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## Poor Future. Foreign Temporalities in Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses Tadeusz Kantor's theory and theatre in reference to a convoluted figure of the future. It reconstructs the principles of Kantor's unorthodox vitalism permeating the theatre of death, rooted in affirmation of theatrical encounter. As it turns out, Kantor's "impoverished" style might also be read as a blueprint for thinking the eponymous "poor future": a figure of the future that escapes hopes and expectations, and functions as a trope of uncanny difference. Within the renegotiated boundaries of life and death, such a difference allows us to rethink our coexistence with alien, often unreconcilable, temporalities. The text is concluded with a tentative reading of *Today Is My Birthday*, Kantor's final work, which integrates all domains of "poor future" discussed in the article.

**KEYWORDS:** time, future, theatre of death, Tadeusz Kantor, vitalism

### STRESZCZENIE

Nędzna przyszłość. Obce czasowości w teatrze śmierci Tadeusza Kantora

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest omówienie refleksji teoretycznych i praktyk teatralnych Tadeusza Kantora w kontekście złożonej figury przyszłości. Autor rekonstruuje główne założenia dziwnego witalizmu przenikającego teatr śmierci, osadzonego w afirmacji spotkania scenicznego. Jak się okazuje, „biedny” styl Kantora może zostać odczytany jako model pozwalający nam myśleć o tytułowej „nędznej przyszłości”: figurze, która wymyka się nadziejom czy oczekiwaniom, stanowiąc raczej trop niesamowitej różnicy. Przekształcone wymiary życia i śmierci u Kantora pozwalają nam przemyśleć ową różnicę w obrębie naszego współlistnienia z obcymi, często sprzecznymi ze sobą, czasowościami. Autor domyka swoje rozważania krótką lekturą *Dzisiaj są moje urodziny*, ostatniego spektaklu Kantora, który zespala wszystkie domeny „nędznej przyszłości” omówione w artykule.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** czas, przyszłość, teatr śmierci, Tadeusz Kantor, witalizm

Essence is the future  
(Morton, 2012, p. 221)

## (Un)locking the Past

Tadeusz Kantor's works, especially those associated with his "theatre of death," are commonly linked with the past. It is a justified view, yet not merely because of programmatic focus on death or spectral, nearly undead, figures that inhabit his theatrical works. *The Dead Class*, *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, and *I Shall Never Return*, to name a few works associated with this period, open up a shared space of memory and trauma, history and nostalgia, myth and sacrifice, all of which redirect us to what is necessarily lost. The prevalence of the past becomes even more apparent in the light of Kantor's artistic and intellectual involvement in repetition. Actions, habits, and words multiplied onstage lock away events in Kantor's theatre in a vicious circle of time, where personal, artistic, and public histories repeat themselves *ad absurdum*. Arguably, Kantor's theatre does not simply focus on the past, but rather, through meticulous strategies of rendering it on stage, it transforms other durations of his spectacles into decoys of the past.

Even though these reflections might seem obvious to more conscious spectators and readers of Kantor's legacy, they prepare a ground for asking a question which is rarely discussed: how can we, then, envision the future in Kantor's works if they systemically reduce everything to loss or to the past?<sup>1</sup> What seems to found this impenetrable impasse might in fact offer us a different reading. It might be argued that Kantor – an author, an actor, and a subject/object of his own works – cares not so much for locking the past in what is behind us. Instead, he carefully attends it as it materialises onstage. Only then does it reveal hidden vibrancy of things, which, as if oblivious to our phantasies of organisation and control, never entirely return to their previous states or repeat exactly the same events.

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1 Even though this reading focuses on the onto-epistemological understanding of the future in Kantor's theoretical reflections and theatrical practices, at least three other areas in which "futurity" of/in his works unfolds should be noted: 1) the revolutionary impact of Kantor's theatre on the following generations of artists and practitioners; 2) the future of Kantor criticism, which currently revises his work in the light of innovative methodologies and reading strategies, including trauma studies or posthumanism (see: Romanska & Cioffi, 2020); and 3) the future of Kantor's legacy as mediated by the visual archiving of his works, which makes it possible for us to access them after his death. What is especially interesting in this last case is that a limited number of recorded works disarms Kantor's insistence on encounter, energy, or matter, which, as he believed, were about to resurface within a living theatrical experience; and yet, digital media and tele-media used to archive these works enrich the dimensions of repetition, a trope crucial to Kantor.

In this article, I explore these intuitions and propose to investigate Kantor's selected theatrical works and theoretical reflections as they offer us an interesting way of rethinking the future, based on his unorthodox vitalism. As I argue, Kantor stages the future as an abstract regime of arrival beyond expectation. The less radical reading of the eponymous "poor future" acknowledges instances when Kantor's works allow us to recognise cracks in the flow of time, as if *s o m e t h i n g e l s e* is happening or is about to happen. These could be seen as glimpses of alien durations that penetrate religious, historical, biographical, or thespian timescales. On a more radical note, we might also conceive of the "poor future" as a process of stripping the future of every determined horizon. In the course of my analysis, I propose to distinguish between three orders in which the future permeates into Kantor's dead universe: oversaturation, condensation, and consistency. Finally, I discuss *Today Is My Birthday*, Kantor's final theatrical work, which binds together various instances of the "poor future" outlined in this article.

### "For the First Time"

Kantor's theatre of death – or theatre of love and death as he has called it since the late 1980s (cf. Kantor, 2005) – is founded on a paradox. It mobilises the artistic regimes of death and the dead in order to make life recognisable in a brief moment of its passing, when the difference between the living and the dead becomes the most apparent. Kantor has an "ever-deepening conviction that it is possible to express life in art only through the absence of life, through an appeal to DEATH, through APPEARANCES, through EMPTINESS and the lack of a MESSAGE" (Kantor, 1993d, p. 112). The dead, being "irrevocably different / and infinitely foreign" (1993d, p. 115), function as uncanny entities with which we are incapable of having any relationships; after all, it is a possibility of building relationships that binds the living together (1993d, p. 115). Because of that, "the dead (...) astound us / as though we were seeing them for the first time" (1993d, p. 114). Otherwise rendered passive – as long as we assume that "life" conjures up activity – the dead gain here a peculiar vibrancy (cf. Bennett, 2010), which orients them towards the future. Deceptively similar and yet strikingly different, they make an unprecedented encounter possible, which tampers with the logic of expectation, hope, or calculation. Seeing them "for the first time" schedules an event in the unpredicted future, which might be only recognised as a sign of promise or potentiality. It should not, therefore, surprise us that the purpose of the theatre of death, albeit rooted in a mythical past

of the beginnings of theatre, also orientates us towards the future; Kantor admits:

It is necessary to recover the primeval force of the shock taking place at the moment when opposite a man (the viewer) there stood for the first time a man (the actor) deceptively similar to us, yet at the same time infinitely foreign, beyond an impassable barrier. (1993d, p. 115)

The recognition of simultaneous difference and similarity between the actor and the spectator corresponds to the situation of the living and the dead. The ontological matrix of the theatrical encounter remains the same, nevertheless. The emphasis is placed once again on an indefinite event in the unspecified future of the spectacle. The “RECOVER[Y] [OF] THE PRIMEVAL FORCE OF THE SHOCK,” as Kantor has it, builds up theatrical conditions for an uncanny, if not messianic, event to occur, which surpasses any degree of expectation or precedence that might mitigate the originary “SHOCK.”<sup>2</sup>

In Kantor’s theatre of death, we might observe that life belongs neither to the living nor to the dead (in the shape of its negation). Instead, it irruptively arrives when these two orders collide. In an earlier text, “Reality of the Lowest Rank,” we read: “[A]ll these figures, objects, and situations of / the LOWEST RANK / are not manifestation of a PROGRAMMATIC (PLANNED) CYNICISM. / They are shielded from the old-fashioned and easily available idea by / POETRY and LYRICISM. / In the domain of the lowest reality, / THE ESSENCE OF LIFE, bereft of / STYLIZATION, GLITTER, false PATHOS, or ACADEMIC/ BEAUTY, is to be found” (1993a, p. 124). In “The Infamous Transition...,” Kantor adds:

Theatre is an activity that occurs if life is pushed to its final limits, where all categories and concepts lose their meaning and right to exist; where madness, fever, hysteria, and hallucinations are the last barricades of life before the approaching TROUPES OF DEATH and death’s GRAND THEATRE (1993b, p. 149).

For him, “true” life is detached from the biological state that necessitates and supports it. Instead, it is redefined into a vitalist force, which might be captured only as a crisis or break. Life and death resist simple chronological movement, but rather are interwoven in the process of becoming. Rosi Braidotti discusses such a possibility when she compares the future event of biologically programmed death with the awareness of death, which retroactively incorporates it in an elusive “now” as an event that has already

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2 The metaphysical interpretation of the affect of shock in Kantor’s theatre of death might be found in Twitchin, 2016, pp. 33–36.

happened (2013, pp. 130–133). Such a vitalist understanding of death, filtered through transformative becoming, matches Kantorian strategy of confronting the actors and the spectators, the living and the (un)dead, each belonging to the shared time and yet bound by dissimilar durations. Because of that, we might argue that theatre is a process of making life repetitively vulnerable, bit by bit disassembling imagery that arrests its vividness in well-furnished or complacent representations. By doing so, theatre becomes a transformative medium capable of mimicking liminal conditions that break the order of the living so that life, understood as vibrant, creative, and irreducible force, might be affirmed.

Reaching the state of the lowest rank – and its further iterations – is a task of impoverishing reality: depriving it of its cultural, logical, symbolic, or mythological superstructures in order to release the potentiality that lies underneath them. Michał Kobińska notes that “Kantor,” like Antonin Artaud before him, “dealt with the representation not by opposing it but by providing strategies and tactics from within to articulate the practices that alter the mode of functioning and topography of representation” (2009, p. 480). As he continues, one of such tactics, “while traveling through the landscape of representation, recorded the erosions in the idea of permanence in representational performance and visual arts” (2009, p. 480). In a similar vein, we might attempt to conceptualise the poor future as it emanates from the crisis of permanence. The future remains poor insofar as it lacks a proper determination that would provide it with a greater meaning within a linear passage of time. Moreover, its poverty is anchored in foundational disappointment; by being irreducibly “shocking,” “different,” and “foreign,” such a figure of the future by design must embrace all virtual futurities that take us by surprise. Lacking a fixed representation, which might invest it with hopes, expectations, or consequences, the future might avoid being an elaborate projection of the present or the past. The poor future, as a mode of futurity in Kantor’s artistic practices, not only becomes graspable as apophatic, but also – to a great extent – deconstructive. John D. Caputo claims: “The time that is out of joint is a messianic time, a time that does not close in upon itself, that is structurally exposed to an out-side that prevents closure” (1997, p. 123). The lack of closure reformulates the temporal horizon significantly in this respect, showing that we might consider it as a broader matrix within the irreducible uncanniness of objects or things.

### Oversaturation and Condensation

Kantor’s turn towards futurity as a figure of uncanniness might be motivated by at least three tendencies of his artistic and theoretical work. Firstly,

as it has been already mentioned, Kantor's project might be understood as an obscure, negative Platonism, which meticulously purifies material and theatrical realities out of any superstructure that confines artistic truth or beauty within any stable appearance. Insistence on the future by design remains an inherent part of the existence of objects; still, it keeps their meaning, representation, or link to convention within a remote distance. Secondly, Kantor's persistent returns to the same and familiar spaces of childhood, art, or history root his work in melancholy: the powers of acting-out never entirely integrate the subject, but rather support an insatiable desire of further reorganisation (Fazan, 2019, p. 113). Melancholy marks an indefinite expansion of absence as this desire constantly demands a suitable form and yet refuses to eventually take one once and for all. Finally, futurity might function as a counterbalance to history, which meets Kantor's ceaseless disdain. In "To Save from Oblivion," he argues that his "poor" style aims at countering "official/History, / the history of/ mass Movements, / mass ideologies, / passing terms of Governments, / terror by power, / mass wars, / mass crimes..." (1993e, p. 167). Kantor adds: "Against / these "powers / stands the Small, / Poor, / Defenceless, / but magnificent / history of / individual / human / life" (1993e, p. 167). Such "counter-history," however, has to resist being absorbed by the "official History": it is supposed to embrace life and not necessarily the masses of the living. The power of an individual is, then, the power of elapsing boundaries and categorisations, which might find a degree of correspondence in the transformative becoming of the future: after all, what is "truly" futural cannot be included in any historical narrative yet.

Poor future as an element of Kantor's practices might be observed in two distinct modes that organise his works belonging to the theatre of death period: oversaturation and condensation. In *The Dead Class*, *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, *Let the Artists Die*, and *I Shall Never Return*, thespian temporality is interwoven with other noticeable durations. The most apparent one stages historical events and sieves them through imperfect and fragmentary memories of childhood in *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* (see: Kantor, 2006). Because of the work of trauma, another temporality might be sensed, which punctures the imperfect recollection. And so, recalled infantrymen leave their photographs, students and family members are locked in their routines, father returns and terrorises other inhabitants of the memory space. *I Shall Never Return* radicalises such disruption (see: Kantor, 2008b). In this spectacle, the figures known from Kantor's earlier works are reintroduced into a new production. Their unwelcome presence emphasises the role of artistic biography that supplements the realms of memory, history, testimony, and trauma. Yet, such an artistic biography is far from being stable: rather, it recontextualises already known figures,

retroactively changing their meaning and significance within Kantor's *oeuvre*. These figures, originally associated with *Let the Artists Die*, *The Water Hen* or *Wielopole, Wielopole*, not only persecute Kantor's character onstage, but also break the convention of the spectacle and disrupt its planned development (if there is one). Finally, in each of the main works of the theatre of death we might note how theatrical events, although varied and ambiguous, are on the verge of being absorbed by greater time-frames: be it mythological (the return of Odysseus), Christian (circular logic of crucifixion; Aunt Mańka's apocalypse), or patriotic (predestined martyrology of Adaś and Marian).

Oversaturation disorients the audience, never allowing it to rely only on a single timeline, but rather showing how each linear passage of time bit by bit falls apart and reveals other human and nonhuman durations. As a theatrical device, it operates within a logic of the primeval shock, in which what is sensed as strikingly familiar happens to be alien. As characters and objects belong to various timelines and yet occupy the same stage, they deconstruct references to the past or the present, whereas the lack of a single, universal framework postpones any stable closure. The role of Kantor is of utmost importance in this respect: first, he belongs neither to the inside nor to the outside; second, he carefully orchestrates the events and then loses control over them, he functions within a space of memory as its purpose and origin (it is his memory, after all); and third, he turns into its director, an actor placed into it, and finally is replaced by a mannequin. In *I Shall Never Return*, he is dispersed into the "Author," "I at the age of six," and "I – the dying one," each with a respective timeline (Kantor, 2004, pp. 109–124). Oversaturated durations flood the theatrical space and dismantle the dogma according to which any recognition of time, including human, might be privileged. Time becomes futural not because it is connected to a single, incoming future; instead, it is futural because it presents time as radically open, permeating through various temporal horizons. While being such, it raises a question whether life as a force can be reduced to any lived present and emphasises our coexistence with diverse and multiple Others, whose durations do not necessarily align with our own.<sup>3</sup>

Condensation is another figure of poor future, anchored in Kantor's understanding of repetition. For Kantor, repetition is an inherent part

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3 In this sense, we might accept the proposition of Timothy Morton, who defines the radical otherness and uncanniness of objects as stemming from their underlying futurity, known as *future future*. Being Morton's redefinition of Derridean *l'arrivant*, future future is one of the concepts that renders the alienating features of all entities, blocked by the aesthetic effect of the world. Rejection of the world as a cultural category and a shared unifying space might allow us to recognise the underlying coexistence on the ontological level that transgresses human dimensions of being and thought (cf. Morton, 2013).

of artistic practice, which imperfectly mimics the divine act of creation (2009, p. 403). Repetition is, first and foremost, an *ersatz*: in its imperfect attempts, it necessarily produces something else or something poorer instead. Kantor believes that by no means should we avoid repetition, nonetheless; its futility allows it to defamiliarise what we take for granted. In the same essay, Kantor notes that repetition might be understood as a temporal figure: as eternity or void, in which time is radically condensed or contracted (2009, p. 404). The ominous venues of Kantor's theatre – be it the room, the haunt, or the classroom – might indeed function as artistic extensions of void-repetition, in which the countless iterations emphasise melancholic desire beyond any possibility of closure. Repetition loops time and disturbs its flow by unfolding the movement of difference. This difference is never entirely defined or predictable; it does not form a logical outcome or consequence. As an event, it is captured in the empty form of its advent, whose potentiality belongs as if to an alien and untraceable time.

For Kantor, repetition can never return to its source since it is by design a failure of imitation and a failure of creation. Because of that, even the void – the emptiness of possibilities – turns out to be performative. What is unprecedented, unexpected, and impossible is thus granted with agency that might come into being only through impoverished aesthetics: in the abyss something is still alive. Yet, repetition is also a murky procedure; originally intended as a Promethean act of creation, it meets with the “revenge of the gods” (2009, p. 403). Whereas for Kantor we might read this metaphor as the *sine qua non* for endlessness and imperfection of creation, the revenge of the gods also marks a punishment for human hubris. To repeat the act of creation is to posit oneself at the beginning of new linearity; contrary to it, circular repetition involves the future horizon in order to remain in endless motion, melting human timelines and challenging the narratives of human superiority.

### Consistency and the Real

Oversaturation and condensation locate Kantor's theory and theatre within a pursuit of life aimed at deconstructing its idols. Temporality is affected in an aftermath of this strategy: since the vibrancy of life must be affirmed in its dynamic coming or passing, it necessarily becomes an unforeseen intrusion, incalculable event, *l'arrivant* (Derrida, 1993, pp. 123–124) or *future future* (Morton, 2012, p. 221). Importantly, such vibrancy is hinged in the future so that its apophatic autonomy remains immune to any violations by what belongs to the present or the past. Life becomes redefined

through death because only an absence or crisis of life might help us shake off its representations and their cultural burden.

Seemingly incomparable, Kantor's redefinition of life and time by means of crisis conjures up the philosophical project of Alain Badiou. Badiou notes that "theatre properly speaking is the virtuality of the Idea that has come to arrive in the perishable actuality of the scene" (2013, p. 101). Later on, he adds: "Theatre brings about an encounter between eternity and the instant within an artificial time" (2013, p. 102). Even though the tension between eternity and an instant might be read as the platitude of performativity, binding theatre with drama, Badiou understands them specifically in his ontological terms. Theatre, for him, is a privileged artistic form that responds to breaks in the order of beings, known as events. To put it in a psychoanalytic discourse, an event nullifies the symbolic and exposes us to the brute materiality of the real; it allows us to supplement what is known with the excess of "not-known" (2001, p. 67). Temporal disjuncture inherent in theatre allows us to notice that being is multiple by nature. There is an excess that pierces through determined local, historical, or artistic situations linking the meaning of theatre with ideas that are irreducible to knowledge. In order to carry this excess – Badiou argues as a staunch moralist – we have to remain faithful to the potential of the real: respond to its intrusion and remain consistent with our desire (2001, p. 52).

Kantor's persistence in puncturing life, time, and reality with their poorer, miserable, or weak counterparts seems to manifest a comparable desire, which is detached from an opinion, conviction, interest, or knowledge, and follows an undetermined idea. Arguably, consistency binds all of the works of the theatre of death together. Kantor understands that theatre manifests itself not in an elaborate fiction, but rather in potentiality that foregrounds it. Still, in order to grasp it, he has to situate himself on the side of the real (cf. Badiou, 2001, p. 52).<sup>4</sup> Kantor might be read as a disciple of an event and truth, who in his meticulous work creates artistic conditions for the theatre that privilege the power of crisis, break, or irruption over their deceptively stable representations (Badiou, 2001, pp. 42–43). Perhaps that is why Kantor identifies the primary task of the theatre of death with recreating the shock of otherness, initially delivered by the mythological first stage encounter. Theatre becomes a medium of

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4 In a similar vein, Konstantinos I. Arvanitakis (2019) points to a connection between the theatre of death and desire: "There is a pressing need to link up with a primal wound situated in 'that other world,' to find a transition from the world of death to the world of the living and to name the un-namable" (2019, p. 77).

events, or an event itself: it captures the potentiality of arrival or coming in the middle of the process, yet before any determined outcome.

### “Again, I Am on Stage”

In the light of oversaturation, condensation, and desire for consistency, Kantor’s final work, *Today Is My Birthday*, offers us a temporal conundrum. The title itself refers to both the past (“birth”) and the present (“the birthday party”). Moreover, the dress rehearsal never happened due to Kantor’s untimely death, and the premiere of Kantor’s work took place in his striking absence (Fazan, 2019, p. 115; see: Kantor, 2008a). Yet, absence in this case is by no means definite. Played by an actor, Kantor’s double participates in the events onstage, whereas Kantor’s recorded voice reverberates from the speakers with the ominous reassurance:

Again, I am on stage. I will probably never fully explain this phenomenon either to you or to myself. To be precise, I am not on stage, but at the threshold. In front of me, there is the audience (quoted after Kobialka, 2009, p. 465).

Being on the threshold posthumously turns Kantor into the perfect portent to the theatre of death, mediating between the living and the dead, and speaking as if expecting our shock. At the same time, Kantor phases from being a subject of repetition – a creator – into its object – an object of repetition. Personal life and death become aligned with the beloved practice of contracting and expanding time. Distinctions into the past, the present, and the future, just as fixed divisions into the living and the dead, lose stability when confronted with the echo of the recorded voice, which emphasises an ultimate bound between the theatre and “the real I” (see: Kantor, 1993c). Kantor’s unique style permeates *Today Is My Birthday*, a pinnacle of an attempt to turn personal and artistic biography into a work of art.

*Today Is My Birthday* manages to encapsulate the richness of Kantor’s struggles with futurity. Kobialka admits that this spectacle “presents us with the unsettling substance of Kantor” (2009, p. 480) which confronts our edifices of the theatre with “thinking ‘otherwise’” (2009, p. 480). Katarzyna Fazan argues that Kantor’s last piece shows his understanding of art as a procedure of creating works that helps us “domesticate both an inevitable death and an incoming world, the future in its unexpected shapes and meanings” (2019, p. 136).<sup>5</sup> Kantor’s post-dramatic (cf. Lehmann, 2006), final work establishes a space in which lack becomes

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5 Translation mine.

abundant in potentialities, whereas the author's physical absence culminates his integration in the art space. First, physical demise empowers the work of repetition with the imperfect recurrence of the voice in the absence of the source. Second, contradictory orders of absence and presence complicate the modes in which spectators, actors, and "Kantor" himself belong to a single timespace. Third, the tragic circumstances of the premiere, dubbed "The Last Rehearsal" (Fazan, 2019, p. 115), provide *Today Is My Birthday* with ominous consistency with the remarks theorised in Kantor's manifestoes of the theatre of death. A two-fold movement might be, therefore, noticed here, grasping the dynamics of the poor future. *Today Is My Birthday*, to rephrase Fazan's argument, orientates us towards the unpredictability of the future, which systematically deprives imagination of idolised representations of hopes and expectations, and welcomes the arrival of radical otherness. At the same time, it binds future with the crisis of human subjectivity and sovereignty, or their inherent weakness, diluted in the multiplicity of other agencies.

### Poor Future Is Now?

Kantor's theory and theatre of death offer rich ways of rethinking the ontology of the future, when informed by selected materialist, deconstructive, and psychoanalytical discourses. Poor future turns out to be a category that makes it possible for us to envision radical difference and unexpectedness of the event within the theatrical space. As a quasi-messianic matrix, it problematises functions of repetition in Kantor's post-dramatic *oeuvre*. Moreover, as one of the means within a broader project intended to express life in art and theatre, Kantor's struggle with time mobilises human and nonhuman actors with their irreducible otherness and alien durations. These often elapse our attention or conceptualisation, yet still provoke thinking of broader spatial and temporal coexistence, in which human subjectivity and cognition turn out to be particularly frail. These reflections might be especially significant today, when the humanities are preoccupied with actual poor future, known as the Anthropocene. This epoch dilutes human agency within deep time, encompassing coexistence with countless nonhuman entities that come to being and come to pass within their own alien durations. More importantly, the Anthropocene designates also the poverty of what is to come as human civilisation is bound to face the inherent crisis of sovereignty, the planetary crisis of human origins, and even consider the state of the world in which human species and civilisation are no more.

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