

II. Bruno Latour's 'New Empiricism'

Bruno Latour's attention to processes of mediation and representation has drawn my project to a more detailed appraisal of his scholarship. What Latour is involved in ultimately is developing a method of observation and re-describing matters of fact as matters of concern, which do justice to what is given in experience. The texts of my corpus operate in a similar fashion; they have devised their own method to experience and document the megacities they are concerned with, and they have found different strategies of describing the megacity and their experience in it. At an initial stage, it is this shared purpose that allows me to consider Latour's ANT and vocabulary for my project. In the course of this chapter, we will use Latour's scholarship to develop heuristic tools for our own analysis of the authors' documentary strategies. As we proceed, we may also venture a further inter-disciplinary exchange and problematize aspects of Latour's scholarship.

To understand Latour's research logic and vocabulary, the chapter traces a developmental trajectory of Latour's central idea of studying networks as a key to different levels or processes of constructivism. In the first part, we will go back to the beginnings of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and its attempts to revive the critical spirit of sociology.¹ The second part of the chapter covers Latour's own, most recent updates and corrections to his proposed method of ANT. Then, in a third part, we will see Latour's implementation of ANT as a method in his interactive web-project *Paris: Invisible City*. These steps will

1 | As with most of the vocabulary that Latour introduces to describe his new empiricism, the term "critical" also has a special meaning. Latour deems the critical spirit itself suspicious; intellectual explanations having deteriorated to the level of conspiracy theories, he equates criticism with modernity's iconoclastic impulse. For Latour, "critical" is a designation, which has to be earned by a researcher by immersing himself long enough in a deep study of something without distinguishing between the domains of nature and culture and thus excluding one from the discussion of the other. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"; This attitude runs more explicitly throughout his Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative"; See also Mallavarapu and Prasad, "Facts, Fetishes, and the Parliament of Things," 185–8.

progressively inform us about ANT's presuppositions and implications, and its goals and achievements. By critically engaging with them, we are made aware of the limitations of Latour's project as it stands. The larger goal of this chapter within our project is to accumulate a set of Latourian terms to enable a reading of our own corpus as illustrations of what may be conceived of as an ANT method.

At this point, we must acknowledge that our project bears certain risks in that it deals with the works of a living philosopher. Apart from being capricious in his manner and strategies of theory making, Latour is also a highly prolific writer with an extremely diversified body of work that is testimony to him still evolving as a thinker.² However, the open-endedness also emphasizes the fundamental openness of his ethno-socio-philosophical endeavor. Latour's early publications were historical and documentary accounts of the scientific processes of knowledge production.³ With *We Have Never Been Modern*, however, we see the beginnings of Latour's radical intervention in debates concerning the relations between science and politics as well as a reconfiguring of theoretical concepts that he says were sacrificed by modernity's rationalization. His subsequent publications represent a generalization of his approach by bringing in the anthropological perspective.⁴ As Latour scholar, Kyle McGee, puts it, these are progressive accomplishments of Latour's overarching project of interrogating Western civilizations in ways similar to those of ethnologists who address non-Western cultures – naively, realistically and pragmatically.⁵ It is thus most natural that many of his propositions remain essentially open questions. Latour is obviously aware of this and capitalizes on it by inviting scholarly additions or critique. See, for example, his open access digital platform designed to enrich his inquiry into possible ontologies of a nonmodern constitution through a dialogical exchange with other scholars.⁶

2 | See for example his own statement where he admits to obliging the "need to retool" without qualms. Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, 92.

3 | See for example Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*; Latour, *Pandora's Hope*; Latour, *Science in Action*.

4 | See especially Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

5 | We can trace a trajectory of the radicalization of Latour's ideas by beginning with Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*; Latour, *Science in Action*; Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*. It reaches a turning point with Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; This is followed by Latour, *Aramis, Or, The Love of Technology*; Latour, *Pandora's Hope*; Latour, *Politics of Nature*. So far Latour used ethnography as a "method" to develop philosophical ideas. In more recent works such as Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; or Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, Latour reverses his strategy and tries to highlight a philosophical strand in his ethnographical methods; See also McGee, *Bruno Latour*, especially xiii–xxi.

6 | "The AIME Research Group Website." (Blog-post)

Latour's own ideas being in the making, he urges scholars to "put their skills to work in devising for matters of concern a style that does justice to what is given in experience."⁷ Our task is thus set – in our engagement with Latour, we must make our additions to his project of reinventing the art of describing, or rather an "Art of Redescribing matters of fact."⁸ With an awareness of the reservations mentioned above and critique leveled against Latour, let us attempt to achieve some clarity by disambiguating the many diffuse ideas which form the theory and method of Latour's ANT, and then 'reconstruct' them with a difference – to advance our own project of analyzing literary documentary strategies.⁹ My reader will notice that I try to identify and pick up a golden thread (roter faden) in Latour's diverse publications in the interest of an overview (be it only in chronological terms). In order to remain within the bounds of my project, I have found it more fruitful to discuss and critically engage with only those aspects that I considered relevant for my project rather than attempt to fathom Latour's thought in its entirety or as a philosophically (un)grounded theory. Nevertheless, suggestions for further reading, for more information, or comments from different perspectives and disciplines have been provided throughout the text.

SHAKING THE MODERN FOUNDATION OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Latour is now a prominent figure in the critique of 'objective' scientific methodology and the power of the discourse that it produces. According to Latour, Science has long enough claimed to produce 'objective facts' while it has actually been leading us away from the 'real' nature of things. In discussions that were dubbed the 'Science Wars',¹⁰ Latour suggested a re-evaluation of the social studies of science (STS) and its critical spirit: "My argument is that a

7 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 50.

8 | Ibid., 46.

9 | Latour's own work resists the synthesizing thrust of my own attempt to grapple with his diverse body of writing. As much as Latour would condemn this synthesizing thrust, I believe he would endorse my own additions to his network as a sort of 'thought-experiment' with his ideas.

10 | See Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Introduction This is a debate focusing on the creation of scientific knowledge. On the one side, positivists argue that scientists discover truth using a series of natural and logical processes. On the other side, STS scholars such as Latour argue that scientific knowledge is socially constructed. Latour is part of a group of philosophers and thinkers of object-oriented ontology as initiated by Graham Harman, practicing within the tradition of speculative realism. This group includes, among many others, scholars such as: Isabelle Stengers, Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, Marshall McLuhan, Karen Barad, Deleuze and Guattari, and is in dialogue with systems theorists such as Richard

certain form of critical spirit sent us down the wrong path. [...] The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism”.¹¹ The “form of critical spirit” that Latour confronts here is an iconoclastic urge that he locates in the project of modernity.¹² Modernity’s ‘purification’ of nature and culture into separate ontological domains of non-humans (nature) and humans (culture) has, Latour says, been misleading us.¹³ Latour’s first step for a renewal of empiricism is foregrounding the work of ‘mediation’ and ‘delegation’. That is, we must study *how* representatives or scientists speak on behalf of nature or culture. In other words, the ‘new empiricism’ must consider the *ways* we construct or represent things. By thoroughly tracing the whole process of scientific research, from the preparation of animals for experimentation to the publication of a scientific article, Latour shows how ‘scientific facts’ are indeed an ‘ordering’ forced onto the world. Scientific facts are not something out there in the world, but were shown as carefully and painstakingly ‘constructed’ through the application of technology. It is here that Latour first introduces the notion of “inscription devices” (technology), which aid in “literary inscription”.¹⁴ In the laboratory, literary inscription translates a substance into a text. After different modalities are attributed to the substance and get added to the original statement about it, this statement gets passed on within a new text in a partially distorted form. Once these stabilized sets of relations are established, carried forward by ‘recipients’ and accepted unquestioningly, they become what Latour calls a “black box”.¹⁵ Conceptually borrowed from Cybernetics, black boxes are a piece of machinery or set of commands too complicated to describe in complete detail. Through this (ant-like) activity of closely following and describing scientific practices, Latour demonstrates how technologies and political, social, and material factors converge to make black boxes meaningful and useful to us.

To overcome modernity’s fallacies and the hegemony of scientific discourse, Latour proposes a non-modern framework and vocabulary that trace and describe the *networks* that constitute nature and society without drawing a demarcation between them. Latour’s notion of networks signifies on the one hand, assemblages, channels or associations that make circulation possible. On

Lewontin and Susan Oyama, Alfred North Whitehead, Donna Haraway, Niklas Luhmann, Roy Bhaskar, Katherine Hayles. .

11 | Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?,” 231.

12 | Ibid.

13 | Latour, “The Promises of Constructivism,” 10–11.

14 | Latour, *Science in Action*, 67. Latour’s ANT vocabulary appears in quotation marks only in the first instance. All further use of these terms or phrases, although unmarked, refers back to Latour.

15 | Ibid., 2, 128–132.

the other hand, networks are also the very flows of information, material, people and so on. Latour's notion of network includes humans and non-humans alike, and refers to them as simply "hybrids".¹⁶ The concept of "agency" conceptualizes how hybrids "attach, detach, and reattach anew".¹⁷ Since Latour's notion of agency may refer to human or non-human alike, it becomes freed of its meaning as subjective intentionality. Agency must, however, be effective (produce a trace) in order to count as agency. Thus, we have here on the one hand, an *abstract* notion of agency as simply the *capacity* of a hybrid for action. On the other hand, we have the empirical *manifestation* of that capacity, or its figuration as actant.¹⁸ That is, when agency is attributed to hybrids in networks, they become "actants".¹⁹ A "spokesperson" is the entity through which the "voices" or "inscriptions" of actants may find representation.²⁰ Inscriptions are defined as the various types of "transformations through which an entity becomes materialized into a sign, an archive, a document, a piece of paper, a trace."²¹ This is the core of Latour's critique of scientific practice; for it is through these inscriptions, that science is able to gain its hegemony.²² By its "deflating strategy", Science lends inscriptions validity in a manner such that a few elements can manipulate all the others on a

16 | Latour refers to these as "quasi-subjects" and quasi-objects" to indicate the move towards a unified vocabulary for both. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative"; See also Latour and Akrich, "A Summary of a Convenient Vocabulary for the Semiotics of Human and Nonhuman Assemblies."

17 | Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, 33, 35.

18 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 54; See also Alworth, "Latour and Literature", forthcoming.

19 | Latour's choice of the word "actant" avoids anthropocentric connotations of the notion of agency in the term actor. See Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 75; This is a good example of one of the many instances in which Latour turns to indicate Latour's turn to literary studies for his scholarship. Here Latour is drawing on A.J. Greimas' narratology: "[A]ny thing that modif[ies] a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor, or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant." Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 54, 71; for more on the actant in literary studies, see Herman, "Existentialist Roots of Narrative Actants"; See also Alworth, "Latour and Literature", forthcoming.

20 | Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 64–70.

21 | Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 306–7.

22 | Latour, "Visualization and Cognition: Drawing Things Together," 16 "It is not inscription by itself that should carry the burden of explaining the power of science; it is the inscription as the fine edge and the final stage of a whole process of mobilization, that modifies the scale of the rhetoric. [...] So, the phenomenon we are tackling is not inscription per se, but the cascade of ever simplified inscriptions that allow harder facts to be produced at greater costs." (Original italics)

vast scale: “The same deflating strategy we used to show how ‘things’ were turned into paper, can show how paper is turned into *less* paper.”²³

Latour then plays with the semantics of the word ‘describe’ by pairing it in his discussion with the verb ‘to inscribe’. The new empiricist must, he says, “de-scribe” given inscriptions to “re-describe” the world beyond the dominance of science and epistemology.²⁴ His former use of ‘de-scribe’ refers to undoing the activity of the scientists while the latter verb ‘re-describe’ refers to the activity that the spokesperson must now carry out, namely, to give a thorough and detailed account. The spokesperson must successfully bring to the fore *all* the actants inscriptions/voices – these now constitute “matters of concern”.²⁵ The validity of the new (re-)descriptions, presented by spokespersons, must depend on the spokesperson’s ability to present the concerns of the actants.²⁶ Latour emphasizes “associations” as the empirical locus of actor-networks – the linkage of individual or collective material artifacts and human actors.²⁷ Tracing the associations enables us to study the relations that affect (stabilize or destabilize, strengthen or weaken) these networks.

In my brief attempt to introduce Latour’s formulations on actor-networks we have begun to see that his studies function largely as a polemic that seeks to blur the divide or demarcation between the ‘scientific’ and ‘poetic’, and to ultimately completely abandon the notion of them being separate spheres. In other words, the modern ‘purification’ of the world into two separate spheres – pre-existing objective Nature and man-made Culture/Society – is explained as a product of intangibly vast networks, strategic ‘translation’ processes (via scientists), and the existence of laboratories and a vast array of technology. This breaking point with modernity is the foundation of Latour’s sociology that seeks to reassemble the social through a new “constitution of hybrids”.²⁸ For Latour, what distinguished modernity was the belief in the existence of pure categories such as the scientific, the cultural, the economic or the political (or the purification of various realms of thought). As a result, the moderns developed and established the tradition of categorizing the world, of distinguishing between knowledge and interests, facts and values or between the natural and the social. The paradox of this practice is

23 | Ibid., 21 (Original italics).

24 | Ibid. In this essay, Latour refines the notion of inscriptions to “immutable mobiles” to encompass products of scientific practices such as images, graphs or physical samples, that is, the physical manifestation of inscriptions that get circulated.

25 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*

26 | Latour admits that representing non-humans is difficult but does not principally differentiate between the processes of representing humans and non-humans.

27 | Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications,” 2; Blok and Jensen, *Bruno Latour*, 49; Latour, *Reassembling the Social* See also.

28 | Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

obvious, says Latour, when we look at something as common and everyday as a newspaper, we are surrounded by “hybrid articles that sketch out imbroglis of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction. All of nature and all of culture get churned up again every day. Yet no one seems to find this troubling.”²⁹ Latour attempts to shake the modern foundations of epistemology and denaturalize scientific discourse by consistently mixing discursive genres.³⁰ Latour gives his work a distinctly sociological bend in that he explains his own study of the sciences and technology as a “sociology of associations”, which approaches the world in a ‘relational’ and ‘hybrid’ way. It shifts the focus from a ‘society’ of humans to ‘collectives’ of humans *and* non-humans.³¹ It asks which actors are connected with each other or which other actor in a given association can replace a given actor.³² Latour is thus enacting Gabriel Tarde’s monist understanding of activity, embracing a unified perspective for the hybrids or quasi-objects, and opening up sociological discussions to include technology and the co-existence of humans with technology.³³

The Nature/Culture Divide and Latour’s Critique of Criticism

One of the founding premises of Latour’s thought is a critique of the “bifurcation of nature” that splits the world into two systems of reality.³⁴ One of these systems describes the world in terms of “primary qualities”, for which we allegedly have knowledge – this is the “realism of science” that is expressed by a scientific discourse:

“[T]he world is made of primary qualities for which there is no ordinary language but that of science – a language of pure thought that nobody in particular speaks and which utters law from nowhere; as to no ordinary language, it deals with secondary qualities which have no reality. On the one

29 | Ibid., 2.

30 | Bowker and Latour, “A Booming Discipline Short of Discipline.”

31 | It also demarcates it from the Durkheimian tradition of the “sociology of the social”. See Latour, “When Things Strike Back – a possible contribution from “science studies” to the “social sciences,”” *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1): 107-123. See also Blok and Jensen, Bruno Latour, *Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, 2011. Also, one must keep in mind that early on Latour mainly concerned himself with science studies and technology. Only later has ANT been applied to other domains. .

32 | Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 304; Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications,” 370.

33 | Vargas, Latour, and et al, “The Debate between Tarde and Durkheim”; Latour, *Politics of Nature*.

34 | Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social.”

hand there is nature which is real, but is a 'dull and meaningless affair, the hurrying of material endlessly'; on the other hand there is the lived world of colors, sounds, values, meaning, which is a phantasmagoria of our senses but with no other existence than in the circumvolution of our brain and the illusions of our mind."³⁵

The other system of reality describes the world in terms of "secondary qualities", which we perceive owing to our sensory faculties. According to the "old empiricism", only the language of poetry can express this.³⁶ Latour attacks such a segregated mode of explaining the world: "The harsh world of matters of fact is an amazingly narrow, specialized type of scenography using a highly coded type of narrative, gazing, lighting, distance, a very precise repertoire of attitude and attention."³⁷ Latour's feat of rhetoric here renders scientific narrative as being highly 'coded' so as to appear awe-inspiring and threateningly abstract.³⁸ This, for Latour, has been possible due to modernity's false division between the domains of nature culture.³⁹

A look at Latour's resistance to the role of criticism (in modernity's separation of the domains of nature and culture) helps to explain his relative neglect of a reflexive or critical stance with regard to his own work.⁴⁰ Latour associates 'criticism' with the modern critical paradigm that relies on an appeal to either the

35 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 10–11.

36 | Ibid.

37 | Ibid., 38 my emphasis.

38 | The notion of 'scenography' that Latour introduces here will be discussed in more detail in the next section on "Modifying Scenography" as this will form one of the central concepts for our own conceptual framework.

39 | Latour demonstrates his point further by assessing Shapin and Schaffer's reading of the debate between Hobbes and Boyle with regard to Boyle's experimental framework for the working of his air pump. Shapin and Schaffer show how access to the inanimate world of nature was made possible through Boyle's use of technology; the weight of air is not an absolute universal but requires a network to support it. In Latour's terminology, a problematic technology was transformed via material, literary, and social mediating processes into a "black box", or a standardized piece of equipment. Shapin and Schaffer thus turn the debate in favor of Hobbes, claiming that knowledge as well as the State are products of human actions. While Latour agrees with Shapin and Schaffer that the category of nature is not a given but a product of an elaborate set of mediations (social construction of scientific facts), he criticizes them for taking for granted the social categories that Hobbes used. Latour reminds us that these social categories themselves are also not absolutes, and Hobbes and Boyle were, by assuming them to be so, laying the foundation for a "modern constitution" that bifurcates the natural and social domains. See Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 27.

40 | See also Latour's own essay Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative."

immanence or transcendence of Nature or Society.⁴¹ Nature becomes excluded from the realm of politics because politics is consigned to the social domain, and therefore, such a critique that is based on social *or* natural 'explanations' is limited in its explanatory power as well as in terms of its politics. In his later works, Latour equates the modern critical urge with an iconoclastic attitude, which he says is also based on appeals to 'truth' and seeks to demystify false ideology.⁴² For Latour, such critical practice that uses a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (borrowed from Ricoeur) is reducible to conspiracy theories.⁴³ We will come back to Latour's rejection of the modern critical attitude as well as his rejection of 'explanations' (causality) in the next section, when we discuss the alternatives he suggests in place of them.

Latour visualizes the bifurcation between the social and natural domains using the metaphor of a river with two banks. One riverbank is the Social and the other is the Natural, separated by violent waters. What the old empiricism has been caught up in is an "arduous bridge-building" between these two banks. Latour suggests that "canoeing, kayaking or rafting" with the flow of the waters in a lateral direction, away from the bridge-building activity would create a better equipped, new perspective – that of forward movement or a 'going with the flow' towards what is given in "pure experience".⁴⁴

"What would happen to the so-called secondary qualities if they were viewed as being that which allows us to grasp the other entities with which we keep moving? Would they appear as "secondary", their meaning as devoid of any importance and reality as before? My intuition is that the two riverbanks would take on an entirely different meaning and that nature, having stopped bifurcating because of the way you have let it *pass*...will be now able to mingle with our speech and other behaviors in many more interesting connections."⁴⁵

What must result says Latour, is a *change of perspective*, a concept crucial to his new empiricism – the poet's metaphors of explaining the world and scientific knowledge can *co-respond* to one another. They can "involve one another in some of the new differences necessary for them to persist in their being."⁴⁶ Science need not claim to solely explain the world but can 'add itself' to the world, to the flow

41 | Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 37.

42 | Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 230.

43 | Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*.

44 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 14.

45 | Ibid. original italics based on the phrase Latour borrows from Whitehead – "passage of nature".

46 | Ibid., 22–3.

of experience, as simply one more way to describe or imagine the reality of the world.

Bringing about a Change of Perspective

The change of perspective that Latour intends to achieve through his symmetrical semiotics brings us to an important implication and development in Latour's thought. As a most natural next step in keeping with the Tardian tradition, Latour revisits the limitations of the macro/micro distinction and develops the principle of irreducibility: "the big is never more than a simplification of *one* element of the small".⁴⁷ In order to completely grasp and appreciate the radicalism of the empiricism Latour is trying to develop, one must go back in time to Tarde himself:

"It is always the same mistake that is put forward: to believe that in order to see the regular, orderly, logical pattern of social facts, you have to extract yourself from their details, basically irregular, and go upwards until you embrace vast landscapes panoramically; that the principal source of any social coordination resides in a few very general facts, from which it diverges by degree until it reaches the particulars, but in a weakened form; to believe in short that while man agitates himself, a law of evolution leads him. I believe exactly the opposite [...] instead of explaining the small by the large, the detail by the big, I explain the overall similarities by the accumulation of elementary actions, the large by the small, the big by the detail."⁴⁸

This is the source of Latour's critique of the dichotomy of 'ways of seeing'. It recalls Michel de Certeau's two different observers of the city and his linkage of their view points with the difference in their representations of urban space. One stands on top of the Empire State building, looking down. This is the spectator or the voyeur who has a 'totalizing' view of the city, while the "walker" is an 'ordinary practitioner' of the city who moves about at street level, 'amidst the bustle' so to speak.⁴⁹ De Certeau associates the first perspective with that of urban planners or cartographers (a bird's eye view) and rejects it at the same time as a simulacrum, not of the 'thing' or 'space' itself but an illusion of objectivity. The walker's city on the other hand is a "migrational, or metaphorical city [which] thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city."⁵⁰ It is this walker's narrative whose

47 | Latour, "Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social," 123, original italics.

48 | Gabriel Tarde as quoted in *ibid.*, 124–5.

49 | Certeau, "Walking in the City."

50 | *Ibid.*, 93.

authority Soja explicitly questions.⁵¹ Perhaps de Certeau sensed something amiss in this distinction he makes, for, he himself does not privilege either of these perspectives or their narratives, but has merely pointed out their characteristics – the former (of spectator/voyeur) has a simplifying thrust while the other has the ability to overthrow the former's apparent authority. This sense of 'something amiss' with the dichotomy of perspectives ties in neatly with Latour urging for a *change of perspective*.

There are two important aspects to hold on to here. Firstly, Latour is engaged in surpassing the division between a law and what is subject to the law.⁵² Secondly, and this is how Latour gets from Tarde to ANT, the notion of network also dissolves hierarchies of perspectives, and replaces the metaphor of 'scales' by the metaphor of 'connections'. A network does not impose an a priori hierarchy of top to bottom (or bottom to top), nor does it differentiate between macro and micro, which means that a network is never bigger than another but implies intensities of connection.⁵³ The network comes into existence through the associations of the actant, the actant being the smallest entity of a network. However, the network could not exist without the actant. This is finally how a change of perspective may be achieved. There is no opposition between structure and agency or an hierarchy of the global and local, and we get rid of what Latour calls "tyranny of distance or proximity".⁵⁴ I can be one meter away from someone in the next telephone booth, and be nevertheless more closely connected to my mother 6000 miles away."⁵⁵

MODIFYING THE 'SCENOGRAPHY', RENEWING EMPIRICISM

The Threshold of a 'New Empiricism'

Latour thus proposes a non-modern model of empiricism that foregrounds the work of mediation (that is, *how* associations are formed between actants), and suggests anthropology as a more suitable framework for 'noncritical' practice.

51 | See my own Introduction

52 | See Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'" for more on Latour's critique of modernity for the bifurcation of nature and for the notion of "action without agency".

53 | Latour differentiates between weak and strong or stable and instable connections but has not really explained these attributes.

54 | See Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications," Especially 67–9 However, as I will argue further on, this "change of perspective", or by implication, a flattening of the field of hybrids for the purpose of study can not be achieved quite so simply as Latour seems to imply.

55 | Ibid., 67–9.

In order to ‘trace’ the tightly woven fabric of their networks, we must follow the actant in that we track and map its multiple associations.⁵⁶

“Once she has been sent into the field, even the most rationalist ethnographer is perfectly capable of bringing together in a single monograph the myths, ethno sciences, genealogies, political forms, techniques, religions, epics and rites of the people she is studying. Send her off to study the Arapesh or the Achuar, the Koreans or the Chinese, and you will get a single narrative that weaves together the way people regard the heavens and their ancestors, the way they build houses and the way they grow yams or manioc or rice, the way they construct their government and their cosmology. In works produced by anthropologists abroad, you will not find a single trait that is not simultaneously real, social and narrated.”⁵⁷

In Latour’s descriptivist empiricism, the follower of the network (spokesperson) must consider questions of epistemology, discourse or sociology together, in order to yield matters of concern.⁵⁸ However, and this is exactly that aspect of Latour’s theory and method which my own project would like to single out and strongly criticize, Latour does not reflect upon the various factors related to this process of ‘observation’ itself: How can a network be identified, traced and observed? Where does a spokesperson position himself?⁵⁹ Is he inside the network, or outside of it? Can he be truly inside or outside the network? How may a spokesperson even decide which networks are relevant?

Mallavarapu and Prasad have voiced similar critique by analyzing Latour’s reading of an excerpt from Anantha Murthy’s novel *Bharathipura* in *Pandora’s Hope*.⁶⁰ They too alert scholars to Latour’s failure to engage with the limitations of his framework, especially with regard to the choices made by the analyst of the network or spokesperson:

56 | Krarup and Blok, “Unfolding the Social.”

57 | Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 7.

58 | Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”; Latour, *Aramis, Or, The Love of Technology*.

59 | In my readings, I have used the words ‘observer’ and ‘spokesperson’ interchangeably. Latour, however, uses the term spokesperson instead of observer: “First, to delineate a group, no matter if it has to be created from scratch or simply refreshed, you have to have spokespersons which ‘speak for’ the group existence [...] some people defining who they are, what they should be, what they have been. These are constantly at work, justifying the group’s existence, invoking rules and precedents and, as we shall see, measuring up one definition against all the others. Groups are not silent things, but rather the provisional product of a constant uproar made by the millions of contradictory voices about what is a group and who pertains to what.” Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 31.

60 | Mallavarapu and Prasad, “Facts, Fetishes, and the Parliament of Things.”

"Latour also fails to consider that even if we deploy an anthropological method, we cannot argue that networks makes themselves visible to anthropologists in obvious ways – there are always certain choices that are made in the representation of networks. [...] To be fair to Latour, we have to accept that there is a methodological limitation to analyzing different factors, or in Latourian terminology, in recovering inscriptions of all the actants implicated in any event. Nevertheless, it seems vitally important to be sensitive not just to the difficulty of gaining access to all the voices and inscriptions, but also to the concern that the very structure (as well as politics) of the network can depend on the choice of the voices and inscriptions that are highlighted."⁶¹

Specifically, the "methodological limitations" that Mallavarapu and Prasad perceive in Latour's ANT is its failure to address imperative contemporary topics such as colonialism, gender and race. Latour could counteract such critique by arguing that somebody else could extend the network further by highlighting the role of these issues they see neglected in his ANT.⁶² He rarely concerns himself with related questions of the real or anticipated difficulties that arise due to asymmetries of power and identity between spokespersons (scientists/analysts) or in inscriptions of actants and their networks. From this point of view, it would appear that ANT simply reproduces the complexity of the world without yielding an angle to cope with this complexity, multiplicity or inequalities.

However, we can extend Latour's theory and method at this point to enable a more reflexive or self-implicating means of tracing the network/associations by emphasizing specifically the combined notions of subjectivity, perspective and agenda of the spokesperson. Specifically, we can use the terms empirical anchorage and process mimesis that I had introduced earlier on to discuss this situatedness of the author (the subjectivity of a spokesperson in an ANT) and his means of self-implication (self-referentiality of the spokesperson in an ANT). In order to constrain his own methodology, Latour suggests that we conceive of the network as a net with empty spaces.⁶³ That which is not the net, or these empty spaces, he terms "plasma" – that which is "not yet measured, not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains, and not yet covered, surveyed, mobilized, or subjectified."⁶⁴ Thus, we already have in Latour's ANT a notion of unknowability and selectivity in ANT. The spokesperson's tracing of networks becomes *his* specific conceptualization of the world, which in turn becomes stabilized through its narrativization and textualization. Latour lays down the basis for this addition in his specifications for matters of concern, where he says,

61 | Ibid., 193.

62 | Ibid.

63 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 242.

64 | Ibid.

it must be clear for *whom* they matter. The issue of interests can be conveniently linked with the spokesperson's position and situatedness, and is a central point of analysis that I add to Latour's framework.

Latour foregrounds processes of mediation by problematizing the notion of objectivity or so called 'objective' representation. At the center of Latour's theorization of an alternative empiricism, we have a critique of the meta-language of Science that turns matters of fact into a black box or indisputable common sense. Latour's polemic attacks precisely this aspect of scientific epistemology. He says matters of fact are fabricated – fabricated not in the sense of being 'made up', but 'made' through a very artificial setup involving numerous technologies and subject to human interpretation. In order to demonstrate this in terms of representation Latour discusses Jeff Wall's photography depicting Adrian Walker, a scientist, contemplating the anatomical drawing of a mummified human arm in a laboratory.⁶⁵

Image 1: Adrian Walker drawing from a specimen in a laboratory



Source: Visser and Naef, *Jeff Wall Catalogue Raisonné 1978-2004*, 124

This 'scene' renders objectivity sterile and completely unnatural as it highlights the challenge faced by the drawer in attempting a one-to-one representation of

65 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 29; Visser and Naef, "Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné."

the limb in this particular artificial set up, exposing also the pretentiousness of photography's attempt to express, capture or re-present reality.⁶⁶ There is a doubling in the problem of 'exact' translation from the 'thing' itself into a representation of it. The art of drawing and 'objective' photography are shown to be insufficient and problematic means of capturing 'reality'. Latour extends this line of inquiry to scientific inscriptions by posing the question: How is it that we allow the hegemony of scientific claims of objectivity or truth (scientific representations of reality) to govern us?

"It is not simply that phenomena *depend* on certain material instrumentation; rather, the phenomena *are thoroughly constituted* by the material setting of the laboratory. The artificial reality, which participants describe in terms of an objective entity, has in fact been constructed by the use of the inscription devices."⁶⁷

However, this is not to be written off as merely the 'constructed-ness' of scientific facts, but to be understood as what constitutes the reality of science. The new empiricism must recognize and overcome the phenomena by which scientific facts become "common sense".⁶⁸ Once these 'scientific' matters of fact have established their authority and have clear boundaries or gain, in Latourian terms, "essence", they become absorbed by the 'collective' as *indisputable* common sense or black boxes.

"Once the candidacy of the new entities has been recognized, accepted, legitimized, admitted among older propositions, these entities become states of nature, self-evidences, black boxes, habits, paradigms. [...] They are part of the nature of things, of common-sense, of the common world. They are no longer discussed. They serve as indisputable premises to countless reasonings [sic] and arguments that are prolonged elsewhere."⁶⁹

The establishment of 'something' as common sense bestows it with power within the collective. Ironically, however, the capacity to publicly contest or debate this 'matter' becomes stunted (*indisputable* premises). Latour's scholarship thus attempts to build a new and durable basis for a new common sense.⁷⁰

66 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 29.

67 | Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 64, original italics.

68 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 96.

69 | Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 104, original emphasis.

70 | Latour is not alone in his aspirations to purge epistemological efforts of common sense. See Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit*; Or Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, wherein scientific creativity is actually a break in scientific thinking, which might contradict "common sense". If

This brings us full circle to Latour's ANT method: the composition of a new common sense requires a "displacement of point of view" by shifting the gaze onto humans and non-humans alike.⁷¹ To recall ANT's central tenet very briefly: when we want to understand a network, we must study the actants, and when we want to understand an actant, we must study its associations.⁷² Thus, on the one hand, we must study how the actants themselves create and order their world, and on the other hand, also the (network) connections which offer the potential for interaction. In other words, we must study the process by which an actant becomes visible to us. According to Latour's epistemology then, "Science is not what allows us to study the monads from the outside, as if we were finding the laws of their behavior, but *one* of the ways in which they (the hybrids) spread and make sense of their world-building activity."⁷³ The contribution of the *sciences* becomes more important; *Science* no longer enjoys the hegemony that privileges it over other accounts of the world. Science merely adds itself to the world – as one more way of studying 'world-building activities' or 'reality-making'. This is the threshold of Latour's *second empiricism*.

Latour's Second Empiricism – Populating the 'Scenography'

Latour encourages scientists and scholars to avoid the hitherto simplification of society's differences to a sort of 'primary reality', which is then used to explain other 'realities' or 'societies'. Instead, they should work with the basic premise and goal of the 'irreduction' of 'reality'.⁷⁴ The concept of network surpasses the 'reductions' or restricting dichotomies and hierarchies that the nature-culture bifurcation caused. Latour's new empiricism is interested in understanding how an interaction between actants/hybrids comes to occur in the first place, for which it distances itself from questions of motive and causality.⁷⁵ Latour rejects *explanations* as they reduce events to 'something else' (an explanation), and turns his attention instead to *descriptions*. Latour does not methodologically discuss his rejection of explanations or his subsequent preference for description, but

this were the case then "common sense" represents "inertia" and acts as an epistemological obstacle. 1–15.

71 | Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 137.

72 | Latour, "Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social," 127.

73 | Ibid.

74 | Ibid.

75 | "Causes and effects are only a retrospective way of interpreting events." Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 39; See also Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative."

we can locate his stance in his engagement with, and rejection of, the notion of causality and subsequent use of description as method:⁷⁶

"However, we worry that by sticking to description there may be something missing, since we have not 'added to it' something else that is often call an 'explanation'. And yet the opposition between description and explanation is another of these false dichotomies that should be put to rest. [...] Either the networks that make possible a state of affairs are fully deployed – and then adding an explanation will be superfluous – or we 'add an explanation' [...] If a description remains in need of an explanation, it means that it is a bad description."⁷⁷

Latour's failure here to theorize a method for descriptions appears to be an almost intentional gap on his part to avoid that same dogmatism for which he criticizes the Sciences. We must thus ask these questions in our own project – is it truly possible to deliver 'pure' descriptions and completely distance oneself from explanations? How do we ensure that our descriptions are good descriptions?⁷⁸ What Latour does instead is, that he plots out 'specifications' for an alternative "scenography" (second empiricism) that we can take to be the aesthetics of matters of concern.⁷⁹ These highlight the notion of 'entering the labyrinth' that Latour had introduced elsewhere, which visualizes the materialist turn of his empiricism for us, and simultaneously addresses and questions three types of representation – political, scientific and artistic.⁸⁰

To start with, he uses the contrast between matters of fact and matters of concern to describe the gap between the two empiricisms:

"A matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theatre. This is, for instance, what has happened to Dutch landscape painting in Svetlana Alpers' able hands, and

76 | Latour is not alone in his rejection of explanatory sociological models. Niklas Luhmann has linked the dichotomy between explanations and descriptions more lucidly with the notion of causality, showing causality to be not a given ontological 'fact', but a construct of the act of observation – that which is bestowed on the observed by the act of reconstruction of events by the observer. See Gertenbach 264-83.

77 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 137.

78 | Description per se, is itself a very dense and debatable topic in literary studies. See for example Hamon and Baudoin, "Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive"; See also Bal, *Narrative Theory*, especially 341–97.

79 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*

80 | Latour, "On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy," 30.

what has happened to anatomical drawing when restaged by a contemporary artist like Jeff Wall. Instead of simply being there, matters of fact begin to look very different, to render a different sound, they start to move in all directions, they overflow boundaries, they include a complete set of new actors, they reveal the fragile envelopes in which they are housed. Instead of “being there whether you like it or not” they still have to be there, yes (this is one the of the huge differences), *they have to be liked*, appreciated, tasted, experimented upon, mounted, prepared, put to the test.

It is the same world, and yet, everything looks different. Matters of fact were indisputable, obstinate, simply there; matters of concern are disputable, and their obstinacy seems to be of an entirely different sort: they move, they carry you away, and, yes, they too *matter*.⁸¹

A ‘new common sense’ involves modifying the scenography by describing ‘what is given in experience’. Latour instructs us “a matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add the whole scenography to it”.⁸² How this may be done is, however, left methodologically open. The ‘specifications’ for matters of concern allow our own interpretations, and thus make Latour’s presence attractive in a literary analysis. Latour’s apparent abandonment of theoretical foundation here affords him the freedom of what David Alworth has so aptly called Latour’s “discursive heterogeneity”.⁸³ This is marked not only by the intersection of the many disciplines in his scholarship, but also by the literary tropes he uses to explain his theoretical reflections.⁸⁴ For our analysis, we can fill in these gaps in his scholarship with the individual strategies that my authors use to ‘discover’ the city and narrativize their experience. Thus, the strategies used by the authors can provide specific methods for an ANT enterprise. That is, the authorial strategies that we will discuss in our close readings of our corpus can enable us to imagine ANT in ways that are more specific.

81 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 39.

82 | He goes on to add that this is much like much like Svetlana Alpers’ analysis of Dutch landscape painting. By a shift of focus or by varying her object(s) of analysis to various elements other than just the artwork such as context, art manuals, implied dialogue in addressing prevalent technique etc., Alpers has given a new interpretation of Dutch paintings contrary to that upheld by art reception till date; her reading renders them descriptive rather than narrative. Again, Latour restrains from a more thorough engagement with Alpers’ work to elaborate what this “new” approach means or entails. For Alper’s own work, see Alpers, *The Art of Describing*; For a heavy critique of Alpers, see de Jongh, “Review of The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century.”

83 | Alworth, “Latour and Literature,” 4, forthcoming.

84 | Ibid.

The first specification for matters of concern is that they have to *matter*. Moreover, for them to matter, they have to be able to identify and mark clearly for *who* they are of interest, that is, for *whom* they matter. Matters of fact sought to be pure and objective; they were expected to speak for themselves, which resulted in abstract and confusing data. On the contrary, the second empiricism must “distinguish those various and confused layers to make sure that our scenography registers that they [matters of concern] matter for some people who have to be specified, and for whom they are a source of an intense interest and a redirected attention.”⁸⁵ This first specification which Latour articulates for matters of concern already supports an analyst. It remains as testimony to his activity, our earlier addition to Latour's methodology – that of highlighting the spokesperson's agenda. Such an addition requires from the spokesperson a certain amount of self-implication that will serve as testimony to his own role of observation, narration and as scripter of the text. It indirectly demands reflexivity from the spokesperson pertaining to his identity and perspective (the ‘lens’ through which he observes). Earlier on we saw that in Latour's new empiricism, the validity of the claims (matters of concern) presented by the spokespersons must depend on their ability to present the concerns of the actants by bringing to the fore their inscriptions/voices. Much like in a legal case, our spokesperson must identify at least a selection of the associations these actants enter into and then provide a substantial form of representation that emphasizes the identity of actants (for *whom* he ‘speaks’). Such a form of representation of actants already begins to make way for the other specifications.

For Latour, matters of fact exercise absolute power that allows the facts to speak for themselves “whether you like it or not.”⁸⁶ As a result, the old empiricism ultimately appealed to ‘violence’ in order to enforce closure. Thus, the second specification for matters of concern is that they have to be *liked*. They cannot be indisputable. Latour is acknowledging the importance of diversity with this specification. This specification warns and safeguards against hegemonic matters of fact that could assert themselves through mere ‘strength’.⁸⁷ By comparison, matters of concern should be conducive to discussion until closure can be attained.

Specification three then logically requires that matters of concern have to be *populated*, that is, a matter of concern has to be recognized as a ‘Ding’ and not ‘Gegenstand’. The Ding, Latour explains, designates “both those *who* assemble because they are concerned, as well as *what* causes their concerns and divisions”⁸⁸ Put simply, ‘objects’ become ‘things’ when matters of fact give way to include their

85 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 47.

86 | Ibid.

87 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 118.

88 | Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik-An Introduction to Making Things Public,” 13.

different associations or complicated entanglements. Matters of concern include all the “different sets of passions, indignations, opinions, as well as a different set of interested parties and different ways of carrying out their *partial resolution*”.⁸⁹ That is, under the modernist’s gaze, ‘Objects’ appeared in a clear light. In the network, we only have partial resolution – a sort of delineation and loss of clarity, which is, however, exactly what the new empiricism must acknowledge.

Specification four requires of matters of concern that they be *durable*, but that this continued existence has to be acquired. The acquisition of durability is a process: “Then physical endurance is the *process of continuously inheriting* a certain identity of character transmitted through a *historical route of events*.”⁹⁰ Latour contrasts the durability of matters of concern with the ‘freeze-framing’ that is necessary for matters of fact.⁹¹ He asks us to ponder once more about the anatomical drawing of the human arm, and ask ourselves how it is that the world ‘jumps’ into representation. Freeze-framing does not take into account that the arm rots at some point or what happens after the rotting of that arm.⁹² Durability of matters of concern may thus be understood as the specification that ensures the tracing of temporal aspects/trajectories of the various associations (historical route of events).

CLEARING OBSTACLES, ‘TRANSLATING’ LATOUR FOR LITERARY STUDIES

In this section, we will take a quick look at Latour’s own experiment that demonstrates his ideas. Latour describes translation as the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies the two actors/elements. In this strain, I use the term ‘translate’ in the title of this section to refer to my own activity of pairing Latour’s ANT with literary studies. My description of Latour’s project *Paris: Invisible City* will recall all the main concepts and terms of Latour’s ANT so that, at the end of the chapter, we may consolidate the means of our own analysis. At the end of the project, we may then reflect on how we have ‘translated’ Latour for literary studies.

Latour’s ‘Sociological Opera’ Paris: Ville Invisible?

All of Latour’s dispersed ideas come together in Latour’s *Paris: Invisible City*.⁹³ In this electronically accessible multi-media essay, Latour tries to put into practice

89 | Ibid., 13, my emphasis.

90 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 49 my emphasis.

91 | Latour and Weibel, *ICONOCLASH*, 27.

92 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 34.

93 | Latour, “Paris: Invisible City (The Web Project).”

the various notions he explores in *Reassembling the Social*. He describes this photographic inquiry into the city of Paris as a “sociological opera” that aims to link social theory with a multi-medial experience of the workings of the city:

“The aim of this sociological opera is to wander through the city, in texts and images, exploring some of the reasons why it cannot be captured at a glance. Our photographic exploration takes us first to places usually hidden from passers-by, in which the countless techniques making Parisians’ lives possible are elaborated (water services, police force, ring road: various “oligopticons” from which the city is seen in its entirety). This helps us to grasp the importance of ordinary objects, starting with the street furniture constituting part of inhabitants’ daily environment and enabling them to move about in the city without losing their way. It also makes us attentive to practical problems posed by the coexistence of such large numbers of people on such a small surface area. All these unusual visits may eventually enable us to take a new look at a more theoretical question on the nature of the social link and on the very particular ways in which society remains elusive.”⁹⁴

The project is conceived of as a very specific and consciously selective virtual tour of Paris constructed through various images/impressions. The user can navigate through four different tabs called Traversing, Proportioning, Distributing, and Allowing which explore various departments that govern life in the city such as water supply, roads maintenance, the meteorological department, or a children’s school. All the time, the perspective of the person making the journey is emphasized. The accompanying narrativization instructs the user to be attentive to the difference and distance between the ‘things’ themselves and their ‘inscriptions’ such as a street as it appears on a map as opposed to the street’s physical ‘sign’ (the plaque bearing its name), or its materiality as experienced by physically being there. We zoom in or out of the city along with that perspective. Each of these tabs in turn consists of a specific ‘route’ through the city. Buttons along this route take us from one set of juxtapositions to another. These juxtapositions are accompanied by text, which narrativizes and describes the journey to which the images stand as witness. When the user arrives at a button, an attempt to view the images accompanying the button results in rapid, successive movement. It is not possible to view an image singularly, creating the impression of the simultaneity of the actual experience of journeying the city. In this manner, an impression is given of traversing the city, using different images such as photographs, graphs, maps or icons and manipulating perspective.

The project begins by describing the panorama from the top of the Samaritaine, a department store. The difference between the contemporary panoramic view

94 | Latour and Hermant, “Paris: Invisible City, Electronic Script,” 1.

and a ceramic panorama from the 1930s indicates the necessity of historical trajectories of changes in the city: “The legend no longer matches the pictures. Virtual Paris was detached from real Paris long ago.”⁹⁵ Here the emphasis lies on the impossibility of grasping the city in its entirety, irrespective of the perspective from which one wishes to do so. Latour is also trying to indicate the problems and limitations of a ‘macro-view’ by juxtaposing the insights provided by both, a detailed view by zooming in from the panorama into a small office, only to zoom out again to consider a satellite image of the same scene, and so on. The perspective on zooming out is compared to a macro-view while the zooming in provides a sort of micro-view. This applies not only to the perspective of the spokesperson but also to the perspective of the various ‘oligopticons’ (macro-view) that are required to consider the city in its entirety in order to plan its functioning, that is, to make possible the many million lives (micro-view). The point Latour wishes to make is that much like the evasive cities in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, any attempt to describe a city is destined to remain partial; neither macro nor micro views can do full justice to the real city.

The activities in the office of the school, of drawing up schedules that encompass all the activities of that school, are compared to the vision of the far-removed, satellite. Both types of literary inscription are limited in their own ways with regard to the type of information they deliver. The former does not consider any deviations from the structured sequence of the schedules it draws up for the school to function while the latter consists of pixels which need to be interpreted to become legible: “The frame has the same dimension, in a sense, as the object it frames. The big is no bigger than the small; the satellite photo of Paris is smaller than Mrs. Baysal’s schedule.”⁹⁶

More importantly, this comparison between bureaucratic inscriptions to geographic data represents a shift of medium, institution, graphic representation and scale, with which Latour thematizes the role of perspective in relation to the medium and methods of observation and documentation. The kind of knowledge produced depends on all these factors (and maybe more). It quickly becomes clear that Latour views the knowledge gained as mere ‘traces’ of the ‘real’ thing. The dilemma he portrays is that while we can collect or follow these traces, these very traces render the ‘real’ thing elusive for they reduce it to ‘something else’ – like the cup of coffee that one drinks at Café de Flore:

“[T]he coffee is reduced to nothingness several times, cascading down from form to form until it becomes a number, gradually eliminating everything not concerning it, discarding its “externalities” one by one, sketching the practical

95 | *Ibid.*, 2.

96 | *Ibid.*, 9.

form of economics as it flashes past – in its accounting version at least. [...] the cup of coffee has been transmuted into a bottom–line.”⁹⁷

Here, the immediate trace of the coffee consumed is the cheque for it, really only a scrap of paper. This is “transmuted” ultimately into a “bottom–line” of the account book of the coffee shop; the traces of that cup of coffee do not in the least resemble the coffee, nor does it resemble the physical currency in which the payment for it was made. Similarly, to stick with Latour’s metaphor, the city (Paris) exists as a tightly folded inventory of such traces. Followers of networks in the city and ‘collectors of traces’ must unfold the urban fabric, but keep in mind the transformation of information: “To measure the hiatus explaining *transformations of information*, we should also avoid two symmetrical mistakes. The first would be to forget the gain and to deduct only the loss; the second, that we’re about to consider, would be to forget the loss.”⁹⁸ This statement can be made to stand in for Latour’s reflexivity because it acknowledges that even ANT is, at best, merely *one* performance of the social being explained; a ‘transformation of information’ occurs, at the latest, in the narrativization or during the textualization of the observations and research data.

Nevertheless, this unified perspective, a collective of things and people, or a turn to objects will enable us, reminds Latour, to discover in our descriptions of networks a performance of the social and thus provide a key to *how* the social is constructed.

“It’s to objects that we must now turn if we want to understand what, day after day, keeps life in the big city together: objects despised under the label “urban setting”, yet whose exquisite urbanity holds the key to our life in common [...] with a multitude of agitated little beings whose combined action gives height, width and depth to the entangled networks described until now as flat as a board.”⁹⁹

The key to a second empiricism is here, according to Latour, not to use ‘the social’ as an explanation for wider phenomena as sociology has hitherto been doing, but rather, to explain the social itself.¹⁰⁰ Latour thus turns pragmatically to objects such as the roads, road signs, plinths, monuments, the emblematic Pont neuf, and then goes beyond these visible ‘objects’/signs/traces to the people and institutions, the various ‘oligopticons’, responsible for making the ‘big city’ function as it does. It is in this that Latour sees a sort of flattening of Paris that exposes all the

97 | Ibid., 19.

98 | Ibid., 26, my emphasis.

99 | Ibid., 63.

100 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 96–7.

spaces in between – the plasma, as he calls it, of unknown spaces that completely elude surveillance.¹⁰¹ In comparison to the seemingly “congested, saturated and asphyxiated” Paris, Latour’s city consists of breathable, *unknowable* spaces:

“The illusion of the zoom, in geography and sociology alike, has the drawback of making life in the city completely suffocating. There are no more loci, since everything is filled by the apparently smooth transition from the whole to the parts and from the parts to the whole, as if there were not a single gap, not a single breathing space. The filling up has been done. We are suffocating. For politics to be reborn, for Paris to be breathable again, the city has to remain invisible, in the sense of neither the parts nor the different wholes into which they fit, being determined in advance.”¹⁰²

The “illusion of the zoom” refers to the reductive transitions between macro and micro-perspectives with no allowance for “breathing space” as Latour calls it, or the elements that go un-observed – the gaps in the knowledge of these disciplines. The non-normative (non-modern) anthropologist’s task is thus to be unbiased in his approach to the city, to *open up space* even if it means to acknowledge that so much eludes our ‘vision’, that most of the city must ultimately remain unknown:

“[T]o highlight the role of the countless intermediaries who participate in the coexistence of millions of Parisians. In the series of *transformations* that we followed with myopic obsession, we would liked to have kept each step, each notch, each stage, so that the final result could never abolish, absorb or replace the series of humble *mediators* that alone give it its meaning and scope. Economics, sociology, water, electricity, telephony, voters, geography, the climate, sewers, rumors, metros, police surveillance, standards, sums and summaries: all these circulate in Paris, through the narrow corridors that can never be used as frames nor infrastructures nor contexts for others.”¹⁰³

Mediation here is thus the linkage between two actors in the network that modifies these two actors in a way so as to leave a trace of their transformations.¹⁰⁴ Under the influence of agency, actors become actants. Agency is thus first aligned with

101 | Ibid., 103. See also Plan 53 of same.

102 | Latour, “Paris, Invisible City: The Plasma.”

103 | Latour and Hermant, “Paris: Invisible City, Electronic Script,” 101, my emphasis.

104 | Latour, “On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy,” 30–41. Using the semiotic field of the term mediation, Latour differentiates the concept further using its four meanings in ANT: translation, composition, reversible blackboxing, and delegation. As and when it is relevant, we will come back to these during our close readings.

effectivity, which is an abstract 'capacity' for action.¹⁰⁵ Its figuration, on the other hand, is the empirical manifestation of agency/effectivity. In Latour's explanatory anecdote, the phrase 'culture forbids having kids out of wedlock' is such an abstraction, while the phrase 'my future mother-in-law wants me to marry her daughter' becomes the concrete manifestation. The former is anonymous and abstract, the latter gives "a form, a cloth, a flesh to an agency forbidding me or forcing me to do things".¹⁰⁶ The uncertainty or anonymity of agency is endowed with a shape and established firmly through its figuration, which, however, may be manifold:

"'Imperialism strives for unilateralism'; 'The United States wishes to withdraw from the UN'; 'Bush Junior wishes to withdraw from the UN'; 'many officers from the Army and two dozen neo-con leaders want to withdraw from the UN.' That the first is a structural trait, the second a corporate body, the third an individual, the fourth a loose aggregate of individuals makes a big difference of course to the account, but they all provide different figurations of the same actions."¹⁰⁷

This is the thread that we must pick to carry us over into our own analysis. The things that make us act or the ways in which the social is configured becomes visible in this notion of agency and figuration. ANT scholars must therefore attempt to identify and describe all the different figurations of the agencies it identifies/follows/observes in the network in order to describe the matters of concern so important to Latour's second empiricism.¹⁰⁸

Coming to Terms with Latour

"Think about it: the call of birds in the sky, the sough of leaves, the babble of waters, the hubbub of human habitations – so many thousands of sounds, big and small, rising without end; so many waves and tremors, comings and goings, yet only a small fraction of all this impinges on one's consciousness. This is chiefly because one's mind, like a fisherman, casts a net of integration and accepts only what it can gather at a single haul: everything else eludes it. When it sees, it does not properly hear; when it hears, it does not properly see; and when it thinks, it neither sees nor hears properly. It has the power to move all irrelevancies far away from the path of its set purpose."¹⁰⁹

105 | See also Alworth, "Latour and Literature," forthcoming.

106 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 53–4.

107 | *Ibid.*, 54.

108 | *Ibid.*, 53–5.

109 | Chaudhuri, *Clearing a Space*, 26.

Latour would himself probably refute Amit Chaudhari's formulations of the selectivity of the spokesperson on grounds that it assumes that 'great divide' between our minds and the outside world.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, Chaudhari's words sum up, more poetically than my own, the gist of my critique of Latour's alternate empiricism. Latour's methodological neglect of (i) the selectivity of the spokesperson's choices and (ii) the spokesperson's limitations when faced with the complexity of the scenography he/she is to describe, represent a serious neglect on his behalf of power asymmetries, political disaccords, opposing voices and similar conflicts. This is especially noteworthy since his project aims to increase the reach of democracy by including as many actants and voices as possible. It is not so much that Latour is unwilling to show sensitivity to questions of interests and politics.¹¹¹ Rather, he has simply not been consistent in applying this awareness. We can tentatively extend Latour's network by our own additions as I have been suggesting in this chapter. We can address questions of interests and politics in our own analysis by adding to it the *situatedness* of the non-modern analyst or anthropologist. To take it a step further, we must follow the non-modern analyst to see how his position and the description it produces is in dialogue or conflict with other interests and politics in a given moment in time. In the readings of my own corpus, it is precisely these aspects that will be emphasized and illustrated.

Latour raises various important issues in his rejection of scientific hegemony and its pretense of 'reducing' the world to smaller, simpler, 'something else' – a graph, image, picture or report. Through a critical engagement, certain limitations of his approach were indicated and tentative additions attempted to enable a more nuanced application of his theory. In order to put his ideas and our additions to task in our study, let us first apply Latour's own terminology to describe some of the basic methodological steps of his project *Paris: City Invisible*. Latour has repeatedly emphasized "a matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theatre."¹¹² In Latour's 'speak', modernity's narrow scenography of matters of fact created black boxes while Latour's nonmodern scenography of matters of

110 | Latour, "Visualization and Cognition: Drawing Things Together," 30.

111 | Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 311: "In its linguistic and material connotations, [translation] refers to all the displacements through other actors whose mediation is indispensable for any action to occur. [C]hains of translation refer to the work through which actors modify, displace, and translate their various and contradictory interests."

112 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 110.

concern opens up black boxes (reversible black boxing).¹¹³ The scenography that Latour focuses on in *Paris: City Invisible* is primarily the material/physical city of Paris, which then leads him to the “countless intermediaries who participate in the coexistence of millions of Parisians”.¹¹⁴ As Latour emphasizes, his new empiricism acknowledges its own limitation by comparing its activity to that of ‘casting a net’. While Latour’s ANT focuses on different physical sites in the city, it simultaneously points to the empty, in-between spaces not captured by the net (plasma), thus indicating the incompleteness of any attempt to describe the city. Nevertheless, the scenography of Latour’s new empiricism becomes gradually populated, by the various actor-networks/figurations that Latour observes and describes. By re-describing the city as an actor-network, Latour tries to demonstrate how we may overcome thinking in terms of the modern dichotomy of subject-object, as the network is at once the ‘associations’ between various actors as well as the empirical locus of their linkage. Humans and non-humans are both capable of ‘agency’ or the power to link with and change or affect another ‘actant’ (mediation/translation).¹¹⁵

Latour’s concepts of scenography and matters of concern provide, in particular, a good point of departure from this chapter, and with that a transition from Latour to our own analysis. They are a guideline and constraint on a study that threatens to dissipate in favor of too much attention to detail. In each of the ensuing chapters, the analysis of my corpus will thus be broken up into a first part that analyses different representational strategies the authors use to re-describe and thus populate their specific scenography. Their strategies may be taken to collectively form a tangible ANT-like method for future scholarship. In the second part, our discussion of strategies of literary documentary will open up means to thematize the situatedness of the author and analyze the discursive effects of these representational strategies. In the third part, we may then evaluate whether these narratives succeed as matters of concern. That is, we may then discuss whether or how each author’s documentary and representational method succeeds as an ANT-like method.

113 | Ibid., 38 “The harsh world of matters of fact is an amazingly narrow, specialized type of scenography using a highly coded type of narrative, gazing, lighting, distance, a very precise repertoire of attitude and attention [...]”.

114 | Latour and Hermant, “Paris: Invisible City, Electronic Script,” 101.

115 | Latour, “On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy,” 32.

