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Techniques of Envisioning and the Arts of a New Climatic Regime

As my title suggests, Donatella Meadows' "Envisioning a sustainable world" most spoke to me from the reading/viewing material, and, somewhat as its flipside, Adam McKay's movie "Don't look Up!". I'm weaving my thoughts on these two inputs into reflections that are part of a book I am currently working on, (tentatively) titled "The Arts of a New Climatic Regime". At the same time, my thoughts hark back to our meeting "Critique and/as Technology" (Utrecht, June 2018) as well as to one of our very first readings, Félix Guattari's *Three Ecologies*.

The premise of the book is the following: Facing the huge gap between the abundance, even overkill of available knowledge about the multitude of unfolding socioecological disasters and adequate reactions to it – a gap that is shockingly put into images by Adam McKay (I am taking the comet as a metaphor for the multitude of entangled ecological disasters awaiting us if business as usual continues)–, it is crucial to take into account the aesthetic dimensions of the current predicament. What if the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene, the new climatic regime, or whatever name you choose to refer to the thorough devastation brought on by the entangled histories of colonialism, capitalism and extractivism, doesn't primarily pose a problem of knowing (knowing about tipping points and golden spikes, planetary thresholds and technological fixes such as geoengineering) but also a problem of feeling, of sensing and affect? What if countering the deadly business-as-usual implies or even necessitates putting aesthetics, rather than epistemology, center place? For a long time now, we know a lot and definitely enough about the consequences of environmental destruction in all its guises. Why is so little happening, why so late? Why isn't knowing enough as many environmental activists have thought for so long?

If the currently unfolding crises poses an aesthetic problem, it cannot be a problem of aesthetics as we know it, however. The new climatic regime marks a challenge for aesthetics and its concomitant practices at least in a double sense. First, it showcases the limits of the discourses and practices of art and aesthetics as they were framed in the 18th century, marked by modern habits of thought, and highlights their implication in the modern constitution.¹ Aesthetics – as a discipline that is concerned with the arts and judgements about the beautiful and sublime – is a child of the modern constitution if there ever has been one. Secondly, the new climatic regime poses a challenge to aesthetics – this time understood not in the sense of a formalized discourse or an institutionalized set of practices but in the sense of sensibility – because it is simply difficult to grasp. Until very recently, most of the changes that the planet is currently undergoing seemed difficult or impossible to comprehend for the conceptual, perceptive and psychological apparatus of human minds, especially those framed, or trained, by the modern mindset: they seem variously too vast, too slow, too overwhelming, too far away or too uncomfortable to grasp or even notice them – or are made to be such for some people,

¹ Sehgal, Melanie. 'Aesthetic Concerns, Philosophical Fabulations: The Importance of a "New Aesthetic Paradigm"'. *Substance* 47, no. 1 (2018): 112–29.

while others are forced to live with the consequences, forced to live toxic lives.² These processes therefore need representation and representational strategies and techniques (f.ex. Earth Systems Science's data visualizations) although more often than not these strategies follow a mediatic logic (think of the ice bear and the difficulty in representing the unspectacular doings of 'slow violence'³).

Addressing the terrifying gap between the abundance of knowledge about a planet in distress and the contemporary responses to it, is not a critique of scientific knowledges. The issue is not to do away with scientific approaches and both Meadows and McKay stress their importance. But could we complement scientific modes of knowing and their aesthetics (of graphs and data visualizations) with other forms of aesthetics so as to fill the gap between knowing and doing? My wager is that we can but that this implies rethinking aesthetics itself. In other words: It is not enough to celebrate the power of Art, conventionally understood, to change modes of perception and feeling. Nor has it proven useful to trust Art (in its honorific modern sense) to translate scientific knowledge, leaving both set of practices firmly anchored in the modern constitution, theoretically as well as practically. Rather, in the book I experiment with the proposition that what could provide useful, helpful given the urgency of the present predicament and the inertia with which it has been and continues to be handled, is a revised aesthetics, a no longer modern aesthetics, embodied by the arts of the new climatic regime.

One way to approach an understanding of such arts of a new climatic regime, is to look for ways of thinking and conceptualizing aesthetics that don't follow modern habits of thought. Félix Guattari for instance was already responding to the ecological crises rising into consciousness in the 1980'ies when he proposed a "new aesthetic paradigm". By this he meant an understanding of aesthetics that transversally cuts through the sectors of the modern constitution and ties together the "three ecologies" – the environment, the social and the psyche – pointing out that all three of them are necessary to respond to the ravages left behind by so called modernization as well as industrialized production and consumption. Rather than assigning to the aesthetic a particular portion of reality, and limiting it to a prescribed box (that of the museum, of particular objects, particular modes of appreciation and of course the human subject), the aesthetic for Guattari is a dimension that concerns all aspects of social life. Such a generalized aesthetic paradigm is promising in leaving modern bifurcations and sectorizations behind but it risks remaining vague in its broadness. How might a transversal aesthetic paradigm, a generalized aesthetics as it were, manifest, how it might take shape concretely? Here, techniques could be one answer, one mode of concretion. At least it is in this double sense that I would like to introduce the notion of techniques: as a possible concretion to the rather abstract understanding of aesthetics, alluded to above, and as a wager that they could provide one answer to the problem of the mismatch between knowing and doing (and feeling) in our current predicament, marked by the climate crisis and ongoing ecocide. How can we

² Liboiron, Max. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2021.

³ Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard Univ. Press.

become sensitive to something beyond our habitual, cognitive grasp? How can we leave accustomed habits of perception, of feeling, of doing that seem to lock us in destructive modes of inhabiting this earth? How can we sense, in the most extended sense of the term, what is going on in order to change its course? We need to learn it. And to this end, I'd like to suggest, we need techniques.

The term 'technique' (as we discussed in the TC meeting in 2018) refers to the Greek word *Technē* meaning art – not in the sense of particular objects or particular experiences within the dispositive of the artworld, but in the sense of artistry, skill or craftsmanship.⁴ Technai are a kind of knowledge for the Greeks, forming part of a continuum of different modes of knowing ranging from sense perception, memory, to habitual and even systematic knowledge. The particular kind of knowledge that is embodied in techniques cuts across modern divides in the sense that techniques can be found in the arts, crafts, and sciences alike.⁵ Importantly too for my purpose, techniques (for the Greeks) are not habits. Like habits, they are an embodied form of knowledge, ranging from the type that Foucault famously theorized as technologies of the self to bodily techniques. But, in contrast to habits, techniques involve a degree of consciousness and intention, embodied in the conscious setting of intent and of rules, that is foreign to habits. Hence techniques are important in order to form new habits. Even though techniques are ultimately embodied, they are not individualistic. They are transmitted through learning and teaching and thus require a social situation that spills beyond the teacher-student relation in an affective and maybe even infective way.

These characteristics make techniques a promising candidate to think through the kind of knowing – and the interweaving of knowing, doing and feeling – which is urgently needed in order to navigate a thoroughly damaged and changed world, marked by a new climatic regime, a world for which the categories of the modern mind-set and its adjacent modes of doing no longer work, if they ever did. But what are examples for such arts or techniques of a new climatic regime? Donatella Meadows proposes one to my mind, a technique we might call the technique of envisioning.

What I like about Meadows' text is how concrete she is about how to go about envisioning. This is all the more important in the light of her diagnosis that envisioning is "missing from our whole culture" (1) which places its main emphasis on "implementation", on how to "do things", based on information and oftentimes implicit "models, which explain how we got to whatever state

⁴ Sehgal, Melanie. 'Techniques as Modes of Relating: Thinking with a Transdisciplinary Experiment'. In *How to Relate. Wissen Der Künste und Relationale Praktiken*, edited by Maximilian Haas, Annika Haas, Hanna Magauer, and Dennis Pohl. München: Fink Verlag (Reihe „Das Wissen der Künste“), 2020 and <https://newalphabetschool.hkw.de/techniques-as-modes-of-relating-thinking-with-a-transdisciplinary-experiment/>

⁵ Mitcham, Carl, "Philosophy and the History of Technology" in Bugliarello, George and Doner, Dean B. (eds.), *The History and Philosophy of Technology*, Chicago and London 1979, pp. 163-201, here p. 173 and 175. Aristoteles, *Metaphysics I, Book 1*, London 2009, 980b, p. 4ff.

we are in, and what we should do to get to a better state” (1). More so, in a culture of thought that values science and economics and their sense of (numeric) predictability “envisioning is actively discouraged” (2). And so, we have to relearn it. This is why it is so important to carve out, explicit, a technique of envisioning – so that it can be shared and practiced, relearned again. How, then, does Meadows’ Technique of Envisioning precisely work? One could extrapolate the following points:

1. Begin with envisioning (don’t begin with thinking about implementation, gathering information or making models)
2. Go to a quiet place and shut down the rational mind in order to develop a vision (let it come)
3. Actively work to keep out any negativity, any allusion to what’s realistic or any demand to know from the outset how to get there, how to realize the vision.
4. Share the vision with others who can correct and refine it so that it can evolve and become a shared and richer vision (5).
5. Write down your vision statement.
6. Look at the statement time and again. Share and adapt it.
7. Let the vision do its work.

I think there are some insights to be drawn from Meadows’ text about critique. The first is, quite obviously, that envisioning is a form of affirmative critique: it’s about bringing about another world – the ultimate aim of critique if there ever has been one. The second one concerns the stronghold of critique as a discursive practice, the stronghold of ‘critical theory’ if you will: if it is much easier to “share our cynicism, complaints, and frustrations” than “our dreams”, as Meadows observes, an observation that speaks to my experience in academia, then this might account for the fact that, in academic discussions, it is much more common to talk about what is problematic about a certain position or text than engage with what we find interesting in it, what we took and learnt from it, i.e. to be in a critical mode rather than an affirmative and productive one. Does this explain the stronghold of a certain kind of critical theory or simply a critical culture that, time and again, asks us to “be realistic” (3)? After all, it can be said that the argumentative mode of critique fully embodies the modern obsession with the “really real”. The critic’s enunciation might take different forms: ‘you think you are free, but actually you are driven by your genes’, or: ‘you think you are pursuing science for knowledge’s sake but actually you are striving for profit/reputation etc’, ‘you think you are worshipping the Virgin Mary but actually you are seeking solace in a disenchanted world’. The modern world is full of these kinds of enunciations, following a scheme of unveiling critique that pits knowledge against belief: “before we believed, now we know...” Envisioning in Meadows’ sense, follows an entirely different idea of critique, if you still want to call it that (and my point is that it would be interesting for thinking about critique to do so). What could be more radically critical than dreaming up a different world, in her case a world that is sustainable and in which there is no hunger? But Meadows’ is a mode of critique that involves vulnerability and necessitates thinking, feeling, dreaming together about what we hope for, what we desire and not what we reject, condemn or problematize. What if we took Donella Meadows’

invitation seriously and used this time together to envision a world, or many worlds, in which we would like to live – and not, as she repeats time and again, simply one we are willing to settle for? What if we imagined how we would like to live, work, and eat, shared our visions about how we would like to work in academia for instance rather than remained in the rather safe space of discussing critical methods? Not that that is not important, even if (I admit), especially in the face of the ongoing crises, that has sometimes remained a bit abstract for me in the past ten years. But maybe now, ten years in, could it be time be visionaries together?