

Environmental Humanities 1 (2012) 7-21
www.environmentalhumanities.org
ISSN: 2201-1919



The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness

Timothy Morton

Department of English, Rice University, USA

ABSTRACT The Anthropocene is the radical intersection of human history and geological time. Humans have belatedly realised that they have become a geophysical force on a planetary scale. This creeping realisation has an Oedipal logic, that is to say, it is a strange loop in which one level of activity—industrial agriculture and the swiftly ensuing industrial revolution—crosses into an entirely new level of planetary force and, following from that, an uncanny recognition of this force. This essay argues that the Oedipal logic is embedded in the technical, logistical and philosophical framework of agriculture as such. Indeed, the Theban plays (of which *Oedipus Tyrannus* is one) dwell on the fact of agricultural society as a form of uncanny existence. This essay argues that the principal reason for the uncanniness is the reduction of being to non-contradiction. Exit strategies from this logic (and its concomitant logistics) cannot cleave to a view of beings that is reductionist in any sense. Thus the potential for using Deleuze and Guattari to exit modernity is limited. What is required is a deconstruction of existing (agri)cultures and logics, rather than an attempt to push past them or avoid them, since as in the story of Oedipus, the attempt to push past and avoid is precisely what brings about the cataclysm.

In the later eighteenth century, humans began to deposit a thin layer of carbon in Earth's crust. This thin layer can now be detected deep in Arctic ice and at the bottoms of large lakes. These deposits marked the beginning of what atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen calls the *Anthropocene*, a term that is now widely accepted.¹ By 1945, humans had begun to deposit a second layer, this time of radioactive materials, in Earth's crust. This moment, inaugurated by the Gadget exploded in the Trinity Test, then by Little Boy and Fat Man, marked the start of the Great Acceleration, a moment in the Anthropocene during which its basic forces were exponentially sped up.

What is the Anthropocene? Quite simply, this is the period in which human history intersects decisively with geological time. History traditionally is thought as a purely human affair—moreover, history for many scholars is reserved for a tiny and recent segment of humanity. Hegel, for instance, viewed history as intrinsic to white Westerners. Africans and Asians suffered from a lack of history, and so must have it imposed upon them.² Heidegger

¹ Paul Crutzen and E. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *Global Change Newsletter* 41, no. 1 (2000): 17–18; Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415, no. 23 (3 January 2002), accessed 8 October 2012, doi:10.1038/415023a.

² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, ed. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), ix, 89–90.

thought that human being, as opposed to nonhumans such as lizards, plants and stones, was unique in its ability to bestow being on things—thus *Da-sein*, his central term, stands for human being; furthermore, German *Da-sein* is better than the others, at least at a certain moment in his life.

The problem of Eurocentrism and racism is based on a deeply related and also urgent problem, which Quentin Meillassoux has recently called *correlationism*: the tendency to insist that only humans (or consciousness, which amounts to the same thing for many) bestow meaning and value on reality.³ Man is the measure of all things—this view emerged precisely at the moment at which human history had intersected with geological time, two halves of a torn whole which ecological thinking and politics must begin to put back together. Think about it: at the very moment at which it could not have been clearer—at least with 20/20 hindsight—that there was a nonhuman real that was physically affected by human action, the very humans responsible for the depositing of carbon in Earth's crust also produced philosophies that denied that the humanities could talk about the nonhuman real due to the limitations of the human perspective. If it were not now creating an irreversible shift in Earth's climate and a concomitant Sixth Mass Extinction Event, this would be a delicious irony.

Humans blindly penetrated Earth while insisting that no (human) consciousness could know the thing in itself: this simultaneous blindness and acting, does it not evoke the primordial myth of what I shall here argue is our agricultural age—an age that is now up to 10 000 years old—the myth of Oedipus? And is it not necessary, in an inaugural issue of a journal on environmental humanities, to assert not only that we must understand the (human) meaning of the Anthropocene, but also figure out a way to think past it? And might these two rhetorical questions be related in some sense? In other words, I shall be arguing that the long history of agriculture, which is now responsible for an embarrassingly large amount of global warming, is the deep background against which thinking about capitalism, communism and 'returns to' pre-capitalist modes often seem like whistling somewhat blindly in the dark. I am not suggesting that the whole of agricultural history is responsible for the Anthropocene—industry and agribusiness are quite evidently the culprits. It is rather that the conditions of possibility for industry and agribusiness—whether they are Soviet or capitalist in their economic form—are the deep background for the emergency in which we now find ourselves. Such deep time thinking is required, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, since humans have now become a geophysical force on a planetary scale.⁴ It is a difficult form of thought, since it requires that we think ourselves not simply as an intra-human cultural and historical agent, but precisely as a physical force, as Chakrabarty observes—a concept that appears easy to grasp, but that on further consideration has proved quite difficult to handle in philosophy and humanities more generally since (ironically) the advent of the Anthropocene itself. The very issue of the limits of history is recursively part of the problem, since it is human insularity that precisely has resulted in our unconsciously becoming such a force on a planet-wide scale.

To understand the magnitude of the problem, then, is to re-read the most powerful artwork of our age—an artwork whose power derives, I shall argue, in part from its troubling of the already stable (by then, the time of Sophocles) realm of agriculture. For to confront the

³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2009), 5.

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 Winter (2009): 197–222.

20/20 hindsight that infects our thinking of modernity, paralysing it with insight as it were, is to study a Möbius strip whose form just is the very form of the Oedipus story: the detective finds out that he is the culprit.

This Oedipal loop, twisted around itself to form an object that threatens only to have one single side, presents us with the one saving insight of the philosophical Anthropocene—the one that Jacques Lacan states succinctly as *there is no metalanguage*.⁵ There is no ‘other side,’ no distance possible between us and our being because, in the words of the great phenomenologist Buckaroo Banzai, “Wherever you go, there you are.”⁶ The great insight of Kant—the one that led him to correlationism—ends up via Hegel and subsequently Husserl as the discovery of an irreducible ‘thereness’ of the subject, or the subject-position, or sincerity, or ingenuousness (Ortega y Gasset’s term).⁷ This very sincerity (1) prevents humans from achieving escape velocity from reality and (2) allows us, if we push it, to discover within the correlationist tradition, through it or under it as it were, a vast array of nonhumans who are as irreducible and unassailable in their relations to others as humans are. Heidegger was right, then, to argue that philosophy and society to come would pass through nihilism rather than resist or reject it. Likewise, in this essay we shall realise that the Oedipus story must be traversed rather than simply rejected in an anti-Oedipal, Deleuzo-Guattarian manner. Indeed, the popularity of Deleuze and Guattari at the moment at which humans realise their implication in geological time is somewhat significant. Is it possible that these figures have arisen precisely to prolong the modernity that spawned the Anthropocene? For to perform an outright rejection of Oedipus is, as this essay shall argue, to remain caught in the fundamental problem of the Oedipus story, which is also the fundamental problem of an agricultural age—the age that eventually resulted in the Anthropocene.

This is not to argue that philosophy is the cause of the Anthropocene, but rather that social constructs such as agriculture embody philosophies, sometimes unconsciously (this is what ideology theory encourages us to see). As a result of increasing population and the inner logic of expanding technicity, humans have become an unwitting geological force on a planetary scale, just as Oedipus became the unwitting slayer of his father. Undoing modernity thus in part involves undoing the philosophical systems that are imbricated in it.

The Agricultural Uncanny

Oedipus, the hero of the second play in Sophocles’ Theban trilogy, was the father of Antigone. In *Antigone* the second Chorus lays out the predicament of humans: “Many are the disturbing beings on Earth, but none is more disturbing than man” (my translation).⁸ Why? *Because humans plough*: they transform Earth into agricultural space. This is precisely what is at stake in the Chorus. The various actions—war, ploughing, carving up the waves—seem all to evoke stable, agricultural societies, beginning to get a purchase on “the elements,” predicated on reshaping Earth for human needs. The scope of the elements in the Chorus is evocative

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 311.

⁶ W. D. Richter, Dir., *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai across the Eighth Dimension* (20th Century Fox, 1984).

⁷ José Ortega y Gasset, *Phenomenology and Art*, trans. Philip W. Silver (New York: Norton, 1975), 63–70; Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 39, 40, 135–143, 247.

⁸ Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. R. C. Jebb, accessed 3 September 2012, <http://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/antigone.html>.

precisely of technical ability to reshape on a scale large enough to disturb. Thus ploughing is the key signature image, as it were, of the Chorus: all the others (war, navigation) make sense in relation to it.

Antigone is the first play Sophocles wrote in the trilogy of Theban plays—plays set in and around the city state of Thebes, namely, a functioning agricultural society, formed according to myth by an army of warriors who sprang out of the ground when Cadmus sowed dragon’s teeth—the founding agricultural act, an act that transforms Earth into the human-friendly, domination-ready state. Out of the very soil spring fully armed soldiers ready to defend—not Earth, but land, the real, the royal realm of humans (*reality* and *realm* are cognates). Reality itself becomes correlated to human being. This is, as we have seen, a philosophical mistake, but it is also an ecological and a political disaster, a thousands-of-years-long disaster within which we are still living.

This is by no means to say that pre-agricultural societies did not make significant impacts on nonhumans, for instance by fire.⁹ It is rather that a certain specific form of management and aesthetics, the one associated with agriculture, paved the way for the Anthropocene by opening up a fantasy space, a fantasy space that coincided with actually existing lifeforms such as grass, trees, and herding animals. Nor is this essay suggesting that we return to hunting and gathering. It is simply pointing out the dark uncanniness of the situation that confronts modernity as it begins to understand its comportment as a physical force on Earth. This uncanniness is marked well by Nick Mansfield when he notes that climate change marks “the limit of a tradition of philosophy epitomised by Hegel where what can be called the natural can be overcome.”¹⁰

The uncanniness of agricultural existence is hard to detect since the entire surface of Earth is now at the mercy of humans. The best modern translation, though rather free, is the new one by Anne Carson in *Antigonick*, because it registers the disturbance as a kind of stealth, something that is hard to detect precisely because of its vast scope:

Many terribly quiet customers exist but none more
terribly quiet than man
his footsteps pass so perilously soft across the sea ...
and every Tuesday
down he grinds the unastonishable earth
with horse and shatter ...
Every outlet works but one
: Death stays dark.¹¹

What Carson calls the “quiet customer” is what in Greek is called *deinotaton*. *Deinos* means “disturbing”—“terrifying” (as in *dinosaur*) but also strange and disruptive. This strangeness is

⁹ See for instance Steven Pyne, *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (New York: Allen and Unwin, 2012).

¹⁰ Nick Mansfield, “‘There is a Spectre Haunting . . .’: Ghosts, Their Bodies, Some Philosophers, a Novel and the Cultural Politics of Climate Change,” *borderlands* 7, no.1 (2008), accessed 8 October 2012, http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol7no1_2008/mansfield_climate.htm.

¹¹ Anne Carson and Bianca Stone, *Antigonick* (New York: New Directions, 2012), 20.

registered in the translation “uncanny,” which was Heidegger’s favourite.¹² And what precisely is disturbing or uncanny about humans? It is *that we plough*.

There is in Heidegger’s usage a sense of “not-at-home,” alienated or distanced, floating in some kind of ignorance. This not-at-home is part of the problem of being modern, which Heidegger dates to Platonism—so no problem there. Yet he seems to overlook one of the central features of why the human is uncanny or disturbing for the Chorus in *Antigone*—the fact of agriculture. Indeed, Heidegger’s general frame of reference, at least in terms of the imagery he loves to use all the time, has to do with agriculture: the peasant shoes of Van Gogh, the forest path, the field path, the house, the horizon—all these terms are something like a neo-feudal way of talking, a way that some readers find infuriating and some seductive.

Is this not something like a blind spot—nay an uncanny one in itself—in Heidegger’s treatment of *deinotaton*? The philosopher who, of all Western philosophers, perhaps, saw most clearly the depth and scope of the problem, the one who is tirelessly evoked in ecological thinking—the one whom indeed one should not simply ignore or ritualistically beat up, but rather traverse—this one, the genius Heidegger, who saw the problem of *technē* as enframing, creating a “world picture” that allows for the manipulation of Earth as a storehouse of standing reserve (*Bestand*), of stuff—is this not another “most disturbing thing of all,” namely the fact that Heidegger himself is caught in the very frame of reference that is the objective correlative to the reification and nihilism that he sees implicit in every philosophy since Plato—the abstraction of Being to a being? For are not huge swathes of fields and pasture precisely that—a kind of objectified nihilism? A nihilism of which contemporary suburbia, with its sterile anxieties, is only the latest variant? If “disturbing” means “not-at-home,” then we had better get back there, and soon. Is this not solving the basic problem only by repeating it, not transcending it at all?

In English translations of Heidegger’s *unheimlich*, however, there is a slippery slide between *canny*, *savvy*, *technically proficient* or *knowing*; and, suggestively, *un-canny* in the sense of *stupid*, *unknowing*, *ignorant* or *obtuse*. This slide contains gaps and inconsistencies, gaps that we shall work away at a little in this essay. *Knowingness* does not have to imply technological *know-how*. There is a sense of *weirdness*, a term that suggests something knowing and strange—a strangeness that Heidegger thinks is toxic to being.¹³ But is this weirdness, this uncanny strangeness, not the very not-at-homeness of difference-in-identity, of identity as a kind of difference-from-itself? As Heidegger’s descendant Lacan argued, there is an irreducible difference between the “I” who can say “I am lying” and the “I” about whom it is said, “I am lying”: in Lacanian, this is the difference between *the subject of the enunciated* and *the subject of enunciation*. And as Heidegger’s perverse descendant Derrida argued, language is irreducibly uncanny because it never quite says what it means or means what it says, as a condition for its being able to say anything at all.

What if this were not a problem—what if the point was not to get back to home base, but to voyage out constantly, nomad-like? What if home base as such were a kind of

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 159–173.

¹³ Key discussions of this are to be found in *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 176–178, 254–258; *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 76–77, 79–80, 84–86, 162–163, 166–168, 227–229.

uncanniness, as Freud argues in his own thinking on the uncanny?¹⁴ This is the tack taken by Deleuze and Guattari in their work on anti-Oedipal, “nomad” strategies for resisting and transforming modern life and society.¹⁵ Yet it is precisely Oedipus who, having blinded himself, wanders weirdly in the world, homeless.

What do Deleuze and Guattari uncannily share with Heidegger? It is precisely this anxiety about weirdness—another term for which might be *aesthetic dimension*. This is a dimension of knowingness, but of what? *Je ne sais quoi*—there is a certain nothingness in the aesthetic experience, something we can’t put our finger on, a threatening level of pretence and illusion, an illusion that might have nothing behind it—or not, and we can’t tell: “What constitutes pretence is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretence or not.”¹⁶

Deleuze and Guattari domesticate their nomads, weirdly—the schizophrenic out for a stroll is in a reality that is more real than the one we deluded neurotics inhabit.¹⁷ To this extent, Deleuze and Guattari are classical metaphysicians, since to be a metaphysician in the Western tradition, as Heidegger himself and then Derrida argue, is to claim that some things are more real than others. The “deterritorialized” flows of energy are more real than the territorial and “molar” forces that agglomerate them: in this view Deleuze and Guattari simply adapt Nietzsche, for whom becoming is more real than being, as if a being were a temporary blob of ice in a giant ocean of becoming. This is the wager of the anti-Oedipal project: that Marx and Nietzsche can be combined against the intrinsically oppressive molar forces of Freud and psychoanalysis in general. Thus they assume that the problem is the concept of self, not the metaphysics of presence.¹⁸ The accelerationism Deleuze and Guattari espouse is precisely to do with hastening the “decoding” and “deteriorialization” of all flows—flows that are temporarily blocked in molar aggregations.¹⁹ Capitalism, according to this accelerationist mode of thinking, is a necessary phase of liquefaction through which everything on Earth must pass.

Insofar as Nietzsche and Deleuze and Guattari do this, they are making a metaphysical distinction between stasis and movement—moving things are more real than static things. Thus they posit the “material flow” as “continual.”²⁰ They take nomad practice and thought to be a sequence of “waves or flows of deterritorialization.”²¹ In other words, Deleuze and Guattari take being, as Heidegger argues, as “a being,” a something or other that can be distinguished from other beings like the way one distinguishes between blood and a blood clot.²²

Deleuze and Guattari, in other words, naturalise: they produce another, “new and improved” version of Nature, which is a direct byproduct of an agricultural age. This new and

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McClintock and Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003).

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre III: Les psychoses* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1981), 48.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 2.

¹⁸ See for example Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 20–23.

¹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 33.

²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 36.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 53.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 332.

improved version is in a sense non-essentialist: cultures, artefacts and other human things are just assemblages of some wider and deeper flow, as they point out in many places, for instance the explicit argument on “nomad” thought and politics in *A Thousand Plateaus*.²³ In this sense the nomads are better than non-nomads, because they “follow a flow,” and reality flows.²⁴ This fluid reality is just Nature in a new and improved guise.

No indigenous culture thinks Nature—for such cultures, reality may for instance be a Trickster, a magician that deceives and eludes. If the reader thinks that this is a presumptuous statement, I defy them to find the indigenous culture that thinks the concept Nature.²⁵ The metaphysical move that claims one thing to be more real than another thing just is an agricultural philosophical move. If we are going to exit the age of global warming—that is, if nonhumans and humans alike have a future on this planet, since their fate is now inextricably bound, to the extent that if we go extinct, a whole raft of beings also goes extinct—then we had better get over metaphysics. Heidegger and Derrida were in this sense prophets of a genuinely post-modern, that is, post-agricultural, that is, *ecological* age.

Deleuze and Guattari’s strangely domesticated alienation lacks a difference between reality and illusion, that is to say, it lacks what is disturbing about appearance—that there may (or may not) be something behind it. Insofar as this happens, it is not correct to claim that indigenous philosophy is immanentist rather than transcendental. The Trickster is a being that exploits gaps in the world, gaps that for instance open a difference between *here* and the *beyond*, as in the indigenous thinking and practice of the Dagara people of West Africa.²⁶ It is not the case that transcendence belongs to the bad Eurocentric West.

Immanence philosophy flattens the threat of transcendence, the threat that things are not as they appear. A quasi-scientific, paraphysical diction takes over in the immanence philosophy popularised by Deleuze and Guattari, full of attractors and fluid dynamics, explaining everything just like science does—explaining everything away. Only science doesn’t really do that—as reality is plumbed, it becomes stranger, not more demystified, as a cursory reading of Darwin shows. Darwin really should have had recourse to emoticons, since *The Origin of Species* argues devastatingly that *there are no species and they have no origin*, a point that would have become more obvious if there had been a “wink” at the end of the title: *The Origin of Species ;)*.²⁷ Deleuze and Guattari do disenchant the world, however, by offering us a view supposedly outside of illusion, the world granted to their version of the schizophrenic—no matter how terrifying or paranoid, this is the real world, no doubt. And that is just it: there is no doubt. Paranoia is realistic, because the world really does consist of thousands of interconnected rhizomes that operate below the threshold of (neurotic) consciousness.

Deleuze and Guattari do make it possible to think how humans act as collectives, in swarms or in packs. In this respect, at any rate, they rightly assault the supposed individualism built into the cultural appropriations of the Oedipus story, and help us to think at the right

²³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 406–407.

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 409.

²⁵ In support of this defiance, see Philippe Descola and Genevieve Godbout, *The Ecology of Others: Anthropology and the Question of Nature* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2012).

²⁶ See Malidoma Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (New York: Putnam, 1994).

²⁷ See Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), *passim*.

scale for addressing the ecological era. Yet in another sense, they are still ironically caught in the Oedipal loop. In laying out their schizoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari hope to do battle with what they consider to be the repressive forces of capitalism, the ones that bind humans to Oedipal family ties, thus, in their view, reinforcing larger despotic regimes. As if it were possible to circumvent Oedipus by ignoring the syndrome altogether—as if Oedipus and agriculture had never happened, as if they could simply be wiped away by wandering freely across the fields. This is indeed anti-Oedipal in the sense that anti-capitalism might just be another form of capitalism, or antimatter another form of matter. Weirdness disappears. Yet it is this very weirdness, this out-of-joint quality, which must be faced and traversed. Contemporary philosophy must move beyond modernity in a decisive way. Deleuze and Guattari do not provide enough momentum to achieve this move.

Same as It ever Was

Let us return to the basic definition of the Anthropocene: *the intersection of human history and geological time*: an intersection that had always already been the case—humanity being the weirdest being of all means, after all, that the intersection has already occurred, since the weirdness is predicated precisely on ploughing, on cutting. To *inter-sect* is to cut into, to cleave: it is as if the Anthropocene is a hyperbolic ploughing, a sowing of carbon deep in Earth's crust. An intersection not unlike the iron spike that nails Oedipus to the earth of the mountain; or the crossroads, the intersection of routes between agricultural centers, the place where wandering Oedipus, temporarily rescued by a shepherd, meets and kills his father. It has already happened, before the play begins—it has already happened, too, before Oedipus realises it. In the weird Sophoclean economy of time and place that Aristotle adored, the very shepherd who rescued him delivers the fatal message. Indeed, the unities (of time, place, and action) allow for a strangely 'timeless' quality, as if nothing were moving at all, as if the same moment were playing out: which of course it is. Can we not detect in these very unities an aesthetic, formal version of agriculture, in which the same place is ploughed and sown and reaped and ploughed again—an economy of space, an efficiency that allows for some kind of meaningfulness, a horizon that creates a hither and a yonder and allows things to 'mean,' by providing a consistent backdrop.

Is this not also the weirdness of global warming, which some indeed now call *global weirding*? That is, the uncanny sensation that *we have been here before* or that *it has already occurred* are fully and technically correct. Global warming is palpably weird—gone for instance is the phatic, world-establishing conversation between strangers at a bus stop about the weather, because in any weather conversation, someone will either mention global warming or try not to. It is now obvious even to the person who thinks that global warming is a hoax that she might need to take precautions against flood or drought. A gap has opened in reality between these raindrops falling on my head and the invisible yet real actions of a massively distributed entity executing in a high dimensional phase space, which is just what climate change is. An entity that is downwardly causal on things such as raindrops, but that is so massively distributed that finding a single, concrete link between these particular raindrops and itself is either impossibly tedious or just impossible. The *weirdness* of global warming is precisely its reality but its incapacity for being located as constantly present. It defies the metaphysics of presence, but not in a way that encourages us to think that reality is simply a (human) construct.

We can be sure that many official documents state that humanity has now arrived at a crossroads.²⁸ Yet what if we had always already been there and are only beginning to notice it now? The place between Thebes and Corinth where three roads meet, the place of Oedipus' murder, is the crossroads at Kithairon. It is a mountain pass, a place between valleys where crops grow and goats and sheep are herded: a necessary intersection between agricultural domains. Two valleys, two city-states, enclosing secrets from one another. No blindness without the different realms of Corinth and Thebes—Oedipus thinks he is the son of Polybus of Corinth, since Polybus adopted him, and for a moment this means that he feels as if he has weirdly escaped fate. The different realms are precisely agricultural realms—*realm*, *royaume*, *reality*, *royalty*, all cognates as we noted previously.²⁹

Only consider the weirdness of Laius, Oedipus' true father. Thinking he can cheat fate, he cruelly exposes his son by having him nailed to the mountainside—hence Oedipus' name, from the Greek for 'swollen foot' (as in *edema*, swelling). Oedipus bears the permanent scar of this intersection of iron, hammer, mountain and foot—a trace of the murderous violence of the father. The nail and hammer try to control and contain Oedipus' body, just as Laius has tried to control and contain his son. One feels terrible for Oedipus, not simply horrified, because he is in this regard just a component of a deeper and older story, the wish of parents to destroy their children, the unfortunate fact that it is easier for humans to allow the children to die rather than let them individuate.

The Laius story, hidden within the Oedipus story, is now coming to light in contemporary scholarship.³⁰ Is this perhaps not itself also a symptom of an age in which humans begin to recognise their centuries-old attempts to cheat reality, to bootstrap themselves into the good life, for what it is—a headlong plunge into reality itself, disguised as achieving escape velocity from it? Do we not recognise, weirdly, the double quality of inevitability and compulsion on the one hand, and vertiginous freedom on the other—the freedom to kill someone out of what amounts to simple road rage, the freedom to kill one's own son, despite the supposed social norms, as long as the oracle suggests you may die at his hand? Isn't this why in some sense we are still at that crossroads at Kithairon, still in the market square, figuring out that we are the criminals we have been looking for?

This Möbius plot is the noir detective story in a nutshell—Deckard discovering that he is one of the replicants he has been seeking to "retire" (to destroy), his nemesis Roy as the Oedipal son who blinds his own father, Tyrell, who wants him destroyed because he threatens his livelihood.³¹ Humans are discovering that they are replicants—evolutionary kluges of good-enough components that look and quack like conscious beings, passing (for now) our own Turing Test for sentience and intelligence. We are a kind of illusion, yet this is known at the very same time as we know that we are part of Earth, deeply implicated in it. This chiasmic, crossroads-like movement describes a moment at which we see that we are both artificial and 'natural' at the very same time and for the very same reasons. We have weirdly, uncannily squared the circle that Levi-Strauss, in his reading of the Theban plays, argues is the source of

²⁸ See for example Matthew J. Hoffmann, *Climate Governance at the Crossroads: Experimenting with a Global Response after Kyoto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, "realm," n., "reality," n., accessed 3 September 2012, <http://www.oed.com>.

³⁰ See for instance Mark Buchan, "The Laius Complex," in Denise Eileen McCoskey and Emily Zakin, *Bound by the City: Greek Tragedy, Sexual Difference, and the Formation of the Polis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 81–102.

³¹ Ridley Scott, Dir., *Blade Runner* (Warner Bros., 1982).

every myth, the irreducible difference between being chthonic or autochthonous, “coming from Earth” or “coming from ourselves.”³² Weirdly, because as it were the circle is still square, the asymmetry between bottomless, scary simulation and irreducible, bedrock reality is preserved, not canceled.

Which brings us to the notion of *philosophy* as such—it is as Socrates himself observed not wisdom, but the love of wisdom. It is not a set of answers but a way of questioning and opening. At the moment at which humans appear to have more knowledge and technical canniness than ever, reality appears stranger and yet truer than it ever has.

Ecology without Agriculture

Now we arrive at the most fundamental proposition of this essay: that humans have been living in an agricultural age for several thousand years, and that this age is no longer helpful, both physically and philosophically. Indeed, this age is directly responsible for the Anthropocene, the moment at which human history intersects with geological time. This is because agriculture turns reality into domination-ready chunks of parceled out space waiting to be filled and ploughed by humans.

Let us return to our exploration of the uncanniness of human ploughing. The uncanny is what is strangely familiar and familiarly strange. The uncanny has the quality of a Möbius strip, a twisted band that appears only to have one side, where one would assume that it had two. Freud talks about trying to get away from a particular square in an Italian town, a square populated by “heavily made-up women.”³³ Every attempt to get away results in his return to the same square. Alice in *Alice through the Looking Glass* tries to exit the Garden of Talking Flowers and the Looking Glass House, but every attempt results in her arriving back at the front door of the Looking Glass House. Oedipus is a brilliant detective who tasks himself with finding the culprit for Laius’ death, the culprit who is bringing a plague to Thebes—a plague thought precisely as an ecological disaster, a *miasma* that affects crops, animals and people, the very form of the agricultural society. His brilliant detective work discovers the culprit—himself.

As we have seen, this Möbius-strip-like collapse of the difference between the detective and the culprit reveal something about the agricultural society that Oedipus is charged with saving. Is it indeed the uncanny ploughing—based on the technological enframing of Earth as manipulable stuff, an enframing humans have perfected over the millennia—that is truly responsible for the Anthropocene that announces the collapse of this agricultural mode, its autoimmunity? I use the term *autoimmunity* because it appears that what we have here is a self-destructive tendency within agriculture itself, a tendency to bring about its own demise, which all the time appears as the demise of the nonhuman, the conquest of space, the subjugation of nonhuman species.

Ecological awareness requires us to realise the truth of Oedipus, the primal myth of the agricultural age—the age we still live in, the age that is responsible for much global warming, the age that established the template for the rest of global warming. Established it, because it reifies Earth into slabs of abstract space, ready for filling and ploughing. Established it, insofar

³² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 213–221.

³³ Freud, *The Uncanny*, 144.

as it attempted to impose consistency upon a fundamentally inconsistent reality. The agricultural age is responsible for the metaphysics of presence. An ecological age must necessarily be a post-agricultural age, which means that an ecological age must push against thousands of years of human history. Oedipus, king of the city state that is the culmination of generations of agricultural development, discovers that he is the culprit responsible for the miasma that plagues not only people, but the environment itself.

The notion of miasma provides a dark, 'sick' version of the environmentality that ecological philosophy and Nature writing strive to evoke. Miasma surrounds and penetrates. It is a dis-ease that affects everything. It cannot be localised in one place. It is the objective correlative—and indeed, according to Oedipal logic, the direct causal effect—of human uncanniness. In this, miasma is the great great grandfather of all the other terms—milieu, atmosphere, surroundings, environment, world—with which humans have tried to think the place they live.

What is of special significance about the term miasma for this essay is that it cannot be localised. We can't directly point to it. It slips out of our conceptual grasp—yet there it is, in this particular form, it does these particular things (kills lifeforms, destroys crops, sickens humans). Miasma thus exemplifies what one philosopher calls *meontic* nothing—a nothing that is not absolutely nothing at all, but rather a shifty, misty "something" that cannot be posited metaphysically as a thing, that is, as an entity that is constantly present, constantly itself.³⁴

Oedipal logic cures Thebes of its miasma, only to bring about a greater miasma, in the form of reified Nature, which ends as an autoimmunity that is now at the edge of destroying Earth. Agriculture has already brought the world to an end, though not actually existing rocks and trees—and it has even assailed some of those, but not all, at least not yet. Agriculture brings the world to an end because, at its limit, it destroys the foreground-background distinction upon which the notion *world* relies. When everywhere is a field, there is no horizon as such, and thus no world—and thus the significance of things is drained, since significance for humans depends upon this foreground-background distinction. Human being becomes inseparable from the nonhuman, which is just what the Anthropocene accomplishes physically, in global warming, and philosophically, with the great humiliation that Darwin dealt to the human.³⁵ Oedipus' releasing of Thebes from the miasma has resulted in a greater miasma, a permanent condition of miasma, which when cropped and carefully Photoshopped, is called Nature.

This Photoshopped version of miasma—Nature is as it were a rare form of miasma—lacks the dark shiftiness that miasma displays. What Nature lacks, as a metaphysically present thing, is nothingness, nothingness as meontic rather than absolutely nothing (*oukontic*). The encounter with the miasma that is Nature must therefore be a necessary return of nothingness to the beings that sent it—the beings that comprise what is mistakenly called Nature. Thinking ecologically means thinking beings as inherently sick—disturbingly hobbled in an ontological sense. This means not that they are temporarily disfigured, but that in their very core, they are lame, like Oedipus whose name means 'Swollen Foot.' More primordially than Oedipus himself, his father Laius is mythically speaking responsible for the agricultural disaster, the

³⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 188.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 136.

disaster that is agriculture, since he tries to avert causality by killing his own son. Thus, he reasons, he will preserve his life, but also the stability of the city-state, which precisely means to maintain the stability of an agricultural society.

Every being is hobbled like Oedipus, since every being is marked by the traces of other beings. In this sense, every being has a little trace of nothingness in it, a series of cracks or dark spots that open onto other moments, other beings. In its curving shape and its symmetrical facets, glass tells a story about the machines that molded and cut it and heated it. With my depression and anxiety, I tell a story about how my childhood experiences treated me. This is not just an accident that happens to beings, but a necessary condition of their existence.

In order for a logical system to be true, argues Kurt Gödel, it must (it truly must) contain at least one sentence that it cannot prove, along the lines of "This sentence cannot be proved." Please pause to let this sink in—all logically true theoretical systems (that is, ones that are true on their own terms), are flawed, *in order to be true*. Alan Turing modeled this astonishing insight by thinking of computing devices he called Turing machines. No Turing machine could possibly be built that could anticipate perfectly the chance that every other Turing machine would go into an infinite loop or not. Since Turing's version of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem relies on physical objects, might we not happily extend Gödel to cover physical systems too? All physical systems are fragile, not because they are totally consistent yet can be broken, but because they are not consistent. They are afflicted with a necessary flaw, what in Greek tragedy is called a *hamartia*, the very flaw that supplies their virtue, their distinguishing characteristics. Oedipus is smart and compassionate, and these very factors accelerate his downfall, as he uses his brain and heart to discover the culprit, who is himself. The *hamartia* of a physical system is not an optional extra, but a condition of possibility for that thing's existence. *Hamartia* means *wound* or *affliction*. To exist is to be afflicted, and thus to be fragile. Everything is cracked. Nothing is perfectly consistent and smooth.

A being contains, by definition, a little bit of non-being, a little trace of nothingness, which just is the crack that allows a being to exist. Entities contain things that are not themselves, by definition. Sentient beings are made of nonsentient components. Lifeforms are made of nonlife. This means that reality is full to bursting with sets of things—ladybirds, worms, magnetic fields and paper—that contain things that are not strictly reducible to those sets.

A miasma in logic, within logic itself, a miasma that logic tries to control by tamping down contradictoriness. For instance, someone such as Russell can rule that sets cannot contain members that are not members of that set—this is also the way Zermelo and Frankel tamed the brilliant and disturbing insight of Georg Cantor into transfinite sets. There are infinities that contain the infinity of rational numbers, infinities that are infinitely larger than the infinity of rational numbers, and thus in some respects horribly different. How can this be? Russell, Zermelo and Frankel answer that it is because these groups of things are not really sets. The logic behind this is the notion of *metalanguage*, a concept developed by the logician Tarski to contain sentences that say two things at once: the sentence "This sentence is false," for instance, which is both true and false at the same time. Tarski rules that this kind of sentence is not a sentence. He has decided that a metalanguage can decide in advance what counts as a sentence.

But we can easily invent a further level of miasma, a virus that assaults the very metalanguage that tries to maintain statements in a constant, rigid and thus ultimately brittle way. For we can think of this sentence: "This is not a sentence." This upgraded version of the

Liar paradox (“This sentence is false”) goes to work on the very metalanguage that tries to maintain order. I cannot decide whether it is a sentence or not. The deep reason for this is that, as Lacan puts it succinctly, “There is no metalanguage.”³⁶ No epistemological escape velocity is possible. Lacan is drawing on the insights of phenomenology and Heidegger, who discovered that we are hopelessly glued to reality: it is just impossible to peel ourselves away sufficiently to establish metalinguistic rules for what counts as a sentence, and so on. Attempts to push past contradiction contain their own form of Oedipal logic that results in an arms race to create impenetrable constructs. This arms race is deeply intertwined with the history of (agri)culture and its logistics.

In turn, the deep reason for the impossibility of an impenetrable metalinguistic fortress is that reality is comprised of entities everywhere we look—there is always some entity or other in the vicinity, and so we are caught in the gravitational field of at least one thing, whether physically, perceptually, psychologically or philosophically. These things are inherently flawed or wounded with a hamartia, according to the very logic that allows for things to be true and false at the same time. Things can happen in the world because things are fragile and slightly broken, already, in order to exist.

A thing is never fully or constantly itself, not because of some supervening more real thing (atoms, measurement, flow), but intrinsically, which is to say ontologically. The attempt to force Earth into self-consistency with the human agricultural project has resulted precisely in a more virulent form of miasma taking hold. The attempt to exit this miasma on the basis of an anti-Oedipal logic (Deleuze and Guattari) is at risk of a more virulent return of that very Oedipal logic, since it is precisely the strange loopiness of that logic that prevents us from pushing past agriculture into ‘something new.’ What is required instead is a deconstruction—physical and political as well as philosophical—of the logics and logistics that this essay calls agricultural.

Whether we call it global warming or biosphere or any other term, what we are dealing with is a gigantic entity that cannot be localised or even directly perceived by three-dimensional beings of limited capacity such as humans. They are beings that can be computed and thought, which means not that they are less real, but that they are profoundly withdrawn from human access. The existence of these beings is intrinsically disturbing, because it means that we live in a reality that is not constantly present and that is not capable of being pointed to directly, or experienced empirically, but which is fully real nonetheless. The very attempt to smooth out the inconsistency of Earth has resulted in the generation of, and scientific discovery of, beings that are far more virulently uncanny, far more obviously riddled with nothingness. These beings are like dragons, in whose mouth we find ourselves, millennia after the dragon’s teeth were sown in the soil. We agricultural humans have reaped what we have sown. We are faced with a blinding insight, just like Oedipus: “My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!”³⁷

³⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, tr. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 311.

³⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1984), 239 (a translation of line 1311 of the Greek).

Timothy Morton is Rita Shea Guffey Chair of English at Rice University. He is the author of *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minnesota UP, forthcoming), *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Open Humanities Press, forthcoming), *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard UP, 2010), *Ecology without Nature* (Harvard UP, 2007), seven other books and eighty essays on philosophy, ecology, literature, food and music. He blogs regularly at <http://www.ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com>. Email: tbm2@rice.edu

Thanks to the editors for their patient work with me on this essay.

Bibliography

- Buchan, Mark. "The Laius Complex." In *Bound by the City: Greek Tragedy, Sexual Difference, and the Formation of the Polis*, edited by Denise Eileen McCoskey and Emily Zakin, 81-102. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009.
- Carson, Anne and Bianca Stone. *Antigonick*. New York: New Directions, 2012.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 Winter (2009): 197–222.
- Crutzen, Paul and E. Stoermer. "The Anthropocene," *Global Change Newsletter* 41, no.1 (2000): 17–18.
- Crutzen, Paul. "Geology of Mankind." *Nature* 415, no. 23, 3 January 2002. Accessed 8 October 2012. doi:10.1038/415023a.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- _____. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Descola, Philippe and Genevieve Godbout. *The Ecology of Others: Anthropology and the Question of Nature*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2012.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McClintock and Hugh Haughton. London: Penguin, 2003.
- Gammage, Bill. *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*. New York: Allen and Unwin, 2012.
- Harman, Graham. *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court, 2005.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, edited by Leo Rauch. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- _____. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- _____. *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. Translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Hoffmann, Matthew J. *Climate Governance at the Crossroads: Experimenting with a Global Response after Kyoto*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Le séminaire, Livre III: Les psychoses*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1981.
- _____. *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock, 1977.

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Schoepf. New York: Basic Books, 1974.
- Mansfield, Nick. "There is a Spectre Haunting . . .': Ghosts, Their Bodies, Some Philosophers, a Novel and the Cultural Politics of Climate Change." *borderlands* 7, no. 1 (2008). Accessed 8 October 2012. http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol7no1_2008/mansfield_climate.htm.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Translated by Ray Brassier. New York: Continuum, 2009.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. *Phenomenology and Art*. Translated by Philip W. Silver. New York: Norton, 1975. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Accessed 3 September 2012. <http://www.oed.com>.
- Pyne, Steven. *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998.
- Richter, W. D. Dir. *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai across the Eighth Dimension*. 20th Century Fox, 1984.
- Ridley, Scott. Dir. *Blade Runner*. Warner Bros., 1982.
- Somé, Malidoma. *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*. New York: Putnam, 1994.
- Sophocles. *Antigone*. Translated by R. C. Jebb. Accessed 3 September 2012. <http://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/antigone.html>.
- Sophocles *Oedipus the King*. Translated by Robert Fagles. London: Penguin, 1984.
- Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.