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*Eating in Theory* by Annemarie Mol (review)

Hannah Drayson

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in almost any discussion of abstract concepts. The press release for the book describes it as

an encyclopaedic dictionary of close to 400 important philosophical, literary, and political terms and concepts that defy easy—or any—translation from one language and culture to another. Drawn from more than a dozen languages, terms such as *Dasein* (German), *pravda* (Russian), *saudade* (Portuguese), and *stato* (Italian) are thoroughly examined in all their cross-linguistic and cross-cultural complexities. Spanning the classical, medieval, early modern, modern, and contemporary periods, these are terms that influence thinking across the humanities.

This describes it well, but even the glittering list of awards that it has attracted does not do the book full justice as an example of the sort of clear authoritative scholarship that the humanities need. Originally published in French, the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* is a massive and admirable undertaking by leading scholars and authorities to codify the possibly simultaneous meanings of the more technical terms that are essential—or seem essential—in philosophical writing. Many of these words are also used professionally by academics in the sciences, arts, and humanities in the sharing of ideas. But words such as “time”, “imagination”, “feeling”, “people”, “pathos”, etc., is

claimed, are untranslatable. The entry for “History,” for example, addresses the Dutch, German, Greek, Italian, and Latin words tracing the path of the idea through its various translations. Despite its widespread use, there is, of course, no definitive translation, because, as the various versions show, it is an untranslatable term requiring clear definition before it is used. Within the 10 pages used to follow this pathway of the concept of history through different languages there are a number of explanatory “boxes” in which cognate branches such as meta-history, historiography, etc. are laid out in clear, authoritative language.

In the process of its efforts to reveal the locus of a concept, there is an awareness of language as partial and subject to wear and tear. Hartog and Werner, who are responsible for this entry, open the translation with a question.

“The path from Greek *historia* to the French *histoire* . . . seems simple and direct. History was always history! One clue, however, should put us on our guard: why did the German end up distinguishing between *Historie* (a clear translation of the Latin *historia*) from *Geschichte* (referring to what has happened but also to the recounting we give of the study of the past—‘History’ with a capital H)?” (p. 439)

This discursive tactic runs through many entries as the contingencies of translation are revealed to have much wider effects on our understanding of ourselves. All this is done with the generosity and grace that often follows confident authority. The fundamental problem that the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* tackles rests most squarely in the domain of philosophy and the philosophy of translation, but that should not deter other readers. In the first place there is sublime pleasure to be gained from engaging with words for ideas in a raw and weightless state as their meanings are briefly freed from the gravitational pull of habitual language. There is also much to be said for the sheer joy and confidence of much of the writing in the book. Perhaps most of all in the context of the Leonardo project, its presence is a constant reminder that as we work

across and between disciplines, we cannot assume that we are using the same terms to mean the same things.

The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* is a clear and cathartic read that cleanses the palate after much of the fast food that is served up as theory. It is still available in hard copy and recommended as a valuable fixture on the desk and an important tool for us to rehearse our ways of thinking as well as a reminder that in dealing with complex topics there is a great pleasure to be had in being clear.

There are also a number of other reviews online including two especially helpful ones by Lucie Mercier (<https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/review-barbara-cassin-et-al-dictionary-of-untranslatables>) and Michael Kinnucan (<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/barbara-cassin-dictionary-of-untranslatables-a-philosophical-lexicon/>).

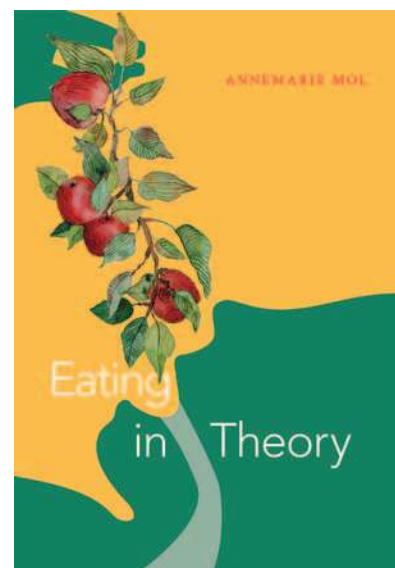
#### EATING IN THEORY

by Annemarie Mol. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2021. 208 pp. Trade, paper. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1037-1; ISBN: 978-1-4780-1141-5.

Reviewed by Hannah Drayson. Email: [hannah.drayson@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:hannah.drayson@plymouth.ac.uk).

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In whatever form they take, eating and breathing are functional necessities of life. They engage human bodies in fundamental material



exchanges with their environment and the other beings in it. Matters of metabolism offer a useful topic in the post-humanities, drawing attention to usually overlooked aspects of living systems' relationality. Paying attention to metabolism can offer many examples of both embeddedness and co-constitution that suggest how we might reconceptualize the human from an ecological perspective. Looking at the acts of eating and breathing shows the vital engagement of individual living beings in material exchanges that span scales from molecular to global.

Annemarie Mol's *Eating in Theory* is one of a number of recent publications that make use of the insights offered by attention to metabolism (another is Desiree Förster's *Aesthetic Experience of Metabolic Processes*, reviewed next month). Here eating offers a way to revisit and critique aspects of humanist philosophy that remain unchallenged even since the move toward posthuman epistemology. Her goal: to overturn the residual "arrogance" of humanist philosophy that was intended to solve very different problems than those we find ourselves with in the present. To do so Mol sets us on the topic of eating, which offers a way to turn our attention to relations that are usually made invisible in the transcendental realm of theoretical philosophy. Anyone looking for long discussions on humanist classics should take note: her targets, who include Arendt and Merleau-Ponty, are dispatched relatively quickly. The book does not so much get involved in arguments on others' terms as instead set out to show just how much more interesting the conversation could be if these terms were refigured with some neglected dimensions in mind. Mol's approach, that of what she calls "empirical philosophy," is grounded in a synthesis of over a decade of ethnographic work on food and eating that ranges from personal observations and diaries to fieldwork including work in clinics and care homes, with professional tasters, dieters, and farmers.

This work then is a continuation of Mol's post-actor-network approach

characterized by a focus on (sometimes technical) practices and how in specific sites and contexts they are used to "do" a number of different coexisting, but not necessarily cohesive, realities—a "multiplicity." Much of Mol's career has focused on the production of material corporeality in medical care. Her early work took a science studies approach but departed from it in order to account for the more pragmatic way in which facts and the activities that produced them coexisted in the space of the clinic. Her first monograph, *The Body Multiple*, drew on her hospital fieldwork to show how differing bodily and disease realities enacted by the practices found in the hospital were not brought into conflict but instead coexisted, producing what could be seen as essentially different objects. In distinction with the varying truth claims of the scientific laboratory, controversies that were brought into battle until one or another succeeded, Mol's work in healthcare showed how, in the clinic, differing facts coexisted. Here, the goals of providing care and enabling healing mean that the work is in making use of these different realities together in a pragmatic and flexible manner. In healthcare, she calls this "doctoring" or "tinkering," the work done by clinicians and nurses to help individuals navigate and make use of the various technical practices in order to find the best outcomes, where facts offer a means to do something, rather than a shape that reality must conform to.

*Eating in Theory* brings Mol's sophisticated approach to materiality and its enactment to bear on the prosaic topic of eating. This fascinating yet complex topic is much enriched by her approach and clarity. Food is really a very satisfying topic for the ecological humanities, because it draws together concerns of phenomenology, perception, matter, ethics, and highly practical and cultural dimensions. The book is rich with insights that extend the already very interesting work in the area of food and philosophy. Mol takes the sensory studies argument that an episte-

mology modeled on taste rather than sight is understood to be one that is immanent in very different ways. As Mol argues, in overlooking eating, even relegating eating to a lower bodily function, philosophers have created hierarchies and distinctions that leave us with an impoverished model of the subject that is no longer fit for purpose.

She argues from four themes—*being*, *knowing*, *doing*, and *relating*—to demonstrate where this new epistemological approach takes us when we engage with it in the practices of which it is composed. In the first theme, that of *being*, she redescribes how the embodied subject, as a semi-permeable "I", not only moves through space but has materials—the things that are eaten—move through it. Mol points out how different this eating body is even to that described by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which sought to centralize the body and (some of) the senses. Instead, the posthuman eating body is one whose edges and remnants are spread out, which absorbs energy from distant beings and spaces, a body that "maintains its form by changing its substance. Its limits are formed not by its skin, but by the finiteness of its lifetime" (p. 142). The section on the theme of *knowing* stresses the relational nature of knowledge. Knowing here concerns the specific nature of a person's knowing: What they do in order to engage with the world is more than an individual standpoint. It is also the result of specific contexts and occasions of ingestion. When something is ingested it is intervened upon, destroyed, changed, in order to be known. When something is known, the knower is changed. They may be changed one way in one context, and in another in a different one.

Mol recasts *doing* with reference to the many complex agencies that are invoked in the practices of eating. Using the example of digestion, she shows how these are spread through space and time, and hence an individual subject's agency and action cannot be considered to be fixed within

an individual body but instead can be found acting in diverse sites and times, even within the metabolisms of other bodies. Digestion engages an organism in the process of breaking down materials, almost entirely the bodies of others, so that they can cross the barrier between the inside of the gut and the bloodstream. The extent to which this is not a simple action is shown partly through moments of failure, for example in the acts of chewing and swallowing. Here the question of what is inside and what is outside becomes apparent; first swallowing, then absorption through the gut offer borders to be crossed by materials. Even following that, materials in the bloodstream must be metabolizable, usable by the body, able to cross the borders of the cell. This process of being made available starts in many places: on the chopping board, where materials are predigested, or in historical farming practices wherein different plants are traded and selected for traits that result in more digestible products. Mol's description of digestion as an act as much extra-bodily as internal can make many familiar settings—a supermarket, a piece of farmland—seem far more a place to which human agency and bodily boundaries are extended. The choice of crops, the behavior of plants . . . are all shaped by the desires of the bodies they will one day feed, as Mol puts it—rice in Thailand “knows” the tastes of people who eat it, wherever they are.

Finally, when approached from the perspective of eating, *relating* involves a complex and ethically muddled set of exchanges and entanglements. As the environmental humanities has explored, beings are related not only through genetic inheritance but across the close exchange and cohabitation of interdependent species: the bacteria in your gut, the weeds in the turned soil in my garden, the banana trees in Spain. Mol's discussion of where eating takes relating picks up on Haraway's notion of “companion species” but shows further layers, resulting in a gentle critique of the idea that “making kin” might address

destruction or asymmetry with more-than-human others. For being eaten means, mostly on an individual level, being destroyed. However, “agri-cultural relations” (p. 110) are complex, variable, local, and uneven. While an individual apple eaten is annihilated, the breed of apples thrives because of one's taste for it. At the same time, other apples, and other diverse forms of life, thrive or suffer because of the use of the orchard's land. In examples from farming, it becomes clear that care and nurture of animals might include a certain kind of love, but an unsentimental one, in which these lifeforms are looked after but still dispatched when ready for consumption or their usefulness is ended. Further, when we make space for beings who are our companions, we crowd out others, such as when we weed a garden, some things get to grow and others do not. On a global scale, this has an impact that results in loss of biodiversity and extinction. The observation is sobering, as Mol points out, whenever we win by planting a crop, or growing something nourishing or tasty for our bodies (or our companions' bodies), there are others who are no longer able to make a life in that space. In some cases, this might be possible, but once we start to look at the kinds of relations that are formed through eating, it becomes possible to see that balanced relations are really not so simply arrived at. As Mol tells us, someone always loses, and this is bad not only for them but for us too.

Despite its relatively modest size, *Eating in Theory* contains many insights. It is presented in a way similar to Mol's other monographs, with a central text accompanied by marginal texts making theoretical asides intended to be navigated however the reader wishes or finds useful. The impressively straightforward prose is also a recognizable and welcome feature of Mol's work. That and the everyday topic mean that the book's arguments resonate eagerly in many settings. Mol's choice of the familiar yet always fascinating topic of eating has allowed her to create a very helpful primer and companion for a

posthuman understanding of being, knowing, thinking, and relating. Naturally it is of interest to anyone interested in the topic of food and eating but should also be read widely across the humanities and social sciences for its contributions to thinking around ecological sustainability and philosophy. The book certainly delivers on its promise to free us of the hangovers of humanist thought, and this success makes it a particularly welcome work given the tangles that are still so prevalent. It doesn't do so by making broad claims or pronouncements but by deftly and carefully showing us many routes to understanding further the world's delicious complexity.

#### **THE DIGITAL IMAGE AND REALITY: AFFECT, METAPHYSICS AND POST-CINEMA**

by Daniel Strutt. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, NL, 2019. 248 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-9-46-298713-5.

*Reviewed by Will Luers, The Creative Media & Digital Culture Program, Washington State University Vancouver. Email: wluers@gmail.com.*

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*The Digital Image and Reality: Affect, Metaphysics and Post-Cinema* probes the philosophical questions, cultural anxieties, ethical implications, and aesthetic possibilities around digital cinema's unique relation to notions of “the real.” That cinema's illusion is now made of bits that can be analyzed, copied, transcoded, and altered in a granular way means that the digital capture of physical phenomena (how our senses take in the world) can be sculpted into novel forms that do more than copy perceptual reality. Bringing together studies in perception and brain neuroplasticity, the philosophical critiques of technology by Stiegler and Heidegger, the media theories and speculations of Benjamin and McLuhan, and the affect and embodiment theories of Deleuze and Massumi, Strutt explores how popular digital cinema is not only altering our collective and individual ideas of the real but also stretching the boundaries of what reality can be.