



**HAL**  
open science

## An Attempt at Writing a Compositionist Manifesto

Bruno Latour

► **To cite this version:**

Bruno Latour. An Attempt at Writing a Compositionist Manifesto. *New Literary History*, 2010, 41 (3), pp.471-490. hal-00972938

**HAL Id: hal-00972938**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-00972938v1>**

Submitted on 21 May 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# An attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”\*

Accepted for publication by *New Literary History*

Bruno Latour, Sciences Po

English kindly corrected by Rita Felski

*For D.H.*

## *A prologue in form of an avatar*

If I had an agent, I am sure he would advise me to sue James Cameron over his latest blockbuster since AVATAR should really be called PANDORA’S HOPE!# Yes, Pandora is the name of the mythical humanoid figure whose box holds all the ills of humanity, but it is also the name of the heavenly body that humans from planet Earth (all members of the typically American military-industrial complex) are exploiting to death without any worry for the fate of its local inhabitants, the Navis, and their ecosystem, a superorganism and goddess called Eywa. I am under the impression that this film is the first popular description of what happens when modernist humans meet Gaia. And it’s not pretty.

The REVENGE OF GAIA, to draw on the title of a book by James Lovelock, results in a terrifying replay of Dunkirk 1940 or Saigon 1973: a retreat and a defeat.## This time, the Cowboys lose to the Indians: they have to flee from their Frontier and withdraw back home abandoning all their riches behind them. In trying to pry open the mysterious planet Pandora in search of a mineral —known as unobtainium, no less!—, the Earthlings, just as in the classical myth, let loose all the ills of humanity: not only do they ravage the planet, destroy the great tree of life and kill the quasi Amazonian Indians who had lived in edenic harmony with it, but they also become infected with their own macho ideology. Outward destruction breeds inward destruction. And again, as in the classical myth, hope is left at the bottom of Pandora’s box —I mean planet—because it lies deep in the forest, thoroughly hidden in the complex web of connections that the Navis nurture with their own Gaia, a biological and cultural network which only a small

team of naturalists and anthropologists are beginning to explore.<sup>iii</sup> It is left to Jack, an outcast, a marine with neither legs nor academic credentials, to finally “get it”, yet at a price: the betrayal of his fellow mercenaries, a rather conventional love affair with a native, and a magnificent transmigration of his original crippled body into his avatar, thereby inverting the relationship between the original and the copy and giving a whole new dimension to what it means to “go native”...).

I take this film to be the first Hollywood script about the modernist clash with nature that doesn't take ultimate catastrophe and destruction for granted — as so many have before — but opts for a much more interesting outcome: a new search for hope on condition that what it means to have a body, a mind, and a world is completely redefined. The lesson of the film, in my reading of it, is that modernized and modernizing humans are not physically, psychologically, scientifically and emotionally equipped to survive on their Planet. As in Michel Tournier's inverted story of Robinson Crusoe, they have to relearn from beginning to end what it is to live on their island —and just like Tournier's fable, Crusoe ultimately decides to stay in the now civilized and civilizing jungle instead of going back home to what for him has become just another wilderness.<sup>iv</sup> But what fifty years ago in Tournier's romance was a fully *individual* experience has become today in Cameron's film a *collective* adventure: there is no sustainable life for Earth bound species on their planet island.

### *Why write a manifesto?*

It is in the dramatic atmosphere induced by Cameron's opera that I want to write a draft of my manifesto. I know full well that, just like the time of avant-gardes or that of the Great Frontier, the time of manifestos has long passed. Actually, it is the time of *time* that has passed: this strange idea of a vast army moving forward, preceded by the most daring innovators and thinkers, followed by a mass of slower and heavier crowds, while the rearguard of the most archaic, the most primitive, the most reactionary people, trails behind —just like the Navis, trying hopelessly to slow down the inevitable charge forward. During this recently defunct time of time, manifestos were like so many war cries intended to speed up the movement, ridicule the Philistines, castigate the reactionaries. This huge war-like narrative was predicated on the idea that the flow of time had one —and only one— *inevitable* and *irreversible* direction. The war waged by the avant-gardes would be won, no matter how many defeats they suffered. What this series of manifestos pointed to was the inevitable march of *progress*. So much so that these manifestos could be used like so many sign posts to decide who was more “progressive” and who was more “reactionary.”

Today, the avant-gardes have all but disappeared, the front line is as impossible to draw as the precise boundaries of terrorist networks, and the well arrayed labels “archaic,” “reactionary,” “progressive” seem to hover haphazardly like a cloud of mosquitoes. If there is one thing that has vanished, it is the idea of a flow of time moving inevitably and irreversibly forward that can be predicted by clear sighted thinkers. The spirit of the age, if there is such a *Zeitgeist*, is rather that everything that had been taken for granted in the modernist grand narrative of

Progress is fully *reversible* and that it is impossible to trust in the clear-sightedness of anyone —especially academics. If we needed a proof of that (un)fortunate state of affairs, a look at the recent 2009 Climate Summit in Copenhagen would be enough: at the same time that some, like James Lovelock, argued that human civilization itself is threatened by the “revenge of Gaia” (a good case if any, as we will see later, of a fully reversible flow of time!), the greatest assembly of representatives of the human race managed to sit on their hands for days doing nothing and making no decisions whatsoever. Whom are we supposed to believe: those who say climate change is a life-threatening event? those who, by doing nothing much, state that it can be handled by business as usual? or those who say that the march of progress should go on, no matter what?

And yet a manifesto might not be so useless at this point, making explicit (that is, *manifest*) a subtle but radical transformation in the definition of what it means to progress, that is, to *process* forward and meet new prospects. Not as a war cry for an avant-garde to move even further and faster ahead, but rather as a warning, a call to attention, so as to *stop* going further *in the same way* as before toward the future.<sup>v</sup> The nuance I want to outline is that between *progress* and *progressive*. It is as if we had to move from an idea of inevitable progress to one of *tentative and precautionary progression*. There is still a movement. Something is still going forward. But, as I will explain in the third section, the tenor is entirely different. And since it seems impossible to draft a manifesto without a word ending with an -ism (communism, futurism, surrealism, situationism, etc.), I have chosen to give this manifesto a worthy banner, the word *compositionism*. Yes, I would like to be able to write “The Compositionist Manifesto” by reverting to an outmoded genre in the grand style of old, beginning with something like: “A specter haunts not only Europe but the world: that of compositionism. All the Powers of the Modernist World have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter!”.

Even though the word “composition” is a bit too long and windy, what is nice is that it underlines that things have to be put together (Latin *componere*) while retaining their heterogeneity. Also, it is connected with composure; it has clear roots in art, painting, music, theater, dance, and thus is associated with choreography and scenography; it is not too far from “compromise” and “compromising,” retaining a certain diplomatic and prudential flavor. Speaking of flavor, it carries with it the pungent but ecologically correct smell of “compost”, itself due to the active “de-composition” of many invisible agents...<sup>vi</sup> Above all, a composition can *fail* and thus retains what is most important in the notion of *constructivism* (a label which I could have used as well, had it not been already taken by art history). It thus draws attention away from the irrelevant difference between what is constructed and what is not constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is *well* or *badly* constructed, *well* or *badly* composed.<sup>vii</sup> What is to be composed may, at any point, be *decomposed*.

In other words, compositionism takes up the task of searching for universality but without believing that this universality is already there, waiting to be unveiled and discovered. It is thus as far from relativism (in the papal sense of the word) as it is from universalism (in the modernist meaning of the world —

more on this later). From universalism it takes up the task of building a common world; from relativism, the certainty that this common world has to be built from utterly heterogeneous parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, revisable and diverse composite material.

I am not going to go through all the points that would be necessary to establish the credentials of the little word compositionism. I will simply outline three successive connotations I'd like to associate with this neologism: first by contrasting it with critique;<sup>viii</sup> second, by exploring why it could offer a successor to nature; and lastly, since Grand Narratives are a necessary component of manifestoes, in what sort of big story it could situate itself. Let's imagine that these are the first three planks of my political platform!

### *An alternative to critique?*

In a first meaning, compositionism could stand as an alternative to *critique* (I don't mean a critique of critique but a reuse of critique; not an even more critical critique but rather critique acquired second hand —so to speak— and put to a different use). To be sure, critique did a wonderful job of debunking prejudices, enlightening nations, prodding minds, but, as I have argued elsewhere, it “ran out of steam” because it was predicated on the discovery of a true world of realities lying behind a veil of appearances.<sup>ix</sup> This beautiful staging had the great advantage of creating a huge difference of potential between the world of delusion and the world of reality, thus generating an immense source of productive energy that in a few centuries reshaped the face of the Earth. But it also had the immense drawback of creating a massive gap between what was felt and what was real. Ironically, given the Nietzschean fervor of so many iconoclasts, critique relies on a rear world of the beyond, that is, on a transcendence that is no less transcendent for being fully secular. With critique, you may debunk, reveal, unveil, but only as long as you establish, through this process of creative destruction, a privileged access to the world of reality behind the veils of appearances. Critique, in other words, has all the limits of utopia: it relies on the certainty of the world *beyond* this world. By contrast, for compositionism, there is no world of beyond. It is all about *immanence*.

The difference is not moot, because *what can be critiqued cannot be composed*. It is really a mundane question of having the right tools for the right job. With a hammer (or a sledge hammer) in hand you can do a lot of things: break down walls, destroy idols, ridicule prejudices, but you cannot repair, take care, assemble, reassemble, stitch together. It is no more possible to compose with the paraphernalia of critique than it is to cook with a seesaw. Its limitations are greater still, for the hammer of critique can only prevail if, behind the slowly dismantled wall of appearances, is finally revealed the netherworld of reality. But when there is nothing real to be seen behind this destroyed wall, critique suddenly looks like another call to nihilism. What is the use of poking holes in delusions, if nothing more true is revealed beneath?

This is precisely what has happened to postmodernism, which can be defined as another form of modernism, fully equipped with the same iconoclastic

tools as the moderns, but without the belief in a real world beyond. No wonder it had no other solution but to break itself to pieces, ending up debunking the debunkers. Critique was meaningful only as long as it was accompanied by the sturdy yet juvenile belief in a real world beyond. Once deprived of this naïve belief in transcendence, critique is no longer able to produce this difference of potential that had literally given it steam. As if the hammer had ricocheted off the wall and made the debunkers dumb. And this is why it has been necessary to move from iconoclasm to what I have called *iconoclash* —namely, the *suspension* of the critical impulse, the transformation of debunking from a *resource* (the main resource of intellectual life in the last century, it would seem), to a *topic* to be carefully studied.\* While critics still believe that there is too much belief and too many things standing in the way of reality, compositionists believe that there are enough ruins and that everything has to be reassembled piece by piece. Which is another way of saying that we don't wish to have too much to do with the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "Let the dead bury their dead".

In suspending the critical gesture, we begin to understand retrospectively the oddness of the definition of nature to which critique had been wed. It had two surprising features: the discovery, revelation, unveiling of what lay behind the subjective fog of appearances ; and what ensured the continuity in space and time of all beings in their inner reality. It has long been realized by science studies, by feminist theory and in a much wider way by all sorts of environmental movements, that this era's character was precisely not the long awaited taking into account of nature, but rather the total dissolution of the various notions of nature. In brief, ecology seals the end of nature.

Even though the word "postnatural" has begun to pop up (for instance in Erle Ellis' "postnatural environmentalism"),<sup>xi</sup> compositionism would probably be more comfortable with the words "pre-naturalism", or "multi-naturalism".<sup>xii</sup> Nature is not a thing, a domain, a realm, an ontological territory. It is (or rather it was during the short modern parenthesis) a way of organizing the division (what Whitehead has called the Bifurcation)<sup>xiii</sup> between appearances and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, history and immutability. A fully transcendent, yet a fully historical construct, a deeply religious way (but not in the truly religious sense of the word)<sup>xiv</sup> of creating the difference of potential between what human souls were attached to and what was really out there. And also, as I have shown elsewhere, a fully *political* way of distributing power in what I have called the Modernist Constitution, a sort of unwritten compact between what could be and what could not be *discussed*.<sup>xv</sup> Once you begin to trace an absolute distinction between what is deaf and dumb and who is allowed to speak, you can easily imagine that this is not an ideal way to establish some sort of democracy... But no doubt that it is a fabulously useful ploy, invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to establish a political epistemology and to decide who will be allowed to talk about what, and which types of beings will remain silent. This was the time of the great political, religious, legal and epistemological invention of *matters of fact*, embedded in a *res extensa* devoid of any meaning, except that of being the ultimate reality, made of fully silent entities that were yet able, through the mysterious intervention of Science (capital S) to "speak by themselves" (but without the mediation of science,

small s, and scientists —also small s!).

This whole modernist *mise en scène* now appears to be the queerest anthropological construction, especially because Progress, under the label of Reason, was defined as the quick substitution of this odd nature for subjective, local, cultural, and human, all too human, values. The idea was that the more natural we became, the more rational we would be, and the easier the agreements between all reasonable human beings. (Remember the big bulldozers and warships of AVATAR in their irreversible —in fact, fully reversible— advance to destroy the great tree of life?). This agreement now lies in ruins, but without having been superseded by another more realistic, and especially more livable project. In this sense, we are still postmodern.

### *A successor to Nature?*

This is precisely the point where compositionism wishes to take over: *what is the successor of nature?* Of course, no human, no atom, no virus, no organism has ever resided “in” nature understood as *res extensa*. They have all lived in the pluriverse, to use William James’ expression —where else could they have found their abode? As soon as the Bifurcation was invented at the time of Descartes and Locke, it was immediately undone. No composition has ever been so fiercely decomposed. Remember: “we have never been modern”— so this utopia of nature has always been just that, a utopia, a world of beyond without any realistic handle on the practice of science, technology, commerce, industry.

And yet it has retained an enormous power over the political epistemology of the Moderns. Not a power of description, of course, not a power of explanation, but the power to create this very difference of potential that has given critique its steam and modernism its impetus. So the question now, for those who wish to inherit from modernism without being postmodern (as is my own case at least), is what it is to live *without* this difference of potential? Where will we get the energy to act without such a gigantic steam engine? Where will compositionism draw its steam? What would it mean to move forward without this engine? And to move collectively, that is, billions of people and their trillions of affiliates and commensals?.

Such a total disconnect between the ruins of naturalism on the one hand, and the slow and painful emergence of its successor on the other, is exemplified in the funny bout of agitation which started just before the Climate Summit (non)event in Copenhagen, around what has been called “climategate”.<sup>xvi</sup> It is a trivial example but so revealing of the tasks at hand for those who wish to shift from a nature always already there to an assemblage to be slowly composed.

In the fall of 2009, critics and proponents of anthropogenic climate change realized, by sifting through the thousands of emails of climate scientists stolen by activists of dubious pedigree, that the scientific facts of the matter had to be *constructed*, and by whom? by humans! Squabbling humans assembling data, refining instruments to make the climate speak (instruments! can you believe that!), and spotty data sets (data sets! imagine that...), and these scientists had money problems (grants!) and they had to massage, write, correct and rewrite

humble texts and articles (what? texts to be written? is science really made of texts, how shocking!)... What I found so ironic in the hysterical reactions of scientists and the press was the almost complete agreement of both opponents and proponents of the anthropogenic origin of climate change. They all seem to share the same idealistic view of Science (capital S): “If it slowly composed, it cannot be true”, said the skeptics; “If we reveal how it is composed,” said the proponents, “it will be discussed, thus disputable, thus it cannot be true either!”.

After thirty years or so of work in science studies, it is more than embarrassing to see that scientists had no better epistemology with which to rebut their adversaries. They kept using the old opposition between what is constructed and what is not constructed, instead of the slight but crucial difference between what is *well* and what is *badly* constructed (or composed). And this pseudo “revelation” was made at the very moment when the *disputability* of the most important tenets of what it means for billions of humans, represented by their heads of states, to live collectively on the Planet was fully visible in the vast pandemonium of the biggest diplomatic jamboree ever assembled... This was the ideal moment to connect the *disputability* of politics with the *disputability* of science (small s)—instead of trying to maintain, despite the evidence to the contrary, the usual gap between, on the one hand, what is politics and can be discussed, and, on the other hand, a Science of what is “beyond dispute”.

Clearly, when faced with the “stunning revelations” of “climategate,” it is not enough for us to rejoice in the discovery of the humble *human* or *social* dimension of scientific practice. Such an attitude would simply show a belief in the debunking capacity of critique, as if the thankless endeavor of scientists had to be contrasted with the pure realm of unmediated and indisputable facts. We compositionists want immanence *and* truth together. Or, to use my language: we want *matters of concern*, not only *matters of fact*. For a compositionist, nothing is beyond dispute. And yet, closure has to be achieved. But it is achieved only by the slow process of composition and compromise, not by the revelation of the world of beyond.

Just before Copenhagen, the French philosopher Michel Serres wrote a rather telling piece in the newspaper *Libération* summarizing the argument he had made, many years ago and before everyone else, in his NATURAL CONTRACT. The article was titled “*la non-invitée au sommet de Copenhague*” or, roughly translated, “who wasn't invited to Copenhagen?”.<sup>xvii</sup> Serres' piece pointed to the one empty seat at Copenhagen's Parliament of Things: that of Gaïa. He wondered how to make it possible for her to sit and speak and be represented.

Unfortunately, Serres' solution was to take the language, rituals and practices of politics —good at representing humans— and the language, procedures, and rituals of science —good at representing facts— and *join them together*. But this is easier said than done. What he dreamed of (much like Hans Jonas, earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) was in effect a government of scientists —a modernist dream, if anything— able to speak both languages at once. A very French temptation, from the “*gouvernement des savants*” during the Revolution all the way to our atomic program and our love affair with the “*corps techniques de l'Etat*”, the close-knit clique of engineers cum bureaucrats that oversee national scientific



and industrial policy. But since these two traditions of speech remain the heirs of the great Bifurcation, we have not moved an inch. For we have simply conjoined the worst of politics and the worst of science, that is, the two traditional ways of producing indisputability. We have been here already. This was once the dream of Marxism, just as it is now the dream (albeit in tatters) of run-of-the-mill economists: a science of politics instead of the total transformation of what it means to do politics (so as to include nonhumans) and what it means to do science (so as to include entangled and controversial and highly disputable matters of concern).<sup>xviii</sup> To believe in this “*gouvernement des savants*” has been precisely the mistake made by so many environmentalists when they interpreted the present crisis as the great Comeback instead of the End of Nature. *Between belief in Nature and belief in politics*, one has to choose.

Needless to say, the Copenhagen event was, in this respect, a total (and largely predictable) failure. Not because there is as yet no World Government able to enforce decisions—in the unlikely case that any had been made—but because we have as yet no idea of what it means to govern the world now that Nature as an organizing concept (or, rather, conceit) is gone. We can’t live on planet Earth nor can we live on Pandora... But one thing is sure—and “climategate” is a good case in point—it is utterly impossible to find any further use for the separation between science and politics invented by the Moderns—even by conjoining them. Two artificial constructions put together make for a *third* artificial contrivance, not for a solution to a problem that was very consciously rendered insoluble at the birth of the 17<sup>th</sup> century—somewhere between Hobbes and Boyle, to point out at a *locus classicus* of our history of science.<sup>xix</sup> Since Nature was invented to render politics impotent, there is no reason why a politics of *Nature* would ever deliver its promises.

### ***Back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century?***

Because of the slow demise of Nature, I now have the feeling, much like Stephen Toulmin,<sup>xx</sup> that we are actually closer to the 16<sup>th</sup> century than to the 20<sup>th</sup>, precisely because the agreement that created the Bifurcation in the first place now lies in ruin and has to be entirely recomposed. This is why we seem to experience a sense of familiarity with the times *before* its invention and implementation.<sup>xxi</sup> When rationalists deride the time before the “epistemological break”, to use Althusser’s favorite (and fully modernist) expression, it is because this earlier “episteme” was making too many connections between what they called the micro- and the macrocosm. But is this not exactly what we now see emerging everywhere under the name of “postnatural”? The destiny of all the cosmos—or rather *kosmoi*—is fully interconnected now that, through our very progress and through our proliferating numbers, we have taken the Earth on our shoulder—as is made so clear by the striking neologism “Anthropocene”, this newly named geological era that kicked off with the Industrial Revolution and its global consequences.

Of course, what is entirely lost today is the notion of a *harmony* between the micro and macrocosm. Yet, that there is, and that there should be, a *connection*

between the fates of these two spheres seems obvious to all. Even the strange Renaissance notion of sympathy and antipathy between entities has taken an entirely new flavor now that animals, plants, soils, chemicals are indeed acknowledged to have their friends and their enemies, their assemblies and their web sites, their blogs and their demonstrators. When naturalists introduced the word “biodiversity,” they had no idea that a few decades later they would have to add to the proliferation of surprising connections among organisms the proliferation of many more surprising connections between political institutions devoted to the protection of this or that organism. While naturalists could previously limit themselves, for instance, to situating the red tuna in the great chain of predators and prey, they now have to add to this ecosystem Japanese consumers, activists, and even President Sarkozy, who had promised to protect the fish before retreating once again when confronted with the Mediterranean fishing fleet. I have this odd feeling that the new red tuna, whose territory now extends to the sushi bars of the whole planet and whose ecosystem now include friends and enemies of many human shapes, closely resembles the strange and complex emblems that were accumulated during the Renaissance in cabinets of curiosities. The order is gone, to be sure, and so is the dense and agreed upon set of allusions and metaphors from Antiquity, but the thirst for mixed connections is the same. Once again, our age has become the age of wonder at the *disorders* of nature.<sup>xxii</sup>

Four centuries later, micro and macrocosm are now *literally* and not simply symbolically connected and the result is a *kakosmos*, that is, in polite Greek, a horrible and disgusting mess! And yet a *kakosmos* is a *cosmos* nonetheless... At any rate, it certainly no longer resembles the Bifurcated nature of the recent past where primary qualities (real, speechless, yet somehow speaking by themselves, but alas, devoid of any meaning and any value) went one way, while secondary qualities (subjective, meaningful, able to talk, full of values, but, alas, empty of any reality) went another. In that sense, we seem to be much closer than ever to the time before the famous “epistemological break” —a radical divide that has always been thought but never actually practiced.<sup>xxiii</sup> When Alexandre Koyré wrote *FROM THE CLOSED WORD TO THE INFINITE UNIVERSE*,<sup>xxiv</sup> little could he predict that barely half a century later the “Infinite Universe” would have become an entangled pluriverse all over again!

But there is no way to devise a successor to nature, if we do not tackle the tricky question of *animism* anew.<sup>xxv</sup> One of the principal causes of the scorn poured by the Moderns on the 16<sup>th</sup> century is that those poor archaic folks, who had the misfortune of living on the wrong side of the “epistemological break”, believed in a world *animated* by all sorts of entities and forces instead of believing, like any rational person, in an *inanimate* matter producing its effects only through the power of its causes. It is this conceit that lies at the root of all the critiques of environmentalists as being too “anthropocentric” because they dare to “attribute” values, price, agency, purpose, to what cannot have and should not have any intrinsic value (lions, whales, viruses, CO<sub>2</sub>, monkeys, the ecosystem, or, worst of all, Gaia). The accusation of anthropomorphism is so strong that it paralyzes all the efforts of many scientists in many fields —but especially biology— to go beyond the narrow constraints of what is believed to be “materialism” or

“reductionism”. It immediately gives a sort of New Age flavor to any such efforts, as if the default position were the idea of the inanimate and the bizarre innovation were the animate. Add agency? You must be either mad or definitely marginal. Consider Lovelock, for instance, with his “absurd idea” of the Earth as a quasi-organism—or the Navis with their “prescientific” connections to Eywa.<sup>xxvi</sup>

But what should appear extraordinarily bizarre is, on the contrary, the invention of *inanimate* entities which do nothing more than carry *one step further* the cause that makes them act to generate an  $n+1$  outcome, which is in turn nothing but the cause of an  $n+2$  outcome. This conceit has the strange result of composing the world out of long concatenations of cause and effect where (this is what is so odd) *nothing is supposed to happen*, except, probably at the beginning—but since there is no God in these staunchly secular accounts, there is not even a beginning... The disappearance of agency in the so called “materialist world view” is a stunning invention, especially since it is contradicted every step of the way by the odd resistance of reality: every consequence adds slightly to a cause. Thus, it has to have some sort of agency. There is a supplement, a gap between the two. If not, there would be no possible way of discriminating causes from consequences. This is true in particle physics as well as in chemistry, biology, psychology, economics or sociology.

Thus, although in practice all agencies have to be distributed at each step of the whole concatenation, in theory nothing goes on but the strict and unaltered transportation of a cause.<sup>xxvii</sup> To use my technical language, although every state of affairs deploys associations of *mediators*, everything is supposed to happen as if only chains of purely passive *intermediaries* were to unfold.<sup>xxviii</sup> Paradoxically, the most stubborn realism, the most rational outlook is predicated on the most unrealistic, the most contradictory notion of an *action without agency*.

How could such a contradictory metaphysics have the slightest bearing on our ways of thinking? Because it has the great advantage of ensuring the *continuity* of space and time by connecting all entities through concatenations of causes and consequences. Thus, for this assembly *no composition is necessary*. In such a conception, nature is *always already assembled*, since nothing happens but what comes from before. It is enough to have the causes, the consequences will follow, and they will possess nothing of their own except the carrying further of the same indisputable set of characteristics. Let these automatic causal chains do their work and they will build up the cage of nature. Any one who denies their existence, who introduces discontinuities, who lets agency proliferate by pointing out many interesting gaps between causes and consequences, will be considered a deviant, a mad man, a dreamer—in any event, not a rational being.

If there is one thing to wonder about in the history of Modernism, it is not that there are still people “mad enough to believe in animism”, but that so many hard headed thinkers have invented what should be called *inanimism* and have tied to this sheer impossibility their definition of what it is to be “rational” and “scientific”. It is inanimism that is the queer invention: an agency without agency constantly denied by practice.

This is what lies at the heart of the Modernist Constitution. And as Philippe Descola has so nicely shown, what makes it even odder is that this inanimism (he

calls it naturalism) is *the most anthropocentric* of all the modes of relation invented, across the world, to deal with associations between humans and nonhumans.<sup>xxix</sup> All the others are trying to underline agency as much as possible at each step. They might often seem odd in their definition of agency—at least to us—, but if there is one thing they never do, it is to *deny the gap* between causes and consequences or to circumscribe agency by limiting it to human subjectivity. For the three other modes discussed by Descola, namely animism, totemism, and analogism, the proliferation of agencies is precisely what does *not* introduce any difference between humans and nonhumans.

This is why rationalists never detect the contradiction between what they say about the continuity of causes and consequences and what they witness—namely the discontinuity, invention, supplementarity, creativity (“creativity is the ultimate” as Whitehead said)<sup>xxx</sup> between associations of mediators. They simply transform this discrepancy (which would make their worldview untenable) into a radical divide between human subjects and nonhuman objects. For purely anthropocentric—that is, political—reasons, naturalists have built their collective to make sure that subjects and objects, culture and nature remain utterly distinct, with only the former having any sort of agency. An extraordinary feat: making, for purely anthropocentric reasons, the accusation of being anthropomorphic into a deadly weapon! In the fight to establish the continuity of space and time without having to compose it, it has been the most anthropomorphic individuals who have succeeded in rejecting all the others for practicing the most horrible, archaic, dangerous, and reactionary forms of animism...

Although this might seem too technical a point, it is important not to confuse such an argument with the plea *against* reductionism with which it is in great danger of being confused. In all disciplines, reductionism offers an enormously useful *handle* to allow scientists to insert their instrumentarium, their paradigms, and to produce long series of practical effects—often entire industries as is the case with biotechnology.<sup>xxxi</sup> But success at handling entities by generating results and entire industries out of them is not the same thing as building the cage of nature with its long chains of causes and consequences. It is actually the opposite: what reductionism shows in practice is that only the proliferation of ingenious detours, of highly localized sets of skills, is able to extract interesting and useful results from a multitude of agencies.<sup>xxxii</sup> Consider how fabulously useful the “Central Dogma” of the first versions of DNA was in beginning to unlock the power of genes: and yet no active biologists now believe that these earlier versions could be of any use for building the “naturalistic” definition of what it is for an organism to live in the real world.<sup>xxxiii</sup> There is a complete—and continuously growing—disconnect between efficient handles and the staging of nature. Once you put to one side this proliferation of clever skills, you are not defining the nature of things, you simply enter into something else entirely: the spurious continuity of nature. And the same thing could be shown every time you move from reductionist handles to reductionism as a philosophical—that is, a political—worldview.

Compositionists, however, cannot rely on such a solution. The continuity of all agents in space and time *is not given to them* as it was to naturalists: they have to

compose it, slowly and progressively. And, moreover, to compose it from discontinuous pieces. Not only because human destiny (microcosm) and non human destiny (macrocosm) are now entangled for everyone to see (contrary to the strange dream of Bifurcation), but for a much deeper reason on which the capture of the creativity of all agencies depends: consequences overwhelm their causes, and this overflow has to be respected everywhere, in every domain, in every discipline and for every type of entity. It is no longer possible to build the cage of nature —and indeed it has never been possible to live in this cage. This is, after all, what is meant by the *eikos* of ecology.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Call it “animism” if you wish, but it will no longer be enough to brand it with the mark of infamy. This is indeed why we feel so close to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as if we were back before the “epistemological break”, before the odd invention of matter (a highly idealist construct as Whitehead has shown so well).<sup>xxxv</sup> As science studies and feminist theory have documented over and over again, the notion of matter is too political, too anthropomorphic, too narrowly historical, too ethnocentric, too gendered, to be able to define the stuff out of which the poor human race, expelled from Modernism, has to build its abode. We need to have a much more material, much more mundane, much more immanent, much more realistic, much more embodied definition of the material world if we wish to compose a common world.

There is also a reason that would have seemed important in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but which is a hallmark of our own, namely the proliferation of scientific controversies. This is a well known phenomenon, but it is still vital to emphasize it at this juncture: what makes it impossible to continue to rely on the continuity of space and time implied in the notion of nature and its indisputable chains of causes and consequences is the foregrounding of so many controversies *inside* the sciences themselves. Once again this phenomenon is lamented by rationalists who still wish to paint science as capable of producing incontrovertible, indisputable, mouth-shutting matters of fact. But, if I dare say so, the fact of the matter is that matters of fact are in great risk of disappearing, like so many other endangered species. Or else they deal with trifling subjects of no interest to anyone anymore. Rare now are topics where you do not see scientists publicly disagreeing among themselves on what they are, how they should be studied, financed, portrayed, distributed, understood, cast. Facts have become *issues*.<sup>xxxvi</sup> And the more important the issue, the less certain we are now publicly as to how to handle it (think of the fracas around the H1N1 influenza virus in 2009 or “climategate”). And this is good... at least for compositionists, since it now adds a third source of discontinuity forcing all of us, scientists, activists, and politicians alike, to compose the common world from disjointed pieces instead of taking for granted that the unity, continuity, agreement is already there, embedded in the idea that “the same nature fits all”. The increase of disputability —and the amazing extension of scientific and technical controversies— while somewhat terrifying at first, is also the best path to finally taking seriously the political task of establishing the continuity of all entities that make up the common world.<sup>xxxvii</sup> I hope to have made it clear why I stated earlier that between nature and politics one has to choose, and why what is to be critiqued cannot be composed.

## *No future but many prospects?*

Critique, nature, progress, three of the ingredients of Modernism that have to be decomposed before being recomposed. I have had a quick look at the first two. What about the third, namely, progress? I want to argue that there might have been some misunderstanding, during the Modernist parenthesis, about the very direction of the flow of time. I have this strange fantasy that the modernist hero never actually looked toward the future but always *to the past*, the archaic past that He was fleeing in terror.

I don't wish to embrace Benjamin's tired "Angel of History" trope, but there is something right in the position he attributed to the angel: it looks backward and not ahead. "Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet".<sup>xxxviii</sup> But contrary to Benjamin's interpretation, the Modern who, like the angel, is flying backward<sup>xxxix</sup> is actually *not seeing the destruction* He is generating it in his flight since it occurs behind His back! It is only recently, by a sudden conversion, a *metanoia* of sorts, that He has suddenly realized how much catastrophe His development has left behind him. The ecological crisis is nothing but the sudden *turning* around of someone who had actually *never before* looked into the future, so busy was He extricating Himself from a horrible past.<sup>xl</sup> There is something Oedipal in this hero fleeing his past so fiercely that He cannot realize—except too late—that it is precisely His flight that has created the destruction He was trying to avoid in the first place. Oedipus, pursued by *dikè*, the Fate who reigns even over the gods, was tragic. But with the Moderns there is no god and thus no tragedy to expect. Simply a gigantic, myopic, bloody, and sometimes comical blunder—just like the botched attack of the "people from the Sky" against Eywa. I want to argue that Moderns had never contemplated their future, until a few years back! They were too busy fleeing their past in terror. A great advance would be made in their anthropology, if we were able to discover what horror they were escaping that gave them so much energy to flee.<sup>xli</sup> What the Moderns called "their future" has never been contemplated face to face, since it has always been the future of someone fleeing their past looking *backward*, not *forward*. This is why, as I emphasized earlier, their future was always so unrealistic, so utopian, so full of hype.

The French language, for once richer than English, differentiates "*le futur*" from "*l'avenir*". In French, I could say that the Moderns had "*un futur*" but never "*un avenir*". To define the present situation, I have to translate and say that the Moderns always had a future (the odd utopian future of someone fleeing His past in reverse!) but never a chance, until recently that is, to turn to what I could call their *prospect*: the shape of things to come. As it is now clear from the ecological crisis, one's future and one's prospect (if onetakes on board these two words) bear almost no resemblance to one another.<sup>xlii</sup> What makes the times we are living in so interesting (and why I still think it is useful to make this manifest through a manifesto) is that we are progressively discovering that, just at the time when people are despairing at realizing that they might, in the end, have "no future", we suddenly have many *prospects*. Yet they are so utterly different from what we

imagined *while fleeing ahead looking backwards* that we might cast them only as so many fragile illusions. Or find them ever more terrifying that what we were trying to escape from.

Faced with those new prospects, the first reaction is to do nothing. There is a strong, ever so modernist, temptation to exclaim: “Let’s flee as before and *have our past future back!*” instead of saying: “Let’s stop fleeing, *break for good* with our future, turn our back, *finally*, to our past, and explore our new prospects, what lies ahead, the fate of things to come”. Is this not exactly what the fable of the crippled Jack abandoning his body for his avatar is telling us: instead of a future of no future, why not try to see if we could not have a prospect at last? After three centuries of Modernism, it is not asking too much from those who, in practice, have never managed to be Moderns, to finally *look ahead*.

Of course what they see is not pretty —no prettier than what was unfolding in the spiritual eyes of the *Angelus Novus*. To be sure, it is not a well composed cosmos, a beautiful and harmonious Pandora Planet, but, as I said, a rather horrendous *kakosmos*. How could the Moderns have succeeded in assembling anything properly while *not looking at it!* It would be like playing the piano while turning one’s back to the keyboard... It is impossible to compose without being firmly attentive to the task at hand. But, horror of horrors, it does not have the same features as the archaic past from which they fled in terror for so long. For one good reason: from this horror you cannot flee! *It is coming at you.*<sup>xiii</sup> It’s no use speaking of “epistemological breaks” any more. Fleeing from the past while continuing to look at it will not do. Nor will critique be of any help. It is time to compose —in all the meanings of the word, including to compose with, that is to compromise, to care, to move slowly, with caution and precaution.<sup>xiv</sup> That’s quite a new set of skills to learn: imagine that, innovating as never before but with precaution! Two great temptations here again, inherited from the time of the Great Flight: abandon all innovations; innovate as before without any precaution. The whole Modernist paraphernalia has to be remade bit by bit for the tasks that now lie ahead and no longer behind. Oedipus has met the Sphinx and she said: “look ahead!”. Was this not what she was actually walluding to with this odd simile: “Which creature in the morning goes on four legs, at midday on two, and in the evening upon three, and the more legs it has, the weaker it be?”? Well, the Moderns of course, now knowing full well that they are blind and fumbling in the dark and that they need a white cane to slowly and cautiously feel the obstacles that lie ahead! The blind led by the blind are in great need of new captors and sensors —yes, new avatars.

### ***What do the two manifestos have in common?***

Why do I wish to reuse the oversized genre of the manifesto to explore this shift from future to prospect? Because in spite of the abyss of time, there is a tenuous relation between the Communist and the Compositionist Manifesto. At first sight, they seem utterly opposed. A belief in critique, in radical critique, a commitment to a fully idealized material world, a total confidence in the science of economics —economics, of all sciences!—, a delight in the transformative

power of negation, a trust in dialectics, a complete disregard for precaution, an abandon of liberty in politics behind a critique of liberalism, and above all an absolute trust in the inevitable thrust of progress. And yet, the two manifestos have something in common, namely the *search for the Common*. The thirst for the Common World is what there is of communism in compositionism, with this small but crucial difference that it has to be slowly composed instead of being taken for granted and *imposed* on all. Everything happens as if the human race were on the move again, expelled from one utopia, that of economics, and in search of another, that of ecology. Two different interpretations of one precious little root, *eikos*, the first being a dystopia and the second a promise that as yet no one knows how to fulfill. How can a livable and breathable “home” be built for those errant masses? That is the only question worth raising in this Compositionist Manifesto. If there is no durable room for us on Pandora, how will we find a sustainable home on Gaia?

---

\* This paper was first written on the occasion of the reception of the Kulturpreis presented by the University of Munich on the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2010. I thank Damien Bright for many useful comments as well as the audiences that generously reacted to the paper at the following venues : UCLA Comparative Literature department ; the MIT department of architecture, the Oxford seminar on literature and science, and the Stockholm Nobel Museum.

<sup>i</sup> Bruno Latour. *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the reality of science studies*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>ii</sup> James Lovelock. *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity*. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

<sup>iii</sup> Funnily enough, Sigourney Weaver leads the charge, having to redo with the Navis what she did earlier with GORILLAS IN THE MIST!...

<sup>iv</sup> Michel Tournier. *Friday or the Other Island*\_(translated by Norman Denny). (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

<sup>v</sup> I realize that this is slightly contradictory and retains a modernist flavor by dividing time, once again, between before and now —but one has to accept to live



with contradictions....

vi I thank Nina Wormbs for this microbial addition.

vii Scientists, politicians, engineers, lovers have a rich vocabulary to explore this difference, but this vocabulary is hidden in their practice and not easily summed up in the rules of method that are supposed to distinguish between true and false statements. The energy taken up by answering the question “is it constructed or is it true?”, leaves no stamina to deploy the complex casuistic that answers, always locally and practically, the question “is it well or badly composed”. On this quandry, see Etienne Souriau. *Les différents modes d'existence. Suivi de "l'Oeuvre à faire"* (précédé d'une introduction "Le sphinx de l'oeuvre" par Isabelle Stengers et Bruno Latour) (Paris: PUF, 2009 (first publication 1943).

viii “Critique” is taken here in the meaning of the word introduced by Kant, that is, a wholesale acceptance of the divide between human and non-human, not in the rather ubiquitous skill of having a critical mind.

ix Bruno Latour. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam ? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern, Special issue on the 'Future of Critique'." *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 25-248.

x Bruno Latour, and Peter Weibel, eds. *Iconoclasm. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002).

xi Erle Ellis “Stop Trying to Save the Planet”, *Wired Science*, May 6 2009.

xii This daring word was introduced in anthropology by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *Métaphysiques cannibales*. (Paris: PUF, 2009).

xiii Alfred North Whitehead. *Concept of Nature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920).

xiv Bruno Latour. "Will Non-Humans be Saved ? An Argument on Ecotheology." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, V, no. 15 (2009): 459-75.

xv Bruno Latour. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (translated by Catherine Porter). (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

xvi Most of the original documents may be found on <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/series/climate-wars-hacked-emails>

xvii Michel Serres. *The Natural Contract* (translated by E. MacArthur and W. Paulson). (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995). and “La non-invitée au sommet de Copenhague” *Libération* 9 December 2009.

xviii On this, see Walter Lippmann. *The Phantom Public*. (New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 1925 [1993]) and my introduction to the French translation in Walter Lippmann. *Le Public fantôme* (translated by Laurence Décréau). (Paris: Demopolis, 2008).

xix Steven Shapin, and Simon Schaffer. *Leviathan and the Air-Pump. Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

xx Stephen Toulmin. *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

xxi An implementation, we should never forget, that has always been disputed since it is impossible to be really modern —except in dreams or nightmares.

**xxii** I am alluding here to Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature*. (Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 1999).

**xxiii** This is what makes the controversy over the very existence of an epistemological break between the Renaissance and the so called Classic Age so interesting. On this, see Horst Bredekamp, *The lure of antiquity and the cult of the machine : the Kunstkammer and the evolution of nature, art, and technology* (translated by Allison Brown). (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) for a clear opposition to Foucault's rendering of the distinction.

**xxiv** Alexandre Koyré. *From the Closed-World to the Infinite Universe*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957).

**xxv** A question which humanists and literary studies are actually better equipped than most social sciences to deal with, thanks to their attention to the complex *semiosis* of human and non-human fictional characters, as can be seen in the writing of Richard Powers, (see for instance, one of his latest novels. *The Echo Maker*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006)) as well as in the renewal of literary theory, for instance Rita Felski. *Uses of Literature*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2008). The redistribution of agencies is the right purview of literature studies, see Françoise Bastide. *Una notte con Saturno. Scritti semiotici sul discorso scientifico*. (trad. Roberto Pellerrey). (Roma: Meltemi, 2001).

**xxvi** From J.E. Lovelock. *Gaia A New Look at Life on Earth*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) to *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*. (New York: Basic Books, 2009). On Lovelock's move from marginality to centrality, see the biography by John Gribbin, and Mary Gribbin. *James Lovelock: In Search of Gaia*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

**xxvii** Which means that in practice the necessity of establishing chains of reference for knowing a state of affairs is confused with the ways in which this state of affairs maintains itself and sustains its existence. On this confusion between modes of existence, see my "A Textbook Case Revisited: Knowledge as a Mode of Existence" in E. Hackett et al. *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), p. 83-111.

**xxviii** Bruno Latour. *Irreductions part II of The Pasteurization of France*. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

**xxix** In his masterpiece, the most important book of anthropology to appear in French since Levi-Strauss' enterprise, Philippe Descola in *Par delà nature et culture*. (Paris: Gallimard, 2005) distinguish four essentially different ways of gathering collectives: totemism and analogism on the one hand, and animism and naturalism on the other.

**xxx** Alfred North Whitehead. *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*. (New York: Free Press, 1929 1978).

**xxxi** Evelyn Fox-Keller. *The Century of the Gene*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000).

**xxxii** Hans-Jorg Rheinberger. *Toward a History of Epistemic Things. Synthetizing Proteins in the Test Tube*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

**xxxiii** Jean-Jacques Kupiec, and Pierre Sonigo. *Ni Dieu ni gène*. (Paris: Le Seuil-Collection Science ouverte, 2000).

xxxiv The notion of eikos is being deeply renewed by the new attention to “envelopes” and “spheres” in the vast enterprise of Peter Sloterdijk. Unfortunately, of his three-tome work on “spherology”, only *Terror from the Air* (translated by Amy Patton & Steve Corcoran. (Los Angeles: Semiotextes, 2009) is available in English. The best introduction to his thought is to be found in Peter Sloterdijk. *Neither Sun Nor Death. A Dialog with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs* (translated by Steve Corcoran) (Los Angeles: Semiotexts, 2010).

xxxv This has nothing to do with the red-herring of “hylozoism” (David Skrbina. *Panpsychism in the West*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007)) because the matter invented by modernism is not proper to any sort of life...

xxxvi Noortje Marres. *No Issue, No Public. Democratic Deficits after the Displacement of Politics*. (Amsterdam: Phd in Philosophy, 2005).

xxxvii For what is now fifteen years, with the help of many colleagues, I have devised methods to map out scientific and technical controversies and explore this new navigation through controversial datascares. For a review of methods and case studies see <http://www.mappingcontroversies.net/>

xxxviii Translated by Denis Redmond (creative commons license)

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

xxxix An odd notion to be sure, but as the anthropological inquiry I have pursued for so long shows time and time again: everything is odd in Modernism.

xl, There is good reason to define this character as a He rather than a She, as so much feminist literature has shown, from Carolyn Merchant’s early work *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Wildwood House, 1980) all the way to Donna J. Haraway. *When Species Meet*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007) a compositionist book if ever there was one.

xli In Toulmin’s rendition, it is clearly the religious wars that they were fleeing in terror and that justified the strange counterrevolution that is wrongly called by him the scientific revolution. But four century later, the much more benign “science wars” show the same flight from the horrors of irrationality.

xlii No more than matters of facts and matters of concern, critique and composition, or, to allude to another transformation I have not commented on here, society and collective. On this last see *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

xliii Isabelle Stengers. *Au temps des catastrophes. Résister à la barbarie qui vient*. (Paris: Les Empêcheurs, 2009).

xliv “Precaution” has become a legal term of great interest in European affairs, analogous to the word “risk,” as evidenced by the telltale book of Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. (London: Sage, 1992).