Chapter 10

Investigating the Extinction Crime Scene: Guido Morselli's Eco-political Manifesto and the Forensic Gaze of the Anthropocene

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that the novel *Dissipatio H.G.* is constructed as a (geological) crime scene in which the protagonist and the reader participate in a forensic analysis of the world without us. In this context, the narrating subject survives in order to be the ultimate witness, the last human that can attest to the ecological crimes of mankind and who willingly accepts extinction as punishment for the entire species. I believe that this deep-time archeological investigation foreshadows the forensic logic of the Anthropocene (Weizman 2017; Yusoff 2016; 2018; Demos 2019; Luisetti 2020) and allows us to read Morselli's final work as one of the origin stories of the Anthropocenic paradigm.

Keywords: Anthropocene - Extinction - Investigation - Decay - Apocalypse - Dystopia

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Written between 1972 and 1973, and posthumously published by Adelphi in 1977, *Dissipatio H.G.* is the last novel authored by Guido Morselli before committing suicide in July 1973. The first English translation of the book—by the late Frederika Randall, who had previously translated *Il Comunista* (2017)—was published in December 2020 by the New York Review of Books. At the moment of its publication, the English translation of *Dissipatio H.G.* is introduced to contemporary audiences as a post-apocalyptic novel, well ahead of its time, as it "depicts a man much like the author himself—lonely, brilliant, difficult—and a world much like our own, mesmerized by money, speed, and machines. *Dissipatio H.G.* is a *precocious portrait of our*

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Anthropocene world, and a philosophical last will and testament from a great Italian outsider."[1]

From a narrative and stylistic point of view, *Dissipatio H.G.*, which stands for *Dissipatio Humani Generis* (dispersion or annihilation of humankind in latinLatin), is difficult to categorize. Structured as a long, erudite, and at times contradictory soliloquy, the novel is an investigation of humanity's fate carried by the last surviving man on earth, the narrator, who wanders through the material and the cultural debris left behind by the mysteriously vanished humans. In *Dissipatio H.G.*, Morselli enters in conversation with multiple literary genres and non-literary texts, generating a *maelstrom* of high and pop culture, contemporary art, autobiographical, philosophical and religious references.

More than self-preservation, the thoughts of the last man on earth are a constant stream of involuntary memories of humanity reduced to slag and waste (Palladini 2017, 241) and serve as an ironic summarization of human thought (Sielo 2016, 11). The impossible post-extinction setting evokes science fiction narratives found in literature and other media, and as science fiction represents a culture's "archive of the possible", it is also the "transmedia genre that has first attempted to articulate the sorts of systemic global changes that are imminent, or already happening", imagining "what our transformed planet might eventually be like for those who will come to live on it" (Canavan and Robinson 2014, 16–17). Science fiction, though, is a type of literature that Morselli tries to explicitly distance himself from: "I possess none of the wishful thinking of science, and none, to my credit, of science fiction either" (Morselli 2020, 42). But at the time of Morselli's writing, science fiction is not the only form of speculative visualization of the planet's possible future states. By the early 1970s, planetary and epochal anxieties, such as the fear of overpopulation, ecological disasters and, of course, the impending menace of nuclear war, had already generated numerous influential non-fiction essays and established a technical relationship to futurity from which "scenario thinking" flourished and gained legitimacy as an epistemic and speculative tool for financial and geo-political governance, as well as military simulation.[2] Morselli, who was an avid reader of science, was familiar with some of the works of first order cybernetic theorists such as John Von Neumann, and possibly Gregory Bateson, and was aware of the Zero Population Growth movement, the overpopulation debate, and, likely, the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*.[3]

Despite being originally rejected for publication, a refusal that possibly provoked Morselli's decision to kill himself,[4] *Dissipatio H.G.* was critically well-received following its release in 1977 and it is often regarded as an influential and essential text of Italian post-apocalyptic, dystopian, and cold

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war literature (Ceccherini 2015; Mussgnug 2003; 2014; Palladini 2017; Sielo 2016).[5] *Dissipatio H.G.* can also be included in a group of literary texts attempting to fictionalize human and non-human life on a post-apocalyptic planet, such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (Shelley 1826), Richard Jefferies' novel *After London* (1885); William Henry Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887); M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), and Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930). In the Italian context, mainstream literature novels set in future scenarios are rare up until the late 1960s (Mussgnug 2014, 197).[6] Post-apocalyptic and survivor narratives include, among others, Tommaso Landolfi's *Cancroregina* (1950), Paolo Volponi's *Il Pianeta Irritabile* (1978), Carlo Cassola's "nuclear" novels (1978; 1979; 1980; 1982), and Mario Soldati's *Lo Smeraldo* (1974). More recent examples of this genre are Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* (2007), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2002), and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993).[7]

Besides its collocation within these literary genres, which have all been influenced by and have fed back into the ecological imagination of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, Morselli's novel is a type of fiction that has been defined by Greg Garrard as a *disanthropy* (2012): a fictionalized account of a spectral and deep-time *world-without-us*, to use Eugene Thacker's category (2011, 13), often evoked as an image of planetary futurity, and sometimes experienced and narrated back to readers by a last witness to humanity's demise. Disanthropy as a literary form has its origins in the nineteenth century and its genesis coincides with the revival of millennial Christianity and the discovery of geological and evolutionary deep-time (Garrard 2012, 43). The figure of the last surviving human is the ultimate embodiment of the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene, an impossible narrator that takes on the role of a speculative deep time geologist and archaeologist, extracting narratives of ecological urgency and preemption from the ruins of human civilization. The emergence of the disanthropic novel as the constitutive literary form of the Anthropocene is a result of a growing awareness of anthropogenic climate change and the possibility of extinction of the human race in a near or distant future (Laakso 2019). The dissemination of multiple eco-apocalyptic scenarios has configured the existential condition of the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene as one of constant exposure to the threat of extinction where the "anthropocenic human subject is defined by its own realization of being a species among other species, a mere episode in the scale of natural history" (Luisetti 2021).

Morselli, with *Dissipatio H.G.*, adopts the literary device of disanthropy to formulate a complex, multi-layered and unprecedented eco-political critique of early 1970s society and of the new worldview brought by corporate capitalism. This critique is influenced by technical and fictional scenarios of nuclear

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apocalypse and by the profound distress of environmental degradation. It is both ecological and political and stems from Morselli's preoccupations with the emergence of troubling global changes such as the economization of nature, the acceleration of capital's automation, and the rise of the corporate state.

In this essay, I will reflect on *Dissipatio H.G.*'s relationship with the Anthropocene thesis in mainly two complementary ways. First, I intend to argue how the deployment of the narratological device of the last surviving human narrator foreshadows a 'forensic gaze' that is constitutive of the literary and visual cultures of the Anthropocene. Second, by studying Morselli's readings and political influences, I will try to interpret and delineate the complex eco-political message of *Dissipatio H.G.* The first part of the essay emphasizes a close reading of Morselli's text to understand its relationship with the Anthropocene paradigm and to avoid overdetermining an interpretation through the categories introduced by Morselli's own readings. The intention is to pull the threads from the text and shed light on Morselli's unique intellectual and political framework. I believe that sizing Morselli's worldview can help us to challenge and expand some of the current socio-cultural implications of the Anthropocene thesis, especially in its more contested and problematic connotations such as its "species thinking" and neo-Malthusian tendencies.[8] *Dissipatio H.G.*'s "precocious portrait of our Anthropocene world"–to quote once again the book's introduction to the English-speaking readers– can be found, then, not in the images of a vanished humanity nor in the sprawl of abandoned infrastructure and garbage it left behind, but rather in Morselli's desperate attempt to rationalize the contradictions of living in a planet being deeply transformed by inhuman economic and political forces.

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Investigating the Crime Scene of the Anthropocene

Dissipatio H.G. begins with the narrator's failed suicide attempt in a cave, after which he emerges into a world in which all humanity has suddenly vanished. The narrator initially connects this unexplainable event to his own suicide attempt (10), prompting him to search for other survivors and for an answer to his questions. Not being able to find anyone else, the narrator, who lives in Widmad, a fictional mountain village in Switzerland, travels to Chrysopolis, a fictional version of Zurich, in order to search for answers about the nature and the magnitude of the event. As humans seem to have disappeared from the planet, their bodies are nowhere to be found; only their earthly possessions are left behind, piling up like trash, and becoming the only visual and physical evidence of their former bodily existence. As a consequence of the disappearance of the "polluting breed" (39), wild animals and the vegetation quickly reclaim the space left by humans: "their instincts tell them something

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they certainly never expected: the great enemy has withdrawn. The air is clear of smoke and fumes, the earth no longer stinks or quakes with terrible noises" (39).

An underlying post-apocalyptic pastoral tone accompanies the narrator's monologues and wanderings through the Swiss re-vitalized and re-wilded wasteland, indicating Morselli's reversal of what constitutes an "alive planet". What provoked the vanishing event is never fully revealed to the readers, and the narrator, in his strolls and hikes among the "audio-visual debris" (3) of humanity, fails to find enough evidence to corroborate his own speculations: the more he tries to make sense and to justify the nature of the event, the more he realizes his own inadequacy and limitations in rationalizing it (Mussgnug 2003, 30). The narrator's guesses about the nature of the mass-vanishing event, on the other hand, freely adopt the lexicon of Christian eschatology and are informed by fears of nuclear warfare and overpopulation anxieties: "the D-Bomb (rapid and thorough depopulation) or the R-Bomb (perfect rarefaction)" (Morselli 2020, 28) or as "the exodus, X-Bomb, or Operation House Cleaning" (32). Human extinction as a concrete possibility and as a consequence of the technological developments of nuclear warfare and of demographic processes was a key theme of science fiction literature of the Cold War, such as Nevile Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), and also of non-fiction works such as *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich 1968) and *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows 1972). Awareness of extinction and warnings about the finitude of the planet are also present in seminal cybernetic texts such as Gregory Bateson's *Awake! Up Against the Environment or Ourselves?*: "the creature that wins against its environment destroys itself..." (1972, 33), and John Von Neumann's *Can We Survive Technology?*: "at long last, we begin to feel the effects of the finite, actual size of the earth in a critical way" (1955). Pondering and writing about the end of the world after the development of nuclear warfare technology means facing human extinction as a possible scenario rather than a mere fantastic hypothesis or thought experiment (Mussgnug 2014, 19). This realization represents a "paradigm shift in our relationship with futurity" (Canavan and Robinson 2014, 3) that is responsible for radically transforming the Western apocalyptic imagination and shaping the eco-disaster imaginary of our times. In the context of the Anthropocene thesis, the Cold War is a fundamental moment, as some indicate the first nuclear explosion[9] as the marker of a new geological era (Zalasiewicz et al. 2015). But also, as pointed out by Joseph Masco, the Anthropocene "can easily be constituted as a mirror to the Cold War logics of closed systems, of limited systems interacting in positive and negative feedback loops and thus subject to command-and-control reasoning" (2018, 75–76). The nuclear apocalypse scenario of the Cold War, then, is a fundamental trope and a precursor of the extinction narratives of the Anthropocene, with such paradigm being "mobilized via apocalyptic visions of the future, drawing on

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tropes developed most directly by nuclear crisis as a tool of political mobilization" (76).

Morselli's descriptions of the empty Chrysopolis foreshadow and resonate with the deep-time archeological gaze of the Anthropocene. In *Dissipatio H.G.*, human remains are represented by the inorganic matter constituting the byproducts of human life in the twentieth century together with the infrastructures of capitalism: highways, banks, railroads, airports, military bases: "But Chrysopolis reveals no trace of bodies. What's left is, yes, bodily, but not organic. [...] The escapees […] took nothing with them. [...] There are other remains, too, organic and alive but not human" (5). Morselli narrates human extinction as an instantaneous and absurd disappearance in the present rather than a logical and preventable progression towards a future self-annihilation. The narrator is not communicating to us from a distant, unimaginable point in the geological folds of the deep-future: the human ruins and garbage have not yet become stratigraphic evidence of a past civilization as they would be in Anthropocene literature; instead, they still lie there like a dismembered and dispersed decomposing cadaver. In *Dissipatio H.G.*, the planet becomes a crime scene with no corpse, but where all the objects of the victim can potentially evoke meaning and stories as well as precious indications of the motives of the crime and the identity of the perpetrators. The only "bodies" the narrator is able to find are machines (e.g. cars that crashed into each other after the humans driving them suddenly vanished), and dead animals (90).

Through the investigative wanderings of the protagonist, the new world mutates and becomes a planet-sized crime scene and the object of a desperate forensic investigation carried out by the last human on earth. By presenting a post-apocalypse landscape in which humankind's physical bodies are disposed of, while the debris, the infrastructures, and the machinery of capitalism are left intact—in some cases even still functioning, performing an eternal liturgy of meaningless automation—Morselli stages humanity's sudden extinction as a crime scene of unprecedented magnitude and reach (Luisetti 2021). While normally presented in Anthropocene literature as an eerie visualization of deep-time aimed at moralizing the humans of the present, in *Dissipatio H.G.*, this crime scene is presented as mysterious, pastoral, and eschatological.[10] The narrator is searching for an answer and a moralizing perspective that could justify humankind's extinction, but he is incapable of finding it. *Dissipatio H.G.* has been read as a text that challenges common conceptions of the utopian and the dystopian and a novel in which the distinction between the two becomes a porous membrane, a threshold of constant renegotiation of catharsis and catastrophe (Palladini 2017, 243). Morselli operationalizes this threshold by blending

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pastoral and apocalyptic registers, the individual and the species subjects, the local and the planetary scales, and the speculative, the diagnostic, and the forensic gazes. In the novel, the narrator embodies the contradictions of the humans of the Anthropocene and disorients the reader by shifting the tone from a celebration of the returned wilderness ("the planet has ever been so alive") to the grief and mourning for the lost humankind ("Sympathy, empathy. A shipwrecked human solidarity bobs up, a surprise last-ditch response"); from the story and place of the individual (the narrator, his relationships, Widmad, Zurich, the valley) to the planetary scale and the history of the species (deciphering the magnitude of the Event, understanding humankind's responsibility and agency); and from the distrust for technology and science as diagnostic tools (the unpredictability of the unfathomable Event, the narrator's long rants against psychiatry and medicine) to his own forensic investigation. The porosity of these distinctions allows Morselli to unmask and dissipate capitalist utopian thought and its cybernetic[11], automated, corporate, technocratic evolutions by contraposing an "anti-utopian hypothesis" (Gaudio 2017, 558), in which capitalist transformations to the consciousness of the collective and the individual are taken to an extreme. In this accelerationist thought experiment, humanity is reduced to a single individual, a human ironically visualized by Morselli as the vertex of a demographic pyramid, an anthropocenic Ozymandias:

> Humanity was, now I am. Incarnation of the epilogue. Outcome of the generations. The purpose, the destination, the journey's end. [...] I see a pyramid. [...] Actually, two pyramids. The one, upright, widens over the eons from the first man or hominid progenitor to the swarming billions of creatures of the same species present on the night of June 2. Underneath that, the upside-down triangle [...] that from the swarming billions suddenly shrinks to a single individual. I am that point of termination. (63)

This inverted pyramid, a reversal of the visual culture of overpopulation and neo-Malthusian eco-racism,[12] becomes an icon for the only survivor, a narrator who is a "point, with no consistency" (Palladini 2017, 240). In the disanthropic literature of the Anthropocene, this last surviving *monad*[13] is assigned the task to investigate the planet as a crime scene and report back through the threshold of extinction telling us a moralizing story that may allow for a different outcome for humanity. The liminal figure of the anthropocenic detective investigator takes center stage: as the last surviving man on Earth, his functions transform him into a geologist-archaeologist, "a narrative-enabling device" who provides readers with "a perspective from which the tale of ongoing human error can be narrated with the benefit of

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hypothetical hindsight" (Vermeulen 2017, 872). He interrogates the spectral *world-without-us*, in ways that seem to coincide with Yusoff's characterization of the last-surviving human witness as "the spectral figure of the last men who will [...] raise sensible questions about the immortality, immorality of humanity" (4). In this context, the narrator serves as a junction between the last-surviving representative of the human species in a speculative future *world-without-us*—and the reader, who still exists in the *world-with-us* of the present, a time defined by the eco-political relations of petro-capitalism. This future detective-archaeologist is "a material and discursive device to trace a geologic sentience back and forth across this epochal threshold" (Yusoff 2016, 4) and whose narratological function is to be both a reader of the ruins left by human civilization and a storyteller from an impossible, after-extinction vantage point in history.

Within the Anthropocene narrative, then, the future geologist, "rather than proposing the question of the ends of man as a moment of finitude (of capitalist expenditure, humanist thought, the end of this or that man), is actualized as an anterior position of survival that speaks to the "ear of the future" (Yusoff 2016, 3) producing, at the same time, "a proto-human (a human-as-fossil-to-come, through the configuration of the future as an occasion of fossilized humanity) and a new originary moment for the human, as the author of an epoch of social geology" (Yusoff 2016, 8). The anthropocenic detective tries to evoke the ghostly, dispersed nature of environmental crimes (Farrier 2017, 8) while simultaneously interpreting and deciphering the traces and the ruins left behind by an extinct humanity, reading "our future anterior bones, our plastics, our mining trails, and holes; a future geologist who will make us 'subjects' of a forensic investigation" (Yusoff 2016, 4). In the forensic crime scene of *Dissipatio H.G.*, the criminal is absent, as is the body of the victim: extinction is a murder scene without a body, an unsolved puzzle from the past (Farrier 2017, 9). The reader of *Dissipatio H.G.* may be drawn to the conclusion that humans, as a species and collective geological agent, are responsible for their own extinction and may read the narrator's soliloquy as a universal act of self-accusation and penitence.[14] Instead, Morselli's apocalypse and the narrator's search for a motive subtly point to a different conclusion. Humanity has vanished, and maybe deservedly so, but the culprit is not to be found in the *anthropos* as a species but rather in the uncontrollable effects produced by Western technology, economic thinking, and cultural homologation. This reading of Morselli's apocalypse becomes clear only after understanding the political background of Morselli's late years and after considering the impact that a handful of books had on the Italian author. These texts represent a fairly uncommon canon (at least for an Italian intellectual of the time) through which Morselli

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attempted to interpret the deep social and cultural changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Living in the Worst of all Possible Worlds

Thanks to the archival and conservation efforts of the *Fondo Morselli*[15] in Varese, it is possible to access and study the author's library, and in particular, his reading activity during the writing of *Dissipatio H.G.* In the last three years of his life, Guido Morselli was an avid reader of essays on the future of the planet and scientific books. Between 1971 and 1973, Morselli spent significant amounts of time reading in depth and taking notes about Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* (1970) —which he read twice— Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970), David Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1970), and Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity* (1971). Morselli also owned and read the influential *La Filosofia degli Automi* (Somenzi 1965), an anthology of translated essays by early cybernetic, automation, and information theorists such as Alan Turing, John Von Neumann, and Claude Shannon. The *Fondo Morselli* has conserved and digitized several of the author's copies of these books, and judging by the vast quantity of notes, comments, and highlights left by Morselli himself, these seem to have had a tremendous impact on his political orientation and on the writing of *Dissipatio H.G.* Automation, information theory, cybernetics, the emergence of the corporate state, system ecology, nature and the individual, evolutionary biology, futurology, civil disobedience, chaos theory, anti-algorithmical anarchism, technofobia, and environmental consciousness seem to be the key concepts originating from the combined reading of these texts.

Morselli's notes on his copy of Thoreau's *Walden* reveal some points of contact between the authors. The choice of the first-person narrative device (Thoreau 1970, 47), but more importantly, the overarching worldview of the nineteenth century American author greatly influenced Morselli's eco-political thought. For instance, Morselli seems to expand on Thoreau's intuition that humans started a process of transforming into machines (Thoreau 1970, 50), becoming "tools of their own tools" (which Morselli refers to as: "the false credo, 'You are the product of Production'") as a consequence of a mutation in the relationship with the environment and the natural resources (Thoreau 1970, 81). For Morselli, humans created the conditions for (or dug their way into) the emergence of a more-than-human consciousness, an algorithmical intelligence of sorts (which he calls in the novel *deadly cryptogram*) that has enslaved humanity as a whole. In this sense, humans are victims of their own automated creation: "the Organization, deadly cryptogram spread over five continents, must be dissolved; and the octopus of the Economy must cease to send out its myriad filthy tentacles. [...] O people of the earth, [...] you will not profit from this liberation. [...] You willed your

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own slavery, you designed it. The only way it can disappear is if you do" (Morselli 2020, 38). Similarly, Thoreau's individualist civil disobedience and the choice of self-exile in the natural world as a politically motivated detachment resonate with some of the ideas expressed by the narrator of *Dissipatio H.G.* For him, as for Thoreau, a truly free and enlightened state cannot exist without the acknowledgement of the individual as a fully sovereign, independent political subject (Thoreau 1970, 394, 397).

Morselli's political reading of Thoreau's *Walden* is reinforced by Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity*. Monod's take on evolutionary biology is characterized by a deep anti-anthropocentric realization: "we want to be necessary, inevitable" writes Monod. "Every religion, almost all philosophies, even a part of science, are witnesses to humanity's inexhaustible, heroic struggle to desperately negate its own contingency" (Monod 1971, 46). Monod's influence on *Dissipatio H.G.* is evident, especially in sustaining Morselli's anti-anthropocentrism and chaos theory. For the French biologist, the fortuitous emergence and randomness of events are the main drivers for the evolution of life on the planet; for this reason, the stability and non-mutation of forms of life are more puzzling and difficult to explain as opposed to their evolution (Monod 1971, 101). The appearance of life, together with the conditions for the existence of humans, then, are not *necessary* but *casual*. Chaos and unpredictability are conditions for life to prosper, and for this reason, Morselli considers them constitutive of an ideal relationship between individuals and society as a whole: "an ideal society must be conceived as a collective of individuals in a perfect state of disorder" he writes in his diary in 1972 (Gaudio 2017, 557).

From reading Reich's *The Greening of America*, Morselli adopts the idea of a hegemonic industrial consciousness dominating the world coming out of WW2. Such consciousness is defined by Reich as *Consciousness II*, representing a replacement of rural farmers' consciousness (*Consciousness I*). It believes in the central ideology of technology, which has induced a mutation in the way humans conceive of the environment. Because of the hegemonic position of this type of consciousness, Reich believes that scientific research, technological innovations, organization and planning become prime values in a society with such an orientation (Reich 1970, 73), but such ideals don't necessarily lead to some sort of liberational event for humanity. On the contrary, with the emergence of an encompassing, global industrial consciousness, a new political form of organizing life has also emerged: the corporate state. The forces driving this new political subject (technology, science, economic planning, etc.) are impersonal, and as such completely indifferent to human needs. The nefarious consequences deriving from a passive corporate revolution are the same as those of a hypothetical

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system "expressly designed for the purpose of destroying human beings and their society" (Reich 1970, 94).

The inhuman forces behind the rise of the corporate state create a "mindless" state that would "cut the last redwoods, pollute the most beautiful beaches, invent machines to injure and destroy plant and human life. To have only one value is in human terms, to be mad. It is to be a machine" (Reich 1970, 95). The coordinates guiding this planetary corporate state ultimately create the conditions for "the worst of all possible worlds" where uncontrolled technology and wild profiteering enslave humanity (Reich 1970, 114). As such, the corporate state becomes the enemy "not merely because of oppression, injustice and war, but because it has become the enemy of life itself" (Reich 1970, 140), a statement on which Morselli comments on the side of the page: "Abbasso lo stato, anarchia è umanità".[16] In *Dissipatio H.G.*, this process is visualized by setting up the extinction of humankind as a crime scene, rather than a punishment or a moral tale from which readers can learn something valuable. The vanishing event is a genocide, a sudden stop in the exponential acceleration of the economization of the world and of human culture, experienced from the vantage point of Zurich-*Chrysopolis*, "one of the main engines of the monopoly, one of the nerve centers of the system (capitalist), and perhaps its most powerful 'stomach'" (Morselli 2020, 56–57).

As the city represents the nervous center of a new planetary consciousness, Chrysopolis is the object of the narrator's intense scorn: "I don't like Chrysopolis much, in fact I can't stand it. For me it is the Biblical antitype. The triumphant consummation of everything I scorn" (5). Simultaneously to *The Greening of America*, Morselli read Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*, a radically different text. Morselli's notes and comments often point to the differences and similarities between the two models of futurity presented in the books. One of the points of agreement is on the limitations and perils represented by the expansion of technocratic governance. Technocrats, according to Toffler, suffer from "econo-think" as they are conditioned to believe that non-economic problems (including environmental issues, human well-being and social relations) can be solved through economic solutions (e.g. incentives, investments, innovation, financial and monetary policies). Moreover, for Toffler, and Morselli seems to strongly agree with him on this point as well, the progressive economization of the political domains of life in the twentieth century is not exclusive to the logic of capitalism; it is reproduced by Marxist thought, too (Toffler 1970, 452). Such econo-centrism leads inevitably to technocratic planning, a form of organization that is short-term and profoundly undemocratic. The mutation of the world into an object of technocratic control and monitoring compels Morselli to fictionalize human extinction as a device to expose the bare bones and the infrastructure of

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cybernetic capitalism. Morselli does not propose a what-if scenario as in the case of more recent anthropocenic literature, like Alan Weisman's influential *A World without Us*, which asks us to "picture a world from which we all suddenly vanished" (Weisman 2007, 5), to summon a "visualization of a *world-without-us* that is instrumental to foster a sense of urgency and to reimagine a *world-with-us* (Bellamy and Szeman 2014, 194). Morselli's *Dissipatio H.G.* is not a cautionary tale. It is an extinction narrative developed *against* or *in reaction to* early signs of a spreading automated, hyper-technological corporate state. It is an eco-political denunciation of the suprematism of economic reason over life. The vanishing event cannot be prevented. It is already here, and it is already happening.

Morselli's Eco-political Manifesto

Dissipatio H.G. represents the lucid attempt by an Italian intellectual to react to some ongoing planetary phenomena: the birth of automated capitalism, the economization of nature, and the corporate control over life on the planet. Some of these tendencies could already be appreciated in the late 1960s and early 1970s as they were introduced in the public sphere by first-order cybernetic theorists and futurologists, and would influence narratives such as James Lovelock's *Gaia* and Buckminster Fuller's *Spaceship Earth*. This is the milieu that later on led to the formulation of system ecology and Earth system science as the hegemonic forms of visualizations of the planet in the West and to the introduction of the Anthropocene thesis.

Morselli uses the vantage point offered by a post-extinction setting to shape a narrative that does not call for ecological action or cultural activism, and neither "to come to terms with the finitude of human life". (Vermeulen 2017, 872) By failing to offer some form of proleptic mourning, "an imagining of the future as if it were already past that makes us ask: what might have we done?" (872), the narrator exposes the political deployment of the forensic gaze of the Anthropocene. Moreover, the notion of a crime lacking a singular body of a victim "points to the peculiarities of ecological damage as a crime" that is constantly present, scattered in space and time (Farrier 2017, 2).

Dissipatio H.G. is a novel about facing the terror of a fully automated planet in which humans are gone, but the infrastructure of capital has survived in a state of mindless, unproductive eternal persistence, represented, for example, by the recorded human voices of the answering machines, the timetables of the airports, the functioning power plants, and so on. The forensic investigation has failed because it focused on searching for the missing pieces rather than seeing what has persisted. Morselli's warning about technological expansion and the economization of nature is evoked not by fear of a deep-future technological singularity in which humans will become obsolete and

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outdated tools but rather because such an eerie planetary vision requires a new type of governance: the corporate state, a force that is already transforming humans' relation to nature and life in the present time through regimentation, obedience, and uniformity in order to reproduce itself and prosper. The vanishing event has eliminated the bodies no longer necessary for the functioning of automated capitalism, and the planet has acquired a new form of homeostatic equilibrium. In this anti-speculative crime scene, impossible to resolve and comprehend, impossible to anticipate and learn from, humans are victims, not perpetrators. In a supreme act of grief and nostalgia for the departed humanity, the narrator-detective builds a monument in their honor made of Coca-Cola bottles, cars, cameras, advertisements, etc.: "One reaction that surprises me: a new mode of thinking about them, together, as a collectivity. An unexpected disposition to understand and feel for them. Sympathy, empathy" (51).

The fictional empty space of the post-extinction world allows Morselli to imagine an "'effectively human' humanity, with renewed dignity" (Sielo 2016, 17). For Morselli, the forces that under the right conditions might lead to the annihilation of humans are already present and are operating a planetary passive revolution. His reaction mobilizes individualism, anarchy, disobedience, isolation and detachment from the techno-centered world and its consumeristic values. In this sense, the failed investigation of the last man on earth reveals an eco-political thought that is anti-algorithmical, techno-pessimist, and hostile, when not openly parodical, to the know-all hubris of the cybernetic forms of control and planetary management. This unsolvable crime scene represents the ultimate failure of the anthropos of the Anthropocene, incapable of offering a clear tale of redemption. The crime scene is set. There is no body; only a detective that cannot solve the murder.

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Notes

[1] https://www.nyrb.com/products/dissipatio-h-g?variant=32752351281289, emphasis mine.

[2] Think, for instance, of the massively influential work of futurologist Herman Kahn, employed by RAND corporation, who "pioneered the technique of 'future now' thinking, aiming through the use of detailed analysis plus imagination to be able to produce a report, written as it might be written by people living in the future. The description 'scenario' was given to these stories by the writer Leo Rosten, who suggested the name based on Hollywood terminology." (Ringland and Young 2012, 207–8)

[3] Zero Population Growth is expressly mentioned in *Dissipatio H.G* (Morselli 2020, 67).

[4] A fact hinted at by Randall in the introduction of the English version of the novel (Morselli, viii).

[5] Antonio Porta's *Il re del magazzino*, for example, was directly inspired by Morselli's *Dissipatio H.G.* (see Palladini 2017; Porta 1978).

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[6] With the rare exception of Volt's 1921 *La Fine del Mondo* (Volt 2019) and of the vastly overlooked Science Fiction production contained in genre-specific magazines and specialized book series. In Italy, the most popular of these specialized book series was Mondadori's *Urania*, which published both Italian authors and translations of foreign science fiction novels. For an in-depth history of this type of publications see Iannuzzi 2014.

[7] Cinema offers numerous examples, such as *Soylent Green* (1973), *Silent Running* (1972), *Zero Population Growth* (1972), and Marco Ferreri's *Il Seme dell'Uomo* (1969) and Bruno Gaburro's *Ecce Homo: I Sopravissuti* (1969) in the Italian context, among others.

[8] With the term "neo-malthusian", I refer to population control and overpopulation discourses present in ecological and economic development debates, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, loosely based on British economist Thomas Malthus's "predictions of population-induced resource scarcity and violence" (Hendrixson and Ojeda 2020). It is a politically problematic perspective since "Neo-Malthusian promotion of family planning as the solution to hunger, conflict, and poverty has contributed to destructive population control approaches, that are targeted most often at poor, racialized women" (Hendrixson and Ojeda 2020). For in-depth critiques of the resurgence of the demographic and neo-malthusian narrative in the Anthropocene debate see Hendrixson, Ojeda, et al. 2019; Ojeda, Sasser, and Lunstrum 2020; Ojeda 2020. For a classic neo-malthusian ecology text, and a precursor of the concept of planetary carrying capacity see Holdren and Ehrlich 1974.

[9] Los Alamos, July 16, 1945.

[10] Considering the narrator's lyrical, often ironic attitude towards the "new nature" left by the disappeared humans and his contrasting sentiments towards mankind's agency, I believe that *Dissipatio H.G.* could be also read as an early example of what Heather Sullivan has recently called *dark pastoral*, "a possible tool for engaging the Anthropocene as a literary trope. It borrows the powerful sentiments associated with the traditional pastoral but reformulates them in terms of the "new nature" of climate change and the post-apocalyptic scenarios that are ever more popular)." (Sullivan 2020, 29)

[11] "I am, therefore I think. The electronic computers continue to function, or anyway could function, whether or not the operators and the users still exist; indeed they are so untouched that should I wish, I could talk to them, if that in turn didn't sound like a theory (cybernetic) to me. Or science fiction. Their memory is still capable of recording data, analyzing it, processing it. I may be immodest but I don't see why, even in the absence of operators and users, I shouldn't be capable of doing the same." (Morselli 2020, 54)

[12] In the novel, Morselli includes an actual image of an equilateral triangle (with two extra dashed sides building a reversed ghost-like isosceles triangle): it is the only image in the text. (Morselli, 86) For some examples of population visualizations informed by Malthusian principles, see the demographic and resource graphs in the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* and William Vogt's *Road to Survival*, as well as the history of the population pyramid graph.

[13] Morselli's ideal society is composed by what he calls independent monads: "Morselli's creative experiment makes it possible to determine the peculiarity of an individual who, in the end, is neither animal nor god because, although isolated, he maintains a social dimension that places him well beyond the mere biological entity. It is in this direction that Morselli succeeds in questioning, on a narrative level, a society that has been ordered in Hegelian fashion as an aggregation of monads. In a page of his diary, written at the beginning of 1972, Morselli provides a precise definition of the relationship

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between the individual and society, borrowing it from Pietro Silva's Treaty of Elementary Physics: the ideal society, Morselli writes, replacing the words gas and molecule with society and individual, must be conceived as a group of individuals in perfect disorder (Morselli writes *dis*order), animated by speed in all possible directions and continually mixing and colliding with each other (Gaudio, 557).

[14] This simultaneously resonates and differs with some of Timothy Morton's ideas presented in *Dark Ecology*: "I am the criminal. And I discover this via scientific forensics. Just like in noir fiction: I'm the detective and the criminal! I'm a person. I'm also part of an entity that is now a geophysical force on a planetary scale. The darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of noir, which is a strange loop: the detective is a criminal. In a strong version of noir the narrator is implicated in the story: two levels that normally don't cross, that some believe structurally can't cross. We "civilized" people, we Mesopotamians, are the narrators of our destiny. Ecological awareness is that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal. (Morton, 9) Morselli, as Morton, may believe that "capital and capitalism are symptoms of the problem, not direct causes" (Morton, 23) of the impactful planetary changes of the 1960s and 1970s. But I believe that rather than circling back to human species' agency on the planet as (conflating the detective with the criminal), Morselli, in a move towards the political, is warning us about the emerging forces of algorithmical intelligence, automated capitalism and the corporate state which may eventually produce the end of human civilization.

[15] https://www.bdl.servizirl.it/vufind/Record/BDL-COLLEZIONE-561

[16] "Down with the state, anarchy means humanity".

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