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INTERVENTION

Epidemic Strangeness and the Need for Myth in the Anthropocene

Theodoros Kyriakides

In this essay I attempt to draw some crucial theoretical parallelisms between ancient Greek cosmology and the Anthropocene. Taking inspiration from Marcel Detienne and Timothy Morton's work, I deploy the figure of Dionysus as a conceptual persona that can help us think of *strangeness* as a non-human trait that human societies in the Anthropocene must urgently engage with. Events such as the ongoing Covid-19 epidemic, through which non-humans are brought to the forefront of politics and social relations, traditionally result in attempts of sublating strangeness through human modes of knowledge. As I argue, epidemics instead demand the creation of mythic practices, collectives and techniques through which strangeness is not eliminated or understood but rather elevated to a fundamental feature of social relations. In such sense, Greek antiquity presents a critical vector of ethical and ecological intervention to the current state of the Anthropocene, because it showcases a cosmos in which human life and society are constantly embedded and negotiated amid non-human strangeness.

Keywords: cosmology; epidemics; Anthropocene; strangeness; myth

Act I

'You don't know what Dionysus looks like.'
—Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*

A consistent motif of ancient Greek society was an event during which a foreign deity entered the walls of ancient city-states and demanded to be acknowledged by its locals. Anthropologist and historian Marcel Detienne writes that ancient Greeks referred to these events as epidemics. As Detienne (1989: 4) explains, for the Greeks '"epidemics" were sacrifices offered to the divine powers when they came to visit a region or a temple or attended a feast or were present at a sacrifice.'

Epidemics direct us to a crucial feature of the ancient world, namely the relation human societies entertained with a cosmological border, which can be understood as their outside. The outside should not be regarded as a geographical area or a spatial vicinity but rather as an indiscernible domain of non-human activity and, potentially, entanglement. As Quentin Meillassoux (2008) shows through his critique of the correlationist circle, ever since antiquity humans have developed epistemologies and models of knowledge used to map such unknown and imperceptible facets of being. Yet, as Meillassoux argues, these scientific and philosophical tools do not constitute factual reflections but rather philosophical, epistemological and metaphysical approximations (correlations) of this external milieu.[1] The limit of human knowledge and perception is hence the *brink* outside entities have to cross in order to become perceptible: rather than a means of understanding them, human knowledge is the cosmological mist from which such entities emerge and enter human relations.

Out of all the divinities that saturated this outside, non-human milieu, Detienne addresses Dionysus as the god with the highest 'epidemic drive' (1989: 5). As Detienne (1989: 8) writes, Dionysus 'is the god who comes from outside, who arrives from Elsewhere'. This erratic and unpredictable nature of Dionysus saturated ancient Greek perceptions and was often venerated in mythology, tragedy and comedy. Consider the following interpretation of Euripides's tragedy *Bacchae*, provided by ethno-psychiatrist Tobie Nathan. Dionysus appears in the city-state of Thebes determined to prove his worth as a god. The city's patron deity, Apollo, is nowhere to be found. 'Dionysus is the new force suddenly imposing itself in the city. It is unknown, therefore strange' (Nathan 2018: 170). In Nathan's description, Dionysus does not appear as an anthropomorphic figure as is often the case with hymnic or mythological representations. Rather, Dionysus manifests as an enigmatic, vital force whose origin cannot be defined. For all we know, it is eternal. It is a force the people of Thebes gravitate towards but also do not know how to address: 'It brings new obligations with it. Established rituals can neither be drawn from it nor applied to it' (Nathan 2018: 170).

Epidemics of the ancient world resulted in periods of cosmological proliferation and contagion, during which

Social and Political Sciences, University of Cyprus, CY
tkyria07@ucy.ac.cy

relations between humans and non-humans multiplied and propagated everyday practices and social relations. Nathan alerts us to the important task human societies and institutions must strive to fulfil during such times, namely the task of creating new vectors of rituality and sociality (obligations) through which the foreign entity can be approached. Epidemics hence necessitate the creation of novel ritualistic practices, networks of social relations and new forms of representation directed at addressing and acknowledging foreign entities and integrating them in the workings of society. The imbrication of Dionysus with ancient city-states resulted in the emergence of a new mode of social organization and ritual—congregations and processions (*thiasi*) (**Figure 1**), through which intermittent encounters between Dionysus and ancient societies were established and negotiated. In return, such practices and modes of sociality constituted heterogeneous assemblages of animals, humans, plants and divinities, which conveyed the importance and fluidity of human and non-human relations in society. As Hannah Willey (2020: 83) details, an important facet of Dionysian ecstasy, as well as heroic narratives of the ancient world, is a process whereby humans transgress the boundaries of society in order to develop bestial and inhuman qualities.

The plot of the *Bacchae*, on the other hand, is well-known: 'Dionysos is denied his rites' (Detienne 1989: 14). As a result of the hesitation and resistance of Thebean elites to interact with this foreign force, Dionysian worship spreads among the local population akin to a frenzied contagion (*mania*), and king Pentheus ultimately has his head put on a spike by the maenads.

But there is a dissimilarity between the two depictions of Dionysus—Detienne's and Nathans'—which is important for us to discern. Nathan continues to argue that the only way for a city-state to foster a relation between an alien entity such as Dionysus is to come to know it through sets of religious practices and techniques. As Nathan (2018: 171) suggests, 'religions are always procedures for knowing about a divinity…religions are not in any way a bundle of beliefs but the code of the user collective that has centered itself around the job of knowing this specific force.' This is a suggestion that perhaps alludes to Nathan's ethno-psychiatric background, according to which unruly spirits are often associated with illness, and where the curing process is predicated on identifying and exorcizing this agent of disorder, hence effectuating a return to a social and mental equilibrium.

A rebuttal to this suggestion is perhaps that no equilibrium exists, and that unknowability and even chaos are cosmological dimensions vital to human interactions with non-human entities. Detienne (1989: 9) thus emphasizes the essentially strange (*xenos*) nature of Dionysus. In the case of Dionysus' arrival in the Achaean city-state of Patras, 'Dionysos is introduced as a foreign demon, a *xenikos daimon*' (Detienne 1989: 9). In such sense, Detienne writes, Dionysus is doubly strange: he is a guest—a foreign entity coming from the outside—but he is also a strange force that resists cosmological classification in human taxonomies of knowledge and culture. Dionysus is a 'strange stranger' (Detienne 1989: 10), whose epidemics necessitate social mechanisms of accommodation rather than assimilation, spiritualities

Figure 1: Roman mosaic of a Dionysian *thiasos* showcasing anthropomorphic figures, marine creatures and Dionysus riding a bull. Displayed at the Palazzo Massimo in Rome.
Photo: Jean-Pol Grandmont, Wikipedia Commons.

and mythologies of *not-knowing* (Kyriakides and Irvine 2021), rather than epistemologies of knowing.

For the Greeks, then, cosmological 'hospitality' (Morton 2010: 77) does not imply that the strange is rendered familiar. Rather, the duration of an epidemic marks a period during which non-human strangeness is acknowledged and allowed to seep into the fabric of social practices and relations. This is where the crucial difference between Nathan's and Detienne's Dionysus emerges. For the latter, strangeness and ambiguity are not deviant elements a society must resolve in order to return to normality. Rather, strangeness is a cosmological constant located at the heart of social relations, narratives and expectations of the future, which *cannot be resolved or known*. This is the tragic paradox that lies at the heart of Greek tragedies like the *Bacchae*: as Theodore Oudemans and André Lardinois (1987: 95) put it, 'The tragically ambiguous character of these gods comes to light when we realize that they represent disorderly power which on the one hand has to be expelled as a threat, but on the other hand is indispensable to support order.' Otherwise put, a collective propensity towards engaging epidemic strangeness constitutes a societal agreement, made among peers, in order for the Greek ideal of society to remain plausible.

Act II

Like Detienne, philosopher Timothy Morton (2010) deploys the term 'strange stranger' to denote the intensifying imbrication of Anthropocene societies with their outside milieus, which Morton refers to as an 'ecology.'[2] Akin to Detienne's Dionysus, Morton's (2010: 42) strange stranger is also an entity whose cosmological standing remains essentially ambiguous and which resists epistemological domestication:

> The strange stranger…is something or someone whose existence we cannot anticipate. Even when strange strangers showed up, even if they lived with us for a thousand years, we might never know them fully-and we would never know whether we had exhausted our getting-to-know process.

Morton's ecology is not scalar and does not operate according to levels of spatiality (macro/micro) but through frequencies of cosmological alterity and affectivity. As Morton (2010: 78) writes elsewhere, 'we need thresholds, not spheres or concentric circles, for imagining where the strange stranger hangs out.' Cosmological hospitality is the outcome of humans becoming receptive and attuned to such alter-frequencies of strangeness, a receptivity that for Morton culminates in an ecological mode of thought.

In such sense, we can understand the Anthropocene as a porous cosmological expanse radically different to the epoch of modernity. Modernity presented a self-enclosed, totalizing narrative crucially dependent on the qualification that nothing can exist outside of its epistemological and institutional coordinates. Modernity, in other words, was an epoch that fundamentally resisted the possibility of strangeness unless it was regarded as something imaginary or fake (Todorov 1975). The point here is not that the outside was relegated to the level of the imaginary, but that human perception of the cosmos became conflated with the shape of human society, hence rendering the possibility of outside existence impossible.

Yet, if strange strangers have a quality we can refer to as 'magical' (Morton 2013), it is exactly because they resist integration in the totalizing, rationalizing zeitgeist of modernity. Modernity was a failed attempt at cosmological segregation. This enclaved narrative and institutional landscape is constantly undercut and disrupted by a barrage of outside 'traffic' (Detienne 1989: 4) in the shape of human and non-human migrants, rising sea levels, nuclear waste, ghosts, guilt, algae, spirits, natural catastrophes, viral outbreaks and narratives of extinction, whose affective capacity intrudes into the workings of human societies. As Nils Bubandt (2018: 3) aptly puts it, the Anthropocene is 'a time when the proper separation between things – between culture and nature, subject and object, human and nonhuman, life and non-life – is collapsing.' By using Freud's concept of the uncanny to indicate the infusion of ecological and weather patterns with eerie behaviour, Bubandt (2018: 5) refigures the scientism and secularism that often pervades narratives of the Anthropocene as 'a time when ghostly forces come to life in ways that are tainted through and through with strangeness.'

The outside thus currently manifests to us not as the affirmation of possibility but as an anxiety—a cosmic condition of sorts—that is increasingly becoming a trope of our collective imagination and sensorium. This anxiety is indexical of an ongoing process of cosmological contagion through which we, humans, are becoming entangled with a newly found milieu. In Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* book trilogy, the outside manifests as the shapeshifting Area X—a gloomy terrain of ecological chimerism operating at the margins of society, which remains impervious to human attempts of cataloguing. Throughout VanderMeer's trilogy, cosmological proliferation and contagion take the form of 'hauntings' (VanderMeer 2016): incidents where the strangeness of Area X leaks into the fabric of social relations and everyday settings, infecting them with a bizarre, uncanny quality. Where does the sensation of haunting VanderMeer so neatly evokes come from if not from the collective inability of human subjectivity and society to accept that multiple orders of existence and affective registers are simultaneously at play? A human perception of cosmological 'leaking' (Charnley 2021) constitutes a haunting, which emerges from a denial to accommodate the essential spectrality and multiplicity of the cosmos. More and more, we feel places we will never visit.

Act III

> 'The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is trans-gressed' (Haraway 1991: 152).

What would constitute the opposite of a haunting? My speculative, admittedly prescriptive, answer to this question entails an infrastructure of cosmological

hospitality and experimentation that does not regard the intrusion of strange strangers as something out-of-this-world. This infrastructure also necessitates sites and modes of social organization, as well as the development of a certain mode of mythic, collective effervescence that actively partakes and even incites loops of epidemic activity. To put it otherwise, the opposite of haunting necessitates the development of a social landscape of *apodemic commemoration.* 'Apodemics,' as Detienne (1989: 4) explains, 'were sacrifices offered upon the gods' departure' from a city-state. Yet, apodemics did not mark the end of epidemics. Rather, an apodemic acted as a social technology of mythic memorialization, through which non-human strangeness was inscribed in collective memory, hence affirming its position in society. The meantime between epidemics and apodemics was hence saturated with festivals, plays and rituals, through which transient and recurrent interactions between humans and non-humans were acknowledged and celebrated.

The very possibility of developing apodemic practices in the Anthropocene first and foremost necessitates a refiguring of the institution of 'politics' as the main medium through which we relate to our ecological concerns. There is another way to describe our ecological impasse, which does not necessitate the use of modern buzzwords such as 'climate change,' 'data,' 'policy' or 'experts': akin to the people of Thebes, our collective mania stems from the influence of a bitter *daimon*, upset at our failure to acknowledge him. The collective paranoia and anxiety pervading the Anthropocene, which is increasingly becoming framed as a social and political malaise, is in reality the result of an ecological failure of communicating and accommodating outside guests.

Indeed, in the past few years, Western reality and society have acquired a claustrophobic, nightmarish quality. Paradoxically, the more we become aware of our position in a cosmic and ecological openness, the more trapped we feel. If the traditional definition of politics and its associated institutions have to be radically refigured, it is because they are historically and intrinsically connected to this toxic image of society and the human subject as bounded, holistic, functioning systems. These are political institutions and narratives that keep 'manning the wall' (Wakefield 2020: 58) and perpetually reinforce the boundaries of modernity. Like Luis Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel*, we find ourselves locked in a hellish room we cannot escape. 'Everything is outside, yet it is impossible to get out' (Wolff, in Meillassoux 2008: 6).

In her recent book, *Anthropocene Back Loop*, Stephanie Wakefield (2020: 57) develops a decisive critique of the 'front loop'— a space of liberal governance saturated with notions of social stability and safety—and instead evokes the Anthropocene back loop as 'an unknown place of chaotic fragmentation and freefall, but also experimentation and potential, where beings and things are opened to new possibilities'. By opposing neoliberal regimes that seek to confine non-human strangeness to human models of policy and governance, Wakefield elucidates a world where grassroots responses and backyard projects of infrastructure, art and survival create spaces of radical ecological spirituality, relationality and consciousness.

Is it accidental that Wakefield (2020: 130) ultimately chooses to connect such experimental open-ended images of the Anthropocene and humanity to a non-anthropocentric interpretation of the Greek myth of Prometheus? Or, otherwise asked, is it farfetched to suggest that such an experimental milieu can benefit from a *mythology*—that is to say, an assemblage of narrativity, materiality and ritual expression, whose objective is reinforcing the position and capriciousness of strange strangers in society?

It is not enough to suggest that the pragmatism of ecological techniques can act as vehicles or projection of myth. Rather than acting as mere representations, novel ecological practices can provide the ferment from which myth emerges and circumscribes itself in society. Or, as Donna Haraway (1991: 165) puts it, 'The boundary is permeable between tool and myth…Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other.' On the one hand, amassing such mythology and set of practices is not a radical suggestion, because the Anthropocene is already loaded with a mythological narrative of human mastery over nature. On the other hand, this is a project that demands refiguring our very understanding of myth: since Plato and the relegation of the cosmos to a philosophical project of knowledge, and knowing, we came to regard myths as fictitious exactly due to their essential relationship to strangeness (Lincoln 1999). On the contrary, as an abundance of indigenous and non-Western examples showcase, myths constitute an 'eternal present' (Kopenawa and Albert 2013: 496n23; see also Murtagh 2019: 125): a foundational narrative, responsive to unfolding ecological events, which modulates and orchestrates recurrent refrains of the cosmos. If the *Bacchae* constitutes one such mythical narrative of the Anthropocene, it is exactly because it marks the return of an epidemic epoch where moderns must progressively learn to do what the ancient Greeks did before them, namely, continuously discern and negotiate the position of strange strangers in society.

The concreteness of a mythic Anthropocene is currently a global project open to speculation and experimentation. Art certainly offers a gateway into achieving an initial semblance of such concreteness. Consider, for example, the 2018 exhibition 'Gaia in the Anthropocene' (Kloosterhuis and van Schie 2018), which used myth as a starting point to imagine and articulate alternative ecological futures. Nevertheless, perhaps the biggest challenge we face with regards to developing radical modes of ecological consiousness is reconciling the affirmative facets of artistic expression and reception with the radical ontological premises of a non-human Anthropocene. Emerging hopeful and capable from the ruinated landscape of modernity demands that we receive our position in this cosmic and ecological openness with a measured understanding of our fragility. Like the ancient world, the Anthropocene does not present a stable relational arrangement but a daimonic milieu

in which relations and encounters between humans and non-humans manifest as transient, ambivalent and erratic. In such sense, it could be the case that a mythic Anthropocene is only graspable by affirming disasters and botched encounters of the past as the very foundations for living and crafting future relations with the strange and the unfamiliar (Cole, Dolphijn & Bradley 2016).

Consider, ultimately, the following apodemic sketch etched by Morton (2016: 161–162):

> Let's get small pieces of plutonium, store them in a way that we can monitor them, and encase them in a substance that will not leak radiation…let's put these structures in the middle of every town square…one day there will be pilgrimages to them and circumambulations. A whole spirituality of care will arise around them. Horror and depression will give way to sadness and joy. We bristle plutoniumly. Or we feel suicidal plutoniumly. Or we cry plutoniumly. Or we even dance plutoniumly.

It is no surprise that scientists involved in the Manhattan Project came to refer to an unstable mass of plutonium used in World War II as a 'demon core': the ancient Greeks considered *daimons* such as Dionysus to be enigmatic, volatile forces, which unpredictably and powerfully intervened in the lives of humans (Smith 1978). Like Dionysian *thiasi*, the milieu imagined by Morton is one in which plutonium constitutes a contagious strangeness, placed at the heart of human relations. Human entanglement with plutonium in this case constitutes both a foundational Anthropocene myth and an everyday encounter with non-human spectrality (Barad 2017).[3] The search for new modes of ecological expression and action must hence be coupled with our very own Anthropocene mythology of hurricanes, petrochemicals, parasites, viruses, plants, bacteria, fungi and animals. Such mythology can in turn foster and complement an 'ecology of practices' (Stengers 2005) and staple occasions through which past and future relations between society and strangeness are affirmed and amplified. To cultivate such apodemic practices, of commemorating our non-human interlocutors like the Greeks did, is to accept our position in our newly (re) discovered milieu of strangeness.

Notes

[1] Meillassoux's arguably most contested philosophical facet is his insistence that mathematics can provide the means by which humans can access the outside in-itself. For a critical overview of this point and the rest of Meillassoux work see Harman (2011).

[2] To my knowledge, Morton arrives to the concept of the strange stranger through Derrida's notion of *arrivant* and independently of Dettiene's treatment.

[3] For a scientific perspective on the first atomic blast as the origins of the Anthropocene see Zalasiewicz et al. (2015). For a critical and ethnographically grounded exploration of relations between nuclear technology and the Anthropocene see Hecht (2018).

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Theodoros Kyriakides is an adjunct lecturer at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cyprus. His research interests and publications span across medical anthropology, the anthropology of magic, and science and technology studies. He has published in journals such as *Cultural Anthropology*; *Social Anthropology*; *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*; and *Ethnos*.

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