The spectre

A spectre is haunting humanity. Or rather, it is haunting every human effort to establish humanity as central, foundational, and of ultimate consequence in the world. That spectre is reality itself, a reality that supersedes, trumps, and outwits all our ideas about it.

This spectre of reality is not exactly humanity’s shadow. It is more the other way around: reality has become shadowed by a humanity, an *Anthropos*, that thinks itself real and reality a mere shadow. As the fossil-fueled sun that has powered the rise of this entity begins its long descending arc, this humanity-shaped shadow lengthens, and the Anthropos finds itself taken aback, thinking: what spectre is this, in a world we thought had no more spectres?

“The Anthropocene” is an attempt to name this situation—this reversible shadowing of humanity and reality—while, at the same time, maintaining the centrality of the humanity that is haunted by it. In thinking it can perform this double task—to recognize the realism of a reality that will overcome and bury it, as the Anthropocene will sink one day beneath the next layer of geologies to come, and to simultaneously name itself, humanity, the *Anthropos*, as the central actor in its drama—the Anthropocene is a contradiction.
The task for a true realist in Anthropocenic times is to unveil this contradiction, to expose it for what it is. The realist’s task in the shadow of the Anthropocene — the task of the shadow of the Anthropocene, for those who align with that shadow — is to bury the Anthropocene, if not literally, then at least conceptually. It is to develop a conception, and an accompanying attitude and emotional stance, through which the empire of the Anthropocene can be undermined by the larger reality that undergirds it, makes it possible, and will ultimately overtake it. The only question for the undertaker-realist is how best to do that and what quality of compost to leave behind with that burial.

“The Anthropocene” names an event that is ultimately not an event at all. It is an Event of the highest, or deepest, order — an order of a burial, a burial that already knows its future as a layer among layers on a planet of sleepy layers, and in a universe that forgives, forgets, and subsumes them all. This is the geological truth that is harbored within the Event of the Anthropocene. (I’ll have more to say about Events soon enough. But for starters, let us say that an Event is a momentous occurrence that has not quite occurred, and perhaps cannot occur, yet which displaces reality even in its non-occurrence.)

Why is Anthropocenic burial a task for realists? Who is a realist today?

Realism, in the way I will use the term, is not a belief that one knows the nature of reality and that it is such and such. Nor is it even a belief that the nature of reality is knowable at all. Rather, the realism I propose is a belief in a reality that outwits and exceeds us, and a belief that it always will. It is a tempered and humbled belief in a crossed-out Real, a Real under erasure. Such a Realism acknowledges its own incapacity to specify the reality in which it believes, and to thereby account for its own realism. It is the belief of an optimist who cannot name the reason for her optimism, nor even be certain that it isn’t folly. She can only speculate, knowing full well that the end of her speculation is likely to be quiet and inconsequential. No tragedy, no comedy. No grand finale or victorious homecoming. Just something beyond. Such is Speculative Realism for our time.
What follows is a series of philosophical engagements, conceptual proposals in effect, that proceed from such a realism—engagements with the challenges of the Anthropocene and with certain philosophical efforts to address those challenges. The realism I propose is an eco-realism because, like the science of ecology, it engages with the relations between things (and between humans and other things) in their thickly entangled and interdependent complexities. And it is an *immanent* realism, one that finds the tools for unmaking the master’s house already present, all around, in the master’s house. As I will explain, however, the house is not really a house, the master not a master, and objects not really objects. We live in a world of events within which we find ourselves always already poised to act; the question is how to do so.

The philosophical efforts with which I contend and engage include the object-oriented ontology of Graham Harman, the transcendental materialism of Slavoj Žižek, the critical post-secularism of Charles Taylor, the immanent naturalism of William Connolly, and the ontological pluralisms of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour. The tools I apply are those from the philosophical tradition I identify as “process-relational”—a tradition that harkens back to ancient Greek, Indian, and Chinese metaphysicians, and that winds its way through history to the processual pragmatisms of Charles Sanders Peirce, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze, among others.

The philosophical positions are less important than what they offer for living. That is what this book, and especially its second section, attempts to outline.

The first part presents the basic contours of a process-relational understanding of reality, a view that takes reality to be ceaselessly creative, semiotic, and “morphogenetic” in the sense that its forms are perpetually being generated through the relational acts of its constituent members.

The book’s second part, aided and abetted by a practical psychology developed from Buddhist and other sources, offers a guide for slicing into a moment of reality so as to be able to genuinely *act* in it. The point of that section is to help us develop an
attitude appropriate to our historical moment, and especially to address the crisis of agency that is very much a part of that moment—an attitude that would allow us to “slice through” this moment of the Anthropocene so as to act in ways that would bury it effectively and lovingly. Burial is, of course, never only a matter of covering over, or of overcoming; it is always also a matter of rearranging and of mixing together into a larger, deeper, and more mysterious set of vital substances. The question, then, is how to contribute to what kind of rearrangement.

The third and final part fills out the picture by examining the role of images and meanings—the sorts of things that cultural beings like us spend our lives debating, negotiating, and fighting over, as we collectively constitute our common worlds. If, as I will argue, we are cultural beings who dwell in and through images and the meanings they carry, then the Anthropocene is for us also a crisis of imagery, meaning, and culture. There is no way to bury it—together, lovingly and mercifully—without recognizing the diversity of relations humans have with their images, their icons, and their gods. This part proposes an “iconophilic” approach to the diversity of those gods and other entities that serve as the vehicles or mediators of creative agency in times of crisis.

Together, these three efforts follow a triadic structure whose rationale is articulated early on in the book and developed throughout. The parts need not be read in sequence. Readers more interested in philosophical debates around the process-relational perspective and its alternatives may find the practical “tool kit” of Part Two distracting. Others who find the overall theoretical armature difficult to follow, but who are seeking for a practical “therapeutics”—what I call a “logo-ethico-aesthetics” to apply in one’s daily life—may find Part Two of particular interest (and may wish to supplement it with the exercises found

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in Appendix 3). Those more interested in debates over culture, “post-secularism,” and the messy world of “multiple modernities” and hetero-globalizations may find the arguments of Part Three more provocative. In any case, it is okay to skip around between the parts, getting enough of a foothold in one before moving on to another. But each part yields the most when read from start to finish.

Taken collectively, the three parts of this book make up my attempt at a manual for living, thoughtfully and reflectively, in the shadow of the Anthropocene.