

# Incandescence as the Immanence of the World

by Fabien Danesi

“(…) when confronted by mega-fires, our material or mental architectures fail to stand up. The habits created by the ideal of a control society or, on the contrary, of a primordial perfection, now have no basis to work on. The ongoing dichotomies of classifications and partitions dissolve.”<sup>1</sup>

—Joëlle Zask, *Quand la forêt brûle. Penser la nouvelle catastrophe écologique* [*When the Forest Burns. Thinking Through the New Ecological Catastrophe*]

On August 30, 2019, almost 44,000 fires had been counted in the Amazonian forest since the beginning of the year. In Siberia, during that same period, flames devastated over 15 million hectares. In California, the blazes in the autumn of 2019 showed that such destruction had become the norm for the west coast of America after the ravages of 2018. As I write these words, in early January 2020, Australia is once again the victim of massive fires which have lasted for several months. To sum up, our world is burning—literally. And it has now been taken for granted that these huge conflagrations which are also affecting sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia are a consequence of climatic perturbations linked to the industrial development of human activities, which might be called the Capitalocene era<sup>2</sup>, an alternative concept to the Anthropocene, which brings to mind that it is in the societies of production and consumption that the collapse of ecosystems is occurring. For, it is the growing use of fossil fuels, which are necessary to globalised economies, that leads to the increase in the release of greenhouse gases, which are involved in planetary warming.

Such data are well-known and now often repeated, by scientists, thinkers, grassroot activists, journalists and politicians. There are of course still some deniers, but it seems obvious that the recognition of the harmful effects of industrial growth is spreading throughout public opinion. While the political economy is continuing its predatory enterprise, progress is being transformed into its opposite, leaving us petrified, as expressed in the famous, ironic expression of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, for whom “it is easier to imagine the end of the world

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<sup>1</sup> Joëlle Zask, *Quand la forêt brûle. Penser la nouvelle catastrophe écologique* (Paris: Premier Parallèle, 2019), 163.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of Capitalocene comes from Andreas Malm whose main books in English are: *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2016), and *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2017).

than the end of capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> It is true that between a mercantile universalism and raving nationalism, the dream of a freer, egalitarian world seems to become more distant, while catastrophic visions are increasingly well-founded. As though all the present had to offer were a dystopian future, proffered as a tense certainty.

It still seems possible to protest vigorously against this state of things. But, as Laurent de Sutter rightly puts it: “You are an average citizen of an average country in the exhausted West: indignation has become your daily diet—but a diet that crushes you way more than you are willing to acknowledge it. You are tired of indignation, to such an extent that you can think that indignation *only* still outrages you.”<sup>4</sup> It is true that indignation is the feeling that is most widely shared in the midst of old western democracies, where conflicts seem to dominate any consensus. Actually, indignation is the affirmation of a weary critical thinking, spinning like a top: this is Reason in an overheated version which enjoys being angry, the better to conceal its passivity. It should be pointed out that this remark is not a reactionary way to disqualify any spirit that would aim at raising questions about current power relations. But rather a way to leave behind any heroic vision of rationality, which might intend to prolong the ideals of the Enlightenment, which have so often been parodied. The noble judgement conveyed by some salutary comprehension should be abandoned for what it is: a self-fulfilling fiction which guarantees its own survival beyond the uncrossable horizon of universality. Below this transcendence, there can be observed a material reality with *n* dimensions that corresponds to the modern world, which is both complex and fragmented.

When confronted with such a disintegration, this situation might leave us bewildered. Yet, the description of this dissolution plunges us into an immanence that incites a desire to invent new situations, in other words to determine new configurations, as in the operation suggested by Bruno Latour in that the Terrestrial “reorganizes politics. Each of the beings that participate in the composition of a dwelling place has *its own way* of identifying what is local and what its global, and of defining its entanglements with the others,” explains the philosopher and sociologist of science. “CO<sub>2</sub> is not spatialised in the same way as urban transport systems; aquifers are not local in the same sense as bird flu; antibiotics globalize the world in a way quite different from that of Islamic terrorists; cities do not form the same spaces as states; the dog Cayenne obliges his mistress, Donna Haraway, to go in directions she would not have anticipated; an economy based on coal, as we have seen, does not shape the same struggles as an economy based on oil. And so on.”<sup>5</sup>

The modern injunction for radical autonomy is here replaced by the need to favour relations of interdependence, which allow us to densify our experiences of the world. Confronted by a globalisation in which traditional schemas condition

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Slavoj Žižek by Éric Aeschmann, *Libération*, February 16, 2018.

See online: [https://www.liberation.fr/evenement/2008/02/16/nous-allons-devoir-redevenir-utopiques\\_65219](https://www.liberation.fr/evenement/2008/02/16/nous-allons-devoir-redevenir-utopiques_65219)

<sup>4</sup> Laurent de Sutter, *Indignation totale. Ce que notre addiction au scandale dit de nous* (Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Catherine Porter (trans.) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 93-4.

our grasp of politics, in classical terms of struggles and actions, sovereignty and emancipation, the point is to weave connections, in a way which is neither abstract nor utopian, on each being's "territory of life" and to have, to cite Anna Tsing's thinking, an "attention to patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages of humans and nonhumans: the very stuff of collaborative survival."<sup>6</sup> Yet, in a less metaphorical viewpoint, an exhibition can be considered to be one of these landscapes favourable to multiple interactions: it is in any case a schema which brings together various entities with their own temporalities so as to produce perceptible arrangements. Such a set-up is political in that it casts a beam of differences and affinities, which, deep down, is a wavelength. Such a frequency should not be confused with a sole message. Such a frequency cannot be reduced to a single piece of information. It is to be read as an oscillation that varies according to our observations and emotions.

Thus, the exhibition "Our World Is Burning" is not limited to the icy observation of its title. Of course, via its rational discourse, it vigorously sends out an alarm about the state of the world from the Arabian Gulf, where geopolitical tensions suggest a region which is ready to ignite. In this respect, it can be placed alongside the formidable democratic élan experienced by a certain number of countries during the "Arab Springs" and which is now being extended by the HIRAK Movement in Algeria, or the social protest movement in Lebanon against the corruption of a political class that is more concerned about keeping its power than representing the people's interests. Fire then becomes an ambivalent element. For, while it can seem destructive, it is still a powerful expression of an imperious will no longer to have your life choices dictated by iniquitous leaders. Thus, the words of Guy Debord still chime out when, after the situationist adventure, he claimed in his last film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978): "We've thrown oil where the fire was."<sup>7</sup> This fire conveys the intensity of rebellion. It is like a fever grasping a collective body so as to stand up for justice. Fire is another word for revolution.

Amid this perceptible reconfiguration sketched out by "Our World Is Burning," there is thus an explicit point of political commitment. Fortunately, the works being presented are not just the pure expression of a given ideology. On the contrary: most often they seek to escape from any assigned position. Subsequently, "Our World Is Burning" sets out to effect a shift in the already existing field of representations. The exhibition associates places, faces, voices, objects, narratives and organisms, so as to produce gaps in the stable order of domination, which occurs through the violence done to beings and their environments. In this period of troubles which we are going through, deserting the present would mean giving up on the future, so it is essential to change the paradigm of our society.

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<sup>6</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Guy Debord, *Œuvres cinématographiques complètes (1952-1978)* (Paris: Gallimard, Paris, 2004), 253.

What waits to be seen is the speed of this exhibition's propagation in order to know if it conveys anything more than the cruel ring of disaster. And, as a form of suspensive conclusion, to recall the words of Donna Haraway who, as early as 2010, remarked that “you cannot imagine the extent and need for the changes that we—whichever ‘we’ is meant here, and there are several—have to face up to, one way or another. I think that many of us are currently experiencing this emergency.”<sup>8</sup>

Translated by Ian Monk

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<sup>8</sup> “La tentation de l’innocence. Conversation with Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway by Vinciane Despret”, in Florence Caeymaex, Vinciane Despret and Julien Pieron (dir.), *Habiter le trouble avec Donna Haraway* (Bellevaux: Éditions Dehors, 2019), 336.