

Eliane Beaufils

Inviting the terrestrial on stage in our minds and bodies

Reshaping perspectives by accentuating
a profound connection to the Earth

Abstract

Grounded in the philosophy of Bruno Latour, this study explores the concept of becoming terrestrial within the context of heightened ecological awareness. The analysis focuses on four distinct theatrical performances (*Cracks* by choreographer Charlotta Ruth, *Devenir forêt* by Marina Pirot, Bretagne, *Où atterrir* by the collective *Où atterrir*, Paris, and *Democracy of Organisms* by Club Real) that aim to reshape perspectives by accentuating a profound connection to the Earth, thereby uncovering new possibilities for environmental engagement. Key elements include the sensory experiences involved, the significance of participatory theater, and the exploration of ecological subjects and their interdependence. The study delves into the evolving political culture and co-evolutionary dynamics inherent in these theatrical endeavors.

Keywords: ecological awareness, Bruno Latour, theatricality, becoming terrestrial, sensory experience, environmental engagement, collective inquiry, participatory theater, ecological subjects, interdependence, political culture, co-evolution

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Scientists and environmentalists over the world have had to face the facts: ecological awareness does not depend on knowledge – or knowledge alone; commitment even less so. The catastrophe can be traced back to the greatest cognitive dissonance of all time. Neither programmatic declaration nor media information is up to the challenge. Citizen, scientific and political activists are multiplying the forms of commitment, without finding one that proves to be efficient. A great deal of research is underway to understand and remodel the links to our regimes of knowledge and communication. Maybe the regimes of theatricality also have to be reviewed.

Like other philosophers, Bruno Latour emphasizes the frontality of these regimes: we have become accustomed to 'Sirius points of view' (Latour 2015, 29-56, 42), those overhanging vantage points that give the illusion of envisioning the problems, and make sight the organ of knowledge *par excellence*. Sight is also the primary organ of the theater – *theatron*, the place from which we see – and of the media. The sociologist's view of the globe, however, is particularly pernicious: we urgently need to abandon the aforementioned perspective, which is unlivable being, strictly speaking, a view from 'nowhere'. We should rather 'land' on Earth, plunge into the world, to apprehend it as the entanglement in which we always already participate, before any idea of a world¹. Latour himself spent a long time thinking about the modalities of 'landing', including in his lecture-performances – which are perfectly based on the frontality of theatre (and the posture of the knowing). In his book *Down to Earth*, he proposes that the main existential and socio-political way to land is to first become 'terrestrial'. After explaining this *conditio sine qua non* of becoming terrestrial, I would like to analyze four theatrical performances that attempt to follow this path, each in its own way, displacing it and opening up new potentialities.

Becoming terrestrial

In *Down to Earth* (the French title is in fact: *Where to land*), Latour looks for a way to take account of the radical reconfiguration of political problems in the wake of global warming. At the crossroads of the local and the global, he proposes to 'define the terrains of life as what a terrestrial depends on for

¹ We know that 'the world' is a polysemic philosophical notion. Environmentally speaking, it could be given today the name of biosphere or critical zone.

survival, while asking what other terrestrial beings are in his or her dependency² (Latour 2017, 120). Becoming terrestrial is therefore a form of inquiry, probing everything that enables us to live. He then suggests everyone to go on by answering the following questions: ‘What do you value most? Who can you live with? Who depends on you for their livelihood? Who will you have to fight against? How do you rank the importance of all these agents? How can we determine all the people and machines that have built our household appliances, the places and hands through which our food has passed? How can we rank all the agents of struggle and life?’³ (Latour 2017, 121).

Such an inquiry cannot be achieved – how can we determine all the people and machines that have built our tools, the places and hands through which our food has passed? How can we rank all the agents of struggle and life *a priori*? But it is a very precious enterprise: it allows us to get a grip on the territory in which we live, and to explore our capacity to act on what we value and should value. In this sense, recognizing our interdependencies means first and foremost recognizing agents: human, institutional or digital agents, non-human agents – water, the soil of agricultural gardens, domestic animals or urban wild-life – and among them, also the non-living agents: food and practical objects such as cars and furniture. We call them ‘agents’ because, for Latour, acknowledging these entities goes hand in hand with acknowledging their agency: they all have the power to act, which can be increased, channeled or decreased, like digital networks or the river studied in *Facing Gaïa* (Latour 2015).

The process of becoming terrestrial thus includes a gathering of data and beings already called for in the article ‘Why has Critique Run Out of Steam – From matters of facts to matters of concern’ (Latour 2023), which contributes to *concern* in addition to critique: gathering means here exploring what we are literally ‘attached’ to, what affects us in more than one sense. Beyond this gathering, agents are invited to be creative in reconfiguring their relationships. Indeed, the act should lead us to ‘innovate by taking advantage of limits’ (Latour 2017, 104) and to make an alliance with what co-constitutes us. Acknowledging networks of agents and alliances can lead to their active development, building on what already exists and the agentic potential of each individual.

2 Translated by Eliane Beaufiles.

3 Translated by Eliane Beaufiles.

Cracks, a sensitive terrestrializing

A first way of inviting the terrestrial on stage can be illustrated by the performance *Cracks*, which was developed by the choreographer Charlotta Ruth for the Earthbound festival at the end of September 2018 (Earthbound being the other translation of terrestrial). It is a research in an urban park in Aarhus, Denmark: everyone is invited to observe their immediate environment, to approach a crack, to contemplate it, to walk along it with their fingers, or to draw its contours, for example with a chalk. Charlotta also gave the participants a notebook so that they could write down a few words or a drawing. The choreography allows time to approach several cracks, on the soil, on the bench, on the tree or the cemented path; everyone can unfold one's observations, and write them down. In a second step, the choreographer invites them to retrace their journey, paying more attention to the overall movement of one's own path. This retracing is more choreographic and places the path and the reflections in a wider environment, in the park, the city, the country. Finally, the participants are called upon to get together in groups of three or four to talk about their discoveries

This small performance is an opportunity for multiple encounters between cracks and humans, and then between humans. I personally never thought of looking at cracks up close. Besides, Denmark is not a country where their presence is obvious. The attention developed during the observation has a somewhat prefigurative dimension with regard to global warming, one could call it educational from this point of view. But it is first linked to an immediate anchoring in the environment, a very situated experience, where one is called to sense everything that goes along with these cracks. One can develop a 'sensual communication' with the cracks (Haraway⁴). Indeed, experiencing the materiality of the wood or the cement is a way to perceive how the materials are linked; how we know the soil we move on and depend on; how we are related to the trees – their cracked bark may also touch us. And in this web of dependencies everything is related to the climate, even the bitumen of the path. It is as if we were extending our members, branching with our arms, rooting with our fingers, in the material body of the world. The becoming terrestrial is at the same

4 Haraway Donna. Lecture at Evergreen College, Viewed on 08 July 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-WQ2JYFwJWU>

time corporeal, imaginative and intellectual, in linking abstract knowledge of warming and chaos, to perception of symptoms.

Looking at cracks has been very unusual. This also makes the perception 'crack', the spectators discover a web of entities surrounding them much larger than they thought of – as is shown by the river for Latour : as soon as you perceive it as an entity, you give it a name, so that the name becomes a web comprising multiple phenomena. But you need not forget all these phenomena, which make a thing. Here, we encounter new entities (cracks), we discover relations, we discover acting, living or transforming materials, and concerns, be they local or planetary.

What's more, this new way of inquiring is enabled by several *practices* = touching, writing, feeling, smelling, imagining the roots and impulses of the crack, moving in an environment where all the materials become palpable and meaningful. *Attention* becomes a performative and reflexive *work* of the terrestrial process. It fosters resonance with the trees, the bench, the grass, and resonance puts an end to the indifferent existence of the thing. It could, depending on the person, be perceived as aesthetic, ethical or anxiety-provoking. But as participants are asked to write and talk about their relationships, the experience clearly goes beyond people's superficial intentions or perceptions. It calls for a work that Andreas Weber calls 'poetic objectivity': it is a self-conscious relating, intuitive, subjective (Weber 2019). This awareness of the experience of relations is necessary and life-giving for the philosopher. It is based on objective experience, but cannot be articulated completely or universally: it is therefore poetic. Indeed, one of the most radical pitfalls of change is a tendency to be satisfied with prior nominations, with definitions of what makes up our world. Usual definitions are objectifying, supposedly rational or even scientific, so that things tend to be reduced to objects in the control of a subject with many relations not being considered. The scientific spirit that the philosopher-biologist knows well reduces objects to characteristics, distinct identities and hinders the personal relationship with reality and its infinite potentialities of meaning and doing. According to him, it is necessary to cultivate forms of reflective observation, attentive to the thing, the relationship and the attention itself. This objective and subjective attention, which finds its language, represents ecological work at its best.

The performance also invites sharing with others. It is a gathering in all senses: co-present, the participants come together, exchange, develop a being-to-

gether as a movement of sensitive meaning, continued poetic objectivity, including meta-objectivity. Eventually the collaboration continues beyond, as participants may choose to leave traces (such as writings, drawings) for others to discover. It is potentially inventive and able to arouse other's creativity.

Devenir forêt/Becoming Forest, by Marina Pirot

In this performance, the spectators face again the practical extensions of becoming terrestrial: the practices of sensation, attention and poetic objectivity. Except that this time, the participants are guided by the performer, and the elaboration of knowledge is more complex. Marina first invites participants into her garden, adjacent to the castle that houses residences for researchers and artists⁵. The garden is part of a former estate, but has not been looked after for many years; weeds grow alongside roses and flowering bushes. Participants are invited to do a gentle physical warm up, to open their rib cages and relax their joints, to feel the fluids flowing through them into their cells. The cellular imagination, kinesthetic perception and proxemics promoted by movement are relayed by reflections on the mitochondria at the heart of our cells⁶. These are found in other forms in plant cells, so that human cells are similar to plants. After this introduction to greenery, participants follow Marina into a piece of forest that has been left to its own devices for a decade; it is fresh and teeming with plants running through the undergrowth. The invigorating breath the spectators are tempted to fill to the point of light-headedness connects everyone with the breathing of the plants, in a shared atmosphere alive with the incessant exchanges between organisms. From breathing, Marina moves on to evoking the skin, our largest sensitive organ, which breathes through every pore and also puts us in vast, immersive contact with the environment. The skin's nerve endings are part of a quasi-autonomous system we call vegetative. Through a few photographic plates showing cells under the microscope, Marina shows us the kinship between the sensitive sensing organs of plants and our neuro-vegetative system. The participants touch the skin of the leaves with their fingers, show them to each other, wander through the forest, continue to exchange air and sensations with each other in a minor, silent mode.

5 The project is called Open Kerminy, and is located in the South of Brittany.

6 The exercises are inspired by Body Mind Centering, the scientific observations are not.

Then they meet up again at the bottom of the woods, where they will learn to probe their respiratory cells, which blossom in a certain way and Marina shows how this resonates with the growth of plants. The experience ends with the reading of an excerpt from Didier van Cauwelaert's book *The hidden emotions of plants* (van Cauwelaert 2018).

In this participatory performance, participants draw constantly on their personal observations and reflections, but it is Marina who has probed the links that unite them with plants and the atmosphere; it is she who has extended her networks of sensors, her readings, to fathom our interweaving with the forest. It is she who enables participants to do the same. This awareness of our interdependence is as much sensitive as it is intellectual; it shifts the mode of inquiry as imagined by Latour, and opens the door even wider to plant-agents. But it still responds to the work of becoming – with the earth, with the organisms that sustain us. This complex work of understanding the living world and the processes that bind entities together or individualize them is, once again, linked to the testing of new knowledge, embodied and reflected. This becoming reinvents a way of being: not only are we far from Sirius's point of view 'immersed in the environment', but we are deeply inscribed in the environment, we are intricately kin-beings. This inscription goes hand in hand with a kind of illumination (Benjamin): Marina combines biological knowledge, reminiscent of school memories, with perceptions, new or old. It is a refreshing and gratifying discovery, and precludes other possible modes of being: acquired knowledge, in this sense past, is combined with a performative present, and a future horizon. This conjunction of past/present/and future is the mark of enlightenment or shock for Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1969), and could also be that of flow, that form of intense presence nourished by all the faculties described by *Mihály Csíkszentmihályi* (Csíkszentmihályi 1996). It may correspond to a 'terrestrial self-discovery'.

The workshop cycle *Où atterrir / Where to land*

The workshop cycle is a more pragmatic example of a real collective effort. Following on from his writings, Latour himself created the *Où atterrir* group, which reinvents one of the historical examples that inspired him: the *cahiers de doléances*, drawn up before the French Revolution, that listed the complaints of the French commoners. The collective called on the inhabitants of several local-

ities to carry out a collective investigation of the problems arising in their area. I will present the cycle of workshops held in Sevran, in the Paris suburbs. The cycle was organized over the course of a year, and culminated in a performance on October 15 and 16, 2022⁷.

Each session was made up of several phases: a somatic phase, with warm-ups and feedbacks between bodies, helping to create a singular space-time and to experience oneself as a group. Then some people summarized the results of an inquiry that was led during the week to find answers to the problem discussed in the former workshop. This was followed by the presentation of a new 'concern' (*concernement*) recognized and put forward by one of the participants; and each session ended with experiments in sound composition.

When talking to residents, the collective defines 'concern' in a very prosaic way, as a 'pebble in the shoe', a problem that arises in everyday life and that we would like to solve: for example, the disappearance of bees, the lack of decent housing opportunities, or the concreting over of the city's last agricultural field. The investigation of the problem is reflected on the Latourian compass: facts and analyses are situated on both a horizontal temporal axis, and a vertical political axis. The sessions are thus built around the concerns and the inquiries, which comprise a more general exploration of the interdependent links between the inhabitants and biotic or abiotic agents of their environment.

The performance-workshop that resulted from the annual cycle of encounters invited the evening's spectators to take part in these different stages of terrestrial inquiry by initiating an investigation. At the same time, they were invited to attend the aesthetic restitutions of the workshops held in Sevran: alternatively to their own collective investigation steps, spectators were invited to listen to polyphonies and thematic sound compositions, to watch videos recounting the results of the annual research, or to talk one by one with a participant in the annual workshop...

This device combines self-learning (as seen in *Cracks*) with the reciprocal learning practiced by Marina. But compared with the previous examples, the relationship to knowledge changes again: it is much less centered on the perceptible, if at all, and much more theoretical. Theoretical knowledge is of two kinds: it is matrixed by socio-political categories and therefore agents that we

⁷ I draw on the study led by the master student Nathan Vaurie, who participated in all the workshops and the final performances during the year 2022.

know or discover as citizens, and it is situated, inscribed in the territory and our experience of it. In all cases, participants, whether annual or occasional, discover themselves as 'a set of relationships and interactions rather than individual and isolated entities' (Posthumus 2014, 15). According to Stephanie Posthumus, this is exactly what characterizes ecological subjects.

Another distinctive feature of this experience is its collective nature. One may recognize a collective dimension at several levels: the inhabitants conduct the investigations together; the evening's spectators also become a group; and the wider Sevrans region, institutions and infrastructures where the surveys are anchored, appear as a collective entity. The terrestrial is thus experienced in the triple Guattarian dimension: environmental, social, as well as psychological and relational (Guattari 2000).

The Democracy of Organisms – Club Real

The fourth device is equally collective and even more processual, potentially spanning years. It was set up in several cities, and I will shortly describe one. The city of Berlin agreed to entrust a small fallow land to the Club Real collective near Osloer Strasse station. With the help of biologists who travelled through the fallow with them, the collective listed about two hundred animal and plant species in 2019. Every six months, by means of urban posters or the Internet, the collective invites the inhabitants to participate in a parliament. People have to go to the wasteland where they are shown the constitution of a democracy. They are invited to be the representatives of the plants and animals living there. Among the spectators, fifteen will sit as parliamentarians to ensure the best possible life on the fallow land. The fifteen species represented are chosen by lot, but ensuring that all the groups of organisms are represented: vertebrates and invertebrates, lichens and grasses, trees and bushes. The human parliamentarians receive sheets on the characteristics of the species they represent, and other species. The history of the sessions is partly available on the project website⁸.

The participants take the trouble to examine what their species might need. For example, the spread of an invasive plant, called an immigrant, can be con-

⁸ ORGANISMS DEMOCRACY. <https://organismendemokratie.org/en/where/berlin-osloer-str/> Viewed on 08 July 2021.

trolled to prevent the disappearance of a particular plant. More often, however, discussions revolve around measures that go beyond the interest of a single species: a watering place is set up in a hollow for the animals on the fallow; the branches of one or more trees are pruned to ensure that the grasses at their foot flourish; discussions with the municipality and the neighbouring company are planned to avoid the purchase of all or part of the wasteland. .

In the case of this device, the spectators once again retrace interdependencies. They try to rearrange them according to an ecological apprehension of the web of relationships on the fallow land. As in the previous example, becoming terrestrial means anchoring oneself in a piece of land to participate in its development. It means redefining one's own position, and the possible actions to be taken. It means relentlessly reconfiguring the reciprocal position of agents on a territory, according to their life interests. Three important features distinguish the democracy from the former examples: the process is never-ending; spectators transcend their own interests and dedicate themselves to the non-human; and the experience includes a form of multispecies design. This democracy can be seen in fact as participatory design. Though, instead of proceeding, as humans so often do, by imposition, it avoids as far as possible to intervene. In this way, everyone also learns to withdraw from the human and the call for the supreme agency: for power. Admittedly, we can criticize this device for remaining deeply anthropocentric, even to the point of speaking for non-humans, but we can observe a real withdrawal of the spectators, who are first and foremost at the service of the ecosystem. And so we can hope that the device represents a new pan-democratic training for places where humans will be much less present, cultivating both their non-presence and their care for all species. Becoming terrestrial, then, means not only reconfiguring the material conditions of life, but reinventing a political culture of non-specialists, uncertain and serious; non-specialists listening and acting, in ceaseless becoming, who reinvent politics as life-commons, even more and much better than Latour himself imagined in his parliaments, and even though these have inspired the Club Real collective.

Conclusion

This study presents four main modalities of becoming terrestrial through theatrical practices: a sensitive and imaginative experience with poetic objectivity;

the embodiment and ‘transversalisation’ of shared scientific knowledge; a collective becoming, situated in a territory and anchored in everyday life; and the co-becoming of an ecosystem giving birth to a new culture of co-evolution.

Thanks to the *practices* of terrestrial becoming, which take the option of probing in depth certain relationships, the spectators can effectively apprehend the intricate interweaving of their lives, in co-evolution with others, human and non-human, living and non-living.

The becoming terrestrial also reveals itself to be becoming in the strongest sense: it is a co-evolving that can redefine modes of co-evolution. The terrestrial practices have an empowering and creative dimension – and this in each of the modalities envisaged.

Indeed, each time, becoming terrestrial is not simply a matter of retracing what binds us together, it is a matter of recreating the interweaving – only the experience of the *Where to land* collective remains little open to proposals for action, and in this way runs the risk of locking those who carry out the survey into an (unfinishable) balance sheet.

The becoming terrestrial has a random dimension, like the development of living things observed on the fallow land or in Marina’s forest. Indeed plants are not just ‘forms that blossom’ (as the philosopher Emanuele Coccia, a gardener, still writes), for plants unfold where they have the best nutrients, or the best partners: they never cease to co-engineer their form and their living conditions, they are inventive. Becoming terrestrial tries to correspond to the development of living things – so that there is no set program.

Rather, becoming terrestrial means developing a ‘*response-ability*’ (Haraway 2016): a consciousness of our thick, ominous present, that is also aware of the potentialities of other presents and has ethical implications. That is why examples of participatory theatres seem, to me, particularly telling: they ‘engage’ with matters, with others, with the non-human, so that the spectators are almost obliged to respond in more than one sense. The audience members may become open to some possibilities, suspended in the free space of art, the experience is powerful: far from being consumable like in the experiential industry, it tends to extend over time because the experiences call for observation, discussion, gestures, the apprehension of relationships; they call for subjectivity. Relationships are living, not fixed, to be lived or died by.

I entitled this study ‘inviting the terrestrial on stage’ rather than becoming terrestrial on stage, because the performances prelude rather than anchor

a longer-term terrestrial becoming; they can prelude engagement in a process that exceeds the purposeless and temporally limited sphere of art, except for the democracy of organisms that combines art and politics. All the examples nonetheless demonstrate the essential part played by the experience made by each individual with others, be they human or non-human. This part has been emphasized by numerous philosophers and psychologists such as Robert Gifford (Gifford 2011, 290-302). The experience of the present anthropocenic crisis is most striking when it is embodied – it is also more plural and open in this case. But it could be fleeting or highly playful in an artistic setting. What is important in these examples is that the spectators' thoughts and bodies are genuinely in motion, that there is some kind of shaking or illumination: this shaking of the subjects is in line with contemporary conceptions of criticism by Jean-Luc Nancy (Nancy 2016), Judith Butler (Butler 2001) and myself in my latest book (Beaufils 2021). For this to happen, bodies need to be situated, interpellated, so that the participatory modality can really make sense by plunging into the turmoil of the Anthropocene and its potentialities.

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