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Post-anthropocentric Dwelling in the City of (Not Only) Mushrooms

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*Humans and vampyroteuthes live apart from one another ...
And yet vampyroteuthis is not entirely alien to us.*

Vilém Flusser

In their paranatural treatise on *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, a deep sea octopod, a mysterious and fearsome creature, Vilém Flusser and Luis Bec ponder what we can glimpse about ourselves as a species when we dare to look at our “other” – that is, when we stare down the abyss which seems to separate humans from non-humans, especially those most different from us because of their bodily structures, but also the ways in which they dwell on Earth: their *Dasein*, or their being in the world. Here, I would like to cast a brief look at another other of the human, different from *Vampyroteuthis* and even more – but still not entirely – alien to us, and gesture towards the potential recognition that such a look can provide. In doing so, I attempt to offer a preliminary chart of post-anthropocentric dwelling and what it can entail. I do so based on the example of mushrooms, and especially those encountered in the most human of all possible landscapes, the city.

Photo No. 1: One autumn morning across the road from the KWI building: *Coprinus comatus* (shaggy ink cap, *Schopf-Tintling*). Photo: Petr Gibas.

A lot has been said and written about the Anthropocene, a new era marked by the unprecedented and profound impact of humans on the world; an epoch in which humans – or *Anthropos*, *Homo sapiens* as a species – become an agent of transformation on a planetary and even geological scale. Climate change and COVID-19 among other phenomena have shattered a belief in boundaries setting us as an exceptional species apart from the rest of nature. Instead, such boundaries seem more permeable and shifting, unstable and porous than we like(d) to imagine. Such consequences of *Homo*'s impact, attest, surely, to the limited power and agency of humans over the world we ourselves believe to be in control of. The dichotomies of mind and body, nature and culture as well as human and living non-humans, which we tend to consider self-evident and take for granted, have been called into question by these crises and developments which we have recently faced as individuals and as a species. Thus, while the word Anthropocene suggests we are living in “the age of Man”, it seems rather that the contemporary times are characterised by “Man’s end” – or at least an end to the belief of humans’ substantial, ontological exceptionality vis à vis the rest of the world. Some argue that we should shift our frame of reference and abandon the “Anthropocene” for terms that would better illuminate the agential forces behind the impact humans have on the planet, such as “capitalocene”.¹ But it is difficult to get rid of the notion which has captured scientific and popular imaginary with such force. Hence the paradox of “Anthropocene” denoting the times in which we need to come to terms with the recognition of post-anthropocentric reality and to try to find ways in which to dwell on Earth differently. This “dwelling differently”, this post-anthropocentric dwelling, is not something given and definite. It is only starting to take form.

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I come from a family of avid mushroomers and from a country where people think of themselves as a “nation of mushroom hunters”. I have been fascinated by mushrooms from my early childhood and have since moved beyond merely picking mushrooms for food. I am amazed by the variety of mushrooms and the richness of forms they take – their aesthetics and more recently also by their very weirdness. And so, wherever I go, I tend to encounter mushrooms. The encounters happen by themselves; but they are conditioned on my (or anyone’s) ability to see the mushrooms, and thus contingent on the ability to look for them, or to be able to glimpse and recognize them. Because mushrooms can be pretty invisible. And yet they are everywhere.

Photo no. 2: At a parking lot near Grugahalle Essen: *Trametes versicolor* (turkey tail, or *Schmetterlingsporling*). Photo: Petr Gibas.

When I arrived in Essen at the beginning of October 2021, the mushrooming season in the Czech Republic had already culminated. But in Essen, probably because of milder weather and higher humidity, I kept coming across mushrooms in the most ordinary as well as unexpected urban places: park lawns, along the pathways at the university campus, under the shortly cut hedges, by parking lots along the road, on the tree in the KWI courtyard, at the playground in front of our house, etc. Mushrooms of different species kept popping up, some repeatedly, some replacing the previous ones on the same spot, catching my eyes when swinging my son or rushing to the KWI's ColloKWlum: *Clitocybe*, *Flammulina*, *Helvella*, *Laetiporus*, *Lepista*, *Melanoleuca*, *Mycena*, *Trametes*, *Tricholoma*, *Xylaria* are just some of the genera I have encountered. We might think of the city as a space built for humans,² but it has surely been colonised by mushrooms (and of course by many other living non-humans). Or fungi, to be precise. Because the mushroom, or at least what is commonly referred to as such, represents only one part of a larger, fascinating organism. Neither plant nor animal, an organism (typically) consisting of hyphae, thread-like cell structures that form a network called mycelium. This is an organism feeding on organic substrates acquired from its environment, an oft symbiont but also pathogen of plants and animals. Mushrooms including those I encountered in Essen are just reproductive bodies of mycelial organisms growing on and through structures and matter, and for the most part hidden to the naked eye. I find mushrooms fascinating exactly because of their indexicality; they point to something else, something unnoticed and rather invisible.³ They testify not only to the usually unseen organisms of

the fungi, but also to the omnipresence and overabundance of living matter in the (urban) world, animate matter that takes on strange, even alien, shapes and forms through which it becomes tangled up and entangled in the city and in itself: like the hyphae of the *Trametes versicolor* (turkey tail, or *Schmetterlingsporling*) growing through the fibrous structure of the wooden tissue of a tree stump, or the *Flammulina velutipes* (velvet shank, or, *Samtfuß*) fruiting from wooden chips at the playground in Essen-Rüttenscheid.

Photo no. 3: At a playground in Essen-Rüttenscheid: *Flammulina velutipes* (velvet shank, or, *Samtfuß*). Photo: Petr Gibas.

3

Fungi are by their very nature alien to us; their existence, their *Dasein*, to return to Flusser, is far away from ours even though we share the same (urban) space. There is an abyss separating us and no meaningful analogy is to be made between mushrooms and people. Nevertheless, they can help us start thinking anew about the world and our as well as others' dwelling in it; this new world, post-anthropocentric because glimpsed with and through mushrooms – as if the mushrooms were prisms, means of diffraction rendering the world in a novel perspective – is a world overabundant with living matter which grows on and through other living, dying, or dead matter (which was once alive and is to give rise and sustenance to living matter).⁴ At the same time, the excessive living matter is impersonal;⁵ it might give rise to individual fungi, mushrooms, even people, but in itself it is as impersonal as it can be. In the form of mushrooms, viruses, trees, people and innumerable others, living matter grows on and through itself; it feeds on itself. Such

a recognition of a world alive and full of living matter might seem banal. But to start pondering that as beings and as a species we are just one way of how the living though impersonal matter comes to be is challenging and has potentially profound consequences. It might even feel harrowing, the excessiveness and impersonality of life materialized all around us, in us. The challenge of the “Anthropocene” and of post-anthropocentric dwelling is to nod to the living matter and by means of this nod to begin to do justice to the liveliness of the world. This might lead to (and require) new sensitivities: ontological (who we are in relation to others and the world) and ethical (what we can and shall do). It also calls for elucidating anew the entanglements of the liveliness of the world, and particularly the ways in which human and societal affairs are part of this liveliness; how they came to be materialized in relation to and through living matter; and how they come to matter in the particular cross-cuttings of the innumerable complexities of the interconnections that the living matter spins.

We may be alien to mushrooms and mushrooms alien to us, not unlike *Vampyroteuthis*. But we are of the same world and what we do matters to living matter in its entanglement, which includes us. We need to stop overlooking the living matter – and the mushrooms can help with that – because we are entangled and relational whether we see it or not. Such might be the essence of post-anthropocentric dwelling.

Photo no. 4: *Exidia nigricans* (Witches' butter, Warziger Drüsling) with the KWI building in the background. Photo: Petr Gibas.

References

1. See e.g. J. W. Moore (ed). 2016. Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism. PM Press.
2. It is, indeed, much more complicated than that, as the field of urban political ecology – among others – exemplifies.
3. On this indexicality, see Gibas and Pauknerová, 2016 [available [here](#)].
4. In contemporary post-humanist/post-anthropocentric thought, thinking about, through and with matter is prevalent, as in the works of J. Bennett, K. Barad, D. Haraway, and others. I follow in their footsteps here.
5. See Melissa A. Orlie's work on impersonal materialism.

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