

Narratives of Scale in the Anthropocene. Imagining Human Responsibility in an Age of Scalar Complexity

Veranstalter: Gabriele Dürbeck / Philip Hüpkens, DFG-Research Project „Narratives of the Anthropocene in Literature and Science: Themes, Structures and Poetics“, University of Vechta

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The three-day conference investigated how „narratives of scale“ matter in human and more-than-human interactions with the planetary environment. Particularly, it focused on the epistemological and ontological challenges posed by multi-scalar socio-environmental destabilisation for inter- and transdisciplinary research.

The first day opened with a welcome address by BERND SCHERER, Director of *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* (HKW). Presenting the HKW-research project „Mississippi. An Anthropocene River“, Scherer stressed the significance of local, indigenous knowledges and compared this place-based and „multiversal“ counter-discourse to already institutionalised narratives of the Anthropocene. In the subsequent introduction to the conference topic, the organisers GABRIELE DÜRBECK and PHILIP HÜPKES (University of Vechta) familiarised the audience with the academic discourse on scalar complexity and derangement, human epistemic practices, and figurations of responsibility in the context of the Anthropocene debate. Beginning with the question of how „narration-based approaches to the scalar complexity of the Anthropocene“ mediate the epistemological, phenomenological and sensual gaps of distant and disembodied planetary events, they formulated the conference’s aim: to engage scholars from the humanities, social and political sciences in an interdisciplinary discussion on how to figure, map, and represent, as well as on how to produce the more-than-human stories of the Anthropocene.

In their vivid and compelling opening keynote, BRONISLAW SZERSZYNSKI and NIGEL CLARK (both University of Lancaster)

developed a non-unifying way of thinking the activity of humans and the earth in the Anthropocene. They proposed that the earth is not one, but that it is self-differentiating; it is folded in itself many times and therefore „contain[s] multiple possibilities at every scale.“ They coined the term *planetary multiplicity* to denote the idea that the earth is able to learn new things and to remember its multiple histories. In this view, the idea of ‘the earth’ is not necessarily uniting mankind. Rather, human activity is itself differentiated into the many ways in which different groups work, imagine and know as parts of the trans-scalar multiplicity of the planet. *Earthly multitudes*, they argued, become part of the earth’s material stories and its memory – a multiple and differentiated geophysical force.

Dedicated to „Scale and Time,“ the first panel opened with AXEL GOODBODY’s (University of Bath) rendering of time travel as an effective narrative device for „modelling trans-scalar thinking“ in three German environmental novels. Employing time travel as a way of linking storylines set in different spatialities and (deep) temporalities, the science fiction *topos* assists in forming a „trans-scalar environmental imaginary“. However, because of time travel’s technophantasmatic radiance, the question arises whether time travel simply reiterates imaginations of controlling supra-individual systems, which have historically led to unsustainable and precarious environments in the first place.

The panel continued with DEREK WOODS’ (Dartmouth College) proposal of a temporal „scale critique.“ The paper focused on the question of a possible „goodness of fit“ between a concrete duration of time and narrative form. Such critique challenges an all too easy use of the geological time scale in the telling and understanding of stories and events. Woods’ scale critique has shown convincingly that narratives are scale variant, i.e., that the meaning of the stories we tell ourselves, as well as their political implications, may change entirely when considered either from the perspective of temporal or spatial scale.

The second panel focused on the relation-

ship between scale and nonhuman alterity. In his talk, CHRISTOPH ROSOL (Max-Planck-Institute for the History of Science, Berlin) focused on the ability of climate and Earth system models to mediate and manipulate deep temporalities through numerical simulation. In doing so, Rosol argued, these models have to incorporate the restive vibrancy of biogeophysical systems simultaneously. He further demonstrated that a more bodily approach to the „geological fluidum“ can be found in the cinematic landscapes of Jean Epstein. Like Michel Serres' writings, Epstein's work sensualises and radicalises the elemental plasma of earth time.

Literary plant-human-relationships, which oscillate between care and colonisation, were delineated in grim detail by HEATHER SULLIVAN (Trinity University, San Antonio, USA). Her trope of the „dark green“ conjured the suppressed vegetal unconscious undergirding human cultural techniques and subverted the plant world's alluring deadness to unveil a funghi-heavy rhizom of fierce vegetable species that resist becoming food or fuel.

In the following paper, BERNHARD MALKMUS (University of Newcastle) approached European philosophy's capacity to radically open up toward „absolute alterity“ by calling for an „Anthropocene sublime“, which dissipates preconceived ideas of natural and cultural agency. Drawing on a wealth of examples, Malkmus demonstrated that the notion of the sublime „other“ poses the question whether there is still room for a „future philosophy of freedom“ and for becoming human amidst the „tragic“ autopoiesis of anthropogenic processes. He also called for a new aesthetics of reception which focuses on listening to and looking at worldly phenomena.

Starting from the predicament that large-scale Anthropogenic transformation ironically requires an ethics of response and responsibility from the same species that is responsible for anthropogenic incursion, ADELIN JOHN-PUTRA (University of Surrey) considered new ethical forms of literary narrative for an age of scalar derangement. Making use of Walter Benjamin's model of historical cognition and Hannah Arendt's call for risky

thinking, she re-evaluated the role of fiction in the Anthropocene as a medium to „think between scales“. Literature, she argued, necessitates an ethics of reading that opens up a space for thinking and reflecting planetary futurities.

Panel three investigated the role of scale for public space and knowledge. In her talk, AYSEM MERT (University of Stockholm) addressed the question of how democracies can respond to environmental urgency without becoming post-political by taking scale into account. The political concept of „democracy“ has already been scaled up in its history: according to Mert, its expansion from the polis to the nation state can be understood as the *first scalar revolution*, whereas the Anthropocene invites us to think about the possibility of a *second scalar revolution*. In that case, an enlarged citizenship beyond the nation state would be based on a form of ecological pluralism, which would be capable of responding to everyday catastrophes.

FRANZ MAUELSHAGEN's (University of Vienna) paper „Anthropocene biographies“ sketched out a way of storytelling that challenges how historians, alone among scholars in this respect, take human history for history itself. If biographies are narratives invented to make sense of our lives, „Anthropocene biographies“ can be conceived as narratives invented to make sense of our lives *on earth*. As a result, they have to take into account the vast scale of deep time when they tell personal stories. Mauelshagen also presented a dating method entitled „carbon dioxide dating“, which is based on the Keeling Curve that shows the annual average of parts per million CO² in the atmosphere. This annual average is perfectly un-ambiguous from 1950 onwards and therefore may be specifically capable of dating the lives of us „anthropoceneans.“

The second conference day culminated in a keynote lecture by American environmental photographer J HENRY FAIR, whose aerial views of hidden industrial sites and toxic landscapes assemble a planetary sight of extractivism. Whilst abandoning figurative portrayals of power stations, mining areas and their hazardous material flows, Fair's aerial aesthetics demonstrate a „collapse of scale“. His new project sidelines the optical vio-

lence of extraction disasters and focuses upon coastlines and littoral areas as particularly vulnerable spaces in an era of climate change. In viewing the detritus of human industriousness close up or from a great distance, the viewer is freed from the compulsion of automatic recognition. This is where novel ecological narratives may emerge.

To complement the examination of temporal scale, the third and last day of the conference opened with a panel on „Scale and Space.“ In the first talk of this panel, EVA HORN (University of Vienna) argued that one should not focus on epistemic transitions between scales, but rather on the worldmaking effects of scaling up and down. In an analysis of Alexander Payne’s film *Downsizing* (2017), and drawing on theorems developed by Anna Tsing as framework, Horn explored scalar aesthetics, the problems of communication between scales and the scalability of environments. Problematising Timothy Morton’s idea of a direct accessibility to nonhuman scales, she emphasised the need for research on the history of strategies that enable operational access to different scales of the planet.

Similarly, JOHN PARHAM’s (University of Worcester) paper addressed literature’s apparent inadequacy to access the non-human scale of the new geological epoch. Parham turned to noise as an aesthetic model for the Anthropocene which, as a „punk concept,“ capitalises on the cultural force of negative affects, e.g. anxiety, rage, or rebellion. For him, punk is the middle perspective of affect concerning aesthetic phenomena, be it anarchic, aphasic or just plain anti-social; it provokes, as he argued, a radical moment of awareness and alterity amidst the ecological and emotional complexity the Anthropocene represents.

Drawing on cosmology in the tradition of Alexander von Humboldt, KATHRIN BARTHA (University of Melbourne / University of Frankfurt) presented a different concept of aesthetic resistance. She explored the concept of cosmos as a way of challenging the practices which have caused the Anthropocene. Alluding to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s „negative universal history“, she described the Anthropocene in its destructive relation

to the Holocene as an echo of the ancient notion of chaos and order as a „negative cosmology.“ Bartha proposed „literary cosmology“ as a counter-narrative to the Anthropocene and asked how literature can regain order and beauty amidst the decline-narrative of the Anthropocene.

In the final talk of the conference, BIRGIT SCHNEIDER (University of Potsdam) addressed the complex relations of aesthetics and action. She offered a rich and critical approach to visualisations of the planet, which she denotes „cosmopragmatics.“ This approach is related to climate services, which have gained worldwide importance and can be seen as signs for a remarkable shift in climate research: from describing the problems to creating solutions, from earth system sciences to climate consulting. Drawing on the visualisations the platform *globalforestwatch.org* uses, which offer open data on forest landscape on a global level, she argued that cosmopragmatics allows for a new form of a less hegemonial and more interactive synopticism.

During the conference’s fruitful discussions about ways of responding to the complex scalar problems posed by the Anthropocene, some overarching lines of thought emerged. One was the search for forms of critical scalar responsibility that could resist the temptation of unifying, hegemonial and totalitarian approaches in the face of planetary ecological urgency. The planet’s earthly multitudes (Clark and Szerszynski) and the ecological pluralism of the second scalar revolution (Mert) pointed toward a non-unifying, but plural and differentiating description of the political and social life on earth. The temporal scale critique of Anthropocene stories (Woods), the proposed history of strategies for scalar accessibility (Horn) and the analysis of the cosmopragmatics of climate action (Schneider) offered critical and historical reflections on scalar representations. Literary cosmology (Bartha) was proposed as a way of developing scalar counter-narratives through literature; and Anthropocene biographies (Mauelshagen) entangled earth history with individual stories instead of eliminating them.

Yet another leitmotif occurring in the con-

text of this conference was a breakdown of scale as an operative force. While scaling with its epistemic roots in colonial and industrial knowledge production allows for the controllability of epistemic entities, some unruly figures emerged against the backdrop of the almost logocentric obsession with scalability. Sullivan introduced the imperceptibility of plant-scale, Parham evoked provoking affective states of silence and noise, and Johns-Putra stressed the generativity of sudden stasis and moments of exteriority – thus invoking disrupting moments that lead to the exhaustion, even to the destruction of scale (Fair), where the scalar desire to map, track, gaze, and measure is no longer sustainable. The focus on scalarity in the Environmental Humanities might find its Other in those ruptured/raptured sites of *scalar unbecoming*.

Conference overview:

Bernd Scherer (Berlin) / Gabriele Dürbeck (Vechta) / Philip Hüpkes (Vechta): Welcome and Introduction

Keynote I

Nigel Clarkand (Lancaster) / Bronislaw Szerszynski (Lancaster): Planetary Multiplicity, Earthly Multitudes: Trans-Scalar Articulations on a Volatile Planet

Panel 1: Scale and Time

Axel Goodbody (Bath): Time Travel as a Way of Modelling Trans-Scalar Thinking: Some Examples from German Environmental Fiction

Derek Woods (Dartmouth): Scale Critique for the Anthropocene, Part II

Panel 2: Scale, Alterity, and the Nonhuman

Christoph Rosol (Berlin): Operational Time Scales

Heather Sullivan (San Antonio): The Dark Green: Plant and Human Scale in the Anthropocene

Bernhard Malkmus (Newcastle): Do you need something that's not at your Disposal? Anthropomorphic Scales and Absolute Alterity

Adeline Johns-Putra (Surrey): When All Yardsticks are Lost: Arendt, Benjamin, and the Ethics of Scalar Derangement in Anthro-

pocene Fiction

Panel 4: Scale and the Public

Aysem Mert (Stockholm): Scaling up Democracy for Governance in the Anthropocene: New Narratives and Imaginaries

Franz Mauelshagen (Vienna): Anthropocene Biographies

Keynote II

J Henry Fair: Anthropocene and Me – Images of a World on the Edge

Panel 5: Scale and Space

Eva Horn (Vienna): The Planetary. Scaling Space in the Anthropocene

John Parham (Worcester): Are we ‚Dumb‘? Silence, Space & Mediating the Anthropocene

Kathrin Bartha (Melbourne / Frankfurt): Cosmology as Counter-Narrative to the Anthropocene: The Fractal Consciousness of Scale

Birgit Schneider (Potsdam): Politics of the Zoom. Downscaling the Cosmograms of a Heating Planet?

Concluding Discussion

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