



## TERRA INCOGNITA CRITICAL NOTES ON THE ANTHROPOCENE

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of the Anthropocene, originally proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, denotes the human-dominated geological epoch that follows the earlier Holocene. This article critically investigates productive potentials, ambiguities, and implications of this concept. It starts with the recent past postmodernist notions as a contrasting background and relates the idea of a pending disaster to the scalar differences between earth systems and human literary and artistic practices. Poiesis is the key concept discussed and explained throughout the article. This proposed concept is based on Marx's idea of the deployment of productive powers (natural or human) as an end in itself. The discussions encompass arts and literature as well as ontological and ethical issues. The main conclusion, presented in the last section, connects the critique of the concept of Anthropocene to the urgency of a collective project based on what I call the principle of sharing.

Keywords: Anthropocene; Arts; Cruelty; Love; Marx.

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## INTRODUCTION

Earth, humans, and time form an intricate web of relations, irrevocably interconnected and irreversibly impacted by each twist in any segment of that web. A short lapse of time can advance a long-lasting event, and the fumes from millions of chimneys asphyxiate the skies. The Anthropocene tries to comprehend the scale of the human-altered Earth. This grand scale seems—at a first glance—to surpass the limits of human agency. In the wake of the impending signs of an unfathomable deadlock and a scale of change that surpasses our cognitive capacity, the discussion on the concept of Anthropocene has transcended the boundaries between humanities and hard sciences. Novel trends, such as new materialism (Bennet 2010, Kirby 2011) or non-human turn (Grusin 2015), or works by thinkers, such as Donna Haraway (2016) and Bruno Latour (2017), are a few recent examples, signifying a turn—that in a way deepens a critical approach to modernity’s human-centered epistemologies—in contemporary intellectual debates. The proliferation of the term “Anthropocene” outside earth sciences, in arts and philosophy, raises new questions about the conceptual capacity of the Anthropocene, and the capacity of arts and theory to engage with it in a productive way. Is the Anthropocene a concept that we can think with—competing with historical markers such as capitalism and a Marxian critique of capitalism—or does its scale and signification mainly urge us to re-imagine our vantage point? The distinction between these two facets of the Anthropocene becomes one central thread in this essay. At the same time, the distinction also implies a certain antinomy between a new vantage point and a conceptual tool for thinking human conditions outside the earth sciences. Can this antinomy be surpassed, if its terms are more clearly posed as scale and conditions: the scale of the Anthropocene and the condition of human life on this planet? In the first section of this essay, I opt for a dialectical method. The exploration of the possibilities of a new vantage point offered by the Anthropocene is followed, at each step, by an exposition of ambiguities of this novelty as a concept. Both the scales of the Anthropocene and ambiguities of the concept are traced through literature and works of art. The second section of this essay engages with the possibility of a co-articulation of scale and conditions of human life. This co-articulation is argued to require a theoretical model that allows for the possibility of choice. Unsurprisingly, a choice at the same time implies an agency. The quest for a theoretical model that

explains both the choice as a moment and agency beyond an idealist conception of an autonomous self-consciousness, unravels the need for a review of ontological premises and ethical implications of the Anthropocene. These premises are singled out through a critical engagement with the mechano-sphere, a term coined by Deleuze and Guattari (2013). The ethical implications are clarified by taking up the notion of cruelty. Both Marx's insight into the urgency of a different collective project for the future, and Lacan's elaborations on love play a crucial role for the conclusions drawn in this part. In the final subsection, I present arguments for a shift away from an ontologically determined approach to a view point located at the brink of a disjunctive conjunction of the scale of Anthropocene and the conditions of collective organization of human life.

## 1. SCALE AND CONDITIONS

### *a) A Recent Past*

To better understand the challenges posed by the concept of Anthropocene in the humanities, we may take a step back and recall the direction taken by the intellectual discourse of the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nearly 50 years ago, Jean-François Lyotard famously declared the end of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1979). While Lyotard confined his arguments to academic sciences and their legitimacy crisis, one of his main references, using the term "postmodern", was a work of literary criticism by Ihab Hassan (1971). Hassan advocated a theoretical approach that surpasses the grand narratives of modernity, particularly Marxism and psychoanalysis. A framework was, thus, established for studies of styles and structure of literary and artistic works. Paul Auster's trilogy has been considered the postmodern work of the time. Robert Venturi's manifesto, *Learning from Las Vegas* 1997, was the starting point for what later became a distinct postmodernist school of architecture. In North American comparative literature and literary criticism, the declaration of the end of high modernist art and literature (Mallarmé, Joyce, Duchamp, Mondrian, Barnett Newman) was followed by deconstruction as an analytical method and the primacy of textuality as an autonomous domain. This development eventually gave rise to a constructivist approach to art and literature, characterized by intertextuality, representation theories, and historicism defining the dynamic of a work of art.

Nonetheless, a foreboding disaster overshadowed this joyous destruction of grand narratives. By the 1990s, the constructivist, textual, post-modern programs had found their proper subjective position *hors-texte*; it was

cynical rationality barely dissimulated under a thin veneer of irony, best analyzed by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (1988).

On a historical account, the new cluster of theories, sciences of the earth system, and philosophy all constitute a rejection of the postmodern repudiation of grand narratives. If the declared end of the modernist narrative was the hallmark of postmodernism, in the Anthropocene, that triumphant gesture has been replaced by the anticipated end times of human and non-human life form. If postmodernism can be argued to be a continuation of high modernity with a romantic twist, tendencies gathered around the concept of Anthropocene carve into another facet of the same romanticism, away from aphorisms and fragments, and back to the vistas of a new sublime, which is, as I argue, both questionable and productive. It is as if inflated constructivist approaches, an imaginary at work both in theory and in art works, were supposed to heat up the reality and make it more exciting than it could be, like in a Hollywood movie. Anthropocene, at least seemingly, signals the return of the real with a vengeance against the imaginary artifacts of a post-Modernist universe.

The term Anthropocene, originally proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, denotes the human-dominated geological epoch that follows the earlier Holocene, a stable period during which the human species thrived for 11,000 years. In a separate short article, Cruzan (2002) dates the onset of the Anthropocene to the invention of the steam engine around the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The Anthropocene Working Group (at the International Union of Geological Sciences) has been debating whether the onset of the Anthropocene should not be dated much later than Crutzen's initial proposal around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Others date it as far back as the beginning of sedentary civilizations (Ruddiman 2003). These diverse opinions seem, however, to converge at one point, which is the irreversible alteration of the stratigraphic, geological, and ecological systems on Earth by human activities.

In Crutzen's early article, this human-altered new epoch is depicted in terms of excessive release of toxic substances, unprecedented levels of greenhouse gas emission, and climate change— all of which are unfavorable for human survival and are detrimental to the life on the planet. The concept of Anthropocene is, thus, not only a classificatory layer in the geological history of Earth; it denotes an irreversible shift away from climatic and geological stability during the preceding period, Holocene. More critically, it involves the survival of humanity. In Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz's words, Anthropocene sums up a crucial insight: "The traces of our urban, industrial, consumerist, chemical and nuclear age will remain for

thousands or even millions of years in the geological archives of the planet” (2016, 48). Donna Haraway resumes what Anthropocene connotes as “times of urgency” and connects this sense of urgency to the “great mass of death and extinction, of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself” (Haraway 2016, 35).

### ***b) The Scale, Self-referentiality and Human Agency***

If human activities present a rupture in the geological history of the Earth and if most of these activities have already consumed finite resources of the planet, how, then, can this irreversible rupture fit into the scale of human-centered imagination? This question sums up a good deal of the anxiety and urgencies perceived in contemporary debates, and it requires, therefore, to be analyzed in its constituent components. In modern literature, the novel as a form depends on the narrator depicting the inner lives of human beings as the center of gravity of the novel’s *diegesis* (Aristotle’s term in *Poetics*). Likewise, the mimetic pretensions of a photograph are defined and determined by the physiology of human vision. Our narrative capacity seems to rely on the representational material, which reaches an altitude far below the planetary scale of Anthropocene. Should we then imagine a post-human point of view as a vantage point for theorizing this scalar difference? We will examine this discrepancy in scale and propose an alternative answer to this question in the rest of this article. The question also touches upon the self-referentiality present in the critique of human alteration of nature. Our insights into the Anthropocene have been mainly obtained by means and instruments provided by industrial and technological development in the last 100 years. The references used are themselves part of what the term Anthropocene comprises.

At the same time, the awareness of the difference in scale and self-referentiality mark a historical shift away from the naive rationalism of the enlightenment (Latour 2014, Chakrabarty 2012). It has put humans at the center in a quest for the concordance of being, beauty, and intelligence, a concordance promised by metaphysical and theological doctrines of being as abstract, pure being. Today, the concept of Anthropocene enables us to question the ontological separation between human subjects and nature. Humans, as the active agent versus a passive nature, was the key moment of a modern conception that justified the cruel exploitation of both human and non-human nature. The contemporary quest for a repositioning of human presence on the planet seems also to be one of the reasons for the recent

renewed interest in natural romanticism and works by authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau.

Yet, do we find a conceptual recognition of an Anthropocene insight in natural romanticism? By writing “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” in 1836, Emerson established a romantic apprehension of an unfathomable correlation between what a fact may consist of and the human mind (2008). The result, as the statement declares, is a ubiquitous symbolism that saturates the universe with a pre-established meaning. This same romanticism, wandering out into pristine nature, finds in Henry David Thoreau’s words in *Walden* from 1854 an enchantment broader and more ambiguous than a signal for a return to nature. Thoreau is enchanted by “the music of a thousand tinkling rills and rivulets whose veins are filled with the blood of winter” (2004, 294), and simultaneously, this enchantment is extended to “the freight train rattling” running in the horizon (116).

One of the pitfalls when elaborating on the critical edge of the concept of Anthropocene is re-molding the past after the image of the present. There is a risk: We may project our contemporary insight back to earlier literature, imagining a future in the past, as if we wanted to compensate for the bleak prospect of a coming future. As Anahid Nersessian writes in “Two Gardens: An Experiment in Calamity Form” (2013), the key term at play is calamity, which may take different narrative and poetic forms. Reducing these forms and their connection to the things in their contemporary world to our present understanding is not only an anachronistic error, it is tantamount to reducing other experiences, other cultures, and above all, what is the unknown for them, their unknowns, to our own unknowns (320).

The flipside to this pertinent remark is how our awareness of the wounded, human-altered landscape of the Earth is not entirely new. However, our belated willingness to conceptualize the significance of a de-centered human agency for a viable planetary future seems to be a novelty.

### ***c) New Landscapes***

To illustrate this de-centered human agency, we should return to the heights of triumphant modernity. The exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs from a Man-Altered Landscape* in 1975 was a milestone in the contemporary history of art photography, both in its formal approach to its subject and thematic re-definition of landscape photography. Historically, the exhibition took place on a unique date. By the mid-1970s, late capitalism had already transformed the natural landscape in an unprecedented way, whereas visual arts shifted away from high modernism to a new, yet undefined landscape.

A nascent idea of the broader environmental implications of rapid global transformations of the planet was in place. The exhibition displayed seminal works by several influential artists, such as Stephen Shore, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Robert Adams.



Mobile Homes, Robert Adams, 1973

In contrast to traditional nature landscapes, these photographs portrayed industrialized landscapes, new urban steel and concrete structures, abandoned theme parks, highways, and ruins of a recent industrial past. The German photographers Bechers' chosen subject was the European desolated industrial scenes, water towers, pumping devices, and other anonymous, human-made objects, which a Victorian, classic aesthetic would have classified as either "ugly" or anodyne. This was far from Ansel Adams' natural landscape photography. More importantly, the real revolutionary shift was the formal aspect of these photographs. As the exhibition curator William Jenkins wrote, "these photographs function with a minimum of inflection in the sense that the photographer's influence on the look of the subject is minimal" (Adams & Jenkins 1975, 12). Extreme objectivity produced a Brechtian estrangement effect, through which the viewer became aware of the extent of more than two centuries of industrial capitalist exploitation of natural landscapes. Therein also lies the impact of the minimalist aesthetic represented in these photographs. Their confrontational objectivity tries to neither beautify nor bring in moral conclusions; it merely registers not only the anthropogenic devastation of landscape, but also a characteristic urge to

turn the gaze away from romantic depiction of nature toward social and technological impacts of a capitalist world. Additionally, there was a sense of surprise with regard to the history of the artistic discipline, as if the topographer set up his camera and, instead of tall mountains and rivers, found herself or himself confronted by an unfamiliar but human landscape. At a formal level, this new usage of large format photography was a breach of classic convention that reserved large format photos for charting natural landscapes and was indirectly an extension of topographical exploration of nature. Instead, the photographic gaze in the exhibition explored the human-engineered environment as a new topographical excursion.

Yet, there is a dialectical twist, which constitutes one of Anthropocene literature's productive features. A photographic apparatus is one of the most iconic products of industrialism. Both optical devices and chemistry involved in photography depend on technological changes that these photographs critically examine. The image produced by a photograph is also determined by formal conventions concerning the frame and rules of central perspective, the elements inherited from quattrocento painting. Moreover, in modern times, a photograph connotes a factual, analogical relation to reality and a representation of a lapse of time in an actually existing space. The term topographic in the exhibition, as a matter of fact, reminds us of the historical role played by photography in mapping indigenous land in North America for further colonial settlements. This hybrid visual apparatus is as much a part of the human-altered landscape as the subject depicted by the photographs exhibited.

Thus, at this point, we can discern a specific difference between art presented at the exhibition and the conditions of writing and practicing art under the Anthropocene. While the artworks showed an acute awareness of its complicity in the rise of Western capitalism and its reckless exploitation of the planet's resources, the formal structure of the works —from Bechers' vertical ruinous monuments to Robert Adams' suburban scenes of insulation— invoked the possibility of reflection from within a modern discourse. The art represented at the exhibition displayed the self-reflective capacity of modernity, the idea that modernity can harbor its own meta-narrative and develop its own tools to register, map, and modify the historical impacts and implications of capitalism's unfolding. Thus, there is on the one hand a certain continuity in approach between the estrangement effect produced in the exhibition and the critical edge implied by the concept of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene would not have been accessible as a vantage point without machines and instruments collecting and organizing data, satellite imagery, computational devices, and the academic and publicist apparatus



involved in the creation of literature and theoretical debates. On the other hand, the Anthropocene does also challenge modernity's self-reflective capacity, insofar as it denotes an outer limit of planetary changes beyond the mapping and representational devices. In other words, the self-reflective capacity of modern photography as exhibited in *A Man-Altered Landscape*—viewed from the perspective of the Anthropocene— has lost its initial social and historical agential capacity before an absolute disaster.

This latter point, brings forward a central issue connected to all discourse that imbricates an absolute end. The concept of Anthropocene tends to cover up the dialectical relation between two moments: a geological absolute limit that may be, as all facts suggest, devastating for human life and the possibility of articulatory, poetic practices that conceptualize and relativize this limit as a gap to be transcended. Poiesis is then primarily the anticipatory act of passing over the limit, now conceived as a threshold, and it is in this sense, that it enables a crossing through the deadlock that the circular self-referentiality embedded in the concept of Anthropocene produces. Art work becomes an external material reality, as if calamity already had taken place and we start anew. Poetry is written and read, as if disaster is a fact before the turn of the page. The persisting and productive powers of poiesis dismantle the very notion of disaster in which absolute devastation and frozen time coalesce. My reference point here is the recurrent dictum that poetry is impossible after the disaster (Auschwitz), an idea attributed wrongly to Adorno (Hofmann 2005). The inaccurate reception of Adorno's idea reveals, however, a fundamental function of poiesis, which by definition starts a new temporal sequence from the blank page as if everything else has already faded away. Poiesis can then be understood as a co-agential balancing act on the edge, where the earthly wound meets the formal structure of the artwork and reveals the unknown of the present.

On a historical account, the notion that in today's world, we are the first who have achieved insights into the consequences of the anthropogenic impact on the Earth system and carry with us an unbearable knowledge inaccessible to earlier generations is as a-historical as the notion of an absolute disaster. As Bonneuil and Fressoz point out "by obliterating the reflexivity of past societies it [the concept of Anthropocene] depoliticizes the long history of the Anthropocene" (2016, 207) In fact, numerous authors from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries did grasp the immense and potentially degrading effects caused by human activities since the rise of industrial capitalism. However, these thinkers were widely marginalized. We may find a new perspective by returning to one of them, Karl Marx, who wrote the following in 1864 in *Capital*:

Capitalist production, by collecting the population in great centers, and causing an ever-increasing preponderance of town population, on the one hand concentrates the historical motive power of society; on the other hand, it disturbs the circulation of matter between man and the soil ... (1996, 507)

This degradation of the human habitat to cramped cubicles in high rises under the pale sky of Dickensian cities (the calamitous social and psychological impact of this modern habitat has been depicted with brutal clarity in J. G. Ballard's novel *High Rise*) actualizes another problematic feature of the concept of the Anthropocene. The term *Anthropos* refers to human species as a homogeneous agent responsible for the onset of the Anthropocene. However, as Marx points out, the agency is not evenly distributed throughout the history of industrial capitalism and within human societies. None of the histories of capitalism, colonialism, the genocide of indigenous people in the Americas, or apartheid in South Africa or Palestine refers to a homogenous *Anthropos*, but to a struggle by a majority against a historically defined set of social relations. Capitalist social relations that capture, regiment, and fetter human productive powers do suspend what we qualified as the possibility of a poiesis. The production of surplus value as the principle of capitalism gravitates around an abstract, monetized world of commodities that is indifferent to the sensuous reality of human life. The pulsating heart of the system that violates the conditions of natural thriving is today the same as it was in Marx's analysis in *Capital*; commodity and its exchange value suppose a mysterious, fateful agent (capital) that is neither the ecosystem nor human natural productive powers. The generic usage implied by the term *Anthropos* in the Anthropocene elucidates as well as conflates the agency and destiny, calamity and ethics, and technocratic narrative and human conditions.

#### **d) Water and Earth**

Hence, we separate agency and calamitous impact of capitalism. This separation opens a space that ultimately is a space of a choice to be made. A recent work of art can further shed light on this point. The interaction of colonial power exercise, capitalism, and Earth is at the heart of a recent documentary, *The Pearl Button* (El Botón de Nácar), from 2015, by a veteran of documentary cinema, Patricio Guzman. Guzman, like the poet Raúl Zurita, filmmaker Raul Ruiz, and, at a certain distance, novelist Roberto Bolaño, belongs to the internationally praised generation of artists who experienced

the atrocities of the Pinochet regime after the coup against Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.<sup>2</sup>

*The Pearl Button* opens with Raúl Zurita, the Chilean poet's words: *Todos somos amigos de una sola agua. (We are all friends of the same water)*. Water is the life element, landscape maker, resting place, and calamitous flow that permeates three interwoven histories. In the first history, Guzman gazes at the stars far above, relating in words and images a scientific hypothesis about the extraterrestrial origin of water on Earth. Frozen water was brought to Earth by falling comets, melting and expanding into vast oceans to form the mountains and coastlines of Chile. This fateful bond between the Earth and water, between humanity and stars becomes then a thread woven into the story of one of the many vanishing indigenous people in Western Patagonia, Kawésqar people, "people who walked under water." A water-based collective human life once extended across several small islands, fiords, and streams. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ocean brought in colonial European settlers, who radically changed the landscape of Chile and developed an economy based on large ranches. Due to European colonial intervention and the destruction of the ecosystem, the population decreased from 3,000 to only 500 over a short period of 15 years. The same fate befell Dowson Island, one of the habitats of the original population. After Pinochet's coup in 1973, Dowson Island was used as a prison camp for communist activists. One of the episodes in this colonial history, which lent the film its title, is about an indigenous little boy from the island who was traded for a pearl button, renamed Jemmy Button, and sent to England to become "civilized."

In the third narrative thread of the documentary, the fate of indigenous people reaches the shores of the contemporary political history of Chile. The film shows us a pearl button retrieved from the waters of the Chilean coast. It belonged to one of the many victims of the military coup; these people were arrested, tortured, and dumped in the ocean in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 coup. Guzman knit oceans, falling stars, the history of colonialism, and traumatic recent events in Chile's history together. Its visual poetry does not explicate these connections and the calamities associated with them, but shares an insight through the images. It shows that the story of Jemmy Button, enmeshed like a pearl in the drift nets of Anthropocene waters, belongs to all friends of the same water. It hints at a divide, which can be re-conceptualized as a possibility of choice, that will also decide the

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<sup>2</sup> Lesser known is that Roberto Bolaño happened to be in Chile at the time and was arrested after the coup.

fate of the Anthropocene. It is this possibility of choice that is the subject of the second section of this essay.

## 2. UNCHARTERED TERRITORY

I started by suggesting that the Anthropocene actually implies a new grand narrative that aims to grasp the contemporaneity of human conditions after the ostensibly unfettered exploitation of the human habitat. However, as the previous sections demonstrated, this effort is fraught with difficulties that obscure the terrestrial reality of confluence and divergences that run through human and natural productive powers. This reality, as I will show in this part is the reality of a choice.

The first step in order to approach the mentioned reality is to recognize this uncharted reality, when it compels us to co-articulate the conditions of our collective existence as sentient beings in both ecological and political terms. One obvious obstacle before such a co-articulation can be found in the implicit ontological premises underlying discussions on the specificity of human collective existence. Among the efforts to revise these premises, one prevalent and powerful theoretical model can be found in the works of Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>3</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, the sentient layer is conceived as a part of an assemblage, or a *mechanosphere*, that envelops both the geosphere and biosphere. The mechanosphere signifies “the set of all abstract machines and machinic assemblages outside the strata, on the strata, or between strata” (2013, 71). The theoretical model proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, specifically Guattari’s notion of machines, opened up the possibility of thinking the confluence and interaction of human and natural forces. This theoretical model suggests an expressive continuity within one and unique abstract assemblage. This expressive continuity, however folded and layered it may be, still presupposes a univocal substance. This univocity can be traced back to Spinoza who, in *Ethics*, book I, realized the axiomatic character of this univocity and consequently began his geometrical exposé with the oneness of substance (Spinoza 2018). The problem is that the emergence of undecided, ambivalent states within ecosystem, produces irreconcilable gaps between different trajectories. The emergence of collective sentience is one instance of such a state. If we reduce the copresence of options, and the notion of choice that ensues, to merely subjective perceptions, or to the mental representations of some external reality, then we would have

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<sup>3</sup> By the expression “Deleuze and Guattari”, we signal a certain difference between the works of each one of the authors and their joint projects in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

preserved the univocality of being at the price of assuming a crude dualism of mind-body at the same time. The argument would be that it is some subjective faculty (mind, will or whatever it may be called) that perceives some external determinism as a possibility of choice. The other option would be that we reduce the rupture presented by emergence to a folding of the plane of immanent being upon itself. The coarticulation of politics and ecosystem will hardly find a viable possibility in either dualism or layering models. The main difficulty in a theory of a layered ontology, of the type proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, is that the world is then assumed to be a compact totality, with relaying layers, called being, whereas any connection between an emergence and copresence of divergent options requires a certain form of void inscribed in the world beneath or beyond the concept of the oneness of being.

One may therefore envisage a different account that does away with an ontological defense of oneness and steps out of the abstract opposition of being and non-being. If a notion of human conditions cannot stop at a simple rejection of anthropocentrism, then a consequent critique starts from the fact that *Anthropos* is a fractured and fracturing event (on par with many other disruptive events in the world), which in turn establishes the difference between anterior and posterior sequences and between different sites at different scales. We may therefore start from interactions and confluences of forces, their trajectories and divergences as well as their ensnared or fettered states of fragile stasis. In such a model, these interactions and confluences lead into disruptions, swerves in repetitive patterns or static systems. The emergence of collective sentience, as a natural event alongside other natural disruptions in the world, indicates a change of trajectory, a rift, a transversal line of flight. Hence, we shift the gravitational point in this account from the presupposed compactness of the world to an indeterminable instability produced through the interactions and confluences of moving forces. This starting point is by definition either less than any univocal substance or more than a self-identical being. The emergence of sentient human life on this planet is neither an essential differentiation, nor the outcome of a linear expressive continuity that supports a substantial identity of nature and its expressions. This emergence is the production of discontinuity in the world. The “strange cavity” in the structure of the world is then visible for the anticipating human producers at this moment of self-deployment, as if these productive forces operate at the brink of a cavity. Productive forces, natural or human, without any references to a univocal substance, are differentiated as long as they are expressed, materialized in divergences and swerves that constitute webs of space-time. The simple opposition between

being and becoming is replaced here with an a-ontological approach that starts from what I would call *the gradation of becoming*. The metaphysical pure being can then be a static moment within the interaction of forces. Throughout this paper, I emphasize the collective character of human sentience in order to distinguish the sense given to this term here from sentience defined as the capacity of signaling different perceptual and affective states. The collective existence of sentience implies primarily the capacity to create a structured field of intelligence (machines, discourses, representational regimes, etc.) which quite often cancels, dissimulate or disavow those perceptual or affective signals.

This account of interactions and confluences implies that relations are created by a play of forces and nodal points of encounter. This process, in which the new patterns of complex relations are formed, can be described by a term coined by anthropologist Lyn Margulis as “the intimacy of strangers” that create trans-genetic structures.<sup>4</sup> In my reading, the strange intimacy enables us to think outside the Euro-centric, capitalist conception of “individual self as a private entrepreneur” facing “the other”. We will later in section six give these series of intimate encounters a proper function and a name in our arguments. For now, it is more important to underline that this co-symbiotic intimacy brings about what from a sentient point of view can be identified as a “choice” in the sense of taking sides.

The relationship between a bacteria and skin around an open wound is an example of what is meant here by our non-subjective notion of choice. The skin bacterial activity may contribute to the healing process through a complex molecular interaction with blood and skin cells (Johnson et al 2018), but the interaction of forces may equally evolve the symbiotic system into something else, make bacteria or their molecular products enter through the open cut, and harm the host; thus, both skin and bacteria transform into another organic or inorganic reality. This existence of two possibilities in the form of a probable bifurcation of the process means firstly that the outcome of the unfolding of a set of interactions between diverse forces is not a linear continuity, but more importantly, it means that this same virtual bifurcation informs the unfolding of the whole process from the start. Subsequently, the moment of choice is defined by the sentient anticipation of this virtual bifurcation. This same process, can be viewed from the inside the process of interaction in our epidermic example. A multiplicity of initial relations starts off, these momentary or lasting relations (gradations of a becoming process) create in their wake divergent lines of flight, until the whole

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in D. Haraway 2016, 59-62.

process reaches a certain inflection point where two sets of options become an actuality. We can articulate the same process in terms of the earlier mentioned cavity in the world. The cavity, the open wound in our example, is the expression of the lack of compactness of the world, as the condition of all the development described above. It is clear that the notion of “choice” in this account is far from a “subjective idea” or a “mental representation” of reality. Choice contains at its center an anticipating of a future outcome via a present intervention. And yet, this interventional actuality already separates collective sentient forces from other forces. In this sequence, the immediate and relevant aspect is the ethical question that the possibility of a choice in a historically given configuration presents. This is not an ethics of the supreme good, but that of intervention, of poiesis. This is the ethics that pertains to the deployment of productive forces whose projected duration reaches out of the confines of the present and surpasses a given historical sequence. A co-articulation of politics and eco-system around the fracturing and fractured event of human collective existence becomes more approachable at this hinging point. Concretely, this means that the choice between healing a wound and widening an already opened wound relies on exercising human collective forces in a free and collective organization of society. Marx’s contribution, whose real significance has long been buried under the modernist conception of history and subjectivity as self-consciousness, was to conceptualize this decisive choice, a taking side with the societal sharing of productivity, that utterly defines the human, sentience, collective existence. A materialist and non-ontological conception of choice involves a decision between destruction and healing, a decision enveloping the necessary anticipation of eternity after the disaster, sanguine coup in Chile, or critical threshold of climate change.

The two different directions implied by the choice— one healing the wound and the other a catastrophic path towards annihilation— embraces the signifying reality of collective existence, fractures the collective existence into divergent historical forces. It is, then, not a surprise that these divergent directions can be named by terms most human: love and cruelty. These are not antonyms, because love is not the opposite of cruelty; they are two divergent lines.

### ***b) On Cruelty***

The brutish nature of cruelty is fundamentally different from violence. Violence, as Walter Benjamin once pointed out, requires justification and is above all “a means for either lawmaking or law-preserving” (Benjamin,

243). Cruelty, in contrast, is a sign of the absence of justification. It is portrayed as an inevitable implication of a theoretical, doctrinaire argument (Marquis de Sade in *Justine* is a clear example). It appears as an extension of violence beyond legal, emotional, or cultural limits of a given age, but its structural reality depends on a procedural joyless enjoyment found in the suffering of others. These procedures aim to reduce the other to the raw material for satiating a disavowed lack of force. As the essence of modern bureaucracy, arbitrariness of the cruel act exploits the fault lines of discourse and ultimately depends on the tautological kernel of any discursive formation; for example, Jews are evil because they are evil.

Cruelty is then disavowed powerlessness perverted and disguised in afflicted pain to others. In Marquis de Sade's phantasy, the victim was tormented in different imagined ways but was always intact at the end so that she could be tortured again. This reiterative pattern is also closely connected to a supra-carnal phantasy about the human body. Gilles Deleuze finds in Sacher Masoch's writings a corresponding logic, which is, however, more dialectical in its structure. In masochist phantasies, the agency is on the manifest victim's side, whereas the tormentor serves as an instrument (Deleuze 1991, 22-23). However, it is not this deceptive maneuver that matters for our purpose beyond the distinctions between Sade and Masoch, but the reiterative moment that in both cases is sustained and perpetuated and that does not know of any end. Nature can be treated in the cruelest manner possible and the perpetrator can still deny the consequences, be it climate change, extinction of species, or mutilated limbs. This reiterative logic — as distinguished from what I earlier called the anticipation of eternity— in the act of cruelty is upheld and framed by a spectacular armature. Montaigne noticed this spectacular dimension of cruelty earlier. Quoting Seneca, he saw the extreme point of cruelty in the enjoyment of watching the victim suffer: "Ut homo hominem non iratus, non timens, tantum spectaturus, occidat." [as a man kills another man, not out of anger or fear, but only to watch him die.] (1965, 133).

What is involved in this spectacular moment of Montaigne's perpetrator watching its victim suffering? The weakness, for which cruelty is a protective lie, reveals itself in this spectacular moment as a disavowed desire for a presupposed third party's presence. The judgment of this third party is sought. The presupposed commanding foreman, boss, general. The imagined satisfaction of this third party that watches and judges is the source of joyless enjoyment in the act of cruelty. The Nazi officer at the concentration camp perceived himself as a simple instrument, and not as an active agent,



servicing a thinly hidden enjoyment clad in the neutral brutality of bureaucratic language. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find a similar logic at work among children. It is astonishing how they can commit gruesome acts like mutilating a little lizard they find in the garden or harming another toddler in kindergarten. This cruelty may vanish eventually, but it would not be because the child would understand how to relate to the other as a fellow human being, or because s/he would become aware of the suffering of the other. This would happen because the child would realize that any third instance, rather absent than present, an Other, cannot contain or support the suffering afflicted to the body of another human being, for this Other is also helpless and desiring. Therefore, the child is ultimately the only responsible person for the act committed. This is what the Nazi officer and the bureaucratic machine that he was a part of repudiated.

Cruelty is, therefore, a limit that separates collective sentience from Deleuze and Guattari's *mechanosphere*, not on an ontological basis, but on an ethical ground that underpins what we called a choice. The point here is not that we are cruel towards nature and that is a condemnable behavior, but that fettering human productive forces, regimenting collective sentience, produces an effect that is cruelty and this effect propagates to the extent that it alienates these powers from other and equally natural forces. Otherwise, nature, including human nature, is indifferent to any notion of cruelty, even though a famine or a tempest or a disease outbreak are cruel events that may separate a child from his parents or let a pearl bottom sink in the ocean. Even though we are fully aware of the profound indifference of natural forces toward us, we do perceive it as a lack of sense on nature's side. Sentience starts with producing meaning whose main qualification is its separation from indifference— for better or worse. This separation may coincide with the possibility of a healing power that closes the wound on the surface of the skin, instead of letting carcinogen substances end up into the open waters. Cruelty is separated, localized, circumscribed and replaced by the presence of a choice. The historical dimension of the Anthropocene becomes decisive at this inflection point by the choice that takes us away from indifference.

By evoking the ethical and historical dimension of the Anthropocene, I do not, however, suggest a return to the modernist ideals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist ideology, which viewed humans as the masters of the universe, an ideal fueled by the exhaustion of the finite natural resources of our planet. Epistemologically, the discursive denial of the finite character of the planet's resources cloaked what we always knew; even the details of the eco-

system we inhabit are endlessly more complex than what our most advanced knowledge can yet grasp. Nevertheless, this same knowledge, the product of collective human powers on a scale inferior to the world, is an added element to the world. I am referring to knowing in a much broader sense than a collection of encyclopedic entries. Knowing is neither a mystical epiphany nor confined to the contemporary obsession with one set of codified information. Knowing is embedded in skills, collective movements of people, and creations of our imagination that these movements give rise to. Knowing is ultimately what, the earlier mentioned intimacy of strangers, or simply love, brings about in the collective human form of life.

If cruelty is all about the disavowal of the sores that we inflict upon the skin of this other, that is the reality of collective existence on earth, the natural collective ingenuity of human beings depends on knowing originating from the love of a gardener, mother, or lover. There could not exist any collective human life without the reality of love in an encounter, a strange intimacy. If I evoke love here, this is not in a romantic, banal sense. Since Plato's dialogue *Symposium*, love is the courage to step outside one's skin, stare at the ineffable void that extends before one's eye, and meet the other by becoming two in a relation that do not leave either part unaltered. In this sense, it is the condition of absorbing new data and learning through intimacy, distinguished from the exploitation of the other as a raw source of joyless enjoyment. There has never been a child who would know how to learn who they will become without attaching love and trust to another caring human being.

### ***c) The Act of Sharing***

This connection between love and knowing brings back what I have signaled as poiesis at the edge of a strange cavity. In love, we are at the rendezvous with what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called the real. The real is the inner limit, that is, the two-ness in intimacy of love. It is a certain limit, a relation of non-relation, which makes any closed ideological narrative to give way to something more than a well-ordered compilation of objects. That is where knowing starts. Love brings us to the brink of this impossible reality with each encounter.

Arts, theory, and literature spin their threads around a quest, retrieving and sharing objects of love we always knew were there at the depth of oceans or in the heart of falling comets. This retrieving and sharing, which could be the possibility of surviving through the capitalist degradation of life on the Earth, does not necessarily bring about a technocratic classificatory

system. It positions us at the limits of what natural history of humans can offer. Lacan's (1975) formula for love, assuming that love is giving that which one does not have to someone who does not want it, resumes it clearly, as the opposite of any transactional conception of the relation between subjects, and as a formula that defines the principle of sharing that supersedes the logic of exchange value. The point at which our poetic power reaches the enormosity of the scale of the Anthropocene resides in this infinitely small thing, a love encounter, which barely makes a perceptible difference in the pre-established epistemological order of things, but stirs up the pre-established order of the world and shifts the degree of sensuous presence of things in the world. The scalar difference between human conditions of thinking and imagining and the planetary impact of our collective powers are woven into the fabric of a simple encounter between the two, between one and another, which remains a disjunctive conjunction, a two-ness. In love, the disjunction is not negated, but preserved within a two-ness, and thus the notion of love always implies the possibility of a choice beyond the monolithic Oneness and insulated existence of well-ordered elements. This is the moment of choice that has no ground other than overreaching boundaries put forth by powerlessness that we identified as cruelty in social relations. The condition for healing the wound and reconciling with the agential capacity of collective sentience resides in love that nurtures sharing at its heart. This principle was defended by Karl Marx as a real alternative to the devastation of the Earth in class societies.

Whereas the discourse of the Anthropocene forebodes a calamitous closure of its own narrative structure, artistic practice or revolutionary struggle, both as instances of poiesis, can indicate an openness via rendezvous with the real and imagining landscapes that will be created after all possible disasters. The principle, which approaches poiesis and love, is that both embody an act of giving and a principle of sharing within concrete sensuous realities. Both demand little, but do not promise ready-made answers. Both are based on a choice that ultimately separates a disease from the cure.

Hence, I propose to undertake a certain distance from all too programmatic, idealist expectations from arts and theory to provide us with either calamitous narratives or moral answers to the aporia of the Anthropocene. Instead, the essential is to insist on the unbending power of poiesis and deployment of productive powers of humans as an end in itself (Marx 1998, 807). This means that the novelty of the vantage point that the Anthropocene implies, should be situated along the fault line that separates and rejoins the scale of Anthropocene and the conditions of human life. This fault line is above all historical in the sense of a possibility to envision the future.

Theodor Adorno (1997) wrote once: “Theories that argue that art has the responsibility of bringing order to the chaotic multiplicity of the appearing or of nature itself, suppress in idealistic fashion the telos of aesthetic spiritualization: to give the historical figures of the natural and repression of the natural their due” (93). In this article, we tried to argue beyond the historical figure of the natural and its subsequent repression, without letting the notion of nature fade away in an easy moral or “naturalist” reversal of terms. This reading is in line with what Adorno calls here spiritualization. By “aesthetic spiritualization,” Adorno understood the bare autonomy of artwork that is nonetheless a material and concrete critique of culture through artistic practices, and hence a dialectical overturn of the idealist notion of spirituality. The same dialectical movement is involved here. The impotence of arts and literature facing the Anthropocene, which we called the difference of scales at the beginning of this article, is its unique strength to raise before our eyes a reality which we all depend on, but fail to recognize: the uncharted terrain of a collective future for all.

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