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A taphonomy of a dark Anthropocene. A response to Þóra Pétursdóttir's OOO-inspired 'Archaeology and Anthropocene'

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Abstract

Þóra Pétursdóttir raises the point that archaeology is limited regarding what it can achieve, including the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, by a series of theoretical assumptions. She challenges the 'traditional' archaeological 'key tropes' in matters of this new epoch, namely the concepts of culture history, deep time/distant pasts, and the nature–culture divide. Instead, she proposes a number of new guiding points to orient archaeological inquiries, framed as part of the object-oriented ontological (OOO) philosophies. In reply, I claim that the use of OOO theories is rather unhelpful for addressing the topic of the Anthropocene, given that they lead to important ethical and political consequences: a fetishization of things, an abandoning of responsibility and an alienation of humans. They are also based on the confusion that analytical distinctions are in some way the ones responsible for the existence of inequalities, ecological destruction, racism or discrimination. Paradoxically, precisely through their annihilation, there is no room left for acknowledging the alterity of the past.

Keywords

ruin; Anthropocene; object-oriented ontology; Graham Harman; agency; humanity

> *[I]t is through its historical dimension that the ruin belongs to the domain of things*
>
> Gómez Moya (2011)

A number of recent texts under the banner of 'the new ontological turn' propose a radical reconceptualization of the relationship between archaeological interpretation and the material record, leading to an 'archaeology without the Past', to quote Christopher Witmore (2014, 204). Following in this trend is the latest article by Þóra Pétursdóttir (2017) on 'Climate change? Archaeology and Anthropocene'. Pétursdóttir raises the

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point that archaeology is limited regarding what it can achieve, including the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, by a series of theoretical assumptions. She challenges the 'traditional' archaeological 'key tropes' in matters of this new epoch, namely the concepts of culture history, the archaeological record, deep time/distant pasts, stratigraphy, locality, and the nature–culture divide. Instead, she proposes a number of new guiding points to orient archaeological inquiries, framed as part of the object-oriented ontological (OOO) philosophies.

The author raises a number of insightful points – an interesting case study, a stylistically new type of narrative, and a push for 'archaeological imagination'. However, in the interest of scholarly debate, I will focus this text on a couple of points which I think deserve careful evaluation. I claim that the use of OOO theories is rather unhelpful for addressing the topic of the Anthropocene, given that they lead to important ethical and political consequences: a fetishization of things, an abandoning of responsibility and an alienation of humans. In turn, these seem incompatible with the challenges raised by the Anthropocene. While OOO might be a useful theory in some cases, the Anthropocene topic is a great example to illuminate both its limitations and important epistemological implications.

The three main points of concern that structure my reflection are: (1) OOO axioms are taking archaeology back to an essentialist view of things, at the same time advancing a world view which has no criterion for validation or evaluation of the advanced hypothesis. (2) They also seem to limit interpretation of materials to descriptive narratives, with little to add in terms either of understanding what has made past/present assemblages as they are, or of eliciting action towards their future. They also seem to fail to open up an enquiry into the elaboration of further hypotheses (instead the focus seems to be on elaborate descriptions of the immediate reality). (3) They seem to be using traditional archaeological concepts – agency, theory, context – but with a different, often ambiguous, meaning. Ultimately, the implication is that while militating for a more inclusive ontological perspective, in reality they fall short exactly in providing room for acknowledging the alterity of the past.

So let's take these observations in turn, and make our way through Pétursdóttir's arguments, similarly to how she followed the driftwood on the beach. First, I will highlight her main arguments as part of the wider 'Anthropocene' theoretical challenges, then critically discuss the limitations of employing OOO-inspired arguments (especially the OOO of Graham Harman), and ultimately open a discussion on the metaphorical value of ruins and debris in contemporary narratives.

The case of the Anthropocene

Since it was introduced in a paper by an atmospheric scientist and a freshwater biologist (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), the concept of the 'Anthropocene' has gained momentum and become a topic of visible concern. It has also stirred several points of contention, from where to draw the temporal boundaries around this 'epoch' (the start of agriculture, the Industrial Revolution, etc.), to the best ways in which to measure its impact on the Earth's stratigraphy.

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But the discussions on climate change urging action have also led to some interesting epistemological points which are of definite interest to archaeology. Among these are the need to devise a new meta-language and transdisciplinary projects that could address the entangled relations between humans and the environment, and the co-construction of the categories culture and nature in the process. The concept also brought forth a 'convergence of planetary and human timescales, a "crease in time"' (Dibley 2012, 140, quoted in Edgeworth 2014a, 75). It has reflected on spatial–temporal points of intersection between the legacies of the past, present and future.

Lastly, it pushes for a meditation on things that escape our immediate perception, a focus on invisible processes which have lasting visible effects. Such are the invisible networks in which the boundaries between nature and artefacts are constantly shifting, networks with local anchors, but planetary ramifications. The term 'hyperobjects' coined by Tim Morton (2011, 80) seems appropriate for this new kind of artefact: they are 'so vast, so long-lasting that they defy human time and spatial scales'.[1]

Archaeologists soon jumped on the bandwagon of the discussion: a forum opened by the position of Brit Solli in 2011 was published in *Norwegian archaeological review*. This was followed by the Archaeology in the Anthropocene session in the Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) Conference at the University of Chicago (May 2013) which led to the similarly named forum in the *Journal of contemporary archaeology* (Edgeworth *et al.* 2014). Besides these, there were a significant number of individual contributions (Van de Noort 2011; Erlandson and Braje 2013; Edgeworth 2014b; Kluiving and Hamel 2016). The debates have ranged from seeing archaeology as 'the discipline "where species and cultures meet"' (Brit Solli in Solli *et al.* 2011, 54), and stratigraphic analysis of change, to attempts at recovering a supposed 'mode of being more in harmony with other beings, humans and nonhumans alike' (Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal in Solli *et al.* 2011, 64).

In this context, Þóra Pétursdóttir aims at shifting the discussion from the 'traditional' way in which archaeology has tackled the subject to a new way of reading the materials. In her analysis of the Anthropocene debates, Pétursdóttir takes as a case study the marine debris and drift beaches in northern Norway and in Iceland. In the hope of showing 'how archaeology can contribute with knowledge and insight of significance in a shifting world' (Pétursdóttir 2017, 175), she aims at restructuring the archaeological narratives around a number of ambitious claims:

- A 'reaffirmation of the archaeological imagination'.
- A reflection on the ways in which the Anthropocene might affect our notion of time, the past and the archaeological record.
- A need for replacing a limiting anthropocentric view, based on nature–culture divides and hierarchical relations, a 'deep-time perspective', and a linear, stratified time (which depicts 'cultural change *as substitution*' (ibid., 195)), with a perspective centred on non-human agency and a-human, or post-human, relations. While doing this, one should acknowledge the 'belligerence' and 'dark side' of things. This leads to

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> a 'meta-political'/'meta-ethical' stance. Following the speculative realist philosophers Graham Harman, Manuel DeLanda and Levi Bryant, she proposes that, if anything, the Anthropocene 'bears witness to the longevity and volatility of things' (ibid., 178), and that 'a truly pro-object theory needs to be aware [also] of relations between objects that have no direct involvement with people' (Harman 2016, 6). 'If we forget this we are, paradoxically, claiming reality and the cosmos as a predominantly *human* settlement' (ibid., 185).

These points revolve around a certain set of metaphysical assumptions constructed on a 'pervasive metaphorics of withdrawal', as Peter Wolfendale (2014, 292) so nicely summed up OOO. But the question is: are they really pushing archaeology beyond its limitations? Or is the effect just of humans withdrawing from meaningful interaction with the universe around them?

Points of contention in a 'dark' imaginary

In what follows I will briefly tackle the author's main arguments, by evaluating them against the assumptions which have led to the formulation of an 'Anthropocene' concept.

Object-oriented philosophy and social theory have permeated archaeology via the works of Graham Harman, Viveiros de Castro or Manuel DeLanda, and have left their mark on seeing humans and non-humans as participants in 'heterogeneous networks'. As Ian Hodder (2012) wrote, all objects and subjects are entangled and dependent, flowing in a world of distributed agency. Building on Heidegger's phenomenology and the metaphysics of the Being, Graham Harman proposes a speculative realist vision. According to it, objects are more than actions ('substances/nouns have priority over actions/verbs' – Harman 2016, 15), they are 'sleeping giants holding their forces in reserve' (ibid., 7); their essence 'is not directly knowable', and the imagined reality is made of 'split-up' entities to which we can gain access only indirectly. To this Manuel DeLanda (2017), following on from Deleuze's work on assemblages, focuses on assemblages as social entities. These are defined as made up of elements which are involved in relations of exteriority, while things are bundles of 'capacities to act'. Many of these capacities will remain hidden and unknowable. Thus, as Pétursdóttir (2017, 184) quotes Graham Harman, 'things in themselves are not directly knowable or fully comprehensible'.

Both Graham Harman and OOO ontology have received many valid critiques (e.g. Bennett 2012; Wolfendale 2014; Lillywhite 2017). Specifically relevant to the case of archaeology one can think of the texts written by Ruth M. van Dyke (2015), Torill Christine Lindstrøm (2015), Artur Ribeiro (2016) and, from a different angle, Tim Flohr Sørensen (2013; 2016). It goes beyond my expertise and my interest to delve into an extensive philosophical deconstruction of such ideas, but for the purpose of this text I just want to highlight a couple of points regarding how these approaches imagine context and open-ended assemblages. This is important for archaeology, as they have ethically and epistemologically problematic consequences.

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To start with, Pétursdóttir (2017, 193) writes,

> The main reason why the wrack zone assemblages of Eidsbukta and other beaches evade archaeological attention is probably found here, in the unintentional character and the ex-human drift and accumulation of the material. Though sources of origin and past functions may be reconstructed for much of this material, it is perhaps most informative of things' 'posthuman' lives.

As we can see, at the heart of her agenda is a change in how one interprets materials in terms of agency, and causal relations. Namely the author is looking at debris which would normally be part of Anthropocene narratives – waste on a beach – but what she sees are the interrelations among the composite elements, and not their relations with human agents. She writes further (ibid., 191),

> In addition to drift registered on the surface, there is also an ongoing dynamic extending below the top cover, as registered through the excavation and section clearing reported at the beginning of this paper ... Like an unseen, roaring undercurrent, it tumbles the material of the beach, mixing it together, burying and tangling it in the depths so that it may never again be undone. Through this ruthless drive the material also becomes ground and crushed between beach pebbles into ever smaller pieces, to lastly endure as brightly coloured freckles – 'confetti' – flickering in the beach sand.

Such a narrative certainly makes an interesting taphonomic reading, which can add depth to understanding the formation processes of these assemblages. At the same time, it seems to fail to address what I find to be a series of fundamental questions: why are the things we talk about here, and as they are, and not in another way? Why have these things remained behind? What makes this assemblage distinct from other debris from a different time or place?

By taking these materials out of the context of their production and discard – after all, don't they attract her attention precisely because these are materials in a place where you would not expect them? – it feels as if we end up with an ahistorical object. What does it mean to call something an Anthropocene assemblage, then – to distinguish it from, let's say, a fourteenth-century A.D. Paris rubbish aggregate on a street, or a Victorian London grave? However, I would expect that this is precisely where she would disagree, probably raising the point that the idea of boundary or context is a human-focused construct. But aren't a beach, wood or Norway also human constructs? How do we then decide which ones to dismiss, and which to keep in delineating our area of research, if all these have the same grounds?

Furthermore, let's say for a moment that we accept taking humans out of the initial focus, and move our attention to understanding the relations among things, and for this we apply a speculative realist agenda, as she does. But aren't we soon going to hit a literally dead end (or, to use her terminology, a dark end)? Because this dead end seems to be the logical conclusion if we follow the theory throughout. The universe imagined by Graham Harman is one of independent entities, whose deep essence will remain hidden; in their interactions things will only get glimpses of each other's surfaces: to

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quote Peter Wolfendale (2014, 296), 'What we have instead is a pluriverse of infernal engines that present themselves to one another so as to hide their internal machinations, each a realm unto itself, like the many hells of Buddhist lore'. Not only does this sound like a depressing perspective to me, but it is also one leading to eternal and universal distrust among the constituent parts. The world that Pétursdóttir imagines seems to be literally a dark one, composed of independent entities which float about in a transcendental universe (that we will not be able to know).

So, should we even be concerned with things that are beyond the possibility of our ever knowing? Also, if they are not actuated, how do we even know they exist? In this respect, I fully agree with a common critique raised against OOO, that in spite of presenting itself as materialistic, and talking about 'real objects', in reality it promotes a new form of negative theology. As philosopher Terence Blake (2012) notes, 'a philosophy of non-access is still epistemological, a pessimistic negative epistemology that subtracts objects from meaningful human intervention'. Artur Ribeiro (2016, 230) raised an essential point: is there a benefit of talking 'about objects as if they were some sort of Kantian *an sich* (the actual)'? Instead of broadening our horizons, I am afraid this OOO turn will have the opposite effect if we keep on viewing materials as holding the keys to understanding something about the nature of their being.

This has also immediate important ethical consequences. While the model claims to be egalitarian, it has the opposite effect. The (apparent) absence of hierarchical relations leads to the absence of any accounts of power relations, imbalance or inequality – forces which are present among humans for sure. If all things are on equal grounds, whose is the responsibility for polluting the environment? Is it the plastic's, the whale's, the sun's or the humans'? Therefore I found valuable the observation of Alexander Galloway (2012) that 'deleuzian ontology' is quite compatible with 'assemblages' of distributed agency and multi-locality. Such seemingly egalitarian structures can also lead to power relations (see Google and Facebook as two good examples). How can one expose power inequalities if analytical distinctions are dissolved, especially between subject and object (see also Hornborg 2017b)?

This also cuts to the core of the Anthropocene debates: while a study of power relations should, of course, in no way be a staple of all archaeological projects, I find it quite difficult to divorce it from the theme of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene narratives have appeared as a specific solution to a specific problem; we might critically evaluate if this is a real problem, or how best to frame or test our hypothesis, but doesn't the following statement of Pétursdóttir's (2017, 178) contradict the general assumptions behind the Anthropocene narratives, that the human agency had a major impact on the planet? 'Anthropocene is, I argue, partly incompatible with, or not most eloquently grasped by, the onto-epistemology … of a culture-historical approach. Approaching this material through that convention, in other words, risks missing the mark of its belligerence'.

Leaving aside the uncertainty regarding the meaning of 'belligerence' in this case, it also seems that accusing humans of claiming the universe just for themselves is a false problem. No one, as far as I know, would claim that

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humans are responsible for the being, or functioning, of the universe, and certainly different academic disciplines bring natural things of a variety of kinds to the fore. But at the same time, how is one to frame accountability for change in a relativistic universe with no analytical boundaries? Objects do not enter into relations on equal grounds. So a point that would benefit from more extensive clarification is, is Pétursdóttir claiming that we should not care about the effect of our actions on the universe? Instead of reframing Anthropocene discussions under the OOO banner, I would say the real choice seems to be between entering the discussion, which revolves around a phenomenon construed in certain cultural and historical contexts (whose legitimacy can be contested, of course), and abandoning the discussion altogether.

Related to this is the following point: the author proposes abandoning a deep-time perspective and matters of scale. This raises the question, what past are we creating through such discourses, as how does one then navigate among a plurality of meanings? The Anthropocene raises an interesting theoretical problem to which she indirectly alludes: we come to name the changes in the outside world at the human level/rhythm of change. If we move further things might look different. So what does this concept mean in rethinking our role in the universe? However, driftwood, mingled with plastic and other materials, has accumulated at a human scale. But the planets, stars and dark matter that she mentions function on a different scale, one which escapes human action and responsibility – la *longue longue durée*, to paraphrase historian Fernand Braudel. Pétursdóttir's concern for gravitational waves brings to mind the scene from *The Lord of the Rings* novel, where the Ents talk among themselves at their war council; as Merry and Pippin soon realize, by the time they finished, the battle would have ended, and even humanity might not exist any more. This makes one wonder whether it is maybe not that useful to be concerned with scales that might not have a bearing on small, human-scale issues.

Lastly, Pétursdóttir proposes a push towards 'archaeological imagination'. While I find this a worthwhile endeavour, what she means, I think, follows OOO's push of ontology to the detriment of epistemology. In other words, I think she would argue that in the encounter with traces of the past, there shouldn't be any predetermined and ordering frame of reference (the classical understanding of what theories stand for), but instead the engagement should be relational (see Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2017). Thus, instead of a subject who comes to know the world though a specific lens (which is open to analysis – epistemology), we have a subject who learns through direct encounter with the properties of things, a personal, immersive engagement which changes them in return. I think this fluid interaction, which takes one into the realms of ontology, is what Pétursdóttir calls imagination. It is not the place here to further unpack this proposal, but it is worth mentioning the relevant critique raised by Paolo Heywood (2012). He writes that the problem with framing interactions with the anthropological Other as 'between worlds and not worldviews' is that in this way alterity becomes a matter of being, and not of 'worldview' or culture (ibid., 143). But this metaphysical claim is questionable, and it also raises a practical problem: in spite of a willingness to stretch one's imagination, how can one actually accept various ontologies in parallel?

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For this reason, I think that moving the realm of imagination to ontological rather than epistemological matters is not the most fruitful way to take.

At the same time the interest in 'sociopolitically charged designation' (Pétursdóttir 2017, 190) and in historical processes seems to be replaced by a poetic contemplation of things. This has immediate bearing on how we imagine the role of archaeology in today's society: either as an endeavour that can become a powerful reflexive tool with social, cultural and political impact, or as a lyrical and passive metaphor. The pitfalls of moving towards the latter are rightly summarized by Alf Hornborg (2017b) in his article on anthropologists' approaches to the Anthropocene: 'Dithering while the planet burns'.

In their 2017 article (at 97), Þóra Petursdottir and Bjørnar Olsen write, 'Like drift matter on an Arctic shore, theories are adrift. They are not natives of any particular territory, but nomads in a mixed world'. Pétursdóttir and other OOO authors claim that the issues they discuss are a matter of ontology, which leaves theory as a loose concept. However, theories are very much constructions embedded in institutional and culturally defined contexts, and they serve as anchor points for moving the explanation further. If we embrace a relativistic perspective regarding this aspect, I am afraid we open a Pandora's box in which there is no criterion left for determining which interpretation of the material record is more plausible. In this respect Adrian Currie (2017) makes a good point for the pragmatics of historical inquiry:

> Real history only concerns the actual world, and to go beyond it into might-haves or could-have-beens is folly ... explanation is very often a matter of contrasts: to explain something, you tell me why one thing happened as opposed to another. And to do this, you need to know at least which events made a difference to the actual occurrence, as opposed to the contrasts, um, occurring.

In essence, I appreciate Pétursdóttir's intentions of recovering a sense of wonder regarding the universe at large. But I do not think OOO is a helpful foundation for this. A passive contemplation, one that surrenders any possibility of knowing, is ultimately one that denies the possibility of meeting and mutual understanding. And no true acceptance or action can be achieved without understanding: 'One cannot long remain so absorbed in contemplation of emptiness without being increasingly attracted to it. In vain, one bestows on it the name of infinity; this does not change its nature', wrote Emile Durkheim (1951, 243). It is possible that this contradiction between her aim and her method leads to the ideas in the article conflicting on a conceptual level: she pushes for a non-anthropocentric agenda, but discusses it as part of the ANTHROPOcene? She is impressed by news of gravitational waves from the deep past, but critiques DEEP-time analysis? She militates for the importance of imagination, and how humans are shaped by it, but then she chooses to focus only on non-humans.

Agency/ruins in the Anthropocene

After briefly sketching a couple of points which I found problematic with the theoretical model that Pétursdóttir proposes, I will now finish with what I take to be an important point of reflection: the importance of epistemological

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concerns for archaeological interpretation, to the detriment of ontological preoccupations, and the place of ruins. It is the metaphorical value of ruins, and not a materialist one, that pervades Pétursdóttir's analysis, and I aim to propose a different way of framing ruins if we are to escape the 'darkness' of the world.

The author certainly picks an important case study – debris washed ashore on beaches. The pollution of seas is maybe the most poignant image associated with the Anthropocene – the unintended and potentially devastating consequences of human action, though probably some readers will disagree here, pointing to a separate literature which sees the name 'Anthropocene' as misleading, a shorthand which obscures the web of multi-species relationships (see e.g. Bruno Latour's Gaia concept). Þóra Pétursdóttir (2017, 192) is also right that these extremely rich 'cultural deposits' have 'mostly escaped archaeological interest'. Thus the challenge of archaeology in an 'Anthropocene' epoch relies on imagining relations between things, and modelling their interdependences, by drawing conclusions which lead to action or constructive reflection. However, it feels that she is doing the opposite, alienating people and things, taking objects outside the reach of both humans and networks. By this it seems that she creates clear divisions among things, instead of connections.

This is due to the main, and insurmountable, problem of OOO (and implicitly of trying to use it as a key to understanding the Anthropocene): that it is ultimately based on a confusion. The confusion is in thinking that the nature/culture, subject/object, human/non-human distinctions are in some way responsible for the existence of inequalities, ecological destruction, racism or discrimination (see Hornborg 2017a for a similar critique). However, these will not disappear if we choose to annul the analytical categories; instead, they will just become impossible to identify and address in a universe where there is no way to attribute responsibility for the actions at hand, and where, for example, the 'materiality of "Mother Earth" has been given intellectual priority' (Ribeiro 2016, 232). These distinctions serve to orient meaning in a world of significances – and the process of making meaning is one which requires a social context in which agents can act, choose between alternatives, and engage with others.

Not only does the concept of agency not make sense outside a 'context of intelligibility' in which agents act in light of the norms which enable their freedom of action (Ribeiro 2018; see also Barrett 2016; 2017), but also ascribing it to all things, human and inanimate alike, rather leaves it devoid of meaning – it is not very useful if it is a quality shared by everyone (see also Wilkinson 2017). Furthermore, the fetishization of things as part of the OOO agenda is again based on a confusion: as Darryl Wilkinson (ibid.) nicely points out, indigenous ontologies which have been the source of inspiration for theories of distributed agency are often misunderstood. Better said, as he shows through examples taken from scholarship on the Inka empire, the Western narratives on these past religious beliefs are rather a metaphor, a translation, and not an 'objective religious practice'. That is because the universe of significance in which those practices operated is different from ours, and even the terms of comparison (thing/person) might

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make no sense. He writes (ibid., 304), 'The Inkas did not treat rocks as people, because that would be nonsensical; they treated certain instances of rumi as wak'as, and saying this is our translation given that both categories of rocks and people didn't "exist as such"'. He also points (ibid., 300) to a worrying consequence of embracing such a perspective, as the reverse is the conclusion that 'humanity can be withdrawn from *Homo sapiens* just as readily as it can be extended to animals and things'.

Thus the differences between myself and Þóra Pétursdóttir in reading the material stem from a different role ascribed to archaeology. In my view, I do not believe that the role of archaeology should be to deal with reflecting on the true/real nature of the universe, and ontological matters – that is a cause for philosophy and religion. Where I think we can bring an original contribution is to understand the historical conditions in which certain ontological views have been enacted – how people have made sense of the universe around and forged their identities.

Even so, what I take away from this paper is the need to think about how we choose to frame debris, relics and ruins of the past. I think the author's concern with contemporary debris is a legitimate one, in more ways than one. The Anthropocene discussions have brought forth the Ruin, almost as a metaphysical category – this point of meeting of nature and culture. The ruin 'unsettles the boundary' between the two, a place where the hybrid nature of agencies (to quote Lucas and Hreiðarsdóttir 2012) are manifest. The debris are also the visible signs where the human has pervaded the environment – the sea/the land. These artefacts are now decaying stories of past glory, now death and destruction, functioning as our contemporary memento mori. As Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir (2014, 3) write on modern ruins, 'The outcome is a ... landscape of closed shopping malls, abandoned military sites, industrial wastelands, derelict amusement parks, empty apartment houses, withering capitalist and communist monuments'.[2]

Therefore what I think Pétursdóttir's attempt of focusing on the 'debris in itself' is signalling is a metaphor of a very postmodern angst in a sliding world. She writes, 'in the agony we feel growing inside us', 'We all know this civilization can't last. Let's make another' (Wark 2015, 225, cited in Pétursdóttir 2017, 177) – lines which one could also easily imagine in a Mad Max, dystopic (post-)apocalyptic world. But I think that trying to understand the formation process of ruins is getting one step closer to surpassing this alienating angst; also to taking actions towards owning them through a sense of responsibility. A theoretical model such as the one she imagines, in which there is no place for an account of responsibility, no criterion of validation of the statements, and which pushes for a passive attitude towards the world around, not only is alienating, but also can only end in a helpless chaos in an unintelligible world.

Instead of 'keeping critical human science defused', in the words of Hornborg (2017b, 67), I think we, as humans, can gain more by becoming active agents in our own histories, and by understanding the ways in which we have actively inhabited the universe around. Along these lines I will end with a quote from Svetlana Boym (2011): ruins are 'physical embodiments of modern paradoxes reminding us of the blunders of modern teleologies and

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technologies alike, and of the riddles of human freedom'. Freedom of choice comes with a responsibility towards other humans, and the world at large, and our own history is a valuable reminder that no choice escapes the passage of time.

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Notes

[1] Though my use of the term here is slightly different to the one Morton intended.

[2] Given this thought-provoking Ruin Memories Project, I found rather surprising the departure she takes from a perspective where ruins were inextricably linked to the contexts of their creation, use and abandonment (modernity).

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