



PROJECT MUSE®

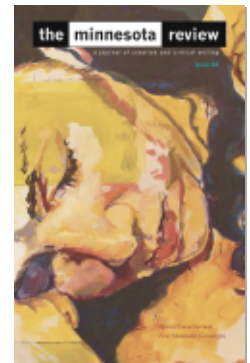
---

Signals Falling: Reading Woolf and Guattari Diffractively  
for a New Materialist Epistemology

Iris van der Tuin

Minnesota Review, Issue 88, 2017, pp. 112-115 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/654592>

Iris van der Tuin

## Signals Falling

Reading Woolf and Guattari Diffractively for a New  
Materialist Epistemology

To read diffractively<sup>1</sup> implies a certain *suddenness*. Suddenly having entered a new idea owing to an impression that “disturb[s] my whole consciousness like a stone which falls into the water of a pond” (Bergson [1889] 1913, 168). This new idea, then, comes about when, being immersed in the reading of text A (the water of a pond), I am interpellated by text B (the stone). Both stone and new idea arrive unexpectedly, by way of a disturbance. Reading diffractively is a methodology that wants to stay clear from classificatory reading (reading *from* and *for* an authoritative classification of ideas, a relation of dependence that is often implicit and stays unacknowledged). The diffractive methodology does not, however, underestimate the power of classification. The emphasis is on classification not as a neutral mediator but as entangled with the work that it implicitly and unacknowledgedly does (van der Tuin 2015). Classificatory reading being the institutionalized form of reading, it is clear that diffractions are also sudden owing to their *seldomness*. This becomes clear in the following fragment of Henri Bergson, the philosopher with whom I have been theorizing and practicing diffractive reading since the early 2010s and continuing to the present: “Not all our ideas, however, are . . . incorporated in the fluid mass of our conscious states. Many float on the surface, like dead leaves on the water of a pond: the mind, when it thinks them over and over again, finds them ever the same, as if they were external to it” (Bergson [1889] 1913, 135). In this short essay I will zoom in on both incorporation and externality, attempting to give each its proper place in a new materialist epistemology that originates from the diffractive methodology. *Ecology* and *entanglement* will turn out to play a key role in this immanent epistemology.

In her book-length essay published in an interwar period, “Three Guineas” ([1938] 2001), Virginia Woolf argues that the daughters of educated men must not prostitute their brains. “Adultery of the brain” is worse than selling one’s body, she says (191–92). This is what the responsibility to prevent the worst kind of adultery consists of:

We must ask you . . . not to avail yourself, in short, of any of the forms of brain prostitution which are so insidiously suggested by the pimps and panders of the brain-selling trade; or to accept any of those baubles and labels by which brain merit is advertised and certified—medals, honours, degrees—we must ask you to refuse them absolutely, since they are all tokens that culture has been prostituted and intellectual liberty sold into captivity. (192)

But even when being a member of the Outsiders' Society, taking part in prostituted culture and finding oneself intellectually captivated is as unavoidable as doing classificatory work. There is nothing innocent about being an outsider (cf. Haraway 1988). Perhaps what is unavoidable *is* doing classificatory work, as a woman thinker, which means, however, that diffraction is at work just as well. This is at least what the opening sequence of Woolf's essay has taught us. It is very well possible either that, albeit suddenly and seldomly, an external token of a prostituted culture is incorporated in the mind or that a captivated intellect is liberated by an impression of a different kind. And indeed, in "A Room of One's Own" ([1929] 2001), Woolf argues that, while staring out of the window on one morning in London, "a single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street and . . . somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked" (83). Entering the "fluid mass of our conscious states," as Bergson would have it, the leaf brought "a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as the stream at Oxbridge had taken the undergraduate in his boat and the dead leaves" (Woolf [1929] 2001, 83). From there, a young man and a girl and a taxicab came together, the sight of which, to Woolf, "seem[ed] to ease the mind of some strain" (83). The effort was suddenly gone, and she had entered "some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back" (84). Later she would affirm that one needs this "androgynous mind" in order to create (85).

When formulating her ideas about—or better: *alongside*—the looming advent of war in a programmatic style, in a style that, we may affirm for the occasion, approaches Félix Guattari's in *The Three Ecologies* ([1989] 2008), Woolf, in "Three Guineas," argues:

The old names as we have seen are futile and false. "Feminism," we have had to destroy. "The emancipation of women" is equally

inexpressive and corrupt. To say that the daughters were inspired prematurely by the principles of anti-Fascism is merely to repeat the fashionable and hideous jargon of the moment. To call them champions of intellectual liberty and culture is to cloud the air with the dust of lecture halls and the damp dowdiness of public meetings. Moreover, none of these tags and labels express the real emotions that inspired the daughters' opposition to the infantile fixation of the fathers, because, as biography shows, that force had behind it many different emotions, and many that were contradictory. ([1938] 2001, 235)

This fragment not only aligns with Guattari's claim, formulated on the threshold of the pre- and post-1989 interregnum, that owing to Integrated World Capitalism, "it is not only species that are becoming extinct but also the words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity" ([1989] 2008, 29). The combination of "that force [which] had behind it many different emotions, and many that were contradictory" and "a force in things which one had overlooked" captures what is essential in Guattari: first, the responsibility to start off thought from the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity *in their entanglement* (cf. Barad 2007); and, second, to be aware of the fact that, therefore, this entanglement is given "as a for-itself [*pour-soi*] that is precarious, finite, finitized, singular, singularized, capable of bifurcating into stratified and deathly repetitions or of opening up processually from a praxis that enables it to be made 'habitable' by a human project" (Guattari [1989] 2008, 35). A new materialist epistemology, therefore, strives for incorporation (a for-itself, an androgyny), while acknowledging that this, too, is but a Bergsonian "virtual past" (cf. Deleuze [1966] 1991, 56–57) that may just as well actualize in externalizing manners that are harmful for "the destiny of humanity" (Guattari [1989] 2008, 44), the destiny of nonhumanity, and the destiny of the nonhuman in us.

## Notes

This essay was first presented as a paper during two events of Terra Critica: Interdisciplinary Network for the Critical Humanities. During the first event, the workshop Re-visioning the Critical Task of the Humanities in a Globalized World, at Utrecht University (November 2013), I received helpful comments from Ernst van Alphen. The second event took place in March 2014 at the ACLA Annual Conference at New York University. The essay, and my work on diffractive reading, was further developed in close collaboration with participants in the COST Action IS1307, New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on "How Matter Comes to Matter."

1. The diffractive reading methodology was first suggested by Donna Haraway ([1992] 2004, 1997) as well as Karen Barad (2003, 2007). I have further developed the methodology in van der Tuin 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b. See also Hoel and van der Tuin 2013, and Geerts and van der Tuin 2016.

## Works Cited

- Barad, Karen. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs* 28, no. 3: 801–31.
- . 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bergson, Henri. (1889) 1913. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. 3rd ed. Translated by F. L. Pogson. London: Allen.
- Deleuze, Gilles. (1966) 1991. *Bergsonism*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Zone.
- Geerts, Evelien, and Iris van der Tuin. 2016. "The Feminist Futures of Reading Diffractively: Replacing Conflict-Based Readings in the Case of Beauvoir and Irigaray." In "Quantum Possibilities: The Work of Karen Barad," edited by Karin Sellberg and Peta Hinton, special issue, *Rhizomes* 30.
- Guattari, Félix. (1989) 2008. *The Three Ecologies*. Translated by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. London: Continuum.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: *The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3: 575–99.
- . (1992) 2004. "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others." In *The Haraway Reader*, 63–124. New York: Routledge.
- . 1997. *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan®\_Meets\_Onco-Mouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoel, Aud Sissel, and Iris van der Tuin. 2013. "The Ontological Force of Technicity: Reading Cassirer and Simondon Diffractively." *Philosophy and Technology* 26, no. 2: 187–202.
- van der Tuin, Iris. 2011. "'A Different Starting Point, a Different Metaphysics': Reading Bergson and Barad Diffractively." *Hypatia* 26, no. 1: 22–42.
- . 2013. "The Untimeliness of Bergson's Metaphysics: Reading Diffractively." In *Bergson and the Art of Immanence: Painting, Photography, Film*, edited by John Mullarkey and Charlotte de Mille, 232–46. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- . 2014a. "Diffraction as a Methodology for Feminist Onto-Epistemology: On Encountering Chantal Chawaf and Posthuman Interpellation." In "Diffracted Worlds—Diffractive Readings: Onto-epistemologies and the Critical Humanities," edited by Birgit M. Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele, special issue, *Parallax* 20, no. 3: 231–44.
- . 2014b. "'Without an Analytical Divorce from the Total Environment': Advancing a Philosophy of the Humanities by Reading Snow and Whitehead Diffractively." *Humanities* 3, no. 2: 244–63.
- . 2015. *Generational Feminism: New Materialist Introduction to a Generative Approach*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield (Lexington).
- Woolf, Virginia. (1929) 2001. "A Room of One's Own." In *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, edited by Hermione Lee, 1–98. London: Vintage.
- . [1938] 2001. "Three Guineas." In *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, edited by Hermione Lee, 99–294. London: Vintage.