

What did I learn from Bruno Latour?

Eda Kranakis told me, years ago, that Bruno Latour was someone worth paying attention to. When I read of his death yesterday I thought about what my interaction with Latour brings me, each time that I engage his thought. His pragmatism is what initially attracted me but the more I read, the less I understood. But the more I paid attention to what he was saying as I was reading it, the more I realized that I was really nothing more than an actor in a network.

I decided to re-read one of his books or one of his essays and while I first thought of *We Were Never Modern*, I opened *On the Cult of the Factish Gods* as, for me, this represents the late Latour at his finest: balancing on the edge of truth and madness, religion and heresy, ruminations on the fate of Frankenstein's "monster".

(Perhaps if I hadn't just finished reading [Frankenstein](#) then I would be using a different analogy but here we are. I should re-write this in a few weeks since I just started an early version of what would later be known as *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, unknown outside of Iceland where it was translated and published called *Makt myrkranna* – Powers of Darkness – but I digress. Back to Latour.)

I put monster in quotation marks because it isn't ever named as such in the book written two centuries ago. It is called a monster by (sighted) humans. The being that herr Frankenstein assembled was reviled because the sight of it sent humans mad and its existence threatened the species. It was an important point, I think, that the blind man accepts the being because of its expressions of culture, known to the fallen aristocrat. Vision and light, "seeing" and "knowing".

Dare I say perspectival light, a "modern" light? A type of light created by, among others, Pierro della Francesca. The *desiring* lux of Dante.

Reviled and shunned because of human sight and an existential threat that these beings would replace humans as supposed by its creator, this living assemblage of dead parts was paradoxical, the source of madness for those that beheld it or contemplated it. In human light, *perspectival lux*, this being is a monster but human culture and literature was

accessible and powerful to this Being. *Paradise Lost* and other works of literature also “created” this being as did the hostility it faced from most humans. These cultural products fulfilled their stated “human” purpose of “humanizing” but why then deny humanity to this being? What makes it *monstrous*? If nothing else, it is pitiable because it has only the desires of humans. But, again, back to Latour.

For Latour’s flat ontology all things are objects, much like in Graham Harman’s Object Oriented Ontology (noting that they themselves thought that they had divergent opinions on some core issues). The point is that just because Frankenstein looks and acts like a human to some, it doesn’t make it so. Just like a never helpful bot on a website, powered by “artificial intelligence”.

So what does make a human human? Is a human a hyper object that defies categories? This isn’t just about a nominalist debate, it is a clear challenge to Kantian categories of identity that would hold that objects are because of what they do or what they are made of. Latour says that it is what objects are assembled with, networked to.

Shelly ruminates on the fact that the being can and does learn to desire the things that humans do, or say that they do, with his eyes: he sees the interaction of the family and he reads *Paradise Lost*. Vision, ergo, lux is the core of this cosmogony. But it is human vision that the monster doesn’t have. Human vision, a human way of seeing, is the thing that the being cannot have and the one element that causes so much grief to it: if it saw itself as humans did, it would destroy itself as it initially intends. Instead, it crusades to the arctic desert knowing its vision can see truth, just a different one from the Others. And knowing that its existence is within its control. A funeral pyre is its noble decision when it chooses.

The arctic, for the being, is a spiritual sanctuary and punishment as it is for humans, much as it is represented in Renaissance literature and imagery: challenging clarity and perspective. Even in the early 19th century the arctic was felt as aporia, anti-perspective, unknown. Contingency exists between subject, object, and image in this geography.

Why does Frankenstein’s monster want to interact with the world the way that it does? All the things that the monster both sees and understands about humanity from observation or study comes to naught because of

the irrational fears of “humanity”. Each time it wants only what it sees, what it reads to be desired, nothing more. It is frustrated by sighted humans at every turn. It just wants to be a producer and consumer, why else does he demand a spouse? Why else does he kill with his hands?

But it is irrational for this “transhumanist” being, pace Haraway because this ontology is denied for an immortal being. These are human things, these desires that it seeks. Once you think that you grasp them, like the light of faint stars, they disappear, or you disappear. Like the lights of the stars that you see your entire life, stars that haven’t existed for millennia.

These objects can only appear in your peripheral, mediated and translated, consumed. They are protean since you can only measure them in time with human tools of a perspectival ontology, you cannot see them clearly in both space and time because of the mortal coil. You will be frozen and destroyed. Humans are or are not.

Human paradise cannot accept this fundamental change to its architecture, its ontology denies this change into permanence. A ribozymic vine is an existential threat to seeded plants. The short life of humans is what gives meaning and explains its desire. The God Proteus is denied access to Eden. A Heraclitean life was in living, and that was only for mortals. Achilles rages when Patroclus sheds his mortal coil.

This human desire, this type of seeing, of consumption, is a mode of modern translation like Benjamin’s *Arcades*: an exchange, a phenomenonology. It is modernism if it is defined as transactional. It is an unchanging desire to desire: one cannot deny the arrow of Cupid – struck by Narcissus. It’s intoxication, like that of the vine. The poison of Bacchus and Loki.

No wonder God denied access to only this tempting thing. It was temptation itself! Desire for permanence.

The only acceptable change for mortals is redemption or reformation in the realm of the Gods, active or passive, never the middle voice, never immortality. This is the nature of Bruno Latour’s factish as it is the nature of the fetish: they exist-ish. Time is denied to the immortal. Humans are suffused with existence in time.

Much as Tristan Garcia revives the notion of Dantean love in his philosophy of being or the role of allure and desire to poet Charles Olson and Charles Baudelaire, this is both transformational and informational, it reveals its multitude in its singularity through its denial of history and time.

This is the form of religious talk I think that Latour wanted us to rehabilitate ourselves to.

// edit - i hadn't considered Latour in connection with the philosophy of Zhuangzhi! <https://aeon.co/essays/in-classical-chinese-philosophy-all-actions-are-collective>

Source: <https://www.idonthaveacoolname.com/what-did-i-learn-from-bruno-latour/>