

*Jeremy Damian*

# WEIRD ANIMISMS

Something is happening.

A new insistence of certain experiences (Drumm).

The derailing of what is referred to as our "modern naturalism", our way of experiencing the world, the beings and things that populate it.

Perhaps, this much is happening already: a re-animation of sorts; fragile, ephemeral, clumsy resurgences of animism. Certain things, certain beings, certain forces are speaking to us, are waving at us. The need for a world to reanimate, this is where we stand. It seems about time to accept the fact that we have never ceased to sustain, through some of our practices, a world perhaps not enchanted, but far more dense with presences than we had believed it to be. Time to rethink the distribution map of the forces, aptitudes and capacities between the living, the invisibles, the things, the cosmic forces... and to nurture the possibility of new cosmograms.



Against the template of religion and the weight of the inherited tradition, two new figures

emerged at the turn of what we call *our modernity*: the Human and Nature. Modernity, which has been presented as a long process of disenchantment, would have dismissed God as the life giving and explanatory power of the world. It would be appropriate to address these mysteries jointly with Nature and Humanity so as to open them up to question and to update them. Belief against fact, the celestial beyond and the supernatural against the down to earth and material; the changeover was not made in a day. It took place over successive and repeated battles which all ended up opposing the old spiritualism to a young and modern materialism. This is at least the story as we have been telling it to ourselves.

In the beginning of this twenty-first century, Bruno Latour demonstrated that spiritualists had roughly the same claims about their God as the naturalists did about their Nature: referring to a truth that was external, universal and as indisputable as it was indestructible. What is this strange dividing line which, as the result of a confrontation, unites God and Nature as a single authority called upon to explain and justify the world? Whereas spiritualists were confiscating all of the animate potential of the world for the benefit of a single self-contained being, naturalists had become merely concerned by a nature which is indifferent to human action; an assembly of inert things and material objects. What some were overanimating, others had disanimated. In this respect, God and Nature can be considered around a common motive: the purification of the world's stage. We cannot speak of a transition from God to Nature as such, the significance of modernity was rather in the alliance, if not the alloy, of one and the other, like two sides of a coin.

## MILIEUX

From our most current perspective – one that perceives the approaching age of catastrophes, of a threatening new climatic order, of rarified spaces of comfort and hospitality – we are beginning to comprehend that we have perhaps not ridded ourselves, as much as we had believed, of principles or of sources of animation. Modernity only ever managed to conceive the world

by dividing it in two – object and subject, matter and soul, etc. – by weighing an unhealthy double operation on this division: casting unilateral relationships of knowledge and predation on each of the two terms of this duality, and forbidding that any intermediate position should be liveable. From object to subject, one had to jump in one discontinuous leap without imagining the continuum of intermediate and hybrid positions possible. But the times are now interested in the questions regarding what *actually* composes our world, and has a right of belonging to it (*y a droit de Cité*). Our era is not limited to its despairs, however plentiful and multifarious they may be, it also knows how to carry the voices which are encouraging a plurality of ways of being and a “sudden disorganisation of boundaries” (Franke). Our moment would be characterised by the fact *this can be felt*. And many are those who, henceforth, would feel ready to defend, and live according to these possibles. RE-ANIMATION would then refer to this moment and the array of practices which are coming to repopulate the purified environment of the Moderns, these between spaces through which we feel, and we accept, that we would not be prepared to limit ourselves to the forms of our supposed heritage, that keeping to them suffocates us, makes us unhappy, narrow and poor in worlds. We are at this strange and fragile moment of rediscovery and of restored confidence in our abilities to inhabit these environments, to redensify and nourish the forms of animation which are particular to them. End of the great slumber.

The environments where these kinds of knowledge, practices and experiments are sustained and cultivated are not rare. A few examples amongst others: the scientists who, in their laboratories, are learning to relate with odd entities (neutrinos, quarks, microbes...) by conferring them decisive agency in our world (Stengers and Latour); the Californian eco-feminists mobilised against the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, who are combining spirituality and politics in their claims to practicing witchcraft and by calling upon the “goddess” (Starhawk); the Tupi Indians of Brasil who know that the bloodthirsty jaguar sees itself as a corn beer drinking human (Viveiros de Castro); those distinctly modern Westerners, involving themselves in uncanny and inventive adventures with their dead (Despret); the pilgrims of Medjugorje who come experience the apparition of the Virgin (Claverie); the philosophers who are letting themselves be haunted by androids and zombies (Tanney); the peculiar naturalists trialling

a werewolf diplomacy along with wolves so as to reopen a round of negotiations towards a potential cohabitation between them and us (Morizot); as well as the artists who, throughout the twentieth century, and keeping to a few examples from the performing arts, have never ceased hybridising the streams of the modern avant-garde with other forms of thought and creation: Antonin Artaud and his fascination with Tarahumara ritualism, Anna Halprin, also influenced by Native American shamanism, in her creation of neo-pagan rituals on the west coast of the United-States, Merce Cunningham and John Cage seeking to overcome the subject/world separation through the influence of Zen in their composing process, Jerzy Grotowski, developing the concept of “art as vehicle”, nourished namely by research on Haitian voodoo, as well as Butoh dance, which is imbued with the animism of Shinto ritual. So many collectives and practitioners, contexts and situations contributing to the act of collecting, documenting and importing forms of animation that are other. So many fragile attempts which are cultivating attentional ecologies in their approach to strange animisms. All the more strange in their seeming almost familiar to us (Rasmi).

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND NON-INNOCENCE

Against their critical inclinations, the social sciences have in some cases become genuine incubators for these kinds of experiments. For twenty years now, they have been inventing positions of knowledge and inquiry which are no longer merely satisfied with counting, revealing and denouncing the processes by which modernity has imposed itself in systematically destroying and dismembering forms of knowledge; the collective ecologies which sustained the possibility of a world that is *justly* animated. It will henceforth be in order to seek ways of accounting for the multiple presences, the heterogenous ways of being, the forces and the intensities which inhabit the world and constitute it as a fragile ecology. In view of such attitudes to research, those who applaud themselves for carrying on playing disanimation against overanimation, or who demand that one chooses between the side of the scholars or of the believers, appear anachronistic. The context of climatic turmoil forces anthropologists and sociologists to come out of their academic reserve. The forms of “truth-telling”

are renewing themselves and changing the orientation. Contenting oneself in noting the diversity of ways of inhabiting the world, interpreting them, and defending this multiplicity even, no longer suffices.

These mutations are particularly perceptible in Anthropology. Tim Ingold and David Abram are emblematic of this reinvestment of animism by their making it a mode of presence-to-world which is characterised by a state of openness, a state of sensitivity and availability to the more-than-human world's forms of solicitation. Both of them are oscillating between two typical tendencies of animism's forms of reinvestment: the first makes the hypothesis of an animist *survival* in the modern Western world, an animism constantly in the bass frequencies which has hushed itself up (because it would have been made silent) without ever having fully disappeared; and a second which makes the hypothesis of its contemporary and necessary *reinvention* in the time of catastrophes. Because of this oscillating movement, the translation of David Abram's book, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, will have played a decisive part in the elaboration of this edition of the journal. Abram is a go-between, an intercessor at the crossroads between worlds. He provides an animist understanding of rationality by making the most general and inclusive category of it, as if our ways of being, reasoning, and our presence-to-world, were still nourished by a paradoxically distant and nearby animism, muffled and yet still operating. The survival hypothesis establishes animism as the bedrock of an experience which is common to, and solidary with, a broader range of entities. However, it has the flaw of appearing to position itself as to the original authenticity of our presence-to-world when what the situation would instead be demanding on our part is rather some collective positions of invention and inception. At the heart of these positions, animism would become a political operator, a force of awakening and assemblage, a “lure for new feelings” (Debaïse) and for new ways of composing worlds.

For these mutations particular to Anthropology to be possible and operational, it required the discipline to waive a privilege: the one that it had claimed at its beginnings. Introduced by Edward Tylor in 1871, in his classic *Primitive Culture*, animism had first been conceived and used as a scholarly category of analysis. This kind of animism was first and foremost characterised by its disqualifying usage, meddling social evolutionism and colonialism.

The animist, by definition, was the other, the one who was not capable of respecting the world's distribution of beings and things, the one who mistook objects for subjects and distributed spirits with largesse across nature. The native, the savage, the primitive. The one that occupied and embodied a radically inferior stage on the span of human development. The scholarly category of animism stigmatised ambiguity and tardiness. Today, advocating animism is requiring us to look this heritage in the face. Innocence is not an option (Haraway). But in the same way that certain terms, denominations or insults are recycled from a stigma and turned into an empowering community emblem, "animism" is experiencing a second wind that is short-circuiting its classical networks, contexts and uses and transforming it into an active political category. Through it, something to think and act with "in the ruins of capitalism" (Tsing) is being built collectively.

*Reclaim animism!*

## WEIRD ANIMISMS

Are these animisms (really) so strange? Admittedly, they do surprise us; but is strange the right word? Are they not, rather, *weird*? Stefan Helmreich pointed out the commonly mistaken equivalence between "strange" and *weird*. If "strange" is what comes from outside ("stranger") and recalls the origin of things or their essence, *weird*, in old english, refers to a spell, chance, fortune. Whereas "strange" assigns a primary and fundamental difference, *weird* traces a map of becoming: "what weird indicates is the future, where things could be leading". We may want to resist this very contemporary desire to see animism everywhere, to make of it our primary and unsurpassable condition of our presence-to-world, not yet contaminated by the layers of rationalist and objectifying naturalism. As if we were soiled and impeded animists. These positions amount to reversing the ethnocentric prejudice by placing true lived experience on the side of animism, as primary experience of the world (Descola). But it is a different thing altogether when we set about tracking our *weird animisms*, as if they were so many possibles or potentials to build, not to rediscover. Their being *weird* means they do not make any claims to purity or authenticity; they serve as so many propositions and invitations to complicate our relationships to worlds, to imagine

and practice monstrous forms of alliance between those who, henceforth, recognise themselves under the common emblem of animation.

## BODY-OBJECT-IMAGE #3

We would like this third edition of the COI journal to question what we would gain in thinking of ourselves and describing ourselves as, as well as in acting as, an enlarged collective discovering its abilities to sustain, detect, potentiate and invoke animated beings in its world, as well as in acknowledging the agencies that are their own. Who is participating in these new possibles which are favourable to an animate world? Who is already one of us and has never ceased to be? A theatre is without a doubt a privileged place to ask such questions and to imagine, literally, numerous possible *mises en scène*.

The theatre stage is in the image of the world, an environment in motion and in constant transformation, unstable and uncertain as to what can, and those who can, produce themselves there. It welcomes new beings, mixtures of bodies, objects, images and texts, beings that are hybrid, material or ethereal, durable or ephemeral, solid or gaseous... One thing is becoming increasingly perceptible: the staging of the actions of non-humans, with paths and dealings of their own, their ever specific ways of relating to the world that surrounds them, made of uncertainties and vagaries, is creating new situations of composition. Objects manifest better than we know how, the fact that they wouldn't know to limit themselves to their own contours, and, that they and we alike only exist relationally.

The trope of (re-)animation resonates with what appears simultaneously as a constant and an urgency in the arts of puppetry. This is perhaps also more largely the case in the performing arts, whose very denomination in French – 'spectacle vivant' (live performance) – is broadening as it loses its self-evidence (in fact, is it only the living that it is concerned by?).

They are relocating and decentralising the actor on stage, the human figure, so that what is at stake in the staging of action embraces the questions of what composes the world through what it is that meshes, that weaves, that binds: the set of forces, of beings and unknown actors that make our worlds hold together

and mean we are attached to them. This third edition of the Corps-Objet-Image journal will endeavour to make connections between practitioners of (re-)animation by hypothesising that the practitioners of the Body-Object-Image occupy a special place in this landscape, due to their privileged and, for some time now, plural relationships with the materials of the world and the beings that they animate.

The various contributions that will come to punctuate this publishing year will each singularly explore ways of nourishing forms of attention and sensitivity to this archipelago of *weird animisms* which bestow it with substance and life and participate in the re-animation of our worlds, including perhaps those most everyday, immediate and familiar. The experiences related in these articles, and the works and artistic undertakings considered in this edition will not resemble (aside from exceptions) what one would ordinarily expect of an “animist” thought or art. It is in this way that they captivate and solicit our attention.

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La Revue Corps-Objet-Image, du TJP, Centre Dramatique National d'Alsace - Strasbourg réunit artistes et chercheurs pour penser autrement les arts de la scène.

Après, « Infra, l'en-deçà du visible », « Alter, l'autre de la matière », le troisième numéro s'articule autour de la thématique « Ré-animation » et est diffusé sur le site [www.corps-objet-image.com](http://www.corps-objet-image.com) au fil des Week-ends TJP de la saison 2016-2017.

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