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Tropes of the Tropics. The Anthropology and Aesthetics of Heat

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When we look at publications on what we have come to call "climate change", in German even more dramatically "die Klimakatastrophe", or "global warming" we notice the use, or even *overuse* of the term "heat":

- George Monbiot: Heat. How to stop the planet from burning (2006);
- Ian Bailey/ Hugh Compston (eds.): Feeling the Heat. The Politics of Climate Policy in Rapidly Industrializing Countries (2012)
- Jim Motavalli (ed.): Feeling the Heat. Dispatches from the Frontlines of Climate Change (2004)
- John J. Berger: Beating the Heat. Why and how we must combat global warming (2000)

At first glance, it might seem trivial to employ the concept of heat when dealing with a phenomenon of rising global temperatures. However, what is striking about these books is that they hardly ever speak of heat. Of real heat, I mean, tropical heat, torrid climates, and the effect of intense heat, whether dry or wet, on the soil, the vegetation and on animal or human bodies. What they talk about instead, are rather unimpressive averages and slow gradual changes in global climate: a rise of temperatures by 2° C within the next hundred years (Berger), the rise of the sea level by one or two millimeters per year (Monbiot), changing coastlines (Motavalli), or melting glaciers and a change in local vegetation. Of course, they uniformly point to the usual suspects: the rise of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the destruction of primary forests in South-America and Southeast Asia, the melting of permafrost in Siberia and Alaska, ocean acidification etc. Last but not least, the heat-books come up with helpful suggestions concerning national climate policy: one book, for instance, in an oddly chosen historical term, suggests a Chinese "green leap forward" (Bailey), others give everyday life advice such as lowering the setting on airconditioning in the house or switching to a hybrid car (Berger).

So even if heat in the sense of the familiar scorching feeling is mainly absent from the books flaunting it on their covers, the thermal metaphor seems to be of vital importance for any politics related to climate change. In a conversation with Ulrich Beck Bruno Latour explains that anybody who refers to global warming as "climate change" is an enemy: "They live in a different world than I do, they live in a world that is being destroyed... they are humans, I am Gaian."¹

The same goes for Timothy Morton, the über-hip guru of a new form of ecological thought and of a theory of global warming as a "hyperobject". Hyperobjects such as the climate, black holes, radioactive matter and other ontologically uncanny entities, Morton suggests, are objects that elude perception and conceptualization precisely because they are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (p.1). They defy metalanguage because they contaminate the forms and concepts that are being used to account for them. Global warming is the "hyperobject" par excellence, extended in time and space, invisible, yet computable, consisting not in a materially graspable entity but in a vast and complex mesh of inter-objective effects and interrelations. Yet, the hyperness of the hyperobject global warming seems to hinge on the thermal metaphor of heat.

"Throughout [my book]", Morton writes in *Hyperobjects*, "I shall be calling it *global warming* and not *climate change*. Why?... Climate change as a substitute [for what in his opinion should be called "climate change as a result of global warming"] enables cynical reason (both right and left) to say that "the climate has always been changing", which to my ears sounds like "people have always been killing one another" as a fatuous reason not to control the sale of machine guns".²

To both Latour and Morton "heat" is essential when dealing with the epistemology, the politics and the philosophy of what might perhaps appropriately - but also somewhat

¹ Discussion between Bruno Latour and Ulrich Beck in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14.5.2014, online at www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/ulrich-beck-und-bruno-latour-zur-klimakatastrophe-12939499.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2.

Here is the context of the conversation in German:

FAZ: Wollen Sie also sagen, dass diejenigen, die die globale Erwärmung als Klawandel bezeichnen, praktischerweise als Feinde konstruiert werden?

Latour: Nein, nein, sie werden nicht „praktischerweise konstruiert“, sie sind die Feinde. Sie leben in einer anderen Welt als ich, und sie leben in einer Welt, die zerstört wird. Sie eignen sich mein Land an. Dass dieses Land nicht als Staat definiert wird, heißt nicht, dass es keine Landnahme ist. Um es zuzuspitzen: sie sind humans, ich bin Gaian.

Bruno Latour/ Ulrich Beck: Die Apokalypse duldet keinen Sachzwang, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14.5.2014

² Timothy Morton: *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2013, 8.

abstractly and lamely - be called "*the Anthropocene*", the fact that mankind is leaving its destructive and ineffacable mark on the surface of the planet. What becomes clear from their outspokenly polemical use of these terms is that "heat" and "warming" here are not neutral descriptions but metaphors, coined to convey the urgency of an imminent threat, the trauma of a looming catastrophe.

"What we desperately need," Morton goes on, "is an appropriate level of shock and anxiety concerning a specific ecological trauma - indeed, the ecological trauma of our age, the very thing that defines the Anthropocene as such."³

Heat is thus not just a metaphor that conveys a physical sense of a process - or rather: a whole bunch of hyper-complex, yet impalpable processes of ecological transformation and destruction. In this context, heat is - in a way much akin to Morton's "hyperobjects" - a *hyper-metaphor*. It is a hyper-metaphor in the sense that it aims to evoke not only a dimension of sense perception that global warming dramatically lacks, but also to generate an affect, i.e. to get - as the Obama campaign put it - "all fired up" about global warming. While we cannot feel global warming on our skins, and while we cannot see it, except in photo series of a hundred years of shrinking glaciers or in long-term simulations of flooded cities, global warming needs to be *felt* here and now, or *made to be felt* both *sensitively* and *affectively*. The heat metaphor seeks to convey a phenomenal sensibility to an uncanny, complex and unrepresentable process that exceeds our categories of perception and cognition.

But the "trauma" of man's unaware "*stumbling* into the Anthropocene", as Dipesh Chakrabarty succinctly puts it (p. 217) also calls for an affective reaction. One that would be strong enough to overcome not only the debates about the "costs" of cutting down on fossil fuels, but also those concerning "climate justice," which claim that reducing greenhouse gases unjustly hampers the economic development of the poor countries. The thermal hyper-metaphor may transport an affect of trauma and anxiety, but perhaps also the feeling of a newly defined coherence of mankind as a species. Aren't we all bodies suffering from heat? It may thus be able to help us to understand the problem's urgency and to transfer this urgency into political structures. In Bruno Latour's words:

"The task might not be to "liberate climatology" from the undue weight of

³ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 8-9.

political On the contrary, the task is to follow the threads with which climatologists have built the models needed to bring the whole Earth on stage. With this lesson in hand we begin to imagine how to do the same in our efforts to assemble a *political body* able to claim its part of responsibility for the Earth's changing state. After all, this mix up of science and politics is exactly what is embodied in the very notion of anthropocene: why would we go on trying to *separate* what geologists, earnest people if any, have themselves intermingled?"⁴

Analyzing the rhetorical structure of this key term in the current ecologico-political debates might lead one down a slippery slope. If "global warming" is a metaphor, does that mean it is *only a metaphor*? Would a critical analysis of this metaphor come to the conclusion that its effect of dramatizing an otherwise impalpable process is just a trick of the hysterical green lobby? If global warming is only a metaphor, then it does not exist. This is definitively *not* what I am trying to say. If I glide down a slippery slope, I definitively do not wish to end up in the arms of the denialist lobby. If I have to slide into anything, it will rather be the heart of the thermal metaphor: the swamp of tropical heat.

For the challenge of understanding the Anthropocene, I believe, lies not only in the simulations of climate research, the findings of ecologists, biologists, and geologists, that is, in an approach defined by the methods and tenets of the natural sciences. Understanding the Anthropocene, understanding the fundamental change in our living conditions that we are facing today, in short: understanding our present, means finding the terms to relate precisely to the *cultural* contents and consequences of this change. This would involve an investigation into the history, the philosophy and the aesthetics of the relationship between man and Nature that needs now to be fundamentally redefined.

To come back to my topic, the question would thus not be as to how and to what degree the Earth is actually heating up. It means to ask about *a history of heat* as the history of man's knowledge and theories of this thermal condition. It means to ask for an aesthetics of heat as the poetic or pictorial rendering of a state that, despite its

⁴ Bruno Latour: Waiting for Gaia. Composing the common world through arts and politics. A lecture at the French Institute, London, November 2011, 8. Online at: www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/124-GAIA-LONDON-SPEAP_0.pdf

overwhelming sensual power, seems hard to depict in words or images. How can we "feel the heat" when or as long as we're not (yet) in the thick of it? And then, what would be the "message" of heat? What can we learn from the historical or fictional accounts and theories about the effects of tropical climates on the human body, the human soul, the human culture? My guess is that heat is a very specific thermal condition, a condition that is not just at the other end of the thermometer as opposed to the cold, but - if I may use this metaphor now - a condition that "melts" the boundaries of man and Nature, the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the body, between perception and imagination, between the subject and the object of cognition.

Thinking about not so much the physics but the history and culture of heat has to start with a concept of climate that is entirely different from what we discuss as "global climate" today. For a long tradition of thought from Antiquity to the age of Enlightenment, the idea of a "world climate" would not have made any sense at all. "Climate", derived from the Greek term κλίμα, marks the specific angle of sun on the slope of the Earth's surface, which defines the thermal conditions of a geographical zone. From the first inception of the concept in Aristotle and Hippocrates, climate is thus essentially a *local category*, specifying and explaining the temperatures, and thus the vegetation, forms of agriculture etc. in a given region. Unlike today, where we have come to see climate mainly as a temporal phenomenon, subject to long-term changes, fluctuations and, eventually, human interventions, climate has, for 2000 years of thought, been an entity that is related to a specific locality and that is thus essentially *stable*. Climate concerns a sense of place, not of time, a sense of what distinguishes one locale from another. It defines a geographical region in its essence precisely because it never changes. Yet, by determining a specific region, climate can be used as category to explain and understand mankind's relationship to the specific environment humans inhabit. This line of thought asks questions such as: How do the temperatures, winds and rainfall in a given area determine a specific form of subsistence? And how do these relate to the inhabitants cultural and social institutions, such as their religion, the form of their government, their habits and social norms? Unlike our modern focus on the history and transformations of global climate this tradition can be called an "anthropology of climate". It investigates the way in which human affairs and social forms relate to the specific and local natural conditions in which a culture is situated.

One of the most famous - if not infamous - attempts in this direction is the 14th book of Montesquieu's ground-breaking treatise *L'Esprit des Lois* (1748). His overall goal is to set up a relation between the facts of human existence and the norms that rule social life. If climate is one of the determining facts of human existence, Montesquieu argues, it is well worth explaining the different forms of social institutions, such as for instance democracy or despotism, monogamy or polygamy, etc in relation to the influences of the climate upon human nature. Not surprisingly, his point of departure is a physiological theory of the effects of coldness and heat on the human body and nervous system:

A cold air constricts the extremities of the external fibres of the body;... consequently, it increases also their force. On the contrary, a warm air relaxes and lengthens the extremes of the fibres; of course, it diminishes their force and elasticity

People are therefore more vigorous in cold climates. Here,... the temperature of the humours is greater, the blood moves freer towards the heart, and, reciprocally, the heart has more power. This superiority of strength must produce various effects; for instance, a greater boldness, that is, more courage; a greater sense of superiority, that is, less desire of revenge; a greater opinion of security, that is, more frankness, less suspicion, policy, and cunning... . Put a man into a close warm place, and, for the reasons above given, he will feel a great faintness.... The inhabitants of warm countries are, like old men, timorous; the people in cold countries are, like young men, brave. ⁵

While the cold preserves the forces of both body and soul and therefore allows for physical strength as well as boldness and courage, heat, in Montesquieu's view, dissolves the fibers of the body, weakening its forces, and hampering man's willingness to do hard work. Heat makes him passive, lazy, cowardly and more inclined to sensual and especially sexual pleasures. His theory not only draws on a bunch of travel accounts and colonial lore of the 17th and early 18th century but also on a relatively crude physiological experiment.⁶ By freezing a sheep's tongue Montesquieu observes that in the cold the taste-buds contract while they open and expand when thawing. Heat, he concludes, opens up the human body to relinquish its energy, but also opens man's mind and soul to perception, imagination and religious faith. The Indians for instance - as

⁵ Montesquieu: *The Spirit of the Laws*, book XIV, chap. 2.

⁶ /check Montesquieu's sources!/.

typical inhabitants of the "South" - are so delicate and sensitive that their climate-induced passivity and cowardice is, at the same time, overcome by the power of their imagination that is intensified by the heat:

Nature, having framed these people of a texture so weak as to fill them with timidity, has formed them, at the same time, of an imagination so lively, that every object makes the strongest impression upon them. That delicacy of organs, which renders them apprehensive of death, contributes likewise to make them dread a thousand things more than death: the very same sensibility induces them to fly, and dare, all dangers.⁷

Of course all this sounds like the jingoistic theory of a climate theorist from the North, who, just like Aristotle, sets his home climate as the norm of truly beneficial temperatures. And this jingoism will be the birthmark of any deterministic anthropology of the climate from Montesquieu up to 20th century theorists such as Ellsworth Huntington or Willy Hellpach. Willy Hellpach, a German physiologist and psychologist of the beginning of the 20th century, follows in these footsteps to produce a similar typology of cultures and social behavior determined by climatic conditions:

Je im Nordteil eines Erdraums überwiegen die Wesenszüge der Nüchternheit, Herbheit, Kühle, Gelassenheit, der Anstrengungswilligkeit, Geduld, Zähigkeit, Strenge, des konsequenten Verstandes- und Willenseinsatzes - je im Südteil die Wesenszüge der Lebhaftigkeit, Erregbarkeit, Triebhaftigkeit, der Gefühls- und Phantasiesphäre, des behäbigeren Gehenlassens oder augenblicklichen Aufflammens. Innerhalb einer Nation sind ihre nördlichen Bevölkerungen praktischer, verlässlicher, aber unzugänglicher, ihre südlicheren musischer, zugänglicher (gemütlicher, liebenswürdiger, gesprächiger), aber unbeständiger.

// The northern parts of the earth are largely characterized by such essential traits as sobriety, austerity, coolness, calmness, readiness to get to work, patience, tenacity, rigor, and the consequent exertion of the understanding and the will. In the southern parts the essential traits are liveliness, excitability, impulsiveness, sensitivity of the spheres of feeling and imagination, a sedate letting-things-go or sudden flaring-up. Within a nation, its northern population is more practical, dependable, but less open and sociable, whereas the southerners are more musical, more open (pleasant, endearing, chatty), but inconstant. (transl. Ben Robinson)⁸

The anthropology of climate seems to project a disparaging, if not utterly racist view on

⁷ Montesquieu: *The Spirit of the Laws*, book XIV, chap. 3

⁸ Willy Hellpach: "Kultur und Klima," in: H. Wolterek (ed.): *Klima - Wetter-Mensch*, Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer 1938, 417-438, especially 429-430. Also check *Geopsychologie*!

any culture other than the Northern-Occidental. From a post-colonial point of view, these broad-brush and mildly ludicrous theories on the cultures of "the South" or of "the North" reflect not much more than the eternal self-proclaimed superiority of the colonial gaze.

However, I would like to throw a more redeeming glance on Montesquieu and his followers. Montesquieu, I contend, has a point: he tries to establish a relation between the facticity of natural habitat and the normativity of human institutions - and thereby investigates the degrees of freedom or determination of culture by nature. We cannot think of the structures of government or of the family outside and independent from the ground, the locality and the natural conditions in which they are set. While modern climate anthropologists such as Huntington or Hellpach see man essentially bound and determined by his climatic origin, Montesquieu emphasizes that within these settings, man has a choice: the good lawmaker will try to counterbalance the pressures of climate on humans, for instance by establishing a cult of work in the hot regions where people are prone to laziness, as the Chinese, according to Montesquieu, had done. He tries to think man's freedom to make his own rules and laws, i.e. man's modernity, but *within* the framework of his climatic environment, not independent of it. Without the determinism that has often marked the anthropological theories of climate, Montesquieu may be seen as a first attempt to think *acclimatisation*, the endless negotiation between man and his climatic conditions. What we call today the cultural history of climate is the history of this negotiation.⁹

From an anthropological perspective, heat presents a particular challenge. As a thermal condition that is much more powerful, much more invasive than cold, heat may be seen as the epitome of climate *tout court*, a climate that radically shapes man and human culture. Cold is external to human fibers; it makes them contract within themselves which in turn facilitates more freedom of movement, more restraint, more control - in other words: more independence from the surrounding environment. Heat and cold are thus not just opposite values on the thermometer. They are qualitatively different. Cold closes the body off from its environment, heat makes the body dissolve into it, open up to it. The body is transcended and infused in heat. While cold allows for distance, self-reflection and objectivity, heat triggers apathy and relaxation, but also, as we see in

⁹ Add Bastian? Herder complicates matters further...

Hellpach, social intercourse and communication. It makes us open up not only to the natural but also to the social environment. Heat gets us involved, as it were, involved with the world around us as our senses are being sharpened to the point of oversensitivity. Our imagination intensifies. Our bodies soften and melt into the sensual and sexual appetites that heat stimulates.

That doesn't necessarily need to be a bad thing. Michael Taussig, one of the few ethnographers to address heat as the almost inevitable condition of ethnographic research, suggests that one just learn the lesson of heat. Surrender to its force and embrace it, like Montesquieu's Indians or the thawing tissue of the sheep's tongue.

"heat is a force like color that sets aside the understanding in place of something less conscious and more overflowing, radiance instead of line, immanence instead of that famous bird's-eye view. As our planet heats up and the Tropics spread, is it not possible that not only a new human body but a new type of bodily consciousness will be created in both temperate and tropical regions, a consciousness that reattaches the body to the cosmos?"¹⁰

Yet, even if we do not embrace heat and become happy inhabitants of new-fangled tropics in Scotland and the Ruhrgebiet, Taussig gets to the core of the fundamental impact of heat. It is not only man who transforms the climate. Climate transforms the very conditions of man's relationship to the world. Heat radiates and thereby dissolves clear-cut lines and boundaries. It oozes out of the atmosphere into bodies and things, it sticks to objects, it distorts our view, it intensifies our feelings. Heat is - as it were - the bodily sensation of what Morton describes as the "viscosity" of the hyperobject. Hyperobjects, such as climate, elude conceptualization precisely because they are too extended in time and space. At the same time they are also too close to be perceived. They don't allow for a distanced reflexive kind of cognition. We are always already immersed in them, as they are immersed in us.

"Global warming... is viscous. It never stops sticking to you, no matter where you move on Earth. ... The object is already there. Before we look at it. Global warming is not a function of our measuring devices. Yet because it's distributed across the biosphere and beyond, it's very hard to see as a unique entity." (49)

Heat, in other words, is the quality of something that has no qualities, yet a quality that

challenges the terms and conditions of perception itself. No bird's-eye view on global warming, no distanced perception or cognition of heat. Heat must be felt, like an affect. Heat may just be an affect.

The question is: how can one represent heat? How can one describe it, make it palpable? We can look at graphs of rising temperatures, but that will not do much for us in helping us - as the books on global warming advise - to "feel the heat". How can we feel the heat when it is not (yet) hot? When it's not hot where we live and massively produce greenhouse gases? What would an aesthetics of heat look, feel, sound, taste like? Let me try to give at least two, perhaps quirky, examples. The first one is a passage from the novel "Tropen" by the Austrian expressionist Robert Müller, published in 1915. "Tropen" is a quite lurid account of a trip three men took into the jungle between Venezuela and Brasil, a journey full of violence, dreams, plans and the desire for an enigmatic indigenous woman called Zana. As the men are being rowed upstream on the fictional "Rio Taquado", in white, blistering tropical heat, the narrator half-consciously starts contemplating:

All dies hatte ich schon einmal erlebt. Diese milden müden Wasser hatten um mich gespült. Dieses scheinhafte Licht, diese Süße, diese Laune, dieses Dämmern im Unausgesprochenen, es war nicht neu, es traf auf Erinnerung im Menschen, es war eine - Wiederholung. ... Es war heiß, ha, heiß, und der Fluß mochte vielleicht eben den Äquator schneiden; ...Vielleicht bin ich nur eine von den Flechten, die hier merkwürdig im Wasser rotieren, eine mit einem Gehirn, mit einem kranken bösen Gehirn... Feiste Lianenarme halsten die überhängenden Bäume und nährten ein Gefolge von laszive blickenden Blüten. Orchideen spreizten ihre kleinen dicken Rüssel mitten durch die Laubknoten... Im Schachte meines Bewußtseins, im Berge meiner Herkunft schlummerte eine Stimmung aus der Vorzeit von Millionen Wesen, das mütterliche Säugen und Tränken des Stromes, die hilfreiche Ruhe des Müßiggangs hatten meinem simplen Trieb geschmeichelt. ... Zwischen mir und diesem Leben rings existiert nicht nur vielleicht eine metaphysische, es existiert sogar eine sehr hervorragende, materielle Identität ... Ich bin eine vielfach verbesserte Tropenlandschaft. Wo ich gehe und stehe, trage ich eine Normaltemperatur von sechsundreißig Graden mit mir herum, ein üppiges Anschießen der Säfte, eine Vegetation von warmer Pracht."// All this I had already experienced once. This mild, weary water had washed around me. This illusory light, this

sweetness, this mood, this dawning of the unspeakable, it was not new, it resonated with the memory in man, it was a – repetition. It was ... hot, ha, hot, the river might even have cut across the equator;... Perhaps I'm just one of the lichens that turn in the water, one with a brain, with a sick, evil brain... The fat arms of lianas hugged the overhanging trees and fed an entourage of lascivious-looking flowers. Orchids spread their little, thick snouts through the knotted leaves... In the depths of my consciousness, in the mountain of my provenance slumbered a mood from the prehistory of millions of living beings, the maternal lactation and feeding of the river, the obliging calm of idleness had gratified my simple drive... Between me and this life about me there existed not only perhaps a metaphysical, but even a superb material identity... I am a much improved tropical landscape. Wherever I go and wherever I stand, I bring with me a normal temperature of 36 degrees, a sumptuous shooting of juices, a vegetation of warm splendor (transl. Ben Robinson).¹¹

It is obvious that Müller, who possibly never visited the tropics but may instead have spent the time in question in a psychiatric hospital, quotes all the tropes of the tropics available from the anthropology of climate and the colonial literature: the laziness and lust triggered by the suffocating heat and moisture; the lush, sexualized landscape and vegetation; and the regression to "simple instincts" and to lower stages of consciousness. However, what is most striking in this passage is the blurring of the boundaries and instances of cognition: while immersed in the perception of the tropical jungle, he suddenly perceives himself not only as part of this jungle but as the landscape itself. He is the landscape turned outside in: a tropical biotope at stable 36 degrees C, "a sumptuous shooting of juices, a vegetation of warm splendor." In Müllers fictional vision of heat, not only the instance of perception and the perceived collapse into one flowing, productive stream - or shall one say: mush. The narrator also dives into the deep time of his ontogenesis, the fetus floating in the nutritious waters of the womb, but also into the even deeper time of the origin of life as such. Into the world of liquids and cells, molecules and temperatures, the "prehistory of millions of living beings, the maternal lactation and feeding of the river". The world of the formation of species, yet in their mere potentiality, in their origin, not yet formed. Heat seems to allow for a relation to this primordial world, and perhaps to what Taussig means by a "bodily consciousness ... that reattaches the body to the cosmos."

This may sound a bit vague, if not esoteric. Let me deepen this impression of vagueness

¹¹ Robert Müller: Tropen. Der Mythos der Reise. Urkunden eines deutschen Ingenieurs (1915), Stuttgart: Reclam 1993, 24-30.

with my second example, this time not a text, but an image, Max Ernsts painting (décalcomanie) *L'Europe après la pluie 2*



Max Ernst: *L'Europe après la pluie II*, 1942 , oil on canvas (148,2 x 54,9 cm), Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, USA.

I will not be able to go into Ernst's surrealist aesthetics of landscape, I want to focus on what it could mean to depict a landscape formed by and infused with heat. What I want to give you, would be - in Latour's words - a somewhat "gaian" reading of Ernst's painting. What does it mean to "paint" heat, to make it visible? Obviously, it does not mean to depict the sun or objects warmed by the sun. What you see is a scenery of strange vegetal and anorganic shapes, rocks, steep mountains and rotting wood, and organisms that look like sponges and corals. Others look like animals or human beings in strange attire, both exotic and archaic, with a head or headgear in the shape of a bird. The sky is bright and mildly clouded, watery in contrast to the solidity of the landscape in the foreground, an effect created by the gooey color paste used in the *décalcomanie* technique. What we see is living matter, yet not fixed in species or objects, but metamorphosing from organic to inorganic, from marine to terrestrial, from animal to human - and back. What looks like coral may as well be a cow's head. Everything, however, seems to be made of one common substance: the vegetation, the rocks, as well as the human or animal figures that emerge darkly against the backdrop of the clear sky. This is what I believe comes closest to what one could call a visual aesthetics of heat. Ernst depicts heat without even trying to mimetically represent it, by light, sweat, mist or the use of certain colors. Ernst depicts what heat does and brings forth: a melting of forms and shapes, a consubstantiality of nature and what might be human figures (or

even works of art: statues?) made out of living matter that just takes ever changing shapes. Heat brings out the inseparable, non-objectivable, "viscous" coherence of life, a life or super-organism, of which the human species is a part. Like any other species, it is formed by and yet also forming and transforming this living matter - for the best and for the worst. Understanding the Anthropocene that we are facing might therefore be a task that necessarily not only involves a new look at history and culture, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has convincingly argued. I think, it must necessarily also draw on works of art, on fiction, on the bizarre imaginations of the heated and overheated brains of artists. "As the planet is heating up", as Taussig puts it, the only way to re-think the relation of man and nature, to re-think the complexity of the mesh of life might be to "feel the heat" through an aesthetics of heat - and to learn its lesson.