

CHRISTOPH COX AND SUHAIL MALIK

Malik: If the basic claim of Speculative Realism (SR) across its several fronts is that what lies beyond human cognition can be apprehended in its alien status—that thought can think beyond itself, as Quentin Meillassoux has put it¹—this is correctly understood as a vigorous challenge to the poststructuralist and post-Marxist orthodoxies of contemporary art and its prevalent theoretical armature. In their divergent ways, these orthodoxies propose that the real is necessarily shaped by discourse, social structure, economy, desire, subjecthood, the material or psychic structures of thought, and so on. Here, the real is not alien to discourse and anthropological praxes but rather, so to speak, inalienable from them.

Given the evident incongruity and even incompatibility between SR and poststructuralism, what has been perplexing is how and why some strands of SR, primarily object-oriented ontology, have been assimilated to developments of poststructuralism from the mid-2000s, particularly materialist feminism, affect theory, some queer theory, and performativity theory. These theories certainly share with SR an interest in breaking up the centrality of the human actor and extending the world of relationality beyond its historically privileged agents (from all kinds of subjects to objects); but their other basic commitments are wholly incompatible with SR. It's this confused hybrid of theoretical stances that the word "neo-materialism" now predominantly signifies in contemporary art, defanging and, worse yet, expropriating SR's most challenging demands on the orthodoxies of both contemporary art and theoretical-academic hegemons.

Cox: Exactly. A rigorous materialism would, as Nietzsche put it, "translate humanity back into nature."² But much of what is called neo-materialism today does just the opposite: it *humanizes nature*. The formerly inert and lifeless is treated as animate, as an "actant" with an "agency" no less "vibrant" than our own. Even deep time—in which human existence is but a fleeting microsecond—is examined in the humanities and arts today primarily under the banner of "the Anthropocene"!

Materialism should reject these new avatars of correlationism in which the world is seen only in our image. This means refusing the divisions between nature/culture and matter/mind by which we persuaded ourselves that we were higher and better than the rest of matter; and it means naturalizing reason, mind, culture, and language, treating them not as anomalous or miraculous endowments but as variants of processes discernible in the rest of the natural world.

Malik: On this, we disagree, in part. We agree in rejecting the exteriority of human

1. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 36.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), §230, p. 123.

sapience to natural processes—a Ptomelaic hangover that has to be renounced. But we shouldn't attribute apprehension of the real to natural processes themselves, espousing a sort of Deleuzian vitalism that's close to the hegemonic variants of neo-materialism (HNM) identified above that confound SR's interest in identifying what is irreducibly alien to thought or discourse (or some proxy of these) with the poststructuralist vitiation of this possibility (even via the limit case of the altering encounter with the Other)...

Cox: I don't think there's anything vitalist about the radical materialism I'm espousing. It naturalizes the human rather than humanizing nature. Reason is not other than nature; and to treat it as such—as, I think, neo-rationalist critics of materialism do³—is theological insofar as it posits a transcendent world of reason and culture that's irreducible to the rest of nature.

Malik: This is our point of contention. Yes, the theological hangover has to be discarded in *all* its varieties: reason is not a proto-miracle nor is it ordained by grace. But, theoretically, the issue is whether what happens on the two sides of the phase shift that is the anthropotechnical nexus are *only* contiguous. A demarcation is definitionally inaugurated with that phase shift, meaning that the effects cannot be described in the terms available *before* it. Furthermore, as technoscience demonstrates, the *before* of nature is itself recursively modified by the *after* of anthropotechnical intervention, which involves the use of reason. That is, nature is now itself anthropogenetically or quasi-rationally constituted—or can be—by technosciences that are fundamentally constructive. This is not only what matter *can* be, but how it *must* now be understood. What is materialism then?

Cox: Doesn't this revert back to the humanism and correlationism I thought we both repudiated, treating nature and the facts uncovered by science as inextricably bound to the human and to human history? I think you also overestimate the place of our species in the natural world and in cosmic history. From Copernicus and Galileo to Hutton, Darwin, and current neuroscience, all the scientific breakthroughs of modernity have pushed in the opposite direction, undermining human narcissism and megalomania.

Malik: Recognizing anthropogenetic interventions and constructions of nature and matter does not mean that we are exporting our image of ourselves into them. As we regularly learn, interventions on nature do *not* necessarily lead to vain images of ourselves. An embryo with the DNA of three “parents” does not reproduce an image of human or animal life but is an invention—in and of nature as well as our self-image. Rational-material invention thinks outside

3. See, for example, “Reason Is Inconsolable and Non-Conciliatory: Ray Brassier in Conversation with Suhail Malik,” in *Realism Materialism Art*, ed. Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey, and Suhail Malik (Berlin: Sternberg, 2015), pp. 219–20; and Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 2–3, 22–35.

thought itself because it recognizes what matter might be in terms that had not yet been thought. Art of course has the capacity to take its role in this, and is maybe even a privileged historical name for this ambition. But neomaterialism in thrall to contemporary art—HNM—cannot.

The claim that this rational determination of materialism is a “theological” or correlational determination of matter is itself a theoretically stipulated subordination of reason to natural processes. As with HNM, but distinct to it, it promulgates a negatively governed materialism. Both proscribe commencing from matter’s rationalizable construction. Granted, *that* postulate is probably not just a materialism—but, given that we agree to dispense with HNM, how is the demand here to be met by the naturalized materialism you endorse?

Cox: Again, it’s deeply narcissistic of us to think that human invention and intervention marks some fundamental “phase shift” in the history of the universe. Natural history is full of such material transformations prior to, and surely following, the existence of human beings: the emergence of life itself, mass extinctions triggered by asteroids, biological mutation, etc. Human reason and anthropotechnics is absolutely continuous with this natural history, which, in the not too distant future, will bury all trace of the human in its eternal course.

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