

THE PARADOX OF MODERNISM AFTER LATOUR

ALEXANDRU MATEI*

Abstract Relying primarily on Bruno Latour's works, such as "We Have Never Been Modern" (1991) and "An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns" (2012), alongside influential texts by Dipesh Chakrabarty, Peter Osborne, Quentin Meillassoux, and Justine Huppe, and contributions from New Modernist Studies scholars like Sascha Bru and Jean-Michel Rabaté, among others, this paper sets two aims. Firstly, it seeks to articulate a concept of modernism distinct from both Latourian perspectives and the approach of the New Modernist Studies, but aiming to foster a dialogue between the two. I will coin it "conceptual modernism" and I will explore the way in which through "We Have Never Been Modern," Bruno Latour transcends his role as a mere sociologist of science, making a significant impact on the humanities. In the second part of the essay, I endeavor to define the paradox of modernism, characterized by a discourse asserting the failure of theories alone to accurately represent truth about reality and the world. The emerging theoretical landscape, indebted to anthropology, shaped by Latour's prominence in the early 21st century, necessitates an interaction between theory and practice. Latour brings theory "down to Earth" as I will illustrate in the final section of this paper. I will explore how Latour, as a new kind of Modernist thinker, addresses this paradox by establishing and practicing a novel "deal" between words (ideas, theory) and things (fieldwork). This involves not only traditional academic pursuits such as writing books and giving lectures but also engaging in various forms of fieldwork, functioning as an anthropologist, artist, scene director, and even a poet.

Keywords Modernism, modernity, Bruno Latour, conceptual modernism, eco-modernism.

*We live in the ruins of modernism, and we seem to be content with them.*¹

* Transilvania University, Braşov. alexandru.matei@unitbv.ro.

ORCID: 0000-0003-4218-3725.

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¹ Bruno Latour, *What is the style of matters of concern? Two lectures in empirical philosophy* (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2008), 49.

The objective of this paper is to explore a topic that has not been thoroughly addressed before, namely Bruno Latour's concept of "the Moderns". This exploration begins with a constellation encompassing modernity, and modernization, on one hand, and what is referred to in literary and art history and theory as "modernism" or aesthetic (literary, artistic and cultural) modernism, on the other hand. This latter concept arises from a comparable constellation involving once again modernity, modern, and modernization. Although these terms share some connections, Latourian epistemological modernism and aesthetic modernism, as explored in New Modernist Studies, are not directly linked. It is true that these two forms of modernism originate from distinct perspectives, yet they are inevitably poised to converge within the framework of contemporary (post-)theory, one in which ecology has become a central discourse and in which the arts never cease to re-commit to a world that is no longer constitutively a social world, but a living world. A world about which Latour wonders whether or not it is still or has ever been modern, in the sense that "modern" appears here as a castrating super-ego that struggles to maintain the purity of the two hemispheres of meaning that prevent the world from perpetually appearing absurd: one of "nature", eternal, and another of society and history, of people, perishable.

My objectives are twofold. First, I endeavor to articulate Bruno Latour's theoretical approach in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991, first edition, French²) in the context of adopting a conceptual definition of modernism from Peter Osborne. This perspective identifies Latour's theoretical gesture as a form of modernism that reinstates both a present and a past. Notably, it diverges from historical modernism by characterizing the present through a distinctive lens –a present shaped by the revisiting and reappropriation of the modern past. This gesture, akin to others that align with it, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of "the Climate of History" or Quentin Meillassoux's philosophical redefinition of "scientifically attested" reality, embodies a modernist essence, primarily in an ontological sense. This is because it redefines the modern distinctions between matter and spirit, humans and non-humans, and the limits of knowledge. It involves a renewed engagement with modernity, acknowledging its inherent contradictions with the intent of resolving them. Instead, we have been witnessing a modernity marked by a critical discourse that is iconoclastic, forthright, and urgent.

My second objective relates to what I call the paradox of contemporary modernism: Latourianism is not a mere theory; it starts as practice and it only subsequently becomes a discourse. If it is to be Latourian, contemporary theory must abandon the pre-eminence of idea over thing/object, and of substance over relation. Contemporary literature can no longer be approached as an entity that is separate from the other arts, nor can scientific practice be viewed as a manifestation of the objective, mirroring the imponderable aesthetic, subjective truths.

I will begin by enumerating several definitions of modernism, aiming to establish a clear distinction between epistemological modernism and aesthetic modernism. The first is the concept used by Bruno Latour in most of his works (particularly in his early writings), and which

² Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Ms. Harvard University Press, 1993). Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes. Essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

must be understood in relation to the term 'modernisation': modernists are, for Latour, the followers of 'modernisation'.³ The second is the aesthetic concept, used since the late 1950s.⁴ This concept has undergone reconfiguration in the early 1990s with the emergence of the field known as "New Modernist Studies". These two uses are still distinct. Latour approached theory from an epistemological and even theological perspective, while modernist studies employed a widely accepted term within literary studies to describe a particular aesthetic in the first half of the last century. Today, however, the situation is about to change, given that contemporary literary studies are rather inconceivable without some reference to the idea of transcending the boundary between nature and culture, or that between humans and non-humans.⁵

Nonetheless, with the growing influence of Latourian thought, the epistemological dimension of what Latour calls "modernism" refers to Cartesian, dichotomous and hierarchical thinking, best hypostatized in an ontological dualism that manifest itself in the post-cartesian, hence modern way of understanding the world.⁶ One might retort that the distinction between this latter modernism and the aesthetic modernism, more intuitive to a literary scholar, could be explained culturally, by the distinction between a French and an Anglo-Saxon intellectual culture. However, there are Anglo-Saxon Latourians, some of whom are, in fact, *literary* studies scholars, as Jane Gilbert, for example, who, writing of the AIME project,⁷ states that "a residual Modernist suspicion of the potential of 'fiction', 'art' and 'the aesthetic' to derail referential knowledge."⁸ In other words, she contends that Latour himself, despite the statements in *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*,⁹ seems to regard the aesthetic regime of the existence of objects with scepticism. Even if we were to think that there is genuinely no such term in French-language literary criticism as modernism, we would be mistaken. *Une saison dans le roman. Explorations modernistes: d'Apollinaire à Supervielle* is the recent work of a Swiss

³ In the last work published during his lifetime, together with Nikolaj Schultz, Bruno Latour no longer uses the term *modernism* at all - he exclusively uses modernization instead. See Nikolaj Schultz, Bruno Latour, *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique. Subject: Comment faire émerger une classe écologique consciente et fière d'elle-même* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2022), passim.

⁴ Douglas Mao, "Introduction. The New Modernist Studies," in Douglas Mao, *The New Modernist Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 1-2.

⁵ Jeffrey R. Di Leo (ed.), Christian Moraru (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of World Theory* (New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021). As for the new ecological anthropology, the classic title to cite here is Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

⁶ Bruno Latour, *Inquiry...*, 110 et sqq.

⁷ AIME is the acronym for *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, the title of Latour's most ambitious work, to which we refer below. Yves Citton also writes about the acronym in this issue.

⁸ Jane Gilbert, "Form and/as Mode of Existence," *Romanic review*, Vol. 111, Issue 11: "Bruno Latour and Medieval Modes of Existence" (May 2020): 28. On the AIME project, see Yves Citton's article in this issue.

⁹ Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Francophone.¹⁰ This cross-reference underscores the reality that epistemological and aesthetic modernism are no longer exclusive domains in contemporary culture. Literary specialists and "philosophers" – a term I employ to encompass all researchers in the humanities and social sciences – must now consider both significant facets of modernism.

I. Historical Modernisms and conceptual modernism

Even when delving into the cultural-aesthetic realm of modernism within the context of Modern Times, offering a clear-cut definition and framework proves to be challenging. Although the term modernism emerged in 1737¹¹, it was left virtually unused until after 1910, after which it had an increasing incidence until the mid-1980s (from 0.2/million words in 1920 to over 8700/million in 1986).¹² Should we opt to consult a reference work, such as the one simply entitled *Modernism*, specifically the chapter dedicated to the "French Literary Modernism," we discover that "in 1873, Littré uses the term moderniste to refer to persons who value modern times over antiquity. The term modernism(e) does not appear in Littré."¹³ Kimberley Healey, the author of this entry, also draws our attention to the fact that, in France, modernism involves "a great deal of attention paid to the past."¹⁴ The term is also linked to the "modernist crisis" of 1907,¹⁵ with the release of Pope Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi Dominici gregis*, the same one that appears in Guillaume Apollinaire's poem-manifesto, *Zone*.¹⁶ This remark takes us directly to Fredric Jameson's contrasting definition from *A Singular Modernity*, where he makes distinctions among modernity, modernization and modernism:

¹⁰ Emilien Sermier, *Explorations moderniste : d'Apollinaire à Supervielle* (Paris: José Corti, 2022). This book is the result of a doctoral thesis supervised by Antonio Rodriguez, a graduate of the same faculty of letters in Lausanne, but whose Spanish name may suggest that he may have been influenced by the poetic "modernism" initiated in Nicaragua by Rubén Darío. See, for example, Gerard Aching, *The Politics of Spanish American Modernismo: Discourses of Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). In general, the Spanish term "modernismo" has been retained for this movement.

¹¹ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, entry: "modernism" <https://www.etymonline.com/word/modernism>

¹² *Online Etymology Dictionary*, entry: "modernization,"

<https://www.etymonline.com/word/modernization> (accessed on 16 November 2023).

¹³ Kimberley Healey, "French Literary Modernism," in Ástráður Eysteinnsson, Vivian Liska (eds.), *Modernism* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, , 2007), 801-816. It is the work of over 65 Modernist Studies scholars and received an award in 2008 from the Memory Studies Association.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 803.

¹⁵ For details, see Maurilio Guasco, *Le modernisme: Les faits, les idées, les hommes* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 2007). The author is a Catholic theologian, but also studied religious sociology in Paris.

¹⁶ The verse can be translated into English as follows: "The Most Modern of Europeans Is You, Pope Pius X." On the concept of 'zone', in its ecological sense and in relation to modernity, from a philosophical point of view, see the interview with Patrice Maniglier in the present issue of *Philobiblon*.

"Why not simply posit modernity as the new historical situation, modernization as the process whereby we get there, and modernism as a reaction to that situation and that process alike, a reaction that can be aesthetic and philosophico-ideological, just as it can be negative as well as positive?"¹⁷

Breaking modernity down into *modernity*, *modernization* and *modernism* can help us find a first common ground between the epistemological, Latourian modernism and the aesthetic modernism of *Modernist studies*: modernity. Both Latour and literary scholars derive their objects from a historical context of modernity. Even if the spans of their modernities are different, they largely overlap. However approximate the chronology of Western cultural dynamics, modernity starts with the imposition of secular values at the expense of religious ones.¹⁸ While this expansive definition may harken back to the period following the medieval Gregorian reform,¹⁹ it carries the benefit of clearly delineating an unquestionable transition from a time before to a time after. We can therefore speak of the historicity of modernity and, as a result, of modernism, whichever way we look at it: epistemological or cultural-aesthetic. The new modernist literary studies, whose rise has probably been facilitated by the exhaustion of a postmodern sensibility,²⁰ seem to have so far postponed dialogue with Bruno Latour, and vice versa. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour speaks of a first and foremost epistemological "modern constitution", which, from his viewpoint, emerged in the 17th century.²¹ Perhaps this is why I tend to reference another text, on what receives the name of "philosophical modernism." This is Peter Osborne's text on "philosophical modernism",²² an alternate term for artistic modernity, one that begins in the mid-nineteenth century, often associated with figures like Baudelaire, according to Antoine Compagnon, or to Flaubert, as seen by Jacques Rancière.²³ While it aligns more closely with aesthetic modernism than

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2012 [2002]), 99. See also Erik Bordeleau's text in the present issue of *Philobiblon*.

¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985).

¹⁹ Bruno Péquignot, *L'émergence de la modernité* (Paris: Le Bord de l'eau, 2023).

²⁰ See the interview with Camille de Toledo in the present issue of *Philobiblon*.

²¹ Underlying it is an analysis of the dispute between Henri Boyle and Thomas Hobbes, which Latour read in Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), and which he reviewed (indeed, the entire essay *We Have Never Been Modern* is based on two reviews, one of this work and another on Michel Serres. See Jérôme Lamy, "Sociology of a disciplinary bifurcation: Bruno Latour and his move from philosophy/theology to sociology in the early 1970s," *Social Science Information*, Vol. 60(1) (2021): 126.

²² Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

²³ Antoine Compagnon, *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990) and Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech. Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011 [1998]).

epistemological modernism, it maintains a distinct stance, yet successfully articulating a significant concept about the underlying temporality of modernism. Clarifying this temporal framework will enable us to categorize Bruno Latour, in his *We Have Never Been Modern*, as a modern(ist) writer, an idea we shall explore in the following.

In his essay, Peter Osborne succeeds in capturing the modern temporality, one that we are still experiencing today, despite the postmodernist parenthesis of a "closure of the future (...) under the authority of the present."²⁴ Modernism, according to the British philosopher, is a negative temporal structure, which always cuts into the flesh of the present, in order to place one part in the hands of the past and another in the hands of the future. Thus, "temporal negation is an antiquation, a making old (hence 'past' and no longer 'living') of the not-new within the present, through an act of disjunction or dissociation."²⁵ In other words, modernism designs a kind of "experience of modernity", a system of experiencing time in the moment, wherein, once lived, it transforms into the past. This idea is clear enough to state that, by showing how three intellectuals representing, for Latour, "modernism", E.O. Wilson, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Derrida, "have developed three distinct approaches to talking about our world: naturalization, socialization and deconstruction."²⁶ Bruno Latour turns them back on each other and make each of them represent the last cry of an epistemological modernity defined by its reductionism and partiality. These three, along with others, misuse what is presently referred to as "critique," a discourse that, according to Latour, simplifies the complexity of reality by reducing it to a common denominator such as nature, society, or "text." By denouncing the partiality of the descriptions of reality that each of the three produces, Latour breaks away from the logic in which the modern is opposed to the post-modern downstream and the pre-modern upstream, thus he himself producing a new division: that between 'modernisation' and 'ecologization'. In the Introduction to *A/IME*, he writes: "In everything that follows, the terms «modernization» or «Moderns» are opposed to «ecology». Between modernizing and ecologizing, we have to choose."²⁷ This critique of "critique" would later evolve into a recognizable discourse known today as "post-critique"²⁸. It is worth noting that before criticizing him for reductionism, Latour borrowed Derrida's concept of "inscription".²⁹ As a good modernist, Latour takes from the theoretical works he dismisses what he needs for his puposes. Perhaps, however, Latour's attempted schism between a so-

²⁴ François Hartog, *A la rencontre de Chronos* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2022), 60 (our translation).

²⁵ Osborne, "Modernism and philosophy," 388-409.

²⁶ Latour, *We Have Never Been*, 6-7.

²⁷ Latour, *Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, 8.

²⁸ Rita Felski has been a key actor of imposing this term today, beginning with her book *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

²⁹ Michel Callon, "Travailler au quotidien avec Bruno Latour (1/2)," *AOC magazine* (13 February 2023): <https://aoc.media/opinion/2023/02/12/travailler-au-quotidien-avec-bruno-latour-1-2/> (accessed on 5 December 2023).

called *critical modernity* and a *charitable modernity*³⁰ can be judged not only by the manner of the gesture undertaken (rupture), but also by its calibre. For Latour's project does not seek to transcend modernity; instead, it aims to incorporate into its secular temporality the liturgical temporality that had previously been banished. Therefore, we are content to bracket the scope of this gesture in which Latour sees theology as a contemporary mode of existence³¹, only to underscore the rupture it creates.

In his essay on "philosophical modernism", Osborne subsequently identifies two meanings of it. One – which is, by and large, the one to which *Modernist studies* implicitly appeal – is "«modernist» in the more historically specific sense of having been the modernism of its day," a "term of an empirical historical criticism."³² The other is modernism as a "meta-critical term," according to the philosopher, an "operation," because we are dealing with a "transcendental structure of temporalization, an operation or a generative logic."³³ In other words, in this last meaning, modernism is nothing more than a new algorithm for distributing reality over time.

II. *We Have Never Been Modern*, or the Latourian modernist gesture

If we opt to explore modernism in this second sense, specifically as a "generative logic," and if we posit that, in this sense rather than the first, we can refer to modernism in a theoretical, "philosophical" context, then today, we can observe Latour's endeavor to distance itself from modernity. This involves rejecting the traditional triad of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern as a premature and even abortive modernocentric division.

We Have Never Been Modern is the most polemical of Latour's works, theoretically speaking. In this essay, the noun "ecology" does not appear even once, and the adjective "ecological" only four times. Latour's project of reforming modern ontology by means of the "modes of existence" method will not be definitively legitimised until a little later. *We Have Never Been Modern* anticipates the very idea that has fundamentally changed theory for twenty years now. It is neither the post-modern blandness criticised by theorists such as Fredric Jameson or Jean Baudrillard (for whom the critique and the judiciousness of its practice are one and the same thing); while militant, nor it is the return to an anthropocentric militancy called for by the re-entry of history into the arena - with September 2001, although we have here only the event that gave the signal for the return of the eventual. But neither is the

³⁰ The adjective and the related adverb have 15 instances in AIME. They are meant to consider things in a more democratic and generous manner.

³¹ Rereading, however, this wonderful phrase of Lamy's from his article on the beginnings of the Latourian work: "Theology prevails over philosophy by setting at the foundation of all reasoning an irreducible hapax outside historical time, extracted from common chronology." (Lamy, 115)

³² Ibid., 393.

³³ Ibid.

emergence of a mere geo-cultural consciousness of theory, through a book like Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*.³⁴

What has fundamentally happened in theory in recent decades was summarized in the 2000s by Dipesh Chakrabarty, in a landmark article published in 2009 in *Critical Inquiry*, "The Climate of History: Four Theses."³⁵ The title contains three essential references: first, "climate", a term that refers to a "natural" reality; second, "history", which here becomes a determinant of "climate", in an unlikely combination, since history is traditionally a matter of culture, and climate of nature. The fact that History and Nature are no longer opposed is only now obvious, and only now does the Latourian critique of modernity, or epistemological modernism, make sense for everyone. As for the second part of the title, "four theses" refers to Walter Benjamin's essay *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, translated into English as *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940). The last reference is not at all coincidental, insofar as the object of Chakrabarty's article is to argue the unexpected *convergence of geological and historical time*. Compared to the latter, the former represents a transcendence. Precisely for this reason, the analogy between the latter – the temporality of his supposedly immobile 'climate' – and the eschatological transcendence to which Benjamin returns in this collection of fragments is undoubtedly deliberate. "According to Scholem, the «Theses» mark Benjamin's decisive break with historical materialism and a return to the metaphysical-theological concerns of his early thought," writes Ronald Beiner³⁶ about this late work by the German essayist. Latour's Catholicism is now widely acknowledged.³⁷ It is only now that Latour's idea of "resuming modernity", which he develops especially in AIME, in the footsteps of his former analysis of *Clio* by Charles Péguy,³⁸ can be seen as a kind of *mea culpa* made to the declaration of war in *We Have Never Been Modern*. What urges us to revisit modernity is not tied to any specific ideology, discourse, or historical event. Instead, it stems from the realization that the climate has permeated history. In other words, the equilibrium between the ephemeral and the eternal is no longer exclusively religious or purely secular (metaphysical), but rather rooted in the earthly and material.

Although the formula of a "climate of history" belongs to Dipesh Chakrabarty, what he summarizes had already been convincingly stated by Bruno Latour himself in *Politics of*

³⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁵ Published in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 2009): 197-222. An initial version appeared in Bengali in a Calcutta magazine,

³⁶ Ronald Beiner, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Aug., 1984): 423.

³⁷ See Antoine Hennion, "Un drôle de paroissien – sur Bruno Latour et la religion", *AOC magazine* (22 November 2022): <https://aoc.media/opinion/2022/11/20/un-drole-de-paroissien-sur-bruno-latour-et-la-religion/> (accessed 12 December 2023).

³⁸ The English translation of the 1973 French version appears in 2015: Bruno Latour and Tim Howles, "Charles Péguy: Time, Space, and 'le Monde Moderne,'" *New Literary History*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Winter 2015): 41-62.

Nature.³⁹ It suffices, here, to take up the first of the four theses: "Thesis 1: Anthropogenic Explanations of Climate Change Spell the Collapse of the Age-old Humanist Distinction between Natural History and Human History"⁴⁰ Here we have the idea of the intervention of historical time ("age-old humanist distinction") on the time of nature ("climate change"), which is also even if the notion of anthropocene had not yet appeared.⁴¹ This conflation between the two temporalities is crucial, because it can now claim a type of reality different from both the phenomenological one, eidetic (*eidos* vs *idea*) and a totally different one, suggested by the concept of "Realpolitik" defined in 1853 by Ludwig von Rochau.⁴² This third type of reality refers to a definition surpassing the opposition in terms of human/non-human.

If, therefore, one cannot "put one's finger" on modernization or modernism, given that the chronologies and the theories that discuss them differ, and if Walter Benjamin's miraculously saved from destruction work, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, appeared as a sort of final countdown before the Holocaust, this time "the Climate Change" proposes a new modernity, one that manages much more convincingly to refer to a *scientifically attested reality*. In the face of this latter modernity, Bruno Latour comes up with the excellent formula *We Have Never Been Modern*: not having realised that modernisation cannot separate culture from nature, we have not been truly modern even if we had wanted to be. Thus, modern today, is neither the one who believes that we can know only appearances and not essences, nor the one who is a "realist" and does not dream of impossible things. Modern is not the one who divides the world into halves (nature/spirit; past/present, etc.), but rather the one who realizes that reality is neither what we all know it to be (the doxa), nor what we all know it to no longer be (the anti-doxa). In other words, neither matter, history, social sphere nor God, nature, spiritual community, but means to concatenate them knowingly.

Within the new era of "ecologization", the phrase "scientifically attested" becomes at the same time a different form of truth than the modern one, which neither opposes to a pre- or non-modern truth. How could this be explained? Simple: to be scientifically attested is not the same as being able to have, as humans, an experience that confirms, in each specific individual case, what each of us knows to be "attested". We cannot feel 'global warming' on our own skin, every single one of us, at any given moment, quite the contrary: the environment seems sufficiently 'anhistorical' to push us sometimes to deny the reality of global warming. Therefore, the type of reality that is "scientifically attested," although distinct from magical super-realities or altered mental states, is not something that one can always confirm

³⁹ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2004) (the original French version dates from 1999).

⁴⁰ Chakrabarty, 201.

⁴¹ Crutzen, P.J. and Stoermer, E.F. will coin it a year later, in 2000, in a newsletter of the *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme*, no. 41 (2000): 17. (<http://www.igbp.net/publications/globalchangemagazine/globalchangemagazine/globalchangenewslettersno4159.5.5831d9ad13275d51c098000309.html>).

⁴² See John Bew, "Real Realpolitik: A History," Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress (2014): <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021689374/> (accessed in November 2023).

through mere sensory perception. This change in the status of objectivity is explained by Quentin Meillassoux, the frontrunner of speculative realism, an already well-known name given to the third sort of reality listed above. The Kantian transcendental revolution consisted, he says,

“in redefining objectivity outside of the dogmatic context. In the Kantian framework, a statement's conformity to the object can no longer be defined in terms of a representation's 'adequation' or 'resemblance' to an object supposedly subsisting 'in itself', since this 'in itself' is inaccessible (...) From this point on, intersubjectivity, the consensus of a community, supplants the adequation between the representations of a solitary subject and the thing itself as the veritable criterion of objectivity, and of scientific objectivity more particularly.”⁴³

With the advent of the “anthropology of sciences” whose span has been growing as to include modernity at large, we have to come back to that moment of redefining objectivity and realize that science practices and speculation can be thought together. The reality of global warming, discussed for several decades, is scientific. However, its connection to individual human perception compels us to revisit the Kantian moment, reminiscent of a “product recall,” to recognize and acknowledge its limitations. The “objectivity” of global warming is not consensual and cannot be proven at every moment and for every individual.

Hence, the Latourian phrase “we have never been modern” is one that precisely undermines the legitimizing of modernity as an era that looks into a desired future without turning back to the past. For Latour, “truly modern” is someone who looks at the world/time dihotomically, “willingly subscribe to the critical project”, while those who pay attention at the same time to the processes of “purification”, as well as those of “hybridization” between the so-called distinct categories of modernity (e.g., Culture and Nature) “stop being wholly modern.”⁴⁴

Let us recall what Kimberley Healey wrote about “French modernism”: there is a “great deal of attention paid to the past.” This is what Latour does when he looks back at the beginnings of modernity and notes that, although we wanted to be “truly/wholly Modern”, we never were, precisely because the very idea of “truly/wholly” Modern was a fiction which, as it happens, even today's science refutes⁴⁵.

It seems to us that modernist studies would benefit from an input of latourian modernity, insofar Latour calls for a revision of the “transcendental structure of

⁴³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Verso, 2010), 4.

⁴⁴ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p 11.

⁴⁵ This is precisely why the ambiguity about what is/isn't scientific persists to this day, such as the recent COP summit in Dubai, where UAE's Sultan Al Jaber declares that “there is «no science» indicating that a phase-out of fossil fuels is needed to restrict global heating to 1.5C”, in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/dec/03/back-into-caves-cop28-president-dismisses-phase-out-of-fossil-fuels> (accessed on 5 December 2023).

temporalization" between pre-modern and modern. Perhaps it would not be an immediate gain in terms of scholarly literature produced, but primarily a conceptual gain. Bracketing the cultural chronology of literary modernism would make this notion a name for artistic phenomena that, despite their indebtedness also to historico-modernist aesthetics, become the expression of a different cleavage. We will refrain from further discussing the categorization of the world into binary divisions, as scientific objectivity is no longer longer defined as consensus. We shall return to the moment of their inception, as another reality is emerging, one which, *although scientifically attested*, is neither opposed to magic nor can be proven by perceptive experience: this is the reality as defined with the speculative realism, a concept which includes the possible.

Therefore, modernism becomes a matrix, a form that can be "filled" according to the historical and cultural moment. Thus, we can only say that a modernist temporal regime - "pure temporal formalism" - can receive a contemporary determination precisely through the double gesture of going back – "re-examine",⁴⁶ "re-create",⁴⁷ "resume",⁴⁸ "reprise"⁴⁹ that past which the avant-garde prospectively denies – and going further in repairing what has been wrong. What the ecological criticism is trying to demonstrate is that the resumption of modernity⁵⁰ can produce new forms, new configurations, in a different way than the (utopian or dystopian) projections of the early and middle of the last century. Detached from the classical framing between Romanticism/Victorianism as *terminus a quo* and postmodernism as *terminus as quem*, aesthetic modernism will retain its historical corpus but can also be examined as a conceptual characteristic within contemporary texts and objects.

III. The paradox of contemporary modernism

Should we choose to disassociate modernism from the historical context in which Latour situates it, as well as from modernization, and from the context in which Modernist Studies positions it, embracing Peter Osborne's so-called philosophical, transcendental definition, we can ultimately identify the genuine paradox of Latour's "supersummed" modernism. That is, the paradox of modernism as a theoretical notion/concept. Its paradox consists in the fact that, by the new cut that Latour establishes between "truly modern" and "not wholly modern", or between critique and post-critique or, finally, between modernization and ecologization, he makes the self-sufficiency of theory implode. Whatever it says, however it is written, theory now needs a practical correlative, on the scale of terrestrial life.

If we go along with Camille de Toledo that the time has come to stop looking at the world "from a commitment to the power of language," where man "believes he is the master

⁴⁶ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 143.

⁴⁷ Latour, *Inquiry into the Modes of Existence*, 90.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 148

⁴⁹ Ibid., 306

⁵⁰ Or even, in Yves Citton's speculative version in this issue, of its "supersumption".

and possessor of nature because he lives without limits in his fictions," in a "semiotic hybris",⁵¹ in this case, we must acknowledge that engaging in fieldwork becomes essential to substantiate theory. This does not necessarily mean that there can no longer be "pure theory", but that literature itself, as aesthetically coded language, must always be placed in relation to the living world. The fact that Latour wrote many books and articles should not make us forget that he was and always remained an anthropologist, a field worker. This is why, whether or not we distinguish between theory and post-theory,⁵² the very term "theory" should be revisited if we were to adopt the idea of an "anthropology of the Moderns". The rise of "post-critique"⁵³ should be read not as the disappearance of critical theory⁵⁴, but as another stage of theory, in a world aware of stakes that humanist intellectuals had not targeted until recently.

If they were to argue the relationship between modernism and theory, modernist studies must follow the paradoxes that the dynamics of the crisis of representation are now generating. These are no longer to be put in relation to the Einsteinian theories or the perishability of the European civilisation, nor are they reduced to Derridean undecidability; the epistemological cut no longer has the same parameters as it did in the 1930s, when Gaston Bachelard postulated it. To say, as Sascha Bru does, that theory is indebted to modernism shows today that he didn't feel the need to update the meaning of "theory" after its anthropological and ecological turns. Once, because modernism is much more than a name for aesthetic objects produced within the first half of the 20th century, but, above all, because theory did not end with the French Theory masters, just as today's world did not end with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 attack or the killing of Bin Laden.

All the data therefore converge towards the idea that Bruno Latour can be considered a modernist thinker, in Peter Osborne's temporal-conceptual sense of the term. But also a modernist writer – insofar as "we have never been modern" is a well-written phrase. It goes without saying that Latour does not consider himself primarily a writer; in other words, he does not share the typical modernist ethos of the lonely author. From this point of view, the dialogue between Michel Serres and Bruno Latour in the early 1990s is enlightening: "What makes for advancement in philosophy, and also in science, is inventing concepts, and this invention always takes place in solitude, independence, and freedom – indeed, in silence" – Michel Serres confesses, proustian, while Latour, who "doesn't share your experience of

⁵¹ Camille de Toledo, *Une histoire du vertige* (Paris: Verdier, 2023), 74 (our translation).

⁵² The term that gives the title to a 1999 paper can no longer say much after Latour. See Martin McQuillan Graeme Macdonald, Robin Purves, Stephen Thomson, *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* (Edinburgh:Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

⁵³ Beginning with Michael Polanyi's *Science, Faith and Society* (1946), in which he takes an ethical approach to the fundamentally modern critical spirit – the pillar of the modern ethos, after all – and ending with Rita Felski's sparkling and relaxed discussions in several volumes, including *Uses of Literature* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2008) or *The Limits of critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁵⁴ For a different opinion, see Zahi Zalloua, "Forget Latour," in Jeffrey R. Di Leo (ed.), *What's Wrong with Antitheory?* (London: Bloosbury Academic, 2019), 249-262.

debate and of group work,"⁵⁵ has always been a team player. But if we keep the purity of "literature" separate from the visual arts, the performing arts and other increasingly technical crafts, if we keep "research" separate from "creation", on which artificial intelligence has recently intervened, we will only succeed in stubbornly being "truly Modern", ignoring the need to bring the discourse "down to Earth"⁵⁶ and confront it with "die Sachen selbst", "the Things themselves", as phenomenologists used to say.

Nowhere is this paradox more evident than in the writings of Camille de Toledo. On the one hand, he bitterly states, *in writing*, that "we believe in the naturalness of what we wrote."⁵⁷ On the other hand, he calls for a radical change, once again *in writing*: "it's from there, from this work that's always being taken up again that we must look for other terms to live in."⁵⁸ In other words, we ask the text, be it a particular kind of text, to take us out of the text, to bring us back to the world. If we are now living through a modernist momentum, this is because writers and artists, researchers and philosophers are incessantly creating forms pulling towards more performative forms of artistic expression. This is why a recent call for papers is called *Unwriting Ecology* ("Désécrire l'écologie")⁵⁹ and why Vincennes University Press have just created a new collection called "Recherche-création".⁶⁰

Modernism may therefore be contemporary, not so much in the sense that we can thematically talk about writers whose style emulates the great canonical Western writers who wrote around 1922 or 1913 (the dates on which Joyce and Proust, respectively, published significant parts of their work), or because we discover in modernist writings a lot of green or blue nature elements and evidence of ecological sensitivity, but because it can be defined as a dynamic matrix in which forms are created and send the reader towards an expanded idea of

⁵⁵ Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, Michignan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995 [1990]), 37.

⁵⁶ We refer here to Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (New York: Polity Press, 2018).

⁵⁷ "we believe in the naturalness of what we have written," in Camille de Toledo, *Une histoire du vertige* (Paris: Verdier, 2023), 22.

⁵⁸ "it is from there, from this work always resumed from writing that we must seek other terms to inhabit," *ibid.*, 104

⁵⁹<https://www.fabula.org/actualites/113157/des-ecrire-l-ecologie-premiere-approche-interdisciplinaire.html> (accessed on 16 November 2023). Among the questions that the conference aims to answer, I will stop at two: "How, for example, can we take on a non-anthropomorphic form of writing about animals and their irreducible strangeness (H.S. Afeissa): a form of writing (literary, cinematographic, digital, etc.) that is perhaps less about animals than it is about them? How can writing, particularly scientific writing, take account of the singular complexity of the living environments to which we ourselves essentially belong, as pieces of the ecosystemic puzzle (L. Abbadie)?"

⁶⁰ The first book published within it is Anne-Marie Petitjean, *La Littérature par l'expérience de la création. Théories et enjeux* (*Literature through Creative Experience. Theories and Challenges*) (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, coll. "Recherche-création", 2023).

the world, beyond the social world, but also towards changing the regime of presentist historicity as it has reigned during the last decades, one that leaves us without a future.

The formal variety of certain niches in an ever-expanding body of contemporary literature no longer has the role of breaking with any dominance of realism, as was the case with historical modernist literature. Today's formal quests cannot, however, be taxed by the often gratuitous formalism of literary texts from the heyday of modernism and of the French *Nouveau roman*. This is why we think it is important to take up the definition offered by Bruno Latour in his *Inquiry of the Moderns*: a "nonformalist description" of form leads to the idea of form as practice, as "putting into form", as distinct from form as "freeze-frame",⁶¹ says Latour in a nutshell.

The travesty of form in the writings and objects of contemporary literature and art are no longer made either to *épater le bourgeois* or to mark a crisis of realist-naturalist representation. We are talking about a different crisis of representation caused by a new expansion of realistic representation stemming from the new speculative realism going beyond the modern mental/material binomial. However, formalism as the work of shaping continues to be essential for conveying messages of social and political criticism, which late capitalism stifles by resorting to *storytelling*, which today can take the form either of a narrative fluid that invites identification without rest, or of the digital flow of microimages and micronarratives. Christian Salomon talks about narrative as an instrument of control in his now well-known book volume *Storytelling*.⁶² His text is resolutely political and takes into account the danger of the uncontrolled expansion of what Martin Kreiswirth had already called in 1992 in a landmark article "the narrativist turn in human sciences."⁶³

However, the trap of formalism, into which many writers fell in the 1950s and 1970s ("les Nouveaux romanciers", to a certain extent), is one that must now be taken into account. Although most of the latourian texts require sustained efforts of comprehension, especially on the part of a humanist-educated reader, Bruno Latour gives them a narrative turn (as in *AIME*) or inserts parables in the form of narratives, precisely in order to get his messages across. Texts and objects that can claim to be modernist are no longer the work of artists who wish to distinguish themselves from the "universal reporting" by which Mallarmé characterized, in *Crise de vers*, all contemporary (i.e. modern) writing, *with the exception of literature*.⁶⁴ Thus, alongside this work of form, commitment remains essential to describe a new modernist moment in contemporary literature and arts.

⁶¹ Latour, *An Inquiry...*, 107 and 110.

⁶² Christian Salomon, *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* (London: Verso, 2017 [2007]).

⁶³ Martin Kreiswirth, "Trusting the Tale: The Narrativist Turn in the Human Sciences" *New Literary History*, Vol. 23, No. 3, *History, Politics, and Culture* (Summer, 1992): 629-657.

⁶⁴ Mallarmé, quoted in Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 233.

One of the best works on the political dimension of contemporary literature, but also of contemporary arts in general, is that of Justine Huppe,⁶⁵ devoted to a "historiography or theory of the contemporary" in which the writer's political commitment is no longer demanded by a consciousness of responsibility towards society, but from an individual choice stemming from an equally individual psycho-social path. If we can speak in this case of a "retreat",⁶⁶ Huppe nevertheless believes that, by resorting to the term "embarkation", meaning that world and literature, the writer and the reader, fiction and history are in the same boat.⁶⁷ We can speak of a political commitment that can be defined in other terms than those by which Osborne designates avant-gardes that "always act in the name of particular, determinate futures [while] modernism simply moves on."⁶⁸ We are no longer talking about this kind of future, but about the condition of existence of a future in general. Talking about future, it does not mean any more time that must come, but space that has to sustain itself. More to the point, what Huppe sees changing today is no longer temporality, but spatiality. If the utopias that nourished the avant-garde always presupposed an external world to be conquered and included in an empire (the United States versus the USSR), what characterises the contemporary is the situation of being "embarked", in a boat that is impossible to leave, because there is no outside. "The situation of embarkment qualifies the production of forms and knowledge in a world where the latter no longer has a position of exteriority."⁶⁹

Very briefly, we can say, like Huppe, that contemporary art, insofar as it takes into account the need to always confront discourse with the reality it relates to, words with things they mean, operates in a dialectical logic: that of the loss of autonomy, which it accuses but compensates for: "on the other hand, it - art - recovers in this loss a properly political force of elucidation, in contrast to a capitalism that deforms or invisibilizes everything that once informed collective life and action (the distinctions between private and public, between commercial and non-commercial, etc.)."⁷⁰ In her book, Justine Huppe does not talk about French writers who are well known to general public. Because her work is primarily theoretical and political, but also because modernism does not necessarily have to be associated with the market and forced to come to the frontstage of the literary production scene. French writers such as Nathalie Quintane, Olivier Cadiot or Christophe Hannah write a rather a-generic literature, but one in which the political and formal concern are basically subject to the same intention: that of political intervention through literature. To these can undoubtedly be added

⁶⁵ Justine Huppe, *La Littérature embarquée* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2023).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁷ According to a Pascalian idea he develops, Ibid., 32.

⁶⁸ Peter Osborne, "Modernism and philosophy", in Brooker, 392.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 43 (our translation).

⁷⁰ Ibid., 48-49.

Camille de Toledo, one of the atypical French essayists and writers whose encounter with Latourian themes propelled him to the centre of the French intellectual scene.⁷¹

Latour can be considered modernist because his disruptive gesture from *We Have Never Been Modern* does not come to establish another future on the ruins of the present, but to restore to the present a moral role in order to satisfy the condition of possibility of the future: the sustainability of life. This is what allows him to criticize postmodernism as evidence of an inability to think existence differently from modern dualism:

"As always, however, postmodernism is a symptom, not a solution. The postmoderns retain the modern framework but disperse the elements that the modernizers grouped together in a well-ordered cluster (...) Modernism - like its anti- and modern corollaries - was only the provisional result of a selection made by a small number of agents in the name of all. If there are more of us who regain the capacity to do our own sorting of the elements that belong to our time, we will rediscover the freedom of movement that modernism denied us - a freedom that, in we have never really lost."⁷²

IV. Conclusion

We will conclude this essay by pointing out a hapax in Latour's work, when he speaks of the relationship between the political and the aesthetic. He does not do this in the same manner in which a literary scholar would have done. The great writers of the heyday of European aesthetic modernism showed that past - perceived as transitoriness - can become an aesthetic object; Walter Benjamin captured most acutely, deeply and spectacularly the dialectic between time, history and aesthetics. Meanwhile, transitoriness bifurcates its meaning: on the one hand, transitoriness is synonymous with perishability, but this now concerns the whole of the 'critical zone', of terrestrial life. On the other hand, it implies what Latour calls above "freedom of movement", one that urges us to create forms and translate them into each other. Possibly, Latour's sole direct engagement with the intersection of art and politics can be interpreted through his recent book detailing the creation and endeavors of the Master of Experimentation in Political Arts, an initiative he initiated and for which Frédérique Aït Touati currently serves as the director. In his chapter titled "Compositionist Manifesto," Latour

⁷¹ In his latest book, which reworks a PhD thesis he defended in 2019 in Paris, he talks about a few writers we can consider modern from the domestic perspective of literary history: Faulkner, with *As I Lie Dying*, Fernando Pessoa, Romain Rolland or Stefan Zweig (see Camille de Toledo, *Une histoire du vertige* (Paris: Verdier, 2023), passim.) The historical parallels between the beginning of the last century and our own are also remarkable: "Just as Pessoa/Soares gave substance to the oceanic, echoing Romain Rolland's search for a spring in order to rise from the hell of war, we too are living in a time of collapse for the idea of Progress." (Ibid., 137-138).

⁷² Ibid., 74 and 76.

discusses a dual operation: one involving "desensitizing politics" and, conversely, "depoliticizing the aesthetic:

"so, firstly, to desesthetise politics (by unfolding this ill-composed amalgam of historical scenes, fragments of heroic films, bravura pieces, proud words of Cambronne, attitudes and poses), but also to depoliticise what we call the arts. When will we put an end to the pathos of iconoclasm? With the conditioned reflexes of criticism - long since fused with the "values" of the art market?"⁷³

What does Latour say here? That if politics must be permanently de-mythologized, demonumentalized, in order to preserve its role as the economic and social mediator civil society assigns it to, aesthetics must also escape the pathos of overcoming, of permanently destroying what exists, claiming an illegitimate right, with murderous consequences, an exorbitant right, to always start from scratch. Latour is not an avant-gardist, he is not trying to impose on the future a particular form to be established in a space previously cleansed of traces of the past.⁷⁴ Embedded as we are today in this world that is changing on a now-historical scale, what motivates the formal search is no longer the fascination for the new, but the need to find sensitive forms for representing a consciousness of the common condition. This is, if you like, Latourian modernism, expressed both in writing and perhaps especially in the aesthetic objects of the exhibitions curated by him and in the competition given to the "political arts" practised at Sciences Po.

Because, beyond his theoretical work, Bruno Latour is not only the founder of this master of political arts, but the curator of several exhibitions: *Iconoclash. Beyond the image wars in science, religion and art* (ZKM, 2002), *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (ZKM, 2005) and *Reset Modernity* (ZKM, 2016) which bring together not only images but many excellent texts - proof of which are the volumes that followed them, *Making Things Public* and

⁷³ B. Latour, "Pour une école des arts politique. Manifeste compositionniste," in Frédérique Aït-Touati, Jean-Michel Frodon, Bruno Latour and Donato Ricci, *Puissances de l'enquête. L'École des Arts politiques* (Paris: Les Liens Qui Libèrent, 2022), 12. This text is not to be mistaken for An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto," *New Literary History*, Vol. 41 (2010): 471-490.

⁷⁴ See a more severe formulation of Emanuele Coccia's imperative of the political arts. I agree with his description, but not with his axiological framing, in: "The artist sees farther than the divinity responsible for creating reality, and thus offers the viewer an additional source of knowledge. And if the question of training artists has always been raised, from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, the art school ceases to be a school for training specialists, to take on the task of educating all publics: if art is not one of the domains of culture, but the place where culture is undone and reinvented, then the modern education must be played out in the aesthetic field, and it is the art schools that have represented the avant-garde of modernity." E. Coccia, "L'artiste voit plus loin que la divinité responsable de la création du réel," in Aït-Touati, Frodon, Latour and Ricci, 22.

*Reset Modernity*⁷⁵ - and above all a whole series of performances, some under the umbrella of *Gaia Global Circus*.⁷⁶ Since 2010, Latour has been leading the SPEAP master program, *Programme d'Expérimentation en Arts et Politique*, whose founders published in 2022 a collective volume in which they explain their approach and manifestations, a work in which Latour explains the relationship between the political and the aesthetic that I summarized above. These concerns, to which we can add the poetry read by Bruno Latour one evening at the *Maison de la Poésie* in Paris (2021) - practically all the forms of contemporary art that can today accompany a theoretical work whose aim is ultimately to reach those to whom it is addressed, virtually everyone - make the paradox of modernism a problem that we can only try to resolve not by reducing modernism - to chronology, to aesthetics, to the appetite for dichotomy -, but by addition, by extension, by hybridisation and im-purification. We emphasize that the paradox of modernism in the contemporary context, a paradox that is gradually diminishing, lies in a discourse that asserts its inadequacy in depicting the world solely based on ideas, and criticism directed towards what is labeled as primitive or pre-modern forms of knowledge.

Only by stepping out of the literature confined to the white sheet of paper and by enmeshing with other artistic forms can we try to render the dialectic of what modernism tried, a hundred years ago, to innovate. Such dialectic is an eco-dialectic, one in which "theses" do not wait, by means of "antitheses", to arrive at something else - as in classical political revolutions and as in modernist aesthetics, for instance in the unleashing of a catabasis preceding apotheosis at the end of major novels like *Lost Time Regained*. Such an eco-dialectic clears the way for all the objects of thought to get a terrestrial affordance.

⁷⁵ Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MS, MIT Press, 2005, volume of over one thousand pages); Bruno Latour and Christophe Leclercq, *Reset Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016) (volume of over four hundred pages).

⁷⁶ Alexander Coppola, "Latour and Balloons: Gaia Global Circus and the Theater of Climate Change," *Configurations*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2020): 29-49.