

Emanuele Coccia

Don't Call Me Gaia

I. The Mutual Revelation of Earth and Humanity

The present conditions we are experiencing—and trying to designate with different names, all equally inadequate: Anthropocene, climate crisis, Capitalocene, etc.—are unprecedented, not only from a historical or ecological point of view, but also and especially from a cognitive and political point of view.

For the first time in human history, we are experiencing not this or that ecosystem, not this or that place, but the planet as a whole.¹ It is as if, for the first time, the planet has revealed its true face. This experience is possible first and foremost because of technology: not only have we gone into space and retrieved the first photographic image of the planet; we have infinite sensors, scattered everywhere, that simultaneously provide data on the biological, geological, and meteorological condition of the planet, thus allowing us to see and feel Earth in real-time. But it is not only because of technology that we see and feel the planet in its totality. If that were the case, what we experience would only be a quantitative increase over the past. Instead, the quality of knowledge of the planet has changed, for even in the smallest and most local of events, we are forced to glimpse the totality of the planet. It is impossible to read the recent flood in Libya or the summer fires in Canada as local phenomena that only have local causes. Within these events, it is not the state of Canada or Libya that is expressed or manifested, but that of Earth. The climate crisis is the reunification of all geological, biological, and ecological manifestations, turning every event, even the most insignificant, into an act and behavior of the entire planet.

No culture or civilization in any other historical era has ever been able to experience this. This means that no culture, no civilization, no individual has the cognitive, technical, and political means to know what to do. No culture has ever had to deal with the planet as such and not simply with this or that ecosystem. No technology has had to relate to the planet as such and not to this or that place. None of the political devices invented so far will help us solve the climate crisis. We need to invent new ones.

Today, no culture and no people are in a situation of cognitive privilege in receiving the revelation of the entire planet. This is precisely because the revelation is not just a matter of knowledge that takes place by technological means, but is also an objective fact that no one can claim to perceive better than others. Further, no one place is better suited than others to perceive this kind of manifestation. Earth has never shown itself simultaneously to all of humanity in a similar and identical way. In the past, every culture and every people were limited to knowing only small portions of the planet. Even assuming Earth had shown itself entirely to one culture, it was a partial revelation—that is, the possession of a single



Bruno Novelli, Na Força, 2009.

people and not of all peoples. This situation of today effectively nullifies all of the cultural, ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions that humanity has produced and cultivated over millennia. If Earth appears to all humanity, humanity appears before the whole Earth without being able to cling to any difference. It is as if the planet is calling to us all, without distinction, beyond nations, ethnicities, traditions, and cultures.

The totality of the planet has appeared to the totality of humanity. This mutual manifestation and revelation of two totalities has enormous consequences. The ecological crisis is an incredible cognitive and political obligation. The fact that the situation arose from a process of violent domination, the planetary colonization of some peoples, and the uncontrolled exploitation of the planet in no way

diminishes its unprecedented nature.

II. Earth is a Meteorological Entity

Climate change is the transformation of the entire planet into a giant storm. We are no longer faced with local, partial disturbances (this or that storm, this or that drought): now, Earth itself is weather. It is bad, and will be forever. Bad weather is no longer an exception but the norm. Said in more precise terms: climate is no longer a part of our lives; it is the substance of everything that happens on our earth. We should therefore stop talking about nature and shift our gaze towards the planet. Rather than biology, geology, or ecology, meteorology should become the preferred viewpoint for thinking about living

things. Life is climate, not metabolism. Geology has become a branch of meteorology. We have long been led to believe that the conditions of possibility on Earth derived from the condition of the lithosphere and hydrosphere—rocks, arable soil, and water, which related to each other in a stable, cyclical way. Instead, everything that inhabits this planet is a climatic accident, an ephemeral consequence of a series of weather events.

This transformation is important for two reasons. First, because every form of “bad weather” is the irruption of unpredictability into the natural world. Climate knows no ontological balance. Far from seeking equilibrium, life feeds on bad weather. From this perspective, the climate crisis is not so much the transformation of the climate as it is the visible manifestation of the profoundly and irretrievably erratic and untamable character of the world to which we belong.

Thinking of the planet as permanently bad weather does not just define a rupture, a hole in our cognitive mastery of the world, but also a break in the continuity attributed to time and the homogeneity of history. Nothing is more interpretable as a cycle, as nature, as substance. What we have called nature is only possible because of a very delicate climatic balance. But we have started to realize that we human beings, as well as all living things, are bad weather. We are the storm and the earthquake; we are the tsunami and the thunder of Gaia. Life has been the weather and it has been forced to live within the eye of a storm that never stops changing and striking its flesh. This was Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s insight. Questioning the influence of living organisms on the matter of the globe’s surface, the father of modern biology recognized that living beings have occupied and permanently transformed the chemical and physical reality of the atmosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere.² We have changed the nature of the planet. Following a similar insight, at the turn of the twenty-first century, American geologist Robert Hazen showed that the richness of mineral species on Earth—the chemical and physical diversity of the planet’s flesh—was produced by a series of chemical reactions triggered by the presence of living things and their metabolism.³ This is precisely why the agreement, the balance, the peace—in short, the contract—among all species is not simply physical, chemical, geological, biological, or ecological, but climatic. Conversely, climate should be defined as the place where all living species and nonliving matter on Earth define their compatibility with each other, with no one having total control over the other.

III. Earth is an Ego

The climate crisis is the site of a paradoxical coincidence: the planet making itself known simultaneously as pure object and pure subject. Never before have we left more traces on the body and skin of Earth (what we call the Anthropocene). Never before have we objectified it so

much, yet never has Earth made itself known as a subject to such an extent as it does today. In fact, the climate crisis is the sensitive emergence of Earth as a subject, one that acts freely beyond any possible control. We are no longer masters of its behavior, either cognitively or pragmatically. Earth has begun to do what it wants again. The climate is where we grant life a strange form of freedom. Unlike on the ground, where movement is slow and often interrupted by excessive resistance, in the sky everything is defined by its ability to move and transform. There are no lasting traces in the sky: movement ends without leaving any remains, and every action is a metamorphosis. It is for this same reason that winds and clouds have no face or history: it is impossible for them to separate the past from the present. Faced with weather, we are forced to momentarily step away from our modern common sense, which wants us to be exclusive and absolute holders of freedom and free will. To call the whole Earth weather is to grant it the same freedom, the same capricious will that we grant ourselves. A general meteorology would then be the science of freedom extended to the whole Earth. We must free ourselves from the hypnosis of the ground and see the planet as clouds or winds: free beings who never allow themselves to be foretold. Everything on the planet has the status of clouds and winds, and everything should be given the strange freedom that we recognize in the weather.

In one of the most decisive passages in the manifesto that founded the West’s contemporary political reality, Thomas Hobbes likened the state of nature—characterized by a form of war of all against all—to a weather disturbance. He wrote:

For WARRE, consisteth not in Battell onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of Time, is to be considered in the nature of Warre; as it is in the nature of Weather. For as the nature of Foule weather, lyeth not in a showre or two of rain; but in an inclination thereto of many dayes together: So the nature of War, consisteth not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary.⁴

For centuries we have regarded bad weather as the opposite of politics, as what politics must eliminate. Instead, we must begin to think of politics itself as a form of bad weather: a climatic variation in existence that can no longer be explained in terms of necessity. Politics must not prevent or avoid the storm: on the contrary, it must accompany and protect it. For every earthly storm is the cocoon of future metamorphoses and the invention of a future life.

IV. A New Name for Earth

If the climate crisis consists of the mutual revelation of the whole planet to all humanity, the first problem to be solved is a logical one. We do not have a name for what we are observing. All the names we have used so far are partial, subjective, and improper. One example of this is the name contained in the term geology—Gaia—which comes from ancient Greek. This name is today undergoing a great revaluation. Now, beyond prejudice, beyond Eurocentrism, beyond even the fact that Greek culture was a sexist, racist, slave-owning culture, the real issue is the history of Gaia. Stories about the curious divine or proto-divine character that the Greeks called Gaia have nothing to envy from the worst American soap operas. The story goes that Gaia, alone and without any connection to anyone, begets (by parthenogenesis, or asexual reproduction) Uranus, whose name means “starry sky.” Then, she begets, again by parthenogenesis, the mountains, the mountain nymphs, and Pontus (the sea). She then marries her son Uranus, with whom she has children, but asks her sons to kill their father (who is also her son). One of them, Chronos (time), succeeds in killing him. But a drop of Uranus’s blood (or semen) touches Gaia’s body, which causes her to have new children with the father-son, including the Erinyes, female chthonic deities of vengeance. Do we really want this toxic story to be our imagination of Earth?

However, the problem lies elsewhere. While it is interesting to collect, compare, and study the different myths elaborated by different civilizations at different chronological latitudes, it makes no sense to privilege one over another. This is because Earth, by definition, is a transcultural object, as well as obviously transgender: it has all genders and belongs to all ethnicities and cultures, even those that have never existed and never will exist. Every myth is the expression of a certain idea from the point of view of a certain culture, or, in the words of Claude Lévi Strauss, every myth is the transformation of a parallel or previous myth.⁵ But Earth does not belong to any of them; it is the disruption of every gender and cultural identity.

In fact, we should also stop calling our planet “Earth.” The term “Earth” is an English/German name that simply means land. It derives from the Old English words “eor(th)e” and “ertha,” the equivalent of the German “Erde.” The term therefore suggests that the planet is primarily soil, the lithosphere, which is equivalent to saying that we define our identity by our feet. Geography is simply the result of this effort to translate our representations of the world—of where we are and what surrounds us—with our feet. But doing things with our feet is never a sign of great dexterity, and measuring the world and our faces with them is surely evidence of great stupidity. We could have chosen other organs and the world would have had a different face, a different name. Our head, for instance, never touches the ground. Instead, it lives in a space open to the sun (the sky), and more importantly, is able to see far

beyond what it can touch. From the tip of our toes upward, the sky begins. We inhabit the sky just like the earth and the ground, and the planet is composed of both. Our planet’s name should reflect the fact that it is a strange conjunction of the earth and the sky.

More than a name, however, perhaps we should come up with a nickname. Something like “guy,” or “sis,” or “bro,” but transgender, trans-age, trans-ethnic, trans-linguistic. Or perhaps, some kind of planetary rosary or a new cabala should be developed to generate new names every day. Because the name of Earth is the name of everything; it is a kind of absolute and general name, or surname. Perhaps it is better not to find a new name, but an absolute pronoun, one through which everything, regardless of whether it lives or not, can say “I.”

Whether noun or pronoun, it is important that there is a common name. One possible objection to this might be that to choose only one name is to prolong an imperialistic, colonial attitude that nullifies differences, pluriverses, and parallel worlds. Not having a common name to refer to the same reality means that everyone is forced to do the slow work not of translation, but of negotiation about the reference: about the fact that two names refer to the same reality. But if there is no agreement that we are talking about the same Earth, any action collapses.

The real reason why we need one and the same name is politics. This one planet is not only shared by all, but it is the condition of possibility for sharing names, things, and life. Translated into political terms, this means that the oneness of the planet is not only the main object of any future democratic politics, it is democracy’s very condition of possibility. To seek a name to share (and thus a single name) is to emphasize this. Think about the experience we all have with our names: every time we multiply our names and create a nickname, we introducing a hierarchy of value and love into relationships. If you would call me not by my name but “babe” in public, you are making and flaunting the claim that you have more intimate relations with me than everyone else. That is, you would be introducing a hierarchy of value, of fondness, of stories into our relationship. We need one name because we need to reaffirm that there is no one who has more right to Earth than anyone else.

V. Earth as Theater

If we have a problem devising a single name for our planet, it is also because we do not know who this subject is that we keep calling by the wrong name. To know it, it is clear that science is not enough. In fact, science is not capable of perceiving reality as a subject. Further, the knowledge we may have of our own self, or of others—that is, the knowledge we have of a subject—is never certain and absolute: it is a form of divination, of interpretation, that is

always ready to transform. I do not mean that another's self (or one's own) cannot be known, nor that that is not certain knowledge: if it were so—if the self were unknowable—it would be impossible to live. But these knowledges are acquired through protocols other than those of experimental science; these are knowledges in which the issue is less certainty or evidence than faith and divination.

There is a form of divination that allows us to grasp subjectivity where only objectivity seems to exist. This is what we have been accustomed to calling "art" for centuries. This may sound absurd, but what if we forget everything we know about art and imagine that we are an alien anthropologist from the thirty-fifth century CE, who lands on our planet to study the significance our culture today attributes to those objects that are categorized as art. The answer we would find is that art is a strange protocol that requires people to relate to an object in the same way that they do to other human beings. In short, it is an unconcealed form of what the anthropology of the last century called animism.

A museum, after all, is a warehouse full of objects for which we have a kind of special veneration. Every day, millions of people enter these huge warehouses and come across more or less finished portions of linen cloth covered with layers of pigment, or structures of steel, marble, wood. Yet instead of seeing only geometric forms of extended matter (as the cultural attitude that Philippe Descola calls naturalism would presuppose), they discern in them the presence of a subject or a soul; they read in them opinions, feelings, or a worldview of someone who existed hundreds or thousands of years before.⁶ Once they leave the museum, they might even tell you that they "met" Leonardo or Rubens. When we encounter an artwork (as well as books or the written page), we accept the idea that it contains a psychological, emotional, or mental intensity that transcends the mere material reality in which it exists. That is, in the face of art, we all become animists.

This was the insight contained within the posthumous book *Art and Agency*, by one of the greatest anthropologists of the last century, Alfred Gell. In it, he describes the cultural forms through which it becomes possible to attribute agency to artifacts and objects in Western culture.⁷ We can see a common form of everyday animism in children and their relationship with dolls or stuffed animals, but also in adults when they talk to cars or computers. This is, however, an ironic and metastable type of behavior, in which the dominant attitude is often one of "as if," of play, or of pretense. However, there is another, deeper form of animism in which the recognition of the subjective character of objects is neither ironic nor unstable: art. Gell's book teaches us that, to think about the planet, it is better to make art, not ecology. Knowing Earth as a subject means knowing it through art. But it is not that art has to represent Earth, nor is it enough to bring

plants into a museum to know the planet. It is about relating to Earth as we relate to art; that is, thinking of the planet itself as an art form, as a kind of open-air museum for contemporary nature—or, if you like, of immense theater. Earth must become a planetary theater: not in the sense of a building, but in the sense of a space in which everything—plants, animals, lichens, fungi, stones, winds, clouds, etc.—is perceived as an actor, as capable of acting, as a subject.

Moreso even than the construction of a building, theater should be considered as an exercise in the metamorphosis of space and its perception. It is, if you will, the opposite of exorcism: if the latter is a way of eliminating a form of excess subjectivity, theater is a matter of inoculating it; not ghostbusting, but ghostloading. To perceive the planet, as well as to name it, it is not enough to represent it; it is necessary to empathize with it, or conversely, to allow it to empathize with us. That is what every actor in a theater does. An actor is a psychic corridor and an initiator into the life of others; acting allows one to live from the point of view of another subject. Theater is an act of psychological gymnastics: living by saying "I" in the soul of another. Theater, in this sense, is the demonic art par excellence. The demon, in Mediterranean theology, was the mobile subject, the "I" insofar as it is able to bind itself to a body without needing to mirror itself perfectly in it and depend on it ontologically. The demon is a relatively autonomous "I" with respect to the form and nature of the bodies it inhabits, and, precisely because of this, it can go anywhere.

It might sound strange, but this is actually what we experience every time we hold a phone. The entire technological universe is defined by a demonological need. Every time we pick up a phone or computer, leave a voice message or write a text, we turn material reality into a demonic presence, into a {form of subjectivity that no longer has an immediate and isomorphic connection with an anatomical corporeality. Because of this, we can move anywhere, even thousands of miles away from our body, and vice versa; precisely because of this, our "I" has nothing immediately human about it.

It also happens every time we play a video game, like *Death Stranding* or *The Legend of Zelda*, where we experience a strange change in the relationship between our consciousness and the body through which we experience. We continue to be an "I," but, by literally occupying or possessing another body, we are experiencing someone else's sensory experience. In video games, even those not played from a subjective point of view, we perceive the world from the point of view of Link, or Mario, who themselves act through our ego. And thanks to this prosthesis, our consciousness becomes the mind of a body that does not coincide with our anatomy. It is this thrill—which is always accompanied by a feeling of alienation—that one can become addicted to: this strange

feeling of slipping into someone else's body, of becoming a mobile self, able to migrate from one body to another until I return to the one I know best, the one I have been in since I was born. When we play video games, our body becomes the vehicle of our demonic nature. We become the demon occupying an alien body.

Here, our relationship with Earth must become something like a kind of planetary demonism, a psychic transhumance that allows us to become and inhabit the soul of everything around us, as well as the opposite: to make the self the experience of the transhumance of all the demons of the planet. This new ecology will have to teach us to demonically inhabit every non-human entity. All animals, plants, fungi, and viruses will appear to us as subjective entities, life forms, and perspectives on the world; rocks, mountains, hills, wind, rain, storms, seas, and rivers will open up as spaces of subjective play and existence. Conversely, our own subjective play space, our consciousness, must become a place where we demonically welcome all other subjects on Earth. It is no longer simply a matter, as Aldo Leopold has suggested, of "thinking like a mountain," but of making thought the playground of all the elements of Earth.⁸ Ecology must become a new version of *Zelda*, where it is never clear who is the player and who is Link.

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Emanuele Coccia is a philosopher teaching at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

Hydroreflexivity is a collaboration between e-flux Architecture and "Fertile Futures," the Portuguese Pavilion at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia curated by Andreia Garcia with Ana Neiva and Diogo Aguiar.

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Cf. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement : Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021).

2

Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, *Hydrogéologie, ou Recherches sur l'influence qu'ont les eaux sur la surface du globe terrestre, sur les causes de l'existence du bassin des mers, de son déplacement et de son transport successif sur les différents points de la surface de ce globe, enfin sur les changemens que les corps vivans exercent sur la nature et l'état de cette surface* (Paris. 1802).

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R. Hazen, D. Papineau, W. Bleeker, R. T. Downs, J. M. Ferry, T. J. McCoy, D. A. Sverjensky, H. Yang, "Mineral Evolution," *American Mineralogist* 93, nos. 11–12 (November 2008) : 1693–1720.

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Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), 62.

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Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson, and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York : Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967) ; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

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Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2013).

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Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1998).

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Aldo Leopold, "Thinking Like a Mountain," in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).