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“A New Era of Scholarship”? *Hyperobjects* and Hyperobjects

Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World by TIMOTHY MORTON

U of Minnesota P, 2013 \$24.95

Reviewed by BART H. WELLING

It can be hard to figure out what to do with Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*. To begin with, the book is impossible to categorize—wonderfully so. One of Morton’s keywords can be applied to the book itself: it *phases* effortlessly back and forth between philosophical polemics, art and music criticism, literary theory, pop-cultural play, autobiographical reflection, meditations on quantum physics and ecology, and more. This impatience with disciplinary, generic, and nature/culture boundaries—and, indeed, with commonsensical views on the nature of reality—can make it difficult to evaluate some of Morton’s central claims. For instance, at one point he triumphantly declares that “[q]uantum theory positively guarantees that real objects exist!” This exuberance is refreshing, but, in order to accept major sections of Morton’s argument, non-scientists will have to take some of quantum theory’s strangest ideas on faith. Moreover, is quantum theory as “deeply congruent” with Morton’s brand of object-oriented ontology (OOO, also known as speculative realism) as he thinks it is? Is full interdisciplinary coherence possible between physics and ecology, art and philosophy? I’m still not sure. On a simpler note, many ecocritics would probably respond to Morton by pointing out that, unlike postmodern solipsists, we don’t need quantum physics to prove to us that real objects exist.

“Ah,” Morton would undoubtedly

fire back, “but that’s precisely why you need quantum theory—because you don’t understand what a real object *is!*” Beyond phasing through conventional boundaries between academic disciplines and rhetorical modes, *Hyperobjects* raises troubling questions about the most basic aspects of time and space, including tough questions about how we should think about and represent a) objects that are too small for our senses to perceive, and b) those that are too massive and long-“lived” for our minds to comprehend—i.e., hyperobjects. Morton’s OOO-inspired definition of “object” is itself highly debatable, especially because it includes human beings and animals. Morton is fond of making lists in which he playfully mixes humans, nonhuman creatures, and other “beings” that we normally don’t think of as such. “Sure, humans have infinite inner space,” he acknowledges,

But so do nonhumans . . . Some even find it in other “higher” primates, some in all sentient beings, and some (the real weirdos such as myself) in all beings whatsoever: eraser, black hole singularity, ceramic knife, molasses, slug.

Lists like these decentre human consciousness and foreground both the autonomy and the interconnectedness of all objects—not in a shallow, pop-ecological sense—but in a weird (another keyword) and uncanny way. Entities from the subatomic to the intergalactic level, including people, stick to each other like melting mirrors, warp spacetime at different rates, and inscribe themselves on and in each other, but also remain profoundly hidden from each other, thanks

to the gap between things and perceptions.

I mostly agree that this can be a productive way of thinking. *Hyperobjects* pushes the sustainability dictum “[t]here is no *away*” to perhaps the furthest possible extreme, forcing eco-thinkers not just to consider where their water comes from and where their garbage goes, but to own up to their role in promoting views of capital “N” Nature that have ironically contributed to the ravaging of the biosphere. Morton invites us to open ourselves to disorienting, frightening, and even humiliating (yet another keyword) face-to-face encounters with shadow hyperobjects, such as oil spills and plutonium waste, that Nature-lovers are deeply entangled with but have worked hard to disown; he also stages disorienting encounters with works of art that try to come to terms with hyperobjects, or that simulate their effects on the mind.

This is what Morton means by “the end of the world”: not some fiery, *future* cataclysm of the kind long foretold by environmentalists and doomsday cults, but the vertiginous realization that tidy categories like “world” and “nature” have *never* come anywhere near approximating the weird realities of existence. “The end of the world” is an experience in which we are stripped of “the false consciousness of gaps and backgrounds between and behind things.” Morton is a brilliant practitioner as well as theorist of what he calls the art of “attunement,” in which “[a]rt becomes a collaboration between humans and nonhumans,” and the artist opens herself or himself to “the end of the world” in an attempt to (re)create this experience in others. At many points throughout the book, Morton manages to produce the kinds of “massive, counterintuitive perspective shift[s]” that he admires in the work of artists as diverse as the band My

Bloody Valentine and the Australian Aboriginal painter Yukultji Napangati. “I’m not saying we need to uproot the trees,” he stresses; “I’m saying that we need to smash the aestheticization[.]” Unlike the Trinity nuclear test orchestrated by Robert Oppenheimer, whose infamous reference to the Bhagavad Gita (“I am become death, the shatterer of worlds”) supplies the epigraph to *Hyperobjects*, Morton’s world-shattering project could actually be good for the biosphere. Some false worlds clearly need to be shattered (I vote for TV commercials.)

Other worlds, however, can only be destroyed at a terrible cost. I hope that in the future Morton will more fully address the ethical, rhetorical, and political implications of categorizing people and nonhuman beings as “objects,” however much his definition differs from the common one. In the “mesocosm” we all inhabit, being an object means something very different for Western thinkers than it does for animals on factory farms, or for people like the Japanese victims of Oppenheimer’s labours, who deserve more attention than they get in *Hyperobjects*. While everyone and everything on Earth has been irradiated by nuclear fallout and affected by pollution and global warming to some degree, I hope that Morton will devote some more thought to the asymmetrical *socio*-ecological impacts of hyperobjects in what he calls the “Age of Asymmetry.” From a quantum theory perspective, Morton may be right that “‘distance’ is only a psychic and ideological construct designed to protect me from the nearness of things,” but there’s no question that distance is going to keep mattering in terms of environmental justice.

Furthermore, while quantum theory shows that human and nonhuman minds,

like everything else, are ultimately made of subatomic particles, and ecology shows that they are inextricably stuck in what Morton calls the “mesh” with hyperobjects like global warming, *minds* follow very different sets of rules than either quarks or tornadoes. Morton persuades me that attunement to hyperobjects is possible and sometimes even necessary, but surely this state can only be temporary. Wouldn’t permanent attunement entail total mental paralysis, psychosis, or death? Just as distance may be an illusion, it may be true that “the pencil you are holding in your fingers is only a rigid extended body on account of a false immediacy,” but where would we sentient life-forms be without our evolved ability to perceive distance, our faith in our normally adequate everyday experiences of the physical world? Leopards presumably do not pause while attacking gazelles to wonder whether surging adrenaline and the taste of blood are products of a “false immediacy”; quantum theorists most likely use pencils like everyone else. On the messy “mesocosmic” level of existence where we *feel* and *believe* that we spend our lives, concepts like “distance” and “lifeworld” are not false, and they aren’t just concepts, human or otherwise—they structure bodies, behaviours, communities, and cultures throughout the biosphere.

By extension, while schools of thought such as utilitarianism, process relationism, and even ecocriticism may break down, as Morton argues, when confronting quantum-level objects and hyperobjectual timescales, I believe that they still have much to offer when dealing with problems pertaining to nonhuman and human lifeworlds in what we take to be “real” spacetime. I hope that in his future work Morton will bring speculative realism

into dialogue with some form of *psychological* realism, and that one philosophical tradition not mentioned in his book—pragmatism—will receive plenty of attention. Morton displays an openness to this way of thinking in his description of one theoretical response to a hyperobject: the Nuclear Guardianship movement’s idea of encasing plutonium in gold. Not only would this approach transform a lethal, reviled substance into “an object of contemplation” and “a member of a democracy expanded beyond the human,” but, as Morton notes, gold “has the advantage of absorbing gamma rays.” This could be an aesthetically powerful *and* ecologically effective way of keeping the plutonium from contaminating the lifeworlds that will mean everything to our descendants and their nonhuman neighbours.

What should we do with *Hyperobjects*, and with hyperobjects themselves? Understandably, Morton seems conflicted on both counts. On one hand, he rejects constructivism, which he defines as the Wordsworthian view of the work of art as “a machine for upgrading the mind of the viewer.” Morton writes that “The wish of constructivism is an if-only: if only I could displace you enough, dear reader, the world would change.” This wish is misguided, he argues, in an era both of too much information and of hard-core denialism—and, of course, of hyperobjects that cannot be “solved,” especially not by the same logics and technologies that created them, and which thus expose human hypocrisy, weakness, and lameness (more keywords) at every turn. Art becomes “grief-work” rather than “PR for climate change,” and criticism becomes “attunement to the nonhuman,” a form of meditative practice, rather than activism. Art

the same time, doing nothing is not an option for the Prius-driving Morton, who also rejects cynicism, nihilism, and the radical environmentalist perspective on humans as a planetary virus that can only be “cured” via a mass die-off. The book frequently drops hints (such as the plutonium-in-gold example) about modes of action that, while they will inevitably be insufficient and wrong on some level, may be as imperative as saving a child from a speeding truck. And Morton clearly believes that thinking about hyperobjects constitutes one of these modes. If he refuses to give us confident ten-point “action plans” for dealing with hyperobjects—and this reticence, like the book’s exuberant weirdness, is itself admirable in an age of “endless maps and graphs”—he nonetheless adopts what looks very much like a constructivist stance vis-à-vis mainstream academic thought. “We are entering a new era of scholarship,” he announces in his final chapter, “where the point will not be to one-up each other by appealing to the trace of the givenness of the openness of the clearing of the lighting

of the being of the pencil.” *Hyperobjects* doesn’t tell us how to stop global warming, but it succeeds brilliantly as an act of intellectual provocation. It may not *shatter* the too-cozy lifeworlds of some contemporary scholars, but it will open up some cracks in these worlds and expose others that have been there all along. It phases, it sticks to you, it terrifies, it warps spacetime; in short, it measures up to its own definition of hyperobjects. Does it represent the beginning of a “new era of scholarship”? One can only hope.

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