Orientation in Onto-Epistemology

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This conference asks: what is the potential of new materialism for historical research, on the one hand, and, on the other, for teaching and learning history? What are the opportunities and limitations of taking material sources (objects) not as passive remains but as actors of the past, in the present and for the future? How do objects participate in reflection on history as constructed? I want to answer these and slightly other questions by focusing on *methodology*, because not only do objects participate in reflection on history as constructed, but also are objects themselves historical, contemporary and speculative material. Objects participate in constructing history. Given that this hinders any form of direct engagement, naturally, the scholar is urged situate her knowledges[1]. Objects exist in duration (ontology, aesthetics) and they are sensitive to the temporalities imposed on them (epistemology, ethics). Aesthetic and academic measurement is necessarily involved in our, and others‹, spatiotemporal and (inter)disciplinary engagement with objects. Hence, neither objects‹ descriptive, prescriptive or visionary labeling, nor their durational dimensions, shared with other matter, and with humans, animals, plants, genes, atoms, quanta, code, in multi-leveled inter- and intra-acting networks, are *objective* in the sense of neutral, disinterested. Choosing an approach, then, is unavoidable. Here, I choose to approach objects as embedded in, and embodied by, a specific historical, present and future time, and a specific temporality of theory, and I choose a location. Quite obviously, as I do my research in an entangled web of connections[2], the decisions I take for this talk do not exhaust the performativity (the doings) of objects, concepts or my measurement apparatus more widely conceived. They may travel to any discipline or discussion whatever. I would suggest that each of you here present and presenting reveals and releases her orientation in onto-epistemology (meaning quite simply: knowing in being[3]).

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1   Donna Haraway: Situated Knowledges: *The Science Question in Feminism* and The Privilege of Partial Perspective. In: Feminist Studies 14 (1988) 3, p. 575-599.

2   Ibid.

3   Karen Barad: Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Durham 2007.

1.   Historical time and the temporality of theory: Lyotard

I am definitely still in agreement with my previous reflections on time and temporality in, and for, a theoretical key: new materialism is not new, but it is, and is informed by, a *rewriting modernity*[4]. This concept also informs the way in which I engage with objects as agents that are active in knowledge production, teaching and learning. Jean-François Lyotard defines modernity as the paradoxical state of being obsessed with periodization while being »constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity«[5]. Thus, Lyotard defines modernity as itself a rewriting modernity: »In the same way that modernity contains the promise of its overcoming, it is obliged to mark, to date, the end of one period and the beginning of the next«[6]. He is keen on shaking off the assumption of a knowing, willing subject in full control of herself: in seeking connection with *Durcharbeitung* (working through) rather than *Erinnerung* (remembering) he argues that modernity as rewriting modernity is a technique that does not provide knowledge of the past, but which »presupposes that *the past itself is the actor or agent* that gives to the mind the elements with which the scene will be constructed«[7]. Here, with this methodological statement, Lyotard positions himself in the history of philosophy: »For what is in play here is not the ›recognition‹ of the given, as Kant says, but the ability to let things come as they present themselves. Following that sort of attitude, every moment, every now is an ›opening oneself to‹«[8]. He aligns himself with Theodor Adorno's micrologies, Ernst Bloch's traces and Walter Benjamin's passages. Besides making the gesture of affirming Lyotard's theorization of time and temporality in the context of new materialism, I mean to choose Lyotard *in our day and age* because for Lyotard, »the questions born of the spectacular introduction of what are called the new technologies into the production, diffusion, distribution and consumption of cultural commodities«[9] are part of the discussion. Lyotard does not go Baudrillardian here, i.e., pushing modernity to a postmodernity. He pushes to an ›algorithmic condition‹[10] by stating that he is interested not so much in a loss of control, a groundlessness, by way of an endless production of simulacra but

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4   Rick Dolphijn/Iris van der Tuin: New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies. Ann Arbor 2012.

5   Jean-François Lyotard: The Inhuman: Reflections on Time. Translated by G. Bennington and R. Bowlby. Stanford 1991, p. 25

6   Ibid.

7   Ibid., p. 31

8   Ibid., p. 32.

9   Ibid., p. 34.

10   Felicity Colman et al.: Ethics of Coding: A Report on the Algorithmic Condition [EoC]. H2020-EU.2.1.1. – INDUSTRIAL LEADERSHIP – Leadership in enabling and industrial technologies – Information and Communication Technologies. Brussels 2018, https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/207025_en.html.

rather in what we would now call *a procedural thought*: bits as »units of information conceived by computer engineering and definable at all linguistic levels—lexical, syntactic, rhetorical and the rest. They are assembled into systems following a set of possibilities (a ›menu‹) under the control of a programmer«[11]. Such procedural thought is tricky, in Lyotard's understanding in a text originally conceived for a lecture delivered in 1986 in the US, but published in (slightly?) modified forms in both English and in French in the years after, because the element of *Durcharbeitung* may get lost in what, again, invokes a rewriting: »The word [rewriting] is used in the jargon of journalism, referring to an already ancient craft, which consists in erasing all traces left in a text by unexpected and ›fantasy‹ associations. The new technologies have given that craft a considerable impetus, since they submit to exact calculation every inscription on whatever support: visual and sound images, speech, musical lines, and finally writing itself«[12]. Luckily, following the work of scholars such as M. Beatrice Fazi[13], we need not worry as computation itself is contingent. And the programmer is not in full control.

2.   Disciplinary location: Cultural analysis

Now that I have touched upon my preferred take on historical time and on the temporality of theory, I wish to name and engage with the location that I have chosen for this talk. In spite of the fact that this is a conference by, and for, historians, *cultural analysis* is the field that I wish to speak from as to preliminarily unpack Lyotard's reflections for research in the humanities today and ground reflection on the question about opportunities and limitations of taking objects as actors of the past, in the present and for the future. I am not a historian or a theorist of history, but that isn't the main reason for starting elsewhere as we will shortly see. The questions »How do objects participate in reflection on history as constructed?« and »How do objects participate in constructing history?« require situated answers: the ones doing the research (cyborgs[14] with non-humans) and thus constructing (reflections on) history together are also and simultaneously affected by the ›macrological‹ tendencies of world historical patterns of in- and exclusion, tendencies about which many are—and quite rightly so—critical, and by

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11   Lyotard (Anm. 5), p. 34f.

12   Ibid.

13   M. Beatrice Fazi: Contingent Computation: Abstraction, Experience and Indeterminacy in Computational Aesthetics. London 2018.

14   Donna Haraway: Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. London 1991, p. 149-181.

the desire to respond with/in micrologies, traces, passages[15]. »The result« of the technique that ›presupposes that *the past itself is the actor or agent* that gives to the mind the elements with which the scene will be constructed‹ »is not the definition of a past element. It is ›new‹ in so far as it is felt as new. One can say of what has gone that it is there, alive, lively. Not present like an object, if an object can ever be present, but present like an *aura*, a gentle breeze, an allusion«[16]. Lyotard then argues that such a technique has epistemic qualities that are in fact aesthetic, not »empirical or cognitive«[17]. To quote him in full:

> [My] description of rewriting is [close] to Kant's analysis of the work of the imagination in taste, in the pleasure in the beautiful. Both give the same importance to the freedom with which the elements provided by sensibility are treated, and both insist on the fact that the forms in play in pure aesthetic pleasure or in free association and listening are as independent as can be from any empirical or cognitive interest. The beauty of the phenomenon is in proportion to its fluidity, its mobility and its evanescence.[18]

»What,« then, »is the potential of new materialism for historical research, on the one hand, and, on the other, for teaching and learning history?« It is in the *sensitivity* to act *methodically* on forms independent of empirical and cognitive fixation, on forms that are fluid, mobile and evanescent. Doing research in a new materialist key implies *trying to avoid having a form (a disciplinary form, for instance) reduce a research outcome*, making a ›retrograde movement,‹ »[f]rom [which] emerges an error which vitiates our conception of the past, as well as our pretension to anticipate the future for every occasion«[19]. My use of the word ›method‹ for this move away from defining and toward feeling is important. First, because Lyotard would consider the modern

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15   See Donna Haraway's webs of connection: »Firstly, »[w]ebs [that] have the property of being systematic, even of being centrally structured global systems with deep filaments and tenacious tendrils into time, space, and consciousness, which are the dimensions of world history« (Haraway (Anm. 1), p. 588); secondly, webs of connections the answer of which to world historical oppression is not ›anything goes;‹ and finally, »the webs of differential positioning« about which critical and creative scholars are »insatiably curious« (Ibid., p. 590)«. In: Iris Van der Tuin: On Research »Worthy of the Present.« In: SFU [Simon Fraser University] Educational Review 12.1, p. 8-20, here 11. Special issue ›Performative and Relational Ontologies in Education.

16   Lyotard (Anm. 5), p. 31.

17   Ibid., p. 32.

18   Ibid. Cf. Hannah Arendt's use of Kant's aesthetics and her suggestion to »train your imagination to go visiting"—a reference to Kant's philosophical essay ›Perpetual Peace‹ from 1795—in order »[t]o think with the enlarged mentality«. Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think. Ed. Mary McCarthy. New York 1981, p. 257.

19   Henri Bergson: The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics. Trans. Mabelle L. Andison. Mineola 2007, p. 11.

attempt at defining a failure all along. This is the paradox of modernity rewriting itself. Second, because method marks the difference between ›opening oneself to‹ artistic production as an artist and the way in which a researcher acts on fluidity, mobility, evanescence. This has to do with the schism produced by, and producing, the researcher seeking knowledge as fixed[20].

What I wish to do next is to bring the Lyotardian discussion to bear on a discussion in cultural analysis on the object. This will allow us to discuss in some detail the technique that leads to scene-construction in keeping with ›*the past itself [as] the actor or agent*.‹

3.   Objects soliciting the researcher

In 2008 the University of Amsterdam-based philosopher of art and culture, Josef Früchtl, attacked the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences professor based at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, Mieke Bal, at a local seminar. The attack against interdisciplinary cultural analysis in general and against the book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (Bal 2002) in particular, two responses, among others Bal's, and Früchtl's afterword were published in *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy*. Früchtl's attack is utterly uninteresting. As an attack, it has ›a form [that] reduce[s the] research outcome‹[21]. Besides that, there is a sliding between object and concept in his text, a sliding that is unhelpful for our discussion[22]. Here is a helpful fragment, though, irrespective of our dis/agreement with what it actually says:

> It is a central intention of cultural analysis »to understand the object better *on its*—the object's—*own terms*.« The unavoidable question then is: how can we know what the object's own terms really are? From German idealism to psychoanalysis and Critical Theory we do receive answers to that question. Like cultural analysis, they all regard the object as a kind of subject (the subject's ›other,‹ something that cannot be thought without a subject). And they all are aware of the *moral* implications. Epistemology has to integrate morality. In that sense a cultural analyst can install the »constraint,« a kind of categorical imperative in performing

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20   The patient seeks a truth or a real, says Lyotard, and here he refers to the difficulty of experiencing truth and reality as ungraspable at the end of a session or analysis. Lyotard (Anm. 5), p. 33.

21   Cf. Murat Aydemir: A Reaction to the Früchtl/Bal Debate. In: Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy 2 (2008), p. 37-39.

22   See explicitly here: »the concept of the *object*«, Josef Früchtl: What is Cultural Analysis? And What is the Role of Philosophy? In: Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy 1 (2008). p 53-58, here p. 55. In addition, Früchtl wrongly assumes that the subject of cultural analysis is a strong subject. Ibid., p. 54.

theory, »never« just to theorize but »always to allow the object ›to speak back‹«
and to have »respect« for it. As mentioned already, the theories of Hegel, Freud
(and Lacan) and Adorno do offer elaborate answers to the question of why theo-
rists should behave morally and respectfully towards and, so to speak, face to face
with their objects. But what is the answer of a cultural analyst?[23]

Bal answers by making the following statements: »cultural analysis« is »a prac-
tice of *engaging objects*«[24]. Following »the practice of engaging objects in thinking«
(ibid.), she not only »engage[s] an object as a partner in this debate« (ibid.) but also
and more specifically she speaks of her »encounter with [an] image, from which
[she] derived many of the ideas or, alternatively, which confirmed, complicated,
and embodied some of these ideas«[25]. Importantly, Bal does not consider the ob-
ject in isolation but rather sees to it that encountered objects are *always* engaged
and that they are engaged in such a way that it is the *encounter* from which ideas
are derived or that ›confirm[...], complicate[...], and embod[y] some of these ideas.‹
Consequently, there are some five activities of the object, some five ways in which
the object »solicits,« says Bal, the one engaging with it[26], the first of which be-
ing the fact that the engagement/encounter happens in the present. The activities
are the object's own terms. In addition to presentism, the object »engages different
disciplines«[27]. Third until fifthly, there are activities such as context, affect and pol-
itics[28]. Interpretation happens only next and it is clear that this interpretation, for
Bal, cannot be a disciplinary affair. Philosophy, theory and other disciplines, his-
tory inclusive, are solicited but never a priori and never as master-discourse (or) so
as to make objects passive[29].

For our purposes here, the important aspect is in the *soliciting* act of the object,
guiding the researcher on a journey through art, academia and activism. We are
invited to go back to Lyotard's discussion of modernity as rewriting modernity as
a technique that does not provide knowledge of the past, but which ›presupposes
that the past itself is the actor or agent that *gives to the mind* the elements with
which the scene will be constructed‹ (previous emphasis adjusted) when we read
Bal claiming that *descriptions* of cultural objects serve to establish the object's own
terms and that these are terms pertaining to *what elements objects give to the mind
of analysts*. In *Travelling Concepts* Bal speaks of »the tripartite relationship between

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23   Ibid., p. 55-56.
24   Mieke Bal: »You do what you have to do«. A Response to Josef Früchtl. In: Krisis: Journal for
      Contemporary Philosophy 1 (2008), p. 59-69, here p. 59.
25   Ibid., p. 59-60.
26   Ibid., p. 60.
27   Ibid.
28   Ibid., p. 61.
29   Cf. ibid., p. 64.

student, frame, and object,« of which »the latter must still have the last word«[30]. In a later text, ›Working with Concepts,‹ frame is more prominently complemented by *field*[31]. And field, in *Travelling Concepts* as well as in ›Working with Concepts,‹ »is not delimited because the traditional delimitations must be suspended; by selecting an object, you question a field«[32]. In addition, Bal says about method: »You do not apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field«[33]. Having conducted this singular and pluralizing meeting as scholar in the here and now, and having subsequently[34] travelled through disciplines, discussions (including »the aesthetic politics, or the political aesthetic«[35]) and affective response, »the object constructed turns out to no longer be the ›thing‹ that so fascinated you when you chose it. It has become a living creature, embedded in all the questions and considerations that the mud of your travel splattered onto it, and that surround it like a ›field‹«[36]. In the fascination we obviously find the active soliciting *of* the research subject *by* the researched object at the very beginning of the research process. In my previous research, I called this soliciting a ›posthuman interpellation‹[37].

Let me return to Früchtl's allusion to morality. I take issue with his omission of a discussion about morality (rules, like law) vs. ethics (practices, like jurisdiction), as well as with the suggestion that cultural analysis propagates a dualistic epistemology of good and bad scholarship. Quite rightly, Bal affirms her »resistance to binary thinking«[38] as well as the fact that »The shift in methodology I am arguing for here is founded on a particular relationship between subject and object, one that is not predicated on a vertical and binary opposition between the two«[39]. »Yes,« says Bal, »cultural analysis engages philosophy selectively, and asks of the selected ideas *relevance, adequacy*, and *effectivity* in its stated goal of engaging the cultural object on its own terms«[40]. There are a few critical remarks I want to make here. First, it is clear that cultural analysis as framed by Bal has a disciplinary bias.

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30   Mieke Bal: Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide. Toronto 2002, p. 9.
31   Mieke Bal: Working with Concepts. In: European Journal of English Studies 13 (2009), H. 1, p. 13-23, here p. 13-14.
32   Ibid., p. 13.
33   Ibid.
34   In my own (diffractive) research, I try to theorize how such travelling happens ›in the same stroke.‹ See below.
35   Bal (Anm. 24), p. 60.
36   Bal (Anm. 31), p. 14.
37   Iris van der Tuin: Diffraction as a Methodology for Feminist Onto-Epistemology: On Encountering Chantal Chawaf and Posthuman Interpellation. In: Parallax 20 (2014), H. 3, p. 231-244.
38   Bal (Anm. 24), p. 65.
39   Bal (Anm. 30), p. 24.
40   Bal (Anm. 24), p. 66.

Not just is there a neo-disciplining tendency to be found, says also Murat Aydemir in his published response, but also is science engaged in a contrasting manner[41]. The latter is a pity. Many here present and presenting will engage with science as precisely the object led them to this un/known terrain that is certainly of higher academic and public standing and authority than the discipline of history or interdisciplinary cultural analysis. Second, I propose to push Bal's horizontalization of subject and object a bit further than »interaction, as in ›interactivity‹«[42]. When Donna Haraway discusses binary thinking (as gendered), she states that we must insist on »nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning«[43]. Not only does Haraway push for a science-humanities perspective here. She also avoids repeating binary thinking by re-essentializing the subject-object relationship as a result of importing the assumption of two pre-existing entities entering into inter-action with each other. Field logic does not allow for such stable linearity, just like Bal's take on history writing is that it is *preposterous*[44]: neither developing linearly nor a singularity but rather everlastingly *emergent* of singular meaning. The idea here is that present-day engagement with the past in artistic, academic, activist manners changes that past constantly thus bodying forth new archival, i.e., archivable and archived meanings for ever and ever. Here, and in spite of what I said earlier about the omission of science as a discipline solicited by the object and about inter-action as imprecise, Bal comes close to Karen Barad's onto-epistemological take on time and the archive: »the point is that the past was never simply there to begin with and the future is not simply what will unfold; the ›past‹ and the ›future‹ are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the iterative practices of spacetimemattering […]«[45]. For cultural analysis, this spacetimemattering brings up disciplinary engagements in subject-object-frame-field entanglements.

4.   Inflections in orientations

What does Haraway imply when she talks about an insistence on ›nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning‹? With and beyond Bal, we may say that a ›node in a field‹ comes to matter when an object-subject-frame entanglement comes, and brings, about

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41   Cf. Bal (Anm. 30), p. 29-34.
42   Ibid., p. 24.
43   Haraway (Anm. 1), p. 588.
44   Mieke Bal: Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History. Chicago 1999.
45   Karen Barad: Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come. In: Derrida Today 3 (2010), H. 2, p. 240-268, here p. 260-261.

a field as the result of a feeling, a fascination, a posthuman interpellation. This field from which the cultural analyst may seek traditionally disciplinary knowledges and insights, should the object solicit such information, comes into being whilst the encountered object is engaged. The field is not a priorily structured by a disciplinary organization albeit that the disciplines, traversed by the interdisciplinary cultural analyst, are mined for information. This practice tells us that the adequacy mentioned before is an adequacy about the object engaged[46], but also about disciplines and disciplinary knowledges. Such a sense of adequacy is congruent with the state-of-the-art in interdisciplinary studies per se, arguing that the interdisciplinary researcher should develop adequacy in (representing) the reductive information available and about that information's knowledge-theoretical characteristics[47]. But what is an ›inflection in orientation‹? *Wikipedia* (last accessed: June 12, 2019) says quite simply: »Inflection points are the points of the curve where the curvature changes its sign. [...] A *falling point of inflection* is an inflection point where the derivative has a local minimum, and a *rising point of inflection* is a point where the derivative has a local maximum.« An inflection in orientation, then, involves movement and, more precisely, a shift in direction. Such a shift in direction has been beautifully written about by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* from 2006. I will end my talk with Ahmed.

Queer Phenomenology is about the reductive ›first philosophy‹ of phenomenology and discusses what phenomenology has to assume and ignore in order for it to suggest that it is a natural human stance. Cleverly, Ahmed asks: »How does the orientation of the paper, which is ›on‹ the writing table, also function as an orientation device, which both shows the ›direction‹ of phenomenology and also takes it in a certain direction?«[48] Here, she foregrounds the materials assumed and ignored by the philosopher—the table, the piece of paper—and questions phenomenology as primary based on those assumptions. Who says ›natural‹? Referring to feminist critiques of disembodying the philosophical subject, and later to postcolonial critiques of philosophy and feminism alike, Ahmed claims: »The masculinity might also be evident in the disappearance of the materiality of objects, in the bracketing of the materials out of which, as well as upon which, philosophy writes itself, as a way of apprehending the world[49]. Ahmed proposes to leave behind this »fantasy of a paperless philosophy« to »suspen[d ...] the [seemingly] natural attitude«[50]. It is in this discussion that Haraway and Bal come together: Haraway's insistence

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46   Please note how ›adequacy‹ complicates a shallow reading of Bal's phrase ›the object speaks back.‹

47   Allen F. Repko/Rick Szostak: Interdisciplinary Research. Process and Theory. Thousand Oaks 2017.

48   Sara Ahmed: Queer Phenomenology. Orientations, Objects, Others. Durham 2006, p. 26.

49   Ibid., p. 34.

50   Ibid.

on ›nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning‹ is also an argument for feminist and class-conscious embodiment; and Bal's field theory is also about suspending a reliance on ›traditional delimitations‹.

5.   Conclusion

By way of conclusion, then, we must admit and embrace that objects are participants in academic work and that they reflect (on) that work even when silent and silenced. Things like paper, not otherwise a noticeable cultural object, willingly and unwillingly orient our thinking. And they inflect orientations as they embed and embody (in) thought. We have known this since 1979:

> While participants in the office space struggle with the writing of new drafts, the laboratory around them is itself a hive of writing activity. Sections of muscle, light beams, even shreds of blotting paper activate various recording equipment. And the scientists themselves base their own writing on the written output of the recording equipment.[51]

Ultimately, orientation in onto-epistemology is about when, where and how one enters the research process. ›Sections of muscle, light beams, even shreds of blotting paper activate various recording equipment.‹ Let us ›shak[e] off the assumption of a knowing, willing subject in full control of herself.‹

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51   Bruno Latour/Steve Woolgar: Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts, Princeton 1986, p. 51.