

# Echoes of the Future: Apprehensive Aesthetics for a Bygone World

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“The Great Day of His Wrath,” by John Martin (1851-1853)

## I. Introduction

How will the world end? Doubtless, every single person has sometimes thought about this unsettling question. The end of the world is often seen as an event that still has to occur. How else would we be able to think about it? This inconspicuous assumption betrays a blind spot on our part: we imagine that when *our* world ends, *the* world ends. But what if this is simply not true?

What if *our* world already ended yesterday?

Or, what if it is in the process of ending? It may be a process that takes some time, but that the end will nevertheless come. Will it be like a thief in the night because no one noticed it? Maybe it will not be exactly unexpected, but it will be surprising that it happened under our very noses.

In this essay, I explore these somewhat counterintuitive issues. First, the idea that *our* world is ending together with the related claim that some of its parts are already gone. Second, the claim that the previous thought undermines the assumption that we are one with the world. This exploration forms the basis for a new aesthetics suited to a bygone world.

To elucidate these points, I use examples of worlds that have passed by, describing the process of ending as it unfolds. The examples I use will be somewhat unusual, in that they come from a variety of fields: first, the focus on *echoes* in the work of Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov; second, the core premise of the *Southern Reach* trilogy written by Jeff Vandermeer; third – interwoven throughout, but further explicated in the last section – the sociologist Ulrich Beck’s notion of the *metamorphosis* of the world.

These examples share a common denominator: they enable listeners, spectators or readers to *experience* what happens when a world disintegrates, when the coordinates of normality drift apart as the onset of oblivion unfolds. These artistic worlds provide the conceptual and experiential tools for thinking about our current predicament in a world that is approaching its end. The last part of this essay is an extended meditation on this theme, showing how we may wrestle an aesthetics for an ending world from these works.

## II. Postlude

The Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov (\*1937) writes music that is best described as a tone language of echoes. He assembles musical compositions consisting of fragments that appear and disappear like reflections, memories, reveries, after-images or ghosts. His 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony (1966) was titled *Eschatophony*, but one could apply this ominous title to many works in his oeuvre. The theme of ending is never far away, and is often present in a half-visible, foreboding manner. If anything, Silvestrov’s music evokes images of a vast and uninhabited expanse. It alludes to the space needed for creating echoes and a sense of distance. The non-linear and echoing structure of his works conjures up fleeting images of deserted shores and desolated planes. Tellingly, Silvestrov refers to some of his works as “cosmic pastorals”.<sup>1</sup> This apt description underlines how *environmental* his music is – it evokes a feeling of vastness, yet combined with an intricacy that elevates the landscape from the level of mere depiction to an enclosing, experiential ambience.

These auditory landscapes are punctuated, haunted and populated by echoes and musical citations from the past. Mozart, Schubert, Bruckner, Mahler – they all wander here, often in a guise that seems alien to their times and musical idioms.

Silvestrov invented the term “postlude” to describe some of his compositions, in contradistinction to the more familiar prelude.<sup>ii</sup> The prelude points forward to something that still has to come – the main part of a work perhaps. The postlude is characterized by its position *after* the main event has taken place. It focuses one’s mind irrevocably on the passing of the main event, and confronts one with a thoroughly open, mostly empty and seemingly desolate future. The echoes of the past serve to underline the expanse of possibilities stretching away in all directions. They open up towards the future instead of re-iterating the irrevocably lost past.

This is all the more curious, as expectations are usually oriented towards the possibilities that the future offers. Yet, Silvestrov’s musical universe has turned 180 degrees around, so that the weight of the past hinders and stunts all temporal orientation in the forward direction. In the absence of clear direction, the presence of the past lingers everywhere, but at the same time it confronts one with a desolation that appears as a vast, empty plane that is threatening in its very spaciousness.

What happened in Silvestrov’s world? First and foremost, in these soundscapes, the traditional symphonic structure with its emphasis on thematic development cannot capture or emulate reality anymore. The orderly and coherent world that such music is supposed to represent is broken, gone and unrecognizably changed. A new structure is needed – one that emulates a world that keeps existing although its ending unfolded already. Therefore, the structure of Silvestrov’s work is an organic yet structured intermingling of tone clusters, motives and atmospheres. Especially the thematic development of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Symphonies (resp. 1980–1982 and 1994–1995) is slow. Their structure sounds like it emulates an evolutionary process rather than a classical thematic development one might find in for example Beethoven, Schumann or Schubert. As musicologist Peter Schmelz has noticed, the very idea of thematic development, of achieving something or elaborating a given musical theme meets its limits here.<sup>iii</sup> Silvestrov’s later orchestral works unfold, but their development has little to do with symphonic development in the traditional sense. It reminds one more of a series of loosely connected auditory manifestations than a purpose-driven teleological process that culminates in a grand finale. And yet, there is a structure discernible in the texture of the music. However, it defies all attempts at characterization by using the historically inherited language of music theory.

One of the reasons for this elusiveness is another aspect of its “post” character. Silvestrov’s works (not only his symphonies) appear to exist beyond the comfortable confines of linear time or historical narrative. Their echoing character positions them beyond the one-directional flow of time. This aesthetic choice may be traced back to the isolated existence of the Soviet Union – trapped as it were behind glass in political isolation. During the 1970s and 1980s, many Eastern Europeans felt as if political stagnation had cut them off from global progress.<sup>iv</sup> We can find traces of

this experienced inertia in works like the Strugatsky brothers' novel *Roadside Picnic* (1972), Solzhenitsyn's *In the First Circle* (1968/2009) and Tarkovsky's films *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979).<sup>v</sup> All these works deal with the effect of a frozen and slowed time, highlighting the tragic character of existence.<sup>vi</sup> Being itself becomes a burden when the temporal progress is removed. It is not that time has stopped, but that change, or development disappears. When every day unfolds exactly in the same manner, the very notion of a forward impetus loses its meaning. Trapped in a domain outside progress or perceptible change, the mind cannot but focus on that which is present, yet repeating *ad infinitum*.

Translating this experience into sound, Silvestrov's decelerated music focuses the mind on the absolute and unavoidable presence of the musical material. The fact that almost nothing happens makes every little occurrence appear as a seismic shift. Every element, every chord, every ethereal musical theme appears meaningful because it is temporarily the only presence on which one can focus. Whether one listens to Silvestrov's music or watches Tarkovsky's films, it is almost impossible to avoid the impression that one is pulled behind an invisible barrier, looking into reality from the outside.

Every auditory element in Silvestrov's tone world becomes top heavy, just as every visual element in Tarkovsky's films acquires an almost unbearable weight. In the absence of everything else, each part of the artwork appears as something so intensely present and imposing that it defines the space in which it appears. Like the immense weight of a black hole, Silvestrov's musical fragments distort the sense of time and space surrounding them, transforming the way in which they appear. However, and more threatening, they expose an emptiness that lies just beyond them. If anything, the cosmic pastoral shows how being is shot through with nothingness.

Being outside the confines of regular time positions the listener in an anterior space where repetition is not the mere duplication of a musical theme, but where the echo takes on the significance of something new, its penetrating novelty depending on the context in which it appears. These constellations of echoes seem to point forward – to things that will come. Especially in the symphonic poem *Metamusik* (1992) the piano part sounds at times strangely bright and hopeful. Combined with low brass parts, its theme evokes images of the last sunrays before an appearing thunderstorm arrives violently at the scene. In an interview for the premiere of the 8<sup>th</sup> Symphony, Schmelz stated:

*In this symphony, which is intentionally devoid of ongoing drama, all you hear are the disturbing echoes of the thunder at the beginning of the work. But there's always an edge to his symphonies, and a sense of other things going on in the distance or below the surface – the menace on the horizon that is represented by the thunder.*<sup>vii</sup>

In Silvestrov's world, each echo points towards the future – an image of what will come as much of what was. What this compositional practice captures is a kind of apprehension for things to come. Such sound landscapes invoke a resigned kind of hope. In the 8<sup>th</sup> Symphony (2012–2013) lyrical themes appear that again sound strangely optimistic and idyllic. They would have not been out of place in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century salon, making their presence in an otherwise dark symphonic world tragic, almost to the point of being naïve. Transformed and fragmentary as these musical themes appear, they point forward towards the possibility of a new world arising from the debris of the old one. One has to start over, but not from scratch.

Two environments intertwine in Silvestrov's music: the echoes of the past (notably those of the Romantic era) punctuate the ambient sounds that form a background. The shifts between foreground and background create a dynamism in which the stasis of repetition is cancelled: each echo emerges, disappears, and re-appears somewhat different. This effect feels invites a foreboding atmosphere because it makes instability and discontinuity audible. The certainty of thematic musical development has disappeared, and what is left is a world that is inherently unpredictable. The puzzle pieces are there, but one can no longer be certain how they fit together.

Throughout the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> symphonies, as well as in the *Metamusik*, the auditory world of Silvestrov sounds almost if someone set the workings of Schopenhauer's *Wille* to music. Ceaselessly transforming, evolving, manifesting and mutating, the thematic material struggles to remain, only to disappear again in the orchestral background. Sometimes these themes return – and Silvestrov makes it masterfully appear as if they *manage* to return. Sound begets its own autonomy in his compositions, behaving almost as a field of forces. In this sense, Schopenhauer and Silvestrov share a common language: they both depart from an autonomous force that manifests itself and that succeeds in uprooting the usual coordinates of cognition. Schopenhauer famously wrote that usually, one perceives the world through the *principium individuationis* or the “veil of Maya”. The core idea is that our world is one of appearances, but that it takes a special moment of insight to apprehend the universe that lies behind them. In a moment of grace or enlightenment, one peaks beyond the veil directly into the structure of reality itself.<sup>viii</sup>

The artistic idiom of Silvestrov deploys a kind of purposive contingency to achieve the effect of a creeping force that permeates reality. The echoes that characterize his music seems at first sight random and without structure. It appears as if they are arbitrary figments of sound existing in a void. By listening closely, the listener succeeds in gradually perceiving patterns, however fleeting they are. The patterns appear as a mild surprise – one must pay attention to hear them, let alone to figure

out an overall structure that ties the symphonic structure together. Silvestrov provides such a structure, but it emerges gradually and inconspicuously out of the material. What looked like auditory detritus at first sight appears to be a symphonic structure that possesses its own rhyme and reason. The apparent contingent pieces (or should one say “ruins”?) of music turn out to have a structure of their own, one that does not answer to preconceived norms, but that are strangely recognizable.

Silvestrov demonstrates this point by showing a field of musical forces at work – the autonomy of these forces is captured in sound, much like the iron filings capture the structure of a magnetic field. Like an observer seeing the patterns form, the listener is witness to the unfolding of Silvestrov’s music only afterwards. The “post” character of Silvestrov’s music is reflected into the listener. It makes the listener an uneasy inhabitant of a world that exists – or persists – after its end has occurred.

The historical format of the symphony makes the progress and thematic development of themes easy to understand. A theme in a traditional symphony is usually introduced, further developed in the exposition, and then it recurs. This traditional structure makes the notion of progress intelligible through variation and repetition. The echoes in Silvestrov’s music undercut this developmental process. One must apprehend the emerging presences of echoes, tiptoeing from one event to another in a world that is fundamentally “off-balance”. Sometimes it appears as coherent, sometimes as disjointed, foreboding or unfathomable.

In the decelerated worlds of Silvestrov, Solzhenitsyn and Tarkovsky, the unassuming building blocks of everyday reality are magnified and placed under close scrutiny. By progressing in this manner, normality itself loses its self-evident character. It can no longer be taken for granted. The inertia of decelerated reality becomes top-heavy – the unbearable weight of being is felt as an inescapable presence.

This artistic tactic *transforms* reality instead of replacing it or questioning it. Silvestrov’s music is an “after-sound”, just as a bright flash produces an after-image on the retina. The auditory residue of history metamorphoses our relation to reality, subtly shifting what counts as normal. At some point, the metamorphosis reaches a point where the very word “normal” loses its customary meaning and starts to open up in new directions. The world itself appears as a repository of remnants. Tarkovsky visualizes this thought with his imagery of the Zone in *Stalker* and the landscape in *The Sacrifice*. Inert, drab, deteriorating, falling apart and yet curiously unchanging, Silvestrov’s and Tarkovsky’s worlds capture a sense of decay that subsides in the background, yet interferes from the periphery of perception, pushing itself inevitably into the center of attention. In *Roadside Picnic*, this sense of encroaching alienation is made effective since nature is allowed to run its course,

while the artificial landscape is inevitably decaying. The original novel describes the Zone in its decaying presence:

*The houses in the Plague Quarter are peeling and lifeless, but the windows are mostly intact, only so dirty that they look opaque. Now at night when you crawl by, you can see the glow inside, as if alcohol were burning in bluish tongues. That's the hell slime radiating from the basement. But mostly it looks like an ordinary neighborhood, with ordinary houses, nothing special about it except that there are no people around.*<sup>ix</sup>

Two worlds collide: that of nature flourishing, while civilization and man-made purposiveness retreats. In the case of *Roadside Picnic*, another life form has moved in, but it is not the type of life we are used to. Its presence distorts an otherwise ordinary neighborhood. Likewise, in Silvestrov's music, civilization is present through musical fragments written by the prime artists the Western tradition, but their works are metamorphosing into something that is unsettlingly distorted.

That there is a theological dimension to this world-picture should not surprise. Silvestrov's music depicts a world that is broken, much like Tarkovsky's cinematic world. It represents an Eden just after the Fall. If anything, the current of events that animates the world has ceased, leaving only remnants and echoes behind. Yet, in Silvestrov's music, there is also an element of redemption, a ray of sunlight that pierces through an overcast sky. The apprehensive echoes point forward to a world that could become new – a new heaven and new earth. The aesthetic of echoes introduces an ethical dimension: it shows that whatever is lost, the world remains. Those inhabiting it have to deal with a new mode of existence – one in which the consciousness of everything that cannot be retrieved is painfully present. The postlude is a world in which absence itself is present. This very gap changes how the present is being experienced. It appears as incomplete, its inhabitants as lacking or missing out. Yet, this very absence creates the space for adopting a new mindset towards the future.

### **III. Transformation**

The novels of the *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014), written by Jeff Vandermeer deal also with a world that is ending, but unlike the world evoked by Silvestrov's music, the plot line suggests that we are still witnessing the end.

The story told in the trilogy is focused on a mysterious area somewhere along an anonymous landscape that is only referred to by its nickname "The Forgotten Coast." Area X is clearly a matter of concern for the government, as a dedicated organization named Southern Reach is tasked with its investigation.

The first book of the trilogy (*Annihilation*) is centered around an enigmatic character called “the Biologist” and is a first-person view report of the twelfth expedition that aimed to explore Area X.<sup>x</sup> The book’s tone is somewhat impersonal, as all the other characters are just introduced by means of their function – as such the expedition consists of the Biologist, the Psychologist, the Anthropologist and the Surveyor. In-between the lines, we learn the background story of the Biologist, who describes herself as introvert and self-contained. Her husband – whom we found out later went missing on an earlier expedition – gave her mockingly the nickname “Ghost Bird” because she was distant and elusive to everyone around her. We learn that the Biologist – to her own embarrassment – is oftentimes more concerned with ecosystems and the creatures inhabiting them than with human company. In a revealing passage, she describes what actually moves her:

*But fun for me was sneaking off to peer into a tidal pool, to grasp the intricacies of the creatures that lived there. Sustenance was for me tied to ecosystem and habitat, orgasm the sudden realization of the interconnectivity of living things. Observation had always meant more to me than interaction.<sup>xi</sup>*

In this short passage, a theme that unfolds its nightmarish depths throughout the story appears for the first time: nature is infinitely interconnected, and we can comprehend its intricacy only obliquely and fleetingly.

In the second book of the trilogy (*Authority*) a new, enigmatic character named “Control” is introduced. He is tasked with interrogating the members of the twelfth expedition when they turn up in unexpected locations all over the country, without someone having noticed them. The Biologist is held captive in the Southern Reach facility, although it is revealed later on that the real Biologist never left Area X, and that Ghost Bird is a duplicate fashioned by it.

The past of Control is retold in a series of non-chronological fragments. The relations to his co-workers at the Southern Reach facility are strained by his difficult relationship with the co-director (named Grace) and his mother, who works as a high-ranking spy. The third book (*Acceptance*) focuses on what happened in Area X and introduces former preacher Saul Evans in detail. Evans provides one of the core motifs of the trilogy: a mysterious string of words that could be a sermon. The third book delves into the background of the Psychologist and her relation to Evans, and as it turns out, she becomes caught in the machinations of political power that loom large in the background of the entire story.

If anything, Area X is a presence that forms a trauma for all involved. None of the characters have any idea of its origins, its purpose, how it functions or whether it wants something. Throughout all the books, there is a feverish speculation going on about the very nature of Area X. In the case of one of the scientists (named Whitby)



at the Southern Reach facility, his personality itself is almost devoured by it, as the mystery never leaves his mind. Forwarding an explanatory theory involving parallel worlds, he contends:

*“And in some of them,” Whitby explained, “we solved the mystery and in some of them the mystery never existed, and there **never was** an Area X.” This said with a rising intensity. “And we can take comfort in that. Perhaps we could even be content with that.” His face fell as he continued: “If not for a further thought. Some of the universes where we solved the mystery might be separated from us by the thinnest of membranes, the most insignificant of variations. This is something always on my mind. What mundane detail aren’t we seeing, or what things are we doing that lead us away from the answer.”<sup>xii</sup>*

Like Silvestrov’s world in need of redemption, Whitby touches a theological theme here. Essentially, he complains “what have we done wrong?” or “what did we miss?”. Redemption is not on the horizon, but the sinner yearns for it. Not coincidentally, the string of words that forms one of the main themes of the trilogy reads: “Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead...”.

Vandermeer captures masterfully a duality in modernity by touching on this theme. On one hand, Southern Reach employs all kinds of measurements and scientific research methods to isolate and quantify the elusive entity that is Area X. Frustratingly enough, the area resists all attempts at characterization and the mass of data that is gathered becomes soon useless. It opens an abyss that has an existential dimension, forcing human beings to re-evaluate their understanding of their place in the cosmos. On the other hand, the landscape of Area X is described in lavish detail and is often referred to as a “pristine wilderness”. For anyone who ventures in, the overwhelming presence of a landscape that has not been touched for more than 30 years is frightening and fascinating in equal measure. As a world devoid of human influences, Area X has subtly and almost imperceptibly changed what is seen as normal.

This change does not only show itself in extraordinary phenomena, but in a specific kind of presence that is almost ordinary — but not quite. For all the characters involved, the nature of Area X is “out there”, but at the same time it is *intensely present*. Its elements are entirely natural, but unexpectedly nature itself opens up an existential chasm: those who visit the area behold a world without humanity. Momentarily, humans are afforded a glimpse of an ecosystem that happily persists without them. They are reduced to “just one of the ordinary species”, like rabbits, lizards, thistles, jays, or seagulls:

*We also needed to acclimate ourselves to the environment. In the forest near base camp one might encounter black bears or coyotes. You might hear a sudden croak and watch a night*

*heron startle from a tree branch and, distracted, step on a poisonous snake, of which there were at least six varieties. Bogs and swamps hid huge aquatic reptiles, and so we were careful not to wade too deep to collect our water samples.<sup>xiii</sup>*

Again, this is a theme that is deeply Schopenhauerian. In characteristically hyperbolic terms, Schopenhauer wrote that life was just an attempt to escape oblivion – all suffering is but an antechamber while we await the arrival of the inevitable.<sup>xiv</sup> In Area X, the inevitable has already happened, and the visitors are witnesses of a world in which they play no role any longer. Instead, as the Biologist remarks “once you see the beauty in desolation it changes you”.<sup>xv</sup>

A related and equally unsettling way in which Area X changes reality is by its very elusiveness. Expedition members who cross the border while going in, return in a mysterious way, their minds blank and without any memory. Fragmentary reports describe mass hallucinations, violence and instances where expedition members saw doppelgangers of themselves. In the novels, people who have visited Area X are described as “changed”, with “empty eyes”. They have changed beyond the constraints of usual human subjectivity. They are not human in the usual sense, and maybe even beyond comprehension for ordinary humans.

This subtle hint is disturbing: humanity has unraveled the principles of evolution but thought itself exempt from it. Notably, humanity has purposively steered and directed evolution, playing lord and master over the substance of nature, creating productive cattle, ornamental flowers and drought-resistant crops. In the Southern Reach trilogy, this position is radically undermined: suddenly, some humans realize that evolution is working on *them*, and that some of its most fundamental mechanisms still elude us. Our dominion over nature is revoked, and unexpectedly, nature itself changes humans in ways that are incomprehensible to them, that surpass their rational capacity. When Ghost Bird, Control and Grace find themselves stranded in Area X at the end of the trilogy, the following, telling conversation ensues:

*“Do you believe me?” Grace said. “I’ve seen strange stars in the sky at night, too. I have seen the rifts in the sky. I have lived here for three years.”*

*“Then tell me—how can the sun shine, the stars, the moon? If we are not on Earth?”*

*“That’s not the critical question,” Ghost Bird said. “Not for organisms that are so masterful at camouflage.”*

*“Then what is?” Control frustrated, trying to take in the enormity of the idea, and Ghost Bird found it painful to watch.*

*“The critical question,” Grace said, “is what is the purpose of this organism or organisms. And how do we survive.”*

*“We know its purpose,” Control said. “Which is to kill us, to transform us, to get rid of us. Isn’t that what we try to avoid thinking about? What the Director, you” —pointing at*

Grace— “and Cheney and all the rest had to keep suppressing? The thought that it just wants to kill us all.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Due to the existence of Area X, the idea of human-realized progress is turned upside down. Writing in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hegel could confidently assert that Spirit became self-conscious of its historical development. He asserted that “substance became subject”.<sup>xvii</sup> In other words: the material building blocks of nature, whether organic compounds, genes, molecules or alleles have conspired to evolve into an organic entity possessing self-consciousness. Therefore, these entities comprehend their own place in the vastness of the universe – their substance becomes the subject of their attention. In Area X, this process is reversed: subjects become substance again. Whatever entity Area X is, it regards humans just as a substance to be transformed and evolved into new lifeforms. This dawning and threatening realization permeates the novels and appears as *the* inevitable – and therefore all the more existentially troubling. Annihilation is literally at the door; the only problem is that it takes its time, leaving humanity cowering in fear. The question that Control asks says it all – what if we are in the process of being transformed beyond what we can imagine?

The story illustrates this point by emphasizing on the frustration of scientists who try to work out rules for the behavior of this alien ecosystem. While the origin of Area X is only hinted at, it is clear that the organism or organisms that created it are in no way comprehensible to humanity. An insurmountable gap between human comprehension and the depths of nature opens up, leaving a traumatic mark throughout the whole book. In fact, the story can be read as a description of humanity’s futile attempts to grasp, comprehend and control the unknown.

The fragmentary nature of Area X visualizes this struggle. Expedition members return without crossing the border checkpoints; a plant that cannot die is retrieved from the area; an amorphous creature with a single arm writes the sermon-like text that surfaces throughout the trilogy on the wall of a spiraling tunnel. Inside the area the weather is different than outside. Time inside and outside the border moves at different speeds. All these phenomena do not add up to form a coherent picture. They are local manifestations of a larger phenomenon that remains hidden. If we put this in Timothy Morton’s terms, we see that Area X is somewhat like a *hyperobject*.

Morton’s concept of hyperobjects is timely, as it provides us with conceptual tools to think about the truly global scale of things. One characteristic of hyperobjects is their *non-locality*.<sup>xviii</sup> We are used to thinking in space and time, but the fact that a hyperobject is non-local proves to be a puzzling phenomenon. A good example is global warming: we experience it as higher temperatures, reports of increasingly frequent superstorms, shifts in the distribution of plant species, or the unfortunate appearance of a new type of mosquito that did not invade bedrooms twenty years

ago. All these signs are local manifestations of a global set of interlocking phenomena. Area X eludes comprehension by manifesting itself in a non-local way – it cannot be grasped as a single, geographically circumscribed entity.

Second, hyperobjects create *temporal undulation*. If we contemplate the vastness of the universe, or the fact that we are literally stardust, the number of hours that it would take to travel to Mars, the lifespan of a Galapagos tortoise, or the fact that the plastics we use are remnants of decomposed ferns from the Devonian period, time itself disintegrates under the weight of the past. And in considering phenomena like global warming, time appears to morph into something unfamiliar under the weight of the future as well:

*There is a time that is beyond predictability, timing, or any ethical or political calculation. There is an **elsewhere elsewhere**. There is a place that is “nowhere” and yet real: not a Neoplatonic beyond, but a real entity in the real universe. We should then entertain the possibility that hyperobjects allows us to see that there is something futural about objects as such.*<sup>xix</sup>

All these features apply to Area X. It defies prediction or calculation; it is too close yet far off; it is present but not of this world; and above all, it is ominously futural – it points to a future that we would like to avoid but that we cannot stop.

Like a glacier that implacably and continuously carves its passage through the landscape, Area X works away at the edge of our reality. Imperceptibly, it metamorphoses the world around it. Bit by bit, the world changes, by “something peering through what we think as reality”.<sup>xx</sup> No sudden change takes place, but a creeping mutation emanating from nature itself changes reality beyond our grasp. The metamorphosis of a new and utterly alien reality is underway in plain sight.

In this regard, the *Southern Reach* trilogy shares its thematic content with Ulrich Beck’s notion of the *Metamorphosis of the World*.<sup>xxi</sup> Earlier theorists had characterized modern life as the experience of a reality that becomes more fleeting by the day. Karl Marx famously coined the phrase that “all that is solid melts into air”, and Marshall Berman gave his study of modernity the same title.<sup>xxii</sup> Likewise, Zygmunt Bauman spoke of a “liquid modernity”, a world where long-standing securities like a career, basic insurance and societal norms become increasingly fluid, creating a sense of bewilderment and loss in people craving such reassurances.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In Beck’s words: “Metamorphosis implies a much more radical transformation in which the certainties of modern society and something quite new is emerging.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Beck’s contribution is that he noticed that modern life became not liquid overnight. If anything, modern life perpetually re-invents itself, changing the coordinates of normality. It does so in a gradual manner, and often the change is only felt

afterwards through its effects. Like a hyperobject, metamorphoses like global warming or the increasing digitalization of our identities are felt afterwards through their effects. They form a world of existential echoes that replace each exclamation mark with a question mark. In the *Southern Reach* trilogy, the metamorphosis is dramatized through the presence of Area X. However, the existential issues that are pressing for the characters are relevant for humanity as a whole.

#### IV. Apprehension

The music of Silvestrov and the narrative of Area X are both suffused with a sense of *apprehension*. The word has a double meaning: first, one can look forward in apprehension and open oneself towards what is coming one's way. Second, the term in its Kantian sense describes the way that we grasp objects.<sup>xxv</sup> For Kant, the term is *technical*; in the case of the artistic worlds we discussed, the term is deeply *existential*.

It is existential because the way that we apprehend our world is closely related to our *Weltbild* (world-picture).<sup>xxvi</sup> This representation of the world we inhabit determines how we view the cosmos and our own place in it. The presence of foreboding, however, forms a dark and threatening sky above the entire picture. As Beck notes, global warming and climate change make us truly cosmopolitan: we are united on a planet with nowhere else to go. And while Beck asks the worthwhile question "how can we think of climate change as an opportunity?", is it clear that for many people, the presence of global warming has immediate consequences that cannot be escaped or turned into opportunities. The "slow violence" that eats away at their existence is hardly visible, as it is distributed in time and space.

Silvestrov's artistic world makes a world-picture of resignation audible. In this reality, the debris of the past constitutes a painful and tragic presence. The listener must deal with the echoes that are essential building blocks of the world he finds himself in. When we transpose this vision onto our world, we see that the echoes we inherited will linger for a long time and will possibly never fade away. Modern consumer society generated a lasting echo of resource depletion, ecosystem destruction, and elevated CO<sub>2</sub> levels. Modern medicine increased the lifespan of individuals and has ironically contributed to overpopulation by being extremely effective. Modern mass media actively alter our perception of the world on an unprecedented scale. Digitalization will alter the face of humanity beyond recognition once more and more digital technologies are linked to our cognitive apparatus.

In such a world, Silvestrov's approach provides an attitudinal alternative: to be able to start over by confronting the only choice we have: artfully repurposing the structures of the past. Where "high modernity" conceived of the road to the future as

an overcoming and erasure of the past, Silvestrov starts over by reconfiguring the past in new constellations.<sup>xxvii</sup> Doing away with the past is not possible – its echoes still resound.

This vision shies away from the modernist vision of a technology-driven highway to paradise. It also avoids reactionary pessimism or a naive “back to nature” approach. There is no nature to go back to, or at least, it is not what it used to be. Our world-picture has metamorphosed, and some of the old categories for thinking about our role as a species have changed or have disappeared altogether. Thus, maybe our new attitude ought not to be characterized by technocratic optimism or reactionary pessimism, but by what Schopenhauer described as “denying the Will” – a self-imposed asceticism in the face of desire. However, this is not the voluntary asceticism of a monk or hermit, but an unwavering acceptance of the predicament we find ourselves in. This existential attitude shies away from consumerism that will guarantee abundance in perpetuity. We must reject it in order to peek beyond our illusionary world-picture.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The old world-picture is increasingly irrelevant for contemporary ecological circumstances. Its reliance on economic growth, profit and the ceaseless transformation of natural resources into consumer products cannot last forever. Clinging to this vision is the reason that we will enter a new world far quicker than we foresaw. Nevertheless, some of the accomplishments of the old order may be sorely needed to make choices that allow new generations to sustain themselves. Humanity has to live with some of its most promising accomplishments *and* with the consequences of its worst excesses. Therefore, we may need to look at the world with a renewed sense of apprehension, but not with a sense of unbridled joy. Presently, we do not know exactly what mechanisms we have set in motion through our global existence as a species. We have no idea what the long-term consequences of our growing societies will be. The tragic note here is that our failures *and* accomplishments accompany any conceivable future, and we need to apprehend them with a combined sense of awe and agency.

Aesthetically, adopting an “attitude of apprehension” may well lead to a renewed interesting in agency as such. The core premise of the *Southern Reach* trilogy is that humans start to recognize that there are different types of agency in the universe, some of which actually work on *them*. In realizing this, our finitude forces itself onto us: the type of subjectivity that defines us is the very cause that we can foresee our own demise. Self-consciousness enables us to recognize the enormous potential of another, alien force for which we are mere substance. In Vandermeer’s novels, this premise leads to an atmosphere of ominous foreboding.

But there is redemption to be found here – if we are able to recognize the agency of other actors in the world in which we are embedded, we may peek beyond a self-

imposed “veil of Maya”: our subjectivity will not be the pinnacle of evolution, although we may be the authors of its inevitable demise. We may continue to exist, but in a different form than we could imagine.

The first step in thinking of ourselves as one type of agency among others is to do away with the existing world-picture of nature. No longer is nature an external domain or an inert conglomerate of resources. Instead, it is a half-object that we can apprehend only partially, its depths inaccessible to us. Surprisingly, we are confronted on a daily basis with the unknown. We go to sleep every night, but the precise cause of sleep is unknown. We do not have a clear definition of what consciousness is (despite claims to the contrary); the precise dynamic of the chemical cycle in the oceans eludes us; we have no idea of the long-term consequences of the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters. Like Area X, our reality does not add up to a coherent picture. On the contrary, the more data we assemble, the less we seem to understand, as the resulting worldview does not add up as neatly as we expected.

It is against this background of incomplete knowledge that Morton proposes that we should opt for an object-oriented approach to nature. Instead of dissecting objects and phenomena into datasets and calculations, we should be ready to confront objects in all their traumatic directness, without prying them apart in attempt to control and direct. In other words, we should be ready to see object as irreducible units that we must deal with. As example, Morton cites Francisco López’s musical work *La Selva* (1998). It is a recording of rainforest sounds that is carefully looped, mixed and equalized. Out of short recordings, a composite sound-image emerges that represents the existence of the rainforest.

However, in my view, Morton misses here the mark somewhat when he says that seeing an object *as* object treats it as a *unit*. López’s *La Selva* is not a monolithic representation of the rainforest, but a multi-impression, or “multiple apprehension” as Kant called it.<sup>xxix</sup> For Kant, the overlaying of multiple images of the same type creates an overall average. Overlaying the images of a thousand individual human bodies creates the representation of “the average human”. In the case of hyperobjects and also *La Selva*, this tactic does not work any longer. We must cope with the full complexity of the object, and no matter how much representations we superimpose, the picture does not become coherent.

That being said, *La Selva* allows us to experience the complexity for which we fashioned the label “rainforest” in its textured and variegated richness. Its careful looping and equalizing create something new that is not faithful recording of a rainforest in action, but an impure and polished sonic representation. This representation is an echoing memory, but one that like Silvestrov’s soundscape has a certain apprehensive and strangely alive quality.

The same lively and layered qualities can be observed in the *Axial Age* paintings (2005–2007) of the German artist Sigmar Polke. Fascinated with the notion of “mistakes” or “printing errors”, he started to combine and overlay different resins, toxins, uranium rays and reactive compounds that resulted in spontaneous chemical reactions on the painting surface. In the *Axial Age* series, the pigments applied to translucent canvases will gradually change color due to their exposure to the sunlight. Through this process, the entire idea of the artist’s control over a work is turned around – the painting becomes the subject of an inevitable process of transformation that is law-bound yet spontaneous. Under the hands of the artist, the materials reveal their agency, transforming the work in something quite beyond what one can control, but that nevertheless is part of its artistic content.

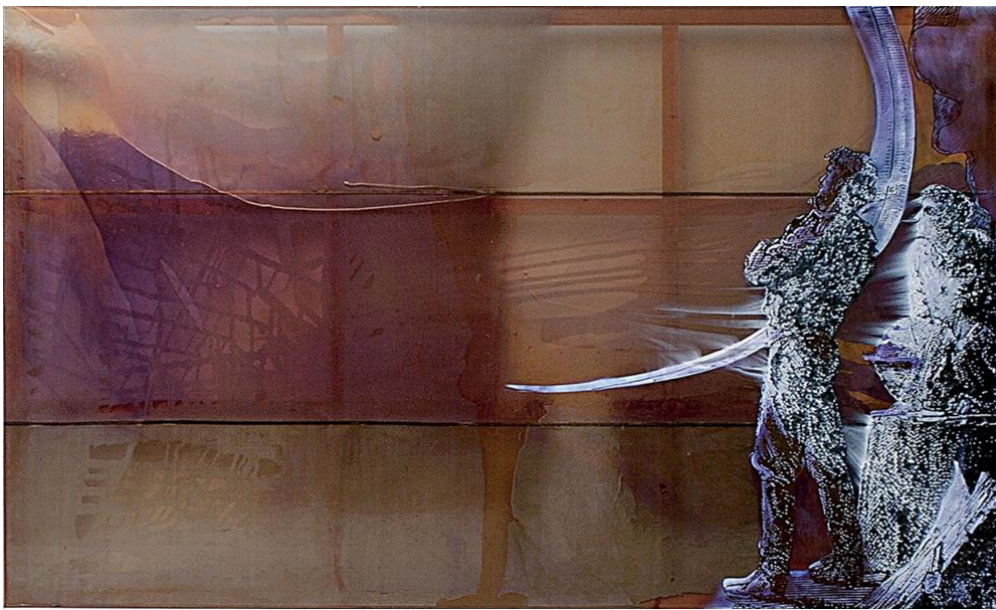


Figure 1: Sigmar Polke “*Forward*”, 2007. Pinault Collection. Copyright: The Estate of Sigmar Polke. SIAE, Rome, 2016. Image via palazzograssi.it

Recorded sounds and painted colors function as echoes, but the technology that made the recording possible is also an echo of sorts, albeit a technological one. It is the result of a series of inventions and machines that led up to modern recording equipment and painting techniques. In the new world picture, the mode of expression is radically impure. It involves recording equipment, rainforest sounds, and digital means for sharing the artwork; technology and nature and technology again. In the case of paintings, it involves the invention of painting techniques, canvas and production of compounds. In this impure mode of being, the realm of unspoiled, untarnished nature is gone forever. At this point in time, we have to enter a new world that irrevocably bears our imprint. It is a new, metamorphosed word-picture that we must inhabit, and of which we do not know the full outline.



The implicit themes of the *Southern Reach* trilogy explore this thought, working out its implications. However, the estrangement sets in when human beings encounter a world that bears an imprint they cannot recognize. They look upon a world that bears someone else's imprint – a view that is just as strange as the one that humanity must currently internalize. Nature in its Romantic, untarnished state is gone – its otherness over and against culture has disappeared, and with it the imaginative space that provides a counterweight to humanity's influence.

Some of the strangeness that accompanies this new world-picture is visible in Philip Beesley's installation *Hylozoic Ground* (2010). In collaboration with an engineer and a chemist, the artist created a fragile, intricate acrylic forest. A densely distributed network of microsensors and valves enables the installation to respond to the breathing, movement or touch of visitors. It moves with an almost imperceptible breathing motion and is able to filter basic chemical elements out of the air, synthesizing them into new compounds. The uncanny thing about encountering the installation is the awareness that it has a metabolic rhythm of its own. Its fragility and Devonian charm lures you in like the Venus flytrap. It responds to your presence, but you do not know what it wants. Its intentions are tangible, but not intelligible. The *Hylozoic Ground* represents a natural-technological otherness that cannot be fathomed directly. The realization that the installation is carefully engineered makes the whole experience all the more fascinating. For a moment, you step in the shoes of the characters that ventured into Area X, but fortunately with more sense of control.



Figure 2: The *Hylozoic Ground* installation (2010) by Philip Beesley. Image via [dezeen.com](http://dezeen.com)

Humanity has to confront its imprint on the biosphere and finds itself again in a universe that is strangely incomprehensible. Natural processes, dynamics on timescales that elude our understanding, imperceptible changes in our biosphere and confrontations with cataclysmic events of the past demand a regimen of expression that – like Silvestrov’s music – probes and reflects the new intricacies of our world. There is a close kinship between these aesthetics and what Ruskin called “vital beauty” or Schopenhauer called “the better consciousness”.

Above all, it is an aesthetics that is imbued with a kind of spontaneity – whether the appearing and disappearing echoes of a Silvestrov symphony, the endless transformation of Area X, the looping sounds of *La Selva*, the breathing motion of the *Hylozoic Ground*, or the endlessly developing intricacy of Sigmar Polke’s paintings. All these works showcase a naturalistic spontaneity that overwhelms one, that invites one to “become” it. In this sense, the American composer John Luther Adams was very perceptive when he named two of his recent works *Become Ocean* (2013) and *Become Desert* (2018). In a structure of ceaseless becoming, transformation and metamorphoses, Adams created sonic immersions in which one *fuses* with the artworks. Its inner dynamics invite one in and encroach on one’s mind. In such works is a spontaneity at work, a life force that animates them:

*Spontaneity is a beauty that is in contact with the sublime, just enough to make it a force of life rather than death.*<sup>xxx</sup>

It is spontaneity that allows us to glimpse the Sublime in all its vitality and vividness. Flower petals unfolding, sand dunes shifting, the play of reflections on the surface of a pond, the formation of a thunderstorm at the horizon, galloping zebras, the heaving of a breathing body and the endless and relentless variation produced by nature display a ceaseless life force – again a version of Schopenhauer’s Will. To recognize this is to pass the threshold into new aesthetic domains. Such domains may be tragic and foreboding, as in the music of Silvestrov; yet, there is also redemption and hope to be found. At the very end of the Area X trilogy, the remaining characters head back to the border, only to find that it has advanced beyond its original position. They find that the whole Southern Reach Facility has been overtaken by it. Literally, the old world is in ruins, and a new one has arrived:

*By mutual unspoken decision, they halted at the edge of the building. From there, a gash in the side showed them three floors of empty, debris-strewn rooms, and a greater darkness within. (...) “What if there is no world out there? Not as we know it? Or no way out to the world?” Grace saying this, while existing in that moment in a world that was so rich and full.*<sup>xxxii</sup>

The old world is in ruins and is “building its own ecosystem”.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The new order is already here, and yet Grace fails to notice it. She simply cannot – yet – accept that

reality has metamorphosed, and that old ways of thinking obfuscate the appreciation for the richness of the new. What she lacks is a sense of apprehension, of things yet to come.

Just like the remaining characters exploring Area X, we may need to accept that we are already in a new world, for which we need a new regimen of apprehensive expression: the old world ended yesterday.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Schmelz 2014: 237.

<sup>ii</sup> Such as the *Postludium for violin* (1981) and the *Postludium for cello and piano* (1982).

<sup>iii</sup> Schmelz 2014: 234–236.

<sup>iv</sup> Schmelz 2014: 234.

<sup>v</sup> This film was based on the Strugatsky brothers' novel *Roadside Picnic*.

<sup>vi</sup> Tarkovsky published a book on filmmaking in 1986. Its title is *Sculpting in Time*, the term Tarkovsky used to describe his art.

<sup>vii</sup> Serinus 2016.

<sup>viii</sup> Schopenhauer 1969: 17, 113, 253, 257.

<sup>ix</sup> Strugatsky and Strugatsky 2012: 21.

<sup>x</sup> This novel has been adapted in the 2018 film of the same name, directed by Alex Garland.

<sup>xi</sup> Vandermeer 2014: 72.

<sup>xii</sup> Vandermeer 2014: 250.

<sup>xiii</sup> Vandermeer 2014: 4.

<sup>xiv</sup> Schopenhauer 1969: 314–315.

<sup>xv</sup> Vandermeer 2014: 4.

<sup>xvi</sup> Vandermeer 2014: 489.

<sup>xvii</sup> Hegel 1977: 21–22 (§37).

<sup>xviii</sup> Morton 2013: 38–54.

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<sup>xix</sup> Morton 2013: 67.

<sup>xx</sup> Vandermeer 2014: 488.

<sup>xxi</sup> Beck 2016

<sup>xxii</sup> Berman 2010.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Bauman 2007.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Beck 2016: 3.

<sup>xxv</sup> Kant 1999: 228–229 (A99–A100).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Beck 2016: 5–7.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Scott 1998.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Schopenhauer 1969: 386–392.

<sup>xxix</sup> Kant 2001: 117–118 (5.233–5.234).

<sup>xxx</sup> Spuybroek 2012: 56.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Vandermeer 2014: 586–587.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Vandermeer 2014: 586.

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