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ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that we have entered a new era of aesthetics. This new era is possible to predict using Hegel's lectures on aesthetics. But for reasons that I outline, Hegel himself would not have predicted it. The Hegelian thinking of art has an unconscious that is only now coming to light. This coming to light signals the collapse of the Romantic period — the "long march of the isms," the most encompassing of which is consumerism, since the late eighteenth century, accompanied by the advent of modernity, the upsurge of industrial capitalism, and the subsequent geological shift we now call the *Anthropocene*: the fact that we have now entered a geological period in which humans have a direct affect on the substrata of their earthly reality. The Anthropocene has a very definite beginning indeed: 1945, when a thin layer of radioactive materials was deposited in Earth's crust. The new period we enter, I claim, is an ecological one. In this period, a new phase of art, unpredicted, and indeed I shall argue, unpredictable, by Hegel, comes about. This phase of art I call the *Asymmetric Phase*.

KEYWORDS

Hegel, Asymmetric Phase, hyperobjects, nonhuman, ecology

Art in the Age of Asymmetry: Hegel, Objects, Aesthetics

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In this essay I argue that we have entered a new era of aesthetics, shaped by the current ecological emergency. This new era is possible to predict using Hegel's lectures on aesthetics. But for reasons that I outline, Hegel himself would not have predicted it.

Hegel's philosophical approach is intuitively very satisfying for literature scholars like me. From early on, literature students are taught that texts have narrators, and that these narrators are different from the author. For instance, a text might not have a single author, or even a human one. You could discover the text written in gigantic letters on the surface of Mars or floating in the tealeaves at the bottom of the pot. No matter: all texts, even texts like these, have narrators.

Now the thing about narrators is that they do two things, roughly: they establish a *point of view* (or points of view), and they establish a *subject position* (or positions). The point of view is fairly straightforward: it's the answer to the question, "What or who is the narrator?" Is the narrator omniscient, omnipresent? Does it have a gender, a race, a class? Is the narrator a character in the story? Characters? And so on.

Slightly more difficult to grasp is the notion of subject position, but this is where it really gets interesting being a literature (or any kind of art) student. If one was forced to boil down what we do as humanities scholars into a single task, it would be identifying subject positions and working on them, which is what Hegelian philosophy is all about. The subject position of a text or artwork answers the question, "Who are you, the reader?" What attitude towards itself does the text expect you to take? Think of a perspective painting. The vanishing points in the painting dictate where to place your gaze in order to make a two-dimensional surface appear three-dimensional. Your gaze is encoded into the picture surface. In the same way, perhaps, a flower's subject position is that of a bee, if it's painted with ultraviolet landing stripes. It tells the bee where to put her proboscis.

In a Lacanian, Althusserian nutshell, this is the news that literary theory delivers. People come in to the theory class with the expectation that they will hear that one can make anything mean anything. Theory teachers will always get a certain essay on deconstruction that totally misinterprets it along these lines. That is in fact what we could refer to as the *pre-theory* attitude. What you should leave the theory class with is the knowledge that not only is the interpretation of texts subject to all kinds of nonsubjective constraints, but also a place for you has been pre-established by the text itself. It's like those maps with the little red arrow that says, "You are here."

Now Hegel's great insight is that ideas come bundled with attitudes — in other words, ideas code for subject positions. An idea's thinkability as such depends upon a certain attitude on the part of the thinker. So when a Hegelian wants to debate you, she doesn't argue the toss about the truth content of your claims. She makes a beeline for the subject position that your ideas code for, and talks to that. Say "welfare" and you evoke a whole host of attitudes; call it "social security" and it becomes very different. The Hegelian doesn't argue the toss about the value of supporting poor people. The Hegelian goes directly for the jugular of the attitude that the "welfare" concept promulgates.

Homing in on the subject position is disarming. The subject position tends to be the unconscious of the idea, the idea's personality, as it were, and we have a clue from psychoanalysis that one's personality, how one appears to the other, is unconscious. So what happens when you home in on the subject position is that you deprive it of its effectiveness. You collapse the idea and the attitude it codes for into a bundle.

Now this bundle is yet another idea. And guess what. Since ideas code for attitudes, this one is no exception. So the Hegelian must figure out that one. And so on. This is the essence of dialectics. It means that philosophy is the history of philosophy, not the superficial occurrence of ideas “in” time, but a temporality and a temporalizing that is internal, intrinsic, to thinking as such. For instance, it has no reverse gear. Thinking is futural, since ideas don't know yet what they code for.

Ideas, for Hegel, have a structural instability, an intrinsic difference from themselves, reflected in the rift between an idea and the attitude it codes for. Ideas are also archaeological evidence of the existence of at least one thing that is not an idea: people who have those ideas. Ideas don't float in a void, but are lived, phenomenologically — which is why of course Hegel calls his history of attitudes that ideas encode *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Now there are ideas humans have about art. And these ideas code for attitudes. And these idea–attitude bundles are structurally unstable and teeter forwards, opening up the future. So Hegel's history of aesthetics is the history of how human ideas about what art is code for attitudes, setting up unstable constructs that collapse into new ideas and fresh attitudes. Hegel's history of art has three phases: Symbolic, Classical and Romantic. Now we can track this history, argues Hegel, according to how humans have developed attitudes towards the objects of art: the painting, the canvas, the cave wall, the pen, the subject matter, all of it. Ideas concerning these objects code for attitudes, the spiritual inside of art, as it were. In a nutshell, Hegel's history of aesthetics is the story of the eventual release of this spirit from the very materials that it used to understand itself, and the subsequent surpassing of art by philosophy, when spirit becomes too heavy for objects to embody it.

(Here I employ the terms *spirit* and *spiritual* rather than *subject* and *subjective*. First because Hegel uses them. Secondly, because those terms are interestingly provocative right now. And thirdly because subject is itself a kind of cheapening or reification of what we are aiming for here, which is more like an analysis of the withdrawn essence of things versus their manifestation for others, or for the other.)

Now I am not a certain type of Hegelian, in the sense that I am not a teleological thinker. I do not believe that the history of what Hegel calls spirit has an end, even a predictable end point — indeed, it's possible that Hegel himself was nowhere near as teleological and rigid as some have

made him out to be.¹ And I am not endorsing Hegel's viewpoint concerning the defects of the Symbolic, Classical and Romantic phases. Indeed, I intend on doing something like a "Hegel" with Hegel himself, since what is of interest here is the fact that Hegel, as a Romantic philosopher, is a very contemporary philosopher, insofar as we are still inside the Romantic period – or were, until very recently, and this is the main topic of this essay.

How can we tell we still have one foot in the Romantic period? The fact is borne out by the persistence of Hegelianism itself. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, can write an essay called "Is It Still Possible to Be a Hegelian Today?"² The Hegelian thinking of art, in other words, has an unconscious that is only now coming to light. This coming to light signals the collapse of the Romantic period – the long march of the isms, the most encompassing of which is consumerism, since the late eighteenth century, accompanied by the advent of modernity, the upsurge of industrial capitalism, and the subsequent geological shift we now call the *Anthropocene*: the fact that we have now entered a geological period in which humans have a direct effect on the substrata of their earthly reality. 1790 was a significant moment in the Anthropocene at which a layer of carbon materials from industry began to show up in the top layers of Earth's crust, from deep lakes to the Arctic. The Anthropocene has a very decisive moment indeed in 1945, when a thin layer of radioactive materials was deposited in Earth's crust. The new period we enter at this point, known in geology as the *Great Acceleration*, is an ecological one. I call it *the time of hyperobjects*, for reasons I shall make clear. In this period, a new phase of art, unpredicted, and indeed I shall argue, unpredictable, by Hegel, comes about. This phase of art I call *the Asymmetric Phase*, again for reasons I shall establish. To argue that there is a fourth phase, logically possible within Hegel yet not predicted by him explicitly, is not to be teleological. This fourth phase just is another moment, not a terminus.

Now I am not a Hegelian as far as ontology goes either. I am, rather, an object-oriented ontologist carefully trained in deconstruction, and before that Marxism. For one, then, I'm a realist, not an idealist. In this I am a little more Kantian than Hegelian: there are places in the universe that thinking can't touch. I just don't accept that when I think this untouchability, I am touching it – this would be the Hegelian response to Kantianism.³ But unlike Kant and his correlationist legacy, I see this not as a reason to confine thinking to a little island of human meaningfulness, but rather to embark on a speculative journey amidst an irreducible plenum of

discrete, unique, sparkling objects, whether they be snow crystals, Arsenal or a single photon.

The fact that philosophy is now thinking ways out of the Kant–Hegel dyad is very significant as we enter the time of hyperobjects. I don't think it's an accident. I believe that this is the moment at which nonhumans, sentient and otherwise, make decisive contact with humans, even those humans who have been living under the spells of modernity, capitalism, correlationism and technology. What we are witnessing today, in aesthetic terms, is the deconstruction of the Hegelian thinking of aesthetics, a deconstruction or as Heidegger would say a destructuring according to the implicit qualities of reality itself, the plenum of unique objects that now impinges on us, the plenum whose thinking some of us call ecological awareness or *the ecological thought*.⁴

Let us proceed, then, through Hegel's history of art, knowing that it too codes for its own attitudes, not the least of which is the Romantic, end-of-history motif, in which we're all dressed up with nowhere to go, beautiful souls in the empty supermarket of anxiety.⁵

Hegel traces a history of phases of art based on the dialectical evolution of attitudes towards things – things such as subject matter, material media, conventions and so forth. But since Hegel argues that history is internal to thinking, we can imagine the three phases Hegel outlines as recapitulated in any process of coming to terms with human creativity. In other words, the Symbolic phase need not be so-called Oriental art pure and simple; the Classical Phase need not be confined to ancient Greece; the Romantic phase need not be confined to a Christian era and so on.⁶ Despite the attempt to produce a grand Romantic narrative (and Romanticism is indeed story-shaped for Hegel), Hegel can't contain a creepy, threatening awareness of nonhuman beings. Even in Hegel, in other words, the objects that seem only to provide blank slates for the unfolding of the human drama begin to vibrate and move with their own uncanny power.

There is a very simple reason for this: *there are nonhuman beings*, and these beings also have agency. It's perfectly straightforward for us to say this now in a moment of ecological awareness. What is significant is not that Hegel was “wrong”; rather, Hegel was so terminally unable to think this thought. This is not to suggest absurdly that Hegel had no idea that there were things such as broom handles and parrots: his own prose is

full of nonhuman beings, and for him sound itself has a kind of agency. Rather, the point is that for Hegel, such entities are little more than bit players in the drama of the (human) subject.

Let us proceed then with a brief walk through Hegel's phases of art.

1 • The Symbolic Phase⁷

In this phase, objects outstrip spirit. Art's substance (statues, instruments, paint) outstrips its content. This is an age of *fetishism* (from the standpoint of the imperialist bearer of Enlightenment) or *animism*, or as Hegel puts it, "primitive artistic pantheism."⁸ The plenitude of art materials and objects overwhelms its spiritual content, which appears far removed from genuine embodiment (says Hegel). Thus the thousands of images themselves seem "inadequate."⁹ This phase collapses — why? Because as humans get to handle objects and investigate them, they come to know more about them and about themselves.

The Symbolic Phase is represented by "Oriental" art, with its tumult of baffling (for Hegel) forms. The Idea "seethe[s] and ferment[s]" in the art forms of the Symbolic phase, producing for instance the manifold forms of Buddhas and Hindu gods.¹⁰ Such art is irreflective, gesturing towards thinking but failing to achieve it.¹¹ Hegel is without doubt the Eurocentric imperialist par excellence here. What remains of interest in this configuration, however, is precisely this very imperialism. Hegel is simply unable to see the spiritual content of non-European art: how it's not just a dumbshow waiting for real content to be beamed into it from elsewhere.

We should hold and reflect on this attitude of Hegel's for a moment. The world of things — and of all the phases Hegel outlines, Oriental art seems nearest to this world of nonhuman things — has no intrinsic meaning. This is somewhat different from an argument that only humans have agency: as a brief reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* reminds us, there are all kinds of nonhuman forces and agents in the world. What is significant, rather, is that nature is self-externality: it does not know itself.¹² It's only later, when humans figure out that ideas are different from things, and much later when I, Hegel, come to tell this story,

that nonhuman things gain meaning. Isn't there a little bit of awareness of the inverse in this attitude? Namely that *there are nonhuman beings*, that may or may not match up with our projection onto them. Surely there is something compelling about this thought as we humans enter an ecological age. In thinking the Symbolic Phase, it appears both as if meaning is dependent on human presence, and as if human presence is irrelevant to meaning.¹³ Hegel's attitude towards the Symbolic Phase has an inner instability that becomes more significant as we proceed towards thinking this ecological era in perversely Hegelian terms.

2 • The Classical Phase

In this phase, there is a Goldilocks sweet spot in which objects and spirit seem perfectly matched in a beautiful symmetry.¹⁴ Hegel finds it embodied of course in the art of Greece. Now this phase collapses – why? Because eventually humans just start to know too much. Although Classical form perfectly expresses inner content, such that there is no gap between form and content, this is a fleeting illusion, since temporality is intrinsic to knowing – time just is, as Kant had argued, the succession of thoughts one after the other. Eventually the spell is broken.

In this Phase, human creativity seems to dance with an unfettered joy, molding everything to its will in such a way that things seem to reflect it perfectly: “the human form divine” as William Blake put it.¹⁵ But this creativity has vertiginous, inner aspects such that to a later age, classical art can't help looking a little bit like a repetition compulsion, the mechanical attempt to ward off basic anxiety of this inner space. Soothing mechanisms confront us in the neoclassical music of Bach or Pachelbel for instance, music evocative of, and to some extent a recapitulation of, the Classical phase proper. Don't these kinds of music suggest the fantasy of an infinite deferral of something threatening? Isn't there something a little bit true in the cliché that Bach shows no emotion? And if the anxiety could indeed be infinitely deferred, wouldn't this suggest an inner power that was infinite? Thus we would be on a Möbius strip: attempting to thwart the oncoming awareness of inner infinity, we arrive at forms that begin to convey it despite ourselves. Thus the Classical Phase collapses into the Romantic phase.

Moreover, doesn't the joy of imposing form on an infinitely plastic world of things strike us as a profound violence? Hegel seems a little seduced by this violence, the sadistic brio of a fugue or a sonata, or to use something closer to his examples, sculpture with its noble calm appears to have wrenched stone from its strife and placed it in a heavenly hall of tranquil mirrors where it reflects back perfectly Blake's human form divine. The sunny Classical marriage of form and content at the altar of human meaning, might now be seen, in a more ecological age, as resembling a shotgun wedding in which one party, the nonhuman, uncomplainingly submits to the will of the other.

3 • The Romantic Phase

In this phase, spirit outstrips objects; art's content outstrips its substance. Infinite inner space is opened up.¹⁶ No external object becomes adequate to convey this inner space, so art must now be about the successful failure to embody the inner world. Philosophy drives ahead, while art can only fail better (irony).

Now in turn the Romantic phase, just like the phases before it, collapses – but why? For Hegel the Romantic phase evaporates into the end of art. But I shall argue here that art does not evaporate, even according to a certain Hegelian logic. This is not predicted in Hegel, nor, I claim, is it predictable according to a certain strict Hegelianism. The collapse of the Romantic phase is not an evaporation into nothing, but rather the collapse occurs because objects themselves begin to speak. The materials that are used to convey the failure to embody the inner start to swirl, drip and go through their motions with less and less deliberate intervention by the artist. There is something like a straight line in this sense between the blank verse experiments of Wordsworth and the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock.

Hegel's fantasy is that this is the period when philosophy takes over from art, since art can no longer handle the *chōrismos* (Greek, "rift") between objects and spirit. Art must tell the story of its inability to tell the story of the spirit. Irony becomes the dominant flavor of art, based on a vertiginous awareness of the gap between spirit and art's materials. In the Romantic Phase, the beyond disappears and reappears within people. God

dies and comes down to Earth incarnated in Jesus. A truly Christian art is now possible, better than Gothic cathedrals and Handel's *Messiah*, in its presentation of the proximity of real, other people: "It is an ancient mariner," as Coleridge writes, beginning his masterpiece with the uncanny proximity of a stranger.¹⁷

For Hegel, it's irony and vertiginous strangers from here on out, human strangers.¹⁸ He forgot to add: slowly but surely it creeps up on humans that this strangeness is nothing special, or at least, nothing uniquely human. He also forgot to add: to think the death of the beyond is to think the essence of things *right here, as substances*, in a weird return to Aristotle. This is the irony of irony as such. The abyss of the subject rolls out the red carpet for the arrival of a monstrous new kind of substance.

There is a kind of master-slave dialectic at work here, or what Heidegger would call the strife between *World* and *Earth*.¹⁹ The more you have of landscapes that convey the subjectivity of the implied viewer, the more you have of hills, trees and water. The more you express your tortured soul, the more globs of paint you need. The march of the isms — Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism... — is also the story of the emergence of nonhuman entities into the very space that appears to be free of them. The very failure of nonhuman entities to express human depth is what allows those entities to emerge, an emergence we examine today under the heading of emerging critical environments.

Consciousness as such, that great discovery of the Romantic period, is not exempt from this liberation narrative. Think of Monet's *Water Lilies* series. Of course what Monet is painting is not the lilies as such but the rippling, floating space between the lilies — the space that in fact is a substance, water. Einsteinian spacetime is also the discovery that space is not just an empty box. Husserlian intentional consciousness, a much misunderstood and maligned idea, is much the same thing: when I am thinking something, there I am, thinking it. Consciousness itself is no longer a void in which ideas just collide like billiard balls. It's a substance: you can't touch it, you can't see it. But then, can you really touch the essence of a billiard ball? Whatever you do will be your anthropomorphic translation of the ball. Just as the billiard cue cue-pomorphizes the ball. Just as the green baize baize-pomorphizes the ball. Writing about music really is like dancing about architecture. Consciousness becomes the

prototype of objects in their infinite, Tardis-like strangeness, which we shall now explore.

4 • The Asymmetric Phase

In the Deleuzian manner, in which we push philosophy from behind to vomit forth some unspeakable secrets, we can imagine a fourth moment, which I call a time of *asymmetry*.²⁰ Now let's begin to think the current phase of aesthetics, a phase that has been developing since the start of the Great Acceleration, out of a structural instability internal to the Romantic Phase. In this phase, art's content outstrips its substance in one way: we know way more every day about reality (science). But in another way, the substance of art outstrips the content (revenge of the objects). An *asymmetrical* confrontation between the human and the nonhuman.

When we compare the Asymmetric Phase with Hegel's three phases of art, we discover some remarkable parallels and recapitulations. The Asymmetric Phase is like the Symbolic Phase, insofar as the world of objects seems to have enormous power and clarity. We know that we carry traces of mercury and radiation in our bodies. We know that gravity waves from the Big Bang are propagating through our bodies. But the Asymmetric Phase is profoundly unlike the Symbolic Phase in that knowledge, science, what we know rides out to meet the objects in all their infinite variety – from quanta to hypothetical bruise marks of other universes at the edge of our own; from entangled carbon fullerenes to global warming; from humanoids and hominids and hominins to slime molds that can navigate their way around a maze. The Asymmetric Phase is like the Symbolic Phase in that objects such as Pollock's paint drips now free themselves from the human realm. But unlike it since humans have more knowledge.

The Asymmetric Phase is like the Classical Phase, insofar as there seems to be an equal match of potency between spirit and objects. Yet the Asymmetric Phase differs wildly from the Classical Phase in that this is not a Goldilocks balance in any sense. What confronts our inner infinity is an equal and opposite outer infinity, or even more disturbingly, an infinite variety of infinities, a transfinite set that is larger than a simple pair; possibly large beyond magnitude, incalculable. For something to be

beyond magnitude would be for it to be truly infinite in the Kantian sense, in which the analytical sublime evokes pure space as a quantum, that is, as a unit incapable of further subdivision.²¹ The unconditional freedom of the human being meets the unconditional freedom of a decaying leaf blown into some gutter.

The Asymmetric Phase is like the Romantic Phase in that there is still irony. But it differs from it since objects are no longer simply sounding boards for human subjectivity. The Asymmetric Phase is like the Romantic Phase, insofar as spirit is vast and top-heavy: we lack, as Percy Shelley puts it, "the creative faculty to imagine that which we know."²² And what a world we know. Yet the Asymmetric Phase differs profoundly from the Romantic Phase, because it is not spirit that is doing the leading in this dance: it's the objects, not the human attitude to them. By which I mean that the human attitude is now infected from within by the object-ness of objects. Why?

There are two absolutely unique features of the fourth age. In this phase, the *strange stranger* appears.²³ We return to a kind of animism (the first age), but *sous rature*: ~~animism~~. In the Asymmetric Phase, the *future future* opens: a future without us. A future in which an object like radioactive waste lasts longer than the time stretching all the way back to places such as the Chauvet Cave with its Paleolithic paintings. A future in which evolution develops intelligent albino alligators who make their own Romantic movies about cave paintings.²⁴

What we now see is that nonhumans are also filled with infinite inner space. Some of us are ready to grant this inner infinity to certain kinds of sentient being. Some are willing to grant it to all sentient beings. Some are willing to grant it to all lifeforms (this was my position in *The Ecological Thought*). And some still further out are willing to grant it to all nonhumans whatsoever, no questions asked. These are the object-oriented ontologists, in whose number I now find myself. I see no inherent reason why what I called the strange stranger in *The Ecological Thought* should not apply to any entity whatsoever: fireplaces, the Oort Cloud at the edge of the Solar System, flamingos and slices of pork rotting in a garbage can. Since lifeforms are made of nonlife, and since what counts as a lifeform is very much a performative act down to the DNA level, I see no big reason not to extend the concept of the strange stranger to cover all entities.

So what we confront in the Asymmetric Phase are infinities everywhere. The universe is suddenly full of Tardises, all bigger on the inside than they are on the outside. Humans are one of these Tardises, but so are salt crystals, tsunamis and twelve-inch vinyl techno records. Now there are varying degrees of resistance to granting entities of all kinds the same basic ontological configuration that humans have. Some people still act like the subjectivity-equivalent of the custodians of the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, granting inner space parsimoniously to certain higher primates or whatever. Others, including myself, have completely given up.

It is as if nonhumans have finally infiltrated human social, psychic and philosophical space, with varying degrees of success. The vanguard of this infiltration was done by what I call *hyperobjects*. Hyperobjects are entities that are massively distributed in time and space, relative to human scales.²⁵ They are immersive, phenomenologically viscous entities: we exist inside them and as the flowers of their massively branching trees. We find ourselves psychologically, socially, aesthetically, politically glued to them wherever we go.

One hyperobject I've been studying a great deal is global warming. Say you decide that the solution to global warming is to go to Mars. Then you go to Mars still under the spell of global warming, and guess what. When you get there, you have to create the atmosphere for yourself, let alone regulate it. You have the same problem magnified even more. This is the theme of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy.²⁶

Hyperobjects come in and out of phase with human time and spatial scales, because they occupy a much higher dimensional space. Look at the Lorenz Attractor, the first strange attractor ever discovered. It was discovered in the attempt to model the phases of weather. The Lorenz Attractor lives in a high dimensional space, in which every point is a weather event in four-dimensional spacetime. Consider evolution, a hyperobject of which we are a direct product. The possibility space of evolution is just outrageously vast. A map of vectors in this space would be on an order of dimensional magnitude almost unthinkably vast for humans. Yet we can't unthink the thought of evolution.

Hyperobjects are the discoveries of modernity: economic forces, the unconscious, evolution, the biosphere, global warming. First we detect them on our instruments. Then we realize we are inside them. Then they crash into social, psychic and aesthetic space. This is what ecological awareness actually is, and what eco-hippie previews miss. Far from

placing human consciousness and power at the center of the universe, as Kant's perhaps misnamed Copernican revolution did, hyperobjects are more like the real Copernican revolution in that they force us to coexist with a vast plenum of nonhumans, a plenum first sensed as the vacuum of space in Pascal's famous line about the silence and stillness of intersidereal spaces filling him with dread. The more we know, the more objects, and the more the objectness of objects, rise up to meet what and how we know. So now we encounter this vastness not as empty space but as a plenum. Emmanuel Levinas's line about cosmic space is appropriate here: how when I look at the stars, I realize that I am sought out by inhabitants of the intersidereal spaces.²⁷ There is no space, there is no abstract other. Only consider what happened to space itself halfway between us and the time of Kant (1900). There is spacetime, an emergent property of large objects, filled with quanta of all kinds, pressing on us like the leering figures of a James Ensor painting.

In this object-oriented universe, there is no background that is not itself an object, like Stephen Dedalus's postal address in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe²⁸

Thus there is no *world*, no *horizon*: the background is only a sensual impression of some real object. It is truly *the end of the world*. This is what it means to inhabit the time of hyperobjects.

Art in the Asymmetric Phase seems to have three properties:

- (1) Demonic force
- (2) Hypocrisy
- (3) Collaboration between humans and nonhumans.

We shall sift through these one by one.

(1) Art as demonic force

Art in the Asymmetric Phase becomes what Socrates calls it in *Ion*: a tuning, an attunement, the channeling of a demonic force.²⁹

Plato imagines artistic inspiration as an electromagnetic field (*Ion*). It is time we took this granddaddy of aesthetic vehicles out for another spin. Post-1800 physics presents us with a universe of waves: electromagnetic, gravitational and quantum. Then there are wavelike phenomena such as Lorenz attractors (high dimensional objects such as hyperobjects must be wavelike). Tuning in this respect is attuning the art object (voice, breath, instrument) to these physical waves, quite literally.

These waves are somewhat or entirely nonlocally distributed. Below the size of an electron, for instance (10^{-17} cm), there is a vast ocean of space, right down to the Planck length (10^{-33} cm) and possibly lower (strings). It is plausible that spacetime is an emergent property of objects larger than 10^{-17} cm.³⁰ This means that objects below this scale are “everywhere.” That is, if we think that quantum theory is telling us something about reality rather than simply acting as a correlationist tool. But in a more mundane sense, Faraday and Maxwell imagined electromagnetic fields permeating the universe. The same can be said for gravitational fields. They never really zero out. We can see the Cosmic Microwave Background from the “beginning” of the universe on our TV sets when we see TV snow, and so on. This is somewhat nonlocal.

Art becomes tuning to the depth of these fields. Genius is no longer something you are, as in the Romantic period, but something you “have,” like in previous periods. You “have” genius because art is an attunement to a demonic force coming from the nonhuman and permeating it: as we all know we have all been strafed by radiation, and so on. Consider a real example. A sound artist can put contact mikes on the window of his apartment in New York. They can record sounds for five days and nights. Then he speeds up the recording, three hundred and sixty times. Traffic begins to sound like the tinkling of tiny insects. A slow, periodic hum begins to become audible. When I hear a recording of this, *Air Pressure Fluctuations* by Felix Hess, I am hearing the standing wave caused by pressure changes in the air over the Atlantic Ocean. I am hearing the sound of the air over the Atlantic. A gigantic entity has been channeled into a sound recording audible to humans.³¹

Heidegger argues that every entity is really channeling, in this *Ion*-like way. I never hear the wind in itself, only the wind in the chimney, the wind in the trees, or in this case, the air mass contracting and expanding as the Atlantic heats and cools.³² Isn't this very close to what Percy Shelley argues in *A Defense of Poetry*? Shelley thinks about an Aeolian harp. The Aeolian harp was a wind harp that was very popular in eighteenth-century households, like Bose speakers and iPods are now. It gives me a bit of a kick to imagine Jane Austen characters listening to the Sonic-Youth-like sounds that emanate from these harps as they tune to the wind that blows over them, as they lie on the windowsill on a summer afternoon. Coleridge wrote a poem called *The Eolian Harp* in which he imagines all organic nature to be a series of such harps, and Shelley does something similar, allowing for the possibility that every sentient being is like one of these harps. We tune to the environment, then we tune to our tuning — that is called thinking, so Shelley has produced a physicalist model of thinking, probably based on materialist theories of mind influenced by the recent discovery of the human nervous system.

But Heidegger's argument goes one step further, implying that every entity in the universe is an Aeolian Harp. Every entity is modulating every other entity. Mercury in the thermometer tells me about my body temperature. Photons hitting my optic nerve tell me about the mercury. Transducers in my ears tell me about pressure waves, translating them into electrochemical signals that I hear as sound. The dinosaur-shaped hole in the fossilized mud tells me about the dinosaur that was walking over the mud. The computer model tells me about global warming.

This Aeolian channeling is an art built out of causal effects between objects, which are on my view entirely aesthetic. A footprint, a software model, a sound, the pulsation of the air: all these are aesthetic phenomena. They are interobjective, that is, they inhabit some etheric shared space between objects, a space that can only in and of itself consist of more objects. Art that talks about these shared effects has two modes: Shelleyan (or Wordsworthian), which is to talk about relations, and Keatsian, which is to give some impossible glimpse of the real object that subtends those relations. Because relations are Shelley poems: vast, sprawling, nonlocal, dizzying, spiraling, constructivist. But objects are Keats poems: unspeakable, unique, black hole-like.

(2) Hypocrisy

This has two components: (a) weakness and (b) irony.

(a) Weakness. Objects ($1+n$ of them) exist ontologically prior to your art, and art's form and content are now asymmetrical. We know so much about real entities (modern science). Yet precisely because of this they loom uncannily towards us, getting stranger by the minute. All our representations are inadequate – we've kept this from the Romantic Phase. Since we are *inside at least one* of these objects (for instance global warming), and since "inside the hyperobject we are always in the wrong," art becomes an art of lameness and weakness. Nietzschean impulses are vanquished by sliding underneath them like a scared little vole or a slime mold. This in particular ends the Nietzscheanism of contemporary Marxian "critique."

(b) Irony. Rather than a vertiginous antirealist abyss, irony presents us with intimacy with $1+n$ objects that already exist. Irony is the canary in the coalmine of the hyperobject, a symptom that existed even during the Romantic Phase. "The vicissitudes of this life are like drowning in a glass pond."³³ Irony is the experience of total sincerity, of being enveloped by a hyperobject, of being Jonah in the whale realizing that he is part of the whale's digestive system. Irony is coexistence without center or edge. Ecological art that tries to delete irony is trying to unthink what was learned during the Romantic Phase. This is impossible, and the attempt is dangerously regressive. What ecological thinking needs to know is that irony is not an optional extra: it's intrinsic to the strangeness of nonhumans.

(3) Art as collaboration between humans and nonhumans

(1) and (2) and their scientific underpinning (we know about global warming, gravity waves, and so on) give rise to a necessary knowledge about smaller scale, medium sized objects such as paintings and poems. Relativity affects pencils and professors flying at altitude above Earth. When you write a poem you are making a deal with some paper, some ink,

wordprocessing software, trees, editors and air (and more). Moreover, given (2) one is compelled to wonder whether one's poem about global warming is really a hyperobject's way of distributing itself into human ears and libraries. And given (1), even the poem that isn't about global warming takes place on the inside of a hyperobject — and so it's a function of that object in some sense.

Now since there are real objects, and since causality itself is an Aeolian harp-like transduction of energies, a translation of one object in terms of another — since causality just is the aesthetic dimension, in other words — then some translations are better than others. How are they better? Somehow they tune to the object in a more powerful, more convincing, more revealing way.

What would perfect tuning look like? It would look like death. When an object perfectly tunes another one, it becomes that object, or vice versa. “It was so beautiful I almost died.” Kantian beauty is already an attunement between two beings, a subject and an object, in which the subject discovers something surprising: it is capable of having an experience outside of its ego shell. Beauty is what happens when an object and its tuning fit so snugly that they fuse together, in a kind of loving extinction. Beautiful death. It happens because an object and its sensual qualities are riven from each other. There is an irreducible *chōrismos* between an object and that object's appearance—for another object. Objects are self-contradictory and fragile. They are mortal: they contain a secret *hamartia* (Greek, “wound”) that makes them vulnerable to at least one magic bullet. Art in the Asymmetric Phase will increasingly tries to come as close to that magic bullet as possible. So art in the Asymmetric Phase is somewhat threatening, reminding us of death, beautiful death. Like a sound that was so beautiful you couldn't stop listening to it, but so loud and in tune with your body that it began to take you apart on a cellular level. Art becomes an object that almost kills you.

Iain Thompson writes, “Heidegger's defining hope for art...is that works of art could manifest and thereby help usher in a new understanding of the being of entities, a literally 'post-modern' understanding of what it means for an entity to be.”³⁴ It seems as if nonhumans have begun to grant Heidegger his wish. The Asymmetric Phase retroactively reconfigures the Phases that came before it. In particular, it now seems clear that the Romantic Phase was not simply a moment at which spirit became too big for its boots. It was also the Phase in which environments

emerged within the humanities and the arts. And what are these environments? Nothing other than nonhuman entities in all their mysterious, vibrant wonder and horror, filling us with guilt and shame, joy, compassion and sadness, decentering our place in the universe.

• Notes •

¹ For a useful counterpoint, see Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Verso, 2010).

² Slavoj Žižek, “Is It Still Possible to Be a Hegelian Today?” in Levi Bryant, Graham Harman and Nick Srnicek, eds., *The Speculative Turn* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 202–223.

³ See Steven Shaviro, “Kant and Hegel, Yet Again,” <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=991>, accessed October 7, 2011.

⁴ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁵ The term beautiful soul is Hegel's own: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller, analysis and foreword by J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 383–409.

⁶ *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T.M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.100–101, 1.299–300. Hegel's remarks on the malleability of symbolism are exemplary in this regard (1.362–375, 1.393–395); his remarks on the persistence of symbolism in Catholicism (and that religion's parallels with Buddhism, “Lamaism”) are also illuminating here (1.324).

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, tr. Bernard Bosanquet, intro and commentary Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 82–84; *Aesthetics*, 1.300, 1.303–322.

⁸ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 83.

⁹ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 83.

¹⁰ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 83; *Aesthetics*, 1.408.

¹¹ Hegel, *Aesthetics* 1.319, 1.322–325, 1.347–354, 1.378, 1.421–422.

¹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), tr. A.V. Miller, foreword J.N. Findlay, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.9, 2.13–14, 2.17–19, 2.24, 2.28.

¹³ I am grateful to Joanna Demers for pointing this out to me.

¹⁴ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1.301, 1.427–442.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 84–85. William Blake, “The Divine Image,” line 11, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1965; revised 1988).

¹⁶ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 85–86; *Aesthetics*, 1.301–302, 1.516–529.

¹⁷ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, 90, 92–93; *Aesthetics*, 1.505, 1.519–522, 1.530–539. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimona Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004).

¹⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1.243–244, 1.438, 2.994.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 15–87.

²⁰ Brian Massumi, “Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy,” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ix–xvi (ix).

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar, intro. Patricia W. Kitcher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 216, 234, 242, 254, 298, 459, 463.

²² Percy Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry", in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2002), 530.

²³ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 14–15, 17–19, 38–50.

²⁴ This is an oblique reference to the strange coda of Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (IFC Films, Sundance Films, 2011).

²⁵ Timothy Morton. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (unpublished book manuscript). Several talks about hyperobjects are archived at <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/p/talks-archive.html>, accessed October 7, 2011.

²⁶ Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (New York and London: Bantam, 1993), *Green Mars* (New York and London: Bantam, 1994), *Blue Mars* (New York and London: Bantam, 1997).

²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 116.

²⁸ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Huebsch, 1922), 11–12.

²⁹ Plato, *Ion*, tr. Benjamin Jowett (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1871), available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/ion.html>, accessed October 7, 2011.

³⁰ Petr Horava, "Quantum Gravity at a Lifshitz Point," arXiv:0901.3775v2 [hep-th], available at <http://arxiv.org/abs/0901.3775>, accessed October 7, 2011.

³¹ Felix Hess, *Air Pressure Fluctuations* (Berlin: Edition RZ, 2001).

³² Heidegger, "Origin" 26.

³³ Chögyam Trungpa, "Instead of Americanism Speak the English Language Properly," *The Elocution Home Study Course* (Boulder: Vajradhatu, 1983).

³⁴ Iain Thomson, "Heidegger's Aesthetics," in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>, accessed October 7, 2011. See also Iain Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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