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Introduction: Meanings of Matter

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Introduction: Meanings of Matter

Those of us in the privileged enclaves of Western European academia have emerged from the years of COVID-19 into a world defined by the physical violence of war on the European continent, the increasing destruction of the world's material heritage, and a new appreciation for physical connection with the world beyond the home. Studying in Leiden but coming from across the world, the members of the editorial board are reminded of the significance of matter and its insistent claims on us all. The 'material turn' that took place across the humanities in the 1990s was driven by precisely the opposite forces, by a seeming rise of immateriality in a decade witness to the digital transformations that have come to condition the contemporary experience: the internet, the mobile phone, and the digitization of culture.¹ The theoretical insights that emerged from this 'new materialism,' however, paradoxically link the historical experience of the 1990s to our present moment. These insights give us new tools to understand the connections behind these seemingly divergent periods, much as they break down binaries more broadly: between matter and immateriality, between biology and society, between the human and the natural.²

This collapsing of binaries can be traced back to the theoretical origins of the material turn in post-Marxist, post-Hegelian, Foucauldian, and feminist approaches. The breakdown of a binary between economics and culture, for example, can be found in the post-Marxist argument that material conditions extend beyond mere economic relations to include symbols, discourses, and everyday practices, which are all pivotal in shaping society. Similarly, post-Hegelian thought, emphasizing materialism and the actual conditions of existence, questions the binary between abstract philosophical ideas and concrete material realities.

¹ Wurth, "The Material Turn," 248.

² Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *The New Materialism*, 94.

Foucault's theories enhance the material turn by examining the power/knowledge nexus and demonstrating how discourses are shaped by and shape material practices. Binaries like male/female and nature/culture are a critical focus in feminist approaches, which argue that these distinctions are not inherent but socially constructed and perpetuated through material practices. These theoretical traditions were deployed during the material turn as part of a focus on the distinctive materialities and efficacies of things, their lives, and their potential capacities.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's assemblage theory, introduced in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), is often regarded as the genesis of new materialism. Deleuze and Guattari argue that human behavior is not primarily driven by individual agency. Instead, they suggest, we rely on material interdependencies and a network of discursive devices that span across legal, geographical, cultural, and economic infrastructures.³ This focus on the role of networks inspired many authors in the new materialism tradition, including Bruno Latour, who details actor-network theory in *Reassembling the Social* (2005). Latour's book explores the mediation of agency by objects and serves as a framework to examine interactions between humans and nonhumans. Latour posits that all entities, whether living or non-living, operate as 'actants' within networks that affect social and environmental realities.⁴ Similarly, Manuel DeLanda builds on Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory in *A New Philosophy of Science* (2006), which suggests that a genetic and linguistic influence also contributes to material interdependencies.⁵ From a feminist perspective, Donna Haraway's influential essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) argues that technology and biology are intricately linked in forming society and identity, taking a viewpoint that considers the conceptual aspects of technology and power.⁶

The authors contributing to this special issue of LEAP draw on this new materialist tradition in a wide variety of ways, with a broad understanding of 'matter' serving as a framework for

³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3-25.

⁴ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 1-9.

⁵ DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, 1-8.

⁶ Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 149-151.

categorizing the diverse contributions into three groupings: culture, environment(s), and politics. While there are many possible ways to organize the contributions in this issue of LEAP, these three key themes seem particularly pertinent to our contemporary concerns, deploying the insights of the material turn in newly relevant ways. Central to all of the contributions in the first section on culture, is the question of the broader relationship between material objects, their symbolic meanings, and their effects. The articles in the second section on environment(s) share a concern with how matter impacts physical spaces and/or ecologies, returning us to the eruption of the physical into contemporary consciousness with which we began this introduction. The third section, on the role of politics in shaping the concept of ‘matter,’ is particularly crucial in a period when ‘reality’ itself can often seem in dispute in political debates, including those with the potential to turn violent.

The journal opens with the theme of culture and Rajae El Morabet Belhaj’s article “Taking on the Black Trauma of Vietnam: Spike Lee and *Da 5 Bloods*,” which engages with matter and meaning through an examination of the 2020 film *Da 5 Bloods*. Directed by American filmmaker Spike Lee, the film highlights the experiences of Black veterans during the Vietnam War, who often experienced discrimination and mistreatment both on and off the battlefield, both during and after the war. El Morabet Belhaj reads *Da 5 Bloods* through the concepts of trauma and memory, arguing that the film matters as a cultural object because it sheds light on a neglected part of American history that remains relevant, especially since the film came out at a pivotal moment in the United States. In the summer of 2020, the murder of George Floyd forced the world to confront the systemic racism and police brutality that have plagued Black communities for centuries. El Morabet Belhaj focuses on how trauma and memory are represented in the film through three techniques: the use of characters, flashbacks, and combining historical footage with contemporary scenes. New materialist thinker Rosi Braidotti argues that moving beyond the dialectics that oppose difference to the notion of sameness, encourages a more nuanced understanding of cultural

representations.⁷ In the context of *Da 5 Bloods*, this means recognizing the complexities and nuances of the characters' experiences and identities rather than reducing them to simplistic categories or stereotypes.

Engaging with similar themes, Zeno Grootenboer's article "Matter as a Tool of Critique" focuses on the political impact of Japanese *nishiki-e* (multicolored woodblock prints) before the Meiji Restoration (1868). These prints, Grootenboer shows, critique the declining government of the shōgun and its conservative stance through anthropomorphic animal satirical imagery. Grootenboer provides chronological context for the emergence of parody and political satire in late Edo-period (1603–1868) *nishiki-e*, drawing on Katsuya Hirano's theory of 'grotesque realism' to highlight the political implications of grotesque depictions, in particular those of animals and insects. In doing so, Grootenboer examines how artists such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi and Kawanabe Kyōsai utilized animal imagery to voice their opinions and affect their audience. Grootenboer is influenced by new materialist thinker Alfred Gell, who argues that we can recognize intentions—or agency—in matter such as artworks because the mental responses provoked by an artwork closely mirror those we associate with social interactions.⁸ Through this lens, Grootenboer explores how the agency of the mass-produced satirical woodblock prints affected the social lives of commoners, unlike unique paintings.

The journal's culture section concludes with Eloise Huai-Yung Huang's "Experiences that Matter," a review of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1986 novel *An Artist of the Floating World*. Huang analyzes sensorial and material aspects of the narrator's memories of Japan in the 1930s and 1940s, arguing that the novel's approach reveals the narrator's attachment to the values these memories represent. Huang then contrasts this attachment to the perspective of the other characters, who have come to repudiate the 1930s and 1940s in Japan's history. In so doing, Huang suggests that the materiality of memory in *An Artist of the Floating World* is intimately involved with the novel's presentation of another type of

⁷ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 1–41.

⁸ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 13–23.

matter: ‘what matters’ for society more broadly, represented through those experiences that Ishiguro presents as meaningful during Japan’s post-war reconstruction. Drawing on the notion of affect as a link between the social and the material, Huang’s reading joins a tradition of writing that can be traced back to the origins of the material turn in the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

While the first set of pieces in this issue examines the correlation between tangible items and their symbolism within culture and memory, the second thematic set redirects attention toward the physical environment. The first article in this set is Rebecca Billi’s “Following *Psychylustro*: An (Imaginary) Travelogue Through the Matter of the City,” which follows the author’s journey on a train ride through Philadelphia, exploring the city’s infrastructure and the relationship between art and the matter of the city through a reading of Katherine Grosse’s 2014 public artwork, *Psychylustro*. Billi draws a comparison between the Benjaminian arcade and the train corridor, turning the passenger into a contemporary flaneur. Philadelphia’s Northeast Corridor line and Grosse’s artworks create a space where knowledge is unveiled through active engagement with the surroundings. Billi’s reading aligns with Tim Ingold’s ‘dwelling perspective’ approach, a mode of learning and understanding that is participatory, situational, and contextual, deeply enmeshed with the material conditions of life.⁹ Billi emphasizes the importance of art in reawakening attention and imagination and the way the infrastructure supporting our built environment is lined with clues about society, inviting us to expand our sense of what makes up the matter of the city.

Mikko Pekkonen challenges the traditional idea of a clear distinction between wasteland and wilderness, particularly in Alaska. In his article “What’s the Matter with Arctic Alaska?” Pekkonen explores how Alaska’s North Slope is portrayed in advertisements and landscape photography, contrasting how the two genres communicate space and matter. He implicates Isabelle Stengers’ concept of ‘cosmopolitics,’ influenced by Latour, in which geological formations are perceived to exert agency, by covering the

⁹ Ingold, *The Perceptions*, 172–189.

role this agency plays in the world's ecological crisis.¹⁰ Pekkonen examines how oil companies portray their operations in the best possible light using marketing techniques inherited from more traditional art forms. In this way, photographic techniques can tell stories about a place that has been both denigrated and revered. Despite controversies over resource extraction in Native Alaskan territories, modern life in the Arctic is upheld by the opportunities that oil extraction provides, shaping both Alaska's media landscape and its physical one.

Completing this section's complication of the relation between matter and environment, Rik J. Janssen interviews Rosanne van der Voet, a lecturer at Leiden University, whose academic pursuits bridge Urban Studies and Environmental Humanities. Recently awarded a PhD from the University of Sheffield for her innovative exploration of marine narratives, Van der Voet's research focuses on the oceanic environmental crisis through nonhuman perspectives. Van der Voet's PhD dissertation "Tentacular Textuality and Anthropocenic Seas: A Medusa Poetics," uses the techniques of creative writing to foreground marine animals' experiences in ecological discussions, utilizing the metaphorical complexity of jellyfish to navigate through these narratives. This approach is reminiscent of Thomas Nail's new materialist thought, in which he advocates for a dynamic perspective on ecosystems within environmental philosophy, emphasizing the continuous movements of air, water, animals, and plants as essential to maintaining ecological balance.¹¹ Van der Voet highlights the role of materiality in understanding the environmental crises and advocates for a profound shift toward inclusive, non-human-centric discourses in humanities research.

The final set of pieces in this issue delves into the relationship between politics and matter. In "Faith and Power," Nicolás Vargas Varillas examines the concept of matter in its physical sense and its relation to politicians' promises of material improvements. Vargas Varillas' analysis is consistent with Arturo Escobar's critique of the development paradigm, which highlights the limitations of material

¹⁰ Stengers, *Cosmopolitics II*, 219–233.

¹¹ Nail, *Theory of the Earth*, 1–18, 177–190.

improvements as a means to address social and political issues. Escobar argues that focusing on material progress often obscures the underlying social and political structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice.¹² Specifically, Vargas Varillas delves into the political alliance formed between Jair Bolsonaro and evangelical Christians in Brazil during the 2018 election, which ultimately led to Bolsonaro's victory. With the increasing influence of evangelical Christians in Brazilian elections, Vargas Varillas highlights the importance of understanding the factors that shape their voting behavior. He argues that in the 2018 Bolsonaro campaign, the focus shifted from promises of material improvements to a 'non-material' approach, centered on values and morality rather than living conditions. This shift in rhetoric highlights the evolving role of religion in political campaigns and the need to further explore its impact on voting patterns.

In this issue's closing article "Mao Zedong's Dialectical Materialism: A Matter of Translation," Berkant Isaev examines Mao Zedong's concept of dialectical materialism as an act of translation. Isaev claims that Mao's concept of dialectical materialism is dynamic and autonomous (and thus different from those of Marx, Engels, and Lenin) as it always refers back to its 'origin' while at the same time employing Confucian and Daoist concepts to 'read' and articulate Marxist theory. Mao's translation naturally creates tension between the Marxist and traditional Chinese concepts and it is in this tension that Mao's dialectical materialism thrives. Mao's dialectical materialism remains Marxist while at the same time becoming a concept of its own, a unique interpretation of Marxist dialectics. Although Mao's dialectics does not fall into a category of new materialism, it shares some similarities with new materialism. It emphasizes contradiction as the primary interaction between and within all the constituents of reality, which are not reducible to binaries but to correlating elements. This similarity implies the need for multifaceted analyses of society, history, and reality as a whole.

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¹² Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 3-20.

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