Performances in the Anthropocene: Embodiment and Environment(s) in Ilija Trojanow’s Climate Change Novel

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Abstract

In this essay on the relationship between bodies and their environments in the Anthropocene two literary accounts of embodied relationships between humans and their environment will be analysed. They both present models of intricate interconnectedness of human bodies and their non-human environments, but they differ in emphasis and orientation. One is a self-conscious landscape performance art event and the other highlights the affective co-constitution of earth and humans. The two projects presented in Ilija Trojanow’s novel EisTau represent two radically different ways of narrating and artistically configuring interconnectedness of bodies and environment. The performance event seeks to highlight the role of the human as driver for creative solutions in a global age. The scientist who suffers from sadness and melancholy, on the other hand, reacts by channelling his affective disorder into destructive—and, in the end, self-destructive—actions. By presenting both sides, Trojanow offers the reader a chance to negotiate the tension between a focus on the critique of dominant narratives and the dire need for people to be involved in helping shape better futures in new and creative ways.

The concept of the Anthropocene, i.e. a new geological era in which the human influence on the earth’s atmosphere has significantly increased in shape and complexity, forces us to rethink the realm of anthropocentric reasoning. Pronounced by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer within the context of the community of climate-change scientists in an article in 2000, the idea of the Anthropocene is quickly catching on within art circles and debates in the humanities. While the concept itself is quite controversial and by no means accepted in the scientific community (see, for example, Ruddiman 2003: 261ff.),

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it has definitely interesting ramifications if applied to culture and society and it has the potential to incite fruitful, revisionist, and critical readings of the tradition. This is the project of a new metaphysical movement called object-oriented ontology where objects are said to exist independently of human perception and on equal footing with one another. With a philosophical foundation in the writings of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, object-oriented ontology rejects the idea that objects can be exhausted by their relations with humans or other objects (see Harmann 2002: 16ff.). In the Anthropocene where the interconnectivity of every part with everything else is an important feature of all world relations, where the world of the human and the non-human is profoundly intertwined, a perspective that emphasises relationality is helpful to understand and conceptualise the relationship between humans and their environment.

Our interest is to reflect more deeply and more concretely on the meaning of different configurations of embodiment in Ilija Trojanow’s climate change novel EisTau [Ice Melt]. The novel features a performance artist and his project of staging a human chain of bodies thereby visually configuring the letters sos in the Antarctic environment and a glaciologist whose object of study—an Alpine glacier—has melted away and who is now overcome with feelings of melancholy, which turn him into an eco-warrior who ends up kidnapping the cruise ship on which he serves as the lead lecturer and tour guide, leaving the human sos chain to its own devices in the remote polar environment and turning a piece of performance art into the real thing—the emergency signal—by enacting a performance himself—the kidnapping of the ship. What does it mean to be embodied? How are bodies troped with respect to their environment(s)? And what is the relationship between humans and their non-human environment? To address these and other questions, it is important that we understand the relationship between bodies and place, or bodies and landscape, or, what Maurice Merleau-Ponty has called “environmental embodiment” (see Merleau-Ponty 1964: 3ff.). Merleau-Ponty has explored various ways in which the human body lives in the world in terms of perception and movement. In its pre-reflective state, the perceptual body engages with the world thanks to a certain corporal awareness and through that awareness also transforms this environment (see Seamon 2013: 1ff.). The body as condition of experience is what Merleau-Ponty calls “corporeity,” a condition that establishes the primacy of perception (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 3ff.). If we extend that property to non-human bodies we are able to perceive of worldly engagements in environmental or ecological terms as Brown and Toadvine have proposed in their introduction to Eco-Phenomenology (see Brown and Toadvine 2003: 12ff.). This eco-phenomenological engagement is situated in a space that is neither purely objective, because it is reciprocally constituted by a diversity of lived