## Interlude 2: Animism without Humans, or Belief without Belief

As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro points out, from an indigenous and animist point of view: "Perhaps there are lives not really worth living; but how could one simply *not* take seriously a life, *any* life?[1] Animism still strikes many as 'weird'. In many ways it is enlightened, rational modernity's 'other'. It contains a resistance to the idea of 'man's' conquest of nature. It sets limits to human exceptionalism and implies a profound affirmation of 'aliveness'. It is therefore not difficult to see its affinities with postanthropocentric and posthumanist thinking. As Kathy Rudy explains, within the context of (posthumanist) animal studies: "Posthuman animism is interested in recovering mystery and enchantment, and proliferating relationships filled with meetings of otherness".[2]

There is definitely something ancestral about animism. It seems like a prehistoric relic in our modern world to remind us of a world *before* humanity, a time *before* human exceptionalism, humanism and anthropology. Animism, however, was in fact never that far removed from modern rationalism. Its history is one of repression and haunting returns, not supersession. It is part of the modern human unconscious and as such it is making a return precisely at a time when the human is 'troubled' both by its significant others, against which it is used to define itself (the animal, the machine, the object etc.) and its 'environment' (and its current destruction). Animism, characterised by its "respect for life", under posthuman(ist) circumstances, suddenly seems like a way forward rather than a step back. In taking the 'other' and their belief(s) 'seriously', as Viveiros de Castro suggests, anthropology "must construct a concept of seriousness (a way of taking things seriously) that is not tied to the notion of belief or of any other 'propositional attitudes' that have representations as their object".[3] This 'belief without belief', as one might call it, must allow for the fact "that 'visions' are not beliefs, not consensual views, but rather worlds seen objectively: not *worldviews*, but *worlds of vision* (and not vision only …)". Apart from this move of suspension of (dis)belief, Viveiros de Castro claims a second principle for (contemporary or 'new') anthropology, namely the principle of 'reciprocity' in the sense that "while we strive to take seriously things that are far from or outside of us, almost all of the things that we must *not* take seriously are near to or inside us".[4] What drives this programmatic double move – an impossible quest for 'authenticity' that pushes the anthropologist towards taking the other life and the life of the other 'seriously' – is the idea that "anthropology is over once the anthropologist believes that the fantasy has been realized and that he or she has 'really' found a life worth living".[5]

However, taking another life *seriously* (as an entire 'sensual world') does not mean taking it *literally*, as Viveiros de Castro hastens to add:

> The idea that "to take seriously" is synonymous with "to take literally" and, further, that to take literally means 'to believe in' strikes me as singularly naïve (or else the opposite – a case of bad faith). Only by being too literal-minded could one fail to understand that to take anything literally is heavy work, requiring good provision of symbolic competence rather than infinite credulity.[6]

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[1] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Zeno and the Art of Anthropology: Of Lies, Beliefs, Paradoxes, and Other Truths", trans. Antonia Walford, *Common Knowledge* (2011) 17.1: 134.
[2] Kathy Rudy, "If We Could Talk to Animals: On Changing the (Post) Human Subject", In *Speaking for Animals: Animal Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Margo De Mello, (London: Routledge, 2013), 157.
[3] Viveiros de Castro, p. 133.
[4] *Ibid*.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 144.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 145.

Taking literally is 'heavy work' indeed, particularly if applied to animism, which cannot just be seen as a set of 'opinions' or 'alien thoughts' of 'other people', especially, as I would add, when these people (or their peoples) are, literally, no longer around, as in the case of those humans *before* humanity that I am predominantly concerned with here. It is, for example, not a question to *believe* the beliefs of Neanderthals (even *if* we could be sure to know what exactly they believed in), which would mean to give up our own, but it can also not be the aim to *not* take them seriously, by calling them 'minor' (primitive, prehistoric, prehuman …), which would mean to justify some kind of superiority on our side. Viveiros de Castro clarifies what for him is the arch-anthropological procedure in the following terms:

> [T]he other, another – is an expression of a possible world, but this world has always to be actualized by the self, in the normal course of social interaction. … When I develop the world expressed by the other to validate it as real and enter into it or to disavow it as unreal. Explication in this way introduces the element of belief.[7]

The other (human, nonhuman, posthuman, prehuman) is thus to be understood as an "expression of a possible world".[8] And 'alien thoughts' are sustained as possibility by "neither relinquishing them as fantasies of others, nor fantasizing about them as leading to the true reality".[9] In this vein, I am here proposing to take seriously, if not literally, the possibility of an animism *without* humans.

*'Believing' in Animism*

Animism (and its conceptual twin, 'fetishism', see below) is not just *any* concept for anthropology. One could argue it is foundational to it[10] – epitomized in the work of Edward Burnett Tylor, first chair and thus founding father of the modern discipline of anthropology.[11] Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) is without doubt the problematic 'origin' of 'the science of man', including its repressed and enduring colonial legacy.[12] In the first volume, *The Origins of Culture*, Tylor strategically brings animistic beliefs into the focus of 'disinterested' and 'rational' modern social science: "Far from its beliefs and practices being a rubbish-heap of miscellaneous folly, they [the general principles of savage religion] are consistent and logical in so high a degree as to begin, as soon as even roughly classified, to display the principles of their formation and development; and these principles prove to be essentially rational, though working in a mental condition of intense and inveterate ignorance".[13] What comes across as a bold move in defence of the 'savage mind' in fact doubles up discursively as a self-legitimating gesture of the establishment of a new discipline and institution, which seeks to historically and rationally legitimate itself through comparison with its 'primitive' subjects and its theological precursors. Tyler can barely contain his (anti)religious zeal in announcing that "[i]t is with

[7] *Ibid*., pp. 136-137.
[8] Gilles Deleuze (1994) *Difference and Repetition* [1968], trans. Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press), 261.
[9] Viveiros de Castro, p. 137.
[10] Cf. for example Nurit Bird-David: "The concept of animism, which E. B. Tylor developed in his 1871 masterwork *Primitive Culture*, is one of anthropology's earliest concepts, if not the first". A statement explained by a footnote which says: "*Primitive Culture* led Tylor to an appointment as reader in Anthropology in Oxford University, the first such position in the academic world"; cf. Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology", *Current Anthropology* 40 S1 (1999): 67.
[11] See Martin Stringer's careful re-evaluation of Tylor and animism in "Rethinking Animism: Thoughts from the Infancy of Our Discipline", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (new series) 5 (1999): 541-556.
[12] Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture 1* (*The Origins of Culture*), (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958); *Primitive Culture 2* (*Religion in Primitive Culture*), (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958).
[13] Tylor, *Primitive Culture* 1, p. 23.

a sense of attempting an investigation which bears very closely on the current theology of our own day, that I have set myself to examine systematically, among the lower races, the development of Animism; that is to say, the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general".[14] This is nothing but the promise of a step from irrational to rational belief which is so characteristic of late 19th century (secular) humanism – or 'believing without belief', as Viveiros de Castro characterized it above. There is thus rational and irrational belief, and the modern discipline of anthropology is called upon to investigate and adjudicate between their difference:

> Not merely as a matter of research, but as an important practical guide to the understanding of the present and the shaping of the future, the investigation into the origin and early development of civilization must be pushed on zealously. Every possible avenue of knowledge must be explored, every door tried to see if it is open. No kind of evidence need be left untouched on the score of remoteness or complexity, of minuteness or triviality.[15]

Nothing could be more frighteningly and promisingly 'modern', nothing could be less aware of its impact even by contemporary research management standards (cf. "an important practical guide", of "the present and the shaping of the future"). The "outlines of a philosophy of primaeval history", however, will be designed to elucidate the "early stages of our mental evolution [which] lie distant from us in time as the stars lie distant from us in space". Thankfully, this is "not limited with the direct observation of our senses",[16] Tylor continues.

From the start, Tylor's was a struggle with religion (i.e. 'belief' – the minimal definition of religion being "belief in spiritual beings", according to Paul Radin),[17] while animism (or 'magic') is nothing but 'primitive' (or proto-) religion. As such its value lies in being instrumental for demonstrating modern civilizational 'progress' and pointing towards a post-religious, secular, scientific, enlightened and most importantly 'ethical' future: "Are there, or have there been, tribes of men so low in culture as to have no religious conceptions whatever?", Tylor begins his detailed study – which is another way of asking about the possibility of a 'belief without belief', one could argue – but which, however, is instantly dismissed:

> The case is in some degree similar to that of the tribes asserted to exist without language or without the use of fire; nothing in the nature of things seems to forbid the possibility of such existence, but as a matter of fact the tribes are not found. Thus the assertion that rude non-religious tribes have been known in actual existence, though in theory possible, and perhaps in fact true, does not at present rest on that sufficient proof which, for an exceptional state of things, we are entitled to demand.[18]

Where to start with a passage such as this one? It seems to presuppose that at some degree zero, everyone, every human, must have been (and continues to be) 'at least' an animist. The absence of belief (in spiritual being) is as unbelievable as the absence of language (if not, more generally, 'technology', here represented by 'fire'). Belief is 'originary', co-constitutional of any (human) 'tribe', for Tylor. It is *rational* to believe, to assume belief (even if a 'non-religious condition' cannot be excluded and out of which 'man' might have emerged, as Tylor admits).[19] Nevertheless, Tylor's Promethean gesture goes on to lay down the following (anthropological) law: "I propose here, under the name of Animism, to investigate the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings, which embodies the

[14] *Ibid*.
[15] *Ibid*., p. 24.
[16] *Ibid*., p. 25.
[17] In his introduction to Tylor's *Primitive Culture 2*, p. x.
[18] Tylor, *Primitive Culture 2*, p. 2.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 9.

very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy".[20] Materialism – which thus becomes another synonym for 'belief without belief', or, indeed, a 'philosophy' that believes in the existence of matter over mind, or spirit, or belief – is called upon to trace the spiritual development of the human race from animism to a modern philosophy of religion as a 'measurement' of humanity's hominization (understood as 'civilization'):

> Animism characterizes tribes very low in the scale of humanity, and thence ascends, deeply modified in its transmission, but from first to last preserving an unbroken continuity, into the midst of high modern culture. … Animism is, in fact, the groundwork of the Philosophy of Religion, from that of savages up to that of civilized men. And although it may at first sight seem to afford but a bare and meagre definition of a minimum of religion, it will be found practically sufficient; for where the root is, the branches will generally be produced.[21]

Tylor is thus prepared to pay a very high price for legitimating an 'anthropological' take on the history and philosophy of religion as an explanation of how we became human. Animism here is in fact used as the 'originary supplement' to modern civilization. It is (necessarily) characterized by both supersession *and* continuity, which provokes the question of what was missing from (primitive) animism *in the first place*?

Tylor's answer to this question is "that the conjunction of ethics and Animistic philosophy, so intimate and powerful in the higher culture, seems scarcely yet to have begun in the lower".[22] What separates 'lower' and 'higher' humans in the history of animistic or (proto)religious thought and what motivates anthropology's investigation into "the connexion between similar ideas and rites in the religion of the savage and the civilized world"[23] is, in one word, ethics. Needless to say how hollow this must sound to 'us', faced with the aftermath of modernity's progressivism, and at the back end of liberal humanist universalism with its succession of modern humanitarian catastrophes (from colonial and racist genocide to anthropogenic climate change and global neoliberal capitalism). All the more strange, however, that Tylor, after all, actually goes on to 'bracket' the ethical issue: "it seemed desirable to keep the discussion of animism, as far as might be, separate from that of ethics",[24] and with it the question of "how the introduction of the moral element separates the religions of the world, united as they are throughout by one animistic principle, into two great classes, those lower systems whose best result is to supply a crude childlike natural philosophy, and those higher faiths which implant on this the law of righteousness and of holiness, the inspiration of duty and love".[25]

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[20] *Ibid*.
[21] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 11.
[23] *Ibid*.
[24] *Ibid*., p. 446.
[25] *Ibid*., p. 447. This, unfortunately, cannot be the place to trace the genealogy of Tylor's ambivalent set-up of animism as a primitive (and mythological) system of belief that is both continuous and (to be) superseded. It certainly appears with similar foundational power in Freudian psychoanalysis and the educationalism of Piaget. For Freud, in "Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thought" (chapter 3 of *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics (1913)*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 75-99), compared to religion and science, animism "is perhaps the … most consistent and exhaustive and … gives a truly complete explanation of the nature of the universe" (p. 77). Where would psychoanalysis (or modernity, or indeed the humanities) be without a certain 'belief' in the animistic 'magic' of the "omnipotence of thoughts" (p. 88), which is most clearly expressed in "obsessional neuroses" (p. 86). It provides proof of, what might be called [originary?] narcissism (p. 89). Tylor's necessarily ambiguous framing of animism as a foundational object of study for anthropology is replicated in Freud's appropriation of it for the purposes of the discursive institutionalization of psychoanalysis. As a consequence, the 'omnipotence of thought' as both an

It is not that "morality is absent from the life of the lower races … without a code of morals, the very existence of the rudest tribe would be impossible; and indeed the moral standards of even savage races are to no small extent well-defined and praiseworthy", as Tylor generously admits. So what is the *difference*, then, one might ask, which gives Tylor the assurance to claim that "[s]avage animism is almost devoid of that ethical element which to the educated modern mind is the very mainspring of practical religion"?[26] If anthropology has moved on from the idea of Western humanist supremacy in any way at all, then it must be, surely, because it has lost belief in this belief? For example, the belief that 'low' morality could be separated and distinguished from 'higher' ethics, as Tylor uses this distinction as justification for the idea that the 'ethical laws' of modern civilization "stand on their own ground of tradition and public opinion, comparatively independent of the animistic belief and rites which exist beside them".[27] Tylor's fundamental ambivalence and his disingenuousness culminates in this 'arch-anthropological' statement, one might say: "The lower animism is not immoral, it is unmoral".[28] I would indeed suggest to push Tylor a little further and say: animism is (not outside, but) *before* morality. If animism is 'unmoral' (for it knows no ethics), it is quite obviously attractive for a 'post-moral' society and calls for a return under posthuman conditions. And return certainly is what animism has done; one could even say, with a vengeance …

*Alter-Anthropological Animism (or A-A-A)*

Philippe Descola is one among a number of anthropologists to defend the continued or renewed use of the term animism despite its history of primitivism and its colonial and cultural imperialist legacy, as he explains:

> If one strips the definition of animism of its sociological correlations, there remains one characteristic that everybody can accept and that the etymology of the term indicates, which is why I chose to preserve it despite the dubious uses made of it in the past. That characteristic is the attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to their own.[29]

originary feature and as something that is to be overcome (cf. Freud's 'motto': *Wo Es war soll ich werden*), thus continues to perform its 'magic' in the 'system of thought' or 'beliefs' that is psychoanalysis:

> If we may regard the existence among primitive races of the omnipotence of thoughts as evidence in favour of narcissism, we are encouraged to attempt a comparison between the phases in the development of man's view of the universe and the stages of an individual's libidinal development. The animistic phase would correspond to narcissism both chronologically and in its content; the religious phase would correspond to the stage of object-choice of which the characteristic is a child's attachment to his parents; while the scientific phase would have an exact counterpart in the stage at which an individual has reached maturity, has renounced the pleasure principle, adjusted himself to reality and turned to the external world for the object of his desires. (p. 90)

Clearly, Freud wishes to take over from Tylor when he says: "Thus the first picture which man formed of the world – animism – was a psychological one" (91); "Animism came to primitive man naturally and as a matter of course. He knew what things were like in the world, namely just as he felt himself to be. We are thus prepared to find that primitive man transposed the structural conditions of his own mind into the external world; and we may attempt to reverse the process and put back into the human mind what animism teaches as to the nature of things" (p. 91). However, Freud is eager to separate the origin of 'the creation of spirits' from 'the first moral restriction', or "taboo" (p. 93) – a gesture to which I will return in the final section, below. For Piaget's account of 'child animism' see Part II of his *The Child's Conception of the World*, (London: Routledge, 1929), 169-252.

[26] Tylor, *Primitive Culture* 2, p. 446.

[27] *Ibid*.

[28] *Ibid*.

[29] Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), 129.

According to Descola, the term is useful in that it can help overcome one of the most unhelpful 'modern' binaries, as the title of his book makes clear, *Beyond Nature and Culture*. For Descola animism needs to be restored (as a concept, if not as a practice) because the assumed similarity and commonality of an 'interiority' between humans and nonhumans authorises an extension of the 'cultural' domain that would include nonhumans and their 'cultures' together with everything that this may imply (i.e. intersubjectivity, use of technology, rituals and conventions). This generalization (or 'humanisation', as Descola calls it) allows for new forms of 'communication' between humans and nonhumans. However, it is not without restriction: "All the same, this humanization is not complete, since in animist systems these, as it were, humans in disguise (i.e., the plants and animals) are distinct from humans precisely by reason of their outward apparel of feathers, fur, scales, or bark—in other words, their physicality".[30] Here seems to lie the crux of the 'new animism' as a strategic counter- or alter-anthropological movement,[31] namely in that it is based on a certain selective 'belief' (a belief without belief, as I suggested above) to take animism 'seriously' (if not 'literally') – i.e. with restrictions. The restriction that Descola produces, one has a feeling, somehow corresponds to the distinction between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism.[32] In fact, the animist while believing in a shared spirituality is perfectly aware of the differences in 'materiality' (or, as Descola calls it, 'embodiment', or 'physicality'). The feathers, hair, scales and bark are plain to see, after all, in their difference from (naked) human skin.

Another key figure in anthropology's "animistic [re]turn"[33] is Tim Ingold who, following Bruno Latour, and with reference to a generalised (and 'ecological') concept of 'livelihood', extends sociality to many nonhuman forms of agency.[34] This is in line with the recent rise of 'new materialisms' and the idea of 'relational ontologies' directed against modern subject-object-centred 'Cartesianism'. Animism in this respect provides a welcome pre-cursor, a useable tradition, of 'pre-modernity' to reopen the question of the animate-inanimate distinction. Ingold's influential essay "Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought" begins by stating that: "people do not always agree about what is

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[30] Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, p. 129.

[31] See Graham Harvey's re-evaluation of animism as a 'morally' superior ecological stance characterised by 'respect' for the living world (cf. the subtitle to his comprehensive reader, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006)): "animism is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons" (p. xi). While the 'old usage' of animism "constructed animists as people who did not or could not distinguish correctly between objects and subjects, or between things and persons … [t]he new animism names worldviews and lifeways in which people seek to know how they might respectfully and properly engage with persons" (p. xiv). And "Animisms are theories, discourses and practices of relationship, of living well, of realising more fully what it means to be a person, and a human person, in the company of other persons, not all of whom are human but all of whom are worthy of respect" (p. xvii). See also Harvey's "An Animist Manifesto", *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 9 (2012): 2-4.

[32] I would certainly agree with Timothy Morton (in his *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, (London: Verso, 2017) – a text I will return to in more detail, below) that: "the actual enemy is not anthropomorphism, it is *anthropocentrism*, an entirely different beast that can express itself *either* by humanizing the nonhuman or indeed by totally dehumanizing it" (p. 174).

[33] See Alejandro F. Haber's explanation (in "Animism, Relatedness, Life: Post-Western Perspectives", *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 19.3 (2009), p. 418): "Within anthropology, animism was abandoned as an analytic category as the crudest forms of uni-linear evolutionism became *démodé* (and politically incorrect). It was not until a couple of decades ago that animism obtained a new lease of life, as anthropology began to focus on the diversity of theories and experiences of personhood as part of the contribution to the questioning of the modern individual and subjectivity … Such an 'animistic turn', part of the greater postmodern and anti-essentialist move away from rigid binary oppositions typical of modernity, is probably one of the most important contributions of anthropology to the criticism of (Western) social theory".

[34] Cf. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

alive and what is not, and that even when they *do* agree it might be for entirely different reasons … people do not universally discriminate between categories of living and non-living things".[35] Animism as a pre-modern (or un-modern) belief system may thus be used or returned to strategically to show, precisely, that belief systems are just that: systems of beliefs. This changes, however, once you are 'inside' a belief system, or as soon as it turns 'ontological' so to speak, which means that, in the case of animism, as soon as it involves 'animacy':

> We are dealing here not with a way of believing about the world but with a condition of being in it. This could be described as a condition of being alive to the world, characterised by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next. Animacy, then, is not a property of persons imaginatively projected onto the things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded. Rather … it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but it is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation.[36]

The implications of such a conceptual move – from restricted to generalised animism (or animacy), as one might call it – are immense, of course. They are aimed at overcoming the distinction that we still found in Descola above, namely between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. They also coincide with a certain 'posthumanism' in the sense that the idea of a general 'animacy' of the lifeworld necessarily problematizes if not dissolves the idea of human exceptionalism. Most promising, however – and this is something that I will have to return to – is Ingold's idea that animacy as a principle might be *prior* to the differentiation between spirituality and materiality on which all the previous anthropological investigations into animism used to rely. One could argue that Ingold thus replies to the anthropological principle of 'belief without belief' with another principle, namely that of a 'science without object' designed to create a new connection of 'thought with life', as he writes: "Knowing must be reconnected with being, epistemology with ontology, thought with life".[37] He thus pushes the 'implication' of the (Western) anthropologist within his or her observed environment to a new level of self-reflexivity.

In the same year as Ingold, Alf Hornberg writes that "animism raises more questions about ourselves than about the animists",[38] thus echoing Latour's notion of 'symmetric anthropology', since "all of us are actually *born* 'pre-modern', have an ontogenetic familiarity with 'relatedness', and will generally tend to struggle to maintain some measure of community in our lives".[39] The reason why animism continues to 'intrigue' us, according to Hornberg, lies in the fact that it is a primary example of relational (as opposed to 'representational' or 'constructional') thinking that modern humans tend to (unsuccessfully) repress. In this sense, Hornberg echoes Latour, in claiming "we were all born 'premodern'":

> 'Relatedness' is a condition that all of us continue to be capable of achieving in particular, experiential contexts of some minimal duration. Our 'modernity' – our inclination toward abstraction, detachment, and objectification – is the product of our disembedding biographies.

[35] Tim Ingold, "Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought", *Ethnos* 71.1 (2006): 10.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[37] *Ibid*., p. 19.
[38] Alf Hornberg, "Animism, Fetishism, and Objectivism as Strategies for Knowing (or not Knowing) the World", *Ethnos* 71.1 (2006), p. 22.
[39] Hornberg, pp. 23-24.

> It is in being involuntarily *deprived* of 'relatedness' that we become Cartesianists. The powerful historical trajectory of objectivism relies on a peculiar recursivity between social disembeddedness, Cartesian epistemology, and technology – ultimately, that is, between individual existence and socio-technical power structures.[40]

Animism thus helps us 'remember' our 'originary' problem of how to distinguish between persons and things. It reminds us of the arbitrariness and impossibility of this distinction *before* humanity (and also *after* it, one might add).[41] Animism thus retains what Istvan Praet refers to as a "subversive quality": "in an age of environmental crisis, animism is no longer seen as backward but as praiseworthy and sensible".[42] However, as Praet also points out, using animism as a 'pawn' within global eco-politics does not remain without problems – an aspect to which I will return in the concluding part, below.

*Posthumanist Animism?*

What is at stake in the current 'return' to animism is aptly described by Harry Garruba:

> How do we account for the recent resurgence of interest in animism and animist thought? Once considered as some kind of cognitive error, evidence of cognitive underdevelopment and epistemological failure, animism has once again become an object of discursive attention and intellectual inquiry, in addition to serving as a platform for political action, particularly in relation to issues of ecology and the environment.[43]

Apart from the ecological motivation for a reengagement with animism there is another aspect of it that has not failed to catch the attention of posthumanist thought, which understands itself as a critique or deconstruction of (humanist) anthropocentrism. As Viveiros de Castro writes:

> Western popular evolutionism … is thoroughly anthropocentric but not particularly anthropomorphic. On the other hand, animism may be characterized as anthropomorphic but definitely not as anthropocentric: if sundry other beings besides humans are 'human', then we humans are not a special lot (so much for 'primitive narcissism').[44]

As I have argued elsewhere, posthumanism is a still emerging contemporary paradigm, worldview, system of thought or beliefs with a view to taking postanthropocentrism with all its implications 'seriously'.[45] Following this logic of 'taking-postanthropocentrism-seriously', one can see obvious

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[40] *Ibid*., p. 28.

[41] However, as Hornberg hastens to add, and as I would very much agree, this cannot be a nostalgic return to some pre-modern, pre-human animism of pure 'relatedness', since "animism and 'relatedness' bring possibilities not only of harmony and community, but also of horror and rage" (Hornberg, 2006: 31). Thus belief here in the value of relatedness is still very much a *vigilant* 'belief without belief': "Only by keeping Society and Nature analytically [critically?] apart can we hope to progress in the demystification of that 'hybrid' web in which we all are suspended, and which more than anything else obstructs our pursuit of 'relatedness': the realm of animated objects we call 'technology'. We more than ever need to retain our capacity to distinguish between those aspects of technology that derive from Nature and those aspects that derive from Society" (Hornberg, 2006: 29-30).

[42] Praet, *Animism and the Question of Life*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 2-3.

[43] Harry Garuba, "On Animism, Modernity/Colonialism and the African Order of Knowledge: Provisional Reflections", In *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*, ed. Lesley Green, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013), 42.

[44] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies", *Common Knowledge* 10.3 (2004), p. 467.

[45] Cf. my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 (first published in German in 2009)).

parallels with what I said about anthropology and animism above: not only anthropology remembers and rewrites its animistic origins, posthumanism is doing so, too. It rewrites what it means to be human including the entire catalogue of distinctions that have been used to establish human exceptionalism. One could therefore say that posthumanism is a kind of 'post-anthropology' that, from a conjectural space *after* the human, asks what it was like *before* humanity. In taking the resulting postanthropocentric scenarios 'seriously' (and 'literally', in Viveiros de Castro's sense) it generalises and radicalises anthropology's conceptual approach of 'belief without belief'. However, does an anthropology without humans still make sense? Is it not a contradiction in terms? It seems, however, that anthropology did not have to wait for posthumanism for this paradox to arise. The notion of an anthropology without humans may in fact be understood as one of the foundational questions that anthropology has been asking itself from its very beginning.

Animism as "the spectral Other that simultaneously constitutes and haunts the modern".[46] From a postmodern or late modern point of view, it thus has to be the bearer of some privileged knowledge about the pre-modern (or, indeed, the 'non-modern', 'un-modern'). The question is how to relate to this other without committing it, from the start, to the knowledge regime of the modern? How to let the 'other' be 'other' and still somehow relate to him-her-it? If there is one anthropological concern that remains constant it would be this impossible relationality. How could this not be a problem that also afflicts posthumanism? Posthumanists generally engage in conceptual moves that involve a radical rethinking of the future of humanity. However, as I have been suggesting, they do so while, at the same time, returning to question of humanity's origins. One could thus argue that what pushes posthumanism (or post-anthropology) towards a 'rediscovery' of animism – or what one might even call its 'desire for animation' – is something like 'relation-envy' – a yearning for (a pure) state of relationality that comes *before* the fateful modern separation of object and subject, which gave rise to all the evil afflictions from which humanity has been suffering ever since, be it alienation, subjugation, or exploitation and consumption (in all of their forms). While modernity and humanism in their self- and world-consuming drive towards progress will ultimately lead to inertia (or extinction), postmodernism and posthumanism can be said to be attempts at 're-animation'. Hence their turn towards things and objects and their 'ontologies', environments and nonhuman forms of 'agency', as well as the search for a new "politics of nature".[47] It seems obvious, however, how very humanist this conceptual framework with its more or less explicit desires for reanimation (still) remains.[48]

Given their outlined affinities, it is almost inevitable that animism has made it into the *Posthuman Glossary* in the form of a very fine entry by Anselm Franke. Franke here explains that animism "describes a world in which all social and ontological boundaries are porous and can be crossed under specific circumstances, a world of becomings and metamorphoses, in which no entity precedes the sets of relations that bring it into being".[49] As outlined above, and as Franke also agrees, "[t]he continued challenge of the concept of animism lies in the imperative to rethink the border between humans and their others, as the minimum demand put forth by the concept is that at least these

[46] Garuba, p. 45. See also Garuba's earlier essay "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society", *Public Culture* 15.2 (2003): 261-285.
[47] An obvious reference to Bruno Latour's attempt at a revaluation of modernity and his *Politics of Nature* (2004). Consider also Viveiros de Castro's explanation in relation to animism: "Animism could be defined as an ontology that postulates a social character to relations between humans and non-humans: the space between nature and society is itself social …" (2004: 481).
[48] In this sense, Ian Bogost is certainly right to say that: "Posthumanism … is not posthuman enough". See his *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's like to Be a Thing*, p. 8.
[49] Anselm Franke, "Animism", In *The Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti, (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 39.

borders and their underlying categories can potentially be re-thought".[50] It is also clear, however, that for Franke the 're-thinking' challenge posed by animism happens under a very specific media-technological condition which, one could say, squeezes modernity from both ends:

> The otherness of animism is simultaneously a horizon that circumscribes and encircles modernity and its civilizational discourse, from both the past and the future. From the past, because the animism described by the ethnologists and psychologists of the late nineteenth century as primordial 'religion' … is that which modern civilization must suppress and leave behind in order to become civilized and modern. But animism also appears at the other end of the vector of time – as a future condition in which alienation and the great divides of modernity are imagined as overcome.[51]

I would very much agree with Franke here as his outline seems to address the same temporal ambiguity that I have been investigating in the *before* of *before humanity*. However, I would also want to emphasise a very specific perspective in this regard. What I would call *critical* posthumanism is definitively more interested in the beginnings than in the projected futurity of the 'posthuman'. With this in mind, I would want to problematize Franke's claim that "[t]he 'return' of animism to the centre of modernity *essentially* proves to be a result of computerization and the experience of medial environments and their feedback loops".[52] As important and exciting as the 'field of expanded mediality' certainly is, and as relevant as the critique of a 'neoliberal' (re)appropriation of animism under the conditions of globalised 'new' media appears,[53] my own genealogical approach to the posthuman and the project of a *critical* posthumanism are based on the idea of 'precedence' rather than 'projection'. Nevertheless, the rise of contemporary scientific 're-enchantment' and 'techno-animism' are important symptoms of a repressed fear of and desire for animism that cannot and should not be ignored.

*Techno-animism and the Re-enchantment of Science*

In a time when "the old dream of progressive humanism is fading fast", as Rupert Sheldrake wrote in 1994, "[t]here are still those who dream of the conquest of the biosphere by the technosphere, the human control of biological evolution through genetic engineering, and so on. But attitudes are changing around, and within, many of us: there is a shift from humanism to animism, from an intensely man-centred view to a view of a living world".[54] While Sheldrake was right as far as the return of animism is concerned, the drive towards conquering biology or the biosphere through technology and thus to create a 'technosphere', if anything, has been intensifying, as can be seen in the steady rise of transhumanism and its popular acceptance. In fact, animism is not as incompatible with science and technology as it may have seemed to the 'moderns'.

In this respect, Isabelle Stengers, in "Reclaiming Animism", further problematizes the idea of 'taking animism seriously' in the sense that I have been pursuing it here, following Viveiros de Castro's cue. She asks, in her critique of a 'progressive' modern Western scientific view: "How, then, to keep the question of animism, if taken seriously at all, from being framed in the terms that verify Science's

[50] Franke, p. 40.
[51] *Ibid*.
[52] Franke, p. 51 (my emphasis).
[53] Cf. Franke, p. 41: "The Animism of capital is a resource which grants the neoliberal subject access to (self)transformability and perhaps even more importantly, following the imperative of flexibility and ecological behaviour, with the means to adapt."
[54] Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God*, (London: Century, 1994), 174.

right to define it as an object of knowledge?".[55] For Stengers, animism is useful as an epistemological stance that 'pragmatically' provides a critique of or an opening within Western scientific rationalism. The point is not to *be* an animist – "Nobody has ever been animist because one is never animist 'in general', only in terms of assemblages that generate metaphoric transformations in our capacity to affect and be affected – and also to feel, think, and imagine"[56] – but to *reclaim* animism, which is a strategic counter-measure against science's power and which Stengers sees at work in the "insistent poisoned passion of dismembering and demystifying [of assemblages]".[57] Animism would thus act as a shield against science's appropriation through objectification, and as a reminder of the idea "that we are not alone in the world".[58] In a similar vein, Cornelius Borck writes that "a reflexive and critical engagement with animism opens a discursive space for reworking the history of modern ways of knowing from a postcolonial perspective".[59] It is precisely this problematically 'postcolonial' perspective that is often lost in both versions of (animist) 're-enchantment' – i.e. the bio-centred and the techno-centred version. Rupert Sheldrake's advocacy of a Gaian biocentric return to animism seems to pass over the entire Tylorian baggage of 'primitivism' the term carries when he falls into what can only be called a (Nietzschean, or vitalist) 'rhapsody' of promised rebirth:

> As soon as we allow ourselves to think of the world as alive, we recognize that a part of us knew this all along. It is like emerging from winter into a new spring. We can begin to reconnect our mental life with our own direct, intuitive experiences of nature … And we can begin to develop a richer understanding of human nature, shaped by tradition and collective memory; linked to the Earth and the heavens, related to all forms of life; and consciously open to the creative power expressed in all evolution. We are reborn into a living world.[60]

It is difficult to see how this 'deep ecology' could be truly 'biocentric', or no longer 'anthropocentric'[61], as long as it is merely self-reflexively about a better understanding of 'human nature'.

Techno-animism, as we might call it, on the other hand, counters and threatens precisely this biocentrism with its extension of animism's 'naturalizing agenda', according to Borck: "Today's technosciences constitute ever more entities with agency in relation to biological, individual, subjective, collective, or political levels of being".[62] It extends animism into the modern technosphere thus subverting the nature-culture/spiritual-material/animate-inanimate matrix of modernity out of which it nevertheless is born: "In this context, animism may demonstrate an unexpected potential as a conceptual tool for highlighting and describing those deviations from modern epistemology that pass under its own guidance".[63] Techno-animism, or 'technological animism', as Erik Davis calls it in

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[55] Isabelle Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism", e-Flux 36 (2012), p. 2; available online: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61245/reclaiming-animism/ (accessed 17 December 2020).
[56] Stengers, p. 9.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] *Ibid*.
[59] Cornelius Borck, "Animism in the Sciences Then and Now", e-Flux 36 (2012), p. 3; available online: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61266/animism-in-the-sciences-then-and-now/ (accessed 17 December 2020). See also Borck's provocative statement: "'voodoo' is perhaps precisely where science and technology are heading – animation everywhere" (p. 7).
[60] Sheldrake, pp. 188-189.
[61] *Ibid*., p. 175.
[62] Borck, p. 6.
[63] *Ibid*.

his *TechGnosis*, is provoked by the sense that "our digital technologies appear to be acquiring mind":[64]

> Perhaps the phenomenon of techno-animism is nothing more than the latest upgrades from the society of the spectacle, infantilizing spells designed to crush whatever critical distance still allows some of us to question the technocapitalist domination of the world. On the other hand, a degree of animism can also be seen as a psychologically appropriate and imaginatively pragmatic response to the peculiar qualities of the information jungle. We associate intelligence with what reads and writes, and nowadays everything electronic reads and writes. For technopagans, the fallout from this is clear: The postmodern world of digital simulacra is ripe for the premodern skills of the witch and magician.[65]

Davis tracks this 'technopagan' return of magic in the age of digital technology and computerization as a form of contemporary gnostic or pseudo-religious techno-spirituality by looking at the "archaic and occult metaphors that cluster around new technologies".[66] These tend to show a "scientific animism bound up with the computer's ability to act as a replicating demiurge".[67]

It was undoubtedly Donna Haraway's remark that "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" in her "Cyborg Manifesto"[68] – a foundational text for techno-animistic posthumanism – which opened up opportunities for the humanities to reclaim lost territory from the sciences in the biopolitical war over 'life' as an urgent object of study. Processes of (re)animation have been pro-*life*-rating, so to speak, ever since in the lead-up to ubiquitous computing, artificial intelligence and the internet of things. (Techno)animism has, in fact, become an integral part of contemporary 'design', if one is to believe Brenda Laurel, for whom 'pervasive computing' has given birth to "designed animism" as the basis for a "poetics for a new world".[69] As Betti Marenko further explains, "The idea that we are 'turning animist' to deal better with a world increasingly populated by smart objects and intelligent things is gaining approbation in interaction design … an animistic response emerges when technology connecting objects becomes simultaneously smarter, more pervasive, and more invisible".[70]

Animism as an 'affective post-cognitive framework' or life-strategy for relating to our digital environments, can thus be seen as the contemporary equivalent of 'believing without belief' in the

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[64] Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 187.
[65] Davis, p. 188.
[66] *Ibid*., p. 195.
[67] *Ibid*., p. 295. Compare this to Stef Aupers's conclusion (in "The Revenge of the Machines: On Modernity, Digital Technology and Animism", In *CyberAsia: The Internet and Society in Asia*, ed. Zaheer Baber, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 156) that "a paradoxical development is taking place; technoanimism … can be seen as a direct but unforeseen consequence of the accelerating process of rationalization. This process does not contribute to the disappearance of religion. On the contrary: it can be seen as the main driving force behind the emergence of this archaic form of religion". I would claim that, in this sense, technoanimism is a near-synonym to 'transhumanism', and to the role of 'technology' plays in transhumanist 'systems of beliefs'. The analogy with technoeuphoric 'magic' or 'voodoo' is not at all implausible here (see above, Borck, p. 7).
[68] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 152.
[69] Brenda Laurel, "Designed Animism", In *(Re)searching the Digital Bauhaus*, eds. Thomas Binder, Jonas Löwgren and Lone Malmberg, (London: Springer, 2009), 252.
[70] Betti Marenko, "Neo-Animism and Design: A New Paradigm in Object Theory", *Design and Culture* 6.2 (2014), pp. 220-221.

animatedness, or to use Jane Bennett's term, 'vibrancy', of techno-matter.[71] In many ways, however, this again inevitably looks, as Marenko readily admits, like a return to *before humanity*:

> I want to argue that in a digitally connected world our apprehension of objects is more prone to deeply pre-modern (irrational? anti-modern? nevermodern?) affective faculties. Animism, magic, enchantment, and sensuousness are intertwined – and they are manifested in the ways that we experience this connected object-*scape* that is made of digital, post- PC devices, smart objects, pervasive computing, ambient intelligence, tangible interaction, and cloud services.[72]

Animism according to this view becomes a coping mechanism for the (re-)animation of 21st-century human environments. Maybe this promises to become the ideal environment for Lok, Golding's Neanderthal hero? However, it may also merely represent a way of preparing contemporary *post*humanity for a kind of 'neoprimitivsim' with its appropriate form of fetishism.[73]

### ~~*Animism*~~ *Under Erasure*

The idea of fetishism raises the question of the 'thing' or the 'object' and its ontology, its 'liveliness', and by implication it also problematizes the emergence of 'mind' and 'mindedness' and their limits, as David Skrbina explains:

> At some point in the past there was no mind, and today there is, therefore mind must have emerged from no-mind. This is the standard view. It is widely held, but rarely defended. And for good reason – it is deeply problematic … This is the *phylogenic* question: where should we draw the line between enminded and unminded beings?[74]

If, "accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such",[75] as Bill Brown writes, accepting the otherness of things is a precondition for animism (or 'panpsychism' – for which nothing as such is 'alien'). From a psychoanalytic point of view, repressing animism could thus be seen as a typically modern form of psychosis (understood as an 'occlusion' [*Verwerfung*] of the otherness of the other). If, as the 'emergentist' position with regard to the evolution of mind that David Skrbina describes above, is characterised by a deeply 'problematic' idea of *before* and *after* mind (especially if this is understood as, *before* and *after* human mind as exceptional trait of humanity, one might add), and if, instead, as John Protevi (and a host of other speculative realists and object-oriented-ontologists) claims, it's 'mind all the way down', then we are dealing either with an annihilation or a proliferation of otherness. In other words, either nothing is truly other, or, the

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[71] Cf. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[72] Marenko, p. 223.
[73] Hartmut Böhme in his *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), provides an insightful comment in this regard:

> *We do not believe in fetishism, but yet we are fetishistic.* We know this, but yet … we cannot leave it be. If this is the case, something has to change in our modern, confident, enlightened sense of self. More clarity is needed regarding our relationship to things, and they should be assigned a much stronger position in the psychological and cultural economy than we have previously been prepared to give them. (p. 4; original emphasis)

[74] David Skrbina, ed., *Mind that Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009), xii-xiii.
[75] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory", *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001), p. 12.

opposite, everything suddenly becomes radically 'alien', as in Ian Bogost's 'alien phenomenology'.[76] If animism or panpsychism take over the new theoretical paradigm, as the precursors of new 'deep' ecologies, new 'nonhuman' ontologies and agencies, these might in fact be seen as 'fatal strategies', in a Baudrillardian sense,[77] namely as designed to recover the ancestral 'great outdoors' (in Meillassoux's terms) and to, finally, "get at the *strangeness* of things".[78]

Thus, in a repetition of the arch-anthropological move of 'getting at' while 'not believing', or 'resisting' the essentially ambiguous 'strangeness of things', speculative realism and object-oriented-ontology are returning to animism with a clear strategic aim, namely to recover 'realism', ironically, through something as unlikely as 'speculation'. "Confronted with the real, we are *compelled* to speculate", as Shaviro writes.[79] But what exactly 'compels' us to do so? The answer is as simple as it is sobering: the looming world-without-us scenario:

> We learn about the world-for-us through introspection and the world-in-itself through scientific experimentation. But we can only encounter the world-without-us obliquely, through the paradoxical movement of speculation.[80]

In order to escape the apparent 'deception' of 'correlationism', then, the anthropologist of deep time and the world-without-us must believe in the impossible (or 'believe without belief', once again) in the epistemological thesis "that it is in some way possible for us to point to, and to speak about, this organized world-without-us *without* thereby reducing it yet again to our own conceptual schemes".[81] This is pure magic, maybe even voodoo, and it is done all in the name of the poor 'thing' (i.e. it is also openly fetishistic). Animism as a fatal strategy of humans arguing themselves out of the picture, however, might be taking it a little too seriously (or literally, but precisely *not* in Viveiros de Castro's sense). Addressing human exceptionalism and the problem of anthropocentrism are valuable and noble ethical imperatives but the idea that the world or things might be able to do the 'caring' business for us seems a little too hopeful, since, as Shaviro readily admits "It is only an anthropocentric prejudice to assume that things cannot be lively and active and mindful on their own, without us. Why should we suppose that these are qualities that only we possess and that we merely project them on the 'universe of things' outside us?"[82]

Which allows the question whether the attribution of mindfulness to things is really going to bring about more justice. There is, for example, a big difference between panpsychism as a new cosmology and Jane Bennett's *strategic* vitalism, which seeks to acknowledge the 'vibrancy' of matter and 'thing-power'. Bennett proposes a form of strategic 'naiveté' (or, as I would again call it, belief without belief) to promote the awareness of 'connectivity' and 'entanglement' between humans and nonhumans. One tactic, she writes, "might be to revisit and become temporarily infected by discredited philosophies of nature, risking 'the taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes'".[83] Strategic or 'tactical' animism is what

[76] Bogost takes as his cue from Thomas Nagel's seminal essay "What is it like to be a bat?", *Moral Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 165-180. See also Nagel's "Panpsychicsm" in the same volume pp. 181-195.
[77] Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1990).
[78] Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, p. 66.
[79] *Ibid*, p. 67.
[80] *Ibid*.
[81] *Ibid*., p. 68.
[82] *Ibid*., p. 77.
[83] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 18.

anthropologists like Viveiros de Castro and many others have been advocating all along, always in the hope that the contamination would be somehow productive, rewarding or '(re)enchanting'.

Timothy Morton is one of the few 'neoanimists' to be more circumspect in this regard. Although animism is not mentioned as such in his *Humankind*,[84] it certainly plays a crucial part. Morton's *Realist Magic*, as the title already suggests, in fact takes its cue from Jane Bennett's strategic animism referred to above by acknowledging that: "it would be better if we had some term that suited neither vitalism nor mechanism".[85] Morton's own use of 'animism' includes some deconstructive caution from the outset. What obviously intrigues but also bothers Morton about animism is precisely that it may be too easily associated with the neo-spiritual and neo-primitive naturism of 'conservative' ecocriticism, as he explains in *Ecology without Nature*:

> [Ecocriticism] needs to be able to argue for a progressive view of ecology that does not submit to the atavistic authority of feudalism or 'prehistoric' primitivism (New Age animism). It requires instead that we be nostalgic for the future, helping people figure out that the ecological 'paradise' *has not occurred yet*.[86]

A progressive use of ecology (without a too Romantic notion of nature)[87] according to Morton, quite paradoxically, is 'nostalgic' for a future. Progressive ecological politics is a politics that focuses on the 'paradise-to-come', not the 'paradise-lost'. I would argue that nostalgia for the future, understood as an alternative or other future, is Morton's way of speaking to the ambiguity of the *before*: a re-membering or 'rewriting' of the repressed origin to open up alternative futures.

Ecology without nature, ecology without ecology, nature without nature – these are all markers of (animist) 'reenchantment' in Morton's 'realist magic'. Animism is attractive, because it "is decidedly not nature worship",[88] and this "turns out to have a lot in common with an ecology to come".[89] It is therefore from an *aesthetic* point of view that Morton feels obliged to put animism 'under erasure', or to 'cross it out', in order to be able to produce an 'upgraded' version of animism:

> Ancient animisms treat beings as people, without a concept of Nature. I'm going to cross out this word to prevent people from thinking of it as another belief system, in particular as system

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[84] This is particularly surprising since *Humankind*'s programmatic subtitle is *Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, (London: Verso, 2017). As an example of Morton's postanthropocentric political programme the following statement might serve as representative: "we've been looking for empathy in the wrong place. An anthropocentric place" (p. 32). Empathy (indispensable for any form of solidarity) is of course the main motif in *Humankind* and the idea of (human) kindness, even though they may merely constitute a "haunted" (p. 85) or "paranoid" (p. 161; or maybe psychotic?) form of solidarity.

[85] Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 101.

[86] Morton, *Ecology Without Culture: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 162.

[87] In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Morton explains: "I don't really believe in nature, I believe in ecology; I think nature is actually a human construct, I think that's what's wrong with it. It's not like I don't believe in coral, I do believe in coral which is why I don't believe in nature. And I think that not only is nature a human philosophical construct, an aesthetic construct, it's also a social construct that is one of the reasons for this violence … And so I think that ecology must necessarily be without nature". See Timothy Morton and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview", dismagazine.com (2014); available online: http://dismagazine.com/blog/68280/hans-ulrich-obrist-timothy-morton/.

[88] Cf. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 180: "Indigenous cultures have not much time for nature as imagined in and against modernity".

[89] *Ibid*.

> that implies something about living rather than non-living things: ~~animism~~. Is there any art that points this way?[90]

Once again, we have an instance of 'belief without belief' in this passage, analogous to the alter-animistic moves outlined above. Not believing in 'nature', but only in 'corals', for example, in a vaguely religious "shimmering"[91] or a "rocking"[92] of generalised 'animation' (the idea of 'life' attributed to all entities) is what one might call Morton's 'hyper-animism'. The problem, according to Morton, is that, in the "age of asymmetry",[93] human reason already "knows too much about nonhumans":[94]

> [T]he Age of Asymmetry is not a return to animism as such, but rather ~~animism~~ *sous rature* (under erasure). It's called the Age of Asymmetry because within human understanding humans and nonhumans face one another equally matched. But this equality is not like the Classical phase. There is no Goldilocks feeling in the Great Acceleration era of the Anthropocene. The feeling is rather of the nonhuman out of control, withdrawn from total human access.[95]

What Morton is trying to make us *believe* here is that this asymmetry – based on an originary 'severance' – can, in fact, be overcome by 'solidarity', or by 'humankindness': "'solidarity' cuts against a dominant ontological trend, default since the basic social, psychic and philosophical foreclosure of the human-nonhuman symbiotic real that we call the Neolithic".[96] What Morton refers to is the originary conceptual separation between humans and nonhumans (the "fissure between reality and the real", in Lacanian terms)[97] that was modern agrarianism with its subsequent unfolding and the global rise of 'humanity'. It seems then, that Golding's fictional scenario of the Neolithic *Urszene* – our primitive-primal scene – is reinscribed here by Morton as precisely the moment and the occasion, or the chance of the *before* – i.e. *before* all went pear-shaped – and ~~animism~~ (under erasure, from now on) is a kind of conduit to re-memberance. Re-membering in the Osiric sense, but without actually remembering the origin, which (necessarily) remains repressed. In other words, there is at work here a "weak holism that isn't theistic".[98] All this sounds very much like 'religion without religion' or 'belief without belief', or, precisely, like "a crictical 'gnosticism'", in Morton's

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[90] Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, p. 110.
[91] Morton, "Animation", In *Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, eds. Lynn Turner and Undine Sellbach,(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 42.
[92] Morton, *Humankind*, p. 175-189.
[93] The "Age of Assymetry", for Morton, is characterized by "[t]he overall aesthetic 'feel' of the time of hyperobjects", which is a "sense of *asymmetry* between the infinite powers of cognition and the infinite being of things" (*Humankind*, p 22), or, as one might put it, a specific 'disconnect' between ontology and epistemology based on a mismatch in 'scale', or, indeed, as a kind of 'disruption' that requires new (aesthetic) answers based on 'beliefs without belief'.
[94] Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 172. This leads one to believe that a (posthumanist) pedagogy instead of '*Bildung*' might instead have to be based on the idea of 'unlearning' – especially 'unlearning to be human' (cf. Herbrechter, "Posthumanist Education", In *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, volume 1, eds. Paul Smeyers et al., (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018), 727-745), since "the young adult is precisely an anthropocentrist in training" (Morton, *Humankind*, p. 15).
[95] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 173.
[96] Morton, *Humankind*, p. 13. See also: "Hiding in very plain sight, everywhere in post-agricultural psychic, social and philosophical space, is evidence of a traumatic Severing of human-nonhuman relations" (Morton, *Humankind*, p. 16).
[97] *Ibid*., p. 13.
[98] *Ibid*., p. 103.

words.[99] But who would be the demiurge responsible for our post-agrarian 'fallen state' if not the human *itself*, creator of the so-called Anthropocene? In which case, however, why still insist on belief *and* the 'critical' as a qualifier of (animistic) gnosticism? As a provisional summary so far, one might thus concur with Abram Lewis's statement that: "Despite the prodigious ink spilled on 'nonhuman agency' in recent years … much posthuman thought retains an ambiguous relationship to inhuman agencies that are magical or religious in character".[100]

*The Animism to Come*

If the challenge that an animistic return poses is, amongst other things, aesthetic, as Morton argues, then where else to look for an animism *before* humanity than in (prehistoric) art?[101] According to Evan Firestone, animism and shamanism appealed to the avant-garde of Twentieth-Century art because of its 'authenticity' and 'naturalism'.[102] From an ecocritical point of view, the same appeal also applies to the contemporary 'return of the real', as we have seen in Morton's work. Whether animism is placed *sous rature* or not, from an aesthetic point of view, the 'effect' of animism should be some kind of 'darkness' (cf. Morton's notion of 'dark ecology') or 'dirty', 'nitty-gritty'.[103] Re-enchantment of the world is what speculative, magical and other animist 'realisms' are yearning for – even though this yearning will probably forever remain the domain of humans and their respective spiritualities. That is precisely what the purpose of 'savages' or 'ancestors' (and ancestrality more generally) has always been, as Christopher Bracken explains in his *Magical Criticism*, namely to serve as the 'raw' source of 'reanimation' of the lost real, and to thereby regain 'liveliness'.[104] So how is one to feel more 'alive' with all this contemporary biopolitical catastrophism around? Maybe the return to animism is precisely that: a desire to just *be* or *become* life (organic, inorganic, or somehow post-organic) itself.[105]

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[99] *Ibid*., p. 109.

[100] Abram J. Lewis, "Trans Animisms", *Angelaki* 22.2 (2017): 206.

[101] See also "Interlude 5: Lascaux, Geophilia and the 'Cradle of Humanity'", below.

[102] Evan R. Firestone, *Animism and Shamanism in Twentieth-Century Art: Kandinsky, Ernst, Pollock, Beuys*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 4.

[103] See for example Ian Bogost's 'aesthetic' understanding of the speculative *realist* philosopher's task:

> Speculative realism really does *require* speculation: benighted meandering in an exotic world of utterly incomprehensible objects. As philosophers, our job is to amplify the black noise of objects to make the resonant frequencies of the stuffs inside them hum in credibly satisfying ways. Our job is to write the speculative fictions of their processes, of their unit operations. Our job is to get our hands dirty with grease, juice, gunpowder, and gypsum. Our job is to go where *everyone* has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger. (Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, p. 34)

Cf. also Bogost's following call for a neorealism after humanism, if not the human:

> The posture one takes before the alien is that of curiosity, of wonder. For too long, humanists have relinquished wonder to the natural sciences, and then swooped in ostentatiously to blame its awe on false consciousness. The return to realism [or the real?] in metaphysics is also a return to wonder, wonder unburdened by pretense or deception. Let's leave rigor to the dead. Let's trade furrows for gasps. Let's rub our temples at one another no longer. Let's go outside and dig in the dirt. (p. 133)

[104] Christopher Bracken, *Magical Criticism: The Recourse of Savage Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 17.

[105] Don DeLillo's character Richard Elster in *Point Omega* expresses this contemporary desire eloquently when he says: "Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field" (DeLillo, *Point Omega*, (London: Picador, 2010), 67). For a

Unsurprisingly, maybe, we have thus arrived back at Freud's idea of the 'omnipotence of thought' that is at work in animism. But maybe we can now introduce a difference into this 'belief system' and slightly unhinge it, before drawing this round-up of contemporary animisms to a provisional close. To recall, Freud appropriates animism as "the first complete theory of the universe" and as a "system of thought"[106] from anthropology to provide psychoanalysis with an evolutionary underpinning.[107] If Freud is prepared to take animism 'seriously' (i.e. not just as a 'primitive superstition') it is because there are significant parallels and investments between animism and the idea of the unconscious (esp. as manifested in dreams):

> Let us now return to the animistic system with which we are dealing. The insight we have gained into other psychological systems enables us to conclude that with primitive man, too, 'superstition' need not be the only or the real reason for some particular custom or observance and does not excuse us from the duty of searching for its hidden motives. … 'Superstition' – like 'anxiety', 'dreams' and 'demons' – is one of those provisional psychological concepts which have crumbled under the impact of psychoanalytic research. Once we have penetrated behind these constructions, which are like screens erected as defences against correct understanding, we begin to realize that the mental life and cultural level of savages have not hitherto had all the recognition they deserve. If we take instinctual repression as a measure of the level of civilization that has been reached, we shall have to admit that even under the animistic system advances and developments took place which are unjustly despised on account of their superstitious basis.[108]

What Freud is doing here is, on the one hand, cautioning his 'contemporaries' not to underestimate animism as a system of thought and belief with regard to its own 'cultural achievements', and, on the other hand, he claims that a psychological dimension of human development – the overcoming not only of individual but also social 'narcissism' – must be the true measure of humanity's evolutionary progress. As such, in its double move, it is a perfect example of modern humanism at work.[109] The particular kind of 'obsessional neurosis' that is animism, understood as a 'primitive' philosophy of nature – "the principle governing magic, the technique of the animistic mode of thinking"[110] – is ruled by the principle of 'omnipotence of thought', as Freud explains. What is already becoming clear here is the proximity and the entanglement as well as the compromise (in both senses of the term) of a certain (let us call it Hegelian) understanding of 'reason' as a force (or even 'life force') that is neither 'material' nor 'spiritual', as well as a certain idea of animism largely projected onto the 'primitive' seen as 'emergent'.

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commentary see my, "Posthuman/ist Literature? Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K*", *Open Library of Humanities*, 6(2): 18, pp. 1–25; https://olh.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/olh.592/ (accessed 17 December 2020). Cf. also Mario Perniola's notion of *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, (London: Continuum, 2004).

[106] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 94.

[107] Cf. his statement: "I shall now go on to draw certain conclusions from the psycho-analytic view of such systems" (*ibid*.).

[108] *Ibid*., p. 97.

[109] Freud tries to pre-empt attacks from his contemporary imperialist-colonial critics (and in doing so he also prepares the terrain for Piaget) by explaining that he is "under no illusion that in putting forward these attempted explanations [he is] laying [himself] open to the charge of endowing modern savages with a subtlety in their mental activities which exceeds all probability. It seems to [him] quite possible, however, that the same may be true of our attitude towards the psychology of those races that have remained at the animistic level as is true of our attitude towards the mental life of children, which we adults no longer understand and whose fullness and delicacy of feeling we have in consequence so greatly underestimated" (p. 99).

[110] *Ibid*., p. 85.

From an evolutionary standpoint the primitive originality of thought, or 'his' belief systems, which remain forever imbricated within each other, are at once the precondition for (Western) modernity to arrive, as well as that which absolutely needs to be left 'behind' (where leaving *behind* is nothing but the reverse side of the *before* I have been exploring here). Even more importantly maybe, it is also what allows every single member of humanity (every 'individual') to undergo and to repeat this evolutionary (paleoanthropological) process, as well as for each 'culture' (or society) to locate itself on the 'map' of human advancement (i.e. modernity and its cultural imperialism).[111] Let us refer back to Freud's statement on primitive 'narcissism' in this context:

> If we may regard the existence among primitive races of the omnipotence of thoughts as evidence in favour of narcissism, we are encouraged to attempt a comparison between the phases in the development of men's view of the universe and the stages of an individual's libidinal development. The animistic phase would correspond to narcissism both chronologically and in its content; the religious phase would correspond to the stage of object-choice of which the characteristic is a child's attachment to his parents; while the scientific phase would have an exact counterpart in the stage at which an individual has reached maturity, has renounced the pleasure principle, adjusted himself to reality and turned to the external world for the object of his desires.[112]

In other words, in as much as primary narcissism is both the source of individual as well as transindividual drives, animism cannot really be overcome or fully superseded by 'religion' and/or 'science', because it is more like a 'life force', i.e. it is more originary. One might thus indeed say that animism always remains *before* modernity, if not *before* humanity.[113]

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[111] Clive Gamble is spelling out this critique in great detail in his *Origins and Revolutions: Human Identity in Earliest Prehistory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); see, in particular, his explanation of what he calls paleoanthropology's "Originsland" (i.e. chapter 3: "Metaphors of Origins", pp. 59-86).

[112] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 90.

[113] This is also how one could read Derrida's reading of Cixous's animism in *H.C. for Life … That is to Say*, trans. Laurent Milesi & Stefan Herbrechter, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). In what is in fact an account of an extraordinary intellectual friendship, Derrida writes of an impossibility to choose between Cixous's 'side of life' and 'the other side', the side of death, 'which is no side', since it is impossible to *be* on the side of death, literally (for a longer commentary see my, "Theory … for Life", *Style in Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy*, eds. Ivan Callus, James Corby and Gloria Lauri-Lucente, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 303-322). In order to explain Cixous's (and Derrida's own) 'narcissism' and the 'animistic moments' (esp. with regard to 'telepathy') in Cixous's work – see esp. Derrida's evaluation of Cixous's 'performative' dimension of 'phantasm' at work in her writings (pp. 76-77), where he refers to Cixous's "new logic of phantasm and of the event that, inseparable from a poetics of the event, may take into account an unheard-of, performative might, a mighty power of making-say as making-happen or arrive …"; see also Derrida's reference to Cixous's "zoo-anthropomorphic-animism" in connection with her "speaking to the telephone" (p. 105) – Derrida, in fact, provides an interesting sketch of a reading of Freud's chapter on animism. He discovers, what he calls, three 'snags' in the 'system of beliefs' about the 'omnipotence of thought' as outlined in *Totem and Taboo* – "*three* problematic snags and *three* opaque areas in the Freudian analysis of the 'omnipotence of thoughts'" (p. 110; the repetition of the word 'three' is an obvious echo of Freud's 'three caskets' motif). The 'snags' concern Freud's exception granted to art in relation to animism; Freud's compulsion to introduce what he calls 'pre-animism' (or 'animatism'); and Freud's gesture of 'denegation' towards the 'necessity' of death (pp. 108-120). For my purposes here, I am focusing on the first two snags: Freud claims that "[i]n only a single field of our civilization has the omnipotence of thoughts been retained, and that is in the field of art" (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 90). Derrida quite bluntly questions the consequentiality of this claim, referring to the 'evolutionist scientism' in Freud's three-phase model of outgrowing animism and labels it as 'coarse', but also as 'full of indisputable common sense': "one may wonder what this exception of art as magic means. Why did art not disappear, if it still survives? And why must Freud hesitate to turn art's magic into a mere animist remnant, the residue of 'narcissism'?", Derrida asks (p. 111). He then counters Freud's claim by referring to art's 'performative' dimension in producing 'effects and affects' of 'enchantment' (p. 112) – or 'performative power

*Conclusion: Seriously, But Perhaps Not Too Seriously?*

As a result, I would argue, we must concur with Spyros Papapetros, when he writes:

> If there is indeed a survival of animistic beliefs in technologically advanced civilizations, it is not animism that persists, but rather the abstract condition of animatism – the belief in a perpetually circulating energy located outside of individual bodies.[114]

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acts' that are at once "rational, technical, *and magical*" (p. 112). Most interestingly, Derrida focuses on Freud's rather curious move which, on the one hand, acknowledges the logical necessity of a 'pre-animistic' phase, "more ancient than the doctrine of spirits … which form the kernel of animism" (p. 112) and which Freud calls 'animatism', but of which, on the other hand, Freud remains completely silent. Animatism – if it exists – Derrida concludes "[i]s something like a theory of living, of being-alive, of livingness [*vivance*], of universal being-for-life (*Lehre von der allgemeinen Belebtheit* [a notion that Derrida places within the proximity of Jankélévitch's 'universal hylozoism', and which of course would be the ultimate philosophical consequence of a 'biological' animism])", and which would thus be a kind of 'originary' and, most importantly, a 'pre-religious' and 'non-spiritual' form of life-affirmation that must be prior to any known (including even the most 'primitive') culture: "a quasi-originary *Belebtheit* that must, if not present itself, at least announce itself to some pre-empirical or pre-positive experience" (p. 114).

Merely for the sake of completeness, Derrida's third snag – which I cannot pursue in detail here – concerns the following Freudian statement:

> Thus man's first theoretical achievement – the creation of spirits – seems to have arisen from the same source as the first moral restrictions to which he was subjected – the observances of taboo. The fact that they had the same origin need not imply, however, that they arose simultaneously. If the survivors' position in relation to the dead was really what first caused primitive man to reflect, and compelled him to hand over some of his omnipotence to the spirits and to sacrifice some of his freedom of action, then these cultural products would constitute a first acknowledgment of *Anankè* [Necessity], which opposes human narcissism. Primitive man would thus be submitting to the supremacy of death with the same gesture with which he seemed to be denying it. (*Totem and Taboo*, p. 93)

While Derrida uses this passage to return to his main argument in *H.C. for Life*, which relates to Cixous's "oppositionless narcissim of *Belebtheit*" (p. 119) and whose power he finds at work in all her writings, Freud's own argument develops into another, much more general statement about human psychic development, with which he attempts to pull the animist firmly onto the (proto-)modern, dualist or Cartesian plane (which, as a reminder, was the starting point of my critique and the main motivation behind the call for a (post-) anthropological return to animism in posthumanist times, in the first place):

> It might be said that in the last analysis the 'spirit' of persons or things comes down to their capacity to be remembered and imagined after perception of them has ceased. (*Totem and Taboo*, p. 94)

The only difference between animism and modern science, according to Freud, lies thus in a clearer demarcation (of the 'soul' from other parts) and hence between conscious and unconscious psychic activity, while "immutability and indestructibility are qualities which we no longer attribute to conscious but rather to unconscious processes, and we regard the latter as the true vehicle of mental activity" (*Totem and Taboo*, p. 94). In summary, what is sketched here in these few very dense pages of Derrida's reading of primary narcissim via Cixous and via a return to Freud is nothing short of what may be called the beginning of a 'deconstruction of animism'. Or, in other words, a way of insisting on the inevitability and necessity of animism as an explanation for life in our, and in any time, as well as a demonstration that, *at the same time*, one cannot and one *must* not take it 'literally', or not too 'seriously', in the sense of a *system of belief*.

[114] Spyros Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 18.

Weirdly but also predictably, one might say, my round-up of the impossibility *and* inevitability of animism has taken me to a place where I can venture two propositions: 1) it might be good to take animism seriously, without taking it too seriously; 2) one might have to acknowledge, while taking into account all the intrinsic restrictions and contradictions of the very notion of animism (with its reliance on the whole Greco-Latin-Christian philosophical tradition of 'anima', for a start), that the idea of 'animation', which provides the main appeal for a contemporary 'return' to animism and its development into a generalized principle of *Belebtheit*, might be best understood as an animism *without* (or indeed *before*) humans.[115]

As Rane Willerslev in his appropriately entitled "Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps Not Too Seriously" explains,[116] referring, once again to Viveiros de Castro's work, in the context of a 'decolonization' of thought (which, today, might be extended towards a generalized critique of all forms of anthropocentrism, as argued above): "Anthropologists need to take seriously what indigenous peoples take seriously, not as a means of exoticizing them as being somehow more knowledgeable or wiser than Western philosophers. Nor is it about ethics, in terms of respecting other cultures. Rather, we need to take indigenous animism seriously, so as to alternate our own ways of thinking".[117] Willerslev admits that despite all the seriousness of anthropology's claims about 'taking the other and his or her beliefs seriously' we may have overlooked something quite elementary, namely the question whether animists take themselves seriously:

> I have started to question if seriousness at all lies at the heart of animism. Perhaps quite the opposite is the case: it may be discovered that underlying animistic cosmologies is a force of laughter, an ironic distance, a making fun of the spirits, which suggests that indigenous animism is not to be taken very seriously at all. I think that we are facing a fundamental yet quite neglected problem here …[118]

It is quite true that the ecological catastrophism – and this is not a way of denying climate change, of course – that has undoubtedly been motivating the contemporary 'return to the real' in theory, is somewhat lacking in ironic distance, maybe also quite simply in some ('dark') humour. Maybe what 'we' are projecting onto animism and its desirability in the time of the Anthropocene – beginning with the idea of a 'false epistemology' or 'primitive consciousness' and its positive shift towards a 'new relationality' beyond the dreaded 'correlationism' – was meant, after all, as nothing but a bad joke? In seeing the animist as 'joker', or the shaman as 'trickster', one enters an entirely different epistemological regime, or 'system of beliefs', one that is much closer to the troubled and troubling tradition of 'gnosticism' with its more than dubious relationship to 'materiality' and human existence. Willerslev uses his anthropological fieldwork on "animistic types of humor in Mongolia and Siberia" to ask: "to what extent does it make sense for the anthropologist to take animism seriously if indeed it turns out that indigenous peoples themselves do not take it seriously?"[119] What if animists

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[115] This entire cluster of arguments remains to be connected with the discussion on 'biodeconstruction' in the aftermath of the translation of Derrida's early seminar "La vie la mort" (originally held 1975-1976) and published as *Life Death*, *Seminars of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). 'Biodeconstruction' is Francesco Vitale's term, cf. Vitale, *Biodeconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Life Sciences*, trans. Mauro Montale, (New York: SUNY Press, 2018).

[116] Rane Willerslev, "Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps Not Too Seriously", *Religion and Society* 4 (2013): 41-57. See also Willerslev's, *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), esp. the concluding chapter "Taking Animism Seriously" (pp. 181-192).

[117] Willerslev, "Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps Not Too Seriously", p. 42.

[118] *Ibid*.

[119] *Ibid*., p. 50.

"see through their own pretentious animist ideology" and the "authority of the spirits"?[120] This is not, in my view, an invitation to stop taking animism seriously altogether. However, it questions the motives and also the extent and manner in which animism can or should be *returned* to. The intrinsic and problematic privileging of spiritualism of some *anima* (the animate, but also the animal) in the idea of animalism should make us wary and maybe prompt a search for a *Belebtheit* that lies even *before* something that may ultimately still be as compromised by anthropocentrism as animism.

[120] *Ibid*., p. 54.