

# Magnitudes of Performativity: Donald Trump in the Anthropo(s)cene

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## **ABSTRACT**

The article presents the Trump presidency and the human-driven geological epoch of the Anthropocene as two arguable extremes among current notions of ‘performativity’: (1) a traditionally vertical model based on individual action and antagonism – where ‘facts’ matter less than ‘making things great’; and (2) the more extended, horizontal human performance of things like global warming (“All the world’s a stage”). Drawing freely on George Lakoff and Timothy Morton, it is argued that these models differ fundamentally in ‘magnitude’: where the one is direct, singular, vertical, and fast, the other is systemic, plural, horizontal, and slow beyond human perception. With Judith Butler and Naomi Klein, it is also argued that to actually confront the twin crises at issue, we need to acknowledge the kind of ‘plural performativity’ – of repetition, norms, and dissimulation – that brought them into being in the first place.

## **KEYWORDS**

Anthropocene, capitalism, climate change, performativity, theatricality

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## INTRODUCTION

In a text first formulated in 1982, Richard Schechner identifies seven “magnitudes of performance,” from *brain event* to public *macrodrama*, with ‘performativity’ as the general condition that permeates them all.<sup>1</sup> In another text roughly dated to 335 BCE, Aristotle defines the appropriate magnitude (*megethos*) of tragedy as one that “can readily be taken in at one view,” likening the perception of plot to that of a “beautiful” animal (*Poetics* VII).<sup>2</sup> In his first major interview as President of the United States, Donald Trump admits to being “periodically hit” by the sheer magnitude of his job: “And it is a tremendous magnitude. [...] The bigness also hits because the – the size of it.”<sup>3</sup> (Admittedly he gets the word from the interviewer, preferring the likes of *yuge* himself.) The same year he was elected, finally, a formal proposal was presented for the beginning of a new geological epoch after some 12,000 years of ‘Holocene’ stability: ‘the Anthropocene,’ so named because of accelerating “human changes to the Earth system” that are “exponential in rate and globally significant in magnitude.”<sup>4</sup>

Proposing to discuss Trump and the Anthropocene side by side in terms of performative ‘magnitude,’ this article is not principally in the business of just extending Schechner’s early tabulation of what *is* or could count as ‘performance.’ Instead, the cases present two arguable extremes among current notions of *performativity, in the causal sense of bringing about some significant change in the world*: a traditionally vertical model based on individual action and antago-

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<sup>1</sup> Schechner 2003, 326.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Belfiore 2001, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Blake 2017.

<sup>4</sup> IGBP, n.d.; while the idea is much older (see Bonneuil and Frescoz 2016), some basic details of Anthropocene science are well summarized on this small website.

nism, and the more extended, horizontal human performance of things like global warming. Whether termed performance or not, we have here two conflicting notions of human action that may respectively be defined as direct and systemic, singular and plural, fast and slow. Where the one sets the entrepreneurial individual against a world reduced to resource, and does much of its work in the tiniest attention span of ‘things done’ – fired! signed! tweeted! – the sheer devastating magnitude of the other – potentially with a sixth mass extinction – escapes both human perception and human concepts of agency, yet cannot but count as the ultimate human performance: yes, indeed, “All the world’s a stage.”

However, it is consequential that the operative term of the article is *performativity*, even as I also refer to action, causation, or performance in passing.<sup>5</sup> To give a snapshot definition, extending from Judith Butler’s work on gender, to be ‘performative’ is to have *normative effects* that are *humanly produced* rather than ‘natural’ – this is the very definition of anthropogenic climate change – yet which *appear* essentially natural to the extent that they *conceal* the socially *iterative* processes of their production.<sup>6</sup>

While this dense, fourfold dynamic of *repetition, norms, appearance, and dissimulation* is something to be followed as the article proceeds, I argue that its very plurality is by far preferable to the dominant individualistic model of performance that Trump so well serves to caricature. For reference, this latter dynamic can be exemplified by two studies in particular: one is Jon McKenzie’s well-known analysis of ‘organizational efficiency,’ three years before *The Apprentice*, its key ‘challenge’ articulated in the slogan, “Perform – or else: you’re fired!”<sup>7</sup> In his *Cambridge Introduction to Performance Theory* (2016), second, Simon Shepherd makes the case that the study of performance, in general, and Schechner-style Performance Studies, specifically, have not simply emerged within a culture of neoliberal capitalism, but may unwittingly facilitate some of its core assumptions: both are fiercely opposed to varieties “material and ideological determination,” discipline and regulation (“whether by text or craft or tradition”), in favour of individual expression and “a fantasy of autonomous agency.”<sup>8</sup>

On this basis, the superficial morale of this article would be that we need to shift our concepts of agency and performativity to a more *ecological* or *distributed* direction, if only to keep us from trumping up the importance of our own individual performance. However, things turn out to be more complex. Introduced in the

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<sup>5</sup> I do admit to letting my larger and more limited terms shade into one another fairly freely – performativity to performance, Anthropocene to global warming – and also, to a spacious use of an inclusive “we” that conceals various differences of privilege.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Butler 1993, as cited later in the article. On the further theoretical range of performativity, see also Paavolainen 2018; Glass and Rose-Redwood 2014.

<sup>7</sup> McKenzie 2001, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Shepherd 2016, 218–20.

following section on Trump, the very framing of this article is heavily influenced by the cognitive linguist George Lakoff's 'conservative' and 'progressive' models of *direct* and *systemic causation*<sup>9</sup>: applicable fairly directly to Trump and global warming, these concepts go some way toward explaining the utter, and utterly paralyzing, blindness of these phenomena to one another (the climate does not care, but neither does the capitalist). While the penultimate section discusses not only the more systemic complexities of the Anthropocene, but also efforts to imagine and address it in more 'direct' terms, the final section attempts to tackle questions of scale and *scalability* more directly: of the direct and the systemic, of performativity as effect and performativity as reiteration. Beginning from certain benefits of 'theatrical' perception – the synoptic magnitude that Aristotle recommended, and Trump so expertly manipulates – it is argued that to confront the twin crises of Trump and the Anthropocene we need to recruit all aspects of the kind of 'plural performativity' that is only tentatively outlined in this article.

As for my own epistemological horizon, it goes without saying that I am no expert in either American politics or Earth systems. If I were Trump, I might say that 'nobody knew [they] could be so complicated' before I myself took to conduct the year or so of research that has gone into the writing of this article. From the lesser magnitude of my position as a concerned Finnish performance scholar, however, I do take some minor pride in basing most of it on sources he would not hesitate to call 'fake news.'<sup>10</sup>

#### **HOW TO DO THINGS WITH LIES: ON DIRECT ACTION AND DISSIMULATION**

The current U.S. President's environmental record is well known. After years of calling global warming a Chinese hoax, he had every mention of it deleted from the White House website within minutes of his inauguration in January 2017 and moved forward with both the Keystone XL and the Dakota Access oil pipelines within a week. With a shifting cast of known denialists and fossil billionaires for a cabinet, and also at the helm of his Environmental Protection Agency, Trump would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, and is prepared to open nearly all U.S. coastal waters to offshore drilling – "systematically ticking off every single item on the fossil fuel industry's wish list," as Naomi Klein puts it,<sup>11</sup> all the while claiming, characteristically, that his is 'the cleanest and most environmentally friendly country on Earth.' To lay out the distinctly *performative* aspects of such

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. Lakoff 2006, 111–30.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout, I use single quotes for phrases the reader may easily detect with a basic keyword search; for the same reason, uncontroversial news facts are cited without references.

<sup>11</sup> Klein 2017, 73.

strategies, this section moves from the rhetorical level to the cognitive models of *causation* it arguably legitimizes – the magnitude of direct action – and then to the more systemic realities these conceal.

Indeed, one of the first casualties of the Trump administration would have been the representationalist view of language that J. L. Austin also set out to challenge in *How To Do Things With Words* (1962). Where the former has ushered in a ‘post-factual’ regime of ‘alternative facts,’ the latter introduced the notion of *performative* utterances: those that are not “true or false,” but themselves constitute “the doing of an action.” Even in Austin’s scenario, however, the mere saying of something will not suffice to “make it so” – as in ‘Make America Great Again!’ – but only takes effect in “appropriate circumstances” of authority or legislation.<sup>12</sup> As for Trump, the first few days of his presidency showed him showing off his newly-acquired circumstances, overturning long-standing policies across the board by his daily signing of executive orders – a prime example not only of *doing* things with words, but of *showing doing* in Schechner’s sense of performing: “pointing to, underlining, and displaying” it.<sup>13</sup>

With the critical gender theorist Judith Butler, however, I here define political performativity as a “*reiterative and citational* practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” – one, moreover, that also “*conceals or dissimulates* the conventions of which it is a repetition.”<sup>14</sup> If we deem the presidency a “crowning extension of the Trump brand” as Klein does, then the frontman’s “only job is to [...] repeat its message”<sup>15</sup> – and so indeed he has, well since the campaign trail: ‘Win, Win, Win. We’re gonna win so much you’ll get tired of winning.’ Apart from Butler and Derrida, the performative force of repetition is acknowledged by the cognitive science filtered by George Lakoff: “The more Trump’s views are discussed in the media” – and that means millions of reiterations per rant – “the more they are activated and the stronger they get.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, even as he goes from “policy to policy in a single sentence [...] he is always on topic,” provided you “understand what his topic is.”<sup>17</sup>

For Lakoff, Trump’s single overriding topic is what he calls “Strict Father Morality,” applied by conservatives in “virtually every issue area”; policy detail matters little insofar as it works to strengthen this model “in the brains of [the] audience.”<sup>18</sup> Ever since his *Moral Politics* (1996), Lakoff has argued that since we are first ‘governed’ in our families, our political worldviews also arise from family-based

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<sup>12</sup> Austin 1962, 5, 7, 13ff.

<sup>13</sup> Schechner 2006, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Butler 1993, 2, 12, my italics; cf. Glass and Rose-Redwood 2014, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Klein 2017, 5, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Lakoff 2016a.

<sup>17</sup> Lakoff 2016b.

<sup>18</sup> Lakoff 2016b.

models of empathy and authority: the Nurturant Parent and the Strict Father. Whether or not this grand claim is borne out by actual evidence, the more limited variant on the theme of *causation* bears directly on my very argument in this article. In short, Lakoff contends that progressives tend to argue on the basis of *systemic* causation (social, cultural, economic, or ecological), whilst conservatives tend to view causation as *direct*, based on individual action, duty, and authority (father knows best and hence is to be obeyed).<sup>19</sup> While most people “have” both worldviews, one tends to dominate; and “when the facts don’t fit the frame, the frame stays and the facts are ignored.”<sup>20</sup>

In terms of performance magnitude, “direct causation is the simplest kind: There is a single agent who purposely exerts force on something.” Throw a ball, flip a light switch – this is performativity in the first-person sense of *doing things with objects*, with the simplest of properties: one agent, one action, free will, no intermediaries.<sup>21</sup> If “global warming is the granddaddy of all systemic causation issues” as Lakoff himself recognizes it to be, it is direct causation that “appears to be represented in the grammars of all languages around the world” and remains by far the easier to understand.<sup>22</sup>

And of course, “many of Trump’s policy proposals are framed in terms of direct causation”: shoot the shooter; ban all Muslim immigrants; build a wall to stop the Mexican ones.<sup>23</sup> If the effects of climate change threaten your golf course (in County Clare, Ireland), use your experience in real estate and propose they wall it off as well. If a long-term sea-level rise is predicted of a magnitude that would erase large metropolitan areas across both American coasts, reduce it to a ‘bubble’ of ‘the bicoastal elites.’ All in all, there is something shady about things happening slowly over time; instead, action is best taken in short impulsive bursts. In a curious iteration of the metaphysics of presence, the ‘best words’ come in the moment, no prompter, just using your ‘brain’ and surfing the stream of impulse. While coherence smacks of forethought and hence of scripted calculation, even blatant lies will sound authentic if only you speak your mind as a direct flow of feeling – which they let you do ‘when you are a star’: for Trump, the decisive shift from bankruptcy to celebrity came with *The Apprentice* (2004–), reducing his direct-action performance to its plain caricature, ‘you’re fired!’ Klein derives much of Trump’s rhetoric from reality TV and its “spectacle of extreme emotion, conflict, and suffering,” its actual reality less important than “the theater.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. Lakoff 2006, 111–30.

<sup>20</sup> Lakoff 2006, 196.

<sup>21</sup> Lakoff 2006, 112.

<sup>22</sup> Lakoff 2006, 123; Lakoff 2016a.

<sup>23</sup> Lakoff 2016a.

<sup>24</sup> Klein 2017, 53.

Within the theatre, importantly, Trump's direct-action performance comes with a decidedly antagonistic dramaturgy of *containment*, aligned with the so-called 'alt-right' against a variety of externalized threats, and rhetorically against a corrupt elite within: even as he speaks to the mixture of racism, nationalism, misogyny, and militarism that brought him to power, there is no doubting his real alliance lies with wealth.<sup>25</sup> In both constellations, however, a good part of his appeal comes from his reactionary performance of what one feminist scholar dubs 'petro-masculinity': be it about sheer capital or lower-middle class insecurities, the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels serves to barricade an endangered, 1950s-style status quo "from the spectre of threatening others, whether pollutants or immigrants or gender deviants."<sup>26</sup> Beyond pretensions of representation, the president's personal rhetoric of 'fake news' neatly shifts attention to his own performance of – imagine it – being wrongfully silenced.

Altogether, these examples begin to suggest how, on this magnitude of performance as direct action, one conceives of *freedom*, and ultimately the structure of reality itself. This is also where Simon Shepherd's (2016) concern about the potentially neoliberal ontology of 'performance' lies: if indeed its only life is "in the present," as Peggy Phelan suggests, then by implication its death lurks in more distant attempts at its regulation.<sup>27</sup> In the conservative Strict Father morality, for sure, "freedom" ultimately means freedom *from government*; thus the Trump administration is also committed to lifting "burdensome" energy regulations and "eliminating harmful and unnecessary policies" that have "held back" "hardworking Americans" "for too long."<sup>28</sup> In projecting its patriarchal values across society, "strict father morality comes with the idea of the moral order, with man over nature, people over animals and plants – with the idea that nature is there purely for profit, to be exploited, not preserved."<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, such conceptions of freedom and world order are the very pinnacle of neoliberalism.<sup>30</sup> In this strand of late capitalism, in political writer George Monbiot's helpful overview, "political freedom, universal rights, human equality and the distribution of wealth" can all be rejected as intruding on the absolute freedom reserved for the rich and powerful – the 'free market' performing a natural hierarchy of winners and losers, in which the wealth gathered at the top magically

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<sup>25</sup> See Foster 2017; on containment, see Paavolainen 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Daggett 2018, 34, 44.

<sup>27</sup> Shepherd 2016, 195, 220.

<sup>28</sup> White House 2017: "An America First Energy Plan," now discontinued.

<sup>29</sup> Lakoff 2006, 122.

<sup>30</sup> The term is utterly contested and may connote any and all aspects of the current *globalized, financialized, corporate, "free trade," or fundamentalist* (i.e. conservative) capitalism. For a specifically performative account of neoliberalism, see Glass 2016.

trickles down to all.<sup>31</sup> Hence also the core policies of privatization, deregulation, corporate trade deals, and ‘donor class’ tax cuts enabled by cuts to public spending – repeated the world over, right and left, destabilizing any reasonable basis for doing much of anything about global warming.<sup>32</sup> And across the board, complex systemic issues are translated into ones of direct action: if we all only seek our own profit, profit for all will be maximized by ‘the market,’ its metaphorical “hand” quite as invisible as concentrations of carbon dioxide.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, whatever executive orders the president makes a spectacle of signing, they will build on anti-regulatory actions already taken by Republicans in Congress.

Hence the ironic performativity of *dissimulation*: ‘draining the swamp’ as a euphemism for what Klein dubs Trump’s “corporate coup”<sup>34</sup>; ‘big, beautiful Christmas present’ for a tax cut that ultimately only affects the rich; ‘entitlement reform’ for the attacks on social security to make up for said tax cut; ‘thoughts and prayers’ to cover the lack of any policy responses to repeated school shootings; calls for such responses dubbed as untactful ‘politicization’ of said shootings; a full history of climate-change denial, from its reality through its politics to its ‘necessarily [being] a bad thing.’<sup>35</sup> In sociologist John Bellamy Foster’s analysis, the common alignment of Trump and similar phenomena in Europe with “right-wing populism” is itself a legitimizing cloak for their distinctly neo-fascist (racist, patriarchal, ultra-nationalist, financial-capitalist) policies. Joining the likes of Butler and Noam Chomsky, Foster historicizes fascism as “the antonym of liberal democracy within a capitalist society,” only more categorical in its rejection of democracy, and as a natural ally of the centre right in times of instability (suffice it to mention the Finns Party or the Sweden Democrats, here).<sup>36</sup>

In sum, even while Trump serves to caricature a magnitude of ‘direct performance’ imagination that is utterly powerful, *essentializing* it to one individual will not do; as Klein argues, he is “less an aberration than a logical conclusion” of a bipartisan neoliberal ideology, decades in the making, now set to “echo through geologic time.” Even if the presidency “were to end tomorrow, the political conditions that produced it, and which are producing replicas around the world, will remain to be confronted.”<sup>37</sup> From a stronger perspective, focusing only on the

<sup>31</sup> Monbiot 2017, 29–41: 32 cited.

<sup>32</sup> Klein 2017, 80–1.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Lakoff 2006, 128–9.

<sup>34</sup> Klein 2017, 18.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Oreskes and Conway 2012. ‘Entitlement reform’ is Senator Paul Ryan’s trademark euphemism; ‘bad thing’ is cited from the lawyer-to-be-coal-consultant Scott Pruitt, Trump’s first head of the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), which, characteristically, he had a history of suing for doing pretty much anything at all.

<sup>36</sup> Foster 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Klein 2017, 9, 266, 10.



excesses of neoliberalism is itself a way to dissimulate the systemic problems with fossilized *capitalism as such*.<sup>38</sup>

### **THEATRUM MUNDI: PERFORMING ‘NATURES’ IN THE ANTHROPO(S)CENE**

In the *geological* magnitude of performance that I now turn to discuss, things get rather more complex still; as a proposed new ‘epoch’ defined by human intervention, the notion of ‘Anthropocene’ has lately caught the imaginations of scientists and more culturally-oriented critics alike (I will return to philosopher Timothy Morton in due course).<sup>39</sup> On this scale, both scene and agent are complicated as *nature* itself can be seen as ‘performed’ – as concept, as category, as discourse, as the ‘essence’ undermined by any performative argument – and performed by a *human kind* that only appears as a hypothetical entity beyond any normal sense of agency or intention. While the geologists will likely date the Anthropocene from the post-1945 ‘Great Acceleration’ of human influence, there are grounds for dating it from the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, or indeed from the spread of agriculture and deforestation thousands of years earlier – and anyway it extends beyond any foreseeable future. In a blast of magnitudes, we may zoom out from the singular events that deniers cling to – the ‘incidental’ hurricanes and the ‘cold days’ that all but disprove ‘warming’ – to a future of climate refugees *flooding in* for real, to use a phrase of Trump’s own.

In accordance with Lakoff’s notion of systemic causation, however, the Anthropocene exceeds by far its most humanly prominent features like global warming. As opposed to the direct causation of the previous section, the science here is one of nonlinear change and dynamic thresholds that may also affect each other chaotically. From an ‘Earth System’ perspective, the Anthropocene has been defined in terms of nine ‘planetary boundaries,’ four of which have already been passed (including the safe orders of magnitude for biodiversity and climate change).<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the Great Acceleration out of Holocene conditions is depicted by twenty-four ‘hockey stick’ graphs for both human and Earth System activity over 250 years – GDP growth, population, energy consumption, atmospheric carbon, species extinctions, etc. – each with a sharp upturn from about 1950, like a forest of Freytag graphs that only go to crisis.<sup>41</sup> Easy as it is to think of climate change, say, as an incremental linear process (so and so many degrees, potentially to be solved by mere market reforms), such graphs conceal a complex set of ‘feedbacks’ and ‘tipping points,’ which again may permanently amplify one an-

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<sup>38</sup> See Malm 2016, on the generic dependence of capitalism on fossil fuels.

<sup>39</sup> For good overviews, see Lewis and Maslin 2018; Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Steffen *et al.* 2015a.

<sup>41</sup> Steffen *et al.* 2015b.

other and bring about a ‘regime shift’ in the system – with dire consequences not only for human civilization but for the very majority of the biosphere.<sup>42</sup>

The initial implications for the theme of performativity are twofold. First, the new geology of the Anthropocene is a matter not of *natural change* but of *human performance*, and it is to human detriment if it is not recognized as such, by the Trumps of the world. Second, however, this is a ‘performance’ not of humans intentionally performing for others, but of reiterated practices that regularly get confused with essential nature. Where the former evokes Trump’s sense of direct action, the latter again equals Butler’s more tacit sense of performativity as a “reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer,” much as a theatrical script “survives” particular actors but also requires them “in order to be actualized and reproduced.”<sup>43</sup> While the concept draws on aspects of the English word ‘perform’ that are simply not present in its Finnish equivalent, say, it seems highly apt, here, in at least three ways.

First, the ‘scripts’ that reproduce global warming only do so by being *massively* reiterated over dozens and hundreds of generations slowly spanning the globe. From agriculture to automobility, the very magnitude of their reiteration also lends them a certain normativity; as they virtually define human conduct and being, their performers become blind to what Austin might call their perlocutionary or unintended effects.

Second, their performance cannot be framed as past in any convenient way. Rather than being *per*-formed as a completed process or background – the implication of static nouns like nature or indeed the Anthropocene – their proper tense is the present participle. The archive is in the sediments, but the repertoire *is raging on right now*.

Third, this magnitude of performance is also *non-humanly* distributed. Zooming out to all those other things on the scene long before and after ourselves, the human species is affected by both the ‘natural’ world and the contingent socio-political conditions in which its communities make their histories. In perhaps the most perceptive historical overview to date, the Anthropocene concept is dissected into intertwining developments in politics, war, consumption, reflection, economy, capitalism, and resistance.<sup>44</sup>

In one sense, surely, the Anthropocene is only performed through “the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it

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<sup>42</sup> Steffen et al. 2018. A fairly comprehensible example of a ‘tipping cascade’ has to do with the ‘albedo effect’ of how Arctic ice normally reflects sunlight: as the ice melts, the uncovered dark ocean will absorb more heat, causing more melting. If the permafrost melts, some predict a ‘methane burp’ equal to all the carbon currently in the atmosphere, which would be ‘game over for the planet.’

<sup>43</sup> Butler 1993, 234; Butler 1988, 525.

<sup>44</sup> Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016.

names.”<sup>45</sup> Much as any research method will *perform* realities rather than just observing them readymade<sup>46</sup>, global warming, for example, is enacted differently from different perspectives – and those of the climatologist, or the corporation, or the political activist, or the discourse analyst, or the meteorologist, or the local farmer will all perform diverging aspects of it, rather than one generic entity. Hence also the proliferation of alternative nomenclature that has come to question the troubled universalism of ‘Anthropocene,’ and the very different grand narratives of guilt and redemption each alternative implies: Capitalocene, Technocene, Homogenocene, and Manthropocene are only some of the contenders in what has become a cultural ‘Anthro(s)cene’<sup>47</sup> of discursive authority. In the words of Christophe Bonneuil, “the various Anthropocene narratives we tell are performative; they preclude or promote some kinds of collective action rather than others, and so they make a difference to the becoming of the Earth.”<sup>48</sup>

And yet – moving now to Morton’s central heuristic – *hyperobjects* such as global warming are not just “a function of our knowledge,” nor “figments of the (human) imagination,” but indeed “real whether or not someone is thinking of them.”<sup>49</sup> In Morton’s version of *object-oriented ontology*, their ‘objectness’ consists precisely “in their being prior to thinking,” yet they are also distinctly ‘hyper’ in their *magnitude*: “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans,” they involve “profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to.”<sup>50</sup> In a way, they are the vengeance of objects, reduced to mere props at Trump’s magnitude of direct action performance. Much like the ‘ready-to-hand’ tool, for Martin Heidegger, only becomes ‘present-at-hand’ when broken, so hyperobjects, too, “act a little bit like the gigantic boot at the end of the *Monty Python* credits”<sup>51</sup>: suddenly they are there, in the foreground, but still very much withdrawn from human access. For Morton, “the necessary ecological thought” is that we contribute to global warming by “performing actions that [are] statistically meaningless” – and yet, zooming out to “Earth magnitude,” it is clear that “humans did it, not jellyfish [...] not bacteria, not lemons.”<sup>52</sup>

At such magnitudes, however, the Anthropocene concept also becomes politically problematic. On the one hand, elevating the undifferentiated ‘human enterprise’<sup>53</sup> into the sole protagonist of a vast biogeophysical drama is not only a triumph of human exceptionalism, but prone to reduce both cause and cure to

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<sup>45</sup> Butler 1993, 2.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. Law & Urry 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Castree 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Bonneuil 2015, 30.

<sup>49</sup> Morton 2013, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Morton 2013, 21, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Morton 2016, 14, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Morton 2016, 19–20, 23–4.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. Steffen *et al.* 2015b; this is a standard term in Anthropocene literature.

frames of direct action. Here, human history is abridged to parameters of population and technology, and the former to an ignorant mass whom a small elite of scientists would readily lead to a ‘good anthropocene’ by turning the planet into a theatre of large-scale intervention.<sup>54</sup> For Naomi Klein, the “superhero narrative” of being “saved at the last minute” by big technologies or benevolent billionaires constitutes a form of “magical thinking”: why not just suck out the carbon or turn down the sun?<sup>55</sup> Moreover, as Morton adds, geoengineering is only one aspect of what he dubs the ‘efficient’ style of ecological thinking (efficiency as in performativity): beyond the masculine ‘ecomodernism’ of a Musk or a Schwarzenegger, the linear, mechanistic, case-by-case template of direct causation is evident in the ubiquitous ecological rhetoric of *taps*, *sinks*, and *footprints*, as well as in all attempts to shift blame from systemic dependence on fossil capital to individual consumption (with the systemic consequence that we keep consuming).<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, deriving a geological epoch from some universal trait of the species not only obscures vast asymmetries between historical populations, but “blocks off any prospect for change,” as two irreplaceable Swedish critics of the concept put it. With the Anthropocene, Malm and Hornborg argue, “climate change is *denaturalised* in one moment – relocated from the sphere of natural causes to that of human activities – only to be *renaturalised* in the next,” as a function of human essence.<sup>57</sup> In this way, Klein adds, the very performativity of “systems that certain humans created, and other humans powerfully resisted, [is] completely let off the hook” – capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism<sup>58</sup> – but perhaps, there is a degree of disabling essentialism to such historical time scales as well: if it has been building for so long, surely today’s fossil capitalism is not to blame? Perhaps, rather than confuse the concept’s real potential with too many additional neologisms – contingent and passing in a way it won’t – we might just retain the Anthropocene for the geological epoch, and use something like Anthro(s)cene to highlight the various theatrics of direct action by which it is performed – not as points of origin but as repertoires of *repetition*: ‘man’ versus ‘nature,’ farmer and field, colonizer and colonized, capitalism and commons.

For Morton, “massively accelerated agriculture” specifically is the “granddaddy hyperobject” that lies behind both industrialization and global warming. Arising in the Fertile Crescent, it was “a disaster early on, yet it was repeated across Earth” – “eventually requiring steam engines and industry to feed its proliferation,” and “still plowing ahead.” Here, the very distinction between nature and culture results from that of nature and *agriculture*, “establishing the necessarily

<sup>54</sup> Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 79–86.

<sup>55</sup> Klein 2014, 255; 256–90.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Morton 2018, 209–15; Daggett 2018, 33–4 (ecomodernism); Malm 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Malm and Hornborg 2014, 67, 65.

<sup>58</sup> Klein 2016.

violent and arbitrary difference between itself and what it ‘conquers’ or delimits.”<sup>59</sup> Crucially to his argument, the very concept of *nature* itself becomes an ideological barrier to thinking ecology as interconnection, a passive stage set for direct performance at Trump magnitude.

And yet, it only takes its appearance of *nature as essence* from a massive “reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed [any] performer” as Butler argued in the context of gender.<sup>60</sup> Importantly for its continuity, this reiteration is “geological as well as discursive”: for Morton, it emerges from “an accidental collaboration” between Earth systems and human systems, “unconscious, and therefore liable to be repeated and prolonged.” Nature is only defined as “harmonious periodic cycling” because the concept *coincides* with “the geological period we call the Holocene, a period marked by stable Earth system fluctuations”: “Carbon dioxide fluctuated in a harmonious-seeming cycle for twelve thousand years – until it didn’t. We Mesopotamians took this coincidence to be a fact about our world and called it Nature.”<sup>61</sup>

## **TOWARD A PLURAL PERFORMATIVITY**

To recapitulate, I have discussed the Trump presidency and the Anthropocene as two arguably extreme examples of the concept of *performativity*, in a causal sense involving repetition, norms, appearance, and concealment. Where the one is direct, singular, vertical, and fast, the other is systemic, plural, horizontal, and slow beyond human perception. Where the one imagines ‘agency’ in a more or less binary world of things done or denied, whatever agency the other allows only emerges from the complex interplay of manifold actants over time, both human and nonhuman, itself a hyperobject in the sense of evading human access and control. And finally, I have noted how the more systemic range has a way of becoming inverted or dissimulated into the normative confines of direct action: how the performance of Donald Trump is but the tip of a decades-old neoliberal or neo-fascist iceberg, and how the still vaster cultural history of the Anthropocene is easily converted into a simplified melodrama of an essential ‘humanity’ acting on essential ‘nature’ – what I called the Anthro(s)cene. Taken to extremes, the two conceptions tend to deny each other’s very reality: from a direct-action perspective, humans could not possibly have an effect on the climate, and from a systemic, post-human perspective, there are no individuals to begin with.

While the very point of addressing issues of this magnitude through ‘performativity’ is to present them as (humanly) *changeable* rather than (apocalyptically)

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<sup>59</sup> Morton 2016, 37, 53, 42–3. On the science of this ‘early Anthropocene’ proposal, see Ruddiman 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Butler 1993, 234.

<sup>61</sup> Morton 2016, 58.

determined, we clearly need to take issue with such inversions and their associated exclusions. Specifically, how are we to make sense of systemic phenomena like global warming, ever, if so much of our minding capacity is based on direct action and perception? In ecocritic Timothy Clark's terms, the central dilemma is one of 'scale framing,' and it is especially acute in the arts, insofar as things like global warming "resist representation at the kinds of scale at which most poetry, narrative or drama operate."<sup>62</sup> As another, Rob Nixon, elaborates, the effects of the Anthropocene are "dispersed across space and time [...] low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects" – a matter of *slow violence*, utterly distinct from the in-your-face norms of direct abuse, yet therefore hard to fathom as violence at all.<sup>63</sup> Insofar as our very *verbs* evoke the frame of direct action, and our *nouns*, that of a static background, we need to acknowledge the "transcendental stupidity" of our embodied human scale itself: as Clark notes, we just cannot "describe the Earth as a whole and not use terms, concepts and images derived from the specific categories of life on its surface (apple, forest, blue dot)."<sup>64</sup>

To begin to actually address the Anthro(po)scene, then, it is advisable to set not only our facts but our orienting frames to scale first. In this concluding section, I only briefly suggest what this entails at three intertwining magnitudes: a plural performativity of *cognition*, *perception*, and *action* – or, nodding toward Schechner's "Magnitudes" essay – of their relatively *narrative*, *theatrical*, and *performative* aspects.<sup>65</sup>

(1) The most general narrative level intertwines Schechner's largest and tiniest magnitudes: with cognitive theatre scholars, all talk and action can be understood as "performative" in the sense that it "makes things happen in the real world of our minds."<sup>66</sup> Such is certainly the case if, with a recent eponymous study by two U.S. sociologists, we frame "climate change as social drama" – not in my sense of its being performed into being by human societies, but as its *representation* in the public sphere, and specifically as a "competition between two camps for interpretative and political power."<sup>67</sup> While Smith and Howe's analyses of *ethos* and *genre* have much to commend them (they praise Al Gore over artistic ambiguity, "heroic romanticism" over apocalypse), the very frame of representation compromises the urgency and proximity of the issue. Specifically, 'competition' entails the very norm of mediatized capitalism, and the whole tired framework of denial and belief, including dated arguments that not *all* scientists agree, or that *specific*

<sup>62</sup> Clark 2015, 73–5, 175.

<sup>63</sup> Nixon 2011, 10, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Clark 2015, 38, 33.

<sup>65</sup> From the smallest to the largest, Schechner's seven 'magnitudes of performance' include *brain event*, *microbit*, *bit*, *sign*, *scene*, *drama*, and *macrodrama* (2003, 325–6). Taking inspiration from this essay does not imply commitment to its categories.

<sup>66</sup> McConachie 2012, 28.

<sup>67</sup> Smith and Howe 2015, 37.

catastrophes cannot be attributed to global warming. In Lakoff's cognitive terms, any frame will only get stronger if negated (his pet examples being "don't think of an elephant!" and Richard Nixon's "I am not a crook")<sup>68</sup>, so any and all arguments on climate science *not* being 'a hoax' should just be refused.

And yet at the same time, to make the Anthropocene *real* beyond its representations, we should firmly undo all the exclusions and distanciations its denial depends on – the first frame to reiterate being that it is *here and now*, not speculative or hypothetical. As the environmentalist George Marshall argues, we should beware of "framing climate change as a future threat for people far away and, especially, as a threat for nonhumans, however cute they might be"<sup>69</sup> – the standard soft-green imagery of melting glaciers or draughts in the tropics. The second point is that, as Klein argues the 'merchants of doubt' well know, it will *change everything*.<sup>70</sup> Specifically, it is not merely an 'environmental' issue in the sense that the word tends to withdraw as mere background for direct action in Trump's sense. Marshall, too, pleads for us to "DROP THE ECO-STUFF, especially polar bears, saving the planet, and any other language that stakes out climate change as the exclusive cultural domain of environmentalism."<sup>71</sup> No marginal concern for a marginal group of hippies, it will embrace us all.

(2) Then again, such embracing rhetoric, especially if heavily reliant on the *ethos* of the messenger, runs all the familiar risks of sensationalism and condescending moralism, prone to *invert* the issue, again, to a direct performance of his or her character. Perhaps, then, we should avoid the contingency of talk and theory altogether, for the directness of embodied perception – embrace our "stupidity," and accept our human scale as the very baseline from which to *extend* our thought, feeling, and existence? Such is the key tenet of cognitive theories of 'conceptual metaphor' and 'conceptual blending,' as advanced by Lakoff and others like the literary scholar Mark Turner.<sup>72</sup> Assuming that we habitually make sense of abstract realities through more immediate experiences, such as of object manipulation or family relations, no wonder that the Anthropocene is readily addressed through more direct frames as well, most evidently the meteorite that launched the previous mass extinction some 66 million years ago (a complex process reduced to a fist-strike event of 'hit the Earth, kill the dinosaurs').<sup>73</sup>

In performance terms, moreover, such 'human-scale cognition' is directly supported by the synoptic magnitude that Aristotle recommended, at the dawn of

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<sup>68</sup> E.g. Lakoff 2008, 232–41.

<sup>69</sup> Marshall 2014, 231–2.

<sup>70</sup> Klein 2014; Oreskes and Conway 2012.

<sup>71</sup> Marshall 2014, 237.

<sup>72</sup> E.g. Turner 2014.

<sup>73</sup> On dinosaurs, see Lewis and Maslin 2018, 74, 76–7; on objects see Paavolainen 2012; on family relations, cf. earlier on Lakoff's Strict Father/Nurturant Parent models.

the agricultural Anthropocene: just as “physical objects and living organisms [...] should possess a certain magnitude [...] such as can readily be taken in at one view,” so tragic plots also “should have a certain length [...] such as can readily be held in memory.”<sup>74</sup>

In the Lakoffian vocabulary I have cited, in short, what I’m looking for at this magnitude are *perceptual* means of “turning systemic causation into direct causation.”<sup>75</sup> On the level of ‘plot,’ first, we seem quite as capable of empathizing with the most abstract of representations as we are with human protagonists competing for our support: imagine if one *line* could depict *action* as first ‘rising’ and then ‘falling’? Visualizing what cannot be perceived directly, even blunt statistics do indeed perform, in accordance with the “sufficient limit” of magnitude that Aristotle located in the “change from good fortune to bad fortune” or vice versa.<sup>76</sup> The principle extends from the expanding lists and maps of renewed climate commitment, in June 2017 – the Paris Accord being reaffirmed by a number of cities, states, and corporations within days of Trump’s withdrawal – to the Anthropocene graphs of the Great Acceleration ‘hockey sticks,’ or the various ‘planetary boundaries’ we are in danger of exceeding. On the grandest scenographic magnitude, a similar affective reduction plays into iconic satellite images of the Earth, such as the 1972 ‘blue marble’ or the 1990 ‘pale blue dot’: in Turner’s somewhat optimistic view, it is by perceptually blending Earth magnitude with our “everyday field of vision,” local to us and subject to our actions, that such images may activate a sense of “human-scale power, responsibility, and duty.”<sup>77</sup>

Altogether, this sense of human scale coincides with “the sign, scene, or drama levels” at which “spectators consciously receive performances” according to Schechner.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>79</sup> the ‘theatricality’ of this magnitude is largely about collapsing into synoptic space what otherwise only unfolds over longer swathes of time? If *performative becoming* tends to evade consciousness – the Anthropocene as its most extreme example – then *theatrical appearance* is intuited precisely as such and may indeed heighten our sensitivity to its performative constitution. Perhaps, seeing all the world as a stage – and so as amenable to meaningful human intervention – indeed depends on a theatrical inversion of its lines of becoming?

(3) Or then, perhaps not. For all the affective power of theatrical perception, it depends on painstaking work behind the scenes, as it were, any sense of human-scale efficacy owing to more systemic realities that must remain concealed for

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Belfiore 2001, 48; her essay is specifically on Aristotle’s concept of magnitude.

<sup>75</sup> Lakoff 2008, 188–9.

<sup>76</sup> Cited in Belfiore 2001, 48–9.

<sup>77</sup> Turner 2014, 181–2.

<sup>78</sup> Schechner 2003, 325.

<sup>79</sup> Paavolainen 2018.



performative effect – these extend from the enabling but invisible work of bacteria and internal organs, through any supporting social structures, to capitalist individualism’s constitutive otherness of abysmal global inequalities and irreversible ecological degradation.<sup>80</sup> Contrasting “the weirdly small, fragile blue marble Earth pictures” just discussed with “all the little things squiggling around on its crust,” Timothy Morton’s striking conclusion is that “the whole is less than the sum of its parts, because the whole is one, and the parts are many.” If we consider “the good of the whole” as more important and thus more real, “we can ignore extinction” – by contrast, ecological awareness demands that we “think outside the Neolithic box [...] on more than one scale at once.”<sup>81</sup>

In other words, again, mere *representation* will not suffice – not in graphs, brains, streets, or parliaments – without a long-term performative basis in systemic *reiteration*. In Lakoff’s terms, where Trump’s Strict Father version of direct action reflects the “natural” self-interest of neoliberal rationality, the more systemic metaphor of the Nurturant Parent is *not* about essentializing altruism instead, but of developing frames of empathy and nurturance “over a period of time and a range of situations.”<sup>82</sup> For Klein, we do need to say NO to the world that Trump most visibly represents, but we also need “a clear and captivating vision of the world beyond that no” – that is, “to build the *yes* that is the world we want and need,” and to perform that world in “solidarity across divisions of race, gender, and sexual identity.”<sup>83</sup> In her scenario, climate change can only be tackled through a “convergence of diverse constituencies on a scale previously unknown,” but it may also provide the “overarching narrative” or “catalyzing force” for those “seemingly disparate struggles” to actually converge.<sup>84</sup>

Altogether, if the *effects* of the Anthropocene even partially reflect such processes of ‘plural performativity’ as I have proposed – practices of widespread *reiteration* that are regularly confused with essential *nature* and thus *concealed* – then any adequate response must be at least equally wide-ranging. Apart from disclosing what has been concealed and for whose benefit, we must seek to instil new values and narratives for ‘theatrical’ perception, and also to embody these in recursive, systemic action. On an optimistic note, affirmative clues are already becoming visible at both ends of the spectrum. At the ‘normative’ level of direct perception, Klein suggests we may one day even come to “thank Trump” for how “the shamelessness of his corporate coup” has made “systemic change seem more necessary” than ever. At the more systemic level of everyday action, likewise, she observes that whole sectors of the economy are indeed “already

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. Robbins 2014; on the constitutive ‘outside’ see e.g. Butler 1993, 16, 95.

<sup>81</sup> Morton 2018, 94, 99–103; last quote from Morton 2016, 40.

<sup>82</sup> E.g. Lakoff 2008, 209–21; 2006, 120–1. On altruism, see Monbiot 2017, 14–26.

<sup>83</sup> Klein 2017, 220, 230, 253.

<sup>84</sup> Klein 2014, 459, 154, 7, 61.

low-carbon: caregiving, teaching, social work, the arts.”<sup>85</sup> In Butler’s terms, for the current norms of global capitalism to appear effective and hegemonic, they must “conceal or dissimulate” not only their performative historicity but the fact that there *are* alternatives: from another perspective, indeed, ours is already a world of ‘diverse economies,’ and ‘other worlds’ are actively being performed as we speak.<sup>86</sup>

In any case, the slow violence of the Anthropocene is itself becoming exceedingly fast and visible, hence more immune to denial and less in need of translation. At the time of writing, I refer to the exceptional heat waves of summer 2018, hitting no distant peripheries but some ‘core’ regions of the world economy as well. With no rain for months on end, the range of responses in the Nordic and Baltic countries alone varied from the systemic – farmers putting down cattle for the sheer lack of fodder – to the direct, every day, ubiquitous: boosting one’s air conditioning (hydrofluorocarbons), preferably with one’s car engine idling (hence fuel consumption and carbon dioxide). The cumulative reiteration of such scenes epitomizes the *Monty Python* boot of global warming, making itself felt in the present participle: a creeping alienation of what we thought was ‘natural,’ the ultimate *Verfremdung* slowly taking its *effekt*, in any case for the next several hundred years. At the same time, it is only through a cumulative change in “human values, equity, behavior, institutions, economies, and technologies” that we might evade the *irreversible* trajectory toward what the latest scientific Anthropocene report of August 2018 dubs, for direct perception, “Hothouse Earth.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Klein 2017, 262, 270.

<sup>86</sup> Butler 1993, 12; Gibson-Graham 2008.

<sup>87</sup> Steffen *et al.* 2018. Such is also the gist of the October 2018 Special Report on Global Warming, in which the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change urges governments to opt for 1.5°C of warming from pre-industrial levels, instead of the maximum 2 degrees of the Paris Accord. In their environmental impact statement of August 2018, by comparison, the Trump administration itself predicts a four-degree rise by the end of the century, but as a matter of course, not as something to be done anything about.

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