



(Re-)Assembling Cultural Studies

By
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Abstract

This paper proceeds from the assumption that the Anthropocene is characterized by a profound impurity and ‘messiness’. It argues that in order to be able to better tackle the immense complexity of the contemporary world, Cultural Studies needs to be more fully posthumanized, that is, brought into an encounter with the various theoretical formations associated with the nonhuman turn (actor-network theory, new materialism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, etc.). Specifically, it proposes the concept of the ‘assemblage’ as an alternative onto-epistemic commitment for Cultural Studies and a very productive hinge for such an encounter. Primarily drawing on the work of the philosopher Manuel DeLanda, the article distils the most important features of this concept and then goes on to explore how it calls for a rethinking and revision of some of the central assumptions and categories of Cultural Studies once it is ‘translated’ into the discursive horizon of the discipline. In particular, the essay, availing itself of a wide range of theoretical resources, investigates how the three key concepts of *culture*, *power*, and *identity* undergo a reconceptualization, one that more strongly opens them up to the nonhuman.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Anthropocene, posthumanism, nonhuman turn, assemblage

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Cultural Studies and Messiness

As Lawrence Grossberg has pointed out, Cultural Studies' commitment to radical contextuality also means that the discipline itself has to be willing to remake itself in the face of a different conjuncture. Cultural Studies, Grossberg writes, "takes its shape in response to its context – [...] cultural studies is a response in part to 'experienced' changes, to changing political challenges and demands, as well as to emerging theoretical resources and debates" (2010: 48). Instead of always asking the same questions and working with a set of quasi-universal theories and methods, then, Cultural Studies reconstitutes itself in response to the 'problem-space' of a given historical conjuncture. I am arguing here that the Anthropocene is such a new problem-space, characterized precisely by fundamental changes, new challenges and demands, as well as novel theoretical approaches, and that consequently, Cultural Studies should be open to "transformation through encounter" (Tsing 2015: 28) with the elements of the contemporary conjuncture.

Beyond its origins in stratigraphy, as a proposed term to denote a new geological epoch in Earth history, the 'Anthropocene' is today widely used to refer to the more general fact that "[t]he human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system" (Steffen et al. 2011: 842).¹ The term thus denotes a radical caesura, a human-induced break with the stable ecological conditions of the Holocene, with the Earth now operating in a "no-analogue state" (Moore et al. 2001), manifest in a plethora of phenomena such as global climate change, rapid biodiversity loss, the disruption of fundamental material cycles, acidifying oceans, or the accumulation of toxic and non-biodegradable substances in the air, the soil, and the waters. As such, the ramifications of the Anthropocene extend far beyond geology and Earth system science and, indeed, the natural sciences generally. Thus, for instance, Erle C. Ellis has argued that "[t]he significance of the Anthropocene resides in its role as a new lens through which age-old narratives and philosophical questions are being revisited and rewritten" (2018: 4). "What's at stake", he writes, "is a new account of our place in nature, our relationship with the rest of the planet", one that has "the potential to radically revise the way we think of what it means to be human" (144, 4). Similarly, for Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, the Anthropocene is not only a new epoch or, better, a (boundary) event, but amounts to "a new human condition" (2017: 24). For the two historians as for numerous other commentators, this condition is above all characterized by the overcoming of the 'Great Divide' (Latour 1993b) between Nature and Society, and hence the shattering of all the disjunctions connected with it – between human time and Earth time, between human agency and nonhuman agency, etc. As an extension of its more narrow meaning, the term Anthropocene thus also functions as a kind of cipher, signaling the complex entanglement of the human and the

(living and non-living – a distinction that is also increasingly blurry) nonhuman.² On the one hand, this state of affairs is indeed something new, insofar as the intermeshing of social and natural orders has today reached an unprecedented degree and, in the global ecological crisis, is now plain for all to see (even though some continue denying it). Yet, on the other hand, insofar as “sympoiesis is the name of the game” (Haraway 2016: 33) and, instead of ‘interactions’ between ontologically independent entities, we are actually always faced with ‘intra-actions’ (Barad 2007) in or through which phenomena are materialized in the first place, ‘we’ have in fact at all times existed as part of a “socio-bio-geosphere” (Bonneuil & Fressoz 2017: 35).

Now that, like progress or the sovereign human subject, so many of the cherished grand narratives and categories of so-called Western thought have been exploded, we find ourselves in a world that is (or that we now recognize as) deeply ‘messy’ (Law 2004), characterized in all kinds of regards by a fundamental *impurity* (Shotwell 2016).³ One of the main challenges for both theory and politics in the Anthropocene is thus being able to deal with *complexity*. As Donna Haraway writes: “In layers of history, layers of biology, layers of naturecultures, complexity is the name of our game.” (2003: 2) What is required are modes of theorizing and forms of political action that are capable of taking the world’s messiness into account, of tackling it and working with and through it instead of downplaying or repressing complexity. Importantly, this includes a need for the combination of different theoretical approaches, both from the so-called social sciences and humanities as well as from the so-called natural sciences – not so much in terms of ‘interdisciplinarity’ than of a hybridizing of science itself, in which diverse theories and methods are not only made to work side by side, but are effectively synthesized, so that they cross-fertilize and their synergies as well as frictions can be made productive. We need to ‘think laterally’, establishing not just dialogues, but connections and fusions between different fields across disciplinary boundaries, and thus forging new perspectives. As I have argued elsewhere (Cord 2022b), Cultural Studies is eminently suited to functioning as a theoretical platform for the development of such an approach. For one thing, this is because Cultural Studies has a long history of and is thus rather used to working with concepts and ideas derived from heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting theoretical sources – albeit not yet in a manner as radical as what is arguably required today. For another, Cultural Studies can be said to have always already proceeded from a sense of the ‘messiness’ of reality (though not regarding ontology) (Cord 2018). That is to say, unlike many other disciplines or projects dedicated to the analysis of culture and society, Cultural Studies has more or less consistently refused the lure of grand narratives and all-encompassing systems and abstractions and instead held to a view of the world according to which, to

borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf, “nothing [is] simply one thing” (1994: 138), nothing is ever simple. For Cultural Studies, in other words, dedicated as it is to focusing on the concrete, to contextualism, and to differentiation, complexity has in fact always been a guiding (epistemological) principle.

Yet, in order to be able to grapple with the kinds and degrees of complexity characteristic of the Anthropocene, Cultural Studies, as I have previously argued (Cord 2022b), needs to be posthumanized, that is, brought into (dialogue with) the nonhuman turn. Even though some aspects of this turn may in certain regards provoke our critical sensibilities as Cultural Studies scholars, I have made the case that this is not necessarily a bad thing, and that it would be vastly more productive to refrain from knee-jerk dismissals and instead open-mindedly engage with the novel theoretical approaches associated with the nonhuman turn as, to borrow the subtitle of Gary Hall’s and Claire Birchall’s (2006) influential collection, a new ‘adventure in theory’. Just as *New Cultural Studies*, published in 2006, both proclaimed and called for a renewal of Cultural Studies on the basis of a number of developments in theory as well as the world, I feel compelled to make a similar move today. Thus, instead of deconstruction, Post-Marxism, ethics, and German media theory, the ‘new adventures in theory’ of the 2006 book, we may today want to engage more closely with, for instance, affect theory, animal and plant studies, new materialism, actor-network theory, and speculative realism; where, in 2006, the ‘new theorists’ were held to be Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek, we may now wish to include the likes of Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, Paul B. Preciado, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Benjamin Bratton, and Jussi Parikka (thus also taking account of [more] women); the ‘new transformations’, instead of anti-capitalism, the transnational, and new media, could today comprise things like platform capitalism, surveillance culture, bio-, necro- and thanato-politics, technoscience, the ‘new right’, and climate change; and finally, whereas 2006’s ‘new adventures in cultural studies’ were deemed to be the Posthumanities, the extreme, the secret, and, somewhat oddly, Rem Koolhaas’ Project on the City, in 2022, we may, for example, want to mention the nonhuman, neoliberal or entrepreneurial subjectivities, conviviality, failure, the queer (in its widest sense), intersectionality, or multiple modernities.⁴

A ‘New Cultural Studies’⁵ for the present must have analytical and methodological means at its disposal to deal with the fundamental ‘messiness’ of the present. Indeed, in view of this messiness and of the rapid and wide-ranging changes that have and still are taking place, whether it is with regards to technology, the economy, politics, society, culture, or identities, we may well feel inclined, somewhat analogous to what Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (1989) did over 30 years ago, to proclaim the arrival of ‘new times’ today. In this moment, how

to be able to tackle complexity is arguably one of the most pressing theoretical challenges – for only by addressing it will we be capable to find adequate responses to it. Dealing with, not denying, complexity is today a political task. That this is so further becomes evident when we consider another characteristic aspect of the present conjuncture: the spread of conspiracy theories. As a discursive phenomenon, and as important elements in the contested arena of the politics of signification, and thus in the larger struggle for hegemony, conspiracy theories need to be taken seriously, both, theoretically and politically. The same applies to other contemporary phenomena such as ‘post-truth politics’ or ‘fake news’, which in some respects seem closely related to conspiracy theories. While, contrary to declarations from within the consensus of the liberal mainstream, conspiracy theories are rather complex phenomena, and while Cultural Studies would do well to retain a post-Foucauldian basic skepticism regarding any such categories which entail a more or less immediate disqualification of certain (types of) statements and to always clearly see them for what they are, namely interventions in a given ‘order of the visible and the sayable’ (Rancière 1999), despite this, it nevertheless seems safe to say that, as “a vast simplification of social reality” (Butter 2020: 34), one of the central aspects – indeed, I would argue, *functions* – of conspiracy theories is that they *reduce complexity*.

Against this, Cultural Studies must continue to hold on to the messiness of the world. This has always been one of its great strengths. Yet, in order to do so in the Anthropocene, to simply go on using our established theoretical and methodological tools will not do. For even though, in a way, complexity has always been a key principle for Cultural Studies, the Anthropocene marks a ‘turn of the screw’ of a whole new order. For one thing, what we have been witnessing for at least the last 30 to 40 years is a previously unheard-of emergence and proliferation of all kinds of border-crossings, entanglements, and hybridities – whole new forms and degrees of (ontological) complexity. And for another, many now agree that, in line with what Bruno Latour (1993b) already argued 30 years ago, the world has in fact *always* been far messier than we thought or were willing to think. To be able to adequately address these realities, many of the received concepts and assumptions of Cultural Studies need to be rethought and revised, some discarded, and new ones added. As I have argued, it is through an encounter with the nonhuman turn that this can happen. In particular, I would here like to propose the concept of the ‘assemblage’ as a productive tool that can serve as a starting or focal point for such an encounter. I want to argue that the notion of the assemblage can be extremely helpful for the necessary task of rethinking some of the central categories of Cultural Studies and can effectively function as something like a hinge – also in the Derridean sense – between it and the various novel theoretical formations.

Complexified Being: Rethinking the ‘Magical Triangle’ of Cultural Studies

Razvan Aminoresi and Jon Bialecki are certainly right when they argue that “theorists tend not to recognize many of the ontological commitments that underpin and direct their inquiries” (2017: 11). The concept of the assemblage counteracts this tendency. Originally derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, this notion has in recent years been appropriated in a large number of different fields, disciplines, and contexts, and informed much innovative and important work. Since Deleuze and Guattari never formulated a clear-cut definition, let alone a fully-fledged theory of the assemblage, the concept is frequently interpreted differently, used in different ways and for different purposes. Yet, what virtually all applications have in common is that they employ the notion as a decidedly *ontological* category, meant to challenge accepted views of reality by significantly complicating, indeed, *complexifying* being. The philosopher Manuel DeLanda is arguably the thinker who has most systematically and comprehensively pursued the project of developing a consistent ‘assemblage theory.’⁶ DeLanda’s is an ontology that is rigorously materialist and realist, a “multi-level ontology” (2016: 7), designed to capture a “multiscaled social reality” and thus “the irreducible social complexity characterizing the contemporary world” (2006: 38, 6). The notion of the assemblage is thus explicitly a theoretical response to the messiness of the present, a properly posthumanist concept opening thought up to the nonhuman.

What, then, is an assemblage? For our purposes, its most important features, mainly distilled from DeLanda’s work, are:

1) *Heterogeneity*: Assemblages are wholes constructed from (sometimes more, sometimes less) heterogeneous components. They typically cut across the nature-culture divide, involving material as well as immaterial or discursive, organic as well as inorganic, elements of various kinds and scales (‘techno-geo-nature-cultures’ and more). As such, assemblages are decidedly *not* organic totalities.

2) *Emergence*: Every assemblage is an emergent whole, the result of the relations and interactions of its component parts. These relations are ‘relations of exteriority’. Thus, as a synthesis, the assemblage is not reducible to its parts. And the components, for their part, may always be separated from a given assemblage and plugged into another one, where their interactions will be different.

3) *Contingency*: Assemblages are always products of historical processes (with history being irreducible to human history). They are historically unique, transient, singular entities. Ontologically speaking, each one is an ‘individual’ (a term here not reserved for human beings or organisms); all are immanent, they populate the same ontological plane – a ‘flat ontology’.

What this means is a farewell to essentialism as well as a serious challenge to abstract totalizations. As Thomas Nail notes, assemblage theory does not ask “What is ...?” but rather, how? where? when? from what viewpoint? and so on” (2017: 24). In the place of sweeping pronouncements on the ‘nature’ of ‘the Market’ or ‘the State’, this theory prompts us to adopt a quasi-*empirical* approach, and to pay attention to the emergence and shape of *concrete historical assemblages*. In fact, as an ontological ‘bottom-up’ approach (DeLanda 2006: 32) which assumes the existence of a multiplicity of social entities operating at various levels of scale, assemblage theory is explicitly conceived to help solve the micro-macro problem of the social sciences, a problem that has also marked the development of Cultural Studies, for instance in the debates surrounding the opposition of structure (structuralism) vs. individual (culturalism) (Hall 1986), or the question in how far the focus on popular culture and everyday practices, especially in the fields of subcultural and media (appropriation) studies, has for the most part entailed a rather unfortunate neglect of the social macro-level or a problematic erasure of the dividing line between micro and macro (Marchart 2008, esp. 243-50). DeLanda’s ontology is finely grained, assuming many intermediate levels between ‘the person’ and ‘society’ as well as complex interactions, in which all social entities emerge from the assembly of smaller ones, while simultaneously reacting back on their component parts. What this amounts to is “a view of reality in which assemblages are everywhere, multiplying in every direction, some more viscous and changing at slower speeds, some more fluid and impermanent, coming into being almost as fast as they disappear” (DeLanda 2016: 7). Thus, “at all times we are dealing with assemblages of assemblages” (3). In this model, ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ remain valid categories of analysis but must be used in a relative rather than an absolute (individual vs. society) sense (20).

As might be expected, DeLanda’s ontology leads him to reject social constructivism, which he considers to be a form of “conservative idealism” (25), and to be highly skeptical of the possibility of radical social change. He writes: “A new left may yet emerge from these ashes but only if it recovers its footing on a mind-independent reality and if it focuses its efforts at the right social scale, that is, if it leaves behind the dream of a Revolution that changes the entire system.” (48) Unsurprisingly, similar to the case of Bruno Latour, such pronouncements have earned DeLanda harsh critique from the left. And Cultural Studies too may well recoil, feeling the need to hold on to both, social constructivism with its powers of denaturalization, and a sense of the social totality as an assumed prerequisite of the struggle for a fundamental transformation of society. Yet, if we ignore the polemics on both sides, and with some pragmatically oriented theoretical modifications, it seems to me that there is no reason why both should not be brought together, each enriching the other. Of course, the theoretical waters

here are quite deep and require much more attention than is possible in a text of a rather programmatic nature like the present one. This will have to be pursued in more detail elsewhere. For now, let me just point out that, as Levi Bryant (2014) has argued, unless we subscribe to what has never really been anything but a caricature of social constructivism (according to which nothing exists but language), it is perfectly possible to combine linguistic and cultural turn-based approaches with the more recent ones focused on matter, materiality, affect, etc. (as attested to, to give just one prominent example, by the work of Michel Foucault). This involves a reorientation of focus as well as methodology (Coole & Frost 2010: 26-28): For one thing, it means complementing the analysis of discourses, representations, ideologies, and identities with a greater attention to, for instance, socioeconomic conditions, economic structures, the materiality of space, or the operation of power at the level of the state as well as of the quotidian, particularly the embodied, corporeal dimension of ordinary experience. For another, it means a realignment of constructivist epistemologies with a view to an acknowledgment of the irreducibility of the material realm. Following actor-network theory or thinkers such as Haraway and Barad, rather than rejecting the notion of the materially real in favor of the culturally constructed, society should be recognized as always being simultaneously both, discursive and material forms being inextricable yet irreducible.

Similarly, the dramatic declarations of DeLanda and particularly Latour notwithstanding, it is actually difficult to see why attention to the various types of 'actants' and assemblages and to their complicated pathways, interconnections, and networks should be incompatible with either a notion of totality or with changes of a radical kind. In fact, when DeLanda, Latour, and others announce that "[l]ike God, capitalism does not exist" (Latour 1993a: 173), they frequently seem to ascribe a thinking to the left, or to the 'sociologies of the social', that must largely be characterized as another strawman. Certainly, there are few analysts of capitalism today who would (still) conceive of it in terms of one homogeneous, closed, fully coherent and consistent, organic, seam- and fissure-less system, let alone one run by "some *homonculus* CEO in command" (Latour 2005: 167). I believe that the work of theorists such as DeLanda and Latour can instill a healthy skepticism towards reified abstractions into social science research – a skepticism which, as I have argued, already has a certain tradition within Cultural Studies. However, to go from such skepticism to the relinquishment of all notion of totality would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, bringing into dialogue the new realist and materialist approaches on the one hand and constructivist and 'old' materialist ones on the other, I suggest that a *'de-totalized' sense of totality* (Coole & Frost 2010: 29) and thus a *combination of empiricist with totalizing research* represents the most promising path of analysis today. In fact, certain

parts of more recent materialist thought seem to point in just such a direction, for instance when they, for their part, refocus on the micro-macro relation and reconceptualize the capitalist 'system' as itself a kind of assemblage, that is, in terms of "a multitude of interconnected phenomena and processes", of "intricate interlocking systems whose interactions and dynamic processes are variable and, for the most part, unpredictable", and in which "more or less enduring structures and assemblages" are hence taken to "sediment and congeal" (Coole & Frost 2010: 29). Such a notion of a complex, 'center-less' totality is understood as involving, among other things, the close study of material practices, understood as "regular forms of behavior that are norm-governed, and that involve one's relation to one's body and to other bodies, as well as to objects of experience" (Edwards 2010: 287). Here, as perverse as it may sound to some, a rapprochement between actor-network theory and Marxism becomes possible⁷ – the totality conceived in terms of complex, dynamic relations and various interlinked levels, layers, practices, and elements, including all sorts of 'actants', and explicitly regarded in terms of a problem of representation or figuration (or 'assembling'). This, in fact, seems to be similar to what Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, in their engagement with Latour as part of their recent defense of social theory's attempts to 'see it whole', have in mind as well when they explain that "the theoretical desire for totality is not incompatible with a painstaking attention to traces, objects and devices" and that hence, "great dialectical writing would constitute precisely the kind of panorama that would [...] present both the totality and its constituent devices, as well as the attendant gaps and dislocations" (2015: 48, 55). "Don't focus on capitalism", Latour tells us, "follow the connections, 'follow the actors themselves'" (2005: 179). However, rather than thus understanding these two approaches as irreconcilable alternatives, I would propose that the latter can actually be *a form or part* of the former. That is to say: It is precisely by means of exact descriptions of the countless concrete assemblages existing at various social levels that we can come to a better understanding of the totality that is capitalism – including, *nota bene*, the sites and forms of struggle needed to transform it. For, against DeLanda, Graham Harman, and others, there is no reason why an ontology of assemblages should preclude radical change. (After all, history is full of it.) What needs to be discarded is not the idea of revolution *per se*, but rather a certain conception (or caricature) of it. Great, systemic change *is* possible – but it should be reconceived in terms of numerous interlocking 'local' changes, at different social scales, in the course of which scores of diverse assemblages become reconfigured. What I suggest, in other words, is that assemblage theory be placed in the service of 'cognitive mapping' (Jameson 1991, esp. 51-54).

So, let's heed Donna Haraway's call for new and unexpected connections, heed it also methodologically, and let us be more Deleuzo-Guattarian: not either/or, but

“and ... and ... and ...” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 25). In the Anthropocene, more than ever does Cultural Studies itself need to be a kind of *theoretical assemblage*, synthesizing a multiplicity of different approaches. Joining Colin McFarlane and Ben Anderson, what I am effectively proposing is an “ethic of theory-as-assemblage, i.e. as a constellation of singularities that holds together through difference rather than in spite of it, and that cultivates a provocative and fertile common ground” (2011: 164). Thus, in no way am I arguing that Cultural Studies should *turn into* some form of assemblage theory or simply adopt wholesale a realist ontology. But I do believe that a lot is to be gained from a ‘translation’ of the notion of the assemblage into the theoretical horizon of our discipline. As is the case with all translations, both literal and metaphorical, this process does not leave the concept – for which, as I have noted, there is no definite meaning or use anyway – unchanged. Above all, what I think gets emphasized and amplified once the assemblage enters the Cultural Studies ‘toolbox’ is its *political dimension*. In particular, stress is now placed on “the ways in which relationalities are generated through political activity” (Featherstone 2011: 141). David Featherstone has suggested that the concept be brought into dialogue with the key Cultural Studies notion of ‘articulation’, in order to add this “directly political edge that usages of assemblage generally lack” (141). However, it seems to me that this political dimension has, at least latently, always been present in the concept of the assemblage itself. As has often been pointed out, unlike its English equivalent, the original French word *agencement* refers not only to an assembled ensemble of parts, but also to the action of fitting these together (*agencer*). It denotes both, the process and the product, and both, “the ephemeral, the emergent, the evanescent, the decentered and the heterogeneous” as well as “the structured and systematic” (Marcus & Saka 2006: 101). Since the structured whole that is an assemblage is never simply ‘there’ and given for all time, but rather the result of a process of assembling (or articulating), there is always the possibility for a politicization of the assemblage. As Thomas Nail points out, “[i]t is not just the so-called ‘application’ of the assemblage that is practical or political, but the very construction of the assemblage – the way it is arranged or laid out” (2017: 28). A *politics of assemblages*, in other words, is rooted in what, following Stuart Hall, we can call their ‘arbitrary closure’, that is, in the fact that the particular arrangement or layout of any assemblage is contingent, a product of history, and thus principally open to change.

Once the notion of the assemblage is imported into the theoretico-discursive horizon of Cultural Studies, it profoundly affects many of its central assumptions and concepts. If, following Oliver Marchart (2008: 33-36), culture, power, and identity can be considered the most basic categories of the field, together forming something like a ‘magic triangle’ in which they are inextricably interlinked, then it

would seem that all three undergo a reconceptualization once the concept of the assemblage is brought in, a reconceptualization that more strongly opens them up to the nonhuman. What follows are some methodological remarks outlining the direction for such a reconceptualization.

Culture

In an aside of an instructive essay dedicated to the subject of what constitutes a 'posthumanist reading', Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus have proposed that "the sum of the otherness projected by humans into their world" may serve as "the equivalent of a 'posthumanist' definition of culture" (2008: 101). Yet, while the deconstruction of such projections must undeniably be a crucial aspect of a 'critical posthumanism', I am not convinced by Herbrechter's and Callus' definition of culture. There are two (interrelated) problems with it: its anthropocentrism and the fact that it remains more or less representational. Bringing the notion of the assemblage to bear on our understanding of culture allows us to move beyond these difficulties and towards a properly posthumanist definition. In fact, to define culture solely in terms of signifying systems and practices, of the production and circulation of meaning, as has been common within Cultural Studies since the cultural turn, has always seemed somewhat reductive.⁸ Is culture really nothing but meanings and the making of them? What about the materiality, the recalcitrance, indeed, the *agency*, of objects? Don't they also 'make culture'? What about animals, plants? The development of a field such as material culture studies has gone some way to correcting this narrow focus on (human) textuality, even though, from a posthumanist perspective, several difficulties remain. Not least, the term 'material culture' is misleading insofar as it can be taken to imply that the material and the immaterial or symbolic are two clearly separate domains. In contrast, an understanding of culture inflected by assemblage theory would move beyond anthropocentrism, textualism, and the 'great divides', by giving a central place to the nonhuman in its various forms instead of reducing it to being merely the bearer of human projections. Thus, material artefacts, animals, plants, rocks, the climate, architecture, infrastructure, and so on would be acknowledged as an "ontologically real and active, lively presence" (Goodman 2001: 183). Now, culture (like the social) is no longer the exclusive prerogative of humanity (and neither are signs or meanings) and no longer reducible to signification. Of course, the latter remains crucial, yet the analysis is now complemented by a close attention to materiality, and reoriented by the awareness that even the "webs of significance" in which, in Clifford Geertz' immensely influential formulation, man (sic!) is "suspended" are not, after all, ones that "he himself has spun" (1973: 5) all by himself, but also the product of different kinds of nonhuman agency. As Jane Bennett puts it: "culture is *not* of our own making" (2010: 115). Therefore,

to speak of ‘culture’ today necessarily means speaking of what Latour calls hybrid ‘networks’, consisting of ‘associations’ of diverse actants, such as persons, animals, artefacts, and signs. It means speaking of ‘naturecultures’ (Haraway), of ‘material-discursive’ (Barad) or ‘material-semiotic’ ‘entanglements’ – and of the processes through which boundaries *are* drawn and seemingly bounded domains and beings come into existence⁹, processes that are nonetheless “never finished, whole, simply there and original” (Haraway 1988: 586).

If, in other words, in Raymond Williams’ famous phrase, culture has to do with ‘ways of life’, or, as E.P. Thompson suggested in his critique of Williams, with ‘ways of struggle’, then these now have to be radically rethought in terms of human-nonhuman assemblages, of “an open-ended entanglement of ways of being” (Tsing 2015: 83) (where ‘being’ is distinctly not synonymous with ‘life’). Such an approach decidedly moves beyond organicist models, conceiving of culture not as a coherent and unified whole, but as a kind of Russian *matryoshka* doll (Bennett 2010: 45) – an assemblage of assemblages (of assemblages, and so forth), a “non-totalizable sum” (Patrick Hayden quoted in Bennett 2010: 24). “To learn about an assemblage” like culture, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing points out, “one unravels its knots” (2015: 83). Such unravelling, that is, the close analysis of the composition (elements, relations, interactions) and functioning of ‘cultural assemblages’ (Bennett & Healy 2011) in their always specific situatedness (how, where, when, for whom?) is now the task of Cultural Studies.

Power

The concept of the assemblage, and the nonhuman turn in general, also has profound consequences for the ways in which we conceive power. While it forces us to rethink a number of our received assumptions about power, I would argue that it is nevertheless in some senses eminently compatible with the general orientation of Cultural Studies analyses insofar as these have always been based on a dismissal of any “essentialising metaphysics of power” (Sedlmayr 2018: 22). In other words: In the wake of scholars such as Michel Foucault, when Cultural Studies investigates power, its inquiries are typically “flat and empirical”, proceeding from the conviction that “power as such does not exist” (Foucault 1982: 786). Thus, instead of speculating about the universal nature of Power, Cultural Studies has always been interested in historically, locally, and culturally specific forms of power, their genealogies, composition, ways of functioning, etc. As we have already seen, a very similar dedication to the contingent and the concrete underlies assemblage theory. To understand power as an assemblage means primarily two things: First, that “power, like society, is the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock, or a capital that will automatically provide an explanation. Power and domination have to be produced, made up, composed.” (Latour 2005: 64) And secondly, that,

in order to be able to fully grasp this composition, agency has to be understood as distributed, and not just between human beings, but across the human-nonhuman divide. Thus, Bruno Latour replaces the ‘actor’ or ‘agent’ – a ‘subject’ confronting passive ‘objects’ – of traditional, anthropocentric political and social theory with his ‘actant’, which “can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action” (1996: 373). To speak of an actant hence “implies *no* special motivation of *human individual* actors, nor of humans in general” (373). An actant, quite simply, is that which “makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event” (Bennett 2010: 9). Building on the work of Latour, Deleuze and Guattari, Baruch Spinoza, and many others, Jane Bennett has seized on the notion of the actant in order to develop an elaborate account of ‘thing-power’, that is, of “an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve”, and to flesh out the idea of a “congregational understanding of agency” (20). Agency, she argues, is emergent and ‘distributive’: never the property of a single (human) mastermind, but always “an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage” (28), by a ‘swarm’ of what she calls ‘vital materialities’. As she points out, “insofar as anything ‘acts’ at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage” (121).¹⁰ Bennett produces a complex and extremely helpful account of the agency of assemblages, concluding that “[t]here was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore.” (31)

Such a rethinking of power and agency in light of the nonhuman turn has at least two important, interrelated consequences for the ways in which we theorize and analyze power: For one thing, as Tony Bennett has observed, it enjoins the task of “tracing the networks of associations through which particular forms of power are assembled, aiming for as dense a description as possible of the capacities that are folded into and accumulate within them” (2007: 615).¹¹ For another, it draws our critical attention to levels, aspects, and domains of power that were previously largely underexplored, ignored, or are only now becoming visible. In particular, this concerns the *material* and the *ontological* dimensions. Even though, contrary to a common perception, a consideration of materiality was never really entirely absent from Cultural Studies analyses, critics like Levi Bryant certainly have a point when they diagnose a recent overemphasis on the textual and the discursive, paradoxically even within materialism itself, leaving them wondering “where the materialism in materialism is” (Bryant 2014: 2). “Why”, Bryant asks, “is there no talk [...] of ‘stuff’, ‘physicality’, or material agencies?” (2) As he points out, this neglect has had detrimental analytic as well as political effects, since “it became nearly impossible to investigate the efficacy of things in contributing to the form social relations take. An entire domain

of power became invisible, and as a result we lost all sorts of opportunities for strategic intervention in producing emancipatory change.” (3) By contrast, once power is conceived in terms of ontologically heterogeneous assemblages, the nonhuman and the material components of these assemblages come clearly into view. For instance, infrastructure, to name just one such formerly invisible domain of power, has recently been explored by Keller Easterling not as merely a “bureaucratic or technical footnot[e]” to the “[w]ell-rehearsed theories, like those related to Capital or neoliberalism”, but as an absolutely central element in the exercise of power, a medium of what she terms ‘extrastatecraft’, “the secret weapon of the most powerful people in the world precisely because it orchestrates activities that can remain unstated but are nevertheless consequential” (2016: 22, 15). It seems to me that the work of scholars like Bryant – who speaks of ‘gravity’ instead of ‘power’ in order to escape the latter’s anthropocentric connotations and associations with discursivity – has a lot to offer if we want to develop procedures for the analysis of contemporary assemblages of power that are able to recognize and address elements such as the ones discussed by Easterling. For what Bryant outlines with his notion of ‘geopolitics’ is very much akin to what we must fashion: a framework that

would include all the issue of traditional social and political thought with its emphasis on ideology critique, questions of identity, political economy, and so on, while opening the political onto the domain of the non-human, investigating how non-humans such as microbes, animals, geography, and technologies contribute to how social assemblages come to be organized through the gravity that they exert, while also striving to give voice to non-humans as beings deserving of recognition within human social assemblages. (2014: 207)

A thus altered critical attention, broadened to include the nonhuman, the material, and the ontological, not only makes possible a timely and needed revision of our established concepts and analytics of power (e.g. regarding biopower), but also allows us to identify and tackle changes in the contemporary ‘ecology of powers’ as well as types of power that were formerly undetected: ‘ontological politics’ or ‘politics of matter’ (Papadopoulos 2014), ‘ontopower’ (Massumi 2015), ‘geopower’ (Bonneuil & Fressoz 2017: 87-96), ‘geontopower’ (Povinelli 2016), and more. Concepts such as these seem to me indispensable if Cultural Studies wants to continue its ‘political project’ in the Anthropocene. As Bennett, like many others, indicates, this should today involve a commitment to the ethical aim “to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such” (2010: 13), and thus to recognize nonhuman bodies as potential participants or members of a public (2010: 94-109).

In doing so, I believe Cultural Studies would do well – as it has in the past in some of its finest works – to integrate, along the lines suggested by Nancy Fraser (1995), such an extended emancipatory ‘politics of recognition’ with an egalitarian ‘politics of redistribution’.

Identity

Stuart Hall’s well-known 1996 essay “Who Needs ‘Identity?’” is a superb, lucid, (then) state-of-the-art discussion of the subject matter of identity, a convincing attempt, in the wake of the (post-)structuralist ‘decentering of the subject’, of “thinking it in its new, displaced or decentred position”, in particular by disarticulating the notion of identity from “its settled semantic career” and instead developing a concept that is “not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one” (1996b: 2, 3). According to this understanding, the defining characteristics of identity are no longer unity, coherence, and continuity, but fragmentarity, heterogeneity, and contingency. No longer taken as signaling a supposedly natural, primordial, stable core of the self, identity is instead seen as a tenuous construct, produced “within the play of power and exclusion” (Hall 1996b: 5), a point of ‘arbitrary closure’, or of a ‘suturing’ of interpellating social discourses and practices on the one hand and psychic processes such as investment and identification on the other. This concept has served as the foundation for countless debates and analyses concerning identity within Cultural Studies, and I think it is still valuable. Yet, in the context of the ‘magical triangle’ proposed by Marchart, I wonder whether identity was perhaps never the ideal term or category. With reference to the extensive and important work conducted under the label of a ‘genealogy of subjectification’ (Rose 1998), especially within governmentality studies, I believe that ‘*subject*’ would in fact be a more appropriate term.¹² This is so because it is the more general, encompassing category, allowing us to grasp the complex relations between culture, power, and person more comprehensively. The concept of identity should be understood as part of the concept of the subject. Whereas ‘identity’ designates merely one aspect of the subject, namely its particular mode of self-understanding and self-interpretation (a ‘hermeneutic of the self’), to ask about the ‘subject’ more generally means to inquire into the specific ‘cultural form’ which individuals adopt in particular historic and social contexts in order to become socially ‘intelligible’ (Reckwitz 2008: 9). The sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2006, 2008) has developed a heuristic framework for just such a ‘subject analysis’, dedicated to analyzing the processes of subject-formation or subjectivation through which, under specific socio-cultural conditions, human beings become or are ‘made into’ subjects. This mode of analysis investigates social and cultural orders, practices, discourses, and all kinds of assemblages from the point of view of what psychic, bodily, and affective models they produce:

A Cultural Studies subject analysis aims at ascertaining which know how and which structures of desire, which bodily routines and which self-image, which forms of demarcation from the outside and which competencies, which mental-affective orientations and instabilities the individual develops in order to become that 'human being' which the respective social orders require. (Reckwitz 2008: 10, my trans.)

While analyses focused on identity will of course remain central to Cultural Studies, in a revised magical triangle, they will become a subset of more far-reaching investigations of (dominant, alternative, residual, emergent) subject-forms, -cultures, and -orders.

Reckwitz's subject analysis is largely based on, indeed, built out of, poststructuralist theories. What happens when it is brought into an encounter with the nonhuman turn? Above all, two things: First, as Reckwitz (2008: 106-20) himself points out, it becomes clear that human beings are subjectivated not just in and through discursive regimes, ideologies, social practices, symbolic orders, etc., but also, to use Latour's terminology, through the various associations with all sorts of actants within the networks of which they are a part. Once again, materiality is emphasized here. Whether it is architecture, media, food, the climate, clothes, or other artefacts, these cannot be reduced to 'objects' which humans as sovereign 'subjects' simply confront or use – rather, humans and nonhumans are closely interconnected within historically specific assemblages, and any subject-form, with its particular psychic, mental, corporeal, perceptual, and affective constitution, is necessarily co-produced by just these linkages. This means that, secondly, our very conception of the subject must be modified as well. Already Reckwitz (2006, esp. 18-21, 81-89) conceives all subject-forms and -cultures as inevitably *hybrid*, as unstable, fissured, contradictory formations consisting of a number of heterogeneous and partly conflicting codes. It would seem that in view of the recent arguments regarding the entanglements, interpenetrations, and cross-contaminations of the human and the nonhuman, this hybridity must today be rethought in yet more radical ways. If being is not only always a becoming, but a 'becoming-with' (Haraway 2008), if corporeality is always 'trans-corporeality' (Alaimo 2010), if action is 'intra-action' (Barad 2007), and so forth, then the subject needs to be reconceptualized in terms of a human-nonhuman assemblage. Any seemingly unified actor, Latour points out, "is itself an association made up of elements which can be redistributed" (1990: 109). In a similar vein, DeLanda has argued that "persons emerge from the interaction of subpersonal components" (2006: 47), and Bennett has proposed a conception of the self "as itself an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage", "a self that is its own outside, is vibrant matter" (2010: xvii, 116). According to Bennett, just as "[i]t is futile to seek a pure nature

unpolluted by humanity”, it is equally “foolish to define the self as something purely human” (116). Speaking about the “alien’ quality of our own flesh”, Bennett writes: “My ‘own’ body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. [...] The *its* outnumber the *mes*. [...] We are [...] *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes.” (112f) Thus, as Rosi Braidotti has recently argued, emphasizing the “embedded and embodied and grounded, multi-directional and multi-scalar” ontological relationality of (human) beings, the subject has to be understood as a “dynamic convergence phenomenon”, a ‘transversal’ “*zoe/geo/techno assemblage*” (2019: 45, 41, 44). In other words, as Tsing observes, considering the subject, “purity is not an option” (2015: 27) – *this human which is not one*¹³.

Summarizing the poststructuralist critique of liberal-humanist conceptions of the subject, to which her own work significantly contributed, Judith Butler once declared that “the subject as a self-identical entity is no more” (2011: 175). Today, it almost seems as if the subject *as such* is no more. It is therefore not surprising that, in a recent special issue of the journal *Cultural Critique*, scholars felt compelled to rephrase the question of “Who Comes After the Subject?”, which had been the subject of an influential debate among numerous French philosophers in the late 1980s (Cadava et al. 1991), as “What Comes After the Subject?” (Haines & Grattan 2017b). Relatedly, Bryant has suggested that the subject should no longer be treated as a particular *type* of being, but rather as a “transitory *role* defined *functionally* in particular situations”, so that “there is no necessity to restrict the category of subject to human beings” (2014: 218, 224). Here, subjects are more or less akin to what Latour terms actants, “transitory catalytic operators” that “quilt other beings together in assemblages” (224, 225). This is a helpful approach, and ontologically speaking, I agree with such a ‘flattening’ of being. Yet, as Bryant himself notes, while humans may not be ontologically exceptional, empirically, they are nevertheless in many ways unique (that is to say: able to form or enter into unique assemblages). For this reason, they certainly require distinct modes of analysis. And after all, the fact that the Subject, that is, the unified and sovereign entity conjured by liberal humanism, never existed (ontology) has not kept this projection from having had real historical force (empiricism). All posthumanist theorizing notwithstanding, what Cary Wolfe has called the “humanist and speciesist *structure* of subjectivization” (2003: 8) remains intact. It continues to produce ‘subjects’. In fact, this production is only *possible* on the basis of a constant repression or ‘abjection’ (Kristeva 1982) of the entangled nature and hybridity of (human) existence. The semblance of unity and autonomy, in other words, is the effect of a continuous, and always incomplete, process of what Latour (1993b) calls ‘purification’, of the labor of ‘ontological hygiene’ (Graham 2002) and the

concomitant fabrication of alterity (a labor that, as Latour, Haraway, and many others have argued, is becoming ever harder and more difficult in the present).

Empirically and analytically, to speak of and investigate the subject is therefore still justified. The task of a Cultural Studies 'subject analysis' is, then, to critically examine existing subject-forms (and -cultures) as well as the processes through which they are produced. Yet, following thinkers such as Barad (2007), whose work is extremely helpful in this context, crucially, this must now include attention to the performativity of 'agential cuts' through which differential boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are drawn and stabilized and bodies are materialized. The task, in other words, is also to bring to light the underlying ontological 'maintenance work' of purification as well as the ways in which the subject is at the same time being unmade by its de facto hybridity and entanglement with the nonhuman in its various forms.

New Cartographies

Cultural Studies has long seen one of its central tasks in the critical analysis of 'maps of meaning' – which, in fact, have come to be virtually synonymous with 'culture.' I have always found this metaphor helpful, and considered Cultural Studies as an expert for this task. However, I have here argued that, in view of the profound changes in both reality and theory (the latter partly responding to the former), this metaphor and this task are no longer sufficient, and have proposed the concept of the assemblage as an alternative onto-epistemic commitment for Cultural Studies, allowing it to better tackle the complexity of the contemporary world. In a sense, I have argued that Cultural Studies, which can be said to be more obviously and self-reflexively an assemblage than many other disciplines, should partly reassemble itself, forging new associations and modifying existing ones, by opening itself up more strongly to the theoretical influx of the nonhuman turn. In doing so, its task will still be cartography. Indeed, the fact that a number of contemporary theorists (as well as artists) have recently mobilized this metaphor (see, e.g., Bryant 2014; Toscano & Kinkle 2015; Latour 2018: 2; Cord & Schleusener 2020) attests to the complexity and confusion that marks the present – adequate maps are much needed. Yet, these new maps produced by Cultural Studies will be maps of a different kind, more comprehensive (though without being totalizing in an unreflective manner), no longer restricted to (human) signification. They will be *maps of assemblages*. Gilles Deleuze, too, uses the image of the map in his discussion of the Foucauldian notion of the 'apparatus' (*dispositif*), which in his reading – in contrast to the one set forth by Giorgio Agamben (2009) – is very much like an assemblage: "Untangling these lines within a social apparatus is, in each case, like drawing up a map, doing cartography, surveying unknown landscapes, and

this is what he [Foucault] calls ‘working on the ground.’” (1992: 159) Untangling associations, tracing networks, surveying ecologies of actants, working on the ground (rather than in the lofty air of abstraction) – these are now the central elements of Cultural Studies cartography. But as in Bryant’s ‘onto-cartography’ (2014, esp. 257-67), which can be helpful in this context, mapping alone will not be enough. As not just an ‘academic’, but an ‘intellectual’ undertaking, “a project, an intervention”, as an endeavor in which “there is something *at stake*” and which “aims to make a difference in the world” (Hall 1996a: 272, 263, 264), the mapping carried out by Cultural Studies should tend to be inscribed into a ‘cartographical politics’ (Bryant 2014: 283). To use Bryant’s terminology, cartography ought to be combined with ‘deconstruction’ and ‘terraformation’ (2014: 267-79), that is to say, with the creation of ‘modal maps’ (266f) of alternative assemblages and possible futures, and with the struggle to bring these into existence. Cartography, in other words, as part of new material-semiotic *worldings*.

In the Anthropocene, more than ever, the *analytical* needs to be coupled not only with the *critical*, but also with the *affirmative*, the latter signifying not acquiescence with the status quo, but, quite to the contrary, an “abandonment of the apocalyptic mood in theory”¹⁴ (Haines & Grattan 2017a: 3). Contra Latour, I am convinced that theorists still need to demystify, critique, attack – but they *also* need to transform, care, compose, assemble (Latour 2004, 2010). This, then, is theoretical practice as “an occasion for social and political experimentation, for redrawing the limits of collectivity and individuality” – theory, that is, as “affirmations of possibility” (Haines & Grattan 2017a: 5, 4).

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¹ Both as a term and as an epoch, the meaning of the ‘Anthropocene’ is contested, there being numerous competing definitions and arguments regarding its causes, origins, and starting points. For a good overview, explicitly from the point of view of the ‘humanities,’ see Horn & Bergthaller 2020. Particularly helpful is the authors’ (2020: 31) suggestion to approach the Anthropocene not in terms of a clearly defined concept or fixed narrative, but rather as a focal point of debates, a problem, an open question, and a research program.

² However, while most commentators agree that the Anthropocene requires a rethinking of many of the central categories in which the relationship between humanity and environment has previously been thought, the nature and the extent of this reconceptualization are far from undisputed, with authors such as Kate Soper (1995, 1999), Alf Hornborg (2019) or Andreas Malm (2020) rather fiercely attacking post-humanist theorizing – “[l]ess of Latour, more of Lenin” (2020: 118), as, for instance, Malm puts it. Though there is no room to engage with these debates here, I would generally want to defend the usefulness of such theories against their critics.

³ Both terms are here used to mark a break with the ‘modern constitution’ (Latour 1993b) and its ordering and ‘purifying’ logics – what Elaine Graham (2002) has called ‘ontological hygiene.’ I follow thinkers such as Bruno Latour or John Law (2002, 2004), who have criticized these logics as a problematic type of simplification because they make it impossible to account for the ontological complexity of realities that are “excessive and in flux, not themselves neat, definite, and simply organised” (Law 2004: 14). It is not, of course, as if simplification could ever be avoided – it cannot – or that it is, per se, objectionable – it certainly isn’t. Nor is it the case that ‘messiness’ is always and necessarily good or desirable (one point on which I disagree with certain new materialist theories). As Law explains: “Whether realities that are fluid, fractional, multiple, indefinite and active are good or not has to be judged circumstance by circumstance. There is no general rule. These are not political goods in and of themselves. But to enact general prohibitions on (the recognition of) realities that display these attributes is to enact a class politics of ontology that is a bad. Greater permeability and recognition of fluidity and all the rest, overall this cannot be a bad.” (2004: 149) What is thus needed is a greater analytic *reflexivity*, based on an awareness of ontological messiness, “so that the question no longer is, *Do we simplify or do we accept complexity? It becomes instead a matter of determining which simplification or simplifications we will attend to and create and, as we do this, of attending to what they foreground and draw our attention to, as well as what they relegate to the background.*” (Mol & Law 2002: 11) The map-making I discuss in the conclusion of this paper would have to attempt to be one of such “modes of relating that allow the simple to coexist with the complex” (Mol & Law 2002: 16).

⁴ Like the ones from 2006, so these examples too are of course highly selective.

⁵ I repeat the term ‘New Cultural Studies’ from Hall’s and Birchall’s book here though I am not really convinced by it. What I find problematic about it is that it implies, or at least can be taken to imply, a naively progressivist understanding of the development of the field, according to which the ‘old’ is at some point simply replaced by the ‘new’. Such a notion is not only inadequate with regards to the complex and convoluted history, not just of Cultural Studies, but of virtually every academic discipline, it also lends itself to functioning as support of what we may characterize as the ‘managerial’ or ‘entrepreneurial’ variant of Cultural Studies, which appears to be winning ever more ground today and is gradually cutting its way towards hegemony. This manifestation of the discipline precisely delegates what is frequently referred to as the ‘Birmingham tradition’ of Cultural Studies to the dead past, claiming that its activist, engagé orientation, its pursuit of intellectual practice as a politics, was really nothing but the product of a particular historical moment and is more or less out of time today. In this view, what, following Foucault, we could call the latter’s ‘ethos’ appears nowadays as highly suspect, incompatible with the standards of ‘objective’ science. Instead, we are told that, now that virtually ‘all the battles have been fought’, we should rather dedicate ourselves to a sober, ‘disinterested’ analysis of cultural phenomena and keep ‘partisanship’, and politics more generally, out of it. That this type of doing Cultural Studies is, inevitably, *also a politics* is, of course, withheld or not even realized. In fact, its advocates are right: this, finally, is Cultural Studies as *discipline*. It is a Cultural Studies adequate to, because supportive of, the neoliberal university, our contemporary, ‘modulating’ factory, or corporation, of knowledge (Raunig 2013). As such, I believe that this ‘New Cultural Studies’ still deserves more critical attention, as part of the field’s ongoing self-reflection and (Foucauldian) genealogy. In contrast, as has hopefully become evident at this point, my research project considers itself part of the tradition that conceives of Cultural Studies as a “political project” (Stuart Hall)

and, beyond that, of the struggle for the ‘undercommons of the Enlightenment’ both within and beyond the university (Harney & Moten 2013: 22-43).

⁶ Most recently, the Deleuze-scholar Ian Buchanan (2020), who has already been working with the notion of the assemblage for quite some time, has also produced a comprehensive study in which he lays out his version of assemblage theory, which is marked by a strong fidelity to the work of Deleuze and Guattari. While this book contains many instructive arguments, DeLanda’s approach – a ‘neo-assemblage theory’ that is not strictly Deleuzian – is the more helpful one for my purposes, as it offers itself as the kind of ‘hinge’ with the theories of the nonhuman I have been talking about. Furthermore, even though I pursue a different line of thinking here, it should also be noted that – not least via the work of Gilbert Simondon, which was a major source of inspiration for Deleuze and Guattari – the concept of the assemblage is also linked with the field of cybernetics, which similarly emphasizes emergence, processuality, complex interplays, contingent and heterogeneous unities, etc. For more on this important dimension of the posthuman, see Hayles 1999.

⁷ See Castree 2002. In this context, let me also note that, interestingly, some of Latour’s more recent works (2017, 2018, 2019) seem to represent something of a moderation of his earlier, harsher statements regarding the tradition of critique, the term ‘capitalism’, etc. Conversely, there are now several leftist and Marxist theorists whose work is more or less heavily indebted to Latour’s thinking (Benjamin Noys [2019: 38] speaks of a ‘left Latourianism’, Alf Hornborg [2020] of a ‘posthumanist Marxism’). See, e.g., Mitchell 2011; Moore 2015.

⁸ A concept like the famous ‘circuit of culture’ (du Gay et al. 1997) already somewhat acknowledges this. Nevertheless, like the ‘magic triangle’ under discussion here, the circuit too will need to be revised in light of the nonhuman turn. (In fact, the more recent, second edition of the book in which it was originally proposed already explicitly concedes this [du Gay et al. 2013].)

⁹ As Tony Bennett (2007), one of the most important proponents of actor-network theory and (new) materialism within Cultural Studies, has observed, the ‘culturalness’ of cultural assemblages is thus derived from, rather than preceding, the assembly. In analogy to science studies, he proposes the perspective of ‘culture studies’ to account for the ways in which the assemblage of heterogeneous elements produces culture as what, following Latour, he calls ‘a specific form of public organization’.

¹⁰ As Levi Bryant notes, in such a model, it seems reasonable to distinguish between different degrees of agency (2014: 220-22).

¹¹ In this context, a dialogue between the study of assemblages and the study of what Foucault termed ‘apparatuses’ (*dispositifs*) (see, e.g., Agamben 2009) may prove fruitful, where both can perhaps be understood as dialectically related, with the latter effectively being a specific type of the former (Legg 2011).

¹² In fact, in Hall’s article, the two levels of analysis – subject and identity – repeatedly slide into one another.

¹³ It is my impression that the work of Luce Irigaray, to whose famous essay “This Sex Which Is Not One” (1985) I allude here, deserves a careful rereading within and, indeed, articulation to the project of a critical posthumanism. Particularly with regards to contemporary art or popular cinema (e.g., the ‘new weird’) it would seem as if new, posthumanist ‘imaginaries’ are emerging that present a distinct alternative to what I would describe as the hegemonic overlay of ‘phallogormorphism’ and ‘-centrism’ with anthropomorphism and -centrism.

¹⁴ Christian Haines and Sean Grattan consider posthumanism as a whole as part of this shift from critique to affirmation (2017a: 28n1). On the topic of the different ‘modes’ of posthumanist theorizing (critical, affirmative, etc.), see Cord 2022a.

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