature itself predisposes the reasonable human race to be sovereign, to reign over nature and to appreciate it by both recognising and creating a genuine beauty – thanks to *a priori* structures of the human mind. Kant in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (2006a) argues that the world of rational beings as sovereign reign of ends is based on the logos of an analogy, on a logos as proportion. Similarly, in his essay *Towards Perpetual Peace* (Kant, 2006b), he claims that the soil upon which human culture lies must be unconditionally accessible to all human newcomers, but he excludes hospitality as a right of residence, limiting human hospitality to the right of human visitation.

Revising Kant's thoughts on human hospitality,[4] Derrida points to his views on hospitality and hostility towards non-human beings. Derrida deconstructs this *parergon*'s instability, characterised by its movable disposition, unclear limits, and possible excess, which has two contradictory consequences in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (Derrida, 2005, pp. 20–21). On the one hand, because it cannot make a clear division between the 'inside' and the 'outside', it cannot produce any clear-cut division resulting in binary

2 I have extensively discussed this topic in my article *Perpetual Peace Today: Ethics and Politics of Sustainability* (Fišerová, 2024d).

3 In Derrida's words, "The perversion, the pervertibility of this law (which is also a law of hospitality) is that one can become virtually xenophobic in order to protect or claim to protect one's own hospitality, one's own at-home which makes possible one's own hospitality" (Derrida, 2023, p. 93).

4 I have thoroughly explained this Derridean revision of Kant's conception of peace in my article *Kant and Derrida: Two Ethical Ornaments of Peace* (Fišerová, 2024b).

opposition. Thanks to the logic of parergonality, Derrida's ethical thinking of difference goes beyond this speciesism, beyond Kant's frame of hospitality as an exclusive bond between human beings. Contrary to Kant's binary framing of concepts, Derrida's deconstruction will enable reframing the concepts of friendship and enmity, defining them not as opposed to each other but as bridged. As Thomson notes, in the Derridean reading, Kant's laws of hospitality enact exclusion of species:

> Even if hospitality were to be offered universally to any other human, it would still be a limited hospitality – and perhaps the very definition of a humanism. (Can hospitality be offered to the non-human other: whether animal, vegetable or mineral?). (Thomson, 2005, p. 90)

Derrida's own work answers such a question, suggesting that the aesthetic frame separating these concepts is permeable. Derrida questions Kant's formulation of the exclusion of unhuman beings from perpetual hospitality. Derrida's subversion introduces a hint of interspecies freedom into Kant's cosmopolitan human duty by suggesting that hospitality be offered to non-human beings, too. Within the interval defined by the logic of parergonality, under specific circumstances, an enemy may be imagined as a friend, and vice versa. As he puts it in *Politics of Friendship*, "I can be hostile towards my friend, I can be hostile towards him publicly, and conversely I can, in privacy, love my enemy" (Derrida, 2020, p. 23). By blurring the dividing line between the binary concepts of friend and enemy, Derrida's thinking may help us 'befriend' weeds and make them look less 'invasive'.

These suggestions concerning interspecies cohabitation are developed by philosophers of posthumanism,[5] especially by Roberto Marchesini. In his book *Beyond Anthropocentrism* (Marchesini, 2018, p. 26), Marchesini introduces his theory of "functional biocentrism", which allows us to shift from a random anthropocentric sympathy toward animals and plants to a complex biocentric cohabitation profiting from a co-creative interspecies symbiosis, or *sympoésis*. Similar initiatives have been recently undertaken by contemporary ethical thinkers of posthumanism, such as Cynthia Willett, who notices that thanks to interspecies ethics, we can overcome the anthropocentric prejudices forcing us to understand animals and plants as enemies and slaves and to propose a new biocentric approach, which allows to grasp the animals and plants we cohabit with in our environments as a our friends or citizens. Cynthia Willett argues that anthropocentric ethical thinking overlooks the possibility of interspecies bioethical collaboration. Even philosophers specialised in utilitarian bioethics, who focus on non-functional relationships between animal suffering caused by human industrial 'progress', overlook the functional, biosocial forms of solidarity that exist between species. Also, analytical thinkers, who focus only on institutional and legal issues in environmental philosophy, lack the tools to grasp and appreciate the importance of symbiotic coexistence in interspecies communities, in which individuals often act as equals, as "fellow citizens" (Willett, 2014, p. 6).

[5] I have elaborated on this comparison of Derrida's deconstruction of animality and posthumanist interspecies ethics in my article *Člověk a zvíře, které není jeho protikladem* (Fišerová, 2024a).

I argue that both Derrida's deconstruction and the posthumanist thinkers allow us to reframe the gardener's anthropocentrically biased gestures of hospitality and hostility. Subverting their binary opposition reveals the instability of their underlying metaphysical construction. On the one hand, every gardener's act brings metaphysical 'violence' of the human law to nature. Neither gardening nor philosophy can entirely free itself from the metaphysical violence that is supposed to legitimate human sovereignty over other forms of life. Besides caring for their cultivated plants, gardeners reject invasive plants and liminal animals that cross their boundaries. On the other hand, due to dissemination, during the conventional act of gardening, the gardener becomes identical with his decorum, yet he does it differently each time. He inevitably 'fails' in some ways of doing the gardening 'right' – they might save an animal or a plant they wanted to kill, or they might occasionally intermix genres. Let us focus on the hostile performativity that accompanies gardeners' encounters with 'weeds' and 'pests'.

4. Gardener's Hostile Performativity: Derrida on Austin

Contrary to Kant, Derrida speaks not about a perpetual duty, but rather about an ongoing promise not to threaten the peace. He also reminds us that the concepts of threat and promise are binary oppositions: while I can only promise good intentions, I can only threaten with bad intentions. Derrida emphasises, however, that every performative may fail.

In *Limited Inc* (1977), Derrida comments on Austin's performatives presented in his book *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1962). Derrida recalls that Austin's illocutionary force of utterance depends on conformity with conventional situations and their occasional iteration, which gives speech its performativity. Austin's iteration, however, does not let the same return – it sets new situations and makes it impossible to predict every context. Therefore, any promise may fail - when something goes wrong, the act is at least to some extent a failure. Even if the utterance is not false, it is unhappy. As Austin puts it, "for this reason, we call the doctrine of the things that can be and go wrong on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of the Infelicities" (Austin, 1962, p. 14). Because he discovers these performative Infelicities, Austin's iteration becomes characterized by the curious fact that it's a repetition which spreads differences and never lets the same return – it sets new situations and makes it impossible to predict every context. Austin thus emphasised the impossibility of creating a totally satisfying classification of speech acts without any exception.

Derrida welcomes Austin's destabilization of the traditional true/false opposition in his analysis of performativity. But he doesn't accept Austin's moving from the 'truth value' to the 'context value'. In Derrida's view, Austin's performativity, which depends on social conventions, doesn't allow meaning to leave its context (which guarantees the full presence of meaning). Derrida emphasizes that Austin's analysis requires a value for context, and even an exhaustively determined context. Therefore, according to Derrida, there is no irreducible polysemy, no "dissemination" escaping the horizon of

the unity of meaning in Austin: "the long list of 'infelicities' which in their variety may affect the performative event always comes back to an element in what Austin calls the total context" (Derrida, 1977, p. 14). In his reading of Austin, Derrida comes to his "paradoxical but unavoidable conclusion — a successful performative is necessarily an 'impure' performative, to adopt the word advanced later on by Austin when he acknowledges that there is no 'pure' performative." (Derrida, 1977, p. 17). By doing so, Derrida introduces the problem of iteration and demonstrates how rituals idealise repetition to the point that they tend to unsee the performative possibility of their failure.

Derrida appreciates Austin's acceptance of this 'failure' of performativity, emphasising its creative promise. Not only the law of genre, but every law, even the law of language, is an established set of norms that can be performatively enforced. As he puts it,

> Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there is law, but justice is incalculable; it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which a rule never insures the decision between just and unjust. (Derrida, 1992, p. 16)

Put otherwise, Derrida warns that one cannot reach the incalculable justice from inside the calculability of law. Although practices of performing peace are iterable, they are not prescribed by a law, but as an incalculable gift of justice, which is a poetic act of 'pure hospitality'. In other words, one can make poetic gifts of justice to challenge the normative violence of the law, including the law of genre and the law of language.

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida investigates this poetic relation to the common law of language that every speaker experiences in her 'own', individual way. While language is a prescribed law and contains collectively shared idioms that frame our thinking and doing in a commonly expected manner, one's personal use of language proceeds through individual stylisation, which iterates "in the same outburst of the same idiom" (Derrida, 1998, p. 4). Derrida explores this iteration further through corporeal expressions of language – accents, tones, and rhythms – that are inherent to such a personal 'possession' of language. In this sense, everyone speaks a unique language, a language unto itself. As he puts it, a speaker's

> [s]entence extirpates itself in a logical contradiction heightened by a performative or pragmatic contradiction. It is desperate. The performative gesture of the enunciation would in the act prove the opposite of what the testimony claims to declare, namely, a certain truth. (Derrida, 1998, p. 3)

Similarly, all beings that enter the garden do not speak the same 'language'. They do not even know the order imposed by the gardener on the natural environment. To survive, they might try to mimic the gardener's order. Still, their performative attempts at expression of the gardener's law sound different each time, often in a way that is unintelligible to the gardener, the language giver. Because of this monolingualism of various creatures attempting to 'speak' the gardener's language, the gardener usually misunderstands these 'speakers'. He hears them simply as incomprehensible strangers, annoying outsiders, noisy outcasts.

Let us focus closely on the gardener's performativity. To transform a bought piece of nature into a garden, the gardener repeatedly performs gestures that are either friendly or unfriendly towards various natural beings who try to settle down and cohabit with him. Gardener's double performativity imposes his frames of aesthetic engagement, separating those invited from those uninvited, insiders from outsiders.[6] This dividing frame can be illustrated by a gardener's caring and protective acts on the one hand, and his hostile and destructive acts on the other. While he willingly and empathetically cares for 'his' plants by planting their seeds, watering, shielding, nourishing, fertilizing, grafting, and pruning them, he also tries to 'protect' them against everything that might interfere with his own aesthetic intentions. Through his repetitive gardening, the gardener declares his peace and his war against selected plants, fungi, and animals. The chosen gardening genre imposes its own order of interspecies cohabitation: only some animal and vegetal beings are invited or allowed to stay. His protective gestures do not protect the privileged plants only, but also – and mainly – his own aesthetic frame of the particular order of beauty and ugliness he constructed. This process of constructing enemies usually leads him to aggressive warfare against beings labelled as 'weeds' and 'pests'. Becoming an enemy of uninvited beings who wander into his territory, the gardener intentionally scares them off, traps them, or kills them.

To maintain the garden cultivated according to a chosen genre, gardeners impose their aesthetic frames shaped by their own sense of sovereignty over 'nature'. They frame the 'beauty' of their gardens through the aesthetically engaging act of strictly delimiting their own work from the agency they fear. For example, they systematically destroy various organisms that cause their preferred plants to rot and go mouldy. Besides rooting out unwanted plants, poisonous traps are prepared for unwelcome visitors, such as moles, birds, foxes, mice, and insects. The main reason for gardeners' abjection and horror of these beings is that they exercise their own vital agency in the very piece of nature the gardener has designed as 'his own'. In this perspective, their territorial performativity appears 'destructive' because it disturbs the 'beautiful' order that the gardener constructs and imposes. His profound dislike of otherness stems from his fear of losing control, which might shatter his belief in his own sovereignty.

This gardener's aesthetic 'engagement' is inscribed in his territorial vocabulary, which is traditionally rich in seemingly plausible, still xenophobic idioms such as deratization, disinsection, and disinfection – all focused on effectively erasing liminal beings from the garden. The precariousness of their lives is inscribed in the very idiomatic concepts gardeners use to label them as enemies – they might speak of them as parasites, invasive species, intruders. This hostile vocabulary aesthetically frames their unwelcoming attitudes, which strongly remind one of xenophobic hostility towards human immigrants, often similarly labelled. Even the concepts of wild and feral, constructed as the binary opposition to cultivated and tamed, are used to warn

[6] I have further discussed this kind of framing by hostility in my article *Outsiders or Insiders? John Berger and the Ethical Reframing of Animals* (Fišerová, 2024c).

of the dangers posed by the unpredictable and uncontrollable. This warning connotation serves as a gardener's trigger to weaponise his 'defence' with powerful gardening tools and toxic chemicals. Intruders of all kinds are gardeners' nightmares – not only might they ignore the dividing line and come uninvited by climbing the protecting fence, but they might also enter his garden from the sky, or even from the soil. How shall one protect his 'proper', cultivated nature from the 'strange', wild nature, if it literally overcomes the frame and enters the protected space from any direction? Unable to deal with their worries, xenophobic 'warriors' make war against self-sown plants and liminal animals who are trying to create new bonds with them. Through their cultivation of hostility toward otherness, human-focused gardeners persistently participate in shaping their own aesthetic frames and in destroying environmental relations that make new interspecies cohabitations possible.

This is, however, not the only way to go. To minimise the risk of such unnecessary environmental hostility, new interspecies bonds shall be performatively engaged and constructed. To opt for another aesthetic framing, one might use inclusive language that supports a different gardening approach. This path of reflection leads to new gardening perspectives that would nourish welcoming and negotiating relations across various natural and 'unnatural' or cultural, cultivated environments. Such a reframed aesthetic approach would avoid the construction of a gardener's identity based on prejudices and hate that would occasionally 'unite' fearful gardeners with environmentally unfriendly industries producing toxic chemicals designed to wipe out potential plant and animal visitors. In this perspective, acceptance of alterity would not destroy the garden's aesthetic frame; it would complete its missing parts and create them anew. Inventing new performative gestures – both in the garden and in language – means reframing the gardener's cultivation of hostility.

5. Conclusion: Reframing Gardener's Cultivation of Hostility

Let us return to the idea of gardeners as deconstructed Robinsons, as self-declared sovereigns who remain trapped in their wars against 'wild' nature that surrounds their carefully framed territory. Is there a way to reach a more 'peaceful' cohabitation?

One answer was given by Derrida's revision of Kant's thoughts on perpetual peace. While Kant frames peace in terms of legal duty, treating strangers as political outsiders, Derrida's perspective of a peace-to-come, which is performatively constructed and iterated over time, allows for the hosting of strangers as quasi-insiders. Contrary to Kant's aesthetics of disinterested judgment, Derrida's focus on the promise of inclusion mobilizes environmental aesthetics in its engagement. Both deconstruction and posthumanism emphasize this ongoing nature of our peace-making processes with otherness. Together with an environmentally thoughtful rethinking of our gardening genres, making our aesthetic frames permeable may help us not only reconsider our selective hospitality and hostility but also experience new aesthetic pleasures in our encounters with otherness.

To reduce the metaphysical violence of our conceptual thinking, Derrida introduced a porous frame between the binary oppositions. Its porosity changes the relation between the concepts of friend and enemy. It is no longer a fixed opposition but rather instability and permeability. As he puts it, "to constitute the space of an inhabitable house and a home, one also needs an opening, a door and windows, that is to say one must open a passage to the foreigner" (Derrida, 2023, p. 96). Contrary to Austin, who regards the possibility of failure as a mere accident, Derrida invites us to work further with this performative dimension of speech, which helps us reframe the violent idealisation in our use of language. This Derrida's subversive appreciation of the failing performative justifies the invention of environmentally 'friendlier' gardening genres, such as biodiversity (Sterry, 2023), sustainable (Boswall, 2022) and permaculture (Richards, 2025) gardening, which make room for wildflowers, self-sown plants, and wandering liminal animals. Applied this way, Derrida's performative dissemination calls for adaptation, reinvention, and improvisation to challenge the established gardening genres.

Finally, Derrida's deconstruction makes aesthetic frames more permeable and porous, which opens the way for a new conception of environmental justice. Derridean justice is conceived as "justice-to-come" (Derrida, 1992, p. 24): it is perpetually approaching, arriving; its meaning is never entirely present. Justice-to come exists only as a promise, which is maintained in a state of permanent deferral. As such, environmental justice cannot be enforced: it remains a promise, a 'ghost' haunting the present meaning of the gardener's order dividing his declared friends and enemies. Blurring this dividing line in biodiversity, permaculture, and sustainable gardening helps gardeners befriend animals and plants that were previously rejected as parasitic pests or invasive weeds. Deconstructed gardening acts can open new paths for sympoiesis (Isar, 2025) in interspecies cohabitation that might overcome the nature/culture divide. To cultivate new gardening genres that impose new respect for the precarious lives of liminal non-human beings would mean redirecting aesthetic framing toward 'peaceful' ethical values of interspecies cohabitation, such as thoughtfulness, curiosity, and vulnerability in our relations to otherness.

Environmentally engaged aesthetics, which follows this path, focuses on constructing modes of cohabitation in which one feels free to form new interspecies connections. Instead of cultivating traditional hostility and abjectness, biodiversity, permaculture, and sustainable gardeners include liminal beings in their aesthetic framing – they invite the very otherness that horrified and disgusted their predecessors. They develop a new ethical and aesthetic generosity that welcomes a partial loss of human control over the natural environment and a partial gain of sympoietic alliances with its non-human living constituents. Because they cultivate hospitality in gardening, they foster new forms of interspecies symbiosis. They discover new ways to aesthetically appreciate the uncultivated nature, without which there would be no garden to cultivate.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640620

Contemporary Regimes of Visuality: The Avatar Mountains

Paolo Furia – Ru Ying

In recent decades, academic conceptions of landscape have been progressively shifting away from a representational definition, according to which landscapes are reduced to scopic fictions aligned with the sensitivities of beholders, towards a substantive understanding that highlights their aesthetic, ecological, and socio-political dimensions. This ongoing turn has promoted more holistic and more-than-representational approaches that emphasise the interconnections between the perceptual and the environmental layers of landscape experience. At the same time, mobility practices (especially tourism) driven by the prior circulation of digital images foster a new reduction of places to the 'horizons of expectation' shaped by such imagery. Without adopting a technophobic stance, this article examines the risks implicit in modes of landscape consumption that disregard their inherent complexity. Focusing on Zhangjiajie Forest Park in China, it analyses how cinema and digital media have transformed this natural landscape, highlighting both the merits of this remediation – in terms of enhanced visibility and economic development – and its drawbacks, notably the encouragement of unsustainable practices such as overtourism and the aestheticisation of natural beauty. | *Keywords: Immersivity, Landscape, Media, Visuality, Zhangjiajie Forest Park*

1. Landscape aesthetics and new media

The first task we set ourselves is to justify our diagnosis regarding the aestheticisation of landscape in the contemporary world. Taking into account a substantial portion of the most recent interdisciplinary and extra-academic literature, one can easily detect a tendency to consider landscape in a 'substantive' sense (Olwig 1996), that is, as the aesthetic-phenomenological manifestation of ecological or socio-political dynamics and equilibria operating at the local level. Article 1, section (a) of the European Landscape Convention, approved by the Council of Europe in 2000, offers the following definition: "Landscape means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Siani, 2024, p. 76). In this definition, the 'character' of landscape emerges from the organic interaction of diverse factors and, as such,

Authorship attribution: The first part of the article was authored by Paolo Furia, while the second part was authored by Ru Ying.

is made available to the perception of populations. This amounts to a genuinely realist turn in the conception of landscape, standing in contrast to the dissolution of landscape's meanings into the representational projections of experiential subjects and, even more sharply, to the reduction of landscape to a mere view designed to elicit the aesthetic appreciation of observers. As Alberto Siani notes:

> The starting definition reflects a concrete and anti-dualistic conception, which is not weakened but rather reinforced by its intentional vagueness, aimed at avoiding exclusion and at providing a sufficiently broad basis on which to design and implement specific policies [...] There are no limitations grounded in dualisms such as nature/culture, habitable/uninhabitable, exceptional/ordinary, beautiful/ugly, insider/outsider. (Siani, 2024, p. 77)[1]

The institutional debate has had significant effects on policies for the planning, conservation, and regulation of European landscapes, as highlighted by the numerous interdisciplinary studies that have followed the evolution of the European Landscape Convention over the years.[2] Yet, the awareness generated by this new anti-dualistic and substantive paradigm has had to contend with quite different socio-cultural trends, ultimately grounded in the very same modern dualisms that the ELC's definition sought to overcome.

What is at stake here is not the persistence of theoretical frameworks, still dominant in certain disciplines, that continue to presuppose a logical-metaphysical distinction between nature and culture.[3] Rather, we are referring to the global promotion of a media ecology of an audiovisual kind, thought as 'immersive' so as to meet the practical and even theoretical demands of a philosophy (broadly understood) that seeks to present itself as anti-Cartesian and anti-Kantian – in other words, anti-modern – through the rehabilitation of the body, experience, and feeling.

The discourse on immersivity, in fact, calls into question embodied, situated, and interactive subjectivities, according to a conception of aesthetic experience redefined in terms of engagement, as opposed to a more traditionally contemplative and detached approach. In a theorist such as Arnold Berleant (1991), this shift from the contemplation of the artwork to engagement with any object or context endowed with aesthetic-

1 For the fulltext of the *Convention* see Premio Nazionale del Paesaggio (no date).

2 We should at least mention the proceedings of the conference *Beyond the Convention*, held on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Convention's initial approval, which was ratified by Italy in 2005 (see Castiglioni et al., 2021).

3 I am thinking, for example, of Anglo-American environmental aesthetics, but also of certain proposals in continental eco-phenomenology, in which the nature/culture dualism continues to operate (see Furia, 2024). Since, in practice, especially in our present age, the vast majority of terrestrial environments we can experience are partly natural and partly shaped by human activity, these approaches are then forced to develop hybrid categories, such as that of modified environments (Brady et al., 2018), conceived as formations arising from the encounter between two otherwise separate principles: nature and culture. The reference to the interrelations between natural and human factors in the definition of the ELC carries a very different meaning. It is the interrelations, in fact, which determine the character of the landscape, and it is this character, produced by the dynamic interplay of these factors, that populations perceive. These factors, whether natural or human, acquire their perceptual (and not only perceptual) meaning within the totality of the interrelations to which they belong. Even the attribution of a 'natural' or 'cultural' sense is, of course, useful, but it takes place within a semantic framework that is far more contextual than metaphysical.

phenomenological potential also led – well before the aforementioned institutional shifts – to a rethinking of the problem of landscape in terms of processuality and metamorphosis, grounded on interaction between the experiential subject and perceived reality rather than detached contemplation. In doing so, it provided genuine grounds for overcoming a purely visual, panoramic, and ultimately dualistic conception of landscape. One could say that, in an author like Berleant, it is the landscape itself that is immersive, not its virtual simulation – if only because, when Berleant placed his wager on this transition from contemplation to engagement in aesthetics, the media ecology that we now consider a defining feature of the contemporary situation had not yet developed.

At first, the media revolution brought about by the spread of digital technologies was seen as a continuation, even a strengthening, of an interactive and holistic conception of perception, opposed to the mere contemplative approach based on the subject/object dualism. According to Giuliana Bruno, the haptic visuality of screens opens up the possibility of a more widespread and capillary communication of the materialities that constitute the world. This possibility leads to a general recomposition of materiality itself: its very surfaces, captured by interconnected screens across every distance, transform our ways of inhabiting the world. As Bruno writes, "virtual movements are taking place on an environment of screen surfaces" (Bruno, 2014, p. 7). Such a radical transformation of the lifeworld is possible on the assumption that every material entity in the world possesses its own surface, and that the modifications affecting surfaces are, in every respect, material phenomena projected onto technologically developed supports – namely, screens. In this regard, Yves Citton draws on the demanding materialism of Karen Barad to describe the contemporary relationship between the current medial regime and individual subjects:

> This radical intermediality means that we live among images, among media, as intermediaries who ensure their circulation. From this perspective, agency can exist only within this medial circulation of images: strictly speaking, one cannot speak of agency except to designate the intra-action that the system of image circulation emits and receives, permeating our bodies and our societies. Neither […] I, the author of this text, nor you, the readers, can claim to act (to feel, to understand, to think) in any way that is truly external to the space–time–matter relations which, through the filters of medial attention, simultaneously constitute our subjectivities, our cultures, our socio-economic systems, and our Anthropocenic environment. (Citton, 2016)

From this perspective, the point is therefore not to deny human agency, but to rethink it within the context of a lifeworld inevitably shaped by the available media. In Citton's discussion, drawing on Barad, this means not giving up the possibility of a creative use of the digital media in which we are immersed: for instance, by fostering a democratic restructuring of participatory practices or by restoring visibility to objects, places, and cultures left at the margins by traditional systems of communication. Intra-action (to recall Karen Barad's well-known term) also implies the possibility of conflict: being immersed in screen-saturated environments does not necessarily mean being

subjugated by them, since digital media, for their very survival, require an active and dynamic attitude on the part of the consumer–user – an attitude sometimes encapsulated in the expression 'produser' (Bruns, 2008).

What matters most to us in relation to the problem of the substantive landscape is that, from a perspective which asserts the material – and therefore real – character of screens, to act on the screen means to act on reality, and thus on space: "The surface, like the screen, is an architecture of relations. It is a mobile place of dwelling, a transitional space that activates cultural transit" (Bruno, 2014, p. 8). Today, however, warnings come from semiotics and media studies about the risk of conflating what we might call 'original' immersivity (in the sense that we are always already immersed in the places of our existence, and this immersion has an onto-phenomenological significance far deeper than it appears at first glance)[4] with the immersivity realised by contemporary media ecology. Jonathan Crary, on the basis of a meticulous reconstruction of optical and simulatory devices and their socio-economic use in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity, leaves no room for doubt: "the isolation associated with the use of digital media is continuous with the social fragmentation produced by economic and social forces throughout the twentieth century" (Crary, 2022, p. 7). This is not only because the neoliberal economic regime in which contemporary media ecology operates represents merely the latest evolution of capitalism, but also because the construction of experience favoured by capitalism, in its various stages, is strikingly similar: the narcissistic seduction of the experiential subject, who must be kept under the illusion of autonomously governing their own tastes and choices in matters of consumption, while a certain technical manipulation of their gaze generates and perpetuates a standardization of taste of which they are largely unaware.

Indeed, while it is undeniable that medial processes act back upon the world, continually transforming it – and that any attempt to return to a supposed condition of 'real' immersive authenticity in place is therefore unfounded and naïve – it is nonetheless necessary, when speaking of landscapes, to ask what they are images of, or, to retain Bruno's vocabulary, what surface they present. And although it is certainly true that every surface is a material projection of matter itself, it is necessary to consider whether the transformations produced by the medial ecosystem upon surfaces are the only ones that matter when we speak of landscape; whether, rather, there exist layers in the structuring of landscape that refer to a non-semiotic and non-representational order of the real: one that does not exclude the projection and feedback of the medial, yet cannot be entirely reorganized according to the meanings established within modal intra-action. In other words, every landscape understood in substantive terms embodies a dialectical interplay between what it is and how it appears. Within the spatial phenomenon are embedded meanings that are not primarily dependent on the medial regime –

[4] This clarification has been attempted by authors such as Tim Ingold (2000), Ed Casey (2002), and Jeff Malpas (2022), drawing on the phenomenological tradition, particularly Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

for instance, ecological fluxes and communitarian interactions grounded in historical and cultural associations and attributions of meaning. When speaking of landscapes, a dialectic between visibility and invisibility is always at work (Wylie 2006). Yet an excessive emphasis on the material constitution of the screen, and on the continuity between the reality of the Earth and its medial conditions of apprehension and perception, may obscure this dialectic, reducing materiality to aesthetics rather than returning aesthetics to materiality, as we will see in the next section.

2. Places images and the paradoxes of embodiment

The emphasis on embodied experience, which in aesthetics has served the purpose of overcoming the subject/object dualism implied in the paradigm of contemplation, therefore falls into the following short circuit: the centrality of feeling, at the expense of any critical distancing from the matter of that feeling, is in fact bound up with strategic forms of manipulation of experience and its places, based precisely on the same subject/object dualism that the appeal to embodiment was meant to overcome. The drama of aesthetic experience – torn between the need for redemption in its everyday, practical, and habitual dimension, and the relentless colonisation by processes of aestheticisation designed to steer production and consumption choices – is aptly described by Bruno Surace with regard to the question of immersivity in contemporary technologies:

> We are once again, and quite uncritically, in the midst of the experiential turn, which mediates every form of cognitive systematization of the world through the corporeal. And thus it effectively imposes experience as the best possible form of mediation, while also subjecting it to a kind of mechanism of accumulation: the more things I can see and feel, the richer my experience will be, where this richness is measured by the storage of experience – just as we do when we dutifully post our vacations on social media or scratch off those inexpensive maps that allow us to 'flag' the countries we have visited, in a great race toward what, in the video game world, is known as "completionism". (Surace, 2023, p. 292)

The examples taken from this passage by Surace bring us back to the problem of the aestheticisation of landscape in the contemporary media ecosystem. Decades of deconstructing modernity and its foundational assumptions have not been sufficient – a deconstruction that, among other things, has led to the recognition of the ideological character of the Western notion of landscape, trapped in a scopic reduction of aesthetic experience linked to a politics of visibility reflecting the tastes and interests of dominant classes (Williams, 1975). Nor has it sufficed to acknowledge the inherently strategic nature of representations of place, whether in the form of artistic images (Cosgrove, 1985) or maps (Farinelli, 2009). We continue to think of landscape as a visual datum resulting from the application of certain socio-cultural and technical frameworks to spatial reality, rather than as a spatial phenomenon possessing its own autonomy and capacity to bind to itself the embodied – and not merely visual – perception of the subject of experience. It is difficult to imagine that this is unrelated to the contemporary medial ecology, characterized by "an incessant iconographic flow, repeatedly described through metaphorical

expressions such as 'bombardment', 'cascade', or 'proliferation' of images" (Pinotti and Somaini, 2016, p. 18) a situation in which the primacy of the visual finds renewed force and novel modes of affirmation in every field and, it goes without saying, especially in those traditionally associated with the visual dimension, as has long been the case with landscape in much of European and North American cultural tradition from the late eighteenth century through part of the twentieth. This occurs at the level of mental and aesthetic habits on a planetary scale, despite the multiple advances toward recovering the originally embodied, synesthetic, and situated dimension of experience.

It is precisely the materialist approach to new media developed by authors such as Giuliana Bruno and Yves Citton that allows us to grasp the phenomenological and ontological impact of such a simplification. The former concerns the formation of the 'horizon of expectation' within which a certain 'space of experience' takes shape, while the latter concerns the transformations of the 'space of experience' in relation to a certain construction of the 'horizon of expectation'.[5] In the pre-digital medial situation, it was easier than it is today to sustain, as the historian Reinhart Koselleck did, that the horizon of expectation which orients the actions of an individual or collective historical subject in a certain direction depends on a cumulative, spatially embedded experience – and to grasp the incremental character of such experience it was legitimate to employ a spatial metaphor: "It makes sense to say that the experience transmitted from the past is spatial, since it gathers into a totality in which many layers of earlier times are present together" (Koselleck, 2008, p. 306). This is more than a metaphor, indeed: this totality that accumulates layers of meaning from various temporal orders is precisely the place, or the network of places, in which the personal and collective existence of subjectivities unfolds, and which perceptually communicates itself as 'landscape'. This is, for instance, the position of Rosario Assunto, articulated in a rare book devoted to landscape within the aesthetics of the late twentieth century: landscape, he argues, consists in a certain "crystallization of time" (Assunto, 1973, p. 52) in a place and constitutes, in the present, a living image of its lived past, one that binds to it the horizons of expectation of those who inhabit or encounter it. Assunto already identifies, in the mechanical logics of modernity, an initial inversion of the temporal relation between a past that becomes present and transmits itself into the future through landscape, and a future planned in an abstract image destined to reshape the space of experience according to its own design: the time of technology and industry is, for the philosopher, "not only without return, but also without memory; a succession in which nothing is repeated and nothing is renewed" (Assunto, 1973, p. 64).

The contemporary medial situation reveals how the inversion of meaning between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation occurs through the performative mediation of abstract images of spaces of

[5] The dialectic between space of experience and horizon of expectation was analysed and discussed by the historian Reinhart Koselleck in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (2007).

experience, rather than through their actual practice. In other words, horizons of expectation regarding places are constituted within socio-cultural imaginaries grounded in the pursuit of the interest, curiosity, and aesthetic satisfaction of tourists and consumers.[6] Already in the 1970s, sociologists inspired by Erving Goffman argued that tourism inevitably divides regions into 'front' and 'back': "the front is the meeting place between hosts and guests or between customers and service staff, while the back is the area where the members of the host team withdraw between performances to relax and prepare" (MacCannell, 1974, p. 590). According to this theatrical conception of social life, tourism duplicates this structure, splitting places into zones staged specifically to meet visitors' expectations while leaving others to the everyday practices of the inhabitants.

The boundaries between these zones, in line with Goffman's view, are inherently porous, if only because tourists who choose such destinations are gratified by the perception of authenticity in their travel experience.[7] The mechanism of image-based competition, however, divides areas more or less suited to aesthetic staging in a far less porous way. Not only do all areas – especially those dedicated to tourism – present a 'face' (the front, resulting from the emphasis on aspects meant to be communicated to outsiders in order to promote a successful imaginary) while concealing another (the back, where inhabitants live their lifeworld free from performative pressures), but within a given macro-region, some areas specialize in aesthetic communication, becoming front regions par excellence, while others remain deliberately in the shadows. In the next section, we will see how the contemporary media ecosystem operates and somehow remediates this dialectic between front and back region by focusing on a case study.

6 The strategic manipulation of lived space through abstract images is clearly understood by two key authors of the so-called spatial turn in the humanities and late twentieth-century philosophy: Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. In Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), "representations of space" are produced by technocrats and stakeholders and imposed upon real space, generating forms of life consistent with the model. Similarly, in de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), strategic representations of space are imposed from above, encountering the discreet and often unconscious resistance of practices – or tactics – developed by inhabitants, through which even strategically manipulated spaces are invested with meanings derived from lived experience, memories, and habits. The main difference between the models of Lefebvre and de Certeau, on the one hand, and the dynamics of today's media environment, on the other, lies in the fact that the abstract images through which spaces of experience are now manipulated are not the outcome of deliberate political strategies or, as in the case of picturesque landscape, the result of an aesthetic ideal defined within the sphere of art. Instead, they emerge from a quantitative competition regulated by social media algorithms. The additional peculiarity of these abstract images is their capacity to colonise people's horizon of expectation before their space of experience. As a result, the arrangement of space conforms to the taste of the viewer: aestheticisation leads to a colonisation of practices and tactics – using de Certeau's terminology – that renders obsolete any model based solely on the opposition between "top-down" strategies and "bottom-up" tactics.

7 Already, according to Dean MacCannell, writing in the 1970s, "visitors are motivated by the desire to see life as it is really lived and to get in touch with the natives" (MacCannell, 1973, p. 592). This correlation between tourism and the search for authenticity appears to be empirically confirmed with regard to contemporary trends. According to a recent study by Kim and Lee (2020), for young travellers, it is more important to spend an entire week in Paris, wandering through its neighbourhoods and savouring their multiple atmospheres, than to spend a single day there with an organised group just to take a picture of the Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame. The preference of Generation Z for intangible cultural heritage can likewise be interpreted as an expression of a new quest for authenticity in travel (Jiang et al., 2024).

3. The Immersive Spectacle: Zhangjiajie and the Remediation of the 'Front Region' in China's Media Ecology

In this section, we will use Zhangjiajie National Forest Park as an example to show how the ideas in the previous section work with respect to a natural landscape. This is a place where natural beauty, cultural meaning, and intense media representations all come together. In particular, Zhangjiajie exemplifies how a 'space of experience' is proactively influenced by a digitally constructed 'horizon of expectation'. In this context, we will refer to a landscape rightly perceived (and consequently institutionalised) as a 'natural landscape', in order to show how technological remediation operates upon places according to a recognizable pattern, regardless of whether they are predominantly natural or cultural.

Zhangjiajie's aesthetic appeal is fundamentally rooted in its distinctive quartz sandstone peak forest landscape, rich biodiversity, and high-quality landscape ecology. As a World Natural Heritage site, its exceptional air quality and ecological environment attract tourists. However, the character of this landscape emerges from the interplay of natural and human factors. The park in fact includes several historical attractions dating back to the Ming dynasty, such as Guānyīn Dòng (观音洞), a spectacular Taoist temple carved into the rock. Human presence in the area now occupied by the park has been continuous over time, though not always traceable through architectural remains. Using a UNESCO neologism, one could say that Zhangjiajie National Park is a kind of 'associative cultural landscape':[8] the park's imposing mountain has been regarded as sacred, particularly within Taoist spirituality, and therefore respected and revered in its integrity, so that the direct physical impact of human intervention on the area is not especially visible at the landscape level. Furthermore, the region is also home to a rich cultural mix, mostly made up of the Tujia and Miao peoples, who make up 85.5% of the local population. This ethnic diversity, alongside other smaller ethnic groups, contributes to the rich cultural character that can be seen in the landscape itself. The natural environment is, therefore, not merely a geological feature but is infused with cultural meaning. This is made evident through the symbolic interpretation of its geography. Certain dramatic formations, such as Golden Whip Rock,[9] are named after local myths, legends, and spiritual beliefs, often resembling human figures or mythical creatures. These local narratives and the ongoing practice of cultural performances and beliefs show how the natural features have deep cultural meaning, making the landscape a place where people hold collective memory and identify themselves.

Zhangjiajie as a distinctive natural marvel, propelled by its remarkable geological structures, initiated a preliminary phase of institutional 'staging'.

8 See Operational Guidelines 2008, Annex 3 at the website Centre (no date).

9 The Golden Whip Rock (Chinese: 金鞭岩, pinyin: Jīnbiān Yán), a prominent geological formation within the Golden Whip Stream area of Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, stands at a height of 378 meters. Its striking morphology resembles an upright whip soaring skyward, evoking a sense of awe among observers. Local folklore attributes its origin to the legendary whip of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, which was said to have been petrified after being switched with a fake created by the Dragon King's daughter.

The formal process started in 1982 when the area was made a national forest park and then in 2004 when it was added to the list of UNESCO Global Geoparks. Most importantly, this early stage of institutions aimed to bring together natural and cultural heritage. This was accomplished by interpreting the physical landscape in a symbolic way and intentionally including and promoting local cultural elements in tourism planning. The goal was to make the tourist experience feel more real by putting the region's cultural identity front and centre through controlled storytelling and traditional performances.

This established 'space of experience', however, is now undergoing a radical change driven by a forward-thinking application of aesthetic and digital principles. Zhangjiajie is being strategically changed from a place to see natural beauty into a multi-faceted centre for composite tourism, which includes leisure, wellness, and vacation activities (Liu, 2025, p. 51). This upgrade relies on its rich cultural resources, but the process is drastically accelerated by digital technology. Integration with the internet sector – which encompasses digital technologies and platforms like social media – is a key driver for personalising tourism experiences, improving marketing, and enhancing operational efficiency (Lu, 2024). Zhangjiajie move beyond its traditional reliance on natural sightseeing and develop deeper, participatory experiences that engage all the senses and create memorable, shareable moments for tourists. The design of these experiences, such as cultural immersion activities, interactive forest adventures, and festive participation, aims to "generate positive emotions and unique personal stories" (Su, Tian and Xu, 2009, p. 267). This transformation involves the use of creative aesthetics and cutting-edge technologies – including Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and Artificial Intelligence-Generated Content (AIGC) – to produce cinematic content and immersive virtual spaces. Such a digital effort showcases both natural and cultural heritage in innovative ways that foster customisation and interactive behaviours. At the same time, it is necessary to highlight the risk that, alongside the potential for personalising experience, new technologies may also lead to a certain simplification and trivialisation of aesthetic experience. This occurs through the reduction of the ecological and socio-cultural complexity of places to spectacular images easily consumed on the web. It is to this risk that we refer when we speak of an inversion of priorities between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations.

The inversion of priority between space of experience and horizon of expectation is explicitly demonstrated by the role of the Hollywood blockbuster Avatar (2009). The park was strategically rebranded as the Avatar Hallelujah Mountains, substituting a pre-existing cultural 'space of experience' with a global sci-fi media imaginary (Yao and Yin, 2011). This constitutes a profound cinematic remediation. The medial rebranding of Zhangjiajie as the Avatar Hallelujah Mountains epitomises the integration of a local space of experience into a global media imaginary, where emphasis shifts from the traditional meanings historically associated with the natural landscape to an aesthetic mode of fruition accessible to everyone in cyberspace.

The impact of this process has undeniably been substantive: the resulting tourism revenue has become a major driver of regional development, while the global platform has amplified the visibility of Tujia and Miao cultures, allowing their traditions to be performed and recognised on an international stage. The digital horizon of expectation thus operates as a powerful generator of both economic and cultural capital. Therefore, the critical task, as anticipated in the first paragraph, is not to wish away this digital layer, but to question the conditions under which its economic benefits are distributed and its cultural representations can acquire greater depth and local agency, moving beyond a logic of pure spectacle and thereby avoiding the unreflective reproduction of practices that may prove harmful at the societal, cultural and especially ecological levels, such as overtourism.

The inversion between the space of experience and horizon of expectation is thus accomplished through the worldwide promotion of an audiovisual media ecology that utilises digital technology to enhance aesthetic and cultural appeal. To make immersive virtual spaces and movie content, people use tools like virtual reality, AIGC, and digital media arts. For example, the Zhangjiajie World Geopark Museum uses AI-driven interactive guides and immersive creation in a smart way to make sure that visitors connect with the landscape through a digital lens, which sets the expectation before they even get there. Convergent media live broadcast *Live Human- Hearing International Zhang*, which includes live streams, short videos, and interactive content across domestic and international platforms, optimised Zhangjiajie's scenic image and boosted tourist attention (Li, 2005, p. 115). This kind of digital mediation makes a feedback loop between how tourists act online and how they act in person. Landscapes are meticulously curated: the most spectacular attractions, once materialised in situ, are then disseminated through social media platforms, fostering the emergence of visual tropes such as the 'glass bridge' and the 'mist-covered peaks'. In turn, the inherently visual emphasis on panoramic imagery in online circulation fuels the creation of further attractions, such as scenic viewpoints and similar installations conceived to replicate and amplify these aesthetic patterns. As previously mentioned, Surace calls this habit of 'checking in' and collecting geo-tagged photos 'completionism', which means that the experience is judged by how shareable it is instead of how deep it is. The horizon of expectation is globally synchronised, illustrating the capacity of abstract images to redefine the experiential space according to their intrinsic design. While this confirms the power of new, surface-oriented media to profoundly shape and transform our experience of landscape, it also exposes a widening gap between the ways we are led to experience a landscape and those dimensions – both of the spatial phenomenon itself and of our own experience – that are overshadowed by the dominant images in circulation, overlooked and excluded from the scope of our horizons of expectations.

In Zhangjiajie, tourism and contemporary media regimes intensify the Goffmanian model of social interaction, resulting in a unique spatial dynamic: the entire park is a 'front region' that is carefully managed

for aesthetic consumption. The tourist experience is carefully orchestrated through a theatrical infrastructure designed to enforce a specific mode of perception. Social media serves as the primary global amplifier of Zhangjiajie's tourism, driving both inbound flows and international visibility, and further magnifying attention when coupled with the area's economic or environmental appeal. Large-scale, innovative events – such as the Wingsuit Flying World Championships[10] – act as powerful catalysts for extensive organic coverage across social media and news outlets, thereby forging a distinctive and compelling brand identity for the destination. This dynamic highlights the critical importance of a strong digital presence: marketing strategies increasingly prioritise mobile-friendly content and social media engagement to reach global audiences (Wu, Bidin and Johari, 2025, p. 14). Accordingly, the city of Zhangjiajie (located only a few miles from the National Park) has adopted a proactive digital strategy, maintaining official overseas accounts such as iZhangjiajie on platforms like TikTok and Facebook to showcase its unique natural beauty and cultural heritage, which consistently attract high levels of viewership and engagement. This effort is bolstered by inviting global Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) to experience attractions like the Tianmen Mountain and Glass Bridge, who then share their adventures in real-time, instantly reaching millions of international followers.[11] Structures such as designated photo spots, viewing platforms, cable cars, and the Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon Glass Bridge serve to physically enforce a panoramic, purely visual relationship with the landscape. In short, the space of experience adapts to the aesthetic expectations produced within the global space of the image economy.

Yet perceiving the height of the Glass Bridge through a screen is not the same as perceiving it in presence: immersion in the deeply artificial and artialised context of the natural landscape still ensures an exposure to spatial otherness by one's own body, with all its senses. The real encounter with the landscape places us, from the very level of perception, to a condition of 'not-feeling-at-home' arising from the simple 'being-elsewhere', exposed to a spatial phenomenon whose surface, to recall Bruno's terms, can circulate in digital space only in a necessarily reduced and relatively atrophic form. At the perceptual level, which opens the way to all other levels of structuration of the spatial phenomenon, there is, for instance, a question of scale: the screen diminishes the difference in proportion between the towering mountain pinnacles, the spatial abysses over which the Glass Bridge is built, and our body. The reality of 'being-elsewhere' leads, on the aesthetic-phenomenological level, to the possibility that the spatial phenomenon may 'speak differently', communicating something that goes beyond, or even runs counter to, the expectations the perceiving subject has formed within

[10] The Wingsuit Flying World Championships is an extreme sports event organized by the World Wingsuit League. Since 2012, it has been held annually at Tianmen Mountain in Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province, China. The launch point for the competition is located at the summit of YuHu Peak (elevation 1,458 meters), with a vertical drop of 990 meters and a straight-line flight distance of approximately 1.3 kilometers.

[11] See more at the website Zhangjiajie chu quan (no date).

the medial system. What is invisible in the landscape can, at least in part, be apprehended through the other senses: the extraordinary natural landscape that reveals itself to sight from the Glass Bridge and from many other panoramic viewpoints manifests itself at the same time as "circumambient and panperceptual," inviting the visitor to a kind of "circumambulation by walking" (Casey, 2002, p. 8).

Processes of aestheticization extend beyond the physical environment to encompass local culture and everyday life, which are likewise staged as components of the tourist product. For example, the large-scale commercial folk performance, *Charming Xiangxi*, blends local ethnic cultures with contemporary tourism, presenting traditional Tujia dances, songs, and customs in artistic forms adapted "to the tourists' tastes and gaze" (Deng, 2021, p. 224). Without an adequate aesthetic education aimed at fostering awareness of both the potential and the limits of such strategic medial reconfigurations, there is a risk that cultural symbols like the hand-waving dance or the weeping marriage ceremony[12] will be transformed into mass-market icons designed to resonate with a predetermined horizon of expectation. The resulting physical and cultural environment thus would turn into a meticulously managed system in which every interaction is orchestrated as a controlled performance, producing a totalizing aesthetic and digital milieu.

4. Conclusion

The case of the Zhangjiajie Forest Park efficiently exemplifies our article's central short-circuit. It markets itself through the rhetoric of 'immersivity' in a natural wonder, which ostensibly engages embodied and interactive subjectivities. Yet, this 'immersion' is domesticated by the inversion between horizons of expectations shaped by the digital environment and the very spaces of experience – the landscapes – reconfigured according to images driven by a quantitative, algorithmic logic of social media. Consequently, there is a risk that the landscape's character may be oversimplified and misunderstood, reduced to the horizons of expectation rather than to the local natural and human interrelations brought to the forefront by the substantive conception. Zhangjiajie is not an exception but a leading example of how landscapes under contemporary tourism and media regimes operate. It demonstrates the triumph of a scopic, aestheticized regime that successfully markets itself as immersive engagement. The critical task is not to mourn a lost 'authenticity' but to develop new analytical tools to understand and critique these totalizing aesthetico-economic systems that reshape our very perception of place. On a theoretical level, one possible path lies in returning to think not only about the phenomenological and ontological continuities between landscape

[12] Weeping Marriage, known as *Kujia* (哭嫁) in Chinese, is a unique marital custom among the Tujia ethnic group, characterised by the bride's ritual of weeping and singing during the wedding ceremony. As the core element of this custom, the Weeping Marriage songs permeate the entire event, reflecting not only the romantic and marital practices of Tujia youth but also offering a comprehensive representation of the ethnic group's political, economic, and cultural circumstances.

immersivity and digital immersivity, but also about their discontinuities, starting from the meaning of the experience of 'being-elsewhere'. Such experience can certainly be domesticated by the socio-economic tendency to stage spaces of experience in ways that increasingly resemble the horizons of expectation shaped by our aesthetic and medial habits and by digital imaginaries. However, precisely in the experience of being-there, in the presence of the mountain, it is possible, for example, to identify oneself with the experience of those who have looked and still look at that mountain as sacred, by virtue of its peculiar morphology aesthetically transmitted – through the contact between surfaces of different scales, between my body and the body of the mountain – thus discovering that at the root of the manifestation of the spatial phenomenon lie invisible processes of slow structuration and, ultimately, of profound ecological and humanistic meaning.

Quang Nguyen Vinh (no date) *Glass Bridge at Zhangjiajie, China*. Courtesy of Quang Nguyen Vinh.

This article has been written in the framework of the project 2025HZ0978, *A Semiotic-Interpretive Study on the Ethical Adjustment of Cross-Cultural Communication in the 'Digital Silk Road'*.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640682

Spatiality, Place and Territory

An Outline of Landscape and its Experience

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This paper explores the aesthetic experience of landscape through the conceptual triad of space, territory, and Earth. It argues that territory is the semiotic structuration of space, while landscape remains unassimilated, operating as a site of desubjectification and spatial openness. The study examines how deterritorialization and landscapification disrupt dominant spatial regimes, allowing new forms of spatial relation to emerge. The paper contends that access to landscape is essential for the possibility of otherness and spatial transformation, particularly for marginalized groups, and that the experience of landscape grounds the potential for rethinking spatiality beyond institutional constraints. | *Keywords: Space, Territory, Landscape, Aesthetics, Territorialization*

1. Introduction

In this paper I seek to outline the aesthetic experience of the landscape by contending that territory is the act by which the Earth is symbolized in accordance with predisposed spatial structures. Furthermore, while territory is the configuration of a particular spatial practice, insofar as space is subjected to strong semiotization, landscape is what remains unbothered by such structures and thus outside the forces of territorialization. Hence, just as territory is the soil in which, and by which bodies individualize and subjectify by means of semiotic communication and representation, landscape is the Outside where all societal bodies (and their associated milieus) experience the complete abandonment of their territory and desubjectify, favouring new forms of intermingling and becoming that do not conform to the actual, or institutionalized, societal and political structures. Therefore, I wish to explore the aesthetic and philosophical derivations of thinking space as the relational mode of existence within an environment, per the analysis of the landscape. To be able to experience what is beyond the societal milieu, it is crucial to vouchsafe spatial freedom among those who conform it, since otherwise both the peoples whose spatial values are deemed positive (usually considered constituents of the majority) and the subcutaneous groups, which

otherwise are lacking on spatial values (thus being the minorities) either are homogenised or their places (their associated milieus) reject one another and leave no room for otherness, abetting crowding.

To elaborate this thesis, I will focus on the relationship between spatiality, place, territory, landscape, and Earth. Now, since the topic of space and its experience is itself worthy of a singular study, and since it has indeed been the focus of major works on geography, philosophy and psychology, I will not focus on this discussion. Such an enterprise would take up almost the entirety of the article. I will instead frame my understanding of spatiality (which comprehends a definition of space, its relationship to place and spatial experience) by focusing on the reticular character of space, as well as on concepts or ideas that will help better delineate the aesthetical frame of this investigation. Furthermore, regarding the connection between individual -or subjective- experience of space and the landscape, I will draw from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work the concepts of 'landscape' and 'deterritorialization'. In that regard, my understanding of territory and Earth is based upon deleuzo-guattarian philosophy, which stresses the onto-semiotical relationship between territory and the experience of space and time by underpinning the metaphysical and practical stakes of thinking the Earth as presence of virtual and chaotic forces.

In sum, this paper explores the possibility of experiencing space as 'lived Earth', that is, as the excess of all semiotic comprehensions of space as an assemblage of discrete, knowable places. When territorialised, bodies experience space in conformity with the linguistic (that are in essence political) structures that hold territory together; then the upsurge of new bodies is also the emergence of new spatialities. This means that new spatial enunciations, that is, new incarnated space experiences, must somehow appear from within territory while remaining outside of it. I suggest that this is what the experience of the landscape entails, for landscape is only lived by the evasive act of meandering, of becoming astray and devious. To witness the landscape is to witness the outsideness of the territory; hence it is also to fathom new spatialities and possible ways to structure the Earth.

2. Space, spatiality and togetherness

During his courses on perception at Sorbonne philosopher Gilbert Simondon tackled the subject of space, its definition and experience. There, Simondon (2006, p. 285) suggests that space is the primary dimension of the "milieu" and that it should not be considered as an object in itself, nor as the physical continent of things, but rather as a mode of existence. This interesting approach serves well to understand how can space perception relate to becoming and remain cohesive with Simondon's theory of individuation.[1] In essence, Simondon commits to an ontology of the pre-individual being and its process of individuation, where Being is a reticular substance that constantly becomes, or individuates. Now, for Simondon, individuation

[1] Other instances of this approach to Space, its experience and definition, can be found in Naess (1989), Relph (1976, pp. 8–9), Buttimer (1980, pp. 21–55) and Bonnemaison (2005, p. 83).

is always, at minimum, twofold, for the individual undergoes a reciprocal process of both psychic and collective individuation, which are poles of a single constitutive relation between the individual and its associated milieu. Psychic individuation is of an internal character, whereas collective individuation is external. For this reason, by externalising and moving towards the other (which can be a human or not) individuals generate a disparity within the environment that manifests spatially.

One example of this is perception, for to perceive is nothing other than to resolve a problematic, or difference that has invaded the milieu inhabited by the percipient. This unknown element represents an individuating problem: if it is a threat, for instance, the subject must respond in flight, attack, or any form of retaliation, thus individuating. The individual then individuates insofar as it perceives, because perception is itself an action that requires a subject already individuated, capable of acting upon objects, that is also part of a system that includes its individual reality and the objects it perceives or constructs. Consequently, space is primarily the physical manifestation of the reticulated existence, or interrelated persistence of things within a specific medium per the association of their respective milieus. Accordingly, space is experienced intensively, since the exterior is perceived as distance, given that the richness of received information and the amplitude of contrasts in quality and intensity gradually increase in terms of proximity. Therefore, contrast is "the most fundamental aspect of external perception and provides the basis for the perception of proximity [...], since, for the living being, for the organism in the milieu, what is positive is proximity, which corresponds to alarm, an involvement of responses" (Simondon, 2006, p. 288).[2] Distance is then primarily a gradient of proximity in respect to the perceiving organism. Indeed, it is per the perception of distance that an organism lives and interacts with a portion of space, which is its associated milieu. Apart from this, distance is also what intervenes in the perception of the relative and different planes that compose the expanse, for the subject rests situated in relation to the different spatial planes where external objects and entities carry their activities.

Hence, per the analysis of Simondon, space is an intensive magnitude. However, this is only insofar as space is defined as a distance, a definition that in turn rests upon the sensorial and perceptive fact that, to humans, space is perceived as proximity. Indeed, human space is defined by two ways of understanding distance, or rather by two modes of spatial existence. On the one hand, space is the perceived proximity of a certain source of stimulation. On the other hand, space is the distance that can be travelled per the motor activity of a given organism within and beyond its associated milieu. Both perceptions derive from the fact that, to the percipient, their own body is the degree 0° of all spatial intercourse. Anchored by its incarnated constitution, all human perceptions presuppose that things are either close or far away. Thus, human space is the reticular existence of things in terms

[2] I want to thank Taylor Adkins for providing the translation of Simondon's *Course on Perception*, forthcoming 2026, University of Minnesota Press.

of distance, this includes actions that assert proximity, or any reactions to the upsurge of spatial intervals within a given environment. Either because we perceive that things are closer, farther, approximating, leaving and meandering along the expanse, or because things themselves showcase different attitudes, predispositions or motivations that are inherently spatial, all things (be them living or not) exist 'in space'. Thus, Simondon offers a rich ontogenetic account of space as the intensive and reticulated existence of things within the milieu. A definition that remains hesitant regarding more formalized models of spatiality. One such model, which Simondon is cautious about in *Individuation in light of notions of form and imagination* (2020), is Kurt Lewin's psychological theory of space as a field of forces (*Feldtheorie*), where the environment is structured not merely by geometric extension, but by vectors of tension, directionality, and motivational charge that organize behavior within a given life space (*Lebensraum*):

> However, what seems to be lacking in the topological and hodological theory is a representation of the being as capable of operating successive individuations within it; for the topology of force fields to be modified, a principle must be discovered, and the old configurations must be incorporated into this system; the discovery of significations is necessary for the given to be modified. Space isn't just a force field, and it isn't merely hodological. For the integration of elements into a new system to be possible, there must be a condition of disparation in the mutual relation of these elements; if elements are as heterogeneous as Kurt Lewin supposes, if they were opposites like a barrier that repulses and a goal that attracts, the disparation would be too great for a mutual signification to be discovered. [...] Action isn't just a topological modification of the milieu; it modifies the very weft of objects and subject much more finely and delicately; what is modified is not the abstract topological distribution of the object and the forces: in both a global but more intimate and less radical way, the incompatibilities of disparation are overcome and integrated due to the discovery of a new dimension; the world before actions isn't just a world where there is a barrier between the subject and the goal; it is above all a world that does not coincide with itself, because it cannot be seen from a single point of view. (Simondon, 2020, p. 232)

Nonetheless, Lewin's insistence that space is defined dynamically as a field structured by the tensions and vectors shaping the subject's possibilities for action, resonates with Simondon's emphasis on proximity, contrast, and the organism's capacity for movement within a milieu and how spatial perception is a form of individuation. In this case, the field should be understood as an intensive map of tensions, affective gradients, and potentialities internal to the individuation process itself. To consolidate this reading and ground an analysis on the experience of landscape, Otto Bollnow's interpretation and expansion of Lewin's theory is crucial, as well as Yi-Fu Tuan's work regarding spatial values, experiences and place, because they drive the discussion onto the terrain of aesthetics of territory, or cultural space.

Hodological space refers to how movement and accessibility within space depends not just on physical distance but also on perceived effort, obstacles, and motivational forces. This distinction brings forward a broader sense of what space is and how spatiality should be defined, because it stresses how

the experienced and structured space through which an individual moves is shaped by psychological and environmental factors.[3] On that vein, Otto F. Bollnow proposed to discern between experienced space and mathematical space, arguing that space should be understood in two different ways, just as it happens with time. Just as there is a mathematical time, susceptible to quantification and abstract calculation (for instance, to be extensively measured by clocks) and a time as experienced by the living human being, which is intensive in nature, there is an extensive, and thus quantifiable abstract space, and a lived human space:

> If, in everyday life, we speak without further consideration of space, we are usually thinking of mathematical space - space that can be measured in three dimensions, in metres and centimetres - as we have come to know it at school and which provides the basic system of reference when measuring spatial relationships in everyday life: for example, if we are thinking about how to furnish a new apartment with our old, perhaps generously sized furniture. Rarely, on the other hand, do we become aware that this is only a certain aspect of space, and that concrete space, directly experienced in life, by no means coincides with this abstract mathematical space. We live so naturally in this environment that its singularity does not surprise us, and we give it no further thought. (Bollnow, 2011, p. 18)

In short, mathematical space is completely smooth, disjointed, and quantifiable in nature; it has no singular values, and it is a purely quantifiable space. Mathematical space is experienced as the empty form of spatiality, where all things can be measured according to formal dimensionalities. In mathematical space things relate to one another strictly per geometrical relationships, which can in turn be designated freely, as long as an overall structure is maintained. Therefore, all meaningful reticulation of this space surges from a trivial codification. No point is distinguished above one another: point A from B have no distinctive qualities other than structural ones, for both their coordinates (the point they represent within a given structure) and valence can be stripped and changed according to conventions with no natural origin. Likewise, no direction is distinguished above one another. Space is then unstructured and regular throughout and thus susceptible to all means of codification, axiomatization and structuration.

Lived space, on the other hand, has a distinct centre, linked to human experience of topology, it has ways, paths, restrictions based upon semiotic values and incorporated practices. Human spatial experience cannot exist as if entirely stripped from social norms and institutions. All human motions, particularly those of travelling, presuppose affective and geographical axis that allow paths to exist. I leave my house expecting to follow a returnable trail. Nevertheless, since driven by intensity and not mere abstract thinking, lived space manifests a certain plasticity, since paths can be created, shortcut, or altered by external forces in such ways that they cannot be backtracked. Yet all these spatial altercations are somewhat not trivial, insofar they respond

[3] It is worth mentioning Eugène Minkowski's seminal text *Verse une cosmologie* (1967), which in turn expands on his earlier text *Le Temps vécu* (2013), where he established a distinction between experienced time and abstract time, by establishing the difference between space as what is experienced psychologically, and space as a smooth extension that can be abstractly numbered and quantified.

either to external forceful encounters that reshape space and my experience of it, or sedimented motivations and incarnated attitudes that are societally institutionalised (for example, jaywalking is baleful for certain societies and thus condemned).[4] Thus, lived space is anchored by something else than abstract spatiality. We cannot experience space as entirely smooth and 'mathematically susceptible'; instead, our experience of space is highly topological, plastic and haptic. While it is by convention that lived space acquires its structure and formal axis, these are much harder to erase and reinvent. Lived space is held together by human institutions, practices and collective experience (a form of spatial coexistence) that shape the environment and help the persistence of homogeneity. In short, experienced space manifests pronounced instabilities, as there is no area of neutral values, since it is inherently related to human being by vital relationships. Thus, all lived space presupposes a territory, which is the fixed set of coordinates that stems from an intense point zero, constructed by the shared space of a society. In a way, lived space is a consequence of how and why the expanse is structured, because it follows the already codified path that allows humans to live and interact with the territory. To better understand this, two concepts are key: hodological space and ergological space.

Our experience of space is not neutral, but rather 'valenced', it is shaped by the different paths or objects which hold positive or negative psychological value depending on a person's goals. Hodological space bridges the gap between 'extensive space' (measurable and geometric) and 'intensive' or 'lived space' (shaped by perception and experience); human movement is not dictated by pure distance but by the psychological and social structure of the environment. In effect, Bollnow argues that hodological space is primarily a way to comprehend distance:

> Every map-user, such as the wanderer in the mountains, soon experiences the limits of such a geometric representation of space; for the distances experienced in real life when one traverses space do not coincide with the distance as the crow flies, or with carefully measured road distances, or, more generally, they do not coincide at all with the distance between two points expressed in metres, but in addition to this they depend very strongly on the accessibility of the destination in question, on the greater or lesser difficulties to be overcome if one wishes to reach it, and on the energy to be expended in doing so. (Bollnow, 2011, p. 181)

Experienced space is fluid, it is a way of decoding the mapping of extensive space according to intent and livelihood, for the interval between bodies is not codified according to fixed places and archetypical harmonic equations but rather paths taken by the wanderer that are easily tracked, communicable and representative of social (territorial) values. This is because hodological direction does not necessarily coincide with the direction determined by the geometrical connecting line that is imposed on me; it is rather linked to the direction that I must take with my first step according to what I esteem more efficient. I can detour from a faster but more intricate path so that

[4] On the topic of society and culture's role of praxis and experience institutionalisation see Searle (1995).

my travel is easier and more tranquil. There is a conflicting appreciation of distance and intervals of space: one that is imposed onto me, and one which I use to transform the mapped-out milieu that is readily available. Essentially, mathematical space looks to resolve this tension by applying a principle of economy that structures all extremes and smoothens them: movements and actions based on the experiencing of space present anomalies that strife from any centre, something that makes them irrepresentable and incommunicable.

Therefore, it is per society's ability to institutionalise spatial practices and construe territory, which is an oriented and shaped land (thus, a landscape), that I am expected to, for example, only travel in forward motion: I cannot wander off the highway as I wish and expect to reach my destination just as quickly.[5] In essence, territory is the space where every path is towards something allocated and deemed important by a society. Along the way I may find establishments or allotments that are interesting only in this respect, only because they are part of this path. In essence, hodological path is the way territory is 'understood' and experienced. Territory, in this sense, is the semiotic structure that relates portions of space with one another, making the expanse 'understandable' and 'communicable'. Therefore, any-space occupied by a human implies a virtual extension or length where they can act. This is addressed by Bollnow as simply 'space of action' [*Tatigkeitsraum*], or ergological/active space:

> Thus we define the space of action as the totality of places which include the objects of use around the working individual. Here no object stands alone, but the individual places are ordered into a significant whole, in which each individual object is related to other things with which it belongs. […] Each individual thing is in a spatial proximity to other things, with which it is linked by a meaningful connection. […] Thus space is structured as a totality of places and areas that belong together. (Bollnow, 2011, p. 195)

Hence, the concrete space of human life is organized by purposeful activity so that everything has an assigned place. This is the territory that is experienced and lived: an already present supra-individual order into which we are born, the place of human operation where all actions are spatially cohesive and comprehensive. Territory is human coexistence, which Bollnow defines succinctly per an example:

> When one unscrupulously extends his space, it is at the expense of the other. The one can gain space only by taking away from the other. In the context of general struggle for existence a struggle for living space takes place, in which one can win only at the expense of the other. (Bollnow, 2011, p. 240)

Consequently, because free space is needed by any human, a spatiality of 'loving togetherness' is formed. In broad terms, we inhabit territory by marrying language and land, by crafting a unity of the world through meaningful intervals or spacings. Culture dwells its territory, for the structuring of all land is based upon having a home, of claiming 'this

[5] The theme of geographical and cultural space as the basis of movement orientation and spatial experience has been extensively studied, both in unison with human incarnated condition, as well as society's semiotic being. See Sennett (1994), Hall (1990), Eco (1980, p. 219) and Bachelard (2014).

is my space'. Brief, territory is when a group of individuals 'has' space. Free space, or 'room' is the condition for all human space experience. A spatialized being is that which requires a sphere of potential places to live and individualise. Because we live ingrained in a society, and because society has its own spatiality as well (which does not necessarily correspond to the individual's) our experience of space is not just the perception of the spatial relationships between things within our associated milieu, but rather the gridded togetherness that the amalgam of various milieus conforms. The spatiality of a human being presupposes the existence of culture and territory. We cannot live space as vast and incoherent expanse where nothing is designated, and all orientations are random: we want to be places, we want to have places, indeed, we are born into a certain parcel of soil that forever remains ours (our neighbourhood, our motherland, our home). Therefore, the 'room' I experience to have is conditioned by the social value of my associated milieu, since what is spatially attributable derivates from how territory is conformed. Then, space is always experienced either as completely susceptible to semiotic structures, or as a piece of Earth already semiotized, a place of inherited coexistence:

> Space means here, quite directly, space to live and space to dwell: that space which is already expressed as a linguistic concept as being carved out like a hollow space for dwelling, out of surroundings no longer perceived as space. […] This is the place where in the most original sense space is created. (Bollnow, 2011, p. 249)

Indeed, wherever human being is present, they impose a schema of space. Such is the structural presentiality of the human individual. In effect, when there is no place, human beings sense that they are lost. Everything in space has for the human being somatic values or is at least susceptible to them: "Rooms at one end of the scale and cities at the end of the other often show front and back sides. In large and stratified societies spatial hierarchies can be vividly articulated by architectural means such as plan, design, and type of decoration" (Tuan, 2011, p. 41). To sum up, through encounters and experiences, human individuals differentiate and structure perceptual space into places, or centres of special personal significance and meaning. Indeed, what the human being perceives is distances, intervals between diverse individuals and associated milieus that interact with their environment: these distances are in turn translated to degrees of accessibility, concern and proximity: "Human beings are interested in other people and in objects of importance to their livelihood. They want to know whether the significant others are far or near with respect themselves and to each other." (Tuan, 2011, p. 46). Thus, the individual both recognises that there is a certain milieu associated to their livelihood as well as to foreign spatial spheres that perform their own spatial activities, that often denote themselves as associated milieus, with their perceptual spaces and places. This constitutes the environment, the expanse, the shape of the Earth, or simply the vast abstract spatial relations that living beings and their milieus instantiate with their presence. Thus, human beings not only experience space as interrelated places, but alter the expanse accordingly. We designate space by contraption of new

relationships that enable our activities to take place. Nevertheless, all differentiations are not done merely on the abstract space, which is but a form of existence and relationship of life. Space is manifest through the material universe.

3. Territory and its forces

Territory is the place where things become fixed, thus constituting the structural basis for every implementation of representations. In other words, within the territory, everything is meaningful and signifying, susceptible to semiotic double articulation through which the various elements of the world can be informed and communicated with ease, insofar as they are representable. This allows the world to be physically transversed, because per signs we represent the Earth as an amalgam of infinite places where we can project different and coexisting bodily instances. We can trace paths because we exercise over the physical world a semiotic articulation that enables mathematical space to co-exist, at least intentionally, with lived space. Places then populate the expanse by designating the Earth, or the land. This allows us to foresee where our bodies might be, because the chaotic world of unexpected physical encounters is acquired and retained per spatial representations, thus the experience of what is beyond our associated milieu is somewhat predictable. Nevertheless, this can only be done if the land has been somehow already articulated, that is, territorialized, for I necessitate previous sedimented spatial experiences to avoid having to trailblaze and expose my body into the wild, chaotic forces that otherwise remain unbeknownst. If I need to go across the city I live in, I dispose of innumerable resources to know exactly how I can do such a thing and preconceive the spatial relationships my body will need to overcome. This is what territory does: it sediments and institutionalizes collective spatiality.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (2002), Deleuze and Guattari define territory as the act that affects the various distances between the bodies that populate a given spatial extension. The way in which territory affects these distances is by gridding and structuring them, so that individuated and temporally sustained entities can exist. Territory allows me to establish coordinates and axes through which bodies and events can be identified: 'Where is my backpack?, 'Excuse me, do you know how to get to Boulevard Cnel. Vicente Dupuy?', and 'The shoebill (Balaeniceps rex) primarily inhabits tropical African wetlands, particularly in countries such as Uganda, Sudan, and Zambia' are all phrases that refer to a territory, because they presuppose a structure that allows things to consistently sustain their identity and be thereby identifiable, representable, and, consequently, communicable as individuals with their associated milieus. In a territory, individuals and the spatial relationships they sustain with others are referenceable and semiotically representable. Territory is thus a point in the world susceptible to reference. As part of a territory, then, individuals become structural components of a whole. In spatial terms, they represent a certain longitude, whether their own extension or the amount of space they occupy through living and acting; as well as a certain latitude – that is, the degree of power with which a body affects space.

Society, then, is founded on territory, since it is the process through which any parcel of land acquires reasonable structure and meaning. Without coding, without a geographical axiom that allows understanding and communication, there can be no society. Thus, territory is the act that "affects milieus and rhythms, that 'territorializes' them"(Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, p. 314). If the distances between individuals in a society have meaning, it is because they are part of a Same – that is, of a structure that grids them, for example through a language. Given that territorial distances are often managed by individuals according to the sensed, or simply felt, degrees of proximity, the interval between one body and another in the territory conveys and represents a regulated but overall fluid meaning. That is, every body inscribed in a territory manages its distances, which are in turn qualitatively intensive: closer or farther signifies, in a Western society, a higher or lower degree of privacy with respect to the body I approach or distance myself from. Yet this fluidity is often regulated, for society is always spatially linked according to how it lives space, how it signifies it, and how it represents it. Consequently, territory is not merely a geographic structure but also a political and social one:

> The territory is first of all the critical distance between two beings of the same species: Mark your distance. What is mine is first of all my distance; I possess only distances. Don't anybody touch me, I growl if anyone enters my territory, I put up placards. Critical distance is a relation based on mat ters of expression. It is a question of keeping at a distance the forces of chaos knocking at the door. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, pp. 319–320)

Each individual maintains a specific distance from the various things surrounding them, for territorialised bodies possess vibratory zones that reorganise with their movement: as an individual approaches something, the rhythm of that approach varies depending on whether the thing is dangerous or not, familiar or not, considered safe or not. Consequently, to navigate space consciously and intentionally, space must be in some way structured and gridded: such basic notions as 'threat', 'harmless', or 'suspicious' must somehow be coded into the traversed geography for a clear route to be followed, with its divergent paths (which give meaning to wandering) and its points of return. Territory is the process that allows heterogeneity to emerge by striating and coding a homogeneous land, because if multiple individuals gather and compose a socius, their differentiating distances will be combined to form a medium that comprehends them all. Nevertheless, within the territory each individual also loses part of their vibratory capacities: their potential for action is affected by the permeability of the space of the other. This is because territory is primarily an amalgam of distances, rhythms, and milieus corresponding to the institution of a semiotic axiom: "Critical distance is not a meter, it is a rhythm. But the rhythm, precisely, is caught up in a becoming that sweeps up the distances between characters, making them rhythmic characters that are themselves more or less distant, more or less combinable (intervals)" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, p. 320). Ultimately, territories are composed of milieus and rhythms, which are in turn constituted from the forces of chaos. Indeed, as a permeable block of space-time, every territory has an excluding outside. Hence, territory is bounded by impassable thresholds, beyond which the world is nothing but pure chaos.

Chaos is the plane where all determinations arise and vanish; it is the impossibility of connection between them, for one does not appear without the other already having disappeared, and one appears as disappearance when the other disappears as contour. Chaos is nowhere – it is a non-place of disordered forces infinitely acting upon one another, the relation of the unrelated, the connection among what is not connected at all. Everything constructed from chaos, then, remains immanent to it, since, as Kleinherenbrink (2015, p. 211) argues, "chaos refers to the fact that, since reality lacks a general organizing principle, nothing has a natural place. Every territory is founded upon a kind of unground over which it is distributed and differentiated, because every territory, insofar as it is spatial dynamism and process, articulates things doubly: it constitutes them (while simultaneously constituting itself) and dissolves them (while simultaneously undoing itself)". Territory structures the matters composing it, turning them into its own elements by means of territorialization; at the same time, territory is composed of membranes through which these elements may escape, just as new entities may manifest. For this reason, with territory lies also the act of 'deterritorialization', that is, a loss of territory, or an escape from it. One may also reconfigure the lost territory, resulting in a reterritorialization—as can be seen, for instance, in the dialect formations of certain regions, where dominant languages, structured by a majority political power, are combined with minoritized and native languages. This means that reterritorialization is not the same as mere territorialization, because it presupposes a prior deterritorialization.

When discussing territory, then, the forces of chaos become the forces of the Earth. These are not, however, experienced directly as forces, but as relations between matter and form: what is perceived is the already constituted rhythmic existence of an individual and its associated milieu. This is because chaos is an infinite speed of birth and disappearance that cannot simply be retained. Something must be configured to contain these disruptive forces. In other words, chaos must be forced to sustain an intense rhythm even before attempting to structure it through representation and signification. Thus, all territories are formed by the assemblage of environments or milieux. A milieu is a semi-stable selection from chaos, a synthetic unification. Milieux "imply the creation of a certain measure of unity that is by no means necessary" (Kleinherenbrink, 2015, p. 212), because territory itself is not something given, but rather constantly unfolds and persists, introducing a degree of sameness "by gathering heterogeneous components" (*Ibid*.).

In sum, milieus and rhythms are born from the Earth, and all individuals are elemental to the formation of a territory, as they are integral parts of the social structure. Nevertheless, all milieus are susceptible to chaotic disintegration and total dissolution: their membranes and intermediate thresholds are constantly harassed by forces that emerge from chaos. To sustain themselves, milieus establish rhythms that force chaos to be territorialized. How? By cutting into the flow of chaos, coding it, consigning or axiomatizing it in some way. This coding must also be communicable: one must be able to inform others that a territory has been established. Thus, a territory is, above all, a semiotic domain. The way

the structure captures the milieus and rhythms of individuals is through the consolidation of a stratum—that is, a complete system of codification that links signs to things through representation. What remains 'outside' it is what remains absolutely deterritorialized, where forces interact unrestrictedly with each other: the Earth.

4. The Landscape and its Dynamics: to Experience the Earth from within

Land is the territorialized expanse; it is the first degree of territory and the first instance of Earth's semiotization. It is where the first social assemblage of forces and signs happens. Land is where the hearth is placed, it is the point amidst the world where the socius gathers and rests, to where it returns and from where it launches onto the unknown. Now, this implies that Earth is forever to be outside our spatial experience of the world, while, at the same time we are, in broad terms, incarnated subjectivities 'of' the Earth. In fact, our body is the main earthly thing that forever remains accessible intrinsically to us, and yet somehow Earth remains aloof no matter how intricate our knowledge and sense of this incarnated constitution is. No matter how much our feet tremble, how much our ears pain at the encounter of acoustic blasts, how heat escapes in our breath, the Earth is unreachable by our bodily experiences. It indeed seems that Earth rests outside our spatial experience because we are primarily territorialised things; and, if Earth is what is 'outside' territory, then to experience it we should first deterritorialise, which has as a consequence the absolute loss of spatial coordinates, of individual constitution and overall vital organisation:

> The earth is certainly not the same thing as the territory. The earth is the intense point at the deepest level of the territory or is projected outside it like a focal point, where all the forces draw together in close embrace. The earth is no longer one force among others, nor is it a substance endowed with form or a coded milieu, with bounds and an apportioned share. The earth has become that close embrace of all forces, those of the earth as well as of other substances. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, pp. 338–339)

This explains why the experienced dimensions of space do not always coincide with the structured territory, since, when lived, space becomes smooth and unmoored, a place of intensities, of winds and noises. Thus, a distinction exists between two spatialities: one structured, controlled, and organised; and another open, fluid, deterritorialised, and infinite. A smooth space where one acts freely; a striated space where Earth is worked; a fluid nomadic landscape that does not take labour into account; a striated space corresponding to a state apparatus of capture, where things are valued according to a system of exchange and political bias, and where space-time is fixed through coordinates and axes that render the world legible. Therefore, to experience the Earth in a way means to dissolve our humanity in favour of new vital connections. In a sense, to experience the Earth we must become 'it' by disrupting our territory. Only do we get a glimpse of Earth as a body and a-subjective, a-signifying existence when be become landscape with it:[6]

[6] Another way of thinking Landscape and a-subjective experience is Berque's definition of 'milieu' as the relationship society has with its environment, insofar as milieux are relational entities construed per diverse 'mediations' (individual relationships). 'Médiance', then, is this liaison that shapes the land, which is in turn neither objective nor subjective but 'trajective', insofar as it is the conjugation of subjective and objective factors that configure the milieu (Berque, 1994, pp. 13–29).

> Although in extension the territory separates the interior forces of the earth from the exterior forces of chaos, the same does not occur in 'intension', in the dimension of depth, where the two types of force clasp and are wed in a battle whose only criterion and stakes is the earth. There is always a place, a tree or grove, in the territory where all the forces come together in a hand-to-hand combat of energies. The earth is this close embrace. This intense center is simultaneously inside the territory, and outside several territories that converge on it at the end of an immense pilgrimage (hence the ambiguities of the 'natal'). Inside or out, the territory is linked to this intense center, which is like the unknown homeland, terrestrial source of all forces friendly and hostile, where everything is decided. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, p. 321)

Thus, leaving the territory and interacting with the chaotic forces of the Earth removes the body from the stratum of the organism, human or animal, and connects it to other strata that remain outside all the prevalent territorial codes. The individual no longer pertains to their territory; they gain the complete vastness of the world. However, this completely deterritorialised world lacks orientation: no more coordinates, no more placed milieus compose the environment, the body becomes an earthly force among others that can only interact with territories as shapes of a smooth world. This is the landscape: it is rather the act by which corporeal and territorial coordiantes completely collapse of and the shape and outline of one's own territory is brought forth. Space then is experienced as the pure relationship of coexistence between worlds and territories, between environments and associated milieux. All landscape experience, then, implies the constitution of a landscape. Therefore, landscape is rather a vivid and dynamic process, landscapification:

> A concerted effort is made to do away with the body and corporeal coordinates through which the multidimensional or polyvocal semiotics operated. Bodies are disciplined, corporeality dismantled, becomings-animal hounded out, deterritorialization pushed to a new threshold—a jump is made from the organic strata to the strata of signifiance and subjectification. A single substance of expression is produced. The white wall/black hole system is constructed, or rather the abstract machine is triggered that must allow and ensure the almightiness of the signifier as well as the autonomy of the subject. You will be pinned to the white wall and stuffed in the black hole. This machine is called the faciality machine because it is the social production efface, because it per forms the facialization of the entire body and all its surroundings and objects, and the landscapification of all worlds and milieus. The deterritorialization of the body implies a reterritorialization on the face; the decoding of the body implies an overcoding by the face; the collapse of corporeal coordinates or milieus implies the constitution of a landscape. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, p. 181)

Space is always encountered through a specific situation that affects human perception, infusing it with qualities such as depth, density, symbolism, and affect. This bloc of space-time that conforms the spatial dimension of our land we call it territory, where our associated milieux coexist dynamically as places. Territory, then, consists of places one alongside another and the distances, or intervals, between them. This is not something to be passively observed or arbitrarily arranged, but what is embedded in human purposes, intentions, and lived experiences: place is not a fixed or uniform

category of experience; rather, it is diverse and shaped by varying human intentions and circumstances. When the bond between self and place is broken, place becomes alien, and what is experienced is how our territoriality shapes the land, how it striates the Earth. While territory is the array of definite intervals that grid individual bodies according to imposed structures, landscape is what remains perpetually 'outside' territory. Nevertheless, landscape is experienced territorially. Insofar as the Earth is the ground for all territories, landscape is where the Earth is lived as the impervious reconfiguring agent presupposed by all territorial upsurges. Therefore, landscape can be thought as the aesthetic experience of what lies beyond the territories, the brute reality that Earth's affective resonance is not constant but intermittently apprehensible, and that such intermittence is foundational to our experience of space as what is to come.

Landscape is where the subjective and the terrestrial meet, where the institutions of place, of memory, emotion, and orientation are delineated and experienced whole. Territory then, is not purely objective: it is qualified, shaped by human perception, imagination, and dwelling. Thus, landscape is the revelation of Earth's a-significance. Through the landscape we realise the superabundance of sense that the Earth harbours. Earth is not neutral, neither it is riddled with significance. Earth is the complete susceptibility of symbols, the true expanse where human spaces may become. However, the aesthetic experience of the world, the fleshly substrate that sustains and binds phenomena, is, by nature, an infrequent event. This event is given the name 'landscape'. Landscape is the encounter with a mode of existence that is at once incorporated in things and yet remains aloof, inhabited yet barren, populated yet desertic, striated yet smooth. It is through landscape that the dissolved, time-afflicted subjectivity gains aesthetic access to Earth, which otherwise remains stratified and semiotically articulated. Landscape thus not only functions as the sensible opening toward what lies beyond territorial conceptualizations of space, governed as these are by intervals, distances, geo-symbols, and emplacement; landscape is also only accessible per the dissolution of the self, which in turn means to become intrinsically related to the eventfulness of being.

5. Conclusion: to be Outside

In conclusion, we usually experience the Earth as an immense, symbolic and structured place, where time is grounded by movement and spatial axis that travers the expanse. The territorialized body is thus subject to relentless axial mutation, moving across a grid where time is quantified as the cost of spatial displacement. The journey is reduced to its metrics (how far is a point from another, how long does it take to go across certain areas) while the experiencing subject is assumed to remain identical to itself, barely unchanged. Only by sensing beyond the territorial can one apprehend the semiotic system that regulates spatial and temporal experience. From a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, landscape appears not as a static formation but as a force of 'landscapification', the no-place in which dissolved subjectivities encounter the forces that generate new configurations of bodily

and affective existence. Thus, since space is always indexed to a body-image, whenever bodies are occluded, crowded, or stratified in accordance with the social values they instantiate, no landscape can be entirely experienced. Indeed, all landscapes presuppose the detachment from territory and the acquisition of a placelessness and timelessness that goes beyond territorial temporo-spatial structures. New people emerge only through new spatial dispositions, through the actualisation of new bodily configurations that exceed prior stratifications. Therefore, domination over bodies entails the control of landscape not as object, but as experience.

Landscape is indeed the experience of an Outside that is not exteriority, because deterritorialization rests on the rupture of the sensori-motor scheme, on the loss of connection with the world, on the loss of coordinates. What exteriority is there if the coordinates that lock our ground are lost? None. But there is, in any case, that inalterable existence that ground that is not the surface, but rather the depth upon which we mount our organism, where places emerge and bodies articulate per the institution of spatiality and social striations of the world. Landscape determines the shape of our territory just as it defines the out-of-place, that structuring Outside of pure sense upon which we articulate our words and actions:

> So, this outside, [50:00] it is not at all the external world, it is not at all the exteriority of the world. On the contrary, we have every reason to believe that this outside might be capable, perhaps, of giving us back a connection with the external world. But this outside can only emerge against the backdrop of a rupture with the external world. [Pause] This outside cannot emerge, it cannot seize us—since it is a matter of being seized by the outside—it can only seize us insofar as we have lost our relationship with the external world. (Deleuze, 1984)

Indeed, to deterritorialise is to be dragged toward a space so disconnected, so inescapable, that it forever remains outside any territory, outside any stratification. It is none other than the unthought, the unthinkable and forever unbeknownst force that will forever remain out-of-bounds of our spatial experience. Time, the constant and invisible force, the immanent and eternal caesura, resides in the deepest recess of thought and spatiality. The force of the Outside, that is Time. To see Time is to see life, to see the unshakable condition of all existence. It is to witness the innocence with which Being unfolds, with which it forms both a surface and a depth, where it treasures the virulent conjunction of its power. That is why the landscape is the fundamental condition of all action, because only in this way is it possible to generate the interval, the rupture of the sensori-motor scheme.

In effect, finding oneself in a situation where the structuring of the world crumbles implies a certain cut, a certain interstice that presents itself as the Outside of every territory, of every ground, whose existence provokes the greatest insecurity; such that the actual and the virtual are the same thing, all possible connections coalesce. And so unbearable is this situation that it becomes necessary to act, necessary to survive this irrationality. How? What to do? Populate the desert, reconnect multiplicities, establish intense and

affective connections between bodies. Ultimately, Landscape is the call for new peoples, new spatialities, new territories. The desert is inhospitable; it is undeniable unbearable. The new territory that comes to inhabit this interstice does indeed exist, however outside of history, outside of narration, outside of strata; it exists insofar as it must be invented, insofar as it is both things at once.

When spatial values become rigid and otherwise non-interchangeable, there is no possibility of experiencing space and time outside given strict paradigms, which are imposed primarily by force. The upsurge of new peoples requires new spatial dispositions that correspond to the new incarnated experiences of space. Now, if the vast Earth, if our experience of Earth as such and ourselves as earthly beings is the experience of the landscape, then the domination on bodies is, partly, in the control of the landscape itself: how can you control and grid what is not an object? By controlling the experience of it, by suppressing all forms of disjointed and dissolved subjectivities that may be voiced by peoples to come.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640750

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 preseumption 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 ppears 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. Planetarity 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). Planetarity 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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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640911

From Forests to Rabbits

Reconsidering Human and Nonhuman Agency in Concentration Camps

Tereza Arndt

This article argues that Nazi concentration camps blurred the line between human and nonhuman by juxtaposing dehumanized prisoners with animals kept in camp zoos and the SS Angora project. Drawing on survivor testimonies, philosophical posthumanism, comic books, and the concept of the 'material witness', the study argues that overcoming anthropocentrism is essential for rethinking perspectives on life, memory, and testimony. The Nazi system's hierarchy of life – caring for rabbits while people starved – demonstrates how domination relies on rigid species boundaries. By treating nonhuman actors, such as trees, animals, and landscapes, as witnesses, the article proposes posthumanist solidarity and shared vulnerability. These challenges inherited notions of humanity and claims that perception should become an ethical act, involving both human and nonhuman agents, in the reconstruction of history. | *Keywords: Dehumanization, Nonhuman, Material Witness, Human–nonhuman Relations, Memory and Materiality*

1. Introduction: Between Humans and Animals

In August 1933, the satirical magazine *Kladderadatsch* published a caricature of Hermann Göring performing the Nazi salute over laboratory animals. The caption read 'Vivisection verboten', meaning vivisection is prohibited. The drawing responded to the ban on vivisection. In Nazi Germany, specifically in Bavaria and Prussia, the law took effect on April 1933. Göring, then the new *Reichsstatthalter* of Prussia, announced the end of 'unbearable torture and suffering in animal experiments'. He threatened to "send those who still think they can continue to regard animals as inanimate property to concentration camps" (Arluke and Sanders, 1996, p. 133). Evidence shows that high-ranking Nazis were actively interested in animal protection. This is shown by the *Reichsjagdgesetz* (Reich Hunting Law), adopted on July 3, 1934, and the *Reichsnaturschutzgesetz* (Reich Nature Conservation Law), adopted on July 1, 1935. According to the Finnish cultural magazine *Kaltio* (Aikio, 2003), Nazi Germany was the first country in the world to place the wolf under protection.

These systematic steps by the Nazis to promote animal and nature conservation are surprising, if not shocking, from our perspective. This is especially notable given the crimes against humanity they committed.

This example illustrates how the status of humanity is sometimes granted to certain nonhumans, such as animals, while being denied to some humans. The complex relationship between humans and nonhuman – animals becomes especially fraught in the context of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany. At that time, the Nazis simultaneously used animal language to insult Jews and herded them into concentration camps (Klein, 2011, p. 42), complicating the notion of animal protection. Our focus is not on comparing the suffering of Jews, Roma, or homosexuals with that of animals, but rather on exploring the conditions and purposes for which humanity as a value was assigned or withheld.

This text addresses species hierarchization and dehumanization in Nazi Germany, including the rejection of equality between humans and nonhumans. I aim to show that more frequent analysis of nonhuman actors in history can help us remember and better understand these inequalities, ideally motivating efforts toward their resolution.

Arthur Johnson: *A Caricature* (Proctor, 2000, p. 129)

The term ‘nonhuman’ is now prominent in philosophy, cultural history, memory studies, and Holocaust studies. It refers to more-than-human actors, such as animals or ecological entities, who challenge humanity's central place in memory and history. Linked to the notion of the ‘material witness’, the term introduces posthumanist perspectives on witnessing and subjectivity. This perspective reveals how human and nonhuman agencies are deeply entangled in bearing witness.

The nonhuman or environmental history of the Holocaust and related topics are being discussed with great intensity (Bartov, 2022; Katz, 2022; Kittel, 2023; Małczyński, Domańska, Smykowski and Kłos, 2019, 2022; Rapson, 2015, 2021). One major problem is the issue of prioritization and dominance of certain agents in the narrative and remembrance of the Holocaust. The refusal to prioritize nonhuman entities and the environment may be understandable from an ethical perspective. Focusing on nonhuman entities raises doubts about appropriate mourning and respect for human victims of the Holocaust. Nonhuman and more-than-human research, as well as the use of terms such as ecocide or animal memory, may imply that humans are being displaced by nonhuman entities, nature, and other living organisms. However, nonhuman analyses of Holocaust memory do not automatically equate victims of ecocide and genocide. There is no denial of human suffering. Instead, these analyses uncover other hurt lives and types of affliction.

We assume a common history and use its perspective to examine our topic. This approach provides us with new insights into dehumanization and the disparities between humans, animals, and other non-human entities. By examining the living conditions of humans and nonhumans, we gain a deeper understanding of how power is diminished and why this occurs. First, this study looks at nonhuman testimony and ontological contexts to reveal parallels and clarify relationships with human actors. Next, we focus on dehumanization from nonhuman perspectives and their experiences. Finally, we present examples that challenge the clear divide between humans and nonhumans. These examples illustrate the problems with anthropocentric thinking and human privilege.

This text argues that understanding the relationship between humans, nonhumans, and more-than-humans requires a framework of common history. This perspective must replace a focus solely on human-centered narratives. By exploring shared memories, particularly those involving nonhuman actors such as animals, the aim is to analyze how they witness and participate in historical and political transformations. Emphasizing their stories sharpens our analysis of these transformations and encourages sensitivity to interspecies violence. All of this still recognizes human experiences.

To form a common history, it is necessary to develop different types of perception. The need for such an approach is urgent today for several reasons. First, the spatial dimension of memory shows that even after conflicts end, traces of violence remain in the environment. These marks affect both human and nonhuman bodies. Second, in times of climate crisis and environmental devastation, we need new ways of perceiving the world. These should promote sensitivity to interspecies violence and more ethically responsible relationships with the more-than-human world (Tsing, 2015). Building on these ideas, the study emphasizes the need to reflect equally on both human and nonhuman experiences. Importantly, this does not deny human suffering. Rather, it shows that the environment and its changes co-create collective memory and provide unique testimony to violence and its consequences.

2. The Ability of Nonhuman Actors to Testify

> Things themselves are much too talkative to be treated as mute intermediaries. (Latour, 1993)

British theorist and artist Susan Schuppli conducts artistic research at the Forensic Architecture center, examining material evidence from wars, climate change, and ecological disasters. In her study, *Arguments. Should Videos of Trees Have Standing? An Inquiry into the Legal Rites of Unnatural Objects at the ICTY* (2019) she focuses on nonhuman actors and in her book *Material Witness* (2020), she describes 'material witnesses' as "nonhuman entities and machinic ecologies that archive their complex interactions with the world, producing ontological transformations and informatic dispositions that can be forensically decoded and reconstructed into history" (Schuppli, 2020, p. 3).

Schuppli attributes to material witnesses the ability to prove and bear external events. She also includes the processes that allow things to bear witness in the scope of material or physical testimony. These entities preserve evidence of events. They "harbor direct evidence of events as well as provide circumstantial evidence of the interlocutory methods and epistemic frameworks whereby such matter comes to be consequential" (Schuppli, 2020, p. 3). She states that these materials can record evidence of violence. According to her, material witnesses "continually twist between divulging 'evidence of the event' and exposing the 'event of evidence'" (Schuppli, 2020, p. 3).

Material evidence, including non-human evidence, may appear insufficient when viewed in isolation. This is mainly because it lacks explanation and context. Combining evidence with other sources and testimonies, whether similar or different, helps fill in gaps and expand our understanding. This process helps us organize our perspective and make sense of our experiences.

Material testimony needs more than looking or listening. It requires searching for links that trigger deeper memory. With nonhuman testimony, this task is even more challenging. We must set aside our human perspective and try to understand a different way of receiving information. Combined testimonies can effectively convey parts of collective memory. Their strength is in preserving the full essence of past trauma or tragic events. However, non-human and material witnesses face a challenge. They cannot testify fully on their own. As people, we must find, interpret, and speak on their behalf. We must translate their meaning and help explain it.

The argument here is that the human perspective is always present, even when non-human witnesses are involved, since humans must interpret such testimony. This creates an ongoing epistemological tension any time nonhuman testimony is considered. The point is not to eliminate or replace human testimony, but rather to reconsider who preserves memory. Witnessing is a network of relationships in which dependence signals a need for cooperation rather than weakness. Interpretation may be uniquely human, but memory itself transcends this limitation.

Video segment of alleged locations depicted on exhibit D2 at 15:36 and 15:42. Document Type: Exhibit 231 (Schuppli, 2019, p. 104)

Chief US Prosecutor at Nuremberg, Robert H. Jackson, who "made the controversial decision" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 115), based the indictment solely on the administrative archives of the Nazi regime and not on the testimony of survivors.

> Jackson's decision emphasized both the sober impartiality he attributed to such material artifacts […], but also the implicit belief that the sheer scale and transparent ambitions of the Third Reich evidenced in these records […] would convert mute witnesses into fully realized agents of legal speech. (Schuppli, 2019, p. 115)

Jackson considered these material witnesses capable of speaking for themselves – if we ignore the fact that someone had to go through them, sort them, and present them to the court – and so devastating that a stark description of the systematic plan to exterminate European Jews would elicit at least the same reaction as 'live' testimony. Apart from minor mentions (e.g., Irma Grese, a guard at Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen, was accused, among other things, of setting dogs on prisoners), the position of animals or the environment was not reflected at all in the Nazi trials. The absence of the topic of animals itself reveals the anthropocentric framework of postwar justice.

In her project *Evidence on Trial* (2014), Susan Schuppli explores a wide range of possible non-human evidence materials and presents a mosaic of testimonies of various kinds that come together in the final verdict. The investigation is conducted through a sixteen-channel installation of objects and hearings, in which these objects served as evidence during the proceedings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former

Yugoslavia between 1993 and 2017. We will now turn away from Nazi Germany to explore, together with Schuppli, the potential of nonhuman actors as witnesses. In the aforementioned text, Schuppli describes one specific trial and the evidence associated with it. It is about "unfold some of the ways in which the procedural arrangements of international criminal courts such as the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) manage, and are challenged by, the non-human witnesses or 'unnatural objects' that enter into its vast legal machinery" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 99). Schuppli does not deny the primacy of human testimony, but notes that in the prosecution of crimes by this tribunal, nonhuman witnesses were also often used as evidence. She presents a case study, the trial of Slavko Dokmanović[1] (along with additional references to other prosecutions), and discusses the role of material witnesses in the current legal system.

Dokmanović's defense attorneys presented a videotape in court that was supposed to serve as his alibi. Although he was seen at the farm where the murders took place, he claimed he was traveling south of Vukovar that day, filming his route. The date and time on the tape matched the day of the Ovčara farm massacre; however, two survivors confirmed his presence at the killings. As a result, prosecutor Clint Williamson remained highly skeptical of the filmed alibi. To investigate, Tribunal investigator Vladimir Dzuro traveled the alleged route and documented it in its entirety. This footage underwent a careful comparative analysis, after which the prosecution summoned Professor Paul Tabbush, "a British silviculturist, 'tree expert'" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 103). Tabbush examined the footage in detail, identifying several distinctive roadside trees. He explained that no two trees grow identically and their branch structures are so unique that they're considered more informative than fingerprints (Schuppli, 2019, pp. 101–103). By matching the trees in the video to their exact locations on the actual route, Tabbush concluded that Dokmanović did not follow the route as claimed. Instead, Tabbush clarified that Dokmanović turned around at a certain point and returned to the vicinity of the farm, contradicting the alibi (Schuppli, 2019, p. 103).

The analysis of the trees alone could hardly prove that Dokmanović participated in the killings, but it could prove that his alibi was a lie and that he did not travel the route described and recorded. At the same time, the testimony of the nonhuman witnesses supported the statements of two human survivors of the executions on the farm. Schuppli concludes the case in which the trees stood trial: "Since its establishment on May 25, 1993, the operations of the ICTY have generated millions of procedural records and processed a staggering number of exhibits. Out of this vast archive of evidential holdings, a videotape of a mulberry, walnut, and poplar tree have emerged to stand as steadfast material witnesses before the law" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 124).

[1] Croatian Serb Slavko Dokmanović was one of the defendants at ICTY, and after the trial, he took his own life in prison in The Hague after the verdict. He was charged, among other things, with the massacre of non-Serbian civilians that took place on the night of November 20-21, 1991. At a farm near the village of Ovčara, approximately 260 people from the Vukovar hospital were beaten, tortured, and subsequently murdered.

Schuppli stating that "the crucial role that non-human forms of testimony and new forms of evidence, such as videos of trees, have played in resolving questions of legal truth does position them as active agents in the production of jurisprudence" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 124). Simply put, an object or living entity becomes a medium of memory when it is presented before a court, assumes the role of a witness, or is incorporated into representative frameworks. The medium of memory, as a material witness, is supposed to prove the existence of certain historical events or document the behavior of specific individuals. The change in form from object to witness is a shift in function, emphasizing the ability to reveal the past, testify, and be presented as evidence.

The example of the 'trees on trial' may, in some respects, resemble the ways in which material witnesses or traces have been treated so far, e.g., in archeology. Working with non-human carriers is not new, but its ontological, political, and ethical framework is changing. In these cases, it is not merely the integration of nonhuman perspectives, where the example of trees as witnesses may not be quite convincing, as if we admit that the nonhuman must always be interpreted by humans. It is not a return to anthropocentrism; the change is that humans cease to be the sole bearers of meaning, becoming instead actors in the network, where memory arises from material processes beyond human control. From inclusion, we move to a fundamental re-evaluation of the forms of memory, testimony, and history – the past persists also in the nonhuman and is not reduced to human knowledge. This post-humanistic approach thus situates the human at the network of epistemic and ethical authority, suggesting that testimony values are grounded in relations of reciprocity and co-agency among things, objects, and environments. Moving beyond Anthropocentrism does not have human experience, but situates it within a broad ecology of witnessing, where the capacity to remember, testify, and signify extends across the more-than-human world.

Schuppli's reflection on non-human witnesses invites a fundamental rethinking of what it means to bear witness within post-humanist thought. Trees themselves need not be the most radical example of nonhuman witness; their strength lies in ceasing to be isolated evidence and becoming part of broader ecological and temporal processes that cannot be integrated into anthropocentric frameworks of knowledge. The presented example shows that witnessing is not an exclusive human act grounded in consciousness or intention, but rather a distributed process unfolding across human and non-human agents. To acknowledge nonhuman witnesses is, therefore, to recognize that the material world does not have a record of human actions but active participation in the articulation of truth. While archaeology uses material layers primarily to reconstruct human history, nonhuman witnesses are seen as memory-holders that persist beyond human narratives and place ethical and political demands in the present. It is not a new source of knowledge, but a transformation of what we consider to be memory, witness, and historical responsibility.

3. Dehumanization: Rethinking Humanity under Nazism

> Experiments on animals during the Renaissance and early Enlightenment were particularly heinous and cruel. When animals cried in pain, it was surmised by science that they were not able to reason, thus they lacked the ability to feel pain and suffering: their desperate shrieks were described by scientists as an instinctive, natural, and purely mechanical reaction. The suffering of animals was/is denied by a rationalized response, allowing people to experiment on animals without showing compassion for their fate (or demise). (Klein, 2011, pp. 42–43)

The right to rule the world, as granted to humans in the Book of Genesis, establishes a relationship between humans and animals (Klein, 2011, p. 42; Bartlett, 2002). In the Western world, based on the Judeo-Christian tradition, animals have been or are used (or, according to Klein, directly exploited) for their meat, fur, or physical strength. Until recently, their killing was not disputed by the majority of society, mainly due to the ingrained perception of their inferior position to humans. This perception of the relationship between humans and non-human actors is fundamental not only to post-humanist philosophy and, for example, memory studies, but also to the broader cultural and environmental context – in many ways, it also illustrates the superior attitude of humans toward the landscape and the surrounding environment. In addition to religious conventions, this approach is also related to Enlightenment thinking, which posits humans in opposition to nature and reduces the landscape and nonhuman entities to passive backdrops of human history or mere sources of raw materials (cf. Descola, 2013; Latour, 1993). This limiting view is proving increasingly problematic. Building upon this historical context, current issues arise not only in the treatment of animals but also in the ways society approaches the memory of traumatic places: it is primarily human destinies and suffering that are remembered, while possible destructive changes in the environment often remain neglected.

The position of animals in relation to humans is important for a more comprehensive understanding of the Nazi process of dehumanization – the inclusion of nonhuman actors who carry material and affective memory (Haraway, 2016; Weizman, 2012) in the analysis will help bridge the gap between the separate realms of the human and nonhuman worlds. Although it may seem after this introduction that the Nazis were progressive in the area of animal rights, their strategy of genocide was based on the same ‘traditional’ foundations: a being with the status of humanity is naturally superior in power to nonhuman actors. The hierarchical subordination of certain ethnic or national groups to the Aryan race was intended to ensure that their subsequent extermination would not be contested by society. Therefore, dehumanization was a key tool in the Nazi system.

The presented text offers a critical-historical analysis of human dehumanization and treats inhumanity as a borderline concept. It reflects a broader shift in historiography and the philosophy of history, giving more attention to non-human actors. However, it does not fully adopt this new perspective. Instead, posthumanistic and more-than-human approaches function as a critical horizon for rethinking anthropocentric historical thought

and for analysing how Nazi ideology systematically deprived human subjects of their humanity.

Inspired by Donna Haraway's ideas – especially making kin and challenging the concept of human exception – this approach does not expand the actors in historical narratives. Instead, it uncovers the paradox of dehumanization: hierarchically attributing inhumanity to certain groups. While Haraway seeks to ethically break the human/non-human boundary to broaden responsibility and care, Nazi dehumanization used analogies with animals and nature to justify violence and exclusion. Haraway's approach provides a contrasting background, showing that dehumanization's history is not merely a questioning of human exclusivity, but a violent, hierarchical, and exclusive redefinition.

The deprivation of humanity and degradation justified murder, torture, and experimentation on these no-longer-human beings. This was similar to how experimental animals during the Enlightenment were not seen as rational or equal to humans. This process freed the perpetrators from guilt, compassion, or responsibility.

Dehumanization was part of Nazi propaganda against Jews from the very beginning and was based on clear associations. This strategy was based on several representations, the most notable of which was comparing Jews to mice or rats. The 1940 film *The Eternal Jew* (*Der Ewige Jude*),[2] presented as a documentary, is an example of Nazi propaganda and, at the same time, preparation for the Holocaust and the so-called solution to the Jewish question using the process of dehumanization. The film was commissioned by Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, in 1939. This anti-Semitic film is composed of diverse material: footage from ghettos in occupied Poland (e.g., Łódź, Warsaw, Kraków, Lublin) taken after the invasion of Poland in 1939 by German army film units (*Propagandakompanien*) and also from staged scenes – the actors were often actual inhabitants of the ghettos. The film also includes montages of veterinary documents, mainly footage of rats; a shot of rats crawling out of a sewer is followed by an image of Jews in the ghetto, with the caption 'Jews are the rats of mankind'. There are also manipulated statistics and graphs presenting, among other things, the 'spread of Jewry' around the world, as well as footage from American films as 'evidence' of alleged control over the film industry. The film also includes, for example, pro- Zionist footage from Palestine and photographs from the archives of the Institute for the Study of Jewish Questions. Today, the film is banned and can only be screened under certain conditions, such as in closed seminars and with accompanying commentary.

Art Spiegelman, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning comic book *Maus* (1986), describes *The Eternal Jew* film as a powerful example of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda:

> The most shockingly relevant anti-Semitic work I found was *The Eternal Jew,* a 1940 German 'documentary' that portrayed Jews in a ghetto swarming in tight quarters, bearded caftaned creatures, and then a cut to Jews as mice –

[2] See also Koonz (2003), Leiser (1974), Petley (2005) and Welch (2001).

> or rather rats – swarming in a sewer, with a title card that said 'Jews are the rats' or the 'vermin of mankind'. This made it clear to me that this dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project. In fact, Zyklon B, the gas used in Auschwitz and elsewhere as the killing agent, was a pesticide manufactured to kill vermin – like fleas and roaches. [...] To accomplish that [trying to kill an entire ethnic group] required totally dehumanizing one's neighbors – one murders people; one commits genocide on subhumans. [...] In Rwanda, for example, Hutus referred to Tutsis as cockroaches. (Spiegelman, 2011, p. 115)

In the book *MetaMaus* (2011), a conversation between Spiegelman and comic theorist Hilary Chute, he explains in detail why he chose comics as the medium for his narrative, the theme of the Holocaust, and the reason why he anthropomorphized the characters. They are depicted according to their nationality – Jews are mice, Poles are pigs, Germans are cats, French are frogs, etc. Spiegelman used national stereotypes for his allegories, but he also drew on Nazi propaganda and used the narrative form to emphasize the dehumanization that the reader is confronted with on every page of the comic. This is an attempt to challenge the notion that animals are beings without consciousness, who do not feel or suffer. A similar line of thinking underpinned the concept of the superiority of the Aryan race over other people who did not meet the idea of "[...] 'superior' and 'inferior' human traits, just like they had been mapped out for animals, attributing some kind of moral justification for the former and despising the latter for the purported lack of desired qualities" (Klein, 2011, p. 43). In this respect, Spiegelman's narrative bridges the human and animal experiences and memories.

Remaining within the genre of autobiographical comics, Nora Krug's acclaimed comic chronicle *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018) also explores connections between the human and non-human worlds. Her search for identity as a German woman after the Holocaust involves mapping her family history and confronting the legacy of guilt. Krug revisits her uncle's adolescence in Nazi Germany, drawing on his 1939 school notebook, which she discovered as a child. In her book, she presents examples such as a text comparing Jews to poisonous mushrooms, accompanied by drawings of a forest and red toadstools. Mushrooms, mushroom picking, and especially the red toadstool are intertwined with German cultural traditions. Krug (2018, chapter 3) observes: "The poisonous red, white–polka–dotted mushroom is depicted in many German children's books. On New Year's Day, it is a symbol of good luck that appears on greeting cards and in marzipan sweets made in its shape". She includes a photograph of her mother as a child dressed as a toadstool (Krug, 2018, chapter 3).

At this moment, the visual metaphor transforms into a posthumanist image: the mushroom ceases to be merely a cultural symbol and becomes a material witness to the interconnection of nature, ideology, and history. Like Schuppli's 'trees on trial', it shows that even nonhuman entities bear traces of collective memory – here, however, in a different, disturbing form. In Krug's work, mushrooms and forests become places where we see how

deeply dehumanization is rooted in images of nature itself. What was supposed to be a 'harmless' symbol turned into a tool of visual toxicity during the Nazi era. We see not only a metaphorical 'comparison of humans to animals or mushrooms', but a process in which the boundary between the human and the non-human becomes an instrument of ideological power.

In the previous subchapter, the *Thing German* is the forest – der Wald. Krug quotes the German-Jewish author Berthold Auerbach, who wrote in 1832: "French should be spoken at the salon, and German in the forest", as well as Joseph Goebbels, who advocated "barring Jews from German forests" (Krug, 2018, chapter 1). Here, the forest appears as a space of national identity, purity, and exclusion – an ecological image of collective memory in which nature becomes an instrument of ideological division. As in the case of trees – nonhuman witnesses discussed in the previous chapter – here, too, the nonhuman world participates in maintaining and mediating historical experience.

A posthumanist reading thus shows that testimony cannot be understood solely as a human activity, but as a network of relationships between the living and the non-living, the human and the nonhuman. In Krug's comics book, the forest, the mushroom, and the body are witnesses that speak the language of memory encoded in the material and symbolic layers of the world. Overcoming the anthropocentric understanding of history here means accepting that nature is not merely the backdrop of history, but its co-creator – and that to understand the past, we must also listen to its nonhuman voices.

The associations involved in dehumanization are clearly and comprehensively framed: the film image of Jews in ghettos is accompanied by the caption 'Jews are the rats'; in the forest, 'you see mushrooms, that look beautiful,' but also "they are poisonous and can kill a whole family. The Jew is just like this mushroom" (Krug, 2018, chapter 3). In both cases, the logic of infection, poisoning, and threat appears – that is, an image in which the nonhuman (animal, fungus, parasite) is used as a metaphor for moral and biological degeneration.

The labelling of Jews, Roma, or homosexuals as pests, parasites, or 'poisonous' beings, reinforced by the language of propaganda, pseudoscientific discourse, and segregation laws, allowed perpetrators to reshape the ethical boundary between human and non-human. As posthumanist theory demonstrates, this boundary was never natural; rather, it is a cultural construct that served to define 'full humanity'. It is dehumanization that reveals the paradox of anthropocentrism: humanity is defined through the constant exclusion of others – those who are likened to nature, animals, or the material world.

From this perspective, Krug's work becomes not only a reflection on collective guilt, but also a sensitive posthumanist gesture of reversal. The motif of the mushroom, forest, or tree, which was an instrument of exclusion and hierarchization in the totalitarian imagination, is transformed in 'belonging' into a space of testimony. These nonhuman entities do not represent a threat,

but rather a continuity of memory that persists even where human stories have failed or fallen apart.

It becomes clear that overcoming an anthropocentric understanding of history does not simply mean 'adding' animals or plants to the human narrative, but recognizing that the world itself is a witness. Memory and testimony are not exclusive to human acts, but rather processes that extend across material and ecological relationships. Krug's 'Belonging' thus offers not only a reflection on German identity but also a picture of how the past can be read through non-human forms of life – fungi, trees, and forests – that persist as a silent yet inseparable part of history.

In this context, dehumanization is defined as the loss of humanity, which, in the issue we are examining, becomes a privilege that affects safety. Concentration camp survivors often recount the loss of identity, degradation, or loss of dignity as daily experiences. Chemist, writer, and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi writes: "The personages in these pages are not men. Their humanity is buried, or they themselves have buried it, under an offense received or inflicted on someone else" (Levi, 1959, p. 142). In contrast, Levi also shows that preserving one's humanity can be vital to survival. He describes his friend Lorenzo: "Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man" (Levi, 1959, p. 142).

Within a concentration camp, humanity is perceived as a fundamental value that supports survival by helping individuals retain awareness of their significance, abilities, and past. The camp system granted this privilege freely only to the SS, who, paradoxically, acted with cruelty and inhumanity. Ordinary prisoners struggled to maintain their humanity, and this internal value could determine their survival. Maintaining a sense of humanity could shape prisoners' futures, even under extreme conditions. Humanity is thus linked to will, autonomy, and the ability to expend the energy and creativity necessary for self-preservation.

The process of dehumanization taking place and continuing in the camps sought to strip every prisoner of their status as a human being and degrade them to the lowest conceivable level – in this case, the level of animals. Descriptions of this decline are again a frequent feature recurring in the memories of concentration camp survivors. Writer, political activist, and Auschwitz and Buchenwald survivor Elie Wiesel, for example, describes the transports to the camp: "There was little air. […] The heat was intense. Sweat streamed from our faces and our bodies. The air was thick and heavy. We were all waiting for the inevitable end. We were all crushed together like animals" (Wiese, 1986, p. 24). Neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl, imprisoned in Terezín, Auschwitz, and Türkheim, describes in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (2000): "The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity […] to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for selfpreservation he may

forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal" (Frankl, 2000, pp. 26–27). The loss of human status is also referred to in the memoirs *None of Us Will Return* (2013) by writer and Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo: "We were like a pack of animals crowding around a dish, fighting for a drop of soup. Yet, somewhere deep inside, we still knew we had once been" (Delbo, 2013, p. 23). Similarly, poet and prose writer Tadeusz Borowski, a survivor of Dachau, Auschwitz, and Dautmergen, writes in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1992, p. 35): "When the door opens, we jump out like a herd of cattle. Those who fall are trampled; those who survive, survive. That's how it is here".

The degradation of prisoners from human beings to animals was ubiquitous in the camps, but not all animals occupied the same position in this constructed hierarchy. Some animals were given more privileges than prisoners, such as dogs that were well-fed, housed, and allowed close proximity to SS officers, even sharing certain rights akin to those of humans or, rather, to SS officers themselves. Others, like vermin or livestock, were treated as unwanted or expendable. In this paradoxical and unprecedented situation, people ceased to be human beings. This paradox allows us to interpret the camps as places where the boundaries between human and nonhuman become materially and symbolically variable categories. Prisoners, animals, and their privileged or degraded status create a complex network of relationships that shows that the concept of 'human' is constructed and, at the same time, vulnerable to ideological violence.

4. Hierarchies of Life: Animals and Humans

> Whether 10,000 Russian females fall down from exhaustion while digging an anti-tank ditch interests me only insofar as the anti-tank ditch for Germany is finished. We shall never be rough or heartless, when it is not necessary; that is clear. We Germans, who are the only people in the world who have a decent attitude towards animals, will assume a decent attitude towards these human animals; but it is a crime against our blood to worry about them. Himmler's speech on October 4, 1943 (Schulz, 1967, pp. 396–397)

A few dozen meters from the crematorium building in Buchenwald, the remains of the bear enclosure, known as the *Bärenzwinger*, are still visible today. It stood just behind the barbed wire through which prisoners could see the bears – the zoo, built by camp commander Karl Koch, was financed by 'contributions' confiscated from prisoners upon their arrival at the camp, including the cost of purchasing the animals. Construction of the zoo and falconry court began in 1938 and was completed two years later. The site was intended to provide Members of the SS and *Deutschen Ausrüstungswerke* (DAW) with an opportunity for rest, relaxation, and entertainment. Employees would go to the zoo for lunch, and officers would take their families there on weekends.

Eugen Kogon describes in detail the construction and topography of the camp, including the falconry court built specially as a tribute to Hermann Goring (Kogon, 1998, p. 42): "The area held the following buildings: the falcon house proper, in ancient Teutonic style, of massive and artfully carved oak; a hunting

hall with hand-carved oak furniture, huge fireplaces and hunting trophies; a circular garden house; and the falconer's house". He states that it also included "game preserve and a cage for wildcats. Fallow deer, roebucks, wild boar, a mouflon, foxes, pheasants and other animals were kept there". Five monkeys and four bears lived in the zoo, and "In the early years there was even a rhinoceros".

The Buchenwald Memorial website documents the zoo's history and features stark archival images. The site's shocking irony lies in two coexisting realities: "The zoo demonstratively placed the well-being of the animals over that of the inmates. were punished for any mistreatment of an animal. This contrast to the mass suffering in the camp was apparently intended. In the early years of the camp, the morgue was situated next to the zoo, alongside the nearby watchtower" (Buchenwald Memorial.de, n. d.). Officers faced severe penalties for hurting animals, highlighting the tragic inversion of compassion.

The existence of this place is hardly reflected in the prisoners' memories, which is interesting because Buchenwald was not the only camp that had a zoo or menagerie on its premises. There was a similar facility in the Treblinka camp – the Treblinka Museum website states the following in the section Topography of the camp: "Another object in the area of the barracks was the ZOO. There were forest animals, such as roe deer, foxes, pigeons and two peacocks. Next to the ZOO, there was a valuables sorting square" (Muzeum Treblinka, n. d.). Patterson (2002, p. 123) quotes Treblinka commandant Franz Stangl, who said after the war that "We had any number of marvellous birds there", and then goes on to describe: "Photographs from the album of Kurt Franz, who followed Stangl as camp commandant, show a small fenced-in enclosure that confined a couple of unhappy-looking foxes" (Pattrson, 2002, p. 123). Similar to Buchenwald, the place was designated for rest:

> Here the SS men relaxed from their bloody work. The main building was a wooden cave for foxes, covered with birch branches. Wire netting prevented the animals from escape. A dovecot was built on top of the zoo. Birch benches, chairs and tables were placed in the centre of the zoo area. The entire site was enclosed with a low birch fence. Flowers rounded up the surrealistic location (DeathCamps.org, n. d.).

Like at Buchenwald, the zoo and menagerie built for guards' entertainment enforced a façade of normality that contrasted sharply with the brutal reality: prisoners were systematically denied their humanity. Memoirs frequently reveal that prisoners compared themselves to animals, highlighting a paradox rooted in Nazi ideology's peculiar morality. This ideology relied on a hierarchy in which Aryans were considered superior to both nature and other humans, who were classified as less than fully human. The animals, under SS control, symbolised domesticated nature, while prisoners were degraded below even these creatures. Prioritising animal care over prisoners reinforced and demonstrated prisoners' utter subordination. The location of the zoo, visible from the prison barracks and crematorium, heightened the psychological dominance of the guards.

Nazi rationality aimed to reshape the world through ideology, dissolving clear boundaries between humans and animals. Categorisation was guided not by consciousness but by ideology that arbitrarily determined who was or was not 'truly' human. This logic underpinned both the use of animals – in agriculture, laboratories, and zoos – and the dehumanisation of people: both became objects, rendered into things deemed 'insufficient'. This parallel shows that camps were sites of violence not just against people but also against the very idea of what it means to be human, exposing how power dictated who deserved protection, care, or recognition.

The paradox of the human and the nonhuman in concentration camps opens up the possibility of using a posthumanist lens to interpret the past. Nonhuman forms of life – animals, fungi, trees, and forests – can function as silent yet effective witnesses that capture and carry historical experiences. At the same time, they can serve as witnesses in court and provide a framework through which collective memory and trauma can be understood and addressed. Accepting this perspective transcends the traditional anthropocentric narrative: memory and testimony are not exclusive to humans, but rather processes that extend across material and ecological relationships. This also challenges the Western hierarchy, which, in its transformed form in concentration camps, determined who was 'fully' human. Humanity and inhumanity are variable categories that are constituted in the dynamics of power, care, and testimony.

In 1945, reporter Sigrid Schultz discovered a hand-bound album in Heinrich Himmler's villa, its covers made of sheep's wool and inscribed with 'Angora' and 'SS.' The album provided evidence of *Project Angora*, an obscure program initiated by Himmler to produce sufficient angora wool to supply warm clothing for several branches of the German military. The project officially began in 1941 with 6,500 rabbits. It will likely come as little surprise that these rabbits were housed in concentration camps, including Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, Trawniki, and Mauthausen. Schultz writes: "In the same compound where 800 people filled barracks built for 200, rabbits lived in luxury in elegant hutches. In Buchenwald, where tens of thousands starved, rabbits enjoyed scientifically prepared meals. The SS who whipped, tortured, and killed prisoners ensured that the rabbits received loving care" (Schultz, 1967, p. 396).

Project Angora offers a precise illustration of the Nazi regime's perverse ethical hierarchy. The regime allocated meticulous care to rabbits – contrasting sharply with its systematic starvation and abuse of human prisoners – inverting normative ethics in favor of ideological values. This calculated display of animal welfare as cultural advancement highlights how civilization can mask profound moral failure. As is often mistakenly attributed to Adorno: "Auschwitz begins wherever someone builds a slaughterhouse and says: these are only animals".[3] *Project Angora* exemplifies as well how the Nazi logic of dehumanization operated through shifting hierarchies of value. Within this context, care and cruelty were not opposed, but rather intimately connected – what determined

[3] Charles Patterson cites German Jewish philosopher, Theodor Adorno, who he claims said "Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they're only animals" (Patterson, 2002, p. 50). However, there is no evidence that Adorno said those words. See also Stuart (2020) and Anonym (n.d.).

care was a constructed utility, rather than any sense of shared humanity. Human beings labelled 'subhuman' were denied care and dignity, while nonhuman animals were objects of attention because they served state goals. This exposes the moral risk of anthropocentrism: the capacity for care is neither universal nor naturally aligned with the human, but instead contingent on arbitrary classification and utility. *Project Angora* thus compels us to question any ethical system that distributes care based on constructed categories, revealing the dangers of subordinating ethics to ideology.

Project Angora can be understood by directly comparing the existence of zoos and menageries in camps to the keeping of rabbits in high-quality hutches. In both cases, animals were treated as objects of care, aesthetic pride, and symbolic control. In stark contrast, prisoners were systematically stripped of their humanity and degraded below even the status given to these animals. This paradox clearly illustrates how power hierarchies define who is considered 'worthy' of care and who is deprived of rights and dignity. The connection between *Project Angora* and camp zoos thus provides a framework for exploring how testimony and memory can extend across both human and non-human actors. The presence and care of the animals become material witnesses to an ideological logic that values life based on usefulness and controllability, highlighting that ethical responsibility is shaped by cultural and power constructions, not limited to human concerns alone.

Camp commandant Karl Koch with his son in the onimal enclosure (1939) (Buchenwald Memorial.de, (n. d.)

Rabbit Hutches at Dachau (1943) (The Wisconsin Historical Society, 1996)

5. Conclusion

When discussing this issue, it is crucial to emphasize one fundamental point: the very idea that certain people can be hierarchically subordinate to other groups of people or animals is fundamentally flawed and ethically unacceptable. Such hierarchization of people and animal species reproduces the logic of evaluation and superiority that underlies the dehumanization and violence that took place in concentration camps. Historical examples, such as *Project Angora* or camp zoos, illustrate how power systems construct artificial boundaries between the human and the non-human, attributing privileges or care only to selected actors while depriving others of their rights, dignity, and chances of survival. Recognizing and rejecting these artificial hierarchies is not only essential for understanding the past but also for defending fundamental ethical values in the present and future. Only by challenging such systems of devaluation can we genuinely affirm the dignity and worth of all beings.

An alternative to this hierarchical way of thinking may lie in a posthumanist approach, where the world is understood as a network of interconnected human and non-human actors, among whom the principles of solidarity and equality apply, rather than superiority or inferiority. This is the only way to dismantle the ideological constructs that legitimize the dehumanization of people and the determination of who is 'higher' or 'lower'. Instead of categorization, which produces hierarchies and exclusion, space opens up for an ethic that recognizes the value and participation of all actors – human and non-human – in a shared world.

At the same time, it must be remembered that posthumanism is not the first, nor the only, way of thinking that analyses the human relation to the nonhuman. Relationship is also present in other concepts, but it is a type of relationship and perception of the abilities of nonhuman actors. The difference between posthumanism and earlier conceptions also lies not only in the degree of sensitivity to the nonhuman but in questioning the exclusivity of the human subject.

The theme of dehumanization in concentration camps shows how power ideologies hierarchically divide life – human and non-human – according to their own logic of superiority and usefulness. This paradox defines 'appropriate' humanity not only symbolizes the moral perversion of Nazi ideology but also reveals the long-standing cultural assumption of anthropocentric thinking, according to which humans can hierarchically subordinate other humans or other species. Such hierarchies are not only ethically problematic, but also analytically limiting: the world cannot be understood solely through human categories and human privilege. Memory and experience are spread across human and non-human actors – trees, fungi, animals, and material objects function as 'material witnesses' that allow us to read the past and think about the present through a broad ecological and material context. The examples presented demonstrate that recognizing non-human actors and their testimony and perspectives can offer not only new interpretations but also an ethical framework that transcends anthropocentrism and ideological hierarchies.

It is necessary to overcome thinking that evaluates and hierarchizes life and instead strive for solidarity and equality between human and non-human actors. Such a perception allows us not only to understand how dehumanization arises and functions, but also how it can be resisted – by recognizing the value and subjectivity of all forms of life, not just those that are privileged, superior, or 'useful'.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18640941

The Atmosphere of the Living

Gernot Böhme and Adolf Portmann on the Boundaries of Aesthetics and Ethics of Life

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The text creates space for mutual interpretation and reinterpretation of the aesthetics of philosopher Gernot Böhme and the phenomenal morphology of biologist Adolf Portmann. Both of these ambitious projects aim to radically reform their disciplines (aesthetics and biology) by breaking away from the subject-centric and logocentric foundations of modern anthropology. Using Böhme's concept of atmosphere, we develop Portmann's notion of self-manifestation and the unaddressed phenomenon of living beings. In doing so, we remove Portmann's categories from their scientific context and limit Böhme's dynamic model of things to living beings. Finally, based on the phenomenology of the living outlined above, we formulate an ethics of relation to living beings. | *Keywords: Atmosphere, Life, Bioaesthetics, Phenomenon, Bioethics, Gernot Böhme, Adolf Portmann*

1. Introduction

The concept of atmosphere, developed in the 1990s by German philosopher Gernot Böhme, represented an ambitious impulse that post-phenomenological philosophy brought to aesthetics. 'Atmosphere' was supposed to radically transform the traditional modern self-understanding of aesthetics and even its place within the philosophical disciplines. The 'new aesthetics' of atmospheres, as stated in the subtitle of Böhme's book, also presupposed a revision of fundamental ontological and anthropological determinations. Our text will therefore first summarise Böhme's basic premises, and we shall then attempt to develop them in contexts to which the author paid only marginal attention. Böhme conceived his concept of atmosphere in connection with philosophical anthropology, he considered the development of the concept of atmosphere to be the 'central theme' of anthropological inquiry (Böhme, 1985, p. 192). In the field of philosophical anthropology, Böhme sought to develop a different strategy for this discipline than what he considered traditional, namely the search for anthropological difference, i.e., drawing a line between human and non-human life (Böhme, 1985, p. 7).

If, according to its author, the theory of atmospheres is to imply an understanding of human that avoids logocentric rationalism, then human reason cannot serve as a distinguishing feature that humans possess exclusively. We will attempt to show that Böhme's project nevertheless retains certain strong affinities with the classical form of philosophical anthropology, insofar as its core is a certain non-reductionist theory of life, or "biophilosophy" (Fischer, 2009, p. 154). So, the question arises as to whether atmosphere can serve as the basis for a newly understood theory of intersubjectivity that will not be limited to the sphere of human subjects.

We can see a sign that our inquiry is on the right track in the fact that Böhme repeatedly refers to Adolf Portmann in his well-known book devoted directly to the aesthetics of atmospheres (Böhme, 1995). Although Portmann is known as one of the pioneers of the aesthetics of the living, he is also unanimously considered one of the founders of philosophical anthropology in its classical form (Honneth and Joas, 1988; Fischer, 2022; Novák, 2024) – which Böhme seeks to overcome. If anthropology and the aesthetics of the living have unexpectedly come together in this way in the concept of atmosphere, then we can expect that the innovative ontological status of atmospheres will transform both of these traditional disciplines.

2. What is meant by Atmospheres?

The concept of atmosphere promises to transcend modern aesthetics in its tradition from Kant to Adorno and Lyotard in a number of respects. The aesthetic experience should cease to be primarily a matter of reflection and aesthetic judgment and return to perception in its original form. Therefore, the most adequate object of aesthetics is no longer to be a work of art in its isolating autonomy from everyday human practice. Seen from the recipient's point of view, atmospheres are spaces of presence that emerge from things and situations and open up to methodically unrestricted perception. Seen from the producer's point of view, the creation of atmospheres is the subject of a number of applied disciplines that aim, in the broadest sense, to present or stage something (architecture, scenography, advertising, cosmetics, etc.).

A prerequisite for a proper understanding of this theoretical model is overcoming subject-object dualism and traditional ontology. Atmospheres fully reign where there is no need to methodically establish a distinction between subject and object as disjointed spheres; they are therefore at home in most dimensions of everyday life. Atmosphere connects the perceived thing with the perceiving person, who thus feels the presence of the thing or situation – as something that literally bodily belongs to oneself.[1] But this is also a way in which the perceiver is present as the one who is a feeling and physically experiencing being, not just as a distanced *res cogitans*.

[1] For this reason, Böhme devotes philosophical attention to the issue of elements such as air and water, which are experienced exemplarily as 'nature that we ourselves are' (our lived body), rather than the objectified nature of science (Böhme 1993).

An adequate ontological understanding of atmospheres, therefore, also requires a revision of the ontology of the thing. We should not understand the thing as a self-identical substantial core that concentrically integrates the thing's own qualities. On the contrary, the being of the thing must be thought of as an ecstatic emergence from itself. All beings spread their own presence in something other from themselves, actively intervening in the space around them and actually co-creating this space. (Even an inanimate object ecstatically comes out from itself, for example, by tuning the colours of its surroundings with its own coloration; its presence enters into the behaviour of living beings in its surroundings, for example, as certain suggestions for movement.) The reason why the prevailing philosophical tradition has mostly overlooked atmospheres[2] lies in the fact that it has found it difficult to find ontological models by which to describe it. Atmospheres were mostly described as feelings, moods, affects, and synaesthetic perceptions, which would not be wrong if it were not disqualified in typical modern thinking as something merely subjective and indistinguishable, which cannot be clearly recognized and is therefore not suitable as an object of theoretical interest. For this reason, Böhme speaks of atmospheres as something 'quasi-objective' in order to counter the prejudice rooted in traditional philosophical thinking. In fact, atmospheres precede subject-object differentiation.

Atmospheres are not a pure, empty medium, as they help shape not only perception but also the existence of the perceiver. Thanks to atmospheres, the perceiving being uncovers the possibilities of its existence in a specific situation, it can 'tune' itself. However, atmospheres are not in a position of something predetermining – an atmosphere can be accepted or avoided. Ultimately, each atmosphere derives its specific nature from the perceiving being and its attitude toward this atmosphere.

Since atmospheres emanate ecstatically from living beings, but also from things and their constellations, Böhme sees great potential for aesthetics in theoretically processing the practical experiences of various fields of design. Perhaps even more important, however, are the socially critical possibilities of such a reformed aesthetics. The concept of atmosphere allows for the analysis of, for example, the architecture of official buildings or the arrangement of public spaces, as well as criticism of the choreography of political meetings and the staging of media appearances.[3]

3. Atmosphere of Light and Approach to Living Beings: Buytendijk and Portmann

After this recapitulation, let us leave aside the possible contribution of the concept of atmosphere to general aesthetics and its social applicability and turn to the specific question of how atmospheres relate to living beings

[2] Traditional aesthetics recognized almost exclusively the atmospheres of 'beautiful' and 'sublime'; W. Benjamin came closest to the general concept of atmosphere as such with his concept of aura (Böhme, 2017, p. 20).

[3] If bodies (e.g., of marine mollusks or fish) are transparent, the internal organs are arranged symmetrically, whereas in opaque bodies they are arranged very asymmetrically. Conversely, markings on the surface of opaque bodies exhibit a symmetrical structure (Portmann, 1957).

and life as such. Böhme himself marginally but repeatedly mentions the work of two 20th-century biologists, Adolf Portmann and Frederik J.J. Buytendijk (Böhme, 1995, p. 42; Böhme, 2017, pp. 95, 97). The following section will therefore present the ideas and research of these authors, insofar as they may be of interest to the theory of atmospheres.

In the first half of the 20th century, Dutch physiologist Buytendijk came up with the idea that organisms are characterized by demonstrative value, actively revealing themselves in various ways as distinct from their surroundings. While organs are usually built strictly for purpose and economy, organisms as a whole are not governed by this economy and invest a lot of energy in building (anatomical as well as behavioural) structures that serve only the 'luxury' of making themselves visible (Buytendijk, 1958, pp. 1–12).

After World War II, Swiss zoologist A. Portmann devoted most of his work to the detailed elaboration and specific verification of this idea, which Buytendijk had only briefly outlined. He based his work on the empirically verifiable fact that in many animals, the structure of their internal organs differs depending on whether their bodies are transparent or not. According to this fact, the possibility of being seen by other beings significantly affects the internal structure and function of organs involved in metabolism and reproduction.[4] It means vital functions that are consensually seen as the most basic. Portmann generalises this principle to the entire field of sensory perception. And consequently, he postulates 'self-manifestation' (*Selbstdarstellung*), the ability to enter the sensory fields of other beings, as one of the vital functions of organisms. Based on that, he seeks to reform the traditional zoological discipline of morphology in such a way that its subject matter is not only anatomical structure, but all perceptible (somatic and behavioural) manifestations spontaneously spread by living beings. Portmann calls the totality of these manifestations of a particular living being its form (*Gestalt*).

In connection with other vital functions, Portmann focuses on proving that self-manifestation cannot be understood merely as a secondary effect of, for example, metabolism. Similarly, self-manifestation cannot be seen as the result of evolutionary selection processes, where a certain form brought an advantage to its carrier (e.g., cryptic coloration in relation to predation or conspicuousness in sexual selection). Alleged primary biological functions associated with self-preservation and reproduction are often integrated and used in a specific way for self-manifestation, i.e., to enhance the appearance of a given being. So, the self-manifestation even appears to be more primary. Portmann argues against reducing self-manifestation to an acquired selective advantage in the struggle for survival by pointing out that all functional structures within the self-manifesting appearance arise only secondarily.

The self-manifestation of a living being always remains to some extent an 'unaddressed phenomenon' that is not intended for the sensory receptors

[4] If bodies (e.g., of marine mollusks or fish) are transparent, the internal organs are arranged symmetrically, whereas in opaque bodies they are arranged very asymmetrically. Conversely, markings on the surface of opaque bodies exhibit a symmetrical structure (Portmann, 1957).

of any other being.[5] (A typical example given by Portmann is the complicated ornaments of deep-sea snails, which no one can see in their environment because none of the deep-sea inhabitants has sufficiently developed eyesight, and moreover, there is not enough light.) Portmann balances here on the borderline between two perspectives. On the one hand, he highlights various striking structures on the surfaces of insects, birds, and mammals (outgrowths, feather crowns, colorful coat patterns) that have no vital function, and considers them a sign of self-manifestation. However, the absence of a functional explanation depends on the current state of biological knowledge, regardless of the fact that these structures may have survived from a past period of evolution when they did have a function. But given that self-manifestation concerns the whole of a living form (*Gestalt*), Portmann is forced to admit that "no one can completely isolate survival functions from self-manifestation functions" (Portmann, 1965, p. 222). From this second perspective, self-manifestation cannot be demonstrated on any specific feature; self-manifestation is perceptible to the senses, yet it is transcendent.

When Portmann occasionally developed the idea of the primary non-addressability of the self-manifestation of living forms, he arrived at a more metaphorical concept of 'space of light' (*Lichtraum*), towards which every living form is oriented. This general relation to the space of light is a condition for the possibility of concrete visual, auditory, and olfactory communication. Portmann acknowledged the (co-)evolutionary origin and usefulness of specific sensory organs and certain perceptible features of living forms for the preservation of individuals and species. In case of self-manifestation, he doubted whether it could be considered a function at all, since it is a general principle of living matter.

The fact that the project of phenomenal morphology remained on the margins of mainstream biology was partly due to Portmann's lack of awareness of the non-empirical nature of such a discipline. At a time when there were no specialized departments of philosophy of biology or biological didactics, he was forced to try to integrate 'self-manifestation in the space of light' into the framework of empirical zoology (cf. Klouda, 2021).

4. Portmann and Böhme interpret each other

At first glance, it is not difficult to see the similarities and differences between the two theoretical models presented above. Both agree on the ecstatic nature of things that operate in another; both consider aesthetic experience important, because according to Portmann, it gives rise to self-manifesting appearance. However, Böhme speaks of the atmospheres of all things, including artifacts and inorganic nature, while Portmann limits self-manifestation to living beings only. For the former, atmospheres always exist in the plural; the latter postulates a single universal space. We also find a number of differences in the description of the effects of atmospheres, or self-manifestation, but these are due to the different areas of interest

[5] The most important texts to this topic are (Portmann, 1965 pp. 212-229; Portmann, 1970, pp. 40–75). Cf. proufound studies by (Wild 2021) and (Conte 2021).

of the two authors. In the following considerations, we will remain within the scope of Portmann's theory, i.e., in the realm of the perception of living beings. However, we will confront the elements that we consider most problematic in Portmann's theory with Böhme's theory, which is, of course, more philosophically elaborated.

Perhaps the most problematic feature of Portmann's phenomenal morphology is his thesis about the primarily unaddressed nature of self-manifestation. The focus of a living being's appearance on the 'space of light' evokes pre-modern metaphysical and mystical speculation and leaves open the question of the ontological nature of this sphere. However, if we view self-manifestation through the prism of atmosphere theory, we can avoid a number of difficulties.[6] According to this view, the self-manifestation of a living being is indeed the space of its presence, which is given to others. However, this presence is not exclusively an affective and cognitive reflection in the nervous system of other beings. Therefore, Portmann connects self-manifestation with the pseudo-objective sphere of light, just as Böhme refuses to reduce atmospheres to subjectivity. Portmann's sphere of light cannot, however, be something completely external, truly objectively distinguishable from the physical existence of living beings. Space in this sense is not a geometric extension, but an illuminated sphere that always belongs to a living being as a living being and in which it bodily finds itself and its environment. In the illuminated space of 'bright' discernibility (which we could call in Uexküll's term *Umwelt*), a being can establish various relationships with other beings of its kind and of other kinds. Therefore, the self-manifestation of the embodied form (*Gestalt*) is intrinsically connected with light, because according to Böhme (cf. Böhme, 2013, p. 137), it is also light that spreads from it like an atmosphere.

A quasi-objective nature of self-manifestation, therefore, has a meaning that cannot be reduced to the state of the recipient. Here, however, Böhme comes up with the claim that it is ultimately the attitude of the recipient that determines the final tuning of a given atmosphere. Portmann himself realized that the facts of self-manifestation (objectively focused on 'light') cannot be easily distinguished in empirical reality from the facts of self-preservation functions connecting living beings with each other. Böhme reckons that the atmosphere is completed by the recipient's attitude, without this contradicting the quasi-objective nature of atmospheres. These remain something external, alien, but which have a place in the life of every (human) being. This does not contradict the understanding of man as an autonomous being; on the contrary, Böhme offers a more realistic understanding of autonomy, according to which the subject "is able to live with moments within himself that he does not cause" (Böhme, 1984, p. 205). In the latter quotation, it is important to note that although atmospheres embrace (human) physical existence, they are not the cause of its homogeneity or integrity.

6 In the second, augmented German edition of *Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, Böhme included two short texts that deal specifically with light as atmosphere (Böhme 2013, pp. 134–158) which are not included in the English version. In these, however, Portmann's ideas no longer play any role.

Let us now try to think about self-manifestation in Portmann in a similar way. All addressed visual, auditory, and other manifestations of living beings, however undeniable their usefulness and however unambiguous their communicative function, will nevertheless remain something that is external, so to speak, to both the emitters and the recipients. The quasi-objective nature of self-manifestation (its addressability to the space of light) can also be interpreted as meaning that no act of cognition exhausts the phenomenon of a living being completely and utterly. Therefore, perception is interpretation and includes room for evolutionary development. Portmann often described the relationship between a living being and its world as a pre-established relationship, or spoke about transcendence of appearance towards self-preservation; to use a more traditional philosophical term, this self-manifestation addressed to the sphere of light is an a priori to all concrete relationships (Portmann, 1965, p. 8; Portmann, 1970, p. 73).

Portmann was ultimately only able to evaluate this view in a negative, critical manner. Understandably, it could not become a positive part of his morphological studies as an empirical fact, which is why this insight manifested itself in his work as an irreconcilable criticism of Darwinian selectionism as the main explanatory principle of the life sciences. This, of course, led to the fact that his phenomenal morphology was being mostly ignored by the professional biological community.[7]

5. A priori of Perception and A priori in Perception of the Living

By comparing Portmann's and Böhme's ideas, we have now reached a common area where living beings can meet. This area is supposed to have an a priori nature in relation to various forms of life, i.e., to function as a necessary condition of possibility. Let us leave aside the question of whether scientific biology would need such an a priori structure for its research. Instead, we will attempt to explain the philosophical consequences of this newly glimpsed a priori area.

We are dealing with a sphere that concerns sensory perception, or rather, appearance and experience.[8] Portmann himself spoke of the self-manifestation of a living being that is accessible to 'naive', non-analytical perception, or he speaks directly of an 'aesthetic attitude'. However, we cannot imagine such an attitude as simple contemplation. If, according to Böhme, the establishment of an atmosphere presupposes an act of acceptance on the part of the recipient, then we must assume this act within the 'space of light' if we want to understand it in the same way as an atmosphere. The atmosphere, something 'in us which we do not cause', enables perception in the most fundamental dimension, which is encountering something else.

7 If Portmann understood science in a more pragmatic sense, according to which its highest virtue is not the possession of fixed knowledge but constant openness to its revision, this would not necessarily lead to his marginalization from the biological mainstream.

8 We would prefer the terminology of appearance and experience to avoid the tradition that understands perception as a causal process between certain organs (receptors) and isolated sensory data. On the other hand, perception is understood more as a physical, motor process, and in this sense, atmosphere is not only an external medium, as it is also the internal 'mood' of the recipient.

Portmann's primary connection of self-manifestation with the sphere of light anchors the perception of living forms in irreducible otherness. This is ultimately always present in any manifestation of life, just as self-manifestation is ultimately non-addressable. To perceive a living being as living means to perceive its fundamental otherness (a priori) before I perceive the fullness of all the details of its appearance. To live – to perceive – means to experience one's own non-identity.

In non-human living beings, we attribute most unlearned animal behaviour to instinct. However, it would be wrong to consider instinct blind and mechanical. If it controls an animal's movements, it guides it like a need, an experienced deficiency (food, partner, etc.), i.e., a certain form of experienced non-identity. In the case of humans, this non-identity will take a different form, but this is not an argument against the above.

Self-manifestation and its experience thus represent a certain parameter in which all living beings participate to some extent and from which they draw the ability to understand themselves and their world. We obtained this transcendental structure together with Portmann through morphological analysis of the structure of living bodies and the way in which they are perceived by other beings. Since we are not starting from human thinking and its inherent necessary contents, as was the case in the prevailing Western tradition, we can assume that such a model may offer certain potentialities. It constitutes a sense of belonging among living beings, which, apart from embodiment and perception, does not presuppose any common basis, any identical core that all living beings (such as DNA) would have in common.

6. Conclusion: From 'New Morphology' to a New Ethics?

Of course, it can be argued that such a theory will always be negative in nature, useful at most as a critical principle. Portmann's morphology was unfortunate in that, as a theoretical discipline, it failed to expand knowledge in its field. However, it might have had more luck if we had transferred its methods to the field of action and ethics. Although it would not be able to formulate general normative principles here either, in this area, the elimination of errors is already an expansion of the field for reflection and action.

If it is true that we never fully and completely recognize a living being in its self-manifestation, then this presents an obstacle to identifying with animals. At first glance, this claim might sound controversial; on the contrary, it seems that identification actually gives us a greater degree of compassion. However, human identification with the genus 'animal' traditionally follows a second step in the formulation of species difference, 'rational' (animal rationale). The species characteristic of 'reason' is hierarchically superior to animality, just as form is superior to matter. Since ancient times, the practice of ethics has consisted in cultivating, taming, or restraining the 'animal' with which we identify ourselves. This, of course, then confirms the systematic disciplining and exploitation of the animals around us. For if we already know animality well from our own (suppressed) inner selves, which we also are in some way, then they can be of no use to us other than for calculated benefit.

However, if we learn to systematically resist such identification and each living form remains a symbol or trace of an unmanipulable 'space of light', then encounters with 'animals' in the atmosphere of their self-manifestation will be a search for our own possibilities and an enrichment of our self-knowledge. Our response and acceptance of the self-manifestation of other living beings may therefore be a feeling of wonder, respect, and perhaps even gratitude, rather than compassion.

The failure of Portmannian morphology, which sought to open up the realm of living forms to an aesthetic approach, did not lie solely in its lack of empirical evidence. To the same extent, this failure was also a discovery of the ethical dimension hidden within the aesthetics of life.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18641059

De-humanize!

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

Tereza Hadravová

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.

My heartfelt thanks to the organizers of the annual conference jointly organized by the Czech Society for Aesthetics and the Slovak Association for Aesthetics, held in Ústí nad Labem on 9-10 October 2025, for inviting me to give a keynote lecture on the conference theme "human, out-of-human, nonhuman". This paper, a revised version of that lecture, benefited greatly from the discussion with the audience. I would also like to thank the referees for their feedback.

This work was supported by the project Susanne K. Langer: Cognitive Aesthetics (GA25-17273S), funded by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18641111

Stories Told to Hide the Truth

Climate Disinformation, Animal Behaviour and the Nature of Narratives

Šárka Lojdová

In her recent article *Overcoming Climate Breakdown Denial and Neglect through the Aesthetics of Nature* (2023), philosopher Marta Tafalla argues for the possibility that one can learn about global climate change (GCC) if one listens to animals and stories nature itself tells us. Contrary to Tafalla, I argue that her suggestion is overly optimistic. In my paper, I first demonstrate that Tafalla assumes the link between cause and consequence always corresponds to findings in environmental science, and that this assumption is unfounded. Second, I examine the strategies and narratives employed by anti-environmentalists and demonstrate that they utilise the same narrative structures as Tafalla when telling animal stories. Accordingly, I claim that one can learn about GCC from animals' stories if and only if one already acknowledges it. | *Keywords: Marta Tafalla, Narrative Structures, Global Climate Crisis, Environmental Aesthetics, Animal Stories*

1. Introduction

In view of the ongoing global climate crisis, ecosystem collapses, and the technological boom, including the expansion of Artificial Intelligence, scholars' interest in reconsidering what it means to be a human in the Anthropocene has been growing. There are visible trends in the humanities and social sciences that criticise the core principles of humanism, namely the superiority of humans over nonhumans and the essential specificity of human beings, as well as their unique or privileged position in the world. More and more scholars argue that humans are part of nature, and there is no reason to put them on a pedestal. Exploring the limits of humanism becomes even more critical in the context of technology. In 2013, Rosi Braidotti published her influential book, *The Posthuman*, laying the solid foundations for what would come to be known as posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013). Similarly, the philosopher Vinciane Despret systematically argued for abandoning human exceptionalism in favour of focusing on animals.

In her *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* (Autobiography of an Octopus), she adopts the point of view of this cephalopod while experimenting with the forms of academic and fiction writing (Despret, 2021).

There are, however, less radical attempts to abandon the anthropocentric perspective, or at least, to renounce the idea that humans should dominate nature. In 2023, Marta Tafalla published an article titled *Overcoming Climate Breakdown Denial and Neglect through the Aesthetics of Nature* (Tafalla, 2023), linking an ongoing climate crisis with aesthetics and one of its traditionally most significant topics, nature. Generally speaking, Tafalla is interested in how aesthetics, as a philosophical discipline and, in particular, the aesthetics of nature, can contribute to solving – or at least slowing down – climate change, which I believe is vital given the urgency of the matter. In my view, any scientific discipline, including the social sciences and humanities, should reconsider its role in relation to the global climate crisis (GCC). In this respect, I follow the call of scholars such as Jukka Mikkonen and Sanna Lehtinen, who urge aestheticians to reflect on GCC and environmental protection (see Mikkonen (2022), Mikkonen and Lehtinen (2022)). Tafalla's goal is, however, more ambitious: as the title of the paper suggests, she aims to show that aesthetics of nature can serve as a counterweight to voices denying and neglecting GCC, specifically, she argues that to become aware of GCC, one should abandon the traditional superficial view of nature, replace it with a profound aesthetic sensitivity based on less anthropocentric understanding of the nature. To do so, we should listen to the stories and narratives told by nature, particularly by animals.

Although I wish Tafalla were right and that the aesthetics of nature could persuade GCC deniers to change their minds, I am unfortunately quite sceptical of this possibility. In this paper, I focus on several shortcomings of Tafalla's study.[1] First, I reconstruct Tafalla's position regarding GCC, the aesthetics of nature, and her emphasis on a direct observation of animals and their experience. Second, I focus on Tafalla's understanding of narratives and stories and demonstrate that her account is insufficient to distinguish narratives informed by the natural sciences and ecology from counternarratives disseminated by climate sceptics. I argue that both of these kinds of narratives have the same structure, and that it is necessary to add some condition or criterion upon which it would be possible to tell them apart.

[1] It might be surprising that only a limited number of scholars in environmental aesthetics address GCC. Jukka Mikkonen, for instance, provocatively claims that "Environmental aesthetics within the analytic tradition is ironically one of the last places on Earth which human-induced global climate change has not yet significantly affected" (Mikkonen, 2022, pp. 1-2). Thus, given the state of the debate, Tafalla's article is pioneering in that it poses important questions and sheds light on GCC. For this reason, I believe Tafalla's article is worth attention despite its shortcomings.

2. GCC Denial and Superficial Aesthetics

Tafalla's paper is motivated by two central questions:

1) Why are people denying and neglecting climate breakdown?

and

2) How could we raise awareness of it?

For Tafalla, both questions are philosophical and should thus be answered through reflection, aided by selected philosophical notions and theories. The pronoun 'it' in the second question is ambiguous, as it can refer to GCC itself or to the denial of GCC. In the broader context of the article and as the argumentation unpacks, it appears clear that Tafalla has in mind the first option, that is, that we should raise awareness about GCC, however, I believe the second reading is essential too, and as I show later, the thoroughgoing assessment of GCC denial and its impact is missing in Tafalla's thoughts and it also weakens her arguments.

Tafalla is careful not to explicitly state that there is a connection between the two questions, for example, an overlap or continuity. To raise awareness of GCC, it is not necessary to understand why people deny this phenomenon, although it might be helpful; similarly, it is perfectly plausible to research GCC denial without considering how to raise awareness of global warming. In Tafalla's account, the two questions intersect in terms of the answers: people are denying GCC because they are trapped in superficial conception of nature that goes hand in hand with banal view of beauty; and it is essential to abandon and replace this superficial and old-fashioned approach with a deep aesthetics of nature that "could help foster our connections with environments and species and consequently promote a more adequate response to climate breakdown" (Tafalla, 2023).

Tafalla's understanding of the superficial conception of nature stems from two 20th-century philosophical currents: Critical Theory and environmental philosophy, especially Anglo-American environmental philosophy and aesthetics. To be more precise, Tafalla is inspired by criticisms of the dominant view of nature in 19th-century philosophy, penned by authors from these two currents. First, following Theodor W. Adorno's thoughts on human domination, Tafalla focuses on the systematic repression of the natural environment, a theme that can be found in 19th-century philosophy from Schelling onward, as well as in our everyday actions and treatment of natural phenomena as tools and resources. Tafalla's interpretation of Adorno is necessarily simplified, as it is challenging to present his complex views within the limited space. Instead, she argues that the idea of human superiority over nonhuman beings is still discernible in real life, and the harmful consequences of this mindset are becoming increasingly apparent, especially regarding GCC. Although Tafalla does not use the term posthumanism and does not explicitly adhere to this philosophical position, her criticism of human dominion over nature could be recast as a critique of humanism and its core principle, anthropocentrism.

Tafalla points out that the dominion-based mindset shapes our view of natural beauty, namely, our aesthetic engagement with natural environments and other natural phenomena. Following Adorno's criticism of tourism from *Aesthetic Theory*, which deforms the very essence of aesthetic experience, Tafalla considers not only over-tourism typical for our times, but also social media, particularly Instagram, which accelerates the consumerism approach to nature and encourages and forces us to reduce nature to an object of a good picture. This behaviour is a form of exploitation comparable to mining or deforestation, as it does not respect nature and reinforces the recently sketched narrative of human domination (Tafalla, 2023).

The deeply rooted conviction that humans are superior to every other species and that nature should serve their, that is, our, needs is responsible for our superficial view of nature, including its shallow aesthetics. For distinguishing superficial aesthetics of nature from deep aesthetics of the very same phenomenon, Tafalla adheres to environmental aesthetics, chiefly to the writings of architects of the discipline, Ronald Hepburn, Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berleant. Tafalla appreciates Hepburn's pioneering role in rehabilitating the aesthetics of nature as a distinctive and independent research field (Hepburn, 1966). For Tafalla, shallow appreciation "tends to reduce nature to an image that has a merely decorative function on the stage where people represent their lives. It gives the impression that nature is passive, like a decorative curtain, something that could easily be replaced by an artificial setting." (Tafalla, 2023) This characteristic echoes Allen Carlson's (1979) view of the landscape model of aesthetic appreciation of an environment that reduces the environment to a landscape in the sense of a painting or scenery.

Tafalla, however, takes a further step and reflects on the actual replacement of the natural environment by artificial settings, as well as the role of social media and picture culture in dominating our society. Tafalla warns against consuming or overexposing oneself to any media, including photos, pictures, and videos, especially those of wild animals. Although they can have educational value and serve as a relevant source of information about the way of life of a particular species, they also hurt our relationship to nature, specifically the nature surrounding us. Instead of caring about our neighbourhood, forests, lakes, rivers, and the animals living in our area, we have built a strong bond with koala bears because they appear on our mobile phone screens in our pockets. In other words, being exposed to videos of wild animals and pictures of different landscapes can harm our genuine relationship with nature; we may feel that our environment does not matter to us because we have not formed a strong bond with it.

Contrary to indulging in virtual experiences mediated by pictures and videos, Tafalla calls for focusing on our surroundings – natural environments that are literally in our proximity. Following Carlson's model of environmental aesthetics, presupposing that one has to experience natural environment as an environment that is natural, that is, not as an object or a landscape (Carlson, 1979), and further emphasising embodied experience and participation, Tafalla

urges that it is critical to experience the environment as a whole, in all its dimensions, and thus through all our senses. Accordingly, Tafalla's experience of the natural environment is multisensorial, aligning not only with Carlson but also with more contemporary approaches that stress bodily sensations and the roles of smell and touch, as found in Brady (2022) and Saito (2005). Further, Tafalla's position regarding environmental aesthetics is significantly influenced by scientific cognitivism. According to Carlson (1995), to appreciate nature fully and appropriately, one must consider the findings and key principles of the natural sciences, the more the better. However, there is a subtle yet significant shift in Tafalla's understanding of the aesthetic appreciation of nature compared to the views mentioned earlier. Let me consider the following passage from her article:

> When we listen to the sounds of wind, rain, and storms, we feel the energy of nature and realise that she is not passive but powerfully active. This is even more clear when we attentively listen to the voices of animals, because then we realise that nature is not scenery designed for us, but is the home where all species live. Every individual animal is an agent who, while we walk through the forest, may be searching for food, exploring the territory, looking for a partner, building a nest, educating her young, or playing with her family. While engaged in these activities, many of them will emit different sounds. Listening to animal voices, trying to discover which species emits each sound and what it means is a revealing way to appreciate nature because we are focusing on active agents (Tafalla, 2023)

Although human beings are subjects experiencing the sound, the focus is on animals and their agency. Tafalla does not discuss how audible sensations affect our experience, nor their impact on the aesthetic appreciation of the site. Instead, she privileges the cognitive role of these sensations, that is, what we can learn about animals if we directly listen to the sounds they produce and interpret their action with respect to the broader way of their lives. Tafalla's emphasis on cognitivism becomes more apparent when we consider her other argument – that humans should listen to stories told by nature, particularly those told by animals. Before I proceed to outline the narrative dimension of Tafalla's environmental aesthetics, let me address the question of why animals.

Tafalla's call that we should go into nature and experience it directly, through all of our senses, has a general validity: only direct experience of nature can be considered a specimen of deep aesthetics of nature. In addition, the narrative dimension of the aesthetics of nature is critical for Tafalla in general, too. However, regarding GCC, she strongly recommends focusing on animals. This suggestion is motivated by two independent, albeit interwoven, aspects: the first concerns animals, the very fact that they are sentient beings who feel emotions and humans usually feel stronger connection with them rather than with, for instance, alga, fungi or rocks; the second aspect links the first one to GCC: given the animals feel emotions and suffer due to GCC, humans can become aware of the GCC while observing involuntary changes animals' behaviour and particularly their anguish caused by GCC. To summarise Tafalla's position, humans are expected to focus on animals, observe, watch,

and contemplate their conduct, and then somehow learn about GCC – or better, acknowledge it. However, how is it possible? Presumably, it is not enough to claim that animals have emotions and that humans feel a connection to them in this respect; there must be something more. In Tafalla's view, the critical point is that nature — and animals in particular — tell stories.

3. Animals, Stories, and Narratives

Of course, taken literally, Tafalla's suggestion is incorrect because animals are unable to tell stories, as they are not endowed with speech like human beings; however, they can – and do –communicate in different ways. Yet Tafalla does not focus on animal communication, nor on communication between species, but on stories – or narratives – told by nature itself. The idea that nature tells stories or that nature should be understood as a narrator seems deeply rooted in our cultural imagination. Yrjö Sepänmaa reconstructs this motif in his essay and disentangles it by arguing that when scholars – as well as writers and other artists – claim that nature tells stories, they can mean significantly different things, and by challenging the very idea that we should take nature as a narrator because nature's ability to 'tell' stories is necessarily limited and what we listen to rarely meets the requirements of a story as it is usually understood (Sepänmaa, 2004).

As already said, Tafalla adheres to a cognitivist position regarding the aesthetic appreciation of nature grounded in the natural sciences. However, as Tafalla puts it, this kind of cognitivism is not in conflict with narrativity: "I defend the idea that to have a deep aesthetic appreciation of nature we need naturalist knowledge; in many cases, this knowledge can be articulated through a story" (Tafalla, 2023). This claim does not seem problematic at all, especially when removed from the broader context: naturalist knowledge can be transmitted and shared in a form of story, as recalled by many documentaries, scientific books for specialists, but also books about nature for the general public, such as bestsellers by David Attenborough and Jane Goodall, books about animals for children, etc. Moreover, even scientific theories can be classified as narratives if we employ a conception of the narrative that is generous enough. Tafalla, however, has something slightly different in mind.

Her approach to narratives and stories aims to combine naturalist knowledge with direct observation of nature. This method does not diverge from Carlson's emphasis on scientific findings, since it is perfectly plausible – and even desirable – to observe animals and their way of life, and to interpret their behaviour in the light of the natural sciences, and *vice versa*; it is necessary to revise our theories in light of new observations. However, Tafalla widens the scope of her reflection, allowing for the inclusion of mythology, folklore, and indigenous wisdom (Tafalla, 2023). Tafalla's position is thus shaped by two views on the aesthetics of nature cognitivism – the scientific one, as defined by Carlson – and a more abstract, broader view introduced by Yuriko Saito. Referring to Saito's essay *Appreciating Nature on its Own Terms* (Saito, 2004),

Tafalla understands nature as a storyteller, that is, as an independent agent able to narrate about itself. Saito puts it in these words:

> Listening to nature as nature, I believe, must involve recognising its own reality apart from us. It includes acknowledging that a natural object has its own unique history and function independent of the historical/cultural/literary significance given by humanity, as well as its specific perceptual features. Appreciating nature on its own terms, therefore, must be based upon listening to a story nature tells of itself through all its perceptual features; that is, a story concerning its origin, make-up, function, and working, independent of human presence or involvement. (Saito, 2004, pp. 145–146)

First, although Tafalla – at least explicitly – does not consider cultural, historical, or even literary (and other artistic) associations linked with particular natural environments that enter into our aesthetic appreciation, she concurs with Saito's conclusion that it is incorrect and misleading to impose human stories upon nature instead of listening to what nature is actually trying to communicate. Saito insists that these associations distort the genuine appreciation of the site, since they replaced stories told by nature itself. In Saito's view, it is essential to focus on perceptual features of the natural environment and interpret them independently of human actions, if possible. Saito does not claim that we should concentrate on pristine nature or that human actions should be forcibly removed from our scrutiny, or even that they have no impact on natural surroundings, but that we should switch the perspective, and instead of focusing on nature as a background setting to human activities, stories, and histories, we should grasp nature as an independent entity with its own stories to tell. Second, again following Saito, Tafalla stresses that we have a moral obligation to listen to nature because failing to do so and creating false stories contribute to Planetary destruction (Tafalla, 2023).

To evoke the role of stories in fostering a deep aesthetic appreciation of nature, Tafalla narrates the story of a fertile wetland teeming with migratory birds. The wetland is an extraordinary place due to the diverse bird species that are rarely found on one site or seldom seen there, as only a minimal number of areas are fertile enough to provide water, food, and convenient nesting opportunities for so many birds (and other animals). The imaginary site is exceptional not only from the point of view of birds and natural sciences, but also from the perspectives of birdwatchers and people living in the proximity of this site – so many birds, and birds of miscellaneous species, some of them with feathers in vibrant colours, other rather pale and colourless, the manner of their flight and so forth, is something spectacular. Some of the birds were ringed, allowing scientists to track their migration and determine whether they return to the site.

Tafalla suggests picturing the same place again, this time affected and damaged by GCC, namely, severe droughts. Water deficiency means not only that the birds have nothing to drink, but also a lack of vegetation and food; accordingly, the place becomes less welcoming, and birds are forced to look for other areas where they can survive and preserve their species. However, this

endeavour might be impossible because other sites are also affected by global warming and drought, which could result in the deaths of several birds or entire populations. In Tafalla's view, this story is critical not only from an environmental perspective but also for the aesthetic appreciation of the site in question. This piece of knowledge serves as a framework in which we interpret – or should interpret – what presents itself to our senses:

> If we know the story of this dried wetland and the role it played in the lives of many animals, we may aesthetically judge this place as damaged, impoverished, sad, and ugly because it has lost its previous beauty. But a first-time visitor who has no idea of the story of the place will not miss the birds and may find that the color of the soil looks beautiful and the silence of the place is calming. We need *stories to connect causes and consequences* and to understand the damage we produce. If we know its story, the dried wetland without birds for us is the site of a tragedy. (Tafalla, 2023, italics mine)

In Tafalla's view, knowledge – or a story of a place – enters into our aesthetic experience of the place and (should) modify it. As the comparison between the first-time visitor and someone familiar with the place – a witness to its destructive metamorphosis – suggests, stories have transformative power: they enable us to change our minds and feel different emotions towards the place. Whereas the deserted area with withered flora might be fascinating and some people might think it beautiful, their judgment changes in light of information about animals suffering. Tafalla follows Saito again in this respect; this time, she addresses Saito's article *Consumer Aesthetics and Environmental Ethics: Problems and Possibilities* and one of its central claims that the knowledge of the production of a product makes a difference in our experience (Saito, 2018, p. 434). Saito is not, however, the only philosopher who believes non-perceptual, chiefly cognitive, information enters into our aesthetic appreciation of the environment. On the contrary, this view is relatively common among scholars working in environmental aesthetics. For instance, Cheryl Foster explores such situations under the heading of 'aesthetic disillusionment', emphasising also the role of ethical concerns regarding the aesthetics of the natural environment (Foster, 1992). Saito and Foster hold a strong position: that learning something ethically negative about the environment – for instance, that it has been significantly (and possibly irretrievably) damaged by human activities – negatively affects our appreciation of the site and makes our judgment of it negative as well. This conclusion has been challenged by María José Alcaraz León (2013, 2022), who persuasively demonstrates that this need not be the case—that is, that we sometimes appraise a damaged environment as aesthetically pleasing, even though we are aware of its moral flaws.

Tafalla is very convincing in telling the story of the dried-up wetland. Personally, I think her narration is moving, and I felt sorry for the endangered birds while reading it, even though I knew the story was fictional. The example also works if approached from the perspective of aesthetic appreciation of nature – although I side with León, I agree that background knowledge can modify our aesthetic experience; that is, contextual information might turn our initially positive evaluation into a negative one. In my opinion, the same

logic applies to our engagement with art. However, Tafalla's assumption is toothless regarding GCC and increasing the knowledge about it. As already said, Tafalla's story is cogent and clearly links GCC (cause) to its consequences: namely, drought (consequence one) and the death of the bird population (consequence two).

Nevertheless, such a story could be made if and only if the person listening to nature is already aware of GCC and acknowledges its ruinous power. In comparison, a person lacking such knowledge can link the suffering of birds to the drought at best, and a person openly denying GCC might not be able to make such a connection at all. Climate breakdown, neglect, and denial – if I borrow the expression from the title of Tafalla's article – are complex matters, and it is thus essential to pay more attention to this phenomenon and its facets.

4. What is Climate Change Denial, and Why Does It Matter?

As already outlined, the GCC denial, neglect, and inaction cannot be treated as a homogeneous category. Inaction need not be motivated by the GCC denial; it may be for other reasons, such as fear of losing the lifestyle one is accustomed to. Accordingly, one might be aware of the ongoing climate collapse, admit that it is human-induced, yet be unwilling to take action or hesitant about the efficiency and cost of proposed measures that should mitigate global warming. In comparison, neglect, as the Oxford dictionary says, is characterised by the fact that we do not pay enough attention to the phenomenon. And finally, there are tendencies belonging to the category of denial – deniers do not trust that GCC is happening or that it is caused by human activities, to mention a few characteristics. Although climate sceptics often claim such things, my exposition so far has been too simple. In this article, the GCC denial or climate scepticism refers to a countermovement that emerged in response to the environmental movement and scientific consensus on global warming, aiming to cast doubt on climate science.

The countermovement has been scrutinised by researchers in political and social sciences, who have examined it from various perspectives. Scholars seek to reveal the strategies of climate sceptics, the historical roots of the movement, and the impact on society and the political organisation of respective countries. Most studies focus on the USA and American context, examining the role of fossil fuel lobbies and companies, such as ExxonMobil, and Donald Trump's rhetoric regarding GCC and the issue of 'alternative science' (McCright, 2016; Gwiazdon and Brown, 2023). However, surveys and research were also conducted in other parts of the world, for example, in Germany (Kaiser and Rhomberg, 2016) and in the Czech Republic (Pecka, 2023a).

Tafalla summarises the position of climate change deniers in one paragraph. Following the sociologist Aaron M. McCrigh, Tafalla points out that climate scepticism is not a homogeneous category either (Tafalla, 2023; for a more detailed explanation of the respective positions, see McCrigh, 2016). However, she surprisingly does not reflect on the *effects* of their campaigns, despite the

haunting question of whether these campaigns are truly successful and whether information spread by the GCC deniers impacts public opinion. Monika Taddicken and Laura Wolff's research shows that exposure to climate disinformation, misinformation, and fake news on social media influences participants' acceptance of GCC, and that this decline was observed in approximately one-third of the sample (Taddicken and Wolff, 2023, p. 727). Although the study's participant pool was relatively small, the findings are still disturbing, given the researchers' focus on exposure to attitude-opposing fake news; that is, participants were individuals who believed in GCC and acknowledged that humans induce it. The study thus indicates that exposure to the narratives of climate sceptics has a negative impact on the attitudes of people who would otherwise be (without this exposure) willing to act or support measures to mitigate GCC.

Tafalla's neglect of the impact of climate fake news is even more startling, given her criticism of social media and the consumption of videos and pictures of wild animals. The author is confident enough to say that consuming such videos harms our experience of nature, since it replaces direct appreciation of the surrounding environment with snapshots of wildlife. In contrast, she remains silent about the possible impact of consuming disinformation and misinformation about GCC. Her silence feels more understandable if we consider the other article by Tafalla, co-authored with Núria Almiron, namely *Rethinking the Ethical Challenge in the Climate Deadlock: Anthropocentrism, Ideological Denial and Animal Liberation* (Almiron and Tafalla 2019, p. 256), in which the authors claim: "After almost three decades of intensive research and discussion, we have failed to provide effective action to mitigate human-induced global warming. On the contrary, we have been wasting precious time on what in this paper we shall refer to as *ideological denial*." However radical this lamentation may feel, authors do not want to say that research on ideological denial is of no value, but rather that it proved not helpful in warding off GCC. Instead, the authors suggest focusing on something new: animal ethics, and in particular the animal liberation movement (Ibid.). Tafalla's approach in the analysed paper appears to follow a similar pattern. Instead of spending more time on treating climate disinformation and misinformation, she aims to provide a positive account grounded in animal ethics and deep aesthetics.

Accordingly, in place of reflection on the role of disinformation, Tafalla narrows the scope of her argument and focuses on a response that she believes is "more widespread than denial: a combination of indifference, neglect, and inaction" (Tafalla, 2023). I agree with the author that the latter response is more common and that people are unwilling to adjust their lifestyles; however, I do not believe it is possible to remove the former category simply because fewer people are actively denying GCC. More concretely, I argue that it is necessary to consider climate denial in itself and the strategies employed by climate sceptics, as they have much larger media power and also utilise narratives to influence public opinion. And these stories often connect causes and consequences, at least at a smaller scale. Moreover, these stories are

designed to provide the public with alternative explanations of what Earth is currently undergoing, what GCC is, and the role of human beings in the destruction of the Planet.

5. Climate Change and Alternative Narratives

In discussions of climate change deniers' communication strategies, the term 'narrative' is frequently used. It is well documented that the fossil fuel industry endeavours to deceive the public using a coordinated campaign arranged by specialists in public relations and media (Sassan, Mahat, Aronczyk, and Brulle, 2023; Pecka, 2023). Just consider these observations: "The climate change countermovement (CCCM) has worked to forestall pro-climate legislation by *spreading alternative narratives* around climate change" (Sassan, Mahat, Aronczyk, and Brulle, 2023, p. 795) or, similarly, "These principles – rooted in state responsibility for the common good, justice, and truth – provide states with a *counternarrative and language* to defend their indefensible inaction (or not enough action) on climate change." (Gwiazdon and Brown, 2023, p.198)

Surprisingly, Tafalla uses the word 'narrative' in connection with stories disseminated by climate change deniers, too. As she puts it:

> Climate change denial narratives have been expanding all around the world and assure people that they need not care about what is presented as it is a fake problem. […] These discourses have been developed mostly by a coalition of think tanks connected to right-wing movements, with the intention of spreading doubt and confusion in society; and the fact that there are different types of negationism increases that confusion further. (Tafalla, 2023).

The first sentence of this passage is critical to my argument, since it provides evidence that climate sceptics tell stories that should prevent us from taking action, or at least slow the establishment of measures to mitigate GCC. Regarding my argument, it is crucial to distinguish between stories and narratives told by nature and those told by GCC deniers, with an emphasis on Tafalla's understanding of 'story'.

The first issue with Tafalla's account of narrative and story is that it is relatively intuitive. The author does not define a story or a narrative; instead, she limits herself to examples. Of course, examples are usually valuable; sometimes they can be even more telling than definitions. Still, given the central argument of Tafalla's paper – that is, that a focus on stories told by animals turns the neglect of GCC into conscious care for the environment – the provided examples do not seem sufficient.

Tafalla insists that there are several types of stories we can listen to: "the story of a particular animal, or a group of them; one we follow over many years, or only for a short period of time" (Tafalla, 2023). This list, however, is by no means exhaustive. We can add other stories to it, for instance, stories of an entire species followed by biologists and other specialists in the field. Similarly, although Tafalla employs the verb 'follow' in the just-quoted passage, she does not mean we should only observe the behaviour of

an animal, that is, that we should rely solely on sensuous inputs, but she expects us to consider additional information, such as knowledge about the typical way of life of a given species. Only in the light of this background knowledge can we truly understand "the specific story of this particular individual" (Ibid.). Tafalla does not explicitly specify the link between the story of an individual and the 'bigger picture', but it seems she wants us to compare the former with the latter, to look for divergencies from the typical and so forth. In her view, this strategy is supposed to be helpful regarding the recognition of GCC: "this will help us understand that global warming may interrupt animal stories and bring about terrible endings. Imagine that some of the birds from the previous example starve in the dried wetland; that would be a very sad ending to the stories of their lives" (Ibid).

I set aside the question of whether the strategy is truly effective for now; instead, I focus on the idea of interruption and what it can reveal about a story's essence. First, Tafalla indicates that the interruption is external – an occurrence or other phenomenon that enters a story that is 'naturally' unfolding or disrupts it in some other way. Either way, this assumption is problematic because many factors (including external ones) enter into stories that become part of what is being followed. If I keep to Tafalla's example of a dried-up wetland and her description of animals forced to look for another place to nest, their struggle – but also their capacity to react – becomes part of what we follow, and we do not consider interruption a phenomenon isolated from the main narrative. However, regarding the narrative's character, it seems that Tafalla links it to a certain continuity. She probably has in mind that animals' lives unfold in their environments heading towards their natural death, but this is not very helpful in reconstructing what she means by a story.

Second, there is only one explicitly stated characteristic of a story: that *stories connect causes and consequences*, or better, Tafalla claims, that we need such stories, which allows for a broader interpretation that there are more types of stories, but the ones appropriate for raising awareness and acknowledgement of GCC are those that link causes and consequences. However, there are also other stories capable of doing this job, namely stories based on climatic misinformation and disinformation, that can have – and sometimes do have – the very same structure as narratives privileged by Tafalla.

Let me proceed to narratives told by climate change sceptics. First, it is essential to bear in mind that climate change deniers employ sophisticated tactics of casting doubts in public. Already in 2004, Stefan Rahmstorf introduced a taxonomy of climate change denial, distinguishing three main types of sceptics: trend, attribution, and impact sceptics (Rahmstorf, 2004). Consider one argument that, according to Rahmstorf, is often used in favour of the idea that global warming must have some natural cause, namely, that scientists pointing out the industry's essential responsibility and the key impact of CO2 production are wrong. The alternative theory advocates that global warming is happening because of "changes in solar activity and/or cosmic rays (due to their effect on cloud formation)" (Rahmstorf, 2004, p. 78). This theory can be interpreted in terms of Tafalla's conception of narrative,

since it also links causes and consequences. Suppose I revisit her example of the dried-up wetland. In that case, the alternative story unfolds as follows: there are two consequences, namely drought (consequence one) and the death of the bird population (consequence two), which are essential to link with a cause. Tafalla believes that GCC caused these occurrences so that the climate sceptics might admit. However, Tafalla, following the findings of climate science, believes that GCC is human-induced, whereas climate sceptics offer another explanation, namely that GCC occurs due to solar activity. Even though this explanation contradicts the scientific consensus, it meets the minimal condition of a narrative because it can connect consequences to a cause. This story may persuade people with limited knowledge of climate science and solar systems, as it provides a clear explanation. At the same time, they can genuinely feel pity for animals struggling due to the drought.

Moreover, this narrative is not an isolated one. Climate science is under constant fire of disinformation and misinformation, intending to weaken the public's trust in science. Apart from providing alternative stories, fossil fuel-funded groups cast doubt on climate science, claiming, for instance, that there is no consensus among climate and environmental scientists, or that predictive models are inaccurate or do not consider some 'significant' aspect. Consider, for example, this piece of news:

> Dr. Clauser [winner of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics] has criticised the awarding of the 2021 Nobel Prize for work in the development of computer models predicting global warming and told President Biden that he disagreed with his climate policies. Dr. Clauser has developed a climate model that adds a new significant dominant process to existing models. The process involves the visible light reflected by cumulus clouds that cover, on average, half of the Earth. Existing models greatly underestimate this cloud feedback, which provides a very powerful, dominant thermostatic control of the Earth's temperature. (Nobel Laureate John Clauser, no date)

Such a commentary, pronounced by a recipient of the Nobel Prize, seems extremely alarming. The bare fact that someone has been awarded the Nobel Prize endows a person with indisputable authority, which is further emphasised by using the academic title in each mention of John Clauser. Without additional information about the CO2 Coalition, of which Clauser is a member, the public cannot help but doubt the current state of climate science. Only after further investigation can one learn about the business connection between the CO2 Coalition and the fossil fuel industry.[2] However, the number of people who fact-check the information and delve deeper into John Clauser's history is limited, and even if more people do this, the lingering doubt remains in the public space. Moreover, climate change deniers portray ecologists and climate activists as villains responsible for the lowering of living standards. For instance, Rachel Carson, the author of *Silent Spring* (1964), who significantly contributed to banning dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, is called a 'mass murderer' because of changes in the labour market accompanied the regulations of DDT (Gwiazdon and Brown, 2023, pp. 207–208).

[2] In the Czech context, the story was revealed by Pecka (2023b).

In a public space saturated with information, disinformation, and fake news, it is challenging to distinguish between narratives that one should trust and those that are not reliable, and it has to be noted that Tafalla's suggestion to listen to animal stories enters into the field demarcated by both serious and fake and misleading information. Thus, it is, as I claim, necessary to offer at least some guidelines on how to differentiate between the two types of narratives.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have critically examined Marta Tafalla's suggestion that it is possible to overcome climate change denial and neglect by listening to stories told by nature, particularly those told by animals. I have shown that, although this idea seems appealing at first, it cannot be successful because Tafalla does not provide us with criteria upon which to distinguish between stories told by nature and those told by climate change deniers. Tafalla seems to have forgotten that we, human beings, are supposed to listen to those stories and that we are prone to being misled or confused. As demonstrated, we cannot infer that there is GCC and that it is human-induced solely from the observation of animal behaviour, including their struggle. We can do so only if we are already familiar with at least the basic premises of climate science.

My criticism might raise the question of whether there are other criteria besides reference to prior scientific knowledge on which one can rely in telling narratives informed by climate science, and those that are not. This need is natural and justified; however, in practice, it is very difficult to put forward such guidelines, especially if we want them to be intelligible to the broadest possible audience. In my view, there should be a criterion that links narratives to morality and ethics. Climate sceptics are familiar with the current state of climate science, but they decided to misrepresent it, and their conduct is highly unethical. Someone can tell that they tell lies, but I am hesitant to include 'truth' on the notional list, as I believe it is beneficial also to embrace artistic and other fictional narratives that cannot meet the truth standards narrowly construed. However, as I stated above, the media landscape is saturated with so much data that one is constantly at risk of becoming confused. Accordingly, whatever the criteria, the public is under extreme pressure to fact-check every piece of information. Philosophy and aesthetics can contribute to the debate by revising terms and notions, thereby increasing clarity, at least on the terminological level. It might not be sufficient, but we have to start somewhere.

The work on this paper was made possible by the grant from Czech Science Foundation GAČR [GA25-17273S].

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18641156

BOOK REVIEWS

Inmidst the Weather

Wolfgang Welsch

Diaconu, M. (2024) *Aesthetics of Weather*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Madalina Diaconu has written a wonderful book. About a great topic: the weather. But the brilliance of the book is not simply due to the fascinating subject matter, but to the way the author presents it.

In three parts (phenomenology of the atmosphere – phenomenographies – collective practices), she unfolds an immense wealth of aspects in a total of 13 chapters (she is apparently not superstitious): sky and atmosphere, outer and inner warmth and coldness, tornadoes, weather wisdom, cloudscapes, wind, fog, the Alps, the Arctic Sea, climate change, pollution, urban climate, waste on land, in the seas, and in the sky, disaster- and astro-tourism (to name just a few aspects). She reminds us of authors from the past (Aristotle, Goethe, Bachelard), proves to be thoroughly familiar with contemporary discussions, and provides numerous examples from the visual arts (Botticelli, Monet,

de Maria, Haacke, Beuys, Chillida, Goldsworthy, Kempinas, Kapoor, Eliasson), architecture (Rahm), film (Tarr and Hranitzky), literature (Coleridge, Musil, Camus, Ransmayr), and even music (Debussy). The book is a treasure trove both for the panorama of weather phenomena as for their cultural interpretations.

Methodologically, Madalina Diaconu assumes that an aesthetics of weather (like any aesthetics) must be based on perception (aesthetics is first and foremost aisthetics). The philosophical discipline that is fundamentally based on experience, such as perceptual experience (and not on thought experiments), is phenomenology. Aesthetics and phenomenology converge in their emphasis on perception. For this reason, the aesthetics of weather must be "a phenomenological aesthetics of weather" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 1). Diaconu's main inspirers in this regard are, from the German side, Hermann Schmitz who, in the course of his 'New Phenomenology', developed a transsubjective theory of affective involvement, and Gernot Böhme, who established an aesthetics of atmospheres (Diaconu, 2024, p. 24), and further, from the English-speaking world, Arnold Berleant, Yuriko Saito, and Emily Brady as the most influential figures for environmental aesthetics (Diaconu, 2024, p. 13).

Madalina Diaconu situates her undertaking in the context of recent efforts to expand aesthetics beyond its reference to art only (Diaconu, 2024, p. 2). Aesthetics has long since conquered new fields of reference such as the environment, politics, fashion, sports – and now turns to the weather. Fortunately, however, this expansion does not prevent the author from repeatedly drawing on examples from the arts. The enlargement of aesthetics beyond art should indeed not lose sight of this traditional core area.

The author takes firm positions within aesthetics. In general, she follows Arnold Berleant's shift from disinterestedness to engagement. The weather is an exemplary case of how an object cannot be perceived neutrally and unaffectedly. Rather, the weather affects us bodily and can only be experienced in this physical way. It is not an object of independent contemplation, but of being affected: "whoever experiences the weather is *subject to* it" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 3). Furthermore, Madalina Diaconu can be uncompromising in her criticism of traditional aesthetics, for example when she rebukes Kant and Hegel for excluding the sense of temperature from the sphere of aesthetics (Diaconu, 2024, p. 118). Finally, even within environmental philosophy (which she advocates) she tracks down misleading remnants of outdated thinking, for example when she convicts the ideal of sustainability of the old desire for stability.[1] She courageously counters the traditional ideal of eternity with that of transitoriness and fleetingness. She suggests to replace the conventional motto "think like a mountain" by the Buddhist-inspired maxim "think like a cloud" (Diaconu, 2024, pp. 195–197).

In fact, the entire book is permeated by a plea for an ontology of processes rather than substances. Western thinking and Western aesthetics were,

[1] Elsewhere, however, she herself advocates "a sustainable way of life" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 192).

according to the author, for a long time bewitched by an "obsession for solid things and stable images" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 23), an "obsession with continuity and permanence" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 197). This began with the Presocratic "quest for an imperishable *archê"* (Diaconu, 2024, p. 196), was made obligatory by Aristotle, and lasted, with only a few exceptions, up to the present day. This aspiration for eternity and stability is a distinctive feature of Western culture. It goes without saying that in such a framework, the weather, which is characterized by "continual change" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 23), cannot be appreciated. The phenomenon of wind is paradigmatic of this. Wind is not a thing at all, and so it has no place in a worldview focused on substances (Diaconu, 2024, p. 106). The situation would be quite different in the context of "an ontology of processes" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 29).[2] In such a context, phenomena of transitoriness could not only be adequately taken into account but would even take precedence.

This recommendation is linked to another shift that the author repeatedly advocates: "the self is relational and feels at home only within a universal web of interrelations that include other living beings and inanimate forces" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 4). She thus proposes not only an aesthetic and ontological shift, but also an anthropological one. Humans are not sovereign subjects who stand in opposition to the world and the environment, but are instead interwoven in many ways: with social partners, historical influences, cultural constellations, and indeed with the entire biological and terrestrial environment, which is essential to them and includes non-human elements, namely other living beings and inorganic nature. This view of general interconnectedness is, according to the author, capable of leading out of the dilemmas of modern thinking with its subject-object dualism ("the subject-object dichotomy of modern philosophy and aesthetics," Diaconu, 2024, p. 106).[3] In the everchanging fabric of the world, we humans are fundamentally connected to myriad processes and things, and the ontology of this "universal web of interrelations" is fundamentally one of processes, change, and flow. In this worldview, aesthetics takes on a new form: it breaks away from the obsession with contemplation and becomes an undertaking of connectedness, commitment, and attentiveness.

Aesthetics has always been concerned with the development of sensitivity (Diaconu, 2024, p. 194). Today its endeavor must take a specific direction. It should no longer concern just the cultivation of individual sensitivity; from now on, aesthetic sensitivity must relate to the (technologically and medially influenced) social and natural environment. This view has considerable practical consequences. Madalina Diaconu endows the contemporary aesthetic experience with moral implications and consequences.[4] According to her, the aesthetic subject should not only be context-sensitive, but "*behave* in a way

[2] Surprisingly, Alfred N. Whitehead who has extensively presented such an ontology in his *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929) finds no mention.

[3] I am more than sympathetic to this worldview, see Welsch (2025).

[4] "The environmental experience is infused with implicit moral concerns from the outset" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 191).

that is sensitive to context" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 187). "In the case of weather, the refinement of sensitivity would enable people not only to enjoy even very slight modifications of the weather but also cause them more pain when facing the losses produced by a dysfunctional atmospheric system" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 188). The fine-tuning of sensitivity is ultimately meant to lead to action: "the cultivation of sensibility and the exertion of imagination are contrary to irresponsible reverie and escapism"; rather, they elicit realism ("a sense of realism is now more imperative than ever" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 188)). "Aesthetic theory can insist on every individual's responsibility for making the world better" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 191).

The main direction of this contemporary amplification and orientation of sensitivity is clear: "our age urgently requires a post-anthropocentric perspective that extends empathy to non-human agents" (194). The basis for this is the aforementioned "understanding of our own relational being and the sharpened sense of universal interdependency" (Diaconu, 2024, p. 194). This gives rise to practical responsibility: "we have to care not only for our 'neighbor,' but also for all kinds of 'strangers,' not only for humans, but also for non-human others" (*Ibid*.). These moral demands culminate in the call to "develop proactive solidarity with the victims" (*Ibid*.).

As likeable as all this may sound, it remains highly appellative. Normative justification is lacking. Undoubtedly, there are interconnections between aesthetics and ethics. But aesthetic impulses still require, in order to constitute valid guidelines for action, moral evaluation and justification. With regard to art, Gottfried Benn once said that 'well-intentioned' is its opposite.[5] Likewise for morality, 'well-intentioned' is not enough – how often do well-intentioned actions prove fatal after just a few steps! Here, one would wish for more differentiated explanations and justifications.

Madalina Diaconu has demonstrated her ability to do so on numerous occasions. I need only mention her discussion of how wind and air currents (which are not visible as such) can be represented in the visual arts (Diaconu, 2024, pp. 107–113); or her suggestion that "sentient landscapes," familiar to indigenous cultures with an animistic view of nature, should be considered as one possibility among others for viewing the landscape (Diaconu, 2024, p. 165).[6] This should be all the easier since such options can also be found, at least sporadically, in 'Western' culture: many painters, reports André Marchand, have said that while they look at things, things also look at them (his key witnesses were Klee and Cézanne).

Madalina Diaconu herself fortunately corrects sporadic onesidedness. For example, she once mentions as a counter-example to the Western emphasis on eternity only the Japanese culture's appreciation of transience and impermanence (Diaconu, 2024, p. 196 f.). But she is also aware that, first

5 "Word has gradually spread that the opposite of art is not nature, but good intentions" (Benn, 1958, p. 161f.).

6 Hermann Schmitz's New Phenomenology makes indeed a comparable move: it turns away from Husserl's theory of intentional constitution toward a pathic view of experience, emphasising our being touched and moved by encountering things (Diaconu, 2024, cf. 24 f.).

of all, the Western tradition is not monolithic: after all, there were also Heraclitus, Hegel, Bergson, Whitehead and Deleuze (Diaconu, 2024, p. 165); and secondly, Japanese culture is not the only alternative, there exist also many indigenous cultures from North to South America and elsewhere that attune themselves to the rhythms of nature and shape their cultural life not in opposition to, but in harmony with it (Diaconu, 2024, cf. 165 f., 203).

However, there is no beauty without (minor) flaws. Many readers will regret the lack of a résumé. The absence of far too many names mentioned in the book in the index is unfortunate. As is the fact that the book would require many more illustrations – and why not in color? This monitum goes, of course, not to the author but to the publisher and is meant as advice and request for the second edition (which, in view of the outstanding quality of the book, I am sure will come soon). Saying this, I do not at all intend to advise the reader to wait for this next edition. I rather strongly recommend reading, enjoying and reflecting on this groundbreaking work at the next opportunity and to thus have a great time in intellectually and emotionally finest weather.

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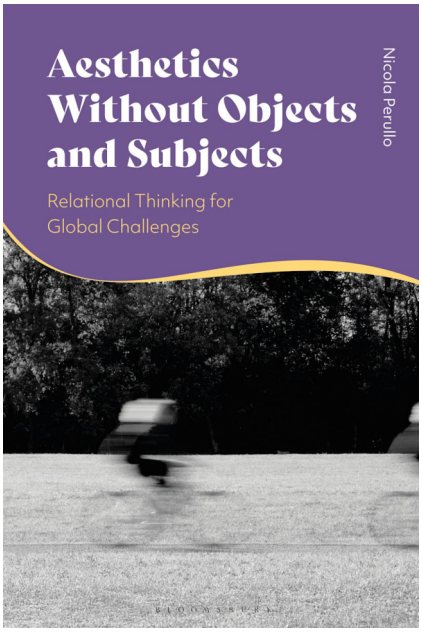
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18648763

Aesthetics without Objects and Subjects: Relational Thinking for Global Challenges – A Book Review

Vincenzo Cerulli

Perullo, N. (2025) *Aesthetics without Objects and Subjects: Relational Thinking for Global Challenges*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.



Nicola Perullo's latest book, *Aesthetics without Objects and Subjects – Relational Thinking for Global Challenges* (henceforth AWOS), is a work of which it is difficult to provide a brief portrait that remains faithful to it and maintains its internal complexities and tensions. Indeed, the structure and style of the work reflect the aesthetic project the author takes on: a new approach to perception capable of bringing out the radically processual and constantly

becoming nature of reality. The goal Perullo sets himself with his aesthetic proposal is rather ambitious, but it could not be otherwise, given the breadth and depth of the crisis he intends to respond to. In the first chapter, *Perceptual Crisis and the Challenges for Aesthetics*, Perullo frames the problem he intends to address: "My main thesis is: the global crisis we *participate in* (not: 'we witness') – environmental crisis, climate crisis, political crisis – is itself a crisis in perception. Specifically, it presents itself as an anxiety crisis due to loss of control-namely, perceptual control" (Perullo, 2025, p. 5). Already from the way Perullo describes our relation to the problem (we participate in) we can begin to sense the direction in which he intends his project to move. We are not faced with a clear separation between subject and object (not least because, as we shall see, it is the categories of subject and object themselves that are called into question), between us and "the crisis"; but, rather, a "coexistence" within the same "fabric of the real" (Perullo, 2025, p. 40).

To emerge from this crisis, Perullo argues, there must be an "evolution of humanity itself" (Perullo, 2025, p. 5): an evolution that leads humanity to become "*more than human*" (Perullo, 2025, p. 6). This 'more-than' is not understood by Perullo as a mere additional surplus; but, rather as an opening to everything else: "[…] more-than-human means cooperative, collusive, and exposed" (Perullo, 2025, p. 7). An important step in this direction can be taken by overcoming the "duality between mind and world, subject and object" (Perullo, 2025, p. 7). The crystallisation of this separation in these dualisms generates, according to Perullo, an approach to the world characterised by control and domination, and it is from this observation that Perullo moves his critique against what he frames as a kind of modern religious precept: 'activism'. Activism for Perullo is unable to address the problems of our times (the various crises mentioned in the opening of the book) because it remains anchored in that epistemological-cognitive fence according to which perception is nothing more than the first step to 'domination and control'. The alternative proposed by Perullo is to practise a kind of conscious and attentive 'passivism': a passivism, therefore, that does not lead to an arid indifference but, rather, to co-participation in the "flow of consciousness as experience" (Perullo, 2025, p. 7). Becoming aware of this co-participation, this co-habitation, is, according to Perullo, of fundamental importance in facing any kind of crisis that affects us because this awareness means realising that we are part of a 'condominium': a condominium of which we are neither the only tenants nor, much less, the most numerous.

The idea of cohabitation in the condominium is probably one of the most interesting and representative of the AWOS project. With it, Perullo intends to question the hierarchization of reality to which we have become accustomed: a hierarchization that has placed us, humans, at the centre of the world ecosystem of which, as we have already mentioned, we are but one of the different life forms that co-inhabit it. In the AWOS perspective, this 'rebalancing' of our ecosystem serves to emphasise, once again, the radically collaborative and relational nature of our living. "*Homo*, then, instead of *comprehending* the nonhuman and *arguing* on its behalf – two sides of the

same coin – must strive to *correspond* with it, thus more-than-human becoming" (Perullo, 2025, p. 8). The concept of correspondence plays a fundamental role in Perullo's aesthetic proposal. Borrowed from Tim Ingold's studies, correspondence here stands for that series of multiple possibilities of interaction included in that 'active passivism', perceptive and attentive, which Perullo hopes for as a paradigm shift from the concept of activism understood as a compulsion to act: and it is precisely this process of continuous correspondence that should guide our cohabitation within the condominium.

The aesthetic-philosophical paradigm shift hoped for by Perullo becomes clearer if we keep in mind the notions of 'doing' and 'undergoing' developed by John Dewey: one of the fundamental theoretical references of AWOS (along with Deleuze, Derrida, Morton, Ingold, Rovelli, Wittgenstein and Whitehead). The aesthetics Perullo looks at in fact shifts the focus from the doing to the undergoing and, in the author's words, we move from a "project/product oriented intentional *agency* (doing)" to a "process-oriented, aimless, attentional perceiving that takes care, first and foremost, of the undergoing" (Perullo, 2025, p. 9). It is precisely this 'care for the undergoing' that we must focus on if we are to better understand the direction in which the AWOS project intends to move. The specific attention given to the undergoing allows us to better focus on reality in its radically processual and relational nature: the reality that has emerged from the discoveries of quantum physics, a reality that is also very close to that described by Buddhist thought.

Already from these brief references, one realises that the sources from which Perullo draws are multiple and heterogeneous, and some readers accustomed to the compartmentalization of knowledge might be baffled by this heterogeneity: in the humble opinion of the writer, it is precisely this constant challenge to the reader (and to the sedimented and now naturalized habits of academia) that makes reading AWOS important and necessary in the contemporary philosophical landscape. Perullo does not hide the tensions and problems that might arise from such an approach and indeed openly acknowledges them, making them almost 'the punctum' of his work. At the end of the first chapter, describing his own approach to the various theoretical references in the work, Perullo speaks of a 'Syncretism without method': "This work is an eclectic essay that, with its limited means, strives for syncretism as the effect of the lack of and dissatisfaction with a single direction" (Perullo, 2025, pp. 25–26).

This 'eclectic syncretism' becomes, in the course of the work, a method for exercising the new approach to perception that AWOS hopes for from the very first pages. Reading AWOS is in fact a constant exercise in correspondence and attunement: the style and structure used by Perullo invite the reader to constantly practise attention and focus in the undergoing of reading. Perullo returns several times throughout his work to the same themes, sometimes to better clarify what he had at first only hinted at, and others to enrich the description of a concept. This recursive, nonlinear writing prevents one from following the development of a concept in the manner

to which we are usually accustomed and forces the reader to follow the structure of the book in its 'leaps' and to return to the passages already read. This 'stretch' turns out to be one of the greatest strengths of the work, which, to quote Hanna Arendt, commits the reader to 'thinking without a bannister'. Perullo offers few footholds for the reader, does not want to offer a theory and does not promise systematicity, but it is precisely because of these inconveniences that the structure of the work manages to faithfully describe this constantly changing landscape: the radical processuality of the reality to which it refers.

Perullo's aesthetics aims to correspond with the reality described by Buddhism and quantum physics, and to do so, it must attempt to 'correspond' with the new scientific paradigm we have entered: for this reason, in this 'new' aesthetic horizon that Perullo wants to inaugurate, subject and object "fall together" (Perullo, 2025, p. 11). Their fall is the natural consequence of an approach that favours process over product, the coexistence of condominium over anthropological hierarchy, attentive and perceptive passivism over activism aimed at control and domination, and undergoing over doing.

> If the real 'is' not but happens, as even quantum physics tells us today, a coherent aesthetic theory will have to draw certain consequences from this [...] AWOS takes into account the relational nature through which the aesthetic as immanent event presents itself. Reality happens as a continuous unfolding of relations; but "relation" here, has not to be understood as connection between subjects and objects. Rather, it is the con-, the entangled field from which subjects and objects develop. (Perullo, 2025, p. 12)

It is precisely on this plane of the 'con-' that much of Perullo's theoretical efforts will focus: trying to give a more precise description of this co-constitutive, relational and processual entanglement is in fact one of the primary goals of AWOS.

Already these assumptions give us a sense that AWOS presents itself as a theoretical project that is difficult to grasp: being a "narrative that does not aspire to any exhaustiveness" (Perullo, 2025, p. 21), it does not offer the reader any firm points with which to orient himself or herself and to hold on to. That said, it should also be noted that it is precisely this anti-systematicity of Perullo's project that ensures its greater 'coherence' with the framework with which it intends to confront: the reality as a flux and 'continuous unfolding of relations' that we mentioned earlier. By 'coherence' here we want to highlight Perullo's 'mimetic' approach to the phenomenon he intends to provide a description of: from this perspective, the correspondence he refers to several times in the text can also be seen as a process of 'attunement' to the fabric of reality and its processes. Reading the concept of correspondence in this way allows us to see it as a reworking, in an ecological and phenomenological key, of the Adornian concept of mimesis: both concepts in fact seek to move beyond that sharp separation between subject and object from which Perullo's work examined here takes its first steps, and both move away from that compulsion to act that remains, for both authors, chained to ends of domination and control.

The aesthetics presented to us by Perullo is anchored in its etymological root (*aisthesis*-sensation), and for this reason, the response to the crisis of perception mentioned in the opening of the work is characterised as a proposal for a different approach to perception itself. This kind of aesthetics is not a discipline confined to the "philosophy of art" (as is often, unfortunately, still understood in some academic circles) but, rather, a "liminal mode of operating and knowing" (Perullo, 2025, p. 15). A feeling that is therefore also always a thinking (and vice versa) we might say reformulating according to a lexicon closer to Dewey: here, this communion of feeling and thinking seems to be one of the characteristic features of the aesthetics Perullo works on and is probably the best way to approach the profound relationality of the real that is thematized in the second chapter.

This chapter is probably the most deeply theoretical in Perullo's work and in it we find the most extensive and in-depth exposition of the various contents anticipated in the first one: here Perullo argues more extensively for his central thesis, 'the real is relational'. In order to move in this direction, Perullo's project shares with various scientific and cultural models their "non-foundational frameworks" (Perullo, 2025, p. 33); but, nevertheless, Perullo emphasises that the relationship between science and philosophy in AWOS is not declined as the subjugation of one over the other but rather as a collaboration: both describe the same reality from two different planes. In these pages Perullo grapples with several major problems, but we can try to summarise his efforts in the following question: how to offer a description of reality that does justice to the radical processuality that constitutes it? It is Perullo himself who frames his project more as a narrative and a corresponding description than as a closed and complete theoretical system: "As a philosophy, aesthetics without objects and subjects is therefore not an explanatory system but a descriptive, artisanal narrative" (Perullo, 2025, p. 157). But how does one decline a processual aesthetics? Already in the first pages, Perullo offers clues and anticipations: "Relational aesthetics is about how to perceive aesthetically in a haptic and processual key" (Perullo, 2025, p. 21), but these 'clues' are not enough and these taken paths are constantly interrupted to be taken up again later. Perullo's writing from this point of view seems to resemble the oblique and uneconomical proceeding of the 'pack donkey' described by Tim Ingold (2013, pp. 137–141) at the end of one of his books. In AWOS we never get the final and conclusive definition of a concept presented to us, but only a 'snapshot' of it that captures it in the flux of its becoming; to it, we will have to add the others that will follow and compose them together in a kind of philosophical montage that is never concluded, never final.[1]

Thus, the main references in this second chapter are Bergson, James and Whitehead, and it is with them that Perullo wants to go beyond "[…] the comfort zone of unilinear and standardized perception" (Perullo, 2025, p. 33). But how does AWOS intend to overcome that kind of perception? Perullo starts

[1] In this sense, Perullo's multiple descriptions of the same concept reminded me of the way Sergei Eisenstein (1985, pp. 210-226), through his re-reading of Lessing, comments on Homer's literary montage process.

from the rich description of a stone offered by physicist Carlo Rovelli. The stone that emerges from his description in no way resembles an entity that is fixed and stable in its singularity; rather, its instability, its contingent and ephemeral nature in the passage of time, its diverse and possible uses and thus also its multiple affordances are highlighted. Perullo links Rovelli's stone to another rich description, that offered by Ingold for the 'stone of Selinunte' and from Ingold he then moves on to the description of another stone, that offered by Martin Heidegger. This inaugural reflection on the processuality of the stone allows Perullo to describe the real as "[...] made of different orders of experience, various planes of different perceptual densities" (Perullo, 2025, p. 31), and in capturing the diversity and multiplicity of these 'different orders of experience', the inevitability of human perspective is not ignored. " [...] a stone can only speak through 'us', through relations that develop from our encounter with it and that involve a perceptual engagement from our side" (Perullo, 2025, p. 32). The proposed perspective of AWOS does not intend to conceal this inevitability, but, rather, it wants to try to place it within that 'more-than-human' nature of humanity to which we have already referred. Indeed, to admit that a stone can only tell its own story if we are the ones to make it speak is not to deny its radically processual nature, its various possible applications and implications, and the constitutive instability of the flow from which it emerges, for a moment, as an island of crystallised meaning.

To go beyond the fetishized dualism of objects and subjects is not to find oneself in an abstract void where there is nothing left with which to orient oneself but rather to realise that those entities that Perullo 'targets' already in the title of the book are nothing but singular and contingent manifestations of relations and processes, flows and transformations: for this reason, beyond the practical-theoretical necessities of subdivision and stabilization that we encounter daily in everyday life and thought processes, they have no reason to exist in absolute isolation. "[...] it does not mean to surpass duality, which is the inescapable tool for agency and identity, but to avoid dualism" (Perullo, 2025, p. 43). Maintaining this tension without resolving into either extreme is by no means an easy task and inevitably requires a great deal of effort, starting with the vocabulary we are accustomed to. "I propose an approach that involves suspending or diverging from the conventional conceptual vocabulary that relies on dualism" (Perullo, 2025, p. 36).

Perullo's goal remains to achieve a different way of perceiving, a way that is more adequate to grasp the richness of this ever-changing flux that we call 'reality': in doing so, he chooses the contemporary current of thought Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO) as main theoretical interlocutor. AWOS and OOO start from a common problem, the need to overcome the centrality of the subject, but from it, they draw diametrically opposed conclusions. OOO is object-centred while AWOS, on the other hand, is relation-centred: according to Perullo, putting objects at the centre instead of subjects merely re-presents a dualistic ontology in which the focus has shifted away from human subjects. The difference between the two approaches is already in the name: Perullo

does not want to replace one ontology with another and therefore prefers the concept of 'ontogenesis'. "Instead of an Object-Oriented-Ontology, therefore,my proposal is for a Process-Oriented Ontogenesis: from OOO to PROO!. With an exclamation mark, of course, to emphasize the dynamic and processual element" (Perullo, 2025, p. 21). The ontogenesis proposed in AWOS thus seems better equipped to deal with the radical relationality of the real: as we said earlier, the centrality attributed by OOO to objects as entities in their own right does not break the dualism that Perullo would like to overcome but merely reverses it by re-presenting it under a different shape. Moreover, what distinguishes AWOS from OOO is its strong component of co-participation: for Perullo objects are not offered in their absolute independence but only in their co-participation in the fabric of the real in which we too are immersed.

At this point, it seems fair to discuss another of the key concepts introduced by Perullo in AWOS: the concept of 'agencing'. We have already highlighted the need raised by Perullo to work on language to produce a vocabulary appropriate to the aesthetic project of AWOS, and in the concept of agencing we can see this effort directly at work. The shift from the noun (agency) to the verb (agencing) denotes a shift towards the plane of becoming and impermanence: agency allows us to circumscribe a subject's (or at any rate a more or less defined entity's) capacity to act, while agencing wants to shift our attention to the process in which reality unfolds and in which we are always already involved. Perullo by agencing refers to a 'correspondence between doing and undergoing' in which the needle of balance tends more towards the latter: the relevance of a research that moves in this direction seems to me to be confirmed by the fact that other seemingly distant research also focuses on similar problems from different perspectives. Hartmut Rosa (2023), for example, through Resonance theory, seeks to explore that 'middle' space between activity and passivity that he calls 'medio-passive'. In addition to the theoretical relevance of the concept of agencing for a posible dialogue with other research (to which only minimal reference can be made here), the concept of agencing is the perfect manifestation of that movement beyond the fetishisation of dualism to which Perullo aspires from the very first pages of his work.

To conclude, I would now like to turn to another of the most interesting concepts that emerged from AWOS's theoretical effort: the 'haptic perception'. As we have already repeated several times, the AWOS project can be seen as a major effort aimed at the transformation of our approach to perception: at several points in the work, Perullo criticises the dominance of 'the visual' in our culture and the always-guaranteed presence of the 'solid world' on which we base our certainties even in the epistemological sphere. The alternative proposed by Perullo to diverge from those modes of perception chained to the solid and the visual lies precisely in haptic perception. The word 'haptic' comes from the Greek *haptikós* meaning 'able to touch', but the haptic to which Perullo refers is not reducible to tactility alone: not least because such an approach would contradict the need to move beyond

the dominance of the 'solid world' in our perceptual horizon. The haptic approach for Perullo first and foremost indicates a "relationship of intimacy, a feeling-with" that stands in stark contrast to the notions of "critical distance, disinterest, and objective knowledge" (Perullo, 2025, p. 101). The haptic approach, on the contrary, aims at engagement and *cum-patire*, undergoing and going-with, com-participation: "[…] I will use the term haptic in the sense of a processual, engaged perceiving: observing without objectivating, that is, by avoiding ontologizing the process of the formation of forms/objects, which thus crystallize as transient passages" (Perullo, 2025, p. 101). With haptic Perullo does not aim at a greater level of 'immersion': indeed, Perullo at several points in the book distances himself from certain modern tendencies founded on the promise of immersivity; but, rather, at a more attentive disposition in listening and receiving. Thus, that 'care for the undergoing' referred to already in the first part of AWOS returns: haptic perception seems to be the privileged tool to put into practise this 'active passivity' that Perullo frames as "[…] listening and submission to the current of life" (Perullo, 2025, p. 101). Haptic perception is not a matter of grasping, but of corresponding; it privileges proximity and coexistence over distance and control: it invites us to feel 'at home' in the undergoing instead of trying to escape it by rebalancing the relationship towards the doing. Perullo contrasts this form of perception with the current fascination for immersion in digital aesthetics, which, in his view, remains captive to the logic of control.[2] Immersion still presupposes a subject entering a space; haptic perception, by contrast, undoes that distinction altogether. Here, thanks to the haptic perception corresponding with the flow of the real in which we are always immersed, the ethical and ecological dimension of Perullo's project emerges more strongly, and it is precisely on this dimension that Perullo closes his work: with a reflection that invests philosophy in general as an (in)discipline and vocation.

The theme of philosophy as a vocation emerges as early as the first page of the work: "This book supports and pursues the idea that philosophy, by its nature, is not a profession but a vocation […]" (Perullo, 2025, p. 1), but it is in the last chapter devoted to *Artisanal Intelligence* that Perullo can return to the topic with greater argumentative force and tie it to the theoretical project of AWOS illustrated precedingly. Perullo argues for the need to think of philosophy (and aesthetics in particular) as an artisanal and amateur activity: in clear opposition to the increasing specialisation that pervades every scientific field. The amateur is not understood by Perullo as one who improvises in a given profession without any in-depth knowledge of his or her subject, but rather, as one who diverges from standardised practices and, consequently, standardised results. The amateur's approach, in AWOS's perspective, has an advantage over the skilled worker (in our case, the one who practises philosophy as a profession) because AWOS's aesthetics favour sharing and

[2] Stefano Velotti's (2024) most recent works also focus on similar issues. There is not enough space here to investigate possible resonances or differences in depth, but I would like to point out that the crisis identified by Perullo at the beginning of his work seems to be stimulated by a loss of control, perceptual 'control'.

listening, undergoing and proximity: all of which are characteristics of the amateur as framed by Perullo. Therefore, AWOS argues in favor of a shift from competence to compassion, and in order to accomplish this shift, aesthetic education, which for Perullo is characterised first and foremost as an "attunement to the life processes" (Perullo, 2025, p. 159), cannot be ignored.

The project/process of AWOS, while containing within itself internal tensions and problems, remains one of the most interesting proposals within the contemporary aesthetic landscape. Rethinking our approach to perception is obviously a task that cannot be said to have been exhausted with a single work, but Perullo's proposals seem to trace fertile paths full of possibilities for the debate to come. In a world increasingly affected by the digital revolutions of artificial intelligence and the progressive proliferation of spaces where online replaces physical presence, rethinking a perceptive approach that favours coparticipation and proximity, coexistence and engagement, becomes a concrete possibility for an ethical exercise of thought.

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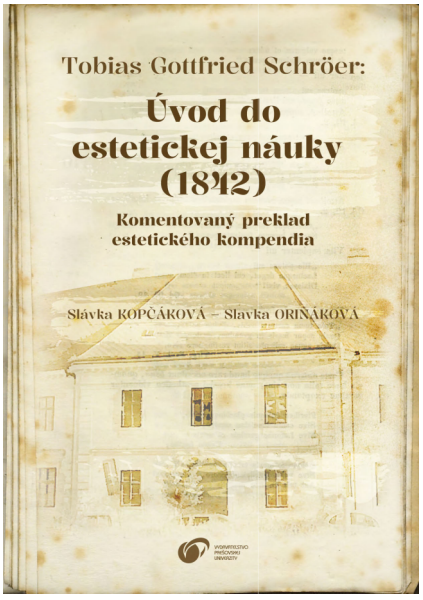
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18658026

A Path Not Taken

Tobias Gottfried Schröer's *Isagoge in Eruditionem Aestheticam* for the First Time in Slovak Translation

Adrián Kvokačka

Tobias Gottfried Schröer: *Úvod do estetickej náuky (1842). Komentovaný preklad estetického kompendia.* Edited and translated by Slávka Kopčáková and Slavka Oriňáková. Prešov: Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, 2024. ISBN 978-80-555-3366-7.



This substantial volume offers a commented translation of Tobias Gottfried Schröer's *Isagoge in eruditionem aestheticam* (1842), a pedagogical Latin compendium written for the educational context of nineteenth-century Pressburg. Edited and translated into Slovak by Slávka Kopčáková and Slavka Oriňáková, the book combines historical reconstruction, philological care, and philosophical framing, and

it succeeds in making a little-known text available to readers who would otherwise have no access to it. The result is a welcome contribution to the history of aesthetics, especially for scholars interested in how aesthetic ideas travelled through educational institutions rather than only through canonical philosophical treatises.

A notable strength of the edition is its nuanced approach in evaluating Schröer's philosophical originality, refraining from exaggerated claims. The editors present him, in a more plausible manner, as a mediator of aesthetic ideas drawn from Enlightenment and post-Kantian sources. The compendium synthesises themes with which the reader will be familiar – beauty, taste, the moral significance of art, and the cultivation of judgement – without advancing a distinctive systematic position. When analysed in this manner, the text becomes historically significant rather than theoretically pioneering. This constitutes a pivotal editorial decision, consistent with prevailing historiographic trends that accord the transmission and assimilation of concepts a philosophical significance in their own right.

The introductory study is particularly effective in its reconstruction of the institutional setting in which the compendium was produced. The account of Protestant lyceum education, and of Latin's continued role in nineteenth-century pedagogy, provides a clear sense of the rationale behind the existence of such a text and its function. The editors persuasively demonstrate that the aesthetic theory under scrutiny functions less as speculative philosophy and more as an intellectual formation directed towards moral and cultural cultivation. This contextual work represents a significant strength of the book, with implications that extend beyond the specific case study of Schröer.

The conceptual framing around the notion of 'school aesthetics' has proven to be a fruitful one. The editors have distinguished pedagogically oriented aesthetic writing from systematic aesthetics, thereby ensuring that the text is not judged by inappropriate standards. The concept elucidates the fundamental issues involved, which lie not in the innovation of theoretical concepts, but rather in the structuring of extant ideas into a format conducive to dissemination and instruction. Simultaneously, the category prompts further philosophical contemplation. One might question whether the distinction between 'school' and 'philosophical' aesthetics is as clear-cut as the framework suggests, given that numerous canonical theorists also wrote with pedagogical aims. Nevertheless, the distinction is heuristically beneficial and opens a promising line of inquiry.

The translation itself is careful and readable, especially given the challenges posed by nineteenth-century pedagogical Latin and historically layered terminology. The accompanying commentary is consistently informative without becoming intrusive. The notes provide clarification on references to classical sources, offer explanations

of terminological choices, and situate examples within broader aesthetic debates. It is important to note that the annotations do not overwhelm the text with philological detail; rather, they remain directed towards conceptual understanding. Achieving this balance is challenging, yet it is a significant quality that distinguishes this edition as both scholarly and practical.

A philosophical analysis of the compendium reveals a persistent linkage of aesthetics with ethics. The concept of beauty is regarded as being dependent on form rather than being autonomous. Furthermore, aesthetic education is presented as a means of shaping character and judgement. While this orientation will be familiar to historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics, the edition usefully illustrates how such ideas were absorbed into curricular practice. The text serves to shed light on the afterlife of idealist and humanist conceptions of art, even if it does not significantly complicate them.

If the volume presents any limitations, they are found in the relatively modest degree of explicit philosophical engagement which extends no further than historical reconstruction. Readers interested in stronger connections to contemporary debates in aesthetics – whether analytic or continental – may find the framing of these debates somewhat cautious. Furthermore, the occasional comparison with parallel pedagogical traditions elsewhere in Europe might have served to refine the broader philosophical implications. Nevertheless, these are not deficiencies but rather indications of directions for future work, and they do not detract from the edition's core achievement.

On the whole, this scholarly edition is of great value and has been executed in an exemplary manner. The book's primary strength lies in its demonstration of how aesthetic concepts permeate educational practices and textual genres that are frequently disregarded by philosophers. By recovering and contextualising Schröer's compendium, Kopčáková and Oriňáková provide a valuable resource for historians of aesthetics and demonstrate that the philosophical life of concepts depends equally on pedagogy as on originality. The book is deserving of attention from those interested in the institutional history of aesthetic thought and in the complex routes by which philosophical ideas become part of intellectual culture.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18663190