

Feeling the future, finding our place in the world: Ecopsychanalytic reflections on 'Future Perfect' by Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs

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The future already traces itself in the present. The future is a promise, and also a warning, and a nostalgic longing not just for a lost past, but for the lost perfect image of the time to come. Past losses and pain are imagined to be replaced with a future perfected. But in doing so the past inscribes itself within the horizons ahead. There's something coming we don't want to see, it is hard to accept and feel, anxiety shifting at the edge of awareness, shadows in the dark. Even worse, it is already here. The catastrophe perhaps has already occurred, for Winnicott¹ the fear of breakdown is a fear of a breakdown that has already occurred ("dread is just memory in the future tense"). No! I can't really believe it, look! The sky, the trees, my love. Still here, still alive, it can't all disappear. It's ok, please say it's going to be ok.

These images are beautiful and striking, and connect to a yearning to travel and see and connect to the beauty of the world, but it is a world that is already passing, a loss both of the real and of the fantasy. Art may indeed hold a mirror up to nature, but nature is also our mirror, a narcissistic idealised picture postcard, and more like Dorian Gray, an abjected place to expel things we don't want to see or confront.

The ecological crisis rushes on with a vertiginous speed. The future is coming, the film has jumped forwards too many frames at once, suddenly it arrives. The Anthropocene is accompanied by fractures and systemic collapses, ruptures and disruptions on many levels. Earth systems science focuses on those of the climate, biosphere, extreme weather, mass extinctions, habitat disruption, and the nonlinear feedback loops leading to complex ripples, some of which are dangerously self-amplifying. These ripples are also felt in disturbances in the psychological and sociocultural spheres, with the increasing amplitude of Bion's 'mad oscillations'². In our dreams, in our feelings, and our art, the Earth is dreaming through us.

Looking through the light shining through sea and plastic and air and glass and the fluids in our eyes. There is a beauty here that is also terrifying. Floating plastic to ensnare the fish. Is it beautiful despite its deadliness, or because of it? As with these images, the scientific findings warning of the dangers we face also illustrate a staggering complexity and beauty, with dynamics involving human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, chemistry and biology, semiotics and affects, languages and particles.

We don't seem to have time to feel the feelings we need to. At times it feels too abstract, almost mathematical, we are lost and seek to retreat the familiar world we knew but find it is no longer there. But the feelings are profound, and it's the feelings we fail to confront that keeps us locked into the future we fear and try avoid thinking about³. There is *loss*, melancholy and mourning⁴. Mourning not only for the loss of a world, but also for the loss of innocence, and for a loss of the imaginary worlds that have always sustained us, just over the hill. Something inside us has emptied, and is hanging there, like rows of empty bottles, hanging from wires. There is *terror*, the fear of a monster of immense proportions ready to swallow us whole and tear us to pieces, a hyperobject⁵ massively distributed in time and space, a leviathan of our own making that is about to devour us and end the age of humanity. And there is *guilt*, a culpability we desperately want to avoid, we can't bear to feel. A guilt that can become suicidal or turn outwards as rage, condemnatory moralistic fervour, and cynical nihilism.

We are in a cage of our own making. A psychoanalysis of our culture is required but beyond the means of our clinical practitioners, who are just as much caught up in these psychosocial

traps. What rituals can we employ for a mourning too great to be named? How can we cope with the cosmic terror of extinction that confronts us? How can we bear the guilt? How can we face the world we have made and the futures that are already here? Psychoanalysis⁶ and ecopsychanalysis³ have a role, but we need art, an art that can reach towards the other than human world, both natural and artificial. How can art imagine the relationship between humans and the rest of nature? There are several positions.

Firstly, we have been living for a long time perhaps with a story that portrays humans as *masters of the world*, above it and dominating and subduing, apart from and separate. The problems this has led us to are all too apparent. Secondly, we have an ecological vision of a *primary union* between humans and nature, as deeply interwoven in inseparable ways to the nonhuman, the wider biosphere, we *are* ecology and not separate from it. At times this leads to the romantic notion of a primary union, that has been shattered by the trauma of separation and disconnection, followed by a Hegelian move to reunion/fusion at a higher level. Thirdly, there is an alternative story from *posthumanism* and the *new materialism*. What we fuse with is not only the natural but the synthetic and technological. What new hybrid models can we find through art and life?

Both romantic fusion with nature and the post-humanist hybridity ask humanity to accept its castration: we are not as special as we think we are. But just as omnipotence is a defence against helplessness, 'helplessness' can also be a defence against omnipotence. Unfortunately, we are not in fact powerless, but have immense power, dangerously so. Yet we are unable to know how to act or control it. We are like a toddler with a machine gun. As Clive Hamilton⁷ states, theories that diminish human agency and power have arrived precisely when human technology now rivals the great forces of nature. While we may be enmeshed with nature, we also have the power to tear the mesh to pieces, ourselves along with it. Can we acknowledge and accept this power without falling into narcissism or Promethean delusions of grandeur? How can we process this, especially when the 'we' doing the processing includes myriad nonhuman parts in temporary connections, assemblages, and exchanges?

The forms throughout this exhibition move between the natural, the human, and technoscientific and mathematical abstractions. We need an art today that can do precisely this. The 'nonhuman' is as much technological and machinic as organic or animal, and equally a cause for ambivalence/desires/fears in terms of fusional fantasies with both. Many of the images here engage with our hybrid natures, recalling Stuart Haygarth's⁸ photographs of beach detritus and plastic found during his 450 mile walk along Britain's coast. The rubbish we discard loses its original function and takes on a second life, as it migrates across the ocean currents on epic voyages, and creates new artificial 'continents'. The form shifts and changes. The line between beauty, horror and disgust is a fine one. Watching ice fracture into fractal patterns as it melts, is beautiful and hypnotic. Seeing the frozen methane bubbles thus released is both wondrous and apocalyptic, each small bubble a piece of our doom.

Psychoanalytic approaches to symbiosis and liminality⁹ show they can be sources of terror, that we will lose ourselves as we re/merge with mother and the nonhuman environment, leading to frantic defences to shore up psychological boundaries. I am NOT nature, I am NOT an animal etc¹⁰ The very fragility of these boundaries leads to increasing violence at the border¹¹. But also that his liminality can be transformational, as we follow the ebb and flow of subjectivity-through-connectedness/merger followed by a separation and re-emergence of the self.

Dark forces approach closer, it's coming, there is a prayer of fear, and holding onto love at the moment of loss. Powerful feelings of awe, gratitude, excitement, and mourning all mixed together. The stew of the Anthropocene. Art can help us to process and come to terms with the awesome scale of life and death. The link between psyche and nature is not only from the inside out (projecting onto nature as a screen, evacuating our beta elements and psychic and material waste). It goes from the outside in. How can we face the end of the world, without denial or being overwhelmed by persecutory or depressive anxieties? There are utopian elements in the art on display here as well, echos of the yearning of our past futures, the futures of our

childhood. But something more. There is hope. A hope that is not manic or delusional, but based on a new imagining. The seeds of another future, while perhaps not perfect, are contained as shadows and lines and colours within these images, along with the traces of the past and the terrifying future that is already here.

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