

An attempt at writing a “Compositionist Manifesto”*

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Bruno Latour, Sciences Po

2nd draft English uncorrected

For D.H.

A prologue in form of 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!¹ Yes, Pandora is the name of the mythical humanoid 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 militaro-industrial complex) are exploiting to death without any worry for the fate of its local inhabitants, the Navis, and of their ecosystem, a superorganism and a 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 use one of James Lovelock’s titles, results in a terrifying replay of Dunkirk 1940 or Saigon 1973: a retreat and a defeat.² 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 like in the classical myth, let loose all the ills of humanity: not only do they ravage the planet, destroy the great tree of life, kill the quasi Amazonian Indians who had lived in edenic harmony with her, they also become infected by their own macho ideology. Outward destruction breeds inward destruction. And again, like 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 begin to explore.³ 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 is to be the first script 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. Like 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 in 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.⁴ 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 writing a manifesto?

It is in the dramatic atmosphere induced by Cameron's opera that I want to write a draft of my manifesto. I well know that, just as much as 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 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. What this series of manifestos pointed to was the inevitable march of *progress*. So much so that they 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 and which could 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 confide in the clear-sightedness of any one —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 when some, like James Lovelock, argue that it is human civilization itself that 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 manage to sit on their hands for days doing nothing and making no decisions whatsoever. Whom are we supposed to believe: those who say it is a life-threatening event? those who, by doing nothing much, state that it could 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, by 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 go 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.⁵ The nuance I want to outline is rather that between *progress* and *progressive*. It is as if we had to move from an idea of inevitable progress to one of *progressive, tentative and precautionary progression*. It is still a movement. It 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 by 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 a clear root in art, painting, music, theater, dance, and thus is associated with choreography and scenography; it is not too far from “compromise” and “compromising” retaining with it 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...⁶ Above all, a composition can *fail* and thus retain 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.⁷ 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 of this later). From universalism it takes up the task of building a common

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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;⁸ 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 sold second hand—if I dare say—and put to 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.¹⁰ 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, and energy that in a few centuries has 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 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 word. By contrast, for composition, 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 not 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 of 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 truer is revealed beneath?

This is precisely what has happened to postmodernism which can be defined as modernism, fully equipped with the same tools as the moderns for iconoclasm, but without the belief in a real world beyond. No wonder it had no other solution

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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 of beyond. Once deprived of this naïve belief in transcendence, critique is no longer able to produce this difference of potential that had given it, literally, 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 former century, it would seem), to a *topic* to be carefully studied.¹¹ While critiques still believe that there is too much belief and too many things standing in between reality, compositionists believe that there are enough ruins and that everything has to be reassembled piece by piece. Which is another way to say that we don't wish to have too much to do with the 20th century: "Let the dead bury the dead".

In suspending the critical gesture, we begin to understand retrospectively how odd was the definition of nature with 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, rather the total dissolution of the various notions of nature. In brief, ecology seals the end of nature.

Even though the word "postnatural" begins to pop up (for instance in Erle Ellis' "postnatural environmentalism"),¹² compositionism would probably be more comfortable with the words "pre-naturalism", or "multi-naturalism".¹³ Nature is not a thing, a domain, a realm, an ontological territory. It is (or rather it has been during the short modern parenthesis) a way of organizing the division (what Whitehead has called the Bifurcation)¹⁴ between appearances and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, history and immutability. A fully transcendent, a fully historical construct, a deeply religious way (but not in the religious sense of the word)¹⁵ to create 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*.¹⁶ 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 it's not an ideal way to establish some sort of democracy... But no doubt that it is a fabulously useful ploy, invented in the 17th 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, and 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 to the subjective, local, cultural, human, all too human, values. The idea was that the more natural we would become, 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 settlement now lies in ruin but without having been superseded by any other 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 had been invented at the time of Descartes and Locke, it had been 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 the same 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 (it is my 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 be 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, could be made very clear in the funny bout of agitation, which started just before the Climate Summit (non)event in Copenhagen, around what has been called “climategate”.¹⁷ 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, critiques and proponents of anthropogenic climate change realized, by sifting through the thousands of emails of the climate scientists stolen by activists of dubious pedigrees, 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 those 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 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 about thirty years of work in science studies, it is more than embarrassing to see that scientists had no better epistemology 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... While it 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, 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 would not be 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 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?”.¹⁸ Serres' piece pointed to the one empty seat at Copenhagen's Parliament of Things: that of Gaïa. He wondered how to make it 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 20th century) was in effect a government of scientists —a modernist dream if any— 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 tradition of speech remain the heirs to 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 to produce indisputability. We have been there already. This was the dream of Marxism before, just as it is the dream (albeit in tatters) of run-of-the-mill economists now: a science of politics instead of the total transformation of what it means to do politics (with nonhumans as well) and what it means to do science (with entangled and controversial and highly disputable matters of concern).¹⁹ 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 the belief in Nature and the belief in politics*, one has to choose.

Needless to say, the Copenhagen event was, in that respect, a total (and largely predictable) failure. Not because there is as yet no World Government able to enforce decisions—in the unlikely case any would have 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 the “climategate” is a good case in point—it is utterly impossible to reuse 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 made very consciously impossible at the birth of the 17th century—somewhere between Hobbes and Boyle, to point out at a *locus classicus* of our history of science.²⁰ 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 16th century?

Because of the slow demise of Nature, I now have the feeling, much like Stephen Toulmin,²¹ that we are actually closer to the 16th century than to the 20th, precisely because the settlement that has created the Bifurcation in the first place now lies in ruin and has to be entirely recomposed. This is why we seem to find an air of familiarity with the times *before* its invention and implementation.²² 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 very 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 these two fates, this 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 have indeed 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 before naturalists could limit themselves, for instance, to situate 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 Mediterranean fishing fleet. I have this odd feeling that the new red tuna whose territory now extend to the sushi bars of the whole planet and whose ecosystem now include friends and enemies of many human shapes, resembles a lot more the strange and complex emblems that were accumulated during the Renaissance in the cabinets of curiosities. The order is gone, to be sure, 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 wonders at the *disorders* of nature.²⁴

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 the primary qualities (real, speechless, speaking by themselves, but alas, devoid of any meaning and any value) went one way, while the 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 radically thought but never actually practiced.²⁵ When Alexandre Koyré wrote *FROM THE CLOSED WORD TO THE INFINITE UNIVERSE*,²⁶ little could he predict that barely half a century later the “Infinite Universe” had 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.²⁷ One of the principal causes of irony poured by the Moderns upon the 16th 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 mind, in an *inanimate* matter producing its effects only through the power of its causes. It is this conceit that is at the root of all the critiques of environmentalists as being too “anthropocentric” because they dare “attributing” values, price, agency, purpose, to what cannot have and should not have any intrinsic value (lions, whales, viruses, CO₂, monkeys, ecosystem, or, worse 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 their efforts, as if the default position was the idea of the inanimate and the bizarre innovation was that of the

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animate. Add agency? You must be 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.²⁸

But what should appear extraordinarily bizarre is, on the contrary, the invention of *inanimate* entities which would do nothing more than carry *one step further* the cause that makes them act to generate the $n+1$ consequence which in turn are nothing but the causes of the $n+2$ consequences. This conceit has the strange result of composing the world with long concatenations of causes and effects where (this is what is so odd) *nothing is supposed to happen*, except, probably at the beginning —but since there is no God in those staunchly secular versions, 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 the cause. Thus, it has to have some sort of agency. There is a supplement. A gap between the two. If not there would be not even a way to discriminate 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 throughout the whole concatenations, in theory nothing goes on but the strict and unaltered transportation of a cause.²⁹ 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* had to unfold.³⁰ Paradoxically, the most stubborn realism, the most rational outlook is predicated on the most unrealistic, the most contradictory notion of an *action without agency*.

Why such a contradictory metaphysics could have the slightest bearing on our ways of thinking? Because it has the great advantage of insuring 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 nothing of their own except the carrying further of the same indisputable set of characteristics. Let them go 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 —not a rational being anyway.

If there is one thing about which to wonder in the history of Modernism, it is not that they 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.³¹ All

of the others are trying to underline the agency as much as possible at each step. They might often seem odd in their definition of agency—at least for us—but if there is one thing they never do it is to *deny the gap* between causes and consequences or to circumscribe agency to humans subjectivity. For the three other modes, 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 have to witness—namely the discontinuity, invention, supplement, creativity (“creativity is the ultimate” as Whitehead said)³² between associations of mediators. They have simply transformed this discrepancy (that would have made 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, only the first ones having any sort of agency. Extraordinary feat: having made, for purely anthropocentric reasons, the accusation of being anthropomorphic a deadly weapon! In the fight for establishing the continuity of space and time without having to compose it, it has been the most anthropomorphic who have succeeded in rejecting all the others as practicing the most horrible, archaic, dangerous and reactionary forms of animism...

Although this might be too technical, it is important not to confuse such an argument with a plea *against* reductionism with which it is in great danger of being confused. In all disciplines, reductionism offer enormously useful *handles* to allow scientists to insert their instrumentarium, their paradigms, and to produce long series of practical effects—often entire industries as it is the case with biotechnology.³³ But the success at handling entities by generating results and 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.³⁴ Consider how fabulously useful the “Central Dogma” of the first versions of DNA has been to begin to unlock the power of genes: and yet no active biologists 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.³⁵ There is a complete—and continuously growing—disconnect between the efficient handles and the staging of nature. Once you background this proliferation of clever skills, you do not define the nature of things, you simply enter into something else entirely: the spurious continuity of nature. And the same 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 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 very capture of the

creativity of all agencies depends: consequences overwhelm their causes, and this overflow has to be respected everywhere, in every domain, 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.³⁶ 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 16th 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).³⁷ 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 the common world.

Also, for a reason that would have seemed important in the 16th century but which is a hallmark of ours, namely the proliferation of scientific controversies. This is a well known phenomenon, but still vital to emphasize 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, 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*.³⁸ And the more important the issue, the less certain we now publicly are of how to handle them (think of the fracas around the H1N1 influenza virus in 2009 or the “climategate”). And this is good... at least for compositionists, since it now adds a third source of discontinuity forcing all of us, scientists, activists, 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 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.³⁹ I hope to have made 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 again. I have had a quick look at the

two first. 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 had never actually looked to 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 behind 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".⁴⁰ But contrary to Benjamin's interpretation, the Modern who, like the angel, is flying backward⁴¹ is actually *not seeing the destruction* He is generating 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 over* of someone who had actually *never before* looked into the future, so busy was He extricating Himself from a horrible past.⁴² There is something Oedipal in this hero fleeing his past so fiercely that He cannot realize —except too late— that it precisely His flight that has created the destruction He was trying to avoid in the first place. Tragic it was with Oedipus pursued by *dikè*, the Fate who reign even over the gods. 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 have 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 fleeing that gave them so much energy to flee.⁴³ What the Moderns called "their future" has never been contemplated face to face since it as always been the future of someone fleeing their past *backward*, not contemplating *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, may differentiate "*le futur*" de "*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 (this 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, the future and the prospect (if one accepts to take those two words) bear almost no resemblance to one another.⁴⁴ What makes the times we are living in so interesting (and why I still think it is useful to make it manifest through a manifesto) is that we are progressively discovering that, just at the time when people despair 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 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. Strong is the ever so modernist temptation to exclaim: "Let's flee as before and *have our past*

The overarching notion
of lack of
future + prospect
of many

X

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 it 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 trying 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 would the Moderns have succeeded in assembling anything properly while *not looking at it!* It would be like playing the piano while turning ones’ back to the keyboard... It is impossible to compose without being firmly attentive to the task at hand. But horror for horror, it does not have the same features than the archaic past they fled in terror for so long. For one good reason: from this horror you cannot flee! *It is coming at you.*⁴⁵ No use to speak of “epistemological breaks” any more. Fleeing from the past while looking 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.⁴⁶ 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 have to be remade one by one for the tasks that now lie ahead and no longer behind. Oedipus has met the Sphinge and she said: “look ahead!”. Was it not actually what she alluded 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, knowing now full well that they are blind fumbling in the dark and they need a white cane to slowly and cautiously feel the obstacles that lie ahead! Blind led by the blind are in great need of new captors and sensors —yes, new avatars.

What 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 some tenuous relation between the Communist and the Compositionist Manifesto. At first sight, they should stand in complete opposition. 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 was 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 has been first written at the occasion of the reception of the Kulturpreis presented by the University of Munich on the 9th February 2010. I thank Damien Bright for many useful comments as well as the audiences that have generously reacted to the paper during venues at UCLA Literature department, MIT department of architecture, Oxford seminar on literature and science and Stockholm Nobel Museum.

¹ Bruno Latour. *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the reality of science studies*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

² James Lovelock. *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity*. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

³ Funnily enough, Sigourney Weaver leads the charge, having to redo with the Navis what she had to do before with GORILLAS IN THE MIST!...

⁴ Michel Tournier. *Friday or the Other Island*_(translated by Norman Denny). (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

⁵ 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....

⁶ I thank Nina Wormbs for this microbial addition.

⁷ To explore this difference artists, scientists, politicians, engineers, lovers have a rich vocabulary but this vocabulary is hidden in the practice and not easily summed up in the rules of method that are supposed to distinguish between true and false statements. The energy taken 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 quandary, 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).

⁸ “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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Bruno Latour, and Peter Weibel, eds. *Iconoclash. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002).

¹² Erle Ellis "Stop Trying to Save the Planet", *Wired Science*, May 6 2009.

¹³ This daring word has been introduced in anthropology by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *Métaphysiques cannibales*. (Paris: PUF, 2009).

¹⁴ Alfred North Whitehead. *Concept of Nature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920).

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

¹⁶ Bruno Latour. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (translated by Catherine Porter). (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Most of the original documents may be found on <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/series/climate-wars-hacked-emails>

¹⁸ Michel Serres. *The Natural Contract* (translated by E. MacArthur and W. Paulson). (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995). and "La non-invité au sommet de Copenhague" *Libération* 9 December 2009.

¹⁹ 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* (translation par Laurence Décréau). (Paris: Demopolis, 2008).

²⁰ Steven Shapin, and Simon Schaffer. *Leviathan and the Air-Pump. Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

²¹ Stephen Toulmin. *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

²² Implementation, we should never forget, that has always been disputed since it is impossible to be really modern —except in dreams or nightmares.

²⁴ I am alluding here to Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature*. (Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 1999).

²⁵ 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* (translation from German by Allison Brown). (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) in a clear opposition to Foucault's rendering of the distinction.

²⁶ Alexandre Koyré. *From the Closed-World to the Infinite Universe*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957).

²⁷ A question for which humanists and literary studies are actually better equipped by their attention to the complex *semiosis* of human and non-human fictional characters than most social sciences, as can be seen in the writing of Richard Powers, (see for instance, one of his latest novel. *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 Pellerey). (Roma: Meltemi, 2001).

²⁸ 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 his biography by John Gribbin, and Mary Gribbin. *James Lovelock: In Search of Gaia*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

²⁹ Which means that in practice the necessity of establishing chains of reference for knowing a state of affairs are confused with the ways in which this state of affairs maintain itself in 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*, 3rd Edition (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), p. 83-111.

³⁰ Bruno Latour. *Irreductions part II of The Pasteurization of France*. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

³¹ 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 to gather collectives: totemism and analogism on the one hand, and animism and naturalism on the other.

³² Alfred North Whitehead. *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*. (New York: Free Press, 1929 1978).

³³ Evelyn Fox-Keller. *The Century of the Gene*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000).

³⁴ Hans-Jorg Rheinberger. *Toward a History of Epistemic Thing. Synthetizing Proteins in the Test Tube*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Jean-Jacques Kupiec, and Pierre Sonigo. *Ni Dieu ni gène*. (Paris: Le Seuil-Collection Science ouverte, 2000).

³⁶ The notion of eikos is being deeply renewed by the new attention to "envelops" and "spheres" in the vast enterprise of Peter Sloterdijk. Unfortunately, of his three tomes book of "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: Semiotextes, 2010).

³⁷ 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...

³⁸ Noortje Marres. *No Issue, No Public. Democratic Deficits after the Displacement of Politics*. (Amsterdam: Phd in Philosophy, 2005).

³⁹ For 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/>

⁴⁰ Translated by Denis Redmond (creative commons license)

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

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² As so much feminist literature has shown, there is good reason to define this character as a He rather than a She, 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 any.

⁴³ In Toulmin's rendition, it is clearly the religious wars that they were fleeing in terror and that justified the strange counterrevolution that is for him wrongly called the scientific revolution. But four century later, the much more benign "science wars" show the same flight from the horrors of irrationality.

⁴⁴ 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).

⁴⁵ Isabelle Stengers. *Au temps des catastrophes. Résister à la barbarie qui vient*. (Paris: Les Empêcheurs, 2009).

⁴⁶ "Precaution" has become a legal term of great interest in European affairs, so as the word "risk" as witnessed by the telltale book of Ulrich Beck. Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity. (London: Sage, 1992).