

## How can we talk about unknowable things?

### *Developing aesthetic guidelines from Timothy Morton's theory of hyperobjects*

In a 2015 episode of 'This American Life' titled, 'Stuck in the Middle (2015),'<sup>1</sup> writer Brett Martin reveals a mysterious condition of his. Any movie he watches while on an airplane, no matter the genre, nor the number of times he's seen it before, will inevitably bring him to tears. Watching movies on the ground does not produce this reaction in him. He ponders the reason why.

Martin considers some specific instigators ("Fear of an accident? Sadness about goodbyes? Recirculated cabin air?"), before settling on a broader culprit - he cries because air travel is absurd. We restrain ourselves inside a metal capsule while it travels at an outrageous altitude and speed, then are ejected into a building that is a strange mirror of the one from which we departed, which might now be on another side of the planet. Our brains, physiologically unchanged for at least forty thousand years, cannot confront this absurdity. The anxiety leaks out, it heightens our other emotions, and as Reese Witherspoon punches Candice Bergen at the climax of the movie, 'Sweet Home Alabama,' writer Brett Martin begins to weep.



*From Left: Reese Witherspoon, mid-punch; Candice Bergen, post-punch. The subtitled line is spoken by Witherspoon to the vanquished Bergen.<sup>2</sup>*

The producers of This American Life recognize that there's something resonant about this story. They've aired it at least thrice through the years (2004, 2011, 2015), and it has always been the final segment of the episode. Martin's theory of airplane-crying leaves listeners at the end of the show to sit with the idea that there might be things of our own construction that are fundamentally too vast for us to comprehend. It is a scenario in which our rational methods of investigation cannot assuage us - no amount of study on the assembly, aerodynamics, or operation of an aircraft will help me hold back the waterworks at forty thousand feet when Constance Wu finally learns about her dad in 'Crazy Rich Asians.' Every few years, this story resurfaces in a world struggling to come to grips with the growing scale of humanity's impact on

<sup>1</sup> "Stuck In The Middle (2015)." This American Life, 3 Apr. 2015, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/553/stuck-in-the-middle-2015>.

<sup>2</sup> Tennant, Andy, director. Sweet Home Alabama. Touchstone Pictures, 2002.

the planet and its inhabitants. “If only we could see the whole picture-” one might think, “- we could solve this problem.” Martin’s theory of airplane-crying gives voice to a sneaking suspicion - “Maybe we can’t. What then?”

This project will take that seemingly dismal view as an opportunity to ask - Can an embrace of the intangibility of global threats like climate change, automation, and inequality help us to communicate about these topics more responsibly and effectively? What are some theories of unknowability out there, and how might they inform our approach to these subjects?

The theory of ‘Hyperobjects’ is a fascinating framework for big unknowable things from contemporary philosopher Timothy Morton. An excellent introduction to hyperobjects can be found in a video called ‘Climate Change is Too Big for our Brains,’ from PBS’s climate-focused Youtube channel, ‘Hot Mess.’<sup>3</sup> The video begins by explaining the premise of the novella ‘Flatland,’ by Edwin Abbott Abbott. In the book, the 2D world of Flatland, which is inhabited by a society of flat geometric shapes, is visited by a sphere. The 2D shapes experience the sphere as an impossibly growing and shrinking circle as it passes through Flatland. The 3D world of ‘Spaceland,’ where the full sphere lives, is inconceivable to the flat shapes. All they can grasp are expressions of the sphere on their plane - manifestations that exhibit impossible behaviors and properties.

Morton proposes that some things, like climate change, are so vast that they can be thought of as extra-dimensional objects - impossible for us to hold in our minds. He calls them ‘Hyperobjects’ and, similar to the relationship between the sphere and flatland, we experience these hyperobjects only through their expressions as they transect our 3D plane.

By using the model of an extra-dimensional visitor to describe massive issues like climate change, the theory of hyperobjects provides a vivid sense of the hidden ‘whole,’ and additionally, a convincing justification for its inaccessibility. The irrational expression of hyperobjects is also useful in elegantly describing why conversations about them can be so difficult to have:

- Packaged meat and factory farms are both expressions of the hyperobject ‘agriculture,’ but are spatially and cognitively distant. For this reason, a person might decry the inhumane treatment of animals in such a facility, but still pick up a chicken breast off a grocery aisle. The distance between the farm and aisle is simply too large - the hyperobject is hidden by its scale.
- Global warming might be just an expression of ‘climate change,’ but is such a drastic and massive object itself that it demands our attention and resources. Sometimes, expression and hyperobject become conflated, leading to unfortunate consequences (-see image below).

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<sup>3</sup> “Climate Change Is Too Big for Our Brains Feat. Mike Rugnetta.” YouTube, PBS Digital Studios, 23 May 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Pqp\\_8XLC6c&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Pqp_8XLC6c&t=1s).



*Image: Senator James Inhofe (R-Okla.) presents one expression of 'climate' (a snowball) as denotative of the whole, to refute evidence of global warming.<sup>4</sup> (2/26/2015)*

- 'America' expresses itself differently to different people - even if they are living in the same place at the same time. America can be both a bastion of democracy *and* a global geo-political tyrant because the 'real' America is the massive and unknowable hyperobject that expresses these opposite characteristics simultaneously as it ripples the fabric of our plane.

Hyperobjects are a useful framework for this project, because Morton takes a very rigorous approach to unknowability. He has carefully laid out for us 5 properties of hyperobjects - each of which provide an insight into how and why they resist our intuition and rational, fact-based communications.<sup>5</sup> However, each property is also a clue on how we, by the tangential approaches of metaphor, insinuation, poetry, rhetoric - the aesthetical approaches over the scientific - might more honestly converse about hidden things.

1) A hyperobject is Viscous:

*Hyperobjects adhere to any other object\* they touch, no matter how hard an object tries to resist. The more an object tries to resist a hyperobject, the more glued to the hyperobject it becomes.*

2) A hyperobject is Molten:

*Hyperobjects are so massive that they refute the idea that spacetime is fixed, concrete, and consistent.*

3) A hyperobject is Nonlocal:

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<sup>4</sup> "Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK) Snowball in the Senate (C-SPAN)." YouTube, C-SPAN, 26 Feb. 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3E0a\\_60PMR8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3E0a_60PMR8).

<sup>5</sup> Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

*Hyperobjects are massively distributed in time and space to the extent that their totality cannot be realized in any particular local manifestation.*

4) A hyperobject is Phased:

*Hyperobjects occupy a higher-dimensional space than other entities can normally perceive. Thus, hyperobjects appear to come and go in three-dimensional space, but would appear differently if an observer could have a higher multidimensional view.*

5) A hyperobject is Interobjective:

*Hyperobjects are formed by relations between more than one object. Consequently, entities are only able to perceive the imprint, or "footprint," of a hyperobject upon other objects, revealed as information.*

*\*'object' is used here as it is broadly defined in the school of object oriented ontology (OOO)<sup>6</sup>*

I intend to begin my work by translating these 5 categoristics into guidelines for artmaking. For example, the non-local nature of hyperobjects might warn us against focusing attention on any particular expression of the hyperobject without pointing out its relation to the whole.

I also intend to fine-tune these artmaking guidelines in two ways:

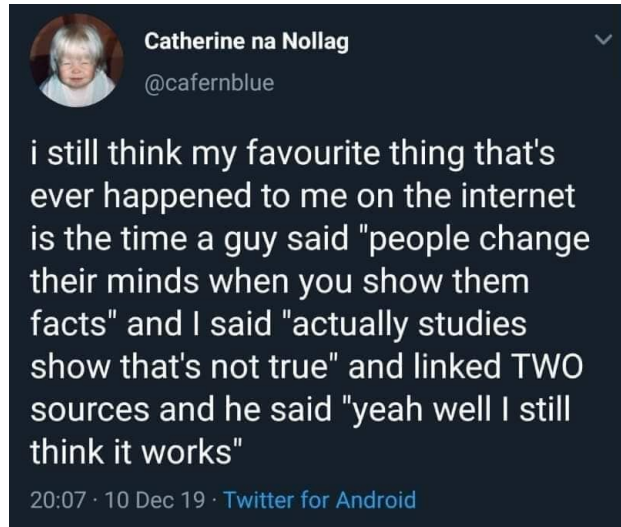
- 1) Analyzing stories about hyperobjects in our culture, to see if the principles derived from the 5 categoristics can explain their complex cultural impacts. Some specific framings I am fascinated by are Greta Thunberg's approach to climate communication, Hollywood's humanoid portrayals of AI, and Tristan Harris' ideas about 'Human Downgrading.'<sup>7</sup>
- 2) Creating art prototypes that follow the guidelines as they develop. I hope to collaborate with artists to see how principles and ideas transform across subject and media. I am curious to see how hyperobject-sensitive artworks and stories are received by a diverse audience, and whether they convey the scope, urgency, and mystery of the hyperobjects that they approach.

In terms of a final product, I hope to present the hyperobject-sensitive artmaking guidelines in a form that can be picked up and used as a powerful tool for artists and communicators everywhere. The previously mentioned prototypes, community feedback, and artist collaborations will be vital to the guidelines' development, and I intend to present some of these prototypes and a summary of the feedback as well, to show the fine-tuning process of the guidelines.

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<sup>6</sup> Harman, Graham. *Object-Oriented Ontology: a New Theory of Everything*. Pelican, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> "A Path to Humane Technology – with Tristan Harris." YouTube, Reinvent, 14 Nov. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oFcGfQ8bWMM>.



*@cafernblue, 10 Dec 19, 20:07*

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