

SUBJECT - OBJECT IN MARTIN HEIDEGGER , BRUNO LATOUR AND MANUEL DE LANDA

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The point of departure of this article is a text by Martin Heidegger on the essence [das Wesen] of the work of art. Heidegger's definition of the work of art is an early attempt to abandon the modernist gap between subject and object, culture and nature, politics and science. Despite Bruno Latour's critique on Heidegger's work, this essay links up nicely with Latour's project in *We have never been modern*. Also Latour acknowledges that, maybe now more than ever, certain entities appear that cannot be positioned within either of the dualistic poles. Moreover, they occupy a grey zone between the subject and object pole. In Manuel De Landa's text "Meshwork or Hierarchy" similar themes are addressed from a neuro-scientific perspective. In an era wherein fish are injected with hormones to fixate the mating season and secure the fisheries' incomes, in an era where cryogenically preserved embryos, genetically modified soy beans and artificial neural networks blur the boundaries between the natural and the human, it seems worthwhile examining these texts again.

1. The Origin of the Work of Art by Martin Heidegger

The Origin of the Work of Art departs from the most obvious quality of the artwork: its materiality. For an artwork does not exist when not materialised. This concreteness attributes to the artwork a thingly element. However, Heidegger does not equate the work of art with the thing [das Ding]. He views the work of art as an allegory to the extent that it says something other than what the mere thing itself is (the Greek *allo agoreuein* means "saying something different"). The artwork is a symbol in the sense that something other is brought together with the thing that is made, which we will call for the sake of convenience the aesthetic experience (*sumballein* is Greek for "bringing together").

What is the thing-character of the artwork, or rather more generally, what is the thing-being or the essence of the thing [das Ding]?

Heidegger formulates three possible definitions of the thing: the thing as carrier of properties, the thing as unit of sensorial perception, and the thing as matter moulded in a particular form. The latter definition, better known as Aristotle's hylemorphism, is regarded by Heidegger as the most useful.

Hylemorphism is a necessary precondition for holding together the Greek dualistic universe. The gap between the world of ideas and the world of matter is negotiated through form (part of the world of ideas), which imposes its principals on matter. Matter is by itself inert and meaningless: it acquires existence from form.

Heidegger states that hylemorphism is not derived from the essence of the thing, but from the essence of the equipment. The form of the equipment is defined by its serviceability. Serviceability consumes matter in the literal sense: for an equipment to be usable, the material cannot obtrude itself, but has to merge wholly in its usefulness. Matter has no dictate. The work of art, however, does not deny matter, but rather foregrounds it in its singularity. The rock whereon a Greek temple is built can only show itself as a rock by virtue of supporting the temple. The temple articulates the resting and supporting quality of the rock. Hence matter is stripped of its dumb and meaningless reputation.

Yet there is more. The work of art does not only show the thingliness of things, but its own thingliness engenders reality. Standing there, the Greek temple holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, first brings to radiance the light of day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air.

According to Heidegger hylemorphism is not adequate to designate the thingliness of the work of art. Matter is more than dumb, inert, meaningless stuff, depending on form for its existence. Also matter is capable of granting meaning and creating reality. The singularity of matter co-determines the form of reality. This is not to say that the specific nature of matter excludes certain forms and by corollary decides about reality, like the porous nature of sandstone excluding the possibility of making a jar out of it. The nature of matter gives reality its form in full.

By defending this idea, Heidegger distances himself from the way matter is being addressed in the sciences. The scientist views nature as a collection of objects that have to be explained through subjects. Without intervention of these subjects, matter remains empty and meaningless. In order to grasp reality (the suggestion of dominance is appropriate here) and to assign meaning to it, objects are being dissected, measured and used in experiments. Heidegger is of the opinion that this isn't the most befitting way of fathoming the essence of nature. For in this way a being [das Seiende] is bereft of its full properties. It is not left in its particular way of being but is reduced to what the subject wants to know about it. Thus a separation is installed between subject and object by reducing the object to equipment and denying its articulate and creative character. It is in this way that we can say that the weighing of a stone doesn't reveal anything of its essence. Weighing is nothing else than converting the heaviness of the stone in the calculation of its weight. The solidity of the stone shows itself only when remaining unexplained. Every attempt by science to penetrate is doomed to failure, and results in a being degraded to a dumb object. Science is an example of subjective, propositional thinking, which rapes beings. The term "propositional thinking" is to be read literally: science positions the object in front of it and tries to examine it from different perspectives. But this way of examining creates a distance between subject and object which excludes any real understanding.

The work of art on the other hand, shows matter in its matter-being, in its reality-founding character, without wanting to penetrate the closedness of matter. Matter is brought out in the open, but as something that is essentially hiding.

It is this game between openness and hiding which Heidegger regards as the essence of art: in the artwork truth is brought out of the covert as that which essentially withdraws itself. This game or struggle between the overt and the covert is never settled in the being [das Seiende]. Because this struggle is continuously taking place in the being, the work is capable of founding the truth.

This is in contradistinction with science, wherein every happening of truth, every game between the overt and the covert is paralysed at service of the subject. Science is not an original happening of truth, but always the cultivation of a domain of truth already opened, specifically by apprehending and confirming that which shows itself to be possibly and necessarily correct within that field.

Heidegger places the propositional and computational thinking of science in opposition with reminiscent thought (das andenkende Denken). The latter can be described as an active openness (e.g. the action of the artist) towards the revealing of the truth and simultaneously acknowledging the covertness of truth. Here the subject does not aspire to grasp or control, but to allow the being

in its being. The subject does not position itself above the object, but sees itself placed together with the object within the framework of the happening of being. It even becomes difficult to speak of objects and subjects, since both transcend each other by their focus on being (das Sein). Being is a dynamic process wherein object and subject are hardly distinguishable from each other. Being, in other words, bridges the gap between subject and object. Or rather, in the light of being, there has never been a separation between the two.

The value of an artwork exists in its mediating role: it allows subject as well as object to partake in the happening of being. The work of art can thus not be thought in hylemorphic terms, since also the materiality of an artwork contributes to the revealing of being.

2. We Have Never Been Modern by Bruno Latour

In the book *We Have Never Been Modern* Bruno Latour acknowledges Heidegger's attempt to draw subject and object pole closer together. However, Latour holds that Heidegger preserves the fundamental principals of the modernist gap. Heidegger denies the mingling of both poles in other disciplines by situating the action of mediation in art and philosophy only. Latour, on the other hand, regards the mixture of poles as being omnipresent, even within modernist thought. Before commenting this critique, let's have a look at Latour's analysis of modernity and the alternative he suggests.

Latour describes modernity as the era where the separation between object and subject pole becomes an absolute precondition in order to practice proper science, whilst in practice this rigid segregation has facilitated a mingling of both poles. However, even the separation had an ambivalent character: on the one hand the assumption was made that nature is not created by humans, and thus transcends the latter, while society is a total human construct and is immanent to human agency.

On the other hand, nature was fabricated artificially in laboratories and certain civil laws and customs seemed to transcend man. In this scenario nature was thus transcendent but mobilizable (immanent) and society was immanent, but at the same time transcended man.

In order to veil the paradoxical character of these premises, a third principle of absolute separation between the poles was inserted. This third principle meant to guarantee modernity application at will of the first two principles. So on the one hand this meant that one could let interfere nature in the construction of society without being forced to deny her transcendence. While on the other hand, man could view himself as the only agent of his political destiny without having to deny the interference of nature. The transcendence of nature did not stop her of being socially immanent, and the immanence of society did not stop her of being transcendent.

A fourth guarantee proposed an entity which could intervene during a possible conflict between the two poles: God. Also God was assigned the same paradoxical character: He was transcendent in order for politics and science to develop undisturbed, yet He was also immanent so he could intervene when necessary.

These four guarantees served each other as checks and balances. The mere transcendence of a nature not of our creation, and the mere immanence of a society, entirely of our creation, would have paralysed modern man because it would render him completely powerless in relation to nature, and too powerful in relation to society. It was then to great advantage that these principles could be inverted without any semblance of contradiction. In that way transcendental nature could be mobilized, humanized, and socialized. The same is true the other way round: though we have constructed society, it laws continuously supersede and dominate us, and is hence in that respect just as transcendent as nature. The moderns could introduce nature within social relations, and yet keep her at an infinite distance from the people (they were free to construct and alter their society) whilst at the same time allow societys laws to be inevitable, necessary and absolute. By corollary everything became possible and all criticism could be circumvented. The first two guarantees allow an alternation in the sources of power by addressing the one time the forces of nature, and the other time the political powerfield. The third guarantee excludes any contamination between what belongs to nature and what belongs to society, though the first two guarantees make an alternation possible. The fourth guarantee proposes a referee, who is supreme judge and powerless at the same time, but which erodes the contradiction between the alternating first two guarantees

and the dividing third one. This ingenious system made it impossible to unveil the paradoxical character of modernity.

By segregating the world of the non-human (science) from that of the human (politics) in theory, and undoing this separation in practice, the creation of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects was facilitated. However, there was no theoretical base which situated these hybrids ontologically, as a result of which the modern thinker could not fathom them. These hybrids were never really acknowledged as such, but existed only as a mixture, as a derivation of the pure poles. Just because modernity has never observed her own principles of purity in practice, one could say that we have never been modern.

Premodern thought, in contradistinction with modern thought, is characterised by the blurring of the object and subject pole. The premodern thinker combines with ease natural phenomena, gods, ancestors, and tribal conflicts in his stories. However, it is exactly by relating all aspects of reality to each other, and by saturating the mixtures of the divine, the human and the natural with concepts, that the practical expansion of these hybrids is limited. The impossibility of changing social order without changing natural order, forces the premodern to be cautious about innovation.

The development of these hybrids increased to such an extent that the moderns were forced to include them in their dualistic universe. Kant's philosophy was one way to relate the two poles to each other, that of the Ding an Sich and that of the transcendental subject, by awarding the phenomena the status of intermediaries. The philosophical trends aiming to build bridges between the world of the human and that of the non-human all acknowledged these hybrids, but only as mixtures of pure forms. The hybrids were denied their own ontological status. They were at the same time acknowledged and denied.

3- Latour's Alternative for the Modernist Concept of Hybrids

In opposition to the compromising, yet in se still modernist philosophical currents, Latour tries to position hybrids as hybrids in reality. His alternative does not depart from the pure forms to end up at the intermediaries (cf. Kants philosophy), but conversely takes the intermediate as starting point in order to arrive eventually at the extremes. The pure object and subject poles are thus preserved, however not as cues to reality, but rather as temporal and partial end results. The two poles indicate the degree of stabilisation. For example, when the elasticity of air was discovered it was classified as a natural phenomenon, and was thus situated at the side of the nature pole. Later it became clear that this phenomenon was very much bound to laboratory conditions, and was subsequently situated at the human pole. A great amount of research and experimentation have made it possible for scientists to define the degree of naturalness and human construction, in order to facilitate classification at either pole, although preliminary.

Latour depicts nature's and society's double transcendence as one set of stabilised essences, while the immanence of nature and society corresponds with one series of instable events, namely the labour of mediation. The gap between nature and society is preserved, but as a result of stabilisation and not as point of departure. The proliferation of hybrids renders the gap to a continuous gradient which is never definite.

Quotation from *We have never been modern*, p. 198: Eventually there exist of course a nature which is not of our creation, and a society which we can change; there exist indisputable scientific facts and law subjects, but these are the twofold consequence of a constantly visible practice. This is different from the modernist view where they are distant and contradictory causes of an invisible practice, which is in contradiction with these causes.

Purification is integrated by Latour as a special form of mediation. Kant's intermediaries become mediators, which do not leave the pure forms untouched but continuously challenge the meanings of nature and society.

The asymmetrical rationale which designated one of both poles as unexplainable departure point, gives way to a symmetrical rationale, where nature as well as society, purification as well as the forming of hybrids, are taken into account. Nature and society cease to be explanatory terms but are in need of explanation themselves. By distributing essence over all forms of being partaking in our history, and not only over nature and society, hybrids become explicable.

According to Latour pure nature and pure culture only exist as theoretical concepts designating the temporal degree of stabilisation. De facto there are only nature-cultures and it is solely on this basis that one can compare with other ways of thinking. It is thus wrong to state that the difference between the moderns and the premoderns lies in the fact that the former propagate a rigid segregation between nature and culture, while the latter mingle the two. The distinction between different collectives is rather made on basis of their classifications of forms of being, which characteristics the latter are attributed, and the way one can appeal to them. These differences are, however, minor gaps.

Nevertheless, one must take heed not to fall into the same trap as absolute relativism: by considering all collectives different at the same level, one obliterates difference. The differences between collectives are not only big, but also appertain to size and dimension. This difference in size was ignored by relativism, and turned into a big gap by universalism.

Quotation from *We have never been modern*, p. 152-153: The collectives are all, except for their dimensions, comparable with the successive coils of one and the same spiral. That on one of the circles ancestors and a fix starry sky are needed, or that on a circle situated more to the outside, genes and quasars are necessary, can be explained by the dimension of the collectives that have to be kept together. More objects require more subjects. More subjectivity asks for more objectivity. (...) In this way, differences can be respected (the coils are certainly of another dimension) while at the same time similarities can be accounted for (all collectives construct human and non-human entities in the same way).

Modernism has stimulated the production of hybrids strangely enough by denying their existence and by propagating an absolute separation between the two poles. However, the question remains whether Latours explicit manner of theorising hybrids is advantageous to the production of hybrids and the growth of society-natures. Latour thinks this is not necessarily the case, but that neednt be a disadvantage. On the contrary, the outrageous dispersion of hybrids will then be replaced by a regulated and collectively approved production. Since the production of hybrids will become an explicit and collective matter, it will be the subject of an extended democracy which will regulate and slow down its growth.

Despite Latours interesting analysis of the paradoxical character of modernity, his alternative non-modern reasoning system seems to provide few solutions to approach hybrids: the ontology of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects is eventually still determined by a pure nature and a pure culture. Though the latter are not taken as point of departure, they remain the theoretical foundation of reality. Latours criticism on Heideggers thought of being, then loses all its power. At first sight Latour seems right when he blames Heidegger for ignoring the hybrids in science, technology, politics, and economy. Heidegger only acknowledges art and philosophy as mediators, by situating them as exclusive locations of the happening of being. Science, technology, politics and economy preserve the distance between object and subject, according to Heidegger.

Latours book *Science in Action* has the merit of showing how so-called objective scientific findings come to being by the virtue of the creation of an intricate network of instruments, institutions, magazines, investments, etc. Objective facts due their existence to the lobbying of many scientists, which enabled the discovery of these facts. Scientific discoveries are nice examples of the mingling of object pole and subject pole.

Nevertheless, Heideggers way of theorising hybrids seems more useful to me than Latours. For how can one do justice to hybrids if they are ultimately defined as the composition of two pure poles?

The problem already starts with the word hybrid, which presupposes two or more pure entities. Heidegger circumvents this principal difficulty by departing from the happening of being, where there is no mention of subjects and objects. In that respect it is not really correct to attribute to Heidegger the idea that science is a pure discipline lacking mediation. Heidegger's theory suggests that science has no insight in the game of showing and hiding of the being, and that it does not allow this game within its own activities. But to state that Heidegger would deny science its happening of being would be a wrong conclusion. The fact that science does not acknowledge the happening of being and hybrids, does not mean that science does not contain hybrids. In a certain sense Heidegger's theory is compatible with Latours, since both argue science does not acknowledge hybrids. In *Science in Action* Latour claims that scientists are absolutely convinced of the objective character of their theories and that they sneer at any suggestion of the human constructedness of their theories. It was only with quantum mechanics, and the scientific evidence that the measuring of natural phenomena indeed influences the behaviour of these phenomena, that the latter suggestion gained more credibility within science.

Manuel de Landa's article *Meshwork or Hierarchy* illustrates by means of neuro-physiology how hybrids can be theorised without appealing to the pure categories of object and subject. Discarding all the big differences, this text forms a point of similarity with Heidegger.

4. Meshwork or Hierarchy by Manuel de Landa

In this essay De Landa wonders whether birds building nests and humans furnishing houses is the result of cognitive labour, be that conscious or not (e.g. instinct, genetic imperative, conscious intellectual effort). Could these actions be described as the manipulation of objects by subjects, or is the distinction rather blurry? Is the furnishing of a house an act where an ideal form is imposed on matter or is this activity an example of hybrid formation where matter and form converge?

De Landa defends the hypothesis that we are concerned here with an interaction between a set of non-hierarchical brain functions and the expressive qualities of territorial markers themselves. Particular objects are placed at certain locations or fulfill a particular function we have carved out consciously for them ourselves. Other objects will be localised at places where they will blend well with the environment. In that sense, order and meaning can emerge without a central agency behind it. Or to put it in a Heideggerian way: matter has a dictate as well.

In accordance to behavioral AI, De Landa does not believe that, in the case of a bird, the bird's brain would typically contain representations of the world, forming a cognitive map of the animal's surroundings. Building a nest is not a symbolic operation performed on these representations and only later implemented as actions in the real world. The bird's brain consists of a collection of neural networks, each of which is directly and dynamically connected to the outside world. Each neural network is in a non-linear stable state (or attractor) which is associated with a similarly stable pattern in the animal's environment, without the intervention of representations of the outside world. A pattern of the outside world can then be recognised by the animal without forming an explicit internal symbol to stand in for that pattern.

This theory differs strongly from the point of view of symbolic AI. The latter decomposes the brain into relatively large functional modules (perception, execution) that must be activated by central representations (beliefs, desires, intentions). The way the environment is thought or felt of, is the basis of a concrete evaluation of this environment. This results in a very causal, hence, linear and static model for human-outer world relations. Mobility is only possible if the central representations change. Change and meaning always depart from the subject pole.

Behavioural AI, on the other hand, does not presuppose high level general modules but postulates low level specific modules. High level skills emerge out of the interactions of these micro-modules, none of which can be said to possess the skill. One cannot speak of an internal generation of a world model because the organisms are directly involved with the real world. The objective features of the environment function as an external memory that determines behaviour momentarily. The exclusion of reflection, and hence of rather fixed beliefs about the world, in combination with the ever-changing environmental circumstances as the only source for knowledge, render this model to a very dynamic representation of the brain.

For example, a bird can conclude from its muscular intelligence and the behaviour of other

animals whether a swampy surface provides enough suitable support to walk on, without the need for an internal 'world model' which includes representations of dry and wet land. The world seems to possess a kind of intrinsic 'proto-semantics', which are meaningful to the subject in a functional way.

Matters are different for humans, though. It is indisputable that humans think and create cognitive representations of reality. Our linguistic capacities, which are already a second-order relation to reality, testify for this. However, this does not exclude the possibility that these representations would not interfere with every action (and I'm not talking about spontaneous actions or utterances). Maybe our mind combines different forms of intelligence: some intelligent abilities might arise out of decentralised and parallel processes, others from centralised and sequential ones. Certain theories hold that we evolved from a highly parallel and non-hierarchical intelligence (networks drawing on heterogeneous elements without homogenizing them) to sequential and centralised cognitive processes (hierarchies as structures wherein components are ordered in higher groups).

Similar to the happening of being in Heidegger, certain cognitive processes and actions cannot be theorised anymore from the subject/object dyad. Since certain actions do not include internal mental representations and the interaction between subject and object is direct and non-hierarchical, the distance between the two becomes very small, almost negligible. It is then that we can speak of subject-objects.

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