



Recovering Anthropocene-oholics: From ‘Ghosts of the Future’ to Active Forgiveness, a Response

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Abstract

This is a reviewer’s response to a video submission to ACME by Kelvin Mason.

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Ghosts of the Future

Kelvin Mason’s ‘Ghosts of the Future’ is a striking piece of work. The contrast is between:

- the *tone* of voice and the *scene* being filmed,
- the *delivery* and the *subject* matter,
- the *mundane academic* submission to a journal and *the sense conveyed* of all that surrounds us being tinder dry paper that at any minute could be burnt to a cinder.

The contrast is extraordinarily evocative. It evokes both the banality of everyday actions being pursued out of habit (reviewing and critiquing/ accepting or rejecting ‘papers’) and what stands always at our shoulder. The film causes us to recognize



that we are dwelling in this long moment (or possibly very brief moment) of the Anthropocene: “the geological age in which human impact is the most significant impact and will leave a long-term signature”. An age that started simultaneously with the nuclear age.

‘Ghosts of the Future’ does not engage with critiques of the concept of the Anthropocene, such as that by John Michael Greer who says the concept misses the point that a geological epoch is a big chunk of time: “The six of them that are definitely over . . . lasted an average of almost eleven million years a piece. (For purposes of comparison, eleven million years is around 2,200 times the length of all recorded human history)”, whereas the Holocene has lasted only 11,700 years and so is really “the tag-end of the Pleistocene”. Greer argues that the idea of an ‘Anthropocene’ epoch represents “the delusion that what our civilization is doing just now is going to keep on long enough to fill a geological epoch”, whereas we are in a momentary transition into a geological period whose start may be marked by our activity but whose period will be defined – for good or ill – by a lack of human impact.

For the purposes of this ‘text’, it may be best to consider the ‘Anthropocene’ not as a geological epoch, but as a way of marking to ourselves the extinction-generating activities we are engaged in. Kelvin Mason asks “What is the perfect text for the Anthropocene?” and seeks to provide the same. His piece carries an underlying refrain – a recurring distant drumbeat – “We are without excuse”: invoking the impact of our inaction on the possible future and on ourselves, given that

“Our identity is partly constituted by how we live the already and the not yet in our everyday life . . . animated by the past and by the possibility of the future.”

The account from Barry Lopez of encountering a bear feasting on a caribou carcass, where “his indigenous traveling companions, rather than concentrating only on the bear, focused on that part of the world of which the bear was only a fragment of the world around it” is used to highlight the need to pay attention to the far broader field of relations that surround (and shape and are shaped by) the shaky camera in southern England, the film on Vimeo, the request to review, and my subsequent rising at 5.30am to fit this in before waking kids for school and the day of work beginning.

Kelvin Mason continues in a way that reflects not only on the encounter with the bear, but his encounter with Burghfield nuclear facility, and our encounter with his words and film:

“The bear here might be compared with a bonfire, a kind of incandescence that throws light on everything around it. Experience of the event in this way extends the moment of encounter with the bear backward and forward in time”.

Words are many things, and academia invites us to tear at them like a bear at a carcass, arguing over their meaning and claiming them for our own. In that spirit I could take issue with Kelvin Mason's quote from Simon de Beauvoir. Here she outlines an existentialist morality:

“Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is a degradation of existence into ‘in itself’, of freedom into facticity. . . this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it, if the fall is inflicted it takes the form of frustration and depression – in both cases it is an absolute evil.”

One word I gnaw at is ‘transcendence’. To me the word ‘transcendence’ can represent all those aspects of religion, thought and society that seek to draw us away from being present to each other, that seeks to suggest there is somewhere else than these relations, that being present to each other is somehow less than striking out on our own. Yet this is probably not what Kelvin Mason means, nor necessarily what de Beauvoir intends, by using this quote.

In seeking “freedom from oppression”, can we seek freedom from the wish to make others wrong, and instead seek enrichment through open dialogue? One piece of dialogue is between the silent filmmaker and an MoD member of staff who states “Do you know its an offence to film onto MOD property?” as the filming continues, drawing us into complicity with the subversive nature of the filming, in just the same way that much of the film highlights our complicity with a Trident missile system where “one Vanguard submarine can kill 53 million people.” When we hear about Angie Zelter organising this action, and how her everyday action is “intended to step into a different future right now”, how “the more she is coerced the more she steps out of line” do we identify with her or do we other her? Do we breathe in the relations that shape and support us, enabling us to take action? Or do we shrink back, impressed by an ‘other’? Do we need more than Sartre defining “authenticity as owning one’s own freedom and responsibility” with the reminder of the acts we therefore need to ‘own’ such as the Hiroshima bomb (‘littleboy’) killing at least 135,000, the Nagasaki (‘fatman’) bomb killing at least another 50,000? Do we need more than existentialism’s crucial emphasis on us each as individuals? Do we also need deep ecology and indigenous emphasis on our collective agency, the extraordinary transformational power that arises from recognising that – whatever the future holds – we have already won by virtue of caring and connecting now, and by virtue of refusing to give up hope and give up care? Does the repeated refrain of “We are without excuse” express a central truth we need reminding of? And would “We are so phenomenally blessed” express an equally vital one?

The deadpan tone of the narration is similar to many used at conferences, evoking the academic world, even while the words are utterly different, such as:

- “Behind me, a policeman. I am again contravening bylaws” or

- “I’m filming a wild rose, aware of how hard it is to hold a camcorder steady, aware of the soundscape . . . I am again contravening bylaws, filming Ministry of Defence property” [meanwhile the film shows a white flower in a hedge]
- “I must stop. A bee is feeding on the rose”.

This combination of:

- a tone of voice that is simply, dispassionately recounting what is going on,
- the minute detail of personal experience, and
- the wider context of law and threat

reflects back to us the reality of the juxtaposed world we rarely bring together in our minds. This juxtaposition is made even more powerful in the account of Kye [Askins] waking to birdsong and so being filled with joy, before realising she was waking next to a place that can destroy birdsong forever. The narrator’s deadpan voice adds “I am still taking this in”, giving us a moment to realise how little we have taken in of this reality: of birdsong alongside the reality that each warhead can kill more than a million people.

Living these contradictions is aptly named as MAD, as Deterrence – this being the theory that the threat to use these weapons stops another killing you with a similar system. This ultimate ‘othering’, this ‘moral’ ‘logic’ of deterrence, is questioned by Rebecca Kay. She asks: “How - if we were subject to a nuclear attack - would it be better to die knowing that our bombs were killing all those other people too?” The answer that we need to abandon such weapons is self-evident to her, while a different answer is evident to Theresa May who says: “The whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies should know that we would use it”. The attempts to bridge these different realities defines the film, the actions, the movement of which it is a part. In simply observing the contrast, the film evokes our humanity, calling on us to abandon tortuous ‘logic’ for stark raving truth.

There is singing, filming of flowers, filming of women talking with police, as a lead in to Mary Midgeley being cited likening nuclear weapons to landmines, only on a vastly greater scale, and her powerful point that we are not deterring terror with these weapons, we are creating a world of terror right now: “the mere act of threatening others with an abomination is itself already abominable”. Can we counter this by drawing on the Ottawa Treaty – signed by the UK - that commits 162 nations to the destruction of land mines? Or do we need to counter by recognising that the harsh sound of fossil fuelled vehicles spitting their way by the gates of Burghfield on the tarmac road are as much a signature of the Anthropocene as nuclear weapons, that radical changes in our every day lives to reclaim peace and song and conviviality are as important as protesting such complexes?

The refrain of “We are without excuse” precedes the filming and narration of people striking the peace camp that has been the film maker’s/ paper deliverer’s “home the last 2 nights”. Does Kafka’s “all the authorities did was to guard the distant and invisible interests of distant and invisible masters” reflect only on the military and civilian police or also on that in each of us that gives our authority away whenever we think there are distant masters who have more power than we collectively do? Our collective power being something which can only ever begin from conviviality and truth telling? The refrain of “We are without excuse” accompanies an account of the civilian police, echoing the earlier point about boredom and astonishment, the point that “Nothing happens” yet “So much is happening”

The weaving of four-inch tall red paper chain people into the gate to represent those who can’t join ‘us’ (the action? the present?), is such a small action, contrasting sharply with the MoD threats of arrest for this same ‘crime’. The compromise – being allowed to leave them woven in for 5 minutes – highlights the strange nature of time: “If we can’t change time, we can change how we live every moment”. This contrast is echoed in Phil [Johnson]’s paper at the seminar, reflecting on how nuclear deterrence stops us from developing a future of empathy, welcome and inclusion, instead creating a future of ‘othering’.

Yet, at the same time, the presentation of the paper creates a social context in which a civilian policeman, who has the task of observing the seminar, ends up joining in an exchange of hugs with all participants, and then – we are told – joins in helping to pack up the peace camp. Is this the action of someone obeying his employers (he is, after all, sending the protestors packing) while at the same time as articulating his care of others in the present? Do his actions represent all of us as we seek to express our humanity while obeying the demands of the ‘Anthropocene’-inducing system? Does he reconcile and transcend the contradictions in himself in this act, or is he tangibly engaged from the inside, immanently present as himself with others? Does he have an excuse for his humanity or is he, and are we all, “without excuse”?

Active forgiveness

Is the experience of living in this period one of hyperactive powerlessness? Kelvin Mason cites Robert Macfarlane’s description of the experience as being one in which astonishment is combined with boredom, leading us to respond with an overload of both anxiety and outrage. One way of responding is through humour. A well-known joke: out in space two life forms are speaking with each other:

- The first one says "The dominant life forms on planet earth have developed satellite based nuclear weapons
- The second one asks, "Are they an emerging intelligence?"
- The first alien replies, "I don't think so. They have them aimed at themselves".

A different response, a different politics, to that of the ‘othering’ that fuels and is fuelled by hyperactive powerlessness, would seek to address the causes, and take emotional and political responsibility for the systems of harm we are implicated in.

At an emotional level what would such a politics (one that wasn’t defined by anxiety and outrage) feel like? Would this form of political action need to be grounded in forgiveness of others, rooted in recognising our implication in the processes we are protesting? In other words: rooted in our awareness of our need for forgiveness. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum defines *forgiveness* as “a change of heart on the part of the victim, who gives up anger and resentment.” She continues:

“We are prone to anger to the extent that we feel insecure or lacking control . . . *anger* becomes an alluring substitute . . . promising agency and control when one’s real situation does not offer control”. In contrast, she sees *trusting* someone as involving a “willingness to be in someone else’s hands . . . Living with trust involves profound vulnerability and some helplessness, which may easily be deflected into anger.”

However, perhaps *active forgiveness* is something different to any kind of passive trust. If *active forgiveness* is the act of seeking to reassure, remind and restore another's confidence in their own good intentions, then perhaps it is at the heart of restoring relations of active trust. Active trust is an option. We don't have to pursue a narcissistic anger that is always desperate to prove the other's wrongfulness (rather than recognise our own contribution to our shared misunderstanding). In *personal relations*, active forgiveness is always the harder, but infinitely more rewarding, choice. The very act of engaging in it restores agency, mutuality, trust.

However, the more that unequal power defines us, the more *politics* becomes about holding onto power rather than enabling all to flourish, and the harder it is for either side to take that step:

- (i) The powerful, because engaging in active forgiveness would mean recognising other's needs, and recognising that others suffering is connected to ones own *privilege*, (requiring relinquishing a privilege that gives an illusion of safety, while immeasurably deepening insecurity);
- (ii) And hard for those having power inflicted on them, because active forgiveness focuses on encouraging the other to bring their actions (actions that are based on blaming others) in line with their stated needs (for security, stability, whatever), while having to endure inflicted pain.

Active forgiveness tries to create the space for agency and mutuality, for calm in the storm caused by everyone 'proving' the irreparable harm caused by the other's duplicity. To calm concerns by addressing and encompassing them, is not the same as condoning harm. Rather it is to not choose the quick satisfaction of enflaming

anger and wrongdoing, but to choose to offer a route back into relationship by acknowledging one's own part.

Recovering Anthropocene-oholics

'Ghosts of the Future' brings together experiences that are normally kept far apart, inviting reflections that are mundane and extraordinary, difficult and obvious. How can it be that we are letting such an extraordinary miracle of interrelated life forms be so devastated on a daily basis, and be under such threat of total annihilation? Through its sharp contrasts, the film helps us by disconcerting us: reconnecting our mundane isolated actions that drive extinction with the mundane extraordinary experience of being breathing bodies, responsive to each other and to this 'text'.

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