Negating the Human, Narrating a World Without Us

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"No Milkshake"

no more drinks are served, no last call, no phone numbers exchanged, no tips, no taxi waiting anymore, no bicycle stolen, nobody pulls an all-nighter anymore, nobody sleeps, no hangover in the morning, no regret, no coffee, no breakfast, no soft-boiled egg, nobody staring at the water until it boils, no smile about something that's been said, nobody thinking about the other night,

no new encounters, no connection, no sweaty hands, no hands that don't know what to do, no feeling put into words, no words for it, no more words, no word for nothing.

no word for the feeling that everything comes to an end, no milkshake, no horror movie, no Casablanca, no black and white, no black, no white, no beggars, no arguments about them,

Nobody is afraid of what's coming next, nobody demonstrates,
nobody keeps their photos in a box,
no future is imagined, no honey kept in jars,
nothing is given a name anymore, no celebration,
no Simon
no Hazel
nobody has to read a story before bedtime,
no dragons, no good, no evil, no faith,
nobody hopes that something won't happen, no bombs are thrown anymore,
no bad news, no pain, nothing is ironic

no ending, nobody dies anymore, nobody digs a grave,
no flowers, no coffin, no hands are folded, no eyes closed, no make-up, no last salute

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nobody misses anything anymore,
the world doesn't miss anything
nobody remembers what missing is,
nobody can explain how it feels,
nobody can talk about what's no longer there,
nobody lives on in memory,
nobody to tell it to,
no room full of people,
nobody gathers to listen in silence
nobody hears the words
to imagine a world of their own,
no seven billion different worlds,
not a single world anymore.

(Ontroerend Goed 2016: 24–25)[1]

The Anthropocene constitutes dramatic challenges to customary literary and artistic forms of expression. One such challenge is how to narrate humanity as a geological agent that is inscribing its existence on the Earth, leaving traces that will outlive the human species, or, as Margaret Ronda phrases it: how to narrate this "'scaled-up' human culpability" (Ronda 2013: n. p.). The anticipatory melancholic grief that accompanies this realisation is often expressed through the form of a proleptic ecological elegy, a mourning for "events that have not yet (fully) happened" (Morton 2010: 254). Typically, such elegies are characterised by the future perfect tense: they weep for "that which will have passed given a continuation of the current state of affairs" (ibid.: 254), and this often goes together with the trope of the future reader. This is a "narrative-enabling device [that] provides a perspective from which the tale of ongoing human error can be narrated with the benefit of hypothetical hindsight" (Vermeulen 2017: 872). Such Anthropocene fiction, however, also contradicts

1 In the following, all quotations without any reference specified are taken from this literary excerpt. In another article on the same play, I write about the relationship between the geological archive and human archiving practices (*World Without Us:* "Staging the Geological Archive: Ontroerend Goed's *World Without Us* and Anthropocene Theater", in: *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 31,1, 60–74). It can be read in companion with this article, which focuses on the narratological and formal characteristics of one specific scene in this play.

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the idea of total destruction: it warns against "total death, or the death of us" by using a future vantage point that implies that "consciousness goes on" (Morton 2010: 254). Most ecological elegies thus provide a consolation in the form of an imagined future "vision or referring eye" that will be there to interpret the traces that remain (Colebrook 2014: 28). In this paper I will do a close reading of the scene "No Milkshake" quoted above from the Flemish theatre play *World Without Us* by Ontroerend Goed to show how a proleptic ecological elegy can avoid such a future vantage point or referring eye beyond extinction. I will argue that this scene simultaneously engages in and problematises the ecological elegy, because its formal features highlight the contradiction in mourning the end of human existence, or the impossibility of mourning total destruction. I will first contextualise the scene "No Milkshake" by providing more information about the play and its staging, before I move on to analysing the actual excerpt. After that I will look at the formal features of the scene at two levels: the stylistic features at the sentence and word level and the form of the literary list on the level of the scene as a whole.

1. Staging a World Without Us

World Without Us imagines what geological and cultural archival traces of humanity would remain on Earth after our extinction. The performance is an artistic reworking of Alan Weisman's speculative non-fiction work *The World Without Us* (2007). In this book, Weisman describes among others how human infrastructure would collapse and eventually vanish, how concrete jungles would slowly turn into, or revert to, real jungles, how birds, cockroaches and other species would flourish, and which man-made products would be "our most lasting gifts to the universe" ("About the Book"). For the theatre adaptation Ontroerend Goed chose to take the physical setting of the theatre space as the starting point: *World Without Us* is a monologue for one actor who functions as a narrator, and who describes in a rather distant and factual tone what would happen to the theatre space if the human species suddenly disappeared. How long will the music in the theatre café continue? When will the small animals start to feel the absence of humans and come out of their hiding places? How long until the last remaining light, the emergency exit sign, will die out? And when the roof finally collapses, what will the world outside, and by extension the Earth, look like by then?

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The form of the play is stripped down and minimalistic: the cast consists of one actor-narrator whose only prop is their voice, and the stage is empty except for a dimly lit pillar. The presence of this narrator is minimised through the performer's costume of black clothes and the reduction of lighting (for a considerable time it is even pitch-dark). From the audience's perspective, the actor is often hardly more than a hint of hands and eyes. In fact, the identity of the narrator matters so little that the play is alternatingly performed by a male and a female actor. These formal choices help to direct attention away from the human presence in a play that largely depends on language — that is to say, one of the most human inventions — to represent a world without our species.

The performance explicitly takes the present, the here and now of the theatre space where the actor and audience are gathered together, as a starting point for a proleptic remembering of the geological archive. The opening words of the actor draw attention to the auditory stimuli that they are experiencing while listening to the audience that is settling in:

> There's rustling, whispering here and there…
> A chair creaks…
> A body still looking for the right position…
> The quick folding of a leaflet…
> A sleeve softly brushes a jacket…
> A handbag opens… (Ontroerend Goed 2016: 1)

The actor has their eyes closed and is standing with their back toward the audience, and it is only at the end of the opening monologue, when the narrator "deletes" the audience — and by extension humanity — from the narrative, that they turn around and look at the audience:

> There's the rising and falling rustling of lungs filling up and letting go
> […] Almost inaudible: this concert of breathing in different tempos.
> This is the sound of an audience being quiet while it's watching.
> This sound vanishes now.
> *performer opens eyes.* (ibid.)

The stage direction "*performer opens eyes*" marks the moment the narrator takes an imaginative leap into a non-human future. From then on, viewers oscillate between the here in the now and the here in the future, and they are simultaneously presently absent and absently present. This paradoxical double bind is also made explicit in the text, when the narrator says: "But then you can hear

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what's left. If everyone's gone, you can hear it" (Ontroerend Goed 2016: 2). For most of the play, the actor then imagines what would happen to a world devoid of humans and which evidence of our existence would remain, ever faster moving into the future by steadily accelerating the narrative speed from the human time of the opening scene to a geological time of centuries per second. The scene "No Milkshake", roughly three quarters into the play, by contrast, is a list and seems to be set outside time. The form of this scene stresses the ephemerality of social memory, by which I mean, drawing on Richard Klein, all the systems of cataloguing and retrieval in organised existence that make the transfer and interpretation of memories and knowledge — be it oral or written — possible (see Klein 2013: 83).

2. Reading the Scene as a List

On a macrolevel, the one characteristic that sets the scene quoted in the beginning of the article apart from the rest of the play, is its form: because it is a list, the temporal progression of the narrative is halted. Drawing on Werner Wolf's way of defining description and narrative (Wolf 2007: 33–34), von Contzen proposes to think of list and narrative as two poles on a continuum on which the former is concerned with "existential" phenomena and the latter focuses on "actantional representation" and in this scene the focus indeed shifts from action to existence (von Contzen 2016: 246). The term "list" can cover a wide range of concepts that includes special forms like calendars and catalogues as well as rhetorical figures such as the enumeration (ibid.: 244), but for my argument Robert Belknap's rather broad definition of the list suffices. He defines the list as "a formally organized block of information that is composed of a set of members. It is a plastic, flexible structure in which an array of constituent units coheres with specific relations generated by specific forces of attraction" (Belknap 2000: 35). The concept of the list can thus be regarded as a subcategory of description that is characterised by a formal framework "that holds separate and disparate items together" (ibid.: 35) and as such "implies a strong formal focus" (von Contzen 2016: 243).

In *Imagining Extinction* literary scholar Ursula Heise notes that, when trying to "convey a more panoramic view of mass extinction, artists and writers often resort to lists or catalogs" (Heise 2016: 55). She is mainly referring to the Sixth Extinction and for now, the human species is not a species that is endangered. Quite the contrary: as the IUCN Red List almost mockingly points out,

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we are listed as "Least Concern as the species is very widely distributed, adaptable, currently increasing, and there are no major threats" (Global Mammal Assessment Team 2008). However, the concept of the Anthropocene has created a heightened awareness of our potential future vulnerability as a species and considering the idea that the form of the list is well-suited to deal with existential phenomena, it seems not too surprising that Ontroerend Goed turns to the form of the list as a way to grasp the possibility of the end of human life. Fictional and non-fictional texts about endangered species often use catalogues to "accompany and complement the narrative [and to] evoke a numerical sublime of sorts, numbers too large to be contained by conventional storytelling procedures that focus on a discrete set of events, scenes, and characters" (Heise 2016: 56). In *World Without Us*, by contrast, the list is not used to evoke a numerical sublime, but to overcome another obstacle that the Anthropocene poses to conventional storytelling: how to represent humanity as a whole as a protagonist? More precisely, the assemblage in "No Milkshake" can be read as an effort to represent the abstract concept of, in this case, the finitude of human life.

As a literary form, the list holds a special position: even though we are used to "encountering and decoding lists in our everyday lives", a list that is part of a narrative text requires a lot of work from the reader, because it "break[s] open the sequential flow of the narrative" and draws attention to the text as form (von Contzen 2018: 323, 316). Because they "resist the immersive impetus and challenge readers on a cognitive level, requiring, to varying degrees, strategies of familiarization and narrativization in order to make sense of their meaning," lists have the potential to disrupt the narrative (von Contzen 2016: 246). In order to make sense of both the list as a whole and the items that are on the list, the list has to be integrated into the surrounding narrative (von Contzen 2018: 316). Due to the link to the everyday experience and practice of list-making, a literary list cuts "across the textual level and the level of content" and it is exactly this feature that allows the reader to 'read' the list (ibid.: 320). In short: as a form, or, more precisely, exactly because of its form, a list is immediately recognisable in a text and requires specific gap-filling processes for which readers can draw on real-life experience. As von Contzen explains: "The practice of list-making becomes the anchor by means of which we can read and decode the list successfully" (ibid.: 323).

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3. Mourning the Loss of the Repertoire

In order to successfully decode the list in "No Milkshake" — with members ranging from objects (coffee, milkshake, soft-boiled eggs, photos, flowers, coffins), over activities and abstract concepts (digging a grave, new encounters, connections), to feelings (the hope that something won't happen, the feeling that everything comes to an end) — the spectators need to activate certain schemata that allow them to fill in the gaps. The items in the first paragraph, for example, match the actions and images that fit within a flirting and bar schema, followed by a dating schema in the second paragraph and a cinema schema in the third paragraph. The fourth paragraph evokes family life, and the items in the fifth paragraph fit in a funeral schema. As "cognitive structures representing generic knowledge" these schemata provide "default background information" that helps to "compensate for any gaps in the text", or — in this case — the list, and together these five sub-lists evoke a life-cycle narrative from adolescence over parenthood to death (Emmott/Alexander 2014: n. p.). The last paragraph lacks a situational schema, but here the theme of (the absence of) remembrance binds the items together. In addition to the schemata, the larger narrative in which the list-like scene of "No Milkshake" is embedded and, most importantly, the stylistic features of the scene itself provide essential cues to decode and integrate the list. The repetitive use of negations, which annihilate every image that the narrator sketches beforehand, helps to signal that the shared characteristic of the items on the list is that they no longer exist. In other words, they foreground the "specific force of attraction" that holds the separate items in the list as a whole together: their absence (Belknap 2000: 35).

Up until the scene "No Milkshake" the play is mainly concerned with describing the traces humanity *will* leave on the earth, with the material memories our species *will* inscribe in the geological archive, but in this scene, the focus shifts from the archive to the repertoire, and, consequently, from what will be left to what will be lost, a shift that is marked by the repetitive use of negations. The repertoire, performance studies scholar Diana Taylor explains, is "a nonarchival system of transfer" (Taylor 2003: xvii). Whereas the archive consists of recorded memories that exceed the live and separates — in time or space — the knowledge from the knower, the repertoire enacts ephemeral, embodied memories and as such requires presence (ibid.: 19–20). Regarding the repertoire "people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' by being part of the transmission" (ibid.). The ex-

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tinction of the human species thus by definition implies the annihilation of the repertoire, of social memory. "No Milkshake" can be read as an elegy for all the aspects of human life that cannot survive in a world without us, from the very small act of "staring at the water until it boils" to the act of mourning itself. The chosen aspects stress that even if the material thing can outlive humanity, the social, personal and/or cultural meaning that we attach to it cannot, as for example the reason someone does not stay for breakfast after a one-night stand, or the emotional meaning attached to photos kept in a box.

Varied though the categories of items that are included on the list may be, as enumeration they can thus be read as an attempt to imagine the end of modern society by listing (aspects of) human forms of life that are gone. Anthropologist Stefan Helmreich defines forms of life as the "social, symbolic, and pragmatic ways of thinking and acting that organize human communities," whereas life form refers to the biological species (Helmreich 2011: 673). The list is, in other words, not so much concerned with the finitude of human life as a biological species, but rather focuses on the finitude of human life as "an assemblage of cultural forms" (Vermeulen 2017: 870). The short sentences, often mere phrases, help to create a tension between the list-like form on the one hand and the topic of this list on the other: they create a staccato rhythm that suggests a detached enumeration of facts, and that highlights the straightforward act of listing things, which contrasts with the content of the list, that can be seen as an attempt to grasp the totality of being human. Because the schemata allow the listener to fill in the gaps easily and almost immediately, the rhythm of the text could be said to evoke a flipbook effect: even though the images are not connected with clauses, the connections can be made so quickly that it seems as if the scene is playing out smoothly. The first sentences of the scene "No Milkshake" might still seem to refer to a typical human scene, an expression of human culture on an individual scale: a date that did not end as planned, because "no phone numbers [were] exchanged, […] no coffee, no breakfast, […] no smile about something that's been said". Or, alternatively, that did end as planned, because there are "no regrets". Soon, however, the narrator zooms out from this situation on the personal scale to the socio-historical scale — "Nobody is afraid of what's coming next, nobody demonstrates, nobody keeps their photos in a box, no future is imagined" — to end at the geological scale at which "nobody misses anything anymore, the world doesn't miss anything" and it becomes evident that this is not a personal memory of a first date, but an imagining of the extinction of human life as we know it. With this in mind, the flipbook feeling created by the staccato

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rhythm can also be linked to the idea of one's life flashing before one's eyes right before one dies.

The stylistic features of "No Milkshake" underline the ephemerality of the repertoire. The most pertinent feature in this scene is of course the repetitive use of negations — starting with "no" and ending with the more specific "nobody" — which stress the theme of total annihilation. This is further emphasised by the physical action of the actor when they say (or actually do not say) the words: "no word for nothing." At this point, the actor stops moving their mouth, and it becomes clear that this elegy is actually recorded, thus highlighting the contradictory nature of the word "nothing", that, in its uttering, destroys what it signifies. They linger a little longer before disappearing from the stage on which their now disembodied voice continues the narrative. After that the text reminds the audience that they too should delete themselves from the act of mourning, both through the repetition of the word nobody, as well as through the sentence "nobody misses anything anymore". In combination with the absence of visual stimuli, these words create a heightened awareness of the essential role of human brains and bodies for the transmission of embodied memories.

The scene thus implicitly points out the pointlessness of what Jacques Derrida called "archive fever" (Derrida 2008: 92) which is, as Mark Currie explains, "the frenzied archiving and recording of contemporary social life which transforms the present into the past by anticipating its memory", by stressing the ephemerality of embodied memory and by wondering to what extent an archive that would outlive humanity — be it geological or cultural — would hold meaning without humans to interpret it (Currie 2007: 11). The choice for the form of the list further stresses that trying to narrate (the end of) human existence is an always already failed attempt. Firstly, because the list is an archival form par excellence and, as Taylor notes, there is a tension between the archive and the repertoire: even though, or exactly because "the archive endures beyond the limits of the live, […] the live can never be contained in the archive" (Taylor 2003: 173). Secondly, because defining human life by enumerating aspects of it leads to a list that can, quite literally, go on forever, yet as a form, the list has by definition a clear-cut beginning and a precise end. As historian of science Geoffrey Bowker notes: by including "all and only a certain set of facts/discoveries/observations, [an archive or list] consistently and actively engages in the forgetting of other sets" (Bowker 2005: 12). Sometimes, however, lists "foreground their own incompletion as a way of pointing towards these things that exceed them, that cannot be listed or enu-

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merated (Eco 2009: 15–17, paraphrased in Heise 2016: 65). Ontroerend Goed is well-aware that as long as there is someone to enumerate, the enumeration of the end of human life is incomplete and this paradox is foregrounded in "No Milkshake" when the narrator stops moving their mouth and disappears from the stage on which their now disembodied voice continues the narrative. But even then, there is still an audience to hear the enumeration and as a consequence, the imagined total extinction is still out of reach. Sentences like "nobody hears the words," "nobody to tell it to," or "no room full of people" make the audience aware of this paradox by transporting them back and forth between the theatre space where they hear the words and the imagined non-human future.

In addition to mourning what will be lost, this scene also points out the upside of human extinction by including negative and destructive aspects of human behaviour. The sentences "nobody hopes that something won't happen, no bombs are thrown anymore, no bad news, no pain" have a universal ring to it, but in the context of the premiere of the play in 2016, right after the terrorist attacks in Brussels, Belgian spectators would probably immediately link this phrase to the emotions they felt at the 22nd of March. The idea that such attacks could never happen again, provides some sort of comfort alongside the sadness for all the good things that would be lost.

The stylistic features of "No Milkshake", and in particular the use of negations as a structural element, convey a sense of nihilism as defined by Ray Brassier: the realisation "that there is a mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, is indifferent to our existence" (Brassier 2007: xi). Each "no" negates part of the social memory of humanity and the long list of negations creates the sense of an enumeration that does not inventory what is left, but that annihilates everything it recites. The list is a negating catalogue of human forms of life, a black hole into which everything disappears: because the items are all preceded by a negation, every image that the narrator sketches is annihilated beforehand. This sentence structure has a similar effect to the instruction: "do not think of a pink elephant in a skirt." The negations paradoxically require the audience to imagine something, only to imagine its absence, as well as their own absence as the ones imagining this absence to begin with. This nihilism is further stressed by the use of the present tense: the directionality of time is from the present into the future. The present tense emphasises that "No Milkshake" imagines a prospective rather than a retrospective viewpoint: the scene works its way towards an imagined total destruction, rather than looking back from beyond

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the death of memory. It projects the audience into the imagined non-human future, but without providing the escape of a future reader.

4. The Impossibility of Imagining Nothing

"No Milkshake" simultaneously engages in and problematises the ecological elegy as a form, because it conveys the contradiction that lies at the base of a true ecological elegy: if the destruction is total, there is no one left to mourn. The sentences "no ending, nobody dies anymore, nobody digs a grave, no flowers, no coffin, no hands are folded, no eyes closed, no make-up, no last salute" explicitly reference the rituals surrounding death, thus providing the context in which an elegy has a place. However, the next sentence shows how futile the narrator's elegy would be in a posthuman world, because: "nobody misses anything anymore, the world doesn't miss anything". An elegy laments the dead, but in a posthuman world "nobody can explain how it feels, nobody can talk about what's no longer there, nobody lives on in memory". The simple negation "no" is replaced by "nobody" which specifically references the absence of bodies, and thus the impossibility of embodied memory. The last sentences of the scene annihilate the function of the elegy, by highlighting that the end of the repertoire also deletes the need for mourning: "nobody gathers to listen in silence, nobody hears the words to imagine a world of their own, no seven billion different worlds, not a single world anymore". In other words, even though it "maintains the importance of elegiac retrospection and its language of necessity and loss," "No Milkshake" highlights that "these conventions are finally inadequate to their current task," because the "elegiac language […] speaks its own constitutive failures" (Ronda 2013: n. p.). The short sentences in combination with the use of ellipsis formally underline this falling short of language in describing the imagined extinction of our species. The scene thus "underlines the radical finitude of both the human life form and our forms of life" (Vermeulen 2017: 870).

To conclude, the form of the scene "No Milkshake" — a literary list — in combination with the stylistic features of the items enumerated on the list are crucial in emphasising the impossibility of mourning of the end of human existence and to undermine the scene's elegiac function by annihilating not only everything that can be lamented, but also everyone that could lament. The ultimate effect of the stylistic features — the present tense, the anaphoric use of negations, the staccato rhythm, the ellipsis and the repetition — is that the

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audience engages in a work of proleptic mourning that, by imagining total annihilation, provides a strange form of consolation. Alongside the sadness for what will be lost, there is the comfort that if humanity goes extinct, sadness as a concept has no meaning anymore, and the planet and the non-human world will not care about the archival traces — geological or cultural — that will be left.

At the same time, this elegy, I argue, comes closer to imagining total destruction than the typical proleptic ecological elegy, since, by using the present tense, it does not provide the consolation of a consciousness that will be there to remember. "No Milkshake" oscillates between lamentation and annihilation, between mourning and nihilism, and as such, it is simultaneously more fatalistic and less cautionary than the typical ecological elegy. Whereas most ecological elegies engage in "ethical mourning and melancholia in an ultimately hopeful attempt to create a better future" (Barr 2017: 191) or what Patricia Rae calls "activist melancholia", *World Without Us* is thus less a call to action than a critical examination of humanity's *hubris* and anthropocentric thinking, and, closely related, a call to ponder the inevitable and ultimate death (Rae 2007: 19).

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