

**New Materialist Literary Theory. Critical Conceptions of Literature
for the Anthropocene.**

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The present volume represents an original and substantial contribution to the field of New Materialism. Apart from analysing literary texts in light of this critical paradigm, it attempts to organise the field theoretically, while also bringing in some new concepts. Of course, it belongs to a larger critical paradigm initiated by authors such as Bruno Latour (*Reassembling the Social*, 2005; *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 2013), Karen Barad (*Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 2007), Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (*Material Feminisms*, 2008; *Bodily Natures*, 2010), Timothy Morton (*The Ecological Thought*, 2010; *Hyperobjects*, 2013) and Graham Harman (*Object-Oriented Ontology*, 2018), as well as others. Yet, the present volume belongs together with second-generation theoretical texts, such as Maurizia Boscagli's *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014), Marco Caracciolo's *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (2021), *Diffractional Reading: New Materialism, Theory, Critique* (2021), edited by Kai Merten, or the comprehensive *How Literature Comes to Matter: Post-Anthropocentric Approaches to Fiction*, edited by Sten Pultz Moslund, Marlene Karlsson Marcussen, and Martin Karlsson Pedersen.

Probably the most important contribution of the present volume to the field is its perception of the paradox at the heart of the domain. In some of the books on the same subject, the material world is seen as already cultural, inescapably entangled with us and transformed by the alterations we inflicted upon it (2). This is the entanglement approach, initiated by Donna Haraway's *naturecultures*. In other books on the same topic, the material world is seen as independent from us – the

“increasingly uncontrollable natural phenomena, such as global heating and concomitant climatic change” (2). This is the speculative approach, developed mostly by such theorists as Graham Harman, with his Object Oriented Ontology, and Timoty Morton, with his “hyperobject”. While authors in general prefer to ignore the actual coexistence of the two trends and deal with only one aspect of the issue, the current volume chooses to accommodate both entanglement and speculation, while also accounting for their possible coexistence – not a minor feat.

Instead of entanglement and speculation, the volume employs mostly (but not exclusively) “diffractive materialism” and “immaterialism”. Diffraction is based on the notion of entanglement on multiple levels and between different kinds of entities, including reader-text and several texts. “Immaterialism” is akin to speculation, being rooted in object-oriented ontology (OOO). It opposes the idea of relationality and believes that our knowledge of the world (of objects) is radically finite, therefore “all we can do is speculate about it,” hence the inaccuracy of the human grasp of the world (6). Diffraction originates in the field of physics, where it was first used in a literary context by theorist Karen Barad in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007).

Although the volume deals with speculation and entanglement separately, it also aims to consider them in combination, hence its originality. In both the editors and the authors’ view, entanglement seems to define speculative realism itself, as “speculator and speculated object are entangled and only performatively and situationally available” (16).

Describing, the volume also prescribes: it imposes the two tendencies as main directions because they are easier to grasp and classify. This does not necessarily mean that they are predominant in contemporary literary production.

The chapter by Kerstin Howaldt, “Diffracting Stabilized/Stabilizing Binaries of Contemporary British Climate-Change Theater” discusses three climate-change plays, Richard Bean’s *The Heretic* (2011), Mike Bartlett’s *Earthquakes in London* (2010) and the collaborative work *Greenland* (2011) by four British playwrights. Theatre

is more attuned to the ecological plight, in Howaldt's view, due to the multimodal experience it provides. Moreover, diffraction seems to be a practice particularly suited for this artistic medium, as the plays' plots intersect to contribute to the climate-change debate. The author mainly seeks theoretical insights from within the plays rather than from a given theoretical perspective; this is to avoid treating climate-change plays as objects to be gazed at with a predefined set of ideas in mind (34). As such, Howaldt shows that the texts, seen from a diffractive perspective, can be read through one another and this is how they reveal their own remarkable theorising potential. Apart from this, she also focuses on the polar bear as an iconic animal that appears in all three plays (29).

"Pastoral Fieldwork: Wordsworth's Labour", written by Philipp Erchinger, looks closely at William Wordsworth's 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The author argues that the work of the poet, although seemingly belonging to the pastoral genre that sees writing as a leisurely, playful occupation, is in fact closer to the georgic mode. The georgic mode of literature places poetry on equal footing with the hard work of the land labourers it describes. "Unlike pastoral, georgic poetry tends to conceive the writing of verse not primarily as music or play" but rather "through the labour of keeping live stock or growing crops" (46). This ensures the actual participation of poetry in the subject matter it describes, making the poet not simply an observer but a "participant observer" (48). The poet becomes himself a farmer and a labourer. Since the working environment of the rural labourer was "cultivating and managing the land" therefore dealing with the immediate material world, the poet deals with the same material world. The result is Wordsworth's "practical materialism", in Erchinger's own words (58). It is a dimension of poetry that brings the Romantic poet close to contemporary Neo-Materialist thought (48) and adds more nuance to contemporary materialist thinking itself.

In "At First Blush: New Materialism and Computational Literary Studies", Grant Hamilton talks about the impact of digital literary studies – or distant reading – upon the study of literature, in the context of New

Materialism. Providing a bird eye's view of literature, digital literary studies address matters in the field of literary texts on the basis of extensive databases. From measuring variables at the end of the 1970s, Computational Literary Studies have evolved "to discover combinations and configurations that could not be foreseen" in literary texts. As such, Computational Literary Studies illustrates the essential relationality of the human and nonhuman worlds – authors and readers, on the one hand, and texts and computers, on the other hand. More precisely, "literature is changed by the apparatus by which we look to know it" (74). Such an apparatus reveals new angles of analysis and interpretation, therefore a new literature. Grant Hamilton illustrates his theory by applying digital techniques to analyse the first lines of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Still in the area of entanglement, "Quicksand, Lispector, and the Volatile Matters of Literary Materialism" is the chapter where Birgit Mara Kaiser focuses on the novel *The Passion According to G.H.* by Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. Lispector's creed was unambiguously the primacy of the material world: <<"the first truth is in the earth and the body">> (79). Kaiser discusses here Lispector's view of the literary materiality of texts (the body of literature) but also the materiality within texts and arising from the readerly intra-action between human bodies and literary texts. Showing how these materialities reach their highest development in *The Passion*, Kaiser compares them to the specific consistency of sand, a substance which is also present in Lispector's own novels (79). Interestingly, Kaiser sees literature's materiality similar to that of sand because partially solid but also partially volatile, shaped and reshaped by our own, often faulty, remembrance of texts. She likens such materiality to quicksand, more specifically. Texts are not the only ones that are redefined in the process; being human is, too. This entanglement of literature, materiality and us "can profoundly unsettle the grounds on which being human is thought and practiced" (94).

"Being a/part: Thinking About the Human/Nonhuman Relationship", by Annina Klappert, considers entanglement together with speculation. This is reflected in the homophonic play between "apart" and "a part" in her title. By exploring this, she hopes to shed more light

on New Materialism's view of the human-nonhuman relationship. In this relationship, the human is seen as either separate from the nonhuman (apart from), or as an integral part of the nonhuman (a part of). Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology would be an illustration of the first tendency, while Timothy Morton's "mesh" is an instance of the second direction. Klappert traces both the etymology and the complex philosophical history of the part-whole relationship (98), moving then on to Romanticism's rethinking of it. She then chooses four literary texts from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries (103) which she close-reads to investigate how they perceive the part-whole relation in connection with the human-nonhuman relationship. Her conclusion is that there is a "crucial ambiguity" within the human-nonhuman relationship: we are simultaneously apart from the world in which we live and a part of the same world. Annina Klappert final position is in favour of entanglement.

While Part I of the volume focuses on interconnectivity and correlation, Part II has speculation at its core. It starts with Evan Gottlieb's "Resisting Finitude, or The Romantic Anthropocene". Considering Michel Foucault's idea of a historically limited, therefore transient human knowledge in *The Order of Things* and Dipesh Chakrabarti's ideas about global warming, Gottlieb argues that such preoccupations are not entirely new (121). The British Romantics had already produced valuable insights on the matter, as back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they experienced "epistemological and ontological crises" similar to those we now correlate with the Anthropocene (121). Discussing Timothy Morton's criticism of the Romantics and Kant's "correlationism", Gottlieb shows that several Romantic poets "were ... skeptical of Kantian attitudes" (124) and of correlationism specifically. Gottlieb proves his point through close reading Percy Shelley's "Lift Not the Painted Veil" and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. He concludes that the two literary texts provide "a clear-eyed negotiation with the limitations imposed by human finitude" (132), namely that they reject the idea of human finitude and profess the possibility of a knowledge of the absolute.

The next chapter is "At War with the Seasons: Wilfred Owen's 'Exposure' and 'Spring Offensive'" by Ann-Katrin Preis. Analysing Wilfred Owen's two war poems, Preis dwells on the personification of nature as a force that counteracts human passivity and comes to resemble a war opponent. Her theoretical framework employs Martin Heidegger's ideas and key concepts in Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology. She shows that human exceptionalism is highly questionable and that nonhuman instances possess an inherent autonomy – "the eluding nature of objects" (142). Preis focuses on natural phenomena like winter and spring, both poetically depicted as hostile agents, to demonstrate from a speculative perspective that nonhuman agency is inexhaustible, exceeding human cognition and defying control (141). She concludes by considering poetic language an agential force in itself.

In "W.G. Sebald and the Exploded View", Arne De Boever discusses the work of Sebald, showing how it anticipates New Materialism both in form and content. Concerning form, Sebald makes use of listing, which is a familiar mechanism in New Materialist writing and which also relates to the political dimension of the text. In what regards the content, the writer deals with extinction in connection not only to the Second World War but also to what we currently call the Anthropocene. Lists present the paradoxical feature of seeming to exhaust the world in its varied entirety while simultaneously intimating the possibility of endless perpetuation. This "explodes" human-centred plot coherence and makes Sebald "an ontographer", in De Boever's words (160). "Ontography" is a kind of "compendium, a record of things" (160) and an ontographer is someone whose narrative does not provide connection but disjunction.

Whereas the first part of the volume deals with entanglement and the second part with speculation, the last three chapters attempt to join the two approaches while still preserving their distinct attributes.

Marco Caracciolo's "Uncertain Materiality in the Neuronovel" pleads for a reinsertion rather than a rejection of (human) subjectivity within New Materialism. He is basing his arguments on "the materiality of human subjectivity" (171), materiality ensured by the mind (171).

Although the mind-matter dualism has been one of the pillars of Western thought, Caracciolo demonstrates that a strand of contemporary fiction, the neuronovel, might challenge such dualism. Richard Powers's *Bewilderment* is the novel under discussion here, as it combines elements of climate fiction and the neuronovel. The novel's protagonist, a child on the autistic spectrum, is most deeply sensitive to the ecological crises our planet traverses. His mind, impenetrable despite neuroscience's efforts to disentangle its mystery, represents in fact a different way of existing. Deeply attuned to the materiality of a world in crisis, it might hold out, Caracciolo believes, "the promise of a new, more ecologically efficacious way of being human" (183). The novel succeeds in bridging the "perceived gap between subjectivity and the materiality of both human bodies and the nonhuman world" (172). Dealing with a mind simultaneously locked within its own subjectivity and yet profoundly connected to the world integrates the novel both within the speculation and entanglement categories.

In "Diffracting Birds and Words in Nicholas Royle's *An English Guide to Birdwatching*", Daniela Keller employs three critical mechanisms to discuss Nicholas Royle's novel: Derrida's claim that *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, Karen Barad's agential cut, and Royle's own theory of veering. Derrida brings an important deconstructive element to the text; Karen Barad's agential cut favours universal entanglement, positing that observer and observed are linked together rather than separated; and Royle's theory of veering is based on notions of digressing, deviating and losing control in literature, which is what Royle himself does in the novel. At stake is a fictional area where the human and the nonhuman – birds, in this instance – can meet. Several authors, writers, readers, and observers intersect in the novel which plays with the diegetic levels. Keller asserts that all these intricate narrative mechanisms constitute "an agential cut between two worlds, inviting readers and writers alike to contemplate a nonhuman perspective" (201).

Book review

Cord-Christian Casper's chapter "How to Get Outside: Assemblages in Speculative Nature Writing" shows how a world outside human perception can still be conceived of in literature. He discusses a set of essayistic texts by the English writers J. A. Baker and Jacquetta Hawkes, texts that anticipated speculative realism. In Casper's view, the authors stage nature's withdrawal "from human perception and essayistic representation alike" (205). The theoretical insights of Graham Harman are connected with Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and Gilles Deleuze's concept of assemblage to show how such a feat can be accomplished. In their fiction, both writers construct assemblages that are autonomous, "bounded objects" rather than expandable networks (221). They function as a unity although they include both human and nonhuman elements: birdsong and its human/nonhuman media; a sculpture-squid-consciousness network; or a feathery integument (221). Their substantial incoherence is what allows them to "withdraw from representation and perception alike" and frees them from the human grasp (221).

New Materialism is an approach that was initially philosophical and theoretical. Yet, discussing literature from this perspective does not mean applying a set of philosophical ideas and theories to literary texts. As we have seen in this volume once again, literature has brought and continues to bring its own original insights into the relationship between the nonhuman and the human. It helps give substantial existence to the field, while also redefining it from the inside, as the authors here have gone to great lengths to show. The present book does more than offering detailed, ingenious information and text analyses: in a literature that seems entirely centred on the human being, it shows that the material world has been a constant, powerful, even overwhelming presence. It only needs our learning to acknowledge this fact.

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