

Hegemonic Neomaterialism and its Limitations

Suhail Malik

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The basic claim of Speculative Realism (SR) across its several fronts is that what lies beyond human cognition can be apprehended in its status as alien to our apprehension of it - that thought can think beyond itself, as Quentin Meillassoux has put it. This is often and correctly understood to be a vigorous challenge on poststructuralist and postmarxist orthodoxies of contemporary art theory which, in their divergent ways, propose that the real is necessarily shaped by discourse, social structure, economy, desire, subjecthood, the material or psychic structures of thought, and so on. Extending his influential term 'correlationism', which precisely designates the antirealist stipulation that thinking always accompanies and accommodates what is thought, Meillassoux has recently identified the premise of these orthodoxies to be what he calls a 'subjectalism'.¹ Subjectalism includes structures which rescind conceptual thought as the condition for apprehension but nonetheless posit noncognitive or even nonhuman premises like social structures and systematic discourses as the condition for the apprehension of the real thereby reproducing the *logic* of correlationism in displaced form.

Given the evident incongruity and even incompatibility between SR and poststructuralism broadly put, what has been strange and perplexing in recent debates is how and why the strands of SR - primarily object-oriented ontology espoused by Graham Harman, Levi Bryant and Timothy Morton amongst others - have been assimilated with the developments of poststructuralism from the mid-2000s such as materialist feminism, affect theory, some queer theory, and performativity theory. There's certainly shared interest in these approaches in breaking up the centrality of the human actor or extending the world of relationality beyond its historical privileged agents (from all kinds of subjects to objects), but their other basic commitments are mostly wholly incompatible. Nonetheless, it's this confused hybrid of theoretical stances that the word neomaterialism now predominantly signifies in the crossover of academic theory and contemporary art.

This variant of neomaterialism is however but an expropriation of SR, taking two main forms: (i) an institutional channel, in which many claims are made by those with established institutional and cultural power to engage with SR though they in fact have nothing to do with those who propound it; (ii) a theoretical expropriation, which repudiates SR even in the claim to endorse it. The latter is instructive for understanding what neomaterialism has recently come to mean in contemporary art compared to what it could or even should mean. One reason for its adoption may be that it suits and vindicates a standard set of claims for antitheoretical, intuitionist, or 'machinic' and networked models of practice by paradoxically giving them a renewed theoretical-academic legitimacy. This is not only an antitheoretical theory, a turn to materiality and naturalized

¹ Quentin Meillassoux, 'Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning', in Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik (eds.), *Genealogies of Speculation: Materialism and Subjectivity Since Structuralism* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2016).

economies that relies upon legitimizing academic formulations. It also claims an interest in SR while at the same time very precisely defusing and defanging its most challenging demands on the orthodoxies of both contemporary art and theoretical-academic hegemons. Or rather, if there is something shared here between SR and its confounding with artpractices that are in fact more reliant on poststructuralist developments, it's on the basis of a common subjectalism that just serves to retrench the received set of commitments in a new guise. Reproducing received artistic and theoretical-academic commitments according to institutionally and discursively accepted and prevalent form, this currently prevalent notion of neomaterialism can be called a hegemonic neomaterialism (HNM). HNM not only repudiates the basic anticorrelationist claim of SR but takes for itself whatever credit and interest SR may have while denying the latter's demand for a thoroughgoing realism.

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While contemporary art may have taught us that appropriation is fine, HNM is for this reason – quite forcibly – SR's *expropriation*. Equally, and other other hand, alert to immobilising and consoling errors of such an expropriation, an SR that rigorously insists on the realist or materialist endeavour must repudiate HNM. The task is not at all straightforward. One strand of HNM that presents a particular difficulty because of its proximity to the core claims of SR is the naturalization of rational thought. Here, conceptual, theoretical and social conditions and constructions are held to be particular cases of general if not universal cosmological or vitalist forces. Gilles Deleuze's philosophy and its offshoots are currently the primary bases for this doctrine. These naturalizations on the one hand support SR's realism in that they do *not* propose a rational cognitive subject as the basis for how the real is to be apprehended. They furthermore completely repudiate the human as the centre or condition for the apprehension of nature. Rather, nature grasps nature; life grasps life and the unliving. Thought thinking the real outside of thought is but one example of this general tendency of life or matter; and conversely rational thought will sink back into the overall and common distribution of matter once the human life is extinguished, as it inevitably will be. While these doctrines do without the theological hangover of an assumed exceptionality of humans from nature, they are on the other hand nonetheless subjectalisms: life and matter and their organizational modes take the place of the subject that is traditionally at the base of how the real is dealt with. For all of their dispensing of the human and of rational thought more particularly as the condition for the apprehension of the real, these naturalizations are but subjectalisms. Contemporary art likewise endorses and celebrates this kind of subjectalism when it claims to release production and distribution effects to systems processes and networks; to palpitating and spontaneous matter and its self-organization; to and automated responsiveness of humans (as affect) or machines (as algorithmic selection), or to the two together in some quasicybernetic configuration; or a combination of some or all of these automated and subjectless or anticritical formation.

The challenge for a rigorously nonsubjectalist SR is how to countermand these kinds of theoretical and practical formulation without reverting either to HNM or, on the other hand, to anthropocentric-secularized formulations of human supremacy and centrality. The anthropocentrism of the latter is relatively easy to identify and contest, and HNM does that too. But it is HNM itself that presents the more intractable problem here, and in two ways. It

either takes an ‘ethical’ or subordinate relation to matter, espousing a passive or responsively aesthetic appreciation of objects or matter, prioritizing them over any rational apprehension and its alleged subordination of the real to instrumental or anthropocentric requirements (typical here are certain ‘wonder of nature’ responses to environmental despoliation). Or, worse yet, HNM proposes that nature and objective systems of all kinds can be apprehended in a general set of ‘relations’ that are putatively alien to anthropic and subjective constitution but which are however – mysteriously and inexplicably - articulable and recognizable via metaphorical displacements of human sensuality and acculturation (for example, ‘vibrancy’ and ‘withdrawal’).

The demand to move past these well-received subjectalist doctrines is made not only for the sake of positioning what might be the better and more radical materialism. It’s also the case that presenting human sociality and accomplishments as ramifications of nature or of what objects are as such prohibits addressing the more complex condition by which nature is now thoroughly transformable and mutable because of human-technoscientific intervention. From the subatomic to the atmospheric and into the extraterrestrial (early days, but still), nature and matter are no longer tenable as categories to which humans are merely external or, conversely, an unexceptional byproduct. Nature is now itself anthropogenically constituted - or can be. Modern physics, chemistry, biology, and information science are not observational or descriptive sciences but fundamentally constructive technosciences. Not only is this what matter *can* be, what might be called an ‘engineering in general’ is how matter *must* now anyway be understood.

Subjectalisms of the cosmovitalist kind, which naturalize humans and rational thought, or of the HNM kind, which also renaturalize nature and matter themselves, not only fall short of the conditions of anthropogenically constituted matter and nature. They also more actively invert the constructiveness of matter itself, postulating it as *preconstructed* or exorbitant to rational engineering. This is a theoretical and political regression, especially with regard to the formation of the emerging politics and strategies that will be necessary to meet the challenges of planetary-scale climate change indexed by the term ‘Anthropocene’. For engineering-in-general means that matter and nature are themselves artificially fabricated, which is to say constituted by rationally-determined processes and praxes. And this presents an insurmountable theoretical *and practical* obstacle for naturalized materialisms which typically look to subordinate rational cognition and fabrication to material and organizational processes that precede or are external to anthropogenic involvement, or beyond the deliberate intervention of engineering-in-general.

One option here is to not only affirm the particularity of anthropogenic artificiality distinct to nature, even if human sentience emerges from nature because of evolutionary contingencies, but also to ramify it further yet to advance the artificing of both anthropic conditions and nature via these rational processes of discourse, technoscience, and other praxes. This is for example the theoretical and political demand of Left Accelerationism in relation to current capitalist developments.² Such a move requires an affirmation of the

² See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, ‘#Accelerate: The Manifesto for Accelerationist Politics’, in Armen Avanessian and Robin Mackay (eds.), *#accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth and Berlin: Urbanomic and Merve, 2014), pp. 347-62. Though it does not explicitly identify itself as an accelerationist tract,

rational construction and fabrication of nature, the social, and the human itself. This artificing leads not just to a general equivalence of relationality, as it does in HNM, but to an interventionary, constructed, and directed social and natural future. Art of course has the capacity to take its role in this, and is maybe even a privileged historical name for this ambition. But contemporary art as generative condition of HNM cannot.

the thesis is elaborated in greater detail in Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015)