1 Symmetry, Inscriptions, and the Epistemological Residue of Writing

A Deconstructive Reading of *Laboratory Life*

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Introduction: Citing Derrida in The Laboratory

In one of his latest books, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018), Latour sees the Anthropocene as a fundamental crisis of modernity and a culmination of modernist 'abstract assumptions' and emphasis on 'human detachment from material constraints' (Latour 2018). In this chapter, we argue that the same privileged dream of geo-escapism that Latour considers characteristic of the Anthropocene is constitutive of the narrative structure of *Laboratory Life*. It is, moreover, our contention that the idea of symmetry risks marginalizing the power of human interpretation as a knowledge constituting political force in local and geopolitical struggles over sustainability. As a case in point of such marginalization, we will present a deconstructive close reading of the introductory chapter of Latour and Woolgar's classic work *Laboratory Life*; a book often understood as an early draft of actor–network theory (ANT). We consider that this text represents a decisive point in the history of the social and human sciences, by challenging the dichotomous understanding of the nature/culture and social/scientific divide, while at the same time undermining its own project by marginalizing the role of human interpretation in deconstructing this distinction.

On the one hand, *Laboratory Life* emphasizes the role of mediation and interpretation in scientific processes, and further insists on the social as an integral part of the domain of science and nature. Compliant with this is a particular emphasis on the role of inscription and so-called inscription devices. On the other hand, the text actually marginalizes the role of mediation, and particularly the various inscriptions and inscription devices involved, in the production of Latour and Woolgar's own text. To tease out this ironic suppression of the material act of writing, and the materiality of the traces and inscriptions in this founding text of ANT, we will relate the notion of 'inscription' in Woolgar and Latour to 'grammatology' and 'arche-writing' in Derrida. Like Woolgar and Latour, Derrida also aimed

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to deconstruct the polarity of nature and culture—as well as the civilizational hierarchy between people with and without writing—by construing inscriptions and writing as conditions of possibility for knowledge. In fact, there is an intriguing textual presence of Derrida and his notion of inscription in Woolgar and Latour's text. Hidden in a footnote in *Laboratory Life*, we find that Derrida is cited to define 'inscription', and that 'inscription' is what Woolgar and Latour's informants are most concerned with, since these scientist-informants have, the authors of *Laboratory Life* state, a 'strange mania for inscription' (Latour and Woolgar 1986: 40).

Latour and Woolgar assert that

> the value and status of any text (construction, fact, claim, story, this account) depend on more than its supposedly 'inherent' qualities [...] the degree of accuracy (or fiction) of an account depends on what is subsequently made of the story, not on the story itself.
>
> (Ibid.: 284)

True to this claim, we need to understand 'what is made of the story' in *Laboratory Life*, on more than an individual level. This implies, moreover, that the text is more than its physical, material qualities; that the arrangement of, and the choices made in, the text matters. In the same way as Latour and Woolgar 'wish to show that the process of construction involves the uses of certain devices whereby all traces of production are made extremely difficult to detect' (ibid.: 176–177), *we* wish to show, not only that they are *also* 'compulsive and almost manic writers', but how they apply narratological and rhetorical devices in the production of their own text erasing the traces of its production. So 'what is made of the story' in *Laboratory Life*?

This chapter starts with an analysis of Latour and Woolgar's deconstruction of the distinction implicit in social studies of science between 'the social' and 'the technical', which they also link to the classic anthropological and sociological distinction between so-called 'etic' and 'emic' concepts. The next section focuses on one of the methodological and narrative tools used by Latour and Woolgar to deconstruct the opposition between the social and the technical, namely the introduction of the anthropologist observer as part of the narrative. Our examination demonstrates, however, that this attempt deconstructs itself by creating what we will call an *epistemological residue*, that is, an invisible omniscient narrator that observes both the scientists and the observer, a gaze that resists any act of reification. By reifying the observer, Latour and Woolgar fail to account for the epistemological residue in the interval between the observer (which is part of the narrative) and the narrator observing the observer. Finally, we return to the footnote and the concept of 'inscription' and show that Latour and

Woolgar operate with two conflicting notions of inscription that partly undermine their own argument of the social as part of the technical.

The Social as a 'Slowness'/'Deferral' within the Technical

In the first chapter of *Laboratory Life*, Latour and Woolgar challenge the distinction between the social and the technical, often implicit and taken for granted in social studies of science. They insist that the social is not an exception that only occasionally interferes with the scientific agenda from the 'outside', as when political interests aim to harness scientific processes, nor is it a problem to be solved or a barrier to be overcome to reestablish the purity of some kind of 'autonomous' science external to society and politics. The social then, is not exterior to science, but *intrinsically* linked to the process through which technical and scientific knowledge comes into being. On the contrary, the social is an internal part of how technical knowledge operates.

Here, Latour and Woolgar situate themselves within the context of the sociology of science, which, in the period before the publication of *Laboratory Life*, had expanded their field of investigation. Rather than limiting the notion of the social to the occasional or accidental influence of socio-political factors on science as a production and a product, social scientists—such as M. Mulkey in his study of the social process of innovation (Mulkey 1972)—had started to take an interest in the technical and intellectual aspects of science (Latour and Woolgar 1986: 24). But Latour and Woolgar went further than the existing scholarship in the history and sociology of science did in 1979. In their own wording:

> Although our knowledge of the *external* effects and reception of science has increased, our understanding of the complex activities which constitute the *internal* workings of scientific activity remains undeveloped.
>
> (Ibid.: 17, our emphasis)

Hence, the aim is to move from the 'external' to the 'internal'. Rather than accepting and taking *the products of science* for granted, Latour and Woolgar attempt to account for *their internal production*. To do this, they build their argument on a specific notion of *social construction:*

> As a working definition, therefore, it could be said that we are concerned with the *social construction* of scientific knowledge in so far as this draws attention to the process by which scientists make sense of their observations.
>
> (Ibid.: 32, our emphasis)

In the second edition of *Laboratory Life*, ‘social construction’ was changed to ‘construction’ in the title of the book. By erasing the ‘social’, Latour and Woolgar aimed to emphasize that the social is not outside or distinct from the scientific production. The construction is not more social than technical; rather the social and the technical are parts of the same process of construction. Hence, ‘social’ was erased from the phrase ‘social construction’. Moreover, by erasing the link between construction and social, Latour and Woolgar also emphasize that constructions are not *merely* social, and that their own account, therefore, is not concerned with what we in another context have called ‘soft supplements’ outside the technical realm of science, but with the hard facts of science (Kristeva et al. 2018).

As part of this argument for both the social and the technical as nature-culture hybrids, Latour and Woolgar problematize the classic anthropological and sociological distinction between ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ concepts, devised originally by K. Pike, and built upon the distinction between the phon*etic*[1] and the phon*emic*. In Pike’s wording:

> Descriptions of analyses from the etic standpoint are alien with criteria external to the system. Emic descriptions provide an internal view … with criteria chosen from within the system. They represent to us the view of one familiar with this system and who knows how to function within it himself.
>
> (Pike in Turner 1982: 65)

While ‘etic’ concepts are thus external to the culture under study, and the audience who will ultimately assess the validity of the definition is the scholarly community of fellow observers, ‘emic’ concepts are internal to and meaningful for the community studied: the ‘ultimate decision about the adequacy of description rests with participants themselves’ and is ‘based on the categorical system of the participants’ (Latour and Woolgar 1986: 38). This methodological distinction accordingly assumes that informants and researchers operate in different languages or linguistic registers: those of informants/actors and those of researchers/scientists. But what happens when the emic register is also the language of science?

In an anthropological study of the laboratory, the problem with ‘etic’ concepts is, however, that they fail to describe the technical or scientific aspects of science, since they are brought into and applied onto science from the outside, from a different epistemic culture, that is, social science. Science in the laboratory is defined by the everyday discourse and emic terminology of scientists. But merely using emic concepts (in this case, the lingo of the scientist) entails the danger of ‘going native’, which is particularly marked in the study of science, because of the ‘widespread acceptance of the methods and achievements of science in the culture of which we are part' (ibid.: 38–39). Hence, the social success of science makes it even harder to resist the temptation to 'go native' by deploying the language of the informants themselves, and thus writing an ethnography of laboratory life as *the scientists* would have written it. Latour and Woolgar's ambition, however, is to explain how the informants (the scientists) 'use these concepts as a social phenomenon' (ibid.: 38–39). More precisely, Latour and Woolgar define what we—deploying a term taken from H. Bhabha (1994)—could call a *third space* between etic concepts (which, we remember, would be foreign to the technical side of science) and emic ones (which run the risk of 'going native' by mimicking the natural sciences) by exploring the process through which both these two sets of concepts come to make sense, that is, as social phenomena:

> By paying more attention to the way in which we, as *observer*s, produce the account you are now reading, *we hope to gain an insight into some of the techniques used by scientists* in their attempts to produce ordered accounts.
>
> (Latour and Woolgar 1986: 36, our emphasis)

Moreover, to deconstruct the distinction between etic/outside (social) and emic/inside (technical) views and concepts, Latour and Woolgar use the methodological and literary device of including the 'observer' in the story: The observer is not to be understood as external to the narrative description of the laboratory but as external to science, he/she is a stranger to the laboratory, like an anthropologist was supposed to be a stranger to the culture he/she sets out to study, and thus translates the local, emic language of the 'natives' into the etic categories of cross-culturally valid anthropology.

Latour and Woolgar, then, attempt to focus their attention on the way the 'observer', as a narratively constructed stand-in for themselves, in their own account produces his descriptions as a comparative lens for understanding how the scientists build their accounts. Hence, they here facilitate for and promise a certain reflexivity; the authors' text production will mirror the informants-scientists' text production, which suffers from 'a strange mania for inscription'.

In other words, both the scientists observed and the social scientist observing them use specific techniques and methods to produce their concepts and descriptions. From Latour and Woolgar's ethnomethodological view, these methods and techniques constitute the *social* sides of science and social science. The social is thus not an external intruder to science, but part and parcel of the *process* through which science is constituted. According to Latour and Woolgar, the social aspect of science is not merely its contextual backdrop but rather the collective, everyday practices that individuals in laboratories employ, both consciously and unconsciously, to generate scientific findings. These practices encompass a wide range of activities, such as scribbling notes, exchanging papers and illustrations, and reading and synthesizing texts, among others. The concept of a singular scientific 'finding' does not exist; instead, findings emerge through a gradual social process involving the drafting, sharing, and discussion of texts. As such, the social is a kind of *slowness* or *deferral* within the technical; it is the procedures unfolding in time through which technical practices come into being—both in the laboratory and in the social science observer's account of what happens in the laboratory. The concept of the 'social', as a kind of deferral, strikingly resembles Derrida's concept of *différance* (1982). *Différance* is a neologism that incorporates both the noun *différence* and the verb *différer*; in present participle: *différant* implies 'differing' or 'postponing'. Through his concept, Derrida emphasizes that any act of creating meaning is an ongoing process, rather than a singular moment in time, and can only be examined as a dynamic emergence (Ibid. 1982).

There are some temporal similarities between Derrida's concept and the notion of the social as a deferral in *Laboratory Life*. Like Latour and Woolgar's understanding of the social, *différance* does not *precede* the elements of the opposition it makes possible: 'What we note as *différance* will thus be the movement of play that "produces" (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference' (Ibid. 1982: 141). In his deconstruction of the opposition between speech and writing (and in the criticism of the continuous privileging of writing within Western metaphysics), Derrida understands *différance* as the condition of possibility for speech and writing, rather than something that comes before speech and writing. Speech and writing exist as *différance* in that their existence is one of differing and deferring in relation to themselves and to each other. Without speech, writing would not exist, but the converse is also true: without writing, there would be no speech. As previously discussed, the gradual nature of meaning production, inherent to written language, serves as a prerequisite for all knowledge generation. Consequently, writing is intrinsically embedded within spoken language. Similarly, the social in Latour and Woolgar's vocabulary is not prior to science but the differing or postponing that produces the social/technical practice called science. Latour and Woolgar explore this differing by focusing on how textual and intertextual practices are involved in the construction of scientific facts. More specifically, they draw 'attention to the (mere) processes of literary inscription which make the fact possible. With this in mind, our observer decided to look carefully at the different kind of statements to be found in the papers' (Latour and Woolgar 1986: 76).

Epistemological Residue

As noted, Latour and Woolgar describe how

> the value and status of any text (construction, fact, claim, story, this account) depend on more than its supposedly 'inherent' qualities … the degree of accuracy (or fiction) of an account depends on what is subsequently made of the story, not on the story itself.
>
> (Ibid.: 284)

Using this claim as our methodological guideline, we need to understand 'what is made of the story' in *Laboratory Life*.

To deconstruct the distinction between etic/outside (social) and emic/inside (technical) views and concepts, Latour and Woolgar use the methodological and literary device of including the 'observer' in the story:

> In order to emphasize the *fictional* nature of the account-generating process, we place the burden of *this anthropological investigation on the shoulders of a fictional character*: the visit to the laboratory is made by '*the observer*'.
>
> (Ibid.: 41, our emphasis)

The observer is thus not to be understood as external to the story but as external to science; he/she is a stranger to the laboratory, a non-scientist analyzing the social production of science from a place outside the events that are studied. He/she is thus figured as an anthropologist, a participant observer; the observer and the observed are interacting agents and part of the same narrated story world. This narrative device then, is turned into a methodological tool by Woolgar and Latour: 'By using this approach we hope to shed some light on the process of production within the laboratory and on the similarities with the approach of the observer' (ibid.: 33).

It is, however, our contention that a possible flaw of Latour and Woolgar's method is to be found here. For while Latour and Woolgar are explicit about the fictional mode of the observer, they do not explicitly account for the potential epistemological implications of the use of this fictional and narrative device.

The chapter opens with an account of how an arbitrary 'ideal observer' anthropologist might experience the first visit, as a newcomer to the laboratory. The exaggerated naivety of the anthropologist ('Perhaps these animals are being processed for eating'; 'Perhaps the individuals spending hours discussing scribbled notes and figures are lawyers'; 'Perhaps the occupants of the laboratory are hunters of some kind …') (ibid. 1986: 44) serves to demonstrate that the notion of a 'total newcomer is unrealisable in practice' (ibid.: 44). However, in contrast with the laboratory visited, which is described in somewhat more detail, the male anthropologist is more unmarked. There is seemingly no experienced body present, no scholarly or disciplinary belonging (except from the very general 'anthropology'), and no epistemological convictions (structuralism or hermeneutic anthropology?). This underlines the fictionality of the 'observer' and leaves it to the reader to fill in the blanks—simultaneously, the authors can do whatever they want with this fictive instance without cultural or epistemological qualities.

The observing social scientist and the scientists observed are assumed to have the same mode of existence in the narrated universe of the laboratory, the diegesis of the unfolded story. By identifying the fictive observer as an instance, a participating observer, in a story world shared with the informants, Latour and Woolgar enable themselves to observe both the observer and the observed on the same level, as equal, or symmetrical actors in the field of study.

However, to accomplish this trick, Latour and Woolgar must collapse the distinction between what G. Genette called *story* (the acts and events narrated) and *narration* (the act of narration, producing and performing the narrated events) (Genette 1983: 168). We may ask with Barthes: 'Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story?' (Barthes 1995: 15). As readers, we are presented with the story of the observer in the laboratory, as told by the implicit author 'Latour and Woolgar'. Using the terminology of Genette, we can say that the observer is a homodiegetic character, existing within the story world, presented by the heterodiegetic narrator, narrating the story of the laboratory from outside. As heterodiegetic narrators, 'Latour and Woolgar' are assigned a particular position in the story world. They see and know everything in the narrated universe, while the focalization of the observer is restricted to the internal story world, the laboratory into which the observer is inserted to perform his epistemological function as a homodiegetic anthropologist.

Opposed to the scientists in the lab, the observer is not aware that he is observed by the omniscient narrators, and thus cannot talk back, critique, correct, supplement, or substitute the account given to him. His 'naivety', his lack of formal traits and disciplinary background (except for his being an anthropologist), makes him easy to discipline, and instates him as a partly blank slate, where the readers are invited to fill in or imagine themselves in the field. Moreover, this literary device invites the readers to 'a mutual imagining' (Hobbs 1990: 40). As the observed anthropologist doing fieldwork in the laboratory is fictive, it is fair to claim that the observer in the story is on a mission for the authors and/or the omniscient heterodiegetic narrator. Accordingly, the observer cannot be read as a mere persona *representing* Latour and Woolgar, but serves as a rhetorical and narratological device in the construction of the story, and thus also establishes the universe in which the methodological drama plays out.

On the level of the narrated, in the narrated world, the strategy of introducing the observer into the story serves to reify him and make him and his observations symmetrical, in the sense that he now shares the narrated world with the observed scientist. Latour and Woolgar, however, fail to account for the epistemological residue in the space between the narrative and the narration, between the observer (who is part of the narrated world) and the omniscient narrator observing the observer. As the observer works as a narratological prop in the storytelling, the authors' reflexiveness collapses, and reduces them to 'Gods' in their own narrative universe, partly inventing, partly describing, 'with a view from above, from nowhere' the world of the laboratory (Haraway 1988: 589).

The whole idea of shedding light on 'the process of production within the laboratory and on the similarities with the approach of the observer' actually assumes that there is an observer beyond the story of the laboratory and the anthropological observer, accounting for what happens in the laboratory, who observes both sets of protagonists (the observer and the observed). This is, we contend, the epistemological presupposition behind the literary deployment of the fictive anthropologist que observer inserted into the laboratory. The comparisons and oscillations between these different levels and languages or linguistic register (emic, etic) would not be possible without an external, omniscient narrator with an observing gaze, who can collect and account for the similarities and differences by textualizing them. Despite intentions to the contrary, reflections on this narrative and the observing gaze, as well as its inscription and textualization, are not incorporated into Latour and Woolgar's 'methodological reflexivity'. If the scientists who serve as the informants for the (fictive) anthropological observer have a mania for inscription, the authors of *Laboratory Life* do not suffer from such an inscription mania. For while Latour and Woolgar emphasize the mediating practices involved in both the observer's and the observed scientists' production of knowledge, they fail to account for the mediating practices involved in *the description* of both these practices.

The deconstruction of the emic/etic is thus possible because of 'Latour Woolgar's' *a priori* knowledge of the laboratory and their all-encompassing knowledge of the epistemologically restricted figure of their fictive observer.

Through the inscription of the chapter text, Latour and Woolgar inscribe themselves as 'Latour and Woolgar', initiators and founding fathers of a new discourse, where *a priori* theoretical terms and assumptions about symmetry substitute the difference inherent in the deferral of the outsider's gaze. A similar ambiguous approach to mediation is visible in their concept of inscription.

Inscriptions

As soon as the anthropological observer enters the laboratory, he is struck by what he observed to be a 'strange mania for inscription' among the scientists: 'Our anthropological observer is thus confronted with a strange tribe who spend the greatest part of their day coding, marking, altering, correcting, reading, and writing' (Latour and Woolgar 1986: 40).

The observer can tell that the informants have a 'strange mania for inscription' (ibid.: 40). Even though no right-minded anthropologist would have described his informants as 'maniacs' in 1979 (when *Laboratory Life* was published), Woolgar and Latour attribute this specific notion of 'inscription' to an 'anthropological observer', whom (as we now know) they construct as a fictive position of observation inside the narrated world of their own text. Possibly, the authors here aim at a kind of literary defamiliarization of science and the laboratory, but—puzzlingly—they do this by mimicking a kind of 'exotism of the other' (Boon 1982: 3–26) that was fought against as colonial and racist in contemporary anthropology.

The concept of 'inscription' is never defined comprehensively, but the following short definition appears in a footnote to the second chapter: 'The notion of inscription as taken from Derrida (1976) designates an operation that is more basic than writing (Dagognet 1973). It is used here to summarize all traces, spots, points, histograms, recorded numbers, spectra, peaks, and so on' (Latour and Woolgar 1986: 88, fn2).

Let's now attend to the 'slowness' (*différance*) of the footnote in a manner similar to how Latour and Woolgar attend to the 'slowness' that scientific facts are inscribed into various traces, codes, definitions, and descriptions in the context of the laboratory, where, we remember, their informants have a certain 'mania' for inscriptions.

What strikes us is that the footnote tells an ambiguous story. First, there is a *deferral* between the reference to Dagognet and the reference to Derrida. Dagognet emphasized the inscription's *non-representational* properties and its material embodiment; the most important function of writing is not to create meaning, but what ANT will call networks, that is, to bring actants into contact with each other:

> To me, it is incomparably important that *on* which and that *by which* one writes. One is to underestimate it, if not to forget it. Nothing but the meaning would count, but the meaning does not really break free from that which conditions it, or in any case carries it. In short, the substrate deserves our attention; it ends up deciding the rest.
>
> (Dagognet 1979: 70, emphasis in original)

In contrast, Derrida maintains the Saussurean understanding of writing and inscription as primarily defined in relation to meaning. But while

Saussure sees writing as an imperfect mirror of meaning primarily formed in oral language, Derrida insists that this so-called imperfection, the distancing inherent in writing, is the basic principle of all production of meaning. In G. Spivak's words:

> A careful reading of the *Grammatology* shows quickly that Derrida points out, rather, that speech too—grafted within an empirical context, within the structure of speaker-listener, within the general context of the language, and the possibility of the absence of the speaker-listener—is *structured as writing*, that in this general sense, there is 'writing in speech'.
>
> (Spivak 1976: XCII, our emphasis)

To signify is to represent something in its absence through a different medium. As such, signification can only happen from the outside and at a distance from what is signified and will always imply an element of validation in an external, etic language. In Latour and Woolgar's own words, to signify is to 'resist the temptation to go native'. It follows from this that the attempt to treat the observer and the observed scientists as actors on the same level is deemed to deconstruct itself because observing can only happen through a different medium, that is, by operating on a different diegetic level.

Understanding is only possible with the help of a difference, an act of distancing, a validation from an external perspective and position. I re-present, by making myself different, splitting myself up into an 'I' talking about 'me', a narrator performing the story about my-self. In this sense, what is fundamental to—and criticized about—writing, namely distance and distancing, is fundamental to all meaning-making.

Hence, in the same footnote, Latour and Woolgar are both reifying the inscription, by insisting on materiality being its most fundamental feature, and metaphorizing it, by describing it in epistemological terms and as an act of deferral common to every process of signification. Through the reference to Dagognet, Latour and Woolgar insist on the *material and non-semiotic function* of inscriptions, as boundary objects of which the most important characteristics are the ability to bring actants together, creating new networks, and by so doing, stabilizing some inscriptions by making them relevant to new networks (and erasing others). In the textual architecture of *Laboratory Life*, this notion of writing is visible in Latour and Woolgar's analysis of how research results come about by circulating texts. Through this process, some facts are stabilized by being carried across networks, while other fact-candidates are neglected, perceived as noise, in processes where some inscriptions are erased and moved to the paper bin. The reference to Derrida, on the other hand, points in the opposite direction, by emphasizing the *abstract and representational* characteristic of writing, that is, that of being a secondary interpretation, a re-articulation of a message in a different medium, a proxy. In this latter sense, writing is a *metaphor* for a necessary deferral that is inherent in any process of meaning-making. The concept of the 'social', on which Latour and Woolgar's argument is based, incorporates this idea of a process of interpretation through which facts emerge, but also 'forgets' or 'erases' it in the construction of a narrative of life in the laboratory.

Besides this, there is a deferral in the footnote and further in Latour and Woolgar's text between inscription defined as 'an operation' and as a product such as 'traces, spots, points, and so on'. On the one hand, writing is the process through which meaning is created, on the other hand, it is the material manifestation of meaning. This ambiguity is reinforced by Latour's differentiation between inscription and writing: 'more basic than writing' (see citation above). Derrida does not draw such a distinction but operates with an extended concept of writing ('arche-writing'). Included in this concept of writing are both inscriptions of various kinds, and on various kinds of surfaces, but also, and that is crucial here, the fundamental act of differentiation (spacing, slowness, *différance*) that serves as the precondition for meaning—beyond empirical differences between various semiotic systems and writing technologies. For Derrida, inscriptions are thus *not more fundamental than writing, but one of the expressions of writing*. By distinguishing between inscription and writing, Latour and Woolgar reify writing; they reduce what they first refer to as an operation to a thing in the world. This reduction of writing to materiality, to things in the world—not the processes of difference and differentiation that constitute things and worlds—is symptomatic for the treatment of writing and textuality in *Laboratory Life*, and much later, ANT. A case in point is the failure to account for the different diegetic levels on which the scientists observed, the anthropologist observer and the narrator making sense of the scientist, and the observations of the anthropologist after the fact, operate as a textual chain of interpretations.

We recall that Latour and Woolgar's objective was to grasp the social dimension of technical knowledge by exploring the process through which technical practices come into being. The social, moreover, was understood as a *deferral* within the technical, as the procedures, methods, and techniques through which technical knowledge is produced, and in which writing and mediation play an important but often underestimated part. However, their concept of inscription only partly supports this analysis. By reducing writing to material inscriptions, they also reduce them to certain kinds of ontological entities, 'material things', and the intertextual interplay and the different layers of signification *within* texts thus risk being marginalized in their own practice of inscription, textualization, and narration. This is particularly visible in their lack of awareness about the difference between the observer and the narrator, the story and narration, in *Laboratory Life*.

Concluding Remarks

The epistemological residue is what remains when all the world is reified; it is the translating and interpreting gaze that carries out the reification. A symmetrical approach—even one that pays attention to processes of mediation—tends to overlook the fact that someone is holding the yardstick, someone with a particular embodied gaze and perspective is doing the comparison, using particular instruments of commensuration. Importantly, the inherent asymmetry of this epistemological residue cannot be reduced without marginalizing the power and politics of interpretation. By introducing the unnamed anthropologist as a fictional character in the story, the deferral between this character and the implied authors, 'Latour and Woolgar' becomes blurred. Hence, the *human presence* that makes the ontological symmetry possible is marginalized.

As noted in the introduction, Latour sees the Anthropocene as a fundamental crisis of modernity and a culmination of modernist 'abstract assumptions' and emphasis on 'human detachment from material constrains' (Latour 2018). Ironically, despite their efforts to achieve the opposite, the authors of *Laboratory Life* inadvertently create a new asymmetry through their symmetrical approach. By introducing the anthropologist as a fictional character, they establish an abstract concept of 'Latour and Woolgar' as a comprehensive, all-seeing perspective—a Cosmotheros—that transcends the material constraints of the narrative. The implied authors thus escape the symmetry imposed upon the narrated events. In this sense, the authors repeat the same privileged dream of geo-escapism that Latour considers characteristic of the Anthropocene; the implied authors escape the local dwelling-place of the story and take on a totalizing and global perspective—outside and beyond the local constraints of the story. By situating a fictional version of themselves on a *local* level, within the story (as the anthropologist), the implied author can operate freely on an extra-diegetic level—as a transcendent *globalized* gaze. These translations between a local and global level, similar to the processes that, according to Latour himself, have made humans into a harmful geopolitical force, establish 'Latour and Woolgar' as a potentially harmful narrative force in their story. This power of translation cannot be reduced without overlooking the epistemological asymmetry on which the Anthropocene is built.

Note

1 Thus, 'etic' has nothing to do with ethics.

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