

Beyond the fact that the « anthropocene » currently is one of the buzz words that is very much debated in the scientific literature as well as commented in the mass media, the main reason why we have chosen to devote this paper to it lies in Eric Landowski's above manifesto itself. Indeed, without explicitly mentioning it, his text refers to the main reasons presiding over its advent. When he writes that the concepts developed by standard semiotics broadly « subtend the very utilitarian conception of value, the idealistic vision of the subject and, correlatively, the fundamentally pragmatic “form of life” imposed by the dominant ideology of our post-modern societies » — both « unswervingly democratic in their principles » and « everyday more and more mercantile in practice »¹ —, he directly describes what is now widely agreed to be the fundamental cause having led to the anthropocene. This manifesto also greatly inspired us insofar as it strongly campaigns for an « “ecology of meaning” rather than an “economy of meaning” (...), that is to say, a vision of existence reduced to the economic management of values and meaning with a view to dominating and appropriating the world ». With this last statement in mind, it was only natural to us to make organic connections, so to speak, between this advocacy and the topic that we are going to deal with in the next pages.

1. *Why on Earth the anthropocene?*

The anthropocene is first and foremost a geological concept. Its very existence as a new epoch of the planetary history following the Holocene in which, until further notice, we still find ourselves as part of the Quaternary era, is currently being contemplated by the academia. The latest scientific debate about it took place no later than last August, at the 35th International Geological Congress in Cape Town where the sub-commission on Quaternary stratigraphy, also known as the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), composed of about thirty five geologists, archæologists and stratigraphists from all over the world who, having been working on it for seven years, presented their summary of evidence and their provisional recommendations on this potential new geological time interval. Basically, these recommendations are i) to officially acknowledge its stratigraphical reality ; ii) to formalise it as an epoch rather than an era, a period or an age ; iii) to establish 1950 as the milestone date of its beginning ; iv) to support the above with the evidence of a clear « golden spike » in sediments (*i.e.* a clearly visible boundary between two stratigraphic layers) ; and v) to characterise this spike, amongst many other primary signals, by the high level of plutonium fallout, that is to say the

¹ Our translation of the excerpts of Landowski's manifesto.

radioactive elements from the many nuclear bomb tests done in the postwar period which were blown into the stratosphere before settling down to Earth². The whole idea behind the term, ever since it was coined in 2000 together by the chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer, is to denote the present time interval, in which many geologically significant conditions and processes are profoundly altered by human activities³. These include changes in erosion and sediment transport associated with colonisation, agriculture or urbanisation, but also changes in the environmental conditions generated by these perturbations : global warming, mass extinction of species, sea level rise or ocean acidification and spreading oceanic « dead zones », amongst other long lasting, and for some irreversible, changes.

As one can obviously gather, the whole notion primarily falls into the remit of the « hard » natural sciences, rather than those of our « soft » social sciences. However, amongst those scholars belonging to the latter, a couple of prominent French researchers have jumped on the bandwagon and taken the anthropocene aboard their research interests. One of them is the current holder of the chair of anthropology of nature at the *Collège de France*, Philippe Descola, who in november 2015 — about one month ahead of the holding in Paris of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, commonly known as the COP21 — organised an international two day congress whose title was « How to think the anthropocene ». On this occasion, his introductory speech entitled « Human, all too human » not only set the scene for the two days, but also articulated a strikingly similar statement to what we have just read under Landowski's pen :

Humanity as a whole can't therefore be made accountable for the origin of the anthropocene, but rather a system, *a way of life, an ideology, a way of giving meaning to the world and to things*, a system whose seduction has been expanding and whose peculiarities must be understood if we want to be finished with it and attempt to diminish some of its most dramatic consequences.⁴

This event gathered philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists. Among them, there was the other scholar whose thinking will largely trigger our own, Bruno Latour, an anthropologist of sciences and technology (among other tags). In his prolific production, we will mostly lean on the transcription of his original six Gifford lectures about « Natural Theology » that he delivered in English at the University of Edimburgh in 2013⁵. Those lectures constitute the bulk of the work that he later completely reorganised and substantially amplified with another two chapters in order to give birth to his latest book : *Facing Gaia. Eight lectures on the new climatic regime*. This book is due to be published in English shortly (but was published in French as early as 2015) and is considered as the follow up to his previous publication *An inquiry into modes of existence*, a work in which the spectre

² Source : <http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/press/press-releases/2016/august/media-note-anthropocene-working-group-awg>.

³ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, « The « Anthropocene » », *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter*, 41, 2000, p. 17-18.

⁴ Philippe Descola, « Humain, trop humain », *Esprit*, 12, 2015, p. 9 (our translation and our stress).

⁵ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Six lectures on the political theology of nature* (Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, Edimburgh 18th-28th of February 2013), available at https://www.academia.edu/7995784/Facing_Gaia (Further in the text, referred-to as FG and page number(s).)

of *Gaia* was already featuring in the distance and started to become an invading and influencing entity⁶.

What unites these two researchers is their shared interest in the interactions between *humans* and *non-humans*, as they both put it, each in his respective field. This question of interaction obviously is at the heart of the notion of anthropocene, be it considered upstream, *i.e.* in its causes, or downstream in its consequences and how humanity is going to deal with those. Moreover, both have in their respective « tool boxes », on top of the human vs. non-human category, a couple of common concepts. On the one hand, that of « *collective* » of living beings, that is to say a specific set of aggregates that has nothing to do with society, which by definition is only composed of humans, insofar as a given « *collective* » can be defined by a combination of humans and non-humans together, or can even exclusively comprise non-humans alone. On the other hand, they both profusely use the notion of « *agency* » that both humans and non-humans can possess and that we as semioticians can simply translate as the pragmatic competence of *being-able-to-do* and the subsequent modality of *doing*.

The overt influence of Greimasian semiotics is claimed loud and clear by Latour himself who has adopted a number of semiotic concepts in his *modus cogitandi* (without incidentally acknowledging explicitly that he has slightly distorted or simplified them to suit his needs)⁷. That said, it then becomes rather legitimate to take a close semiotic look at the viewpoints expressed by these two scholars, and Latour more particularly, all the more so as their shared interest in interactions rightly happens to be the pivotal object of socio-semiotics, as Landowski's manifesto has so clearly re-stated. What we therefore propose is to appraise their thoughts and the way they envisage the future political management of the anthropocene with regard to the various regimes of interaction brought to light and modelised by socio-semiotics.

2. From *kosmos* to *kakosmos*

Their common starting point is about the same as that of anyone else interested in the notion of anthropocene, whatever their disciplines : the assessment that the familiar and reassuring « natural order of things » which we had, in our western developed countries, so far been used to, proven by science down here on Earth as well as on the far borders of the universe, is at an end. Latour summarises it as follows :

After having moved from the closed cosmos to the infinite universe, we have to move back from the infinite universe to the closed cosmos — except this time there is no order, no God, no hierarchy, no authority, and thus literally no « *cosmos* », a word that means a

⁶ His personal website heralds its publication in early 2017 by Polity Press. The French version of it is : Bruno Latour, *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*, Paris, La Découverte, 2015. See also Matteo Treleani's recension of *An inquiry into modes of existence*, *Actes Sémiotiques*, 117, 2014 (<http://epublications.unilim.fr/revues/as/5194>).

⁷ About the connections between Greimasian semiotics and Latour's thinking, see *e.g.* Roar Høstaker's writings, in particular « Latour. Semiotics and science studies », *Science Studies*, 18, 2, 2005, pp. 5-25 ; his book *A different society altogether. What sociology can learn from Deleuze, Guattari and Latour*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014 ; or else John Law, « Actor-network theory and material semiotics », in Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 3rd ed., 2008, pp. 141-158.

handsome and *well composed* arrangement. Let's give this new situation its Greek name, that of *kakosmos*. What a drama we have been through : from cosmos to the universe and then, from the universe to the *kakosmos* !⁸

This *kakosmos*, « that is, in polite Greek, a horrible and disgusting mess ! »⁹ which can also be described by this other greek word *chaos*, is the living proof that the old western worldview that Descola calls *naturalist* and Latour *modernist* is no longer relevant. This « *Moderns'* » worldview, inherited of a few centuries of humanities and scientific discoveries that had subtended the main mode of interaction between humans and their natural environment posits that nature, being inanimate (*i.e.* devoid of « agency »), obeys a set of immutable and predictable causal laws that natural sciences have devoted themselves to discovering. As Latour puts it, this former notion of nature

has the great advantage of ensuring the *continuity* of space and time by connecting all entities through concatenations of causes and consequences. (...) 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.¹⁰

The advent of the anthropocene, with its fast procession of adventitious and sometimes irreversible catastrophes, makes the inconsiderate and careless humans that we are realise in a sudden and abrupt way that they have in fact been living in quite a different environment from what they had thought, imagined and believed for ages. At the same time, these same humans are « promoted », so to speak, to the status and rank of a colossal geological force, while, although they are partly responsible for those changes, some irreversible, they find themselves deprived from any « agency » whatsoever, leaving them impotent, in a state of utter helplessness and complete abandonment to their fate. Latour describes them as » obstinately dumb humans sitting impassibly frozen while the whole former décor of their older plots is passing away at a frightening speed ! » (FG, p. 129).

In semiotic, and more specifically interactional terms, we can translate this drastic transition as the shift from the regime of *programming* to that of *accident* (or *assent* to the unpredictable). The pre-anthropocenic regime of interaction between the milieu and its human inhabitants had developed on the basis of the believed continuity, regularity and therefore predictability of the determinist laws ruling nature, envisaged as a purely inanimate and passive object that can be both studied by exact sciences and plundered and exploited *ad libitum* by the industry. This type of interaction corresponds to what Landowski names *unilateral adaptation*, which is one of the strict forms of the regime of *programming*. As he puts it, « an interaction is of programmatic nature when, in order to achieve its

8 Br. Latour, « Agency at the time of the Anthropocene », *New Literary History*, 45, 2014, p. 4.

9 Id., « An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto" », *New Literary History*, 41, 2010, p. 481.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 482.

goals, an actant simply needs to lean on the pre-existing, stable and knowable determining factors of the other's behaviour »¹¹.

Quite to the opposite, the new regime which now prevails and that has left mankind abashed, manifests itself through the principle of a radical discontinuity underlying the stochastic cohort of ecological catastrophes and cataclisms that seem to increasingly and haphazardly surge here and there on the planet. Under this *new climatic regime*, as Latour puts it, the environment is no more passively inert but has now got quite a potent « agency ». From being a mere indifferent object, it has now turned into a concerned, reactive and even « ticklish » agent. To describe this brand new situation, Latour uses an expressive theatrical metaphor whereby the anthropocene becomes an anthropo-scene, so to speak : he compares our environment to the set of a play that all of a sudden would not only become alive and turn into an actor in its own right, but would also take a prominent role within the plot. And he goes so far as giving this actor a name : Gaia. Gaia also is in itself a metaphor that he has borrowed from James Lovelock, a British scholar who introduced it as a hypothesis as early as the 1970s in several of his articles and books¹². Lovelock is among the first scientists to have sounded the alarm over global warming caused by industrialisation and pollution. Amongst many other writers, he now argues that if mankind does not take action to reverse the damage caused by centuries of careless exploitation of its frail environment, it will soon be too late¹³.

But Latour's use of the « *Gaian* » metaphor goes a trifle further than simply connoting that planet Earth is a living superorganism (one « global » determiner, the unity of which he incidentally disputes). On the one hand he uses it as a shorthand to denote the multiplicity and proliferation of various human and non-human entities operating together whose combined actions impact the Earth in intertwined unpredictable ways. On the other hand he exploits this mythological figure to the full, on the basis that it « is the most secular figure of the Earth ever explored by *political theory* » (FG p. 8., our stress). Despite this secularist dimension that he attaches to it, he starts from its being a deity, and more specifically one that antedates all others as she is supposed to have given birth to many, not to say most of them, and bestows upon her a transcendent position along with an arbitrary free will (an « agency ») which in many respects endows her, in his « play », with the semiotic actantial role of *Sender*. And what is more, conversely to the caring motherly figure that popular culture has by and large adopted to depict her, quite a terrible and horrendously threatening sort of *Sender* : in Hesiod's *Theogony*,

far from being a figure of harmony, Gaia, the mythological character, emerges in great effusions of blood, steam and terror together with Chaos and Eros. (...) she is an earthly, black, brown, dark skinned and scheming monster, a feminine power that three times in a row tricks her progeny into murdering her loved ones (...), showering blood all around,

11 E. Landowski, *Les interactions risquées, Actes sémiotiques*, 101-103, 2006, p. 40 (our translation).

12 James Lovelock, *Gaia. A new look at life on Earth*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979.

13 Among many other publications, see Clive Hamilton's *Requiem for a Species. Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change*, London, Routledge, 2010 ; Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars. What People Will Be Killed For in the 21st Century*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012 ; or the now famous book by Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'Événement anthropocène. La terre, l'histoire et nous*, Paris, Seuil, 2013.

every drop begetting a horrible monster. (...) Sorry to say, but Gaia, at least viewed from the later point of view of the Olympian gods, is a dangerous figure. (FG, p. 57)

Along the same line, building on the title and content of one of Lovelock's latest books¹⁴, he further presents her as some sort of angry *Sender-Adjudicator* who, having passed a negative cognitive judgement on humans, now exercises the subsequent negative pragmatic sanction by declaring war and

taking *her revenge*. (...) because the anthropocene might be conceived, not as the great irruption of Nature finally able to pacify all our conflicts [*conversely to many ecologists' utopian theories*], but as a generalized state of war. No matter how horrendous history has been, geostory will no doubt be worse since what, until now, had remained safely in the background — the landscape that had framed all human conflicts — has now joined in the battle. (...) What had been metaphorical until now — that even the stones are screaming in pain at the misery humans have caused them —, has become literal. (FG, p. 100, our stress)

Needless to underline how much this notion of revenge, in the form of an internecine war, echoes the polemical dimension of narratives unearthed by standard semiotics. The mode of thought underpinning both the depiction of the current state of affairs on Earth and the account of the string of events having led to it seems to be entirely reliant on the free will of some necessary transcendent entity posited as the font of the meaning and value of things, not to say of life. On the one hand, the *Programmer*, actorialised by humans, and westerners in particular who, full of themselves and convinced of their cognitive and pragmatic superiority in the universe, have not hesitated to plunder it for their own sake. The *Sender-Adjudicator* on the other, in the shape of Gaia who, by dint of being ruthlessly exploited, unexpectedly manifests herself in an ominous and unpredictable form : the set off of « *a war of all against all*, in which the protagonists may now be not only wolf and sheep, but also tuna fish as well as CO², sea levels, plant nodules or algae, in addition to the many different factions of fighting humans. (...) That's what it means to live in the anthropocene : we are locked in a world war — the Two Hundred Years World War » (FG, p. 103 and 115). The advent of Gaia is further described as some sort of return to a pre-Hobbesian situation, in which the *bellum omnium contra omnes* prevailed. However discretionary Gaia's unforeseeable decrees may appear, it seems that humans, as Landowski would put it, « have no other option than to take cognizance of and submit to them, be it either through resignation before fatality, with a feeling of revolt, or in an attitude of oblation and respect, in short of *assent* »¹⁵.

14 James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia. Why the Earth Is Fighting Back — and How We Can still Save Humanity*, New York, Basic Books, 2006.

15 E. Landowski, « *Shikata ga nai* ou Encore un pas pour devenir vraiment sémioticien ! », *Lexia*, 11-12, 2012, p. 52 (our translation).

3. From *kakosmos* to a new Hobbesian Leviathan

From there on, Latour elaborates on the various forces in play in order to better work out what he sees and proposes as the way out of these belicose circumstances, so much aspired to in Descola's introductory speech in 2015. And very much like Hobbes in his *Leviathan*, he endeavours to delineate the political conditions under which peace may eventually be found. This leads him to cherry-pick from « the toxic and unavoidable » Nazi legal expert Carl Schmitt a notion of politics conceived as contests between enemies and to also rely on the Schmittan concept of *nomos* to think about space and territories, a concept to which he adds those of *demos* and *theos*, i.e. the notion of peoples occupying these spaces along with the transcendent entities' banners under which they rally into battle¹⁶. Basically, this means that in the same manner as Hobbes with his sovereign Leviathan, what he foresees as a viable solution is in the form of a *contract*, a *compact* or a *covenant*, and more importantly also in relation with some other, if not friendlier, at least potentially more intelligible figure of *Sender*. Translated into socio-semiotic terms, this entails to give up on the current regime of *accident* in a sustained effort to establish that of *manipulation*.

We need to exert an enormous violence on ourselves to practice this turn, this *metanoia*, this conversion, and to force the backward-looking Modernist to finally look forward ; to consider a state of affairs that is not a future — something comprising the vague hope that things will take care of themselves (« *Après moi le déluge !* ») — but a state of affairs that comes as a threat and that does not bring hope. (FG, p. 110)

His recipe to do so comprises the above three ingredients and the sequence in which they need to be assembled is as follows : asking what sort of people are being called (*demos*) ; then asking what entity they are being assembled under (*theos*) ; and lastly ascertaining how their agencies (be they human only or also non-human) are spatially distributed to define their territory (*nomos*).

Firstly *demos*. Following Schmitt's notion of necessity to draw a line between friends and foes, between allies and enemies, he divides mankind into several segments (« collectives ») on the ground that the formerly admitted unity of the *anthropos* has proven a fiction, in very much the same way as the « backward-looking Modernist's » Nature was allegedly One, universal, undisputable, de-animated and indifferent.

Rather, it is the human as a unified agency, as one virtual political entity, as a universal concept that has to be broken down into many different *peoples* with contradictory interests, opposing cosmoses and who are summoned under the auspices of warring entities — not to say warring divinities. The *anthropos* of the Anthropocene ? It is Babel *after* the fall of the giant Tower. (FG, p. 81)

Although one is often lost in the maze of the author's thoughts, trying to find one's way in the midst of the wide array of profuse, often overlapped and sometimes weird denominations that he uses

16 Br. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, op. cit., p. 101. Carl Schmitt, the author of *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europæum* (New York, Tellos Press, 2003), was an overt Nazi intellectual who is considered as the official legal expert of the IIIrd Reich.

to describe these multiple peoples — « the people of OWWAAB¹⁷, Modernists, modernizers, ecologists, activists, geo-engineers, climato-sceptics, the people of Nature, Earthlings, the people of the Earth, the people of Gaia, etc. » — he eventually comes up with a simplified and overarching dichotomy between the « *Humans* » with a capital H on the one hand and the « *Earthbound* » on the other.

In the geostorical situation we have entered with the Anthropocene, we might even have to say that Humans are now at war not with Nature, but with, *with whom* ? I am at loss to find a name. (...) « *Gaians* » ? « *Terrestrials* » ? I have chosen *Earthbound* — « bound » as if bound by a spell, as well as « bound » in the sense of heading somewhere (...). I know that it's terribly dangerous to state the matter this starkly, but we might have to say that at the epoch of the Anthropocene the Humans and the Earthbound should be at war. (FG, p. 117)

He thereby creates a disconnect between those who continue to live and think under the auspices of the former modernist and now obsolete « *inanimist* » nature vs. culture divide and those who will have adopted his new, although still somewhat obscure and oblique, conceptual combination of a *multiplicity of existing agents*, both humans (with a small *h*), and non-humans (housed neither in nature or culture but in compounds defined by their *nomos*) with a *multiplicity of ways of their existing* outlining a « multiverse », as a result of a process otherwise called *worlding*¹⁸.

The « *Earthbound* », or the « people of Gaia » (the two terms seem almost interchangeable), are contrasted with the old notion of the « *Humans* » as *anthropos*, by which are meant not only those who continue to defend an outdated view of science and nature, and who either benefit or profit from keeping the business-as-usual system of politics and economics in place, but also those who still refuse to acknowledge that the Earth is now responding to human actions (via climate change and other biophysical feedback processes). Conversely, the « *Earthbound* » understand nature (with a small *n*), rather than the old view of animate *anthropos* separate from inanimate Nature with a capital N. Similarly, they understand science (with a small *s*) as a process of knowledge, history and power intertwined with politics, rather than the old conception of Science (with a capital *S*), understood as an abstract and objective process of collecting neutral facts and discovering truths via observation and experimentation (*i.e.*, the scientific method). In Descola's simpler terms, this means the difference between the « ontology » of the naturalists (self-defined as « *Humans* ») and that of all three others groups he has identified (the animists, etc.) :

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 non-humans. All the others are trying to underline agency as much as possible at each step. (...). For the three other modes discussed by Descola, namely animism, totemism, and analogism, the

17 « "Out-of-Which-We-Are-All-Born", "OWWAAB" for short » (FG, p. 13).

18 Cf. Ph. Descola, « Cognition, Perception and Worlding », *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 35, 3-4, 2010, pp. 334-340.

proliferation of agencies is precisely what does *not* introduce any difference between humans and non-humans.¹⁹

The outcome of all this overly complex ratiocination is fairly simple : a polemic divide between a *subject* (the « Earthbound ») and an *anti-subject* (the « Humans »), competing for an *object of value* (the survival of mankind), which incidentally remains largely anthropocentric.

Secondly *Theos*. It is the name that our author has chosen to designate the supreme authority under the ægis of whom any « collective », however « secular » it claims to be, has to be operating. To put it another way, for him, there has to be a « god function » in any collectivity, which in semiotic terms means that there must be a transcendent *Sender* who institutes the values and transmits the desire or obligation to pursue them to the *subject*. If we follow his reasoning correctly, we have Gaia as a *Sender*, however threatening it may be, and « old » Nature as the *anti-Sender*, however illusory it may appear today. Now, according to Schmitt, the state of war in which both parties find themselves is characterised by the absence of a third party, a supertranscendent referee, that is to say some neutral impartial and disinterested *meta-Sender* who, from above, because it embodies « previously determined norms », might decide between right or wrong : « War begins when there is no sovereign arbiter, when there exist no “general norms” that may be applied to pass judgment : such is the extreme “state of exception” » (FG, p. 102). Thus, there is no Hobbesian Leviathan, no « mortal god », to put an end to the state of exception and to bring the belligerents back at peace. Neither Gaia nor Nature can assume that actantial role : the « previously determined norms », also known as the « laws of nature », established by natural sciences according to the « Moderns’ » understanding which assumes that things of the natural world will work always and forever in the same way, are now rattled ; and on the other hand, Gaia is nowhere near being disinterested and neutral in what men do as she reacts so fiercely to their deeds. Hence the solution that Latour proposes, which consists in recreating a Leviathan : « It’s just that we realise that we can not obtain a civilized collective without *composing* it, bit by bit, agency by agency, thus searching for a new Leviathan that would come to grasp with Gaia. In other words, the task of building the Republic, the true *res publica*, is still *way ahead* of us » (FG, p. 104). This is where one of the author’s hobby horses comes in : « diplomacy », in the form of « peace negotiations », that is to say a way to establish a common ground across parties, an agreement, which in narrative terms we would quite simply call a *contract*.

Lastly, the legal concept of *nomos*, that applies to land or soil to define each camp’s *oikos*, merely reinforces the intricacy and confusion of the contentious situation, making the advent of the new Leviathan so difficult to imagine. On the one hand, the « Humans », as an overarching category that appears to comprehend a composite hotchpotch of all sorts of diverging interests, yet having in common to still firmly hold to the famous progressive motto *Plus ultra* (ecologists, geo-engineers, capitalists, globalisationists, modernisers, « Moderns », and so forth), seem to avoid the question of territories altogether. They either claim to be from nowhere or from everywhere, *e.g.* to belong to the Earth, to Nature, to the globe, to the cosmos, etc. : « (...) you never know where they are heading nor what the principle that delineates the boundaries of their people is. It is thus impossible to draw an

19 Br. Latour, « An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto” », *New Literary History*, 41, 2010, p. 483.

accurate map of their geopolitical conflicts » (FG, p.118). In the other camp, that of the « Earthbound », the various « collectives » can claim to belong to territories, each of which is defined as the aggregate of the smaller individual territories that every *agent* on a given soil, a given *oikos*, occupies : « A territory is everything that you need to survive and that may suddenly *fail you*. Such a plot is not well delineated but made of highly surprising networks of unexpected connections suddenly jumping up at you — be they fish, fowl, air, soil, carbon, protein or rare earths » (FG, p. 134). Given that the « Earthbound are not land-surveyors, cartographers or geologists looking *from above* at the flat surface of their well-delineated maps », each territory is highly variable and fluctuating in time and space, and dependent on the *interagentivity* in play within its ever moving boundaries, *i.e.* on the reciprocal survival of its human and non-human constituents, defined as interacting « *existents* » equipped with an « agency » (FG, p. 134).

In much simpler layman's terms, Philippe Descola refers to these unstable « collectives » as « ecosystems or systems of interactions between humans and non-humans that would be entitled to rights, of which humans would simply be the usufructuary or that they could, under certain conditions, guarantee »²⁰. This long awaited new Leviathan, this supertranscendent *meta-Sender*, would therefore emerge from the *manipulations* — debates, arguments, transactions, diplomatic negotiations, etc. — across all these different « collectives », possibly within the arena, if not of a « *Parliament of Things* », at least of some sort of forum in which human agents, having the biggest share of responsibility in the disruption of the biotic and chemical equilibria of their ecosystems and at the same time being the only « existents » equipped with a capacity to debate, would be the legal spokespersons of the non-humans living in the territories to which they belong²¹. In such a highly manipulative political forum, scientists would necessarily have their say. Needless to underline that the mechanics of this hypothetical, scale-nonspecific polity raises many practical issues : « Imagine the political, legal and scientific set of inventions necessary to bind humans to their carbon footprints ! How many procedures will have to be designed so as to feel legally tied by the possible disappearance of the Gulf Stream ? » (FG, p. 137).

4. A colossus with feet of clay?

So far, our socio-semiotic inventory of the regimes in play amounts to three : the regime of *programming* between Humans (with H) and Nature (with N) in pre-anthropocenic times ; the regime of *accident* currently prevailing ever since the anthropocene started to « show on stage » ; and the regime of *manipulation*, in its political and legal dimensions of negotiation (« diplomacy »), *persuasion* and *contract*, which both Latour and Descola view as the safest, or at least the least risky way out of the current situation. Yet, the above notion of *nomos* applied to the « Earthbound », grouped in various « collectives », poses several questions that are of high interest to the topic at stake here. Considering that any given « collective » comprehends both humans and non-humans, which regime of interaction prevails between them, *i.e.* internally ? And upstream of its advent as one given « collective », what kind of process can be imagined at work to bring these humans and non-humans together under that same umbrella entity, the same *oikos* ? In these matters Latour's hunches seem to

20 Ph. Descola, « Humain, trop humain », *art. cit.*, p. 19. (our translation)

21 Br. Latour, « Compositionist Manifesto », *op. cit.*, p. 479.

verge on the concept of *adjustment* on various occasions, as he explicitly makes use of three of the key notions that define it²².

First of all, as we have seen, his nomos-driven conceptualisation of a territory as being made of « entanglements » across its inhabitants and defined as « an unbounded network of attachments and connections »²³ leads him to envisage the delineation of its borders as a constantly developing interactional process which excludes the intervention of any transcendent authority : « Of course the territory does not resemble the nicely coloured geographical maps of our classrooms. It is not made of nation states (...) but of interlocking, conflicting, entangled, contradictory networks *that no harmony, no system, no “third party”, no overall Providence may unify in advance* » (FG, p. 119, our stress). What is strikingly resonant here with the regime of *adjustment* is not only that the process takes place outside any *contract*, in the absence of any *Sender*, of any pre-determined rules, but more importantly excludes the possibility to predict any outcome or even, if eventually established at all, to take it for granted once and for all — *adjustment* being a type of

interaction whose neither form nor outcome can be fully knowable in advance. Because under this regime, it is the dynamics of the interaction itself which steers its modalities and purpose in the course of its own proceedings.²⁴

Secondly, logically linking this mode of treatment of space with an approach to time, this Gaia Prophecy, if one may say, underlines the fact that one of the conditions for this process to be fully fruitful is to envisage it as *apocalyptic*, in both senses of the word, by « accepting to live at the end of time, or rather, (...), at the *time of the end* » (FG., p. 138). Along that line, reminding his audience of the threat of the nuclear holocaust during the cold war period and how its fear greatly contributed to proving Cassandra wrong and to having avoided the self-mass-destruction of mankind so far (incidentally, let us remark that this threat is still pending), he urges them to accept that « we have entered, or we have never left, or we should never leave *the Time of the End* » (FG, p. 99). Such a recommendation fully echoes one of the parameters of the regime of *adjustment* insofar as its neighbouring regime — namely, that of *assent* (to the accidental) — makes it an interaction « where the “best” can only be achieved by responsibly taking the risk of the “worst” and where the mutual fulfillment of both partners borders on the accident »²⁵.

Last but not least, it is also the pivotal notion of *sensitivity* that Latour summons in his descriptions : « Gaia, (...), seems to be overly *sensitive* to our action, and it appears to react incredibly fast to what it feels and detects. This is why we should become cautious, careful, yes, *sensitive* in return » (FG, p. 96, our stress).

22 *Oikos* happens to precisely be the term chosen by Landowski (in contrast with *Cosmos*, *Chaos* and *Logos*) to describe the regime of adjustment in the abstract of a lecture entitled « Ni cosmos ni chaos — pour une écologie du sens ». *METAMIND 2014* Conference, Riga, Latvian Academy of Culture, September 25 - 28, 2014.

23 Br. Latour, « Anthropology at the Time of the Anthropocene. A Personal View of What Is to Be Studied », Distinguished lecture, American Association of Anthropologists, Washington, December 2014, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/139-AAA-Washington.pdf>.

24 E. Landowski, « À quoi sert la construction de concepts ? », *Actes Sémiotiques*, 117, 2014 (our translation and our stress).

25 *Ibid.* (our translation).

Let us dwell on this notion of sensitivity for a short while. Arguably, the use that is made of it in this context most of the time corresponds, in the socio-semiotic interactional model, to one of the two types of aesthetic competence identified by Landowski, namely the *reactive sensitivity* (distinguished from « perceptive » and aesthetic sensitivity), which « from a general epistemological point of view (...) is not miles away from programming *stricto sensu* — the regime which proceeds from causal regularity — and may well be one of its possible forms »²⁶. This restrictive interpretation seems all the more relevant to Latour's understanding of sensitivity as he exclusively refers to it in the context of the urgent need for humans to multiply the scientific instruments devised to gauge the response given by their fellow non-human « Gaians » to the stimulus of their mere presence, triggering what he calls « feedback loops ». This equipment is supposed to capture and record how reactively sensitive non-humans are so that humans can evaluate the « boomerang effect » that they are the cause of and thus interpret and make sense of it.

When the dictionary defines « sensitive » as being « *quick to detect or respond to slight changes, signals or influences* » this adjective applies to Gaia *as well as* to the *anthropos* — but only as long and as far as it is fully equipped with enough *sensors* to feel the feedbacks. (FG, p. 96)

Even if, according to Landowski, the *amœba* itself was eventually granted a soul by Greimas, it seems that Latour, despite his claim to have been influenced by him, entirely reduces his whole approach of sensitivity to the physical inputs and outputs processed by this scientific paraphernalia²⁷. Ignoring aesthetic relationships and whatever form of feeling induced by non-mediated relations, he makes the proliferation of monitoring apparatuses the sole possible condition of the interaction between humans and non-humans, underpinning it by the mechanical and programmatic principle of linear causality according to which « *if X, then Y* » :

Any weakening of the sensors, any limit in the bandwidth of the instruments, and, at once, the agent becomes less *sensible*, less responsive, less responsible, losing its territory, unable to define to what it belongs. (FG, p. 120, our stress)

Wherever the instruments go, our sensibility increases ; wherever the instruments are interrupted, our sensibility dims and then disappears. Science is the new aesthetics able to render us *sensible* to where we are standing. So, in a sense, never in human history was a situation so totally defined by the span, quality and data flows of science. (FG, p. 130, our stress)

Although such statements would certainly thrill the enthusiasts of tensive semiotics who could indulge in turning them into one of their geometric curves (in this case it would certainly be a positive correlation, unfortunately confusingly named *converse* in French), and beyond the highly debatable

²⁶ *Les interactions risquées, op. cit.*, p. 45 (our translation).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

æsthetic value attributed to such curves, as well as presumably to other scientific graphics such as algebraic diagrams, chemical tables or statistical histograms and pie charts — *de gustibus et coloribus non disputandum* —, what he describes here is the mere data capture and information recording through a pattern relying on the intermediacy of technology.

Thereby, the possibility of contemplating unmediated contact between interactants adjusting hand-to-hand to one another is *de facto* excluded from this scenario insofar as it necessitates a go-between in the form of a technical device : no possible direct sensing for humans here who, despite their being equipped with the æsthetic competence needed in that regime (both *reactive* and *perceptive*), are simply required to exercise their cognitive competences of *knowing* or *believing*, theoretically in play in the opposite regime, that of *manipulation*. Along the same line, be it a foreigner's *lapsus calami* or not, it is remarkable to note that the English adjective used on more than one occasion to describe « us » (humans) is not *sensitive* but « sensible », which by and large describes a cognitive rather than an æsthetic disposition (*i.e.* being « reasonable, with common sense and wisdom », or « aware », or « functional (rather than æsthetically valuable) », or even « sizeable, considerable » : a rather *sensible* difference with « sensitive », so to speak...).

Another clue that may advocate for the partial dismissal of *adjustment* as one of the main modes of interaction between humans and non-humans envisaged by Latour lies in the fact that the latter are endowed with the modal competence of *wanting*. At some point in the presentation of his understanding of Gaia, and with a view to disproving its characterisation as one unified « superorganism », he underlines the multiplicity of contradictory intertwined non-human « agencies » at work in the feedback loops and establishes the manipulative principle of *intentionality* underlying them individually : « In that sense, every organism *intentionally* manipulates its surroundings to its own benefit. It is not that Gaia is some “*sentient being*” but that the concept of Gaia captures the distributed intentionality of all the agents that are modifying their surroundings to suit themselves better » (FG, p. 67). This manipulative approach, although reciprocally adopted by both non-humans and humans towards one another, seems to dominate among non-humans and perspires in the view that the feedback loops recorded by the humans' instruments « don't start with them toward the map, but *from* the landscape *back to them* — and more often than not they come back with a vengeance ! Each of those loops registers the unexpected reactions of some outside agency to human action » (FG, p. 133). We may conclude that it is a *knowing*, *i.e.* a *modal object* of cognitive nature, that is *conjoined* to the humans by the machines whose sensors have recorded humanly imperceptible changes and transformed them into legible and intelligible information. And we can also conclude from the word « vengeance » that this response from the non-humans is not only interpretable as a *pragmatic sanction* resulting from some wrongdoing, but also as a threatening admonition, a *dissuasive manipulation*, an *obstruction* (a *causing-not-to-do*), that the popular proverb « Mess with a bull, and you get the horns » so wisely encapsulates. In both cases, non-humans are viewed as *Senders*, *Adjudicators* and *Manipulators* at the same time, in an interaction that falls in the *constellation of prudence* where the standard narrative grammar of *junction* prevails.

Lastly, it is also to be noted that according to the author, if humans have to give up their tendency to appropriate the land, on the other hand he nevertheless describes the territory construction process in terms of *re-appropriation*, and again in a very dissuasive threatening manner :

« Far from being the “land-appropriation”, the *Landnahme* celebrated by Schmitt, it is rather the violent *re-appropriation* of all Humans’ titles *by the land itself*. As if “territory” and “terror” shared a similar root » (FG, p. 134). On the whole, it becomes clear that what could have been mistaken for a form of *adjustment* in a logic of sensitive *union* or *contagion* between interactants falls in reality within the logic of *junction* and *appropriation* between conflicting interests. This is confirmed by the notion that the territories would expand or shrink over the course of « controversies (...) raging over what is or what is not an item of the series and what is or what is not an accepted way of distributing agencies », that is to say according to the imbroglio of reciprocal *manipulations* between interactants (FG, p. 120).

Having said that, the fact remains that Latour uses the word *sensitivity* quite abundantly. What does he exactly *mean* then? When it is now very clear that the sensitivity of the non-human « existents » as well as that of the scientific instruments designed to auscultate and sound them is of the reactive type, it seems that the relevant acceptance when it comes to humans alone is quite different. Having established that the interaction now falls in the regime of *manipulation*, it sounds as if what Latour understands as human sensitivity covers in fact what Landowski labels the *decision making motives*. And indeed, sensitive humans are described as being « able to spread their loops further and to *feel the consequences* of what they do come back to haunt them » (FG, p. 96, our stress). He further complements this definition by adding that « the capacity to render oneself sensitive » means « being able to “perceive” and to be “concerned” » (FG, p. 97). His definition of sensitivity therefore has to do with being aware of and responsible for the results of one’s deeds. This ability can develop providing one is conscious of the hypothetical ultimate threat from Gaia : « To become sensitive, that is, to feel responsible, and thus to make the loops feedback on our own action, we need, by a set of totally artificial operations, *to place ourselves as if we were at the End of Time* » (FG, p. 112, our stress). This forced reminder of the ever possible and unpredictable adventitious arising of « the worst » sends us back to the regime of *adjustment*. Indeed, one can also read that this process is expected to be « a slow and painful progressive merging of *cognitive, emotional and æsthetic virtues* because of the ways the loops are rendered more and more visible through instruments and art forms of all sorts. Through each loop we become more sensitive and more responsive to the fragile envelopes we inhabit » (FG, p. 94, our stress). This interoceptive merger of cognitive and æsthetic competences (« virtues ») makes us waver back and forth between *manipulation* and *adjustment*. Could it therefore be that these toings and froings outline a hybrid regime that would combine elements of both ? In that case the long awaited Leviathan would indeed become a colossus with feet of clay, all the more likely to collapse that it is sitting on a quaking ground, as a result of this oscillating movement between both regimes. But dealing with this issue would require to dig much deeper into the literature.

5. A lame colossus anyway

In order to conclude our socio-semiotic tour of these hypothesised anthropocenic interactions between humans and non-humans, we would like to stress that if Latour harnesses a number of semiotic concepts, it really is unfortunate that his knowledge of the discipline appears to have remained frozen into its purely Greimasian developments, and to be lacking of an update on the latest post-Greimasian state of the art. For instance, it just so happens that Landowski, in the above

mentioned lecture²⁸, coincidentally summarised in a few lines the whole issue that Latour takes 368 pages to expose²⁹. After explaining how the overall notion of *non-significance* subsumes those of « insignificance » (that of a well ordained and programmed *Cosmos*, *i.e.* to us the pre-anthropocenic world) and of « nonsense » (*i.e.* that of the *Chaos* resulting here from Gaia's stochastic and nonsensical behaviour), Landowski notes that either of these terms, *Cosmos* and *Chaos*,

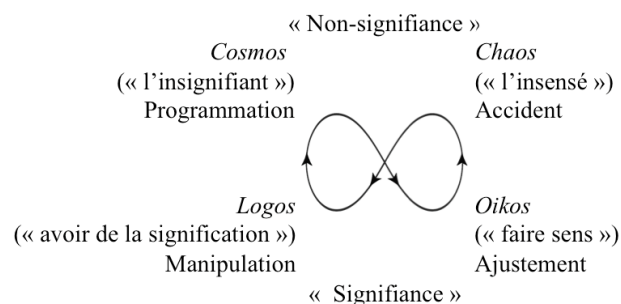
have to be negated, surpassed or destroyed in order to access possible forms of *significance* : either by overcoming the nonsensical through the discovery or invention of an order within chaos itself — thereby founding a world of the *Logos* wherein things will « *have a meaning* », a conventional and revocable meaning ; or by disrupting the platitude of the repetition of the same by means of some disorder — thereby escaping the insignificant regularity and producing a universe in which whatever happens will « *make sense* » : an *Oikos* populated with interactants (human or not) capable of creating sense and value by adjusting to one another.³⁰

Arguably, the regime of *adjustment* being only partially covered, whilst some of its main components are clearly stated, the feeling emerging from Latour's exclusively natural-science-based thesis and scenario is that other dimensions are seriously missing. It all seems as if the sole sort of non-human « existents » that he takes into account are those that escape our five senses and can only be apprehended through high-tech « protheses » compensating for our physical flaws. Although trained as a philosopher, his current line of occupation as an anthropologist of sciences seems to have made him overlook the simplest non-human elements surrounding us in our daily lives : trees, meadows, hills, forests, plants, domesticated or wild animals, etc., many of whom do not require any sophisticated binoculars or stethoscopes to be observed and interacted with. But beyond this very

28 « Ni cosmos ni chaos — pour une écologie du sens », *METAMIND 2014, op. cit.*

29 Number of pages of the French edition of *Facing Gaia*.

30 Our translation. French original : La *non-significance* subsume à la fois l'*insignifiant* et l'*insensé*, à savoir, d'une part, l'idée d'un *Cosmos* idéalement ordonné, univers de sens exhaustivement programmé par des codes (génétiques, linguistiques, sociaux) et des régularités de tous ordres (causales, sociales, psychiques) mais n'autorisant, à raison même de ces strictes déterminations, que l'éternelle répétition du même — et d'autre part celle d'un *Chaos* de non-sens résultant, au contraire, de l'absence de toute régularité, c'est-à-dire du pur aléa. Il faut ensuite que l'un ou l'autre de ces termes, une fois posé, soit dénié, dépassé ou détruit pour pouvoir accéder à l'une ou l'autre des formes possibles de la *significance* : ou bien surmonter l'insensé — découvrir ou inventer un ordre au sein même du chaos — en fondant un monde du *Logos* où ce qui adviendra « *aura de la signification* », une signification convenue et révocable ; ou bien rompre par un désordre la platitude de la répétition du même — échapper à la régularité insignifiante — pour produire un univers dans lequel ce qui adviendra « *fera sens* » : un *Oikos* peuplé d'interactants (humains ou non) capables de créer du sens et de la valeur en s'ajustant les uns aux autres.



trivial remark, in the context of a piece of thinking dedicated at defining the conditions into which life on Earth may continue to *have a meaning*, it certainly is an opportunity missed not to have envisaged, not only the four regimes of interaction, but more interestingly their corresponding regimes of meaning : *nonsense*, *insignificance*, *signification* and *sense-making*³¹. Of all four, *adjustment* rightly is the most fruitful when it comes to creating value and meaning which, under this regime,

take shape (...) as the fruit of a process which is neither planned nor uncertain or guided by scheming subjects trying to manipulate each other, but which is entirely dependent on the mutual discovery of just relations by both actants, in the immanence of a direct face-to-face encounter.³²

Conversely to the other three, in this regime the *subject* will not behold things from a distance nor will he evaluate them with a view to either pragmatically or cognitively appropriating them. He will feel *united* to the becoming of what surrounds him, he will view himself as part and parcel of the immanent and encompassing « process of things », according to François Jullien's formulation³³. Is this not precisely what the whole notion of the « Earthbound » (humans and non-humans) under the shadow of Gaia is about ? Is this not highly regrettable to have missed such a well fitted analytical framework in the context of the anthropocene ? The flipside of it certainly lies in the inherent level of risk attached to it : letting the other — non-human — unveil and accomplish itself, and trying to mate with its own *propensity to be* necessarily entails elements of potential danger, all the more so if the adopted viewpoint (the *axiology*) leads to interpret any response as a « vengeance »... This is probably why it appears so crucial to our former philosopher to rebuild the colossus, the new Leviathan, the new supertranscendent *meta-Sender*, even if it means having its feet made of clay. But the bad news is that, without the regime of *adjustment* at its full in the loop, not only is the colossus doomed to be fragile, but it is bound to be lame and may well end up as the giant tower once erected in Babel.

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31 See Massimo Leone, « De l'insignifiance », *Actes Sémiotiques*, 119, 2016.

32 E. Landowski, « À quoi sert... », *op. cit.* (our translation).

33 François Jullien, *Les transformations silencieuses*, Paris, Grasset, 2009.

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