

# Paradigms

John Zerzan

To many, it seems there will be no escape from the dominant reality, no alternative to an irredeemably darkened modernity as civilization's final, lasting mode. We are indeed currently trapped, and the nature of our imprisonment is not subject to scrutiny. Its very existence is off-limits to discourse.

An October 2014 *New Yorker* cartoon shows two lab-coated technicians in front of a subatomic particle collider. One of them declares, "Once you have a collider, every problem starts to look like a particle." The system itself defines what is real, just as a mammoth industrial base produces a corresponding picture of physics, as in the cartoon. Everything looks like a particle and nothing else is seen. Or, seen but not seen, worth only lip service at best, not really thought about or taken seriously.

Of course, the way we look at things can change. Thomas Kuhn's 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* attacked the prevailing idea of how models or paradigms of science change. Instead of cumulative, positivist development, in which evidence builds up, slowly altering the prevailing outlook, Kuhn argued that shifts usually happen rather suddenly in a kind of "quantum leap" fashion. This conceptual switch approach is now mainly taken for granted as a description of how science paradigms actually change.

A paradigm shift in perception may be far more sudden. For instance, a drawing of a young woman that—with a second look—portrays a very old woman. Or, in another example, a duck becomes a rabbit.

In terms of real-world shifts, the technology-worshipping transhumanists predict the Singularity, coming fairly soon, when techno-advances will cross a threshold and transcend every current issue, including mortality. Artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and genetic engineering will meld machine and humanity into a new super-existence!

Proponents of this pathological project overlook the fact that technology is systematically destroying nature and shredding our humanness along the way. Transhumanism represents more of the same, the latest manic drive to dominate all of life, yet another manifestation of civilization's inner predictability. A "radical break" must be the radical reversal of such an outlook.

The deep malaise and melancholy of modernity, its dreariness and distancing, have spread everywhere; there is less and less room for escape. Almost nothing is left outside the totalizing Machine.

We live in a paradigm inaugurated by domestication, nine or ten thousand years ago. Its costs at every level are everywhere apparent. "While there is a beggar, there is a myth," according to Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project*. There's a necessary paradigm, an overriding schema that justifies what is, including the existence of beggars.

Our own natures have been besieged, along with every other domesticate, under this reigning paradigm. It is possible to see things in a very different light, even though basic questioning is illegitimate under the reigning sign of domestication.

Benjamin also asserted that the smallest cell of visualized reality already outweighs the prevailing perspective. Especially when the old, dominant paradigm cannot explain what is unfolding, e.g., the chronic multiple homicide events. A shift is already underway, though not yet in sufficiently valid terms: the massive erosion of faith in all public institutions, for example.

Nietzsche called for a “transvaluation of all values,” but completely missed the centrality of domestication, and its product, culture. At some point the balance tips and the aggregate cost or toll, the anxiety, emptiness, sense of no future, is felt more acutely. Domination/civilization had a historical beginning. It may have a historical end—which would be the end of history.

Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno gives a relevant insight: “To the child it is self-evident that what delights him in his favorite village is found only there, there alone and nowhere else. He is mistaken; but his mistake creates the model of experience.”

This has to do with unique experience itself, and reminds one of Situationist Raoul Vaneigem’s wonderful comments on the still-free zone of childhood, and what cannot be exchanged for something else.

At the end of *Minima Moralia* is my favorite line by Adorno. “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.”

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