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Space of Domination or Domination of Space?

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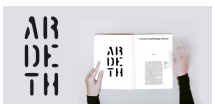
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Ardeth
A magazine on the power of the project

9 | 2021
Race

Space of Domination or Domination of Space?

The Editorial Board of "Ardeth"

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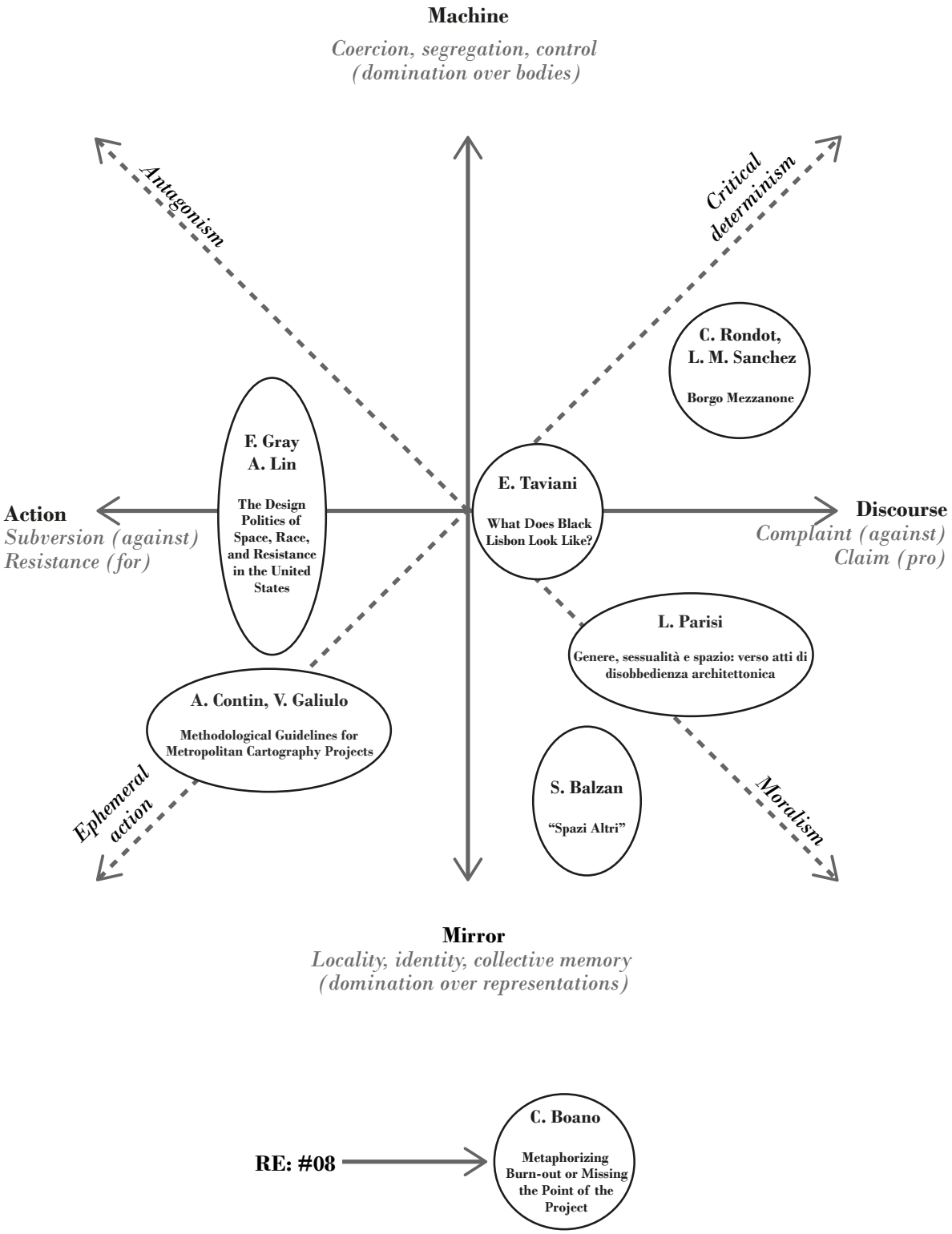
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RE: #08 → **C. Boano**

Metaphorizing Burn-out or Missing the Point of the Project

Space of Domination or Domination of Space?
Spazio del dominio o dominio dello spazio?

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With this issue, "Ardeth" opens the debate on the project to an unsettling issue, due to the articulated controversies that discussing race in connection to space and its design may have, and before that for the difficulties in focusing on what race implies depending on by who and in what context the term is appropriated. On this latter point, the editorial decision to keep the title of the call for papers *Race* in English, without translation into Italian, reflected the concern that a limited conversation in languages other than English might lose the current use of the term. In Anglo-Saxon contexts, especially when used by racialized subjects, race recalls a social construction and a structural phenomenon with effects on the material world and technologies, to the point of questioning whether race is "a technique that one uses, even as one is used by it – a carefully crafted, historically inflected system of tools, mediation, or enframing" (Chun, 2009: 7). During the long elaboration for this "Ardeth" issue, Silvia Montis – the Italian translator of *Why I'm no Longer Talking to White People about Race*, by Reno Eddo-Lodge – wrote in a note to the volume that, "with reference to the issues addressed in the original

text, the absence of a code shared by a fairly large community of speakers – and the observation that, for some concepts, perhaps new words were needed, which naturally could not be artificially made up", would not urge "to solve terminology questions, but to open them up"[1] (Montis, 2021). In February 2021, the podcast "On Race" by Nadeesha Uyangoda, Natasha Fernando and Maria Catena Mancuso proposed to "open up a conversation on the race issue in Italy – and to do so with up-to-date language and in a format that voices Italians of color", noting that "Race, in the United States, is a commonly used word; instead in Germany it is used within quotes, in France has a footnote added (to say: 'races don't exist'), in Italy it's avoided". In the academic field, Alana Lentin has analyzed this "silence" around the word race in continental Europe, after the Second World War (Lentin, 2008 and 2020), while Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfaù and Giovanni Picker have described the Italian context as "post-racial", or one that excludes "not only the relevance of race (which colorblindness chiefly does), but the very possibility of naming facts, organizational logics, official discourses and circumstances" (Ghebremariam Tesfaù, Picker, 2020: 3) as pertinent to racialized subjects in Italy. These are the arguments underlying *Race* beyond the Anglo-Saxon perimeters of use. In addition, in academia and in the design professions, wherever the perception prevails of a primarily national and homogeneous community of practices, there are no explicit conversations using such a lens to discuss the transmission of historical knowledge and technical standards related to the transformation of space, the reconstruction of innovation trajectories and patrimonialization. It would take more layered and plural voices (and points of view) to undertake such a challenge.

Back to the built and designed environment, it condenses the effects of multiple dynamics: forms of life intersecting with present and past power relations, conflicts between groups, classes, social bodies, economic trajectories and paths of individuals. These effects, insofar as they are inscribed in space, retroactively offer a broad spectrum to interpret in the matrices of agentivity (human and non-human) a palimpsest of domination[2] (of practices and policies of extraction, control, segregation, colonisation…). Recognizing correlations does not legitimize the recognition of an ever coherent system of causes and intentional actions of this matrix of agentivity, revealed through the traces imprinted in the material body of inhabited space. The age-old question engulfs the social sciences and, perhaps, will never find a peaceful answer. Francesco Garutti and Shahab Mihandoust's 2014 documentary, *Misleading Innocence (Tracing what Bridge Can Do*), was perhaps one of the most recent examples of critical discussion on this point (Garutti, Mihandoust, 2014).[3] The film investigates the effects of technology and artifacts, their political use and intrinsic agency, beyond declared intentions, without glossing over issues of transparency in decisions and the exercise of power.

1 – Translation in English of all texts originally published in Italian is by the authors.

2 – We use this word in a very broad sense, which presupposes a reference to the notion of domination as it has been consolidated in critical theory, starting with seminal texts such as the *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* (Horkheimer, Adorno, 2010).

3 – The documentary takes up Langdon Winner's famous article, *Do Artifacts Have Politics?* (Winner, 1980), which blamed Robert Moses for purposely having the bridges on the parkways to Long Island built at such a height that buses, almost exclusively used by the African-American population, could not pass. We thank Albena Yaneva for discussing this with some of us a few years ago.

To use the lexicon of design, then, once a necessary relationship between cause (of domination) and effect (of space form) has been identified, would it be possible to operate in the opposite direction, modifying that effect of space to the point of giving it a power capable of intervening at the level of domination relations? If it is already difficult to be sure that the form of space *mirrors* the form of domination (as well as bearing the signs and scars of it), proposing to change dominion orders by transforming space risks being *out of reach*.

Assuming, if only as a limiting hypothesis, that these two conditions are plausible: that is, that (1) the form of space is the effect of a dominant order – of exploitation, segregation, extraction, control – and that (2) by acting on space one can modify that order – making the effect a new cause, in turn able to produce new emancipatory effects. Even with these assumptions, for a magazine that calls itself "a magazine on the power of the project", the fundamental question remains: what role would the architectural project play in this transformation? What power could we attribute to the project as such? Because, of course, while it is true that a transformation of physical space could have many effects *if it were implemented*, an architectural project goes through trials and tests that are inscribed in existing power structures and institutions. So, is it possible for an architectural project to be subversive and act against the order that creates it?

Far from being a neutral and, in the end, conciliatory practice, since it is inherent to the project to act in a network of determining relationships that refer to the external power of politics, institutions, capital, etc.,[4] the imagined neutrality of the architect presupposes a task carried out on a different plane of controversy (a creative, or technical plane, capable of conciliation). In order to practise this imagined neutrality, the architect can assume the responsibility of *staying outside*, deciding not to become an accomplice, from time to time, of property speculation, worker exploitation, spatial segregation or other nefarious intentions.[5] But, with respect to the previous assumptions, neutrality can in no way serve as a rhetorical pivot for the legitimization of architects' practices: because the challenge posed is precisely not to remain outside the controversies around the issues that the Race call mobilizes – segregation, discrimination and systemic racism – but to play a tangible subversive role in them. If this role is out of reach, then for the architectural project we should speak of *impotence*.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the most relevant examples on this horizon of challenges concern operations of a cultural nature. Take, for instance, Sumayya Vally's design for the Serpentine Pavilion 2021, with its four Fragments spread across London (Serpentine Galleries, 2021). Responding to the historical erasure and scarcity of informal spaces, the pavilion was a tribute to existing and erased places that hosted diasporic and multicultural communities and aimed to reveal and make visible places and practices of non-dominant culture. A different sensibility

4 – This is what Stephen Gray and Anne Lin observe in their piece: "we aim to reorient planning and design away from a do-no-harm approach, with a neutrality that only serves to perpetuate legacies of racism, and toward one of explicit anti-subordination".

5 – See, for example, Franco La Cecla's polemic in *Against Architecture*, regarding Renzo Piano's design for the Columbia University campus in Harlem (La Cecla, 2008).

produced other interesting examples – such as the Museum of Modern Art's New York exhibitions *Reconstructions. Architecture and Blackness in America* (MoMa, 2021), and *The Project of Independence. Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia, 1947-1985* (MoMa, 2022) – which show how the issue directly affects architecture. However, it is fair to ask what the reception of operations such as these has been, in addition to restoring a different plurality of voices in highly educated and generally already sensitised audiences. How much can we be satisfied with critical representations of the relationship between *Race* and architecture?

Pars construens

The articles in this issue contend specifically with the conceptual impossibility and political impotence of the project when confronted with this challenge. Speaking of Race and the architectural project, a hypothesis emerges from the multiplicity of positions on how to situate the project in relation to the scope, scale and rank of the phenomena with which the authors are faced. In many cases, architecture and its design seem to be more the scene that "reflects" conditions of a social and racial nature, but there is no lack of operative suggestions, stories and descriptions of particular places and situations. The illusory character of project neutrality seems to be better revealed: especially in cases of peripheral, ordinary projects, managed in the folds of communities, architectural design practices appear inextricably interwoven with many other types of practices. In each of these cases, contingently, the forms of the interweaving between what we would identify as the "architectural project" and other activities and phenomena give substance to specific conditions of domination. There is no possible neutrality for a project that happens and struggles to be brought to life in a neighbourhood; if anything, this is impotence. However, it is precisely along the margins of impotence that one can trace a partial reversal: architectural projects bring with them *potential* for interference, effectiveness and capacity for action, within conflictual situations, whose multidimensionality is always much more extensive than the perspective connected to a merely architectural intervention. It would seem that the question needs to be reframed. Not a general question, such as: how can we imagine a fair, non-discriminatory, non-segregating city through architectural design? But rather a specific question: To what extent does this project, which takes place *here and now*, offer the possibility of displacing *this* situation of domination? What opportunities does it open up? What equilibriums does it unblock? Of course, such a radicalization of the contingency of design power has many consequences, in the first instance because it becomes very difficult to make a generalization and theory out of it. There are many different answers, but they are almost always based on localised circumstances and situations.

The plane in which we feel we can place this issue is therefore based on two pairs of complementary extremes. The first pair positions the articles

in relation to a series of fundamental dilemmas, which emerge from the considerations just made:[6] What relationship can we define between the forms of power and domination and the material form of space? Is it space that produces domination, through measures of separation, control and coercion, or is it domination that forges space in its own image, manipulating the mechanisms of representation, identity and collective memory? Should we recognise the characters of a device that produces effects on bodies, or should we decrypt the values that give identity to places? What are the most appropriate forms of resistance and action: is it a question of dismantling a machine, or of breaking a mirror? The two possibilities do not exclude but complement each other. In some articles, a hypothesis emerges according to which it is material space that embodies domination and segregation – as in the case of **Gray** and **Lin**, who describe "racialized spaces [...] [They were] socially engineered by racial zoning and restrictive deeds". Whereas in other texts, the idea that domination generates and orients values by translating them into space clearly prevails – so much so that for **Parisi**, for example, it is necessary to "reveal how architecture contributes to the production of gendered, racial, sexual subjectivity".

The second pair in our outline concerns the programmatic dimension of the articles, which, depending on the situation, either construct arguments oriented towards a proposal for action and a project, or enunciate a discourse of a critical nature, if not outright denunciation. Here a problem of ambivalence arises, which in some texts remains unsolved: given a certain place, one can consider it either as a spatial matrix of a (negative) situation that should be modified or eradicated, or as a particular (positive) configuration of an identity or memory to be defended. Thus for example (but this is not the only case) **Rondot** and **Sanchez** describe Borgo Mezzanone as both a hell of slavery and a place of unexpected vitality and urbanity. In the oscillation of this ambivalence, between what should be defended and what should be subverted, critical discourses of vindication and denunciation emerge on the one hand, and pragmatic proposals for intervention and resistance on the other.

In summary, the horizontal axis represents the programmatic dimension, between the more *action*-oriented hub of proposals (of resistance or transformation) and the hub that leans toward a *discourse* of a critical nature (of denunciation or vindication). The vertical axis, on the other hand, attempts to measure the positions, more or less explicit, that the various authors express regarding the relations between material space and the many forms of domination: reciprocal and symmetrical relations, or of prevailing determination, of one term over the other depending on the cases shown. Thus, upward indicates the prevalence of the spatial *machine* that produces domination directly over bodies, while downward indicates the prevalence of the dominant system that reflects its values and representations in space, as in a *mirror*.

6 – Dilemmas reminiscent of one other, addressed in the fourth issue of "Ardeth," *Rights*, about the relationship between norm and form.

Gray and **Lin** regard urban space as a vector of political values, in two senses. On the one hand, "[politically constructed] meanings of race and identity shape our built environments"; on the other hand, the built environments "politicize individuals within them". Such urban space is considered as much on the level of its identity power, which is symbolic in nature, as on the material level, which is of an exclusive and segregationist nature. The purpose of the Community First Toolkit developed in conjunction with Harvard Design School is to make design a "generalizable human practice", capable of "aligning architects, planners, and designers with struggles for racial equity" in both symbolic and material terms. Although, in the end, the dimension of collective representations and vindications seems to prevail in the practice of design futuring, geared toward "channeling design imagination towards reparative, just futures". The field of the symbolic would thus be the complementary key to action, since, as the authors write, *representation is a privilege, and representation is power.* **Contin** and **Galiulo** recapitulate research on "Metropolitan Cartographies" in Latin America. In this case, the crucial assumption is the *otros saberes*, the local intelligences and skills that are in danger of being erased by colonialist and extractivist metropolitan development. The research aims to "represent the values of the contested territories" and moves on a plane that programmatically includes the dimension of values and affections. **Rondot** and **Sanchez** investigate the case of Borgo Mezzanone, an "extreme" territory, a segment of a sub-Saharan city occupying Italian territory, in the heart of the countryside in the province of Foggia. Through photographs and cartographic visualizations, the authors expose the fragile and inequitable conditions of those places, dependent on extractive logics and exploitative dynamics. The exploration of the forms of territory restores the ambivalent character of space, both as a device of segregation, control and coercion, and as a tool of resistance and diversity. **Taviani** investigates the urban dimension of "blackness"-"urban racialization" and its materialization in places and architecture, through digital visualization tools to try to shed light on the complexity of the relationships between race and places in Black Lisbon. Racialization manifests itself through the *omission* of spatial elements, recognizable through phenomena of exclusion and marginalization, which is opposed, while resisting, by the concrete garrison of places by the people who materially inhabit them. Spatial practices, such as suburban informal farming, limit the consequences of relocations to increasingly marginal areas: "They are the fruit of daily resistances and essential economic support for a number of families. They are also the hub of old friendships". **Balzan** explores paradoxes and ambiguities in the late Portuguese colonial experience in Africa. Based on a historical case study investigation, she problematizes the notions of race and class through the perspective of intersectionality. The production of space is reread in light of the "multiplicity of social players and ideological instances involved in co-determining notions of race and

class". Moving beyond the static category of race there is an in-depth examination of the "other protagonists of colonization, initiators of other spaces that struggle to find an easy place in the strictly oppositional logic between colonizers and colonized, blacks and whites". Physical architectural-urban space is then reread as a translation of "class and race consciousness in order to understand the conditions under which they develop and how they are intertwined". Finally, **Parisi** proposes to critically read the relationships between gender, sexuality and architectural space. The discourse is essentially based on the plane of representations: "reality has shown that the seemingly innocent conventions of architecture operate covertly within a system of power relations to convey social values". Consequently, the design dimension is oriented toward interventions that are essentially performative and cultural in nature.

7 – A built in example of this is the story of the monument erected in 1936 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to celebrate 14 years of the fascist party: a spiral staircase of 14 steps that Haile Selassie decided not to demolish, but to re-signify by placing the Lion of Judah at the top (Decolonizing Architecture Art Research, 2019).

Four forms of impotence

We conclude with a summary that is a resolution for the future. The distribution of items in our diagram is skewed toward discourses of a critical nature, but also toward a focus on those forms of domination that are manifested through the monopoly of representations and signifying connotations of places. Proposals for the transformation of space oriented to intercept the material dimension of this dominion remain in the background. The published texts are a contribution, limited in comparison to the enormous possibility of exploration, to going beyond the dominant collective narratives, helping us to see and decipher spatial manifestations and practices layered, hidden, and overlapping in them. Learning to give voice and relevance to these insights that emerge from other perspectives, so that they may find expression and speak out as distinctive modes of existence and truth in the arenas that make up the space of common living, is an unavoidable challenge.[7] At the same time, with respect to the material dimension of the problem posed in this issue of "Ardeth" and the possibilities for action that architectural research and the journal could develop to effectively transform the world, the spectre of impotence does not seem to have faded at all.

Each quadrant of the diagram represents, on the one hand, a potentially relevant aspect of the *Race* theme to which the project might attempt to respond. But at the same time the quadrants manifest, on the dividing line of their diagonal, a peculiar form of impotence, which is also a risk of radicalization. We could even name four types of impotence, into which architectural design, and its theories, are in danger of falling: critical determinism, moralism, ephemeral action, and antagonism.

Moving away from the items actually present and looking at the plan and its axes, proceeding clockwise, we could say that the first quadrant (top right) allows us to see the way in which the conditions of domination materialize in space, creating separation effects, fostering surveillance, discrimination and exclusions with respect to resources, environmental

quality, etc. But the radicalization of this stance produces forms of *critical determinism*, which end up attributing effects to spatial configurations that probably emerge from a much more intricate set of factors.[8] The second quadrant (lower right) is the field in which critical analyses are structured, that are capable of demystifying the arrangements of values, memories, and implications declared as *natural* or *historically determined*, with which inhabited space is imbued. The urban semiosphere is a battlefield that requires continuous deconstruction operations. On the other hand, at the point when the signifying dimension of space is assumed in its autonomy, there is a risk of overestimating the ability of critical discourse to affect the built environment, falling into forms of new idealism and *moralism*.[9] The third quadrant (lower left) allows us to focus on the potential that places offer for tangible operations of critical resemantization of the semiosphere. But, at its extreme, it can result in a program of exclusively performative actions that aim to act on values and symbols with inevitably *transient* effects because they fail to permanently change the material palimpsest of the city. Finally, the fourth quadrant (top left), considering the action and material dimensions of domination, can effectively aim to challenge the very infrastructure and its socio-technical power, in which the conditions of segregation, control and value extraction reside latently. Yet, even in this case, the claim to transform this material arrangement in an immediate way, without recognizing its institutional, legal and even symbolic substance, can lead toward forms of *antagonism* that purport to impose themselves on space without mediation, refusing to submit to the convoluted game of procedures and norms – and end up remaining marginal, or abusive.

The challenge that unfolds, in the face of what *Race* poses to us as a necessary horizon, is to be aware of these forms of impotence. Project research can deploy strategies that make critical discourse and concrete interventions complementary, moving in a circular fashion from the form of physical space to the multiple implications of its meanings, constraints, memories and identity connotations. Designing is like transiting from one point to another of the field we have drawn, through its center, to increase the effectiveness of architectural designs within these tensions.

Concluding with a purpose for the future suggests that we present the issue as open-ended. We believe that republishing the call for papers in full, instead of the usual editorial by the guest editor, frames the collected contributions and relaunches crucial topics many months after – and in a context that has profoundly changed – the time in which they were initially conceived (Autumn 2020). We look forward to receiving further ruminations to be accounted for in future issues.

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8 – The example of L. Winner cited above is, in some ways, an example of this.

9 – In the sense in which Latour defines the attitude of "moralists". "There will always be a strong temptation to include in the world of facts one of the values one wishes to promote. By dint of small nudges, the reality of what is will gradually become loaded with all that one would like to see exist" (Latour, 2000: 111).