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# Bruno Latour's Earthbound Theater

## Applying Stage-Thinking to Reclaim the Critical Zone

### Abstract

This article shows that the numerous allusions to theater that can be found in Bruno Latour's work are not mere metaphors but are at the core of Latour's thought process, based on experimentations between philosophy-writing and stage-writing. This thought process can be traced back to Latour's early work, in the 1980s—on Louis Pasteur and his invention of the laboratory, which Latour calls a “theater of the proof.” The article then turns to a question that is central to Latour's work on the New Climatic Regime: how to design a new theater of the proof suited to our ecological condition—a theater that would definitely cast the temptation for the sublime away and insert us into what Earth system scientists call the “critical zone.” It finally argues that the most striking instantiation of this new theater of the proof can be found in the “Où atterrir?” workshops Latour initiated in 2020, which develop pragmatist and situated inquiries relying on an applied, “ecologized” theater.

## Keywords

Bruno Latour, theater ecology, Louis Pasteur, New Climatic Regime

## Abstrakt

### **Teatr Ziemi Bruno Latoura: Rola myślenia scenicznego w odzyskiwaniu strefy krytycznej**

Artykuł dowodzi, że liczne aluzje do teatru, które można znaleźć w pracach Bruno Latoura, nie są jedynie metaforami, ale stanowią istotę procesu myślowego autora, opartego na eksperymentach pomiędzy pisaniem filozoficznym a scenicznym. Ten proces myślowy można śledzić poczynając od wczesnych prac Latoura z lat 80. dotyczących Louisa Pasteura i wynalezionej przez niego laboratorium, które Latour nazywa „teatrem dowodu”. Artykuł stawia pytanie, które jest kluczowe dla prac Latoura nad Nowym Reżimem Klimatycznym: jak stworzyć nowy teatr dowodu odpowiedni dla naszych warunków ekologicznych – teatr, który odrzuci pokusę wzniosłości i wprowadzi nas w to, co badacze systemu ziemskiego nazywają „strefą krytyczną”. Autorka artykułu stwierdza, że najbardziej uderzającym przykładem takiego nowego teatru dowodu mogą być warsztaty „Où atterrir?”, które Latour zainicjował w 2020 roku, rozwijające pragmatyczne i usytuowane badania oparte na stosowanym, „zekologizowanym” teatrze.

## Słowa kluczowe

Bruno Latour, ekologia teatru, Louis Pasteur, Nowy Reżim Klimatyczny

## All the World's a Moving Stage

In *Facing Gaia*, first published in French in 2015, Bruno Latour argues that one of the most striking challenges imposed by the New Climatic Regime is that what we used to call “Nature” cannot be considered any longer as a mere background or décor for human battles; it has actively joined the fight and refuses to be silenced or made invisible.<sup>1</sup> This is a true drama, he suggests, as we are “emotionally, intellectually, morally, politically, culturally” ill-equipped to absorb the news that the Earth and the myriad of beings making it inhabitable (for now) have as much agency as humans to alter the course of History.<sup>2</sup> Modern political institutions (nation-states), conceptual systems (positioning Nature and Culture in opposition), or even aesthetic devices (usually assuming a place where spectators can contemplate splendors and catastrophes from afar) do not appear robust enough to make us feel and think like actors amidst pluralities of other-than-human actors in what has become an accelerated *geohistory* rather than a well-staged (human) History. How can we not be bewildered when we begin to realize that we are not on a mere Globe that can be mastered by thought, ingenuity, and technology, but that we are confined to a thin critical zone, that is a “thin biofilm no thicker than a few kilometers up and down, from which we cannot escape—and . . . whose *reactions* (chemical alterations and geological mechanisms, as well as social processes) are still largely unknown”?<sup>3</sup> This critical zone is critical indeed, as it is the only place where life has been able to prosper so far, but where carbon dioxide, nuclear radiation, average temperatures, pandemics, and the very geology of the ground we used to take for granted are acting frenetically with unpredictable consequences for the ways we live as individuals and societies. The geohistory we find ourselves in, Latour writes, “is as ‘full of sound and fury’ as the history of the earlier age.”<sup>4</sup>

One does not need a PhD in literary analysis to spot the numerous theatrical references Latour uses in order to set the stage for philosophically, politically, scientifically, emotionally, and aesthetically apprehending the true revolution brought forth by the New Climatic Regime. If a quick reading could give the

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<sup>1</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 73–74.

<sup>2</sup> Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> See Bruno Latour, “Seven Objections Against Landing on Earth,” in *Critical Zones: The Sciences and Politics of Landing on Earth*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 239.

impression that theater is used here as a metaphor, paying close attention to the manner in which Latour's thought constructs itself through and with theater reveals a more complicated—and interesting—theatrical way of knowing-by-doing. Through this article, I aim at demonstrating that, while theater may seem like a mere metaphor in Latour's first publications, it actually always was a major heuristic tool in the development of his thought, from his first books to his theatrical experiments in the 2010s and 2020s; I eventually argue that the "earthbound" theater Latour was looking for in the last ten years of his life may be found in the applied theater he experimented with through the "Où atterrir?" workshops rather than in more classical forms of representation.

For now, let us simply turn to the structure of *Facing Gaia*. The introduction to the book opens with what Latour describes as the obsessional figure of a dance movement that captured his attention in the 2000s:

A dancer is rushing backwards to get away from something she must have found frightening: as she runs, she keeps glancing back more and more anxiously, as if her flight is accumulating obstacles behind her that increasingly impede her movements, until she is forced to turn around. And there she stands, suspended, frozen, her arms hanging loosely, looking at something coming towards her, something even more terrifying than what she was first seeking to escape—until she is forced to recoil. Fleeing from one horror, she has met another, partly created by her flight.<sup>5</sup>

It took him almost ten years, Latour states, to properly realize what this obsessional figure meant. And this realization is twofold. On the one hand, the dance movement, called "the Angel of geostory" in a nod to Benjamin's "Angel of History,"<sup>6</sup> finally appears to Latour as an allegory for the current position the Moderns find themselves in: by fleeing the "archaic" horror of a non-modernized past resisting Progress, they create a still bigger horror—that of the New Climatic Regime, or what Isabelle Stengers has called the intrusion of Gaia.<sup>7</sup> This allegory provides the impetus for the writing of the whole of *Facing Gaia* and, one could argue, for the entirety of Latour's work in the last decade of his life. But on the other hand, to be properly understood, this allegory could not remain as a mere intellectual intuition: it had to be performed by a dancer,

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<sup>5</sup> Latour, 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

<sup>7</sup> See Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey ([Lüneburg]: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 43–50, <http://dx.medra.org/10.14619/016>.

Stéphanie Ganachaud, in the frame of a theatrical, collective work that would lead to the creation of the play *Gaia Global Circus*.<sup>8</sup> Without dance and theater experiments, without staging the obsessional figure of the Angel of geostory, *Facing Gaia*, this impressive summa that deals with no less than sciences, politics, metaphysics, and religion in the epoch of the Anthropocene, would not be what it is; the introduction to the book suggests as much.

In the same vein, *Facing Gaia* closes with a final chapter based on another theatrical experiment: this time, a simulation of the COP 21 held by international students from thirty countries at the Parisian theater Les Amandiers in May 2015, a few months before the COP that led to the Paris Climate Accords. Based on a scenario supervised by historian of sciences and stage director Frédérique Aït-Touati and staged by Philippe Quesne, the simulation—entitled “Make It Work! The Theater of Negotiations”—was a kind of enactment of the program Latour set forth in *Politics of Nature* in the 1990s:<sup>9</sup> how do we integrate representatives of nonhuman entities (the Amazonian Forest, oceans, the Atmosphere, etc.) and of unrepresented human collectives (like the First Nations) into global conferences where the nation-states seem unfit to represent all the divergent, vital interests each being and network carry with themselves? And how does this diversification of representatives impact politics and the way politics represents (or not) diverse territories made invisible when considered from the point of view of nation-states? When Latour begins *Facing Gaia*'s last chapter, he insists on the fact that this chapter, devoted to no less than a speculation about what a constitutional law of the Earth may look like, could not be what it is without this theatrical simulation. Factually, the international students taking part in the simulation brought new ideas into the script (if big corporations can influence international conferences' decisions by negotiating backstage, why not make them become plain actors of those conferences and state publicly what they defend, and at what cost for themselves and other entities?).<sup>10</sup> Conceptually, Latour could not insist more on the co-construction of knowledge by the interweaving of the theatrical simulation and a more theoretical approach to political philosophy: “I grant [the theatrical simulation] the same credibility

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<sup>8</sup> Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 2. *Gaia Global Circus* was created in 2013 in Toulouse, on the basis of a work begun in 2010 with Chloé Latour, Frédérique Aït-Touati, Claire Astruc, Jade Collinet, Matthieu Protin, Luigi Cerri, and Pierre Daubigny.

<sup>9</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> See Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 267–268.

I give to the equally fragile, equally provisional, equally awkward activity of philosophizing.”<sup>11</sup> And a few lines below:

What have I been doing, in these pages, except commenting by way of further improvisations on the “stage writing” that commented on mine? Conceptual characters relocate themselves as they see fit, breaking through all the walls.<sup>12</sup>

It is quite baffling that the importance of theater and performance arts in the making of Latour’s thought is so little commented on while Latour himself insists on it from the very beginning to the end of *Facing Gaia*, thus shedding a bright light on the decisive part taken by experimental, performative devices in the making of his thought. Theater and performance arts appear to an attentive reader as central heuristic tools in Latour’s thought-in-the-making—and they do so very concretely, far from the status of mere metaphors or exemplifications. Actually, as Aït-Touati underlines when she reflects on the conceptual background of the theatrical *Terrestrial Trilogy* she co-created with Latour and the Zone Critique company between 2016 and 2020, her common interest with Latour for theater as a heuristic laboratory can be traced back to Latour’s early work, about Louis Pasteur, in the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> When writing about how Pasteur managed to become one of the definitive scientists of his century, Latour states that Pasteur’s genius does not only come from his breakthrough discoveries but also from his ability to publicly demonstrate the veracity of what he had discovered; in his laboratory, Latour writes, Pasteur staged a bright new “theater of the proof” aimed at visually demonstrating the veracity of the discoveries he made through experimentation.<sup>14</sup> In a book first published for the centenary of Pasteur’s death in the 1990s, Latour is still more explicit about Pasteur’s theater of the proof: in the nineteenth century, obsessed with using insignificant details to uncover dramatic truths (hence the invention of detective novels, forensic science, and, a bit later, psychoanalysis), mere facts are not enough to convince the general public. A fact—be it as important as the discovery of the existence of microbes—remains unnoticed and does not register in society if the inquiry and ordeals that led to it being established are not intensified, staged, and dra-

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<sup>11</sup> Latour, 256.

<sup>12</sup> Latour, 257.

<sup>13</sup> See Frédérique Aït-Touati, “Pour un théâtre-laboratoire,” in Frédérique Aït-Touati and Bruno Latour, *Trilogie terrestre* (Montreuil: B42, 2022), 7.

<sup>14</sup> See Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 85–87.

matized in the laboratory-turned-theater for the convincing of other scientists as well as the masses.<sup>15</sup>

From Pasteur's theater of the proof Latour writes about in the 1980s and the 1990s to the ecological inquiries he undertook in this century, theater is not a metaphor for him but a genuine laboratory, where theoretical knowledge can be drafted, tested, proved, and modified in a back-and-forth gesture between thinking, writing, and staging. The staging component of this laboratory cannot be neglected: to produce scientific facts that will be recognized and discussed as such by the general public, to grant the entities discovered in laboratories their full agency including in political representations and decisions, scientists have to go public, and reinvent how to represent their findings. This gesture is all the more amplified within the New Climatic Regime, for reasons we now have to examine.

## No Way Out: Lockdown in an Earthbound Theater

If Louis Pasteur could and had to move his laboratory-theater from place to place in a century that was just discovering what a laboratory is, the theater of the proof required by the New Climatic Regime is faced with radically new conditions. Pasteur was a son of the modernizing project, for which "Nature" was something external you could emancipate yourself from and "the Earth" was but a launching site for the new conquests of Human Progress towards Globalization. But despite its almost demiurgic denomination, the Anthropocene brings a brutal halt to this Modern, groundless approach: what we are discovering when we claim that "There is no planet B" is that the Earth is not an inert matter that can be infinitely mobilized for human development purposes but a fragile envelope reacting to our actions and, by doing so, endangering our conditions of life—if not most forms of life—while being the only zone where life can sustain itself. The Moderns moved on a Globe and dreamt of escaping it (some, like Elon Musk, still work to keep this groundless dream alive); those who understand the ecological damage brought forth by Modernity realize they have to land in a fragile envelope full of limits.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned above, Latour chooses to call this envelope the "critical zone," following the path of Earth system scientists:

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<sup>15</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Pasteur: Une science, un style, un siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: La Découverte, 2022), 62–91.

<sup>16</sup> As Latour sharply writes in his *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, "between modernizing and ecologizing, we have to choose;" Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 8.

we painfully discover we are no longer masters of a Globe but intricately into complex, interspecific interactions all happening within a few-kilometers-wide band in which the totality of life as we know it is confined. “Confined” is the proper term indeed, as Latour highlighted after the worldwide Covid-19 lockdowns, called *confinements* in French: there is no way out, no more outside to our earthbound condition, affected by the myriad of nonhuman agents we are now forced to take into account.<sup>17</sup>

Coming down to Earth after centuries of the modernist, groundless parenthesis changes everything, including for a theater of the proof that would aim (amongst other tools) at absorbing the scientific, political, philosophical, emotional, and aesthetic consequences of such a revolution. Of course, one can still move from place to place as Pasteur did but, contrary to Pasteur’s laboratory-theater, you can no longer address this new theater of the proof to distant spectators, to an outside world that would be disengaged from the inquiries you undertake. As we are confined to the critical zone, there is no livable outside, no safe place from which we could contemplate the spectacle of the world as if we weren’t actively part of the disasters and regenerations that are being staged. Let us turn to *Down to Earth*, first published in French in 2017, where Latour ponders the meaning and consequences of Trump’s election as president of the United States for political ecology. Stressing the fact that Trump incarnates the “Out-of-This-World” attractor that falsely promises we can groundlessly continue implementing disinhibited “business as usual” models without suffering critical consequences, Latour contrasts the Out-of-This-World attractor with the “Terrestrial” one of the critical zone—the only place where life, politics, philosophy, sciences, art, love, and anything we care about can happen. When highlighting that this critical zone is a totally “New World”—but not a *terra incognita* since it has long been overpopulated by myriads of agents, humans not being the principal protagonists—Latour writes:

humans have always modified their environment, of course, but the term designated only their surroundings, that which, precisely, encircled them. They remained the central figures, only modifying the décor of their dramas around the edges. Today, the décor, the wings, the background, the whole building have come on stage and are competing with the actors for the principal role. This changes all the scripts, suggests other endings. Humans are no longer the only actors, even though they still see themselves entrusted with a role that is much too important

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<sup>17</sup> See Bruno Latour, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

for them. What is certain is that we can no longer tell ourselves the same old stories. Suspense prevails on all fronts.<sup>18</sup>

Once again, the idea that the whole theater building has become the main actor of our more pressing drama may partly be a metaphor (the theater building, and not only human actors, constitutes the whole drama within which we have to define our new role, without any outside, similarly to the critical zone whose outside means direct death) but it cannot be brushed off as a mere metaphor. While he was writing his defining books about the New Climatic Regime (from *Facing Gaia* to *After Lockdown*), Latour was also involved in theatrical experiments, from *Gaia Global Circus* to the *Terrestrial Trilogy* (constituted of *Inside*, 2016; *Moving Earth*, 2019; *Viral*, 2020).<sup>19</sup> The published French texts of the three lecture-performances that make up the *Trilogy* are testimonies to the way Latour's thought develops itself through back-and-forth commentaries between stage-writing and philosophy-writing. Staged lectures, public talks, and books resonate and co-construct each other with the same obsessions: How to go beyond a mere intellectual acknowledgement of the New Climatic Regime? How to make us *feel* and *act* like earthbound beings in the critical zone, which does not provide any escape outside as the Modern conception of the Globe did? How to aesthetically and emotionally develop exhibition tools both adapted to the new world that Earth sciences are modeling and robust enough to neutralize disinhibited impulses towards the Out-of-This-World attractor? *Viral*, for instance, tackles the billionaires' dream of escaping the critical zone they have actively damaged towards Mars, a "simple" planet broadly equivalent to his map as it is not continuously modified by the activities of living beings—a topic Latour first evokes in *Facing Gaia*, before coming back to it in *Down to Earth* and *After Lockdown* and in numerous lectures.<sup>20</sup> Mars, here, stands for all the attempts to ignore if not revoke our vital and material attachments to the critical zone, and for the strong attraction modernist endeavors still effect in mainstream storytelling. Why is it we still act as if a magical, effortless solution could appear and save us from climate change even though we intellectually know the magnitude of the changes we have to implement in our ways of life to

<sup>18</sup> Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 43–44.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to the French edition of the texts of the lecture-performances quoted above, one can refer to the Zone critique company's website: <https://www.zonecritiquecie.org/trilogie-terrestre> (accessed May 2, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> See for instance: Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 76–78; Latour, *Down to Earth*, 30; Bruno Latour, "Comment penser les suites de l'aventure moderne?" inaugural lecture for Université Libre de Bruxelles's Chaire Perelman, March 22, 2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1brJox3XtU>.

keep the critical zone a desirable place to live in? Why are we not utterly revulsed by the elections, all over the world, of climate deniers or quietists? Why can billionaires such as Musk play with their rockets and still appear as aspirational figures to many? By working on the figure of Mars as the Out-of-This-World attractor—the exact opposite to Gaia—between theater and philosophy, Latour uncovers the necessity for a new theater of the proof, able to address the triple crisis of representation characterizing the New Climatic Regime: a crisis of confidence in the way scientists establish facts; a crisis in political representation; an aesthetic and emotional crisis that leaves us feeling powerless when faced with the divide between current and forthcoming ecological disasters and the unsatisfying political answers to these disasters.

Reading interviews with Aït-Touati and Latour about the *Terrestrial Trilogy* is enlightening in that regard, as they never cease to insist on their willingness to address this triple crisis of representation with both conceptual and aesthetic tools: they talk about retroactive loops between sciences, philosophy, and performance arts;<sup>21</sup> they discuss visual and narrative devices to decenter (and not erase) human figures on stage;<sup>22</sup> they evoke staging methods that break the fourth wall and transform our perspective from the mirror gaze of external onlookers to the affective immersion of beings that are interwoven in the drama of the critical zone.<sup>23</sup> Most interestingly, they identify the aesthetic component of this drama as the fact that we do not share a common representation of the critical zone as we do with one of the Globe, and they connect this lack to the modern aesthetics of the sublime. Latour already says as much in *Facing Gaia*:

It would be thrilling to live in such an era, if only we could contemplate the tragedy from a distant shore that would have *no history*. But from now on there are no more spectators, because there is no shore that has not been mobilized in the drama of geohistory. Because there are no more tourists, the feeling of the sublime has disappeared along with the safety of the onlookers.<sup>24</sup>

Immanuel Kant, indeed, defines the feeling of the sublime as the enjoyment of gigantic or violent natural phenomena (the eruption of a volcano, thunderclouds, and hurricanes), *providing they are contemplated from a secure position* giving us

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<sup>21</sup> Frédérique Aït-Touati and Bruno Latour, “Le décor n’est plus un décor,” interview by Sébastien Hendrickx and Kristof van Baarle, in *Trilogie terrestre*, 48.

<sup>22</sup> Aït-Touati and Latour, “Le décor n’est plus un décor,” 50.

<sup>23</sup> Aït-Touati and Latour, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 40.

the thrilling discovery of our human power of resistance.<sup>25</sup> The sublime, in my view, is this impetus that drives us to the Out-of-This-World attractor because it connects the three aspects of the representation crisis: it makes us contemplate catastrophes predicted and described scientifically as if we were external to the world they are happening in; it encourages political and business projects that make us believe in our moral superiority compared to the material requirements of the critical zone, thus depoliticizing ecology;<sup>26</sup> it is based on an “aesthetics of the outside” that makes us unable to emotionally register the meaning of living within the critical zone. As Aït-Touati and Latour underline, this can only lead, at the level of artistic productions, to “disaster-porn” as a degenerated, dark form of the sublime.<sup>27</sup>

The challenges of an earthbound theater of the proof for the critical zone becomes clearer: how do you escape the attraction of the sublime? How do you overcome the triple crisis of representation by staging a theater that, as our world, has no outside—and that consequently transforms the very definition of spectators in order to make them active protagonists of the drama? As is suggested in *Inside*, the solution may not be “immersive theater” in the canonical meaning of the term; it may reside in renouncing a total representation altogether in favor of local, partial mapping practices from the inside.<sup>28</sup> And as Latour never stops experimenting with hybrid devices, those mapping-from-the-inside processes have been put to the test, in theaters and cultural centers, through yet another kind of inquiry at the intersection of research-action, art-based research, and participatory art: the “Où atterrir?” workshops.

## The “Où Atterrir?” Workshops as an Ecologized, Applied Theater of the Proof

*Down to Earth* is Latour’s reaction to Trump’s election as president of the United States, but it is also a programmatic book about the necessity to find and experiment with devices in order to *land* in precise territories in the critical zone (the French title of the book is *Où atterrir?* which can be literally translated as

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<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, revised and ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91; quoted in *Reset Modernity!*, ed. Bruno Latour and Christophe Leclercq (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 169.

<sup>26</sup> On that matter, see Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, “L’Anthropocène et l’esthétique du sublime,” in *Sublime: Les tremblements du monde*, ed. Hélène Guenin (Metz: Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2016), 44–49.

<sup>27</sup> Aït-Touati and Latour, “Le décor n’est plus un décor,” 51.

<sup>28</sup> Aït-Touati and Latour, *Trilogie terrestre*, 41.

“where to land?”). Latour underlines that recognizing ourselves as earthbound terrestrials does not produce the same kind of politics as defining ourselves as Humans in Nature but, he adds, terrestrials do have a problem: Modernity has made them unlearn what their territories—or “dwelling places”—truly are, hence the difficulty in designing proper procedures by which to come down to Earth.<sup>29</sup> While a peasant from the seventeenth century could quite easily describe the territory he depended on to live (with the wood coming from the forest right there, the water coming from the river at the border of this wheatfield, etc.), things are much more difficult today: we are used to thinking of territories at the scale of nation-states, but those are not the territories we depend on to live well, which imply both very local, invisible infrastructures and mass-consumption products assembled in China, rare-earth elements in our smartphones, rather obscure legislation about food and drugs, and so forth. Coming down to Earth, Latour argues, first requires we are empowered enough to begin anew mapping our true territories, what they provide us that we cannot live without, and what precisely is endangered in the vast networks we are inserted in. *Down to Earth* hence ends on a call for both massive and individual inquiries, precisely describing what each of us depends on and is ready to fight for:

What to do? First of all, *generate alternative descriptions*. How could we act politically without having inventoried, surveyed, measured, centimeter by centimeter, being by being, person by person, the stuff that makes up the Earth for us? Without doing this we could perhaps utter astute opinions or defend respectable values, but our political affects would be churning in a void.<sup>30</sup>

Latour always wanting to experiment with new devices, this call has not remained confined to the pages of *Down to Earth*. In 2020, at the cultural center La Mégisserie in Saint-Junien (France), Latour assembled a small team of architects and stage designers in order to organize “Où atterrir?” workshops, accompanying a small group of citizens in their inquiries to better map and defend their dwelling places. Those pilot-workshops allow the team to design new devices such as a compass that is traced on the stage of the Mégisserie and that functions as a mapping tool of complicated and intricately territories that the citizens learn to describe on the basis of the *concernement* (“matter of concern”) they have identified—the matter of concern being a threatened entity they depend

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<sup>29</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Latour, 94.



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**FIG. 1** A “Où atterrir ?” workshop in Bordeaux, Spring 2022. The compass device was designed in the frame of the “Où atterrir?” pilot project with Bruno Latour, S-Composition, and soc in 2019/2020, and adapted by the Rivage company

on to live or survive.<sup>31</sup> Theatrical tools and practices are used to “activate” the compasses of each citizen-enquirer. If the lockdowns that punctuated the year 2020 did not allow a full completion of the “Où atterrir?” project, the workshops nevertheless sketch what is, in my opinion, Latour’s strongest theatrical approach to the question: how do we escape our attraction to the sublime, and the triple crisis of representation that comes with it? In a gesture inspired by the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, Latour, with the “Où atterrir?” workshops, answers: by having earthbound citizens *inquiring* about their most pressing issues, thus constituting situated, active communities rather than a too massive and broadly defined “people” relegated to the position of distant onlookers.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Images of the compass and a whole manual about how to use it are available on the website of soc-Société d’objets cartographiques, which first designed the compass: <http://s-o-c.fr/index.php/ncd/> (accessed May 3, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1927); see also Latour nodding to the importance of Dewey’s approach to the public and to inquiry for political ecology in Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz, *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2022), 90–91.



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**FIG. 2** A mapping of overlapping dwelling places during a “Où atterrir?” workshop in Bordeaux, Spring 2023. Technique inspired by Donna Haraway’s concept of “string figures”

And these inquiries are theatrical at their core if one considers the “Où atterrir?” workshops as attempts to design a new theater of the proof, far away from the sublime. I have had the chance to experience it since the Summer of 2021, when I first met Maëlliss Le Bricon and Loïc Chabrier. Bordeaux-based trained actors, Maëlliss and Loïc were amongst the first citizen-inquirers in the Saint-Junien workshops. Now, they have created the Rivage company,<sup>33</sup> working between sciences and the arts, with the goal to develop “Où atterrir?” workshops in Bordeaux between September 2021 and June 2023. They contacted me as a philosopher who had worked on (and, for a very small part, with) Latour as well as on theater and I have thus been given the opportunity to discover monthly workshops in Bordeaux (Maëlliss and Loïc work with two groups of about twenty people each), both as a citizen-inquirer and as a part of the creative

<sup>33</sup> See <https://www.collectifrivage.com/> (accessed October 18, 2023).



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**FIG. 3** Mapping of matters of concerns during the final *Où atterrir ?* workshop in Bordeaux, June 2023

team. As I closely follow Latour's new work, I first think I know what to expect from the workshops: I have read about them in *After Lockdown*; I know the kind of survey citizen-inquirers are asked to fill in during the first workshop to identify their matter of concern; and I know Dewey's theory of social inquiry and its importance for Latour. However, from the first workshop, in September 2021, to this day, I have been surprised by the importance of theatrical tools in the procedure. Maëliiss and Loïc work with a dancer and a singer, and each workshop begins with corporal and vocal exercises very similar to the ones practiced in actors' training; sometimes, several timeslots are devoted to this kind of theatrical practice during a single workshop. The compass can be turned into a "compass of emotions," inviting inquirers to physically experiment with what a specific emotion does to the body and how it affects their gaze and engagement. I am not the only one surprised by this theatrical dimension in what would otherwise be labeled as cultural or scientific mediation: some people leave in a hurry after being asked to improvise a chorus with other participants; others complain at length about the time devoted to this theatrical practice "instead

of” the socio-ecological inquiry undertaken by each participant. And yet, as the workshops succeed one another and as Maëliiss and Loïc continuously work at adjusting their scripts, I realize those theatrical experiments are necessary if the inquiries are always to be so detailed, precise, and effective.

I had a firsthand confirmation of this intuition when, in January 2023, I decided to implement an introductory “Où atterrir?” workshop in the frame of an “arts and ecology” class for master’s students at the University of Toulouse. It is the first class of the semester, on a bland and cold Monday morning; students don’t know me and expect a “regular” lecture simply requiring them to sit down and take notes and yet, here they are, obliged to take part in theatrical exercises that take most of the two hours we spend together. As a teacher, I can feel the students’ quality of engagement and their attention to details grow as the workshop unfolds, and I can feel they would not be able to identify their matter of concern as accurately as they do without a theatrical warm-up. At the end of the class—an interdisciplinary, optional one including students with various majors—some students come and talk to me; they are the first enrollees of a new master’s in applied theater developed by the communication and performance arts department,<sup>34</sup> and they feel like the “Où atterrir?” process is exactly that: applied theater for the critical zone. This is when I begin recognizing the “Où atterrir?” workshops as the new theater of the proof Latour was looking for in the last decade of his life: an active, interdisciplinary process without onlookers that forms a small community of inquirers who vitally need to situate themselves at the intersection of sciences, politics, and the arts in order to generate subjective, moving, situated maps from within the critical zone. The theatrical “warm-up” no longer appears to me as a preparatory tool; it is the very process that allows for the transformation of spectators into inquirers, and for the affective attunement required to learn how to situate oneself within the critical zone.

Since then, I have had numerous opportunities to discuss this approach to the role and functioning of the “Où atterrir?” process with Maëliiss and Loïc. Our ongoing exchanges about the importance of the arts, and most particularly of performance arts, in the completion of the inquiries allow us to echo and expand some of Latour’s hypotheses regarding the new theater of the proof. First of all, working with *applied* theater enables us to emancipate ourselves from the idea that the process should eventually result in a deliverable conceived as a spectacle that would give the one and only “good” representation of the critical zone. Theater then becomes “ecologized”; it is not a goal to reach under the

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<sup>34</sup> See <https://www.univ-tlse2.fr/accueil/formation-insertion/master-mention-arts-de-la-scene-et-du-spectacle-vivant-parcours-theatre-applique-aco6ma> (accessed May 3, 2023).

form of a stabilized performance but a tool amongst others to feed the inquiries and produce situated, subjective perspectives of and into the critical zone. This implies continuous negotiations between different artistic tools, from performance-reading to digital mapping and the production of sound-landscapes for each inquiry. These tools complement each other and add different layers to the overlapping inquiries without having one form identified as “the final result of the inquiry,” especially since all those tools are aimed at empowering the participants to formulate a grievance that can be properly understood and answered by public officials. Once you accept that theater is applied to ecological inquiries, you can pivot from the quest for *the* right representation to the humble, partial, and always moving mapping of the critical zone. You will never reach a total representation of the situation, which is a good thing since such a goal characterizes the Modern obsession for globalization we are trying to escape by ecologizing it; as the critical zone is alive and always moving, so are our tools, their relevance, and the temporary results they provide.

Secondly, Maëliiss and Loïc have always approached the “Où atterrir?” workshops from a radical starting point: they accept all matters of concern, however remote they may seem from what we are used to calling “ecological” matters. So, in the Bordeaux workshops, inquiries about water consumption or public transportation mingle with others regarding neighborhood relationships or time for creative thinking in a context of the management of academic research. But, as Maëliiss and Loïc claim, wherever you start your inquiry, you always find yourself engaged in an ecologizing process pushing you to investigate various networks made of human, socio-technical, and living beings—you always end up “repopulating” yourself and your dwelling place with a scientifically, emotionally, politically, and artistically richer description of what you depend on. This approach helps us understand how to equip ourselves for the drama brought forth by the New Climatic Regime: as Latour underlines, even though humans are no longer the central figures of the new theater of the proof, it does not mean they have to be erased from the stage (how could you seriously address the scientific, political and aesthetic crisis of representation with such a premise?). It means that applied theater has as a goal to “stretch and enlarge the human in order to include the nonhumans”<sup>35</sup> in our inquiries and grievances, so as to make the critical zone thicker, richer, and full of futures still worthy of our desires and concerns.

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<sup>35</sup> Aït-Touati and Latour, “Le décor n’est plus un décor,” 50.

The most precious gesture we can inherit from Latour's experiments between stage-writing and philosophy-writing may reside in this empowering conception of an ecologized theater of the proof: it is not a matter of erasing or belittling humans; it is a matter of reclaiming, with all the tools at our disposal, the rich networks and agencies of the other-than-humans that make us and who we have been deprived of by the dualisms that have structured Modern societies and their ideal of globalization.



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