

# Underworlds: Abyss(al Critique)

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David Chandler, University of Westminster, UK. [D.Chandler@wmin.ac.uk](mailto:D.Chandler@wmin.ac.uk)  
Jonathan Pugh, Newcastle University, UK. [Jonathan.Pugh@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Jonathan.Pugh@ncl.ac.uk)

## Abstract

The world is over. The world has increasingly demonstrated itself to be so much less than the earth we inhabit. The world of modern ontology, of entities, essences and linear causality is too abstract, too reductionist to be of use for contemporary purposes, ranging from tackling the climate emergency to seeking alternative modes of political becoming. Thus, there is a growing consensus that, as the world fades in import, underworlds are coming to the fore. There is much at stake in thinking about and with underworlds today. In our brief paper we seek to heuristically set up a debate over the ethical and political import of these underworlds. We establish a divide between critical theorists who see underworlds in affirmative terms, as generative, differentiating, and creative immanent forces and those who see them more negatively, as limits, as voids, as inaccessible to sensible attempts at understanding or control. We engage this debate from a third postionality, that of abyss(al critique).

**Keywords:** critique, affirmation, aesthetics, abyss, negative, relational turn

## Introduction

We seek to develop the abyssal as a critical lens, as a sort of meta-postionality, that can draw out the limitations of contemporary critical thought. Contemporary approaches to underworlds (which we define as those that attempt to go beyond the Human of modern ontological understandings), fail to break from modernity's constructions of world and subject and therefore reproduce hierarchical governmental imaginaries. Affirmative and generative understandings of underworlds seek to go beyond the limitations of the modern ontology of subject and world, making the world more 'real' through the introduction of processes, relations, emergence, non-linearity, and networks that go beyond, disrupt and problematise the human/nature divide. These approaches have been criticised by more negative framings of underworlds, which seek to emphasise alternative forces at play, those of limits, barriers, blockages, non-relation, and incapacity. In this way, the unknowability and inaccessibility of underworlds acts to stymie the generative and reparative imaginaries of relational approaches.

The abyssal approach finds both the affirmative and the negative approach to underworlds to share a similar problematic. This shared problematic is one that operates through the reification of ontology and the human as subject. The world (of modernist ontology) remains at the core of both affirmative and negative approaches although the methods of reification differ. Affirmative approaches tend to emphasise sensing technologies and the hermeneutical sciences of correlation. This world is modified by relational and cybernetic process ontologies of interactive emergence, the 'missing masses' are added (as Latour might say). In a similar way, negative approaches tend to emphasise aesthetic or poetic sensibilities. Thus, this world is modified by negative approaches which seek to draw upon underworlds to humble the subject and to question the line between beings and Being, the virtual and the actual, phenomena and the 'noumena'. The abyssal gaze differs in that it seeks to deconstruct imaginaries of underworlds as part of the process of ending rather than adding to this world. It engages in a kind of 'meta-political' work, critiquing both affirmational and negative approaches to underworlds for continuing to be taken in by the lure of the world.

### **The Underworld Beneath: Pragmatism & Relation**

There are many constructions of underworlds as concealed realities. In our heuristic divide between two key paradigms, critical purchase operates either optically, in relation to knowledge of what exists, or ontologically, in relation to the nature of being. The first affirmative paradigm, the revelation of reality as underworld, could be usefully engaged with in terms of shock or catastrophe. Three key examples might be WEB Du Bois' short story 'The Comet' (1920), Ulrich Beck's conception of 'Emancipatory Catastrophism' (2015) and the demands of 'no return to the norm' that arose in response to the Coronavirus pandemic (Chandler, 2020). The self-assured complacency of modernist thought is thus held to require a catastrophe, usually in the form of a natural disaster of some sort, to reveal the underworlds of racism, oppression, exclusions, and inequalities. These underworlds are present optically, as in literally there in the world but occluded, invisible to contemporary subjectivities, despite lying in plain sight. In this paradigm, it appears that the unconcealment of reality through catastrophes does more to destabilise our given 'reality' than radical critique. For example, Bruno Latour (2013, p.77) famously argued that climate change had done more to undermine modernist certainties than continental critical theory ever did; see also the similar framings of Yuk Hui regarding Covid-19, Chernobyl and Fukushima (Hui, 2021, p. 86, p. 126).

The disaster reveals the underworlds of relation, interdependency and interconnection that are necessary to keep things working. This shock of revelation works in a similar way to Heidegger's understanding of tools as irreducible to their being 'at hand', where the necessary and contingent histories, contexts and framings are only seen in the moments of breakdown (see Graham Harman's analysis in *Towards Speculative Realism*). There is a strong romantic inflection in the assumptions that modernity is problematic essentially

because it breaks us from a world of interconnection and feedback effects, we turn our backs on the earth, constructing a world that forgets dependencies and inter-relations (see, for example, Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*). In Benjamin Bratton's phrasing, disasters, and catastrophes, such as the coronavirus pandemic, are then the *Revenge of the Real* or the 'return of the repressed'.

### **The Underworld Beyond: Aesthetics & Speculation**

Yuk Hui's *Art and Cosmotechnics* (2021) makes an important intervention into the methods of thinking and engaging with the negative. He seeks to develop an approach to aesthetic thought enabling it to move beyond the modernist ontology of discrete entities, essences, and linear causation. In doing so, he draws upon and reworks a number of aesthetic traditions from Greek tragedy, German idealism and Chinese philosophy. The importance of aesthetics is that it supposes the development or training of a sensibility beyond what is immediately available to experience (2021, p.29). The capabilities that Hui looks to develop are intuitive rather than rationalist, capacities for resonance, resonating beyond the given of appearances; refusing 'to accept the phenomenal world as it is' (p. 276). Of course, the aesthetic form of critique can take many forms, from expressionist art to Buddhist approaches to gardening. The point is the desire for the ungraspable outside, the negative, to be integrated into a recursivity that enables a path towards openness rather than cybernetic closure.

The importance of Hui's approach to working with the negative is that, for Hui, the negative, the void, nothingness, are vital for pushing past the closures of the end of modernity, of the Anthropocene (2021, p. 48, p. 70) offering a 'radical opening to the unknown' (p. 48). Hui's approach is speculative rather than relational - going beyond relational focusing on the material semiotics of feedback and generativity (central to the concerns of Beck, Latour and Bratton in the affirmative paradigm). However, speculation cannot just be arbitrary but needs to be grounded in cultural and subjective sensitivities of time and space. Therefore, art, philosophy and technics are interlinked in a shared desire to both understand and to change how the world is perceived. This training in sensibility Hui calls 'cosmotechnics'.

Thus, the underworld beyond, the negative, the void, can be approached through many ways, depending upon cultural and historical modes of thinking art and technology. Kant's aesthetic training of the subject in the appreciation of beauty is one example of an approach to beauty as something that cannot be rationally grasped as a phenomena but only experienced 'as if' it was in the world (p. 197). Hui makes the point that, in this way, the unknown is experienced 'not as mystery, but as openness' (p. 198). An aesthetic training is thereby not about painting what is seen, the literal or figurative, but going beyond what is perceptible or sensible (p. 200). While Kant wished to limit speculative reasoning, Chinese

philosophy, according to Hui, precisely, wished to cultivate it (p. 201). 'The unknown has to be recursively rationalized through the known' (p. 243).

Hui does not directly refer to the similarities with contemporary approaches of new materialism, speculative realism, and Object-Oriented Ontology, in this ethical training in underworld enablement but interestingly takes inspiration from Kandinsky's (p. 117) aesthetic gaze which enables cigarette butts, buttons and pieces of bark and a calendar page, to bring 'dead' objects to life. This passage directly parallels Jane Bennett's similar aesthetic desire in *Vibrant Matter* (2010, p. 4). This is an aesthetic gaze which seeks to go beyond the figural, the literal, beyond representation to intuit a beyond. In this respect, it is possible that the weakness of Bennett's vital materialism is precisely her lack of appreciation of the distinction between the aesthetic approach of opening towards the infinite and scientific positivist assumptions of an underlying relational reality (Lemke 2021, 151).

Aesthetics (art as cosmotechnics, in the terminology of Hui) could be seen as the 'epistemology of the non-rational' (2021, p. 123) or 'the epistemology of the unknown' (p.254), 'beyond phenomenal truth'. Opening to alterity, even if this alterity is ungraspable or not fully knowable, becomes an affirmative act, enabling the actualisation of hidden potentiality in the subject itself (p. 165). The other, the outside, the unknowable, is the basis for this generative recursivity of individuation, of becoming as negation (Hui 2015). This unknown is a barrier to rationalist forms of appropriation but provides a training for sensitivities, for attunement, for resonance, for the enabling capacities for responsiveness, for reacting to contingency and spontaneity, and thereby liberating the subject towards the infinite (2021, p. 173-4). Thus, perhaps counterintuitively, the emphasis on the negative, on non-relation and the unknowable, on the project of the undoing or the unmaking of the subject, is one of adaptive growth and development (see also Rei Terada's analysis of Hegel and negation in *Metaracial*).

### **Refusing the Lure of (Under)Worlds: Abyss(al Critique)**

The Abyss is not an underworld. In fact, the abyss(al critique) is an alternative to both the affirmative, relational, and the negative, speculative, underworlds on the basis that they work to empower the subject and to extend the world, constituting new regimes of governance, new hierarchies of power and knowledge and new modes of being and becoming in an antiblack world (see Pugh and Chandler, 2023; Chandler and Pugh 2023). The abyssal approach is contrapositioned to that of inculcating and enabling underworlds in that it seeks to problematise the imaginary or the promise of other or further worlds that can be added or juxtaposed to facilitate a more real reality. Even the most negative speculative, forms of aesthetic critique are clearly focused upon enabling the subject to break from or make a 'leap' to thinking about and perceiving the world differently. It is still very much about the affirmation and renewal of the subject and its being in the world.

To move towards our concluding comments, this process of critique via work on and towards underworlds tends to assume two forms. Firstly, taking the affirmative step of literally adding to the world, the entities, relations, and interdependencies that are excluded in a modern ontology of entities with fixed essences in fixed grids of time and space. This form of adding often seeks to extend the ontic sensitivities of the human, through new forms of more-than-human or posthuman sensing and relation. Alternately, the process of worlding 'otherwise' can take a more negative aesthetic or speculative form of seeking to undo, unmake or divest the human as subject. This is the ontological rather than the ontic path of returning the human to the world. Speculative non-relational work that engages and affirms the negative is therefore equally world affirming, enabling a more 'authentic' subject and world. Our response to these framings of underworlds has been to argue that an alternative critical approach is available, that of the abyssal. By contrast, the abyssal approach sees neither the relational approach of pragmatism nor the non-relational approach of aesthetics as adequate and seeks to problematise the shared desire to enable new (more-than- or less-than-human) genres of the human.

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