

# FROM POSTMODERNISM TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

## Baptisms of an age without a name

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### *Abstract*

It is only a few years since the word “Anthropocene” has entered the common language, after being for a long time the exclusive domain of the scientific community. It is now progressively adopted in the humanities as the proper name of our age. This is in itself a rather extraordinary fact: it is the first time that a term used in geology is chosen over a cultural term as a definition of the age we live in. Over the past two centuries, the names that baptized the current epoch, *modernism*, *postmodernism*, came from art, architecture, sociology or philosophy; but to name this new age that has succeeded the postmodern, the humanities have had to take their cue from the sciences.

What has prevented humanist culture from exerting its customary baptismal right over the new epoch? What has inhibited the normal methods of historical periodization and the typically modern way in which the movement through History is represented? This essay investigates this new and curious sense of being lost in history and the way in which the humanities have repressed over the past decades the greatest emergency mankind has ever faced: the risk of its own extinction.

*Keywords:* Modernity, Epoch-baptizing, Cultural history, History of the Earth, Earthlings.

### 1. *The race to find a name*

It has only been a few years since the word “Anthropocene” entered the common language after having long been the exclusive domain of a restricted group of scientists. As is known, it designates the epoch in which men have begun to interfere with the evolution of the planet, leaving indelible traces such as climate change and radioactivity. The neologism was first adopted by the American biologist Eugene Stoermer, who

started using it loosely in the 80s. It was, however, in 2000 (the date itself seems fateful), during a scientific conference in Mexico, that the Nobel prize winner for atmospheric chemistry Paul Crutzen officially proposed using it to indicate a new geological era.<sup>1</sup>

The story goes that Crutzen, after sitting through a great number of papers that described the current geological epoch as the Holocene, stood up and blurted out: “stop saying Holocene. This is the Anthropocene!”. Thus an unplanned remark by a leading atmospheric scientist kickstarted a phenomenon similar to a whirlwind progressively gathering strength.

The term was finally consecrated, as it were, sixteen years later at the 2016 International Geology Conference of Cape Town: well beyond the scientific community, however, and well before receiving its official imprimatur as the word that defines our epoch, *Anthropocene* had already started to circulate in earnest. By the second decade of the century it had finally taken hold in all fields of knowledge, not just those relating to science, but also to the humanities, as well as becoming common currency in journalism.

What, in the meantime, was happening in the humanities? The new millennium was marked by a progressively strong feeling that a new historical phase had been entered. The attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 triggered a widespread perception that an epochal caesura had occurred, definitively distancing the present from the cultural climate and aesthetic parameters of the preceding phase, which had been called *postmodern*. Another aesthetic gained momentum, which abandoned postmodern irony in favour of other forms of creativity and expression<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, following a familiar pattern, the need arose to christen the new that was being experienced, to new-mint a name that might function analogously to the term *postmodern*, and, for the immediately preceding era,

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- 1 See P.J. Crutzen and E. F. Stoermer, *The Anthropocene*, in “IGBP Newsletter”, vol. 41, 2000, pp. 17- 18.
  - 2 If we take the refusal of postmodern irony as the significant sign of a change in epochal sensibility, it should be pointed out that this already featured in a 1993 piece of writing by David Foster Wallace (*E Unibus Pluram. Television and U.S. Fiction*, in “Review of Contemporary Fiction”, 13, 2, 1993), and in the work of Italian authors such as Tiziano Scarpa (*Cos'è questo fracasso*, Einaudi, Torino 2000). Pasolini had criticised it even before it was defined as postmodern: see, for example, his review of Montale's *Satura* di Montale, published in “Nuovi argomenti”, n. 21, in 1971, and now to be found in *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, ed. by W. Siti, t. 2, Mondadori, Milano 1999. On this, see C. Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino*, Bollati-Boringhieri, Torino 1988, in particular the chapter 2, “L'effetto di apocrifo”.

the term *modern*. But this time the customary baptism was slow to come, despite many zealous efforts made to invent a name for the present.

In literary and art theory, in sociology and in political philosophy there appeared neologisms such as *metamodernity*, *neomodernity*, *surmodernity*, *altermoderniy*, *hypermodernity*, as well some others I shall also discuss<sup>3</sup>. Many, possibly too many names. None of them, however, succeeded in irradiating their influence beyond their specific field of application, and sometimes not even to fully win popularity in that field itself. No name gained recognition as *the* name chosen by the age as its own. There was a widespread feeling that we were being helmed into a new era, but no name seemed adequate to capture this newness.

Who would devise it? Which intellectual, what field of research would succeed in selecting a single powerful epoch-defining word? Should we expect it to be a philosopher? An art movement? An aesthetic treatise? The title of a sociological study? In the humanities the anonymity of the present lasted for over a decade. Until this curious unofficial race, this competition amongst so many Adam-like name forgers, was unexpectedly won by an atmospheric chemist.

This was the first time that the Earth sciences had entered into competition with the humanities in the business of naming the present. It happened without the two parties even realising what was taking place because each worked in its own independent sphere, following parallel paths, each with its own horizons and paradigms. Though unannounced, a competition had however been silently going on – a fact proved by its very outcome: one winner, albeit the least likely, beat all the others, and the name that had emerged in the scientific field gained ascendancy in all other fields.

*Anthropocene* has been progressively adopted by philosophy, political thought, anthropology, as well as art and literature as the name of our time<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, the names put forward in the field of the humanities (*neo-*

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3 I will expand on each of these proposals in the section entitled *The spinout of modernity*.

4 Among the humanists who have redeployed the term and dedicated book-length studies to the subject the following, at least, should be mentioned: B. Latour, *Fourth Lecture. The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe*, in Id., *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the new Climatic Regime*, Polity press, Cambridge 2017; Ch. Bonneuil, J.-B. Fressoz, *The Shock of Anthropocene. The Earth, History and Us*, Verso, New York 2016; J. Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, University of California Press, California 2016. In November 2013, at the University of California at Berkeley, I gave a seminar entitled *After postmodernism, Anthropocene?*; some of the ideas put forward on that occasion have formed the basis for this article. The use of the name *Anthropocene* in art will be discussed in a later section.

*modern, hypermodern* etc.), although coined in the same years, already sound a bit outdated, and while still adopted by some scholars, they have never succeeded in becoming the common name by which our epoch is known.

That a geological term should outclass a cultural name to define the time we are living in is surprising and deserves some attention. We are not speaking of the Quaternary or the Paleolithic Periods, the Copper Age or any of the other periodisations of so-called Prehistory, which have always been the domain of geology and paleontology. This is a period belonging to history – and specifically to present history. The definition and the naming of a historical period has always been the province of the humanities: *Antiquity*, the *Middle Ages*, the *Renaissance*, are all denominations and periodisations deriving from these fields and are the result of operations of historical retrospection. In defining the phases that have succeeded one another in the last two centuries the need did not even arise for a posthumous naming ceremony: such moments of fracture coincided with cultural and artistic ferment which denominated themselves at the very moment in which they stepped onto the stage of history. So it was for *Romantic*, *Modern*, and *Postmodern* – names forged in the furnaces of literature and philosophy and later adopted by history and sociology. But for this present age that comes after the postmodern, humanists have for the first time handed over the baton to science.

How should we interpret this handover of power? Or rather, what has prevented the humanities from following their customary promptness in christening this new epoch? Evidently something has taken place that has inhibited the normal processes of historical periodisation and their – typically modern – manner of representing our relationship with the past and the future.

Before exploring this subject further, we shall take a step back to look more carefully at those transitional years and the sense of confusion and bewilderment the cultural world experienced.

## 2. *Lost in history*

In June 2000 the international politics review *Global* launched a “consultation” on the name that should be given to our epoch. On the cover, a multicoloured but slightly blurred gigantic vortex served as background to the question “in what era do we live”, its large print arranged around a huge question mark at the centre of the vortex. A number of renowned international opinion leaders were invited to submit their answers: “the era of global citizenship” was the suggestion put forward by Brazilian politi-

cian Fernando Cardoso; “the market of Babel” was Brian Eno’s proposal; among the others were “era of the open society”; “era of the end of history” (Francis Fukujama); “era of migrations and small wars”; “era of the IT revolution”; “era of the biotechnologies”.

All these phrases were formed by a postmodifying genitive, *the era of...*, followed by the social, economic or technological phenomenon considered most relevant. Some of them already seem sadly outdated. We are no longer in the age of global citizenship but in the age in which states, including those that in the past have been the greatest promoters of globalisation, are erecting walls to protect their borders. But, setting aside the validity of those predictions, what it is interesting to note is that from the early years of the new millenium throughout the Western world the question of “what era do we live in?” was discussed across a variety of fora, without, however, actually hitting on a name powerful enough to step into the limelight and hold the stage long enough.

In October 2004, Radio Canada went as far as to launch an actual competition to name our epoch. 3,300 proposals were sent in, five of which were shortlisted by the jury: *The years of shock*, *The exploded years*, *Age of Babel*, *The great disorder* and *Ego.com*.<sup>5</sup> Once again, none of the proposals could be said to describe more than a partial social phenomenon, which the coiner of the phrase saw as more important than others. What, after all, could one expect from a public competition? *Modern* and *postmodern* were certainly not the outcome of a poll or vote, nor were they put forward by an individual. They germinated from a synergy of voices and spontaneously won the day.

Although these attempts to denominate the present proved fruitless, they nevertheless reveal a number of things. First, how difficult it is to christen this new historical phase, almost as if something that was previously spontaneous had become problematic. Also, judging by the amount of discomfort caused by this uncertainty, they indirectly show the importance contemporary culture has invested in naming the age in which it is living. Epoch-baptizing must have been so deep-rooted in the moderns and in the ways they experience time and history that even when it fails to arise spontaneously from discursive practices, an attempt is made to force it into existence. Indeed, to name the present means to transform it into a significant historical period, removing it from the shaplessness of the mere passage of time. In this act of naming one may distinguish the typical traits of the modern vision of history and its unique dominion over time: each

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5 Cf. <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/radio/indicatifpresent/epoque/>

successive phase of civilization is named in order to separate it from what we think we have left behind.

### 3. *Modern baptisms*

To exemplify what has been said so far, let us take a step back into the Paris of the second half of the nineteenth century, when the old city centre was torn apart to make way for the great boulevards, when gas lighting spread everywhere and the first universal exhibitions took place. These and other profound transformations so greatly changed life in the metropolis that Baudelaire was compelled to say, in a famous line from *Le cygne*, “le vieux Paris n’est plus”. Such disruptions were nevertheless extraordinarily stimulating. A new sensibility spread through art and literature. For many artists of the time, as for Baudelaire himself, all of this could be rolled up into a name – a strong and exciting name that alluded to both a new era and a new aesthetic: the *modern*.

Just over a century later, that name had exhausted its currency. The triumphal phase of modernity was a thing of the past. No promise or excitement emanated from that word. In the societies dominated by the so-called mature capitalism history was read through progressively disenchanted eyes, utopias crumbled together with human’s faith in progress. True, Baudelaire himself, like many other ultimately antimodern moderns, had foreseen the negative outcome of the “universal progress”<sup>6</sup>. But now, what was a foreboding had become an observable fact. The progress of art itself, if viewed against the tireless search for the new that had characterised full modernity and the avantgardes, began to slow down and make room for an ironic reuse of forms from the past.

No sooner was the sun felt to have set on the word *modern*, however, than a newly minted term started to circulate, first in architecture, then in other fields. It was a name that summarised both the crisis of modernity and growth of a new sensibility: *postmodern*. It no longer carried any promise of progress in either culture or civilisation; indeed, its prefix seems to announce that nothing new is any longer possible. And yet, its first appearance was marked by an excitement in no way inferior to that which had accompanied the word *modern*. On the contrary, it irradiated an extraordinary

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6 Baudelaire was critical of modernity and its logic based on progress; to the point that he is often viewed as an antimodern. See, for example, A. Compagnon, *Les antimodernes: de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*, Gallimard, Paris 2005.

and fast-moving energy, spreading like wildfire from the USA to Europe, from architecture to art, literature and the other fields of knowledge.

The naming ceremony has been a distinguishing feature not just of the two important cultural phases described above, but also of the artistic movements that have succeeded one another on the stage of history over the past two centuries. If one looks at all the labels that served to announce the latest literary and artistic trends – *Romanticism*, *Scapigliatura*, *Impressionism*, *Symbolism*, *Cubism*, *Expressionism*, *Futurism*, *Dadaism*, *Surrealism* and so forth – it is noticeable how the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were characterised by a flowering of new names. Each announced something “new”, with a touch of the transitory and fugitive (and therefore, as Baudelaire argued, the thrill) that modern art shared with fashion<sup>7</sup>. Each new trend and avantgarde euphoriously gave itself a name, fuelled by the belief that it represented the brave new face of history. Viewed in this light modernity may be described as a series of baptisms of the new and breaks from the past, the two always going hand in hand.

That the shape of modernity consists in an intervention on the perception of time, that is, in a periodisation that introduces a break in the chronology of history, was something the Romantics had already guessed, and later historians have further underscored<sup>8</sup>. This break not only establishes a beginning but serves also to make the present a powerful present, by means of an energetic separation from the past which also endows it with a mission. What these readings of the modern often do not foreground is that such an operation is always associated with a naming. Each time this structure (the chronological fracture followed by the naming ceremony) is reapplied, each time a programmatic manifesto launches a new name for a new artistic practice, a feeling of excitement is produced which gives “power” either to the present, turning it into an epoch charged with meaning, or to the movement itself, which now becomes an important trend projected into the future.

By calling these language acts *baptisms* or *name givings*, I am using the same metaphor deployed by Hilary Putnam<sup>9</sup> and other language philosophers to illustrate the way in which the terms for basic substances or measurements are fixed (for example “water”), through ostensive reference (“this is water”), rather than by means of a description of the physical qual-

7 See Ch. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, transl. by P. E. Charvet, Penguin Books, New York 1972.

8 See F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, Verso, New York 2002.

9 The phrase used is *name-giving ceremony*. See H. Putnam, *The Meaning of Meaning*, in “Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science”, vol. 7, 1975.

ities of the thing named (“H<sub>2</sub>O”), which may actually not be known to the person speaking. The similarity between the two phenomena is less vague than one might think. When an epoch or an art movement is described or launched, this is done ostensibly (“this is postmodernism”), in order to indicate something for which we do not yet have an explicit definition (“the characteristic traits of postmodernism are x, y and z”), in a way that almost anticipates its arrival. The explicit definition will come later, elaborated – often controversially – by cultural historians or art theorists through retrospective analysis.

To use a concept introduced by the French historian François Hartog, one might say that these naming ceremonies are an integral part of the “modern regime of historicity”<sup>10</sup>, if it were not for the fact that Hartog does not in fact mention them among the salient traits of this regime. And yet they have played a determining role in the peculiar way in which modernity has shaped its experience of time, having always gone hand in hand with the possibility of making the present separate from the past. Unlike the ancients, the moderns have been unable to conceive of an epoch without a name. To give a name to the time we inhabit and to all that is changing in it has been over the past two centuries one of the cornerstones of how we situate ourselves within history.

#### 4. *The spinout of modernity*

One more leap forward takes us back to the beginning of the new millennium, from where these reflections started. Once again we witness a swerve away from the past. The postmodern sun has finally set, that particular cultural climate, one constantly hears, with its unique mindset and art forms, is now a thing of the past. In this case, however, unlike what occurred with previous fractures, no new name has claimed the stage, no baptism has been announced for this new age. For over a decade, literary and art critics, cultural historians, philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have been extremely vocal in announcing the end of postmodernism – innumerable essays on the subject have jockeyed for attention.<sup>11</sup> And if one considers

10 See F. Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and the Experiences of Time*, transl. by S. Brown, Columbia University Press, New York 2015.

11 The “end of postmodernism” was first talked about in the late 90s. In Italy, for example, in a 1997 essay by A. Berardinelli, *La fine del postmoderno*; now in his *Casi critici. Dal postmoderno alla mutazione*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2007. Since then an astonishing volume of writing has been published on the subject; I shall



that each new artistic, literary or philosophical proposal that has emerged in these years has without exception pitted itself *against* postmodernism, while at the same time declaring its predecessors' demise<sup>12</sup>, we see how greatly this swells the count of postmodernism's death certificates. However, no one has succeeded in telling us what began after its end.

The labels proposed by the humanities for the baptism of the new epoch have been many: some of them I have already mentioned; let us now examine more closely how and by whom they were coined. *Hypermodern* is the brain-child of the French philosopher Paul Virilio, but was later reprised and readapted by sociologists, philosophers and literary critics<sup>13</sup>. More or less in the same period, the term *Sur-modernity* was launched by the French anthropologist Marc Augé<sup>14</sup>. In 2010, two cultural theorists, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, proposed *metamodernism*<sup>15</sup>, which was adopted as a keyword also in the titles of some art exhibitions<sup>16</sup> as well as in some essays in literary criticism. The name *Altermodern* was minted by the art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who also adopted it in 2009 for the title of an exhibition he organised<sup>17</sup>. As a noun, *altermodernity* was also used, albeit with a different nuance,

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mention here only two important studies: *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, ed. by J. López and G. Potter, The Athlone Press, London 2001; and R. Luperini, *La fine del postmoderno*, Guida, Napoli 2005.

- 12 An Italian example of this is the "New Italian Epic", a literary trend identified by Wu Ming 1 in 2008 (further discussed in *New Italian Epic*, Einaudi, Torino 2009), and used to describe a number of novels published between 1993 and 2008, which present similar stylistic and thematic features, but above all a refusal of the "icily ironic" tone that dominated the postmodern novel. I shall look at some examples of new trends lauded against postmodernism in the field of art and philosophy in a later section.
- 13 See P. Virilio, *From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, ed. by J. Armitage, Sage, London 2000; G. Lipovetsky and S. Charles, *Hypermodern Times*, Polity, London 2006; G. Lipovetsky, *Les temps hypermodernes*, Grasset, Paris 2004; in Italy the term has been applied to literature by R. Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2014.
- 14 See M. Augé, *Non-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, transl. by J. Howe, Verso, London 1995.
- 15 See T. Vermeulen and R. van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*, in "Journal of Aesthetics and Culture, vol. 2, 2010, pp. 1-13.
- 16 For example, in the exhibition *No More Modern: Notes on Metamodernism*, which was held at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York in 2014.
- 17 *Altermodern*, the fourth Tate Triennial at Tate Britain, 2009. See also N. Bourriaud, *Altermodern*, Tate Publishing, London 2009.

in the political theory of Toni Negri and Michael Hardt<sup>18</sup>. *Neomodern* was first heard towards the end of the 90s (in 1997 British artist Guy Denning founded a group called *Neomodern*), and the name has held its ground to this day, when it was adopted also by the Italian philosopher Roberto Mordacci to describe – yet again – a condition characterised by a complete rupture with the postmodern<sup>19</sup>. Finally, two more descriptive labels deserve notice here: Ulrich Beck’s *second modernity* and Sigmund Bauman’s *liquid modernity*<sup>20</sup>. While these may not properly be called neoformations as they simply add an adjective to the word *modernity*, they were nevertheless used in those years in an attempt to give a name to the period and should therefore be mentioned – they do, after all, belong to the family of name-derivations from *modern*.

What is immediately observable is that all of these names continued to be connected to the – by then hardly exciting – semantic field of the modern. Also, if one examines more closely what distinctive traits of the present time they foreground, one common feature emerges, despite the many differences: each name explicitly declares that the present has not completely broken with modernity, but is rather an evolution or even an exasperation of the modern. *Hypermodern* stresses an idea of a modernity whose negative traits have been pushed to excess, but at the same time it also includes a sense of its positive – ethical, critical and self-corrective – drive<sup>21</sup>. The present is therefore viewed as an epoch that remains radicated in the modern, in its good as well as in its bad features. The same is true for the other names that have been put forward, none of which – setting aside how they spotlight the various aspects that differentiate our own time from high modernity, attempt to question that continuity. Indeed, what these names are determined to encapsulate is precisely the resumption of the modern, which is thus reinstated, albeit partially, after the interruption of

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18 By *altermodernity* Hardt and Negri mean “a decisive break with modernity and the power relation that defines it”, while for Bourriaud, as for the majority of the theorists I have mentioned, the break is with postmodernity. See M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Commonwealth*, Belknap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge Mass. 2009, p. 103.

19 R. Mordacci, *La condizione neomoderna*, Einaudi, Torino 2017. The cover reads: “Postmodernism is dead. History, philosophy, science and art have once more begun to flow unrestrainedly and disquietingly. This is the new modernity – challenging and hopeful”.

20 See U. Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, Sage, London 1992 and Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity, Cambridge 2000.

21 However, it takes for granted, as Raffaele Donnarumma argues, that revolution is no longer possible (see R. Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità*, cit., p. 105).

the postmodern – now viewed as an unfortunate hiatus. In all these cases we observe a notable simplification of everything that animated postmodernism, a blunting of its incisiveness, and especially, an erasing of its criticism of modernity.

This spinout of the modern appears even more clear-cut in another phenomenon that also took place at the beginning of the millennium<sup>22</sup>. Among the various names put forward for the new epoch there also appeared, unembellished by prefixes or adjectives, the straightforward term “modern”. A number of international art exhibitions in Europe and the United States presented new artists as “moderns”; far from using the adjective neutrally, however, these shows selected it to mark its opposition to the postmodern, the *bête noire* and favoured target of all these name proposals<sup>23</sup>.

Although we are accustomed to all forms of revival, it is impossible not to perceive the paradoxical nature of this vicious circle. Why, after the demise of the postmodern, should our own time herd us back into the old womb of modernity? If we cannot call ourselves postmoderns, it should go without saying that we cannot call ourselves moderns without retrospectively obliterating the previous rupture, which had declared the modern “superseded”. Thus, rather than a new cultural phase, such denominations seem to suggest that history and art are imprisoned in a loop, destined to repeat what has already been produced. Such trends, after all, these theorists believe, resuscitate expressive modes, ways of thinking and of relating to the world that were characteristic of modernity: utopia, engagement, and, most importantly, realism<sup>24</sup>.

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22 See C. Benedetti, *Disumane lettere. Indagini sulla cultura della nostra epoca*, Laterza, Bari 2011, in particular the chapter on “Il revival della modernità”: here I describe the phenomenon as a recursive process, whereby the differential logic of the modern is recursively reapplied to the concept itself of the modern. For a criticism of the return to modernity, see also, F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, cit. and my introduction to the Italian translation, *Una modernità singolare*, Rizzoli, Milano 2003.

23 For example, in the exhibition curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin in 2003, which showed work from contemporary artists from around the world and was entitled *I Moderni/The Moderns*. The choice of name – explains the curator – was determined by the fact that these artists “wish to distance themselves from much postmodern art that was typical of the late twentieth century”, and are animated by the “sense that they belong to a new epoch” (*I Moderni / The Moderns*, a cura di C. Christov-Bakargiev, Skira, Lausanne 2003).

24 The book I mentioned earlier, *After Postmodernism* was also subtitled *An Introduction to Critical Realism*. For a critique of modern Western realism see A.

Italy, too, has seen a return to realism, in the fields both of art and philosophy. In 2011, the philosopher Maurizio Ferraris launched the manifesto of *New Realism*, which began as follows: “A spectre is haunting Europe. This spectre I propose to call ‘New Realism’”<sup>25</sup>. The characteristics of this trend are “a greater attention towards the outside world”, “a rehabilitation of the notion of ‘truth’, which the postmoderns believed to be exhausted”. Here too, as in art, there is a stepping away from postmodernism. Nevertheless, the opening line of Ferraris’s essay is an almost theatrical echo of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. It is not just realism that makes a comeback, it is one of the most typical forms of the modern, the manifesto format, with its vaguely prophetic tone announcing what is about to come, the privileged form of expression deployed over and over again by the avant-gardes to launch new artistic trends. This format is here reused with an irony that seems lingeringly postmodern in order to proclaim a return to what came *before* postmodernism.

These backward-looking rethinkings of history, and the contradictions they labour under, reveal the same sticking point that characterises the difficulties encountered in giving a cultural label to the era we live in: the periodisation processes by means of which the moderns were in the habit of giving an historical shape to experience no longer seem to be effective. The gesture is repeated continually but seems to fall short every time, because an entirely new experience has barred any possibility of making the present capable of “superseding” the previous epochs following the logic that has held fast so far. The risk of a complete extinction of the species that humanity is for the first time in all its centuries-long history seriously facing, does not open a new phase in history, but rather subverts the modern system itself which we have been using to catalogue the eras of human history.

The perception of an epochal faultline, which was so strong at the beginning of the present century, was powerfully influenced by approaching end of the millenium (2000 after all was the year in which Paul Crutzen first put forward the name *Anthropocene*), and even more so by the catastrophic event that took place in the first year of the new millenium. The attack on the Twin Towers suddenly and concomitantly spread throughout the Western world a perception of danger and a sense of bewilderment. The stability of the old world was crumbling and a new and uncertain era, riven with anxiety, was about to come.

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Ghosh, *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, The Chicago University Press, Chicago 2016.

25 The article appeared in “Repubblica” of 8 August 2011, and later in a book. Cf. M. Ferraris, *Il manifesto del nuovo realismo*, Laterza, Bari 2012.

All these symbols and events certainly worked as catalysts. But the fracturing of the continuum of history which is so vividly perceived in the present time is not the result of an historical or political event, however great or significant it may be. It is the experience of the limits of human as a species that has definitively interrupted the cycle of modernity and kickstarted a new open-ended time that floats on a sea of contingency. This is the real epochal threshold we have crossed. Its nature is not that of an event *in* history, such as that modern historiography has commonly taken as conventional demarcations of historical transition. It is not classifiable as either a radical institutional change, or as one of those social, technological or economic transformations historians tend to highlight as faultlines. Indeed, it may be said that it cracks the very surface of the plane along which we have hitherto imagined History as unfolding.

It is therefore possible to understand the reasons for the unusual difficulty in naming our time that has been encountered in the new millenium and the discomfort it has caused. The threat of an environmental collapse, which puts the survival of human and many other species at risk can no longer be contained within the illusion of a history as it has been conceived over the last two hundred years, with its successive phases formally christened, each superceding its predecessor: an unprecedented, unknown element has entered the scene, eluding all the categories the moderns have so far devised. No man or woman had previously been forced to think of themselves as a species on the route to extinction – a possibility we are, on the other hand, made very aware of every time we think about climate change, overpopulation, the planet resources which are being depleted much faster than the Earth can regenerate itself, not to mention the destructive potential of the weapons at our disposal. This last danger was in fact, historically, what first created an awareness that extinction was a possibility, when, immediately after Hiroshima, it became evident that humanity was now in possession of a weapon capable of swiftly annihilating itself.

Today the environmental crisis is engendering anxieties that are even greater than those caused by nuclear weapons, at the very least because one may always cherish the hope that nuclear weapons will not be used, whereas no illusion can deflect attention from the effects of global warming and climate change.

The epoch names that have been put forward in the field of the humanities have therefore avoided direct confrontation with the caesura that has in fact occurred over the last decades – indeed they actually hide it. By using names such as *hypermodernity*, sociologists, philosophers and art and literary theorists have evidenced cultural and social changes that are certain-

ly significant but exceedingly partial. These names captured the dominant trait of our epoch only at the cost of leaving out of the picture the newest, as well as the most macroscopic and dramatic trait of all, which, once brought into focus would have disrupted and subverted the whole picture. Just as the existence of the entire human species was entering a risk zone unknown and unexplored by either the moderns, the ancients or the “primitives”, the greater part of the humanities seemed tone deaf to the discontinuities that resonated in the concepts and categories they were upholding.

Those typically modern name ceremonies, reapplied to the present as if to perpetrate a pattern now void of meaning, are themselves the symptom of the great blindness of our time. The dramatic break caused by the appearance of an emergency affecting the human species has been masked by the idea of a new historical phase, which is different from but also analogous to those that preceded it in terms of its underlying logic and that is seen as following the customary succession of the various epochs. And yet it has altered our historical and temporal parameters. One may attempt to keep it out of our discourse, or indeed succeed in excluding it from philosophical or historical reflection, but it remains deeply engrained in our experience, generating discomfort and anxieties that demand elaboration.

It is not therefore difficult to understand how the *scientific* name for the epoch has spread so successfully, while the labels proposed by the humanities have remained a dead letter. Their implementation has failed because they have failed to grasp the radical faultline that separates us from modernity and from all that came before. Such labels in fact try to hide this fracture behind the appearance of a continuity with the modern. *Anthropocene* on the other hand signals a marked break with all that preceded the present, not just in the recent past but on the millennial time scale, and makes modernity itself feel like a very distant past. Anthropocene – Bruno Latour has observed – “is the most pertinent philosophical, religious, anthropological and political concept yet produced as an alternative to the very notions of ‘Modern’ and ‘modernity’”<sup>26</sup>. The fortune it has enjoyed is due to its being able to signify all this, while also communicating – at least in the initial phases of its diffusion – a sense of emergency proportional to the enormity of what is taking place.

The two approaches to naming the time in which we live, the scientific and the humanistic, obviously capture entirely different traits of our time;

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26 B. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, cit., p. 77. On this, however, see also D. Chakrabarty, *The Human Significance of the Anthropocene*, in *Reset Modernity!*, ed. by B. Latour, MIT Press, Cambridge 2016.

most significantly, they do so from entirely different and discordant perspectives. The temporal frames they evoke, and therefore the histories they imply, are incommensurable and almost entirely incompatible. On the one hand there is the incredibly elongated scale of Earth's geological epochs against the background of cosmic history; on the other, the infinitely smaller scale of human history – and the smallest segment of human history at that: two centuries of modernity and half a century of postmodernity. In the title of this chapter I have deliberately placed *anthropocene* after *post-modern*, as if they could coexist on the same temporal line, in order to foreground their incompatibility and highlight the fracture that has opened up in our present way of perceiving ourselves within time: we live in a history that can no longer be entirely contained within the bubble of man's social and cultural history, because it overflows onto the territory of another kind of history, which was once called "natural history" and which the moderns habitually cut out from the background of their history, preferring to view it as the exclusive domain of the sciences.

It has, however, never been possible, if not at the cost of abstraction and simplification, to entirely separate the two histories. Today, such a separation, albeit illusory, has become clearly impracticable: cultural history and natural history have ended up mingling in this curious segment of time that is our epoch<sup>27</sup>. Two different ways of looking at man in history have come into collision with each other and this conflict reveals all the inadequacy of the categories of modernity. If those engaged in the field of the humanities find it hard to deal with the experience of the limits of man as a species it is because this cannot be addressed with the tools of the philosophy of history as forged over the past centuries by Western culture. This vision of history pivoted on the idea of time's arrow moving inexorably in the direction of the progress of humanity and unrestrained growth. While this idea today has visibly crumbled, the same cannot be said for the methods set up by the moderns and their way of reading history, which have continued to be used, ossified, residual and inadequate as they are, to interpret the world before our eyes, and *particularly* inadequate to open up new perspectives on the catastrophic trajectory taken by human life on Earth.

A deep laceration has traversed and continues to traverse our time: on the one hand our species has evidently reached a limit point; on the other hand it continues to deploy previously developed mental patterns that can continue to function only by ignoring that limit, or, once it has appeared

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27 Bruno Latour observes: "Where we were dealing earlier with a 'natural' phenomenon, at every point now we meet the '*Anthropos*'", Id., *Facing Gaia*, cit., p. 120.

clearly, only by repressing awareness of that limit. The cost is a terrifying blindness. The anxieties raised by the environmental crisis have been on the whole dismissed by the humanities as if they were of no concern to them: it was the province of geology to establish whether the Holocene had ended or not; that of politics and technology to find a solution. Never so much as in the present time has there been such a gaping divide between the dominant culture and real life, between the narrative of history produced by the humanities and what we experience as living creatures on this planet – as earthlings. Only a metamorphosis can bridge such a chasm.

### 5. *The final ceremony*

*Anthropocene*, therefore, is not just a name; it is a perspective on human being that offers an alternative to that which has so far dominated modernity – it is a beneficial corrective that mitigates the abstractions of the anthropocentric vision. It brings back into our processes of thinking, storytelling and artistic creation the deep-buried time of Earth and the cosmos, which the moderns believed they could ignore; it obliges us to examine, without turning our gaze elsewhere, the complexities and the interconnections that mold the environment in which we exist, and which go well beyond the structures of economy and society, and well beyond man. But next to these positive repercussions, other, more ambiguous traits, are noticeable.

Once carried across into the field of the humanities, the notion of *Anthropocene* has been interestingly used in ways that have allowed the residual mindsets of the moderns to reemerge. Significantly, there features among these residual mindsets the practice of epoch-naming: instead of disappearing, name-making has spread; in the space of a few years our time has been renamed a number of times through labels derived from *Anthropocene*: *Chthulucene*<sup>28</sup>, *Plantationcene*<sup>29</sup>, *Agnotocene*<sup>30</sup>, *Pyrocene*

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28 *Chthulucene*, coined by Donna Haraway, takes its inspiration from Cthulhu, the octopus-dragon-man of H.P. Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*. See D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2016.

29 *Plantationcene* points to the great plantations and therefore to deforestation as the causes of the ecological crisis. See D. Haraway, N. Ishikawa, S. F. Gilbert, K. Olwig, A. L. Tsing and N. Bubandt *Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene*, in "Ethnos", 2015.

30 *Agnotocene*, was first used to indicate the creation of blind spots of knowledge that prevented us from gaining awareness of the environmental crisis in the years



<sup>31</sup>, *Growthcene*<sup>32</sup>, *Econocene*<sup>33</sup>, as well as the most successful of them all, *Capitalocene*<sup>34</sup>, which clearly indicates capitalism as the primary cause of the environmental crisis.

It is as if the Earth sciences had furnished the humanities with the missing piece that repaired their broken machine, allowing them to continue to officiate at the naming ceremonies so beloved by the moderns. Evidently epoch-baptizing induces a sense of calm. After the sense of bewilderment and the loss of direction that characterised the first decade of the new millennium, Anthropocene has once more given us a place card, as it were, at the high table of history, even if history itself is terminally ill. To think of ourselves as the last generations before the end may paradoxically have the perverse effect of actually heightening the significance – albeit the dramatic significance – of our present time. The result is not a sense of emergency, but an attitude similar to that which produced the proverbial “après moi le déluge”, past on from a king to us common mortals.

Ever since it passed into the hands of the humanities, Anthropocene has become a controversial notion. Just as had happened with the *Postmodern*, it has triggered debates on both its periodisation and the definition of its essential traits as well as its historical and social causes. Both of these last two areas of debate are divisive. According to some the new epoch began with the industrial revolution; others believe it started around 1950, in parallel with the beginning of the so-called Great Acceleration. It goes without saying that these different datings engender different readings, conclusions and political positions. But not even these disagreements about dating have jeopardised the baptismal effect of the word. In whatever specific moment the threshold was crossed, the decisive fact that finally fills an uncomfortable void is that it gives a name to what we have been experiencing over the last decades.

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of the great acceleration. See Bonneuil-Fressoz, *The Shock of Anthropocene. The Earth, History and Us*, Verso, London, 2016.

31 See S.J. Pyne, *Fire Age*, in “*Aeon*”, 2015, <https://aeon.co/essays/how-humans-made-fire-and-fire-made-us-human>.

32 See E. Chertkovskaya and A. Paulsson, *The growthocene: Thinking through what degrowth is criticising*, in “Undisciplined Environments”, 2016, <https://undisciplinedenvironments.org/2016/02/19/the-growthocene-thinking-through-what-degrowth-is-criticising/>.

33 See R. Norgaard, *The Econocene and the Delta*, in “San Francisco Estuary and Watershed Scienc”, n. 11, 2012, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4h98t2m0>.

34 See *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. by J. W. Moore, PM Press, Oakland 2016.

These disagreements surrounding primary causes stoke the great furnace of name-forging, *Anthropocene* – that is “the age of man” as it is sometimes translated with a phrase that does nothing to hide its anthropocentric bias – presents two opposing risks: the first is that it highlights the guilt of man *in general*, taking man as an abstract a-historical entity.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand we know, and cannot pretend not to know, that the principle cause of damage was industrialisation and its outcomes: the exploitation of fossil fuels, the capitalist production system and imperialism. It is also to eschew this oversimplification that some scholars prefer the term *Capitalocene*. Although the choice of this term may appear justified, its adoption as epochal name also tends to offer an oversimplified version of the planetary emergency. Some areas of the earth, especially outside the Western hemisphere, which the moderns call “backward”, have had no experience – at least until relatively recent times – of industrialisation. *Capitalocene* aims to seize back from geology the history of the ecological crisis and bring it back into history proper, making it adhere to the history of capitalism; in doing so, however, it reduces to one the plurality of the histories experienced by the different peoples of the earth. *Capitalocene* envelops in historical dialectics the greatest emergency that humanity has known so far; through this dialectic it claims to explain all the passages that have led us to this point, leaving unexplored the deeper and darker mechanisms that drive human being and civilisation – those explored, that is to say, not by Marx but rather by Freud in *Civilisation and its Discontents*.

This manner of reading the present emergency, which also concedes to Marxist theorists a useful terrain on which to relaunch their categories, carries the further risk of viewing the ecological crisis exclusively through an economic and productive lens, hiding other, equally decisive factors. Such filtering, for example, eschews the issue of overpopulation, which is not a consequence of capitalism. The earth, whose population is about to overtake the 8 billion mark, is too small for such numbers and for their foreseeable increase over the next decades: there is simply not enough earth, for everyone, and the resources of the planet are being increasingly depleted. Migrations will increase, as will conflicts, wars and indeed climate catastrophes. This macroscopic factor is also pushed into the background by other labels used to name the present state of emergency, every time

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35 See, for example, G. Chelazzi, *L'impronta originale. Storia naturale della colpa ecologica*, Einaudi, Torino 2013, where the finger of blame is pointed at man's original sin: *homo sapiens* cannot but destroy the environment. A similar position is also in Y. N. Harari, *Homo deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 2015.

they are taken as totalising concepts – the phrase *climate change*, for example, spotlights only one factor, possibly the most evident and measurable among many, but not the only one.

The second risk of the concept of Anthropocene in contemporary humanist culture is that it evidences not only human's guilt, but also human's *power*. Human being has mastered nature, both for better and for worse. Our age thus is envisaged as the final stop of a glorious journey whose only protagonist is man. An example of this outlook is the optimistic rhetoric emanating from theoretical positions such as those of accelerationists, ecomodernists, bioengineers and climate engineers when they describe our planet as a machine entirely governable by human and his technological inventions.

One more complex, or simply more ambiguous case, is offered by the documentary film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, di Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, whose intent is to prove – as the off-screen voice that accompanies the images repeatedly states – that “man has transgressed his limits”. But the images on the screen, the spectacular and powerful aesthetic of the photography, narrate the overwhelming supremacy of human and the gargantuan machines he has been capable of building. We see their enormous teeth bite into the earth, slicing into the sides of mountains to extract cyclopean blocks of marble, or chewing the soil with their extraordinary iron mouths, uprooting houses and bell-towers with gigantic steel beaks, attached to the seemingly endless necks of metal cranes, moved by the minuscule hands of men. The bird's-eye views taken through drones, slowly open up onto vast stretches of deeply molded yet poignantly beautiful land, the soundtrack further magnifying the titanic but noxious work of mankind.

## 6. *The time of earthlings*

Should a time such as ours, which looks onto an uncertain future, dominated by the unprecedented experience of human's limits as a species, and perilously poised between the history of human civilisation on the one hand and the history of the Earth on the other, be subsumed under a single concept, identified through a name that fixes it as an historical epoch? The lack of any strong denomination need not necessarily be a source of anxiety: indeed it may even become a positive and fertile drive – “finally, a time without a name!”, someone might even exclaim with relief. We have finally freed ourselves from the presumption of the

moderns that they may dominate time by imposing a name on it. The sense of disorientation in history that characterised the first decade of the new millennium may actually herald a new awareness. Unlike the repeated attempts to christen our time, with their artificial prolongation of the logic of modernity and its vision of history, the sense of displacement does not produce blindness. On the contrary, the collapse of Western categories of modernity and of its metaphysics paradoxically liberates us from the need to conceive of History as an anthropocentric and ethnocentric stage on which successive cultural and historical stages perform, each with its different name, each superseding the other, along the path of a supposed progression. But if this new experience of time is to be felt as truly liberating, it must be adequately elaborated and digested, and this requires time. In the humanities, this still encounters many obstacles, which the great debate that has developed around *Anthropocene* has not yet entirely overcome.

François Hartog argues that over the last decades we have transitioned from a modern “regime of historicity” that was oriented towards the future to one that looks only to the present; this he calls “presentism”. The future is indeed for us a source of anguish as it has never been before, but it is also charged with a sense of risk and responsibility towards future generations, whose existence depends, in a manner wholly unprecedented, on the decisions we make today. The future has in no way disappeared from our temporal horizon; nor does it simply terrify us: it places us at a crossroads.

One of these two roads leads to what is effectively an erasure of the temporal horizon, so much so that the overwhelming effect is a perception of time as being arrested at the present moment of catastrophe. This is Hartog’s “presentism”, describing in my view a pathological condition, as it were, an adaptation to the catastrophe which is viewed as unavoidable, or if we wish, a paralysis induced by having repressed consciousness of the present emergency of the human species. This is perceivable in the more apocalyptic versions of Anthropocene, which view it almost as the *destiny* of *homo sapiens*, inevitable, untrammelled by contingency, by the choices human beings have made and the paths they have followed.

The other direction one may choose at this crossroads leads towards an entirely new vision of history, one that is geological, cosmic and species-related. It is within this giddingly immense, wide-open horizon created by the new emergency that a new conception of “nature” and of human himself, at the antipodes of the anthropocentrism of the moderns, is taking

its first steps. Human being is not an entity in opposition to nature, but an *earthling* among *earthlings*.

*Earthlings* was the title of a series of talks and initiatives that took place on 14-17 November 2019 in Naples, and of which I was one of the organisers<sup>36</sup>. By choice, neither *Anthropocene*, nor *Capitalocene* was mentioned, although all that the terms imply was treated as a given. *Earthlings* is not an epochal name, but a simple, primary word pointing to what we are, beyond and above all else. Even before being blacks, whites or yellows, Westerners or Easterners, Christians, Muslims or Hindus, we are defined as creatures living on this planet, our lives intertwined with those of other non-human living creatures. This condition encompasses every form of life, whether human, animal or vegetable, prompting us to remember that our own lives are deeply rooted in and intertwined with the soil, with the earth's crust and with the atmosphere that envelops it, which depend on keeping temperatures within certain limits and ensuring the continued existence of other non-human living creatures that share our habitat and contribute to its survival. *Earthlings*, moreover, is a word that stirs powerful emotions, pointing not only to the looming danger, but also to a possible way of confronting it.

This primary "identity", the most obvious and self-evident, is also the most forgotten. Politics represses it by focusing on smaller and partial identities, be they national, religious, cultural, ethnic or racial. Simply to recognize ourselves as earthlings carries political value in the widest and most positive sense of the word. While smaller identities give rise to conflict, this one foregrounds brotherhood and solidarity, not just among men but with all living things, animals and plants.<sup>37</sup> To recognize ourselves in this relationship with the planet also implicitly takes a stand against capitalism, which conspicuously ignores such perceptions.

The way in which the West has always viewed human history as inherently progressive, has not taken into account Earth's limits. Our relationship with the planet has been repressed over the centuries by innumerable age-old layers of political, scientific, philosophical and cultural elaboration. Our earthling state has often been obfuscated even in the way we

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36 People working both in the humanities and in the earth sciences took part in the event, which ended with the foundation of a symbolic Republic of Earthlings; the programme may be accessed here: <https://www.ilprimoamore.com/blog/spip.php?article4299>.

37 As Bruno Latour writes, "To say 'we are earthlings among earthlings' does not lead to the same politics as to say 'we are humans in nature'", B. Latour, *Où atterrir: comment s'orienter en politique*, La Découverte, Paris 2017.

tell our stories, nor does it feature in those novels that have been most successful in the West, whose characters move in an environment made up solely of social, cultural and economic relations; it is as if their actions took place against a theatre backdrop, without bacteria, without gravity, without atmosphere, without ground beneath their feet, without the universe— it is as if their very environment were also a fiction. *Earthlings* returns to centre stage all that has been erased by the know-how, the abstractions and the separate fields of knowledge introduced by the moderns; it disallows the separateness of nature and culture, where the former is viewed as external to the latter and functioning as a sort of immutable background to the history of humans and civilization. To recognize ourselves as EARTHLINGS radically changes the foundations of our understanding of the world and of our actions within it: this is the metamorphosis that awaits us.