

Ghosting the Human in the (Post)Anthropocene –

Some Thoughts Inspired by Marija Grech's *Spectrality and Survivance*

Ghosting as an Un/Social Practice

Aware of our own imminent end and the end of the world around us, we live and experience the present as a spectre of itself – we live in a time that is defined by the anticipatory knowledge of its own end and that is haunted by the future memory of itself as past.¹

As more and more governments consider protecting “our” human future by banning children from so-called social media and their unsocial effects I propose to look at another rising trend in social relationships facilitated by social media use. “Ghosting” originally meant “the action of becoming, or making someone into, a ghost” and “the action of appearing to someone or haunting a place as a ghost”, according to the OED. More recently, however, ghosting has taken on the following meaning: “the action of ignoring or pretending not to know a person, esp. that of suddenly ceasing to respond to someone on social media, by text message, etc.; the action of ending a relationship or association with someone by ceasing all communication” (OED). This seems particularly curious, disruptive and cruel since social media’s *raison d’être* is surely to create and share “content” and to participate in social “networking”. In fact, social media ghosting seems especially strange and upsetting since, whereas ghosts’ usual unpleasant haunting effects are based on their appearance, or on their disturbing “presence”, social media ghosting is the sign of a disturbing absence, namely, a lack of “decency” to break up in person, the withdrawal of, or the absence of a “human” touch, etc. Some are predicting that this is a growing trend (esp. among “Gen Z”), a sign of the more general withdrawing from social media, with a significant decline in the number of postings and shares, which might spell a larger social media “fatigue” and disappointment with the fact that social media platforms owned by the big tech bros have hijacked the original idea of social sharing and connectivity for marketing and other purposes.

The outrage, in any case, is understandable, as I am sure everyone agrees. That is not the way for humans to deal with each other (even though we have to readily admit that there has always been a bit of ghosting going on in social relationships). Nevertheless, it is disappointing. One would expect better from humans. Psychologists have duly picked up on the trend under the headings of “abandonment in the digital era” or “disappearing in the age of hypervisibility”, for example. Ironically, due to technological “advancement” and the “increased popularity of dating apps” the incidences of “an abrupt one-sided ending, without explanation, of an established friendship/romantic or other communication connection”² have increased dramatically; so much so, that there’s a growing wariness

¹ Marija Grech, *Spectrality and Survivance: Living the Anthropocene* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), p.3.

² Lateefa Rashd Daraj et al., “Ghosting: Abandonment in the Digital Era”, *Encyclopedia 4* (2024): 36-45 (36). Ghosting happens as a result of an “affordance” of social media that allows for “pseudo- or disembodied intimacy among relative strangers”: “The present-day practice of ghosting thus reflects what happens when attempting to relate through impersonal means rather than face-to-face. It takes advantage of the impersonal to avoid painful conversations and social accountability” (p. 37). Even though breaking up a relationship without explanation is of course nothing new – it is an essential part of the social, in fact – as a tendency that is technologically enabled, however, “normalized ghosting risks a feedback loop that reinforces selective empathy and erodes accountability and communal bonds” (p. 41). To put it bluntly: “ghosting emerged at the intersection of wide-spread access to technology-mediated communication and relationship dissolution” (Jhanelle Oneika Thomas and Royette Tavernier Dubar, “Disappearing in the Age of Hypervisibility: Definition, Context, and

and threat to social media survival as such. There seems to be a general decline in the willingness to “post” and to “share”.³ It looks like it is no longer worth sharing our lives online given that we are now competing with bots, fake news, hate speech and shaming, trolling, deep fake, as well as populist extremism, the influencer phenomenon, “attention farming” and “data scraping”, aggressive marketing all happening regularly on social media platforms. Now that everything is just “content” that is being seized and used as big data to feed algorithms that are then being fed back to users, this “kind of removes the purpose of social media”. In fact, social media are becoming increasingly unsocial, if not anti-social, one might say. Social media “becomes just like television”.⁴ This does not mean that the need for social media no longer exists, it is just being abused and hijacked, hence the frequent calls for alternative social media platforms. In any case, as a result, “privacy” seems to be back at the top of people’s agenda.

However, the hijacking and datafication of the social is only one side of the medal. This is all happening in the context of what one might call the growing effect of “future trauma” (or “anticipatory trauma”), which, in turn, is one of the symptoms of living in the so-called “Anthropocene”. The psychological distress experienced as a result of the anticipation of traumatic events that, even though they have not yet occurred, but seem increasingly inevitable, is characteristic of a time when the worst – irreversible climate change, civilizational collapse, extinction, etc. – are more or less omnipresent in the mediasphere. It is, in fact, a kind of anticipated PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) that affects more and more people. At a more mundane level, however, it is something that probably used to be called “worrying”.⁵

In the context of more and more generalised future trauma, the popularisation of the term “Anthropocene” is in fact somewhat of a mixed blessing. This is equally the case for a critical posthumanism because, on the one hand, it could be seen as further illustration of why moving towards a postanthropocentric ethics, politics and way of thinking more generally is so important and urgent. On the other hand, however, it also plays into the hands of transhumanist desires of human grandeur in naming an entire geological epoch after the “Anthropos”, this arch-humanist, universalist, Western phantasm of an essential “humanity”, which apparently is now so powerful that its impact can decide over survival or extinction of all life on this planet.

From the point of view of a *critique* of the latter, i.e. the “human-supremacist” point of view, the adoption of the Anthropocene notion is compromised by a “suspicious timing” – namely: just when the human “Anthropos”⁶ has been almost successfully “decentred” (by feminism, postcolonialism, queer studies and other critical discourses including posthumanism), the Anthropocene comes along

Perceived Psychological Consequences of Social Media Ghosting”, *Psychology of Popular Media* 10.3 (2021): 291–302 (300)).

³ Cf. Katty Kay and Kyle Chayka, “Why did our friends stop posting on social media”, BBC (23 July 2025); available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20250722-social-media-user-changes-kyle-chayka-katty-kay-interview> (accessed 17 March 2026). This is a conversation based on Kyle Chayka’s article “Are you experiencing posting-ennui?”, in *The New Yorker* (9 July 2025); available online at: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/are-you-experiencing-posting-ennui> (accessed 17 March 2026).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cf. Francis O’Gorman, *Worrying: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁶ On the history of the “anthropos” see, for example, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, “Who is the anthropos?”, *The Shock of the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 65-96.

and threatens to radically “re-centre” it.⁷ From this, more suspicious, angle one might therefore ask: what is the *ideological* function of the term “Anthropocene”? Is this the term that attempts to hide transition from (modern, capitalist, neoliberal) biopower to an even more fearsome “geopower” to prepare the next phase of technocapitalist extractivism (now at a planetary, interstellar or cosmological level)?⁸

One can maybe demonstrate this ambivalent role the Anthropocene plays most clearly by looking at the two very different regimes of “responsibility” that seem to arise from it: on the one hand, a bio-ecological responsibility for the protection of life on this planet; on the other, a regularly invoked techno-cosmological responsibility for the survival of “intelligence” and its continued “evolution” or “progress”, through intensified technological development on this planet or indeed beyond it – a survival so precious that it would even sanction the jump from biological to technical evolution and thus from humans to their successor species (AI), at the expense of everything and everyone else, of course.⁹

Institutionally, by taking on questions concerning biopower and geopower, extinction, climate change and technological development – questions that used to be the exclusive domain of the “natural”, bio- and geo- or Earth sciences – the Anthropocene discussion is having the effect that contemporary critical (post)humanities¹⁰, or the environmental humanities as well as the social sciences, have been witnessing what one might call a “geological turn” (one of many turns and “wars” in recent decades).¹¹ This can be seen in the fact that they have embraced the notion of “deep time” and helped produce what one might call a “geological imaginary”. One could therefore speak of a “geologisation” of the kind of critical posthumanism that now operates in large parts of the humanities and social sciences.¹² It is in fact this “deep time” perspective that forms an increasingly important antipode to the techno-utopian and techno-centred figure of the posthuman as envisaged by transhumanists. Ironically, there seems to be something “cathartic” and meditative about humbly embracing deep time, as a kind of deceleration and an opportunity for much needed human self-reflection when faced with extinction.¹³

Placing the human within a deep-time geo-political and geo-ecological framework in the context of the Anthropocene, global climate change and extinction threats allows for a new deep ecological thinking and new forms of postanthropocentric narrativisations, or “geo-stories”. The idea is that these deep-

⁷ Cf. Clive Hamilton’s take on a “new anthropocentrism” in his *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

⁸ On the notion of extractivism, see Philip John Usher, *Exterranean: Extraction in the Humanist Anthropocene* (New York: Fordham University, 2019).

⁹ For a detailed critique of transhumanism, see Michael Hauskeller, *Mythologies of Transhumanism* (Cham: Palgrave/Springer, 2016).

¹⁰ On the critical posthumanities, see Rosi Braidotti et al., “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 36.6 (2019): 31-61.

¹¹ Most notably and recently the “nonhuman turn”, cf. Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); on the “geological turn” see Christophe Bonneuil, “The Geological Turn: Narratives of the Anthropocene”, in Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne, eds., *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 17-31; see also Kathryn Yusoff, *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

¹² See my “Posthumanism and Deep Time”, in Herbrechter et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 29-54.

¹³ Cf. for example Vincent Ialenti, *Deep Time Reckoning: How Future Thinking Can Help Earth Now* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).

time narrativisations are able, mainly through “speculation”, to provide alternative and differential accounts of both deep pasts and deep futures, and diversify scenarios of ancestry and extinction.¹⁴

In this sense, the Anthropocene can be seen as a troubled “present”, haunted both by uncertain origins and uncertain futures. In other words, what it means to be human today is being caught between two “world-without-us-scenarios”,¹⁵ the deep prehuman time of planetary history and the anticipated posthuman time when some alien future geologists might be discovering the sedimentational impact of our species (an idea that extends the notion of “fossilisation” into a humanless future, a kind of wondering about “our” anticipated human legacy readable through our “technofossils”).¹⁶

This geo-imaginary scenario, however, could nevertheless be seen as somewhat too “melancholic”, and maybe also as a little too comforting, since it represses the inter- and intra-species differences that the Anthropocene produces and exploits. Instead it might promise or even anticipate some kind of exculpation of humans by “arguing ourselves out of the picture”, or by, precisely, “ghosting the human”, where, in fact, taking responsibility *now* would probably be the right thing to do.¹⁷

The peculiar “future-orientation” the discipline of geology acquires through the Anthropocene,¹⁸ as well as the cultural “geologisation” effects this has caused more widely can be described, in Marija Grech’s words, as the “*future-retro-vision* of our times: a vision of the present that is haunted by the future memory of itself as past”.¹⁹ In other words, “The Anthropocene paradigm is structured by a gesture of future-retro-vision in which the present functions as the spectral past of a speculative future”.²⁰ It is this “ghosting of the human”, as I would call it, that needs to be unmasked as ideological and resisted.

Why? Because of the political nature of the very specific “construction of the future” this ideology hides, and which is all about resource allocation, based on an apparent “choice” between several equally futurological (and utterly resistible) scenarios: the degrowth/rewild option; the geoconstructivism/geo-engineering/technosphere vision; or the interstellar/exoplanet phantasm.

¹⁴ See my *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), where I engage with Quentin Meillassoux’s notion of ancestry in the context of object-oriented-ontology and the critique of (Post-)Kantian “correlationism” (cf. Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008)). See also Roman Krznaric, *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking* (New York: The Experiment, 2020).

¹⁵ See Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 2007).

¹⁶ The geologist and paleoanthropologist Jan Zalasiewicz frequently uses the trope of the future geologist looking back at the Anthropocene and humans’ geological traces, notably in *The Earth After Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), or *The Planet in a Pebble: A Journey into Earth’s Deep History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). On the notion of “technofossils” and their “futuraity” see David Farrier, *Footprints: In Search of Future Fossils* (London: 4th Estate, 2020); see also Sy Taffel, “Technofossils of the Anthropocene: Media, Geology, and Plastics”, *Cultural Politics* 12.3 (2016): 355-375.

¹⁷ Cf. all those approaches that aim to substitute the “Anthropocene” with a more socially just or critical notion like the “Capitalocene”; see for example Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Cf. for example Jeremy Davies, “Geology of the Future”, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 69-111.

¹⁹ Cf. Grech, *Spectrality and Survivance*, p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

More concretely, the political challenge the idea of the Anthropocene poses lies in how to reconcile universalist and particularist claims as to what kind of responsibility humans (at an individual or specimen level) and humanity (at a collective or species level) have and how to act on these.²¹ Critical posthumanism proposes that we *both* individually *and* collectively start by accepting the social, biological, ecological and geological reality of entanglement with the nonhuman, which should be the starting point for working towards a multispecies planetary justice, a form of geo-cosmopolitanism leading towards what Timothy Morton calls “humankind” based on solidarity with nonhumans.²²

In other words, the positive effect the notion and the reality of the Anthropocene *could* have is that they might eventually lead to a “negative postanthropology”²³ capable of dealing *both* with the *unexceptionality* (that is the plurality, difference and entanglement) of humans, as well as, and *at the same time*, with their *exceptionality* (humanity’s undeniable achievements and its potential cosmological importance, in the absence of hyper-intelligent alien life forms). It is this fundamental ambiguity and uncertainty the Anthropocene notion harbours that also explains the lack of agreement on whether our aim has to be, to learn to die,²⁴ to thrive in,²⁵ or to leave the Anthropocene behind as quickly as possible,²⁶ because it already raises another spectre, namely that of the *Post-Anthropocene*, and whether we might in fact have already entered it, or else, what we might have to do to reach it.²⁷

Ghosting the human in the Anthropocene is thus a peculiar mix where interpersonal communicative interaction breaks down and humans withdraw from the social, aided by the traumatic effects of anticipated futures, at a time when some humans, at least, are designated as both the most powerful and the most destructive form of planetary, geological, and atmospheric “agency”. This is the context, in which I believe a number of recent interventions, and Marija Grech’s *Spectrality and Survivance* in particular, need to be read.²⁸

²¹ On the question of social justice (i.e. “intra-species inequalities”) see, for example, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative”, *The Anthropocene Review* 1.1 (2014): 62-69.

²² Cf. Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017) and my *Solidarities with the Non/Human, Or, Posthumanism in Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2025). Also further discussed below.

²³ See my “Critical Posthumanism and Negative Anthropology”; available online at: <https://stefanherbrechter.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/CPH-and-Negative-Anthropology.pdf> (accessed 31 March 2026).

²⁴ Cf. Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene; Reflections on the End of Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015).

²⁵ Cf. Gerasimina Theodora Zapanti and Skanavis Constantina, “Thriving in the Anthropocene: Building Community Resilience to Combat Climate Change”, *Proceedings of the World Conference on Climate Change and Global Warming* 1.1 (2024): 29-43.

²⁶ Cf. for example European Environment Agency, “Exiting the Anthropocene? Exploring fundamental change in our relationship with nature” (12 August 2025); available online: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/exiting-the-anthropocene> (accessed 31 March 2026).

²⁷ Cf. Claire Colebrook’s use of “post-anthropocene” in *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction*, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press/University of Michigan Press, 2014) and her “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual”, in Richard Grusin, ed., *Anthropocene Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 1-20.

²⁸ Grech, *Spectrality and Survivance*; cf. also David Wood, *Deep Time Dark Times: On Being Geologically Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019); Ted Toadvine, *The Memory of the*

Spectrality and Survivance

It is only by confronting the future absence of the human and the unimaginable depth of time that exists outside of human history and consciousness (...) that we might begin to transform the way we think about the world and behave within it.²⁹

What would it take for humans to, if not avert, then mitigate climate change so that human and nonhuman survival would be possible? This seems to be Grech's question in *Spectrality and Survivance*. Like Günther Anders before her, she investigates the curious "need" for humans to argue themselves out of the picture, to imagine a world without "us", to look back at "us" from an alien time and perspective, to understand whether anything and what exactly would be lost by human and nonhuman disappearance. This is all self-defeating, literally, one might say, at least if we are really serious about survival (and not only "survivance" – the phantasm of surviving through self-denial – and "spectrality" – i.e. "ghosting" ourselves, as if we had to go through the experience of our own death to enact redemptive re-incarnation in some strange "Christian" logic). Which means, as Grech believes, that "apart from trying to imagine the end of the world and the end of all human life, we must also be able to imagine and bring about *an end to human ways of thinking about the world*; we must be able to find a language with which to think and talk about the present and the future that does not privilege the human above all else and does not structure itself around the possible presence or absence of human life upon this planet" (pp. 2-3). In other words, what is needed is "an attempt to find non-anthropocentric ways of conceptualising the present and the future and of thinking the complex relations that exist between and amongst human beings, other lifeforms and other forms of earthly matter" (p. 3). This, in a nutshell, is the problem: overcoming "our" anthropocentrism to achieve continued co-existence and self-survival and extricate ourselves from the curious "spectrality" that dominates our Anthropocene "present" in which we are "[a]ware of our own imminent end and the end of the world around us, [and in which] we live and experience the present as a spectre of itself—we live in a time that is defined by the anticipatory knowledge of its own end and that is haunted by the future memory of itself as past" (p. 3).

These "memories of the future", as one might call them, disseminated by dystopian science fiction and dystopian science fact, from alien invaders turned geologist of the future, reading back the traces of humanity to itself long after humanity has disappeared, in a time-loop narrative that we all know through science fiction speculation about various "Terminator scenarios", only that, in reality it is not "our" machines that turn against us but our own desire for technologically driven progress, our "modernity", in other words. As the world is "haunted by *the spectre of what will have been*, as the present comes to constitute a trace of what once was in a future that is not yet" (p. 5), "the *future-retro-vision* of our times" that is becoming a dominant feature of our "cultural malaise" called "Anthropocene", is "a vision of the present that is haunted by the future memory of itself as past" (p. 5). This future-retro-vision feeds a kind of anticipated nostalgia (resembling the logic that Meat Loaf famously sang about, namely that objects in the rear-view mirror may appear closer than they are, which, in this case, paradoxically, includes the future, however, now without its radical unknowability): a vision in which "the present functions as the spectral past of a speculative future" (p. 6). The role of speculation is in fact here not about the future as such, but about an alternative present that only becomes visible with anticipated hindsight – a "traumatic" logic in which the worst will have happened

World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and my own *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2023) and many others, of course.

²⁹ Grech, *Spectrality and Survivance*, p. 2 (further references will be given in the text).

and the “cure” lies in intervening in the past as a kind of projected future to provoke an alternative present; basically, it is a form of “magic”.

Perversely, this future-retro-vision as the symptom of a bizarre “posthuman” desire to project ourselves into the future as absence, as the only form of continuation and hope of survival, is extremely suspicious, to say the least. It is an abdication of responsibility. It is, arguably, the end-point or extremity of a (self)destructive anthropocentrism – this is what I mean by the phrase “ghosting of the human”; this is what has to be resisted. This anthropocentrism, as Grech also argues, “is rooted in future-retrospective gestures that appear to *defamiliarise* the present, inviting us to confront the possibility of our own demise and the non-existence of the world as we know it, but that simultaneously also continue to reassert the *presence* of the human upon the earth in a way that undermines the possibility of thinking any true human absence” (p. 6). “True” absence, because of course, this is not an argument for climate change *denial*, but, on the contrary, for an *active* and unsentimental embracing of the finality – outside the humanist melancholia of the “already-dead” and the transhumanist phantasm of technological controllability or “immortality”. Instead, Grech follows Derrida and his notion of how to address the inevitably “spectral” structure of the present, which is never fully present (to itself), or its “non-contemporaneity with itself”,³⁰ and acknowledges that one would have to overturn the defeatism that might arise from a simple acceptance into an active acknowledgement. In other words, in order to “learn to live finally”³¹ one has to become aware that it is this spectral structure of the present as non-contemporaneous that allows for the “other” (human and nonhuman) to appear in the first place. Or, to put it differently, to acknowledge and assume that life is shared in a co-present co-habitation that should be cherished, however, with suitable humility and *respect*. Respect, in fact, says it all, because respect itself follows such a logic of future-retro-vision in that the prospect or the becoming-aware of intrinsic value produces a re-cognition, a re-vision, a seeing-anew in a different perspective on which the very logic of respect is founded.

It is more than doubtful whether people can be “shocked” into action as far as climate change is concerned. It is precisely the ambient catastrophism that entrenches the future-retro-vision inertia which lends itself to fatalism. Since the worst has in a way already happened (but the “in a way” is of course a giveaway for it hints at the ideas of an “experience without experience” that is all too comforting) let us discard the possibility of radical change from the start. Or, as Grech puts it:

this desire to create the conditions for change in the present and the future is often fundamentally undermined by the very logic of future-retro-vision that these discourses adopt. In many of its manifestations, the attempt to look back at the present from the position of an imagined future does not so much create the possibility for radical change as foreclose it. The speculative and specular device of future-retro-vision does not open our eyes to something outside of ourselves that we cannot see; instead, it holds up a mirror for us to continue to see ourselves in. The very act of future-retrospection through which the present is projected onto a supposedly unknown and unknowable future transforms this future into a reflection of the present, a reflection that serves to assert and affirm the significance and centrality of human presence upon the earth instead of radically challenging it. Rather than opening up the possibility of a *different* future, this gaze reflects the present *back at itself*, reproducing and replicating it in this very reflection. Such a specular and circular logic co-opts both our understanding of the present and our visions for the future, restricting our ability to view the world differently and ensuring that the same anthropocentric values and assumptions that

³⁰ Cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³¹ Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007).

structure the present will be projected into the futures that we create. In the place of change, this logic offers stasis, in the place of difference, the repetition of the self-same. (pp. 9-10)

What future-retro-visions very simply and starkly forget or repress, in fact, is that with the obliteration of the present, even projected onto the future, the past also disappears. There is simply nowhere to go back to because every past is irrevocably lost, cannot be relived, just like the future is, strictly speaking, always unknowable, unanticipatable. That does not mean that we cannot “know” anything about the future (or past), of course, but, and this is by no means news, without a present (even though it may always somehow escape us in its no-contemporaneous hauntology) there is neither past nor future to be experienced. The idea that the human would somehow survive as “trace” or as spectral absence into an unknown post-apocalyptic (post-Anthropocene?) future and be in the position to look back at itself – whether approvingly or disapprovingly – is, in one word, simply too reassuring. The alien geologist retro-actively condemning or indeed regretting the disappearance or extinction of the human, in short, acts as an ideologeme in the current climate that threatens to undermine the kind of radical rethink that would be required *in the present*. It would be the continuation of what one might call a very humanist form of consolation and self-indulgence: look, the human, “he” wasn’t so bad after all. There were errors of judgment but there were excellent moments of grandeur as well, similar to the assessment of all the “great and fallen civilisations”. In times of anticipated apocalypse, one wonders whether there actually is any point in speculating, whether one would not better have recourse to theories and politics “without” speculation, because: “underneath the surface, these gestures of future-retro-vision and the worlds they evoke remain mere reflections of the present—specular devices that reproduce rather than fundamentally challenge the frameworks and assumptions that underpin our present world” (p. 13).

So, while the Anthropocene at first appeared to be able to carry the promise of a non-anthropocentric vision of the world, a change of heart in the face of anthropogenic climate change, its usefulness in terms of environmental politics has quickly been used up and given way to the disenchantment of the “too late too little” reality:

the Anthropocene seemed to promise a new way of thinking that could generate ‘viewpoints, framings or intuitions of an inhuman look,’ or even refuse ‘the inscription of “the” human altogether’. This geological concept promised to defamiliarise the present, inviting us to view the earth through ‘another eye entirely’. But the logic of future-retrospectivity that structures this geological paradigm undermines any such possibility. While it might appear to invite ‘a proleptic memorial of ecocide from a back-glance that is not anthropoid at all’, in its conceptualisation of the traces of human activity on the earth as being geologically and stratigraphically readable, the notion of the Anthropocene betrays the possibility of any such ‘ex-anthropocentric perspective’, reinstating the figure of the human right at the moment that it appears to cast it aside. (13-14)

Only if we manage to realise that extinction is the most likely and, above all, irreversible scenario not only for humans but also nonhuman species, only if we understand that our survival as the only of several human species was not an inevitable outcome of evolution, can we begin to have a more “normal” relationship with the world and our others, one might argue.³² So, “[w]hile the notion of the Anthropocene might at first appear to offer the possibility of a radically different engagement with the earth, opening up inhuman vistas that disrupt and fragment human frames of reference and systems of thought, in its reliance on the logic of future-retro-vision, this geological and cultural paradigm continues to be structured by an anthropocentric framework that transforms any thought of the future into an anthropomorphic projection of the present” (p. 15). There just is no consolation in the fact that

³² See my *Before Humanity*, *op cit.*

human traces will remain (in the form of “pollution” or radioactivity or atmospheric changes) for a long time after our disappearance. There is no satisfaction in the fact that it is “human” power that has changed the planet forever because the planet does not “care”; and to think it would “miss” us is part of the unhelpful future-retro-vision complex.³³ Both “logics” of anthropocentrism – that of a perverse kind of survival through future-retro-vision and the idea of an irreversible “inscription” of the human into the geology of the planet, as Grech argues, need to be resisted:

The anthropocentric logic that structures the notion of the Anthropocene manifests itself in two interrelated ways: firstly, through the positing of an anthropomorphic gaze that projects itself into the future in order to look back upon the present as past, and, secondly, through the assumption that certain geological markings in the strata of the earth will survive into the future as spectral traces of the human immortalised in the rock, continuing to bear witness to the significance of the human even in the face of its own absence. (pp. 22-23)

Instead, thinking seriously about the human and its survival in the form of a human/nonhuman/planetary co-existence has to address the narcissism that the conceptuality of the Anthropocene (but not its reference) entails. Or, as Grech puts it: “[in] our contemporary cultural imaginary, the concept of the Anthropocene functions primarily as a mirror: it is a specular device that reproduces the image of the ‘human’, allowing us to contemplate our continued presence and survival upon this earth” (p. 35). It is ultimately about preservation, a look from an anticipated post-anthropocenic future that still reassuringly implies a readable continuity. No wonder it is so difficult to make any fundamental changes even in the face of the starkest apocalyptic scenarios of extinction and climate catastrophe, because ultimately our narcissism protects us against the worst, the nothingness of death, both at an individual and at a species level. At least, and this is what serves as the ultimate consolation, the planetary “archive” of the human will remain intact and in place for millennia to come so that we can be sure to survive ourselves. However, this happens at the expense of any real change and any realistic future.

Meanwhile, evasive action is being taken in a number of forms. Catastrophism and nihilism, withdrawal and denial, or hyperactivity and (techno)solutionism (e.g. “geoengineering”) – all designed to extend more or less the status quo, with the perverse effect to “spectralise” the actual present in which change would have to occur: “[i]n anthropocenic conceptualisations of the present as a future remnant of what once was, the current world functions as a spectral trace of itself – it constitutes an already-past, a fixed and indelible mark of something that survives in its own absence” (p. 45). In doing so we play into the hands of “stasis”, because “[i]f the present is viewed or made to function as an already-past, then it becomes fixed, unchangeable and frozen in time” (p. 45). The Anthropocene, in this sense, becomes what Grech calls, essentially an “echo-chamber”, or, in other words, a self-fulfilling prophecy. To get out of this catch-22 situation one needs to think the spectrality of the human and its (self)presence otherwise, namely in posthumanist and postanthropocentric terms, as “entangled” or “embedded” in “material worlds and biological realities that we so often separate ourselves from” (p. 56).

Anthropocene Future Trauma, or, Ghosting the (Human) Future

³³ Cf. Weisman, *The World Without Us*.

It is only through the failure of our thought and imagination, or, at least, through a recognition of this failure, that we can perhaps begin to glimpse the possibility of a world and a future that do not and cannot be made to belong to the human.³⁴

What Grech is moving beyond or at least away from, as critical posthumanism has been attempting to do more generally, is the “postmodern” version of (post)apocalypticism of the “future anterior”, in the sense of moving “this will have been the end (of modernity, the human, the world...)” and speculating on how to survive that,³⁵ towards the now much more literal, concrete and definitive end, or what one might call the “posthuman” future (im)perfect, namely that of the Anthropocene and irreversible climate change, emblematically captured in the alien geologist of the future’s view of “looking back on the end of the world” – this time, however it’s “for real”, i.e. *without* survival.³⁶ This is no longer the Cold War consciousness, playing with the imaginary anticipation of nuclear extinction held in check by mutual deterrence; it is a “future trauma” that is no longer a symptom of some return of the repressed but a future in which no repression and no return will be able to occur. What has changed here, in other words, is the temporality of the unconscious; once the repressed is no longer capable of returning to the present, Slavoj Žižek’s explanation of (the Lacanian notion of) trauma no longer really applies:

The Lacanian answer to the question: From where does the repressed return? is therefore, paradoxically: From the future. Symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively – the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning. As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier’s network. Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way.³⁷

The very specific future trauma that irreversible climate change and extinction produces, and the massive repression it causes at the individual, social, political and species-biological level, however, can no longer function according to this recuperative logic. Nevertheless, it explains perfectly why the required action to at least mitigate the effects of climate change, and thus to defer the inevitable extinction event, is not happening. In a sense, this time it is the necessary evasive action that is repressed, not the extinction scenario, which, on the contrary, is almost fetishistically indulged in ever more sophisticated and graphic science fiction scenarios and other speculative outlets. This time the future trauma really *is* in the future and cannot be lived “backwards” and thus controlled, so to speak. This time “we” cannot intervene in the past to change what caused this particular and possibly final future trauma, i.e. we cannot return to the climate traumatic event (whether it be the invention of agriculture, industrialisation, nuclear radiation, micro- or forever plastic or other anthropogenic factors and their associated “tipping points”) and take any comfort from the fact that it is only through human intervention that “the scene from the past *become[s] what it always was*: [the human’s] intervention was from the beginning comprised, included”.³⁸ Forgetting (or ignoring, repressing) here

³⁴ Marija Grech, “Where ‘nothing ever was’: anthropomorphic spectrality and the (im)possibility of the post-anthropocene”, *New Formations* 95 (2018): 22-36 [26-27].

³⁵ See Andrew J. McKenna, “Postmodernism: It’s Future Perfect”, in Hugh J. Silverman and Donn Welton, eds., *Postmodernism and Continental Philosophy* (New York: SUNY, 1988), pp. 228-242.

³⁶ Cf. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf, eds., *Looking Back on the End of the World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 55-56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57-58.

concerns the fact that the human and its transformative acts in this particular case cannot be remedied, and it is indeed this disavowal that explains the continued and indeed intensified repression of the inevitability of the future “traumatic” event. But in fact, since the trauma is irrecoverable and remains radically futural but “imminent” in its inevitability, there is no hope of a “working through”. It is thus in fact questionable whether we are still dealing with a trauma at all, at least in the psychoanalytic sense.

And this time, speculation does not really help, or, in fact, only contributes to aggravation of the growing spectrality (of the future, the human, the world, survival etc.). However where should some kind of consolation, acceptance and maybe also the necessary “realism” to face and somehow attenuate this situation come from? Grech puts her money on a kind of “introspective” and “enabling (anthropomorphic) spectrality”:

But if the human is indeed caught within this spectral and speculative vision, if, as Anders suggests, the human is unable to think and perceive a world beyond its own boundaries and its own finitude – to imagine a world of human nothingness in which the possibility of any past and any future ceases to exist – then perhaps the anthropomorphic should not be thought of as a naive failure of human imagination, but as the condition and possibility of thought itself. If the human can only exist within the spectrality of its own world, then it is perhaps only through this spectrality that it can recognise the (im)possibility of that which remains outside its field of vision.³⁹

The very specific challenge that the anthropocenic future trauma poses lies in rejecting what I’ve called the ghosting of the human, or, as Grech puts it: “Our failure to truly think such an afterness is what *must* be thought, because it is only by acknowledging the (im)possibility of a world without us that we will ever be able to create a world that does indeed *function* without us: a post-anthropocene world that is no longer anthropogenically shaped, but that we can continue to inhabit nevertheless”.⁴⁰

It is therefore more important to address, maybe not the future trauma as such, but rather the various “posthuman desires” that emerge out of the ghosting scenario of a world without us and to remember that we are not in this alone. What are these “posthuman” desires? There is first of all the transhumanist techno-euphorian fantasy that ranges from pharmacological enhancement, mind uploading, to immortality, geo-engineering and the colonisation of exo-planets, and the desire to combat climate change by taking control of the planet’s atmosphere. In other words, a kind of techno-solutionism of the hypermodern kind, to overcome both our disavowed “animality”, our “biodegradability” and our reliance on a (now increasingly “hostile”) biosphere. However, there is also the other, maybe diametrically opposed, phantasm or desire of becoming “posthuman”, namely the desire that informs all those claims that “we have never been human” or that “we have (in a sense) always (somehow) been posthuman”. While it is certainly true that being human in a humanist sense is never what “we” actually were nor ever should be – the kind of self-celebratory and self-centred being that claims an exceptional status on the basis of its “unique” abilities – it is equally questionable to “write ourselves out of the picture” by abdicating the special responsibility humans have acquired, not as a result of their superiority but, precisely, because of their co-animality, i.e. their ecological responsibility, which Dominique Lestel calls humans’ “infinite debt”.⁴¹

³⁹ Grech, “Where ‘nothing ever was’”, p. 34.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴¹ See Dominique Lestel, “Like the Fingers of the Hand: Thinking the Human in the Texture of Animality”, in Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus, eds., *French Thinking about Animals* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), pp. 61-73. As Lestel explains. “This human debt towards the animal [or nonhuman life in general] is infinite because it is immersed in the immemorial human past, because it extends to the furthest

It is a transformation that involves becoming human “otherwise”, more aware of the fact that becoming is always a “becoming-with”, hopefully leading to what Timothy Morton calls “humankind” or “humankindness”, based on solidarity with the nonhuman.⁴²

And this is where the argument against “ghosting the human” comes full circle, since, as Morton proposes: “*Spectrality is [in fact, also] nonhumans, including the ‘nonhuman’ aspects of ourselves*”.⁴³ Ghosting the human – imagining a world without us by looking back at “humanity” from an anticipated extinction horizon – is ultimately about repressing our responsibility for the survival, and is also the disavowal, of the nonhuman animal other “haunting” us. Becoming-with, or *symbiosis*, is really what calls for ecological responsibility: “To encounter an ecological entity is to be *haunted*. Something is already here, before I think”.⁴⁴ So, while the human is always already haunted (by its nonhuman others) it is absolutely vital not to ghost “it” (the human) in return, before it can actually be haunted, because “to feel solidarity is to feel haunted”.⁴⁵ We cannot, we must not, deny this solidarity and shirk our responsibility by developing strategies of self-extraction by (self-)ghosting. The ghosts that haunt “us” do so precisely because they are not “us”, and they can only continue to haunt us because we are *not dead yet*. Some would call this hope, others would see it more as our ultimate task. We have to bring “this” to a decent end in the hope that the ghosts of the future will actually get a chance to continue to haunt our present on this “damaged” but nevertheless still quite beautiful, and more importantly, only planet.⁴⁶ Or, to conclude, with Anna Tsing’s moving words:

Ghosts remind us that we live in an impossible present – a time of rupture, a world haunted with the threat of extinction... Ghosts, too, are weeds that whisper tales of the many pasts and yet-to-comes that surround us. Considered through ghosts and weeds, worlds have ended many times before. Endings come with the death of a leaf, the death of a city, the death of a friendship, the death of small promises and small stories. The landscapes grown from such endings are our disaster as well as our weedy hope.⁴⁷

human future, and because it has a depth that is impossible to reach. (...) it is largely through this debt that I constitute myself as human. It also represents an important spiritual and existential vulnerability: I am only human to the extent that I am the host of the animality that dwells within me” (pp. 67-68).

⁴² Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁶ See Frédéric Neyrat, “Ghosts of Extinction: an Essay in Spectral Ecopolitics”, *Oxford Literary Review* 41.1 (2019): 88-106.

⁴⁷ Anna Tsing et al., eds, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).