

Discussion

Putting a spin on circulating reference, or how to rediscover the scientific subject



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ABSTRACT

Bruno Latour claims to have shown that a Kantian model of knowledge, which he describes as seeking to unite a disembodied transcendental subject with an inaccessible thing-in-itself, is dramatically falsified by empirical studies of science in action. Instead, Latour puts central emphasis on scientific practice, and replaces this Kantian model with a model of “circulating reference.” Unfortunately, Latour’s alternative schematic leaves out the scientific subject. I repair this oversight through a simple mechanical procedure. By putting a slight spin on Latour’s diagrammatic representation of his theory, I discover a new space for a post-Kantian scientific subject, a subject brilliantly described by Ludwik Fleck. The neglected subjectivities and ceaseless practices of science are thus re-united.

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1. Introduction: it’s not easy being two-dimensional

Boa Vista sounds like a wonderful place. I learned of it from Bruno Latour, who describes it beautifully in the second chapter of his 1999 book, *Pandora’s Hope*: “Circulating Reference: Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest.” Yes, Boa Vista sits at the Amazon Forest. When I’d finished reading Latour’s engaging tale of scientific adventure, I wandered into my kitchen, where a large map of the world hangs on the wall. There it was, in the northwest corner of Brazil, a small dot under the tip of my index finger—*Boa Vista*. How I wished to be there!

But maybe, somehow, I already was there. In his adventure story, Latour (1999, p. 65) writes that “the extension of the index finger always signals an access to reality even when it targets a mere piece of paper [...]. [T]hanks to inscriptions, we are able to oversee and control a situation in which we are submerged, we become superior to that which is greater than us.” Alas, after reading Latour’s lush account, my own experience of this small point under my finger tip felt pretty disappointing. Did this dot really give me access to the reality of Boa Vista? Did I, by spreading my hands across this world map, now oversee and control the

situation in which I was submerged, my being-in-the-world? Sadly, no. I yearned to feel the gentle breeze of the savannah on my skin. I craved the warm camaraderie of Latour’s charming scientific field unit. Instead, I stood alone with my finger stuck to a tiny speck on a faded map, enveloped in the miserably gray, wet weather of Switzerland in February. I did not feel superior.

I sought solace back in the pages of Latour’s jungle tale. He admonished me to buck up: “Yes, scientists master the world, but only if the world comes to them in the form of two-dimensional, superposable, combinable inscriptions. It has always been the same story, ever since Thales stood at the foot of the Pyramids” (Latour, 1999, p. 29). I tried to imagine myself as a vigorous player in this heroic history of two-dimensional mastery, lording over the world with my books and maps. But the bud had fallen from the vine. The three-dimensional rain battering the window of my study suddenly felt more powerful than Latour’s entertaining pep talk.

2. Science in three dimensions

In this brief essay, I’d like to introduce a third dimension into Latour’s two-dimensional account of scientific practice. My goal, like Latour’s, is a philosophical one. His chapter is an exercise in field philosophy. Rather than cogitating endlessly in his comfortable Parisian armchair, Latour rose and flung himself into the

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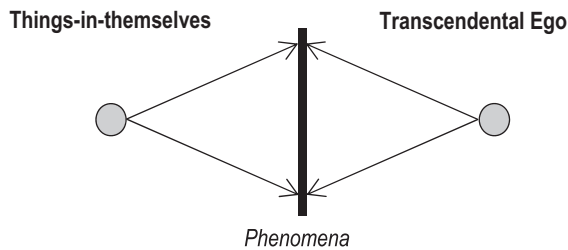


Fig. 1. Latour's "Kantian scenography." Phenomena reside where inaccessible things and the disembodied subject meet. But where are the practices? (Based on Latour, 1999, p. 72.).

rugged and remote jungles of northern Brazil, journeying as a participant observer with a small, international group of plant and soil scientists. He was not there as a social scientist, but as a philosopher. An ethnography of scientific culture was not Latour's brief, but the disinterested and merciless testing of an allegedly orthodox philosophical theory of "reference." The test was a success, and the result was negative. The theory was dramatically falsified by the overwhelming evidence of science in action. However, as luck would have it, Latour's philosophical field notes provided him with the material he needed to construct an empirically adequate alternative, his theory of "circulating reference."

Latour attributes the offending theory, just blown to bits in the Amazonian jungle, to the followers of Immanuel Kant. He provides a neat diagram depicting what he calls the "Kantian scenography" of this theory (Latour, 1999, p. 72). Fig. 1 closely approximates Latour's diagram. On the left, we find inaccessible things-in-themselves, on the right, a disembodied transcendental subject, which Latour also calls the categorising "forms of the human mind" (Latour, 1999, p. 71). The two sides are meant to meet—*somehow*—in the middle, where the phenomena reside. According to Latour, his Amazonian field test demonstrates that the countless attempts over the generations to unravel the mystery of this "somehow" amount to nothing more than a fool's quest: "Our philosophical tradition has been mistaken in wanting to make phenomena the meeting point between things-in-themselves and categories of human understanding" (Latour, 1999, p. 71). This may be so, depending on who "we" are. My own tradition, for one, didn't hit the skids with Kant, but includes a distinctly post-Kantian contingent.¹ But such niceties will not delay Latour (1999, p. 72): in order for him to repair the debilitating mistake in "our" tradition, "a fifteen-day expedition is all that is required."

Latour's meticulous and penetrating expedition notes reveal that phenomena "are not found at the *meeting point* between things and the forms of the human mind; phenomena are what *circulate* all along the irreversible chain of transformations" characteristic of science in action (Latour, 1999, p. 71). Hence, phenomena do not refer to inaccessible things-in-themselves, but only to each other. They circulate through a complex, multi-stage sequence of material practices, which Latour gathers under the labels "reduction" and "amplification." He provides another neat diagram depicting the scenography of his theory of circulating reference (Latour, 1999, p. 72). Fig. 2 closely approximates this second diagram.

The principal question prompted by Latour's Kantian scenography is how a disembodied transcendental subject is supposed to gain epistemic access to definitively inaccessible things-in-themselves. If you think that this question makes no sense, then you have understood the root of Latour's problem. Where is the

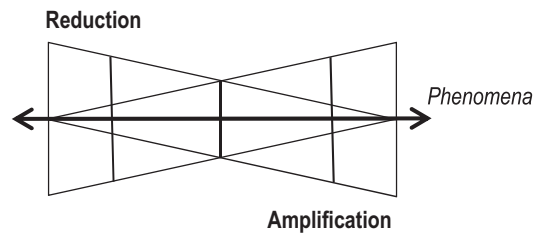


Fig. 2. The Latourian scenography, depicting circulating reference. Phenomena circulate through a cascade of practices. But where is the subject? (Based on Latour, 1999, p. 72.).

sense in trying to gain access to things which have already been defined as inaccessible? And, anyway, without a body, how is a subject supposed to do anything at all? Something seems to have gone wrong here. At the very least, Latour's Kantian scenography, as a depiction of scientific research, fails because it doesn't provide a place for scientific practice. Rather than recognising phenomena as constituted within complex fields of practice, where things and embodied subjects naturally interact, it tries instead to imagine them as the meeting point of two impossibly divided spheres, those two little, self-contained orbs depicted in Fig. 1.

Latour will have nothing of this ridiculous scene. Having dramatically revealed its patent absurdity, he sweeps it off the table and erects his own alternative scenography in its place, the scenography of circulating reference. Fig. 2 doesn't just include a place for scientific practice, it is comprised entirely of practices from end to end. Across this expansive plane, phenomena ceaselessly circulate in a complex choreography of science in action. There is no longer a question of how disembodied subjects hook up with inaccessible things, because the starting point for any question is now the recognition that things are always already swept up in an incessant current of referential scientific activity. Latour has replaced the apparently barren moonscape of Kantian epistemology with the lush and verdant jungle of his own theory of scientific practice.

But wait. Something is still askew. In his enthusiastic rush to clear the deck of science studies for the new superstructure of circulating reference, Latour has also jettisoned the scientific subject. The little, self-contained orb on the right side of Fig. 1 has also been swept out to sea. But how can there be science without a subject? If phenomena are reduced and amplified in fields of practice, then who is doing the reducing and the amplifying, where are the practitioners? The Latourian scenography leaves these questions unanswered, and perhaps not unintentionally. Latour has, after all, told us that he "can't swallow much phenomenology [...] and] never understood why consciousness was an important question anyway" (Crease, Ihde, Jensen, & Selinger, 2003, p. 21). As a result, he simply excludes the scientific subject from Fig. 2. But this disappearance is less one of deletion than it is of submersion. What Roy Boyne calls an "indeterminate subjectivity," an ineluctable and inchoate being-in-the-world, is threatened with suffocation as Latour sinks it beneath the smooth surface of his alternative scenography (Boyne, 2001, p. 34). The result is an impoverished picture of the scientific research process. With one dramatic turn, Latour has successfully removed some of the deepest difficulties plaguing his Kantian problematic, but clearly there is still more to be done. If we are to preserve a place for the post-Kantian subject in our practice-based studies of science, then we need to introduce one more turn after the Latourian turn.

This turn is really just a bit of spin. You can see it happening in Fig. 3. It's quite simple. Just spin the Latourian scenography 90° into the page. Latour's two-dimensional account of science suddenly becomes three-dimensional! The lush scenography of scientific

¹ Among them Heidegger, from whom Latour has worked hard to distinguish himself; see Harman (2009), Kochan (2010), and Riis (2008).

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