

“CHE TEMPO, CHE TEMPO”: GEOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT IN MAX
FRISCH’S *DER MENSCH ERSCHEINT IM HOLOZÄN*

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“Che tempo, che tempo”: Geology and Environment in Max Frisch’s *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*

Abstract

Critical readings of Frisch’s *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* [*Man in the Holocene*] have tended to read its heterogeneous and inter-medial form as a code for the mental disintegration of its protagonist. This paper argues instead that this feature can be seen as a poetological engagement with geological and climatic timescales. Due to its hybrid form, the incorporation of a multiplicity of textual fragments and pictorial representations, the text undermines both conventional definitions of narrative and representations of nature. *Holozän*’s non-linear structure establishes an aesthetic of slowness that ushers in an awareness of the utterly different time schemes of geological and climatic processes. Furthermore, the importance of the material features, such as an interplay between text and image and the disconnected, paratactical arrangement of sentences mirrors the novel’s focus on natural phenomena. Frisch’s narrative establishes a poetics that tries to reach beyond the confinements of an anthropocentric perspective and thereby subverts the borders between culture and environment.

1_Deep Time

With the emergence of geology as a scientific discipline around 1800, the conception of the earth’s history went through a period of profound change.¹ In contrast to the biblical account of creation, dating Earth’s origin to 6000 years ago, the planet suddenly appeared as the outcome of inconceivably vast time periods that bore no evidence of any human presence or divine origin. Trying to determine the age of fossils, the French comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier saw a relationship between this conception of deep time and the Copernican revolution of astronomy.² In addition to the loss of a meaningfully ordered space, with humanity placed at its very center, the succession of geological time periods did not purport any teleological purpose. Human exceptionalism, so it might seem, was stumbling backwards into oblivion. Consequently, the problem for early geologists consisted not only in the difficulty of bringing up a systematic explanation of geologic evolution, a theory of the earth; another, no less vital issue resulted from the question of how to represent and conceive of the unfathomable time periods that were indicated by the evidence of fossils and the geological record.³ With great resolution, Charles Darwin endorses an awareness of this incomprehensibility as the indispensable condition for any kind of engagement with questions of geology: “He [...] who does not admit how incomprehensively vast have been the periods of time, may at once close this volume.”⁴

However, the import of this veritable paradigm change is not limited to a distant chapter in the history of sciences. In recent discussions on human-induced changes in the environment, geological conceptions have again played a key role. The very structure of geological timescales, together with the problems of representation they entail, seems to have prefigured a decisive change in some of the urgent environmental problems that we are now struggling with. Already in *Le contrat naturel*, published in 1990, Michel Serres had argued that human civilization had reached a tipping point where its impact was to be measured on a geological scale. Considering the dense population of European cities, he writes:

Elles équivalent bien à maints déserts, les architectures dures et chauds des mégapoles; à des groupes de sources, de puits, de lacs [...], landes mouvantes tellement plus grandes que les sables de Goya — ou à un océan, ou à une plaque tectonique rigide et mobile. Nous existons enfin naturellement.⁵

Since then, this assessment has become part of debates on the emergence of a new geological epoch. In 2000, Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer argued that, since the industrial revolution, humanity has changed the composition of the atmosphere to such an extent that the notion of a new geological era seems warranted: the Anthropocene.⁶ Obviously, this redefinition would not only draw the line between human culture and nature in a slightly different way; in fact, one would be hard-pressed to draw any line at all. One result of this messy entanglement between different ontological spheres seems to be a different conception of human agency, but also of epistemological approaches towards the consequences of our current behavior. Environmental changes such as global warming and the ensuing rise of sea levels evolve, at least for the more privileged parts of the world's population, on such slow timescales that they tend to remain unobserved, below the radar of the cognitive and narrative schemes that we have habituated ourselves to live with. The long-term consequences of our present civilization reach into such distant points of the future that they seem to far exceed our capacity to imagine. They are, as Darwin might have said, “incomprehensively vast” and as the geologist David Archers writes: “About 10% of the CO₂ from coal will still be affecting the climate in one hundred thousand years.”⁷ Notably, time spans such as these not only pose obstacles for our imagination, but also distort our capacities to assess the political and ethical dimensions of current affairs in a responsible manner. Since slowly evolving forms of destruction lack the suddenness of events or acts that we normally associate with the concept of violence, these long-

term changes might not be viewed as violence at all. Therefore Rob Nixon refers to the inherent, yet unobserved aggression of these processes as “slow violence.”⁸

While these issues pose problems for our cognitive and imaginative capacities, they can also be related to more specific questions of literary form and narratability. In this respect, it has been argued that traditional narrative forms are inevitably ill-equipped for processes of the temporal cycles inherent to the natural world. Richard Kerridge argues “that conventional plot structures require forms of solution and closure that seem absurdly evasive when applied to ecological questions with their extremes of timescale and complexity of interdependence.”⁹ This issue becomes most apparent in respect to a vast phenomenon such as the formation of the earth. Famously, Frank Kermode argued that any narrative is directed towards an endpoint and thereby gains its structure and meaning.¹⁰ However, the disconcerting character of geological research was exactly due to the absence of any goal-driven and purposeful progress. Understanding geophysical processes, as Charles Lyell did, as the constant succession of micro-processes that are dispersed across the whole globe and stretched out over several hundred million years,¹¹ one might think that literature, with its alleged dependence on a narrative *telos*, a perspective, and individual characters, has no means to grasp such gradually and slowly evolving changes in any meaningful way. However, it should not be forgotten that in the early days of geology, the natural sciences stood in close relation to literature.¹² Romantic poetry, such as that by Lord Byron, was not only quoted in a demeanor of gentlemanly education, but also, and more importantly, its means of trope and indirect speech seem to have provided an inevitable tool to actually grasp and explore those conceptions of time, which lacked both precedent and language.¹³ This specific potential and import of poetic forms is not necessarily restricted to a bygone situation before the separation of what C.P. Snow called the “two cultures.” In reference to the aforementioned problems of narration and representation, literature might offer distinctive means of aesthetic experience, by which otherwise oblique dimensions of reality become discernible. It is against this backdrop that I would like to take a close look at a late narrative of Max Frisch’s, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*.¹⁴ First published in 1979, the short but formally complex novel can be read as an engagement with exactly those aspects and rhythms of nature that are normally conceived as the timeless background of human history. It possesses a distinct aesthetic and narrative structure that gradually erodes

the distinction between its character and the geological phenomena with which it is occupied. This approach doesn't try to attribute to Max Frisch a rather anachronistic awareness of today's environmental problems. Nonetheless, it rests on the assumption that recent discussions on the Anthropocene didn't evolve out of nothing, but have their own prehistory. *Holozän* marks a decisive step in this development.

2_ Writing on Days like These

The plot of *Holozän* might seem minimal, even trivial. The short novel depicts an aging man of 74 years, Mr. Geiser, who spends the summer in an isolated valley in the Swiss Alps. In several aspects, this setting is described not only as detached, far from any connection to the turmoil of world history, but as a place that has remained almost unmarked by the presence of human beings at all: "nicht anders als vor Jahrtausenden."¹⁵ This peripheral position at the margin of human history and civilization becomes even more striking with a sudden change of the weather. Due to a dire period of rain and thunderstorms, the only connecting street is closed to traffic. Unable to pursue his usual work in the garden and stuck by boredom, Geiser is overcome by the thought that the constant downpour could, in a catastrophic disruption, undermine the bedrock of the whole valley.

Die Nachrichten im Dorf sind widersprüchlich, andere behaupten, es sei gar kein Hang gerutscht, hingegen sei eine alte Stützmauer eingebrochen, eine Umleitung der Straße an dieser Stelle nicht möglich. [...] Notfalls können Helikopter eingesetzt werden, sofern kein Nebel ist. Niemand im Dorf glaubt, dass eines Tages oder in der Nacht einmal der ganze Berg ins Rutschen kommt und das Dorf verschüttet für alle Zeit.¹⁶

The granite mountain landscape, seemingly immovable since the beginning of time, suddenly turns slippery, treacherous. While the possibility of the disaster is explicitly negated ("Niemand im Dorf glaubt"), its sheer mention creates a level of disturbance that can no longer be undone, and that sets the stage for the whole following story. Placed at the end of both sentence and paragraph, the final disappearance of the valley "für alle Zeit" seems to have the final say, only to be followed by a space of silence and empty time. But, notwithstanding these vague moments of fear and anxiety, there is no catastrophic event. The predominant theme in *Holozän* is a profound feeling of boredom, silence, and repetition. Anxiously searching his environment for signs of a fissure that could possibly wipe out the village, Geiser is depicted as listening and watching. The ensuing moments of silence and waiting create a pronounced

and tense form of sensory attentiveness to the natural world, the acuteness of which is realized on the textual level in the shape of lengthy descriptions and several lists. Altogether, sixteen different sounds of thunder are carefully described and distinguished. A whole Sunday is divided into 12 different textures and intensities of rain with their respective time and duration. However, Geiser's fears about a cataclysm turn out to be unwarranted. Indeed, they could be read as forebodings of an altogether different event, which bears no relation to the actual natural world and rather concerns the disintegration of inner landscapes. After an unsuccessful attempt to leave the valley on foot, Geiser seems to lose his memory and, eventually, suffers a stroke from which he never recovers.

With respect to this individual loss, the text's peculiar narrative structure has an important role to play: On the one hand, the narrative perspective remains quite distant and reserved, referring to the main protagonist rather formally as "Herr Geiser." On the other hand, *Holožän* is almost entirely told by a personal narrator, who stays very close to his focalizer's disordered perceptions, memories, and fragmentary thoughts that are narrated without the use of any *verbi dicendi* or other means which would establish distance: "Ohne Gedächtnis kein Wissen. / Heute ist Dienstag. / Noch immer kein Hupen aus dem Tal,"¹⁷ "Kein Vieh – / Kein Vogel – / Kein Laut –."¹⁸ Passages such as these might give the impression that the reader becomes drawn into a dissolving consciousness that gradually loses any attachment to reality.¹⁹ Indeed, no person actually ever talks in this text. Since everything is told and assessed through the eyes of Geiser, and given the fact that the peaceful valley will, of course, remain unchanged after his disappearance, one could come to think of *Holožän* not as undermining, but instead reinforcing the inevitably human perspective on nature. "Katastrophen," the reader will recall, "kennt allein der Mensch."²⁰ This approach, however, fails to appreciate the text's outstanding material composition. Put together by the extensive use of montage, the text acquires an autonomous complexity and formal richness that hardly can be limited to the wandering mind of a fictional human individual. Furthermore, the use of montage erodes the idea that Geiser's slow demise is told from a narrative perspective whose position stays completely disentangled and autonomous from the material that is spread out in the text.

On account of the ever-present conditions of rain and fog, Geiser is forced to direct his gaze elsewhere, and, stuck within the confinements of his house, he turns to his

small private library: “Es bleibt nichts als lesen.”²¹ Delving into works of geology, natural and local history, the Bible, hiking guides, and various dictionaries, Geiser’s account is juxtaposed to historical accounts on natural disasters, earthquakes, deluges, and landslides. The act of reading, initially a mere pastime, becomes urgent, extensive, and takes over Geiser’s whole interest. Thereby it becomes increasingly evident that the particular weather conditions function less as a sign for Geiser’s own fate, but rather incite a moment of temporal suspension that ushers in a reconsideration of the concept of nature. While the sparsely populated Alpine valley is situated at the outermost boundary of civilization, Geiser, on the other hand, finds himself at a stopping point, from the perspective of which he tries to create an inventory of nature and his own knowledge:

Wann sind die ersten Säugetiere entstanden? Stattdessen weiß man, wieviel Liter der Heizöltank faßt und wann der erste Post-Bus fährt, sofern die Straße nicht gesperrt ist, und wann der letzte. Wann ist der Mensch entstanden und wieso? Trias, Jura, Kreide usw., keine Ahnung, wie viele Jahrmillionen die einzelnen Erdzeitalter gedauert haben.²²

This lack of knowledge is not going to be cured by the mere act of passive reading. Distrustful towards his diminishing capacities to remember, he begins to take notes and finally cuts out whole articles and passages to pin them to the walls of his home. Playing on the analogy between house and memory, the different rooms slowly become transformed into an archive of natural history, in whose loose paper clippings the wind rambles around. It is noteworthy, however, that the protagonist has a very selective stance towards his reading and shows an explicit disregard for fiction and the genre of the novel:

Romane eignen sich an diesen Tagen überhaupt nicht, da geht es um Menschen in ihrem Verhältnis zu sich und zu anderen, um Väter und Mütter und Töchter beziehungsweise Söhne und Geliebte usw., um Seelen, hauptsächlich unglückliche, und um Gesellschaft usw., als sei das Gelände dafür gesichert, die Erde ein für allemal Erde, die Höhe des Meeresspiegels geregelt ein für allemal.²³

At this point, the concept of catastrophe becomes detached from its possible relations to a single individual and, asking for new conceptions of writing, takes on a meta-fictional dimension. The novel, as it is represented here, is restricted to the realm of the human. It deals with individuals, the family, with society, and with all these miserable, unsatisfying love affairs whose rather limited importance is indicated by the twofold and dismissive use of “usw.” In contrast, Geiser directs his attention to forms

of the environment that are normally simply taken for granted as the inert backdrop and stage for the human drama: the sea level, the place, the earth itself. This turn, however, does not mark a mere change of perspective. The use of the conjunction “als ob” implies that the narrative focus on human relationships literally rests on the silent assumption of a stable and fixed setting or place — an assumption whose validity all of a sudden seems to be far from evident. While not explicitly stating the opposite, the conjunction creates the disturbing possibility of an earth that is anything but the taken-for-granted symbol of eternal steadiness, and instead is subject to change, contingency, and disruption, similar to human history. The indistinct prospect of a natural catastrophe therefore does not simply denote a possible event of disruption, but takes on a second, poetological meaning, referring to a turn in the form of writing.

The engagement with the natural sciences takes on a major role in the novel. This becomes apparent by seemingly minor details, such as the figure of a physician who specializes in solar sciences and spends a few days in the valley before fleeing in consideration of the weather. This interest in empirical and historical knowledge becomes most apparent through Geiser’s passion for books dealing with his environment:

Was außer dem Lexikon in zwölf Bänden vorhanden ist: Gartenbücher, ein Buch über Schlangen, eine Geschichte des Kantons Tessin, das Schweizerische Lexikon sowie Bilderbücher für die Kinder (DIE WELT IN DER WIR LEBEN), der Fremdwörter-Duden, und ein Buch über Island, wo Herr Geiser vor dreißig Jahren einmal gewesen ist, sowie Landkarten der näheren Umgebung und Wanderbücher, die Auskunft geben über Geologisches, Klimatisches, Historisches, usw. betreffend die Gegend.²⁴

Again, all these different items and things could be seen as marking the outlines of a narrative, briefly touching upon the stations of a whole lifetime, as the very personal and melancholy remains of a life nearing its end. Books entrenched with the memories of dwelling-places and past vacations; of one’s own children exploring nothing else but the world in which we live. Inevitably though, this inventory creates a second layer of meaning that exceeds the confinements of any private biography and entangles it with phenomena such as climate and geology that, by their very nature, seem to bear no relationship to the comparatively short timescale of human existence, to say nothing of a single individual or consciousness. Frisch’s protagonist becomes hopelessly enmeshed in his eclectic studies. Lacking any systematic approach or goal, he takes notes on lightning, geological timescales, the sensory organs of fishes, dif-

ferent rock formations, extinct animals, continental drift, climate charts, and the history of the earth (fig. 1).

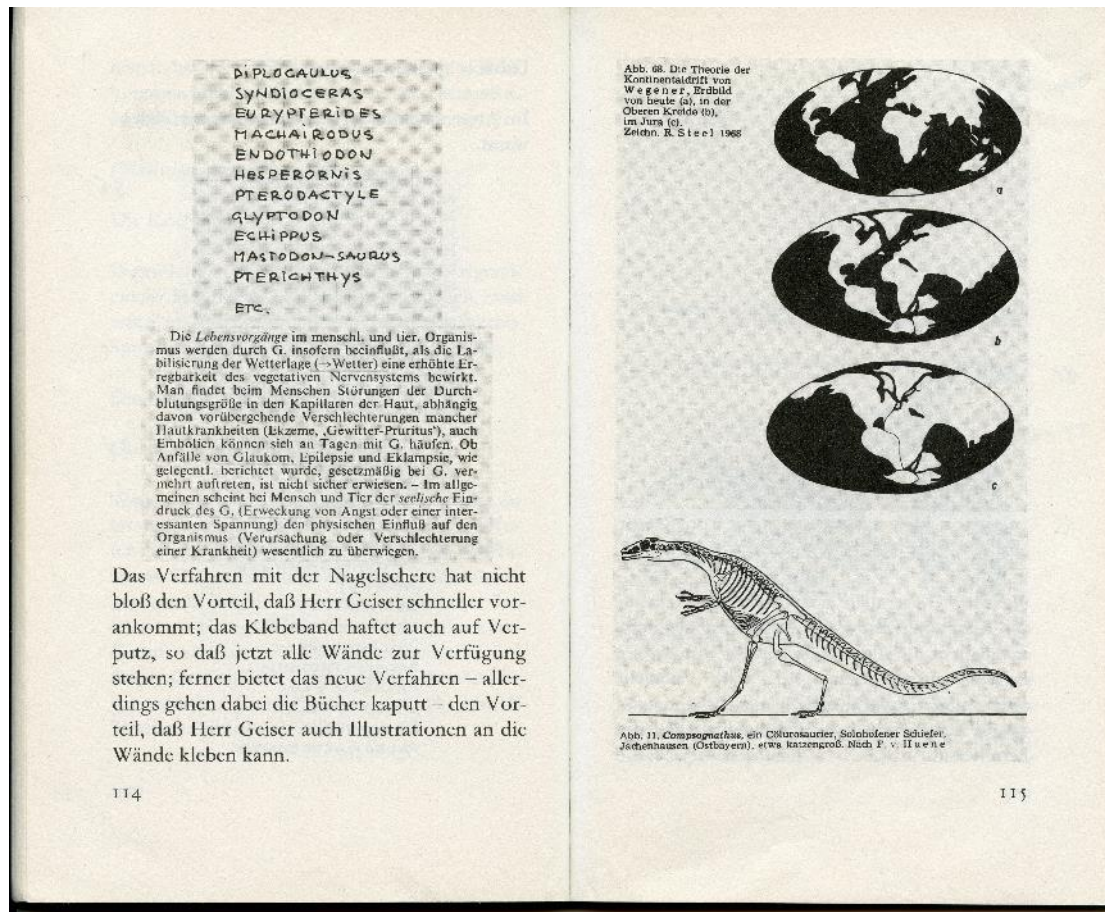


Fig. 1: A handwritten list of extinct species; a cut-out from a lexicon; narrative passages on Geiser; three different illustrations of the earth showing the progress of continental drift; an illustration of a small dinosaur. (MH 114, 115)

Thereby the text builds up a multitude of connections and ramifications that can't be explained by the notions of plot, nor kept within the realms of an individual literary character. A striking example of this is the ostensibly incidental mention of the book *Heller als tausend Sonnen* by Robert Jungk, which is part of yet another reading list. Written in the fifties, it was one of the first works touching upon the involvement between physics and the atomic bomb. Though mentioned only in passing, the beautiful and pristine Valle Maggia suddenly looks different and becomes more connected to a world in which the very concepts of near and far have lost their meaning. Just as the half-life period of radioactive elements transcends our own life, the boundary of the narrative form is constantly transgressed and becomes intermingled with forms of empirical knowledge.

3_Slow Catastrophes

“Che tempo, che tempo!,” the Italian-speaking villagers exclaim repeatedly in a mixture of wonder and routine resignation, thereby also calling to memory the fact that, after all, a spell of rain is not exactly the end of time, or is it? For Geiser, at least, the notion of *tempo* takes on a more dubious, ambiguous meaning that echoes the inherent connection between time and weather, still apparent in the French and the Italian languages. There is a child’s game in which a certain word is repeated again and again, until a formerly ordinary sound begins to sound strange, foreign, and unfamiliar. In *Holozän*, this effect of repetition seems to occur with several concepts, and one of them is *weather*, tempo. The relation between time and the “condition of the atmosphere,” as the *OED* defines the term weather, is not only a recurring theme of Geiser’s thoughts; it also shapes the whole narrative structure of Frisch’s text. While all the clocks in the nearby village have come to a standstill, and the rain is slowly dripping outside his hideout, Geiser ponders the possibility that indeed, against all odds, time itself could have come to a final halt.

Als Herr Geiser wieder zum Fenster geht, um an den langsam gleitenden Tropfen zu sehen, daß die Zeit nicht stehen bleibt — das hat es in der ganzen Erdgeschichte nie gegeben! — und als er es nicht lassen kann und nochmals auf seine Uhr schaut, zeigt sie sieben Minuten nach sechs.²⁵

Marking a peculiar feature of Frisch’s language, this sentence overtly dismisses a certain state of affair that yet, once it’s mentioned, develops an uncanny echo, which slowly undermines the assumed certainty of the statement. Because indeed, from an aesthetic perspective on *Holozän*, time does stand still. As we have already seen, forms of deceleration and the engagement with vast time cycles is certainly dominant on a thematic level.²⁶ “Erosion,” as the reader is informed, “ist ein langsamer Vorgang.”²⁷ But beyond this strong engagement on a thematic level, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* shows temporal forms of deceleration, slowness, and standstill that are realized through the use of montage, parataxis, and enumeration. Given the arrangement of various facsimiles such as handwritten notes, different forms of typesetting, and pictorial media such as graphs, maps, and drawings, the narrative has a non-linear form and lacks both a clear beginning and end. Geiser’s eclectic, unsystematic studies of natural history thus are mirrored by the visual appearance of a quite heterogeneous text that is saturated by a vast array of different fragments. Altogether,

53 hand-written notes, excerpts, texts, and images are incorporated into a text of 144 pages.

In terms of narrative temporality, this very dense arrangement of different elements leads to a permanent disruption of the narrative process by fragments of history, mythology, and knowledge, notably geology. The movement of reading, often-times depicted as a linear, sequential movement both through the text and the narrated time, is constantly led into digressions on the geophysical history of the Alps, the causes and effects of erosion, the movement of glaciers, several depictions of dinosaurs, and a cartographic representation of continental drift (fig. 2).

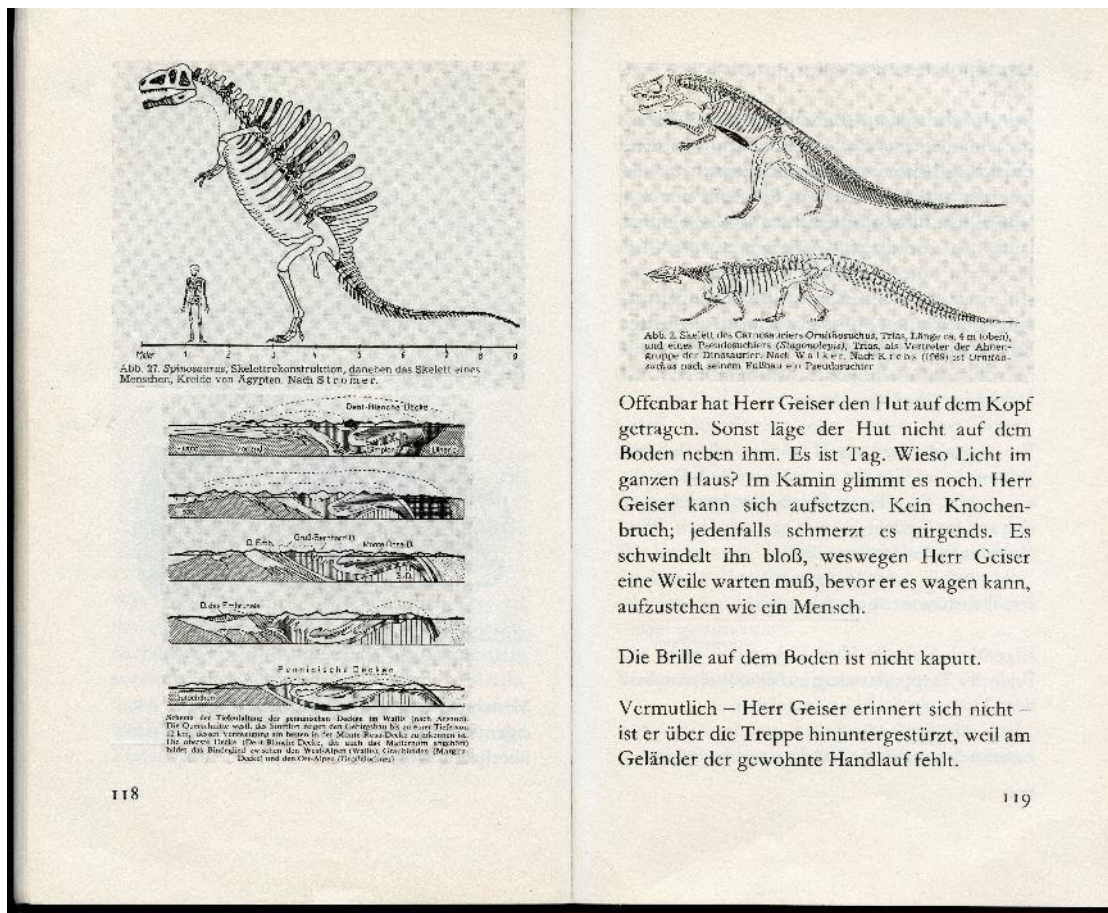


Fig. 2: Illustrations of several dinosaur skeletons next to a human; a schematic depiction of the Alpine orogeny; Geiser suffers a stroke. (MH 118, 119)

Crossing the line between knowledge and fiction, *Holozän* is equipped with a bibliography that lists 13 titles, including *Der große Brockhaus*, a standard German lexicon in 12 volumes. Consequently, the text itself takes a non-linear form, the structure of which is akin to the actual lexicon or encyclopedia. This feature is further underscored by the fact that, within the notes and articles, the reader finds further cross-

references to yet other lemmata, on account of which he is supposed to skip back and forth within the text or simply draw on his own bookshelf. Similar to the principle of a *mise en abyme*, the walls of Geiser's house, scattered with different paper fragments, therefore can be seen as presenting an analogy for the narrative as a whole, giving the text a spatial form which can be crossed and read in divergent directions. It turns into a sort of echo chamber in which different voices, writings, scripts, and media oscillate and perpetually create and shift new layers of meaning. Even though *Holozän* is a rather short text that can indeed be read in the course of a rainy afternoon, the reader is confronted with a constantly increasing amount of different elements, each coming equipped with its own respective appearance and meaning, whose diversity and possible connections defy any attempt of definition and thematic limitation.

This principle of juxtaposition of divergent elements is not restricted to the interplay of different texts and media on the material page, but can likewise be found on a syntactic level. The relationship between single sentences and paragraphs is anything but coherent, structured by a principle of parataxis and repetition which undermines any clear conception of a temporal succession, hierarchy, or order.

- die Alpen sind durch Faltung entstanden.
- die Ameisen leben in einem Staat.
- das Gewölbe haben die Römer erfunden.
- wenn das Eis der Arktis schmilzt, so ist New York unter Wasser, desgleichen Europa, ausgenommen die Alpen.
- viele Kastanien haben den Krebs.
- Katastrophen kennt allein der Mensch, sofern er sie überlebt; die Natur kennt keine Katastrophen.
- der Mensch erscheint im Holozän.²⁸

If a purported topic or common theme of these sentences is difficult to define, it is partly because of their formal structure. The loose cohesion of statements, separated and listed by the use of hyphens, clearly do not form a narrative, understood as the representation of a sequence of events. Thus, the writing is constantly interrupted and the page is honeycombed by gaps and pauses (fig. 3).

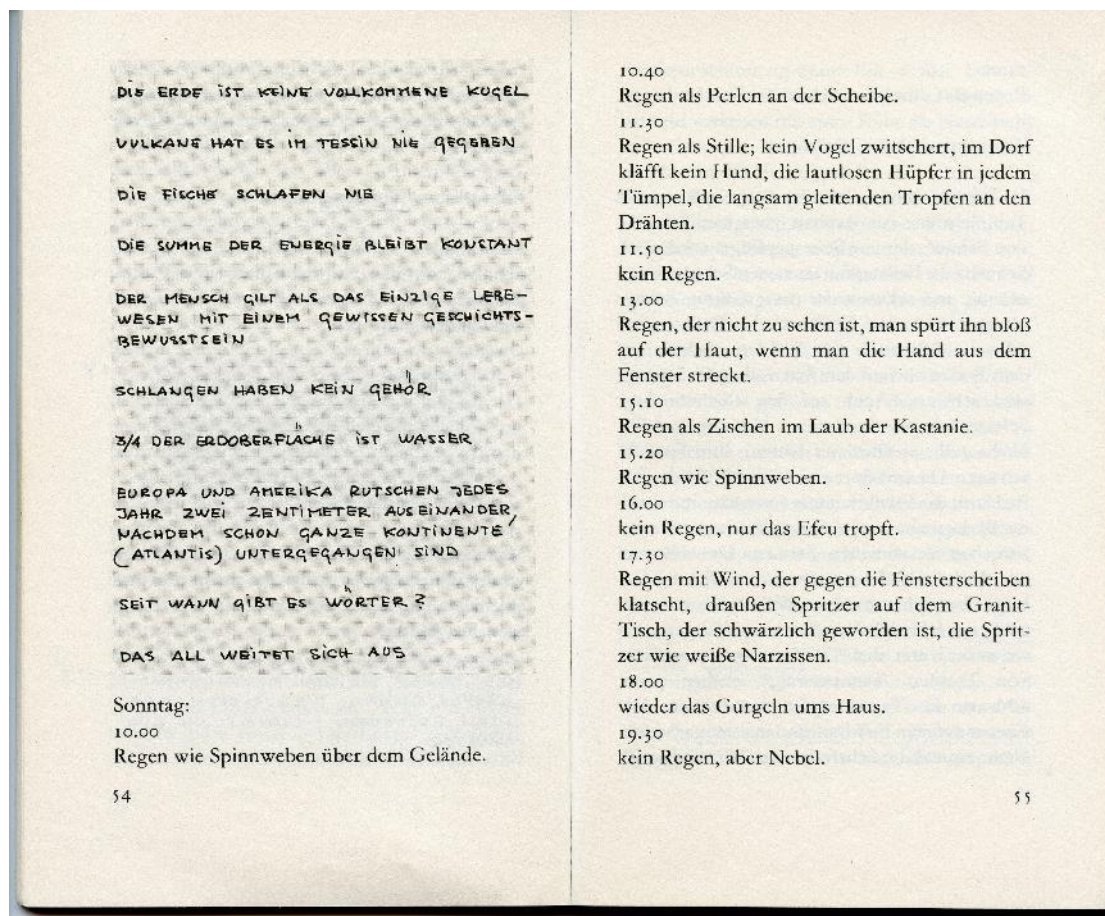


Fig. 3: Handwritten notes and questions next to a chronology of different types of rain. (MH 54, 55)

By the sheer enumeration of texts, sentences, and words, the reader is hard-pressed to find a clear conception of hierarchy, narrative progress, or meaning between the different parts. Since the narrator never comments on the various materials the reader is gazing at, the result is a proliferation of meaning, much more open to interpretation. This also has troubling consequences for questions of narrative genre: Geiser is not only uneasy and scornful with regard to the novel and its formal and thematic conventions, but, more importantly, the narrative itself turns the logic of a linear sequence of narrated events into the spatial array of different textual or pictorial pieces on the actual page.

In a twofold way, therefore, this particular feature establishes a close relationship between the narrative form and the geological processes and landscapes it deals with on a thematic level. Due to their dense arrangement, the different parts of the assembly take on the shape of the different layers and strata of geological sedimentation. Thus Frisch's text almost mimics in its structure the geological sediments that it tries

to describe. At the same time, the narrative's peculiar syntax and form, dominated by montage, parataxis, and intermediality, destabilizes taken-for-granted views on a linear narrative process, and thereby opens up a perspective on the slow timescale of natural cycles. Processes that are extended across vast time periods, such as the movement of glaciers, the drift of continental plates, or the slow changes in the climate are mirrored by a narrative structure of slowness and deceleration.²⁹ It is important, though, that this relationship is not to be mistaken for the idea of a comforting reconciliation with nature, or a search for stillness in the age of industrial or digital acceleration. Instead, the concentration on moments of halting velocity can incite an awareness to those, as Rob Nixon rightly puts it, "slowly unfolding catastrophes" and a form of violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."³⁰

Seen from this perspective, the aesthetic form of *Holozän* offers a particular epistemic position: In the early years of film criticism, Walter Benjamin referred to the technique of slow motion as an unprecedented means to reveal external reality. The process of filmic deceleration was not to be seen as simply a more accurate and therefore more objective depiction of the actual state of affairs, but rather, on the contrary, as an exploration of what otherwise would remain unconscious, hidden.³¹ In a similar form, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* uses an aesthetics of slowing down in order to explore a natural world which otherwise would remain but the parergon, the background for the drama of the unhappy soul. In this context, the particular materiality of the text bears an interesting relationship to a different representation of nature. Reading Frisch's text, the reader's attention is less troubled, I would argue, with the question of how the story is going to unfold. Instead, the text exposes its own heterogeneous quality — the graphic disposition of letters, scripts, and images — on the page. Concentrating on this visual, material, and medial condition of literature, the actual print is not seen as a mere byproduct for the otherwise disembodied meaning of arbitrary language. This shift of attention on the reader's part mirrors a corresponding change in the representation of natural phenomena, usually depicted in relation to the human center of meaning as a periphery, or, to use the common word, as the environment. Timothy Morton has described this change in the representation of nature in the following way:

Nobody likes it when you mention the unconscious, and nowadays, hardly anybody likes it when you mention the environment. [...] Nobody likes it when you mention the unconscious, not because you are pointing out something obscene that should remain hidden — that is at least partly enjoyable. Nobody likes it because when you mention it, it becomes *conscious*. In the same way, when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the environment. It stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us.³²

This distinction between foreground and background offers a promising way to analyze the peculiar transitions that occur in *Holozän* on an aesthetic level. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's aesthetic conception of slowing down as a means that works similar to analysis, Frisch's text reverses the logic between center and periphery, human fore- and natural background. The text creates such an extent of attentiveness and awareness to the natural environment that these elements cannot be reduced to the function of a mere source domain of metaphor that provides the story of a single individual with meaning. Just as much as the sheer materiality and the composition of the actual page is highlighted and becomes more prominent, nature, both in its extended temporal cycles and its spatial dimension, oftentimes considered as a mute background phenomenon, starts to linger uncannily in the foreground.

4_Amphiboly

Thus far, I have tried to argue that *Holozän* destabilizes the boundary of human and non-human phenomena through a distinct aesthetic of montage that posits Geiser's individual story in juxtaposition to an array of materials, covering vastly different natural phenomena such as erosion, the movement of glaciers, and the extinction of species. This frontier and its transgression becomes simultaneously manifest in the spatial configuration of the narrative that can be seen in correspondence to the relationship between humans and animals. While Geiser seems very keen to avoid having visitors to his home, he is finally surprised by an unexpected intrusion when he finds a salamander in his bathroom: "Der Feuer Salamander muss durch das offene Fenster hereingefallen sein, und da er an den glatten Kacheln nicht wieder hochkommt, liegt er einfach da, schwarz mit gelben Tupfen, reglos."³³ Although this might come across as an ordinary incident, Geiser is immediately fascinated and disturbed by the presence of the animal and bends down to examine it with the help of a reading glass. Subsequently, his thoughts are haunted by the presence of the small being, and, finally, the narrator even remarks on a similarity between his character and the animal:

Wenn Herr Geiser wieder in den Spiegel schaut, um sein Gesicht zu sehen, so weiß er: die Tochter in Basel heißt Corinne und die Firma in Basel, die der Schwiegersohn leitet und die seither ihren Umsatz verdreifacht hat, trägt seinen Namen, auch wenn Herr Geiser aussieht wie ein Lurch.³⁴

At first glance, this resemblance could be explained by the stroke Geiser is suffering and that paralyzes one part of his face. But again, a more promising approach to this passage is to take the animal seriously as an actual life-form and direct the reading glass, as Geiser already does, at the peculiar skin of the salamander. Amphibians are exceedingly open to their environment since the functions of both breathing and drinking are realized, partly or even totally, by their permeable skin. For this very reason, amphibians are sometimes referred to as ecological indicators for the condition of an entire ecosystem. Since they are born with gills, but change to pulmonary respiration in their mature state, amphibians also represent a link between sea and land animals. Tellingly, the Greek term *amphi* literally means *on both sides*. The salamander, therefore, not only transgresses the spatial frontier between inside and outside, house and nature, by climbing through the open window, but also the animal as such is by its biological makeup a liminal being that lives on the threshold between different spheres. From this point of view, we can recognize some of the threads that link seemingly different aspects of the novel: the narrator quite rightly remarks on a resemblance between Geiser and the amphibious animal, insofar as both beings lack any clear boundary in relation to their respective environments. While the salamander's vulnerability stems from the fact that it lives in constant interchange with its habitat, Geiser's identity is not clearly delineated and seems to dissolve into the mountain landscape. Revealingly, *Holozän* not only includes an article on amphibians (fig. 4), in which the process of metamorphosis is mentioned and explained, but also includes yet a different, handwritten note, that features the same concept of metamorphosis, this time referring to Ovid's work of the same title: "VERWANDLUNG VON MENSCHEN IN TIERE, BÄUME, STEINE ETC. SIEHE: METAMORPHOSE / MYTHOS."

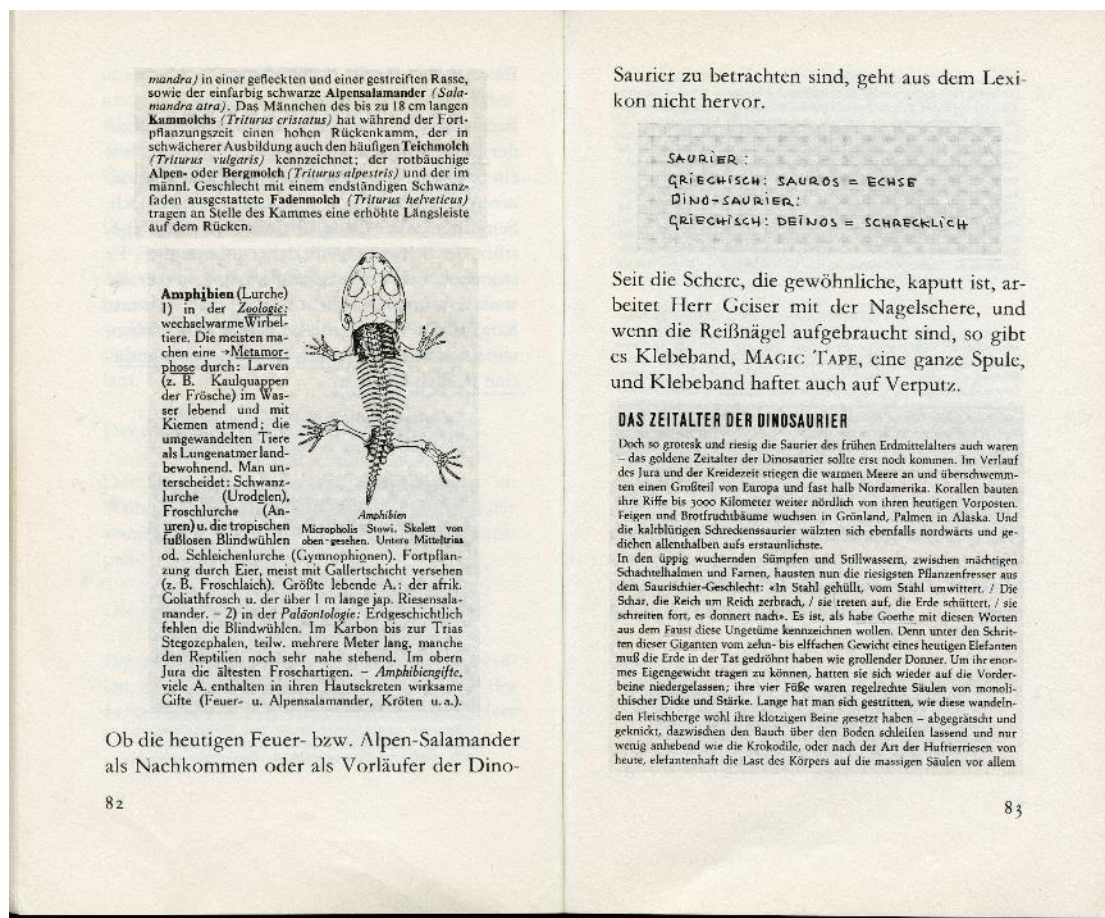


Fig. 4: The narrative on Geiser between different articles on salamanders, amphibians, and dinosaurs. (MH 82, 83)

Against this backdrop, Geiser's identity gradually dissolves and blurs the lines between the human and the animal. This absence of a clear hierarchy becomes observable in the paratactic style of the narrative's language, both in its interplay of different texts and images, and in the enumeration of sentences and words. The porous look of the graphic page forms a material and graphic counterpart both to the window the salamander climbs through, the hybrid being that climbs through it, and to the dissolving boundary between human and nature. The uncertain ontology of the amphibian is, therefore, mirrored in the amphibolic composition and language of the text.

5_Writing in the Anthropocene

This paper started with the assumption that contemporary issues of environment seem to pose problems of narratability and plot. *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* offers a poetic engagement with these incomprehensively vast scales of time and thereby also hints at an utterly different conception of the relationship between man and nature.

Again, that does not mean that *Holozän* offers the image of a harmonious reconciliation between culture and a pristine nature. Quite the opposite: Geiser's forays into different discourses function as an inventory of a natural world which, contrary to his original hopes, loses all its familiarity, comprehensibility, and taken-for-grantedness. Thereby emerges a poetics, a form of writing that bears an astonishing resemblance to characteristics we sum up under the term of the Anthropocene. As Timothy Clark writes:

The main artistic implication of trying to represent the Anthropocene must be a deep suspicion of any traditionally realistic aesthetic. With its bizarre kinds of action-at-a-distance, its imponderable scale, the collapse of distinctions between the trivial and the disastrous, nature and culture, and the proliferation of forces that cannot be directly perceived, the Anthropocene becomes deeply counterintuitive. It may find its analogue in [...] texts in which distinctions between 'character' and 'environment' become fragile or break down.³⁵

Seen against this backdrop, *Holozän* becomes more than a literary engagement with age and last things. Exactly by omitting the event of a single disaster, and by including the banal, trivial realm of the private, the text develops an awareness for those slow, inconceivable catastrophes that Timothy Clark seems to have in mind. Frisch's late work thereby opens up a fresh, engaging form of writing which foreshadows a radical change in the conception of literature and our identity as human beings. Geiser, as a fictional character, cannot be separated from, and actually can no longer be clearly identified within the different layers of texts and images, nor can he be separated from natural processes such as the geological and climatic cycles mentioned and depicted. Thus the text anticipates the intricate and messy entanglement of our present situation, in which questions of empirical sciences and ecology are hardly separable from those of politics. As Bruno Latour puts it: "Les tailles, les enjeux, les durées, les acteurs ne sont pas comparables et pourtant les voilà engagés dans la même histoire."³⁶ In *Holozän*, the environment is furnished with a history and narrative energy, thereby providing a striking example of how the aesthetic means of storytelling and narration can in fact enlarge or even enable an understanding of the complex epistemological and ontological situation we find ourselves in. Considering these issues as incomprehensively vast, the reader may at once open up this volume and start to read.

Endnotes

- ¹ “[W]hat was involved in the reconstruction of geohistory [...] was a new and surprising conception of the natural world. Rather than being essentially stable and bound by unchanging ‘laws of nature’ — ever since an initial act of creation, or else from uncreated eternity — one major part of nature, the earth itself, came to be seen as a product of *nature’s own history*. Furthermore, geohistory turned out to be as contingent, as unrepeated, and as unpredictable (even in retrospect) as human history itself.” Martin John Spencer Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6.
- ² Georges Cuvier, *Recherches sur les ossements fossiles de quadrupèdes* (Paris: Flammarion 1992 [1812]), 45.
- ³ Stephen Gould therefore stresses that any understanding of geological timescales has to rely on the detour of tropes: “Deep time is so alien that we can really comprehend it as metaphor.” Stephen Jay Gould, *Time’s Arrow: Time’s Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge, MS/London, England: Harvard University Press, 1987), 3.
- ⁴ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1859]), 208.
- ⁵ Michel Serres, *Le contrat naturel* (Paris: Éditions Francois Bourin, 1990), 40.
- ⁶ Paul Josef Crutzen and Eugene Filmore Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene’,” in *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000), 17–18.
- ⁷ David Archer, *The Long Thaw: How Humans are Changing the Next 100,000 Years of Earth’s Climate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1. In a similar way, Timothy Morton has argued that contemporary phenomena such as global warming complicate traditional concepts of ontology, since they are both non-local and “involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones that we are used to.” Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.
- ⁸ Cf. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MS/London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- ⁹ Richard Kerridge, “Narratives of Resignation: Environmentalism in Recent Fiction,” in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. John Parham (Aldershot: Ashgate Publisher Limited, 2002), 87–99, here: 99.
- ¹⁰ Frank Kermode, “Wating for the End,” in *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, ed. Malcolm Bull (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 250–263, here: 250.
- ¹¹ Referring to the work of Charles Lyell, Peter Schnyder understands geological processes as “(Zwischen-)Resultate einer unendlichen Akkumulation von beständig wiederholten Mikroveränderungen. Hier wird ein Entwicklungsrhythmus wenn nicht sicht- so doch denkbar, der in seiner Langsamkeit jenseits jeden menschlichen Maßstabs liegt.” Peter Schnyder, “Die Dynamisierung des Statischen: Geologisches Wissen bei Goethe und Stifter,” in *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, Neue Folge 19.3 (2009), 540–555, here: 541.
- ¹² “‘Literature,’ for one, was not yet a category that excluded nonfiction, and geologists, coming into contact with ancient worlds, needed imagination to recreate a past neither they nor any human being forebear could directly observe.” Adelene Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 14.
- ¹³ At several crucial points of his *Principles of Geology*, Charles Lyell refers approvingly to Lord Byron. See Charles Lyell, *The Principles of Geology* (London: Penguin Classics, 1997 [1830–

1833]). This flirt between science and literature was anything but unrequited. In the preface of the play *Cain: A Mystery*, Byron refers explicitly to Cuvier's theory of catastrophism. This is the same Cuvier that the narrator of Honoré de Balzac's *La peau du chagrin* is giving an eulogy on, calling him "le plus grand poète de notre siècle."

14 Max Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2014 [1979]).

15 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 64.

16 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 9.

17 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 14.

18 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 96.

19 This plotline incited the tendency of biographical readings. Max Frisch was 68 when *Holozän* was published in 1979, and it was read as an autobiographical engagement with the calamities of aging and the fear of dying. Its author was attributed with the same problem of a dissolving consciousness his fictional protagonist was suffering from. In contemporary criticism, this confusion between author and literary figure has been replaced by the tendency to read both the depiction of landscapes, and the formal structure as an allegorical code, as the expression or symptom of Geiser's troubled and increasingly incoherent mind. For Karlheinz Rossbacher, the descriptions of nature can be seen as a perfect analogy: "Dem Schlaganfall als Riß einer Gehirnader entspricht der Riß im Berghang." Karlheinz Rossbacher, "Lesevorgänge: Zu Max Frischs Erzählung *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*," in *Zeitgenossenschaft: Zur deutschsprachigen Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert; Festschrift für Egon Schwarz zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler (Frankfurt, Main: Athenäum, 1987), 252–265, here: 260. In a similar way, Neil Donahue argues that "Geiser's fears of senility are rarely expressed directly, but rather appear in concerns for the environment, objectified in apocalyptic scenarios or in almost obsessive worries [...] that becomes a sort of code for his fear of cerebral hemorrhage and stroke." Neil Donahue, "Beauty, Age and Apocalypse: Yasunari Kawabata's *The Sound of the Mountain* and Max Frisch's *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*," in *Arcadia* 28.3 (1993), 291–306, here: 303.

20 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 103.

21 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 16.

22 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 28.

23 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 16.

24 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 18.

25 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 87.

26 In this respect, my reading differs from Georg Braungart's various interpretations of *Holozän*. Braungart concentrates on the relationship between geological timescales and the literary character, but does not consider the importance of formal aspects such as the use of montage and intermedial aspects. Georg Braungart: "'Katastrophen kennt allein der Mensch, sofern er sie überlebt': Max Frisch, Peter Handke und die Geologie," in *Figurationen der Literarischen Moderne*, eds. Carsten Dutt and Roman Luckscheiter (Heidelberg: Winter, 2007), 23–41. In a similar way, Gabriele Dürbeck's interesting reading of Frisch's text against the backdrop of the Anthropocene lacks a clear discussion of the relationship between formal aspects and geological timescales. Gabriele Dürbeck, "Ambivalent Characters and Fragmented Poetics in Anthropocene Literature: Max Frisch and Ilija Trojanow," in *Minnesota Review* 83 (2014), 112–121.

27 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 64.

28 Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 103.

- ²⁹ Lutz Koepnick argues that aesthetic effects of slowness enable a consideration of the copresence of different time schemes and velocities that contemporary societies are structured by: “[S]lowness actively reworks existing perceptions of cotemporality, of the copresence of disjunctive streams of development, in order to warrant the very possibility of experience. Far from fleeing the now, slowness asks viewers to take time and explore what our contemporary culture of speed rarely allows us to ask, namely what it means to live in a present that no longer knows one integrated dynamic, grand narrative, or stable point of observation. It sharpens our sense for the coexistence of different and often incompatible vectors of time.” Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness: Towards and Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4. In extension of this argument, I make the case that slowness can increase an awareness of our increasing entanglement with natural processes.
- ³⁰ Nixon, *Slow Violence* (cf. note 8), 2.
- ³¹ Cf. Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” in *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. I.2, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt, Main: Suhrkamp, 1974 [1939], 470–508, here: 498.
- ³² Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1.
- ³³ Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 78.
- ³⁴ Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (cf. note 14), 124.
- ³⁵ Timothy Clark, “Nature, Post Nature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, ed. Louise Westling (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 75–89, here: 80.
- ³⁶ Bruno Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: Essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1991), 8.