



Re-Thinking Agency: Non-Anthropocentric Approaches

**3–5 February 2022
(Deadline for abstract submission: 15 November 2021)**

University of Warsaw and via Zoom worldwide

Keynote lecture: Karen Barad (University of California, Santa Cruz)

A common-sensical definition of agency is “the ability to act in a given environment”. This definition, however, requires clarification of what “acting”, “ability”, and even “environment” are. Consequently, the definition suggests a set of questions that should be probed further.

For a long time, acting and agency were seen as components of a metaphysically and religiously founded patriarchal order and thus formed a basis for the imperial understanding of colonial power, which cemented the one-dimensional determination of active impact and passive subordination. This understanding was expressed in all areas of both private and public life, grounding all possible systems of oppression. We can detect it in gender-based oppression, as well as in the class structure of society, and in the machinations of world politics. At the latest since the establishment of the Cartesian view of nature, agency has also been restricted to human beings who – as thinking subjects – have gained absolute power of influence in relation to the natural world, which has been degraded to a collection of objects, without any potential for action and agency.

This state of affairs began to change very late, when the foundations of the phallogocentric patriarchy were called into question in the course of ongoing decolonization and emancipation of the oppressed in global politics and social discourses. Accelerating awareness of the catastrophic consequences of human predatory exploitation of the natural environment and increasing occurrence of world-wide natural disasters, including the ongoing COVID pandemic, force a rethinking of epistemological and ethical subject-object models and the one-dimensional, anthropocentrically-oriented conception of agency.

The aim of the conference should therefore be an emancipatory-oriented discussion about the possible characteristics of agency in the posthuman age, understood as a time-space continuum of equality and diversity incorporating the technological advances of the digital age.

The conference is correlated with the topics of the project “Non-anthropocentric Cultural Subjectivity” realized as part of the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” Programme at the University of Warsaw*.

The following seven thematic sections are planned:

(Please send proposals for papers to the coordinator(s) of the selected section by **15 November 2021**).

I. Cultural heritage and the agency of nature

Coordinators: Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec, Monika Stobiecka

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The concept of agency has a long and rich tradition in heritage studies. Even though the most heated debates over the agency of monuments, architecture and various heritage sites took place in the 90-ties, the subject could and should be revisited taking into account the most recent discussions inspired by the theories presented by Karen Barad and Jane Bennett. Both new materialist philosophers invite us to rethink the biological and lively aspect of objects and sites that throughout centuries were perceived as stable and unchangeable. This venue becomes increasingly important when heritage is exposed to various natural processes that intensify during the ongoing ecological crisis.

Therefore, this session will encourage posthumanist and ecohumanist approaches to the agency of nature on (cultural) heritage. Agentive role of nature affecting the ontological, epistemological and ethical dimension of heritage will serve us to launch a critical platform to rethink heritage in the age of the Anthropocene.

* Interdisciplinary Research Project “Non-Anthropocentric Cultural Subjectivity” at the University of Warsaw.
Coordinator: Prof. Paweł Piszczatowski (p.piszczatowski@uw.edu.pl)

2. Re-presentation and re-cognition of non-human agency (cultural representations)

Coordinators: Patrycja Pichnicka-Trivedi, Justyna Schollenberger

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This panel session is devoted to the problem of the representation of non-human agency. We are not only interested in beings such as plants or animals, but also in materiality as such. According to thinkers such as Haraway, Morton, Braidotti, Bennett, Tsing (to name a few), we are essentially entwined in relations with the non-human that often elude the tools of representation or cognition. Rather, this entwining opens the dimension of what can be described as “weird” (Morton), “chthonic” (Harway), “vibrant” (Bennett). Therefore, in this panel session we are interested in all kinds of represented non-human agency: real, potential or fantastic. We are also interested in the way(s) in which such agency is represented: whether non-human agency is showed as monstrous, abject, unnatural (directly defined as such or symbolized by narrative figures like walking dead bodies, vampires, zombies) or whatever it is (re)affirmed (agency of things as absolute freedom (Zizek)). The posthumanist perspective confronts us with the question of adequacy of our narratives concerning not only non-human beings but also man’s place in the world. This perspective can be used as an analysing tool, as well as it can be somehow represented within a narrative itself. Thus, posthumanist insight allows for a re-examination of the figures of non-human agency inhabiting literary, poetic, scientific texts and art.

3. Performativity of agential realism and diffractive reading of literature

Coordinator: Paweł Piszczatowski

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Karen Barad’s conception of agential realism will be discussed in the section. According to this theoretical approach “agency is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit. Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity. [...] [I]t is an enactment, not something that someone or something has” (Barad 2003, 826–827). Linking the agency to the principle of intra-action brings a dynamic of entanglements and “world’s ongoing reconfiguring” into play. Through the redefinition and further development of Donna Haraway’s metaphor of diffraction, based on the findings of quantum physics, Barad also creates a new reading model that is to be verified on the basis of concrete text analyzes.

4. Agency, Subjectivity and Performativity in Contemporary Fiction from a Feminist Perspective

Coordinators: Aránzazu Calderón Puerta, Karolina Kumor, Katarzyna Moszczyńska-Dürst
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Poststructuralism, posthumanism and feminist theories abandon the idea of representing a universal subject and question the phallogocentric and humanist paradigm for the symbolic order centred around logos. Subjectivity becomes ex-centric, nomadic, animalistic (personal as well as communal), underlining what is singular and different. Embodiment and performativity are seen as indispensable conditions which situate one's experience in relation to the experience of others, thus allowing for collective agency. This, in turn, allows such researchers as Barad, Butler, Braidotti, Foucault, Rancière, Preciado, Haraway, Despentes to redefine certain naturalised accounts regarding agency, materiality, gender and the body; the focus is now on the precarious, vulnerable human and non-human lives. The aim of this panel is to analyse from a feminist perspective the means by which contemporary fictions codify and discuss the questions of agency, subjectivity and performativity.

5. Non-human and more-than-human agency in performances of harmonious interspecies relationships

Coordinator: Justyna Włodarczyk
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This panel is interested in rethinking the notion of more-than-human agency (Whatmore 2006), especially in contexts in which humans see themselves as acting not just on behalf of non-humans but together with non-humans to achieve goals which are beneficial for both humans and non-humans. Contexts in which more-than-human agency can emerge include various types of animal-rights activism, animal welfare work, but also urban planning strategies that aim to approach the cityscape as co-shaped by human and non-human agents, etc. We are also interested in cultural, literary and visual representations of more-than-human agency. The questions for further exploration include the following: What are the dangers of the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human agency? How can anthropocentrism be avoided in such situations? How can we make sure that non-humans' interests are not misrepresented? How can we ensure that non-humans are truly agents in more-than-human agency and not simply subjects whose interests are taken into account?

6. Agency and (Inter)subjectivity in After Modern-Society

Coordinators: Piotr Kulas, Aleksander Manterys
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The concept of agency has a long and rich tradition in sociology, social psychology, and (psycho)social theory. Yet, there is no univocal way of understanding: who is the real agent making things happen? In addition, new means of understanding agency beyond humanistic intervention have appeared. So far, one of the main questions of social (and sociological) theory concerning social action is about the individual subject and the common actors.

We offer an in-depth description of agency and subjectivity in after-modern society. We aim for our panel to be a space for presentations and discussion on different modes of understanding agency, possibilities of subjectivity, relations between individual and social agents, formation and development of new ways of agency. We propose a critical reflection on the ontology of the social world concerning agency and subjectivity as modes shaping social order. Moreover, we would like our panel to entail theoretical and empirical studies devoted to the aforementioned problems. We are also interested in presentations implementing the concept of agency and subjectivity in experiential research – one of them being the general and current problem of the pandemic.

We mostly take an interest in theoretical and empirical approaches to agency that will allow for a better understanding of the usefulness of this category today. We encourage the participation of sociologists, social psychologists, social philosophers and researchers from other fields who deal with such problems as action-network theory, critical realism, situation, sociology of risk, science and technology studies and relational sociology.

7. Agency of/in digital culture

Coordinators: Piotr Kubiński, Mariusz Pisarski, Ewa Szczęsna
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The topic of this panel opens a discussion on digital modeling of culture – its texts and discourses. We are especially interested in changes in the way art exists (through its material affordances, communication situation, semiotics, and poetics), but also in transformation of other forms of expression. We are interested in research on the present and future of digital culture and invite participants to reflect on the blurring of boundaries between textual genres, discourses, art and non-art. We welcome comparative discussions about forms of agency in the field of humanities (e.g. literary studies, cultural studies, arts, linguistics, archeology, history, religion) as well as reflections on new literary and storytelling forms made possible by linguistic AI and its employment in games, conversational apps and on social media.

An important research issue is the impact of digital technologies on emancipatory cultural processes that can result either in empowerment and liberation, or in colonization and oppression. Reflections on the phenomenon of discursive violence – the use of digital tools in exercising the power of some discourses over others – are highly encouraged.

Accompanying event:
Questioning anthropocentrism?
Biocentric epistemologies in the indigenous languages of Mexico

Coordinators: Julia Fiedorczuk, Gerardo Beltran

The panel organized by the Eco-poetological Laboratory as an event accompanying the conference aims at looking at the practice of several contemporary Mexican poets whose work focuses on indigenous languages (Nahuatl, Ayuujk-Mixe, Diidxazá-Zapotec, Maja, Mè'phàà). Is it possible to suggest that the indigenous languages of Mexico allow for or imply a non-anthropocentric (biocentric, ecocentric) epistemology, as opposed to the anthropocentric ways of knowing and world-making carried by the dominant Spanish? If so, how is this epistemology articulated? Can it be learned through poetry? The participants, all of them practicing poets or writers, will discuss these questions in relation to their writing and activism.