

ok i will admit to being grumpy this morning but this might be the most annoying article ever written about someone who is also quite annoying but who nevertheless has some seriously interesting and important ideas. the good news is that i cut out the most annoying bits for you 😊 i also made a pdf version where i've highlighted the most interesting bits. for those with strong stomachs, at the bottom is a link to the original.

## Timothy Morton's Hyper-Pandemic

The New Yorker · by Morgan Meis · June 8, 2021

In 2013, a philosopher and ecologist named Timothy Morton proposed that humanity had entered a new phase. What had changed was our relationship to the nonhuman. For the first time, Morton wrote, we had become aware that “nonhuman beings” were “responsible for the next moment of human history and thinking.” The nonhuman beings Morton had in mind weren't computers or space aliens but a particular group of objects that were “massively distributed in time and space.” Morton called them “hyperobjects”: all the nuclear material on earth, for example, or all the plastic in the sea. “Everyone must reckon with the power of rising waves and ultraviolet light,” Morton wrote, in “Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World.” Those rising waves were being created by a hyperobject: all the carbon in the atmosphere.

Hyperobjects are real, they exist in our world, but they are also beyond us. We know a piece of Styrofoam when we see it—it's white, spongy, light as air—and yet fourteen million tons of Styrofoam are produced every year; chunks of it break down into particles that enter other objects, including animals. Although Styrofoam is everywhere, one can never point to all the Styrofoam in the world and say, “There it is.” Ultimately, Morton writes, whatever bit of Styrofoam you may be

interacting with at any particular moment is only a “local manifestation” of a larger whole that exists in other places and will exist on this planet millennia after you are dead. Relative to human beings, therefore, Styrofoam is “hyper” in terms of both space and time. It’s not implausible to say that our planet is a place for Styrofoam more than it is a place for people.

When “Hyperobjects” was published, philosophers largely ignored it. But Morton, who uses the pronouns “they” and “them,” quickly found a following among artists, science-fiction writers, pop stars, and high-school students. The international curator and art-world impresario Hans Ulrich Obrist began citing Morton’s ideas; Morton collaborated on a talk with Laurie Anderson and helped inspire “Reality Machines,” an installation by the Dutch-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson. Kim Stanley Robinson and Jeff VanderMeer—prominent sci-fi writers who also deal with ecological themes—have engaged with Morton’s work; Björk blurbed Morton’s book “Being Ecological,” writing, “I have been reading Tim Morton’s books for a while and I like them a lot.”

In 2015, sections of a sprawling e-mail exchange between Morton and Björk were collected as part of “Björk: Archives,” the catalogue publication accompanying her mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. “I really like your song ‘Virus,’ ” Morton wrote to Björk. “Virus” is not a pandemic story but a love song:

Like a virus needs a body  
As soft tissue feeds on blood  
Someday I’ll find you, the urge is here.  
Like a mushroom on a tree trunk  
As the protein transmutes  
I knock on your skin, and I am in.

“Being alive means being susceptible to viruses and so on,” Morton wrote. “They are intrinsic parts of being a thing at all.” Morton admired Björk for letting her songs be remixed and remade by other artists, just

as a virus “remixes” the components of the organism it enters.

Remixing, for Morton, is in some sense an ecological act: **ecological thinking involves being open to and accepting of everything, even the strangest and darkest aspects of the world around us. “Earth needs this tenderness,” Morton wrote to Björk. “I think there is some kind of fusion between tenderness and sadness, joy, yearning, longing, horror (tricky one), laughter, melancholy and weirdness. This fusion is the feeling of ecological awareness.”**

(..) It’s Morton’s belief that, as we approach the ecological precipice, it is becoming easier for us to see our reality differently. **Reality, Morton writes, is populated with “strange strangers”—things that are “knowable yet uncanny.”** This strange strangeness, Morton writes, is an irreducible part of every rock, tree, terrarium, plastic Statue of Liberty, quasar, black hole, or marmoset one might encounter; by acknowledging it, we shift away from trying to master objects and toward learning to respect them in their elusiveness. Whereas the Romantic poets rhapsodized about nature’s beauty and sublimity, Morton responds to its all-pervading weirdness; they include in the category of the natural everything that is scary, ugly, artificial, harmful, and disturbing.

(..) in Morton’s book “Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence,” from 2016. Morton writes that cats, “weirdly symbolize the ambiguous border between agricultural logistics and its (impossible to demarcate) outside. I mean we don’t let dogs just wander about. It’s as if we want to use cats to prove to ourselves that there is a Nature.”

(..)

In 2007, while a professor at the University of California, Davis, Morton published “Ecology Without Nature,” which was noticed and praised by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Morton had shifted from being a literary scholar of British Romanticism to a philosopher of ecology, interested in fundamental questions about how human beings relate to one

another, the planet, and the cosmos. Over the next decade, Morton published seven more books that escaped easy categorization. Books such as “Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People” and “Dark Ecology” offer a sometimes bewildering mix of literary references, philosophical argumentation, scientific speculation, and memoir. “Dark Ecology” is dedicated to “Allan”—Allan Whiskersworth, Morton’s cat, run over by a mail truck. (...) Being ecological, for Morton, is not about spending time in a pristine nature preserve but about appreciating the weed working its way through a crack in the concrete, and then appreciating the concrete. It’s also part of the world, and part of us.

(...)

The problem with hyperobjects is that you cannot experience one, not completely. You also can’t not experience one. They bump into you, or you bump into them; they bug you, but they are also so massive and complex that you can never fully comprehend what’s bugging you. This oscillation between experiencing and not experiencing cannot be resolved. It’s just the way hyperobjects are.

Take oil: nature at its most elemental; black ooze from the depths of the earth. And yet oil is also the stuff of cars, plastic, the Industrial Revolution; it collapses any distinction between nature and not-nature. Driving to the port, we were surrounded by oil and its byproducts—the ooze itself, and the infrastructure that transports it, refines it, holds it, and consumes it—and yet, Morton said, we could never really see the hyperobject of capital-“O” Oil: it shapes our lives but is too big to see.

(...)

Since around 2010, Morton has become associated with a philosophical movement known as object-oriented ontology, or O.O.O. The point of O.O.O. is that there is a vast cosmos out there in which weird and interesting shit is happening to all sorts of objects, all the time. In a 1999 lecture, “Object-Oriented Philosophy,” Graham Harman, the

movement's central figure, explained the core idea:

The arena of the world is packed with diverse objects, their forces unleashed and mostly unloved. Red billiard ball smacks green billiard ball. Snowflakes glitter in the light that cruelly annihilates them, while damaged submarines rust along the ocean floor. As flour emerges from mills and blocks of limestone are compressed by earthquakes, gigantic mushrooms spread in the Michigan forest. While human philosophers bludgeon each other over the very possibility of “access” to the world, sharks bludgeon tuna fish and icebergs smash into coastlines.

We are not, as many of the most influential twentieth-century philosophers would have it, trapped within language or mind or culture or anything else. Reality is real, and right there to experience—but it also escapes complete knowability. One must confront reality with the full realization that you'll always be missing something in the confrontation. Objects are always revealing something, and always concealing something, simply because they are Other. The ethics implied by such a strangely strange world hold that every single object everywhere is real in its own way. This realness cannot be avoided or backed away from. There is no “outside”—just the entire universe of entities constantly interacting, and you are one of them.

(...) We are not getting rid of the hyperobject Plastic anytime soon, or of any of the other hyperobjects that are the result of our industrial practices. We are deeply involved with all of them now. We might as well admit our commitment, physically, practically, and emotionally.

In “Dark Ecology,” Morton writes that we must cultivate a “spirituality of care” toward the objects of the world—not just the likable parts but the frightening ones. Morton suggests that, instead of burying nuclear

waste, we might store it aboveground, in a visible place, where we can learn to take more responsibility for it—perhaps even building an aesthetically interesting enclosure. The kind of care Morton envisions is as interested in piles of sulfur as in trees; it is concerned with both polar bears and circuit boards. Morton wants us to care for plutonium. At a minimum, Morton thinks that this kind of caring could cure us of the idea that we are in control; it might show us that we are part of a vast network of interpenetrating entities that come to know one another without dispelling their mystery. At a maximum, Morton seems to feel that **this omnidirectional, uncanny form of care could help save the world.**

(...)

Nearly a year after my trip to Houston, I called Morton on the phone. It was April, 2020. COVID-19 was tearing through the U.S.

“Is COVID-19 a hyperobject?” I asked them.

“It’s the ultimate hyperobject,” Morton said. “The hyperobject of our age. It’s literally inside us.” We talked for a bit about fear of the virus—Morton has asthma, and suffers from sleep apnea. “I feel bad for subtling the hyperobjects book ‘Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World,’” Morton said. “That idea scares people. I don’t mean ‘end of the world’ the way they think I mean it. But why do that to people? Why scare them?”

What Morton means by “the end of the world” is that a world view is passing away. The passing of this world view means that there is no “world” anymore. There’s just an infinite expanse of objects, which have as much power to determine us as we have to determine them. Part of the work of confronting strange strangeness is therefore grappling with fear, sadness, powerlessness, grief, despair. “Somewhere, a bird is singing and clouds pass overhead,” Morton writes, in “Being Ecological,” from 2018. “You stop reading this book and look around you. You don’t

have to be ecological. Because you are ecological.” It’s a winsome and terrifying idea. Learning to see oneself as an object among objects is destabilizing—like learning “to navigate through a bad dream.” In many ways, Morton’s project is not philosophical but therapeutic. They have been trying to prepare themselves for the seismic shifts that are coming as the world we thought we knew transforms.

(...)

I return to that line that Morton wrote in one of his e-mails to Björk, describing the “fusion between tenderness and sadness, joy, yearning, longing, horror (tricky one), laughter, melancholy, and weirdness.”

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