

MAIN SECTION

The Image of the World in the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to show the sense and the limits of some of the contemporary critiques of the idea of the world. It will be structured as follows: in a first paragraph, we will show the conceptual structure of these critiques as they take shape in Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), especially in Timothy Morton's work, *Hyperobjects*. In a second, we will focus on the two main difficulties that such critical work encounters. In a third, finally, we will show the possibilities, aesthetic and political, of a revisited concept of world.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene; Object Oriented Ontology; Posthuman; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Aesthetics

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Since its appearance, the philosophical category of ‘world’ has been linked to an aesthetic dimension:¹ the world is what I perceive through my senses. Phenomenology, i.e. the twentieth-century philosophical current that aims to investigate the being of entities starting from their appearance, owes an important debt to Jakob von Uexküll, an Estonian biologist who, referring to Kant, tried to demonstrate that the world (*Umwelt*) is not what the subject receives passively, but what he actively constructs through the form of his own body.² This idea of the world as an intermediary between a dimension of activity and passivity, between a sensitive body that constructs its surroundings and at the same time inhabits them, is unquestionably at the heart of contemporary philosophy.

It seems, however, that the recent debate on the Anthropocene³ may mark the end of such a long and glorious history. There are some, in fact, who believe that the experience humans have in the Anthropocene can no longer be explained through this category. Space, time and the ensemble of objects in the Anthropocene would therefore no longer be a world. This entails an important series of transformations of the most central elements of the philosophical disciplines: ontology, aesthetics, politics. The aim of this essay is to show the sense and the limits of some of these contemporary critiques of the idea of the world. It will be structured as follows: in a first paragraph, we will show the conceptual structure of these critiques as they take shape in *Object Oriented Ontology* (OOO), especially in Timothy Morton’s work, *Hyperobjects*. In a second, we will focus on the two main difficulties that such critical work encounters. In a third, finally, we will show the possibilities, aesthetic and political, of a revisited concept of world.

Morton. The end of the world

The central thesis of Morton’s successful book, *Hyperobjects*, is that climate change on a planetary scale has made evident the idealistic vice of much of Western philosophy: conceiving reality on the basis of experience, thus structuring it as a world and not as a set of autonomous objects, irreducible to each other and to experience itself.⁴ According to Morton, “the world is an aesthetic effect based on a blurriness and aesthetic distance.”⁵ In other words, the world it is neither an object, such as the Earth or climate change, nor a space in which we move, but rather the effect of imagining that we live against a relatively calm and orderly background. It is a space of meaning that the perceiving subject creates when what

1 Marco Russo, *Il mondo. Profilo di un’idea*, (Milano: Mimesis, 2018).

2 Jakob Von Uexküll, *Theoretical Biology*, (New York: Nabu Press, 2011).

3 Paolo Missirotli, *Teoria critica dell’Antropocene. Vivere dopo la Terra, vivere nella Terra*, (Milano: Mimesis, 2022).

4 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology at the End of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 6-7.

5 *Ibid.*, 126.

is around is harmonized according to aesthetic criteria: for Morton, just listening to a melody that is not coherent with a scene in a film is enough to break the world that the vision, at first, had created.⁶

This conception of the world as a harmonious space, which Morton calls “hobbit aesthetics,”⁷ shatters in the Anthropocene. This is because, in this geological epoch, it is no longer possible to live in a nature conceived as a background to human action. On the contrary, in the Anthropocene we are constitutively in close contact with an infinite series of objects and hyperobjects that, far from constituting some form of order or horizon to inhabit, are rather what dis-order the existence of humanity as a species. Climate change, for example, is a hyperobject of which the various local ecological crises are merely particular manifestations: there is no longer stable soil, but an infinity of objects, hyperobjects and their concrete manifestations that imply that to speak of the world is to prevent ourselves from understanding our historical condition. There is a more radical reason why the category of world is now unserviceable and harmful, for Morton: not only is that stability characteristic of the Holocene now lacking, but also, and above all, technical-scientific progress that makes it possible to relate immediately, albeit only one at a time, to all the various objects/hyperobjects in the world. There is background, therefore world, only where there is a series of things that the subject cannot see, that remain latent and can never be made explicit:

“Worlds need horizons and horizons need backgrounds, which need foregrounds. When we can see everywhere (when I can use Google Earth to see the fish in my mom’s pond in her garden in London), the world—as a significant, bounded, horizoning entity—disappears. We have no world because the objects that functioned as invisible scenery have dissolved.”⁸

The blurriness and aesthetic distance we were talking about consists exactly in this: in the inability to see, at least potentially, all objects. The absence of the world, in the Anthropocene, derives precisely from the fact that, on the one hand, we now have the possibility of confronting all objects and that, on the other hand, they show us a condition that is anything but harmonious. Moreover, it is with the discovery of the hyperobject Anthropocene/Climate change that, in Morton’s opinion, we fall into a world in which there are only objects. With these objects, and this is the core of the ontological realism proposed by the American philosopher, we are immediately in contact; we simply see them, although not entirely and not all at the same time. We are in a relationship with them that Morton calls “intimacy”:

“What is left if we aren’t the world? Intimacy. We have lost the world but gained a soul—the entities that coexist with us obtrude on our

6 *Ibid.*, 105.

7 *Ibid.*, 104.

8 *Ibid.*, 104.

awareness with greater and greater urgency. Three cheers for the so-called end of the world, then, since this moment is the beginning of history, the end of the human dream that reality is significant for them alone. We now have the prospect of forging new alliances between humans and nonhumans alike, now that we have stepped out of the cocoon of world.”⁹

According to Morton, all this has crucial aesthetic/practical implications. In general, it is a question for him of escaping from any (falsely) harmonic dimension to embrace this network of humans and non-humans that we constantly encounter in our relationship with the world. The confrontation with this quasi-chaotic dimension is plastically manifested, in his opinion, in the music of Pierre Boulez, who in *Répons* evokes “the sound of a vaster word”¹⁰ which invades the realm that the artist has to deal with. For Morton, attention to the real means, essentially, looking at a chaoticness that is irreducible to the ordering gaze of the human; realism is every thought and every art form capable of relating to this absolute multiplicity. In his opinion, however, it is in architecture that the discoveries of OOO can be fruitfully applied. In contrast to the “hobbit aesthetics” of above, an architecture in the age of hyperobjects would no longer aim at beauty and harmony, i.e. it would no longer be an architecture in a world, but an architecture in contact with a set of toxic objects, which it would be able to collect and manage. Morton gives the example of the *Dusty Relief* designed in Bangkok in 2002 by the architectural firm R&Sie, an electrostatic building in Bangkok that would collect the dirt around it, rather than try to shuffle it somewhere else¹¹. These architectural forms take their meaning, then, from manifesting our intimacy with certain objects and our abandonment, to stay with the Tolkenian metaphor, of the Holocene Shire.

Rediscovering mediation

This perspective, fascinating as it is, seems to present essentially two kinds of problems. Firstly, one wonders whether this position that there are only absolutely unique objects, “sparkling unicities; quantized units that are irreducible to their parts or to some larger whole,”¹² does not bring OOO too close to a classical form of empiricism, whereby reality is composed of irreducible parts to which we have immediate access. In fact, it is by no means certain that what is revealed to us in the Anthropocene is a set of objects that manifest themselves to us in all evidence. Planet Earth itself, for example, is increasingly revealing itself as a homeostatic system

9 *Ibid.*, 108.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, 110.

12 *Ibid.*, 120.

regulated by retroactive processes.¹³ The infinite complexity that characterizes our planet means that any mechanistic model cannot explain any of the most significant processes taking place on our planet.¹⁴ The Earth is “a unitary reverberating system, consisting of feedback loops and tipping points that we cannot predict, as well as thresholds that we cross at our peril.”¹⁵ The planet we live on does not appear to be a collection of objects all clearly available to our view, but something very similar to an unlit horizon, a space pervaded by obscurity¹⁶. On the other hand, it is curious that in rejecting this concept of the world Morton almost forgets one of the most interesting ontological theses, in our opinion, of his work. It is reported in this way by Morton himself: “there is an essence, and it’s right here, in the object resplendent with its sensual qualities yet withdrawn.”¹⁷ Of course, in this passage Morton reiterates the sparkling uniqueness of individual objects. Yet he notes a movement of continuous retraction, of indefinite elusiveness, of these objects themselves. Is it not precisely by virtue of this partial visibility that there is a world? In other words: is not the world as horizon, as the atmosphere of a life, precisely this sagittal of negatives? According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the world, and more generally Nature, is precisely what emerges for us insofar as there is an irreducible margin of invisibility in our experience: “nature is an enigmatic object, an object that is not an object at all; it is not really set out in front of us. It is our soil -not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather. that which carries us.”¹⁸ We are in a world as a space of sense because of the fact that the ground on which we walk is always, in part, negative and invisible. We cannot but look at it from a certain point of view, to make ‘cuts’ (symbolic, imaginative, and technical) of reality itself. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he argues that we are «condemned to sense.”¹⁹ Every human being is in a world that has its own sense, which he receives passively, but at the same time produces by turning in one direction rather than another. This does not result, of course, from a supposed, original, separation from reality: Morton is undoubtedly right about this. We have always been in contact with a reality that is in front of us. What Morton fails to emphasize fully, however, is that we do not see everything that is in front of us, because reality is too complex, too deep, too ‘layered’ to be available to us. The world is, for us, our perspective on that reality.

13 Marten Scheffer, Victor Brovkin, and Peter M Cox, “Positive Feedback between Global Warming and Atmospheric CO2 Concentration Inferred from Past Climate Change,” *Geophysical Research Letters* 33, no. 10 (2006).

14 Julia Adeney Thomas, Mark William and Jan Zalaziewicz, *The Anthropocene. A Multidisciplinary Approach* (New York: Polity Press, 2018), 27.

15 *Ibid.*, 3.

16 Frédéric Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth. An Ecology of Separation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

17 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 159.

18 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 4.

19 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon-on-Tames: Routledge, 2010), 29.

It is a cut through that level of adversity²⁰ with which we are in contact. Secondly, removing the margin of negativity of reality in this way has an extremely dangerous political feedback. Claiming that there is an immediate contact between the subject and the totality of objects risks deluding us into thinking that, in order to elaborate a genuinely transformative political position, it is enough to look at an entirely clear and illuminated world that shows us a path without shadows. This is, after all, a form of scientism not dissimilar to that which Merleau-Ponty criticised in *The Adventures of Dialectics*: if one perceives reality as inert and without shadows, one is condemned to a kind of blind determinism.²¹ In other words, it is believed that in order to make ethical and political choices it is sufficient to look at objects from time to time, ignoring that very obscurity, that excess of the space in which we are, which in fact means that, from time to time, we can only operate in the realm of the probable. In this way, all space for critique, understood as an evaluation of the contradictory nature of the real and an attempt to bring out from it elements capable of transforming that real, is removed: for Morton, it is simply a matter of noting what objects are or are not in the world and acting as they dictate to us. This theme of obscurity cannot be overestimated. It is by virtue of this that every determinist policy is in effect overturned into absolute voluntarism²². Since reality is not at all the objective thing that Morton seems, at times, to expect, any action that purports to be inspired by it is in fact a completely arbitrary cut in that real plane. On the contrary, true action, as well as aesthetic choice (e.g. Cézanne's painting) according to Merleau-Ponty, is precisely that which takes on the situatedness of the one who acts or paints and realizes a perspective, questioning that fundamental ambiguity. World is precisely the name Merleau-Ponty gives to an ambiguous space, full of shadow zones, and yet active and real, somehow qualified neither a Nothing, nor a Whole, but *Etwas*, a something. In this sense, the OOO has the same problem that Sartre and all Stalinist Marxism had: it still has to "learn the slowness of mediations."²³

Believing in the world: an aesthetics for the Anthropocene

Almost anticipating the ultra-realist critiques of OOO, Gilles Deleuze argued, in a well-known interview: "believing in the world is what we miss the most: we have completely lost the world, we have been dispossessed of it. Believing in the world also means arousing events, however small they may be, that escape control, or giving life to new space-time, even of

20 Gianluca de Fazio, *Avversità e margini di gioco. Studio sulla soggettività in Merleau-Ponty*, (Milano: Mimesis, 2022).

21 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of Dialectic*, trans. Joseph J. Bien (London: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 40.

22 *Ivi*, 100.

23 *Ivi*, 102.

reduced surface and volume."²⁴ Beyond the particular declination of the classical concept of event that Deleuze gives, it is interesting to see how the diagnosis that the French philosopher makes of our time is exactly the opposite of Morton's. The problem of our own age, an essentially political problem, is precisely the inability to create worlds, or, in other words, to interrogate reality in such a way as to let her to give us meaningful answers.

This is the perspective recently taken by Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. What they argue is that, in the Anthropocene, the world does not end: only the cosmos of the Moderns disappears, with their distinction between nature and culture, the first being an objective and inert space and the second a space of creation and indefinite annihilation. In the opinion of the two scholars, this is not, however, for us to renounce to the concept of world as a space of meaning resulting from the *chiasme* between subject and object, between embodied consciousness and the place where it concretely and historically gives itself. On the contrary, it is a matter of drawing on a series of non-western cosmologies in order to create a new world, not in the sense of technically reconstructing what already exists, but of addressing our geographical being²⁵ in a different sense. Namely asking, so to speak, new and at the same time never really overcome questions to the natural space in which we have always been.²⁶ The two authors represent our condition through a cinematographic image, taken from the film *Melancholia* by Lars Von Trier. In the last scene of the film, before the planet crashes into the Earth and the world (Life) ends, the three remaining humans wait for the end inside a hut made of pieces of wood, holding hands. Claire's little son believes that this hut is magic and that it can save them; Claire and Justine use those last seconds to shake hands, to look into each other's eyes, and to give back, even if on the brink of catastrophe, a meaning to their lives. They build, in other words, a world, that is a space of meaning within which it is possible to give a meaning, even only for those few final seconds, to their existence. Against the end of all things, against the end of Life, against the end of the world, they inhabit a world.²⁷

This way of posing the question has an almost immediate aesthetic consequence. An aesthetics for the Anthropocene, in fact, no longer consists, if we accept the need to believe in a world, in a mere passive reflecting of a whole series of objects that are outside of us.

24 Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparler. 1972-1990*, (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2003), 199.

25 Augustin Berque, *Écoumène. Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains* (Paris : Belin, 2000).

26 Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *End of the World*, trans. Rodrigo Nunes (New York: Polity Press, 2016).

27 A more in-depth analysis, from a philosophical point of view, of this film can be found in Paolo Missiroli, "Credere nel mondo. L'umano e la fine", in *Glocalism*, 3, 2018.

As Czakon and Michna have recently demonstrated,²⁸ and as Merleau-Ponty had already said about the painting of Cézanne, in order to find the perceived world, beyond the abstractions of the absolute dualism of Westerners, it is necessary to make the maximum inventive effort.²⁹ Consider, for example, the work of the French artist Mathilde Roussel, entitled *Lives of Grass*.³⁰ These sculptures are made from recycled materials, earth, and cereal grains. The artist prompts us to reflect on the life cycle of living beings: she shows the human body in symbiosis with a plant. It is clear how the artist wants to represent our metabolic relationship and continuity with the natural and biological world. At the same time, it would be absurd to think that this relationship derives from a direct gaze at a hyper-object. Roussel has by no means received, ready-made, some elements that have directed his creative action; rather, he has attempted to represent our chiasmatic relationship (since the grass takes on a human form, and not only is the human form taken in a “grassy” materiality) with the natural world. This relationship remains in an obscurity that we cannot in any way appropriate. We might say that Roussel, unlike Morton, learned the slowness of mediations. This is what happens, in fact, in Boulez’s music as well: it is not, as Morton thinks, the passive repetition of an entirely clear and evident world, of an assemblage of objects. It is rather a collage: there is a real bricolage, we could say, that the artist puts into action in relation to the world. Neither creation *ex nihilo*, nor passive repetition of the already given, but rather, institution, recovery that transforms.³¹ The awareness of the centrality of a negative dimension for any artistic-aesthetic form in the Anthropocene is well present in almost all those who undertake artistic paths with these interests. For example, Anselm Frank, the curator of the well-known *Anthropocene Project*,³² stated in an interview:

“In a way, I’ve been trying to figure out this spectrum—it was more unclear to me before *The Whole Earth*—that goes from boundary practices with strong negativity toward the Anthropocene condition, where you no longer know how to circumscribe, address, or even deal with negativity, and hence with processes of ontological transformation.”³³

28 Dominika Czakon and Natalia Anna Michna, “Art Beyond the Anthropocene: A Philosophical Analysis of Selected Examples of Post-Anthropocentric Art in the Context of Ecological Change”, in *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2021.

29 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Causeurseries 1948* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 25-26.

30 Matthieu Raffard, Mathilde Roussel, “Lives of Grass v. 3,” Raffard–Roussel <http://www.raffardroussel.com/en/projets-lives-of-grass-v3/> (accessed March 23, 2022).

31 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’instition, la passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France* (1954-1955), (Paris: Belin, 2003) ; Roberto Esposito, *Pensiero istituyente. Tre paradigmi di ontologia politica* (Torino: Einaudi, 2020).

32 https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2014/anthropozaen/anthropozaen_2013_2014.php. Accessed March 25, 2022.

33 Anselm Frank (in conversation with Etienne Turpin), “The Fates of Negativity”, in *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heater Davis and Etienne Turpin, (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 144.

Frank is concerned with the elaboration of expressive forms that do not consist in a mere reproduction of reality (in which case, in his opinion, they would be of no use). It is by virtue of this concern that he emphasizes the necessity of artistic invention to narrate the contemporary condition; to this end, it is not enough to look at objects and reproduce them, therefore, but rather to receive and institute a world. This negativity, declined through the notion of invisibility, is at the center of another important reading of a series of artistic works by Gutierrez and Portefaix.³⁴ In fact, already Bonneuil and Fressoz, in their famous book, have spoken of the Anthropocene as a narrative:³⁵ as is evident, every narration consists by definition in a gap, in a distance that is not cancellation but recovery and transformation of the same real to which it turns and to which it always returns. A different perspective on realism emerges here. There is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty and the other scholars quickly mentioned here are realists, in a sense, however, quite different from that of the OOO. It is, we might say, a negative realism, that is, one that does not think of the real as an object (or a set of objects), but as a place endowed with agentivity and at the same time never entirely visible. It is because of this ultimate invisibility that, for us, there is a world, that is, the need for a perspective, always partial, on reality. This is what Erich Auerbach argued in his masterpiece *Mimesis*. Reading the tenth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, Auerbach describes it as creative realism. In it, in fact, the tendency towards reality never results in a radical empiricism. Dante does not want to report reality as it is, in toto, outside of any experience, but rather "to imitate the sensible experience of earthly life,"³⁶ show a contingency linked to the biological-everyday dimension that cannot be separated from an eternity and an eternal (the *Inferno*) pervaded in any case by contingency and unpredictability. It is precisely this emphasis on partiality and unpredictability³⁷ that is missing from the realism of the OOO.

It is only in this way that aesthetic disciplines can be assigned an ethical-political role that is not a mere copy of the set of things that exist, but returns that deep and real dimension that is the world. If it is true, then, that the Anthropocene needs a form of realism, it is also true that the latter must be declined beyond and against the OOO, at least in its most openly empiricist tones. Some ideas in this direction, with reference to the literature, come to us from the recent work of Carla Benedetti. Picking up on Amitav Gosh, she states that "if there is one thing that global warming has made perfectly clear, it is that thinking about the world only as it is

34 Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix, "Island and Other Invisibles Territories", in *Art in the Anthropocene*, 223-232.

35 Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, trans. David Fernbach (London, New York: Verso, 2017).

36 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Williar Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 205.

37 Ubaldo Fadini, *Il senso inatteso. Pensiero e pratiche degli affetti*, (Verona: Ombrecorte, 2018).

tantamount to collective suicide.”³⁸ The point, for Benedetti, is not to see a whole series of objects that are present in front of us and to reaffirm their existence in the literary work, but rather to think of literature as rousing power, as a narrative tool capable of arousing another world, at least on the level of the imagination.³⁹ This is why a literature (as well as art or architecture) in the Anthropocene is, also, political: it has the power to give birth to a world, to interrogate the real in a different way than the way western-capitalist modernity has done so far.

In conclusion, it is necessary to clarify a fundamental point. In recent years, there has been a vision of politics and ethics flattened on an entirely symbolic dimension, for which the construction of the space of meaning is entirely delegated to a symbolic procedure.⁴⁰ The position that seems to emerge from this rediscovery of the notion of world does not go in this direction: Benedetti, as well as Gosh, de Castro or Merleau-Ponty himself (but we would like to mention, at least, the name of Ingold) do not think at all that there is no real and that reality is an unreachable X. However, they do not think that reality is entirely unfolded before our eyes. However, they also do not think that reality is entirely unfolded before our eyes. We need a world to the extent that reality is sprinkled with a negativity that makes it elusive to us in its totality. Believing in the world means nothing more than asking this reality questions and having the ability to come to terms with the answers it offers us. In this sense, we are quite curious about the contempt Morton shows for Tolkien’s small and yet so brave hobbits. What could be less provincial than the journey they undertake outside their own little world? And isn’t their courage manifested precisely in their willingness to deal with the crises and catastrophes of that larger real? But, at the same time, how is this real given to them, if not as the outline of their world? As they open themselves to the infinity of Middle Earth and transform its fortunes, they always dream of home. Meaning always arises from the encounter between a point of view and a real that exists before us. Only from this encounter can transformative power arise. There is no possible transformation that does not start with the imagination and the concrete practice of a world.

38 Amitav Gosh, *The great derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016) 159.

39 Carla Benedetti, *La letteratura ci salverà dall'estinzione*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2020), 24-25.

40 Alenka Zupancic, *Ethics for the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2012) ; Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason*, (London: Verso 2007).

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