

**Theory on Stage: The Paradox of Anthropocene Spectatorship in Latour and Aït-Touati's *Inside* and *Moving Earths***

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The Anthropocene, an epoch in which humanity has become a major geological factor and environmental force (Crutzen 2002), is singularly difficult to grasp and to represent. Theorists in the humanities have described it a series of “hyperobjects”, such as anthropogenic climate change, that defy the very notion of an overview (Morton 2013), a polymorphous entity that surrounds us and envelops us so that distanced observation seems impossible (Zalasiewicz 2019). The epistemological challenge humanity now faces is thus partly a viewing difficulty, since comprehensive views of the planet are both necessary and problematic. The two lecture performances examined in this article, *Inside* (2016) and *Moving Earths* (2019), were created by Bruno Latour and Frédérique Aït-Touati in response to this difficulty. Their topic is how we view the Earth, and what models might be appropriate to the political awareness of a “new climate regime” and the ethical need for new modes of inhabiting the planet. The shows are lectures: what the spectator watches is the French philosopher and social scientist, Bruno Latour, commenting a slideshow, and attempting to convey the urgency of these epistemological questions. Yet these lectures are performances, built on the tensions that develop between a man and the images that surround him.

Unlike the lecture *scene*, which often features in contemporary “science plays” (Shepherd-Barr 2006), Aït-Touati and Latour’s lecture performances are neither part of, nor prologue to, a fictional representation. While lecture formats have become a popular way for 21<sup>st</sup>-century artists to provoke reflections on their work and its social context (Milder 2011), the agenda of *Inside* and *Moving Earths* is closer to political performances such as Verdecchia and Brooks’s 1990 play *The Noam Chomsky Lectures*, which combined conversations and direct addresses to the audience, using slides as demonstrative props. Latour, or in some cases an actor presenting his views, improvises the lecture along an agreed structure, in a didactic format that resembles the current trend of lectures hosted by theaters for non-specialized audiences.<sup>1</sup> But *Inside* and *Moving Earths* are only the most recent installments in a series of performative experiments carried out by the two researchers. A historian of science and comparative literature scholar, Aït-Touati explores new environmental imaginaries through collaborations with architects, filmmakers, academics and performers. The theatrical work she has created with Latour focuses on the philosopher’s theorization of climate change politics, and on the implications of Earth System sciences, the transdisciplinary research which views the Earth as a dynamic system interlinking human, physical, chemical and biological processes. The name of Aït-Touati’s theatre company, *Zone Critique*, refers to a key concept in contemporary geoscience: the critical zone, or “zone of the planet that is critical to the maintenance of life” (Chakrabarty 2019, 3), generally understood as extending “from the tops of the trees down to the deepest groundwater” (Goudie and Viles 2016, 7).

Latour and Aït-Touati’s experiments have taken various forms, including a “climate tragi-comedy” written by Pierre Daubigny, *Gaïa Global Circus* (2013), in which a mobile floating canopy played the ambiguous role of the climate, a décor-turned-actor in humanity’s ecological predicament. By contrast, the lecture format of *Inside* and *Moving Earths* is a consciously didactic choice, made by two researchers who are highly aware of the visual etymology linking theory and theatre, and of the theatrical dimension of demonstrations in the

history of science (Latour 1988). In Aït-Touati's scenography, diagrams, maps and video footage come to life around the philosopher, moving between the different surfaces of the stage and shifting from background to foreground. As Latour explains the shifts in perspective entailed by the politics of climate change (*Inside*) and by the Gaia hypothesis (*Moving Earths*), the stage functions as a testing space for different models and images of the Earth. Visual representation becomes a quest, in which images act as both antagonists and protagonists, alternatively helping and hindering the philosopher.

In a critical assessment of Caryl Churchill and Wallace Shawn's "drama of bad ideas", Una Chaudhuri has argued that although climate change poses "formidable obstacles to dramatic representation", the theatre may be particularly well equipped to tackle what Timothy Clark has called the "derangements of scale" provoked by Anthropocene awareness, which forces us to link individual behavior to planetary hyperobjects (Chaudhuri 2015, 20). Chaudhuri brings ecocritical thought to bear on dramatic form, showing that theatre can pinpoint and question the links between individual thought and wider, catastrophic transformations. Latour and Aït-Touati's performances take a different, non-dramatic approach, using the stage to examine images and their ideological implications. Yet their focus on the gaze also suggests that the theatre is a particularly appropriate space in which to face the ethical and intellectual challenge of the Anthropocene. *Inside* and *Moving Earths* explore the different viewing positions implied by conflicting models of the Earth, such as the infinite globe of capitalist expansion or the limited planet of anthropogenic climate change. They ask their audience to consider the political implications of these viewpoints, and thus present Anthropocene awareness as a crisis in our ways of seeing. Both shows emphasize the pitfalls of distanced views, critiquing models that imply the possibility of detached spectatorship instead of acknowledging our entanglement in the system under study.

This article examines the ways in which the scenography and dramaturgy of *Inside* and *Moving Earths* convey this critique of visual representations, so that the audience experiences Anthropocene awareness as a problematic form of spectatorship. My analysis suggests that the topic of these shows – the necessity and difficulty of visualizing the entangled Earth system from within – creates productive tensions within the lecture performance format. I argue that the philosopher on stage functions as a figure for a particular form of enquiry, *theoria*, in which knowledge is based on distanced spectatorship, and that this position is put into question by the science and ethics explored by *Inside* and *Moving Earths*. This tension between form and content places the philosopher in the paradoxical position of the spectator of the Anthropocene, for whom comprehensive views are both deceptive and necessary. The resulting overlap between scientific observation, political modeling and theatrical spectatorship expands the metaphorical role played by the stage in the philosophy of the Anthropocene.

### ***Inside*: from blue planet to tangled earth**

How do we visualize the Earth of global heating and mass extinctions, and how do we distinguish it from its dangerous other, the globe of infinite expansion and climate change denial? As it attempts to answer this question, the 50-minute lecture performance *Inside* uses the stage to test the ideas presented in Latour's recent essay *Down to Earth*. Both the show and the essay present the political crisis of climate change as a problem of cosmography, or as Latour calls it elsewhere "Gaiagraphy" (Arènes, Latour and Gaillardet 2018), in which conflicting views are founded on incompatible models of the Earth, and an alternative is needed to the "Globe of globalization" (Latour 2018, 5). While the written essay explores these representations through words and diagrams, the performance introduces an extra dimension, turning the image into what Aït-Touati calls an "*espace-image*" (Le Tanneur

2019). Aït-Touati's scenography uses a slideshow to shape the stage space, projecting images created by Alexandra Arènes, Axelle Grégoire and Sonia Levy onto a scrim placed between Latour and the audience, and then shifting them to the surface of the stage and finally to a screen behind him.<sup>2</sup> By effectively placing Latour inside the image for the first half of the performance, the scenography enacts the epistemological injunction expressed by the philosopher. His main argument is that we cannot know the Earth from the outside, as pictures taken from space or Plato's myth of the philosopher leaving the cave would make us believe, since we cannot escape our involvement in the Earth system we depend on. Placed *inside* the image of the blue planet, Latour emphasizes how constructed this image is and how dangerous the reassuring unity it conveys.

Timothy Clark has demonstrated that depictions of the Earth viewed from above tend to slip into human-scale metaphor, thereby papering over the discontinuity of perception between life on the surface of the planet and the view of the whole, and masking "the disjunction between individual perception and global reality" (Clark 2015, 36). Latour and Aït-Touati attack the fallacy of the image itself, which lets us believe we can embrace the terrestrial in one gaze. Placed inside the famous "Earthrise" photograph, his voice almost drowned out by the white noise of machinery, Latour points out this image's dependence on the hyper-technological, constricted space of the Apollo capsule. As he introduces the notion of the Anthropocene, the view from space is replaced by pictures of geological strata. Reduced to a small glowing head deep inside these layers, Latour's discursive position enacts the idea that "the Terrestrial is no longer the framework for human action, [...] we are landing in the thick of *geohistory*" (Latour 2018, 41-42). He attempts to speak from inside geology rather than to speak of it as a detached observer. When graphs of the Anthropocene timeline or maps produced by photogrammetry fill the screen, the philosopher moves aside, almost disappearing from sight as he emphasizes the "amazing heterogeneity" and thinness of the critical zone in which life is sustained.

The proposed shift of perspective, from the global to the terrestrial and from the external to the internal, is enacted not only by the performer's position in relation to the projections, but by the images themselves, which switch scales without warning, so that Latour is suddenly dwarfed by a moving 3d map of dust on grass. The staging refuses detachment and upsets perspective, thereby destabilizing the theoretical position itself. For the audience who has come to listen to the famous philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour, the performer embodies the Western tradition of *theoria*, a philosophical tradition that has been founded on detached observation. In Ancient Greece *theoria* was a journey, undertaken by a *theoros*, to observe religious practices in another city. In Plato's *Republic*, the practice of *theoria* becomes a metaphor for philosophy, and theoretical contemplation a form of journey from which the philosopher returns estranged to his own city. References to *theoria* in 4<sup>th</sup>-century Greek philosophy thus link knowledge with detached visual perception, a paradigm which informs Western thought and leads to the metaphor of the "eye of reason" (Nightingale 2004, 395). Latour's slideshow is rooted in this tradition of the distanced gaze, beginning with aerial views of the Earth and taking us on a journey of contemplation through different images of the Critical Zone. Yet the lecture begins by rejecting Plato's idea that we might ever escape the cave to observe reality from the outside, a story Latour describes as an "implausible show".<sup>3</sup> This philosopher follows the opposite trajectory, towards the acceptance that all knowledge will be projections from the inside.

*Inside* sets up an ambivalent relation to the theoretical gaze, by simultaneously endorsing and distrusting its distanced position. In the first half of the lecture the *theoros* is denied his detached position, swathed at first by the images projected on the scrim, and later decentered by the huge graphs, maps and landscapes against which he all but disappears. In the second however, Latour adopts a classic lectern position, outside the image, to present two

series of diagrams through which we may better understand the Earth system. The first are counter-intuitive visual representations that avoid conventional structures, inverting for instance the center and the periphery of the globe to place the atmosphere in the center, or filling maps with trajectories of human and nonhuman agents. The second are conflicting models of the planet: the globe of globalization, the escapist model implied by climate change denial, and the terrestrial model Latour proposes. The *theoros* thus retrieves the visual mastery he had renounced, and comments on models of the “disorientation” he previously embodied. Crucially, this visual control is performed over diagrams rather than photographs: what the philosopher sees, and invites us to see, is not the Earth but his own theory. Nevertheless, the final image leaves a paradoxical tension between the lecture format and the proposed shift towards an embedded terrestrial view. Standing at a lectern beside the projection of a diagram created by architect Alexandra Arènes, on which crisscrossing lines and circles attempt to convey the complexity of geochemical factors in the Critical Zone, Latour describes us as “entangled” in a “vortex” of life. His position as a spectator on stage mirrors our own, and only strengthens our sense of detachment from this entangled life.

### ***Moving Earths: telescope meets microscope***

Whereas the scenography of *Inside* takes its shape from questions of perspective and position, *Moving Earths* uses the parallel as a visual structure and thought path. Latour and Aït-Touati’s most recent lecture performance explores the birth of Earth system science and the construction of Gaia theory by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. Standing or seated at a desk against a backdrop of projected images, the lecturer introduces the audience to Lovelock and Margulis’s description of the Earth as a self-regulated system, which depends on a fragile balance of chemical and biological processes. This discovery, he argues, is as revolutionary as Galileo’s defense of the heliocentric universe. Latour demonstrates the parallel in a 45-minute lecture by drawing cosmological models on his blackboard desk, while both his hands and the chalk diagrams he produces are projected and magnified onto the screen behind him, so that the process of thought becomes the subject of the performance. These models alternate with scientific graphs, video footage of the two scientists and of recent marches for the climate, and excerpts from Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* in Joseph Losey’s film adaptation.<sup>4</sup>

The parallel with Galileo is both epistemological and political: just as Brecht’s play explores the social and political dimension of science, *Moving Earths* highlights the conflicting agendas of climate change discussion. Donald Trump, who provides the escapist planetary model in *Inside*, features once more as a defining absence in *Moving Earths*, when Latour describes his empty chair at the 2019 G7 summit in Biarritz as a Brechtian scene of cosmological denial. Choosing Galileo as a central figure allows Latour to emphasize the political nature of spectatorship, and of the viewing points we select. He presents Galileo and Lovelock as engineers whose machines – the telescope and the particle detector – had unexpected political consequences. In both cases the scientific gaze, initially directed towards outer space, turned back towards the Earth and radically transformed the perception of humanity’s position. Moreover, the lecture’s focus on the *Life of Galileo* anchors the comparison in a figure Brecht construed as the ideal political spectator. Galileo, in the *Short Organum for the Theatre*, is a model of the distanced viewer, the man capable of seeing the familiar as if it were new and strange (Brecht 1964, 192). *Moving Earths* thus follows Brecht in exploiting the theatrical potential of visual paradigms of knowledge: Latour refers repeatedly to the researchers’ “gaze”, and concludes the slideshow with images of the empty chair at the G7 summit, of Greta Thunberg staring at Donald Trump at the 2019 UN Climate

Action Summit, and of an empty, wooden stage. We are confronted not just with the theatre of climate politics, but with the political weight of the gaze and of its absence.

Although the lecturer no longer moves around the stage or into the image, the relation to visual representations is as central a question in *Moving Earths* as it was in *Inside*. Huge diagrams and footage of humans or microbes fill the stage, producing scale contrasts that leave the lecturer dwarfed by his own models and by the great scientists who came before him. The image becomes a site of conflict between different types of spectatorship, a medium in which epistemological and political upheaval is played out. In a “thought experiment” conducted by Latour, the audience are asked to imagine that they are gazing at a room and a view beyond the window, only to find that the “painting” and “landscape” dissolve, as this “spectacle” of stable Galilean objects begins to mingle and intertwine, until the world can no longer be viewed like a painting or a show. These thoughts, he adds, can only be thought thanks to the bacteria living in our guts. Galileo then, is not only a model, he also represents a visual regime that is no longer adequate. When Latour explains the necessary shift from Galilean relativity to Gaian relations, his diagrams are projected onto a picture of an empty backstage which slowly rearranges itself before our eyes. The set machinery acquires a life of its own, until the living stage becomes a visual metaphor for the epistemic instability described.

As Latour’s discourse moves from distance to entanglement, and from a lone genius narrative to a collaborative model of discovery, tensions arise once again between the story told and the lecturer’s position. The focus of the lecture shifts from Lovelock to Margulis, and the scenography endorses this move from the “view from above” to the “view from below” by placing the philosopher against a backdrop of swarming bacteria or beneath a huge image of Margulis. Yet his position remains fixed and central. A man seated alone at a desk on stage tells the audience a tale of scientific collaboration in which a woman plays a key role, and concludes that we can no longer view the Earth as we would view a show, since we are intertwined with our surroundings. The awakening of the landscape is represented by diagrams coming to life, or by footage of Margulis digging into a beach, showing us traces of a continuous bacterial mat linking Nova Scotia to North Carolina. But the performer who watches Margulis touching this “fabric of life” can only remain detached, physically embodying the difficulty of such a paradigm shift. For the audience watching him, Latour’s position on stage highlights the challenge of the visual revolution he advocates.

### **Theatre as metaphor and the stage as heuristic space**

Latour and Ait-Touati’s experiments foreground the epistemological potential of performance in a context of shifting planetary awareness. The act of theatergoing, as a collective experience, frames the topic of climate change as a socio-political question. The scale of an audience or a set can respond to what Timothy Clark calls the “scale effects” of the Anthropocene, the phenomena that “only emerge as one changes the spatial and temporal scale at which the issues are framed” (Clark 2015, 22). Moreover the stage can problematize viewing points through its three-dimensional dialogue with two-dimensional visual media, so as to question dominant images at a time when our environmental awareness risks tipping into what Latour calls the “pornography of catastrophe” (Le Tanneur 2019). The stage thus has the potential to function as a heuristic space, in which new visualizations are put to the test.

These research performances also draw attention to the role of theatre as a metaphor in contemporary epistemological discussions. For Ait-Touati, the challenge of the Anthropocene is a problem of scenography, the question not only of how to share the limelight with nonhuman actors, but how to engage with “a new *theatrum mundi* invaded by agents who no longer act *on* stage but are constantly making and transforming the stage.”<sup>5</sup> Her work draws

on metaphors that frequently appear in contemporary theory: much as 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy drew on spectator/actor metaphors to describe the unavoidable impact of the observer in quantum physics, 21<sup>st</sup>-century philosophers such as Bruno Latour, Dipesh Chakrabarty or Isabelle Stengers use the image of the *backdrop come to life* to emphasize the revolution brought about by Earth system sciences. Climate change is presented as a disruption of inherited narrative structures, in which “geological and evolutionary developments were like a backdrop on the stage on which our very human dramas unfolded” (Chakrabarty 2015, 179). For Chakrabarty the tension between planet-centered and human-centered views of history can therefore be described as a hesitation over who the main “protagonist” should be: while the temporal perspective of Earth system sciences leaves humanity upstaged by nonhuman forces, social-science debates still frame humans “as the subject of the drama of the Anthropocene” (Chakrabarty 2018, 25). Such theatrical metaphors underpin Latour and Aït-Touati’s stage work. They are enacted by the image of the empty backstage that comes to life in *Moving Earths*, and by the way in which the lecturer is, for a time, upstaged and decentered by representations of the Earth system in *Inside*.

The central position of the *theoros* is nevertheless preserved by *Moving Earths* and by the final section of *Inside*. Although their topic is a paradigm shift from visual mastery to entangled understanding, the lectures do not attempt to make the audience experience this physically, as artists such as Kris Verdonck have done in installations inspired by ecology.<sup>6</sup> Instead, they leave an unresolved tension between the lecturer’s distanced theoretical position and his assertion of entanglement. This tension enacts the epistemological challenge of the Anthropocene, the necessity of studying the planet as a whole while questioning the fallacy of distanced, totalizing views. For their audiences, *Inside* and *Moving Earths* create a highly paradoxical invitation which reflects the conflicting imperatives of Anthropocene awareness: on the one hand, the injunction to “face” the planetary (Connolly 2017), or in Latour’s terms to come face to face with Gaia; on the other, the need to acknowledge the impossibility of detachment, and the irresponsibility of passive spectatorship.

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<sup>1</sup> Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theater for instance runs a series of "Performance Lectures" in partnership with the Nobel Center.

<sup>2</sup> This description is based on the performance given at the Kaaitheater in Brussels on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2018.

<sup>3</sup> *Inside* was originally produced as part of *Welcome to Caveland!*, a festival directed in 2016 by Philippe Quesne, during which the Nanterre-Amandiers theatre welcomed a number of artists around the theme of the cave and the underground. Latour and Aït-Touati's references to Plato's myth of the cave answered Quesne's *La Nuit des Taupes*, an allegorical show in which human-sized moles performed on a set conceived as a cross between a fall-out shelter, a performance venue and Plato's cave.

<sup>4</sup> This description is based on the performance given at the Odéon theater in Paris on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2020. On this date Latour's lecture was performed by Duncan Evennou.

<sup>5</sup> My translation. These quotes are drawn from Aït-Touati's recent lectures, in which she explores the narrative and visual challenge of the Anthropocene as "*une question de scénographie*" (Aït-Touati 2019b), "*théâtre du monde brusquement réanimé, envahi d'agents acteurs qui ne sont plus sur la scène mais qui la font, et qui la transforment sans cesse*" (Aït-Touati 2019a)

<sup>6</sup> Kris Verdonck's 2011 installation *Exote, An indoor garden for IAS* (at the Z33 House for Contemporary Art in Hasselt) was a good example of an "entangling" performance, in which spectators wearing lab coats moved around a selection of Belgian plants and animals considered to be "invasive alien species" threatening biodiversity, economy and public health.