

What does Gaia request of us?

BL 17-7-14

(a note prepared for the afternoon of Wednesday 23rd)

The setting

“Us” first covers the Moderns *after* the inquiry has given them another description of themselves; second, it covers whoever considers the concept “Gaia” as the name of an instance toward which they direct their attention because it requests something from them. Third, and less grandly, it designates those who have accepted to participate in this odd enterprise (the co-inquirers of the 21st-25th of July week and then the speakers and the public coming for the 28th-29th event).

“Gaia” is this instance that has no shape yet, except that of an intruder (pace I. Stengers, in French “*une intruse*”) (the dictionary offers *trespasser*). It means that nothing in the format of modern thought is prepared for it. This is why it is also called a *gate-crasher*.

“Request” means that we are forced to turn our attention to it and that it has the initiative (it’s not by our whim, will, consciousness or knowledge that we shift attention, but because the gates have been crashed by something that demands attention).

Close encounter

The ways through which we answer the request is necessarily messy since we have no formatted procedure to recognize the intruder. We are in some way replaying something like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (hence the importance of science fiction for D. Haraway as well as E. Hache and I. Stengers). The AIME meeting is a small budget *philosophy-fiction* production (not as fancy as Spielberg’s and without François Truffaut’s marvellous tone of voice...).

It is not a welcoming ceremony, since we don’t know enough about what is coming and are not prepared enough to welcome any new instance. As a rule, gate-crashers are never welcome at parties! There is nothing nice, nothing uplifting, nothing to boost our spirit, in such an encounter. Maybe it will; but not for the moment. For now, it’s simply something that comes crashing in and is simply unwelcome.

The encounter can be close or it can be missed but it cannot go happily and smoothly. This is what is at stake in the *philosophy-fiction* event of July: “*Missed encounter of the Fourth Kind is a distinct possibility*”.

The only thing we can do is to be prepared for a close encounter, that is, we should at least avoid misinterpreting the intruder for something already

registered. The encounter will count as “close” only if we are able to modify the definition of the agency that we are to encounter.

One thing is sure, if we had not done the inquiry, the encounter would not have taken place at all: Gaia will have passed us by without being recognized. This is why we first had to redefine which gates are likely to be crashed by this trespassing instance. The Moderns could not meet Gaia. They had other gates, other limits, other definitions of their past and of their future: the front of modernization. For them everything that had not been registered was like so many UFOs: *unidentified flying objects*. Gaia could not be there requesting anything. It would have remained something odd, to lump together with flying saucers and extra-terrestrial intelligence (*intra-terrestrial intelligence*, though, could be a pretty good name for Gaia, except that “intelligence” is not the good word...).

We assert that those who have taken part in the inquiry are equipped to feel that something new is taken place that has to be identified. What? They don't know. So far, they just feel the wind, force and violence of what is coming. In the emblem proposed by Lars von Trier of a planet (*Melancholia*) crashing on their planet, the Earth (in fact a closed park), they recognize a fairly convincing approximation of the intruder.

Three tiers

To prepare themselves, co-inquirers have made a series of propositions trying to identify what should be encountered as closely as possible. At least without fleeing away horrified. It is their collective work that forms the first tier.

But it is not enough, since they are well aware that their propositions are tentative and mainly negative (they are better at saying what Gaia is not than at offering a plausible format to express what it requests). This is why the producer of this philosophy-fiction has proposed to assemble a second tier: the “*chargé d'affaires*” (a French word accepted in English to mean those who are not really ambassadors but with whom, nonetheless, “affairs”, that is issues and concerns, may be lodged).

Do they know more about Gaia? Maybe yes, maybe no. The point is that they are *at some distance* from the co-inquirers (either because they are critical of it, or familiar with other domains, or because they have become conversant into some of the other “thousand names of Gaia”). They don't share our many years of collective work. So they are able to test the co-inquirers: “Do you know what you are doing? What do you hold to?”. Running a “crash test” would not be a bad metaphor for what we expect from them.

They make for an amazing list, those with whom we are going to discuss: Anne Marie Mol has done more than anybody else to multiply the templates necessary to redescribe modern science, technology and medicine; Barbara Cassin has given us back the whole Sophistic tradition and worked with the “untranslatables”, directing the most elaborate collective enterprise of conceptual diplomacy, an enterprise so large that our AIME project sounds a local affair; Deborah Danowski knows more about the philosophy of Gaia than anybody else in the room; as for Eduardo Viveiros de Castro he will bring to the table other anthropological (or rather cosmological) ways to “world” the world that don’t share anything with the European tradition; Dipesh Chakrabarty has not only “provincialized” the Moderns, but he is the first historian to have alerted academics to the intrusion of this new “agent of history”, the disputed “*anthropos*” of the Anthropocene; Peter Weibel has transformed the European art scene and invented a hundred new ways of curating our intellectual and technical existence (at least two of which are directly related to the AIME inquiry); as for Simon Schaffer, he has deeply transformed the whole history of science and its associated anthropology; and chance has it (or is it Gaia’s omen?) that Clive Hamilton, the philosopher whose life has been most transformed by the concern for ecology, will also join us in Paris for those days of reckoning! Yes, what a team to crash test our proposal!

The “*chargés d’affaires*” have Gaia behind them and the co-inquirers in front of them. So if they have to help us, we, the co-inquirers, have to help them to give a shape to what has saddled them with so many “*affaires*”, so many matters of grave concern. The idea (yes it is a mad idea, a fiction) is that the first tier and the second tier, together with the public in attendance that forms the third tier, could define what are the gates that are so violently being crashed through. Will we be able to define what Gaia is? Probably not, but we can define which gates are being crashed. In that sense, this fiction is a true simulation. What thought cannot handle, fiction may.

Diplomacy

There might some misunderstanding in the use of the word “diplomacy”. Diplomacy is a skill and a trade that draws its inheritance from many eons of war and peace settlements among instances of various shapes and solidity (not necessarily nation states). It is obvious that very little of it can be of any use for our encounter. We are not equipped to “negotiate” anything with this instance called Gaia. It requests, we answer, but we don’t know what it is. Nobody has a mandate from it.

What is the object of negotiation (inside the first tier, and then between the first and the second tier, and probably among the second tier as well) is just how far off or how close we are from being prepared to heed Gaia's requests. No one has authority to speak "in the name" of this instance. It is authority itself that is being gate crashed.

This is why the metaphor is that of Richard White's *Middle Ground*: neither the English nor the French, in the *pays d'en haut* in the 17th and even in the 18th century are able to use their States to "negotiate" with the Indian nations and leagues. Everything is up for grabs and especially the Ground and what is Middle and who represents whom and how to smoke the calumet and what it means to "cover for the dead". Speak of *untranslatables*...

And yet what seems clear is that whatever Gaia does, it redefines geopolitics simply because it breaks the definitions of politics as well as the Earth (the old Gè). It is in that sense that the invocation of diplomacy remains useful. We might be requested to delineate yet again what the Earth is and what it means to be with it. Also by alluding to diplomacy we clearly state that we are not assembled by or in the name of knowledge. Yes, we might be mostly academics, but we are held by something that devours our insides a little deeper than knowledge would (at least this form of instrumented and rectified knowledge that we have recognized as the traces left by beings of [REF]).

Diplomacy implies technicalities. It is all in the details. A false movement, a word misspelled, a threatening gesture, and that might occasion the shift from peace to war — or the disbanding of the Middle Ground on which we were precariously assembled. Knowledge also deals with technicalities, but, by definition, it can be reprised, there is always a second chance that will make it more accurate: "Tomorrow I will know better", that's what knowledge says. Not in diplomatic encounters. "If we fail to have a deal by tonight, tomorrow it will be too late". Once the chance is gone, it might not be had again for another century, after another war. August 14, August 14, August 14. This is why we have to be careful, relatively secluded from outside noise and why we will talk shop. "Elitist"? If you wish, but because it's a delicate and dangerous affair. "Esoteric"? Yes, because it depends on an exact wording.

Requests

What do we have to bring to the table to be crash tested? Here everyone should speak for themselves and accept they are not representing any higher entity. Everyone flies under their own colours. Let me try then.

I don't feel it would be fair to stick to negative terms only (apophatic theology went only so far...). So as to sketch the figure of Gaia, I propose to speak in a format that: a) begins with a negation; then b) tries to sketch positively the alternative we have to work out during the week before c) attributing agency to the instance that formulates the request.

(Before booing me silent, let the next speaker wait for their turn, take up a puff from the brightly feathered calumet (peace pipe), cough and clear their throat, stand up and redraw the Middle Ground in a different way...).

Nature

Gaia is not Nature but it inherits from the modernist Nature some of the features that had been lumped together in what was called the "material world" known by "the scientific worldview", moulded by "technology" and externalized as "the environment" — the great outside.

Since Nature was a highly composite and complex institution (mixing politics, laws, providence, economics as well as science and fiction), we owe it to Gaia to redistribute, recompose and reinstitute something that keeps track of what it has crashed through. If Gaia is not Nature, what is it?

Putting words in the non-existent mouth of the Great Encroacher, I make it say: "Give me a position and a respect and an extension that Nature never gave me but don't deprive me of what Nature, my predecessor — is she my predecessor or my successor or what was always inside me? — always had benefitted from. I want to be known, well and accurately known, because I want to be composed, well taken care of and don't want to be dragged into your fights and wish to remain indifferent, just as Nature was, and yet close as well as closed. And remain open and far. Do your job, you Earthlings, this is less complex than the Sphinx's riddle. Go back to the drawing board to tell me in what way I differ from Nature."

Politics

Gaia is not a State but it has some features of what used to be called authority, this strange fluid made of nature, law, social bonds, cosmos, religion and that has been used to build the notion of sovereignty as well as, later on, that of the State and government.

What would be the use of denying sovereignty to that which comes crashing through all authorities, borders, frontiers and legal properties? The whole idea of the Totality does come from law and politics, so what is to be recomposed needs to take the up question of sovereignty yet again. The whole question of the parts and the whole (questions of mereology) has to be reopened.

She agrees (here I am allowed to give her a first person position; *prosopopeia* is indispensable here!): “I am not your Mother, nor your protector, nor anything in the name of which you have assembled, but figure out the enigma of my presence above, under and around you, you Superficial Terrestrial Intelligences. If you cannot recognize a Power when you see one, what use is your political philosophy? But don’t expect me to fit inside your Parliaments. I am not a State and I don’t care for you, nor do I speak, and yet I lord over you and request in some ways that you have to decipher the situation if you want to remain alive. Don’t assemble me too fast but don’t believe either that I am made of disjointed parts. To be one and many is what politics should go through: then go through it for good, for God’s sake — ah, but I am not a God either.”

Religion

No, she is right, Gaia is not a small g god and even less a capital G God. We have made, I am afraid, a terrible carnage of gods and divinities in our history, we Moderns, believing simultaneously that we had One God or no God or that we had to fight against gods — and demons. What a mess.

It will be impossible to understand what is coming gate crashing if we don’t put the question of religion and belief and ritual in order. Transcendence, spirituality, other worlds, and worse, secularism, what can we do with this? The most pious people on Earth believe they are without piety and without belief... How could they handle what it is to care if it is true that the opposite of religious is *carelessness*? Maybe we will have made some progress once we have clarified Nature and Politics, since what passes for religion and gods depends so much on them. But we have to clean up our mess first.

“I am not a goddess, even when I was called Gè, the Gaia of old, I was already not a goddess, but something else *before* the gods, so imagine what an even more monstrous figure I am now. If you don’t want to see my face (Lovelock’s title and Margulis’s obsession) don’t even begin to approach me. And don’t believe you know which rituals I will be able to appear through. But if you believe you can do *without* ritual, go down your cursed path and wish me away. I will catch you. And don’t call me ‘pagan’, you never understood what that meant anyway, but if you believe your horizon to be secular, then where on Earth do you live? Offshore? ‘There is no offshore’, that’s one of my thousand names. Take heed, you Terrians, the wars of gods are not behind you.”

Economy

Gaia is not an economy, nor an ecosystem, nor anything “oikos”, nothing homely for sure, not even a Providence (the old *oeconomia* of the Greek Fathers is still with us). And yet it insists on taking over (crashing through is more like it) everything that we call (we the Moderns) economy (the vast domain of goods, luxuries, well-being, possessions — we used to call them “earthly possessions” when we were blissfully ignorant that “earthly” could designate a fairly *different* owner).

Offshore is the name of The Economy, not only because of the fiscal paradises (islands of no place, letter boxes in tax havens, utopia of absolute freedom) but because it has no place on Earth (religion, science and politics of Natural laws with no ground — no middle ground for sure, but only the future where nobody lives). Its other name is “escapism”, strange adventure for what was previously called the “dismal science” because it was supposed to be so practical, so down to earth — except Earth was exactly what went missing even more, paradigm shift after another. What does it mean to reverse the course of The Economy without regressing to abject poverty? How can we add the *Land Lord* to the owners and possessors? Here the Moderns have everything to learn, once again. Revolution inside the revolution, involution inside the revolution, to extract the Commons out of communism (same word but radically different radicality). Back to the drawing board at such a scale, in such a bewildering number of details, against everything built up and believed in, breaking down and retooling every single infrastructure. Who was it proposing to use the words “re-engineering” and “down-sizing”? Downsizing indeed!

Here, I don’t know what Gaia would have to say, except that, if we don’t heed the request to find a successor to The Economy, we will have failed entirely.

At this point, the speaker sits and wait for what the next will have to say. But what I am sure is that going through this slowly-moving powwow is what Gaia requested of us. This is what it means, for me, to draw the Middle Ground. This is why I have written such an Inquiry and proposed to you to join me in this impossible task. If I have failed, let me pass the feathered calumet to the next speaker.