

*Articoli/6*

## ***Always Already Anthropocene?*** **On the Production of the Things Themselves**

Riccardo Baldissoni

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The appeal to material constitution as opposed to interpretation forgets that materiality is a provisional performance of practices, and the temporary effect of permanence is the result of the iteration of some operative intervention.

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«*Una dispersa dinastía de solitarios ha cambiado la faz del mundo,*»<sup>1</sup> a sparse dynasty of solitaries changed the face of the world. This is not the alarmed statement of a catastrophe theorist, but one of the last sentences of a short story that the Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges publishes in 1940: *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. The plot of the story combines in a clever blend presumably spurious personal experiences, apocryphal or imaginary books, and the usual (for Borges) extraordinarily subtle considerations on a vast array of subjects, which are addressed with the likewise usual unassuming approach of a descriptive narration. And it is an explicitly heterogeneous combination of a mirror and a book, which reminds of Lautréamont's conjunctions<sup>2</sup>, that opens and motivates the story.

Borges quietly chronicles the planning, the production and the effects of a whole new world. He first disseminates with consummate narrative ability a series of hints to the whole process, which is then revealed in the papers of one of its numerous and modest demiurges. In the meantime, the new planet takes shape within the pages of a recovered Encyclopaedia, which supposedly describes the various features of the alien world: Mallarmé could not have imagined a

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* [hereinafter *Tlön*], in Id., *Obras completas 1923-1972*, Buenos Aires 1974, p. 443.

<sup>2</sup> «[E]t surtout, [beau] comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie!» (And over all, [beautiful] as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella!) Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, chant VI, 1, in Id., *Œuvres complètes*, Paris 1938, p. 256.

better illustration for his convergence of the world on a book<sup>3</sup>. Borges surveys the eleventh volume of the encyclopaedia of Tlön – such is the name of the planet – to give us a synopsis of the local worldviews. In a lapidary sentence of unmistakable Whorfian flavour<sup>4</sup>, he informs us that the languages of Tlön and their derivations, namely religions, literatures, and metaphysics, all presuppose an idealistic attitude<sup>5</sup>. The idioms of Tlön's Austral hemisphere revolve around verbal forms: it mooned, quotes Borges. This focus on actions may remind of Homeric Greek before writing practices – as Havelock underscores – re-organize the text around available nouns and newly produced abstract terms. In turn, the Boreal hemisphere sees the prevalence of agglutinated adjectives, which also give rhythm to Homeric lines long before being nominalized by Plato.

However, wherever on the planet, people conceive of the universe as a series of mental processes<sup>6</sup>, rather than a combination of material entities that variously last in time: on Tlön, nothing is permanent, apart from the knowing subject, which is one and eternal. As to the object of knowledge, Borges underscores that on Earth the latter is usually explained (or judged) by connecting it with something else; on Tlön it does too, but this connection only links a mental process with another mental process, and it is understood as an act of association or recollection on part of the same universal knowing subject. The absence of an external referent for knowledge would appear to exclude the existence of science, which instead, paradoxically, on Tlön proliferates in countless varieties: on the planet, sciences simply occur, like all philosophies, as branches of fantastic literature.

Centuries of idealistic leaning left their mark on reality though<sup>7</sup>: as a striking example, Borges describes the phenomenon of the duplication of lost objects. *Hrönir* are copies that may appear in a series, as a kind of excess replacement for disappeared objects. The methodical elaboration of *hrönir* allows archaeologists to modify the past, which – as Borges is pleased to note – on Tlön nowadays is thus no less plastic and docile than the future<sup>8</sup>. And yet, later in the text Borges quotes the multiplication of *hrönir* as one of the previous information that are absent or toned down in the subsequent complete edition of the Encyclopaedia. As he suggests, such cautious expurgations may

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<sup>3</sup> «[T]out, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre». (Everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book). S. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, Paris 1897, pp. 273-280: 273.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Lee Whorf shows how different languages literally constructs different worlds.

<sup>5</sup> «Su lenguaje y las derivaciones de su lenguaje – la religión, las letras, la metafísica – presuponen el idealismo». J. L. Borges, *Tlön*, cit., p. 435.

<sup>6</sup> Borges himself in a later interview refers to Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* as a source: «Diese anschauliche und reale Welt ist offenbar ein Gehirnphänomen», (this vivid and real world is obviously a phenomenon of the brain).

<sup>7</sup> «Siglos y siglos de idealismo no han dejado de influir en la realidad. No es infrecuente, en las regiones más antiguas de Tlön, la duplicación de objetos perdidos». J. L. Borges, *Tlön*, cit., p. 439.

<sup>8</sup> «La metódica elaboración de *hrönir* (dice el Onceno Tomo) ha prestado servicios prodigiosos a los arqueólogos. Ha permitido interrogar y hasta modificar el pasado, que ahora no es menos plástico y menos dócil que el porvenir». Ivi, p. 440.

aim to render Tlön not too incompatible with terrestrial common sense<sup>9</sup>. The multiplication of *hrönir*, inasmuch as explicit and repeated materialization of the productive power of desire, squarely challenges the well-established Earthly separation between subjects and objects<sup>10</sup>. Hence, Tlön's demiurges prudently opt for not risking to undermine their more subtle and effective challenge, which rather captivates the terrestrial readers with the rigor of the new planet's order: the very Earth is becoming Tlön, because – Borges complains – the enchanted humans forget that the new order has just the rigor of chess players and not of angels<sup>11</sup>. However, if the Earth yields to Tlön – Borges explains – it is because it desires to yield. «Ten years ago [Borges writes in 1940], any symmetry with an appearance of order – dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism – was enough to enchant people. How could one not submit to Tlön, to the painstaking and vast evidence of an ordered planet?»<sup>12</sup>. Here, Borges' bitter sarcasm exposes the feature shared by earthly and Tlönist ideologies: they are but variations on the common theme of order. Of course, considering the declared (Berkeley, Schopenhauer) and undeclared (Hegel) sources of Tlön's idealism, we should not be surprised that such a worldview would just offer different answers to the same earthly and modern questions. In other words, the worldview of Tlön is as much a variation on terrestrial themes as idealism – both on Earth and Tlön – is a variation on the theme of modernities. If we paraphrase Montesquieu<sup>13</sup>, and rephrase Borges' last question as 'how can one *not* be a Tlönian?' we would realize that Borges, however sympathetic with Tlön's productive attitude, is horrified by its modern hybris. This is why his character<sup>14</sup> in the story neither accepts nor refuses the impending metamorphosis, but he simply continues to devote his attention elsewhere – in his final words, «an indecisive Quevedian translation (which I do not think to publish) of Browne's *Urn Burial*»<sup>15</sup>. And yet, *in cauda venenum*<sup>16</sup>: the 1658 *Hydriotaphia: Urn Buriall* is dedicated by Thomas

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<sup>9</sup> «Algunos rasgos increíbles del Onceno Tomo (verbigracia, la multiplicación de los hrönir) han sido eliminados o atenuados en el ejemplar de Memphis; es razonable imaginar que esas tachaduras obedecen al plan de exhibir un mundo que no sea demasiado incompatible con el mundo real». Ivi, p. 442.

<sup>10</sup> Long before modernities, the power of Eros seems to be exerted just as an induced alteration of perception: after the erotic mania ceases to modify their aspects, the characters come back to their ordinary shapes, apart from the alterations that occur in the meantime (such as Pentheus's severed head in Euripides' *Bacchae*).

<sup>11</sup> «Encantada por su rigor, la humanidad olvida y torna a olvidar que es un rigor de ajedrecistas, no de ángeles». J. L. Borges, *Tlön*, cit., p. 443.

<sup>12</sup> «Hace diez años bastaba cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden -el materialismo dialéctico, el antisemitismo, el nazismo- para embelesar a los hombres. ¿Cómo no someterse a Tlön, a la minuciosa y vasta evidencia de un planeta ordenado?», Ivi, p. 442.

<sup>13</sup> «Comment peut-on être persan?» (How can one be a Persian?) Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, George R. Healy trans., Indianapolis 1964, p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> Borges tells the story in the first person.

<sup>15</sup> «[U]na indecisa traducción quevediana (que no pienso dar a la imprenta) del *Urn Burial* de Browne». J. L. Borges, *Tlön*, cit., p. 443.

<sup>16</sup> Latin for 'poison in the tail'.

Browne to sepulchres as custodians and witnesses of human memories<sup>17</sup>. The treatise is both a rhetorical exercise and a proto-textbook of archaeology, whose causal logic it espouses. As «Nature hath furnished one part of the Earth, and man another»<sup>18</sup>, well directed excavations may reveal this second portion, which «lie high, in Urnes, Coynes, and Monuments, scarce below the roots of some vegetables»<sup>19</sup>. Browne's construction of hidden archaeological evidence offers us a key to Borges' invention of *hrönir*. According to Browne, nature does not make the sole contribution to the composition of the Earth: human culture adds a relevant – albeit relatively tiny – component. Borges follows Browne's Aristotelian distinction of natural and manufactured objects, and he reserves the mechanism of duplication to man-made things: pencils, coins, amphorae<sup>20</sup>. By definition, artefacts can be reproduced: what is unusual, is that *hrönir* are found objects.

In Borges' story, the theme of findings links the considerations on the permanence of objects with the reports on archaeological excavations. From the perspective of Browne and his antiquarian interest, these excavations bear an essential role in deciphering the past. For him – as for Vico – the very human history, just like Tlön's detailed architecture, is «a labyrinth contrived by humans, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by humans»<sup>21</sup>. And yet, Borges refuses to forget that a deciphering endeavour is carried on by human decipherers: and no matter how much a decipherer strives to be as impersonal as the eye of god, each of her findings can't help being, just like the pencil *hrön*, somewhat «more adjusted to her expectation»<sup>22</sup>. Should I evoke once more Borges' sardonic amazement at Tlönian archaeologists' use of *hrönir* for modifying the past?

Gadamer suggests that the act of understanding may even imply the effort to improve the interlocutor's arguments<sup>23</sup>. We should probably add that such an improving effort is inevitably exerted according to one's parameters and expectations. However, we may extend this interpretative effort also to an interlocutor as mute<sup>24</sup> as an archaeological finding. An improvement, however defined, is no doubt a modification. If Gadamer's observation is not completely wrong, archaeologists' interpretations of their found objects do modify the past, on Tlön as on Earth. The difference between Tlönian and terrestrial archaeological common sense lies, if any, in the construction of this transformation. Actually,

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<sup>17</sup> See T. Browne, *Hydriotapia: Urne-Buriall, or, A Brief Discourse of the Sepulchrrall Urnes Lately Found in Norfolk*, New York 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> They may even be just hypothetical handwork, such as the retrieved golden mask that is not a reproduction of an existing object, and which Borges, following the Encyclopaedists, thus does not classify as a *hrön* but as a *ur*.

<sup>21</sup> «[U]n laberinto urdido por hombres, un laberinto destinado a que lo descifren los hombres». J. L. Borges, *Tlön*, cit., p. 443.

<sup>22</sup> «[U]n segundo lápiz no menos real, pero más ajustado a su expectativa». Ivi, p. 439.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, *Von Zirkel des Verstehens* in H.-G. Gadamer, *Kleine Schriften, IV, Variationen*, Tübingen 1977, pp. 54-71: 55.

<sup>24</sup> Plato would contend that a written text is no less mute than a retrieved amphora.

Borges gives us only a few hints about Tlön's archaeologists: however, even if they do not entirely follow the local metaphysicians in seeking for astonishment rather than truth or verisimilitude<sup>25</sup>, they clearly seem to apply to the past a constructivist approach, with which on Earth social and political scientists address, at best, the future. We can generalize even less about archaeologists on Earth: nevertheless, they are most probably interested, inasmuch as archaeologists, in improving their knowledge of the past rather than the past itself. Of course, also on Tlön archaeologists question objects about the past, but the range of possible answers transcends the mere restitution of facts. In their relation with their findings, Tlönian archaeologists may be better compared to a different category of earthlings: artists. The notion of *objet trouvé* – found object, in French – enters the vocabulary of art at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Picasso, a trailblazer as always, begins to incorporate scavenged materials into his works<sup>26</sup>. The role of his pickings varies from plain addition to prodigious metamorphosis, as in the case of his heterogeneously assembled animals<sup>27</sup>. Picasso famously points out: «They usually take me for a researcher. I do not search, I find»<sup>28</sup>.

Duchamp takes further the artistic practice of found objects: his technique of ready-made is possibly the most devious of compositions, as it combines a (nearly) unmodified object with the world as a stage. For example, the only material intervention by Duchamp on his most celebrated work is an apocryphal signature upon the porcelain urinal that he has bought in a shop. Duchamp's artistic intervention lies precisely in the transformation of a utilitarian object into an exhibit. Though the ordinary function of the urinal partly obfuscates its metamorphosis behind an appearance of mere provocation, Duchamp's gesture is much more than a scatological joke.

Inasmuch as the ready-made sets apart the found object from any further material transformation, it highlights the specific intervention that modifies the object by merely changing its status. This intervention takes place as an artistic operation, but it also casts a different light on the relation between humans and things. More than that, Duchamp's artistic practice, similarly to Tlön's *hrönir*, questions the very separation between subjects and objects. After Duchamp's intervention, the so-called material constitution of the urinal, which is supposed to keep it stably apart from its users, is no longer enough to assure the object a permanent identity. *Hrönir* challenge the association of material constitution and identity by multiplying the object in space: ready-mades issue a similar

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<sup>25</sup> «Los metafísicos de Tlön no buscan la verdad ni siquiera la verosimilitud: buscan el asombro». J. L. Borges, *Tlön*, cit., p. 436.

<sup>26</sup> The first of these works is probably the 1912 *Nature morte à la chaise cannée* (Still life with chair caning), 27 x 35 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, 1942, *Tête de taureau* (Bull's head), bicycle seat and handlebars, 33.5 x 43.5 x 19 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris; 1951, *La guenon et son petit* (Baboon and young) 54.6 x 33.3 x 61.0 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris.

<sup>28</sup> «On me prend d'habitude pour un chercheur. Je ne cherche pas, je trouve». P. Picasso, *Propos sur l'art*, Paris 1998, p. 21.



challenge by multiplying the object in time. Both multiplications are deemed necessary by Latour and Lowe for the very existence of artistic objects in general. As an example, they claim that «a painting *has always to be reproduced*, that is, it is always a *re*-production of itself even when it appears to stay exactly the same in the same place»<sup>29</sup>. I underlined elsewhere how ageing does not improve art pieces: colours fade or darken, paint cracks, wood and plaster dry up and fissure, not to speak of the physical exertion of objects of art in use, such as architectural artefacts or furniture. As to countermeasures, Latour and Lowe resort to a revealing simile: «For a work of art to survive, it requires an ecology just as complex as one needed to maintain the natural character of a natural park»<sup>30</sup>. Though not all archaeological findings may be classified as pieces of art, they all demand similar attentions.

Similarly to works of art, archaeological objects need to be reproduced to remain the same. And just like particularly damaged artistic objects, archaeological pieces often have first to be freed from the embrace of other materials, and then, they have to be literally reconstructed. That's why Latour and Lowe suggest to compare a work of art not to «any isolated locus but to a river's catchment, complete with its estuaries, its many tributaries, its dramatic rapids, its many meandering turns and, of course, also, its several hidden sources»<sup>31</sup>. They also propose a definition for this catchment area: trajectory.

Latour and Lowe's fascinating hydrogeological image is able to include the variety of sources and outcomes that compose the career, so to speak, of a work of art: however, this image also captures within a single flow such a multiplicity, which is made to converge within the smooth space of an undifferentiated water basin. This fluid path undoubtedly recalls Deleuze and Guattari's construction of nomad space, which «is smooth, marked only by "traits" that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory»<sup>32</sup>. And yet, this is an *ideal* rendering of objects that reappear as battered archaeological findings, and whose career is rather a scarred path «striated by walls, fences and paths between the fences»<sup>33</sup>.

Those who are familiar with Deleuze and Guattari's deployment of the notions of smooth and striated spaces, would be probably surprised by the previous reversed association of these notions with an essential and a processual construction of objects respectively. And yet, I am questioning whether the image of continuum and cuts – which Deleuze and Guattari possibly derive from Boulez – is not only applicable to processes of production but also to

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<sup>29</sup> A. Lowe and B. Latour, *The migration of the aura, or how to explore the original through its facsimiles*, in *Switching Codes*, T. Bartscherer and R. Coover eds., Chicago 2011, pp. 275–97: 284.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 278.

<sup>32</sup> «[L]’espace sédentaire est strié, par des murs, des clôtures et des chemins entre les clôtures, tandis que l’espace nomade est lisse, seulement marqué par des «traits» qui s’effacent et se déplacent avec le trajet». In G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, Paris 1980, p. 472.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

their products. In the latter case, I wonder if instead this application would surreptitiously reaffirm the very continuity of each product's identity, which Picasso and Duchamp so bravely subvert.

I previously attempted to show, also with the help of Latour and Lowe, that objects of art, as well as archaeological objects, need to be reproduced to remain the same. The water flow that is guaranteed by the natural inclination of a catchment area powerfully depicts the ongoing activity of productive practices: but unfortunately, the association of this image with objects would misleadingly suggest their continuity, which is instead the result of unceasing interventions. As we are dealing with excavations, I would rather associate artistic and archaeological objects to the labyrinthine network of a mine, which would recall its never-ending demand for intervention in order to ensure its practicability. It would also help us to remember the cost of both real and metaphorical quarries: the same Browne, who does not miss to quote Potosí, seraphically ignores its death toll of Amerindian Auschwitz<sup>34</sup>. However, the galleries of a mine are still a too smooth connection between the stages of the career of artistic and archaeological pieces. The more abstract notion of series would probably be a better reminder of the discontinuity of their paths. We may then imagine an object as the series of its reproductions in time.

Moreover, as the image of series would imply a just sequential multiplicity, we should better associate each object to a bundle of series. This double plurality would make room not only for the iteration of reproductive interventions, but also for the variety of constructions of the object from different perspectives. For example, we may easily suppose that only some visitors of the first (and last) public display of Duchamp's urinal in 1917 acknowledge its transformation into an object of art: other attendees surely keep focusing on its function of catchment area for urinary flows. At least two objects, or better, two series of objects are thus on display on the same pedestal: the series of the urinal-turned-object-of-art, and the series of the urinal-still-outrageously-urinal. Such an objectual duplication still falls short of the performance of Tlön's *brönir*: and yet, I am aware that it goes far enough to contravene a long tradition of thought, which since Aristotle's *Physics* does not admit that two objects may occupy the same place<sup>35</sup>. I produced elsewhere a genealogical account of this tradition<sup>36</sup>: here I will only briefly recall a counter-example that shows unprecedented and possibly productive perspectives by challenging our received ideas. The site of Jerusalem is undoubtedly a wider support than Duchamp's pedestal, but in our current political imagination is not yet large enough to host three cities at once: our

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<sup>34</sup> A hypothetical gated access to the mountain of Potosí, its silver veins and its abysmal amount of dead miners, would have deserved no less than Auschwitz to display the label *arbeit macht frei*.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Physica* 209a6–7.

<sup>36</sup> See R. Baldissoni, *Towards a Grammar of the Multiverse: A Genealogical Reconsideration of Humans and Places*, in *Diaspora, Law and Literature*, D. Carpi and K. Stierstorfer eds., Berlin 2016, pp. 23-40.

inherited Aristotelian approach offers us, at best, a tripartition of the topographical space. On the contrary, we may construct Jerusalem as three cities, each of which extends over the whole place<sup>37</sup>. Anderson made us familiar with the notion of imagined communities<sup>38</sup>: it should be not too difficult to acknowledge that the role of imagination is no less important in the construction of places than of nations. If we acknowledge to each imagined community its right to its imagined place, there may be more hope for a fair negotiation to happen between them. Of course, following Aristotle, his innumerable modern epigones would counter that one thing is the cultural construction of objects and space, and another thing is their physical constitution. Back to 1917, they would protest that it is just one urinal that lies oddly on its back on the pedestal in the exhibition space, and the only multiplicity is that one of the various interpretations that the viewers project upon it. And yet, the numerical unity of the urinal's material constitution is not just multiplied in the kaleidoscope of its representations. Regardless to its supposed materiality, our good device also undergoes a substantial shift in the practical interaction with its users. Before ascending to the higher world of art, its collecting function would hardly afford it the possibility to engage with more than one patron at a time. Its transformation into an object of contemplation instead immediately expands its relational potential: it can be observed, at the same time, by curious, perplexed or utterly horrified spectators. In more abstract terms, we may say that if we abandon the key of ontology for the perspective of practices, numerical unity is not necessarily the testing ground of identity. From the non-ontological perspective of practices, relations determine the relevance of material constitution and its predicate of numerical unity. Whilst we need a numerical multiplication of bread and fish to feed a multitude, just one speaker would be enough to tell a parable to them all. Perhaps, it would be time to recognize that, outside of the language of ontology, terms such as 'object' and 'material' are excessive, and indeed unnecessary, abstractions. Of course, as the same Borges lapidarily states, «thinking is forgetting differences, is generalizing, abstracting»<sup>39</sup>: nonetheless, if we forget this forgetting, the derivative nature of products of our amnesic outcomes – ideas, essences, concepts – would dangerously disappear from view. We certainly cannot renounce our positive forgetting power and its precious thinking tools: what we can do instead is to shape these thinking tools, so that they would keep memory of the differences that they erase. A clamorous example in regard is Heidegger's positioning of a word under visible erasure, by crossing it out. It is maybe not by chance that Heidegger first suggests to cross out the name of a

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<sup>37</sup> Ivi, p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> See B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York 1982.

<sup>39</sup> «Pensar es olvidar diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer». J. L. Borges, *Funes el memorioso*, in Id., *Obras completas 1923-1972*, cit., p. 490.



material object: a rock<sup>40</sup>. In doing so, he revives the Aristotelian severance of humans from other animals<sup>41</sup>, by claiming their different relations to objects such as, for example, rocks and blades of grass: more in general, for Heidegger «the world of the animal, if we may express ourselves in this way, is not simply a degree or species of the world of man [*sic*]»<sup>42</sup>. However, we have to wait more than twenty years before Heidegger actually crosses out the word ‘*Sein*,’ that is Being, in a letter to Junger<sup>43</sup>. By appearing under erasure, the term ‘Being’ articulates the world as construed by metaphysics with the yet unnamed space that the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics would announce. Derrida not only understands well the articulating power of notions under erasure, but he locates this very power in the impossibility of the destruction of metaphysics. Paradoxically, a hypothetical destruction of metaphysics would confirm metaphysics itself inasmuch as a series of substitutions of a hierarchical structure with another hierarchical structure<sup>44</sup>. Derrida seeks instead to articulate the possibility of metaphysics with its impossibility, by producing an ongoing de-hierarchizing and decentring effort, which he calls deconstruction. I previously argued that just one series is not enough to render the multiplicity of an object of art: a fortiori, an object of thought<sup>45</sup> as multifaceted as metaphysics would be better associated to a plurality of series. For example, we may list the series of onto-theological instantiations of metaphysics according to Heidegger’s destructive picture, together with the already recalled series of centred structures as evoked by Derrida. For analogous reasons, the process of pluralization should not stop here though: if we consider the Derridean series, each centre – idea, *ousia*, god, *et cætera* – would be better thought as a double multiplicity, namely the series of its reproductions in time, multiplied according to the variety of its different constructions. Of course, one may wonder whether this dissemination would dissolve the very notion of centre: on the contrary, I maintain that it would rather show centres as the result – always temporary and precarious – of

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<sup>40</sup> M. Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, W. McNeill and N. Walker trans., Indianapolis 1995, p. 198.

<sup>41</sup> This purportedly essential interspecific severance camouflages the intraspecific human division of labour both in Aristotle and Marx. A similar fracture emerges somewhat in the reverse as a cultural divide in Levi-Strauss’ opposition between *bricoleurs* and engineers.

<sup>42</sup> M. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, cit., p. 200. With this triumphal conclusion, Heidegger gets close to the ground assumptions of Amerindian perspectivism, to use the definition of Viveiros De Castro. Unfortunately, unlike Amerindians, Heidegger only understands animal difference as deprivation.

<sup>43</sup> See M. Heidegger, *Über “die Linie”*, in *Freundschaftliche Begegnungen: Festschrift für Ernst Jünger zum 60.*, Frankfurt am Main 1955. See also M. Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, J.T. Wilde and W. Kluback trans., London 1958.

<sup>44</sup> See J. Derrida, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, in Id., *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass trans., London 1978.

<sup>45</sup> Havelock associates the production of objects of thought to the process of elaboration of Greek written language, which is also the first alphabetical language. These new abstract words are made with materials that range from gods’ names to nominalized adjectives (as in the case of Plato’s forms), and they linguistically perform as nouns. See E. A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Cambridge 1963.

the iteration of centring practices. Similarly to the process of abstraction, centring practices mainly consist in the obliteration of differences – and first of all, the difference of the very centre with itself. This operation combines the notions of identity and permanence. And yet, identity and permanence, inasmuch as objects of thought, may be construed as double multiplicities too. Also in this case, the process of re-contextualization of the notions of identity and permanence may appear to miss their logical core. I contend instead that the reappearance of contexts would also make visible the tremendous ongoing effort that is required to produce the vanishing of contexts themselves. Latour and Woolgar narrate a case of a particularly relevant kind of decontextualization processes, namely the construction of facts in scientific laboratories. They emphasize that they «*wish to show that the process of construction involves the use of certain devices whereby all traces of production are made extremely difficult to detect*»<sup>46</sup>. Inasmuch as also the notion of fact is an object of thought, it may be construed as a double multiplicity. In this case, Latour and Woolgar may be credited with adding a strikingly productive series of iterations of the very notion of fact. Their claim of the fictional nature of this addition is only deceitfully modest, as it actually implies the more general contentions that all texts are stories, and that they do not so much *inform* but *perform*<sup>47</sup>. The appeal to the performative effect of texts generalizes Austin's claim of the ability of some utterances to perform what they declare<sup>48</sup>. More precisely, Latour and Callon embrace the notion of performative as an alternative to the separation of description from prescription in scientific texts. Modern scientists pride themselves with the ability to tell us how the world *is*, and not how it *ought to be*, to say it in the words of Hume<sup>49</sup>. Callon examines economic theories and contends that their role is not limited to the description of economic practices: on the contrary, economics is performative in regard to the economy. Moreover, Callon does not limit his surprising reversal to the relation between economic theories and economic practices: he also affirms that, more in general, «all science is performative»<sup>50</sup>. Of course, this does not mean that, for example, the economy can be created from scratch by economics. Callon remarks that performativity is not about creating, but about making happen: and a statement, however repeated, is not enough. That which is rather required is a combination of various practices, which Callon defines as a socio-

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<sup>46</sup> B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, Beverly Hills 1979, p. 176, original italics.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, 284-285.

<sup>48</sup> As examples of performatives, Austin mentions the actions of betting, apologizing and christening: «I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth». In J.L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock eds., Oxford 1961, p. 222.

<sup>49</sup> See the end of section 3.1.1, *Moral Distinctions Not deriv'd from Reason*, in D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, P. H. Nidditch and L. A. Selby-Bigge eds., Oxford 1978.

<sup>50</sup> Michel Callon, *What Does It Mean to Say That Economics Is Performative?*, «CSI Working Papers Series», 2006, p. 10.

technical *agencement*, or composition<sup>51</sup>. This compositionist<sup>52</sup> logic casts a new and surprising light upon Borges' narration of the rise of Tlön. Just like Pasteur<sup>53</sup>, the sparse dynasty of Tlönist solitaires does not work alone: for instance, it engages in a socio-technical composition with the billionaire Ezra Buckley and «its mountain goldfields, his navigable rivers, its prairies trampled by the bull and the bison, his blacks, his brothels and his dollars»<sup>54</sup>. More than that, Borges does not only put Vaihinger's *Philosophy of 'As If'*<sup>55</sup> into narrative by telling us what did not happen in the previous four centuries: he also – probably unwittingly – gives us an account *per speculum*<sup>56</sup> of what did happen. Toulmin traces the emergence of early modern thought from the seventeenth-century quest for a common theoretical language as a response to the insurmountable divides of the wars of religion<sup>57</sup>. He recalls natural philosophers' defensive strategy as a retreat towards method, and their construction of nature as the safe realm of facts. The constellation of early modern thinkers that goes from Galileo to Descartes, from Hobbes to Leibniz, and from Spinoza to Newton is nothing short of a sparse dynasty of solitaires, who do not even enjoy the solidarity links of an explicitly common endeavour. However, we may now reconnect their various efforts as the joint invention of a new world. Of course, the construction of this new world only reaches full swing with the help of socio-technical components such as army barracks, factories and schools, which at last join us educated humans together through the common supposition of the naturalness of nature. However, considering my suggestion that Borges somewhat obliquely evokes the triumphal march of modern naturalist thinkers through the complementary modernism of their idealist colleagues, we may well say that the Earth is now Tlön – or at least, we do believe it is<sup>58</sup>. And that is not all: Borges' parable may not only be construed as a twisted account of the past, but also as an anticipation of the future. In 1947, seven years after the publication of the story, Hayek promotes the constitution of an actual (albeit not secret) confraternity, the Mont Pelerin Society, which in just thirty years manages to accomplish the feat of Tlönists,

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<sup>51</sup> *Agencement* is a French term that Callon borrows from Deleuze and Guattari, who, in turn, take it from the vocabulary of interior decoration, in order to bypass a major modern dichotomy, that one between ideology and science. Though in English *agencement* means something close to 'composition,' it is usually rendered with the infelicitous translation 'assemblage'.

<sup>52</sup> See B. Latour, *An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"*, «New Literary History», 41, 2010, pp. 471-490.

<sup>53</sup> See B. Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, A. Sheridan and J. Law trans., Cambridge 1988.

<sup>54</sup> «Les dejará sus cordilleras auríferas, sus ríos navegables, sus praderas holladas por el toro y por el bisonte, sus negros, sus prostíbulos y sus dólares». J. L. Borges, *Tlön*, cit., p. 441.

<sup>55</sup> See H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, 2nd ed., C. K. Ogden trans., London, 1968.

<sup>56</sup> In the *Vulgata*, Paul's sentence βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι [*blepomen gar arti di esoptrou en ainigmati*] in 1 Corinthians 13:12 is rendered in Latin as «vedimus nunc per speculum in aenigmate», now we see as if through a mirror and in an enigma.

<sup>57</sup> See S. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, New York 1990.

<sup>58</sup> Most probably we have never been modern, but we still act as if we were so.

and plunges us all into the nightmare of a neoliberal planet<sup>59</sup>. Obviously, here I am not claiming Borges' forecasting powers: I am rather suggesting that Borges' narration may help us to acknowledge the demiurgic power of humans. This acknowledgement is still largely hampered by the perpetuation of languages and habits that keep re-enacting our intellectual tradition, by continuing to recentre our knowledge around a series of objective notions. I argued at length elsewhere for including in this series of objective centres the series of notions of nature as construed by modern sciences from the seventeenth century onward. This inclusion adds to the previously recalled series of metaphysics a new element, which is construed as a genealogical series of centres, from the forms and *ousiai* of classical thought, to the god of the various Christianities, and to the modern versions of nature. In this case, the consideration of modern naturalisms as our hegemonic metaphysics may be better rendered with the composed term 'onto-theo-physiology,' which also includes the Greek term for nature, that is *physis*<sup>60</sup>. The inclusion of modern naturalisms within the genealogy of metaphysics may be surprising; and yet, modern nature not only ends up re-occupying the space of theological questions, to say it with Blumenberg and his strategy of legitimation of modernities, but it grants answers that boast the same objectivity of theological dogmas. In practical terms, the erasure of the production of scientific facts requires different procedures from the erasure of the production of ontological and theological truths, but it aims at same result: objectivity. The resemblance between ontological, theological and naturalistic truths is not limited to their processes of production: the decontextualized objectivity of ontological, theological and natural entities appears to be put to work with the same scope, which is the exclusion of differences and negotiations. For example, Platonic forms are meant to ensure a rock-solid ground for the constitution of the city and its policies; Christian dogmatics emerges in the fourth century out of an imperial request for uniformity, long before the twelfth-century invention of theology as we know it; and the contemporary appeals to the supposed laws of the Market similarly pretend to cut short political discussion. Of course, objectivity too is an object of thought, and it may well be multiplied into the double plurality of its various constructions and their iterations in time. And yet, I contend that all these objectivities (or, more precisely, the socio-technical compositions of their producers, exploiters and believers) are somewhat burdened by a disturbing conflict of interest, because they are made to act at once, at least to some degree, as evidence, witness and judge in human disputes.

The recent notion of Anthropocene is a particularly significant case in point. In a 2000 newsletter article, Cruzer and Stoermer suggest that the

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<sup>59</sup> Callon's observations on the formatting of *homo oeconomicus* underline the performative power of neoliberal socio-technical compositions.

<sup>60</sup> My proposed term 'ontotheophysiology' is not just a longer agglutination than Heidegger's, but it also shifts the latter's clinical definition of Western thought's alleged bipolar disorder towards a genealogical sequence. Even if we cannot overcome metaphysics, we may well find a way out of it.

relevance of the impact of human activities upon the constitution of the Earth has to be acknowledged as a new geological era<sup>61</sup>. They propose to define this new era as 'Anthropocene,' and they claim for it a theoretical genealogy that even predates the 1885 adoption of the previous (and officially<sup>62</sup> current) denomination, namely 'Holocene'. Moreover, Crutzer and Stoermer are aware that their proposal not only complicates the series of the geological transformations of the object Earth, by adding to this series a further element (the Anthropocene) at the partial expense of its previous last one (the Holocene): they also anticipate the possibility that the newcomer might replace altogether this final stage<sup>63</sup>. We may compare the object Earth of Crutzer and Stoermer's proposal with Duchamp's urinal. Though such a juxtaposition may evoke the use of poor Gaia as a receptacle for the dejections of human activities, here I am rather matching the Earth and the urinal as two objects, which are both understood as double multiplicities. Just like Duchamp's object may or may not be primarily associated with its collecting function, the Earth may or may not be primarily considered in relation to human activities. This double range of possibilities opens different perspectives of action. In the case of the urinal, its inclusion in the histories of art eventually leads to its reappearance<sup>64</sup>, and even to its multiplication. This late proliferation undoubtedly recalls that one of *hrönnir*, as it apparently, and *pace* Benjamin, does not imply any loss of aura: the urinal (in the singular) is felicitously bi- and tri-located in museums around the world, where it also enjoys temporary restitutions to its previous function<sup>65</sup>. However, even if I do not certainly undervalue the impact of art on humans, I would admit the more pressing urgency to choose between one or the other series of Earth. This admission is a double-edged sword though, because there are always issues that appear to be more urgent than others, and the sense of urgency may make us anxious to accept non-negotiable solutions to problems whose priority appears as equally non-negotiable. In other words, it may be tempting to address issues that are perceived as being as urgent as intractable by recurring to some kind of shortcut, as it were. Western metaphysics showers us with a whole arsenal of shortcuts, according to a historical alternation of cures of collective, personal<sup>66</sup> and scriptural bodies. Inasmuch as the ongoing production of these bodies is erased, their resulting decontextualized presence

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<sup>61</sup> P. J. Crutzer and E. F. Stoermer, *The "Anthropocene"*, «Global Change Newsletter», 41 (May 2000), pp. 17-18.

<sup>62</sup> The International Commission on Stratigraphy has not yet officially approved the definition of Anthropocene.

<sup>63</sup> «To assign a more specific date to the onset of the "anthropocene" seems somewhat arbitrary, but we propose the latter part of the 18th century, although we are aware that alternative proposals can be made (some may even want to include the entire holocene)». P. J. Crutzer and E. F. Stoermer, *The "Anthropocene"*, p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> The 'original' object went lost soon after its first exposure to the public.

<sup>65</sup> There have been various attempts at filling the urinal's avatars with male human urine as provocations and/or performances.

<sup>66</sup> At least after Hobbes, the attachment to an individual and to a collective body are only alternative to each other as elements of a single dichotomy.



(be it material or immaterial) is a shortcut to ourselves and to the world that cuts us out from the due negotiations with ourselves and the others. Despite its charming shape as Gaia<sup>67</sup>, the body of the Earth as construed by Western metaphysics in its scientific instantiations is no exception. This objective body of the Earth can only be accessed via procedures that grant its objectivity. To this aim, digging practices may be as revealing as they are in Browne's quest for buried treasures. Cruzet and Stoermer invoke the stratigraphic evidence of ice core data to support their proposal<sup>68</sup>. In stratigraphic observations, as compared to Browne's inferential reconstruction of human history on the basis of recovered human artefacts, the chain of translations gets longer and longer, because the geologists deduce the effects of human activities from the presence of chemical elements in their samples. For sure, similarly to the infelicitous miners of Potosí, geologists are left with less margin than archaeologists in the identification of their findings: expectations may rather play a role in the inferential chain that guides their searches. However, that which is at stake is not the (relative) certainty of the human impact upon the planet. Nowadays, this impact is only denied for merely instrumental reasons. The deniers of anthropogenic climate change are less interested in the possibility (or the impossibility) of scientific assessments than in the instrumental use of cautionary arguments for resisting any measure to control industrial and mining activities. In other words, the fight of corporate lobbies against the challenge to the neoliberal absolute priority of profit is presented as a scientific debate. And yet, it is not surprising that such politico-economic strategy acts under the camouflage of epistemology. The triumph of modern naturalism is the result of a series of socio-technical compositions. Within these compositions, the notion of scientific objectivity supports various and even contrasting regimes of discourse and fact, from colonialisms to really existing socialisms, and from concentration camps to welfare arrangements. The last composition in place, namely our neoliberal Tlön, recovers the notion of factual objectivity in conjunction with the early modern presupposition of universal calculability (despite Hayek's reservations), which underlies the simplistic anthropology of rational choice theory. Within this still-current arrangement, the unprecedented stance of Earth scientists on anthropogenic planetary transformations thus produces a double bind: on the one hand, as the discourse of neoliberal rationality claims to logically evaluate objective facts, it has to accept the evidence gathered by the scientists; on the other hand, this acceptance would undermine the very neoliberal composition, as the available figures demand one of its main components, namely the mining

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<sup>67</sup> We may understand the recent attachment to the body of the Earth as the attachment to a transitional object, which on the neoliberal planet addresses the loss of collective belonging after the disappearance of progressive projects. See D. W. Winnicott, *Transitional objects and transitional phenomena – a study of the first not-me possession*, «International Journal of Psycho-Analysis», 34, 1953, pp. 89-97.

<sup>68</sup> «[D]ata retrieved from glacial ice cores show the beginning of a growth in the atmospheric concentrations of several “greenhouse gases”, in particular CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>» P. J. Cruzet and E. F. Stoermer, ‘The “Anthropocene”,’ 17.

and heavy industrial production, to step back. One may expect that such a logical contradiction would produce schizoid reactions, as surmised by Bateson in relation to human behaviour. And yet, split personality is more the effect of the threat of exclusion than the violation of logical rules<sup>69</sup>. This is all the more true for corporations: as they are in the position of exerting the power of exclusion rather than being subjected to it, their fictive personae<sup>70</sup> can defy with impunity even logic, and embrace the stance of the *bête noire* (and straw man) of Western metaphysics, that is, the sceptic. Corporate lobbyists turned scientific experts pretend to engage in scientific debates with the rhetorical weapon of scepticism. It is not surprising that the reactions of actual experts range from the irritated appeal to scientific findings to the open dismissal of the alleged challenge. At the 2014 Climate March in downtown Manhattan – Latour reports – scientists walk behind an eloquent banner: «The debate is over»<sup>71</sup>.

And yet, is the debate really over? What if we resist the anxiety that rightly comes from our shared sense of impending ecological disaster, and which pushes us to accept another metaphysical shortcut, in the shape of the objective evidence produced by the scientists? What if instead of hastily drawing the debate to a close, we shift the deliberation towards another agora, where scientific evidence may be accepted as a weighty testimony, but the judgement may be cast according to criteria that transcend the horizon of science? After all, if modern polluting emissions and material depletion are the result of the practical applications of modern scientific theories, we will not produce a substantial change of course without making scientific thought accountable for its ultimate effects. Of course, the re-enactment of our long-standing metaphysical attitude keeps instead producing recentring strategies: for example, the suggestion of the term ‘Capitalocene’<sup>72</sup> recovers the notions of capital and capitalism, whose process of theoretical construction, just like that one of scientific facts previously recalled by Latour and Woolgar, «involves the use of certain devices whereby all traces of production are made extremely difficult to detect»<sup>73</sup>. Moreover, these notions not only obscure their own process of production, but also the double variety of different, overlapping and even contrasting processes of commodification, and their involvements in socio-technical compositions. In other words, as the

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<sup>69</sup> See R. Baldissoni, *Poetics of Exclusion: Derrida and the Injunctions of Modernities*, in «Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy», XVIII, 2, fall 2014, pp. 77-97.

<sup>70</sup> Corporations are endowed with legal personhood.

<sup>71</sup> B. Latour, *Anthropology at the Time of the Anthropocene - a personal view of what is to be studied*, distinguished lecture, American Association of Anthropologists, Washington, December 2014, 6. Retrieved on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016 at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/139-AAA-Washington.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> Donna Haraway writes: «Personal email communications from both Jason Moore and Alf Hornborg in late 2014 told me [Andreas] Malm proposed the term Capitalocene in a seminar in Lund, Sweden, in 2009, when he was still a graduate student. I first used the term independently in public lectures starting in 2012». In *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*, «Environmental Humanities», 6, 2015, pp. 159-165, 163 (note 6).

<sup>73</sup> B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, cit., p. 176.

notion of capitalism keeps being construed just as «a way of *organizing* nature»<sup>74</sup>, it obscures the participation of processes of commodification in socio-technical compositions as major factors in *co-producing* realities. At least, Donna Haraway's paratactic arrangement of Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Chthulucene does undermine the bottleneck of scientific singularization. In particular, with her notion of Chthulucene, Haraway is not afraid to directly claim fabulation as fabulation: and in this case, that which really matters is «which figures figure figures»<sup>75</sup>. Deleuze rightly underlines both the disruptive and productive power of parataxis<sup>76</sup>, which may nonetheless be impractical more often than not. A perhaps less effective but more practical grammatical multiplication is the plural form: following the pluralization of modernities, a variety of Anthropocenes may thus help to remind us that scientific narrations are not the only constructions of realities. Even if the scientific 'discovery' of the Anthropocene is a recent issue, since long before the use of industrial machines, the human machinery of fabulation is producing the Earth, or better still, the Earths: borrowing from Haraway's list, Gaia, Papa, Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Pachamama, Oya, A'akuluujjusi, and many many more. Maybe, it was not only always already Anthropocene, but Anthropocenes.

Riccardo Baldissone  
Goldsmiths University of London  
✉ riccarobaldissone@yahoo.com.au

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<sup>74</sup> J. W. Moore, *Putting Nature to Work: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the Challenge of World-Ecology*, in C. Wee, J. Schönenbach, O. Arndt eds., *Supramarkt: A micro-toolkit for disobedient consumers, or how to frack the fatal forces of the Capitalocene*, Gothenburg 2015, pp. 69-117: 74, my italics.

<sup>75</sup> D. Haraway, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene*, cit., p. 160.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, G. Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory on Human Nature*, C. V. Boundas trans., New York 1991.