



PoiÄ?sis

Description

Planet Earth is a giant spherical communications machine with a diameter of about 84,000 kilometres. Well over 1,000 satellites orbit between the earthâ??s surface and this outer (geosynchronous) layer.

Nature and artefact seem to merge due to the scale, ubiquity, sophistication, and conceits of contemporary techno-science, especially if we add to the global communications infrastructure the prospects of geo-engineering intended to rebalance the Earthâ??s climate via [stratospheric aerosols](#), [orbiting sunshades](#), and [remote control hover clouds](#).

By convention, nature is â??The phenomena of the physical world collectively; *esp.* plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations.â?• (OED)

As many attest, thereâ??s now nothing we could readily call â??natureâ?• beyond what humans probe, modify and invent. [Big data science](#) delivers a nature formerly hidden from view â?? e.g. gene sequence data combines with thousands of medical records to be analysed shared and compared across many laboratories in the hunt for patterns, causes, drugs and cures. It seems we donâ??t only discover nature through techno-science. We make it.

Societies make nature in a tangible way by controlling and modifying the worlds they inhabit. They build dykes, clear forests, farm animals, plant hedgerows, demarcate nature reserves, modify crop genes and invent medical treatments. Such interventions confound distinctions between the natural and the artificial. We also make nature in the way we explain, report, articulate and define it.



“Making” is a useful term in this context, and resonates with the inventive and creative arts of engineering, informatics, architecture, design, music, and the visual, sonic, literary and digital arts. But in the case of nature, who is making what? Are human beings the nature makers?

Meet your maker

Poiesis is the key term in ancient Greek for *making* or *production* as revived by Martin Heidegger. From *poiesis* we get the word *poetry*.

Nature is of course derived from the Latin word *natura* (and *nascor*, to be born). For the Greeks the word we translate as nature was *physis* (or *phusis*) as growth, from which we derive *physics*.

For Heidegger we’ve lost something important that was present in the original usage of the term *physis*. Not least, the artist (craftsperson) and nature both share in the creative act that is *poiesis*, i.e. making or production. In Heidegger’s influential essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, we read (in typical Heideggerian prose):

“Not only handcraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, *poiēsis*. *Physis* also, the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing-forth, *poiēsis*. *Physis* is, indeed *poiēsis* in the highest sense. For what presences by means of *physis* has the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth, e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom, in itself (*en heautō*). In contrast, what is brought forth by the artisan or the artist, e.g., the silver chalice, has the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth not in itself, but in another (*en allō*), in the craftsman or artist.” (10-11)

Heidegger writes about nature in several key texts, notably *Being and Time*, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, *Letter on Humanism*, *The origin of the work of art*, and *The question concerning technology*.

I’ve been reading a lot about Heidegger on nature, and this passage just about distills it, with help from an articles by Charles Guignon. The passage rewards contextual analysis and much reflection, but in simple terms we could say that nature and the making of things by humans both take part in *poiēsis* (making). In the case of handcraft there’s a craftsperson or artist involved, though Heidegger is careful not to reinforce the obvious point that it’s the craftsperson who makes the artefact. Handcraft is a “bringing-forth,” a practice with ambiguous agency.

Heidegger seems at pains to remove from *making* the necessity to ascribe agency, i.e. who or what does the making in the case of nature or art. (He does though expand on Aristotle’s four causes that

Iâ??ve summarised in another [post](#).)

Making in nature and craft

Guignon identifies Heideggerâ??s three characteristics of nature, as *physis*, and shows how things in nature

1. present themselves, as if moving into the spotlight
2. show themselves for what they are, in how they seem to us
3. are caught up in a struggle, in a field of contrasts and differences. This struggle exists independently of and prior to the presence of human beings.

These donâ??t seem to me like particularly radical propositions in the case of nature, but are when applied to the making of artefacts. Guignon examines Heideggerâ??s example of the noble and culturally significant Greek temple as artefact standing out on a hilltop against the elements. The temple

1. presents itself in an opening or clearing, as if moving into the spotlight
2. is the subject of continued interpretation as defining the community it serves
3. is caught up in many struggles including between victory and defeat, being blessed and cursed, master and slave. Itâ??s much too simple to assert that the temple is simply a human invention. For Guignon, â??The Greeks, for example, became the Greeks they were only through the world shaped by the temple and other world-defining works of artâ?• (43).

Itâ??s easy for those of us attuned to a [Poststructuralist](#) world view to accept this 3rd attribute of the process of making. After all no invention (or work of art) is attributable to just a single author. Itâ??s creation and reception depends on a host of cultural contingencies, let alone teams, legacies, educators, mentors, socio-technical networks, etc.

I think Heideggerâ??s insights add gravitas to the simple (though controversial) proposition that the natural world has always been artifice all the way through.

Shepherds of Being

Itâ??s a commonplace to assert that human societies make nature according to their needs, aspirations and the technologies available. Itâ??s also ordinary to assert that we humans are the products of nature and natural processes, as if made by nature, or that we harness nature to make things like temples and satellites.

As far as I know, Heidegger doesnâ??t use the word â??agency,â?• but I think his radical proposition is to identify *making (poiesis)* as agent, the entity that acts, above people, nature or technology.

He says something similar about language: that we are in it, rather than controllers of it. Itâ??s as hermeneutical scholars say of an engaging [conversation](#): we are led by the conversation, rather than the leaders.

For Heidegger, humankind is on the brink of â??a precipitous fall,â?• where people just regard each other as resources for exploitation: â??Meanwhile man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything

man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct (27). For Heidegger this sense of lordship is a delusion, as we are trapped in a technologically-enframed world view that conceals that revealing which, in the sense of *poiēsis*, lets what presences come forth into appearance (27).

That's what I take from Heidegger's reflections on *poiēsis*: it's fine to say that we make nature as a way of emphasizing that what humankind does in the anthropocene has consequences. On the other hand, such instrumentalism makes it harder for us to think in terms of letting be, understanding, enjoying, caring about and shepherding what is. After all, in his Letter on Humanism, Heidegger asserts, "Man is the shepherd of Being" (234).

We discover nature through techno-science. We make nature and are culpable for its exploitation, but it's sobering to contemplate Heidegger's proposition that there's more to investigate about our relationship with the world than resource management.



Bibliography

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Notes

- As indicated in the quote from the edition of "The question concerning technology" I've used above, *poiesis* is sometimes presented with a diacritical mark (to aid pronunciation) as *poiēsis*. This is useful to know if searching for the word online. The search terms "poiesis" or "poiēsis" will both work.

and *poiÄsis*• yield different results. For characters with diacritics copy and paste from the [unicode character table](#).

- A link to *poiÄsis*: [Jake Myers blog](#).
- For information about satellite orbits see the [NASA Earth Observatory website](#).
- Iâve attempted to avoid Heideggerâs reference to Being in this discussion, or *technÄ*, *alethia*, *praxis*, etc, or the reverential tones that inevitably accompany Heidegger scholarship.
- The first image is an off-shore wind farm, Clacton-on-sea, England; the second is a flock of sheep outside Fez, Morocco.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

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