

## Pushing dualism to an extreme: On the philosophical impetus of a new materialism

Rick Dolphijn · Iris van der Tuin

Published online: 21 October 2011  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

**Abstract** This article discusses the way in which a group of contemporary cultural theorists in whose work we see a “new materialism” (a term coined by Braidotti and DeLanda) at work constitutes a philosophy of difference by traversing the dualisms that form the backbone of modernist thought. Continuing the ideas of Lyotard and Deleuze they have set themselves to a rewriting of all possible forms of emancipation that are to be found. This rewriting exercise involves a movement in thought that, in the words of Bergson, can be termed “pushing dualism to an extreme.” By this movement, Deleuze has stated, “difference is pushed to the limit,” that is, using Colebrook’s words, “difference is shown differing.” The article addresses the ways in which modernity’s dualisms (structured by a negative relation between terms) are traversed, and how a new conceptualization, and *ontology*, of difference (structured by an affirmative relation) comes to be constituted along the way. New materialism leaves behind all prioritizations (implicitly) involved in modern dualist thinking since a difference structured by affirmation does not work with predetermined relations (e.g., between mind and body) nor does it involve a (counter-)hierarchy between terms. The article makes explicit the *methodology* of the current-day rise of non-dualist thought, both in terms of its non-classificatory mode of (Deleuzian) thinking and in terms of the theory of the time of thought thus effectuated (Lyotard’s notion of ‘rewriting modernity’ is not a post-modernism). Throughout the article we will engage with an example in order to demonstrate the ontology that is being practiced following this methodology: How does a new (feminist) materialism traverse the sexual dualisms that structure modernist (feminist) thinking? This example also shows how a feminist post-modernism (found in the canonical work of Butler) has remained dualist, and what makes new materialism “new.” Freed from a

---

R. Dolphijn (✉) · I. van der Tuin  
Utrecht University, Muntstraat 2a, 3512 EV Utrecht, The Netherlands  
e-mail: R.Dolphijn@uu.nl

I. van der Tuin  
e-mail: I.vanderTuin@uu.nl

dualist methodology, the modernist emancipatory project comes to full fruition in new materialism.

**Keywords** New materialism · Rewriting modernity · Cultural theory · Dualism · Difference

This article engages with the way in which several significant contemporary Continental philosophers establish a philosophy of difference in the form of a “new materialism.” The article thus builds on and furthers work on new materialism’s specific philosophical impetus as well as it carefully unpacks the methodology through which it is actualized. Albeit that we will demonstrate that this double move concerning ontology on the one hand and methodology on the other is inherent to the new materialism, most contemporary commentaries focus on ontology only by *positing* the new philosophical stance. In other words, the materialism of new materialism is reflected upon, whereas a clear perspective on how new materialism is *new* remains underdeveloped. This article addresses this discrepancy by demonstrating how the new materialism proposes a revolution in thought by traversing modernity’s dualisms (structured by a negative relation between terms), and by constituting a new conceptualization of difference (structured by an affirmative relation) along the way. This conceptualization of difference entails an ontological philosophical practice predicated on leaving behind all prioritizations (implicitly) involved in modern dualist thinking, since a difference structured by affirmation does not work with predetermined relations (e.g., between mind and body) nor does it involve a counter-hierarchy between terms (which would make the new materialism into a postmodern philosophical exercise).

The “new” of new materialism, that is, the way in which its non-dualist philosophy is related to dualist philosophical stances, comes close to Jean-François Lyotard’s plea for a “rewriting” of “modernity.” In chapter three of his *The Inhuman* (1991), Lyotard, famous for his thoughts on “postmodernism,” critiques this concept particularly because of its implicit notion of time. Postmodernism *is* modernism in the sense that the issues raised by modernism are also on the agenda of postmodernism, which is rather a post-modernism. Issues, as he keeps on stressing, that predominantly include the emancipation of humanity as a whole. Yet by appropriating the term post-modernism, his project automatically claims itself to be a linear consequence of modernism *and* (at the same time) refuses to think the here and now (or at least, it can only think the here and now as a consequence of a period in cultural history long gone). In rereading Aristotle’s *Physics* (book iv), however, Lyotard agrees with the idea that what has already taken place (*proteron*) and what is about to take place (*husteron*) cannot be considered apart from the now. Both history and the future unfold from the now. Our age then should not be considered an age that follows from modernity, but rather an age that sets itself to a continuous rewriting of several of the (emancipatory) features that have been raised

by modernity, thus actively creating a past (while projecting a future). That is why Lyotard suggests rephrasing his project as “rewriting modernity.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea of rewriting modernity might also be considered a good description of what Lyotard’s close colleague at the University of Vincennes, Gilles Deleuze, seemed to have proposed. Deleuze (e.g., 1991) too seems to accept the Aristotelian notion of time, which, in his books, is mainly at work in how Henri Bergson rewrote Aristotle (with the concepts of actuality and virtuality). Deleuze himself, as have his interpreters, has always claimed he intended to rewrite the history of philosophy as a whole, or at least, his goal—especially in the early part of his career—was to question the History of Philosophy (with capitals) as a whole, as its dominant lines of thought overcoded many ideas that he considered of the greatest value. Yet without doing any harm to his timeless contributions to thought, there are good reasons to consider the work of Deleuze not so much a rewriting of the entire History of Philosophy, but rather a rewriting of modernity. For although authors like Lucretius and Duns Scotus, as well as the Stoics, play an important role in his thinking, they have never been at the centre of a particular study, nor has Deleuze made much effort to shed a new light on their ideas. He did, however, give philosophy, and many other parts of academia, important rewritings of philosophers like Spinoza, Leibniz, Nietzsche and Bergson, and authors like Proust and Kafka. These were authors who, without exception yet in very different ways, all lived their lives in this so-called modern era. Renaming Deleuze’s project then as “rewriting modernity” seems all the more agreeable, because its key feature, being the emancipation of humanity thought through in its most radical form, seems *precisely* what Deleuze’s philosophy is all about. Deleuze (and Félix Guattari)’s rewriting modernity was about the rewriting of a “minor tradition” in thought, as it was named (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1987), which is mainly based on the four “modernist” thinkers mentioned above. By rewriting their modernity, and not in the least place modernist ways of thinking emancipation, Deleuze did not create a post-modernism that continued (in any way) the traits that had given form to the modern era. Deleuze’s take on the Other, for instance, can, as we will show below, not be captured by the post-modern countering of the One.

The perpetual rewriting of modernity is something also taken very seriously by those inspired by Deleuze’s thoughts today. The work of a rapidly growing group of contemporary scholars that we name “new materialists” (in line with how two of its important contributors, being Rosi Braidotti and Manuel DeLanda, have coined this term) makes use of the works within this minor tradition and the way in which Deleuze, in his own work and in his collaboration with Guattari, opens this (philosophical) tradition up to the arts and the sciences. In line with Lyotard, the new materialists, even more explicitly than Deleuze himself, have set themselves to rewriting all possible forms of emancipation (non-humanist even) into all parts of academia today. *The way in which* they rewrite modernity’s emancipatory processes is by rewriting the dualisms that are so central to modern thought, a prominent one being sexual difference. In *Nomadic Subjects*, for instance, Braidotti, in a Lyotardian vein and while referring to Deleuze’s minor tradition, states that we

---

<sup>1</sup> Lyotard (1991, p. 24).

ought to “work through” the notion of woman: “Like the gradual peeling off of old skins, the achievement of change has to be earned by careful working through; it is the metabolic consumption of the old that can engender the new.”<sup>2</sup> This kind of argumentation can be summarized, in the words of Bergson, as a movement of “push[ing] dualism to an extreme.”<sup>3</sup>

In this article we discuss the way in which a new materialism comes to be constituted precisely by this movement of pushing modernist dualisms to an extreme, which Deleuze,<sup>4</sup> when discussing Bergson, has typified as methodological (it touches upon ways of arguing, ways of doing philosophy) as well as ontological (it is interested in a material spirit, that is, in what Brian Massumi calls is “ontologically prior”<sup>5</sup>). It is the type of movement Deleuze himself has adopted as his own (anti-) methodology, especially in the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* diptych written together with Guattari. In their *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), they conceptualized this as a schizoanalysis, insisting that “any fixed representation—prohibitive or not—distorts the true protean nature of desire.”<sup>6</sup> Schizoanalysis attacks any dualism and is thus most interested in conceptualizing sexuality beyond the male/female dualism (and even beyond human sexuality), and in breaking through the Oedipal plot that overcodes the ways in which we think (through psychoanalysis), and oftentimes individually and collectively experience, desire. In *A Thousand Plateaus* they developed their (anti-) methodology further not only by introducing several new concepts (such as rhizomatics, pragmatics, stratoanalysis, nomadology, micropolitics, the science of multiplicities) that more or less set out to continue their project, but most of all by adding: “We invoke one dualism only to challenge another. We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models.”<sup>7</sup> The methodology proposed in rewriting modernity then in no way “follows from” modernity. By pushing dualism to an extreme, “difference is pushed to the limit.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, by radically rewriting the emancipatory dualisms of modernity, new materialism precisely becomes a philosophy of difference that opens up for a “new” ontology.

In an earlier article we defined new materialism as being a transversal cultural theory that qualitatively shifts the dualist gesture of prioritizing mind over matter, soul over body, and culture over nature that can be found in modernist as well as post-modernist cultural theories.<sup>9</sup> We thus “invoke[d] the same testimony”<sup>10</sup> against two seemingly opposite cultural theories. Despite the fact that such prioritization appears even nowadays as common sense in prominent parts of the sciences and the humanities, as well as in common sense in general, its reliance on

<sup>2</sup> Braidotti (1994, p. 171).

<sup>3</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 236).

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze (2004, p. 32).

<sup>5</sup> Massumi (2002, p. 66).

<sup>6</sup> Holland (1999, p. 38).

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 20).

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 45).

<sup>9</sup> Van der Tuin and Dolphijn (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 236).

dualism is by no means unquestionable. The outcomes of the prioritization exercises are generally presented as True in its most totalizing meaning, whereas minor traditions throughout the centuries have opposed them in convincing ways. In other words: A new materialism is constituted by demonstrating how the canonized relations between the mentioned terms are in fact the outcomes of “power/knowledge” according to which Truth is an instantiation of a politics or régime, as Michel Foucault would have it.<sup>11</sup> This article is intended to take our previous arguments a step further by focusing on the methodological and ontological issues surrounding the current-day momentum of non-dualist thought. We will begin by considering an example of such non-dualist, emancipatory thought, after which we will carefully unpack what the radical rewriting of modernity in the case of new materialism entails.

### 1 New feminist materialism pushes sexual difference to the limit

A provocative exemplification of a rewriting of modernity can be found in new *feminist* materialism. Feminist theory nowadays finds its apotheosis in the work of Judith Butler. Her books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) were intended to shift the feminist landscape predicated on the work of Simone de Beauvoir. Albeit that Butler has succeeded in demonstrating how Beauvoir’s insight in the socially constructed asymmetrical relation between women/femininity and men/humanity limits feminism’s disruptive potential in that it naturalizes “sex” in order to de-naturalize “gender,”<sup>12</sup> new materialist feminists like Claire Colebrook,<sup>13</sup> Braidotti,<sup>14</sup> and Vicki Kirby<sup>15</sup> have shown how Butler’s own work has had (similar) limiting effects which is why these feminist theorists plea for rewriting (Anglo-American) feminist theory. Butler is said to have continued to de-naturalize (read: free) gender, yet allegedly she makes sex or bodies into malleable materiality. Butler’s work thus continues to circle around the modernist dualism of sex versus gender, that is, mind versus body, culture versus nature, and language versus materiality. The new feminist materialist argument hints at the possibility of transforming this what Colebrook will call “equivocal” conceptualization of gender, which is structured by a negative relationality (distribution and asymmetry) between men and women, masculinity and femininity, into a “univocal” sexual difference, which allows sexual difference to *differ*. New feminist materialism is the cultural theory that enacts this possibility.

New feminist materialist cultural theorists work along the lines of affirmative relationality, the workings of which we will demonstrate in this article. In doing so, they push sexual difference to the limit by pushing the dualism that is ordinarily installed (gender vs. sex) to an extreme. The new feminist materialism can

---

<sup>11</sup> Foucault (1980).

<sup>12</sup> Butler (1993, pp. 4–5).

<sup>13</sup> Colebrook (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Braidotti (2002).

<sup>15</sup> Kirby (2006).

demonstrate the workings of difference structured by a univocal logic of affirmative relationality, but also the ways in which feminism per se is an interesting site for our exposé about new materialist cultural theory, that starts with difference *as a practice*, that is not “about” sexuality or gender (as a theory opposed to the practice or act) but that is an ontological practice or act itself, by means of the concepts it gives rise to and through which it practices its power.

Feminism has always enveloped sexual difference in its ordinary dualist sense as well as the traversing thereof. Both movements were a necessity to feminism, as Joan Wallach Scott explains:

Feminism was a protest against women’s political exclusion; its goal was to eliminate ‘sexual difference’ in politics, but it had to make its claim on behalf of ‘women’ (who were discursively produced through ‘sexual difference’). To the extent that it acted for ‘women,’ feminism produced the ‘sexual difference’ it sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need both to accept *and* to refuse ‘sexual difference’ – was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history.<sup>16</sup>

The book in which Scott makes this complex diagnosis is entitled *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, and we want to demonstrate here why the situation she explores is in fact not at all paradoxical, or not at all a paradox that, according to a modernist gesture, needs to be *solved*. Sue Thornham makes exactly this point, when she explores the work of Luce Irigaray:

One cannot, she writes, analyse the gendered nature of culture by stepping out of the identity ‘woman’ into a gender-neutral discourse – by claiming an ‘equal right’ to speak – because there *is* no gender-neutral discourse; the public discourse of analysis is thoroughly masculine. To write from outside that discourse is, however, to be ignored. To do either is to remain within the terms of the dominant discourse.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the fact that many feminists, including Irigaray and Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz and Colebrook have found their individual and/or generational answer to this seeming paradox, we want to show here how feminism *is* Scott’s diagnosis, a paradox that is not in need of a solution.

Grosz, a new feminist materialist, states that major Philosophy, a philosophy structured by the dominant modernist lines of thought, has traditionally excluded women, whereas it has produced a discourse that is implicitly gendered masculine.<sup>18</sup> Philosophy has objectified women, thus erecting the male philosopher figure. The Irigarayan analysis of this onto-epistemological diagnosis states that,

The question of sexual difference signals the virtual framework of the future. What today is actual is sexual opposition or binarism, the defining of the two sexes in terms of the characteristics of one. Sexual difference is that which is

<sup>16</sup> Scott (1996, pp. 3–4; emphasis in original).

<sup>17</sup> Thornham (2000, p. 188; emphasis in original).

<sup>18</sup> Grosz (2005, p. 156).

virtual; it is the potential of this opposition to function otherwise, to function without negation, to function as full positivity. It is the future we may be able to make, but which has not yet come into existence.<sup>19</sup>

Sexual difference, that is, as an ordinary dualism functions as prominently in feminist theory as well as it is feminist theory's virtuality. Feminist theory will produce a revolution in dualist thought not by overcoming sexual difference (conceptualizing emancipation as a striving for equal gender relations or as the overthrow of a discourse that is gendered masculine) but by traversing it (allowing for sexual *differing*). Feminist theory has to push sexual difference as an ordinary dualism to an extreme precisely *so as to* push sexual difference to the limit. A sexual difference according to which women are worth-less-than men, to use Braidotti's language, has to be pushed to an extreme so as to release sexual difference as that which is virtual. This is in fact precisely how we should read Beauvoir's conclusion to *The Second Sex*, usually considered the modernist feminist text *par excellence*, which indeed thinks through the emancipation of humanity in its most radical form thus exposing a rewriting of modernity instead. After a full description of the dialectic of sex (a dualism structured by a negative relationality), she concludes that: "new carnal and affective relations of which we cannot conceive will be born between the sexes."<sup>20</sup> It is precisely by thinking through sexual difference to its remotest aspirations, thus alluding to difference as structured by an affirmative relationality, that Beauvoir came to produce the revolution in thought that has made her famous, and infamous, for constituting feminism as a rewriting of modernity, that is, feminism-as-differing. Beauvoir thus exemplifies a new materialist take on difference, since by traversing the (sexual) dualism structuring modernist thought, modernity comes to be rewritten and difference is shown *differing*. It is only by the repetitive post-modernist gesture (of Butler) that the sexual dualism gets to be stifled. But how does this work exactly?

## 2 New materialism's radical rewriting of modernity

Let us agree on the idea that a cultural theory can only be truly distinctive and *original* if its establishment does not claim to be a next step in a discussion that is structured according to the dominant lines of sequential negation and progress narrative, that is, if its installment does not follow the classificatory lines that started dominating thought within modernism as it has branched off into so many different parts of life. Similarly, *opposing* this narrative, in the sense of a re-action or a consequence of these particular lines of thinking, is also not an option. Lyotard has already taught us that his increasing concern with the idea of postmodernism also had to do with the prefix post-, and the way this opposed yet re/created the narratives of modernity. It was Michel Serres who put the latter into a general theory, however, when he stated: "An idea opposed to another idea is always the

<sup>19</sup> Grosz (2005, p. 164).

<sup>20</sup> De Beauvoir (2010, p. 765).

same idea, albeit affected by the negative sign. The more you oppose one another, the more you remain in the same framework of thought.”<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, not just the idea of postmodernism but actually all thought that starts with either the acceptance and the building upon a particular tradition or the repudiation thereof, is not about a radical rewriting, or about a revolution in thought. Grosz, who follows Irigaray’s investment in thinking through (feminist) revolutions in thought, states most clearly that it is *only* in a radical rewriting that revolutions in thought can come into being as such movement

is not a revolution on any known model, for it cannot be the overthrow of all previous thought, the radical disconnection from the concepts and language of the past: A revolution in thought can only use the language and the concepts that presently exist or have already existed, and can only produce itself against the background and history of the present.<sup>22</sup>

Earlier Grosz<sup>23</sup> had already explained that the seemingly constraining model, or framework of thought, or concept allows in fact for the indeterminacy of revolution in thought.<sup>24</sup> Wishing to anticipate future thoughts and practices by negating the past, one positions oneself in a relation to past thoughts and practices that is solely constraining. In such a situation, the past undergoes nothing but re-confirmation in the present, albeit that progress is assumed to be made. *This*, we want to argue, is the structuring principle of classificatory modes of thinking, which are consequently prevented from a radical rewriting of thought, from being truly revolutionary.

Our goal in the paragraphs to come should thus be to find out in what way the revolutionary constitution of new materialist cultural theory rewrites modernity as a present according to which a past and a future unfolds. In order to get there we shall first demonstrate by which means the new materialist break-through of dualism, that is, of the structuring principle of modernist cultural theories, stirs a revolution in thought. New materialist cultural theorists do not involve themselves with ongoing repetitive discussions in the modernist humanities.<sup>25</sup> New materialism helps us analyze and shift the structuring principles of these discussions by showing how classificatory negation involves a specific relationality, which is reductive. We will demonstrate how new materialist cultural theories are not relational in a negative, reductive manner, but rather are structured along the lines of an affirmative relationality, which in the end turns into a non-dualism, a philosophy of difference. Invoking one dualism in order to challenge another allows new materialism to rewrite modernity *as an* emancipation.

<sup>21</sup> Serres and Latour (1995, p. 81).

<sup>22</sup> Grosz (2005, p. 165).

<sup>23</sup> Grosz (2000).

<sup>24</sup> The feminist point being that women are not “to deny [...] the resources of prevailing knowledges as a mode of critique of those knowledges” (Grosz 2005, p. 165). When modernity can be (re)thought as thinking emancipation, women better affirm it.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Serres and Latour (1995, p. 86).

### 3 Dualism: A negation is a relation structured by negativity

Bergson has argued that: “The difficulties of ordinary dualism come, not from the distinction of the two terms, but from the impossibility of seeing how the one is grafted upon the other.”<sup>26</sup> Bergson’s “ordinary dualism” indicates the structuring principle of Serres’ repetitive discussions, and Grosz’s (failed) overthrow of previous thought. Even in our days cultural theory is predominantly structured according to this ordinary dualism. It continues—implicitly or explicitly—the modernist framework of thought, accepting and thinking along the dominant lines of dualist distinctions of mind and matter, soul and body, and culture and nature. But albeit that Bergson has demonstrated that ordinary dualism is inherently problematic, the act of making distinctions between terms is not. It is the *treatment* the distinguished terms receive that makes dominant cultural theory—then and now—questionable. Bergson implies that as long as we are clear about the fact that the one term of a dichotomy is “grafted upon” the other, we will not fall into the trap of setting up a discussion that leads us away from serious thought. This applies also to how contemporary thought, often through denial, is grafted upon modernist cultural theory (through, for instance, “representationalism” [Karen Barad’s term (see below)]).

Time has come to make a formal difference between this ordinary dualism, as Bergson analyzes it, and the radical writing of modernist dualisms, that Lyotard and Deleuze propose instead. The difference lies not in the idea that the latter two suggest a dualism that starts from the relation, whereas ordinary dualism denies this relational nature. Both start from the relation. Yet ordinary dualism is underlain by a *negative* relationality, and it is this particular type of relationality that is not subscribed to by Lyotard and Deleuze (and Bergson for that matter). Let us continue then by focusing more specifically upon the set-up of argumentations about the deficiency of ordinary dualism. We have to go back to Bergson once more, whose work provides insight in the ways in which concrete cases of ordinary dualism that structure cultural theory (the humanities) as well as scientism and the common sense can be overcome, but also how non-dualist philosophy is always “onto-epistemological” (Barad’s term), that is, how philosophy involves the way in which “concept and creation are related to each other.”<sup>27</sup> This refers back to Deleuze’s remark about the work of Bergson as both methodological and ontological: Bergson not only provides insight into ordinary dualism as the structuring principle of non-revolutionary thought, but also re-writes modernism so as to provide a non-dualist ontology structured by the “unity of the thing and the concept.”<sup>28</sup>

When Bergson introduces the concept of ordinary dualism in *Matter and Memory*, he works on the problem of the union of the body and the soul. The centrality of this union comes to the fore, according to Bergson,<sup>29</sup> on the basis of a distinction made between matter and spirit. This ontological distinction, and more

<sup>26</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 297).

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 11).

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze (2004, p. 33).

<sup>29</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 235).

importantly the way in which it is treated, makes that Bergson's analysis is exemplary of the (necessary) circumvention of ordinary dualism, alongside which a distinction of terms is still being made:

We maintain, as against materialism, that perception overflows the cerebral state; but we have endeavoured to establish, as against idealism, that matter goes in every direction beyond our representation of it [...] And against these two doctrines we invoke the same testimony, that of consciousness, which shows us our body as one image among others and our understanding as a certain faculty of dissociating, of distinguishing, of opposing logically, but not of creating or of constructing. Thus, [...] it would seem that, after having exacerbated the conflicts raised by ordinary dualism, we have closed all the avenues of escape [...] But, just because we have pushed dualism to an extreme, our analysis has perhaps dissociated its contradictory elements.<sup>30</sup>

This lengthy quotation provides insight into the way in which the terms that are divided up by ordinary dualism are grafted upon one another, but also the way in which ontology and methodology/epistemology are grafted upon one another. The two levels of analysis (for lack of a better term) indicated here are intrinsically intertwined. We want to underline that "all the avenues of escape" do exactly not end up being "closed," because of the complexity with which Bergson shifts ordinary dualism and moves into the direction of thinking differently, of thinking a non-dualist ontology. Let us explain this complex move by seeking recourse to Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?*, this time read through the work of Barad.

Deleuze and Guattari state that "the question of philosophy is the singular point where concept and creation are related to each other."<sup>31</sup> Not defining the nature of philosophy as such would seduce one into uncritically affirming common-sensical and scientific representationalism, also to be found in the humanities, which is predicated on an ordinary dualism in a two-leveled manner. Barad elaborates upon precisely this point. In 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter' she states:

The idea that beings exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation, is a metaphysical presupposition that underlies the belief in political, linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism. [...] representationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent [...].<sup>32</sup>

In other words: What she calls for is a "performative understanding, which shifts the focus from linguistic representations to discursive practices."<sup>33</sup> We have alluded to

<sup>30</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 236). Cf. Balibar (1998, p. 106).

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 11).

<sup>32</sup> Barad (2003, p. 804).

<sup>33</sup> Barad (2003, p. 807). Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 77) use the concept of '(indirect) discourse' similarly to how Barad does. Following Foucault, this long quote brilliantly explains how this does away with the linguistic representations that have been so important in academia up until today:

these practices already, when we explained how philosophy both addresses and explains the structuring principles of the dominant, classificatory lines of thought. Through the work of Barad, it becomes clear that when thinking through what Bergson calls thinking through scientism, or common sense, or the one pole of any dualism (also in the humanities) “in its remotest aspirations,”<sup>34</sup> one ends up affirming an onto-epistemology according to which: “We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because ‘we’ are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming.”<sup>35</sup> Onto-epistemology demonstrates how philosophers do philosophy, which is, following Deleuze and Guattari, a discursive practice according to which

the concept is not given, it is created; it is to be created. It is not formed but posits itself in itself – it is a self-positing [...] The concept posits itself to the same extent that it is created. What depends on a free creative activity is also that which, independently and necessarily, posits itself in itself: The most subjective will be the most objective.<sup>36</sup>

Philosophers do philosophy when working with concepts, when studying the concepts that are given rise to in a particular practice and which are related to concepts that are at work in other practices with which they interfere. Elsewhere, Deleuze clearly states that he will not accept any form of representational dualism structured by negative relationality when it comes to what philosophy does. The created concepts, he claims, are no less “practical, effective or existent”<sup>37</sup> than the practices in which they happen. Thus “philosophical theory is itself a practice just as much as its object. It is no more abstract than its object.”<sup>38</sup> Doing philosophy then is engaging in this creation of concepts, and not relying on “referential signs” (our term).<sup>39</sup> The latter is a representationalism, implying a negative relationality (most obvious when the assumption is made that “theory is not a practice”) that does not do justice to matter as “*the aggregate of images*” and perception of matter

---

Footnote 33 continued

Let us follow Foucault in his exemplary analysis, which, though it seems not to be, is eminently concerned with linguistics. Take a thing like the prison: the prison is a form, the ‘prison-form’; it is a form of content on a stratum and is related to other forms of content (schools, barracks, hospital, factory). This thing or form does not refer back to the word “prison,” but to entirely different words and concepts, such as ‘delinquent’ and ‘delinquency,’ which express a new way of classifying, stating, translating and even committing criminal acts. ‘Delinquency’ is the form of expression in reciprocal presupposition with the form of content ‘prison.’ Delinquency is in no way a signifier, even a juridical signifier, the signified would be that of the prison. That would flatten the entire analysis. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 66).

<sup>34</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 260).

<sup>35</sup> Barad (2003, p. 829; emphasis in original).

<sup>36</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 11).

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze (2000, p. 280).

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze (2000, p. 280).

<sup>39</sup> Grosz reminds us of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of precisely the onto-epistemological aspect of the work of Bergson. He claims that it is a transcendentalism. We, however, do not define the onto-epistemological as “collapsing our knowledge of a thing with its being” and accept another onto-epistemology (Grosz 2005, p. 123).

as “*these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body.*”<sup>40</sup>

When Bergson invokes “consciousness” against materialism and idealism, and against empiricism and dogmatism, he claims that this concept can show that “a third course lay open,”<sup>41</sup> which allows him to escape from the representational traps affirmed in any dualist philosophy. His conceptualization of consciousness, which shows how, in this specific case, the four epistemic classes are all predicated on ordinary dualism on the two levels of analysis simultaneously, breaks through the ordinary dualisms by positing against discontinuity a continuity, that is, a “pure duration.”<sup>42</sup> Such a concept cuts across epistemic classes, that is, creates a third, and revolutionary course:

Homogenous space and homogenous time are then neither properties of things [materialism, realism] nor essential conditions of our faculty of knowing them [idealism, dogmatism]: They express, in an abstract form, the double work of solidification and of division which we effect on the moving continuity of the real in order to obtain there a fulcrum for our action, in order to fix within it starting-points for our operation, in short, to introduce into it real changes. They are the diagrammatic design of our eventual action upon matter.<sup>43</sup>

The third course, then, opens the way for “the true power of creation,”<sup>44</sup> which we have already found in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, but also, (un)surprisingly, in the work of Beauvoir. This power is not attributed to *either* body *or* mind; *either* matter *or* the perception/representation of matter; et cetera. The creation of concepts entails the break-through of representationalism on two levels. This revolutionary shifting entails precisely the activity of “pushing dualism to an extreme,” which opens the way for a thinking in action that is affirmative, practical and thus necessarily revolutionary.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 8; emphasis in original). Cf. Leibniz (1962).

<sup>41</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 243).

<sup>42</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 243).

<sup>43</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 280).

<sup>44</sup> Bergson (2004, p. 236).

<sup>45</sup> In an article that questions the monism of Bergson and claims that his work is Eurocentric and phallogocentric, Rebecca Hill ends with the following conclusion, thus undoing the argument presented in the article, yet affirming consciousness as a concept:

In my view these passages demonstrate the valorization of a hypermasculine theory of life and corresponding devaluation of matter as feminine. This is not a binary hierarchy because Bergson’s concepts of life and matter are never actualised as pure activity and pure space. [...] matter’s inclination towards pure repetition is never fully achieved. [...] At the same time, life is not manifested as pure creative energy. [...] Moreover, Bergson admits that if materiality was pure repetition, consciousness could never have installed itself within matter’s palpitations. (Hill 2008, pp. 132–133).

#### 4 Difference, or the shift to affirmative relationality

Pushing dualism to an extreme helps to further our thoughts about new materialist cultural theories and the way in which they are constituted. New materialism does not rely upon a representationalism; it shifts the representationalist epistemic/methodological premises of Bergson's ordinary dualism by invoking a discursive practice that centers around the creation of concepts *in their relationality*. The often binary oppositions that dominated modernity, and that are still accepted, that is, taken up as premises in much of the theory of our age (which can therefore be considered post-modern, as Lyotard defined it) are structured by a relation of negations, and by re-affirming these negations. The new materialists, instead, practice a philosophy of difference by engaging in the activity of creating concepts, which is an onto-epistemological activity. Whereas a relationality in the negative dualist sense presupposes the terms of the relation in question, the creation of concepts entails a *traversing* of dualisms, and the establishment of a relationality that is affirmative, i.e., structured by positivity rather than negativity. What happens here is that "difference is pushed to the limit."<sup>46</sup> By "pushing dualism to an extreme," "difference is pushed to the limit," the latter movement being less evaluative and more performative. Let us now demonstrate the workings of the affirmative relationality and the philosophy of difference thus constituted.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari state that they "Arrive at the magic formula we all seek—PLURALISM = MONISM—via all the dualisms that are the enemy, an entirely necessary enemy, the furniture we are forever rearranging."<sup>47</sup> Similar to Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari do not avoid or negate dualisms, but rather traverse them, that is, pass through them. This affirmative approach to the modern, ordinary dualisms is an instantiation of what Lyotard called a rewriting of modernity. It shows how dualisms are inherently untenable, whereas holding on to a negative relationality between terms appears historically seductive. (Feminists too have fallen into the trap of relying on such a dualist logic!) Bergson as well as Deleuze and Guattari effectuate an *affirmation of* the way in which two terms relate. It is this affirmation that pushes dualism to an extreme. Following an affirmative approach, a dualism involves not (only) a binary opposition, that is, a relation in which different-from is by necessity worth-less-than.<sup>48</sup> The starting point is that "Related terms belong to one another."<sup>49</sup> Only when this sense of belonging is affirmed are we able to work "towards an absolute concept, once liberated from the condition which made difference an entirely relative maximum."<sup>50</sup> Precisely the

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 45).

<sup>47</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 20–21).

<sup>48</sup> Braidotti (1994, p. 147). When different-from translates into worth-less-than, emancipation either means the inclusion of women, laborers, black people, and other Others in the hierarchically privileged domain (a strategy of equality) or the revaluation of the underprivileged domain (a strategy of difference). This binary opposition has been repositioned in the section on new feminist materialism.

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 30).

<sup>50</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 33).

activity of working towards an absolute concept defines the rewriting, the revolution in thought that we are interested in.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze contends that “The negative and negativity do not even capture the phenomenon of difference, only the phantom or the epiphenomenon.”<sup>51</sup> This phantom-like character of negation should be taken literally, because here, Deleuze produces a critique of representationalism. Capturing difference can only be done when “difference” is “shown *differing*,”<sup>52</sup> when thinking does not start with the respective phenomena that are then claimed to be different from one another, but with mapping *difference in itself*. How does this work? In ‘Postmodernism is a Humanism: Deleuze and Equivocity,’ Colebrook asserts that “one should go beyond the fantasy and structure of signification to its possibility.”<sup>53</sup> What we are looking at here is the invention of the conditions of invention,<sup>54</sup> namely, the establishment of a non-dualist logic of univocity as opposed to the dualist logic of equivocity: Whereas “equivocity posits two radically incommensurable levels” [that which signifies (e.g., gender) and that which is signified (e.g., sex/the body)], “there is just one plane of expression” according to a univocal logic.<sup>55</sup> Colebrook goes on by stating that “*both* the simple image—as a world of simulation, signification, representation or social construction—and the criticism of this notion are equivocal without justification,”<sup>56</sup> whereas under a univocal logic, “truth may be intuited as that which expresses itself, not as that which is in itself and then belied by relations, but that which gives birth to—while remaining irreducible to—relations.”<sup>57</sup> Under univocal logic, “a perception of *x* is perceived as a power *to x*,”<sup>58</sup> which is to say that difference is shown *differing*. Here we see that feminism as a practice that has only paradoxes to offer is affirmed: It posits sexual difference and is emancipatory in that the hierarchical element (different-from as worth-less-than) is broken through. Equivocity, that is, is locked up in a dualist framework of thought, structured by negativity (and representation-alism: Here sexual difference implies that women/femininity should become equal to men/humanity), whereas univocity pushes difference to the limit, producing a shift to an affirmative relationality (producing a situation in which, as Beauvoir envisioned, new, that is, as yet inconceivable carnal and affective relations are born between the sexes). By way of another example: In the concluding section of ‘Postmodernism is a Humanism’ Colebrook talks about the work of Virginia Woolf who pushes equivocal gender to univocal sexual difference, thus evoking a situation in which: “There are no longer distinct kinds or generalities, or genders, so much as

<sup>51</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 52).

<sup>52</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 56); emphasis in original.

<sup>53</sup> Colebrook (2004, p. 287).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Serres and Latour (1995, p. 86).

<sup>55</sup> Colebrook (2004, p. 288).

<sup>56</sup> In other words: Modern and post-modern cultural theories are both structured along the lines of an equivocal logic.

<sup>57</sup> Colebrook (2004, p. 290); emphasis in original.

<sup>58</sup> Colebrook (2004, p. 297); emphasis in original.

essences that are the power to differ, essences that are sexual precisely because they have their sole being in creation.”<sup>59</sup>

The remaining question is *how* exactly differing, or affirmative relationality is a non-dualist univocity. Deleuze demonstrates how representationalism corresponds to identity politics or a régime in what he calls the major History of Philosophy (with capitals). Just in case difference is thought of in terms of identity (under this dominant way of thinking, assuming one perspective or multiple perspectives), the Other (e.g., the woman) can only be thought to exist in (social) relation to the One, the Same, or the Centre. This is when and where a dualism structured by negativity (distribution) comes to be installed, and when and where different-from is transformed into worth-less-than (hierarchy, asymmetry). It is for this reason that Deleuze, unique among his contemporaries, found it difficult to relate this concept to his thoughts. The Other is the expression of a possible world as he, reading Tournier’s *Friday*, developed this idea in *Difference and Repetition*. In an interview with *Magazine Littéraire*<sup>60</sup> and in a letter he wrote to his Japanese translator Kuniichi Uno<sup>61</sup> he continued this argument by making an implicit comment on Derrida’s “Letter to a Japanese Friend”<sup>62</sup> and his use of the Other as Deleuze comes up with a Japanese man whose words can function as the expression of a possible world. Contrary to Derrida (referring to Martin Heidegger)<sup>63</sup> who emphasizes the non-translatability of his French text into Japanese and yet simultaneously the necessity to do so, Deleuze does not accept the relative existence of the One (the Same, the Centre) and the Other (here the French language and the Japanese language) and the negative relation drawn between them. Deleuze stresses that the expression of a possible world (even when done in Japanese), “confers reality on the possible world as such, the reality of the possible as something possible [...]”<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to the negative dualism then, and in line with the Bergsonian virtual-actual pair, Deleuze proposes a logic according to which “Each point of view must itself be the object, or the object must belong to the point of view,”<sup>65</sup> that is, the moment we think *differing*, or *difference in itself*, a univocal logic is established. This occurs when we think dualism to an extreme—Deleuze states that it is *within* Kantianism, or “*in the same stroke*”<sup>66</sup> that such a shift is effectuated. Difference is then established as “the element, the ultimate unity,” that is, difference that “refer[s] to other differences which never identify it but rather differentiate it.”<sup>67</sup> It proposes a thinking according to which

<sup>59</sup> Colebrook (2004, p. 304).

<sup>60</sup> Reprinted in Deleuze (1995, pp. 135–155).

<sup>61</sup> Reprinted in Deleuze (2006, pp. 201–203).

<sup>62</sup> Derrida (1988).

<sup>63</sup> Heidegger (1971).

<sup>64</sup> Deleuze (1995, p. 147).

<sup>65</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 56). Cf. Leibniz (1962, p. 263 §57) and Deleuze (2004, p. 39).

<sup>66</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 58); emphasis in original).

<sup>67</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 56).

Each difference passes through all the others; it must ‘will’ itself or find itself through all the others. [...] a world of differences implicated one in the other, [...] a complicated, properly chaotic world *without identity*.<sup>68</sup>

Referring to the work of Nietzsche, Deleuze states that

What is then revealed is being, which is said of differences which are neither in substance nor in a subject: so many subterranean affirmations. [...] for a brief moment we enter into that schizophrenia in principle which characterises the highest power of thought, and opens Being directly on to difference, despite all the mediations, all the reconciliations, of the concept.<sup>69</sup>

In other words: What is established is the univocal logic<sup>70</sup> with which we do philosophy.

It should not come as a surprise that it is not only Nietzsche who then practices philosophy as a creative act, but Bergson as well. In “Bergson’s Conception of Difference,” states that “either philosophy proposes for itself *this* means (differences of nature) and *this* end (to arrive at internal difference)”<sup>71</sup> or else it would always end up in a representationalist, equivocal logic. Bergsonism, as said, is looking for “the unity of the thing and the concept,” that is, for a philosophy that practices a univocal logic. Such a logic enacts what we previously called an onto-epistemology whose concept of difference is predicated on affirmation. Deleuze is explicit about this when he says that Bergson “rais[es] difference up to the absolute”<sup>72</sup> by thinking difference following a univocal logic, which entails a qualitative shift away from equivocity, that is, among other things, negation:

If duration differs from itself, that from which it differs is still duration in a certain sense. It is not a question of dividing duration in the same way we divided what is composite: duration is simple, indivisible, pure. The simple is not divided, *it differentiates itself*. This is the essence of the simple, or the movement of difference. So, the composite divides into two tendencies, one of which is the indivisible, but the indivisible differentiates itself into two tendencies, the other of which is the principle of the divisible.<sup>73</sup>

The relational nature of the structuring logic is kept in place (previously we saw that Bergson continues to make distinctions), but relationality at work is not predicated on equivocal notions such as negation, or analogy for that matter, because relationality is never predeterminable (from the outside). Deleuze even explicates how “vital difference” for Bergson is “not a determination” but rather “indetermination itself,” which is not to say that it is “accidental” but rather that it is “essential”; in other words: “Differentiation is the movement of a virtuality

<sup>68</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 57); emphasis in original.

<sup>69</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 58).

<sup>70</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 67).

<sup>71</sup> Deleuze (2004, p. 33); emphasis in original.

<sup>72</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 39).

<sup>73</sup> Deleuze (1994, p. 39); emphasis in original.

actualizing itself.”<sup>74</sup> This non-reductive, univocal take on difference cannot be a dialectic or structured according to dualism, because according to Bergson

the negation of one real term by the other is only the positive actualization of a virtuality that contains both terms at once. [...] The opposition of two terms is only the actualization of a virtuality that contained them both: This is tantamount to saying that difference is more profound than negation or contradiction.<sup>75</sup>

Allowing for the virtual, for pure recollection, to be reflected in the actual, constantly exchanging the two into one another as it creates the circuit of duration; this is what Bergsonism does. Such a philosophy, which is a new materialist rewriting of modernity, is the production of revolutions in thought *not* by negating ordinary dualism (the structuring principle or equivocal logic of modernist thought), but rather by pushing ordinary dualism to the extreme thus installing a new take on difference, the univocal logic of which is an affirmative relationality. Such a philosophy is the activity of pushing difference to the limit by traversing dualism.

## References

- Balibar, Étienne. 1998. Politics and communication. In *Spinoza and politics*. London and New York: Verso (first published 1989).
- Barad, Karen. 2003. Posthumanist performativity. Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(3): 801–831.
- Bergson, Henri. 2004. *Matter and memory* (trans: Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer). 5th edn. Mineola, NY: Dover (first published 1896).
- Braidotti, Rosi. 1994. *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2002. *Metamorphoses: Towards a materialist theory of becoming*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Colebrook, Claire. 2004. Postmodernism is a humanism: Deleuze and equivocity. *Women: A Cultural Review* 15(3): 283–307.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. 2010. *The second sex* (trans: Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier). New York: Alfred A. Knopf (first published 1949).
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *Difference and repetition* (trans: Paul Patton). New York: Columbia University Press (first published 1968).
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (trans: Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (first published 1972).
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (trans: Brian Massumi). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (first published 1980).
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1991. *Bergsonism* (trans: Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam). New York: Zone Books (first published 1966).
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1994. *What is philosophy?* (trans: Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell). New York: Columbia University Press (first published 1991).

<sup>74</sup> Deleuze (2004, pp. 40, 42).

<sup>75</sup> Deleuze (2004, pp. 42–43).

- Deleuze, Gilles. 1995. On philosophy. In *Negotiations 1972–1990*, 135–155 (trans: Martin Joughin). New York: Columbia University Press (first published 1988).
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2000. *Cinema 2: The time-image* (trans: H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (first published 1985).
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2004. Bergson's conception of difference. In *Desert islands and other texts 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, 32–51 (trans: Michael Taormina). Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press (first published 1956/2002).
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2006. *Two regimes of madness: Texts and interviews 1975–1995*, ed. D. Lapoujade (trans: A. Hodges and M. Taormina). New York: Semiotext(e).
- Derrida, Jacques. 1988. Letter to a Japanese friend. In *Derrida and difference*, eds. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, 270–276. Evanston: Northwestern University Press (first published 1985).
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power-knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 2000. Histories of a feminist future. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25(4): 1017–1021.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 2005. *Time travels: Feminism, nature, power*. Durham NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1971. A dialogue on language between a Japanese and an inquirer. In *On the way to language* (trans: unknown). New York: Harper & Row (first published 1959).
- Hill, Rebecca. 2008. Phallogentrism in Bergson: Life and matter. *Deleuze Studies* 2 (supplement *Deleuze and gender*, eds. Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein): 123–136.
- Holland, Eugene. 1999. *Deleuze and Guattari's AntiOedipus: Introduction to schizoanalysis*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Kirby, Vicky. 2006. *Judith Butler: Live theory*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Leibniz, Gottfried. 1962. The monadology. In *Discourse on metaphysics, correspondence with Arnauld and monadology* (trans: George R. Montgomery). 251–272. La Salle, IL: The Open Court Publishing House (first published 1714).
- Lyotard, Jean-François. 1991. *The inhuman: Reflections on time* (trans: Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby). Stanford CA: Stanford University Press (first published 1988).
- Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. 1996. *Only paradoxes to offer: French feminists and the rights of man*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Serres, Michel and Bruno Latour. 1995. Third conversation: Demonstration and interpretation. In *Conversations on science, culture, and time* (trans: Roxanne Lapidus). 77–123. Ann Arbor MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Thornham, Sue. 2000. *Feminist theory and cultural studies: Stories of unsettled relations*, eds. John Storey and Graeme Turner. Cultural Studies in Practice. London: Arnold.
- Van der Tuin, Iris and Rick Dolphijn. 2010. The transversality of new materialism. *Women: A Cultural Review* 21(2): 153–171.