

›Difference in Itself‹ in Contemporary Feminisms

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*A feminism without end, without definitive goal,...
Invested in processes, becomings, materialities,...
will make a difference.*
Elizabeth Grosz

Staying with the Trouble!
Donna Haraway

There is considerable need today to again emphasize the centrality of the concept of difference. Looking at our times which all too often suffer from a severe incapacity to live in a highly differential world, to engage in a thought of difference and take on the task to think difference must be seen as not only one of the ‘burning issues of all philosophy’, but as perhaps ‘the issue of our age’.¹

That if we think difference, difference must be thought *in itself*, is also one of the best known slogans of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. At first, a renewed engagement with this most fundamental category of difference might then seem to bring forth nothing more than merely the very basics of the latter’s philosophy. However, what I would like to develop in this article is that in specifically focusing on the concept of difference, it becomes visible that the (Deleuzian) demand of thinking difference in itself, a demand which so often is said to be an impossible demand because what difference depends on is a fixed ground from where the process of differentiation starts, by now has found most promising and *realist* actualizations: in contemporary feminist philosophies! Therefore, this article will turn to two exemplary feminist thinkers of such productive ways of starting with difference – and nothing but difference – in both its conceptual and ethico-political rigor: on the one hand Elizabeth Grosz’ philosophy of sexual difference, who next to Luce Irigaray is also inspired by Deleuze’s philosophy of difference, and on the other hand Donna Haraway’s account of ‘companion species’ which though in distance to the Deleuzian horizon strives in a most singular way for a strong thought of difference. Their differences notwithstanding, my aim is to show that both authors base their writings most centrally on a very powerful thought of difference, and it is precisely this emphasis that enables both of them to also imagine the world differently, or even ‘to create *a* world’ – it is this, that in this article should be understood as a practicing of thought that makes a difference.²

Showing Difference Differing – Grosz’ Difference-Feminism

Let us begin with one exemplary passage by the Australian feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz whose commitment to difference can be said ‘to go all the way’, and thereby shows how much is at stake when starting with difference. Nothing less but the world itself is turned upside down when starting with difference:

The very feature that cultural theorists single out to privilege – change, difference – is the condition of the natural order...Nature can no longer, since the intervention of Darwin, be regarded as passive, inert, unchanging, ahistorical: we need now to develop a correspondingly complex understanding of the relation between the cultural and the natural which more adequately acknowledges the dynamic forces of self-differentiation or emergence that characterizes a nature conceived as evolving, as alive, as subject to upheaval and transformation, nature construed as unpredictable and open-ended, as a form of perpetual becoming.« (Grosz 2005: 49)

In order to fully grasp this complex re-writing of ‘the world’, when nature and culture do no longer oppose each other but live of each other, it is most central to understand that it is precisely the concept of difference thought in itself, that is at the heart of Grosz’ feminist endeavor. In a unique way she combines the feminist legacy of Luce Irigaray with the Deleuzian credo – Deleuze who was already mentioned and to whom we will turn later on again – when she shows that difference either is a differing force, ‘the dynamic forces of self-differentiation’, or it falls back into the all too common regimes of identity and sameness. According to her, such approach alone endures the difficult task of both positioning thought and of being a ‘beginning’ of a sophisticated argument that lives up to today’s world. The quote above exemplifies as well that difference (here both between nature and culture and – at the same time – within both of these ‘differential forces’) is thought and approached in Grosz as pure movement of differentiation, as a ‘perpetual, unpredictable and open-ended becoming’. And as she also shows in her unique re-reading of Charles Darwin whose evolutionary theory she un-reads of its most problematic teleological aspects and strengthens in regard to an understanding of evolution as variation and differentiation, this *indifferent* (because necessary) force of differentiation (un)grounds everything, both nature and culture (cf. Grosz 2004). Therefore, and here the argument gets most provocative even for feminists, difference and change is to be thought not only as a conceptual force turning around the stakes ontologically, but since this cannot but have most significant consequences on every other level of analysis, difference in the same rigorous manner has to be taken as the un-grounding of the ethico-political dimensions in this world, too, and here we do speak of the very concrete questions of intersubjectivity, political vision, and morals. “Nature is the

endless generation of *problems* for culture”, Grosz states, and the latter has to be understood as nothing but “as part of the ongoing evolution of the natural” (ibid.: 52). It is such affirmation of *this* world as pure (natural/sexual) differentiation that exemplifies how difficult a thought is that takes difference ‘all the way’. It not only challenges Grosz’ readers who still cherish a belief in an autonomous principle of culture, but also herself in not giving way to a reductionist evolutionary biologicistic argument such as others so often end up when drawing from Darwinian evolutionism.³ And just to make this point crystal clear: the difference is significant, because, according to Grosz, the force of nature in Darwin is a differentiating machine which instead of (re)producing the same – a deterministic logic of causality – is the proliferation of variation, the production of the new, of an unforeseen future. “Is it possible to understand culture not as the completion of nature but as the endlessly ramified and open product of nature...can we regard culture as the most elaborative invention of a nature that is continually evolving? (ibid.: 50). This is how she wants to read the *naturecultures* she explores.

Continuous differentiation as alteration on but every level might not give us a safety line for how things will develop – and this is what is difficult when we think of a politics of difference (instead of identity) – but it necessarily carries all the disruptive and transformative potentials, and most of all the necessity that nothing – literally nothing – can remain the same. Grosz’ feminist political vision in this sense doesn’t so much look for finding the correct form of resistance, but rather wishes for a

feminist politics [that] should...now consider the affirmation of a politics of *imperceptibility*, leaving its traces and effects everywhere but never being able to be identified with a person, group or organization. It is not a politics of visibility, of recognition and of self-validation, but a process of self-marking that constitutes oneself in the model of that which oppresses and opposes the subject.« (Grosz 2005: 194)

‘Difference in itself’ – The Deleuzian Legacy

Before turning to my second exemplary feminist of difference and explore further the significant consequences of putting difference first, let me pause for a short moment in order to explain in more detail the philosophical heritage that is carried along when a thought of difference *in itself* is emphasized. For it could be claimed, what is it that makes thinking ‘difference in itself’ so significant, a difference that ‘makes all the difference’ – every time that it is thought and enacted? It is here, that for our feminist inquiry into difference I would like to introduce again the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze who in his philosophical opus

magnum *Difference and Repetition* (1968)⁴ articulated the credo that if we think difference we have to think it *in itself*.

The claim at stake results for Deleuze from looking at the history of the majoritarian philosophical tradition from its ‘Greek origin’ onwards. What must be argued there is that difference has never been thought as difference so far but rather as something else, and to be precise, it has been thought always as an antagonistic relation, a *contradiction* or *opposition*.⁵ For Deleuze, as he elaborates at length in *Difference and Repetition*, the peak of this philosophical heritage is found in Hegel’s dialectic, according to which in order to truly grasp difference, that is to give it a *Begriff*,⁶ one precisely must think difference in terms of opposition. Only this way does one arrive at clear and distinct differentiations such as ‘me’ and ‘not-me’ which alone overcome indetermination towards categorical determination, and that is, towards true subjectivity.⁷ Only in the mode of contradiction and/or opposition moves difference through *negativity*, such is Hegel’s claim in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, which alone is the motor for a ‘living’ determination finding a way out of the said to be ‘dead’ indetermination and indifference, and only this way does the possibility of a rational result – subjectivity – appear at the (temporary) end of the process.

What such a conceptualization of difference reveals most of all, however, and this is where Deleuze’s thought of difference starts to intervene, is the submission of the notion of difference to pre-set requirements, and Deleuze calls them the requirements of the *logic of representation*⁸ whose inherent premises have always already determined from where and how to think difference. To make a long story short, the requirement that stages the (Hegelian) thought of difference, according to Deleuze, is that instead of starting with difference it puts identity before difference – both in rank and value – and thus reproduces an image of difference that ‘in itself’ is nothing but in need of a prior identity which sets the process in motion. It, thus, (re-)produces a thought of difference which is only able to think difference in and as a relation in an oppositional mode, activated alone via a process of recognition, and ultimately to be overcome into something else.

While most prominently figured in the Hegelian dialectic, it can be argued that most of today’s theorizations of difference are continuously determined by such model of recognition as the basis of dealing with differences; and the word recognition has to be understood here in the full polysemy that the French *reconnaître* carries: from recognition as cognition (epistemological dimension) to recognition as (political) acknowledgment.⁹ All wild and free-

floating differences below or above this representational frame, i.e. a difference, or even better differences, which do not fit this ‘natural’ measurement of recognition, remain outside of this view; they are remain to be devalued as either dangerous *chaos* (Plato) or, as was said above, abysmal *nothingness* (Hegel).

Now, *turning away* from such thinking that merely strives for bringing difference to a halt by putting identity first, Deleuze poses his own project with the claim that instead of thinking difference via identity-based sublation, difference must be thought in itself, and that means that “[d]ifference must be shown *differing*” (DR:56).

We have already seen in Grosz’ feminist unfolding that what this implies is that instead of pre-given units such as an oppositional pair of nature vs. culture, it is difference itself that, according to Deleuze, “must become the element, the ultimate unity; it must therefore refer to other differences which never identify it but rather differentiate it” (ibid.). Radically different from the mimetic order of representation, difference – the production of differences – here is taken primary. Difference does not merely start *between* things/identities, but everything, every-thing, has to be thought as always already differing with(in) itself. Only then can we speak of a dynamic or movement that “implies a plurality of centres, a superposition of perspectives, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which essentially distort representation” (ibid.). Instead of the formula that “only that which is alike differs”, difference thought ‘in itself’ affirms the disparate and claims “only differences are alike” (DR:116). What is to be witnessed – and we have seen it in Grosz’ evolution of nature as culture and her feminist political vision following from there – is a total un-grounding by actively affirming disparity and distance, and thus escaping both the philosophical conditions of presence (being) and identity (the same) towards the possibility of a future that really is a future: “In this manner, the ground has been superseded by a groundlessness, a universal ungrounding (*sic*) which turns upon itself and causes only the yet-to-come to return.” (DR: 91)

What is most essential for a strong feminism of difference in drawing out a politics of difference that does not fall short of difference is to understand that it is precisely this groundlessness – not so much as an abyss but rather as endless variation and process – which alone enables a thought of difference that makes a difference every time it is thought and enacted. For only this way becomes difference not already thought under the regiment of something else which cannot help but appropriating it, and instead of producing a difference reproduces the same, that is identity.

In saying that, however, it shouldn't be forgotten that the reverse side of this formula according to which difference must be shown differing means that nothing merely 'is what it is', but every-thing has to become-other. In such a perspective we, therefore, have to un-learn our habit to *recognize* something as something (regime of truth) and learn about a transformation that Deleuze does not shy away from calling the *simulacrum*. Already at the very beginning of *Difference and Repetition* he states what this implies: "The modern world is one of simulacra. Man did not survive God, nor did the identity of the subject survive that of substance. All identities are only simulated, produced as an optical 'effect' by the more profound game of difference and repetition." (DR: xix)¹⁰

Now why, one could ask, put so much stress on this 'everything is simulacrum' when actually striving for the deconstruction of the modern 'modest detachment'¹¹ into a politics of difference that makes a difference, such as it was claimed in the case of Grosz? Why, that is, stress falsity – a disengagement from the (real) world – to such an extent? Does it not make impossible to grasp how the affirmation of difference in itself can *really* make a difference?

It is here that we encounter the provocation that the thought of difference never lost. Only by going 'all the way' as I have said in regard to Grosz, only by stressing the simulacrum, and that is the necessity of the affirmation of the false, will we turn away from the concealed teleology in our thought of difference, and only this way will difference truly be shown differing. This is what we have to face up to: Difference shown differing means that difference is all there is – and this is why Grosz pleads for a rigorous politics of imperceptibility as the always becoming-other of every politics; it is what remains, what constantly differentiates itself, and it implies that the desire to, yes, start with difference but then move on to something else, that is a different or a new 'universal', a new 'truth', is absolutely pointless. It is pointless first of all because there is neither a *beyond* difference(s) nor merely a particular time for difference(s) which ultimately will stop and complete the cycle of difference into a new (comm)unity; and it is also pointless because such a move misses again the un-grounding movement that any rigorous thought of difference demands and which alone doesn't return difference to the identitarian and self-same thinking. It is precisely in its *limitation* on difference – a difference that cannot be superseded – that new possibilities in engaging with differences are opened up.

In a world in which difference and diversity is the most common experience we make today, we have to take on this *difficult* dimension of differential thinking. Only this way will we

realize that rather than being able to give a finale answer, right now we are still stuck with the question of how to move about in this world of difference(s) in an a/effective way.

'Staying With The Trouble!' – Donna Haraway's Different Difference

The question which is most urgent to be treated then is how to engage creatively with each other in this world without falling prey to the trap that I have just described and that seems to be wherever one steps: the trap of ultimately reducing difference(s) again to mere difference(s) between units which if we only tried hard enough could find ultimate settlement; the trap which instead of avoiding the dream of transcendence (teleology) that for far too long inhibited a real encounter with(in) a world of differences, reiterates it.

In choosing Elizabeth Grosz and Donna Haraway as two exemplary feminist thinkers stressing the power of difference, I mean to present two – precisely different – modes to face up to this task: Both Haraway and Grosz share what in this article is followed through as the Deleuzian 'imperative' to think difference in itself. This means that they both exemplify an enormous rigor in regard to what we are looking for here, and that is, as I said above, that nothing ever merely 'is' what it is but everything is only ever becoming – all potentials and limitations belonging to this thought included.

Their encounter is in this sense then also not only one between two exemplary feminist thinkers who seemingly share a common interest and – although this parallel has not yet been acknowledged very widely – enjoy the same fields of study (Grosz coming from philosophy and turning towards biology in order to rethink ontology and Haraway, trained both as a biologist and philosopher who from her earliest intellectual engagements did not limited herself to merely one point of view), but it is also an encounter which in itself can be seen as always already differentiated, that is thinking difference 'all the way'! Interest in the very same – 'difference in itself' – can thus be show in very different effects via this encounter. To think with Grosz and Haraway via Deleuze about the question of difference is never about the sameness of a thought of difference but of a difference always about variation. Feminism never was, and it never should be, merely *One*. It (necessarily) is a differential field which most productively engages in a world that is always in need of more in order to move on and produce 'more' than mere acknowledgment or recognition.

If we, thus, turn once more, this time to the US-American zoologist and feminist philosopher Donna Haraway as our second angle from where to show difference differing, the following

is to be said: Whereas it is the radical primacy of (natural/sexual) differentiation that Elizabeth Grosz emphasizes in her ontological endeavors, which then also makes her emphasize the differentiating side of difference most strongly in her political vision and this because of the fact that there is always already a difference that cuts through everything – sexuation –, Donna Haraway’s most radical insight into the question of difference lies similarity in where she locates it, but in this she differs from Grosz. Instead of starting with sexuation as the model of difference that *cuts through* everything, the ‘image’ of difference which accompanies her thought is rather the *relationality* or *situatedness* – ‘situation’ as always already a manifold and multilayered, and thus differentiated context – which is used against the logic of the *One*, teleology and the ongoing ‘dream of transcendence’. Difference as partiality and relationality is at the heart of Haraway’s rethinking both when it comes to the acquisition of scientific knowledge and an intervention into this world. This is a credo that she already explored in her seminal article on ‘Situated Knowledges’ (1988). Instead of falling for the simplicity-trick, according to which we only have to get to the most simple unit for finding the most truthful way into something, Haraway argues for ‘complexity’, “for a politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, were partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway 1991: 195). Instead of the most unfussy we have to think “from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body” (ibid.) in order to *encounter the real*. In the most recent turn of her work towards the differential thought of ‘companion species’, this premise takes the following shape:

It would be a mistake to assume much about species in advance of encounter...To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where *who and what are* is precisely what is at stake...Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. (Haraway 2008: 18-19)

As a scientist and therefore in certain ways more familiar with a thought of difference as ‘variation’ (evolution), Haraway leads her inquiry into companion-ness by referring to “the amazing abilities of slime to hold things in touch and to lubricate passages for living beings and their parts” (ibid.: 3). For her the sticky belonging-together of everything – naturecultures, the material-semiotic – has to be foregrounded. Instead of emphasizing so much the bifurcation of nature, it is fundamental that we stop dividing further and further, and rather become aware of the becoming-with that is characteristic of all forms of (non-)life on earth. Human nature, according to Haraway, is in this sense always already an interspecies relationship: there never is a *One* of species, but neither is there a *One* of the

individual, and if we only finally would understand this in all its dimensions – from biology to ontology, from politics to morality, from which her writing tells so many stories – it would promise an ‘*autre-mondialisation*’ that this world is so much in need for: “I am not a posthumanist; I am who I become with companion species, who and which make a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind. Queer messmates in mortal play, indeed.” (ibid.: 19)

This seems to be a nice endpoint, but to stop here would be too easy. It would look like as if we have arrived at a sort of comfortable conclusive moment in the discussion, an appearance that does not only fail to do justice to Haraway’s thorough way of thinking difference(s) but it does also contradict the article’s approach whose punch line is precisely not to arrive at an endpoint, but to proliferate the discussion of difference. If we would conclude our argument by saying that in comparison to Grosz’ more *differentiating* point of view in thinking difference in itself, Haraway’s is the eco-feminist harmonious and thereby slightly utopian alternative that ‘creates a world’ beyond our histories (structured by power relations, struggles, and tensions), we would precisely miss out on what before I have called the most provocative dimension of the commitment to difference and thus also of Haraway’s positioning. While in her writing Haraway does focus more specifically on the *relational* aspects of difference(s), this is not in order to transcend the differential as such. Here, I would argue, does she join the radical non-teleology that the Deleuzian conceptual registers offer, even if she herself isn’t so fond of his thinking sometimes.¹² In a recent lecture, at the *California College of Art* (2009), Haraway makes her point in this regard as crystal clear as Grosz manages to delineate her own take on Darwinian evolution. The topic of Haraway’s lecture for that occasion was “Staying with the Trouble. Becoming-With Species of Empire”, and in it she emphasizes the *troublesome nature of becoming-with*, an encounter that creates problems, and is never innocent. Thus, she shows her most serious commitment to the non-teleological and affirmative attitude to this world ‘as it is’, such as I would claim a thought of difference in itself is in need of (cf. Thiele 2010). If we want to get out of the circularity of a dialectics of difference(s) that splits ‘us’ from ‘them’, the becoming-with and interspecies respect Haraway demands means learning to maneuver with(in) the trouble. In a world that is characterized by the most promising and dangerous potentials of diversity and differentiability, instead of merely finding a way out we have to learn to think difference ‘all the way’; we

might then become aware of the promising encounters “dancing before us” (Foucault 1998: 367) which the feminist philosophies of Grosz and Haraway are opening up for us.

¹ Both of these statements are ‘variations’ on Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s claim in *What is Philosophy?* that the quest of immanence is still the burning issue of all philosophy (cf. p. 45), and Luce Irigaray’s announcement in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* that “[s]exual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age” (p. 7).

² We could trace the Deleuzian legacy also in other prominent feminist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti and Claire Colebrook who in a less limited space than the one provided by this paper would further contribute to the thought of difference ‘in itself’.

³ To name just two versions of such problematic Darwinism much discussed in the Humanities, I refer the reader to the works of the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and the philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett.

⁴ In the following referred to as DR.

⁵ “[W]e do not think difference in itself. With Aristotle, Philosophy was able to provide itself with an organic representation of difference, with Leibniz and Hegel and orgiastic representation: it has not, for all that, reached difference in itself.” (DR: xv)

⁶ For a helpful interpretation of Hegel, cf. Nancy 2002.

⁷ “The living Substance is being which is in truth *Subject*.” (Hegel 1977: 10)

⁸ These are, according to Deleuze, the four aspects of identity, analogy, opposition, and resemblance (cf. DR: 29).

⁹ In the field of political philosophy one could think of theorists such as Seyla Benhabib, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Charles Taylor.

¹⁰ How important the concept of ‘simulacrum’ is in Deleuze’s oeuvre can also be made explicit by referring to another of his major philosophical publication, *The Logic of Sense* (1969), which has an Appendix devoted to ‘The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy’.

¹¹ “[M]odesty is one of the founding virtues of what we call modernity. This is the virtue that guarantees that the modest witness is the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish the facts. He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity is his objectivity.” (Haraway 1997: 24)

¹² For Haraway’s sharp criticism – justified or not – on Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming-series in *A Thousand Plateaus*, cf. Haraway 2004: 27ff.

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