

# Critical Variants of Materiality. Polish Literary Criticism from Post-structuralism to New Materialisms

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## Shared matter

Trends in theory (critical reflection) and themes in modern art have been in sync roughly since the 1970s, when, according to Hal Foster, they started to share at least three research fields: the structure of the sign, the constitution of the subject, and the siting of the institution<sup>1</sup>. When Foster was writing about a new form of relations emerging between art and criticism in the 1990s, he stressed their significance for the valuation of artistic practices, reflected in the interest of critical reflection, and new conceptualizations and theoretical strategies resulting from it<sup>2</sup>. The situation of the Anglo-American world of art described by Foster – with a few nec-

<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, *Powrót Realnego. Awangarda u schyłku XX wieku*, translated into Polish by Mateusz Borowski, Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Universitas, 2010), 15. English version: *The Return of the Real: The Avante-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska, “«Puste miejsce po kulturowych mandarynach». Krytyka sztuki i język teorii” [«Vacancy left behind cultural Mandarines». Art criticism and language of theory], *Kultura Współczesna* 4 (2010): 42.

essary differences and reservations<sup>3</sup> – can say a lot also about the current, twenty-first-century interference of themes of literature and critical-literary orientation. In order to properly put the analogy in motion, it is enough to replace post-structural studies with post-humanistic, non-anthropocentric, and new-materialistic fields of research in humanities, which resonate in artistic activities, theoretical conceptualizations, and critical reflections. These fields, together with transdisciplinary and artistic articulations, function in the broadest, shared horizon of modernity, marked by climate crisis and attempts at redefining ontological differences in the human and non-human community resulting from it. According to Karen Barad, one of the leading representatives of “new materialism”, “new possibilities, which with any luck will have the potential to help us see our way through to a world that is more viable, not for some, but for the entangled wellbeing of all”<sup>4</sup> are the stakes of such efforts. In order to meet these expectations, new materialism in humanities focuses on revising the notion of “materiality” and critical ethos; the latter requires a turn towards affirmative, engaged criticism able to overcome negativity and suspiciousness, which – according to Barad<sup>5</sup> – dominate in the modern critical tradition. Simply speaking, resignification of the notion of “materiality” related to the vitalistic, dynamic ontology of matter, is combined with reevaluating critical theory, required for reinforcing connections in the shared world in an emphatic way rather than for hard-hitting reductionism in bonds between entities<sup>6</sup>. Thus, post-criticism derives from (among other things)<sup>7</sup> new-materialist ethics, which is opposed to the humanist critical approach, characterized with the use of such obviously ethically-charged metaphors as “reductionist”, “distancing”, or “big-headed”<sup>8</sup>. Post-humanist materiality outlines new critical postulates, including procedures for

<sup>3</sup> Foster was describing the moment when the late modernism crisis in painting and sculpture resulted in replacing high art with mostly structural theory. Today shared themes in art and theory include especially the climate catastrophe and dimensions of the Anthropocene, as well as producing knowledge. Also the change in the scope of transdisciplinary research in artistic practices, combining philosophy of science and knowledge of art, positioning artistic research within the framework of new-materialist ways of thinking, is significant. According to Dorota Golańska: “From the perspective of new materialism, both the creative act, the existence of a work of art, and the aesthetic experience connected with dealing with art, have both material and meaning components – the materiality of art produces and brings to life discursive meanings, which in turn allows to give sense to matter. The notion background of such an approach is based on such a processual understanding of art, especially in terms of the notion of «thinking/feeling», referring to intellectual-material aspects of art and creative encounters with it” – “O praktykach i procesie. Nowomaterialistyczne spojrzenie na sploty sztuki, nauki i wiedzy” [On practices and process. New-materialist perspective on the contexture of art, science and knowledge], in: *Feministyczne nowe materializmy: usytuowane kartografie* [Feminist new materialisms: situated cartographies], edited by Olga Cielemecka, Monika Rogowska-Stangret (Lublin: E-naukowiec, 2018): 213, <https://e-naukowiec.eu/feministyczne-nowe-materializmy-usytuowane-kartografie-pod-redakcja-olgi-cielemeckiej-i-moniki-rogowskiej-stangret/>.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Barad, “Erasers and erasures: Pinch’s unfortunate «uncertainty principle»”, *Social Studies of Science* 41, 3 (2011): 450.

<sup>5</sup> And not only her, as evidenced by Rita Felski’s post-critical approach; in her last books she postulated transgressing the limitations of traditional (i.e. suspicious and negative) ethos of criticism, which she sees especially in symptomatic reading, criticism of ideology, Foucault’s historicism, as well as in searching for traces of transgression or resistance in texts – Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3. In her latest book Felski develops a project of criticism based on “engagement in art” – its non-reducible, phenomenological nature manifesting itself considering the complexity and variety of aesthetic experience – Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 241.

<sup>7</sup> For Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski, editors of a volume on post-criticism, research in affects is also an important inspiration, in which they see acts of resistance to “omnipresent pessimism of academic thought” or “chronic negativity of criticism” – Elizabeth S. Anker, Rita Felski, “Introduction”, in: *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 8.

<sup>8</sup> In his polemics with new-materialist ontology and ethics, Paul Rekret refers to specific authors of these metaphorical terms of modern criticism – “A critique of newmaterialism: Ethics and ontology”, *Subjectivity* (2016), DOI: 10.1057/s41286-016-0001-y.

reading texts<sup>9</sup>, currently crossing paths with literature focused on reflection upon the Anthropocene, i.e., incorporating structures and topics of debates regarding the climate disaster. As a result – what I would like to show in the present text – a contiguity of dictionaries of criticism and literature emerges, which stems from post-humanist theories which easily permeate discussions about literature beyond academia. I will focus on practical consequences for literary criticism rather than argue with new-materialist criticism or literary theory<sup>10</sup>. This is because vitalist materiality produces a certain type of critical commentary, influencing the scope of its central property: valuation.

## Criticism versus materiality of language

Opposing the post-structuralist tradition which established “language power” as the basic tool of cultural representations, is one of the key orientations in new materialism. According to Barad’s classical (and disputable<sup>11</sup>) statement: “the linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every «thing» – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation”<sup>12</sup>. Barad argues that materiality as a “matter of language” has limited figurations: it seems passive and unchangeable, and it has potential for change only as a derivative of discursive forms. Barad’s observation can be paraphrased as an accusation of post-structuralist “linguisticsfication” of matter, as a result gaining only specific meanings. However, if we take a closer look at specific, critical applications of materiality in its post-structuralist sense, Barad’s diagnosis turns out to be incorrect.

In the Polish criticism of poetry of the 1990s, “materiality” (in the *French Theory* sense) was a useful concept defining self-referring dimensions of language; its material shape rather than the communicated meaning<sup>13</sup>. Materiality turned some poems (e.g., by Andrzej Sosnowski) into autonomous entities, or even living organisms<sup>14</sup>, which went beyond referential stability. In discussions focused on post-structuralist philosophy of language materiality of poetry

<sup>9</sup> Among others, “diffractive reading” proposed by Karen Barad, who borrowed a notion from physics for defining a desired reading practice based on “reading through” (rather than reading “against” which she sees in reflective reading). This type of reading entails connecting authors, theories, disciplines and dictionaries in such a way as to make them redefine or transform one another argumentatively, according to entanglement in refraction – see e.g. Kei Merten, “Introduction. Diffraction, Reading, and (New) Materialism”, in: *Diffractive Reading. New Materialism, Theory, Critique*, edited by Merten Kai (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021): 1–27.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Paweł Kaczmarek: “Materialism As Intentionalism: on the Possibility of a *New Materialist* Literary Criticism”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4, 4 (2019): 191–235.

<sup>11</sup> See Dennis Bruining, “Interrogating the Founding Gestures of the New Materialism”, *Cultural Studies Review* 22, 2 (September 2016): 21–40, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v22i2.4461>.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, *Signs: Journal of Woman in Culture and Society* 28, 3 (2003): 801.

<sup>13</sup> Specific examples of such an understanding of materiality (on the example of discussions about Andrzej Sosnowski’s poetry) are provided and discussed by Marta Koronkiewicz – “Materiality as Resistance and Protection: The Case of Andrzej Sosnowski”, translated into English by Paweł Kaczmarek, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 34, 4 (2019): 152–153.

<sup>14</sup> Agata Bielik-Robson, “A poem should not mean but live. Oznaki życia w późnej poezji Andrzeja Sosnowskiego” [Traces of life in Andrzej Sosnowski’s late poetry], in: *Wiersze na głos. Szkice o twórczości Andrzeja Sosnowskiego* [Poems to read out loud. On Andrzej Sosnowski’s works], edited by P. Śliwiński (Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2011).

ultimately led to accepting its dynamic, metamorphous properties opposed to the hegemony of sense and the legibility of dogma stemming from it. As a result (as demonstrated by Marta Koronkiewicz) “materiality” of language defined in such a way clearly influenced the type of critical commentary based on individual confessions to not understanding poems and on generalizing their program status: texts striving towards being incomprehensible<sup>15</sup>. Even if such ideas are solipsistic (and, as demonstrated by Koronkiewicz, divergent from Sosnowski’s reflection on the materiality of poetic language), they reveal the paradoxical dimension of post-structuralist materiality of language: its self-referentiality, “inner-linguisticity”<sup>16</sup>, and sophistication of readers’ affects – the incomprehension from which criticism derives its own, individual usages of poems. Materiality, referring to linguistic expression, thus served interpretations resulting from the recognition of dereferentialization of words; it became a center of reading in the paradigm of negative representation: in the conditions of accepting that a word does not adhere to an object. However, as demonstrated recently by Dawid Kujawa, in these conditions the materiality of linguistic signs is subject to the hermeneutic procedure of explaining the process of dereferentialization<sup>17</sup>. Kujawa lists influential poetic criticism projects, such as “reductionist deconstructionism” by Grzegorz Jankowicz, responsible for (among other things) the myth of Andrzej Sosnowski as a post-political poet. Negative representation was the center of this myth, i.e., material existence of signs of poetic language deprived of connection with social life and circulating in a closed circuit outside the world. Jankowicz uses the metaphor of a worn coin whose circulation fuels the inflation of linguistic signs. In this critical model, the materiality of words highlights the autonomy of poems, their independence from both transcendence and power. This interest in materiality pointing towards the autonomous dimension of poetic material overlaps with the modernist tradition of material subversion of materials (artistic and linguistic). In post-1989 criticism this tradition returns to the question of the need to describe literature outside of “presentism and etism” (as Przemysław Czapliński put it), on which works from the years 1965-1989 were based. Said tradition set off the work of probing the literary representation in terms of making text independent from “semantic servitude”<sup>18</sup> – not only in poetry, but also in prose criticism.

The materiality of prose language played a fundamental role in Czapliński’s seminal, non-epic model of modern prose proposed in the 1990s. “Text density” characterizing non-epic prose, suggested literary a character manifesting itself in “semantic particles”<sup>19</sup>, and creating autonomous plots comprising “lexical events”. The anti-mimetic dimension of literature read by Czapliński reveals itself via a detailed analysis of linguistic structures, unveiling the internal logics of a text subjugated to the principle of linguistic rather than event entailment. The focus on literary material proposed by him highlights the properties of prose as a collection of autonomous linguistic tropes which it continuously reproduces. The structuralist dismantling of non-epic prose

<sup>15</sup>Koronkiewicz, 153.

<sup>16</sup>Ewa Nofikow, “Między językami, między głosami. O *poems* Andrzeja Sosnowskiego” [Between languages, between voices. On Andrzej Sosnowski’s *poems*], *Biblioteka Postscriptum Polonistycznego* 3 (2013): 93.

<sup>17</sup>Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000* [People’s kisses. Poetry and criticism after 2000] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2021). EPUB.

<sup>18</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, “Nieepicki model prozy w literaturze najnowszej” [Non-epic model of prose in modern literature], *Teksty Drugie* 41, 5 (1996): 72.

<sup>19</sup>Czapliński, “Nieepicki model prozy w literaturze najnowszej”, 73.

establishes the visibility of creative means as the basic filter for literary criticism which extracts literature from representational regime and allows us to highlight its anti-illusiveness.

Both in post-structuralist criticism of poetry and in Czapliński's structuralist proposal references to text materiality led literature from entanglement in non-literary rules of communication, simultaneously valuing works in which material sovereignty created a barrier for instrumentalization of senses. It is significant that the turn towards non-referential literature in criticism took place at times of ideological crises (ethical-moralistic in Czapliński, free-market in Sosnowski's critics), seeing the materiality of pure language as an antidote to monopolizing meanings and senses. Disruptions in representation and dereferentialization of language were thus articulations of artistic and literary-critical self-awareness – signs of the discreteness of discursive practices from marketing and opinion-forming messages. The strategy of a molecular focus on literary language matter allowed us to problematize the issue of mimesis and the subservience of literature to extra-linguistic reality. Criticism which traces textual disruptions in communication employed articulations and metaphors of materiality in order to appreciate works which cancel both traditional (i.e., legitimized by the canon of practice), and consumptional (characteristic for mass production) styles of reception. Materiality crystallized as a critical category for establishing the hierarchy and value of those texts which question the uninterrupted transfer between graphic sign and its designate; they reject naïve representationalism and thus favor testing the limits of communication.

## Materializations of identity

Reducing articulations of postmodern materiality to the dimension of reflection upon representation and aesthetic autonomy would be a meta-critical oversimplification. In Polish literary criticism there is a context of using the "materiality" notion alternative to the "quasi-deconstructive" (Kujawa) optics. It manifests itself especially in interpretations of prose accentuating its identity-related parameters. In texts by, among others, Kinga Dunin (*Czytając Polskę* [Reading Poland], 2004), Błażej Warkocki (*Homo niewiadomo. Polska proza wobec odmienności* [Homo I don't know. Polish prose and otherness], 2007) and Przemysław Czapliński (*Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje* [Poland needs replacing. Late modernity and our grand narratives], 2009) strategies of producing identity, textual procedures of socialization, and representations of identity diversion are a significant interpretation key and a tool for categorizing literature. These critics are interested in narratives surrounding producing gender and gendered subjectivity, made present in the represented world of the analyzed texts and defined according to theoretical formulae proposed by Judith Butler. Her conceptualization of gender (as socio-cultural norms materialized in the body) provided some Polish critics from the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century with an interpretative framework according to which literature was read from the perspective of an emancipatory task: "Emancipatory task – initiating new stories and new language – formulated, practiced and introduced to the narrative universe undermined the legitimacy of the grand narrative"<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B, 2009), 302.

For Przemysław Czapliński, author of those words, literature which makes procedures of giving identity a discourse, among others by showing non-normative bodies, has a subversive character, because it becomes an ally in constructing other bonds<sup>21</sup>. Such an attitude to literature reveals a literary-critical dimension of materiality (significant for the present paper), which is close to Butler's ideas of materiality as a matter of language – not as a metaphorical question or the problem of referentiality, but as an issue of language referring to materiality (body) through the denotation process. For example, reading Mariusz Sieniewicz's prose, Czapliński treated fiction as a tool for probing the illusion of a universal identity, demonstrating how signs of otherness creating the other materialize on a normalized, male body, of an outcast who will be rejected by his community in order for that community to strengthen its social borders. The tension between the body's universalism as a sub-species matter of existence and institutional procedures of emerging borders helped Czapliński demonstrate the transformations in late modern identity narratives. Thus, contemporary literature gains a performative function – Czapliński subjected it to a conceptualization focused on the intersection of matter and meanings, in order to highlight the potential of fictional narratives for new rules of participation in the socio-political life.

Also, Dunin's and Warkocki's books, which were published before *Polska do wymiany*, originated in the idea that literature is a tool for probing existing and emerging social orders, and its analysis can become an analysis of establishing and stabilization of relations, including especially identity-shaping mechanisms in reference to social conventions and repetitive practices of perpetuating meanings. *Czytając Polskę* and *Homo niewiadomo* stem from constructivism; Dunin is interested in society as a fiction derivative of interpretation, Warkocki – in ways of constructing otherness. It is significant that both critics explain their constructivist approach with references to materiality (of the body – Warkocki<sup>22</sup>, of reality – Dunin<sup>23</sup>); they draw conclusions regarding the status of interpretative work of literary texts based on these references. For Dunin interpretations of literature need to take into consideration “strong entanglement of literary discourses in other discourses and colloquial thinking”<sup>24</sup>; which is why she is interested in “the congruence [of texts] with social reality understood as a process, a constant struggle over what this new reality is”<sup>25</sup> rather than their uniqueness. As a result, she leaves out the literariness of the texts she interprets, symptomatically relegated to the sphere of “language games”, which Dunin opposes with literature's engagement in the process of learning about and creating society. Warkocki's approach is less antagonizing – he is interested in tracing misfits and symbolic conditions of their existence in texts, which results

<sup>21</sup>Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje*, 368.

<sup>22</sup>In the introduction to his book Warkocki devotes a lot of space to considerations regarding Butler's and Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's concept of gender, pointing out to the special role of the body as matter on which cultural rules of gender are imprinted. In his analyses and interpretations of prose the issue of corporality (as a theme in the discussed works) allows Warkocki to go towards procedures for social construction of identity – *Homo niewiadomo. Polska proza wobec odmienności* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2007), 17–44.

<sup>23</sup>“By using literature I do not wish to join the endless process of reading a text, but the endless process of learning about and creating society” – Kinga Dunin, *Czytając Polskę. Literatura polska po roku 1989 wobec dylematów nowoczesności* [Reading Poland. Polish literature after 1989 and the dilemmas of modernity] (Warszawa: SAGA Egmont, 2021. EPUB 3.0), 28.

<sup>24</sup>Dunin, 29.

<sup>25</sup>Warkocki, 44.

in a series of interpretations which are “close and loyal to the text”<sup>26</sup>, focused on identity dilemmas, revealing ways of producing otherness. Warkocki thus favors reading and writing practices, as the category which interests him – “otherness” – does not exist as something immanent; it has no stable or coherent definition. Reaching to literature and activities related to it is thus a necessary condition for noticing the constructional dimension of identity which – as Warkocki seems to argue – cannot be uncovered without referring to interpretative work. Thus, this literary-critical project can be treated as a reflection on the role of the symbolic dimension in the process of materializing subjectivity which becomes visible thanks to interpretative procedures required by literature rather than in literature itself.

Formulating a (general) conclusion regarding the transformation in the way of understanding materiality through criticism from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it can be conceptualized as a methodological shift – from linguistic self-referentiality of poetic matter to social materialization of discourses: from quasi-deconstructionism to critical social theories focused on unmasking universalism via making “other narratives” (Czapliński) visible, pointing to the need to rebuild the natural order (hitherto phantasms). Including the posthumanist provenience, i.e., stemming from new-materialist ontology and modifying the type of critical comments, especially in popular prose reviews<sup>27</sup>, is a sign of the next transformation in the literary-critical discourse of materiality.

## Materiality as a literary theme

Trends in today’s non-anthropocentric humanities resonate not only in methodological proposals; they are also reflected in artistic practices, including literature. New genres (such as climate fiction), are emerging and old ones, such as weird and science fiction, are being revised with current themes of more-than-human communities. The fact that literature, criticism and humanist methodologies share themes and problems results in literary-critical texts focused on the literary represented world, multiplication of cultural interpretative associations and intertexts, and finally – highlighting the paradigmatic dimension of text as a voice engaged in the current debate regarding the planetary future of the world.

“I knew I wanted to write a book about the Anthropocene and climate catastrophe even before I knew I wanted to write “Samosiejki” [Self-sown]”, says Dominika Słowik<sup>28</sup>.

Słowik is close to Timothy Morton, author of “dark ecology”, who refers to childish imagination in his texts due to its non-anthropocentric character (as children, we all talked to non-humans, did we not?). According to Morton, being truly human – based on community, solidarity, and symbio-

<sup>26</sup>Warkocki, 43.

<sup>27</sup>In modern poetry criticism, new materialism and posthumanism do not lead to such far-reaching reduction in the interest in medium and representation. To the contrary – critical books by Anna Kałuża, Kacper Bartczak, as well as papers by Dawid Kujawa and Jakub Skurtys testify to the benefits of incorporating these perspectives in work on poetry. In the case of prose a reductionist approach is more common, in which criticism focuses on the thematic conceptualization, and treating literary representation as an extension of discussions of the world in crisis.

<sup>28</sup>Natalia Szostak, *Dominika Słowik: Nie jestem typem aktywistki. Moją bronią jest literatura* [I am not an activist. Literature is my weapon], “Wysokie Obcasy” 2021, <https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,157211,27736785,dominika-slowik-nie-jestem-typem-aktywistki-moja-bronia-jest.html>.

sis – is only possible thanks to connecting with the non-human. Noticing it is in turn easier if we allow ourselves to return to the “childhood dream” – lifting the lid of black boxes. This is the spirit in which I read the environmental message of “Samosiejki”<sup>29</sup>.

I treat these statements – an author’s declaration regarding the origins of her latest novel, and an excerpt from its review – as symptomatic for the dialogue between literature and criticism. I see the reviewer’s reaction as significant; the attempt at translating elements of the literary world into the language of philosophy, or showing how a literary theme approaches a specific field in humanistic knowledge. What the critic is doing here does not differ from literary scholars who have been trying to combine the new materialism philosophy with eco-centric reading practices. They share an illustrative approach to literary works whose attractiveness reveals itself in the possibility to treat them as realizations of theories, notions, or posthumanist trends<sup>30</sup>. The review cited above offers more such illustrative-associative examples, including the titular “black boxes”, referring to Bruno Latour’s concept, which is also used in the discussion of Dominika Słowik’s novel<sup>31</sup>. This style of reading and organizing a review (explaining the represented world through theoretical-conceptual contexts) results in a discursive paraphrase of literature and the comment which stems from it – contemplative-descriptive rather than diagnostic-valuating. However, this shift is unsurprising when we consider new-materialist revisions of criticism, clearly dissociating themselves from the violence of negative criticism and postulating “affirmative engagement”<sup>32</sup>. However, the problem is that a critical comment respecting this postulate easily falls into the catalogue of literary motifs whose validity is supposed to highlight the connection with both current issues, and questions raised by posthumanist science. “Materiality” then becomes a thematic category of prose, automatically setting off new-materialist notions through which a text can be treated as a voice in an engaged, more-than-literary discussion. However, it seems that suspending representation and shifting the weight of critical reflection from language to plot and non-literary contexts is the price for treating the literary voice in such a way. This shift can be observed in the cited review, which opens with an extensive description of an association set off by the reviewed book:

In aerial photos it looks like a skeleton of a giant fish grown into the ground. A huge dune rather than a mountain. Forty years ago the Yucca massif near Las Vegas was considered the safest isolator for the quickly accumulating pile of radioactive waste. The waste was buried in holes resembling anthills, which were several kilometers deep, and experts claimed it was not supposed to be a threat for the planet for at least 10 thousand years. In early 1980s people were brainstorming ideas how to warn future inhabitants of Nevada about the toxic landfill – people who likely will speak a language which does not even exist yet<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>29</sup>Monika Ochędowska, *Czarne skrzynki* [Black boxes], “Dwutygodnik” 319 (2021), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/9757-czarne-skrzynki.html>.

<sup>30</sup>Paweł Kaczmarski discusses this property on the example of an anthology of texts about new-materialist reading (*Material Ecocriticism*, 2014), demonstrating how developing “poetics of matter” transformed into instrumentalization of literature as an illustration of philosophical notions – Kaczmarski, 198.

<sup>31</sup>Monika Ochędowska cites Latour’s notion in order to read actions of the novel’s protagonists, in which she accentuates mostly specific cognitive disproportions and sensitivity to more-than-human reality.

<sup>32</sup>This is how Karen Barad writes about her “diffractive reading”, proposing to replace what she sees as reductionist suspicious criticism with affirmative-conjoined criticism – see Barad, “Erasers and Erasures”, 450.

<sup>33</sup>Ochędowska.



This association has a significant cognitive value, just as the philosophical contexts referred to in the review. However, it is significant that abundance leaves no room left for considerations regarding literary representation, neutralized so that textual plots are treated as part of the material, empirical reality affected by the climate crisis. Anthropocentric plots and a new-materialist critical approach share the same goal: they are striving towards making the connection between literature and reality of the world visible through transforming readers' imagination – a connection which is best highlighted by shared images.

The problematic dimensions of this union are perhaps best visible in criticism of translated prose, where compromises regarding linguistic analysis and representation considerations<sup>34</sup> lead to embedding texts in global, universalized reception with the conceptual instrumentarium of posthumanist discourses as a tool. This instrumentarium encourages us to consider the representational rather than the linguistic dimension of a text, with figurations of communities in the center:

The stake is to design and implement a different vision of human community – one that would be supportive of non-humans. It can resemble a beehive or a herd of horses, but it necessarily must connect to some loss – a key term in Lunde's dictionary. And it is not about the economic sense of lack or a psychological state of longing which results from absence, but about the ability to experience loss in an ethical sense. Each protagonist described by Lunde at some point needs to learn how to lose – do something against their individual will, sacrifice a part of oneself in order to give life to others. Perhaps this is our main problem: we cannot and do not lose anything. This is why it is hard for us to imagine even one small world for whose realization we would have to sacrifice our lives<sup>35</sup>.

The excerpt cited above concludes the review, or rather, an interpretative essay about Maja Lunde's bestselling tetralogy. Lunde's ecological prose is discussed from the perspective of the anthropocentric imagination, via a reconstruction of the represented worlds of her novels. Obviously, it is difficult to argue with the ethical perspective on the plot, which may serve as exercises in attitude to the world for readers. However, the ethical perspective, so characteristic for climate fiction<sup>36</sup>, pushes questions of the value of literary representation further away. The weight of the issue, its significance for the problems of today and tomorrow, staves off the question of the construction of the represented world – its simplifications, one-dimensionality of characters – and narrative moralizing, whereas it was Lunde's decisions regarding

<sup>34</sup>Olga Szmidt discusses the problem of leaving out the linguistic status of translated literature in popular reviews – "Eksplorowanie ruchomych piasków. Krytyka przekładu i krytyka literacka wobec petryfikacji współczesnej literatury światowej" [Exploring quicksand. Criticism of translations and literary criticism versus the petrification of contemporary literature], *Przekładaniec* 42 (2021): 40–63, DOI:10.4467/16891864PC.21.017.14328.

<sup>35</sup>Andrzej Marzec, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/9378-saga-o-ludziach-poznego-antropocenu.html>.

<sup>36</sup>Following Adeline Johns-Putra conceptualization: "fiction concerned with anthropogenic climate change or global warming". *Climate fiction* is "a topic found in many genres" rather than a genre, since climate change themes appear in many different literary genres – "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: From Cli-fi, Climate Change Theater and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism", *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews. Climate Change* 7, 2 (2016): 267.

literary representation that are believed to be behind the book's international success<sup>37</sup>. The turn towards language – to its intentional simplicity – and the representational convention (its adequacy to the narrative scheme of climate fiction) is necessary for highlighting literary mechanisms which set off reader's empathy, which is elevated on the impression of a universal, over-literary message for a world headed to its end. In other words, the weight of the message of the novel is tied to formal decisions – the more they support neutralization, transparency (both of the medium and linguistic material), the more they force us to focus on the marginalized aspect. In climate fiction this task is not only necessary, but also simply interesting; one of the trends from this category, operating with a futuristic frame of the represented world<sup>38</sup>, is often based on realism tautology<sup>39</sup>, via which it encourages a reasonable thematic reading, successfully hiding the representation convention and its rules.

Tendencies in criticism oriented towards posthumanism, focused on searching for connections between different co-existing entities, work towards cognitive and popularizing goals; they are undeniably attractive as when we read about literature, we also read about how it is connected with current international issues. New-materialist criticism of representation as a linguistic sign of distance and materiality mediation in discourse seems to be problematic for critical-literary practices which move away from the effort to recognize the rules behind persuasiveness of stories about the Anthropocene; techniques for their universalization; mechanisms which facilitate their reception. The return to these dimensions of representation becomes increasingly important depending on the extent to which the Anthropocene presents itself as a digestible, more and more familiar notion which is being commonly exploited and capitalized. Reducing materiality to a thematic category does not “only” result in resigning from searching for and noticing formal experiments in prose, or indifference to the significance of literary forms. Ultimately it leads to equating literature with other objects (empirical objects outside of art), which is in fact in radical opposition to the goals of engaged criticism (and reviews), in which literature is supposed to provide ethical education.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>37</sup>Ion-Alin Ungureanu conducted an extensive comparative analysis of the first installment of Maja Lunde's tetralogy, both in terms of international and local reception (in Norway, English-speaking countries, and in Romania) – *A reception study of Maja Lunde's Bees in Norway, the English-speaking countries and Romania*, <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/84649/1/A-reception-study-of-Maja-Lunde-s-The-History-of-Bees-in-Norway--the-English-speaking-countries-and-Romania.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup>I.e. set in the future in which climate change is presented beyond moral or psychological implications of individual behaviors, as a result of the downfall of human society. The second trend in *cli-fi* presents modernity or near future in which climate change is an ethical, political and economic challenge for individuals. Identifying readers with characters who are emotionally engaged in climate change is a common convention within this trend – see Ungureanu, 5.

<sup>39</sup>Catherine Belsey explains that it is a fallacy to claim that a literary form is a reflection of reality: “If by *the world* we understand the world we experience, the world differentiated by language, then the claim that realism reflects the world means that realism reflects the world constructed in language” – Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 43.

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# KEYWORDS

## POSTHUMANISM

### materiality

### *poststructuralism*

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper reviews the meanings attached to the notion of “materiality” by literary criticism since 1990s. These meanings depend on several essential philosophical tendencies: poststructuralism, critical social theories, and posthumanism, which has a significant influence on critical-literary conceptualizations of “materiality”. The paper analyzes specific examples, mostly from critical-literary texts about contemporary Polish prose in order to show how “materiality” affects different types of critical commentary, including especially the possibilities and limitations of review.

review

## NEW MATERIALISM

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