

## ***Perdre la mesure ... or, the ecologies of extinction***

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Thus the unknown god appears as the unknown by way of the sky's  
manifestness. This appearance is the measure against which  
man measures himself.  
(Heidegger, 1971: 223)

Once self-sustaining communities exist away from Earth – on the Moon,  
on Mars, or freely floating in space – our species would be invulnerable  
to even the worst global disasters.  
(Rees, 2003: 170)

...for as long as the world was essentially in relation to some other  
(that is, another world or an author of the world), it could *have* a sense.  
But the end of the world is that there is no longer this  
essential relation, and that there is no longer essentially  
(that is, existentially) anything but the world 'itself'.  
Thus, the world *no longer has* a sense, but it *is* sense.  
(Nancy, 1997: 8)

Cooper: 'Mankind was born on Earth. It was never meant to die here'.  
(Nolan and Nolan, 2014: 37)

In his 2012 treatise on the future of ecological thinking, *Ecologiques*, the eminent poet and philosopher Michel Déguay asks whether 'the currently dominating techno-scientific treatment of the "human condition" [is] irreversible' and whether ecology in its current form might be 'failing the world' (Déguay, 2012: 21):

[T]he management of all flows: *eugenics*, *eubiosis* (bare life), *euthanasia*, *eudoxia*, *eutrapelia*-welfare, *euphemia* etc. – have already deterritorialised the human ... to the point where an exit or mutation has already taken place: the exit from all vernacular modes of millenary existence ... could be summarised as an exit from the 'logos' and all –logies, so that ecology itself would be protesting and rebelling 'too late', when its etymology is already being forgotten, 'logic of the *oikos*'; more succinctly: it would lose *its own measure* in terms of environment, the technological change of technics which improves the environs of every '*Umwelt*' ... (21; all translations and italicisation, unless indicated, are otherwise mine)

Déguy's notion that ecology or any eco-logic seems to come too late at the present time – a time which he characterises as *eu-topian*, in the sense that the human has 'outgrown' its environment with the help of technology – is particularly relevant here because of its reference to *scale* and the *loss of measure* when faced with making sense of the human and the environment (the 'world') today. Taking its cue from Heidegger's famous quotation of Hölderlin, Déguy's pessimistic conclusion is that 'man no longer "poetically" dwells on Earth', which means that '[t]he future of the illusion and the illusion of the future now form a loop'. The main question is: 'Can we get out of it?' (22).

This dilemma – between a 'belated' ecology and the absence of 'futuraity' – also structures the recent blockbuster movie *Interstellar*. As the director, Jonathan Nolan, explains in an interview:

We're sort of in this moment in which humans are obsessed that we'll prove our own undoing – that we'll poison the planet, we'll destroy ourselves, and all these things. But I thought it would be more interesting to find a slightly less personal Armageddon, or the idea that the universe obliterates you or the planet turns itself toxic because it doesn't care about you and me because we're an accident in outer space. The blight and the dust provided what I thought was a great impersonal way for the planet to sort of gently suggest that our time here was over. That it was the moment to move on, rather than being something that we had brought on ourselves which, in its own way, feels anthropocentric (Nolan and Nolan, 2014: ix).

However, while this might sound like a thoroughly 'posthumanist' scenario with its potential to take the very fashionable notion of postanthropocentrism in contemporary thought and culture seriously, the film in its motivation and ultimate resolution remains profoundly humanist precisely *because* of the futurity loop that Déguy refers to above. This illusion of a future and the future of an illusion loop is nothing but a rearticulation of the very 'postmodern' and psychoanalytic logic of trauma that underpins both the science fictional idea of time travel (both into the future *and* into the past) and the metaphysics of 'future generations', as articulated by Slavoj Žižek as the basic 'paradox' of retrospection:

This, therefore, is the basic paradox we are aiming at: the subject is confronted with a scene from the past that he wants to change, to meddle with, to intervene in; he takes a journey into the past [or future (SH)], intervenes in the scene, and it is not that he ‘cannot change anything’ — quite the contrary, only through his intervention does the scene from the past become what it always was: his intervention was from the beginning comprised, included. The initial ‘illusion’ of the subject consists in simply forgetting to include in the scene his own act ... (Žižek, 1989: 57-58)

Nolan readily subscribes to this curious generational logic by saying that,

in the interim I had a little girl of my own ... But even in the few months since I’ve become a parent, you begin to realize that, as you get older, you become a bit of a passenger in the universe. And I imagine I will probably get to a moment in my life shortly towards the end of it where you just want to keep living because you want to see what happens ... that you’d be able to glimpse that on some level, that you’d be able to glimpse where all that is going, is very sad and very alluring all at once. (Nolan and Nolan, 2014: xvi)

To ‘live on’ just to ‘see what happens’ is also what inspires the heroics of the prototypical astronaut, Cooper, in the film. As his mission to discover a habitable exoplanet for a dying humanity on a desertified Earth literally runs out of time and fuel, Cooper plunges into a black hole to explore the mysteries of time and gravity. The vision he has is that of a ‘tesseract’ (a five-dimensional structure that transcends time and space) and which functions to overcome the ‘generation game’. Through the tesseract, a ‘medium’ created by future humans, Cooper is able to talk back to his daughter, Murph, from the ‘future’ and help her solve the ecological problems humanity has been facing since he left her behind. Through this trans-gravitational time loop he is thus ‘enabling’ the future from which he is communicating back to ‘happen’ in the first place:

Cooper: ‘They’ aren’t ‘beings’ ... they’re us ... trying to help ... just like I tried to help Murph...

Tars: People didn’t build this tesseract –

Cooper: Not yet ... but one day. Not you and me but people, people who’ve evolved beyond the four dimensions we know ... (Nolan and Nolan, 2014: 144-5)

What constitutes the ‘conduit’ for this intergenerational yearning for communication between parents and children, or present and future generations, is – and that is where the film returns to an essential humanism – love:

Dr. Brand: I tell you that love isn’t something we invented – it’s observable, powerful. Why shouldn’t it mean something?

Cooper: It means social utility – child rearing, social bonding –

Brand: We love people who’ve died ... where’s the social utility in that? Maybe it means more – something we can’t understand, yet. Maybe it’s some evidence, some artefact of higher dimensions that we can’t consciously perceive ... Love is the one thing we’re capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can’t yet understand it. (84)

Loving ‘dead’ people – believing that their disappearance is never final, that they might come back (i.e. to haunt) – is what both powers and upsets the generational order of succession. Cooper, the lone parent, who is raising his kids together with their grandfather on a corn farm, teaches Murph about technology and science. When he is called up for a space mission he is aware that, due to relativity, his family will have aged much more than himself (it turns out that the time difference is almost Murph’s entire life span). When Cooper is finally rescued and brought to the space station that his daughter created to save humanity with the knowledge about gravity that Cooper transmitted to her ‘from the future’ through the tesseract, he experiences the ghostliness created by this generational upset:

Murph: ... but I knew you’d come back ... Because my dad promised me ... No parent should have to watch their child die. My kids are here for me now. Go.

(...)

He watches [Murph’s kids and grandkids], their love, as if from another dimension. A man out of time. A ghost. (151)

But he also anticipates this and exposes the spectral co-existence of generations even under ‘normal’ (i.e. humanist) circumstances where parents are merely ‘ghosts of their children’s future’:

Cooper to Murph: [your mother said] ‘I look at the babies and I see myself as they’ll remember me ... It’s as if we don’t exist anymore, like we’re ghosts, like now we’re just there to be memories of our kids’. Now I realize – once we’re parents, we’re just the ghosts of our children’s futures ... Murph, a father looks in his

child's eyes and thinks – maybe it's them ... maybe my child will save the world. And everyone, once a child, wants to look into their own dad's eyes and know he saw how they saved some little corner of their world. But, usually, by then, the father's gone. (38-39)

Cooper in the fashion of a true explorer and saviour thus needs to disappear, needs to get out of this world, and take to the skies to save humanity and create a future 'without' him.

Getting out of *this* world is again the subject of current science fiction and it also informs the return of science's dream of travelling to the stars to find a new 'home', a new 'world', for 'us'. As Déguy remarks: 'The cloned world where life will be better and where 'real life' will at last exist is live on your screens' (2012: 98). What Déguy refers to as 'ecologics', however, involves a 'rethinking of the imagination in its inventive relation to the world' (24). In the face of a European (and soon global) refugee and migrant crisis, for example, one may ask, following Déguy, whether there is in fact 'a degenerative auto-immunitary contradiction within ecology' (118) that prevents it from addressing new challenges at a planetary *scale* and instead forces it to look to the stars:

Paleoanthropology and common sense teach us that ... no people is native [*autochtone*]. There is a time for everything ... there was a prehuman time, a human and now a posthuman time. And now every human by necessity, chance, and desire demands the possibility soon to be inscribed by law, to be, to be allowed to be, at home anywhere on this planet. Consequently, nowhere to be refused residence. (153-4)

In a similar vein, faced with the immeasurability of 'our new ecological situation', the mathematician Olivier Rey asks: 'Comment perdre la mesure ...' [how to lose measure] (Rey (2014: 103). Starting from the premise that 'we no longer live in a cosmos' (103), humanity's situation is that '[f]rom now on we have a planet lost within the immensity and the eternal silence of infinite space' (108). The resulting (ecological) dilemma is that of the 'loss of measure':

Instead of fitting into the world, man tried very hard to appropriate it ... On the other hand, one realises that the more this maxim begins to dominate, the more human measure is being lost ... Since measure is an adjustment between two terms, when all the legitimation is concentrated in one term, the auto-referential loop turns crazy and measure disappears. (123)

Consequently, '[w]ithout incorporating a scale of pertinence into the definitions of concepts, conceptual thinking obscures the realities it is supposed to illuminate' (170), which means that everything boils down to '*une question de taille*' (a question of size). In a wonderfully ironic vein, Rey asks, if 'the future is in our hands! One mystery remains: who is this much-touted "us", who has been invested with such marvellous power to decide and act?' (234). Far from being empowering,

the view of the Earth from space completes our spatial as well as historical deracination. Rather than engendering a feeling of belonging it produces the opposite, it does not make us think of the Earth as ground, home, history, but shows it to us as a planet amongst others and on which we have been born by accident. It feeds into the dream to escape from this cramped star, the idea that the time might have come for life to continue elsewhere than on this small used ball from which humanity self-ejects by making it inhabitable. (235)

Rey goes on to claim that 'there is no point in imagining a solidarity between the billions of individuals that might be comparable to that among the crew of a ship – this would be a typical example of a useless and misleading comparison because it ignores the differences of scale' (235), because 'the general degradation will only accentuate the difference between the powerful and the poor – which means that the powerful will be less inclined as ever to give in ... the current dynamics seem to be our destiny' (236). This goes against the views of an astronaut like Cooper (and against the very idea of a science fiction film like *Interstellar*), who defends the spaceship-lifeboat vision of saving humanity. So while *Interstellar* and some of the more optimistic ecological scenarios that involve finding a new habitat for humanity on another planet are keen to construct an interplanetary future, Rey cautions that 'the future is dealt with, as much as that is possible, not by a wish to preserve it, but by respecting the right measure for

its own sake in the present ... The future, if there is one, will be given to us as a bonus [*par surcroît*]’ (242). It is this idea of ‘the right measure’ that seems to be at the heart of contemporary ecological thought: how to do justice to several ecologies and ecologies at once, survival *or* extinction of humans – what would be more ‘ecological’?

The problem that arises out of these two contradictory visions or imperatives is that our contemporary ‘cosmology’ seems to bring with it a fundamental dilemma which in its crudest form might be put as a stark (and impossible) choice – either the planet or us. Biocentrism or anthropocentrism, what to put first? This also becomes clear during the clash Cooper has with Murph’s teachers who denounce space travel as an ideological construct and as a waste of resources under the current climate conditions and levels of erosion:

Murph’s Teachers: [R]ight now the world doesn’t need more engineers. We didn’t run out of planes, or television sets. We ran out of food ... The world needs farmers ... We’re a caretaker generation ... [The Apollo missions were] a brilliant piece of propaganda. The Soviets bankrupted themselves pouring resources into rockets and other useless machines ... if we don’t want a repeat of the wastefulness and excess of the twentieth century, our children need to learn about this planet, not tales of leaving it. (14–15)

Against this green ‘meekness’ Cooper and the inspiring figure of Professor Brand, who heads NASA (by now an ‘underground’ organization, or the last ‘resistance’ against the ‘ecofascism’ of the new ‘agrarians’), doggedly proclaim the need to think ‘big’ in the face of global ‘blight’. For them (and NASA of course), the true ecological choice and the survival of the species lies in the search for exoplanets:

Cooper: We’ve forgotten who we are ... Explorers, pioneers, not caretakers ... We used to look up and wonder at our place in the stars. Now we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt. (18–19)

Professor Brand: Earth’s atmosphere is 80 percent nitrogen. We don’t even breathe nitrogen ... Blight does. And as it thrives our air contains less and less oxygen ... The last people to starve will be the first to suffocate. Your daughter’s generation will be the last to survive on Earth ... We’re not meant to save the world ... we’re meant to leave it (30–31).

The absurd choice between saving life on this planet *or* humanity is ultimately based on the illusion of measurability. It hinges on the loss of the sense of scale pointed out by Rey, but which was also already perceived by the media philosopher and cultural critic Vilém Flusser in a short essay entitled ‘Orders of Magnitude and Humanism’ (1990) where he states that: ‘We are forced to differentiate between orders of magnitude [scales (SH)]. In this, the human order is one among many. Humanism is inappropriate to the present’ (Flusser 2002: 160). ‘In short: man has advanced into the inhuman, the inhuman strikes back at him, and under these blows, humanism breaks down’ (161).

In a metaphor that, significantly, runs through many alternative accounts of technology and ecological thinking Flusser compares this hiatus of measures to a ‘Russian doll’ scenario:

We are somewhere in the interior of a *matrjoschka* (Russian doll), a hierarchy of orders of magnitude [i.e. scales (SH)] in which each contains all smaller ones while being contained by all bigger ones. The transformation of our region from a Mediterranean island into the Russian doll is called – not to put too fine a point on it – the ‘Copernican revolution’ ... It is in question what we are actually doing when we jump from doll to doll, from measure to measure, from scale of values to scale of values. (161)

It is the practice of measuring itself – so crucial to any conception of scale – which thus comes under scrutiny and becomes suspicious, especially while jumping ‘from doll to doll’ or from ‘scale to scale’. What Flusser calls ‘barbarism *by means of* measurement’ arises precisely out of comparing or measuring the incomparable: ‘The dolls not only contain one another; they are also each permeable by the other. It is especially these gray zones between the orders of magnitude [scales (SH)] that set our teeth on edge [*durch Mark und Bein gehen*] – in case we stay long enough in that doll inside of which we have teeth, marrow, and bone. For we only have marrow and bone in the margin between  $10^{-5}$  and  $10^5$  cm and between decades and seconds, that is, in that order of magnitude which we can perceive with our senses but which we leave more and more often’ (162).



Against the nihilistic implications and ‘anti-humanist’ tendencies of the measuring barbarism Flusser proposes a move ‘from subject to project’ under the auspices of a ‘new humanism’:

The new humanism would have to criticize the gray zones between the orders of magnitude [scales (SH)], that is, the zones in which dwell artificial intelligence, artificial life, and artificial immortality ... The new humanism cannot want to deny that different orders of measurement overlap each other and interpenetrate. On the contrary, it has to emphasize that, for each order of magnitude [scale (SH)], there is a typical epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics that is effective, and that, in spite of the gray zones, abysses gape between the orders of magnitude. (163)

For Flusser – this is probably one of his most famous statements – ‘the Enlightenment has overshot its mark’ and, as a result, ‘the new humanism is forced to break out of the linearity of technical progress into the winding [*das Gewundene*]’ (164). However, while Flusser gambles on a renewed attention to the ‘priority of the human’ that a ‘new humanism’ would help guarantee, based on the ‘specificity of each order of magnitude’ or a context and category-specific sense of scale, which in his view would equal a ‘Ptolemaic counterrevolution’ (164), the anti-humanism of the last decades of the twentieth century has given way to an array of other, much more complex and ambiguous – ‘posthumanist’ – possibilities.

This posthumanist – in the sense of no longer quite anthropocentric (mentioned above) – move to take nonhuman scales seriously is for example already present in Jean-François Lyotard’s late work, in the 1980s. In a much more radical form than *Interstellar*, Lyotard’s thinking already comments critically on the fascination with the ecological future of ‘interstellar’ travel. In ‘A Postmodern Fable’ (1982) he plays with science fictional conventions to tell a ‘fable’ of life’s ‘preparing for exodus’ from planet Earth (1993: 83-101): ‘What a Human and his/her Brain – or rather the Brain and its Human – would resemble at the moment when they leave the planet forever, before its destruction; that the story does not tell’ (83). While the cosmological truth of the fable lies in the fact of the exploding Sun, which provokes the thought that ‘something ought to escape the conflagration of the system and its ashes’ (84),

and not yet in the ‘blight’ or climate change scenario of *Interstellar*, it nevertheless captures the shift towards the current posthumanist alliance between ecological and technoscientific thinking in the context of neoliberal globalisation:

At the time the story was told, all research in progress was directed to this aim, that is, in a big lump: logic, econometrics and monetary theory, information theory, the physics of conductors, astrophysics and astronautics, genetic and dietetic biology and medicine, catastrophe theory, chaos theory, military strategy and ballistics, sports technology, systems theory, linguistics and potential literature [not to forget cinema (SH)]. All this research turns out, in fact, to be dedicated, closely or from afar, to testing and remodelling the so-called human body, or to replacing it, in such a way that the brain remains able to function with the aid only of the energy resources available in the cosmos. And so was prepared the final exodus of the negentropic system far from the Earth. (91)

Under these conditions, however, Lyotard’s ‘inhuman’, just like Flusser’s above, spells out the anxiety that, today, provokes the ubiquity of the posthuman spectre, namely that ‘everything’s dead already’. In ‘Can Thought Go on Without a Body?’, in Lyotard’s 1987 collection entitled *The Inhuman*, he follows up on the ‘postmodern fable’ scenario with a fictitious dialogue: ‘He: You [philosophers] explain: it is impossible to think an end, pure and simple, of anything at all, since the end’s a limit and to think a limit you have to be on both sides of that limit ... But after the sun’s death there won’t be a thought to know that its death took place ... That, in my view, is the sole serious question to face humanity today ... everything’s dead already if this infinite reserve from which you now draw energy to defer answers, if in short thought as quest, dies out with the sun (Lyotard 1991: 9). Lyotard here unmasks the teleological belief that underlies the ecology of the ‘exodus’ scenario by saying: ‘The sun, our earth and your thought will have been no more than a spasmodic state of energy, an instant of established order, a smile on the surface of matter in a remote corner of the cosmos. You, the unbelievers, you’re really believers: you believe much too much in that smile, in the complicity of things and thought, in the purposefulness of all things!’ (10). Under these circumstances ‘the only job left you is quite clear ... the job of simulating conditions of life and thought to make thinking remain materially possible after the change in the condition of matter that’s the disaster’ (12).

While Lyotard was thinking ecology through cosmology the last two decades have seen a shift back towards planetary immanence so to speak – also visible in the scaling down of US manned exploratory space travel. Instead, the main ecological focus has shifted towards what has come to be called the ‘anthropocene’ – centring on the period of humanity’s irreversible impact on planet Earth and the prospect of global climate change that arises from that. In their influential ‘Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos’, Paul J. Crutzen and Christian Schwägerl (2011) start by claiming that Earth is ‘a planet that is being anthroposized at high speed’, and that ‘we humans are becoming the dominant force for change on Earth’. The major conceptual and ethical change this provokes is that the idea of ‘nature’ in the post-Romantic sense simply no longer applies (and certainly not in opposition to ‘culture’). One might even venture the formula ‘nature is us’: ‘we are no longer disturbing natural ecosystems ... instead, it’s we who decide what nature is and what it will be’ (Crutzen and Schwägerl, 2011):

Rather than representing yet another sign of human hubris, this name [Anthropocene] would stress the enormity of humanity’s responsibility as stewards of the Earth ... The awareness of living in the Age of Men could inject some desperately needed eco-optimism into our societies. (Crutzen and Schwägerl, 2011)

In a tightrope walk, Crutzen and Schwägerl propose a list of actions that are quite revealing in their ambiguity towards the idea of exoplanetary solutions to the ecological crisis. Their suggestions concern the reduction of ‘hyperconsumption’ (‘To accommodate the Western lifestyle for 9 billion people, we’d need several more planets’ – which speaks to the exploratory and colonising theme that informs the plot of *Interstellar*). Second, they take sides with the anti-NASA faction represented by the teachers in the film who argue for investment in science and technology into agriculture rather than space travel: ‘Global agriculture must become high-tech and organic at the same time. Thirdly, ‘to prevent conflicts over resources and to progress towards a durable ‘bioeconomy’ will require a collaborative mission that dwarfs the Apollo

program’ – a statement that again could be seen as a swipe against the exoplanet faction. And finally, with clear allusions to Gaia theory, ‘we should adapt our culture to sustaining what can be called ‘the world organism’ ... Living up to the Anthropocene means building a culture that grows with Earth’s biological wealth instead of depleting it’ (Crutzen and Schwägerl, 2011).

The argument between the two ecologies at work here – should we invest in staying or in leaving? – are closely connected to the question of scale. While the idea of the Anthropocene, on the one hand, emphasises the massive impact of humans on everything on the planet, which leads to the temptation to continue and maybe even to extend the reach of anthropocentrism into outer space with the justification that (human) intelligent life is too precious to take any risks on misplaced ‘meekness’ and self-restriction. On the other hand, ever since the first human experienced the view of planet Earth from ‘outside’, the planet and with it humanity have been ‘shrinking’, as Charlie Gere implies in his ‘The Incredible Shrinking Human’: ‘Against the idea of an earth shrunk to a size that we can see as a whole, we should be more realistic about our own actual shrunken status, power, and importance’ (Gere, 2011: 47). The truly ethical interpretation, according to this ecologic of the Anthropocene, is thus ‘humility’, or thinking ‘small’:

The predictions and arguments about climate change are themselves symptoms of a sense of separation from the world of which we are part... against the supposedly shrinking globe which we are supposed to manage, it is ‘man’ who should and will shrink to acknowledge ‘his’ own singular monstrosity as a necessary concomitant of there being a future at all. (60)

This contradiction, consequently, is also what underpins the current theoretical debate which focuses on what Timothy Clark called ‘incalculable scale effects’ (Clark, 2012:148-66). Clark’s approach takes its cue from the statement that ‘dominant modes of literary and cultural criticism are blind to scale effects in ways that now need to be addressed’ (150). Given that scale is relative to a prior established position normatively set as zero degree, one to one or ‘to scale’, Clark explains that ‘the difficulty of conceptualizing a politics of climate change may be

precisely that of having to think ‘everything at once’ [i.e. ‘outside’ of any normative scale]. The overall force is of an implosion of scales, implicating seemingly trivial or small actions with enormous stakes while intellectual boundaries and lines of demarcation fold in upon each other’ (152). Clark’s criticism of criticism and its critics is that ‘[i]t is as if critics were still writing on a flat and passive earth of indefinite extension, not a round, active one whose furthest distance comes from behind to tap you uncomfortably on the shoulder’, which leads him to say that ‘[p]erhaps then the most trenchant environmental and postcolonial criticism in relation to climate change would be one which took up the more meta-critical role of examining assumptions of scale in the individualist rhetoric of liberalism that still pervades a large body of given cultural and literary criticism’ (155–6).

One of the requirements for such an environmentally informed criticism would thus be a heightened attention to ‘the scale of reading’, as Clark outlines in his contribution to *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change* in a chapter entitled ‘Scale’ (Clark, 2012: 148–66):

Any broadly mimetic interpretation of a text, mapping it onto different if hopefully illuminating terms, always assumes a physical and temporal scale of some sort. It is a precondition of any such mapping, though almost never explicit in the interpretation. The scale in which one reads a text drastically alters the kinds of significance attached to elements of it, but ... it cannot itself give criteria for judgment. (157)

The problem that arises out of the im/possibility of scale (i.e. the necessity and unavailability of the ‘right’ scale in the time of the Anthropocene), ultimately leads to the question of ‘what on world is the Earth?’ (Clark, 2013: 5-24):

However, one scale forms a kind of norm for human beings, the usually taken-for-granted-scale of bodily terrestrial existence and perception, its up and down, sense of distances and orientation ... The Anthropocene enforces the realisation of the contingency of this normal scale. The scale at which one speaks of oneself as a person-with-a-world may be a constitutively opaque to understanding beyond a now dangerously narrow spatial/temporal window ... The phenomenal self-evidence of my singular world is itself a scalar effect unable, so to speak, to see itself as such. (9)

The problem of the ‘worldness’ of the world, from a deconstructive point of view, is that of its irreducible ‘fictionality’. In ‘The Fiction of the World’, part of his final seminar (*The Beast and the Sovereign*), Derrida challenges thinking by claiming that: ‘No one will ever be able to demonstrate, what is called *demonstrate* in all rigor, that two human beings, you and I for example, inhabit the same world, that the world is one and the same thing for both of us’ (Derrida, 2013: 1). On the other hand, necessarily, thought cannot take place without or ‘outside’ the prior assumption of a ‘world’: ‘But in a more current sense, and one that does not contradict this one, there really must be a certain *presumed, anticipated* unity of the world even in order discursively to sustain within it multiplicity, untranslatable and un-gatherable, the dissemination of possible worlds’ (1).

Derrida formulates the ‘aporetic’ structure of the necessity and unavailability of a world thus:

... nothing is less certain than the world itself, that there is perhaps no longer a world and no doubt there never was one as totality of anything at all, habitable and co-habitable [or uninhabitable for that matter] world and that radical dissemination, i.e. the absence of a common world, the irremediable solitude without salvation of the living being depends first on the absence without recourse of any world, i.e. of any common meaning of the word ‘world’, un sum of any common meaning at all ... Yes, don’t you agree, it is, it seems to be as if we were behaving as if we were inhabiting the same world and speaking of the same thing and speaking the same language, when in fact we well know – at the point where the phantasm precisely comes up against its limit – that this is not true at all. (1-2)

In the absence of a ‘world’ the relativity of scale and the necessity to act on a number of scales at the same time thus requires a combination of several ‘scalar narratives’ or, as Joni Adamson calls it – in a vein similar to the postcolonial and environmental criticism called for by Clark above – ‘nesting’, that is ‘... a modulation upwards and downwards, through different scales, much the way Russian babushka or nesting dolls are set one inside the other’ (Adamson, 2010: 25). As pointed out before, it is no coincidence that Adamson uses the same analogy of the Russian doll as Flusser in describing the ‘nestling’ of different scales and the need for a complex discourse that enables an environmental ethics that does justice to many layers, levels, and

scales at the same time. Again it is what happens in jumping from scale to scale or doll to doll that constitutes a Lyotardian ‘différend’, or the unavailability of a narrative that would be able to do justice, for example, to the ‘world’ and to ‘us’, *at the same time*.

A similar (eco)logic is at work in Timothy Morton’s notion of ‘hyperobjects’, as he explains: ‘hyperobjects ... refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans ... They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to’ (Morton, 2013: 1). Following Nancy’s deconstruction of the ‘sense of the world’ (cf. the third epigraph), Morton sees hyperobjects as ‘directly responsible for ... *the end of the world*, rendering both denialism and apocalyptic environmentalism obsolete’ (2). As a result:

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 nonhumans make decisive contact with humans, even the ones busy shoring up differences between humans and the rest ... Hyperobjects are what have brought about the end of the world. Clearly, planet Earth has not exploded. But the concept *world* is no longer operational, and hyperobjects are what brought about its demise. (5–6)

And since, in this sense, the end of the world has come ‘too early’ and the future becomes a time ‘after the end of the world’,

the strongly held belief that the world is about to end unless we act now’ is paradoxically one of the most powerful factors that inhabit a full engagement with our ecological coexistence here on Earth ... The end of the world has already occurred ... the end of the world, brought about by the encroachment of hyperobjects, one of which is assuredly the Earth itself, and its geological cycles demand a *geophilosophy* that doesn’t think simply in terms of human events and human significance. (7)

The specific (scalar) problem that arises through hyperobjects like the ‘world’ is that ‘they present us with scalar dilemmas in which ontotheological statements about which thing is the most real (ecosystem, world, environment, or conversely, individual) become impossible’ (19).

The scalar jarring within the ecologies available to contemporary thought – whether of a

‘deconstructive’ or an ‘object-oriented-ontological’ vein – remains the ‘world’s’ greatest challenge.

It is this scalar dilemma that Claire Colebrook takes as the starting point of her argument for ‘an emerging global ethos’:

It is the possibility of extinction or the end of human time that forces us to confront a new sense of the globe: far from being an unfortunate event that accidentally befalls the earth and humanity, the thought of the end of the Anthropocene era is both at the heart of all the motifs of ecological ethics and the one idea that cannot be thought as long as the globe is considered in terms of its traditional and anthropocentric metaphors. (Colebrook, 2012: 31).

In a move against ‘globalism (if globalism remains the correct term for the imaginary opportunities presented in the advent of a sense of the limits of the human)’, Colebrook declares that ‘the physical image of the globe ... serves as a reaction formation’ or an ‘alibi’ that today prevents the articulation of a politics that would begin to escape the dilemma of the ‘two ecologies’ which this essay attempts to illustrate as being at work in a film like *Interstellar* (see also the paragraphs below) and which may serve as a ‘symptom’ of the contemporary cultural imaginary and its limitations. As Colebrook states: ‘the image of the globe, of an interconnected whole, is a lure and an alibi ... it is the image of the globe that lies at the center of an anthropocentric imaginary that is intrinsically suicidal’ (37-8). One could therefore say, with Nancy, Gere, Colebrook, and many others that the current ecological focus on ‘planetary’ concerns like climate change, (human) extinction, biodiversity and the Anthropocene – like the entire focus on the ‘nonhuman’ – might be part of a process you might call ‘arguing ourselves out of the picture’. Transcendence, in this new ‘grand’ narrative, lies both at the very small and very big end – in belittling the impact, importance and responsibility of humans, on the one hand, and in exaggerating the cosmological stakes in extinction scenarios. A politics of ‘the right measure’ would be located somewhere in between (without being providing a dialectical resolution of the ‘scalar jarring’, however).



It is in this context that *Interstellar* can be read as a cultural document that addresses this jarring of the two ecologies arising out of the diverse contemporary extinction scenarios. It remains an attempt, however, which ultimately fails to find an appropriate scalar narrative with a convincing resolution. The (rather standard) scalar resolution it does propose – think as a species rather than about the survival of the individual – is met with stubborn humanist outrage both in the film itself and by liberal Western culture more generally. There is something of the Darwinian *and* the idealist about the slightly mad but also deeply melancholic Professor Brand, when he says in his intergalactic existentialist mode:

Stepping out into the universe, we must first confront the reality that nothing in our solar system can help us ... then we must confront the realities of interstellar travel. We must venture far beyond the reach of our own life spans. We must think not as individuals, but as a species ...

He goes on to cite Dylan Thomas's lines composed 'against' his father's (and humanity's) dementia: 'Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light ... (81).

That existentialism is a humanism (cf. Sartre 2007) remains also true on a cosmic scale. Brand's disciple (or his spiritual son), with the telling name, Dr Mann, who, motivated both by his own survival and the success of the mission (namely implanting a new human colony in space), lures the expedition led by Cooper and Brand's own daughter to the wrong (inhabitable) exoplanet, explains that the Professor, despite his inhuman and monstrous lie, is paradoxically the most human of humans, the one who made the 'ultimate sacrifice' by renouncing or giving up his own humanity:

Brand: Why not tell people? Why keep building that damn station?

Dr Mann: [Your father] knew how much harder it would be for people to come together and save the *species*, instead of themselves ... Or their children ... Would you have left if you hadn't believed you were trying to save *them*? Evolution has yet

to transcend that simple barrier – we can care deeply, selflessly for people we know, but our empathy rarely extends beyond our line of sight.

Brand: But the *lie*. A *monstrous* lie ...

Dr Mann: Unforgivable. And he knew it. Your father was prepared to destroy his own humanity to save our species. He made the ultimate sacrifice. (95-96)

Cooper is quick to reinsert Mann's (and Brand's) twisted (eco)logic back into liberal humanist (individual) parameters by saying:

Cooper: No. *That's being made* by the people of Earth who'll die because, in his arrogance, he declared their case hopeless. (96)

Cooper thus forecloses, without resolving, the dilemma between the two ecologies, between human and humanity, present material conditions and futurity – without giving up, however, on the most dangerous and resilient component in the whole metaphysical equation, namely the (humanist, existentialist) yearning that *is* the 'dwelling' and which constitutes the 'poetics of a world'. This is expressed in the final words of the dying Murph, who tells her own father to live the future he himself helped to 'engender' by joining his love, Dr Brand, so that the story of humanity can begin again:

Murph: She's out there ... Alone in a strange galaxy ... By the light of our new sun ... In our new home. (151-2)

In the absence of an appropriate scalar narrative that might do justice to the need for a truly postanthropocentric and a humanitarian ecologic, Oliver Morton's words upon looking back at the Earth from space, therefore, haven't lost any of their truth and poignancy: 'It is both wonderful and unsettling to live on a planet that is unique' (cf. *SpaceQuotations.com*). Even though 'we' may trust neither the sense of uniqueness (at an individual, species or cosmological scale) nor of wonder, it would seem impossible to motivate any ecological ethics and politics without them. But, arguably, this is precisely what the phrase '*perdre la mesure*' means ...

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