MEDIA OF NATURE AFTER LATOUR

Toward a Media-Anthropological Concept of Nature Through the Anthropology of the Moderns

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Abstract: Recent returns of "nature" in literature, theory, and politics – from nature writing to new materialisms and the Anthropocene debate – have not simply restored an old object to philosophical attention. They have re-opened a question about mediation: by what means does "nature" appear, insist, resist, and intervene in collective life? This essay proposes that Latour is most useful today when read as a theorist of the media of nature. Across We Have Never Been Modern, Pandora's Hope, Politics of Nature, An Inquiry into Modes of Existence and Facing Gaia Latour dismantles the Modern bifurcation of nature and culture and replaces it with an account of heterogeneous associations, chains of reference, and plural modes of existence. Nature, on this view, is neither a mute background nor a metaphysical totality; it is a set of operational mediations through which nonhumans acquire agency without being anthropomorphized. Drawing on media-anthropological perspectives (Christiane Voss's conception of anthropomedial relations and Stefan Rieger's virtuality-theorem), I reconstruct a Latourian concept of nature as a virtual and withdrawing condition that is knowable only through effects – yet effective precisely as withdrawal. A final critical section asks whether attributing agency to nature risks obscuring the specificity of human praxis. I argue for a non-foundational, media-operative concept of nature: nature does not ground practice, but destabilizes its self-description, enabling a politics of composition without recourse to transcendental Nature.

Keywords: Bruno Latour; media anthropology; nature; mediation; political ecology.

The contemporary "return of nature" is not a nostalgic re-enchantment. It is a symptom of a crisis in the Modern settlement that used to separate, with remarkable confidence, culture and nature, meaning and matter, technique and world. Climate change, biodiversity collapse, and toxic infrastructures have made it increasingly difficult to keep "nature" in the background as a passive stage. At the same time, many

cultural and theoretical currents – nature writing and "new nature writing," ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and the various "new materialisms" – have insisted that nonhuman processes participate in shaping human history and perception. When theorists speak of "vibrant matter," "hyperobjects," or the species-history entanglements of the Anthropocene, they register a mismatch between inherited categories and the present experience of ecological and technological interdependence.[1]

Yet the decisive point is that "nature" reappears not as an immediately given entity but as a problem of access and articulation. For the contemporary imagination, nature is encountered through sensors and satellites, models and maps, museum specimens and genetic databases, water infrastructures and media images. Even the most intimate experiences of landscape, weather, and animal life are increasingly organized by technical and cultural dispositifs: trail apps, wildfire alerts, pollution indices, "smart" agriculture, and the data regimes of conservation. The return of nature is, therefore, also the return of mediation as an explicit issue. We are not asked to "go back" to nature; we are asked how nature becomes present at all, and how its presence changes the conditions of politics and knowledge.

Latour matters here because his anthropology of the Moderns is, at its core, a critique of the Moderns' mediatic self-misunderstanding.[2] The Moderns have not been wrong because they used media; they have been wrong because they made media disappear behind purified categories. When Latour opens *We Have Never Been Modern*,[3] he is describing the media-form of contemporary reality as an entanglement that resists disciplinary purification: «All of culture and all of nature get churned up again every day.»:[4] The daily newspaper is a medium that exposes that the Modern constitution is performative: it can only maintain the separation of nature and society by constantly cutting the threads that connect them. In other words, the nature question is, for Latour,

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[1] Jane BENNETT, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2010; Timothy MORTON, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2013.; Dipesh CHAKRABARTY, *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, "Critical Inquiry", 35, 2, 2009, pp. 197-222.

[2] See Henning SCHMIDGEN, *Bruno Latour in Pieces: An Intellectual Biography*, Fordham University Press, New York 2015.

[3] Bruno LATOUR, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1993, p. 2.

[4] *Ibid.*

a question about the operations that make a nature-culture split possible at all, and about the alternative operations that could make other collectives possible.

Media anthropology,[5] as I argue, adds a decisive emphasis: nature becomes a limit-case within the Nature/Culture-entanglement: it is what insists through media and against media, what conditions media, and what appears only in and as mediated effects, but is only addressable as a virtual opacity: Nature as that which interrupts totalization – an virtual unavailability that becomes sensible only through concrete operational effects.

The following sections therefore pursue a guiding question: How useful is Latour for a contemporary, explicitly media-philosophical and media-anthropological concept of nature? I proceed in three steps. Section 1 reconstructs the relevant trajectory through Latour's works and shows how they can be read as an account of the media of nature. Section 2 develops the Latourian framework through media-anthropological work on anthropomedial relations and virtuality (Voss, Rieger) and addresses key gaps in Latourian onto-epistemology (praxis, power, political contingency). Section 3 concludes by summarizing the article's main findings and by restating what a media-anthropological concept of nature can inherit from Latour without reinstalling Nature as foundation.

1. Latour and the Media of Nature: From Hybrids to Modes of Existence

1.1. We Have Never Been Modern: Hybrids, Purification, and the Parliament of Things

We Have Never Been Modern (1991/1993) is not simply a critique of modernity; it is a manual for re-describing the Moderns as an anthropological collective. Latour's wager is that the Moderns have never managed to live according to the distinctions they officially proclaim. Their public ontology is organized by what Latour calls a "Modern Constitution," which guarantees the separation of Nature and Society while allowing – indeed requiring – the proliferation of hybrids through science, technology, and politics.

The opening scene is famous because it is so ordinary: reading the newspaper, Latour encounters ozone chemistry, industrial decisions, treaties, meteorology,

[5] See ZMK, *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturtechnikforschung 1:13 (2013): Medienanthropologie.*

elections, and moral claims in one continuous thread. The point is not that "everything is connected" as a vague holism. The point is that a single issue (the ozone hole) appears only as a networked mediation: instruments, companies, atmospheric processes, policies, and public controversies co-produce what counts as the issue. The Modern Constitution tries to purify this entanglement into separate domains ("science" versus "politics"), but the entanglement returns as the very condition of the event. Latour's key claim is methodological: if the world is made of such entanglements, analysis must follow translations rather than begin with predefined domains.

Latour describes the Modern Constitution by staging a canonical scene: Boyle's experimental objects and Hobbes's political subjects. Modernity, for Latour, does not simply discover "nature" and "society"; it invents an arrangement that keeps them separate in principle while connecting them in practice. The Moderns can therefore do two things at once: multiply mediations (laboratories, technologies, markets, legal devices) and deny mediation by claiming that nature is purely objective and society purely constructed. The concept of purification names the denial; the concept of translation names the practical work. This double language is a productive strategy that allowed modern collectives to expand.

The concept of the quasi-object clarifies why nature cannot be a pre-given outside. A quasi-object is neither a pure natural object nor a pure social construction; it is the "object-discourse-nature-society" that gains properties through collective practice.[6] Quasi-objects are media-like: they circulate, they connect heterogeneous actors, and they demand representation. Their reality is not less real for being mediated; it is more real because it is stabilized by multiple mediations.

For a media-anthropological nature concept, *We Have Never Been Modern* offers two decisive moves. First, it reframes "nature" as the effect of purification operations rather than as an ontological given. Nature is what the Moderns invoke to close controversies by appealing to "facts" that supposedly stand outside politics. Second, it proposes a nonmodern constitution that makes mediation explicit. Latour insists that the task is not to invent hybridity but to "ratify in public what is already happening":[7] to acknowledge that collectives are composed of humans and nonhumans and that their hybrids must be regulated in daylight, not proliferated clandestinely.

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[6] LATOUR, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 142.
[7] *Ivi*, p. 143.

This proposal anticipates a media-philosophical point: every constitution is also a media-constitution, because it organizes what can appear, who can speak, and what counts as evidence. The Modern Constitution is a regime of visibility that hides its own mediations. The nonmodern constitution would instead expose the mediations by which nature becomes a political actor. In this sense, the "parliament of things" should be understood as a procedural demand for media-literacy about the infrastructures of representation.

1.2. Pandora's Hope: Circulating Reference and the Materiality of Objectivity

Pandora's Hope (1999) deepens the argument by focusing on the reality of scientific practice. Here Latour confronts the suspicion – common in the "science wars" – that emphasizing construction undermines realism. His counterclaim is that science studies does not subtract reality from science but adds reality to it by making visible the work that produces objectivity. The question "Do you believe in reality?" becomes a symptom of an implausible picture of knowledge as immediate access to an "outside" world.

For the media of nature, the crucial chapter is "Circulating Reference." Latour follows a field expedition in the Amazon and reconstructs how soil samples, inscriptions, maps, photographs, and reports form a reversible chain. The key point is that reference is not *adequatio rei et intellectus* but the quality of the chain as a whole: truth-value circulates as long as the circuit is maintained.[8] Reference is thus explicitly medial: it depends on translations between media (soil, paper, numbers, diagrams) and on reversibility. The "world" is not on one side and "language" on the other; rather, the chain grows from the middle outward, producing both "world" and "language" as stabilized poles. This helps clarify why ecological facts are inseparable from the infrastructures that circulate them: from measurement practices to public controversies.

Pandora's Hope also offers an explicit alternative to subject-object metaphysics. Latour writes that the goal is not to "extend subjectivity to things" but "to avoid using the subject-object distinction at all" when describing the folding of humans and

[8] See ID., *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1999, p. 82.

nonhumans.[9] This resonates strongly with media anthropology. If media anthropology studies how media co-produce forms of subjectivity and world-relation, Latour adds that these forms are inseparable from nonhuman mediators. "Boeing 747s do not fly, airlines fly"[10] is a compact formula for distributed agency: action belongs to institutions and apparatuses, not to isolated humans or objects.

In terms of nature, the same holds. A forest does not become an ecological entity by itself; it becomes an ecological actor through the apparatuses that connect it to publics and institutions: measurement stations, conservation regimes, legal categories, media images, and indigenous practices. Nature's agency is thus not a mysterious interior force but a distributed capacity to modify trajectories within collectives. The "media of nature" are precisely those dispositifs that allow nonhumans to enter into circuits of reference and into procedures of political composition.

1.3. *Politics of Nature*: Letting Go of Nature and Composing the Collective

Politics of Nature (1999/2004) radicalizes the issue by attacking the political function of nature as a unified transcendence. Latour's thesis is provocative: "political ecology... has to let go of nature".[11] The paradox is that political ecology seems to be precisely about nature. Latour argues, however, that the modern concept of Nature (singular, totalized, and invoked as an unquestionable authority) is what has historically hampered public discourse. Nature, in this sense, is a political operator: it allows one to close debate by claiming that "facts" have already decided the matter.

Latour's critique targets the "myth of the cave":[12] the idea that Science speaks for a reality outside politics and thus can settle disputes. In ecological controversies, this myth becomes especially dangerous because it produces a pseudo-consensus that bypasses democratic composition. Latour's alternative is to distinguish "Science" (capital S, as an authority) from the sciences (plural, as practices) and to bring the sciences into democracy. The aim is not to politicize facts in the sense of relativism but to politicize the procedures by which facts and values are assembled. Here Latour's earlier

[9] *Ivi*, p. 194.
[10] *Ivi*, p. 193.
[11] ID., *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2004, p. 9.
[12] *Ivi*, p. 14.

"parliament of things" becomes a detailed institutional program. When it comes to determining a non-dualistic relationship between nature, culture, technology, and society, Latour believes it is important to avoid thinking about the boundary relationships between the respective entities "in the form of ignorance, conquest, or war".[13] What Latour proposes instead is the figure of the diplomat, who negotiates boundary relations and thus keeps them open for further revision. Politics is thus not a sphere alongside nature, culture, technology, and society, but becomes the modus operandi for the emergence of hybrid collectives that cannot be reduced to a single sphere, but in which all spheres are gradually and proportionally involved.[14]

The key concept is the collective: the arena in which humans and nonhumans are assembled "according to due process".[15] Instead of dividing reality into nature and society, Latour proposes to redistribute capacities: speech, action, and recalcitrance. Nonhumans do not speak like humans, but they can be represented through spokespersons whose reliability must be tested. Latour insists that the task is to learn to be skeptical of all spokespersons, human and nonhuman alike.[16] This is important for avoiding anthropocentrism, since the danger not solely lies in excluding nonhumans, but also in including them in a way that is merely ventriloquism.

If *We Have Never Been Modern* provides the critique of the Modern Constitution, and *Politics of Nature* provides a political proposal, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (AIME, 2012/2013) supplies Latour's most systematic metaphysical framework. The project is explicitly defined as "an anthropology of the Moderns," but it is also a pluralist metaphysics of modes. The key idea is that existence is not one uniform ontological domain. Different beings persist through different "passes" and "hiatuses," each with its own felicity conditions and its own form of veridiction.

1.4. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*: Chains, Hiatuses, and the Metaphysics of Mediation

For the media of nature, AIME is crucial in two respects. First, it offers a refined account of reference as a chain of mediations. Latour defines "chains of reference" as

[13] *Ivi*, p. 212.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ivi*, p. 8.
[16] *Ivi*, p. 62.

trajectories "tiled and covered over" with "immutable mobiles".[17] The oxymoron is instructive: the chain achieves mobility through transformations that preserve certain constants. What matters for nature is that this chain "would not be clarified in the least" by inserting a "human mind" into it.[18] And, in a phrase that reads almost as a manifesto for media philosophy: "Without mediation, no access."[19] Nature, as an object of knowledge, is thus always mediated; but mediation is not a veil that hides nature. Mediation is the very means by which remote beings become accessible.

AIME introduces the figure of Double Click, the Evil Genius of the Moderns. Double Click is the fantasy of "displacement without transformations,"[20] of immediate access to information without mediation. This is an epistemological as well as a political and ecological fantasy. When the Moderns treat nature as a set of indisputable facts, they are acting as if ecological propositions could be "double-clicked" into politics without translation. The result is the familiar stalemate: either technocracy (facts decide) or romantic relativism (values decide). Latour's pluralism of modes offers a third way: different modes have different conditions of truth and different ways of unfolding and folding. Nature, in this sense, cannot be reduced to the mode of reference alone, because reference does not describe how beings persist. First and foremost, it pertains to how knowledge extends.

The most provocative question for a media-anthropological nature concept is therefore the following question: can "nature" itself be understood as a mode of existence in Latour's sense? Or is "nature" rather the name for a modern operation that obscures modes and crossings by imposing a singular background? Latour's own answer, especially in *Politics of Nature*, suggests the latter: nature (singular) is a political-epistemological shortcut. But AIME also opens another possibility: we can treat what used to be called "nature" as a bundle of modes and crossings that have been wrongly unified. The beings of reproduction, for example, describe how lineages persist through discontinuities; the beings of technology describe detours and foldings; the beings of metamorphosis describe crises and transformations; and the beings of reference describe the costly extension of knowledge through inscriptions. If "nature" names

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[17] ID., *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2013, pp. 76–77.
[18] *Ivi*, p. 77.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ivi*, p. 93.

anything today, it would be the practical and conceptual challenge of arranging these modes without collapsing them into a single ontological plane.

In the conclusion of AIME, Latour explicitly links this to the Anthropocene and to Gaia: the Moderns could survive "a nature indifferent to their projects," but are unsettled when "Nature ceases to be indifferent" and becomes "sensitive... to their weight".[21] The sentence is striking because it indicates that what returns is not a stable Nature but an entangled system of feedback loops. Nature, here, is a relational operator that forces a reconfiguration of institutions, modes, and political categories. For media anthropology, this means that nature is encountered as a medial drift: a series of unintended effects that emerge through the very media of modern life – energy infrastructures, industrial agriculture, data-driven logistics, and the global circulation of images and models.

This suggests a further, specifically media-philosophical interpretation: nature is not simply one more "actor" that enters the collective, but the name for the operation by which collectives become readable as contingent. In moments of ecological crisis, what is revealed is not a hidden substance called Nature, but the fragility of the alignments that make everyday continuity possible. AIME's diagnosis of Double Click is relevant in this context because it describes how stable mediations veil their own costs until a breakdown forces a "restart." Latour notes that the error is not trusting smooth functioning, but "slip[ping] unwittingly from omission to forgetting".[22] Ecological disruption functions similarly: as long as infrastructures work, nature seems like a silent background; when they fail, nature appears as the unavailability-effect that exposes how much mediation was required for "normality." In this sense, nature is virtual: it is real as the capacity to produce unforeseen drifts, yet it cannot be captured as a determinate ground. It is accessible only through the effects whose "impossible cause" it is, and it withdraws precisely insofar as it insists. The media of nature are therefore not just scientific inscriptions, but also the operational couplings that make some possibilities viable and others impossible: energy grids, food chains, legal thresholds, and bodily vulnerabilities. A Latourian inheritance, revised through media anthropology, should treat these couplings as the site where nature becomes legible without becoming a new metaphysical envelope.

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[21] *Ivi*, p. 485.
[22] *Ivi*, p. 275.

1.5. *Facing Gaia*: Earthbound Politics and the End of Nature as Arbiter

With *Facing Gaia*,[23] Latour shifts the register of his project. The conceptual grammar of mediation and composition remains, but the tone changes: urgency, geohistory, war, and territory move to the center. For the question of the media of nature, this book is indispensable because it shows how Latour transforms the earlier politics of nature under conditions of climate crisis, while simultaneously exposing tensions – especially in his strategic recourse to Carl Schmitt – that should be, as shall be argued, critically reworked.

The first decisive move in *Facing Gaia* is Latour's insistence that Gaia is not nature in the modern sense – and that the modern sense is itself a very specific political-epistemic arrangement, not a neutral name for "everything that is".[24] Nature, for Latour, is shorthand for the "nature/culture"[25] operator: a historically produced distribution of roles that makes nature look like the "unmarked category"[26] or self-evident background against which culture (values, interests, perspectives) appears as the contested foreground. That is why, early on, he proposes to "link the two typographically by referring to Nature/Culture",[27] precisely to prevent nature from functioning as the tacit, unquestionable baseline.

Reconstructed this way, nature is not merely a set of entities (trees, oceans, climates) but a normative foundation that modern societies have repeatedly used to stabilize disagreement.[28] Latour shows this in two intertwined registers. First, in the familiar moral-juridical register of human nature and natural law where "the adjective 'natural'quietly becomes a synonym for what is 'moral,' 'legal,' or 'respectable'".[29] What Latour wants to show is that invoking "nature" becomes a technique for converting a disputed practical question into something that ought not to be disputed – a way of presenting a controversial norm as if it were simply how things are. This is

[23] ID., *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2017.
[24] *Ivi*, p. 93.
[25] *Ivi*, p. 16.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Ivi*, p. 20ff.
[29] *Ivi*, p. 20.

why he remarks that, in practice, "it is as though common sense had fused the statements *de facto* and *de jure*."[30]

Second – and more important for understanding nature as the modern court of appeal – Latour argues that even the supposedly value-free scientific invocation of the natural world carries a powerful, if indirect, normativity. Epistemology tells us that the natural world "cannot dictate to humans what they must do" and that "axiological neutrality"[31] should keep facts from turning into prescriptions. But Latour's claim is that this neutrality works socially only because it smuggles in a demanding moral discipline of its own: "Here is a very powerful moral requirement: the one according to which one must *abstain* completely from moral judgment if one wants to take the full measure of the reality of what is!".[32]

And the moment "brute facts"[33] enter an argument as brute, they often enter to end the argument – enforcing what Latour calls "the paradox of the invocation of 'nature': a formidable prescriptive charge conveyed by what is not supposed to possess any prescriptive dimension."[34] Nature, in this modern sense, becomes the name for an authority that can interrupt politics by declaring that the matter has been settled by the facts and therefore obscuring that brute facts

> are only the final results of very complex assemblages that allow reliable witnesses to validate the testimony of laboratory tests. These assemblages are in no way contained in the word "fact" – unless one remembers its etymology. Isolated, left to its own devices, cut off from its network of practices, a "matter of fact" is a weak injunction, too readily ignored. It *maintains* its indisputability only if support teams accompany it throughout its career.[35]

Latour ties this epistemic authority to a deeper picture of modern objectivity: Nature served as the normative ground for both law and science because it was imagined as a domain without man, and thus without perspective, interest, or disputable intention. The power of this subjectless nature is precisely that it can appear as a higher tribunal standing outside social conflict – what everyone can, in principle, appeal to because it

[30] *Ivi*, p. 21.
[31] *Ivi*, p. 22.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] *Ivi*, p. 23.
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] *Ivi*, p. 164.

supposedly belongs to no one. In this sense, the modern settlement does not merely separate facts and values; it authorizes a specific political choreography in which nature can be invoked as an "unchallenged arbiter".[36]

Once nature can no longer function as the shared, external foundation – once it is no longer the unquestionable background, nor the final court of appeal – ecological disputes cannot be narrated as if neutral facts on one side simply ended politics on the other. They have to be treated as conflicts over how to compose a common world without a supreme arbiter – precisely the space in which Gaia, for Latour, becomes a new (and explicitly non-pacifying) figure: "Gaia is not a kindly figure of unification".[37] Latour refuses the temptation to replace the modern abstraction of Nature with a new ecological One. Gaia names not a harmonious totality but a conflictual multiplicity of interdependent agencies, feedback loops, and asymmetrical consequences. For media anthropology, this implies that nature can no longer function as a final, silent background; it appears through distributed procedures of sensing, modeling, inscription, and political conflict.

At this point *Facing Gaia* becomes especially relevant for media anthropology. The Earth system does not appear as an immediately present whole. It is accessed through highly mediated scientific infrastructures: sensors, models, historical reconstructions, statistical syntheses, simulation platforms, and transnational institutions. Yet these mediations do not produce a view from nowhere. They produce situated capacities to become sensitive to what Latour calls Gaia's sensitivity. The sciences are not elevated to the role of sovereign third party. Instead, they become among the parties that make new agencies and dependencies perceptible. The question is never simply whether the facts are there; it is how chains of instruments, models, institutions, and publics make earth processes enter situations of decision, hesitation, and conflict. In a striking passage, Latour characterizes "earthbound scientists"[38] not as neutral arbiters but as participants representing agents otherwise voiceless in geopolitical conflict. Those scientists

> are embodied creatures. They form a people. They have enemies. They belong to the territory outlined by their instruments. Their knowledge extends as far as their ability to finance, to control, to maintain the sensors that make the consequences of their actions

[36] ID., *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, p. 23.
[37] *Ivi*, p. 142.
[38] *Ivi*, p. 252.

> visible. They have no scruples about acknowledging the existential drama in which they are engaged. They dare to say how afraid they are, and from their viewpoint such fear *increases* the quality of their science rather than *diminishing* it.[39]

The conceptual gain here is substantial. Latour extends the argument of *Pandora's Hope* from local chains of reference to planetary-scale infrastructures of sensitivity. The media of nature has become explicitly geohistorical and political: Earth observation, climate modelling, legal conferences, territorial mapping, and diplomatic staging are not external add-ons but constitutive operations through which Gaia becomes a matter of collective orientation. In this sense, *Facing Gaia* radicalizes the thesis that nature is accessible only through mediation while also insisting that mediation now entails conflict, alignment, and stakes of subsistence.

At the same time, the book's political vocabulary introduces serious problems. Latour repeatedly frames the current ecological condition in terms of war, enemy designation, and the absence of a neutral arbiter. He does so, notoriously, by invoking a "proper dosage"[40] of Carl Schmitt. The strategic aim is understandable: to repoliticize ecology against the fantasy that nature can pacify conflict from above. Latour wants to show that ecological disputes concern forms of life, territory, and coexistence, not merely technocratic management. In this sense, his Schmittian detour is polemical and diagnostic.

Still, the risks are real. Even where Latour carefully distances himself from Schmitt's authoritarian decisionism and explicitly criticizes the reduction of politics to leader-centric exception, the Schmittian framing threatens to overcode ecological conflict in friend/enemy terms and to underplay the democratic productivity of indeterminacy, institutional mediation, and symbolic conflict. The danger is not simply guilt by association, but rather a conceptual imbalance: war metaphors can obscure the difference between acknowledging conflict and absolutizing antagonism.

From a media-anthropological perspective, this explains where *Facing Gaia* is both most powerful and most fragile. Its strongest contribution is to show that the end of nature as arbiter forces a new politics of mediated sensitivity, territorial articulation, and distributed agency. Its weakest point is the temptation to secure this insight through a politico-theological dramatization that risks narrowing the plurality of forms in which

[39] *Ibid.*
[40] *Ivi*, p. 220.

ecological conflict can be institutionalized. For the present essay, *Facing Gaia* is therefore a hinge text. It demonstrates the contemporary urgency of Latour's project, especially for understanding how ecological processes enter politics via scientific and technical mediation. The key point to consider from *Facing Gaia* is therefore not a Schmittianization of ecology, but a rigorous account of how Earth becomes politically operative through mediated visibility, distributed agency, and contested composition. It also compels a critical reconstruction of the politics of nature – one that preserves conflict and non-neutrality without surrendering democratic contingency. This reconstruction will be sketched in section 4.6. through a turn from Schmitt to Lefort.

2. Media Anthropology after Latour: Completing a Concept of Nature through Mediation, Virtuality, and Contingency

Latour alone does not yield a full media anthropology of nature. His analyses of mediation, translation, and composition are extraordinarily fertile, but they require articulation with theories that explicitly address the anthropological and medial constitution of relationality. At this point, two current approaches from (German) media anthropology by Christiane Voss and Stefan Rieger can be brought into play in order to further develop Latour's conceptual impulses at the level of systematic theory formation. Read together with Latour, they make it possible to sharpen the concept of nature as mediality (Voss) and virtuality (Rieger) without relapsing into either anthropocentric exceptionalism or a flattened ontology of generalized agency.

This need for articulation has been repeatedly noted in German-language debates at the intersection of Latourian ANT and media theory. For example, the ZMK editorial on ANT and media describes the ANT reception in media theory as attractive in part because it promises, as the editors Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert elaborate, an exit from the stale opposition between sociology and technological materialism (see ZMK 2/2013; 7). In a similar spirit, Lars Gertenbach and Henning Laux emphasize that the media-theoretical reception of Latour turns on mediatization and mediation rather than on a narrow concept of media objecthood, and that this very shift invites a re-description of how technical, social, and epistemic processes co-vary.[41] This also allows to situate the transition from ANT to the modes-of-existence project. Henning Laux has

[41] Lars GERTENBACH, Henning LAUX (eds.), *Zur Aktualität von Bruno Latour*, Springer, Wiesbaden 2019, p. 84f.

aptly described AIME as Latour's "difference-theoretical turn".[42] For the present essay, that phrase indicates that Latour's later work does not abandon mediation, but multiplies and specifies the regimes, veridictions, and practical constraints through which mediation operates. The question of nature's mediality can thus be reformulated across, rather than against, the shift from networks to modes and media operations.

2.1. Christiane Voss: Anthropomedial Relations

Christiane Voss's media-philosophical and media-anthropological work is an important interlocutor for Latour because it reframes the problem of "the human" and media as a question of "anthropomedial relations and entanglements".[43] Instead of taking media as external instruments used by already constituted subjects, Voss asks how human forms of perception, action, and self-relation are constituted in and through medial arrangements. The shift is subtle but decisive: it moves inquiry from substances to operations, from what something is to how and where relational configurations are enacted.

Voss explicitly formulates a relational priority that resonates strongly with Latour's anti-substantialist ontology. Anthropomediality "grants primacy to the relations over the relata".[44] This means that entities become determined only within relationing practices and relational positions. Such a claim is highly relevant for the concept of nature. If relations are primary in this operational sense, then nature cannot be treated as a self-identical block standing outside culture and technique. It becomes legible as a relatum that is constituted, transformed, and made efficacious through relational articulations – without thereby being reducible to human projection.

Voss is particularly helpful because she combines this relational primacy with a form of "weak anthropocentrism",[45] a reflexive anthropological situatedness. Human beings remain a necessary point of articulation, not as sovereign center, but because the very description of decentering occurs from within human practices of perception, language,

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[42] Henning LAUX (eds.), *Bruno Latours Soziologie der Existenzweisen*, transcript, Bielefeld 2016, p. 9.

[43] Christiane VOSS, *Existing in Motion: Foundations for a Philosophical Media Anthropology*, in Lorenz ENGELL – Tim OTHOLD – Christiane VOSS (eds.), *Anthropologies of Entanglements Media and Modes of Existence*, Bloomsbury, London 2023, pp. 15-31, p. 19.

[44] *Ivi*, p. 25.

[45] *Ivi*, p. 24.

and media use. It is exactly this balance that can be considered beneficial for a post-Latourian media anthropology. A purely anti-anthropocentric rhetoric can become performatively blind to the fact that de-centering is always enacted through concrete mediations in which humans remain implicated. Voss's anthropomedial perspective allows for preserving this reflexivity.

Especially instructive is Voss's attention to relationing as an event of configuration rather than the mere connection of preexisting units. In this perspective, one can ask, allowing a margin for speculation, whether nature is best thought not as one relatum among others, but as a name for the irreducible dimension of relational productivity itself – provided that this productivity is not hypostatized into a metaphysical substance. Here the old distinction between natura naturata and natura naturans becomes newly suggestive. If we read natura naturans not as a hidden totality but as the autopoietic productivity of processes of entanglement, then nature could function as a cipher for this productivity whose effects exceed dichotomizing descriptions. Voss's framework formulates such productivity without dissolving into mystical holism: relationing remains situational, mediated, and analyzable.

This allows a productive continuation of Latour's project of modes of existence. AIME disaggregates the modern category called nature into plural modes and crossings. Voss adds a relational-theoretical precision: what appears as a mode, a crossing, or a collective may be re-described as a historically and technically conditioned relationing event in which entities acquire determinations and agencies. From this angle, Latour's collective and Voss's anthropomedial relation converge in a shared refusal of substantialism – while Voss contributes a sharper account of how mediation constitutes the standpoint from which decentering is registered at all. Anthropomediality therefore offers a grammar for specifying what AIME leaves relatively open at the anthropological level: how human modes of existence are co-shaped by media operations without presupposing either a sovereign subject or a technological determinism.

2.2. Stefan Rieger: The Genealogy of Human Virtuality

Stefan Rieger's *Cybernetic Anthropology* (*Kybernetische Anthropologie,* 2003) offers a second, equally important extension of Latour for media anthropology. Its relevance lies in the way it reconstructs a genealogy of virtuality that precedes digital

media and is rooted in anthropological, physiological, and cybernetic discourses. Rieger's central thesis is that the human becomes describable through image-, time-, and control-relations; virtuality is not a late digital add-on but a structural feature of anthropological self-description:

> Human beings are creatures who, because of their constitutive virtuality, are always already different and always already other, who are always already oriented toward something, something that is called a military target, a physiological teleology, a holistic perception in psychological terms, or simply an intention or purpose in trivial psychological terms. In order to encounter humans in the full semantic range of this word, one must have access to the coordinates of their movement data in space, one must extrapolate into the space of a future, one must make them the subject of a prognosis, one must take into account the fact that humans are never themselves, but always already anticipate themselves and are different.[46]

Several aspects of Rieger's argument are especially significant for the present topic. First, Rieger shows that modern anthropologies often define the human through image-dependence, projection, anticipation, and mediated self-relation. The human appears as a being that relates to itself and its environment through imagined images, virtual movement drafts, and temporally shifted regulatory operations. This directly destabilizes the classical opposition between human spirit and natural environment. If human world-relation is constitutively virtual and technically inflected, then the human cannot simply be placed on one side of the nature/technology divide.

Second, Rieger's linkage of anthropology and cybernetics undercuts the separation of nature and culture at the level of epistemic forms. Concepts such as regulation, feedback, self-steering, and environment circulate across biological, technical, and anthropological discourses. Rieger's historical reconstruction – by tracing how operational figures such as feedback, regulation, environment, target, prognosis migrate between physiology, military science, psychology, and engineering – makes visible how distinctions between the natural and the artificial become porous when one follows operational figures rather than disciplinary boundaries. This is highly compatible with Latour's critique of purification, but it adds historical depth and media-theoretical specificity.

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[46] Stefan RIEGER, *Kybernetische Anthropologie: Eine Geschichte der Virtualität*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 2003, p. 239.

Third, Rieger's treatment of virtuality provides a key resource for rethinking nature in non-substantialist terms. If virtuality names not unreality but a mode of prefiguration, regulation, and potentiality operative in world-contact, then nature can no longer be equated with immediate presence. Rieger's analyses repeatedly suggest that no world-contact is possible without virtuality: "Without virtuality, there is no contact with the world; without contact with the world, the distinction between natural and artificial worlds is therefore also invalid."[47] Such a thesis can be translated into the present argument as follows: nature is not what lies beyond mediation; nature becomes thinkable as that which is operative in and through virtualizing mediations, including those that constitute human perception and action. Rieger's point is not that the human is unreal, but that human self-relation is structurally anticipatory, projected, and technically mediated. In that sense, virtuality names a constitutive condition of anthropological description itself: being human means being always already decentered by his own virtuality.

This is where Rieger can push Latour further: if Latour deconstructs the modern opposition between human subjects and natural objects at the level of collectives, Rieger shows how the human pole of that opposition is internally destabilized by virtuality: This proposition is particularly powerful for a media-anthropological concept of nature. It suggests that the distinction natural/artificial is secondary to the conditions of world contact. Nature, understood as virtuality in the sense developed here, would then designate neither the opposite of mediation nor a hidden substrate behind media, but the irreducible excess and enabling condition of mediated world-contact itself. A common misunderstanding of Latour can then be avoided. Latour's redistribution of agency is sometimes read as if it simply flattens all actors onto a single plane. Rieger's genealogy complicates this by showing how different media-technological and anthropological regimes produce distinct forms of virtuality, asymmetry, and control. In other words, not every relation is equivalent; the medial constitution of relations matters. A Latourian media anthropology enriched by Rieger can therefore remain anti-essentialist without becoming indifferent to the historical forms through which agencies are organized and made visible.

[47] *Ivi*, p. 500.

2.3. Nature as Relatum or Cipher of Relationality Itself?

Bringing Voss and Rieger into dialogue with Latour permits a more precise formulation of the essay's central question: can nature be thought of as an existence mode in Latour's sense, or does nature name something like the excess that makes modes and collectives contingent? A first answer, compatible with Latour, would insist that nature should be decomposed into analyzable modes, chains, and collectives. On this view, nature as a unified term is mostly a residue of the modern constitution. A second answer, suggested by Voss and Rieger, would nuance this decomposition by arguing that nature remains a necessary index of the productive and unavailable dimension of relationality itself. Nature would then denote neither an ontological substrate nor a mode among others, but the fact that processes of medialization generate effects, drifts, and constraints irreducible to the self-descriptions of the phenomena involved.

This second answer can be formulated in a media-anthropological way. Nature is an unavailable relatum of relation insofar as every relational configuration (technical, symbolic, bodily, institutional) presupposes and produces excesses it cannot fully command and signify. But nature may also function as a cipher for relationality as such (natura naturans in a post-metaphysical, operational autopoietic sense). In this framework, nature names the generativity and opacity of medialization that become tangible only in its effects.

Latour can be carried further by Rieger here because Rieger's virtuality concept is suitable to describe how such effects are operative before and beyond explicit thematization. And Latour can be carried further by Voss because her concept of anthropomedial relations makes it explicit that decentering is itself a mediated event of description and self-transformation. The human is not simply displaced by nonhumans; it is re-situated within processes that exceed it. This excess can be addressed as nature. Being marked by nature thus also means that the dimension of uncontrollability and unavailability does not disappear when it is explicitly addressed by epistemic engagement with it since nature is the very force limiting and deforming any epistemic scope in the first place.

Nature decenters the human precisely as the condition that cannot be fully presented as an object yet keeps producing consequential effects – feedback loops, thresholds, delays, drifts – that force collective re-articulation. Concrete examples of nature as a

"condition" illustrate this structure.[48] (1) Climate models function as media that render atmospheric dynamics politically present, yet the climate system remains unavailable as a controllable whole: policy acts under conditions (carbon budgets, tipping points) that are knowable only through mediated projections. (2) Water and heat operate as conditions of media infrastructures themselves: data centers, semiconductor fabrication, and energy grids are materially conditioned by hydrological cycles and ambient temperatures; drought or heat waves become media events because they reconfigure what infrastructures can do. (3) Wildfire smoke and airborne particulates act as bodily conditions that force new forms of perception and public regulation; nature becomes present as a respiratory, sensory, and legal constraint. (4) Soil ecologies condition agriculture and thus political economy, but their efficacy appears mainly as latency and delay (depletion, loss of microbial diversity) that manifests through effects rather than through an immediately present "thing." In all these cases, nature is a withdrawing condition that co-produces the field in which action is possible at all while at the same time obscuring its own operational "nature" and keeping it latent in the face of efforts to make it transparent or to view it as an epistemic object or project. Nature is the operative background that becomes visible when it interrupts continuity and the tangibility of phenomena.

2.4. Critical Discussion: Agency, Praxis, and Political Contingency

In order to better define the scope of a media anthropology grounded in a post-Latourian framework, the following discussion will address two critiques of Latour: first, a critique from the perspective of action theory regarding Latour's understanding of agency; second, a sociological critique of the scope of a "parliament of things." This allows, on the one hand, for a more detailed examination of Latour's ANT and, on the other, for a more precise demonstration of what constitutes the media-anthropological perspective of Latour. This ultimately enables Latour's project of a politics of nature. In contrast to Latour, an understanding of the political is put forward that certainly also takes its starting point in an understanding of contingency and conflict, but does not reify either of them. The fact that such a revised politics of nature, in turn, cannot exist

[48] See for the following examples in greater detail: ZMK, *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturtechnikforschung 2:16 (2016): Medien der Natur.*

without a media-anthropologically reflective understanding of media and their role in what can even appear and count as nature in the parliament of things closes the circle of the considerations presented here.

The Latourian redistribution of agency is often criticized for flattening differences between human action and nonhuman causality. If everything acts, does anything act in the specific sense of praxis? If agency is everywhere, does responsibility dissolve? These worries have sharpened in debates about new materialism and ANT. On the one hand, proponents emphasize that recognizing nonhuman agency is necessary for ecological politics; on the other hand, critics argue that such recognition can become a metaphysical inflation that underestimates human institutions and deliberation.[49]

A first clarification is required. Latour does not claim that nonhumans act in the same way as humans. He claims that action is never purely human. Agency is a distributed achievement of mediators, apparatuses, and institutions. For this reason Latour can say both that artifacts are parts of corporate bodies and that the subject-object distinction is an obstacle to understanding action.[50] Human praxis remains specific, but its specificity lies not in being outside mediation; it lies in being capable of reflecting, negotiating, and reconfiguring mediations. Praxis is a mode of re-assembly, including a capacity to invent procedures that register nonhuman recalcitrance without pretending to fully master it.

Still, a real danger remains: attributing agency to nature can lead to an eclipse of the normative and historical dimensions of human practice. If climate change is framed as the "revenge of Gaia" or as the action of Earth systems, political conflict can be depoliticized into a naturalized destiny. Latour himself warns that nature, when treated as a unified authority, paralyzes democracy.[51] Yet even a pluralist conception can slide into a quasi-metaphysical narrative in which "the Earth" becomes the ultimate agent that explains everything.

Latour's own resources help to avoid this. In AIME, the concept of Double Click diagnoses the temptation of foundation as the desire for displacement without mediation. Ecological politics often repeats this desire when it seeks to secure action by appealing to indisputable facts. But the alternative is not to deny facts. The alternative

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[49] See Benjamin BOYSEN, Jesper Lundsfryd RASMUSSEN (eds.), *Against the New Materialisms*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2023.
[50] See LATOUR, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, pp. 193–194.
[51] See ID., *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, p. 28.

is to describe the mediations and to keep open the hiatuses through which propositions must pass. This is why Latour's politics emphasizes due process and representation. Nature's agency becomes politically relevant only when it is articulated in procedures that remain revisable and when human responsibility is reframed as the responsibility to maintain, repair, and contest mediations.

The upshot for a media-anthropological nature concept is the following: nature is operatively effective as unavailability. Nature intervenes not by grounding norms but by producing shifts, drifts, and recalcitrances within practices. The virtuality of nature means that it cannot be captured as an ultimate cause; it is recognizable only through effects that remain partly opaque. Latour's insistence on mediation supports this: if the chain is interrupted, reference ceases to circulate.[52] Likewise, if ecological infrastructures fail, nature becomes present as breakdown, as an event that forces re-description. Nature is thus both the effect of withdrawal (it appears when mediation fails) and the source of effects of withdrawal (it withdraws as the impossible cause of its own effects).

A second line of criticism is sociological: ANT, critics argue, is insufficiently attentive to power asymmetries and to structural constraints.[53] By focusing on local networks and translations, it may underplay institutions such as capitalism, colonialism, and the state. In ecological politics, this criticism matters because climate and environmental injustice are not only problems of representation; they are problems of domination, extraction, and unequal vulnerability.

Latour's later work responds by placing institutions and constitutions at the center. *Politics of Nature* is explicitly concerned with procedures, separation of powers, and the institutional conditions of common worlds. *Pandora's Hope* stresses that action belongs to institutions and apparatuses, not to isolated actors. Still, a media-anthropological approach must ask whether the "parliament of things" can adequately address entrenched power relations or whether it risks translating conflict into neutral composition.

The answer depends on how the parliament is interpreted. If it is imagined as a harmonious inclusion of all actants, it risks becoming a liberal fantasy of consensus. But

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[52] See ID., *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, p. 82.

[53] See Georg KNEER – Martin SCHROER – Erhard SCHÜTTPELZ (eds.), *Latours Kollektive. Kontroversen zur Entgrenzung des Sozialen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 2008.; Lars GERTENBACH, *Entgrenzungen des Sozialen*, Velbrück, Weilerswist 2015.

if it is understood as a contest over media of representation – over who speaks for whom, what counts as evidence, how recalcitrance is registered, and how costs are distributed – then it becomes a framework for analyzing power. Power, in this view, is not an external force added to networks; it is the capacity to stabilize certain mediations and to render others invisible. The Modern Constitution exercised power by hiding mediations and by invoking nature as a neutral arbiter. A nonmodern constitution would not abolish power; it would relocate it into explicit procedures where it can be contested.

What this suggests is a more precise role for nature in media anthropology: nature is not only what must be represented; it is also what can be mobilized rhetorically as a depoliticizing device. Appeals to "the science says" can mask political choices about risk, distribution, and responsibility. Conversely, appeals to "natural limits" can be used either to justify authoritarian measures or to demand new forms of solidarity. Latour's insistence on due process does not resolve these conflicts, but it offers a diagnostic: whenever "nature" is invoked as an unquestionable authority, we should ask which mediations are being hidden and which collectives are being excluded.

This also clarifies why nature can be conceptualized as virtuality. Virtual in the context of a critique of power means a real condition that is not present as a determinate object but as a capacity to produce effects and to withdraw from full capture. Latour's analysis of mediation supports such a concept because it shows that what appears as nature is always an effect of operations that both reveal and conceal. The more stable a chain of reference becomes, the more its mediations "disappear"[54] and only its endpoints remain. Nature, in the modern imaginary, is precisely one of these endpoints: the illusion of a non-mediated pole. The illusion is operationally effective: it organizes institutions, controversies, and power. A media-anthropological concept of nature can therefore redefine nature as the name for the operationally effective withdrawal that accompanies every stabilization.

But does this mean that nature is only conceived as a process of naturalization in the sense of hiding actual mediations and stabilizing again the myth of the cave: from the shadows to the illusion of the cave exit? The proposal of this essay is that a media-anthropologically informed concept of nature can – as has been indicated and in contrast to nature as naturalization – be articulated through the categories of virtuality

[54] LATOUR, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, p. 92.

and unavailability resp uncontrollability. Nature is operative in praxis, but often as what cannot be fully presented, controlled, or grounded. It enters human worlds through effects: disruptions, affordances, resistances, delays, thresholds, drifts, and emergent couplings. These effects can be measured, narrated, visualized, litigated, and politicized, but the cause or ground named as nature is never simply present as a total object. Nature comes into view as a structurally receding dimension of efficacy. It deactivates foundational and anthropocentric grounding figures by confronting praxis with operative unavailability. Nature is what makes praxis possible and impossible in the same movement: possible by providing conditions, milieus, materials, and energies; impossible in the sense that these conditions remain only partially accessible and never fully sovereignly commandable.

In this sense, nature is virtuality: not unreal, but already effective as a field of latent and differential potentials, thresholds, and trajectories. It is knowable only from effects whose "origin" remains impossible fully to present and therefore causes both a limitation and a distortion of the field of the knowable. Nature is both the effect of withdrawal/unavailability and the withdrawing/unavailable dimension legible in effects. Nature's effect is, in short, opacity – not obfuscation. This also means that there is no de-centering in itself, only de-centering through media – through those operations that displace human self-certainty by forcing it to register what exceeds it. It is also these operations that introduce an internal opacity into the media's function of making things transparent (as sensible, intelligible, workable, designable, transformable, calculable ecc.) and bringing them into view. Sensors, legal conflicts, bodily symptoms, failed infrastructures, atmospheric data, drought maps, toxic residues, and ecological narratives are all media of such decentering. They compel humans to revise their self-description as always already traversed by more-than-human conditions. It is important to note that those conditions do not abolish the human. On the contrary: This concept serves to uphold the significance of human praxis. If nature is virtual unavailability rather than a sovereign super-agent, then human action remains indispensable as the site where effects are interpreted, institutions built, and responsibilities assumed. But praxis can no longer fantasize itself as the origin of all efficacy. It is one relay among others in a relational field whose full conditions remain unavailable.

At this point the question posed earlier can be sharpened: should nature be treated as a mode of existence in Latour's sense? A strict Latourian answer may say no. The modern term "nature" is precisely what AIME seeks to decompose into plural modes

and crossings. To reintroduce nature as a mode could risk reinstating the unifying abstraction Latour criticizes. Yet the refusal need not be absolute. One can distinguish between (a) nature as the modern, bifurcating master-term and (b) nature as a media-anthropological index of contingency, unavailability, and relational productivity. In the second sense, nature would not function as one mode among others but as the name for what becomes visible when modes are forced to encounter their limits, crossings, and non-closure. Nature would then be an effect of operations that render modes transparent to their own contingency and precariousness. If one wanted to stay close to Latour's vocabulary, one could say that nature in this sense is not a mode but a recurrent signature of failed purification and unavoidable composition. If one wanted to translate this into Voss/Rieger terms, one could say that nature names the unavailable relatum/cipher of relationing and virtual world-contact.

This also has a normative consequence. It prevents a fundamentalist politics of nature. If nature is not a final essence but a virtual condition legible in effects, then no party can simply claim to speak in its name once and for all. Political claims must remain mediated, contestable, and revisable. At the same time, the absence of a final natural foundation does not imply arbitrariness, because natural effects continue to constrain and redirect what can be sustainably composed.

The final step is then to connect nature's unavailability-effects with political contingency. In this context media anthropology is conceptually important because it treats de-centering as a medial event: de-centering occurs only through the operations that decenter, and the decentered subject must revise its self-description accordingly. In ecological contexts, humans are decentered not by an abstract theory but by concrete media: climate models, satellite images, statistical indicators, and the everyday breakdowns of infrastructure. No actor controls the whole, and yet the whole constrains every actor.

This resembles Claude Lefort's account of democracy as a form of society in which the place of power is represented as empty. The emptiness of power is not an absence but a symbolic condition that prevents totalization and keeps conflict open.[55] Political orders are contingent and contestable because no representation can fully coincide with society. The "empty place" is thus an institutionalized withdrawal that makes politics

[55] See Claude LEFORT, *Democracy and Political Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1988.

possible. Analogously, nature's virtuality can be understood as an ontological withdrawal that makes ecological politics necessary: nature cannot be fully represented, but its effects force representation to continue: There is no alternative to a politics of nature.

The urgency of a politics of nature, emphasized in the introduction, becomes fully explicit in *Facing Gaia*. But *Facing Gaia* also introduces politically troubling premises, above all through Latour's tactical use of Carl Schmitt. The problem is not that Latour acknowledges conflict. On the contrary, his insistence that ecology cannot be depoliticized by appeal to a neutral nature is one of his most important insights. Latour's recourse to Carl Schmitt can be understood as a provocation meant to recover conflictuality against technocratic or moralizing depoliticization. The problem is thus not only Schmitt's political commitments – though these are decisive – but also the risk that the field of ecological politics gets overcoded by friend/enemy schemas and latent decisionism precisely when what is needed are institutions of mediation, representation, and contestation across heterogeneous evidentiary regimes. Lars Gertenbach's and Henning Laux' analysis of Latour's recourse to Schmitt is helpful in this context because they reconstruct the internal rationale of Latour's Schmitt references while clarifying their limits. They show that the appeal is tied to conflict, territoriality, and the impossibility of a neutral third instance in Anthropocene politics, not simply to an endorsement of sovereign exception.[56] Yet precisely this reconstruction also shows how easily the argument can slide from anti-technocratic conflict theory into problematic decisionist resonances if one does not explicitly secure the plurality of mediations and the non-occupiability of the place of political unity.

A contingency-theoretical reading via Claude Lefort's account of the political offers a more productive continuation. Lefort preserves the irreducibility of conflict while refusing to center politics on a sovereign decider who would incarnate unity. The place of power remains symbolically empty and permanently contested. Transposed into ecological politics, this means: no actor – not 'Science,' not 'Humanity,' not 'Nature,' not 'the People' – can legitimately occupy the position of final arbiter. A politics of nature must instead institutionalize conflict over shared conditions of existence while remaining open to revision. This move has several advantages. First, it preserves

[56] See Lars GERTENBACH, Henning LAUX (eds.), *Zur Aktualität von Bruno Latour*, Springer, Wiesbaden 2019

Latour's anti-bifurcation insight. Facts and values, science and politics, nature and society cannot be cleanly separated in ecological controversies. But instead of translating this into a Schmittian friend/enemy drama, Lefort lies the emphasis on the democratic condition of an indeterminate social-symbolic order that must continuously re-articulate its terms of coexistence.

3. Conclusion

This article has argued that Latour is most productively inherited today as a theorist of the media of nature. Across his critique of the Modern Constitution, his reconstruction of circulating reference, his institutional proposal for a politics of composition, his pluralist metaphysics of modes, and his earthbound re-politicization of Gaia, Latour dismantles the unusable dualism between nature and culture by tracing the mediations through which nonhumans acquire agency without being anthropomorphized. Nature, on this reading, is neither a mute outside nor a totalizing metaphysical One; it is what becomes operative through chains of translation, infrastructures of sensitivity, and procedures of public representation.

Media anthropology sharpens this inheritance by insisting that mediation is also anthropological: decentering happens only through medial operations that reconfigure how humans encounter themselves and their environments. Christiane Voss's priority of anthropomedial relations clarifies why neither humans nor media – and thus neither "culture" nor "nature" – can be treated as pre-given substances. Stefan Rieger's genealogy of virtuality adds historical depth to Latour's anti-bifurcation program by showing how the natural/artificial distinction becomes porous at the level of operative figures (feedback, prognosis, environment). Together, these approaches support a concept of nature as a virtual and withdrawing condition: nature is knowable only through effects, yet effective precisely as withdrawal.

Finally, the integrated critical discussion has suggested how to avoid two symmetrical errors: treating nature as a sovereign super-agent that eclipses human praxis, or treating human praxis as an autonomous origin that ignores its more-than-human conditions. A media-operative politics of nature therefore neither grounds norms in Nature nor dissolves responsibility into generalized agency. It composes common worlds under conditions of uncertainty and conflict, while refusing to let any actor – Science,

Humanity, or Nature – occupy the place of final arbiter. In this sense, Latour's project can be continued as a contingency-theoretical politics of mediated coexistence.

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