

Why Art?
The Anthropocene, Ecocriticism,
and
Adorno's Concept of Natural Beauty

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Abstract

The article confronts contemporary ecocriticism with Adorno's concept of natural beauty. If ecocriticism may be understood as a reaction to climate change – the gravity of the situation turns the academic into an activist – a fundamental question often remains unanswered: why should we turn to art if we are facing ecological disaster? The article then presents Adorno's answer to this question, an answer that is closely tied to his theory of natural beauty. A crucial point in Adorno's discussion of nature is that we no longer have access to it. We are stuck in a second nature which deprives us of all contact with first nature. But the closest we can get to this absent nature is art, and more precisely natural beauty, which contains both a memory of something lost, and a promise of something yet to come. Therefore the aesthetic experience is a moment where the subject may approach something unknown – something which is not subject, not human – in a non-dominating way. In that sense art may be our best option to get out of the anthropocentrism which prevents us from even understanding the current situation. After a comparison with contemporary theorists like Timothy Morton and Claire Colebrook, the article finally turns to Andrei Tarkovsky's film *The Sacrifice* in order to illustrate what the strange combination of memory and promise in natural beauty may look like in practice.

Keywords

natural beauty, second nature, promise, memory, déjà vu, truth content, Timothy Morton, Claire Colebrook, Andrei Tarkovsky

1.

Climate change has become undeniable. Today you would have to be the American president not to see the problem. And the problem, in short, is that the changes in the climate are inflicted by us. That is: natural changes are caused by culture. This is, in short, what *the Anthropocene* is all about. There are of course various opinions on how this concept is to be defined and valued, when it started and so on, but so much is clear: actions of human beings (industrialism, burning of coal and oil, nuclear bomb-tests, etc.) have provoked changes on a planetary scale.

This has consequences also in the context of the humanities. If even geology is affected by mankind, it seems like the whole relation between *history* and *nature* has to be rethought. As the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it in his influential article “The Climate of History: Four Theses”: “[...] anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history.”¹ What was regarded as a necessary, natural condition, underlying the contingent changes of history, now appears to be an effect of human history.

In literary studies, this new awareness has also had a growing impact. The main expression of this is the rise of fields such as environmental studies and ecocriticism. These disciplines are, in themselves, a response to the environmental threats, a reaction to the historical situation. “Ecocriticism

takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature”, Cheryl Glotfelty states in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* published in 1996. “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. [...] ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.”² This was perhaps not as new as the scholars involved would like it to be – that nature and culture are intertwined had been said before, and earth-centred perspectives were hardly that new either. What distinguished the ecocriticism arising in the 1980s and 90s was rather, I would argue, a sense of urgency or responsibility, certain ethical obligation to *do something*. As Glotfelty puts it in her introduction: “How then can we contribute to environmental restoration, not just in our spare time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature?”³

Two decades later, it is hard *not* to understand this need to do something, at the same time as it is hard not to see certain naivety in this will to contribute. Quite logically, due to the growing awareness of climate change, the political or activist aspect of ecocriticism – or rather ecological research in general – appears to have become both more central and more questioned since then. “Environmental readings of literature and culture may need to engage more directly with delusions of self-importance in their practice, keeping alert to the need for more direct kinds of activism”, Timothy Clark writes in the concluding paragraph of his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, published in 2015. “This is a challenge for any sort of activism,

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009), 201.

² Cheryl Glotfelty, “Introduction”, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xix, xviii.

³ Glotfelty, xxi.

but especially for one that limits itself to the realm of cultural representations.”⁴ The underlying assumption is quite clear: the historical situation, named the Anthropocene, necessarily turns the academic into an activist. (A famous example is the American climatologist James Hansen, who became an activist as a result of his research on climate change.⁵) This may be problematic and delusive, just as Clark indicates, and yet he argues that it is unavoidable, given the severity of the situation.

From an Adornian perspective, this is an interesting development for several reasons. First, since the breakdown of the nature/history-dichotomy is very much in accordance with an argument that occupied Adorno throughout his life. Second, since the question of activism in current ecocriticism relates directly to the discussion of theory and activism in which Adorno was deeply involved in the days of the student protests of the late 1960s. And third, since the *importance given to art* and literature in ecocriticism is also strongly reminiscent of Adorno’s position.

What I want to discuss here indirectly concerns all these points, but primarily the last one: in which sense does art have a privileged position regarding our possibilities to face and perhaps combat climate change? *Why turn to art if we want to stop global warming?* I believe that these questions are taken for granted rather than answered in ecocriticism in general.

⁴ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 198.

⁵ See Justin Gillis, “James Hansen, Climate Scientist Turned Activist, Criticizes Paris Talks”, *The New York Times*, December 2, 2015; James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), xii.

This is problematic, and I will return to the problem at the end of my essay. First, I will turn to Adorno, since I believe that he actually *does* present a very thorough and still relevant answer to this question: why should we study visual arts, music, literature or film when facing ecological disaster?

2.

According to Chakrabarty, the history/nature-opposition may be traced back to Vico’s distinction between God’s knowledge (of Nature) and human knowledge (of civil institutions).

This Viconian understanding was to become a part of the historian’s common sense in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It made its way into Marx’s famous utterance that ‘men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please’ and into the title of the Marxist archaeologist V. Gordon Childe’s well-known book, *Man Makes Himself*.⁶

Ever since, nature and history have been treated as two separate spheres, and the natural sciences and the humanities as the forms of knowledge corresponding to them.

Already in his lecture “The Idea of Natural History” from 1932, Adorno talks about the need to get out of this understanding: “[...] the real intention here is to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history. [...] I am pursuing the intention of pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference.”⁷ The

⁶ Chakrabarty, 202.

⁷ T. W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History”, trans. Bob Hultot-Kentor, in *Telos*, June, 20 (1984), 111; “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte”, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), 345.

opposition between nature and history should be overcome. Why is that so important? Because, as he later argues in *Negative Dialectics*, the antithesis is both true and false. True in the sense that this is what “nature” has *become*: the realm of stability and passivity, as opposed to development, agency and morality (history), not just conceptually, but in the way we understand and interact with these entities in our daily life. But it is also false, in the sense that the categories are hiding a reality that is more dynamic, ambivalent, dialectical.⁸ If Critical Theory aims at changing the state of things, this antithesis is hence one of the most fundamental aspects to rethink. One might even say that it is a central task of Critical Theory to disclose this dialectic.

The place where this critical effort is conducted with most verve is arguably *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As Sabine Wilke puts it: “What Horkheimer and Adorno are proposing is nothing less than a revision of the history of ideas as a history of the destruction of nature – a critical counterpart to the philosophy of idealism.”⁹ The dialectic of enlightenment could hence just as well be described as the dialectic of nature. For if the Enlightenment was the liberation from nature (which, to Wilke, simultaneously meant the destruction of nature) it also maintained or even reproduced the earlier oppression; the destruction is just a continuation of what was destroyed. Or as Horkheimer and Adorno formulates it in the foreword to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “[...] the subjugation of everything natural to the autocratic subject culminates in the domination

⁸ T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London & New York: Routledge, 1973) 358; *Negative Dialektik*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), 351.

⁹ Sabine Wilke, “Enlightenment, Dialectic, and the Anthropocene: Bruised Nature and the Residues of Freedom”, *Telos*, 177 (Winter 2016), 97.

of what is blindly objective and natural.”¹⁰ In that sense we are still slaves under the spell of nature which the subjective domination was meant to wipe out.

Up to a certain point this well-known argument coincides with a prevalent notion of how modernity amounts to the exploitation and oppression of nature. Examples of this are Carolyn Merchant's books *The Death of Nature* and *The Ecological Revolutions* published a decade after Adorno's death. In short, something is lost, nature is dead, due to a mechanistic form of rationality that started with the scientific revolution in the 17th century. But to Merchant nature is nonetheless *still there*, as something real. At least in the sense that it still makes sense to talk about it as something that women have a special bond with, something that may be controlled or preserved, something that hopefully will “survive”, as the very last word of her book hopes.¹¹

Today, with the advent of climate change or, if you like, “the Anthropocene”, her argument may appear to be more relevant than ever. The hope she expresses has perhaps weakened – since we are all beginning to realize the gravity of the situation – and yet her way of understanding nature has arguably taken over in the public debate: every day we are told that we must save the planet; every politician is talking about

¹⁰ Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xviii. Translation altered; *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1981), 17.

¹¹ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 295; see also Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 264.

sustainable development; celebrities are campaigning, and the commercial sector tries to persuade us that there is such a thing as ecological consumption. It is hard to see any reason to be against this, but there are certainly reasons to question the concept of nature that is implied here: the idea of nature as *something to save*.

Intuitively it is of course better to try to save nature than to exploit it (in search of oil, gas, uranium, wood, bauxite and so on), and yet one may argue that in this context it amounts to the same thing: in both cases nature remains a passive object for our actions (care or use). In that perspective, the urge to save nature has less to do with nature, than with what Adorno, following Hegel and Lukacs, calls second nature, “the negation of whatever might be thought of as a first nature”.¹² Adorno goes as far as saying that “[t]here is not even the possibility of something outside it becoming visible, something that is not caught up in the general inclusiveness”.¹³ We’re simply trapped in second nature – a web of social mechanisms that are so old so they appear natural – just as we’re trapped in the text according to Derrida.

But what, in that case, is “first” nature? And how should we understand our concern for and delight in nature in the traditional sense? If the first question is a tricky one, Adorno actually has a concrete answer to the second one: “Delight in nature was bound up with the conception of the subject as being-for-itself and virtually infinite in itself; as such the subject projected itself onto nature and in its isolation felt

¹² T. W. Adorno, “Lecture 14. The History of Nature (II)”, in *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–65*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006) 120.

¹³ “Lecture 14. The History of Nature (II)”, 121.

close to it; the subject’s powerlessness in a society petrified into a second nature becomes the motor of the flight into a purportedly first nature.”¹⁴ This remark, taken from the chapter on Natural Beauty in *Aesthetic Theory*, is interesting since it illuminates the difference from the current urge to “save nature”. In the latter case, “nature” is often exemplified by the dying coral reefs, drowning polar bears or devastated forests in the Amazon. The picture could not be clearer: nature is on the verge of extinction due to our consumption, flying and burning of oil. That is: culture is killing nature. Accordingly, we have to save it, save nature, save the planet, etc.

From Adorno’s perspective, this urge or angst could be understood as just another version of our delight in nature. They are both directed to a nature “over there” – the forests, the lakes, the wild animals – and are, thereby, both symptoms of our imprisonment in second nature. To be more concrete: what I experience or enjoy when I go out in the Swedish wilderness is, strictly speaking, not nature as such, but a projection of my own condition in society. Since the subject I am is not only free and autonomous, but also, as a part of society, inhibited and repressed, “nature” becomes an image of another condition, a picture of a condition where the subject is reconciled with the surroundings. The same goes for the concern for polar bears and pandas. The “subject’s powerlessness” is simply projected onto what we regard as powerless and organic, as Adorno describes it. The problem is that our anguish – notwithstanding its aptness – therefore reinforces the opposition that actually caused the problems.

¹⁴ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London & New York: Continuum, 1997), 65; *Ästhetische Theorie*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970) (hereafter GS 7), 103.

The false dichotomy (nature/history) is not threatened at all; on the contrary it is maintained through our unease.

But if nature, as Andrew Bowie puts it, is “not something that is simply given” to Adorno, neither can it be described as just a construction.¹⁵ Although the word “construction” (*Konstruktion*) does play a role in *Aesthetic Theory*, it is not in that poststructuralist sense. Actually, the term “semblance” (*Schein*) is more relevant here: semblance stands for something that is true in the sense that it negates “all false being-in-itself”.¹⁶ What appears to be there, “in-itself”, is merely an appearance, a semblance of self-identity. It is important to understand, however, that *Schein* does not denote something non-existent (like “simulacrum”) to Adorno; it is rather the case that semblance implies that something makes itself known in its absence.

This logic is important to the argument in *Aesthetic Theory*, and more precisely in the chapter on Natural beauty. It may be surprising that this category is given such an importance in a book written during the era of pop-art, postmodernism, student protests, second-wave feminism, the golden age of television, etc. This is something Adorno is very much aware of. In his own account of art history, natural beauty was replaced by art beauty a long time ago, but on a closer look, things are not that simple. Of course, in a trivial sense natural beauty is outdated – art is no longer occupied with beautiful landscapes – but that does not mean that natural beauty has been surpassed, it has rather been *repressed*.

¹⁵ Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 87; see also Camilla Flodin, “Adorno and Schelling on the art–nature relation”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2018), 191–93.

¹⁶ *Aesthetic Theory*, 108; GS 7, 165–66.

And what is repressed is, as psychoanalysis has taught us, not necessarily gone – “The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound” Adorno writes.¹⁷ Apparently, there is something here that both hurts (something has once been damaged, and it is still not healed) and causes pleasure (beauty). This paradox is directly linked to the contradiction that is inherent in the mastery over nature from Adorno’s viewpoint. In short, nature is something we have learned to master to such an extent that it is almost obliterated. We no longer have any access to nature.

The point with natural beauty is that it contains a *memory* of this loss. This means that natural beauty is a memory of “a condition free from domination”.¹⁸ In other words, it is connected with a condition *before* it all began, before the Enlightenment and the mastery of nature (a condition which nevertheless has not existed in the form we, or the bourgeois consciousness, pictures it). This is not all however. At the same time, natural beauty contains a *promise* of freedom, that is, a possibility *yet to come*.

How should this ambivalence be understood? What are the grounds for it? That natural beauty contains a memory is perhaps not that strange, even though that argument points in a rather conservative direction. Nature must then be understood as a lost origin, something that is still there (as in Merchant), deep down, beneath all progress; something that could be sensed only in the aesthetic experience. But then again, there is also, in natural beauty, a promise, something to hope for, something yet to come. Natural beauty contains an

¹⁷ *Aesthetic Theory*, 61–2; GS 7, 98.

¹⁸ *Aesthetic Theory*, 66 (translation altered); GS 7, 105.

opening towards something that we still do not recognize, something constantly waiting to spring forth.

Seen from another perspective, all this has to do with what Adorno describes as a hubris of the spirit, a hubris of the autonomous subject, represented by Kant and Hegel.¹⁹ That art beauty has replaced natural beauty means, in short, that beauty, which once used to reside in the landscapes, plants or bodies, turned into something produced by the subjects. The subject became free to invent the beautiful, so to speak. In that sense, the aesthetic development mirrors the technical development in society at large: everything is subordinated under the free subject. Or, that was how it appeared at least. For, if everything became matter to the actions of the “free” subject, the subject also lost contact not only with everything material, but also with itself. For the point is that what is regarded as a mute and passive material is not after all as mute as the subject thinks. Or conversely, as subjects we are not as detached from the passive material as we may believe. As Deborah Cook puts it: “Freedom presupposes the ability to act, but individuals can act only because they are also material, physical things, inhabiting specific social and historical contexts.”²⁰

But, this is where art becomes interesting in relation to the Anthropocene: what Adorno designates as the hubris of

¹⁹ *Aesthetic Theory*, 62, 72; GS 7, 98, 113.

²⁰ Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 38. Or as Adorno formulates it himself in the short essay “On Subject and Object”: the “difference between subject and object slices through subject as well as through object”. T. W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 256; “Zu Subjekt und Objekt,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 755.

the subject is arguably what has caused global warming, the effects of which we are starting to experience today. In contrast to conceptual thinking, art is a comportment that still contains, not nature in itself, but traces of this nature, nature in its absence (remember the “wound”). If nature is gone, art now “stands in for” it, states Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*.²¹ What does this “stands in for” mean? It certainly does not mean that art should portray nature. “The green forest of German impressionism is of no higher dignity than those views of the Königssee painted for hotel lobbies”.²² It means, rather, that the memory/promise that nature contained is now preserved in the artwork. The nature that is addressed here is obviously less of an organic reality, and more of a utopian possibility, something that exceeds all our notions of what is “natural” and so on. To “stand in for” nature is, hence, to reach an expression, a language, beyond all ideology about nature.

In an interesting passage, Adorno talks about a feeling of déjà vu through which the experience of nature is related to allegory: “Natural beauty is suspended history, a moment of becoming at a standstill. Artworks that resonate with this moment of suspension are those that are justly said to have a feeling for nature. Yet this feeling is – in spite of every affinity to allegorical interpretation – fleeting to the point of déjà vu and is no doubt all the more compelling for its ephemerality.”²³ How should this enigmatic comment be understood? It becomes a little bit more accessible if one relates it to a passage in the essay on Kafka where the enigmatical character of his work is discussed. There too, Adorno is talking about a “permanent déjà vu” and a promise

²¹ *Aesthetic Theory*, 66; GS 7, 104.

²² *Aesthetic Theory*, 67; GS 7, 105.

²³ *Aesthetic Theory*, 71; GS 7, 111.

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of something *more*, of a meaning that exceeds what is there, a promise that is not fulfilled (since Kafka's parables are not allegories after all – the meaning that they promise is lacking).²⁴ So, the form of the experience is the same: the subject is drawn by a promise of something more, but since there is no more than what is to be seen, one is thrown back on the facticity or literalness one started out from – hence the *déjà vu*.

Against this background, the combination of memory and promise touched upon before becomes more understandable. For is the *déjà vu* not actually the very form of experience of the the paradoxical absence of nature: something that simultaneously is “no longer” and “not yet”? The strange movement at the core of the aesthetic experience is, hence, actually passed on from the experience of nature – the *déjà vu* is the same, the rupture is the same. If art beauty has replaced natural beauty as Adorno argues, that change is, in this perspective, less remarkable than one might think. Art beauty may thus be understood as an imitation of natural beauty. The wound is still there, even though we may have forgotten about it. Nature is no longer – therefore it is important, and hence art is necessary.

But why is natural beauty described as “*suspended history*”? Apparently, something is brought to “a standstill”, something appears – nature? – but is simultaneously withdrawn. Wouldn't it actually make sense to understand this suspension of history in the aesthetic experience as the

²⁴ T. W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka”, in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 246; “Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka”, in: *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.1 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 255.

antithesis to the disappearance of nature that characterizes enlightenment at large? Due to the continuous rationalization, everything becomes second nature, i.e. something which appears to be necessary, impossible to change. It is this character, this illusion, that is broken in the experience of natural beauty: for a moment it becomes clear that everything could be different. History is suspended. There is a promise of something else.

This also implies that the concept of (first) nature ends up close to the “truth content” (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) that every artwork contains according to Adorno. At the end of the chapter on natural beauty, this actually becomes explicit:

Mediate nature [Natur Mittelbar], the truth content of art, takes shape, immediately, as the opposite of nature. If the language of nature is mute, art seeks to make this muteness eloquent; art thus exposes itself to failure through the insurmountable contradiction between the idea of making the mute eloquent, which demands a desperate effort, and the idea of what this effort would amount to, the idea of what cannot in any way be willed.²⁵

As always there are a number of contradictions here. On the one hand, there is a *language*, and on the other hand, this language is *mute*. This muteness should be made eloquent, which takes an enormous *effort*, but at the same time there is something about this that cannot be willed, that is *unintentional*...

If we read this remark on natural beauty against the background of the hubris of the subject, it makes more sense. In contrast to the hubris, where everything is subordinated

²⁵ *Aesthetic Theory*, 78; GS 7, 122.

under the subject – which accordingly forgets that it is also an object, nature, material (this oblivion is what that hubris is about) – here the subject meets that which is not subject, not human in a non-dominating way. What is that? It is a language, Adorno states. A language which is simultaneously a muteness. It belongs to nature but exists only in the artwork. In order to reach it one has to lose oneself, break down in order to reach a sensibility which is not one's own. Accordingly, at the heart of the aesthetic experience there is a crucial passivity which corresponds to an activity not met before. Another way to put it is that the subject confronts objectivity as if this objectivity were a subject. The subject is thus *confronted* just as much as the other way around. The object is looking back – for a moment its blindness is overcome.²⁶

This is the closest we can get to the presence of an absent nature, a nature which immediately turns into its opposite when it takes shape. The place where this is possible, where this fluid or illusive thing called “nature” is maintained, and in one sense made present, is the artwork.

3.

I started out with the question that ecocriticism in general tends to neglect: why is literature, or art in general, important in relation to climate change? Or, put differently:

²⁶ In “The Essay as Form” Adorno writes that the essay “is concerned with what is blind in its objects”. To overcome this blindness would mean to make the objects *seeing* rather than transparent. “The Essay as Form”, in *Notes to Literature* vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 23; “Der Essay als Form”, in: *Noten zur Literatur. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), 33.

why should literary scholars bother at all about problems regarding nature (climate change, pollution, nuclear waste, etc.), in their role as scholars? The answers that are normally given (that poetry may sharpen our senses, that art contains a different kind of knowledge, that it is a way to store energy, that it may be a call for action,²⁷ etc.) are not necessarily false; it is just that they on the whole are too vague, too general, and above all that they tend to rely firstly on the assumption that literature belongs to the good powers, and secondly that “nature” is something “out there”, in need of our help.²⁸ They are simply parts of an old idealist notion of literature, without acknowledging it. The risk, therefore, is that they end up in moralist claims or wishful thinking of different kinds. Also, these analyses mostly tend to confirm what we already knew, namely that there are alarming threats to the ecological system, that the future of mankind is dark if nothing radical is done, that plants and animals deserve to be listened to, etc.

One problem with this is that we do not really need literary scholarship to know this, we do not even need literature. Another problem is that these ideas just tend to maintain and strengthen the crucial dichotomies behind the problems: culture/nature, man/environment, subject/object, active/passive, developed/undeveloped, etc. Hence one may

²⁷ William Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 108; Patrick D. Murphy, *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures* (Lanham, Boulder, New York & London: Lexington Books, 2015), 8; Peter Degerman, *Tala för det gröna i lövet: Ekopoesi som estetik och aktivism* (Lund: Ellerströms förlag, 2018), 277.

²⁸ This is basically Timothy Morton's point, in asking “what all this nature writing is *for*”. He answers the question himself: to evoke the idea of a nature “over there”. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 70, 160.

argue that ecocriticism actually contributes to the image of Man as the saviour, based on the assumption that Nature is something in need of being saved. In that perspective, the form of “Naturbeherrschung” that has characterized the enlightenment from the very beginning is, ironically enough, prolonged and strengthened through the ecocritical aspirations we see today. Notwithstanding its good intentions, the unconscious but primary aim is, I would argue, to preserve the image of *humankind* or *the individual* as active, in control (“How can we save the planet?” “What can You do?”) and *nature* as passive, in need of help (“Donate money to save the climate!”).

And nevertheless, global warming is not fake news. In a very simple sense, the Anthropocene is undeniable, no matter how we designate it, regardless if it started with the birth of agriculture, with the industrialization, or perhaps with the emergence of “the technosphere”.²⁹ And that this harsh reality is caused by the “subjective hubris” Adorno talks about is also rather evident. But then things start to become complicated. For is not the very *notion* of the Anthropocene in itself, the *discourse* reproducing the idea, also an expression of this hubris? Does it not, as Chakrabarty argues, confuse the apocalypse of humanity with the apocalypse of the planet? “For, ultimately, what the warming of the planet threatens is not the geological planet itself but the very conditions, both biological and geological, on which the survival of human life as developed in the Holocene period depends.”³⁰ The situation

²⁹ See Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 38–59; Clark, 1–3; Peter Haff, “Humans and technology in the Anthropocene: Six rules”, in *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 1(2) (2014), 127.

³⁰ Chakrabarty, 213.

is certainly grave – temperature is rising, a large number of species are being extinct, and it may very well be the case that humanity as we know it is threatened, millions of concrete human beings certainly are – but it is not, after all, planet Earth that is going under.

The problem with the notion of the Anthropocene (or, for that sake, the Capitalocene, the Econocene, the Technocene, etc), from that viewpoint, is that the discourse around it aspires to take responsibility for the Earth, but in fact just projects the historical situation of Man on the rest of the planet. As Donna Haraway puts it, the “story of Species of Man as the agent of the Anthropocene is an almost laughable rerun of the great phallic humanizing and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on superpowers in his secular-sacred ascent, only to end in tragic detumescence, once again.”³¹ Hence one might ask whether the Anthropocene really signifies an objective change (as the scientists argue), and not merely a subjective one. From a human perspective something is happening, but objectively? As Chris D. Thomas puts it: “Nature just happens, and the distribution of species change – no slice of time has any more or less merit than any other.”³² Species come and go. Planets

³¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016), 47.

³² Chris D. Thomas, *Inheritors of the Earth: How Nature Is Thriving in an Age of Extinction* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), 218. While some researchers, like Elizabeth Kolbert, argue that a massive extinction is taking place right in front of our eyes, Thomas means that this “extinction” also brings with it new life too. In his opinion there is no “ought to” regarding nature. I won’t enter more deeply into this discussion. See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014); Chris D. Thomas, *Inheritors of the Earth: How Nature Is Thriving in an Age of Extinction* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), 218.

come and go. Stars light up and darken. Disaster has, as Haraway points out, “already come, decades and centuries ago, and it has not stopped”.³³ In that perspective, the Anthropocene is just one catastrophe among many (which doesn’t mean that it’s not disastrous to the species affected, above all *homo sapiens*, and that we should not do everything to avoid it). Maybe it is not even the only one going on right now, as Timothy Morton argues: “[...] the Anthropocene is a small region of the Bacteriocene, which is a small region of the Cyanidocene, and so on”.³⁴ The mistake, in other words, is that we confuse life with human life. With Claire Colebrook’s formulation, “[h]umanity has been fabricated as the proper ground of all life – so much so that threats to all life on earth are being dealt with today by focusing on how man may adapt, mitigate and survive.”³⁵

One way to make sense of the Anthropocene against this background, and from an Adornian perspective, is to understand it as a glimpse of (first) nature. Finally it becomes evident to us that nature is something more than green meadows and dying polar-bears. Nature is what cannot be controlled, whilst it simultaneously is produced by our failed attempts to do exactly that – control “nature”. Hence one might say that “the Anthropocene” is the event where nature and second nature converge. This would imply a change in the relation between history and nature, a changed sense of time. While Adorno, as we have seen, configured nature as a not yet / no longer, Morton, in his discussion of the Anthropocene,

talks about an “always-already”.³⁶ As if nature had finally arrived. Or rather, as if we could finally sense it.

Why then – to return to the question once more – turn to art? Because art is the place where this event may be understood. Because art contains another comportment than the *Naturbeherrschung* that brought us here. If ecocriticism is an academic form of activism, of “doing something”, the point, from an Adornian perspective, would be to find a way of getting out of the demand for action, without resigning to the way things are. This is what art provides: *a possibility of an action that is also a passivity*. Besides, art is our best option to get out of the anthropocentrism which prevents us from even understanding the situation. In other words, as Adorno argues, art harbors a possibility to connect to this nature-to-come. Art does contain exclusive *traces* of what is lost – traces which are possibilities of reconciliation as much as warnings of the fragility of our “freedom” – and the aesthetic experience is a way of coping with that loss, this promise. The traces of nature have nothing to do with the themes or content of literature. It is rather as a practice that art offers a means to approach nature: through the dialectic of subject and object in the aesthetic experience, art has a unique possibility to give expression to what is unknown and unintended – we may call it “nature”, something which turns into its opposite as soon as it takes shape.

One might compare this with Colebrook’s comment about the “ambivalent status of art”: on the one hand, art is the humanist expression par excellence; on the other hand, art is interesting since it may be understood as “the persistence of

³³ Haraway, 86.

³⁴ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 70.

³⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction*, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 142.

³⁶ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 81.

sensations and matters that cannot be reduced to human intentionality”.³⁷ This is very close to Adorno’s view – I would even say that it sheds light on a non-anthropocentric aspect that is present in his aesthetic theory. It is there when he talks, in the quotation above (on page 71), about making the muteness of art eloquent. What Adorno opens up is a possibility for the subject to experience itself as object, and correspondingly to face the subjecthood of objectivity. Or, put differently: the form of experience that art conditions, an exclusive experience, is one that may still meet nature in a nonviolent way; that is, encounter nature as something unknown and not just as an ideological product. To Adorno, this is actually what art is all about.

From that perspective, perhaps the step from natural beauty to art beauty did not change that much after all. It has taken us further away from nature, but at the same time it has preserved an ecological comportment through the passivity in the aesthetic experience.

4.

There is a scene towards the end of Andrei Tarkovsky’s film, *The Sacrifice*, where the protagonist wakes up alone in a room after what could be either a terrible nightmare or the apocalypse. He gets up. Confused. Walks into a piano, stumbles around. He looks at a cupboard, walks up to it and opens it. Inside there is a mirror and a hi-fi-equipment. He switches it off and the discrete flute music we have been hearing throughout the whole scene, and a large part of the film, stops.

He sees himself in the mirror. Everything becomes silent. Or, not really. Birds are singing.

This abrupt silence is very surprising. As a viewer you suddenly have the sensation of being on the same level as the person in the fiction: after all, the music stops both for him and for us. It is as if we are experiencing the end of an illusion, an awakening from a strange dream. A narratologist might describe it as a “metalepsis”; with Adorno, one could say that the music, an aspect of the form, suddenly appears as content, as something taking place in the fictive universe, originating from a hi-fi-equipment in the film.

What does this have to do with the question of nature and the Anthropocene? Actually, quite a lot. Before this scene, the characters have been immersed in the music as if it were a transcendental condition, and hence not there for them to hear. But then, suddenly, the protagonist hears it. This is the miracle of the scene: that the protagonist may sense the form of his fictive universe. As spectators, existing outside of the film, we have heard the music all along. Or have we really? Was it not part of the filmic convention that we took for granted – a second nature? Is it not in fact *only afterwards*, when the stereo is turned off, that we can really “hear” it? But what is it in that case that we hear or experience? A memory, a lost possibility of really *being part* of this music, a memory of an immediacy which is inevitably gone... But nonetheless we also experience a possibility, almost a promise. Of what? Of true music? Of this very immediacy, this presence beyond our control, this being immersed in something, a presence which nevertheless presupposes our subjective being... Is it not the *no longer / not yet* of natural beauty, described by Adorno, that appears here?

³⁷ Colebrook, 142.

Before this scene, the big disaster was about to arrive. The nuclear war (or something like it) had started. All hope was gone. Everything was coming to an end (just like in the Anthropocene, only at much greater speed), everyone was in despair. It was from those circumstances, from that nightmare, that the protagonist woke up. The fact that the music is there in the scene, that it can both be heard and turned off, means that the Apocalypse did not take place after all. The nightmare is over, he is back in reality (the pain of stumbling into the table and seeing himself in the mirror confirms it) – life goes on. What appears is a reconciled world.

Or is it? After this scene, the protagonist burns down the house. Does he go mad? Was the whole experience just too much to bear? In any case, it takes a disaster for all this to happen, for nature to appear. One could actually argue that the appearance of nature and the disaster are two sides of the same coin. The threat – that was removed by a sacrifice – was the premise for this appearance to occur, for the reconciliation to become perceptible.

“Authentic artworks, which hold fast to the idea of reconciliation with nature by making themselves completely a second nature, have consistently felt the urge, as if in need of a breath of fresh air, to step outside of themselves” Adorno writes.³⁸ There is indeed something of that fresh air in this scene.

³⁸ *Aesthetic Theory*, 63; GS 7, 100.

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