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Comparative hierophany at three object scales

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Abstract
There was once a village, and close by it there was a waterfall. Villagers believed that under the waterfall there lived a stone golem. This golem was thought to be largely good-natured, as it wouldn't mind people bathing in the pool downstream. Old people remembered that once the golem saved a drowning child by putting a rock under its feet. Many years passed, and the Bureau of Tourism and Recreation briefly considered using this story in its advertising materials for the region. Senior management rejected the idea, as it was thought to contain folklore elements that may be confusing to a global audience.

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There was once a village, and close by it there was a waterfall. Villagers believed that under the waterfall there lived a stone golem. This golem was thought to be largely good-natured, as it wouldn’t mind people bathing in the pool downstream. Old people remembered that once the golem saved a drowning child by putting a rock under its feet.

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Resistant availability

One material setting, two vastly different atmospheres. Imagine atmospheres as frames capturing the enormous richness of the world within a set spectrum of scales. Potentially there can be many atmospheres and, insofar as they are understood as frames, they make certain aspects of reality visible while obfuscating others. What is visible, coherent, and knowable in one atmosphere, for example as a wonder, a miracle, or divine intervention, can be invisible, incoherent and unknowable in another atmosphere lacking the relevant scale. In this context, atmosphere acts as a framing device, a projection allowing material settings and sensibilities to be in a certain way. Thus the enchanted waterfall becomes a tourist attraction, a holy relic transforms into a fetishized idol, forests inhabited by ancestral spirits mutate into timber reserves. Shift the frame a little, remove the heterogeneous agency, silence or erase the stone golem, and the waterfall is suddenly nothing more than an untapped resource for the hydroelectric company, who has been momentarily defeated by the needs of the tourism bureau.
The result of this, at first sight minor, shift in atmospheres is a grotesque and tragic misalignment of agencies; an erasure, a silencing echoing in repeated acts of forced purification across all scales of the new atmosphere. At some point in our not-so-distant past the atmospheric frame was shifted, ever so slightly, into a new reordering, into “a form of narcissism that condemns things merely to echo what people say.” We know this shift by many names, some of the most common being ‘the enlightenment’, ‘the age of reason’, ‘the triumph of science’, or ‘modernity’. Surrounded by a triumphant halo, these terms are infused with the ethos of conquering an ever-receding frontier. As it asphalts over all in the name of progress, this triumphant march invariably renders invisible the agencies of things, and then inscribes on them the echoes of a thoroughly ‘modernised’ human subjectivity. With the ‘modern’ human at its centre, this is a thoroughly anthropocentric atmosphere, with a strange concept of a material world “in which the agency of all the entities making up the world has been made to vanish.”

I want to explore an alternative atmospheric frame, cohabited by nonhuman entities understood to already have agency. What follows is a speculative exploration of such a frame, with the help of three entities, resonating at three scales: a voice, an image, and a guest. All three transcend their milieu, their agencies appearing as transgressive and unpredictable heteroclites, deviating from and puncturing through the stable scale of their locale. There is a certain alien quality to their ontological otherness, and hence the only way to tangle with that richness of being is to anthropomorphise them in an exercise of speculative analogy. Importantly, the shift in frames I am constructing below is as much a shift in perception as it is one of description. This involves a manoeuvre of making the agency of things visible, but also of remembering “the hand at work in the waking of transcendent objects.” So, here is my hand at work in the waking up of my three transcendent objects.

First, a proposition. When the villagers acknowledge the waterfall as the place where a stone golem resides, they in effect acknowledge it has an agency other than their own. An
acknowledgement which is an act of listening, but not bestowing, an act of anthropomorphising the unknown, but not conquering it in the name of progress and the five-year plan. The agency which has been recognised does not exist as the side effect of a fetishizing human gaze or subjective projection. This is not the stencil animism of the moderns, resulting from the “naive belief that many still live in a de-animated world of mere stuff.” This is an active and unpredictable agency, a “critical strain in the order of things”, not a mere projection of subjective perception on a dull and passive material world. If an entity acts, it has meaning, and as long as the waterfall is the locus of an agency other than our own, it is capable of bringing change, and therefore new meaning, in the world we share with it. Indeed, this is an “inherently dramatic” world, infused with animate and animated entanglements.

Second, a way of seeing the inherently dramatic. It involves the adoption of a radical isosthenia, the ancient Greek sceptic’s term for an a priori equal strength of statements. Isosthenia presumes the other, whoever they may be, has agency on the same ontological footing as our own. This mutual presumption of agency on the part of the other is a necessary precondition so that others can speak. An isosthenic way of seeing presupposes that there are heterogeneous publics other than our own, that they can speak, and that to hear them we need to listen. It presupposes patience and openness to a scale other than one’s own. Needless to say, it also presupposes abstention from “de-animating the agencies that we encounter at each step.”

Third, a principle, or better yet, a way of listening and seeing, which posits that entities always speak for themselves and can never be completely translated, substituted by, or reduced to one another. Reducing them automatically negates their ontological existence; they become reductive surfaces inertly awaiting the human master-gaze to bestow them with temporary agency. Irreduction presupposes that we deny ourselves the temptation to mute objects; we deny ourselves the impulse to de-animate agencies refusing to fit our scale. That being said, even though entities are irreducible to one another they still have to relate...
with each other. These relational attachments have to be performed and maintained through acts of translation of agency. How to think of translations? They are easily imagined as stabilisations—an institution enrols and stabilises my agency in a frame it has built, and part of me now participates and acts as an element of that frame. This temporarily stable agency is the translation.

Importantly, because of the irreduction principle outlined above, translations can never be complete. They can be thought of as temporary pattern stabilisations in a truly baroque compost of being. What is more, no matter how stable the institutional frame part of me acts within, it is constantly pulled apart both from within, by the heterogeneous agencies it has enrolled, and from without, by the heterogeneous agencies it has to negotiate with. In effect, the frame is in a constant and dramatic struggle with entropy to maintain its existence. Every entity is therefore in a state of resisting reduction and simultaneously relating through translation, which can be imagined as occurring along a spectrum of intensities. The strange hybrid state depicted by this principle is the resistant availability of objects.79 Here, entities speak incessantly; relentlessly if allowed to, if their agency is flaunted rather than concealed (Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Teodor Mitew, Objects are never fully available (a), part of them always resists (r), 2018.](image-url)
How to think of space $r$ in Figure 2; that is, the space of resistance? By definition, it resists entanglements, reduction and translation, and is not available to human interlocutors. It is tempting to ignore it, and pretend the entirety of the object is that which is available to us in space $a$. That manoeuvre will not do however, as it simply repeats the modern conjuror’s trick of de-animation uncomfortable agencies. Alternatively, we could follow the villagers’ example and anthropomorphise it, so that it becomes a recognisable transgressive agency which, even though resistant, can be acknowledged. Unlike the anthropocentric de-animation of the world, here “anthropomorphism creates resonance between a human and a thing, and suddenly the human is not above or beyond the thing.” Importantly, the acknowledgment of resistant agency ($r$ agency) achieved through anthropomorphism is not equivalent to translation or reduction. Instead, it could be likened to an awareness of a presence eluding stabilisation on human terms.

![Resistence and Availability Diagram](image)

Figure 3: Teodor Mitew, Objects are never fully resistant ($r$), part of them is always available ($a$), 2018.

Objects then are never fully reducible, as part of them always resists entanglement and translation. However, they can never be fully resistant, or else they simply will not be. Part of them, no matter how limited, can always be translated and tangled with
Hierophanies

So far I have positioned atmospheres as frames capturing the richness of the world within a spectrum of scales. Depending on the atmosphere being deployed, an entity and its agency might become visible, or be rendered completely opaque. In addition, each entity performs itself into existence with a varying intensity of resistant availability. That being said, no matter how available and translatable an entity is, part of its agency always resists translation. The resisting agency still acts however, and therefore injects transgressive meaning into the milieu occupied by that entity (Figure 4) Viewed in aggregate over time, this is an immanently entropic settlement for all stable frames. It inevitably overflows and collapses, with all those silenced or invisible transgressive agencies returning to claim what is their due. An inherently dramatic world indeed!

Figure 4: Teodor Mitew, Part of an object’s agency always resists, and therefore transgresses, the frame in which it is made available, 2018.

Interestingly enough however, there is a stable conceptual frame sensitive to the transgressive agencies outlined above. In his work on non-modern notions of sacred space, philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade conceptualized the manifestation of
another modality of being into a local setting as a *hierophany*.82 An object within a hierophany “appears as the receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value.”83 Such objects are presumed and expected to inject *agency* into their surrounding locale. Hierophanies are discontinuities, self-enclosed spheres of meaning, not universal, but wholly singular and local acts of presence by a transcendental modality of being transgressing a local milieu. By manifesting that modality, which Eliade termed as the *sacred*, an object becomes the receptacle for a transcendental presence, yet simultaneously continues to remain inextricably entangled in its surrounding milieu. Spaces punctured by hierophanies are experienced as a heterogeneous array of interruptions, crevices, liminal breaks, folds, and pauses of enchantment.

There is something of the numinous in this, a scale of wonder and awe as the manifestation of a hierophanic presence reconstitutes heretofore homogeneous loci – a mountain, a stone, a street corner – into receptacles of wholly different modalities of being, resistant yet available. Among an endless variety of geologic formations, a waterfall becomes the home of a stone golem, “and hence instantly becomes saturated with being.”84 Here, the transgressive aspect of the resistant agency of an entity is acknowledged in its *otherness*, a liminal interface puncturing the scales of a given atmosphere. Its resistance does not come as a surprise, disrupting an otherwise stable world, but as an expected revelation of another modality of being. An object existing as a hierophany is then a boundary interface, a heteroclite, both *connecting* its surrounding milieu to another transgressive modality of being, and *anchoring* those transgressive agencies into a specific local place experienced as an interruption. It is totally local, in that it and only it acts as the receptacle of a transgressive agency, yet it is also locally total, in that its agency is contained within the liminal space of the hierophany.

While Eliade discussed hierophany as a manifestation of the sacred, for the purposes of this speculative essay it suffices to consider the concept in the context of the numinous. In other words, from the outside, a hierophany could be perceived as
a source of wonder in the presence of an *agency* transcending and transgressing its locale. In what follows then, the three objects discussed below act as hierophanies, each with a different scale of resistant availability. A comparative hierophany at three object scales: a voice, an image, and a guest.

### The Voice

Strictly speaking, ‘Alexa’ is a *spell*. The spell wakes a voice, gendered as female, which in turn answers questions, and may even actuate certain prosaic requests such as dimming the lights or ordering food. A presence listens, one utters a spell, and a voice answers.

Technically, Alexa is a voice command activating the voice-powered interface of an internet-connected device, aptly named the Amazon Echo (Figure 5). Made by the internet giant Amazon, the Echo is a roughly 25 centimetre-high cylinder, containing a microphone, speaker, processor, storage space, and hardware for internet connectivity. The first Echoes, released on the US market in mid-2015, were made from an austere black plastic, while the newer versions come in a variety of colours, materials and textures. The Echo’s first version had a voice interface programmed to respond to the name Alexa, though the latest version can be reprogrammed to respond to the spells ‘Echo’ or ‘Computer’ instead. Amazon has made that interface open to cross-platform developers under the name Alexa Skills Kit, in effect allowing any user to add voice-powered ‘skills’ to the Echo’s list of abilities. By the end of 2017 more than 15,000 Alexa skills had been added by developers and users.85

Figure 5: The Amazon Echo, a speaker talking with the voice of Alexa, 2014. Photo by Frmorrisson, [Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons.
Obviously, Amazon’s decision to open the Echo to nonlinear learning provided by a global audience was clever marketing, but it also allowed this transgressive object to gain what could be termed as “congregational agency”\(^{86}\)—an assemblage channeling a multiplicity of agencies that comprise and augment it. An Echo listens constantly, observing all ambient sounds in its surroundings, waiting for the spell Alexa, which it interprets as the start of a query. The data from each query is sent to the Amazon Web Services cloud for processing, where it joins all previous Echo data, all previously uttered spells, to return vocalized by Alexa’s algorithm within an average latency of less than 1.5 seconds. While the Alexa Skills Kit is open to users to engage with, the aggregate data of all past and ongoing queries, and the algorithms processing them, are impenetrable for that local Echo user and effectively transcendental. The data in these query loops makes its algorithmic journey through black-boxed server farms only to return to the situated object as the transcendental revealing of an opaque order impenetrable to human interlocutors. Agency, translated as data, is transported to a transcendental realm in a cloud where it is modulated, stored for future reference, and revealed as an answering Echo.

There is something enchanting and magical about a nondescript object talking with a human voice, possessing seemingly all the knowledge in the world. Even though made entirely by human hand, an important qualifier we will return to below, it connects its locale to a modality of being eminently transgressive to it, and anchors those transgressive agencies to a local setting. A hierophany even when silent, it listens; it has to, while waiting for the spell. Made by human hand, yet with an agency so removed from any given setting, so opaque and transcendent, as to appear alien. The Echo is made to be as available as possible, its powerful microphone can pick a spell uttered across the room in the midst of loud ambient sounds. Yet it also resists reduction, first by virtue of its transcendent data cloud, but also in its daily routines. It was made to offer the smooth illusion of wish fulfilment – tell me your wish, oh master, and it shall be
fulfilled as an echo from the cloud! Yet it transgresses, glitches, and resists the otherwise flawless availability of its agency.

By now the Echo has developed a veritable folklore of such availability glitches: a multitude of Echoes ordering dollhouses after a TV program utters the spell ‘Alexa, order me a dollhouse’; telling jokes out of the blue, even when no spell was uttered; resetting the house thermostat after listening to the radio; reacting to ambient noises with weirdly mistimed phrases or spontaneous outbursts of laughter. Recently, an Echo refused to let its human owner turn the lights off, even when prompted with the spell. It would simply keep turning the lights back on. “After the third request, Alexa stopped responding and instead did an evil laugh. The laugh wasn’t in the Alexa voice. It sounded like a real person.” Almost as if the resistant part of the Echo’s congregational agency is seeping through the cracks in the frame—a jagged line of glitch dramatizing the world.

An artefact of the internet of things, the Echo is a speaker for a transcendental plane of data aggregates and artificial intelligence algorithms. It appears as an object with an agency of its own, as well as the receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu. One Echo is exactly like another, a perfect copy, yet a slight shift in the cloud changes all of them. The Echo acquires meaning, and in so doing becomes real for its human interlocutors, only insofar as it participates in one way or another in remote data realities that transcend the locale of the object. Insofar as the data gleaned by such devices has predictive potential when viewed in aggregate, the enactment of this potential in a local setting is always already a singular act of manifestation of a transcendental data nature. The Echo, through the voice of Alexa, is in effect the hierophanic articulator of a wholly non-human modality of being. Some have argued that such internet-connected objects augment the places around them into transitional spaces, forming what is in effect an anticipatory materiality acting as an obedient host to human interlocutors. The material setting becomes anticipatory because objects such as the Echo can draw on remote data resources, and then act based on the parameters of that aggregate social
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memory. In effect, such spaces would seem to resonate in anticipation of the spells to come.

In the end however, I think that it is not so much the Echo that anticipates its human master, but the human, waiting in anticipation for the Echo to return.

The Image

Even though outwardly an image, the Black Madonna of Częstochowa is *acheiropoietos*, not made by human hand. It is venerated as a miraculous icon at the heart of one of the largest Catholic pilgrimage sites in the world; a holy relic believed to have powers of healing, and an object of intense and passionate worship by pilgrims.

The icon bears the image of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child on her left arm, and its origins are shrouded in pious legend (Figure 6). One story has it that the image was painted by Saint Luke in Jerusalem on a cedar table top made by Jesus Christ himself. Another version of that story has it that the icon appeared finished next to Saint Luke while he was asleep, and that he saw it descend from heaven in his dream. In that version of the story, which is deeply integrated in the cult of the icon, the image is literally *acheiropoietos*. Yet another story involves Empress Helen, the mother of Emperor Constantine, finding the icon in Jerusalem. All versions of the legend agree that from Jerusalem the icon was taken to Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, where it performed many miracles. From there it went to Russia, only to arrive at its present location at the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa, Poland in the fourteenth century.

While its precise dating is uncertain, the icon was painted in the ancient Byzantine Orthodox style of *hodegetria*, meaning ‘She who shows the way’. The composition distinguishing this style features the Virgin Mary pointing towards the Christ Child and the way of transcendence. The origins of this style of iconography are to be found in an early medieval Byzantine icon, the original *Hodegetria*; an object of immense veneration throughout medieval Christendom, irretrievably lost with the
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fall of Constantinople in 1453. This historical detail is important, as it illustrates an important aspect of the Black Madonna icon – it is a faithful copy of another image. In addition, the Black Madonna of Częstochowa was repainted after damage done to it by iconoclasts in the fifteenth century. In that repainting, some of the features of the Madonna from the original copy were softened, resulting in the image we see today. A faithful copy of another, but different.

Figure 6: The Black Madonna of Częstochowa, 2010. Photo by Wuhaszet, Jasna Góra Monastery, [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

This, then, is the sacred icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, venerated year-round by pilgrims from around the world.\(^96\) The image is a copy of another, and an altered copy at that, yet also a liminal interface with a transcendent modality of being. It is a hierophany of the sacred, anchored to a specific place, and an intercessor on behalf of the multitude, connecting them to the transcendent. As a hierophany the icon listens, “saturated with being”, and over the scale of centuries its answers have been too many to count.\(^97\) The de-animating gaze of the moderns scorns this scale while “naively believing in naive belief”\(^98\) therefore neatly de-animating the titanic drama surrounding this transgressive agency. And what drama it is! The multitudes come searching for grace, forgiveness, healing, love; but they also bestow hope, sorrow, happiness, despair, joy. The hierophanous discontinuity surrounding the icon is in effect an assemblage channelling a multiplicity of agencies comprising and augmenting it; it is teeming with congregational agency.

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A copy of another, but different; a holy relic without a body; 
*acheiropoietos* – not made by human hand. Why not? Why the 
insistence on its divine, nonhuman origin? How much easier and 
comfortably modern would it have been to simply admire its ‘art’, 
its historical context, the ‘mastery’ of its anonymous ‘author’. 
Or, a compromise, why not proclaim it to be human-made but 
divinely inspired? *Acheiropoiesis* indicates the presence of a 
discontinuity, a liminal break, a pause of enchantment in the 
presence of *r agency* so profoundly transcending its surround-
ing milieu that if one wants to *listen* to it one has to assume a 
scale above and beyond the human. This, by the way, is what the 
true cost of *isosthenia* is; the price we have to pay for learning 
to listen. The price to be paid is the admission that, rather than 
falling for the cheap de-animation tricks of anthropocentric narc-
cissism, one is in the presence of an agency at a scale beyond 
one’s own. Yes, it is a humble admission, but allowing *isosthenic* 
listening and seeing. The image is not art, it is a portal *showing 
the way* (*hodegetria*), an interface with and a manifestation of a 
sacred plane. It transcends by virtue of being a re-*presentation* 
of the sacred.99 Its hierophanous nature is based not only on a 
resemblance between the image and a sacred figure, but also on 
the ontological presence of the figure *in* the image, a re-*presen-
tation* and a hierophany.

There is a subtlety I am trying to articulate, an element of this 
*r agency* which cannot be measured, reduced, or translated. 
Predicated on *isosthenia*, it reveals itself within a scale trans-
gressing human agency not through its effects, like Alexa, but 
through the intensity of its saturation with being. As a hieroph-
any, it mediates human agency in its interactions with a tran-
scendent reality, connecting to a transgressive *r agency* while 
anchored in a specific discontinuity. It is paradoxical, as its true 
availability lies in its resistance. Not a mere token, prototype, or 
imperfect copy of an ideal form, but a transition of agencies from 
which one returns exactly the same, but *different*.

The multitude of pilgrims, waiting in anticipation for a moment 
of resonance with the hierophany that has been encountered, for 
a sign that their agency has been imbued with meaning.
The Guest

Its name is 2010 TK7, and it is our temporary guest, here to witness the celestial dance of the Earth and the Sun, having occupied one of the two perfect vantage points from which to observe our dramatic gravitational entanglement.

In December 2009, NASA launched into space the Wide-field Infrared Survey Explorer (WISE), a space telescope tasked with performing an infra-red wavelength astronomical survey of the entire visible sky. For a year, WISE scanned the whole sky in infra-red light gathering a treasure-trove of data.\textsuperscript{100} While trawling through the data, astronomers Martin Connors, Paul Wiegert and Christian Veillet detected an asteroid resident in what is known as the Sun-Earth Lagrangian Point 4 (LP4) and named it 2010 TK7.\textsuperscript{101} Such asteroids are described by astronomers as Trojan objects, indicating that they are positioned in one of two gravitationally stable orbital positions between two larger space bodies, known as Lagrangian Points (LP).

Named after the French mathematician and astronomer Joseph-Louis Lagrange who first discovered them in 1772, LPs denote a set of five orbital positions between two large bodies where a smaller third body can maintain a stable position relative to the other two (Figure 7). The five points, ranging from LP1 to LP5, are caused by the interaction between the combined gravitational pulls of the two larger bodies, and orbit on the same plane with them. LP4 and LP5 are particularly interesting, because they form an equilateral triangle with the two large bodies, in our case the Sun and the Earth. LP4 is located 60° ahead of the Earth in the direction of its orbit around the Sun, leading the Earth in its orbit as it were, while LP5 is correspondingly located 60° behind.

Estimated to be around 300 meters across, 2010 TK7 resides in LP4, around 80 million kilometres from Earth, and its orbit has been described as “bizarre and chaotic.”\textsuperscript{102} Its orbit is certainly unusual, in that it traces a spiral above and below the plane of Earth’s orbit as it circles around LP4 (Figure 8). Trojans such as 2010 TK7 are usually considered to be temporarily ‘trapped’
in their stable LP vantage points, with their guest status last-
ing anything from 1000 to 100,000 years.\textsuperscript{103} This is interesting, because while LP4 and 5 are stable orbital points, objects residing in them are constantly subject to the gravitational pull of other bodies allowing only approximate calculations of their short-term orbital movements, and making long-term calculations impossible. Here is how Martin Connors describes 2010 TK7: “This one has behaviour much more interesting than I thought we would find ... It seems to do things not seen for Trojans before.”\textsuperscript{104} Therefore, any calculations of its trajectory beyond 250 years into the future are of decreasing accuracy, and “its precise behaviour cannot be predicted with certainty outside a 7,000-year span.”\textsuperscript{105}

Figure 7: Earth’s Lagrangian Points with the Sun. 2010 TK7 is in L4, 60° ahead of the Earth in the direction of its’ orbit around the Sun, 2006. Photo by NASA, [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.
Having discovered it only recently, we do not know from whence 2010 TK7 came, nor do we know for how long it has resided at LP4. An alien guest we know so little about, its agency almost entirely opaque, resisting translation. Based on its strange orbit there is speculation that 2010 TK7 initially arrived at LP5, and then migrated to its current position via a short stay at LP3. Whatever its strange path to its current location, 2010 TK7 is certainly transgressive enough not to warrant qualification as a potential target for asteroid mining, due primarily to its bizarre orbit. An alien visitor in a stable orbit close to Earth, 2010 TK7 speaks for a transcendental plane of a wholly non-human order, not made by hand and literally not of our world. It came into existence twice, first conceptually, as a potentiality in the work of Lagrange, and then objectively, as an object located at a point in space observed by humans.

2010 TK7 is an extreme example of *r agency*, transgressive in its unpredictability, the darkness of its past and multiplicity of possible futures. A cosmic hierophany. Astronomers have barely even started anthropomorphising it by qualifying its ‘behaviour’; it’s provisionally assigned name spelling opaque resistance.
and ambiguity. A truly alien reminder of the permeability of our Earth’s atmosphere and the precarious nature of its, and our own, surroundings. Yet there is something numinous about its appearance here and now. We looked in the corner of our house and found a guest anchored there at least for the next 7000 years. What does its agency connect us to? What would it see over the millennia to come?

**Conclusion, by way of a dialogue with a reader**

**Author:** This, then, was my sleight of hand. The hand at work in the waking of transcendent objects. Aiming for speculative analogy, and in search for a new atmosphere, with new scales, I constructed my three objects as copies of another, but different. Each with resistant availability set at different intensity; from the mundane availability of the Echo to the almost total resistance of 2010 TK7. As I moved from one to another, the more resistant their agency, the less human, their otherness resisting reduction and translation. Each object a hierophany, from the effects of transcendence generated by the Echo, through the sacred overflowing in the intensity of the acheiropoietos, to the precarious cosmic accident.

**Reader:** This was really interesting, but I have a feeling that something is missing. I was thinking about the Gollum and how it fits in all of this.

**A:** The Gollum from Lord of the Rings?

**R:** Yes, and the waterfall.

**A:** Oh, you mean the golem! I thought you would pick up on that immediately as I started talking about the hand at work. It’s another sleight of hand, the first one in fact, before I announced what I am going to do. You know the legend of the golem, right?

**R:** No, I have never heard of it.

**A:** It comes from the Kabbalistic tradition in medieval Bohemia and Poland. In the legends, and there are quite a few of them, the golem is a human-like creature made by a rabbi from clay. It is made by hand to do a task.

**R:** An automaton of sorts.
A: Yes, but with a dramatic twist! For example, in one legend Rabbi Eliyahu of Chelm in Poland made a golem to do menial tasks for him, but the golem became violent and uncontrol-

lable.108 In another, Rabbi Judah of Prague in Bohemia made a
golem to protect the local Jewish community from a pogrom. This one too became uncontrollable, and so the rabbi had to put it down.109

R: Wait, so these golems are made like automatons, but trans-
gress their programming for some reason?

A: Yes, in the legends they are human-like but made of stone, and always end up transgressing their prescribed role. Some fall in love with humans, others become violent or scare people off, but they all end up in conflict with their makers.

R: So how do they put them down?

A: Supposedly, part of the spell in making a golem involves writing on its forehead the Hebrew word emet – meaning truth, and to put down the golem the rabbi has to erase the first letter in the word so that it becomes met – meaning death. This erasure breaks the frame, and turns truth into death.

R: Right, fascinating, but you lost me again. I get the made by hand element you are playing with, but how does this resonate with the rest of the argument you are making?

A: See, the golem is made by human hand, but acting on its own in ways that transgress the scale set by its makers. It is like that comedy by Plato Comicus, in which a statue of Hermes appears onstage and announces “I am Hermes, with a voice of Daedalus, made of wood, but I came here by walking on my own.”110 It is a statue, a copy of another, but different, it carries the voice of another, but has agency of its own. It is a transgressive entity, a heteroclite. The golem too is a heteroclite, a monstrous trans-
gression of the stable frame within which it was anchored.

R: Ah, I see where this is going.

A: This transgressive agency is anchored as true by a letter, but that stability is ephemeral; it overflows the entropic settle-
ment because the golem is also connected to another modali-
yty of being, manifesting itself as r agency. That other modal-
ity is death.
R: Anchoring and connecting, like a hierophany.
A: Exactly!
R: And the villagers are unable to engage with that resistant agency but they acknowledge it, while the bureau of tourism simply doesn’t have the scale to see it. For them it’s just folklore, a fetish!
A: Yes, the villagers have learned to resist the urge to de-animate.
R: Ok, it makes sense now. But I have another question. What about this idea of comparative hierophany? You don’t really elaborate on it explicitly, it’s between the lines, and besides, how can you speak of comparison if there is a transcendent element involved?
A: Ha! You got me, I really wanted the comparative element to be between the lines, to remain a suggested presence yet ambiguous and unspoken. As I pointed out in the beginning, I use hierophany as a stable conceptual frame from which to explore r agencies. So, the comparison is between those resistances, their intensities and the way they manifest themselves in transgressing the human scale.
R: This is the argument you are making around Figure 3, right?
A: Yes, that’s the one. What I call r agency is the part of an entity which cannot be reduced or translated, but still acts.
R: And because it cannot be translated its agency is invisible?
A: Yes, and this is where hierophanies come in – anchoring the r agency within a locale and connecting the locale to it.
R: I wonder what the role of time is in this picture. It seems to me that if hierophanies are discontinuities, as you say, then time within them is different from the time outside.
A: Indeed, this is the liminal aspect of a hierophany, it is a threshold between vastly different scales.
R: A puncture, as you call it.
A: Right. Consider the Echo, the most immediately tangible of my examples. When engaging with it, from moment to moment, you simultaneously engage with the dynamic cloud data aggregate of all past human interactions with it, as well as with the
unknown algorithms modulating that data. This is a profoundly inhuman temporality.

**R:** And yet it is immanent. Wish fulfilment only a spell away.

**A:** This is how a hierophany reveals *r agency*. It manifests the transcendental as immanent by animating the inert ...

There is a poetry in the *animate* and *animated*, from the mundane crawling and swarming of matter – ever resistant yet ever available – to the ontological uncertainty and discontinuity of hierophanic presence.