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Editorial Introduction: The New Materialisms

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The role of matter has been marginalised in much of historical and philosophical thought. Its proximity to the inertia of the physical, and its imbrications with the more basal nature of things, has cultivated a preference for an understanding of the world formulated as a flight from the tiresome weight of the material itself. Matter, as it seemed, has been a mere platform from which the exploration of more significant elements that characterised our experience as human beings could take off. In the past few decades, this relegation of materiality has allowed academics and theorists to focus their attention on discourses of language and ideology instead, particularly in relation to the construction of subjectivity as determined by intangible networks of power relations. Poststructuralist understandings of subjectivity are underscored by their complex entanglements with knowledge and power, and have proved to be profoundly productive in transforming underlying theories of gender, race, and class, particularly as they emphasise the relentless destabilisation of several longstanding dichotomies upholding the hallmarks of the Western philosophical tradition. Yet the dynamic currents of critical theory very much mirror the unpredictable terrain of our contemporary times. In recent years, the viability of these textual approaches to subjectivity, collectively termed as the 'linguistic' or 'discursive' turn of critical theory has been increasingly called into question. Poststructuralist theorists, in their embrace of the seemingly endless possibilities of language, have been accused of overlooking the nature of material reality itself, insofar as it has been referred to only through discursive constructions. The binary of language and reality has remained largely uncontested, with the spotlight predominantly focussed on the realm of the former pole, but the concerns of the twenty first century have increasingly called for the critical revisiting of the notion of materiality to account for our conditions of existence.

These debates over the construction of subjectivity reveal a far broader trend in critical theory of a new wave of accounts calling for a redefinition of our prevailing understandings materiality as related to the ineluctable *real*. As an intellectual who has stood for years at the forefront of engaging with the socially constructed nature of scientific fact, the French philosopher and social scientist Bruno Latour's has given a brutal assessment of the very paradigm he has for years been closely associated with is bleak, and stands out as an influential voice in light of these recent developments. Latour reflects in a 2004 issue of *Critical Inquiry* dedicated to the future of critical theory that:

... [A] certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism. (231)

In his article, Latour identifies the apparent exhaustion of the critical spirit in the social sciences by

suggesting that the dominant line of social constructivist thought, generated by endless critique for its own sake, has led us down a path where this deterioration of reality has become devoid of all truth and agency. He posits that the new definition of a critic is one who should instead be cultivating “a *stubbornly realist attitude*”, and argues for a return to realism that deals with “*matters of concern, not matters of fact*” (231). As such, matters of fact must be seen as “very partial ... very polemical, very political renderings” (232) in a much more complex epistemological understanding of what he terms matters of concern, and this revisiting of current critical practices in a second empiricism would involve, for a start, “reconnect[ing] scientific objects with their aura, their crown, their web of associations ... [in order to] *strengthen* their claim to reality” (237). Latour’s sustained evaluation of the very narrative of critique can be extended to the general field of academia itself, of which he argues has not adequately prepared itself to confront “new threats, new dangers, new tasks, new targets,” and likens academic scholars to “mechanical toys that endlessly make the same gesture when everything has changed around them” (225). The radical intellectual backdrop of our time has precipitated pressing ethical and political implications, demanding from us a more nuanced understanding of our place as human beings in the world. Rapid scientific, technological, and environmental developments in the twentieth century have, in addition, inevitably connected diverse disciplines once ensconced in their separate spheres of the university, and called for the urgent examination of existing critical practices to reflect the multitude of forces constituting modernity. As Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin suggest, the valorisation of a new tradition of thought would thus need to occur, one that “rewrites thinking *as a whole*, leaving nothing untouched, redirecting every possible idea according to its new sense of orientation” (13).

This demand for contemporary paradigms of critical practice which supersedes the singularity of academic disciplines, and the recent emergence of materialist strands of thought associated with the perspective that years of grappling with linguistic representationalism were proving to be insufficient, have collided in the broad area of cultural theory in a movement termed as new materialism, or *the new materialisms*. This turn to envisioning new materialist philosophy calls not only for a return to our understanding of matter, but for a crucial redefinition of its terms: not as a passive or brute substance as traditionally conceived, but rather that which is in possession of an inherently unpredictable force and vitality. It constitutes, as Karen Barad argues, not an immutable or passive site awaiting signification or theoretical inscription, but rather “an ongoing historicity” (821). Matter is configured as an active agent imbued with generative capabilities, and is always involved in the process of becoming. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost elaborate further:

For materiality is always something more than “mere” matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable. In sum, new materialists are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and focus and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency. (9)

Investigations into the inventive agency of matter are currently occurring in areas such as material culture, ecocritical discourses, material feminisms, and science studies, where material reality has

been given particular emphasis. This is not an abandonment of the historical legacies of materialist thought, or even a model of thinking hostile to the constructivist mode it takes its cue from, but an attempt to reconsider the notion of matter in acknowledgement of the powerful constellation of geopolitical and biotechnological forces acting in the world today. These processes of materialisation cultivate a new ontology which can be argued to sustain an “antipathy toward oppositional ways of thinking” (Coole and Frost 9), in which the longstanding dualities of nature and culture, language and reality, mind and body, the human and the inhuman are rapidly dissolved. As such, it is argued to be a post- rather than anti-Cartesian paradigm that “avoids dualism or dialectical reconciliation by espousing a monological account of emergent, generative, material being” (Coole and Frost 8). van der Tuin and Dolphijn thus posit that the immanent gesture of new materialist thought is “transversal” (158), both in its emphasis on the vitalist nature of matter which deconstructs the ideologies of binary thought, and its overarching call for generating a pluralistic theoretical gesture which enacts a “transcendental gesture” (159) towards the otherwise narrow boundaries of traditional academic disciplines. The new materialist affinity for cartographies of infinite movement rather than stasis, and for multiplicity rather than singularity, reflects our ineluctably altered understanding of matter itself, and heralds a new wave of scholarship intent on engaging with the complex demands of the twenty first century.

The new materialisms has brought together scholars from diffused disciplines across the academic landscape including Manuel DeLanda, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Quentin Meillassoux, Brian Massumi, Vicki Kirby, and Stacy Alaimo, who have engaged with the newly envisioned force of materialisation in their respective scientific and/or philosophical realms of research. Recent accounts of the specifically transformative conceptions of matter – the ‘agential realism’ of discursive practices as underscored by Karen Barad, for instance, the ‘vital materiality’ of Jane Bennett’s thing-power as exhibited in her explorations of political ecology, the neologism of emergent ‘naturecultures’ as coined by Donna Haraway, and the ‘Actor-Network Theory’ as Bruno Latour’s alternative way of conceiving of sociological forces – have emerged as only a small and certainly non-exhaustive list of suggestive interdisciplinary theories bound together by the examination of various ontological and metaphysical questions surrounding the meaning of the material and its embedded relation to contingent frameworks of power. As a testament to the transversal insight of the emerging field, new materialist anthologies have since also found collectives in feminist theory (see Alaimo and Hekman) and the creative arts (see Barrett and Bolt), by stimulating an ongoing conversation between scholars that have gathered to consider the political and ethical implications resulting from these conceptual shifts in thought.

The widespread interest in the new materialisms today was reflected by the interest that this issue of *Forum* generated when it circulated its call for papers, where the journal received submissions from postgraduate and early career researchers working in vastly different fields of the arts and humanities from literature to film theory, gender studies, geography, and the philosophy of science, just to name a few. What has resulted is much like Gilles Deleuze’s theory of an *assemblage*: as “wholes characterized by *relations of exteriority*” (DeLanda 10), a collection of essays autonomous in nature and seemingly diverse, and yet inextricably intertwined in their engagement with similar

points of interest. In his opening essay, Alex Casper Cline makes more extensive use of the work of Gilles Deleuze, and provides an interesting essay in identifying an exploratory theory of metallic affect within the Western philosophical tradition. He draws from wide-ranging theories of metal affect, geotrauma, and the cyborg, and finds a parallel the work of the twentieth century historian Theodore Wertime who was concerned with the conception of the anthropocene as the increased entanglement between human beings and their tools of technological development. Hannah Collins brings the discussion of the new materialisms into realm of literature, and examines the embodied nature of matter in several works of the science fiction writer William Gibson. She demonstrates that the material ontology of the body remains a significant marker of human existence, particularly when it becomes imbued with posthuman discourses of hybridity. The theory of the assemblage is central to Clare Echterling's examination of the Great Pacific garbage patch in the North Pacific Ocean. She illuminates the complexities of tackling the representational challenges of marine plastic pollution, insofar as plastic can be understood as an *actant* which interacts and merges with other material debris to form a constantly mutating assemblage. Rumen Rachev continues to explore the significance of technology in his essay, now situated in the contemporary context of processes of software. He argues for the material becomings of software as Jane Bennett's 'vibrant matter', and traces the perspective of software as a "*movement of material practices*" (2). Eric Schmaltz considers the experimental work of the sound poetry quartet The Four Horsemen through the lens of various theorists of voice, sound, and materialism. He argues that such a critique of their work surfaces radical possibilities, which subsequently undermines the homogeneity of capitalism. In our final essay, Eva Zekany highlights the troubling phenomenon of media addiction through the perspective of Derridean hauntology: "the sporadic re-emergence of nostalgia for presence, materiality, and the body" (3). The inherent spectrality that the media produces is manifested in the notion of media addiction, a disease inflecting our contemporary times. These essays are brought together and more comprehensively introduced in a reflective piece by our guest contributor Iris van der Tuin, whose work is located at the dynamic centre of the emerging field of the new materialisms. In her article, van der Tuin attempts to conceptualise the future of new materialist studies based on the contextual background of the essays in this issue as well as her own experience with ongoing research in the area, emphasising that at the heart of this exciting wave of critique is its unwavering gesture to expand and reimagine the theoretical space of possibilities.

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