



## Materialist media theory: an introduction

by G. Bollmer, New York & London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 198 pp.,  
\$26.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9781501337093

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## BOOK REVIEW

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On a recent road trip, I tried to listen to an essay collection by a late American writer who was known, among other things, for his gratuitous use of footnotes. This presented a practical challenge for the book's narrator: with no "bottom of the page" in which to sequester footnotes, how was the imagined listener to know what was and wasn't the body text of the essays? Footnotes, the narrator duly explained, would be delivered in a kind of *sotto voce* in contrast to the meatier baritone of the body text. Let's just say that this did not work. Despite the narrator's best efforts, I soon became annoyed by the erratic switching between full and half voice, which (in my view) blunted the quality of an essay I otherwise remembered enjoying. So I abandoned the collection for a different, more conventional audiobook, one that told a story from start to finish without much in the way of typographical flourish. Some things, it seems, are just meant to be read.

What is there to be learned from this very modest disappointment? It's not as if the audio version of the essay I had hoped to consume was "worse" because it was composed of different words (it wasn't). The problem, so to speak, was the relation of its words to the media that "held" them and, by extension, the creative possibilities these relations both enabled and foreclosed. Ontologically, then, it is difficult to speak of these two "texts" (the printed and the aural) as *the same essay* unless we are willing to abandon any consideration of the media artifacts that inscribed, stored, and circulated them. And doing so would miss something important in the experience of creating and consuming media, as well as severely curtail the capacities, critical and otherwise, for analyzing it.

Speaking broadly, many scholars have expressed similar frustration with representational critique and other "reading"-centric approaches to cultural artifacts that have predominated in the humanities over the last few decades. One consequence of this shift is that many have turned away from the text and interpretive methods (whether content analysis, ideological critique, rhetorical criticism, etc.) and toward how the physical capacities of media produce and delimit texts as objects, shaping, though never quite determining, the conditions of their circulation through space and their persistence across time. If there is a common thread to this material turn—technically a revival, for materialism was an established tradition prior to the various linguistic and cultural turns of high postmodernism—it is that it concerns itself primarily with how physical matter *matters*. Even so, materialisms have taken many forms across many disciplines and emerge out of different intellectual lineages (Marx, McLuhan, etc.), not all of which are necessarily sympathetic to one other. Object-oriented ontology, thing theory, media infrastructures, new materialism, material rhetoric, German media theory, vital materialism, speculative realism, media archaeology (etc.)—all claim to take *things*, *objects*, or just *stuff* seriously in one way or another. Though matter may indeed be back on the menu, there are nevertheless significant (and often confusing) gradations to *thinking* matter, both in theory and practice.

All of this makes Grant Bollmer's *Materialist Media Theory*, an able guide to this dizzying landscape, a timely publication. Bollmer's goal is simple enough: "to convince [the reader] that physical materiality is essential for any study of media." (p. 1) If that seems obvious, it is the purpose of his lengthy introduction to point out how complex taking this position

seriously is and why it has become necessary at all. Aligning himself within the many media theorists who have engaged McLuhan both to extend his insights and critique their (very real) shortcomings, Bollmer argues that interpretive paradigms have dominated media studies for too long. This has oriented researchers toward questions about what media represent and how those representations in turn construct social reality. There's nothing wrong with such questions, of course, but they can be (and often are) asked with an implicit assumption that media are merely "host" to the "real" objects of study—i.e. texts—rather than something with agency of its own. As a counterweight, Bollmer claims that it is necessary for contemporary scholars to resurrect medium theory and foreground how the materiality of media "shapes the possibilities for politics, space, time, and experience." (p. 3) Underwriting this project is a convincing critical attitude that centers the political import of media technologies, which, as Bollmer rightly notes, "are locations for the perpetuation of inequality and management of social difference." Ultimately, it is by recognizing that the politics of media cannot be reduced to representation that scholars may examine how power is enacted and resisted through the relations of time and space that media create.

Along with its introduction and epilogue, Bollmer's book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1, "Representations and Performances," orients the reader away from asking questions about what media *mean* and toward what media *do*. The argument walks a tightrope here: It is undoubtedly true that some materialist scholarship proceeds as if meaning is irrelevant, a position that courts (among other things) technological determinism. Worse, insofar as scholarship on representation often grapples with the politics of identity, dismissing representation can easily become "a reactionary position [that], intentionally or no, works to legitimate discrimination, prejudice, and hatred." (p. 24) Yet Bollmer is at his best when he points out the false binary at work here: the point is not that materiality is more important than representation, but that *representations are themselves material*. Pulling from Judith Butler and Karen Barad, he elaborates a theory of "performative materiality." It is by emphasizing performativity, Bollmer summarizes, that "we can conceptualize representation as something that emerges because of the material capacities of bodies and technologies to represent, along with the power of representations to shape and determine how bodies come to matter." (p. 50) This orientation, among other things, makes it easy to discuss why a given essay might work better in print than audio *without* giving up on the content of the essay.

Chapter 2, "Inscriptions and Techniques," builds on this theory of performative materiality by elaborating on the implications of a seemingly simple fact: that a medium permits (or prevents) something to be written down and stored over time. Drawing on an extended discussion of how marginalia in archives has often enabled the subaltern to materialize even in "official" texts, Bollmer lays out the political stakes of inscription while also showing how this orientation sidesteps thorny (and frequently unproductive) questions about intention in favor of how the material specificity of a medium shapes how information (aural, textual, and otherwise) can be written, organized and retrieved. A useful discussion of Michel Foucault and Friedrich Kittler's respective understandings of the archive clarify how media technologies, from note cards to hard drives, are as much a part of the historical *a priori* as discourse—another reminder that matter and discourse are co-constitutive, or "infra-active" in Karen Barad's term. The chapter ends with a discussion of Bernhard Siegert's theory of cultural techniques, expanding the domain of inscription from texts to all manner of objects produced by humans that bear the traces of their creation.

Having laid out the stakes and foundations of media performativity, Chapter 3, "Spaces and Times," turns its attention to what Bollmer calls *spatiotemporal materialism*: an

awareness of how the materialities of media create or transform relations in time and space. To some degree, this is a re-packaging of Canadian media theorist Harold Innis's well-known distinction between time-biased media (e.g. that which persists across time, like stone) and space-biased media (that which can be easily transmitted across space). Bollmer's intervention is to point out that while all media create relations in time and space, they do so unevenly and, hence, are political insofar as they create different spatial and temporal regimes. (Hence the plurals in the chapter's title). This should, as he notes, cast doubt on many of the spatial and temporal metaphors, from global village to accelerationism, common in political thought that fail to account for the heterogeneity of time(s) and space(s).

Chapter 4, "Bodies and Brains," which grapples with the materiality of speech and thought by elaborating a theory of "neurocognitive materialism," is arguably the book's most abstract chapter (though still considerably clearer than much of the scholarship it discusses!). We are accustomed to thinking of thought as immaterial, and yet, as Bollmer argues, mustering both the philosophy of mind and its McLuhanite critics, thought is not free-floating. Rather, it is both enabled and constrained by the material facts of the unified body and brain, which shape (among other things) what sounds can be made and the forms thought may take. Even so, it is not possible to think of the brain and body in these terms without acknowledging how both are produced historically through particular technological apparatuses—a key insight of media archaeologists. "We can't think *about* media," as Bollmer summarizes, "we only think *in* media" (p. 138). The chapter ends on an interesting—and provocative—question of whether we are able to every truly understand our sociotechnical positionality when it is that very positionality that enables thinking in the first place. McLuhan famously wrote that fish know exactly nothing of water; we humans may be marginally more successful in thinking media, but the degree to which we are is, for Bollmer, an open question.



The final content chapter, "Objects and Affects," attempts to unify affect theory with the growing body of scholarship that attempts to theorize the role of the non-human in the shaping of reality, a category that includes object-oriented ontology (OOO) and various new materialisms. Unifying these is no easy task, given their seemingly irreconcilable, meta-physical assumptions about objects: does an object have an existence in excess of its relations (as speculative realism and OOO might have it), or is it relations all the way down? Whether Bollmer's resolution—a "both-and" approach that emphasizes the multiplicity of beings and relations, heavily indebted to Katherine Behar and Sara Ahmed's object-oriented feminism—would be accepted by object-oriented philosophers or affect theorists is not clear to this reviewer. But even if one isn't persuaded by this argument, the chapter still offers a lucid tour through heady debates in contemporary metaphysics.

The book ends with "10 Theses on the Materiality of Media," a useful distillation of a wide-ranging book. The arguments of the preceding chapters tend to proceed synthetically—that is, they tend to unite existing theories according to a consistent, materialist logic, rather than "inventing" new ones. As a consequence, it's easy to find oneself nodding along to Bollmer's theoretical moves while missing the actual interventions they would make in practice. The punchy theses help remind the reader that thinking materialism is not, in fact, merely a set of arguments but a *way* of doing research into media differently. But they are not quite enough. Few, I suspect, would disagree with the tenets of materialist media theory out of hand; the issue is that scholars in media studies—the ideal audience for this book—are not always accustomed to thinking in these terms. *How* are we to look askance? What would a given study look like if it had been conducted from a materialist perspective? How would this differently construct the problem space, or transform the objects of analysis? In what ways would the research questions be translated to account for the mattering of physical

matter? Bollmer, for better and worse, then leaves the reader with what is arguably the most important task: to move materialist media theory from something one can agree with to something one can *use*.

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