

### **Abstract**

In 2011 a Master's programme called "Narrations spéculatives" was established at the École de Recherche Graphique (ERG). It arose from a meeting between teachers and practitioners (Fabrizio Terranova and Yvan Flasse) from the ERG, and of certain researchers (Didier Debaise and Katrin Solhdju) of the Groupe d'Études Constructivistes de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (GECO). The idea of connecting two notions as apparently seemingly disparate as "narration" and "speculative" thinking became clear to us at the end of a collective process. ERG's need to give back to narration its deeply political dimension, to re-intensify it beyond exclusively human stories, found hitherto unused resources in the renewal of speculative thinking, which as it happened, the GECO was also attempting to do. Narrative practices reciprocally contributed to the redefining of the status of speculative propositions. It was therefore starting from two histories—narration and speculative thinking—with their different requirements, that this Master's programme was established, incorporating both notions. The following interview focuses on that moment from the viewpoint of its main protagonists.

# Speculative Narration:

## A Conversation with Valérie Pihet, Didier Debaïse, Katrin Solhdju and Fabrizio Terranova

### VALÉRIE PIHET

Valérie Pihet is developing independent research and consulting activities related to the coproduction of knowledge and articulation between arts, research and society. Since 2016, she is the coordinator for arts and research in PSL University Paris. She is also the co-founder of Dingdingdong—Institute of coproduction of knowledge on Huntington's disease, with the writer Emilie Hermant. She is a member of the advisory board of the Mobile Lives Forum, research institute initiated by SNCF, and of the PARSE research group (Platform for Artistic Research Sweden). She is the president of The Council (art agency), directed by Sandra Terdjman and Gregory Castera. In the past, she co-founded and directed with the French philosopher Bruno Latour the Programme of experimentation in arts and politics (SPEAP) at Sciences Po Paris (2010–2014). She has collaborated with Bruno Latour on a number of other projects, including the *Iconoclash* (ZKM, 2002) and *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (ZKM, 2005) exhibitions, and the founding of the Sciences Po médialab in 2010.

### KATRIN SOLHDJU

Katrin Solhdju is a permanent researcher at the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) at the department for Sociology and Anthropology of the Université de Mons. Her research focuses on the history, philosophy and social implications of the life sciences. She is a member of the Groupe d'Études Constructivistes (GECO) at the Free University of Brussels, and a co-founder of the collective Dingdingdong, an institute for the co-production of knowledge about Huntington's Disease. Since its inception, she has taught the main theory class of the Master's programme "Narration Spéculative" at the École de Recherche Graphique, Brussels. She has published two books, *L'Épreuve du savoir. Propositions pour une écologie du diagnostic* (2015, to appear in German in 2017) and *Selbstexperimente* (2011). She has also written numerous articles on the history and philosophy of scientific and clinical practices and their epistemologies, and edited volumes on the practice of self-experimentation (*Introspective Self-Rapports*), the New Patrons (*Faire art comme on fait société*), and the moving frontiers between the living and the dead (*Das Leben vom Tode her*).

### DIDIER DEBAÏSE

Didier Debaïse is a permanent researcher at the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) and the director of the Center of Philosophy at the Free University of Brussels (ULB), where he teaches contemporary philosophy. He is the co-founder, with Isabelle Stengers, of the Groupe d'Études Constructivistes (GECO). His main areas of research are contemporary forms of speculative philosophy, theories of events, and links between American pragmatism and French contemporary philosophy. He is director of a collection at Les presses du réel, member of the editorial board of the journals *Multitudes* and *Inflections*. He has written two books on Whitehead's philosophy (*Un empirisme spéculatif* and *Le vocabulaire de Whitehead*), edited volumes on pragmatism (*Vie et expérimentation*), on the history of contemporary metaphysics (*Philosophie des possessions*), and he has written numerous papers on Bergson, Tarde, Souriau, Simondon, and Deleuze. He has just published a new book entitled *L'appât des possibles* which will shortly appear in English (*Nature as event*, Duke University Press, 2017).

### FABRIZIO TERRANOVA

Fabrizio Terranova is a filmmaker, activist, dramaturge and teacher at the École de Recherche Graphique in Brussels, where he launched and co-runs the Master's programme in Récits et Expérimentation/"Narration Spéculative". He is also a founding member of Dingdingdong, an institute dedicated to raising awareness around Huntington's disease. His 2010 experimental documentary film *Josée Andrei: An Insane Portrait* screened internationally and was adapted into a book published by Les Éditions du souffle. Terranova recently published the article "Les Enfants du compost" in *Gestes spéculatifs* (Les Presses du réel, 2015) and the film *Donna Haraway, Story Telling for Earthly Survival*.



*Created by students of the 2014 seminar of Récits et experimentation, narration spéculative (speculative narration) Master's programme at the École de Recherche Graphique in Brussels.*

**I**N 2011 A MASTER'S programme called "Récits et experimentation, narration spéculative" (speculative narration) was established at the École de Recherche Graphique (ERG) in Brussels. It arose from lively exchanges between practitioners (Fabrizio Terranova and Yvan Flasse) and of certain researchers (Didier Debaise and Katrin Solhdju) of the Groupe d'Études Constructivistes (GECO) at the Free University in Brussels, all of whom were at the time teaching at ERG. The idea of connecting two notions as seemingly disparate as "narration" and "speculative" thought was thus the result of a collective process. ERG's need to give back to narration its deeply political dimension, to re-intensify its tasks beyond exclusively human stories, found hitherto unused resources in the renewal of speculative philosophy, which as it happened, GECO was attempting to cultivate. Speculative propositions contributed to redefining the status of narrative practices and vice versa. It was thus starting from two trajectories, narration and speculative thinking, with their different requirements, that this Master's programme was established, incorporating both. The following interview retraces some crucial aspects of

this collective adventure from the points of view of its main protagonists.

**VALÉRIE PIHET:** To start, I would like to return to the context in which the Master's programme was set up, that of the École de Recherche Graphique (ERG) and the Groupe d'Études Constructiviste (GECO), but also that of your respective practices and disciplines.

**FABRIZIO TERRANOVA:** I began teaching at the ERG in 2008, when I was asked to take on the particular challenge of breathing new life into the field of narration, which for some time had been flagging in the school. The ERG is a very young school in the landscape of art schools in Belgium, as it was established in 1972 at the initiative of two teachers who wanted to dissociate themselves from the School of Higher Arts of Saint-Luc, and more specifically from its politics.<sup>1</sup> Saint-Luc wanted to create a new art school to be able to develop a long-term curriculum, but at that time the laws on education in Belgium did not allow for the establishment of a new art school. However, a loophole was found in cultural legislation which allowed for the authorisation for a school to be set up, as long as it was experimental. The two teachers in charge of the new school took advantage of the situation to create an alternative school, in contrast to the beaux-arts perspective. Saint-Luc was not entirely expecting things to develop this way. Thus this experimental dimension was initially expressed by a strong desire to break down the barriers between the different artistic disciplines, integrating other artistic categories, such as song and dance, that had been taught in the 1980s. Quite soon, a great importance was also given to narration, in the sense of telling stories, at that time largely despised in the art world. This was largely due to one of the people in charge of the school, Pierre Sterckx, a great fan of comic books, who opened up the ERG to popular arts and cultures. He expended narrative practices by going as far as introducing advertising into the curriculum, and opening the force of narration as

a way to tell stories which can make “possibles” exist. After Sterckx had left, it was far from easy to safeguard his legacy. As a student, I remember very clearly that the most disparaging attribute you could give to anything was to say that it was narrative. At the time, what was important was to create autonomous objects, stand-alone objects, things no longer connected via a whole string of attachments, and which above all were not supposed to tell a story. Today we feel that human being can no longer cope without their stories and those of the world they live in, which is why there has recently been such a revival of interest in questions of narration and/or speculation.

**DIDIER DEBAISE:** I would like to add to this story from our perspective, because I believe that we can't really dissociate the Master's in “Speculative Narration” from the existence of a constructivist study group (GECO), which had been set up in Brussels on the initiative of four researchers in philosophy—Maria Puig, Isabelle Stengers, Nathalie Trussart and myself—more than fifteen years ago. Later on, besides Katrin, we were joined by other researchers, such as Vinciane Despret, David Jamar, Emilie Hache, Benedikte Zitouni and many others. The question of speculation began to arise, but very gradually, as we became interested in looking at the links between different practices of knowledge. We were working on philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, William James, Henri Bergson, Étienne Souriau and Alfred North Whitehead, and I would say that, apart from Whitehead, there was something which made them all—and us by extension—very uncomfortable in regards the term “speculation”.

This term represented everything that needed to be rejected in contemporary philosophy, yet it interested us greatly. These philosophers who came before us, and whose thinking we were seeking to build on, had to avoid any temptation of speculation because it was so profoundly embedded in idealism, the very post-Kantian Hegelian idealism they were struggling against. In short, in post-Kantian idealism, thinking had become the foundation for experience; in other words, thinking had its own dynamic and would by itself lead us to discover experience, and not the other way around! This implied a kind of belittling of experience and the real, which certain philosophers, such as James and Bergson, were resisting. In contrast, they argued for expanding experience. What is at stake is not so much whether this picture of post-Kantian philosophy is correct or not, rather, what seems important to me is that we keep in mind what kind of approach had been rejected by a whole tradition of philosophers with which we were thinking and that were constitutive for GECO as a consequence.

**VP:** Was this philosophy called “speculative philosophy”?

**DD:** Yes, exactly. Historically, what is called speculative philosophy characterises this very special moment of post-Kantian philosophy (Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schelling and Georg Hegel). The term speculation, before this rehabilitation, was very often used pejoratively, applied to thinking that was not put to the test, to pure unrealities, to pie-in-the-sky. With Hegel, post-Kantianism returns to this negative nature of speculative thinking

1. The two teachers were Thierry de Duve and Jean Guiraud.

to make it into a positive effect vector, leading the strength of this thinking to reside in the fact that it has not emerged from, and is therefore not dependent on, experience. A kind of radical idealism therefore arose in which the ideality of thinking is precisely its very condition of veracity and possibility. I think it's very important to recall that the whole tradition that impacted upon us (e.g. pragmatist philosophy, Deleuze, Bruno Latour) and which constituted us, was absolutely anti-speculative in the sense of this post-Kantian radical idealism. Whitehead's philosophy is a notable exception: it made us aware of the importance of another form speculative thinking, deeply linked to experience, in a total rupture with post-Kantian idealism. It did take on certain requirements of speculative philosophy: thinking beyond a purely human perspective or condition, taking into account the importance and irreducibility of abstractions, freeing the imagination from any exclusive ties to representations, intensifying the sense of possibles. But it did this without ever losing the pragmatic sense of experience. This return to speculative thinking, which found its justification in experience alone, was not a smooth process: quite the contrary. This call for speculative thinking met with major difficulties. Was it not running the risk of re-positioning philosophy and a certain abstract thinking in a position of authority? Was it not seeking a new foundation to the detriment of experience?

The meaning of the term "speculation" was fluid and it was perhaps less understandable for us to make this move than for what we call today "speculative realism", which emerged at about the same time. Its relationship to speculative thinking seemed easier to justify, since it embraces a very idealised version of speculation, which was the very thing we were attempting to break away from. We have still not forgotten the dangers of this term.

Fabrizio, whom I had known already for several years, invited me to come to the ERG, in around 2008, a few years before the Master's programme

was set up, in order take charge of a number of philosophy courses. In 2010 Katrin took over from me, but we continued lively joint discussions. Over time, the concept of speculation was insisted upon, but in a sense that was crucially nourished by the question of fabulation as it had been developed by Deleuze. In Deleuze's *Image-Temps Cinema 2* there is a magnificent passage which is very important to the question of speculative narration: "What cinema must grasp is not the identity of a character, whether real or fictional, through his objective and subjective aspects. It is the becoming of the real character when he himself starts to 'make fiction', when he enters into 'the flagrant offence of making up legends' and so contributes to the invention of his people."<sup>2</sup> The whole politics of fabulation is there already. But the question of stories and fabulation also further complicates the relationship with truth in our philosophical research. To quote Deleuze again: "What is opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always that of the masters or the colonisers; it is the fabulating function of the poor, in so far as it gives to the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster."<sup>3</sup> ERG's connection with narrative was obvious as soon as we began working together, but we were not yet ready to give it a name, because this act of identifying what is in the process of being set up only has consistency in the two weak spots of our trajectories: the one linked to narration and the other linked to speculation. Today the thought of abandoning the term "speculative" when it enabled us to identify a new relationship with imagination—and especially with abstraction, merely because it triggered a fashionable effect, with its enormous concomitant misunderstandings—is not necessarily the right solution; it might, however, become necessary.<sup>4</sup>

**KATRIN SOLHDJU:** I joined GECO and ERG in 2010, the year when I moved from Berlin to Brussels, one year before the foundation of "Speculative Narration". Although I was close to philosophy, I come from another discipline, cultural studies,

but with a strong focus on the history and epistemology of science and thus a practice in which conceptual and narrative work are necessarily intertwined. For us historians the question of narration arises more directly than for philosophy, because we are always wondering what is at stake when we set about narrating this or that story in this or that way. I was very well acquainted with the work of Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, but I approached them through the angle of constructivism rather than through that of speculation, a later arrival in their writings, and in my research for that matter. Two questions seem crucial to me. Firstly, as already mentioned by Didier: what does truth mean to us? What is knowledge? How is it constructed? Does it correspond above all to a reality which pre-exists and is exterior to it, or does it actively participate in constructing a reality while at the same time creating a truth with regard to this reality? And secondly, which stories are told, by whom, from which perspectives etc.? This second question is increasingly discussed in the historical discipline from the 1970s or so onwards, and takes on a particular importance in the field of the history of science, which, since the 1970s and 1980s, became more and more interested in those actors who have been “forgotten” by history all too long because they lost out in competition with their peers. Thereby such histories started to shed some light on the objects and forms of knowledge that were discarded in the course of the history of science, but that might very well have become of importance and thus remembered if things had been slightly different at this or that point. They thus

render us sensitive to the “what ifs” in the possible becomings of the stories that we tend to forget. Very early on I became interested in what Siegfried Kracauer had already described as “lost causes” in his theory of historical trade. Particularly in my research on self-experimentation, knowledge that was slightly marginalised as regards the sciences with a capital S, was central. I was a bit of an alien when I arrived at ERG, because my research was or at least seemed even further away from the problems posed by an art school than Didier’s, since philosophy was fairly widely taught in that context. As a member of the GECO I was, of course, familiar with the discussions around the notion of speculation, but when Fabrizio asked whether I’d be interested in being part of the Master’s Programme in “Speculative Narration”, I took this as a prompt to plunge further into the conceptual and philosophical traditions at stake, but also to explore the term in its etymological and historical dimensions.

It turned out that the etymology of “speculation” leads not only to the verb “speculare” but also to the word “speculator”. In Ancient Rome, a speculator was a scout, a lookout, either in a tower observing the surrounding area, or sent ahead of an army. If we take this very literally, the speculator has a practical function that is very embedded in the real, in experience: to be on guard against approaching danger, to warn his comrades if necessary to prepare the city to defend itself, to prepare the soldiers to get into position etc. Later on, the term came to denote the stargazers, people looking far into the distance, equipped with apparatuses to observe the stars. We can see very

2. Deleuze, Gilles.  
*Cinema 2. The Time-Image*.  
Minneapolis: University  
of Minnesota Press. 1989.  
p. 150.

3. *Ibid.* Translation slightly  
modified.

4. We only have to look at  
the now very frequent use of  
“speculation” or even “specu-  
lative narration” in the art  
and design world (writings,  
exhibitions etc.).



clearly how the term “speculator” came gradually to represent someone who looks further and further afield, hence finally the pejorative meaning of someone speaking of things whose existence escapes experience, an existence that cannot be proven. I found it really exciting to return to the primary sense of this term and to see what we could derive from it: “speculation” as a pragmatic function closely linked to the real. From the beginning, in the class entitled “Gestes spéculatifs” that I teach, I put great emphasis on the fact that the speculative, in the sense that interested us, is embedded in reality, including as it is applied to and in narration. It is at this point that a first distinction must be drawn with the question of utopia. I talk of the need of a distinction to be drawn, because we cannot give a precise definition of speculative narration despite the understandable expectations of students of this new Master’s programme. We did have some ideas, but we did not have, nor did we want to, a single definition. However, it did seem of interest to us to work with the distinctive practices of other genres. It became very clear early on that we could not set up a Master’s programme on the writings on utopias, since they ran the same risks as the philosophical (idealistic) abstractions that we mentioned earlier. Utopia is to be found far from an experimented reality of experience. It wipes the slate clean of what precedes it and of the world from which it is written. In this Master’s programme we are attempting to make the students aware of the importance of starting from a situation, from a given issue, without, however, depriving ourselves of fiction and of imagination; “staying with the trouble”, as Haraway proposed to call such an endeavour.<sup>5</sup> In other words, we never ask them to be creative starting from a blank page. We also try to make them aware of any forms of denigrated, forgotten, marginal practices and knowledge, which constitutes another thread running through the outlines of “speculative narration”.

**VP:** The great care with which you describe these beginnings through your cross-referenced stories

and encounters leads me to think that it is very difficult to “define” what we call multi-, trans- and/or interdisciplinary. These terms become a kind of catch-all label, and yet rather surprisingly it is increasingly difficult to define what happens in experiments involving several fields of practice and knowledge without simply reducing it to the label “multidisciplinary”. Clearly this isn’t merely a matter of placing creation and philosophy side by side. Can you help me to put a little more energy into the term multidisciplinary?

**DD:** I think that this question forces us to enter into a little more detail about the positive features of speculation and narration. I believe that one of these features, indicating the difficulty of introducing the problem of speculation, is its absolutely pragmatic “embeddedness” contained in this sentence by James: “To be radical, empiricism must not admit in its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced.”<sup>6</sup> James’s twofold proposition is firstly hammering home that an experience is what forces us to think. We must here understand experience in the very broad sense of a situation that poses a problem and forces itself upon us. There is always a starting point, a problematic situation, an event: something happens. The second part of the proposition might appear enigmatic at first glance: “exclude no element that is directly experienced”. Yet this is an essential requirement. The means we use to attribute sense and importance to the situation we are dealing with must never become opportunities to disparage certain aspects. In this sense one might have the impression that speculative thinking is an almost liberal way of accommodating the multiplicity of beings and situations, whereas in fact, it is extremely stringent. Making a situation important is in itself a test, because it implies sifting through many things, and among these many things anything that might reduce its importance will be excluded. This is not a test of rigour, coherence, or the internal logic of speech or narration, but it is a question: “does this situation reach its full

amplitude, dignity and force?” We are beyond the question of interdisciplinarity, because disciplines presuppose relatively constituted knowledge. What is important to us is the very undermining of this knowledge, the point at which discipline loses its function even, since it has no stake in view of what is important and of what it might or might not amplify.

**KS:** This brings Bruno Latour to mind, who wrote in *Face à Gaïa* that given climate change, we can no longer remain on the sideline, we can no longer remain at a distance and observe what is happening, since we are out of necessity caught up in what is happening.<sup>7</sup> I think it is possible for different disciplines to work together as long as there is a truly shared problem, and we manage to nourish it with our multiple competences while producing mutually reinforcing outcomes, rather than different ones. But without necessarily aiming at reaching a consensus, things can very well remain tense; it seems crucial to me to resist the risk inherent to many multi- or transdisciplinary projects of reducing or giving up on the exigencies and obligations that are proper to each scientific, artistic or thinking practice. Because if we allow for that, I think, we lose more—particularities, distinctions, contrasts—than what might be gained.

**FT:** Echoing what has been said, firstly, what is decisive in this experience is having brought together practitioners of different disciplines who were already dealing with a series of similar issues in their own field. For me this is extremely important. We can feel that there is something “organic” (even if I

don’t like the term) in the idea and the construct of this Master’s programme. Artists are not acting as philosophers, and philosophers are not claiming to know everything about art. It is crucial that there should be shared concerns to start with, and that each should respond from their own discipline. In the art field I see many experiments where the borders are much more blurred, leading to less interesting results. Secondly, if we feel that speculative narration’s time has now come, we also feel quite clearly that the mechanisms of the art and culture world that are at work, and that in a few years, or even a few months’ time, this will be the thing to avoid. I think we must be vigilant and consider the art world as part of the capitalist machine. The way in which the art world can latch on to anything that moves, chew it up and digest it, is something we need to look at. There is no reason to ascribe additional “soul” to art. Art is often seen as something to elevate our existence, yet art is caught up in the same capitalist dynamics as the rest. I believe that we are really suffering from this exceptional status granted to art, a status that plays tricks on us...; you can see two movements at work in the Master’s programme, specifically with regard to the term “speculative narration”—the art of constructing stories, certainly the oldest art there is, all the while stressing the non-innocence of this art, since stories produce effects. This reminds us of Haraway’s “avoid instructions at any cost”, the idea being to evaluate not the degree of speculation of the story at any cost, but rather to set up a sequence of actions that inhabit the stories and make us think about this act of telling stories. There is no programme to follow at the

5. Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2016.

6. James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. New York: Dover Publications. 2003 [1912].

7. Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaïa. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2017.



end of which you might say: “I am a speculative narrator”. Our students are much less daunted by the term speculation, because they experience it in their practice. What has been important for us is rather to define the characteristics that inhabit the act of creating a story, closely linked with the work done by Didier and Katrin. This particular creation is a very precious painstaking construction, far removed from any broad-brush instructions. The work of the students is not based on a set task in speculative narration as its starting point: what comes first is their personal project. On the basis of these individual projects we establish links with speculative philosophy. Here there were a series of features we considered essential, that is to say we relate to the world upon which our attention is set, we do not simply describe, condemn, or criticise it. The very act of producing art has since a long time been blended with critical thinking (the Situationists, Frankfurt School, etc.) We want to provoke a shift by working with authors like Stengers or Haraway, who are anything but critical. It is not a matter of saying “we will no longer criticise”, but rather of understanding that “this is not enough to give power to our stories”. Merely saying that this cannot be solely and uniquely description, criticism, dystopia, utopia, pure fiction or pure imaginary already makes the work extremely concrete and precise. In our practice with students, there are three movements we are very interested in, which we did not pre-define but discovered as we went along, and which provide extremely powerful guidelines: avoid anthropocentric stories, that is to say that man is no longer the only one at the centre of the story, enabling through this a whole constellation of elements to participate in non-hierarchical relationships. Another movement is the “struggle of possibles versus probables”, to use Stengers’s words.<sup>8</sup> And then there is the creation of propositional forces, because, beyond criticism and condemnation, the story must make a proposition. We need to return to the idea of “possible”, which for me and for the students was one of the most complex notions to deal with in practice. With these

three movements, we find a very precise approach to working, yet it is one that is far from following a recipe. Together, these three movements provide a very specific handle to the art of the story, while at the same time remaining very broad and open.

**VP:** Could you come back briefly to the question of the students’ personal projects, because it might seem rather contradictory to invite them both to remain connected to the world and also to work collectively? You yourself are the first to say that we need to bring an end to autonomy in art, or, to put it another way, to put an end to the exceptional status of art, which, among other things, leads to artists turning inwards on themselves.

**FT:** Yes absolutely. The personal project is something the students can understand very quickly, because that’s the way we are made, but what we want to do is precisely to shake up this idea of the personal project. The idea is not to tell one’s own story, but to narrate the world on the basis of a local experience, from a given position. That’s where the subtle difference lies. And I would like to hear what Katrin and Didier have to say on this subject, because it is connected to this question of the probable and possible. The easiest connotation is to imagine that the role of the artist is to create a possible. Speculative narration commits us to understand the propositional act as something that is always connected to the real and therefore not to create a possible ex-nihilo, but to make a possible manifest that is already contained in the real.

**KS:** If I go back to the first of the three movements, which in effect gradually emerged as we went along in the course of our experience with the Master’s programme, I think we could say that we have inherited our way of placing ourselves with regards to the question of anthropocentrism from thinkers such as Whitehead, Latour and, in more general terms, from the history and philosophy of science. These are thinkers who lay great emphasis on the importance of beings other than humans. On the

other hand, seen from a more methodological angle, the anthropology of science has introduced the notion of symmetrical anthropology, which is based on the principle of considering humans and non-humans using the same tools, on one and the same level. For example, Latour wrote a book about Pasteur in which microbes become active agents in the process of knowledge production and so play a true role in history.<sup>9</sup> It is a difficult challenge to present to the ERG students this tradition of thought, which caused many shock waves within the academic world.

The second movement is closely linked to what Stengers started to develop in her book series *Cosmopolitics* in the late 1990s, and thus well before the Master's came into existence. She epitomised her reflections in an article a number of years ago in claiming that the touchstone of speculation is the possible and not the probable. We have tried to work on this proposition *inter alia* by reading a chapter of Bergson's *The Creative Mind*, called "The Possible and the Real". Here is an excerpt:

*If we put the possible back into its proper place, evolution becomes something quite different from the realisation of a program: the gates of the future open wide; freedom is offered an unlimited field. The fault of those doctrines, – rare indeed in the history of philosophy, – which have succeeded in leaving room for indetermination and freedom in the world, is to have failed to see what their affirmation implied. When they spoke of indetermination, of freedom, they meant by indetermination a competi-*

*tion between possibles, by freedom a choice between possibles, – as if possibility was not created by freedom itself! As if any other hypothesis, by affirming an ideal pre-existence of the possible to the real, did not reduce the new to a mere rearrangement of former elements! As if it were not thus to be led sooner or later to regard that rearrangement as calculable and foreseeable! By accepting the premiss of the contrary theory one was letting the enemy in. We must resign ourselves to the inevitable: it is the real which makes itself possible, and not the possible which becomes real.<sup>10</sup>*

In this text Bergson recounts that a journalist came to see him during World War I, when Bergson had just received the Nobel Prize for Literature, to ask how he envisaged the great dramatic work of tomorrow. Bergson answered: "If I knew, I would be writing it."<sup>11</sup> It is from there that his thinking on the possible arises, and also from there that his difficulties emerge as he tries to navigate between a notion of the possible that would precisely be a realisation of something already virtually or latently present in the actual, and a possible that would be purely utopian. He tries to ensure that it is neither the one nor the other. I think this was what made us hesitate a great deal. Of course it is really simple retrospectively, to claim that nothing stood in the way of the creation of something new in an oeuvre that is already there, and that it had thus been possible. It seems to me, however that it is often more interesting to pursue the question: what are the obstacles the realisation of a creative act has made surmountable in the first place, and how did it succeed in doing so? The

8. Stengers, Isabelle. "Un engagement pour le possible" in: *Cosmopolitiques* No. 1 (2002), p. 27.

9. Latour, Bruno. *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1988.

10. Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind*. The Philosophical Library: New York, 1946. p. 122.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

creation of a piece of art then cannot be reduced to or explained as the simple reorganisation of elements of reality that were already there. Rather, it has to be conceptualised as the realisation of something unforeseeable, non-calculable, an act of realisation that at once makes itself possible.

If, however, the possible is characterised by being unpredictable, non-calculable, the opposition implied by Stengers, the opposition between the possible and the probable, starts to become graspable. The probable, then, is that which with respect to the real only lacks one single thing: existence. Apart from that, however, it can be described entirely with the help of those coordinates and within the conceptual framework that also helps us to understand the current and past state of affairs—it is an activity of (probabilistic and statistical) deduction. If Stengers insisted that the touchstone of speculation is the possible, and that means, as we might now say, the successful resistance to the probable, she does so in order to counteract the fatalism that comes with a conception of reality according to which everything is calculable and, consequently, defined unchangeably in advance. The plea for speculation in this sense takes on a political as well as moral necessity today, because in the face of catastrophic climate change and other humanitarian as well as ecological disasters, resigning to fatalism is almost as dramatic as denial—as it goes hand in hand with accepting that all we might hope for is to wait for barbarism to take over or rather to further radicalise.

The third movement concerns the question of propositional force, in contrast to the tradition of criticism, which has become classical. From my perspective as a historian and philosopher mainly of medicine, I see the danger of transforming this question into an order to produce propositions and in so doing to lose rigour in our respective practices. It is essential to always ensure that the propositions we make are strongly connected to the given situation that they problematise in new, fruitful ways. In the continuity of pragmatist thinking, what is crucial is that these

three movements taken together should be part of the art of consequences, of attention given to the consequences of propositions made, which must be tested and prove themselves in the stream of concrete experiences. This is why pragmatism, besides Bergson, Deleuze, Stengers, Haraway etc., and particularly the philosophy of James, plays a central role in the theoretical courses given within the Master's programme.

**DD:** Concerning the question of anthropocentrism, I would like to return to the anthropological project that was, for twentieth-century philosophy, a guarantee of immanence, one could almost say of positioned experience. The legitimacy of the discourse we can have about the world or about the real is concerned with anchoring, and we must let go of this anchor. The limit of this thinking arose because of the arrival of new elements. The very worst thing for thought is to become inadequate, yet a thought has no intrinsic reason to disappear. What really overturned and made inadequate a whole slew of philosophy—although this had to clearly emerge for us to become aware of it—were science studies, thanks to which we began to attribute value to non-human experiences because these experiences became more and more a part of our world. I would call this philosophical paradigm anthropological, since it consists of validating, justifying and legitimising propositions and statements by anchoring them solely in human experience. If there is a shared feature in all the trends of speculative philosophy today (realism, speculative philosophy, etc.), it lies in the rejection of a purely anthropological paradigm. It is not really so much a rejection of human beings as of imbuing mankind with a particular function and of introducing a continuity of all beings, human and nonhuman, in Haraway's more precise terms, "more than human".<sup>12</sup> Today the question can be phrased as follows: "what does it mean to celebrate, intensify, make possible, and what enables this to happen?" Starting with Whitehead, the philosophers we are interested in who posit that abstraction do not begin with language, intentionality or

even awareness, but that it is contained within all beings. A reality, however basic, is already potential abstraction. For Whitehead, abstraction is the sense of the alternative, it is the “might have been”, the fact that there is a decision about existence that rejects other legacies, other influences, other elements of the milieu. It is what a being, human or non-human, might have integrated, but does not necessarily integrate: in other words, the choices made, are of importance. That is where the value of beings and their actions resides.

This brings me to the second notion, the probable and the possible. The probable is a re-arrangement of the real, which takes the possible as its beacon. The possible arises from what was already there and which is re-arranged, this is what utopias do: take a given situation and amplify its characteristics, for example a human being who has become perfect, or a society which has become perfect. We think of the possible always as an image of the real: you simply change the way it is arranged, change the intensities of its qualities, but these are qualities with which we are familiar. Utopia is nostalgic thinking, because it is attached to the past; it cannot think beyond the past. Put simply, it projects the past and it says “this is the future”, because it has amplified certain of its qualities.

**KS:** This idea of utopia as nostalgia for the past seems to contradict the idea that we put forward earlier of utopia as starting from scratch...

**DD:** I think we need to distinguish between utopia as it believes it functions, thinking to sweep away the past, and

utopia such as we might describe its almost symptomatic functioning, which in reality is a break with nothing at all. This is an extremely modernist act, because it is the means by which we are moving towards something better, yet this better is already there; it is simply following the logic of the probable which is already going in that direction. To return once again to Whitehead, a historical event is constituted by all the concomitant “might have beens” that are there, either in history or in our actions. He adds a second thing we have explored a little less, perhaps: the contemporary is the collection of events that have no influence upon one another and which can say nothing beyond themselves; that is to say, the future, the meanings of our actions, the meanings of what we do, we do not decide upon these outside of how we have inherited them from previous situations. It is future acts that will give them meaning. Whatever we do, we cannot determine how our acts will be inherited. The possible will emerge in the act that gives rise to it. The problem is that this is very difficult to pose from a methodological viewpoint. We can take the almost ironical example of speculation. The return to speculation that we are seeing today was not possible 40 years ago. It was not possible because all conditions were against it. But once all the operations, the experience, the multiplication of fields (ethology, etc.) have happened, taking us outside an anthropological project, this new reality will be able to be deployed in its past to make itself possible. So people will say: “But look, James already, Bergson, Deleuze already ...” But no, that’s the point, the act was necessary for it to make itself possible. Bergson said

12. Haraway, Donna, *op. cit.*

that the possible is a mirage of the present in the past; as soon as it appears, it projects onto its past the conditions which make it possible, so that we think that we are in a space of causality, at the risk of losing the act giving rise to the possible. The third movement is along these lines: a proposition is usually made in the form of a statement or judgement, that is to say that it must reflect a reality, or, in the case of a future proposition, arrange another; or again, re-arrange a past situation, as in the case of utopia for example. There too, Whitehead can help us with the idea that we must not leave the theory of propositions to logicians alone, but we should define propositions as “lures for feelings”. This idea gives back all its force to narration since it suggests using the lure as a tool. You do not lure just anything. Luring implies a certain sensitivity to the milieu hosting this or that proposition, that is to say, being aware of all the interests conveyed by this milieu. The proposition is not something that imagines a “real” where there is none; all the “real” is space for proposition, everything is propositional. This is pretty much what Haraway says: Everything is already a story. So the real is not that which exists independently of propositions, it is what exists, already articulated in a thousand propositions. This redress is very important, because the proposition adds to and re-articulates a “real” as soon as it takes place, which will be the support of new propositions.

**FT:** We could say that the possible is the redeployment of the real. This is very important, because it runs counter to the idea of a totally invented world that would come to our rescue.

**KS:** Here we are going well beyond Bergson, because while he draws our attention to what the possible is not, he does not help us on the question of the practices of luring.

**VP:** In conclusion, I would like to touch on the question of methodology. With regard to what has just been said, a possible response from our interlocutors would be: “What you say is all well and

good, but where do we go from here?” Methodology is a strong temptation, in view of the discomfort of the experiment. We can agree to experiment, but we will always like to formulate a kind of recipe at some stage. You use the term “inhabit”, Fabrizio, which I find interesting. Could you explain a little more what you mean by that?

**FT:** I think there is a paradox worth underlining here. Repopulating the scene, rendering it collective swirls up our practices and thus radically changes the situation. This change has indeed become very tangible while working with the students over the past years. I think that the paradox resides in the fact that we cannot define what we’re doing, because that is not desirable, but it is not a leap into the unknown for all that. We know what we’re doing, equipped with a whole range of criteria and settings that are the result of a subtle, long drawn-out piece of work, which we are continually attempting to put to the test. The notions of setting and obligation become a provocation to the traditions of the art world, as it is more used to acting first and only looking later. This action is not determined, but it presupposes arrangements for work. At the risk of being somewhat pedagogical, I would still like to add that the term methodology has seen a true semantic shift. From a path we followed, methodology has become the path *to* follow. All modernity has retained the latter meaning, of a path to be followed. Communicating to someone the experience of a path followed has nothing normative about it.

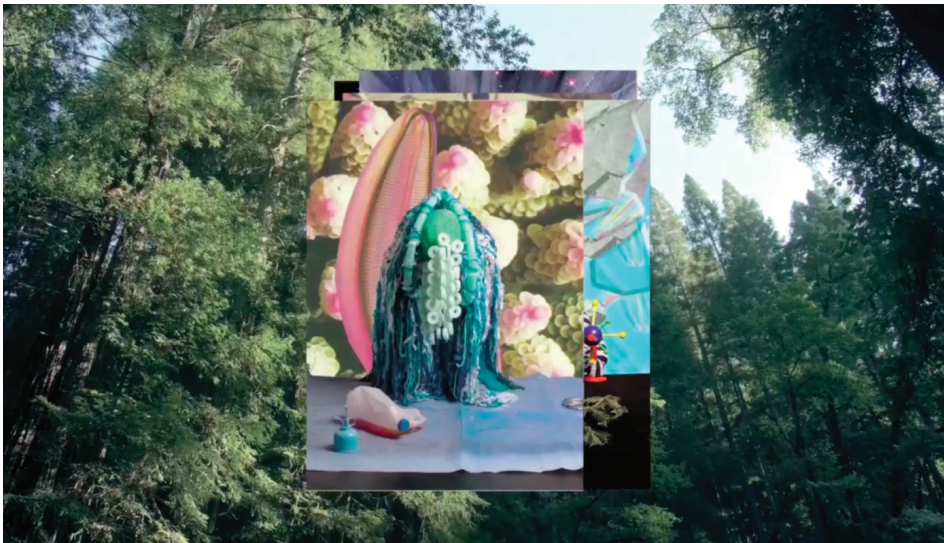
**KS:** The problem today with methodology is that one thinks one can take it, shift it, and apply it elsewhere. Here again, turning to Whitehead is useful thing. Crucially, Whitehead defined speculative philosophy as a method. But for him, a former mathematician, the notion of method was not at all linked to the idea of application. A method is not a ready-made tool-box that might be transferred from one context to the other in order to gain insight and knowledge about some new (pre-existing) field of research. On the contrary, a method, for Whitehead



is more than anything else an act of creativity, a creation. Such a creation (in mathematics), however, is never arbitrary; rather, its creation is only possible with respect to the precise construction of a well-defined situation of constraints. Stengers once added in her reading of Whitehead: “The mathematician-methodologist is a creator for whom the ‘solution that needs to be constructed’, is what obliges him to his creation.”<sup>13</sup>

**DD:** We would like this shift to be instantaneous, but we forget that it is the transformations of milieus that require learning, and much time. We cannot think of what we’re doing in terms of other milieus; each milieu requires us to work it out anew.

13. Stengers, Isabelle. *Thinking with Whitehead*. Cambridge, MA: Yale University Press. p. 27.



Screen grab created by students of the 2014 seminar of *Récits et experimentation, narration spéculative (speculative narration)* Master's programme at the *École de Recherche Graphique* in Brussels.