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CAN HUMANS SURVIVE THE ANTHROPOCENE? AN ECO- RHYTHMOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: This paper proposes an ecocritical approach based on a practice-oriented physics of literature. Considering Henri David Thoreau’s romantic transcendentalism and contemporary trends of ecocriticism as experiments of practical orientation, it examines the *immanent* kinetic spaces which are supposed to encompass all their alternatives. By distinguishing different rhythmic “strata,” eco-rhythmology reveals that Anthropocene-generated climate change or dramatically diminishing biodiversity are not the only actual time directions. While arguing that technological or political solutions are not enough to modify them, this proposal underlines the need of rhythmical shifts in our practice. The second part of the paper shows, through examples taken from the poetry of contemporary British poet Philip Gross and the author’s Land-Rover Book experiments, how attempts like thinking together with the waters and the liquid muds of an estuary or writing and reading together with the more-than-human environment can change the time directions of Anthropocene destruction and discover common rhythms with our ecosystem.

Keywords: Anthropocene, post-environmentalism, kinetic spaces, eco-rhythmology, artistic experiment.

This paper proposes an ecocritical approach based on a practice-oriented physics of literature. In this proceeding research is focused on gestures of attention practiced during literary reading and writing, which I describe, by analogy to string theory, in

terms of complementary rhythmic dimensions, possible passages between their *kinetic spaces* and/or their time-projections to complementary rhythmical dimensions of other *practices* (Berszán, Empirical)¹. Considering both Henri David Thoreau's romantic transcendentalism and contemporary trends of ecocriticism as experiments of practical orientation, I will examine the immanent kinetic spaces created through the paradigmaticization of certain models of action and types of relation as applied to other practical ways of making connections. In the second part of the paper I will show, by means of Philip Gross's poetic experiments and my own Land-rover reading and writing exercises, how survival in the Anthropocene can be facilitated by experiencing the occurrences of one's environment in the rhythmic dimensions of their temporality, instead of their time-projections to paradigmatically immanent kinetic spaces.

Logically speaking it is highly probable that the Anthropocene will come to an end because of the general and rapid extinction of humans. But since it hasn't happened yet, we can orientate ourselves in multiple time directions, both in our individual and collective experiments.

Geological stratigraphers usually reject the idea of Anthropocene because there is no rock layer serving as its clear-cut evidence. From an eco-rhythmological view, we can answer that Anthropocene is not a layer of geological history, but the most encompassing present surface of all previous layers. Everything that is going on in my/our practices is not the mere consequence of the past or part of a process, but the actual rhythmic context of all geological and historical epochs. Ethics in this sense is our practical orientation in time(s) – not in and between layered epochs, but in and between

¹ A mini-glossary of introduced terms:

Practice: precise gestures of attention tuned to a rhythm (e.g. singing, swimming, playing kendama, riding a horse, calculating quantities or literary reading).

Rhythm: the *observed rhythm* appears as the recurrence of regular patterns, but the *followed rhythm* means practical connectedness of gestures.

Temporality: any distinguishable rhythm has its specific time. We define temporality as the rhythmic space of a movement/happening/practice or, in short: *kinetic space*. There is no way to find the rhythm of a practice in the kinetic space of another: in order to get in the rhythm of a practice, one has to get out from the temporality/kinetic space of all others.

Rhythmic dimensions: beyond the only extended time dimension (projected usually on the axis of numbers) I propose to take into account the complementary rhythmic dimensions of happenings as well. Introducing more than one time dimension entails the supposition of independent time directions. Practice-oriented physics defines occurrences with different rhythms as time directions. If rhythm is time direction, changing the direction in time means changing the rhythm.

Time projection: we can follow a happening/practice in the rhythmic dimension according to its own time direction or we can follow it as a time projection to another rhythmic dimension.

parallel kinetic spaces or different temporalities as rhythmic directions. Artistic practices are relevant here because they are cleverly designed experiments in multiple kinetic spaces changing the rhythm of our practical orientation.

Usually we refer to history with the certainty of addressing processes of the factual reality, but, in fact, we have to deal with experiments of practical orientation in time(s) which are not only interrelated, but they may sharply differ from one another. The Anthropocene makes no exception at all to this proliferation of temporalities. I don't mean only the conflicts arising from irreconcilable interests or the environmentalists' ecocritical engagement in opposing globalized economical practices. If we dive into recent literature in the field, we encounter diametrically opposed tendencies even among the strategies aimed at solving the global crisis.

There are those who diagnose continuous innovation and economic growth as unsustainable and propose a rethinking of our cultural and market principles, formerly considered independent systems, in order to mitigate human intervention in the biophysical environment (see Diamond; Brown and Timmerman). Others label this strategy as cowardly recoil or helplessness, and they would address the undesirable consequences of civilization by more intervention, i.e. by further reshaping of the environment (see Latour and other postenvironmentalist in Shellenberger and Nordhaus). While environmentalists propose a strategy of limiting ourselves, *compositionists* (a term introduced by Bruno Latour) try to surpass the modern myth of human emancipation from nature by means of new technologies for the well-being of human and plural non-human *natures*.

In their post-environmentalist study, Peter Kareiva, Robert Lalasz, and Michelle Marvier refute the 19th century transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau as follows: "Beneath the invocations of the spiritual and transcendental value of untrammelled nature is an argument for using landscapes for some things and not others: hiking trails rather than roads, science stations rather than logging operations, and hotels for ecotourists instead of homes" (Kareiva et al. chapter 3). This argument, however, seems to defend equity only until we realize that it postulates usage as the paradigm for activity. According to it, there are no other considerable differences among contact-making practices with landscapes, except the way we use their physical objects conforming them to our purposes.

Thoreau's transcendentalist attempts look like an arbitrary and powerless ideology only if we totally ignore his experience over the course of two years, two months and two days on the shore of Walden Pond, including intensive experiments like finding out what colour is a lake (Thoreau 132). While the above authors mention ironically that he built his cabin close enough to town "that he could frequently receive guests and have his mother wash his clothes" (Kareiva et al. chapter 3), they fail to observe that, by his experiments, Thoreau left behind not only the town, in terms of geographical coordinates, but he exited the kinetic usage space as well (see Berszán, *Border*). He wasn't breeding fish to sell them on the market, nor did he start a tourist guide enterprise, but he sought the company of the lake and the surroundings combining this with a *subsistent* activity of cultivating beans and peas with a minimal budget and persistent work. We can regard his contact-making experiments as usage only, by creating a distorted time projection of them, if we are not willing to exit the kinetic space of usage, not even during the time of reading *Walden*. Yet reading a literary narrative is equal *practically* to learning gestures of attention we are invited to perform while the artistic work of writing is actually practicing them.

In order to relate everything to everything else (which we misunderstand usually looking for certain kinds of connections among them) we need an immanent system of relations, which we do not want to exit anymore. "Anthropocene helplessness" (Kareiva et al. chapter 3) is not only about the unsuccessful projects of environmentalists who have been trying in vain for decades to mitigate our ecological footprint on a global scale, but also about the types of immanence we choose through certain practices and our insistence on holding on to them. After we reduced God – in our enlightened will to understand and control – to a cultural construction and discovered Nature as (raw) material, we began to explain and treat everything (including ourselves) in an immanent way. In order to succeed we had to find, one by one, those kinetic spaces which make this attempt possible: tables and encyclopaedias as kinetic spaces for positive data, calculation as a kinetic space for numbers, the kinetic space of social mechanisms, that of market relations or different histories according to the way they are narrated (there is a kinetic space for productive forces, another one for social relations or class struggle, and further kinetic spaces for evolution, for historical reception studies, for media history, political history, the truth process investigated by Alain Badiou (*Being and His*

Ethics, 2005, 40–57) or the distribution of the sensible in Rancière’s conception (Disagreement etc.)

These scientific or philosophical achievements gained considerable efficiency inside their especially elaborated immanent spaces, but at the same time they captured us inside them, too. This is why we see everywhere data, commodities, rhetoric patterns, medial transfers, ideologies, scientific projects, cultural and historical constructions, meeting and operating with them always in economic, political, cultural and historical contexts/media. Closed in such created world-scapes we meet less and less fellow inhabitants or Earth-mates, while intensive rhythms are happening to and with us together.

Bruno Latour invokes our responsibility as creators. Like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, technology becomes a monster if we leave it alone, detaching ourselves from its non-human nature. In order to avoid such a mistake, we have to accept the indistinguishable entanglement of humans, technology and nature. We are living in an age of “planetary gardening” – there are no remote wild places anymore, every spot on the Earth is part of and ground for our economic projects. Latour calls this non-Levinasian proximity “intimacy,” meaning that we are surrounded by more and more complex hybrids which must be considered newly created natures, rather than analyzed as composed of “natural” or “unnatural” components. We should not be afraid of the unexpected consequences of our actions, nor consider them scandalous, since actually every action has unintended consequences. Instead of withdrawal, we have to deal with the backlash of such effects by implementing new actions. It is impossible and undesirable to stop or reduce the tempo of technological innovation or societal modernization all over the world. There is no way to leave our created world in which we ourselves have incarnated, it is our job and responsibility to encroach, even more than before, on shaping the planetary “environment,” and to assume responsibility for all forthcoming complications, including taking care of them.

However, to what extent can we regard indistinguishably entangled things as intimacy? In my view, this is one of the main questions, when we evaluate the post-environmentalist or “compositionist” proposal. If we accept hybridity or entanglement as intimate bonding, we unavoidably discuss the topic of the Anthropocene condition in the terms of love and careful dominion, envisaging a controlled development in which

the master himself is dependent on his dependents. Thus he never leaves them alone, but works on their wellbeing and intends to save them. In other words, surprisingly the Christian God becomes the model and example in the development driven by science and technology, the God who loved his creatures even when they seemed to have become monsters.

Continuing with a biblical example, let us ask the following question: is the prisoner chained to his guardians in an intimate relation with them? It is true that the Apostle Peter sleeps well between two soldiers in prison (Acts 12:6, Revised Standard Version), but one can hardly imagine that he would lay his head on their shoulders. Examining intimacy, we have to decide if we approach the issue from the position of those who seek each other's intimate proximity or we want to grasp the inevitable closeness of the parties (or components) already bound together in a way that cannot be disentangled anymore. In the first case, intimacy depends on mutual attempts of contact making, while in the second case we have to deal rather with an immanence in which relatedness between parties or components is inevitable. We should neither confound these two approaches, nor consider them as a hybrid construct. Both of them exist, but their co-presence is not the consequence of a close and inseparable unity, they are radically different. Latour himself makes a definite distinction when he compares environmentalists as *separators* to postenvironmentalists as *compositionists*. These trends can appear together, but they are not intimately related (unless some, or at least two of them begin to seek each other's intimate company). If someone wants to argue for the hybrid nature of their aims, he/she needs some kind of immanent space where they are connected in a way that can bridge or neutralize their duality. Science and technology studies, however, have not revealed such a connection between them, according to it they are opposed to each other.

Latour's argumentation, however, seems to be convincing:

Everyday, in our newspapers we read about more entanglements of all those things that were once imagined to be separable — science, morality, religion, law, technology, finance, and politics. But these things are tangled up together everywhere: in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in the space shuttle, and in the Fukushima nuclear power plant. If you envision a future in which there will be less and less of these

entanglements thanks to Science, capital S, you are a modernist. But if you brace yourself for a future in which there will always be more of these imbroglios, mixing many more heterogeneous actors, at a greater and greater scale and at an ever-tinier level of intimacy requiring even more detailed care, then you are... what? A compositionist! (Latour, chapter 2)

But we have to take into consideration which of the enlisted “things” – science, morality, religion, law, technology, finance, and politics – offers that immanent space where the heterogeneous actors get entangled with one another, since there is no all-encompassing neutral space. Usually we consider as neutral that particular space in which we orientate ourselves for the time being, because that is the space in which we connect together the practices that actually take place in parallel kinetic spaces, in their own rhythms as different temporalities or time directions. It is obvious that we establish incomparably different relations between the things Latour enlists if we put them together in the kinetic space of a certain scientific research field, a religion or of the financial world. When Jesus answers the question about tax payment – while holding in his hand a tax coin with the image of Caesar – he says: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22: 21). This formulation seems to set up a parallel between equal parties, but it isn’t the case. We have to pay our debt to everybody, and the two mentioned debts may exist side by side, but it is obvious for Jesus and for his listeners as well, that the two authorities mentioned are not equal: people are much more indebted to God than to Caesar. In another teaching, Jesus makes clear that one cannot serve two lords at the same time concluding that “you cannot serve God and Mammon” (Matthew 6:24). Though his disciples used money, too (we know that they had a money box), and his later followers could possess movable or immovable assets as well, economic status or economic growth can never be guiding principles for those who orientate themselves in life according to the Sermon on the Mount.

It is interesting to see how different the relations established among the above-mentioned practical dimensions are when seen according to Latour’s way of orientation. Starting from media, he draws our attention to the everyday news that observe the inseparable entanglement of things considered separate realms before. Thus, we have to

realize how intimate the relation is among science, religion, politics etc. The final conclusion of Latour's paper however makes it clear in which kinetic space these close relations are established:

Which God and which Creation should we be for, knowing that, contrary to Dr. Frankenstein, we cannot suddenly stop being involved and "go home"? Incarnated we are, incarnated we will be. In spite of a centuries-old misdirected metaphor, we should, without any blasphemy, reverse the Scripture and exclaim: "What good is it for a man to gain his soul yet forfeit the whole world?" (Latour, chapter 2)

What is that kinetic space in which it is not a blasphemy to change something by a skilful process so radically that it turns into its own opposite, so as it would serve our goals better? It's not difficult to recognize technological immanence in which all possible transformations are intimately close to each other as technical achievements generating new types of nature. But the compositionist acceptance of such new natures pays no regard to the sustainability of that nature that wasn't created technologically. According to Latour, there is no traditional environment anymore, only newer and newer natures created by us. Turning Jesus' teaching into its contrary is not considered a blasphemy here, because it is legitimized as an innovative technological operation in an immanent space where innovation and development constitute the rhythm of any happening.

I wonder whether we could establish such an intimate relation between Jesus' teaching and its transformation into its opposite, also in the kinetic space of moral decisions or ethical orientation. I'm afraid not really. It does matter in what kinetic space we observe that science, morality, religion, law, technology, finance, and politics cannot be disentangled. It is dangerous to stay inside one of these kinetic spaces and assume that everything, that is, all other kinetic spaces intersect there. Totalizing the technological kinetic space as neutral is equal to claiming that everything outside it must be considered a transcendentalist illusion. In this way we ignore non-technological skills – like artistic practices, for instance – by which we do not transform everything into new natures, but become able to access and move through different kinetic spaces, thus learning multiple ways of contact making. A special way in each by means of special exercises and orientation techniques. If I learn to connect the world to my soul

according to Jesus' teaching, it will be a totally different experiment than learning "the same" in the context of Latour's technological immanence, or vice versa.

If environmentalists recoil in actions of Anthropocene immanence or they interrupt their momentum in a way or another, it is not necessarily cowardice or helplessness, but it can be an experiment of being responsive to extra-immanent occurrences. Though I question some of Roy Scranton's conclusions in his book *Learning to Die in The Anthropocene*, and sometimes I get averse to his melancholic intonation, there are at least two points where his essays seems to touch upon something essential for me: one of them is the philosophical program of learning to die, traced back to Montaigne, Cicero, Plato and Socrates; the other one is his interest for our being attuned to vibrations and rhythms and for our ability to interrupt them in our current behaviour. The global environmental crisis is a very serious warning that we cannot lock ourselves in the immanence of economic growth indefinitely – among other tasks we have to learn to die. Recognizing that such an "enterprise" is neither a market process, nor mere calculation or political struggle doesn't mean that dying must result from economic, scholarly or political helplessness. It also could be a different practice, which seems to be boringly decadent only in its time-projection to the kinetic space of market, calculation and politics. But if following its rhythm, we can exit the immanence of the mentioned kinetic spaces or interrupt the flow of their processes (at least in our behaviour), so learning to die can turn into critical reflection or even into an experiment to access other possible kinetic spaces. According to Scranton,

Humanity's survival through the collapse of carbon-fuelled capitalism and into the new world of the Anthropocene will hinge on our ability to let our old way of life die while protecting, sustaining, and reworking our collective stores of cultural technology. (Scranton 23)

It could be that 200 years from now, in the future, one can hardly recognize the forms of the present civilization in the life of people. Scranton adds:

Learning to die as an individual means letting go of our predispositions and fear. Learning to die as a civilization means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas

of identity, freedom, success, and progress. These two ways of learning to die come together in the role of the humanist thinker: the one who is willing to stop and ask troublesome questions, the one who is willing to interrupt, the one who resonates on other channels and with slower, deeper rhythms. (Scranton 24)

The practice-oriented physics I proposed independently from Scranton, explores this radical interrupting or entering other rhythms as passages between (complementary) rhythmic dimensions. My case studies (Berszán, *Ritmikai dimenziók/Rhythmic dimensions*) also confirm that human rhythms and resonances, modelled by Scranton with the dance of bees, are more than metaphorical expressions.

Our individual and collective practices take place in particular complementary rhythmical dimensions and we may move into their kinetic space exclusively by gesture resonance, i.e. by retuning the rhythm of our practice. This simple everyday practice of orientation seems to be odd as the object of investigations, since recent scholars have neglected the rhythmic density of our practices. In order to reveal calculable immanent processes in everything, investigations focus on the measurable output of actions, rather than their duration. Even arts are surveyed by searching measurable and calculable patterns (see methods like the contextual approach or the distant reading of literature). I'm afraid this is not the result of some sober-minded orientation, but rather a consequence of transforming construction into a paradigmatic model for practice (equal to the limitation of practice to production and construction).

Any interruption of getting attuned to such immanent processes can reveal the multiple rhythmic dimensions of practice – not some abstract lines, but real-time and real-space possibilities of relating to human and non-human beings. Changing the rhythm is an important way of making visible how art is relevant in moving beyond or surviving the Anthropocene. Latour's compositionist proposal is also focused on the joint survival of the human and non-human. But the rhythm linking one to the other is what actually matters here. Compositionist technology is a kinetic space for joint survival where the non-human environment gains immanent value by being used.

Let us consider the following example. In terms of contact making possibilities, I can relate to a little dog in many ways. I can, for instance, shine my shoes with it (its weight and size are optimal for this function and its fur is much higher quality than the

best brush in a specialty shop). But I can also make friends with the little dog to find out in common experiments in how many ways we can accompany each other or enjoy each other's company. What is the difference? Am I using the little dog for amusement instead of shining my shoes, or in the second experiment I move beyond the immanence of use in order to gain practice in some common rhythms we discover together in the company of each other?

To show how Artistic experiments can help us bypass the paradigmatic practices of the Anthropocene (such as use, construction, consuming), let us examine two further examples: Philip Gross' poetic experiments and my Land-rover reading and writing exercises.

The first two parts of the poem series entitled *Betweenland I-X* dive into the secrets of more or less liquid substances. The restless body of water in the estuary of the River Severn, constantly driven by the wind, tossed to and fro in the attraction of the earth and the moon, as well as the slow swirls and visible weight of the mud settling at low tide are approximations and contrasts of each other. One of them collects, carries and settles the other. Still, wet mud, especially in quantities of megatons, is fluidic, though on a different time scale. The river of mud here is not only an analogy to water, since it dissolves in it, adapts to its fluidity while passing back and forth between the solid and liquid state. Thoughts and changes of mind are also more than analogies, as they become the description of the shapes formed in the body of water or the barely visible streaming of the mud. Where billions of molecules or billions of neurons gather together, there even simplicity derives from incredibly complex interactions, and vice versa: complex interactions derive from simple principles. It is not known whether the mind is embodied in this case, or the changes in the extremely complex body generate into thinking. The curling oil-illuminations of the body of water, the secret shapes of the sea of neurons and the thinking mind are difficult to distinguish within the enlightenments of the poem's body; among them there is a *betweenland* in formation, a land that would be quite different without any of the components, moreover, it is in continuous change in the presence of these constituents. Not only is the mind able to recognize these changes as thoughts, but it is itself reflected in them, too. Is there a simpler or more concrete description of the unfathomably opaque transfigurations of

our thoughts than *the water's body*: “unquiet body (...) always trying / to be something other, to be sky, / to lose itself in absolute reflection” (Gross 11).

The heavier flow of the dense sediment of exceedingly fine composition raises resonances in the more obscure processes of the mind. Instead of a sudden enlightenment, the *suspended movements* of the slowly, inscrutably transfiguring, and sometimes stiffening mud become a delicate description of our curiosity or the re-articulation of our expressions for the nonarticulated. In one of the mud swirls, “spins off like a slow world, / like / a question / about nothing it can put a / name to, / an expression / that leaves home in search of a / face of its own” (Gross 12).

Formally, the *Betweenland* poems are dominated by description, but this description becomes poetic due to two kinds of experiments: one of them abolishes the “prosaic” distance between the describing observer and the object observed, and makes the description into a *betweenland* between the two; the other one transforms the comparison from a relation in a “neutral” space into a connection in the physical and/or mental space of encounter between those compared. Philip Gross thinks together with the waters and mudstreams of the Severn estuary.

Similarly to the thought resonances of fluid material, my reading and writing experiments also seek for common rhythms with our ecosystem. In the Land-rover reading and writing camps (Berszán, Land-rover) we try to get in the company of a “more-than-human” (Bristow 2) environment in the course of literary reading and writing exercises and to involve more-than-human environment into the literary reading and writing practices.

At the beginning of the silent night tour exercise, I introduce myself to the participants as the narrator of a story without words. It’s not a secret that the story is about a silent tour in the forest at night without flashlights or a path. How can you follow a narrator who is not speaking at all? By foot. It is important that I’m not the author, as neither the night forest, nor the fellow walkers were made up my me. As a narrator, I’m responsible for and in front of my reader-protagonists: first, it is my responsibility to arrive back to the camp fire safely, and secondly, the story has to be interesting.

In the *Perception poem* exercise, we are working in groups of three. There is a reader, a poet and a scholar in each group. The reader searches for a nook around the

camp where he/she would spend even a longer time with pleasure – as the chosen place for reading this is the library. He/she lays down on his/her back there and stretches his/her bare underarms behind offering them as a writing surface. The poet gathers some material for his/her poem (whatever he/she finds around the wilderness camp) and tries to transmit impulses to the writing surface with them. Again, the poet is responsible for and in front of his/her reader.

The scholar is outside the reader's site, but close to him/her, so the scholar watches the common ritual of the poet and reader and follows the perception poem on the face of the reader (Documentary Film: *Lakatos and Berszán, Terepkönyv oldalak/Pages of a Land Rover Book*).

In these reading and writing experiments, more-than-human environment becomes an active partner influencing the practice by which we enter its places and events. Instead of dominion, mastering or unilateral stewardship, all participants are fellow workers and playmates in a refined and intensive collaboration. Intimacy appears this time as heightened alertness in searching for and finding common rhythms. As a "leader" of the Land-rover camp exercises I am, in fact, an assistant of the surrounding landscape and part of the student group learning to pay attention in many different practical ways. Later on, we extend these exercises to the printed literature and/or we involve poetic and narrative experiments as artistically designed gestures of attention.

Conclusions

Artistic experiments (among them literary reading and writing exercises) can help us in moving beyond and survive the Anthropocene because:

1. Proposing alternative rhythms, they take us beyond the immanent spaces that seem to be inescapable from within.
2. They facilitate our practical orientation by teaching us to be attentive in many different ways.
3. And they can involve us and the non-human environment in common rhythms as co-authors.
4. The Anthropocene does not include all human practices since the steam engine was invented, or since the Great Acceleration that begun in the 1950's. It includes only the market-immanent, society-immanent, media-immanent or history-

immanent events arranged in closed kinetic spaces according to certain orientation attempts in time(s). The good news is that there is no completely immanent kinetic space encompassing all the others, so, in parallel with past- or future-oriented time directions there are alternative experiments that can be accessed and exited by changing the rhythm of our practice. Surviving the Anthropocene depends to a considerable extent on people's ability to search for and learn to accompany environmental events in their rhythmic dimensions, not to confuse them anymore with their usage-/construction-immanent time projections.

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