

DESIS Philosophy Talk #7 “Designing as politics (of nature)”

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The DESIS Philosophy Talk “#7.1 “Designing as Politics (of nature)” is the first of a new series of talks dedicated on the topic of post-anthropocentric design. This first conversation, that will be prompted by the Politecnico di Milano PhD programme in Design, will take place on February 21st, 2019 in the city of Milano.

This DESIS Philosophy Talk will bring in conversation design research with the thinking of contemporary philosophers and anthropologists reflecting on post-anthropocentric thinking. This intellectual dialogue will be structured throughout an afternoon seminar curated by the Politecnico PhD programme in Design, in collaboration with the DESIS Philosophy Talks.

This new series will tackle a particularly urgent issue emerging from current design experimentation: to be able to re-frame post-anthropocentric, non-patriarchal ways to inhabit the earth, acknowledging the radical interrelationships deeply weaving our life with the life of other non-human natural agents. In detail, the hypothesis to consider, together with James Lovelock and more recently with Bruno Latour, our earth as Gaia - according to which “the Earth is a totality of living beings and materials that were made together, that cannot live apart, and from which humans can’t extract themselves.”¹ – can help to form a cultural framework escaping the fundamental anthropocentrism of the Western cultural history, that has in the past – and still is, in many contexts – not considering our relationship with the earth in terms of interacting agents, but rather in terms of human subjects exploiting nature, instrumentalizing, fetishizing it and making of it an object of his domination. To Latour, “all lifeforms have in common that they make their own laws... they are free agent”². He sees in this non-dominative, non-hierarchical relationship with earth – that he also calls “the Terrestrial” (“an agent that participates fully in public life”³) - an alternative path for escaping the many mystifications introduced by modernity, allowing humans to finally enter contemporaneity: “Galileo invented a world of *objects* placed beside each other, without affecting each other, and entirely obeying the laws of physics. Lovelock and Margulis sketched a world of *agents* constantly interacting with each other... taking on board such a world had nothing to do with ecology, but quite simply with a politics of living things”⁴. A politics, a relationship between living beings, is then made possible, where politics is not a prerogative of human actions, but is rather stretched to include a politics of radical interrelationship between all living beings. To embrace this thinking, means to change the most consolidated idea of ecology, where nature is outside politics, and introduce nature inside the political discourse, recognizing nature as a political actor of an ecology that cannot be separated from politics. This is becoming according to Latour particularly evident in these last years, where nature is shaking politics, literally by shaking the earth so to say under everybody’s feet.

Urged by the massive environmental crisis we are currently facing, contemporary philosophy is challenging design to re-think at the relationship between human and non-human agents, looking at

1 Bruno Latour, Bruno Latour tracks back Gaia. Los Angeles Review of Books, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/bruno-latour-tracks-down-gaia/>

2 Arturo Escobar, Habitability and design: Radical interdependence and the re-earthing of cities, *Geoforum*, Volume 101, May 2019, 133

3 Bruno Latour. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

4 Bruno Latour, Bruno Latour tracks back Gaia. Los Angeles Review of Books, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/bruno-latour-tracks-down-gaia/>

their radical interrelationship, and how to include them in the idea of politics. This preoccupation is also at the core of many design experimentations around the world, for instance when designers working for instance to give voice and agency to non-human natural agents, to bridge their matters of concerns to the ones of institutional politics, to empower emerging bottom up collectives of citizens giving voice to those non-human agents that are key for an eco-systemic urban renewal and provide them of a real political agency, crafting with them both future non anthropocentric eco-systemic visions as well as the instruments to develop collaborative actions towards the needed systemic change.

Clearly the exceptionality of the environmental emergency we are witnessing today requires specific efforts in terms of thinking/acting in designing. The consequences of anthropocentric ways of producing, consuming and living - which do not consider the intrinsic radical interrelationship between human and non-human natural agents and therefore account only humans interests as if they could ultimately be separated from the ones of other natural agents - are under everybody's eyes. In other words: every time humans are solely pursuing what they consider their own interests (which are often at the end of the day just the interests of a small privileged group of people), they actually make a perspective error, as they do not acknowledge the fact that human concerns cannot be seen loss from the concerns of the Terrestrial. This perspective error is suicidal. Humans are now obliged to realise they didn't actually succeed to pursue their own interests. Instead, they made of our planet a place where life is becoming more and more difficult, both for non-human as well as for human agents. The environmental crisis we are in, the New Climatic Regime to put in Latour's words, is, at the end, also an anthropological crisis.

If one needs to stretch the understanding of politics - including also non-human agents in a politics of radical interrelationship between all living beings - Latour also challenges us to also enlarge our understanding of society, thinking at "*Societies of Human and non-human agents*"⁵. This ontological turn, where living beings shaping Gaia are considered free agents, is that Copernican twist making it possible to step outside the modernist paradigm placing humans at the controls of Spaceship Earth: in other words, in anthropocentrically shaping the planet in which we live. Latour speaks of "*coming back to Earth*"⁶, "*repoliticizing our concept of*"⁷, "*being earthy*"⁸ as this modality of being aware of being part of Gaia, of caring of Gaia:

*"We (humans) have misunderstood the injunction: we weren't supposed to bring Heaven to the Earth, but, first, to take care of the Earth, thanks to Heavens? This is the only way to oblige us to change the direction of our attention after so many years spending neglecting what was taking place beyond our back."*⁹

As much as we have lost the sense of what is the Earth under our feet - imagining the whole planet as a field to exercise our hegemonic power on all other living beings - we also lost the feeling of being earthly. What does earth - and our being Terrestrial - really mean to us today? Latour says that we are today "*incapable of defining a behaviour that would be down to earth, terrestrial, embodied.*"¹⁰ We are part of Gaia. If we end up kill Gaia, or if we alter it as a lifeform, we also inevitably end up killing our own life as humans. At the core of the anthropological crisis - which is at the core of the environmental crisis we are in - there is the inability or lack of willingness to re-think what it means

5 Bruno Latour, Senior Loeb Scholar Lecture, "A Tale of Seven Planets - An Exercise in Gaiapolitics" Bruno Latour - Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Tuesday, October 16, 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UjXgbuBo_Q

6 Bruno Latour. Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime. John Wiley & Sons, 2018. 223

7 Ibidem.

8 Ibidem.

9 Bruno Latour. Facing Gaia. Eight lectures on the new climatic regime. John Wiley & Sons, 2018. 244-245

10 Ibidem.

to be terrestrial: *“the question to belonging to a particular soil”*¹¹, *“and that the question is increasingly about a land that must be cared for. Of course, this is not the national or ethnic territory towards which people have been regressing ever since the prospect of modernity became untenable.”*¹² It is rather a questioning of caring for the earth, recognizing our radical interrelationship with it. In Escobar’s words, *“The current crisis is a crisis of the heteropatriarchal, colonial, and capitalist occidental modes of dwelling that have eroded the systemic mode of living based on radical interdependence.”*¹³

In similar words, also contemporary key anthropologists such as Arturo Escobar and Tim Ingold are for instance dealing with similar issues. For instance, Escobar speaks of coming back to Earth in terms of *“re-earthing”*¹⁴ while Ingold articulates on what it can concretely mean being human in the world, as a continuous, relational process of auto-poiesis¹⁵ in the world, even if we are often *“inclined to forget that the environment is, in the first place, a world we live in, and not a world we look at. We inhabit our environment: we are part of it; and through this practice of habitation it becomes part of us too... This inhabited world – the world of our perception – includes the earth beneath our feet, the sky arching above our heads, the air we breathe, not to mention the profusion of vegetation, powered by the light of the sun, and all the animals that depend on it, busily absorbed in their own lives as are we in ours.”*¹⁶ Also for Escobar *“the understanding of the world is much broader than the western understanding of the world.”*¹⁷ Anthropology can help us to broaden our understating of the world, and our being in this world.

In other words, contemporary anthropology is currently challenging us to re-think our being terrestrial beyond the anthropocentric, patriarchal way in which human subjectivity has been described in Western culture - and particularly in the project of modernity - seeing the world we inhabit as an object casted outside of ourselves: a world to be exploited by human subjects, for their own convenience. This operation of decolonization and de-patriarchization of culture does not only mean to re-frame the idea of the earth we inhabit, where by Earth one means with Escobar *“based on indigenous cosmovisions as much as on insights from contemporary biological and social theory — the radical interdependence of everything that exists, the indubitable fact that everything exists because every- thing else does, that nothing preexists the relations that constitute it. Earth signals the capacity of life for self-organization, life’s ceaselessly unfolding flux of changing forms, forces, behaviors, and relations, and the fact that entities, processes, and forms are always in the process of dependent co-arising. I take this notion of Earth as the horizon for a renewed living praxis, and as the basis for the essential act of human dwelling.”*¹⁸ It also means to re-imagine how the relationship with the earth can be re-shaped, what can we do as terrestrial in this earth

11 Camille Riquier, Bruno Latour, For a terrestrial politics: An interview with Bruno Latour, Esprit, Le partage de l’universel, 2018

12 Ibidem.

13 Arturo Escobar, Habitability and design: Radical interdependence and the re-earthing of cities, Geoforum, Vlume 101, May 2019, Pages 132-140

14 Arturo Escobar, Habitability and design: Radical interdependence and the re-earthing of cities, Geoforum, Vlume 101, May 2019, Pages 132-140; Arturo Escobar, Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana www.aibr.org Volume 11 , Issue 1, January - april 2016. Pages 11 - 32

15 Tim Ingold, The Life of Lines. Routledge, 2015

16 Tim Ingold, Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description. Routlegde 2011, 95

17 Arturo Escobar, Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana www.aibr.org Volume 11 , Issue 1, January - april 2016 Pag.16

18 Arturo Escobar, Habitability and design: Radical interdependence and the re-earthing of cities, Geoforum, Vlume 101, May 2019, 132.

The ontological turn many contemporary anthropologists are currently describing is first of all a process of becoming aware of the implication of taking our being terrestrial seriously, and re-think how we relate to what collectively compose the earth, caring for each other. And it is the philosopher Maria Puig de la Bellacasa who can help us to better frame how to compose this politics of nature (or “alterbiopolitics”¹⁹, as she names it), where the modality of human relationship is defined in terms of care:

*“Care is everything that is done (rather than everything that ‘we’ do) to maintain, continue, and repair ‘the world’ so that all (rather than ‘we’) can live in it as well as possible. That world includes... all that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”*²⁰

De la Bellacasa can help us to imagine what the new ethos of radical interrelationships might mean, where “concrete ways of life holding together a bios, entailing the whole network of often concealed dependencies and interrelations supporting co-existence of humans and more than humans together and alongside each other.”²¹ Being terrestrial might then implicate to acknowledge one’s own radical interrelationship with other living beings and caring for it. Escobar calls who can do this, those who “*sentipiensan con la Tierra (think-feel with the Earth); they orient themselves towards that moment when humans and the planet can finally come to co-exist in mutually enhancing manners.*”²²

This new anthropocentric vision – alternative to the ruling one pointed out by modernism – is a concrete alternative, and entangles concrete sets of actions, for us as humans but also as designers. What does it mean to use this conceptual framework when designing? Which are the implications of this ontological turn for us as designers? What does it mean to acknowledge ourselves as terrestrial, and caring about what is around us?

If design played (and often still plays) a role in what we call the Anthropocene, and has in many ways contributed to feed this anthropocentric mindset, how can design play a role in stepping out of this paradigm? In other words: what is needed is “the ontological redesigning of design, away from its functionalist and instrumental orientations and towards relational principles and goals.”²³ What does it concretely mean to take this task seriously? Which new kinds of caring design practices should we foster?

If design has a responsibility in this process, designers are obliged to recognize the risks connected to this anthropocentric mindset and of its consequences. If in the past designers have often been working anthropocentrically – considering the planet’s interests as subsumed to the ones of human beings – they are now becoming aware that designing needs an ontological shift. In other words: we need to step out from an anthropocentric mindset and to recognise the radical interrelationship between humans and the planet, and to care for it. In other words: we need to re-orient a new wave of design experimentations making of “care” its main motivation and objective. How can design help us to become terrestrial? What does the idea of being earthly concretely mean? What is its potential implications for (post-anthropocentric) design? On the passage from spaceship earth to being Terrestrial, which are the main metaphors that can guide designers, and which are the guidelines they can provide them when designing with/for Gaia? In which sense is care a relational modalitie to deal

19 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*, Minnesota Press, 2017.

20 Ibidem. 161.

21 <https://ethicsofcare.org/reframing-care-reading-maria-puig-de-la-bellacasa-matters-of-care-speculative-ethics-in-more-than-human-worlds/>

22 Arturo Escobar, *Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South*, *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* www.aibr.org Volume 11 , Issue 1, January - april 2016: 14

23 Arturo Escobar, *Habitability and design: Radical interdependence and the re-earthing of cities*, *Geoforum*, Volume 101, May 2019, Pages 133

with Gaia which also can be adopted when designing for a politics of nature? What does it mean to design for those ecosystems? How can design help to come to a politics of nature, where this radical interdependency is at the core of the political concern?

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