**"APT INVENTION"
IN THE
ANTHROPOCENE:
HYPEROBJECTS,
MAREK HŁASKO,
AND ZERO K**

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Introduction

Human-induced climate change is a significant feature of the contemporary global experience informally referred to as the Anthropocene, the latest in a series of mass extinction events to emerge as a looming issue, a dominating Real to which all other realisms are secondary—what philosopher Timothy Morton calls a “hyperobject.”

Fellow ecocritic Timothy Clark defines the Anthropocene as “the epoch at which largely unplanned human impacts on the planet’s basic ecological systems have passed a dangerous, if imponderable, threshold.”¹ The key word for the literary community is imponderable. The Anthropocene “evades normal categories of attention,” and is thus as frightening as it is “intellectually liberating.”² The hyperobject remains out of reach.

In the ‘50s and ‘60s the novelist Marek Hłasko, the so-called “Eastern European James Dean,”³ developed a technique he called “apt invention” to characterize his own writing on the trauma of growing up in Nazi- and Soviet-occupied Poland. In his autobiography, *Beautiful Twentysomethings*, Hłasko held that truth was incomprehensible for people, arguing that only by surpassing the so-called facts via “apt invention” could a writer actually begin to communicate the real experience, the systematic absurdity, of totalitarianism. “Facts turn out to be impossible to use.”⁴

“Apt invention” is the act of mediated imagination in literature that makes the gesture of realism possible even as reality remains out of reach. A marketplace rich in speculative fiction, so-called “weird” fiction, and other modes of genre-lucid literature reflect a readership’s tolerance for the imaginary in realism. Don DeLillo’s *Zero K* (2016) capitalizes off a popular appetite for “apt invention” to explore the meaning of personal death in an age of extinction and communicate the “real Real,” the Žižekian term for an experience that remains outside of representation—if experience remains to be communicable at all.

Genre vs. the Hyperobject

In 2011’s “The New Cultural Geology,” Mark McGurl argues that one of the ways in which narrative has reacted to the new mores of the Anthropocene has been to move away from human-oriented ontology and towards a geological- or object-oriented agency. The resulting genre of realism is, by McGurl’s definition, scientifically-literate (non-naïve) but inescapably speculative, as it will always be reaching towards agencies that the author has no fundamental access to.

The contradiction is that writing about these new object-oriented ontologies is a gesture towards the ultimate potential form of literary realism, moving closest to the “real Real” that defies representation, while always dealing in truths that are beyond the reach of the subject’s access, and therefore contrary to any authorial claim on reality. The resulting impasse is terrifying for McGurl not because of what it says about the Real, but of what it suggests about our own failures as ethical agents. “The veil of nature’s concern for the human has fallen away, leaving nothing but an empty sky. But it’s not even as simply as that, for the sky is not really empty. It is now the repository of greenhouse gases, the particulate waste matter of the modern,” he writes in light of the Anthropocene. “Having dramatically increased the spatial and temporal scale at which human history will be viewed, that is, human agency itself becomes visible as something nested in forces beyond its control. Thus the terror we see in the not-quite-empty sky is the terrifying nature of our ethically unconscious selves.”⁵

Confronting the not-quite-empty sky can cause moral paralysis and personal action, as journalist Katha Pollitt writes for *The Nation*: “When I see a long article in *The New York Times* about melting glaciers or flooded coastal plains or disappearing species of deforestation or desertification, I skip it. Why? Because I already know what’s happening and about to happen.”⁶ The problem for Pollitt, and others like them, is the disconnect between knowledge and action, the “illusion that I am making a difference.” After all, according to a similar sentiment expressed by Martin Lukacs, “a hundred companies alone are responsible for an astonishing 71%” of carbon emissions since 1988. Is individual action just a

“neoliberal con?”⁷

Not according to Timothy Morton, the literary-critic-cum-ecocritic who refuses to call global warming climate change because “the globe is literally warming.”⁸ For Morton the concept of climate change itself is a call-to-action. “Can you understand hyperobjects? Then you are obliged to care about them.” Morton offers five characteristics to help understand “global warming” as a hyperobject. “It is ‘viscous’—whatever I do, where I am, it sort of ‘sticks’ to me. It is ‘nonlocal’—its effects are globally distributed through a huge tract of time. It forces me to experience time in an unusual way. It is ‘phased’—I only experiences pieces of it at any one time. And it is ‘inter-objective’—it consists of all kinds of other entities but it isn’t reducible to them.”⁹

If nomenclature itself can be a tool for accessing reality, as with terms like Anthropocene and hyperobject, then the idea of genre becomes a kind of toolbox. In *Anthropocene Fictions*, Adam Trexler points optimistically towards the traditional conventions of genre fiction, which in the inventiveness offer “extraordinary resources for dealing with complex issues like climate change,” even as the ontological demands of the Anthropocene threaten to “rupture the defining features of the genre: literary novels bleed into science fiction, suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of every day life involuntarily become biting satire.”¹⁰

Perhaps that’s why 83 readers on the popular consumer-facing social review site *goodreads.com* categorize DeLillo’s *Zero K* as “Science Fiction,” while only 32 users categorize it as “Literary Fiction” (and 23 call it “Fantasy”). The old marketing distinctions become increasingly quaint, even untenable, in the mobilization of literature against the accelerating threat of climate change. The idea of working outside-genre becomes disingenuous; genre narrative is flexible enough in its imaginary capacity to arm the contemporary realist against the hyperobject without resorting to the kind of—in McGurl’s words—“anti-realist postmodern constructions” that prevent literature from pointing “towards a forced ecological confrontation with the ‘desert of the real,’ that place where representation simply fails.”¹¹

Surpassing the facts at the local level to represent a non-local totality that is otherwise impossible to represent, capitalizing on the co-extensivity of truth and fiction—these are by no means new projects for literature. For a young Marek Hłasko in postwar Poland, they were the only way out.

Marek Hłasko’s “Apt Invention”

In 2013 Ross Ufberg published the first English translation of Hłasko’s autobiographical *Beautiful Twentysomethings* through the Northern Illinois University Press, a scattered collection of essay-memoirs that detail Hłasko’s experiences living under and writing against a totalitarian regime, and share with wry and hard-boiled prose everything the author has learned.

Born in Warsaw in 1934 and dead only 35 years later of mysterious circumstances, Hłasko was, according to his friend Roman Polanski, a “born rebel and troublemaker of immense charm.”¹² Hłasko came of age in Nazi- and Soviet-occupied Poland and spent his adulthood working as an anti-Communist journalist and novelist in Poland, America, and Israel. He made his literary debut in 1951 with a collection of short stories, edited the prose section of the radical *Po Prostu* weekly from ‘55-’57, and wrote his most popular novels between ‘58 (*Cmentarze*, “The Graveyard”) and ‘65 (*Drugie zabicie psa*, “Killing the Second Dog”), a few years before his death (during which time he was apparently imprisoned for disorderly conduct, checked in and out of mental institutions, and twice attempted suicide).

Much of Hłasko’s oeuvre is determined to depict the reality of totalitarianism for an audience that refuses to believe it really exists, both for Soviets and capitalists. His family lost everything to the Germans in Warsaw and then, following forced relocation to Czeszochowa, lost everything again to the Red Army. “Later,” writes Jarosław Anders in the introduction to *Beautiful Twentysomethings*, “Hłasko would say that the hunger and terror of the war accounted for what he called ‘the intellectual poverty’ of his stories. ‘I simply cannot make up a story that wouldn’t end in death, a catastrophe, a suicide, or prison.’”¹³

In the sixth essay in *Beautiful Twentysomethings*, “Two Wardrobe Doors for Sale,” Hłasko formulates

the difficulty precisely: the problem about writing totalitarianism, a hyperobject like global warming that is both imminently threatening and objectively inaccessible, is that people don't want to read about totalitarianism. "Writers who write about totalitarianism are absolutely helpless because nobody's willing to accept the truths they portray," he writes.¹⁴ As for Communism, it's a "dead horse, and it won't pay you any dividends."

If anything, Hłasko suggests, the real genre of fantasy belongs to the occupation of Poland, not the writers and artists responding to it. "The commies created a fantasy world," he writes, "and the average person has neither the desire nor the ability to think about things like the gulag camp in Kolyma, Lybyanka prison, or the nighttime interrogations. I heard that in the camps of the Far North, when prisoners were planning an escape, they would sometimes bring along a new arrival so they'd have something to eat along the way. I know it's the truth, but even so it's hard for me to believe it..."¹⁵

For Hłasko reality is always either immanent or unintelligible: crooked cops insinuate anti-party sentiment, innocent writers go to jail, people disappear, informants turn on their families, but "all of these facts didn't add up to anything. And I bet, even if a better writer than I were to build a story on these very facts, even then, nobody would believe the things seen, heard, and talked about in whispers every day."¹⁶ Reality must be exaggerated, distorted and surpassed if the things "seen, heard and talked about in whispers" was to survive on the page, to remain communicable. Realism must be fictitious.

But there's a significant difference between random invention, or naïve creation, and the literary expectations of apt invention, the elucidating metaphor.

Hłasko gives specific examples of apt invention in his time: Arthur Koestler's 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon*, an "otherwise feeble novel I'm tempted to call a sentimental lecture on totalitarian," and "full of nonsense;"¹⁷ William Faulkner's 1939 story "Wild Palms," of which "Hostowiec writes that if Wild Palms were to be regarded as a document of the life of the American man, the reader would come to the conclusion that money is the rarest and most difficult thing to come by in the United States of America, the richest country on earth. At least it's apt invention;" and Orson Welles' architectural conglomerations in his 1962 film *The Trial*—"After '56, authors like Ionesco and Beckett became favorites in Poland, not to mention Kafka and Gombrowicz."¹⁸

But the defining example he gives, the Platonic form of "apt invention," is Roman Polanski's 1958 short film *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, starring Jakub Goldberg as "Man with the wardrobe" and Henryk Kluba as "Man with the wardrobe (as Henryka Kluba)." Hłasko developed a friendship with Polanski at the now-famous Leon Schiller National Higher School of Film, Television and Theatre in Lodz, who he described as a "devil of a guy," still a student at the time, whose "profile, viewed from the left, looked like a man making nasty eyes at a girl; from the right, he was the girl."¹⁹ In 1955 Hłasko secured Polanski's release from a jail in Warsaw. *Two Men and a Wardrobe* didn't come out until 1958, but garnered Polanski a reputation at school, and he graduated one year later.

"I can't say I thought *Two Men and a Wardrobe* was particularly revelatory," writes Hłasko. "Polanski began making films that seemed grotesque back then, but which today I'd call apt invention. The two characters traipsing through the city, dragging the wardrobe behind them, didn't seem like believable characters to me at the time. Now I know each one of us drags his wardrobe through the city, and we're the only ones who know the value of what's inside."²⁰ Yet this passage withholds just how far Polanski surpasses reality in this 15-minute film, which opens with two men emerging from the sea, primordial, carrying a prohibitively-large mirrored wardrobe behind them. The two men wander around civilization, taking in shunnings and beatings despite an apparent interest in helping, while a smooth, sometimes frenetic jazz, composed by trained otolaryngologist Krzysztof Komeda, provides the soundtrack.

Is this really the experience of postwar Poland? Does this episode embody tragedy more than writing about tragedy itself can? For Hłasko, who provides his own coda at the end of the essay, the answer is yes. Recounting a conversation he had with an old Polish woman at the end of her life, he writes that he "didn't know back then that the world is divided into two halves: in one of them it's impossible to live, and in the other it's impossible to survive." Sitting next to the woman he takes a newspaper out of his pocket,

which on the last page reads: "Two wardrobe doors for sale, glass. Awaiting best offer." "I understood right then that there was more truth in those few words about the life I was leaving behind than in all the hundreds of pages of prose I'd written."²¹

Where's the truth for DeLillo?

Apt and Less-Than-Apt Invention in *Zero K*

A year before the publication of *Zero K*, Post45 theorist Kate Marshall mapped out the relationship between geology and aesthetics in her article, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time." Among her dataset is Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* and DeLillo's 2010 *Point Omega*, both of which, set in the desert, "reflexively stage the production of art on Pleistocene desert sands."²²

DeLillo returns to a nowhere-geology of Central Asia in *Zero K* to exercise a new reflexive vision, placing an imaginary compound called the Convergence (a stage for both aesthetic production and ontological labor) in a "long slow scan of salt flats and stone rubble...nothing else, nowhere else."²³

This setting is framed narratively by the contemporary environmental phenomena of the Chelyabinsk meteor, a February 2013 superbolide meteor over the Ural Mountains that wounded 1,100 people, and the summer 2014 separatist uprising and counter-insurgency of Konstantinovka, two hyperobjects beyond immediate comprehension that seem to erupt out of nowhere, displace reality, and return to the earth.

"Russia's Urals region has been rocked by a meteorite explosion in the stratosphere," wrote RT.com in 2013. "The impact damaged several buildings, and blew out thousands of windows amid frigid winter weather. Hundreds have sought medical attention for minor injuries." (RT.com) DeLillo puts it in more existential terms: "One minute, calm prevails. Then there's a light in the sky and a sonic boom and a shock wave—and a Russian city enters a compressed reality that would be mystifying if it weren't so abruptly real. This is nature's thrust, its command over our efforts, our foresight, every ingenuity we can summon to protect ourselves. The meteor. Chelyabinsk."²⁴

But a return to earth doesn't mean a return to naivety, to a state of pre-confrontation with the hyperobject. From the halls of Convergence the narrator of *Zero K* watches the present world unfold on a random and unending array of screens. The broadcasts range from visceral reportage of disaster to metafictional absurdity, populating the desert—recall McGurl's "forced confrontation with the 'desert of the real'"—with visions of collapse, imagistic exercises in apt invention. "Here was our climate enfolding us," writes DeLillo. "I'd seen many tornadoes on TV news reports and waited for the footage of the rubbled storm path, the aftermath... It appeared, yes, whole streets leveled, school bus on its side, but also people coming this way, in slow motion, nearly out of the screen and into the hall, carrying what they'd salvaged, a troop of men and women, black and white, in solemn march, and the dead arrayed on ravaged floorboards in front yards."

The episode ends with blankness, wasteland, "the same drained screen," and the narrator waiting, like the reader, for something else to happen.²⁵ It is an even less optimistic take on "Two Men and a Wardrobe," men and women emerging without explanation from a sea of rubble, carrying everything they own, attended only by silence. The narrator, like the reader, wonders how they're supposed to interpret these videos, who created them, who curates them, whether or not they're fabricated.

A character called "the Monk" dismisses the images entirely. The narrator, obsessed with understanding what he's witnessing, asks the Monk about what he sees. "The screens, they appear in the halls and disappear into the ceiling. Last screen, last film, a self-immolation. Have you seen it? I thought they were monks. Were they monks? I thought they were kneeling on prayer mats. Three men. Awful to see. Have you seen it?"²⁶

The Monk defers to the hypothetical potential of the screens, that the things they purport to represent are real in some sense, even if only off-screen, in theory. "I don't look at the screens," he says. "The screens are a distraction. But there are monks, yes, in Tibet, in China, in India, setting themselves aflame."

The screens may be a distraction, but they're not random, and they're not naïve, and they're inventions only so far as they deviate towards the truth.

So too is apt invention the source of all nomenclature in *Zero K*, one of the most directly metafictional devices in the novel, beginning with the narrator's father. "Ross Lockhart is a fake name," the narrator reveals a third of the way through. "He'd been thinking about it for years, first in a spirit of fantasy, then with determination, building a list of names that he inspected critically, with a certain detachment, each deletion bringing him closer to self-realization."²⁷ Apt invention isn't just a fulfillment of some "spirit of fantasy," but the production of truth itself, the promise of "self-realization."

"I named them the Stenmark twins. They were the Stenmark twins. Jan and Lars, or Nils and Sven."²⁸ With patrilineal precedent set, the rest of the names in *Zero K* become playing fields for language games, exercises in the associative, if not downright arbitrary, whims of the narrator. In the narrator's hands inventive nomenclature is just as likely to reveal the truth as to obscure it, and therefore isn't particularly apt: "I called her Arjuna, then I called her Arjhana. These were pretty names but they weren't right. Here I was, in a sealed compartment, inventing names, noting accents, improvising histories and nationalities. These were shallow responses to an environment that required abandonment of such distinctions."²⁹ Shallow responses to a deep environment, but necessary for the story to exist on the page (with some exceptions—such as the escort, whose name is withheld to accommodate her as an environmental agent; "I watched her dress, slowly, and decided not to give her a name. She blended better, nameless, with the room."³⁰)

The Lockharts, the protagonists of *Zero K*, are trying to move past a reality where apt invention is necessary, or even possible, but still need apt invention to get there—and sometimes less-than-apt invention, too.

Conclusion

The hyperobject of climate change is its own call-to-action for anyone who encounters and understands it, and understanding the Anthropocene is a call-to-action for contemporary realisms. For some, the most "real" realism moves beyond the subject and into the object, rethinking the agency of the natural world. To access these agencies is an act of speculation on the part of an author, however, which means it can never be real.

For Marek Hłasko 70 years ago, "apt invention" was the only way out of this contradiction. And while writers have always struggled against the limits of language in expressing the inexpressible totality of experience, today's realisms turn specifically to this kind of speculation, imagining a new set of facts to better delineate the old ones that remain out of reach. If literary fiction intends to pursue the truth it no longer has any choice but to indulge in speculation—meaningful differences between genre fiction and literary fiction, already strained by centuries of war and hyperobjects, continue to deteriorate in the face of climate change.

Zero K pushes apt invention into the geology of death, inventing nomenclatures, images, and ineffable real Events to catalogue its narrator's own confrontation with the "desert of the real," the alarming but literally unthinkable experience of climate change, of a Sixth Great Extinction already well-underway. As readers and writers in the literary community we have already been exposed to the hyperobject, we have already begun to identify it on the horizon. And as readers and writers we must continue to imagine worlds outside of ourselves, worlds beyond yet in conversation with our own. We must continue to speculate. Facts alone are not enough.

Because facts, when written down, are not even facts.

Endnotes

- 1 Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ross Ufberg, "Rebel Without A Country." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 20, April 2014.
- 4 Marek Hłasko, *Beautiful Twentysomethings*. (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), 141.
- 5 Mark McGurl, "The New Cultural Geology." *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.3/4, 2011, 388.
- 6 Katha Pollitt, "Climate Change Is The Tragedy of the Global Commons." *The Nation* 22, April 2014.
- 7 Martin Lukacs, "Neoliberalism has conned us into fighting climate change as individuals." *The Guardian*, July 17 2017.
- 8 Timothy Morton, "Introducing the idea of 'hyperobjects.'" *High Country News*, January 19, 2015.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 14.
- 11 Mark McGurl, "The New Cultural Geology." *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.3/4, 2011, 383.
- 12 Marek Hłasko, *Beautiful Twentysomethings*. (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013).
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid, 135.
- 15 Ibid, 108.
- 16 Ibid, 141.
- 17 Ibid, 142.
- 18 Ibid, 143.
- 19 Ibid, 154.
- 20 Ibid, 155.
- 21 Ibid, 159.
- 22 Kate Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time," *American Literary History* 27.3, 2015, 523-538.
- 23 Don DeLillo, *Zero K*. (New York: Scribner, 2016), 4.
- 24 Ibid, 128.
- 25 Ibid, 37.
- 26 Ibid, 85.
- 27 Ibid, 81.
- 28 Ibid, 71.
- 29 Ibid, 72.
- 30 Ibid, 79.