

THE END OF THE WORLD THAT IS NOT ONE: WRITING ABOUT EARTH AS A HYPEROBJECT

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Abstract

The physical threats posed by the environmental crises of the Anthropocene are matched by an equally devastating epistemological challenge: the epoch that signifies human dominance over ecosystems on a planetary scale is also marked by the utter failure to 'manage' the crisis, let alone the planet. The world, as Timothy Morton claims, has thus already ended. That is, 'world' as a notion of something that can be grasped and controlled in its entirety – both physically and epistemologically – is no longer a valid concept for what we are dealing with. How, then, to describe the non-world we live in? How to imagine the future? By analyzing Dietmar Dath's novel *The Abolition of Species* and comparing it to Morton's *Hyperobjects*, this essay explores the epistemological challenge posed by the 'End of the World.' Linger on the borderline between academic and creative writing, both texts explore an emerging style of writing and thinking appropriate to the Anthropocene.

World is a fragile aesthetic effect around whose corners we are beginning to see. True planetary awareness is the creeping realization not that "We Are the World," but that we aren't. (Morton, "Hyperobjects" 99)

In the present situation, climate change is but one of a series of profound environmental transformations which threaten living conditions on a planetary scale. The premise of the so-called Anthropocene is that human activity on Earth has accumulated to the extent that it becomes a geological force. Anthropogenic transformation of environmental conditions on a planetary scale affects the relationships of human beings on an existential level. That is, not only is the future of eco-systems, biodiversity and, more generally, 'the world as we know it' seriously threatened – scientific evidence for the influence of the human species on the natural history of planet Earth calls for a reevaluation of the very place of the human species within 'the world':

[The] major irony of the Anthropocene is that, though named as that era in the planet's natural history in which humanity becomes a decisive geological and climatological force, it manifests itself to us primarily through the domain of 'natural' becoming, as it were, dangerously out of bounds, in extreme or unprecedented weather events, ecosystems becoming simplified or trashed, die-back or collapse. (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 6)

Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* offers a model of the planet and phenomena of planetary scale (e.g. global warming, nuclear waste, and biodiversity) that thrives on

the apparent contradictions of the Anthropocene. Hyperobjects are “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (“Hyperobjects” 1). Like global warming, hyperobjects challenge the notion of human agency, and, according to Morton, have already caused the end of the world: “the notion that we are living ‘in’ a world – one that we call Nature – no longer applies in any meaningful sense, except as a nostalgia or in the temporarily useful local language of pleas and petitions” (101). Dietmar Dath’s novel *The Abolition of Species* (orig. *Die Abschaffung der Arten*, 2008) is full of such hyperobjects. Global warming and the urgency of environmental crises of the present may no longer be a problem for the civilizations living on Earth in this “future history”,¹ because the originary agent of the Anthropocene is all but wiped out. However, the novel’s central topics – coexistence, access to resources, and, most importantly, the relationship of life to Earth and the consequent understanding of the planet as one world – overlap significantly with those aspects of the Anthropocene which go beyond the imminent endangerment of the environment.

In this essay, I will read these two texts as attempts to craft a style of writing that accounts for the consequences of seriously implementing the Anthropocene as a way of looking at the human situation. *The Abolition of Species* ends with a stunning image of Earth as a closed system, a huge, if finite museum of itself – in Morton’s terms, one could say that Dath’s novel succeeds in turning the planet from a hyperobject into a world. “World” and “Earth” in this perspective become, as I will show, mutually exclusive ideas which develop their most convincing argumentative force if presented in language free of apocalypticism. Their texts thus provide powerful examples for the challenges and opportunities which the Anthropocene presents to both academic and fictional writing.

One-World, Whole Earth, and Earth-as

The Anthropocene possesses an apocalyptic quality that does not exhaust itself in environmentalist doomsday-prognoses, but is in many ways to be regarded as revelatory.² What it reveals is the ambivalent insight that human influence on planet Earth evidently achieved a planetary scale but does not in the least resemble any historical (and present-day) fantasy of control. While any attempt to imagine control on an even remotely similar scale, e.g. deliberate manipulations of the global climate, requires a thorough simplification of the conditions at hand,³ the perspective of the Anthropocene confronts the human viewer with a level of complexity that seems to exceed the capabilities of human thought.⁴ Hence, the confirmation of human influence on ‘the planet’ not only becomes visible through an increased vulnerability to ‘natural’ forces but brings forth a “bafflingly vast loss of comprehension” (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 11). While paralysis might be one likely response,⁵ another is the overcompensation of the perceived loss of control visible above all in the admonitions to ‘save the planet’. The acts associated with this goal point to a “derangement of linguistic and intellectual proportion in the way people often talk about the environment” (37). The “derangement of scale” manifest in these statements attests to

a breakdown of ‘decorum’ in the strict sense. Thus a sentence about the possible collapse of civilization can end, no less solemnly, with the injunction never to fill the kettle more than necessary when making tea. A poster in many workplaces depicts the whole earth as a giant thermostat dial, with the absurd but intelligible caption ‘You control climate change.’ A motorist buying a slightly less destructive make of car is now ‘saving the planet’ (151).

Clark's example of the office poster is a striking example for his claim that the Apollo photograph of the 'whole Earth' "has already become the obvious emblem of the Anthropocene" (30). This is true both in regards to the ubiquity of the photograph itself and to the variety of contexts in which it appears. Depending on the perspective, the photograph of planet Earth can be used to critique as well as to reaffirm the kind of lifestyle that is associated with the massive transformation of the biosphere. It is just as likely to appear in the context of an environmentalist campaign, as it is to be part of an international corporation's logo (cf. Cosgrove, "Contested Global Visions", and Garrard 181-205). The ambivalence of the image, however, contains many of the problems and possibilities in thinking and representing the Anthropocene, and thus offers a number of clues for the analysis of Morton's and Dath's versions of the Earth as a hyperobject. By regarding the whole Earth image as an emblem, it becomes possible to escape the seemingly contradictory confrontation of the 'pure' photograph and the network of narratives from which it cannot be meaningfully separated. The contradictions Garrard and others have identified are, therefore, not to be disconnected from the image itself. Instead, as I will show later on, they inform and drive attempts to deal with the "Anthropocene disorder"⁶ productively. A cursory summary of their history shows that the Earth-from-space-photographs are both widely influential and influenced by a range of scientific, political, and epistemological discourses. Stripping the image from them, so as to look at it as an isolated object and thus reproducing a sort of laboratory situation, would be missing the point entirely. As we shall see, the inherent contradictions of the whole Earth-discourse lie at the core of the planetary visions offered by Morton and Dath.

When it was first published, the Apollo photograph of Earth was hailed as offering the first objective view of the planet "as a whole." However, this appearance itself is pre-mediated by what geographer Denis Cosgrove has called "Apollo's Eye". In his study of the same title, Cosgrove follows the *Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* which is bookended by Apollo, or the Apollonian perspective, respectively. The Greek god of the sun "embodies a desire for wholeness and a will to power" (*Apollo's Eye 2*) which Cosgrove identifies as one of the reasons NASA named their space-missions accordingly. By tracing this particular 'god's eye view' to a Greek rather than the Christian god, Cosgrove demonstrates that the frame for the desire to encompass the world in a single gaze is not bound solely to a Christian context but easily adaptable to many scientific and, most importantly, political goals (54-78). The idea that the view of the whole world, the globe, or, more recently, the Earth can bring forth a vision of a united humanity thus dates back to classical antiquity. While this in no way diminishes the effect of the Apollo photographs of the late 1960s and especially the 1972 'Blue Marble', it helps to explain why even under the conditions of the Anthropocene the Earth image can help reinforce notions of control (be it as a figurative thermostat or the object of geo-engineering). Cosgrove shows that the Apollo photographs strengthen this possibility precisely because, in contrast to cartographic images of the globe, they obscure the fact that they are man-made: "They have become the image of the globe, simultaneously 'true' representations and virtual spaces." (257) The fact that photographic images of "our home planet" purport to simply document what has been "witnessed" by astronauts (258) illustrates the rhetorical and epistemological shift that accompanies the shift of perspective which these photographs bring about. According to Cosgrove, the most notable effect of the whole Earth image within the tradition of the Western global imagination has been the formation of two related discourses: the whole-earth discourse on the one hand, "which stresses global organic unity, and matters of life, dwelling, and rootedness"

and, on the other hand, the one-world discourse which focuses on “the global surface, circulation, on connectivity, and communication” (262-263). While it is all too tempting to fully associate the former with the environmental Earth and the other with an economic (globalized) globe, the similarities of the two discourses should not be dismissed too quickly: “In their different but complementary ways both one-world and whole-earth discourses inherit the most persistent and contradictory feature of the Western global imagination, its sense of global mission.” (266) As Timothy Clark puts it, “both readings assimilate in given cultural terms [...] an image whose initial force is to dislocate given frames of meaning-making and scale” (*Ecocriticism* 31).

Nevertheless, the “lack of evident human presence” (Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye* 259) to which Clark attributes its dislocating force also substantiates, according to Cosgrove, its success among those who read it in the ultimately imperial terms of the one-world discourse. Philosopher Hans Blumenberg, too, rejects the idea that the new perspective on planet Earth made it palpable as humanity’s finite home-world (*Weltheimat*); instead, he claims that this interpretation came as exaltation after the fact. Since the image hides the transformations of the planetary environment due to human civilization, showing no trace of human beings, their artifacts, waste, or desertification, it acted not so much as a warning, but rather as an “assurance.” The precious whole Earth appears to offer pristine ground for human expansion.⁷ In other words, the *Totalgegenwart* (“total presence”) of the whole Earth image as such does not favor any one interpretation. Rather, it is its appearance as a sort of clean slate that makes the image such a potent emblem for the ambivalence of the Anthropocene. Following Blumenberg, the effect of the Earth image relies on the fact that the Earth’s atmosphere, itself composed of the remnants of metabolic processes of the Earth’s biosphere, hides the existence of those who are responsible for the image as well as the production (and state) of the atmosphere. The “peculiar eventhood” (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 31) of the whole Earth image is, thus, indeed “not to be neutralized by forms of reactive humanism, moralistic appropriation or normative vitalism (‘Gaia’)” (39). To the contrary, it causes a “sense of acultural shock” (39). Clark’s focus on scale reveals the central insight that the ‘Blue Marble’ offers: nowhere is the terrestrial as a norm as evident as in the perspective on the Earth itself: “Its continuing event of surprise is a testimony to our terrestriality, both its scale and its drama of phantasms, something delusory in which one cannot not believe simply by being alive.” (39) The outside perspective, that is, proves that there is no outside. Clark’s argument confronts the human scale of the “given dimensionality of our embodied existence” (30) with the realization “of how deeply this scale may be misleading” (30). He concludes that the idea of a life-world derived from the terrestrial norm is not only a phantasm but one of the “greatest obstacles to being able to think the Anthropocene” (30). At the same time, the inability to disconnect from one’s own terrestriality – something Blumenberg described in terms of the continuing human production of waste, atmosphere, and ultimately, “miniature Earths” (434) – is the very cause for the persistence of the “sense of a cultural shock” (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 39). The invisibility of human existence in the whole Earth image is at the same time challenge and reassurance. The shock and surprise results in large part from the emblematic quality of the whole Earth. The fact that we see a photograph and, what is more, one that is the byproduct of a technological milestone in human history,⁸ proves the existence of the human civilization and its advanced technological state, while at the same time ‘humanity’ is not visible at all. This is as much a surprise as it can be regarded as an insult to those who strove to realize “Apollo’s view” (Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye* 254). This is where Clark’s “Anthropocene disorder” (*Ecocriticism* 140) becomes prevalent: it is as

much an anxiety-inducing insight as it is an affront to notice that the human species has indeed become a planetary force but that this, as mentioned before, is not in the least the result of intentional, concerted effort. Just as the Earth image does not show the slightest trace⁹ of human activity, the anthropogenic influence on the atmosphere realizes itself in 'natural' events. This insight marks the point at which both Morton's and Dath's texts locate the 'end of the world'. That is, the point where the inability to comprehend what is happening is matched by an all too human unwillingness to let go of a comfortable (world-)concept. In other words, the onset of the "Anthropocene disorder" is also the implicit acknowledgement that the world is not one.

What is to be criticized, then, is not the absence of humans and human products in the Earth images or the ignorance thereof – it is the continuing assumption that what we see in those images, and what we deal with in the Anthropocene, is 'the world'. Indeed, what is striking is that for all the references to Earth, the planet, or the globe, the image is still used to reinforce the notion that 'we are the world'. But if, as Morton claims, the world has indeed ended, then, the images suggest that *only we* – and not Earth – are the world. Consequently, the constant attempts to frame the planet in terms of world-metaphors, that is the constant use of the "Earth-as"¹⁰ are bound to fail. Morton is hardly the first to criticize the holistic vision attached to the whole Earth image.¹¹ In fact, Blumenberg's rather sarcastic remarks about the (re)discovery of our *Weltheimat* aim at the same target. Framing Earth as a/the world is nothing more than an exercise in shrinking it and its problems into view by rhetorical means. Consequently, a depiction of the Earth that would properly account for the vastness and complexity of its subject must fulfill the impossible task of resisting such simplifications while at the same time remaining intelligible.

Hyperobjects and the End of the World

In many ways, Morton's attempt to find a term that names what cannot be fully depicted or comprehended is set up to fail. A lack of consistency and analytical precision seems to be symptomatic of the phenomena it aims to bring to light. Nevertheless, the conjunction of the term and the mode of argument that Morton presents offers, as I aim to show, a productive way to approach the complexity of issues which often lead to the kind of paralysis and linguistic derangement described above. Hyperobjects, I would argue, are at once a tool to analyze and to depict phenomena on a planetary scale. Since their relation to human beings is a defining aspect of hyperobjects (Morton, "Hyperobjects" 1), they can be read as models of the cognitive and aesthetic effects the perspective of the Anthropocene imposes on humans and their sense of time and space. What the concept of the hyperobject allows for, then, is a dynamic and productive approach to the crises at hand which openly rejects aspirations to wholly 'understand' what is happening. It avoids paralysis by embracing 'the end of the world' as a starting point for new modes of thought. In his introduction, Morton states that "Hyperobjects, then, are 'hyper' in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not" (ibid.).¹² Because they are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (ibid.), they resist inscription into a bounded world. Since the observing mind cannot distance itself from the "object" of her attention, hyperobjects cannot be "objectified." In this sense, they "stick" to us – a property that Morton designates as "viscosity" (ibid.).

Morton's account parallels Clark's argument about "terrestriality" – although Clark emphasizes its normative, rather than its physical effects (*Ecocriticism* 29). Either way, the very idea of the Apollonian gaze, of scientific objectivity or of any kind of metalanguage is rendered impossible (Morton, "Hyperobjects" 2). This has

radical implications for the depiction and analysis of hyperobjects. Morton, for example, describes his style of writing as a direct effect of the hyperobject's viscosity: "Throughout *Hyperobjects* I frequently write in a style that the reader might find 'personal' – sometimes provocatively or frustratingly so." (ibid., 3) He deliberately adds a performative dimension to his writing that actively refuses notions of objectivity insofar as they rely on the detachment of the writing subject from the object that is written about. This also refers to earlier rejections of environment, or *Umwelt*, as a concept that is dependent on a human subject at the center of a stable 'world' of its own creation (*Ecology* 97-101). By constantly referring to himself as a writing subject, Morton attempts to take into account the viscosity of hyperobjects and his consequent inability to take on a truly objective stance:

I am unable to go beyond what I have elsewhere called *ecomimesis*, the (often) first-person rendering of situatedness 'in'. This is not to endorse ecomimesis, but to recognize that there is no outside, no metalanguage. At every turn, however, the reader will discover that the prose in this book sways somewhat sickeningly between phenomenological narrative and scientific reason. ("Hyperobjects" 5-6)

What Morton's prose lacks in analytical consistency,¹³ it makes up for in immediacy and persuasiveness – it is itself 'sticky' in that it latches on to the reader on an affective level, in ways that are both disconcerting and hard to escape. Since one cannot distance oneself from the hyperobject, or, in Morton's words, since there is no such thing as a metalanguage, the modern expectation that objective, i.e. scientific examination can produce facts or even truths about a phenomenon is fundamentally mistaken. His claim that hyperobjects have already brought about the end of the world (7) toys with this opposition of the physical world and the mental concept of a world in that "clearly, planet Earth has not exploded. But the concept *world* is no longer operational, and hyperobjects are what brought about its demise" (6). It should have become clear at this point that Morton's concept leaves no room for the possibility of a depiction of the whole Earth which could sufficiently represent the planet and its ecology. While viscosity and non-locality are the properties of Earth as hyperobject that come closest to the problems that have already been discussed regarding the depiction of Earth, "temporal undulation" refers to the hyperobject's non-human timescales and their effect on time (and space) itself: "These gigantic timescales are truly humiliating in that they force us to realize how close to Earth we are. Infinity is far easier to cope with. [...] But hyperobjects are not forever. What they offer instead is *very large finitude*." (60)¹⁴

Morton's account of what Clark terms "terrestriality" establishes a close connection between his and Dath's texts. The realization of our earthliness and that a concept of infinity is easier to cope with than the timescales with which a planetary imagination confronts us are central to both texts. However, at this point the difference in style between Morton's and Dath's writing becomes most apparent. While they share a penchant for rhetorical exuberance, Dath's science fiction thrives on the very kind of metalanguage which Morton condemns. The novel creates a perspective capable of taking into account both the "very large finitudes" and the "terrestriality" of its creatures. It is striking that, compared to Morton's 'voice' in *Hyperobjects*, the narrator of *The Abolition of Species* appears to be detached from the content of the narrative but still, as I will show, does not get caught up in the apparent trap of (unreflective) holisms. This is due to a shared understanding of the limited human capability to perceive and process hyperobjects, and the concurrent unwillingness to let go of a certain concept of world.

Morton distinguishes the physical properties of an object from its aesthetic characteristics.¹⁵ He traces our failure to conceptualize hyperobjects to an outdated understanding of physics: "It's a false cliché that we have grasped the meaning of relativity. Far from it. In our daily psychic practices we are still Newtonians, still in awe of infinite space, and behind all that in awe of the infinite God of infinite space." ("Hyperobjects 63) Newtonian physics views space and time as containers of objects, rather than as the 'aesthetic' effect of objects (with large gravitational fields), as an 'Einsteinian' understanding of objects, time, and space would demand.¹⁶ Consequently, the scale of hyperobjects can be understood to transgress the frame of the whole Earth image in that it insists on the connection of Earth to a planetary system and to the cosmos as a whole. In effect, the physical experiences that are possible on Earth are a reflection of the relationship between Newtonian and Einsteinian physics – the former being a special case of the latter. The "kinds of imperatives on the sensitivities of apprehending objects, such as human nervous systems, antennae, and tape heads" (63) that are exercised by hyperobjects, in this case planets, are thus perceived as stable but are influenced by physical processes which exceed even planetary scale. This property of hyperobjects, I would argue, has the most profound impact on the possibility of depicting Earth in relation to human beings and the influence of human civilization on the planet. It is thoroughly connected not only to the physical quality of the planet, but also to the notion of the current geological age as the Anthropocene. The hyperobject's physical effect on time and space is related to the (human) capability to perceive and depict historical and geological time.

Ultimately, Morton describes the same human inability or even unwillingness to draw the right conclusions from the information at hand which also is a central theme of *The Abolition of Species*. Between the four parts of the novels, Dath interpolates (fictional) excerpts "From the *Conversations with the Lion*"¹⁷ in which the founder and king of the Gente discusses the difference between this life-form and the humans which preceded them. Here, the shortcomings of humans are presented in terms that recall Morton's discussion of hyperobjects. In attempting to answer the question why humans weren't able to use their knowledge about non-locality (Dath 2) or the genome (106) to achieve freedom from the natural order, the Lion comes to the same conclusion as Morton: apparently, humans were too much in awe of "the infinite God of infinite space" ("Hyperobjects" 63). The Gente's most significant difference from humans is not their form or their ability to shapeshift, but that they have overcome this fixed system of belief and embraced "the idea that there is a rich, vibrant living world where everything has some causal connection with everything else and that everything made sense, comprehensively, with no need for a supernatural guiding hand" (Dath 106). The world that has ended in both texts, hence, is one in which fixed belief systems – be they political, religious, or scientific – determine reality. The end of the world refers at once to the cause and the effect of the ecological transformations that characterize the Anthropocene, if 'world' is the aesthetic effect of a holistic concept which allows for an anthropocentric appropriation of the planet.¹⁸ But in the Anthropocene, Morton claims,

we are no longer able to think history as exclusively human, for the very reason that we are in the Anthropocene. A strange name indeed, since in this period non-humans make decisive contact with humans, even the ones busy shoring up differences between humans and the rest. ("Hyperobjects" 5)

Hyperobjects, hence, force us to accept the impossibility of a metalanguage and at the same time they allow us to open up to the poetic qualities of this new perspective:

Global warming plays a very mean trick. It reveals that what we took to be a reliable world was actually just a *habitual pattern* [...]. We took weather to be real. But in an age of global warming, we see it as an accident, a simulation of something darker, more withdrawn – climate. As Harman argues, world is always presence-at-hand – a mere caricature of some real object. (“Hyperobjects” 102; emphasis added)

It comes as no surprise that Morton’s rejection of holism comes with a rejection of irony. Not only is the situation too serious, but the abolition of metalanguage caused by hyperobjects demands representations which are aware of their own status as representations – in other words, representations which refuse the distance implicit in constructions of ‘the environment’ or ‘one world’. Morton rejects ‘objective’ distance as well as the ironic or aesthetic distance he associates with a romantic perspective as inappropriate with respect to hyperobjects. Despite the apparent differences between objective, aesthetic, and ironic perspectives, they are deeply similar insofar as they rely on the practice of distancing oneself as a viewing subject from one’s object. For Morton, the corrosive effects of irony in particular highlight the need for a different stance towards hyperobjects. This is not to say that irony itself becomes impossible – the opposite is the case: “Humans enter a new age of sincerity, which contains an intrinsic irony that is beyond the aestheticized, slightly plastic irony of the postmodern age.” (“Hyperobjects” 128) Again, this is played out in Morton’s style of writing, which “sways sickeningly” not only between “phenomenological narrative and scientific reason” (ibid., 5-6), but also between irony and sincerity. Where Morton criticizes aestheticized postmodern irony, he also rejects the purported seriousness of objectivity and metalanguage. Locating irony *within* the age of seriousness is meant as a general dismissal of the practice of distancing oneself from or elevating oneself above an object. In contrast, Morton regards the “intrinsic irony” of the Anthropocene as an essential precondition for “ecological awareness” (ibid., 128).¹⁹ Recognizing hyperobjects leads to a “detailed and increasing sense, in science and outside of it, of the innumerable interrelationships among lifeforms and between life and non-life” (ibid.) which ultimately, and ironically, abolishes the idea of a stable environment. The viscosity of hyperobjects makes it impossible to distance oneself from an object and, consequently, to separate irony and sincerity. Ecological awareness is no less political than environmental awareness, but it focuses on “displac[ing] the human from the center of meaning-making” (ibid., 16-17) by abolishing the ability to order things and practices by means of separation.

Curators of the Hyperobject Earth

Dietmar Dath’s *The Abolition of Species* has been hailed as the linguistically and conceptually most radical thought experiment attempting to dissolve the privileged position of *homo sapiens* among other species (Heise, *Nach der Natur* 140). The novel takes a decidedly non-apocalyptic stance on the ‘end of the world’ and creates visions of Earth and its inhabitants which attempt to explore different visions of the planet and its biosphere. The posthuman vision of a civilization, the “Gente”, identical with a life-form independent of genetic limits, addresses one of the central issues of the Anthropocene. Genetic engineering is marked as the defining step into a future beyond the gridlock of nature-culture relations that characterizes many of the physical and intellectual problems of the current epoch. Indeed, the explicitly artificial construction of the text, which almost overflows with references to other literary texts, political ideas, and scientific concepts, disconnects its characters from any form of dynamic relationship to the environment and thus avoids a

direct comment on the current crisis of biodiversity.²⁰ Nevertheless, as Stefan Willer notes, the novel is anything but an autoreflexive game, but clearly distances itself from postmodern aesthetics (Willer 405). Although it might, at a first glance, seem to be the very antithesis to Morton's ideas about an art that would address the contradictions of the Anthropocene, Dath's text positions itself in a very similar manner. Its irony is not the "aestheticized, slightly plastic irony of the postmodern age" (Morton, "Hyperobjects" 128). Dath himself has rejected this type of irony on several occasions (Willer 397). Instead, the impossible perspective of the novel allows for the presentation of a non-human lifeform and the history of its civilization over the course of a vast temporal expanse. Relative to humans, the Gente themselves – because of their immense life-spans and their ability to shape-shift – are hyperobjects. Still, the narrative perspective takes on spatial and temporal scales at which it becomes apparent that even these superior beings are confronted with hyperobjects, and, most importantly, prone to overestimating their own concepts of nature and world. Rather than focusing on particular environmental problems, the novel builds an archive of cultural representations of relationships between nature and culture. This archive is realized in the last part of the novel in form of a whole Earth image. The planet becomes a museum of itself, a physical realization of a holistic world. While this world is indeed a paradisiac vision of unity and peace, it is in its orderliness the opposite of life itself. Before taking a closer look at this version of the whole Earth image, I will look at how *The Abolition of Species* depicts the phenomena Morton refers to as hyperobjects and show how this concept helps illuminating the particular ways in which the novel criticizes holism as a way of conceptualizing the relationship of humans and non-humans.

The Abolition of Species covers at least three millennia and the entire Earth, the Earth's Moon, as well as the neighboring planets Mars and Venus. While this is a relatively short period compared to a geological era or a climatological age, and there are many science fiction texts which cover even vaster ranges of time and space,²¹ it makes obvious the aspiration to a more general view on Earth and its inhabitants than a smaller scale might allow for. The novel begins approximately 500 years after the end of human dominance, or "the Monotony" (*Langeweile*), as the Gente refer to it. The end of the human world that is brought about by the demise of its dominant species does by no means bring about the end of Earth and its biosphere, or even of civilization. Although from an anthropocentric perspective, the prospect of a future without humans may appear apocalyptic, in the novel, it is hailed as a liberation, not only from the consequences of anthropogenic destruction of planetary ecosystems, but also from the restrictions of biology. The Gente seem to have overcome most of humanity's limitations with regards to health, energy, communication, and the environment. They have merged species and civilization into properties of their being – nature and culture have literally become one. The most dominant property that distinguishes the 'Gente' from their human predecessors is their ability to shape-shift. It becomes immediately obvious that their characterization as animals is not based on the current human-animal distinction which, although it is increasingly under dispute, still serves to justify a hierarchical order of species. The Gente achieve freedom from physicality insofar as they are neither bound to any one specific form, nor subject to ageing and illness – their life expectancy, compared to that of humans, can accurately be described as a 'very large finitude'. Therefore, the animal names that characterize them in the manner of Aesopian fables are more stable throughout the novel than any of the physical forms they assume (Willer 398).²²

In the course of the novel, the Gente are threatened by another posthuman life-form, the Ceramicans. The Ceramicans are an originally anorganic life-form

which attained its present form after coupling with the remaining exemplars of the human species. In contrast to the Gente, who are a civilization of individuals with a hierarchical order, the Ceramicans develop into a swarm, centered around a god-like figure named Katahomenleandraleal. Their success depends on an element of surprise insofar as the Gente cannot fully comprehend and thus react to the opposing life-form. What the Gente are unable to grasp is that what they perceive as 'war' is in fact nothing but an expression of Katahomenleandraleal's hunger for biomass, which does not distinguish between them and other living matter. In order to escape, the Gente have no choice but to kill their king, since Cyrus Golden refuses to understand the conflict as anything other but a geopolitical struggle and forbids their exodus. This is where style becomes an issue of central importance, both in regards to the narration and the content of the novel. The possibility of communication between two vastly different life-forms is a classic topos of science fiction, as is the confrontation of quasi-mythical genealogies with high-tech futurism. However, Dath juxtaposes Gente and Ceramicans in a way that can be described as a philosophical thought experiment. The novel walks a thin line between postmodern aestheticism (as criticized by Heise) and a decidedly modern attempt to imagine a future beyond the mere continuation of present politics, thinking, and modes of existence. As Willer stresses, Dath's conception of science fiction requires strenuous work by both author and reader to produce 'cognition effects'.²³ The abundance of information in Dath's 'encyclopaedic writings' hence does not only serve the purpose of creating a world and producing knowledge, but also evaluates the ways in which this knowledge is produced and applied. Thus, the worlds created in *The Abolition of Species* acknowledge their own aesthetic nature and contain the possibility of their own abolition. In refusing simplification at every turn, the novel thus produces worlds alongside the knowledge of their produced-ness. This becomes most apparent in the ending of the novel which demonstrates the consequences of planet Earth becoming an actual world.

After being defeated by the Ceramicans, a fraction of the Gente settles first on Earth's Moon and finally on Mars and Venus, where several centuries pass as the Gente become the forebears to yet another life-form which trains a pair of "children," Padmasambhava and Fire. The two siblings are supposed to one day go back to Earth and possibly pave the way for a collective homecoming. When they finally reach Earth, they encounter a planet which is very different not only from their own "nurseries," but also from what their history lessons taught them to expect. Katahomenleandral has "devoured" herself (371) and left behind a planet which, under the care of invisible 'curators,' has grown into the kind of pristine green paradise that Morton declared to be an illusion. And in a way, an illusion is indeed what Earth has become: instead of a dynamic and evolving biosphere, the lush green world that the siblings encounter is the utopian vision of Earth as an ideal world. What the curators – non-biotic beings, seemingly afterthoughts of a "programme" (373) – have done is to alter the planet's physical properties by closing it up from the rest of the universe. They have effectively stopped time and turned Earth into the realization of the holistic snapshot:

'[...] you've brought history to an end? The way we might seal an arc? Earth's reality has become [...] a curve in time that leads back to itself, the higher-dimensional equivalent of a Klein bottle in three dimensions or a Möbius strip in two?' 'The construction, the monument, is held together by Ceramican work. They're diffused [...] [...] through all phases of development right up to the Singularity. In the Age of Gente, in the Monotony [...] and we're two Gente partials, so that means we're visitors for you. Guests, from outside, for your museum. (372)

Fire and Padmasambhava are witnesses to a remarkable feat. Although the originator of the "programme" (372) that the two are entering, Katahomenleandreal, is long gone, the transformation of Earth's 'nature,' which she brought about by a total pervasion of the planet with a hybrid bio-mechanical substance, is continuously maintained. The "Gente-partials," as they call themselves, will have to spend "a thousand years, local time" (373) on the closed-up planet until a "take-off slot" (373) is opened for them. During that time, they are able to explore it almost in its spatial and temporal entirety. Earth is now identical to the holistic vision of both the one-world and the whole-Earth discourse. It has become an ideal archive, containing every stage and information about the planet's history, an ideal coincidence of cultural and natural history – yet its "planetary ecotecture" (374) has been perfected in a way that renders these traces invisible (unless one knows the time-tunnels that lead to other versions of Earth).

In that sense, Dath's novel envisions what Earth would be if it were not a hyperobject. For the curators and the two visitors, the planet eventually ceases to be 'hyper' since it is possible to know it exhaustively, to traverse it synchronically and diachronically. Fire and Padmasambhava encounter a world that, although vast, invites the attempt at a playful yet total comprehension which the Earth as hyperobject, as emblem of the Anthropocene, denies. Nevertheless, they also have to leave it eventually, should they ever wish to continue their actual lives, that is, should they want to be able to experience time. The ending of *The Abolition of Species* comes about as a sweet apocalypse. In a final uprising, the curators brought about the end of the world by making Earth the world that, in Morton's terms, it never was. The novel's ending can be read as an inversion of Earth as hyperobject. The end of the world is lifted to another level: it is both the literal end of the world and the end of the world as a concept – and yet, the world is preserved, in both of these senses, by being sealed off from the larger universe. Whereas for Morton, the realization that "we are the curators of a gigantic museum of non-art in which we have found ourselves, a spontaneous museum of hyperobjects" is cause for celebration ("Hyperobjects" 121), *The Abolition of Species* takes any notion of spontaneity out of the equation, instead turning the whole Earth into an artificial construct – and thus into the kind of stable *oikos* which, according to Morton, is revealed as illusory when hyperobjects force us to acknowledge that "without a world, there are simply a number of unique beings [...] to whom I owe an obligation through the simple fact that existence is coexistence" (126). Ironically, Earth as a life-world, i.e. as an embodied world identical with its sensuous perception, ceases to offer a sense of terrestriality. Existence and coexistence have become equally impossible since the Earth has become a final comment to the entirety of natural, social, and intellectual ideas that have been formed of it.

The Abolition of Species offers this beautiful and peaceful, but ultimately uninhabitable world as a comment on the "major irony" (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 6) of the Anthropocene. In many ways, Dath's way of approaching central topics of the epoch of humanity as a geological force is close to Morton's idea of an age of seriousness that produces its own intrinsic irony. Precisely because the novel resists the temptation of offering direct commentary on current crises such as biodiversity loss, pollution, or climate change, but instead seems to effortlessly transcend these problems, it can explore the implications of the Anthropocene beyond the rhetoric of scarcity. As an example of ecological as opposed to environmental awareness, *The Abolition of Species* articulates ways in which interconnectedness and terrestriality exceed the limitations of current political and scientific discourse. With its narrative of the rise and fall of the Gente and the museumification of Earth, the nov-

el critiques a form of holistic thought that remains attached to a narrow understanding of what constitutes humans as a species. The “evolutionary pressure” which the Lion’s daughter invokes as an argument for regicide and exodus alike serves as a metaphor for an open, non-teleological future. The Gente, although they have left the limitations of natural evolution behind, nevertheless fall prey to the same deficiency which makes it so difficult for present-day humans to deal with the consequences of the Anthropocene: a lack of imagination. Considering life at any given moment as without alternative may produce beautiful worlds, but it runs the risk of foreclosing evolutionary possibilities. Terrestriality, seen from the perspective of this text, is thus not a physical limitation, but rather akin to what Blumenberg described as “the human fate” (435): to turn anything and everything into a miniature Earth. In other words, the desire to produce and inhabit a life-world should never lead to the assumption that this life-world is identical with reality. However, as humans and Gente painfully discover in the novel, just as it is “naïve [...] to believe that we could just leave natural history behind” (Dath 207), the world-producing ‘programs’ might also turn out to retain their power even after the species which devised them have disappeared.

Morton’s and Dath’s texts start from a shared assumption about what is wrong with our present situation: the Anthropocene appears to be an age of self-deception in which humans, in clinging to an anthropocentric concept of world, risk the Earth’s physical destruction. Articulating this insight, however, requires ways of thinking and styles of writing which resist simplification and, most interestingly from a literary or cultural studies perspective, undercut the distinction between fictional and non-fictional writing. In his strenuous effort to produce cognition effects, the science fiction writer sometimes appears to be more rigorous than the theorist or philosopher. In their attempt to describe the indescribable, both adhere to the “precept” of the Lion in *The Abolition of Species*: “that we should study, and take seriously, reality as it happens to be, but we shouldn’t worship or admire it. Quite the contrary, whoever holds it up for worship is quite mad” (Dath 106). This, it seems to me, might also be a proper maxim for humanities scholars as they tackle the strange, worldless worlds of the Anthropocene.

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Notes

- 1 For a classification of “future history” as a genre and its role within climate change fiction, see: Trexler/Johns-Putra.
- 2 Greg Garrard offers an insightful discussion of apocalypse as one of the major narratives in environmental discourse (Garrard 93-116).
- 3 See for example Fleming: Fleming analyzes many examples which demonstrate that the simplification of meteorological and climatological conditions that are necessary in order to design means by which the highly complex mechanisms of the atmosphere are to be influenced (much less controlled) render almost any attempt to do so ineffective, if not outright dangerous.

- 4 Clark proposes to frame this kind of complexity by means of Allenby and Sarewitz's levels of the human species in relation to technics. Level I refers to "simple and visible relations of cause and effects" (e.g. technology as a simple tool) whereas Level II presents "complex socio-technological system[s]" (e.g. traffic networks etc.). "Events at Level III broadly correspond to Morton's notion of the hyperobject [...]. Level III effects represent complex emergent properties that defy our ability to model, predict or even understand them, a problem already all too familiar to scientists attempting to model human influence on future climate" (*Ecocriticism* 8).
- 5 Clark for example notices an "air of excessive resignation" in "Sarewitz and Allenby's diagnosis of Level III paralysis" which requires refinement in order to "loosen the sense of paralysis" and find ways to comprehend and take action after all (*Ecocriticism* 11-12).
- 6 According to Clark the discrepancy between the scale and complexity of the Anthropocene and 'normal' human experience hinders proper reaction and comprehension, leading to a syndrome he terms "Anthropocene disorder" (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 140). As Benjamin Bühler notes, this also entails the epistemological dilemma of employing categories of knowledge (Erkenntniskategorien) in order to comprehend something which exceeds them by far (Bühler 181).
- 7 "Nur ist eines unzutreffend, was neuerdings auch gesagt worden ist: Der neue Blick auf die Erde habe sie als endliche Weltheimat des Menschen sehen lassen. Das ist einfach eine rückprojizierende Überdeutung. Im Gegenteil: Die Erde sah aus, als gäbe es den Menschen, seine Werke und seinen Unrat, seine Desertifikationen nicht! Keine Spur vom Menschen. [...] Eine Reinheit des Kostbaren, als sei es lupenrein. Und damit auch ein noch unberührter und ungenutzter Boden für das fatal dazugedachte Wachstum. Es war eine Versicherung, was man sah, keine Warnung." (Blumenberg 440).
- 8 The context both of the first emergence of the image (on TV, commented by astronauts, in papers etc.) and its publication since then (often manipulated in a way such as Clark used as an example – as a thermostat, with flames etc.) practically eliminates the possibility of a naïve view of the whole Earth photograph, that is, a view that is not aware of the image being not 'the real Earth'. Still, this obvious fiction – that 'we' see the whole Earth in this image – remains a potent aspect of the emblem (see Cosgrove, "Contested global visions" and *Apollo's Eye*, Poole, Lazier, and Boes).
- 9 Images which do, require an additional dimension, as Boes shows in regards to the digitalized versions of the whole Earth image, which make the "inscriptions" visible, humans leave on the planet's surface (Boes 160).
- 10 "Earth-as" refers thus to the whole Earth image as an index. Particularly of earth as index of the human (see. Clark, *Ecocriticism*, 32) – as for example in Marshal McLuhans "global village", Lovelocks "Gaia", Buckminster Fuller's "spaceship earth", also in philosophical renderings of Earth as artifact (see. Lazier, as archive of the human (Sagan quoted in Clark 2015, 32) or as medium (Boes).
- 11 See Heise, *Sense of place*, especially "Allegories of Connectedness: From Gaia to the Risk Society" 22-28.
- 12 As critics have pointed out, Morton risks stretching the term beyond the point of usefulness when he seeks to turn it into a general theory of what objects are (e.g. when he writes that "[in] a strange way, every object is a hyperobject," ("Hyperobjects" 201); cf. Heise, "Ursula K."). In my view, such criticisms are valid, but they do not diminish the concept's utility with regard to the phenomena that are, as it were, "hyper in relation to humans."
- 13 This has been criticized for example by Clark, who prefers Allenby and Sarewitz's concept of three levels of complexity to Morton's concept due to their analytical consistency (*Ecocriticism* 8).
- 14 "Hyperobjects are time-stretched to such a vast extent that they become almost impossible to hold in mind" (Morton, "Hyperobjects 58). Hyperobjects present human beings with time-scales that Morton refers to as "horrifying" (500 years – styrofoam), "terrifying" (30.000 years – plutonium), and "petrifying" (100.000 years - Ice Age). (58, 136)
- 15 Aesthetic both in the sense of 'beautiful' and 'available to sensuous perception.'

- 16 While Morton's recapitulations of Newtonian vs. Einsteinian physics are indeed somewhat simplistic – e.g. rather than mutually exclusive, the former is a special case of the latter – I would argue that the juxtaposition as presented in *Hyperobjects* serves, much like Morton's overall employment of scientific concepts, an argumentative purpose rather than aiming at a thorough explanation which could claim scientific validity. Given this limitation, the juxtaposition illustrates the uniqueness of hyperobjects especially with regard to their hybridization of physical and aesthetic properties.
- 17 See Dath 2, 106, 207, and 309.
- 18 Morton presents a similar critique of holism in *Ecology without Nature*, where he dismisses notions of "being environmental", and categories such as "state", "system" and "body" for their holistic and thus exclusively human way of rendering ecological thought (92-109).
- 19 Morton introduces the idea of a kind of irony that critiques holism, rather than reinforcing it in *Ecology without Nature* (100-101).
- 20 Heise criticizes the novel for avoiding a direct comment in favor of playing with 'endless possibilities of metamorphoses' (*Nach der Natur* 146).
- 21 For example, Dath's subsequent novels *Pulsarnacht* and *Feldeváye*, which reference *The Abolition of Species* but are set in a future well beyond even that of the Gente, in which humans inhabit the entire milky way.
- 22 Another subtext for the relationship of Lion, Fox and Wolf is the 15th century German epos about Reineke Fuchs (see Heise, *Nach der Natur* 142).
- 23 In an interview, Dath uses the German term "Erkenntniseffekte," which is a translation of Darko Suvin's "cognition effect" (qtd. in Willer 396).

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