

# INTRODUCTION

No matter how much we pretend that technological acceleration and transitioning to a computational civilization can pave the way to salvation anew, in truth, it is as if the short history of humanity on Earth has already been consummated.<sup>1</sup> Time itself might have lost all potentiality. With the system of nature now so out of kilter, it might be left to us merely to contemplate the world's end.<sup>2</sup> The task of thought then consists simply in announcing it. Hence the current rise to power of all sorts of eschatological narratives and the discourse of collapsology.

## **Combustion of the World**

Collapsology truly risks dominating the decades ahead. Multiple anxieties backdrop its spread. On the one hand, the predatory reflexes that marked the first phases of capitalism's development are being honed everywhere, as the machine wrests free from all moorings or arbitration and seizes the living itself as its raw material.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, from the point of view of the production of signs that speak to the future, we keep going round in circles. In the North in particular, old imperialist impulses now combine with nostalgia and melancholy.<sup>4</sup> This is because, stricken with moral lassitude and boredom, the center is now being irremediably gnawed at by the aggravated desire for a border and the fear of collapse. For this reason, we see barely disguised calls not for conquest as such, but for secession.<sup>5</sup>

If the mood is one of withdrawal and closure, it is partly because we no longer believe in the future.<sup>6</sup> With time having exploded, and duration having been evacuated, all that counts now is emergency.<sup>7</sup> The Earth is

held to be irremediably contaminated.<sup>8</sup> We no longer expect anything, except the end itself. Besides, the norm, our common condition is more and more one of the living of life at the extremes. The concentration of capital in the hands of the few has never before attained the astronomical levels that it has today.<sup>9</sup> On a planetary scale, a devouring plutocracy has never stopped playing here and elsewhere at capturing and sequestering humanity's goods and, soon, all living resources.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the heightened risk of a dizzying loss of social condition affects entire strata of society.<sup>11</sup> Until quite recently, such strata had had the possibility of changing status and experiencing upward mobility. Now that the race to the bottom runs at full tilt, however, they are confined to a struggle to hold on to, and possibly to secure, what little is left to them. Yet, instead of blaming their setbacks on the system that causes them, they shift the threat of impoverishment wielded against them onto others more unfortunate than they, others who have already been denuded of their material existence, and they call for those who have already been stripped of almost everything to have even greater brutality meted out on them.<sup>12</sup>

This desire for violence and endogamy, together with the rise in forms of anxiety, takes place against the background of the awareness of our spatial finitude, which is much keener than ever before. The Earth is indeed contracting continually. In itself a finite system, it has reached its limits. The division between life and nonlife is all the more telling. Living bodies exist only in relation to the biosphere, of which they are an integral component. The biosphere is not only a physical, organic, geological, vegetal, or atmospheric reality. As many scientists are rediscovering, it is also interwoven with noumenal realities that lie at the source of existential meaning.<sup>13</sup> Some will come up against this experience of limits before others do. As a matter of fact, for many regions of the South, *having to re-create the living from the unlivable* is already a centuries-long condition.<sup>14</sup> What is new is that the ordeal is one these regions now share with many others, others that no wall, border, bubble, or enclave will be able to protect in the future.

The experience of the world's combustion and the headlong rush toward extremes is manifest not only in the vertiginous depletion of natural resources, fossil energies, or metals that support the material infrastructure of our existence.<sup>15</sup> It is also manifest, and in toxic form, in the water we drink, in the food we eat, in the technosphere, and even in the air we

breathe.<sup>16</sup> It occurs in the transformations undergone by the biosphere, as evidenced by phenomena such as ocean acidification, rising water levels, the destruction of complex ecosystems—in short, climate change—and the flight reflex and hastened path to exodus of those whose living environments have been wrecked. In fact, the very food system of the Earth is impacted, and perhaps thus also is the ability of humans to make history with other species.

Even our conception of time is called into question.<sup>17</sup> While speeds continue to explode, and distances to be conquered, the concrete time of the flesh and breath of the world, and that of the aging Sun, is no longer infinitely extensible.<sup>18</sup> The countdown has begun.<sup>19</sup> Ours is an age of planetary combustion. An emergency is thus upon us. Yet many peoples of this Earth have already known the reality of this emergency, fragility, and vulnerability—of the ordeal facing us—peoples who have had diverse disasters inflicted on them, disasters that have marked their histories with exterminations and other genocides, with massacres and dispossession, with slave raids, forced displacements, confinement in reserves, carceral landscapes, colonial ravages, and skeletal remainders along mined frontiers.<sup>20</sup>

The possibility of a generic rupture thus hovers over the membrane of the world, subjected as it is to corrosive radioactivity.<sup>21</sup> This possibility is fostered, on the one hand, by today's technological escalation and the intensification of what I am here calling *brutalism*, and on the other, by logics of combustion and the slow, indefinite production of all kinds of ash clouds, acid rains, and so on—in short, of all the ruins among which those whose worlds have collapsed are forced to live.<sup>22</sup> Strictly speaking, the age of the world's combustion is a posthistorical age.<sup>23</sup> The prospect of this event has seen reruns of old races, starting with that to redistribute the Earth, to partition it anew. Old nightmares have also resurfaced, above all the human race's division into different species and varieties, each marked by their supposedly irreconcilable specificities.<sup>24</sup>

This is perhaps what explains the revival, on a planetary scale, of the desire for endogamy and of the kind of selection and sorting practices that stamped the history of slavery and colonization—two moments of rupture borne by the storm of steel and fed by the fuel that racism has been for modernity.<sup>25</sup> Unlike in those times, the selection drive is now based on manifold forms of nanotechnology.<sup>26</sup> It is no longer simply about machines.

This time it concerns something even more gigantic, something apparently limitless, that stands at the juncture of computation, cells, and neurons, and which seems to defy the very experience of thought.<sup>27</sup> Technology has become biology and neurology. It has become a figurative reality, shaking up all humans' fundamental relations with the world.

Everything is converging on an unprecedented unification of the planet. The old world of bodies and distances, of matter and expanses, of spaces and borders still persists, but through its metamorphosis. Further still, the now transformed horizon of calculation continues to see a spectacular return of animism, a cult of the self and of objects, while the almost indefinite extension of logics of quantification is leading to an unexpected acceleration of humanity's becoming artificial. This becoming-artificial of humanity and its counterpart, the becoming-human of objects and machines, may well constitute the real substance of what some today call the "great replacement."

Brutalism is the proper name for this apotheosis of a form of power without external limits or an outside, which dismisses both the myth of exit and that of *another world to come*. In concrete terms, what characterizes brutalism is the tight interweaving of several figures of reason: economic and instrumental reason; electronic and digital reason; and neurological and biological reason. Brutalism is based on the deep conviction that the distinction between the living and machines no longer exists. Matter, in the last instance, is the machine, which today means the computer taken broadly—the nerves, the brain, and all numinous reality. The spark of the living lies in it. The worlds of matter, machine, and life are henceforth one. As privileged vectors of the neovitalism that fuels neoliberalism, animism and brutalism accompany our transition to a new technical system, one more reticular, more automated, more concrete, and more abstract all at once. Under these conditions, can the Earth and the living be places not only of intellectual provocation, can they also be properly political concepts and *events for thought*?

The idea of a generic rupture, at once telluric, geological, and almost techno-phenomenal, can be found at the basis of modern Afro-diasporic thought. The idea is particularly manifest in the three currents of Afropessimism, Afrofuturism, and Afropolitanism. A theme impels each of these currents, namely that of the fallen seed that, landing on barren soil, struggles to survive by catching light rays in a hostile environment. Thrown

into an unknown world and confronted with extremes, how can this seed germinate in a place that is so poor and where everything tends to desiccate? What root systems must be developed and what subterranean parts maintained? In each of these three currents of thought, and particularly in Afrofuturism, the invention of a new world is a vibratory act. This act proceeds from what we could call radical imagination.<sup>28</sup> The vibratory act is characterized by its straddling and going beyond the given and its constraints. This is how it participates in technical activity, where such activity is understood as the capacity to actualize, deploy, and manifest a reserve of power.<sup>29</sup>

In these three currents, Africa, beyond all its wounds, is that which will have paradoxically represented this reserve of power, or this *power in reserve*, as the sole power able to repatriate the human being not to Earth, but to the Cosmos. It is a potentially constitutive power, in its reality as well its form, in its vibrations as well as its matter, since it is liable to open onto an unlimited field of permutations and new structurations. In this essay, then, we set out from the hypothesis that *it is on the African continent, the birthplace of humanity, that the question of the Earth is now posed, and is posed in the most unexpected, complex, and paradoxical manner.*

In Africa, indeed, the prospects of decline are the most glaring. But it is also where we find the ripest chances for *creative metastasis*. Many planetary issues related to the question of reparations manifest themselves with the greatest acuity in Africa, starting with the reparation of the living, the persistence and durability of circulating human bodies in movement, of our accompanying objects but also of the *part of the object* now inseparable from what humanity has become. Africa is, as the Earth's *vibranium* (in the sense that others speak about a *sensorium*), also the place where all the categories that have served to envisage what art, politics, need, ethics, technology, and language are, face the most radical challenge, and where, simultaneously, paradoxical forms of the living emerge ceaselessly.

Moreover, this planetary turn of the African condition and the Africanization of the planetary condition will perhaps constitute the two major philosophical, cultural, and artistic events of the twenty-first century. It is indeed here, in Africa, that the great questions of the century, those that challenge the human race most immediately, are posed with the utmost urgency and acuteness—whether concerning the ongoing planetary repopulation, significant population movements and the imperative to

deborderize, the future of life and reason, or further, the need to decarbonize the economy. Thanks to Africa's gigantic animistic reserves, all truly planetary thinking will inevitably have to confront the African sign.

### **The *Pharmakon* of the Earth**

This is why the expression "African sign" ought to be understood as that which always exceeds what is given to be seen. As it happens, contemporary Afro-diasporic creation is engaged precisely in an attempt to show this excess and this beyond of appearances. It strives to imbue it with a particular energy. On the world stage, Africa is once again an object of intense psychic and oneiric activity, just as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. From within and among its various diasporas, there is renewed interest in the dream of a nation that stands on its own feet, powerful, and unique among humanity, or of a civilization (the word is not out of place) capable of grafting a futuristic technological core onto thousand-year-old indigenous traditions.

In cinematographic productions, Africa is portrayed as a land that harbors unfathomable riches, an abundance of minerals and *raw materials* that undoubtedly make it the *pharmakon of the Earth*. In science fiction, dance, music, and novels, Africa evokes almost telluric rituals of resurrection, as when, on clay or buried under the red ocher soil, the king's body undertakes its journey to the ancestors, carried by the shadow of Osiris, and begins dialoguing with the dead. In fashion and photography, Africa seizes upon costumes of solar beauty, depicted in a deluge of colors and a tornado of forms.

In gleaming colors, bodies are making their appearance everywhere—from dark blue black to sun black, fire black, brown and yellowish black, clay black, copper and silver black, lunar black, volcanic black, and crater black. These are true hymns to multiplicity, proliferation, and dissemination. And what can we say about matter at the level of dreams and machines that are themselves sculpted in the image of the world of animals, birds, flora, fauna, and an ancient aquatic environment? And, above all, how can we not evoke woman? Is she not ultimately, when it comes to the world's duration and rebirth, the enigma and the secret alike?

Here in Africa, everything has always been plurally combined. Life itself has always been about learning to put together composite, disparate,

and in a pinch, incompatible elements, then establishing equivalences between them, transforming the one into the other. In addition to this social polytheism, we must also add movement, *circulations*. Its apparently immobile expanses are actually worked by extensive movement, on the surface as well as subterraneanly.<sup>30</sup> Even duration is a mobile cut. There is thus a planetary becoming of Africa that forms the counterpart of the planet's becoming-African. The task of critique is to take this planetarity on board.

But, apart from this, every project to do with repairing the Earth will have to take into account what we, in this essay, call *humanity's becoming-artificial*. The twenty-first century has indeed begun with a spectacular return to animism.<sup>31</sup> This is no longer the nineteenth-century's animism, whose expression is modeled on the worship of ancestors; this new form is based instead on the cult of the self and of objects as our multiple doubles. More than ever, these latter constitute the sign par excellence of the unconscious states of our psychic life.

It is through their mediation that experiences of strong emotional intensity are increasingly felt, and what is not directly symbolizable now tends to be expressed. Humanity no longer stands and looks down from above on a system of objects. Humans are now traversed, from one side to the other, by objects that work us as much as we work them. There is a becoming-object of humanity that is the counterpart of the becoming-human of objects. We are the ore that our objects are tasked with extracting. The objects act with us, make us act and, especially, animate us.

Digital technologies have above all made possible the rediscovery of this power of animation as well as this psycho-prosthetic function. As a result, the new animism merges with electronic and algorithmic reason, which is its medium and its envelope, and even its motor. On the political level, this new animism is a knot of paradoxes. Virtualities of emancipation are to be found in its deepest core. It announces—perhaps—the end of dichotomies. But it is also able to serve as a privileged vector of the neovitalism that feeds neoliberalism. The new animist spirit must therefore be critiqued. The aim of this critique would then be to contribute to *protecting the living against the forces of desiccation*. Therein lies the signifying force of the African object in the contemporary world.

This critique, undertaken on the basis of precolonial artifacts, also bears on matter and the mechanical principle itself. To this mechanical principle, the African object opposes that of breathing, as that which is

specific to all forms of life. In fact, African objects have always been the manifestation of what lies beyond matter. While made of matter, they are actually a strident call to overcome and transfigure it. In African systems of thought, the object is a discourse on the beyond of the object. It acts, with other animated forces, within the framework of a regenerative and symbiotic economy. An uncompromising critique of this civilization in the process of immaterialization in which we bathe would gain inspiration from this history and this epistemology.<sup>32</sup> What do these latter teach us if not that life is not sufficient to itself? It is not inexhaustible. Neovitalism asserts that life will always survive all sorts of extreme and even catastrophic situations. We can thus, according to this logic, destroy life as much as we want.<sup>33</sup>

But neovitalism does not know how to live with loss. Within humanity's ongoing and frantic race to extremes, our shared lot is dispossession and deprivation. It is increasingly likely that that which is being taken is both invaluable and unable ever to be returned. The absence of any possibility of restitution or restoration will perhaps mark the end of the museum, understood not as the extension of a cabinet of curiosities but as the figure par excellence of humanity's past, one to which it would be a sort of silent witness. The antimuseum alone would remain—not the museum without objects or the fugitive residence of objects without museum, but a kind of attic of the future, whose function would be to welcome what must be born but is not yet there.

To anticipate a potential, as yet unaverred, presence, one that has not yet assumed a stable form, should perhaps be the starting point of any future critique whose horizon is to forge a common ground. It would be a question of starting not from absence, not from what is vacant, but from an *anticipatory presence*. For, it will be impossible, without this common ground and thus without deborderization, to repair the Earth or set the living back in circulation.