

## Invertebrates. Lives and forms in sciences and arts (Paris, 31 May 23)

Sorbonne-Nouvelle, LIRA, Maison de la Recherche (Salle Athéna), Paris, May 31, 2023

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Invertebrates : lives and forms in science and art.

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Certain forms of life can be qualified of liminal so much they côtoient the thresholds and the borders of the living; it is the case of the invertebrate lives. These beings - jellyfish, snails, slugs, anemones, argonauts, octopuses... - are "almost a quality" (Ponge, [1942] 2008) in that they live as close as possible to their natural environment and seem to constitute a simple moving extension of it, in the form of a pulsating muscle which would have been detached from the world. Unbound from any skeleton, invertebrates embrace more totally the forms of the world, even in their most pungent modulations - snails do not hurt themselves when they come into contact with rose thorns -; they are radically ambivalent: at the same time unbreakable and prey to an extreme fragility. This day will be an opportunity to collectively build a bestiary of invertebrates, deploying their objective and figurative presence in the sciences and in the arts. We will also be interested in certain figurations of an "invertebrate humanity", which led us to use the inclusive writing of the title.

Invertebrates as guides in contemporary ruins

To follow the invertebrates implies to let oneself be led in their own spaces. You have to bend down to the ground, swim, crawl, search the earth, squint if you want to track an invertebrate. For these are more beings of surprise, they appear and disappear at the mercy of the dews or the marine currents. Specialists of secrecy and dark hiding places, they have been little studied by science. Indeed, not allowing themselves to be stuffed or preserved in formaldehyde, invertebrates have long been preserved from too much inquisitive light. And somehow, this halo of enigma is also the object of our study. The founders of the classifications of the XIXth century (Cuvier, Lamarck) constituted them in "family". Today, this taxon grouping together almost a million species, against a few tens of thousands of vertebrates, has become obsolete.

New approaches to invertebrate life were proposed by the human sciences in the 20th century: the first steps of biosemiotics, with the work of Jakob Johann von Uexküll, were made around the case of the snail and the jellyfish, seeking to reproduce their Umwelt, their sensory world (Uexküll, 1956). This impulse of the human sciences to put themselves in the place of non-human life has been particularly enriched in the last twenty years, with the announcement of a new geological era called the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000), which goes hand in hand with a questioning of an anthropocentric relationship to the world. Thus, disciplines such as multispecies ethnography (Helmreich & Kirksey, 2010; van Dooren & Bird Rose, 2016) or so-called extended anthropolo-

gy (Tsing, 2015, 2022) have forged disciplinary apparatuses that want to think an ontological turn that puts the idea of interdependence between species at its core. This disciplinary craze has brought dogs (Haraway, 2003), grizzly bears (Metcalf, 2008), wolves (Mori-zot, 2016), birds (Despret, 2019), or even crocodiles (Plumwood, 2021) into the ranks of guides capable of providing us with the means to learn to live in a damaged world (Macé and al, 2019). Among this horde of animals, and often of large mammals, the slow and docile invertebrates had not yet received much attention. The interest they arouse is recent: when jellyfish bans provoke "new wild worlds" (Tsing, 2022) where nothing stops them; when species of snails endemic to Hawaii become extinct and create deafening silences for local cultures, which saw in them a link between the world of the dead and that of the living (Van Dooren, 2022). We will ask what narrative and euristic gestures are produced by researchers who listen to invertebrate lives. What does the contemplative presence of these millennial beings teach us, between pullulation and extinction?

The environmental humanities are working on an epistemological turn: to the classical methods of scientific knowledge are added literary and artistic gestures. These last ones particularly engage the question of affects, between human lives and invertebrate lives (Despret, 2021 ; Hayward, 2008 ; Bigé, 2022 ; Haraway, 2020), affects that we propose to explore collectively.

#### Invertebrates in the arts

This study day is an opportunity to open a new catalog of ideas and forms, through the discovery in art and literature of a bestiary of invertebrates. A bestiary that, once you get interested in it, seems to be as old as antiquity. Such argonauts, long buried in the Aegean Sea, painted and carved on ancient remains of the Bronze Age (Bradfer, 1998); such disproportionate snail going on the frame of the Annunciation of Francesco del Cossa studied by Daniel Arasse, who sees a sign of the Immaculate (Arasse, 2012).

We could however make the hypothesis of an increased presence of the invertebrates in a corpus of more contemporary work: the XXth and the XXIst century made of it a figure of choice, coming to feed the discourses, to disturb the imaginary ones. What do these invertebrate lives and forms embody in the works?

Victor Hugo's octopus in *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, the embodiment of the frightful: "It is something like darkness made beasts." (Hugo, [1866] 1980)? The spiral of the snail used as an image of the flow of consciousness in Virginia Woolf (Woolf, 1917, 1919)? The hero of Giancarlo Pastore's *Me-duse*, obsessed by his intestinal disorders and dreaming himself "inside a jellyfish" (Pastore, 2008)? And in contemporary art: the presence of snail shells left here and there by Mimosa Echard and Youri Johnson? The virtuosity of the octopus shown since the 1990s by Shimabuku? The sponges brandished as weapons by Josèfa Ntjam?

A drama can begin in front of us: that of a new confrontation of the human being with the animal. The invertebrate was often the receptacle of the first childish cruelties, of the primal instincts (Ombrosi, 2022; see the massacre of the crabs in John Fante's *The Road to Los Angeles* or the earthworm cut in two by the two teenagers in Witold Gombrowicz's *Pornography*): it becomes a sign of suffering. Carrying a modern pathos, which is inscribed in its ineluctable passivity, but can be charged with a new power, sometimes threatening. The invertebrate opens us then a theater of fascinations and phobias, that we could invest during this study day. When it becomes symbol or metaphor, it places the human being in front of its hauntings: as the sartrian experience shows; the being of the viscous becomes under the pen of the existentialist philosopher an insistent inver-

tebrate presence in front of him:

"It is a fluidity which retains me and which compromises me, I cannot slide on the viscous one, all its suction cups retain me, it cannot slide on me: it clings like a blood-sue". Sartre, 19 Being and Nothingness, p. 655

In our trajectories, we could be tempted to reduce the invertebrate to a simple matter or property (the viscous, the sticky; the soft, the formless, the plasticity...) but we hold a maximum to think of the invertebrate in its quality of living being. Even if it means going to see in certain works not so much the presence of invertebrates in themselves, but their living metaphor: these human figures designated as invertebrates. When humanity and animality merge; when trans-species symbioses appear (Hayward, 2008; Haraway, 2020). Such human-butterfly filiation, in Donna Haraway's work, with her Camillas that are biologically linked with monarch butterflies. Such individual snail, in Copi, with Irina in the play L'Homosexuel ou la Difficulté de s'exprimer, who seems to be very aware of the complex life of the without vertebrae:

"IRINA - Do you know what it means "invertebrados"?".

Power relationships, erotic and love relationships, troubles of individuation: the invertebrate characters write their own drama.

Pulling back the curtain of this theater of invertebrate figures, a question comes to us that is a little more than the dream of an opening for this study day: what about the interpreter? And the actor? What is playing an invertebrate? Let us formulate it rather like a paradigm: what is to play an invertebrate? The contradiction does not have to be removed immediately: the actors, the dancers, designated as bony beings, then assuming the performance of an invertebrate. The stage would possibly be the bearer of the dream or the threat for the interpreter to become invertebrate: this opens to us a whole world of physical and playful propositions. Let us see these possible gestures of scene which will allow us to think it.

The interpreter and their movements, their rhythms, their materials, can be at the heart of our interrogations. The body and the stake of its overcoming or its disintegration on stage. Physical and mystical imaginations can easily take root in the depths of the images and affects that invertebrates carry within them.

The interventions will be able to explore the following axes:

- The narrative gestures produced by the sciences and the humanities that explore the specificities of invertebrate lives. The links between science and art and science and literature.
- The presence of invertebrates in works of art and literature; working on the meanings or the imaginary thickness.
- Identify what would be an invertebrate human figure in a work of art; explore its drama.
- Take the invertebrate as a model or anti-model for the actor or dancer on the performing arts stage.

How to participate: Proposals for papers (500 words with a provisional title and a short bio-bibliographic note), should be sent to the following addresses: [chloe.pretesacque@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr](mailto:chloe.pretesacque@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr) and [mayeul.victor-pujebet.1@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr](mailto:mayeul.victor-pujebet.1@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr), before March 10, 2023.

The answer will be given in mid-March 2023. The study day will be held on May 31, 2023 at the Maison de la Recherche, 4 rue des Irlandais, 75005 Paris.

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