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On The Threshold of New Materialist Studies

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This article answers a question addressed to the author during the selection procedure for a research network: if we were to be awarded funding, would we also work toward formulating (under)graduate degrees in new materialist studies? The article engages with this issue of Forum to provide an original impetus for preliminary thoughts on the institutionalisation of new materialist studies as a platform for academic research and scholarly degrees.

What does the contemporary university look like? An analysis through the lens of Donna Haraway's 'situated knowledges' leads to the following typology: academic lecturers and scholarly researchers are increasingly busy with administrative tasks of control¹, (under)graduate students are invited to play a bigger role in the evaluation of their teachers' performances via evaluation formalities (Lambert 184), and finance administrators progressively enforce that lecturers, researchers, and students "perform, or else" (McKenzie 3). Just as I have experienced on a daily basis the increasing role of students in professional evaluations alongside the growing involvement of, and negotiation with, administration and administrators, I remember very well when my job description had changed from a shared teaching and research load with managerial and service tasks on the side, to being evaluated for promotion alongside my generation of European scholars by the amount of money our ideas had brought (looking back) or could bring (looking forward) to the university. The Dutch government, for example, was in the process of centralising a significant part of the budget for research by taking it away from universities and making these same universities now compete for a piece of the pie through the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The decision behind this push toward the so-called 'dynamisation' of research monies was implemented in the second half of the 2000s. This move precipitated widespread implications that went beyond the national level itself. Dynamisation implied that EU-monies (funding beyond the national, Dutch level) and local funds (funding from smaller agencies within the country itself) became more and more important too. Universities were outsourcing decisions about which research projects to support intellectually (or not) and on what grounds; it was the price tag that came to count for the assessment of the potential and quality of a researcher. The described situation of *potestas* as thoroughly affecting quality control had another side of the coin, however, as the existing hierarchies at universities and the boundaries in between its departments could be shifted, and research projects on innovative topics or from more innovative angles that were long overlooked were now in the position to be funded. This situation of *potentia*, in Foucauldian terms, could only be observed in coexistence with these newly developing hierarchies in research funding (or just the eternal return of the old ones).²

As a young European scholar back in September 2013, I found myself in a room with colleagues from several EU-countries giving a twenty-minute presentation on the project proposal *New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on 'How Matter Comes to Matter'* (see

www.newmaterialism.eu). Clearly inspired by Karen Barad's formulations in her 2003 article "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", I had applied for a COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action (see www.cost.eu) focusing on the epistemology, methodology, and theme of the new materialism(s). My colleagues Milla Tiainen, Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Ilona Hongisto, Jussi Parikka, Cecilia Åsberg, Hannah Meissner, Marie-Luise Angerer, and Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer had helped me to structure this application. We intended for the COST Action to fund a variety of research activities, including four conferences, four training schools, several working group meetings, research exchanges, editing and open access publishing. We were excited; a successful application would provide us with the necessary financial means for expanding our network of new materialist scholars and scholarship in future events organised in Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe (in the previous years, we had met in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland).

That September, I was interviewed on the fifteenth floor of a skyscraper in Brussels, Belgium. The project proposal had passed the initial peer review process and an interview was being conducted in order to finalise the shortlist. During the Q&A session following the presentation, I was asked one striking question among many other more predictable ones: if we were to be awarded funding, would we also work toward formulating (under)graduate degrees in new materialist studies? In the heat of the moment, I gave an affirmative answer because I thought it opportunistic in the situation of the interview. But what exactly are the new materialist studies, and what would a degree in new materialist studies look like?

This issue of *Forum: The University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts* can help to provide some answers to these proposed questions. I am grateful to the editors of *Forum*, and to Yanbing Er in particular, for giving me this space for experimentation. On the basis of distant and close readings of the articles in this issue on 'The New Materialisms', that is, by using methods ranging from digital text mining to traditional interpretation, I will engage with questions such as: what would the new materialist studies entail? What are the necessary academic surroundings in which the studies can flourish? What kind of scholars would they produce? Which academics should be hired for them to develop? Which scholars have provided the genealogy of the field for researchers in new materialism to rely on in their subsequent writing and teaching? By treating this issue as a repository, I will assume that its contents can be studied in their own right in order to address these questions: the articles in this issue of *Forum* will be taken to provide an original impetus for preliminary thoughts about the institutionalisation of new materialist studies as a platform for academic research and scholarly degrees.

Distant Reading – What would be the key terms of a new materialist degree?

Assuming that the graduate students who have written for this issue of *Forum* have done so in the capacity of a first, informal generation of new materialist graduates, reading their articles from a distance can generate insight in the key terms of a future new materialist degree. What would this kind of education focus on? Although I am aware of the fact that the basic methodology of tallying words, and studying the subsequent images that are generated, is now going out of fashion (even

independently existing entities. This taken-for-granted ontological gap generates questions of the accuracy of representations. (804)

Luckily, none of the articles in this issue fall into the trap of such atomism or individualist entity logic. The statements they generate are of a different kind and thus compel a different theorisation of both representation and mediatisation. We encounter in this issue, and therefore tentatively in our future degree modules in new materialist studies, media that are rich and entangled environments producing entities, communication, and imagery. What, then, does the above Wordle demonstrate? Only that it must not be used for our PR materials or placed above our advertisement text because its two-dimensional, static, and spatial representation might seem to be based on cumulative and reflective accuracy. This reading of knowledge production, however, is utterly flawed, insofar as it elicits a disjunction between new materialism and such a theory of representation. At the very least, the Bergsonian notion of time as *duration*, an important gesture of new materialist thought as highlighting the coming-into-being or actualisation of materials and textual representation as distinct based on an inclusive virtual realm that is ontologically prioritised, must be added to the mix so as to do justice to the precise relationships between matter, materials, materiality, and materialism (the '4Ms' as coined by my colleague Ann-Sophie Lehmann). Interpreting representations – words, sentences, images – as mediating between pre-existing entities that differ from each other following fixed parameters assumes also that the knower is positioned outside (above) the research setting, whereas duration is reached even before this spatiotemporal hierarchy is actualised. After all, Henri Bergson³ stated in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* that:

[...] divergences are striking between the schools, that is to say, in short, between the groups of disciples formed around certain of the great masters. But would one find them as clear-cut between the masters themselves? Something here dominates the diversity of systems, something, I repeat, simple and definite like a sounding of which one feels that it has more or less reached the bottom of a same ocean, even though it brings each time to the surface very different materials. It is on these materials that disciples normally work: in that is the role of analysis. And the master, in so far as he formulates, develops, translates into abstract ideas what he brings, is already, as it were, his own disciple. But the simple act which has set analysis in motion and which hides behind analysis, emanates from a faculty quite different from that of analyzing. (168)

Not analysing mediatisation or representation, but immersing oneself in what poetry does, or how the Great Pacific Garbage Patch moves in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, would result in that very act of hiding behind analysis; it implies emanating from that other faculty without which analysis would not have started in the first place. Taking this into consideration, the results of such research would differ as a consequence.

Bibliographical Study – What would constitute a state of the art module in the new materialist studies?

Diving a little deeper into this issue, the combined bibliography of all the authors can provide insight not only in a survey course of the field (so far I have mentioned Barad, Foucault, and Bergson;

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were brought up in a footnote), but also in a more advanced, state-of-the-art module in which prospective students in new materialist studies can further their knowledge. The survey course is necessary in the first instance because the backgrounds of these students would probably differ significantly. Where they would have done their first degree, for example, and in which discipline or neo-discipline⁴, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary combinations, let alone as considered in the backdrop of different national contexts and languages?

In compliance with the results of my attempt at reading this issue's new materialist output distantly, what strikes me is the notion of *transmediality* as a prominent topic of new materialist study and debate. Transmediality in this context references, firstly, media and the relations between media as a research topic: the new materialist scholars gathered in this issue study new media, literature, performance, and so on. Secondly, I have also noticed an interesting development in terms of what should be constituted as a reliable source for building up arguments. In relation to this definition of transmediality, we find in this issue an interesting pattern of re-canonisation that characterises not so much new materialist study per se, but very much the type of scholar as herself producing the work: generated by digitally connected researchers, the bibliographies of the articles here published contain scholarly output alongside newspaper clippings, Internet sources such as research or lecture notes of well-established thinkers, blog posts, et cetera. But we can also observe a schism between the introduction of these 'new' sources, and the repetition of the old pattern of referencing more established university presses based in the United States. In random order, I note exemplars such as Indiana University Press, Duke University Press, University of Minnesota Press, Zone Books, University of Chicago Press, Routledge, Harvard University Press, and Stanford University Press. The same goes for the academic journals that are heavily relied upon by the authors published in this issue of *Forum*: they are well-known and established.

The previous observation notwithstanding, the bibliographies also demonstrate an emerging field of new materialist study that is fully transgenerationally composed. We find Deleuze and Guattari and Manuel DeLanda next to Jussi Parikka and Tiziana Terranova; Rosi Braidotti and Susan Bordo next to Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska; N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway next to Barad, Jane Bennett, and Stacy Alaimo. We find a consistency that runs through the entire transgenerational group, as it finds itself backed by a genealogy that is firmly constituted by a tradition of Continental philosophy (most of all, French). We see shared references to Jean Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Foucault, Bruno Latour, Jacques Rancière, and Bernard Stiegler. References to the work of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Kittler are also present, and through the lens of these philosophers the focus on the media comes to the surface.

One last detail regarding the bibliography and (imagined) scholarly communities pertains to the relations between the new materialisms and object-oriented ontology (Graham Harman, Reza Negarestani, and Timothy Morton feature in this issue), affect theory (the canonising work of Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth appears in this issue), and gender studies. The link to gender studies, in particular, is clearly elucidated by the kinds of questions posed and the scholars staged in new materialist study: these questions and scholarly references have an emancipatory and/or feminist trajectory, which immediately suggests the need to develop a specialised module in our future degree

programmes which acts to repair the currently disjunctive relationship of the new materialisms with fields such as anti-racist and postcolonial studies, and queer and trans theory.

I want to underscore that these observations on the role of gender studies in the new materialisms, and the absence of references to certain traditions within that particular field, highlight two points. Firstly, that the new materialisms are to some degree a 'minor history' in the capitalist times of the neoliberal corporatised university and secondly, that the specific role played by gender studies and feminist theory in the new materialisms – as informed by their Deleuzian heritage of theories of 'becoming' (rather than the entity logic of 'being') – point to the need to continue to develop 'minor' histories of thought. It has become clear then, that in order to address and study the technological side of new materialisms, we need those voices that are themselves not fully and unconsciously defined by the digital technologies such as the blog (as is the case with OOO; see the parodic 2011 piece by Michael O'Rourke in *Speculations*). This is to say that for our contemporary generation of new materialist scholars, arguably the first generation of new materialist graduates, not caring for mediation because it is purportedly atomistic, as addressed by Bruno Latour and María Puig de la Bellacasa, is not at all a productive venture because, in the words of N. Katherine Hayles, it is precisely how we think that must be on the agenda.

Close Reading – What about the theses to be delivered?

Since the articles in this issue of *Forum* have been gathered as a repository of postgraduate and early career research in the new materialist studies, what can we learn about our prospective student body and their research interests? To formulate a response, I have studied closely the opening paragraphs of each article, borrowing heavily from the textual research methodologies of Clare Hemmings. In her book *Why Stories Matter*, Hemmings analysed the starting paragraphs of articles in the feminist studies journal *Signs* in order to find out what gender studies scholars assume collectively about the feminist past, present, and future. In this issue of *Forum*, what we see first and foremost is an immanent sense of urgency. New materialist studies are written and conveyed with insistence. These articles have underscored the importance of dealing with the Great Pacific Garbage Patch *now*, with software *now*, with Internet addiction *now*, and with the sound dimension of poetry *now*. Secondly, these articles immediately communicate the need to denaturalise each chosen topic of the author: the acceptance of the immateriality of software, the adherence to certain rules if online participation is to be deemed normal, or the importance of addressing the silencing of the sound dimension of poetry. And more importantly, the authors do not raise the issue of naturalisation in order to invoke a social constructivist mode of thought, but rather highlight the agency of that which is usually naturalised. As Rumen Rachev states, for instance, "the moment software break down, as represented by the well-known 'blue screen' in the case of the operational system Windows, the user is made aware of the existence of software, even though software processes still do not reveal how they operate" (1). Or, in the words of Clare Echterling: "[t]he gyre's circulating currents catch and hold debris, a phenomenon that concentrates garbage into a comparatively small area and thus makes marine pollution more visible than in other areas of ocean waters" (1). This focus on agentiality

implies that new materialist scholarship is built on the insight that the social construction of matter participates directly in its muting. In the words of Isabelle Stengers on Alfred North Whitehead:

Nature is [...] neither knowable – definable, for instance, as a system of relations between entities – nor unknowable, the famous ‘mute reality’ upon which we project human, linguistic, or social categories. [...] Nature is that about which relevant knowledge may be produced. If we pay due attention to it, we can learn, discern relations, and multiply entities and ratios. (106)

Again in Stengers we find an emphasis against entity-logic, on the one hand, and a strong plea for caring for one’s research topic as well as the situation of the researcher on the other.

Lastly, and consequentially, what I perceive as important in new materialist studies is the horizontalising of the object and concept of research. Barad has argued clearly in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, following Haraway’s earlier statements, that “[r]eflexivity is based on the belief that practices of representing have no effect on the objects of investigation and that we have a kind of access to representations that we don’t have to the objects themselves” (87). As a result, she argues that a social constructivist account of what has been rendered silent by realist or positivist researchers is not much of a change: both are methodologies of “reflecting on the world from outside” rather than “way[s] of understanding the world from within and as part of it” (88). This brings us to what Deleuze and Guattari write in *What is Philosophy?* on “the constitutive relationship of philosophy with of nonphilosophy” (109). I do not want to assume that new materialist studies are situated within the domain philosophical studies, but rather that new materialist studies have taken on a particular approach to material-discursivity. As Deleuze and Guattari state:

Artaud said: to write *for* the illiterate – to speak for the aphasic, to think for the acephalous. But what does ‘for’ mean? It is not ‘for their benefit,’ or yet ‘in their place.’ It is ‘before.’ It is a question of becoming. The thinker is not acephalic, aphasic, or illiterate, but becomes so. He becomes Indian, and never stops becoming so – perhaps ‘so that’ the Indian who is himself Indian becomes something else and tears himself away from his own agony. We think and write for animals themselves. We become animal so that the animal also becomes something else. (109, emphasis in original)

The point we can extrapolate from this is that new materialist scholars of software, for example, understand this life outside of the usual scholarly grooves. This is how the so-called ‘object’ of study functions, in new materialist terms: not as a subjective rendering of scholars persuaded by separate socio-political, ideological, or scholarly ‘paradigms’, but rather as a lived reality of entangled agentialities. Paradigms become reductive structures when a new materialist scholar takes on an environmental perspective on media (as expressed above), one that we can call also ‘posthuman’, following in the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, or ‘transversal’, in the terms of Rick Dolphijn and myself in our monograph *New Materialism*. Hannah Collins phrases it this way in her article’s opening sentence: “If, as Veronica Hollinger argues, contemporary Science Fiction often problematises the nature-artifice dichotomy whilst keeping the human ‘ensconced in its privileged place at the centre of things’, then cyberpunk fiction ‘is about the breakdown of these oppositions’ (204-5)” (1). The object of study is not located ‘out there’ but is rather envisioned as a concept that

entangles the researcher with an urgent, thematically determined medium. *This*, then, precisely constitutes the new materialist study.

Speculating about Staffing – who to hire?

What is clear from this issue on the new materialisms is the necessity for the future staff working on our speculative new materialisms programmes to be intellectually versatile. These scholars need to be receptive to notions of rewriting established models of knowledge production. In this issue, I have observed that the authors have attempted to rethink such models in their articles, particularly in its dualistic interpretations. This mode of research is expressed very accurately in my favourite quote from Whitehead:

Another great fact confronting the modern world is the discovery of the method of training professionals, who specialise in particular regions of thought and thereby progressively add to the sum of knowledge within their respective limitations of subject. [...] This situation has its dangers. It produces minds in a groove. But there is no groove of abstractions which is adequate for the comprehension of human life. (196-7)

On one instance, the desire to comprehend human life, or life on a posthuman register, is what new materialist scholars intend to do. New materialist scholars recognise the limitations of ‘grooves’ and work actively on getting out of them. Sedimentations of paradigmatically dualist renderings are tackled as well: what has, either unconsciously or unwantedly, remained ‘dualist’ thus needs to be seen as an imprisonment by a ‘logic of One’ that ascertains that one member of the set of two (the natural sciences and the humanities, whereby the social sciences appear as transforming neither of the two) is governed by the other, and renders one member as not that (the humanities are not the natural sciences). The ways in which new materialist scholars deal with software as material constituted similarly to hardware, for example, are all instances of Lyotard’s ‘working-through’, or Sara Ahmed’s “through and beyond” (118) stalemate patterns of mapping. This works to address what Bergson has termed the “sounding[s] of which one feels that it has more or less reached the bottom of a same ocean” (168): necessitating a radical departure from binaristically oppositional terrain, in other words. The goal of cherishing and developing academic sensitivity for “the simple act [...] that] hides behind analysis, emanat[ing] from a faculty quite different from that of analyzing” (Bergson 168) implies the importance of hiring staff with an interest in fostering of sensitivities in a bottom-up approach in what Haraway calls ‘staying with the trouble’. In other words, this would mean hiring (neo-) disciplinary staff with a longing to work in between boundaries, interdisciplinary staff willing to work beyond the confines of their own backgrounds, and transdisciplinary colleagues with an interest in academia: encompassing in their projects the thoughts of tech-savvy programming specialists, ‘green’ policy makers, activists of all kinds, and so on.

Would we, in conclusion, work toward (under)graduate degrees in new materialist studies? The participants in the COST Action IS1307 – now firmly in place for 2014-2018 – have shown that the future staff for such a programme is already present, the authors represented in this issue have demonstrated that a widespread interest in the new materialist studies already exists, and the editors of *Forum*, together with the COST Action and other existing new materialist spaces, are available to

provide the infrastructure that is required. The committee member who asked me the above question truly had a vision for the degree programmes of the future!

Notes

¹ See in particular Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin's articles "Doing the Document: Gender Studies at the Corporatized University in Europe I." (2013), and "Doing the Document: Gender Studies at the Corporatized University in Europe II." (2014) in the *European Journal of Women's Studies*.

² I borrow the vocabulary of *potestas* and *potentia* from Michel Foucault in order to refer to the interrelatedness of oppressive and liberating power.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari mention Bergson in *What is Philosophy?* in relation to "the nature of philosophical problems" (81).

⁴ In the use of the term 'neo-discipline' I mean the establishment of new fields of study as disciplines in their own right. Relevant examples are gender studies, and science and technology studies.

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