Towards a Diffractive Mimesis: Karen Barad's and Isabelle Stengers' Re-Turnings

Karolina Rybačiauskaitė[1]

Abstract

This article seeks to further the discussion of mimesis in the current new materialist philosophies that are charged with doubts about the potential of mimetic practices, i.e., practices of reflection, and propose a more differential/diffractive notion of mimesis. It argues that the concept of mimesis and performative approaches to knowledge making can be compatible. The figures of mimesis appear in the conceptualizations of both reflective and diffractive practices, and if mimesis is considered rather as a diffractive operation, it could be seen as having a different efficacy and ethico-political function. Drawing on Karen Barad's and Isabelle Stengers' arguments, I start by showing why in the representationalist view of knowledge making, the tool of mimesis is dysfunctional—it is a way of separating and classifying copies of reality. Then, I introduce a diffractive notion of mimesis in line with the mimetic re-turn in posthuman studies. From the perspective of relational understanding of knowledge making supported in Barad's and Stengers' ethico-political proposals, mimesis can be perceived as a tool for provoking change and thus, imply a need to do it carefully.

Keywords: *Karen Barad; Critical reflexivity; New materialisms; Diffractive mimesis; Isabelle Stengers*

Introduction

Why do practices of imitation still trouble us so much? Although in different forms, the uneasiness with imitation continues to appear in various poststructuralist and immanent philosophies: from Jacques Derrida's (1983) focus on the unstable process of writing to Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari's (2013[1980]) notion of becoming as opposed to mimicking, the role of mimesis keeps being ambivalent.[2] It has regained a more explicit significance in recent poststructuralist and new materialist accounts of mimesis such as Jane Bennett's (2017) writings on sympathy (via Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *effectivity* of mimesis). As Nidesh Lawtoo notices, Bennett opens a way of thinking about mimesis that would be attentive to both human and more-than-human affective encounters (Lawtoo, 2019a, 730). This paper seeks to further the discussion of mimesis in the current new materialist philosophies that are similarly charged with doubts about the potential of mimetic practices, i.e., practices of reflection, and propose a more differential/diffractive notion of mimesis.

I take this challenge by looking at rather implicit fluctuations of mimesis in the ongoing discussion of reflective and diffractive practices. Keeping in mind that the problem of mimesis has played a defining role in the language of criticism since its beginning (Lawtoo, 2019b, 899), I see its micro-reappearance within the attempts to turn away from the language

---

[1] Karolina Rybačiauskaitė, Vilnius University, Lithuania. E-mail: karolina.rybaciauskaite@fsf.vu.lt.
[2] More about the ambivalent figures of mimesis in anti-representationalist accounts, see Lawtoo, 2019a, 2019b.

of *critique.* In 1992 Donna Haraway proposed that to grasp the relations of difference between human and non-human organisms, machines, and other beings, we should think of different optics and practices than that of reflection—such as practices of diffraction (Haraway, 1992, 300).[3] More recently, Haraway's doubts on the validity of reflection as an optical metaphor and a dominant critical practice have been elaborated by Karen Barad (2007) in her attempt to devise an alternative to reflection practices, i.e., the methodology of diffraction. In doing so, at the very beginning of her seminal study, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Barad addressed the problem of analogical thinking and what is defined as representationalism. The analogical approaches presume that it is possible to compare or draw analogies between, for instance, particles and people, the micro and the macro, the scientific and the social, nature and culture, etc. (Barad, 2007, 24).[4] Similarly, the notion of representationalism suggests that it is possible to find the accurate representations for what is reflected (whether in the form of words, concepts, or thoughts).

Trying to define the role of mimetic knowledge in Barad's framework, we could assume that she links the principle of mimesis with the notion of representationalism and reflective practices. In the second chapter of *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Barad gives us the table in which various aspects of the concepts of diffractive and reflective practices are put side-by-side. Here the principle of mimesis appears in the column of reflective practices, and it is claimed to be a category that necessarily implies sameness. According to Barad, in the reflective understanding of knowledge making, objectivity is a matter of accurate reflections, thus, the practice of reflexivity is like an "iterative mimesis" and "does nothing more-than a mirror mirroring" (Barad, 2007, 88). In contrast to the critical practice of reflexivity and in reference to Haraway, Barad claims that only "a diffractive methodology is a critical practice for making a difference in the world" (Barad, 2007, 90). Described in this way, the principle of mimesis as a time-tested technique of learning and creating overlapping knowledge patterns is not functional.[5]

The doubts about the practice of critique or critical reflexivity also appear in the constructivist understanding of knowledge making (e.g., Latour 2004, 2010; Stengers 2008, 2015, 2017, 2018a). The question of critique goes all back to Immanuel Kant's conceptualization of *Aufklärung,* where he claims one's need to have a right to use reason without being directed by an authority (Kant 2007[1784]), or as Michel Foucault defined it, to learn "the art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault 2007[1978], 45). The validity of the practice of critique is questioned mainly because of its predication that behind the veil of appearances lies the world of true realities (Latour, 2010, 474). The problematic separation between more and less real realities is also a basis of Isabelle Stengers' argument when she

---

[3] Elsewhere, Haraway also argued that reflexivity as a critical practice in as much as the optical process of reflection raises the unnecessary anxieties about the copy and the original and leads to a search for authenticity and real realness (Haraway, 2018[1997], 16). For the sake of genealogy, it is important to notice that Haraway's and Barad's relational perception of difference is much influenced by literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of difference. For more about Minh-ha's influence on the concept of diffraction, see Geerts & van der Tuin, 2021.

[4] For more about the method of "reasoning by analogy" or "analogical thinking" that is commonly used to relate theories of natural and social sciences, and this way undermining Barad's own account of agential realism, see Barad 2021, 120-121.

[5] However, it is important to mention that the columns in this table are not meant to be dichotomous, and the separating line between them should act as "a diffracting cut." As Barad clarifies in the second footnote of the article "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together Apart" (2014), "reflection and diffraction are not opposites, not mutually exclusive, but rather different optical intra-actions highlighting different patterns, optics, geometries that often overlap in practice" (Barad, 2014a, 184). I can add that this distinction is less strict when Barad discusses the coexistent nature of the physical phenomena, but when she writes about the methodology of diffraction as a tool of analysis, the attempt to leave behind the paradigm of representationalism and critical reflexivity is more evident.

writes about the need for diffracting operations (Stengers, 2018a). Unlike Haraway and Barad, Stengers almost does not discuss mimetic or diffractive practices directly and in the same terms.[6] And yet, she frequently writes that what we call theory, including her own speculative propositions, should not be taken as a matter of critique or critical reflexivity.

Does this turn from the practices of critical reflexivity also mean moving away from the condition of being all too mimetic beings? The concept of mimesis and theatricality more generally trouble the theories of performativity. For instance, according to performance researcher Rebecca Schneider, mimesis demonstrates that "not everything in the world is real—or not *only* real" (Schneider, 2015, 14). Thus, in this article, I seek to grasp some fluctuant appearances of mimesis in Barad's and Stengers' accounts of reflective and diffractive practices and claim that the concept of mimesis and the performative approaches to knowledge making can be compatible and relevant for posthuman studies. The figures of mimesis appear in the conceptualizations of both reflective and diffractive practices, and if mimesis is considered rather as a diffractive operation, it could be seen as having a more substantial efficacy and different ethico-political function. First, I present Barad's and Stengers' arguments that supplement each other as forming the critical view of reflexivity in which the tool of mimesis becomes dysfunctional. Then, I will introduce a diffractive conception of mimesis. From the perspective of a relational understanding of knowledge making supported in Barad's and Stengers' ethico-political proposals, mimesis can be perceived as a tool for provoking change and doing it carefully.

Separating and classifying copies of reality

Barad's and Stengers' criticisms of the practice of critical reflexivity or critique challenge the dominant representational concept of mimesis. First, Barad describes a problem of isolation characteristic to the notion of critical reflexivity and makes it possible to claim the likeness between separated entities. The problem of isolation that assumes the "metaphysics of individualism" is traced back to Democritus (via Ian Hacking, 1983) and Descartes (via Joseph Rouse, 1996). Barad writes that the separation between the worlds of realities and appearances in the name of representation that allows keeping the world at a distance is first found within Democritus' atomistic worldview. The metaphysical gap is even deepened in the view of Cartesian doubt. It validates the primacy of the "internal" representations of thoughts over the "external" reality of things (Barad, 2007, 48-49). Here, following Rouse's criticisms of Descartes, Barad questions the "asymmetrical faith" in linguistic representations over the real things and, more generally, asks why we still believe in the notion of mediation that holds the world at a distance (whether it would be the lens of language or the lens of culture, technology, labor, etc.).

The feeling of protection that the mediating representations give us is even more questioned by bringing the matter of effects. Barad writes that in the representationalist account of knowledge making, it is presumed that there are two kinds of entities fully independent of the practices of representation: "representations" and "the entities to be represented." This common presumption makes us think that, for instance, using the scientific instruments for "seeing," such as microscopes, we can "see" without producing any effects on the reality we

---

[6] It is possible to assume that the process of mimicking is taken by Stengers rather negatively, for instance, when she writes about the speculative propositions that should not be "mimicking other practices, but 'seeing' them and wondering" (Stengers, 2011, 380).

are looking at. In other words, there is a belief that the practices of representation do not affect the represented entities and vice versa. Taking the example of the complex method of "seeing" by the scanning tunneling microscope (STM), Barad argues that:

> Examples like this make it clear that representationalism is a practice of bracketing out the significance of practices; that is, representationalism marks a failure to take account of the practices through which representations are produced. Images or representations are not snapshots or depictions of what awaits us but rather condensations or traces of multiple practices of engagement (Barad, 2007, 53).

This habit of "bracketing out the significance of practices" or simply completely disregarding the effects of practices of representation appears in all kinds of representation making. Thus, the process of theorizing, critically thinking, and writing about reality is no exception. Barad claims that theorizing should be perceived as "an embodied practice" rather than "a spectator sport of matching linguistic representations to pre-existing things" (Barad, 2007, 54). It also means that theorizing as a practice of representation making, and its linguistic representations, do not protect from making the effects upon reality or from being affected by that reality to which it is directed.

From the perspective of critical reflexivity that presumes the notion of isolation claimed by Barad, the primary function of mimesis is to reproduce separated entities that can be easily compared. The mimetic appearances in this view do not risk interfering or creating relations with the surroundings they are part of. Such appearances are like soap bubbles that constantly appear and disappear from reality without much trace. This understanding of reproduction does not assume any relational effects that mimetic appearances would make upon reality or could be transformed by; thus, it implies a notion of sameness and readiness for comparison. Accordingly, it is easy to claim the similarities between the separated entities and dismiss the differences in their relationally produced situations.

Another aspect of critical reflexivity that influences how mimesis is generally perceived occurs in Stengers' *Cosmopolitics I* (2010[1997]). There she describes a problem of sophists or, more concretely, a problem of classification and disqualification of knowledge. She writes

> The question of our relationship to the sophists is not closed. Even more than the poet, who was also chased from the Platonic city but has since been reintegrated into an honorable civic category, the sophist, vector of lucidity or creator of illusion, doctor or soul thief, continues to trouble us (Stengers, 2010, 28).

Stengers' reference to the classical Platonic dismissal of sophists and the fear of instability of knowledge they produce[7] recalls the anxiety that is still being felt about the methods used by the sophists, poets, magicians, and other neglected knowledge makers who were not welcomed in the Platonic city: namely, practices of mimesis. The sophist, "a producer of imitations," as Plato attributed it,[8] continues to trouble no less than the practice of mimesis is still troubling us. Plato uses the figure of sophist to stress the distinction between different

---

[7] Holding in mind Jacques Derrida's "Plato's pharmacy" (1983), Stengers associates the figure of sophist with the ambiguity of *pharmakon* that cannot provide us with any fixed point of reference: "a stable distinction between the beneficial medicament and the harmful drug, between rational pedagogy and suggestive influence, between reason and opinion" (Stengers, 2010, 29). For more about the inability to accept this kind of ambiguity, see Chapter 3, *Culturing the Pharmakon?* (Stengers, 2010, 28-41).

[8] Perhaps the most comprehensive account of the notion of sophist can be found in Plato's dialog *Sophist* (see Plato, ca. 360 B.C.E./2013, especially from 233a and onward). Here the sophist is claimed to be, for instance, "as possessing a sort of belief-based "knowledge" about all things, not as possessing truth" (Plato, ca. 360 B.C.E./2013, 233c).

types of knowledge: belief-based "knowledge" and "truth," and gives way to the classification and disqualification of less valued knowledge. Even in the Greek term *doxa* used to describe the type of knowledge that the sophist possesses, there is a hint of the evaluative manner of this distinction: the *doxa* can be translated as a common belief or popular opinion but also as a judgment.

The risk of undervaluing the knowledge associated with the notion of judgment is vividly expressed in Stengers' conception of "ecology of practices" and its difference from gardening practices or creating a vivarium. As Melanie Sehgal notices, Stengers, in her conception of "ecology of practices," develops a notion of "an ecology" that notably contrasts with an aesthetic practice understood in a modern way (Sehgal, 2018, 122). Unlike the gardener who has the power to judge, namely, a power to freely select, arrange, prune, or eliminate if needed, and unlike a vivarium creator who only observes without engagement, an ecologist acknowledges mutual dependence and being of the same temporality (Stengers, 2010, 57). In Stengers' framework, the practice of critical reflexivity is like gardening, where a power of judgment means a superior power to sort out and remove what is deemed not valuable.

In the perspective of critical reflexivity, which implies a notion of separating and sorting out the types of knowledge, mimesis seems to be helping to produce a less valuable knowledge that, at the same time, is necessarily awaiting evaluation to be completed. The need for assessment is so prevalent, "as if making the difference between what is entitled to "really" exist and what is not was our only safeguard against the monstrous grip of illusion" (Stengers, 2018a, 100). The presumption of this distinction allows not only to separate the matters of truth from the matters of illusion but also to claim the falseness of the latter. In the case of mimesis, it is possible then to assert the falseness of appearances that are produced and compare or devalue them. The mimetic representations in this understanding and critical practice are always just false copies of what is meant to be original and the most valuable piece of reality. Thus understood, in its still dominant Platonic metaphysics, mimesis is a dysfunctional type of practice that leads to the production of false copies.

Making and revisiting patterns of difference

The function of mimesis is quite different from the performative or diffraction-based perception of reality and knowledge making. Plato, for one, was not unaware of the performative powers of mimesis as he critiqued actors along with sophists in the *Republic*. Furthering a re-turn of attention to a performative notion of mimesis internal to modern (Lawtoo 2013), poststructuralist, and now to posthumanist approaches as well, I argue that in the perspective of diffractive practice, mimesis can be perceived as a tool for provoking change and thus, implying a need to do it carefully. The mimetic creation becomes quite a dangerous tool if we do not separate the worlds of realities and appearances and see these worlds as always being entangled. For this reason, it is helpful to employ Barad's notion of "entanglement" or what she also calls an "agential separability." In her account of "entangled ontology" or "onto-epistemology," Barad writes about *phenomena* that, at the same time, are material *and* discursive. To put this differently, the material and discursive aspects of phenomena are not separated in this view, and thus, all phenomena are perceived as being material-discursive phenomena. Elaborating on Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's notions of the discursive practices and the body's materiality, Barad claims to be connecting our discursive and bodily practices in a specific way. She argues that even in Butler's

understanding of agency, the performative matter remains enclosed in the social or cultural sphere, and the discursive and material never, in fact, come into "closer proximity" (Barad, 2007, 64). In Barad's understanding, the body's materiality also expresses history that is discursive and material simultaneously, and it needs to be actively noticed and acknowledged as such.

Another aspect of entanglement inscribed in the concept of phenomena is related to how phenomena are constituted and could be known or represented. According to Barad, phenomena, as the primary ontological unit, do not have any inherent boundaries or properties that could be recognized and learned by individuals[9], but rather are themselves a bunch of relations: a form of *doing* that is co-constituted and co-learned when it is approaching, and it is being approached. As Barad puts it,

> In my agential realist elaboration, phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of observer and observed, or the results of measurements; rather, phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intraacting "agencies." That is, phenomena are ontologically primitive relations— relations without preexisting relata (Barad, 2007, 139).

Thus, Barad's understanding of phenomena and ways of making sense of phenomena that are a part of its very discursive-material body gives the account of the reality that is always necessarily entangled. And even the idea of mimesis seems not to be able to dismantle this notion of reality. Let's take, for instance, the example of the brittlestar and field of biomimetics used in different places in Barad's writings (e.g., Barad 2007, 2014b, 2021). We see that biomimesis is perceived here as more than just a way of imitation. Instead, she notices that the currently emerging field of biomimetics is not about the copies and originals as these engineers who are doing the biomimetic projects do not claim to make any replicas of nature, but it is a co-constitutive field of nanotechnology, biotechnology, and information technology and thus akin to posthuman mimesis. At the same time, the practitioners or creators of these designs are co-constituting the organisms they approach by using their apparatuses of knowledge making: their systems of perception and their very specific tools of inquiry.

The notion of apparatus in Barad's relational ontology also involves the practices of "critically" theorizing and writing. It broadens Foucault's notion of apparatus or *dispositif* as it entails not only discursive but also material nature of meaning making. As such, "apparatuses are the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering; they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad, 2007, 148). From the perspective of a diffractive understanding of reality, where phenomena, both human and non-human bodies, come into matter through "differential patterns of mattering" or "diffraction patterns," the apparatuses of scientific practices have particular importance. According to Barad, the task of critical practice and methodology of diffraction is to create the tools for examining the specificities of the entanglements. Putting it another way, if our practices of thinking and writing are discursive-material practices that significantly shape the form and meaning of reality or if they are "direct material engagements" with reality, as Barad would

---

[9] To make this assumption, Barad draws on Niels Bohr's epistemological views, more concretely, on his understanding of *position* and *momentum* and their measurement. In Barad's interpretation, Bohr shows that both concepts are meaningful only in relation to the *apparatus* used for their measurement. For more about it, see Chapter 4, *Agential Realism: How Material-Discursive Practices Matter* (Barad, 2007, 132-185).

phrase it, we must create the apparatuses that would be careful about those entangled and re-entangling realities.

As a physicist and philosopher of science who at the same time is a thinker and writer, Barad aims to create such an apparatus within the scientific practices by introducing the notion of *re-turning*. It is a practice of coming back and re/un/doing what has been just fixed by asking the questions of justice at every level of meaning making. For Barad, the questions of justice are always already within scientific practices, but how to put them into light in the relational process of conducting research is a question of creating techniques or devising apparatuses (Barad, 2021, 124; 139). The apparatus of re-turning is made to revisit the effects of one's engagements with the world in its becoming. It implies a need to look back and do it repeatedly since each engagement produces more and more "patterns of difference." In the diffractive understanding of knowledge making, the act of repetition does not only make the indeterminate effects or "what gets lost, disperses and multiplies itself" in Jacques Derrida's words,[10] but as an ethico-political tool, it is also used for coming back to these ends, lapses, and slips. The practice of re-turning is not simply about going back to the past, as it is implied in the case of reflecting, but it is about turning it over and over again.[11] As it is in the process of earthworms rebuilding the soil, when they are "digesting and excreting, tunnelling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing a new life into it" (Barad, 2014a, 168).[12]

Thus, mimesis as a performative way of learning and approaching reality and as being a diffractive (and not reflective) operation can have a different level of efficacy and ethico-political function. In the notion of "entangled reality," where the appearances are not just the shadows of "more real" reality and the discursive is not separated from the material, mimetic practices create the discursive-material effects that require careful comeback. In the framework of diffractive practices, mimesis is not only a relational process through which "matter regularly becomes other matter" (Schneider, 2015, 14); it is also an ethico-political tool for revisiting the differences in those relationally created patterns of knowledge making.[13] Therefore, it is an example of an entangled discursive-material activity that both describe the mode of relation in which reality is made and known and suggests how it could be revisited. In this sense, a diffractive version of mimesis also recalls the rhetorical notion of *imitatio* that has been previously reserved only for discursive practices.[14] Similarly to Barad's practice of re-turning, the process of imitating within the literary works has a long

---

[10] In *Plato's Pharmacy* (1983), Derrida claims that repetition simultaneously enables both: the movement of true and the movement of untrue. Besides creating the truth of the same, the clear and the stable, the repetition gives the presence to "what is gets lost, disperses itself, multiplies itself through mimemes, icons, phantasms, simulacra, etc." (Derrida, 1983, 168).

[11] At the same time, the terms "returning" and "re-turning" differ only by a hyphen, and Barad claims the importance of them being not completely opposed but somewhat overlapping in practice. For more about it, see Barad, 2014a, 184.

[12] Noticeably, the idea to employ the notions of "soil" or "compost" to recreate our critical practices is used in other close contexts as well. For instance, Latour in his *Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"* (2010) besides other forms of construction mentions the matter of compost and de-composition (Latour, 2010, 474) and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa draws on soil sciences to rethink the temporalities of inter-species practices (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015).

[13] For instance, the re-turn to mimesis in posthuman studies presents precisely this type of critical re-turn when researchers show the awareness of the diffractive powers of their mimetic phenomena and their mimetic approach simultaneously.

[14] The term *imitatio* was used, for instance, by the Greek rhetorician Dionysius of Halicarnassus (c. 1st century B.C.E.) and seeks to explain how authors (speakers and writers) reworked and enriched the sources of previous authors. The metaphors that are used to describe *imitatio* also involve the notions of digesting and giving birth. More about it see Collin, 2019, 6-9.

history of being perceived as a way of re/un/making and associated with the productive process of fertility.

Opening for a change

Another important notion of performative understanding of reality in which mimesis can be reworked and gain additional meanings is Stengers' emphasis on "mutual dependency" and the ability to allow yourself to be transformed by others. In Stengers' perception of reality and knowledge making, similarly to Barad's account, the worlds of realities and appearances are closely interconnected; hence, the destabilizing concept of mimesis can also gain a risky quality of being transformative. However, the notion of strong mutual dependency implies not only a need for careful transformation of the world but also an openness to being transformed by that world. This type of awareness involves both the questions about the efficacy of one's actions and the questions about one's ability to learn and be affected by the material engagements with the world. Stengers invokes the notion of mutual dependency when she explains the specificity of how practices in her framework of "ecology of practices" address each other. As I briefly mentioned earlier, they perceive themselves as belonging to the same temporality as other practices and define themselves by attending their accountabilities to other practices; namely, their requirements and obligations (Stengers, 2010, 56-57).

The importance of mutuality in the co-dependent and co-defined practices is especially present in Stengers' term of a "reciprocal capture." This term has been derived from Deleuze & Guattari's concept of "double capture," which is used to describe a type of relation or exchange when two very different beings from different kingdoms are setting up a "marriage" (such as the marriage of a wasp and an orchid). Stengers uses the term "reciprocal capture" in a slightly narrower sense. It describes "a double capture that creates a relationship endowed with a certain stability" (Stengers, 2010, 266). She refers to an "immanent process of "reciprocal capture" when writing about the situation of the "symbiotic agreement." According to Stengers, symbiosis does not substantially differ from the other relational processes such as parasitism or predation, but only in symbiosis as a type of reciprocal capture the identities are mutually co-constructed. It means that "each of the beings coinvented by the relationship of reciprocal capture has an interest, if it is to continue its existence, in seeing the other maintain its existence" (Stengers, 2010, 36). For Stengers, the notion of reciprocal capture helps to overcome the opposition between values and facts because each knot of such a relationship claims its value just by its strength or stability; thus, then the question that matters is not about finding "a shared intent," but it is rather about a shared creation of value (Stengers, 2010, 36-37).

As shared creation of meaning might be itself a volatile and unintentional process, Stengers is also concerned with the need to attend to the effects or consequences of meaning making. In this sense, her attention to the effects corresponds to Haraway's and Barad's notion of overlapping "patterns of difference" and the methodology of diffraction. As Haraway puts it, "a diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the effects of difference appear" (Haraway, 1992, 300). Similarly, Stengers introduces the notion of ecology, a "science of multiplicities" created for attending to the effects of meaning creation, whether intentional or unintentional. She writes

Ecology is, then, the science of multiplicities, disparate causalities, and unintentional creations of meaning. The field of ecological questions is one where the consequences of the meanings we create, the judgments we produce and to which we assign the status of "fact," concerning what is primary and what is secondary, must be addressed immediately, whether those consequences are intentional or unforeseen (Stengers, 2010, 34-35).

To recover from the destruction of the environment partly caused by our inability to account for the consequences of knowledge making, Stengers suggests the tools of *reclaiming* and *relaying*. I perceive them as having a certain similarity with Barad's apparatus of re-turning and also being *mimetic*. Stengers' practices of reclaiming and relaying have a sense of returning, but also of coming back toward the familiar: that is, remembering what was taken away or destroyed, and this way regaining the strength to create something again. Here there is a reference to the demolition of practices which for Stengers is related to the consequences of modernization and the practices which were disowned in the name of progress and reason, but it can also be thought of in relation to reclaiming the commons or recovering what we have been separated from and more generally, recovering from very separation itself (Stengers, 2012). It is important to emphasize that reclaiming is a different kind of operation than just "returning" or "coming back to the past." Engaging the past and, at the same time, meeting the present and future for Stengers is a material operation. It is not a neutral or isolated activity, as would be the case in the practices of reflection. She writes that the process of reclaiming the past is not "a matter of dreaming to resurrect some "true," "authentic" tradition, of healing what cannot be healed, of making whole what has been destroyed," but it is rather "a matter of reactivating it" (Stengers, 2018a, 103).

The repetitive manner of Stengers' conceptual tool is induced by involving the notion of relaying. Stengers claims that reclaiming as an experimental operation needs critical attention, but this attention should differ from the activity of judging or "reflecting on" (Stengers, 2017, 396). The difference between a reflective researcher and a relayer is that a relayer does not just define or evaluate but also adds to the question that is created and becomes responsible or accountable for it, as research is always a collective process. Thus, similarly as in the case of Barad's notion of re-turning, Stengers is concerned about the material effects of meaning making and the need of continuous effort in revisiting those effects. However, this twofold "art of effects" also implies that one should be aware not just of their own power to transform but also of the ability to be transformed and be open to such transformation. As Stengers puts it, relaying demands "accepting that what is added can make a difference" and "becoming accountable for the manner of that difference" (Stengers, 2017, 396).

The operation of reclaiming can be well illustrated with the example of writing practice. First, the process of writing is an *agencement* or an *assemblage*.[15] It means that the process of writing is shaping, and it is shaped by various material forces such as keyboard, screen, paper, fingers, ideas, etc. When Stengers describes her writing process, she says that "to write means to be in a very particular cerebral assemblage" (Stengers, 2018b, 64). It is cerebral because in the making of the words, they fold, twist, and connect, and this whole process is an embodied experience. In her article *Reclaiming animism* (2012), Stengers proposes that the first

---

[15] The process of *agencement* in a more general sense is similar to the previously described "reciprocal capture," as both processes are based on mutual support. For instance, Vinciane Despret describes an agencement as the indeterminate "rapport of forces that makes some beings capable of making other beings capable" (Despret, 2013, 38).

step toward recovery from the destruction of practices can be acknowledging the indeterminacy of writing experience. Treating the text this way means to notice its animating power, but also to allow yourself to be animated by it: respect this experience "as not ours, but rather as animating us, making us witness to what is not us" (Stengers, 2012). Thus, reclaiming in Stengers' sense is not only about transforming the world in its relationality but also about acknowledging mutual support and dependency.

From the perspective of performative understanding of knowledge making that recognizes the interconnectedness and mutual dependency of beings, mimesis as a way of making meaning and creating relationships is a much more transformative activity than in the reflective view. It has a broader and stronger reach because it is not an action that produces sameness (the same bubbles repeatedly). On the contrary, as touching one simultaneously affects more connected beings, it demands to account and take responsibility for the created differences. In this understanding, the relational process of mimesis also unfolds as having an ethico-political function of revisiting the consequences of intentional or unintentional meaning making. It might be a critical tool for coming back and "adding to," and this way cultivating materialities of the world.[16] At the same time, having in mind Stengers' call for honoring the transformative power of what is not us, we may perceive mimesis as a tool that demands not only to care about one's agency but also to open oneself for a change.

Conclusion

This article aimed to grasp some micro-mimetic appearances of mimesis in the new materialist accounts of knowledge making and propose more differential/diffractive perceptions of it. Unfortunately, the practices of mimesis still tend to be pushed aside and somehow condemned to shame. Even if we discuss it in the sphere of arts and aesthetics, we are afraid to admit its relevance and recognize that our work is always embedded in a web of mimetic relations with other works and patterns of the world. The mindset of individualism or what has been discussed here as "critical reflexivity" demands erasing the overlapping parts of the patterns in favor of ones that are supposed to be ours or "truly produced" by us. Instead of neglecting the patterns produced by the mimetic way of knowledge, we could draw attention to what these copies do: when they are a stimulus for destruction and when they open the space to breathe. As we know, the Greeks had their ways of differentiating between "the living assimilation of one's reading—digesting it, or resembling it as a child resembles a parent, or seeking to reincarnate an earlier author" and "creating a mere s*imulacrum,* a superficial likeness" (Colin, 2019, 7). The latter could not have been the same as "living assimilation," which expresses the important power of vitality.

I claimed that in the discussion of reflective and diffractive practices, the concept of mimesis is entirely disregarded, for it is still restricted to a passive copy or representation. The current usage and conceptualizations of imitation give a way to associate mimesis with the notions of isolation, classification, and overall disqualification of knowledge making. Drawing from Barad's and Stengers' criticisms of critical reflexivity, it is possible to find at least two reasons to doubt the dominant conceptions of mimesis based on a representationalist account of creating and evaluating knowledge. The perspective of critical reflexivity presumes the notion

---

[16] It corresponds to Göran Sörbom's notice that for Greeks, "the mimema and picture is not a slavish copy of an external object, something the theory of mimesis is often said to imply," but the goal of art is to create a typical or ideal of the sort (Sörbom, 2002, 25). In the case of diffractive perspective, we have a notion of collecting which is rather vertical than horizontal: a mimetic process of creation happens not through selecting and putting together into one, but through layering: revisiting and adding to.

of separateness between the represented entities and the representations themselves, enabling us to make the untroubling traceless comparisons between them. The separated entities succumb more easily to being judged and eliminated. The idea of mimesis in this understanding in some way confirms that reality can be easily mediated into a second-class form of appearance and then later be endlessly multiplied.

However, if we take mimesis as a diffractive operation, it can have different efficacy and ethico-political functions. From the perspective of Barad's onto-epistemology in which discursive and material phenomena are inseparable, the mimetic way of knowledge making could also imply a "direct engagement" with reality and a need to devise an apparatus to take care of the patterns it produces. In the framework of diffractive practices, mimesis becomes not only a mode of relation in which reality is made and known but also a type of practice to study it. In this sense, I tried to show that both Barad's apparatus of re-turning and Stengers' tools of reclaiming and relaying can be perceived as mimetic practices. They invite us to come back to the intentional or unintentional consequences of meaning making and continually put some effort into revisiting the patterns of difference. These practices are mimetic because they imply a requirement to turn around and re/un/make what was once fixed and not create the world as it would be possible to do entirely from scratch. At the same time, Stengers' argument on being tightly related and mutually dependent adds another layer to the diffractive notion of mimesis. The mimetic practice as an ethico-political activity implies a mode of being that is not so much about being highly proactive and productive but about being interdependent and acknowledging the relational notion of change. Perhaps we may call this type of mimesis a "living assimilation."

Acknowledgments

References

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2014a). Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart. *Parallax*, *20*(3), 168-187.

Barad, K. (2014b). Invertebrate visions: Diffractions of the brittlestar. In E. Kirksey (Ed.), *The multispecies salon* (pp. 221-241). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822376989-012

Barad, K. (2021). Dialogue with Karen Barad. In M. Juelskjær, H. Plauborg, S. W. Adrian (Eds.), *Dialogues on agential realism: Engaging in worldings through research practice* (pp. 118-141), Routledge.

Bennett, J. (2017). Mimesis: Paradox or encounter. *MLN*, *132*(5), Comparative Literature Issue, 1186-1200. https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2017.0091

Colin, B. (2019). *Imitating authors: Plato to futurity*. Oxford University Press.

Derrida, J. (1983). Plato's pharmacy. In B. Johnson (Ed.), *Dissemination* (pp. 61-172). University of Chicago Press.

Despret, V. (2013). From secret agents to interagency. In *History and Theory, 52*(4), Theme Issue 52: Does history need animals, 29-44. https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.10686

Hacking, I. (1983). *Representing and intervening: Introductory topics in the philosophy of natural science*. Cambridge University Press.

Haraway, J. D. (1992). The promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inapproporiate/d others. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, P. A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 295-337). Routledge.

Haraway, J. D. (2018[1997]). *Modest-witness@second-millennium.Femaleman-meets-oncomouse: Feminism and technoscience*. 2nd edition. Routledge.

Latour, B. (2004). Why has critique run out of steam? From the matters of fact to the matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry, 30*, 225-248.

Latour, B. (2010). An attempt at a "Compositionist manifesto." In *New Literary History, 41*(3), 471-490.

Lawtoo, N. (2013). *The phantom of the ego: Modernism and the mimetic unconscious*. Michigan State University Press.

Lawtoo, N. (2019a). The powers of mimesis: Simulation, encounters, comic fascism. In *Theory & Event*, *22*(3), 722-746.

Lawtoo, N. (2019b). The Shadow of the symposium: Sameness and difference replayed. In *MLN*, *134*(5), 898-909. https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2019.0101

Geerts, E., van der Tuin, I. (2021). Diffraction & reading diffractively. In *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, *2*(1), 173-177. https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v2i1.33380

Kant, I. (2007[1784]). Was ist aufklärung? In S. Lotringer (Ed.), *The politics of truth. Michel Foucault* (pp. 29-37). Semiotext(e).

Foucault, M. (2007[1978]). What is critique? In S. Lotringer (Ed.), *The politics of truth. Michel Foucault* (pp. 41-81). Semiotext(e).

Plato. (2013). The Sophist. In C. Rowe (Ed.), *Theaetetus and sophist*, (pp. 99-177). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published ca. 360 B.C.E.)

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2015). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.

Rouse, J. (1996). *Engaging science: How to understand its practices philosophically*. Cornell University Press.

Sehgal, M. (2018). Aesthetic concerns, philosophical fabulations: The importance of a 'New aesthetic paradigm.' In *SubStance*, *47*(1), (Issue 145), 112-129.

Schneider, R. (2015). New materialisms and performance studies. In *The Drama Review, 59*(4) (T228), 7-17. New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Stengers, I. (2008). Experimenting with refrains: Subjectivity and the challenge of escaping modern dualism. In *Subjectivity, 22*(1), 38-59. https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.6

Stengers, I. (2010[1997]). *Cosmopolitics I*. University of Minnesota Press.

Stengers, I. (2011). Wondering about materialism: Diderot's egg. In L. R. Bryant, N. Srnicek, G. Harman (Eds.), *The speculative turn: Continental materialism and realism* (pp. 368-380). Re.press.

Stengers, I. (2012, July). *Reclaiming animism*. e-flux journal #36. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61245/reclaiming-animism/

Stengers, I. (2015). *In Catastrophic times: Resisting the coming barbarism*. Open Humanities Press in collaboration with meson press.

Stengers, I. (2017). Autonomy and the intrusion of Gaia. In B. Braun, S. Nelson (Eds.), *The South Atlantic Quarterly, 116*(2), Special issue: Autonomia in the Anthropocene (pp. 381-400). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3829467

Stengers, I. (2018a). The challenge of ontological politics. In M. de la Cadena, M. Blaser (Eds.), *A world of many worlds* (pp. 83-111). Duke University Press.

Stengers, I. (2018b). *Isabelle Stengers, active les possibles. Dialogue avec Frédérique Dolphijn*. Esperluète éditions.

Sörbom, G. (2002). The classical concept of mimesis. In P. Smith, C. Wilde (Eds.) *A companion to art theory*, (pp. 19-28), Blackwell Publishers.