Article

The Virtual as Affirmative Praxis: A Neo-Materialist Approach

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Abstract: This chapter addresses the resonances between the concept of the virtual and a material philosophy of life, based on heterogeneity, hybridity, and becoming. It outlines the basic tenet of this materialist philosophy and explores its implications, in relation to the notions of difference and becoming. It, also, highlights the importance of an ethics of affirmation, which may balance the creative potential of critical thought with a dose of negative criticism and the oppositional consciousness that such a stance, necessarily, entails. Situating this project in the context of cognitive capitalism, it discusses the question of how to resist the injustice, violence, and exclusions of the times, our times, the better to resist them and engage with them in an affirmative manner.

1. One Concept: Materialism as the Non-Reductive Property of Living Matter

The virtual is a materialist way of defining the force of matter as embodied, embedded, relational, and affective in a vital, but not reductive, manner. The concept of the virtual instils the temporality of the constant becoming the ontological core of matter, assuming that all entities are variations on the same matter that unfolds, relationally, across multiple axes of encounter. This dynamic property of living matter is what makes it vital, that is to say, a non-essentialised vector of becoming.

Contemporary neo-materialism, when compared with earlier philosophical versions, is marked by a more comprehensive understanding of matter itself. This entails a closer relationship between the three cultures of philosophy and the humanities, the social sciences, and the life sciences (Kagan 2009). This transversal approach bridges the gap between the binary oppositions of nature/culture, human/non-human, and technology/matter. It proposes to replace such dualisms with a naturecultural continuum, which is immanent and, hence, embedded and embodied, constitutionally linked to others as well as technologically mediated. That is to say, naturecultural matter is a heterogeneous assembly that connects but does not amalgamate.

A neo-materialist approach, thus defined, does not entail the dismissal of the importance of language, signification, or meaning-making. It, rather, points out the limitations of the linguistic turn, as formulated in the American reception of French philosophy in the second half of the 20th century (Cusset 2008; Redfield 2016). Whereas the linguistic turn gives priority to the semiotic theory of language and representation in the process of subject formation, the materialist turn looks towards the vitality of matter itself and its self-organising capacity. When confronted by the thick and painful materiality of the current environmental crisis on the one hand, and the divisive social implications of the new technological advances on the other—a historical condition I referred to as the post-human convergence (Braidotti 2013, 2019)—I think that a new materialism is urgently needed.

Materialism is about the complexity of being embodied, embedded, relational, and affective. It is a philosophy of immanence, in that it assumes that matter is vital, intelligent, and self-organising, which, of course, includes a structural relationship to non-human entities. These non-humans are geological, zoological, ecological, and technological 'others', and they relate to humans not in any linear sequence or succession, but rather in dynamic

inter-relations, transpositions, and becomings. What moves them is their shared capacity to affect and be affected by one another. This mutual force of attraction sets in motion flows of relations that inform and transform all participants. Their generative interaction enables the instantiations of novel potentials and capacities—the virtual—and it, thereby, expresses the ontological relationality that defines all living entities. However, it is obviously affected by specific historical conditions and is never outside the social, though it exists as the core capacity of all matter to be activated. To a certain extent, therefore, vital materialism prompts a form of philosophical realism, in assuming that matter cannot be reduced to a social construction, but should be understood to exist, independently, of human representation. This line is in keeping with the physics of matter itself, as combinations of elementary particles that are never stable but, rather, "vibrate and fluctuate constantly between existence and non-existence" (Rovelli 2014, p. 30). The vitality of matter today has been extended to the technological apparatus, which is 'live', smart, and self-correcting.

Vital neo-materialism is, therefore, an enlarged and dynamic materialism that cannot be easily accommodated within the binary and polarising oppositions of matter/mind and nature/culture. It is activated by the intrinsic tendency of living matter to be actualised, yet with untapped forces, competences, and relations. This virtual generative force is the heart of the matter. It can also be described as materialism in a differential mode, which moves away from dualistic thinking, while avoiding holistic organicism. It rejects an undifferentiated system—the tendentious 'flat' ontology—that would form alleged equivalences across all species, all technologies, and all organisms, under one common signifier. The transversal character of neo-materialism allows, on the contrary, for materiality to emerge as the differential common denominator across the human, non-human, and dehumanised entities of all species.

That common denominator is the relational character of the vital properties of matter itself, that is to say, its constitutive heterogeneity, not any holistic homogeneity. To say that vital relationality is the ontological core of matter means that all material entities are driven by the power to differ from within, in so far as their process of individuation depends upon, requires, and co-exists with all the other entities they encounter. All entities are, therefore, 'dividuals', traversed and co-constructed by the affective impact of others. Affect is the gravitational force that attracts them—the ethical powers of joy and affirmation—keeping in mind Nietzsche's distinction between morality and ethics. The former is the implementation of rules and protocols of acceptable behaviour, while the latter is about relations and intensities. Ethics is, therefore, an ethology of forces, which mobilise power relations as multi-layered and pluri-facetted. Mindful that power functions both as a restrictive force (*potestas*, or entrapment) and as an affirmative one (*potentia*, or empowerment). These different modalities of power are not mutually exclusive but, rather, co-exist as multiple facets of the same process, the perennial unfolding of yet-unexplored possibilities.

The primacy of the relation re-positions difference as a verb, in a process ontology that is heterogeneous and constitutionally hybrid. Contrary to Masumi's equation of the virtual to pure abstraction (2002), I see it as the capacity to be instantiated, by emerging as the core relational force of all entities and, more specifically, of their capacity to persevere in their relational potency. This is what allows vital neo-materialism to acknowledge the specificity of different bound categories and species, while emphasising cross-species interconnection and mutual dependence. It, accordingly, respects differences in intensities, properties, and locations, and prioritises a relational ethics of mutual affirmation.

Methodologically, neo-materialism allows for more precise analyses of contemporary power formations. Exploring both discursive and material practices, it exposes the normative power of the traditional humanist and anthropocentric ideals of 'the Man of reason' (Lloyd 1984). It also calls for adequate analyses of the role these ideals have played, in constructing sexualised and radicalised hierarchies of dehumanised others, as well as the exclusion of naturalised and nonanthropomorphic others. I have argued, by extension, that a post-human materialist approach focuses on the complex workings of the system of

human exceptionalism within neoliberal, biogenetic, and cognitive capitalism. New materialism provides more precise analytical tools to reveal, specifically, how the contemporary market economy capitalises on the genetic propensities and vital potencies of matter and life itself (Braidotti 2006; Rose 2007; Cooper 2008; Protevi 2013).

A vital materialist philosophy of becoming stresses trans-species inter-dependence and relational collaboration, not only with the material eco-systems and their non-human entities, but also with technological apparatus and artefacts. Accordingly, matter is *re*-materialized by becoming embedded and embodied in the physical ravages of environmental depletion, climate change, and global pandemics. At the same time, matter is, also, *de*-materialized, through advanced computational and bio-genetic technological interventions (Fuller 2005). This is only an apparent dematerialisation, however, which actually involves a material reconfiguration into another kind of matter: codes, numbers, storage, algorithms, etc.

This double pull, towards rematerialisation and dematerialisation, is constitutive of a vital neo-materialist ontology and is crucial to the logistics of perception and actualisation of the virtual (Massumi 2002). It is an internal vacillation or swing, that need not be resolved but must be acknowledged and operationalised. Post-human thought embraces the tensions of neo-materialism and repurposes them, by alternatively re- and de-naturalising, strategically, all naturecultural-mediated matter. It, thus, produces a process ontology of cross-species relations that includes the inorganic and the technological apparatus. It foregrounds relationality and difference as the engines for the actualisation of the perennial unfolding of virtual modes of becoming. Moreover, relationality, as driven by affirmative ethics, turns this intimately collaborative vision of matter into a value, thereby criticising the profit-oriented incursions of contemporary capitalism into life and living matter.

Enfleshed subjects are both material and in the process of perpetual becoming: embodied entities are materiality in process, and, also, signify sociality, but, above all, bodies are relational and affective. This means they are capable of incorporating external influences and en/unfolding their own affects outward, in a constant in-between manner. Embodied and embedded subjects in a neo-materialist frame are time machines, as well. They are mobile entities in space and time, enfleshed memories capable of lasting through discontinuous variations of intensity, while remaining faithful to their ontological core. That core is the desire to persevere in one's existence, which forms the basis for an ethics of affirmation.

What is affirmed is desire, freedom, and becoming, and what makes the actualisation of these values possible, is the force of the virtual as the structural capacity of all entities to differ from themselves, as argued above. This non-unitary structure, however, is not framed by an ontology of negativity, antagonism, and lack (as in the Hegelian and Lacanian paradigm). It is, rather, supported by ontological positivity, a non-binary notion of difference and the idea of desire as plenitude and generative excess (as in the Spinozist–Deleuzian paradigm).

Critical Spinozism is of the essence, for the case for vital neo-materialism. Spinoza's central idea being that we, humans and non-humans, are all part of a common matter or nature. There is no mind–body dualism, but rather a continuum and also a parallelism between mind and matter as well as nature and society, in that all matter is capable of affecting and being affected. Spinozist philosophy produces a careful renaturalisation of subjectivity, which challenges the reductive reading of scientific reason. It, also, refuses to see the political sphere of the *polis* as being dualistically opposed to the state of nature (*physis*). Last but not least, it de-links the ethics and politics of the human animal—*bios*—from the non-human dimension—*zoe*.

Spinozist–Deleuzian materialism bridges all those divides. Matter and thought are different but equal attributes and expressions of the same substance, linked by productive resonances. This produces an environmentally integrated form of trans-individuality, and a non-unitary vision of the subject as a heterogeneous assemblage. Obviously, our relationship to the natural continuum is affected by the historical social context in which we live. Nature is immersed in history and social structures, and vice-versa, without dualistic

oppositions. What gets foregrounded is the process of constitutive trans-individuality of all entities, human beings included, thereby rejecting the transcendental power of consciousness as the organising principle and a distinctive human trait (Deleuze 1988, 1990; Balibar 1994).

For neo-Spinozist thinkers (Lloyd 1994, 1996), the immanent, naturalistic worldview demands an adequate understanding of one's life conditions, through a process of gradual clarification of the ethical forces at play in one's relationship, to the said conditions and their affective charges. Adequate understanding is rational, in the sense of not being superstitious, fanatical, or caught in the delusions of unchecked passions. The task of reaching an adequate understanding of the conditions that weigh upon us is collaborative and relational. It is driven by 'common notions' that connect us to kindred spirits and link the force of the imagination to the power of reason. The process, therefore, entails a better knowledge of ethology, the physics of bodies, and the validity of ideas. Spinoza applies these basic notions to a political analysis that opposes despotism, authoritarianism, and mob politics, electing democracy as the only system capable of supporting free subjects' quest for adequate knowledge and joyful passions. Spinoza takes critical distance from liberal philosophers, such as Locke and Hobbes, and contests the contractualist model of the social contract—which is, incidentally, also a sexual contract biased against women and LBGTQ+ people (Pateman 1988)—with a more radical idea of democracy from below. These assumptions allow for a post-human "vital politics" (Olkowski 1999; Braidotti 2002; Bennett 2010; Sharp and Taylor 2016).

As a consequence, materialism is not an idealised internalisation of the outside world through grids of cultural representations. There is no such thing as an inert outside-of-the-human—be it body, stone, earthworm, or code—whose existence depends on the activities and perceptions of the human mind, although matter does get filtered by a linguistic grid and internalised by humans as a psychic representation. This relational materialism entails a form of philosophical realism, which asserts the existence of entities in the world, independently of the existence of the human mind (Delanda 2006, 2016). This is a distributed sense of neural agency, which argues that the human mind and the world it inhabits are, inextricably, entangled in a myriad of ways. Of course, the human mind has the ability to perceive and visualise the world, but the concepts and mental representations of the world we form in our minds do not have the power to change the qualities of the entities thus perceived.

To open up to and take on the world, however, means to take in the pain of the world, its negative aspects, and its wounds. In his commentary on Spinoza, Deleuze (1988, p. 22) stresses his extensive use of the term 'poison'—which in Latin is 'virus'—to describe the impact of this encounter. Negativity enters our system as we embrace the world: "all the phenomena that we group under the heading of Evil, illness, and death, are of this type: bad encounters, poisoning, intoxication, relational decomposition". They stand for the negativity that undermines the affirmative ethical life, in a "dreadful concatenation of sad passions; first, sadness itself, then hatred, aversion, mockery, fear, despair, *morsus conscientiae*, pity, indignation, envy, humility, repentance, self-abasement, shame, regret, anger, vengeance, cruelty". (Deleuze 1988, p. 26). Like many diseases, negativity (poison) goes viral and turns the poisoned into toxic poisoners, who bring out the worst in each other. Unethical behaviour destroys our capacity to deploy our relational power and, thus, our persevere in living; it betrays trust, legal obligations, moral bonds, and emotional accountability. That is the definition of negativity, or ethical evil.

The rejection of these sad passions reasserts the ontological positivity of living matter, as a self-differing force that aims at persevering or enduring. Negativity supports, instead, the cult of humiliation, degradation, and the disparagement of life's generative forces. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio describes "Spinoza as mental immunologist developing a vaccine capable of creating antipassion antibodies" (Damasio 2003, p. 275, my emphasis). To be immunised against toxic negativity has become even more of an imperative in our world since the COVID-19 pandemic became almost emblematic of the contradictions of

the post-human predicament. Here is a human-induced environmental disaster, causing a public health crisis that is shared unevenly across the globe, with disadvantaged groups bearing a disproportionate share of the costs. In addition, the solution proposed is an increase in technological mediation, both via vaccines and bio-medical intervention as well as through information technologies and digital platforms.

Some humans—the sexualised, racialised, and naturalised minorities as well as other marginalised groups—have always had to face up to uncomfortable truths through the hardship of their life circumstances. Having had this kind of intensive training to bear and process the negativity thrown at them, they are epistemologically ahead of the rest. They develop their anti-negativity antibodies stoically, as they go and, hence, they know better. Such a critical and creative counterforce gives the 'wretched of the earth' (Fanon 1961), a head start in the historical process of envisaging alternative worlds as well as more just and sustainable social systems. The multiple axes of oppression and, hence, of hurt, humiliation, and pain, also, contain within them the creative forces that they can generate as motors of transversal and collective transformation. I shall return to them in a later section.

This non-representational apprehension of the world is the core of neo-materialist notions of the virtual. The first step of the argument is that there is no such thing as unmarked or inert environmental matter, awaiting socio-cultural coding by a symbolic system dominated by Man/Anthropos, and that human minds are heterogeneous relational structures embedded in these dynamic and auto-poietic agents, as their multiple ecologies of belonging (Guattari 2000). What, then, follows from this structural inter-dependence on non-human factors and forces, is the primacy of the relation itself. In the beginning, there is always differential and material heterogenesis, that is to say, the relational principle of ontological difference defined as differing within a commonly shared matter. The premises for ethical and political accountability, therefore, are immanence, complexity, and heterogeneity, as well as the positivity of difference as the principle of non-one, or complexity.

This critique is helpful in redefining the virtual as an affirmative ethics of becoming. Affirmative ethics as the establishment of mutually empowering relationships, based on cooperation and the combination of the specific powers of each entity, aims at increasing each entity's individual capacity to self-preserve against adverse forces. Entities and individuals grow, thanks to a collaborative community. The capacity to resist and fight back emerges from the same relational capacities that can also potentially cause harm and discomfort: all we have is others, and our relationship to others is constitutive of ourselves. What binds us—humans and non-humans—together, over and above contractual interests and transactional protocols, is a common propensity to persevere in our existence and increase our relational capacities. In the absence of such a shared propensity and its spatio-temporal force, which is the virtual, we would be left in the banality of an undifferentiated flux. The virtual as the very practical, ethical, and political urge to 'become otherwise', is what activates matter to be *both* embodied and embedded *and* differential and flowing. An ethics of affirmative collaboration is our binding factor.

Given this vital potency of material matter, nothing is ever completely actualised, and nothing is totally lost. What is defeated or excluded is not dialectically cut off from the processes of becoming, by being confined into the limbo of nothingness. The dialectics gets this process wrong, by over-emphasising the negative. What is not actualised is just that: a non-potentiated option, which falls asleep, in an ontological slumber that Leibnitz describes so well, as different degrees of being—vegetating, hibernating, and going virtual. Until, that is, it is called out again by a collective assemblage, which demands the freedom to become and desires its actualisation.

The emphasis on freedom as non-reactive activity driven by the ethics of joy is the key notion. Affirmation is the force that endures, aggregates, and sustains, whereas negativity brings about reaction, disaggregation, and stasis. Affirmative ethics is the affect that binds together the heterogeneous components of complex subject assemblages. It works through

the confrontation with and transformation of negativity, in a rigorous and humble praxis, not as a metamorphic flash or a revolutionary leap.

Political consciousness is emancipatory, to the extent that it repairs the violence and pain of structural exclusions and injustices. It revives the minoritarian counter-memory of the oppressed, by filling in the blanks of dominant cultural memory and bringing the specific memories of the minorities within that linear order. In this respect, the battle for partial recognition entails processing the pain of injustice and exclusion in a process of affective healing, which is integral to political projects. However, it does not exhaust that political process. Just as importantly, it also mobilises the virtual forces of becoming, by splintering/deterritorialising the consolidated identities that defined them as excluded minorities to begin with. In other words, political consciousness is transformative, if it is allowed to act as a de/reterritorialising agency that dislodges subjects from their sense of selves. The virtual is a praxis that needs to be enacted, a new location that needs to be constructed by subjects, as heterogeneous and praxis-oriented alliances.

There is no immediate revolutionary metamorphosis, but rather a praxis, a collective practice of activating both critique and creation as well as resistance and vision, right here and now. The essentialised vision of all identities, including those of empirical minorities, are challenged by a qualitative transformative process that is essentially ethical, in that it allows affirmative ethics to set the politics. The generative force of this anticipatory politics, and the desire to exit the present world, is not nihilistic or reactive but, rather, affirmative. It expresses a deep and trans-historical aspiration to justice and freedom. This is an irrepressible force that will not be squashed or avoided, though it will be subjected to regular and systematic delays as well as boycotts by the opposition.

2. Multiple Corollaries

2.1. The Primacy of the Virtual

If matter is not a stable entity, but instead a process of constant self-differentiation in relation to multiple others, then all entities as individuated organisms are bound in-stantiations of a matter potentially infinite in its modulations. This means that there is always a residual seed of possibility to be actualised in all instances. In other words, the full potency of becoming is never completely exhausted. Or rather, a potential for regeneration is always subtracted, from that which has managed to become actualised. An affirmative kind of passivity is at work at the core of vital matter: a preference, a tendency, and an ontological gravitation towards the inexhaustible, which is a heterogeneous compossibility that is neither dialectical nor voluntaristic, but refers to a variable capacity of matter to act. This capacity can be activated, accelerated, or delayed, in relation with others, but shall never be deleted.

There is a temporal side to the primacy of the virtual as well: the present is a complex multi-directional process of flowing from virtual past to future perfects, via the continuous present and everything in between. Deleuze (1988) teaches us that the constant en/infolding by the subjects, with their multiple outsides, affects the sedimented strata of past experienced contained within us and activates them. That means it liberates us from the authoritarian hold of the past (oedipalised, patriarchal, Eurocentric, monumentalised), as the main force shaping the present. It defrosts the authority of the past as the main point of reference for the present and, thus, activates many internal virtual pasts. The heterogeneous memories within are not frozen archives, but also points of regeneration: the pasts await actualisation and realisation in the present. These resonances are what shapes new processes of becoming.

The force of the present—and the core of its intelligibility—is that it does not coincide, completely, with the here and now. Such synchronisation is never complete, since in a neo-materialist vital system, all human and non-human entities are nomadic subjects-in-process, in perpetual motion, immanent to the vitality of self-ordering matter. Approaching the present, therefore, produces a multi-faceted effect: on the one hand, the sharp awareness of *what we are ceasing to be* (the exhaustion of the actual), and on the other, the perception—in

different degrees of clarity—of *what we are in the process of becoming* (the activation of the virtual). Both phenomena occur at once, in a non-linear time continuum. That amounts to multiplying the present along these parallel plateaus of actual and virtual (Deleuze and Guattari 1991).

In other words, thinking about the present makes us not only confront, but also exceed, the immediate conditions we inhabit. If the present is multi-layered and multi-directional, then, we are always dealing with the virtual past, what 'we will have been'. We are always projected/projective futures, always delving in a time continuum. Yet, we need enough meta-stability to hold the frame long enough, to draw a cartography of the very conditions of the present that shape and escape us. By extension, philosophy cannot stop at the critique of the actual (i.e., of what we are ceasing to be), but needs to move onto the creative actualisation of the virtual (i.e., of what we are in the process of becoming). The interplay between the present as actual and the present as virtual unfolds and sustains the process of subject formation, always in a collective, collaborative frame.

The conceptual heart of the virtual is a process ontology, driven by the positivity of desire as endurance and affirmation. In addition, since philosophical thinking is about the creation of new concepts, it is a way of actualising the virtual. Thus, thinking is immanent to the world, embedded in the very conditions it is trying to affect and transform—we humans are part of both the problems and the solutions.

2.2. Difference as Non-Binary Complexity

Difference is disengaged from dialectics, as a positive, self-generating force internal to all entities—as sets of modulations of a common matter. This difference is ontological and, therefore, immediate, not dialectically mediated, and not oppositional, in the sense of being generated by binary contradictions, antagonistic alterity, or negation. Difference as ontological is not a matter of "either/or", but of "AND.. AND.." (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

This concept of difference is irreducible, to external or abstract degrees of difference, and it is vital and material, though it does not refer to a reductive biological notion of life. It, rather, is an immanent philosophy of complexity and of multiple specified and situated lives. It is a process of difference, through internal differentiations carried by the inexhaustible force of these immanent lives. These include many non-human categories—from *zoe/geo/techno*—mediated lives (Braidotti 2019, 2021) to a general ecology of "chaosmosis" (Guattari 1995)—pointing to the vitality of living matter as both actual and virtual; 'we' are in this neo-materialist vital flow of becoming together, but—as I have repeatedly argued— 'we' are not one and the same, but differentially individuated and located. Differential materialism is crucial to the politics of immanence and becoming as well as to its feminist, environmentalist, and anti-racist applications (Braidotti 2021).

The political is defined by this affirmative ethics of actualising the virtual, which cannot just repurpose existent realities and social conditions—that is to say, the present as that which has already been actualised and, hence, also, as the record of what we are already ceasing to be. The politics of immanence, rather, state that the conditions for the overturning of negative realities cannot be drawn from the present as the actual, since the possibility for renewal does not emerge, dialectically, from the present conditions. They need to be constructed in the present as the virtual, that is to say, that which they are capable of becoming, through affirmative ethical encounters. This is not so much accelerationism, but actualisation and active deterritorialisation: we need to borrow transformative energy from the future, in order to articulate a vital materialist philosophy, which combines resistance to real-life historical conditions with visions for alternative futures.

The positivity and non-dialectical structure of difference grounds, also, the relation between humans and non-humans. Non-humans are constitutive of the heterogeneous assemblages that compose human subjectivity. As argued above, non-humans are both organic and technological as well as integral to the activity of thinking. Thinking is a relational gateway to the openness of *zoe*—the non-human life that does not bear a human

name, let alone an individual name. Thinking is the stuff of the world (Alaimo 2014). In addition, by taking place in the world, it is accountable to multiple constituencies, not only the academic community. All the more so today, when knowledge is being produced across a broad range of social, corporate, activist, artistic, and mediated locations, as well as in specialised scientific, technological, and academic settings.

Of course, there is a qualitative difference between accepting the structural interdependence among species and actually treating non-humans as knowledge collaborators. However, the point here is that this is precisely what we need to learn to do, since we live in the age of computational networks and synthetic biology on the one hand, and climate change and socio-economic polarisations on the other. Granting equal status to natural and non-human organisms is an explicitly post-anthropocentric move, which entails conceptual and methodological transformations.

It also requires defamiliarisation from established habits of thought and anthropocentric mindsets, by offering more adequate concepts to deal with the ecological environment, media–nature–culture continuums, and non-human others. This is a crucial aspect of the post-human ethical and aesthetic sensibility. It extends, also, to keeping the importance of the inhumane aspects of the post-human predicament high on the agenda, notably, the status of devalorised and dehumanised others. This is a feature of the necropolitical governance of life in cognitive capitalism (Braidotti 2019).

The political imagination plays a crucial role in actualising movements/ defamiliarisations, and transformative becomings. Actualising the virtual is a gesture of conceptual creativity that enlists resources other than analytical reason. It includes an intensive, qualitative dimension, which connects to the virtual totality of a block of past experiences and affects and activates them as action in the present, thereby realising their unfulfilled potential. This mode of affirmation is an exercise in temporary and contingent synchronisation, which sustains in the present the activity of actualising the virtual. In other words, this virtual intensity is, simultaneously, after and before us, in a flow of mutation, differentiation, or becoming, which is the vital material core of thinking.

There is also a speculative element at play in this reactivation of memories, as collective imaginings (Gatens and Lloyd 1999), which foregrounds the importance of creativity, literature, and the arts, as vehicles of philosophical enquiry. The strategy of disidentification or defamiliarisation is, also, a crucial tool of critique of the in-built power of dominant narratives and entrenched habits of thought. Disidentification can be seen as a creative form of unlearning "unearned privileges", through disengagement from the institutions of power and knowledge (Spivak 1990). The impact of disidentification is that it triggers both critical and creative visions as well as the imagining of becoming a world together.

This approach sets a subtle balance between the negative critique of the power (*potestas*) of the present—as the record of what we have been and, hence, of what we are ceasing to be—and the visionary energy of what we are in the process of becoming. Taking seriously the definition of desire as positive and power as enabling (*potentia*), actualising the virtual activates empowering creative alternatives to the objectionable present. It is a political praxis of taking in the pain and damages of the world at present, step by step. This is not to deny the importance of the negative, but, rather, to assign it an analytic, not a substantive, force. We are, ontologically, oriented towards the affirmation of our innermost freedom—the freedom to become all we are capable of, all our bodies can take. This, also, means that binary opposition is secondary and any dialectical model of conceptualising difference obscures, ignores, or denies the positive force of actualisation, which constitutes the relational core of matter.

We need to proceed, therefore, by gradual degrees of disengagement, from what is considered as the dominant or, even, the natural or normal state of affairs, events, and values. This is a crucial ethical project, of anticipating better futures through the unfolding of the virtual as affirmative ethics.

3. Half Hopes

3.1. To Constitute 'a Missing People'

The point of the virtual is to compose a missing people, a complex subject formation that aims at producing its own lines of actualisation. These actualisations are produced by the transversal assemblages of a missing people, a 'we'—embodied, embedded, relational, and affective, bonded by affirmative ethics as communal praxis.

The conceptual distinction between the perception of what we are ceasing to be—the present as the record of the past—and that which we are in the process of becoming—the present as the unfolding of the virtual/the future—offers critical and creative margins of intervention. They join forces in producing the multitude of ways in which the human is currently being recomposed. However, who is this 'we', whose subjectivity is now at stake? What are 'we' capable of becoming as a species, and as a set of technologically inter-linked material cultures? Embodied differently and embedded in diversity, relational and affective, depending on what our bodies can do, 'we' are not a unitary entity, but a materially differential one.

Within the post-human predicament, we need to focus our collective efforts upon the projects of defining what 'we' could become as a species and a set of technologically inter-linked material cultures. The aim is to track the multiple, grounded, and, hence, specific and diversified ways, in which 'we' are becoming knowing subjects, as 'otherwise other', rather than the dialectical oppositions and pejorative differences posited by classical Humanist 'Man´ and the supremacist assumptions of 'Anthropos'.

This position has several consequences: the first is that there is not, nor does there need to be, a panhumanity. The 'human' never was a universal or neutral term to begin with. It is, rather, a normative category that indexes access to privileges and entitlements. Appeals to the 'human' are always discriminatory: they create structural distinctions and inequalities among different categories of humans, let alone between humans and non-humans. Secondly, it is inappropriate to take the post-human predicament either as an apocalyptic or intrinsically subversive category. This way of narrowing our options down, to the binary extinction versus liberation (of the human), misses the point of this convergence. We need to resist, with equal lucidity, this double fallacy and embrace, instead, multiple accounts of embodied, embedded, relational, and affective processes of post-human subject-formation. They, in turn, enable subtler and more complex cartographies of power and discourse. They start by questioning who 'we' might be, whose anxiety may take the form of calling for a new humanity bonded in fear and vulnerability; 'we', who may well be in this predicament together, but are not one and the same.

The operational 'we' that I propose begins with the composition of a missing people, who embrace the common cause of resistance to the negativity of the present, by co-constructing affirmative modes of relation and values. This is a collective praxis, not an individual psychological disposition, and one which is sustained by the ethics of affirmation. The political imagination intervenes here as the motor of the virtual. It is the over-flowing anticipatory force that injects much-needed doses of hope for the future, affirmative visions of possible alternatives. They are fuelled, but not saturated, by the negative experiences, in so far as they demonstrate the ability to rework them collectively, as seeds of becoming. The politically transformative gesture consists of empowering creative 'counter-actualisations', or affirmative alternatives.

Thus, vital neo-materialism and post-human theory focus, through critical and creative cartographies, on the margins of the expression of yet-unrealised possibilities, by concentrating on the challenge of heterogeneous subject formations. Affirmative ethics as collective praxis guides this politics. The process is driven by the actualisation of the virtual and the constitution of heterogeneous trans-subjectivities, in order to sustain the collective effort of differing affirmatively from the present. I have also defined these formations as trans-individual, trans-cultural, trans-species, trans-sexual, trans-national, and trans-human modes of subjectivity.

Affirmative ethics is a praxis that begins with the production of adequate knowledge about the present, in order to critique it and resist. Adequate understanding of our life conditions is the faculty that grants us freedom from fatalistic determinism, through the force of the understanding. It is capable of providing qualitative differentiations between instances, ideas, and relations. This approach is modelled on Spinoza's ethics of joy, in that it connects adequate understanding to the analysis of our bondage, i.e., of power as potestas. Providing criteria to clarify such distinctions between negative/entrapping modes of relation and the affirmative/empowering ones, amounts to mapping different speeds of becoming. It, also, involves the ethical coding of different forms of knowledge and of detecting the possibility of enacting the yet-untapped possibilities of the virtual. To be accountable for the present, to be worthy of it, is neither a passive acceptance of the status quo, nor a flattening out of our differential locations. It is, rather, a multiplication, a complexification of the work of critical thinking, based on the generation of alternative processes of becoming.

The source of affirmative ethics is the necessity to extract knowledge from pain, in order to make the actualisation of the virtual into a concrete possibility. To come to terms with failure, in order to "fail again, fail better" (Beckett 1989) and to reconstruct, again and again. This is why Deleuze reads Spinoza so carefully, so lovingly, and so pragmatically, without any romanticism about what is entailed in the process of affirmation (Deleuze 1988, 1990). This is a practical philosophy that aims at transforming the debris and the ruins into workable possible systems: despair into praxis.

Confrontation with negativity and processing the pain are the means by which we achieve adequate knowledge about the condition we wish to overturn or modify. Critique is also clinical, as it is about detoxifying us from the effects of the negative. As I mentioned earlier, entire chapters of Spinoza's *Ethics* are about poison, sickness, and death, as well as about feeling diminished by the times that you are living in, which decrease our ability to act, to take in and take on the world. Microfascism, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is such a decrease in our desire for freedom—an opaque sadness and impotence that settles into our souls and saps our life energies away.

Negativity makes you feel disoriented and diminished. Such a negative affect signals you are diminished in your power of relating to the very conditions that engender your existence. It points to a deficit in relationality, since your relation to power has been squashed, squeezed, and chopped up by the nastiness, the violence, and the vulgarity of the times. Affirmative ethics labours as a practical exercise, to go beyond that disempowering mode of relation. Then, it entails the effort to activate in a stubborn and empowering relation with others, the force of the virtual, which is to say, the awareness that "yes, we are against aspects of the present, but we are already in the process of becoming something else". That "yes" is not a demented beatific acceptance of what is already the case, but rather the joyful counterpoint that leads to implementing yet-unexplored alternatives. It means: I prefer not to comply.

The task of critique is to actually create a missing people as a heterogeneous assemblage, gravitating around affirmative ethics.

3.2. To Escape the Epistemic Accelerationism of Cognitive Capitalism

The social, environmental, and affective contexts, within which the double accelerations of advanced technologies and climate change are taking place, are anything but abstract. They are rooted in the grounded conditions of advanced capitalism.

It is undeniable that contemporary vital materialism and its post-human philosophy resonates with a bio-genetic and technologically mediated economic system, which is threatening the survival of the globe. However, that does not mean that they are just the expression of the schizoid speed and accelerations of this system. They, rather, exceed the conditions that engender them and are not saturated by the present state of affairs. They negotiate with the conditions of the present, as both actual and virtual, in order to repurpose them. Applied to the discussion of the contemporary political, this means that

the crucial problem is the different speeds of de/reterritorialisation, by cognitive capitalism and the toxic saturation of the present, which enacts to the detriment of the actualisation of the virtual. The violent erasure, or passive-aggressive blockage, of our collective desire to express and materialise virtual potentials, affects both subject formations and knowledge practices in society. They actually disorient and diminish us.

Accelerationism is a possible strategy in this regard. It marks a full immersion into the immanence, with the aim to overtake the paths and flows of capital (Noys 2014). Thus, radical accelerationism calls for an inhuman form of rationalism that privileges the computational abilities of technological apparatus—notably its algorithmic logic—in the hope of turning them against profit and exploitation (Williams and Srnicek 2015). It is one thing, however, to argue that one way to defeat capitalism is by exacerbating and radicalising its contradictions, in the hope of making it implode. However, it is quite another to advocate the pursuit of annihilation as the only strategy, coupled with the enjoyment of violence (Land 1992, 1993). This position, which Achille Mbembe (2017) has labelled "negative messianism", is a contemporary authoritarian position, populist both on the right and the left of the political spectrum. Such a stance has nothing in common with the project of affirmative ethics, an ethics that critiques power and invites us to cultivate empowerment, as the actualisation of affirmative relations and projects. Feminism, anti-racism, radical ecology, and anti-fascism are among the political movements that have clearly stated their commitment to creating alternatives.

Affirmative ethics is neither an endorsement of the shallow optimism of advanced capitalism nor an accelerationist strategy, though it is closer to the latter. It, rather, focuses on the construction of subjectivity as a differential, grounded perspective, which must encompass non-human forces and strike its own meta-stable alliances, within the flows of the deterritorialisation of advanced capitalism. As a critical and creative relational field, the virtual as political praxis actualises multiple possibilities, which evade the profit-led accelerations of capital and work within it to go elsewhere. It functions at different speeds, moves on different timelines, and is fuelled by different ethical affects, which do not always coincide with the surplus-value profit motive. It is opposed to the axiom of profit and the maximisation of the capital consumption of living matter, instead designing an alternative horizon of becoming.

Since power is a multi-layered and dynamic entity, and since, as embedded, embodied, relational, and affective subjects, we are immanent to the very conditions we are trying to change, we need to make a careful ethical distinction between different speeds of both theoretical production—with the predictable margins of institutional capitalisation—and the construction of alternative knowing subject formations. These heterogeneous missing peoples are transversal subjectivities that interact and negotiate with the techno-social, psychic, and natural environments as well as resist overcoding by the capitalist profit principle and the structural inequalities it entails. Taking 'living matter' as zoe-/geo-/techno-centred process, transversal subject assemblages activate counter-proposals about what they are capable of becoming, which actualise the unrealised or virtual potential of a 'missing people'.

Neo-materialist immanence, therefore, mobilises this transversal collective ability to produce knowledge otherwise, as well as in relation to other species. Zoe-/geo-/techno-centred egalitarianism is the core of a post-human thought that might inspire, work with, or subtend informational and scientific practices as well as resist the full-scale commodification of life by advanced capitalism (Braidotti 2006). The barrier against the negative, entropic frenzy of capitalist axiomatic is provided by the grounded and transformative politics that ensue from the ethic of affirmation. In this regard, a neo-materialist vitalist position offers a robust rebuttal of a system, which is overcoded by the profit-minded axioms of bio-mediated, cognitive capitalism.

4. Conclusions

Actualising the virtual is a way of giving a measure of the possible, which is not a negative injunction of the present, but rather an affirmative gesture about possible patterns of becoming. In some ways, it is a leap of faith, in what heterogeneous assemblages of humans and non-humans may be capable of. What does it mean that you trust and love humans, not only for what they are—and are already ceasing to be—but, also, for what they are capable of becoming? It means to embrace an ethics of affirmation as collaborative co-construction of horizons of hope. In my affirmative philosophy, this is a way of expressing the inexhaustible collective energy of those who are tired of the status quo. They instantiate the virtual possibilities of becoming, which are not completely blocked by the negativity of the present conditions.

This positive becoming expresses a trust in the future, which allows us—the heterogeneous collective subjects—to 'back cast' paths of becoming from it. This is opposed to a teleological 'forecasting' from present to future, which imposes a programme of linear development onto these processes and, thus, preempts the unexpected consequences they could mobilise.

This reveals the true meaning of the notion of *amor fati*, which is no passive acquiescence, but an active passion for the others of Man, as harbingers of possible futures, as well as as the social engineers of alternative patterns of becoming and new imaginaries. What does it mean to be enamoured by the virtual, the eventual, and the ephemeral possibility of alternatives, which seem to be flatly contradicted by everything that is going on in reality right now, in a world that is drowning, burning, cracking, and suffocating? It means to be not only disenchanted with the old patterns on oppression, but also in love with the joyful possibilities of endurance and the overturning of negativity. The affective language is no coincidence: affirmation is a shared collective passion that extracts hope from the ruins of disenchantment, with dogged and slightly irritating conviction. This praxis of forging communal solutions, through the confrontation of uncomfortable truths, is central to the critical edge of the ethics of affirmation.

Accepting our shared exposure to ways of living and dying together, amidst human-led environmental and public health disasters, is, also, the starting point for a process of assessing what binds us together as a community. Beyond solipsistic fantasies, post-human thought as the actualisation of the virtual is a radical democratic project that combines critique with a struggle for community and social justice. Since this is the only world we have, 'we'—a missing people in the constant process of being constituted—have to be worthy of it, embrace it, the better to transform and take care of it. Or so I hope.

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