The Performative Gift: A Feminist Materialist Conceptual Model

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Introduction

So far, little effort has been taken to advance gift theory into a new materialist or posthumanist thinking. In an attempt to take that first step, this paper provides two contributions. First, it highlights how feminist theorizing of the gift comprises interesting forerunners in a new materialist conception of the gift. Second, it explores the analytical traction that can be gained from interlocking theories of the gift, feminist materialism and digital media, the result being a conceptual model that addresses the gift as a form of virtual-digital-material communication.

The paper begins by presenting a brief account of gifting theory, focused on two feminist critiques and elaborations of common conceptualizations of the gift. These two critiques were chosen on the basis that they each represent a clear position on the discursive-material scale. Vaughan[1] presents a linguistically based critique of exchange, while Diprose[2] suggests that giving must be connected to the material body. Addressing the intermediate area between these two poles, the paper moves on to develop an analytical framework based on more recent feminist and media materialist approaches. As an underlying motivation throughout the paper lays the recent renewed interest in gift economies as models for explanation and change in an time where digital media technologies have altered the game for social interaction and sharing.

Feminist gifting theory

Gifting (or gift-giving) is a particularly interesting form of communication that envelops both material and social dimensions. Objects are transformed into gifts through particular socio-material practices. While these practices are, of course, interesting in themselves, this paper will take a step back and revisit attempts to define and theorize the gift as a concept. In a time when the gift economy is often called upon as a potential candidate for more "participatory alternatives to capitalist totality", particularly in relation to theorizing of labour on and through the Internet[3], theories of gifting provide an important foundation for discussing the

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[1] Genevieve Vaughan, *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange* (Austin,TX: Plain View Press, 1997).

[2] Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merlau-Ponty, and Levinas* (New York: SUNY, 2002).

[3] Christian Fuchs, "Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet," *The Information Society: An International Journal* 26, no. 3 (2010); Graham Murdock, "Political Economies as Moral Economies: Commodities, Gifts, and Public Goods," in *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*, ed. Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa. (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011); Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010).

boundaries of alternative futures and economies. Feminist attempts to move beyond 'the economic man' are based on an assumption that many contemporary economical concepts are always/already gendered[4]. Critique has also been raised concerning the negligence of power differentials and perspectives that go beyond the economical (including for example ecological, corporeal, and a variety of norm-critical, viewpoints)[5]. Whether or not it is possible to escape market exchange is still debated – some would say that our very subjectivity, and subsequent rise of individualism, is infused with the logic of market exchange.

> *One could criticize the claims that behavioural economics makes in its statements of scientific fact, but nothing is ever quite so clear-cut in the world of economic theory, where fantasy, hallucination, wishful thinking, and a sometimes disingenuous aping of the experimental sciences are often the order of the day. It would be interesting to look at economic theories not so much as representations, but as component parts in the production of particular forms of subjectivity.[6]*

From this position, I intend to map out two feminist trails through the vast territory of the gift. First, I will depart on a route set out by feminist scholar Vaughan in her linguistic critique of capitalist exchange[7]. Second, I will attend to the corporeal dimensions of the gift as put forward by Diprose[8]. Interestingly, both trails have a mutual point of departure in the gift theories of Mauss[9] and Derrida[10]. These two theories have become more or less ubiquitous to gift-giving research, recurring in virtually all analyses of the gift. One ambition of this paper, however, is to avoid this theoretical pervasiveness and emphasize alternative conceptions of the gift. As such, I will not dwell on Mauss and Derrida, except as a point of

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[4] David F. Ruccio and Jack Amariglio, "Feminist Economics: (Re)Gendering Knowledge and Subjectivity," in *Postmodern Moments in Modern Economics* (Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[5] Genevieve Vaughan, ed. *Women and the Gift Economy: A Radically Different World View is Possible* (Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2007).

[6] Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey, *Evil Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012). 55.

[7] Vaughan, *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*.

[8] Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merlau-Ponty, and Levinas*.

[9] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies* (London: Routledge, 1990 [1922]).

[10] Jaques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

departure in the sense that it is a point from where *divergence and deviation* from the established way of thinking can set out (or *de-part*). So, while the general approach in this paper may be described as genealogical, I have neither hope nor ambition to provide a complete genealogy of the gift as such. Rather, I wish to identify two possible trails of continuities and disruptions that serve as trajectories towards a socio-material understanding of the digital gift.

Point of Departure: Mauss and Derrida

As mentioned previously, the works of Mauss and Derrida already enjoys a significant amount of attention in the theorizing of the gift. While this attention is in no way unjustified, I argue that the conclusions of these two scholars are too often taken as premises, potentially foreclosing alternative readings of the gift. Therefore, I will only very briefly summarize the main respective arguments.

Marcel Mauss is widely regarded as the forefather of gift-giving research. For Mauss reciprocity is a key concept – the pragmatic obligation of reciprocity creates a system where no gifts are without a compulsory chain of giving, receiving and giving back. Interestingly though, for this paper, the gift in Mauss' conceptualization also transcends the division between the material and the social (or spiritual) by suggesting that the gift is always an indissoluble tie between gift and gifter[11].

Further theorizing the connection between gift, gifter and receiver, Derrida arrives at the conclusion that the (genuine) gift is a "possible-impossible aporia"[12]. Derrida also regards reciprocity as the key mechanism of gifting, suggesting that it is the very obligation of reciprocity that renders the genuine gift impossible. According to Derrida, the giver must not apprehend any reward (intrinsic or extrinsic) and the receiver must not disclose any recognition or gratitude, resulting in a paradox which makes the conditions for the actualization of the gift also the conditions for its impossibility.

Route I: Vaughan and word-gifts

Feminist scholar Vaughan[13] presents an account of the gift that takes issue with Mauss and Derrida. The most important critique is that for Vaughan the gift is both non-reciprocal and, not only possible, but imperative for developing a sustainable future. Vaughan stresses the power of language in creating a gendered capitalism, which over-privileges some and under-privileges others. By making

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[11] Mauss, *The Gift: forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*.

[12] Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*.

[13] Vaughan, *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*.

visible such hidden power structures of language, Vaughan ultimately seeks to develop an alternative agenda based on a semiotic critique of capitalist exchange[14].

Vaughan stresses a naïve point of view as a way to circumvent patriarchal thinking and contractual exchange-based interaction (something she has in common with queer theory[15]). While there is a stress on language in Vaughan's work, there is also an acknowledgment of the material and psychological consequences of language, indicating a reciprocal relationship "beneath the abstractions of linguistics and semiotics"[16]. Although there is a problematic connection made between the gift paradigm and the, somewhat essentialist, notion of 'mothering', Vaughan's approach of putting forth the gift (lat. munus) as an alternative based on meeting the changing needs of others in the study of co-muni-cation is still critical. A change in language is, according to Vaughan, a first step towards a material change. "With language, we create the human bonds that we have stopped creating through material co-munication."[17] Vaughan goes on to develop an interesting needs-based theory of socio-materiality where the relation between words-as-gifts and the corresponding objects-as-gifts is contingent, but also ambiguous:

> *It is useful also to consider the materiality of words as somewhere between goods and services, because the gifts on the nonverbal plane which they re-present, may also be of varying degrees of materiality.*[18]

For Vaughan, language utterances, or word-gifts, are tools for creating convivial experiences that have both social and material dimensions. Interestingly, Vaughan also touches upon the idea of 'evil gifts', where a relation emerges that may be adverse or even antagonistic. The important conclusion drawn in relation to this, is to question who (systematically) benefits from 'evil gifts'. In summary, Vaughan's proposed alternative to capitalist exchange-based relations is to re-

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[14] Notably, Vaughan does not critique Derrida's larger ideas of language as a mode of exchange or the deconstructive paradigm as such. Rather, Vaughan's critique is mainly directed towards the proposed impossibility of the gift, and its over-emphasis on obligatory reciprocity (and under-emphasis of alternative forms of generosity as a force of social change).

[15] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[16] Vaughan, *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*: 11.

[17] Ibid., 18.

[18] Ibid., 19.

build discursive practices, based on words-as-gifts, that can come to re-shape our relation to its ubiquitous material components.

Route II: Diprose and corporeal generosity

Diprose makes an interesting argument that generosity includes an openness to others that goes beyond the notion that giving is limited to possessions within contractual exchange economies. Diprose aims to build a politically sensitive notion of giving and generosity and theorizes intercorporeal relations as a form of social production where the self is given to others. As such, she provides an ontological account of the gift that goes on to discuss sexual, cultural and stylistic similarities and differences. Diprose argues that the corporeal dimensions of the gift are important for two major reasons. First, she follows Derrida's proposition that gifts must go unnoticed for them to become gifts. Diprose takes this further though, by arguing that gifts can not go unrecognized on a corporeal level[19]. Thus, generosity is always based on carnal perception and affectivity, where the resulting production of identity and difference is material. It is interesting to note how this conception of the gift considers the gift as affect and materiality in cohort. Second, Diprose proposes that the corporeal dimension of the gift is central, because it highlights how there is a systemic asymmetry in the evaluation of different bodies and how they become privileged or not:

> *Some bodies accrue value, identity, and recognition through accumulating the gifts of others and at their expense.[20]*

In their material actualizations gifts are then asymmetrically distributed depending on the contextual social norms and values that come to evaluate specific bodies, again pointing to a very socio-material view on the gift[21]. The important

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[19] To emphasize this notion, we may refer to Aafke Elisabeth Komter, "Reciprocity as a Principle of Exclusion," *Sociology* 30, no. 2 (1996)., who in turn invokes Giddens and proposes that gift-giving belongs to the sphere of practical knowledge, where the rules are ambiguous, but we still "know how to play the game"

[20] Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merlau-Ponty, and Levinas*: 9.

[21] In a paper of its own it would be interesting to focus specifically on the relations between bodies, code and the gift, via for example Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminism and the Ethical Space of Nature," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006); N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

contribution that Diprose provides here is how actualizations are also political, and may privilege some while marginalizing others.

As seen, both Vaughan and Diprose include discursive and material elements in their analyses. However, there is also a lack of a coherent socio-material theory to underpin their work. With the recent theoretical development in new materialist perspectives it becomes interesting to follow this trajectory of gift theorization towards an updated conceptual model of the gift.

Feminist materialism

Together, the insights of Vaughan and Diprose direct our attention towards a new materialist reading of the gift. This is called for not only considering the material turn[22], but also seeing how computation has changed the landscape of everyday media performance and sharing (i.e. the computational turn[23]). On an overarching level, I will use Lykke's combined reading of Haraway and Barad as an analytical strategy[24]. This approach provides a basic model of sociomateriality, from which we can begin to discuss the more specific components of digital gifts. Based on this approach, I argue that the gift can be understood as an imploded object[25] or phenomenon[26] that appears mundane, self-evident and non-spectacular, but which can be "analytically unlocked and genealogically traced back to the dynamic processes of transformation of which they are momentary products"[27].

A central argument in this strategy is to take a step away from representationalism (the separation between a representation and the "thing" to be represented) towards performativity. Performativity pertains to the notion that phenomena are co-constituted (or co-performed) by human and non-human actors alike, including both discursive and material dimensions. In Barad's conceptualization, phenomena are the ontological building blocks of the world and are both constructed as well as objectively existing. Acknowledging

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[22] Dan Hicks, "The Material-Cultural Turn: event and effect," in *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, ed. Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[23] Caroline Bassett, "Feminism, Expertise and the Computational Turn," in *Renewing Feminisms: Radical Narratives, Fantasies and Futures in Media Studies*, ed. Helen Thornham and Elke Weissmann (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

[24] Nina Lykke, *Feminist Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[25] Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004). 338.

[26] Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of how Matter Come to Matter," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008).

[27] Lykke, *Feminist Studies*: 153.

performativity then, rather than strict representationalism, means to "allow matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its on-going "intra-activity""[28]. Intra-action refers to a co-evolving, co-affecting, mutually transforming relation between phenomena, causing boundaries to be continuously reworked. Through so-called, agential cuts, local (within-phenomenal) separations between the components of a phenomenon are enacted – "[…] boundaries and properties of the "components" of phenomena become determinate and […] particular embodied concepts become meaningful"[29]. As such, the components (or relata) do not forego the relations between them. Rather, the agential cut enacts not only the components, but also a potential for situated objectivity (a potential to reproduce the agential cut) as well as a causal structure between components. Particularly interesting for this paper is how the situated practice of making agential cuts depends heavily on the apparatus. The apparatus (e.g. the theoretical framework, methods, or technologies used in research) is central because it co-produces a particular type of result.

Diffraction is a figuration used by both Barad and Haraway in order to emphasize a methodological ambition to shift perspectives and allow for alternative patterns to emerge. Diffraction is contrasted against the ubiquitous use of 'reflection' in critical thinking. As such, the optical analogy of diffraction provides a thinking tool by which we can imagine how new facets and new patterns may emerge by allowing analytical light pass through a bending, morphing and agential 'object' of study. While "agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world"[30], it might still be worthwhile to consider the (unique?) agential capacities of digital objects that has been highlighted in digital media theory. The digital can be seen as morphable in specific ways and notions of, for example, computational, algorithmic and recursive agency could provide a diffraction specific to phenomena that includes digital media. At this point, however, it is also useful to underline that the notion of mediation in itself, according to Barad, generates a dichotomous relation giving 'media' the status of a lens that separates e.g. nature and culture:

> *[…] the notion of mediation – whether through the lens of consciousness, language, culture, technology, or labor – holds nature at bay, beyond our grasp, generating and regenerating the*

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[28] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of how Matter Come to Matter," 122.

[29] Ibid., 133.

[30] Ibid., 135.

> *philosophical problem of the possibility of human knowledge out of this metaphysical quarantining of the object world.*[31]

For Barad, this means that media technologies' ontological status is not as *media* (something that mediates between two 'worlds'). Rather they are perhaps better conceptualized as apparatuses (which can be phenomena in themselves) that can co-perform agential cuts. As apparatuses, I would argue that media in fact does co-create cuts, but cuts in Barad's sense of the word. Rather than an isolating and detaching cut, it is a cut where specific relations and causal structures are actualized. Media does not mediate as much as they separate. Seeing digital media as apparatuses that perform agential cuts may also help us to model how certain interfaces produce the (illusion of the) informed, sovereign and empowered subject as well as an exploited, mapped and programmed aggregate of individuals[32]. Computational media as apparatuses based on code cuts through grey zones enacting certain subjects, objects and causal relations, and enabling and disabling certain agency[33]. In summary, reducing code to representation does not capture the performativity of code[34]. The processual power of (computational) media is not restricted – rather it leaks across boundaries[35]. Because of the computational agency of digital media it seems appropriate to further propose an elaboration of theoretical concepts relevant for the analytical unlocking of the digital gift, namely distributed agency, virtual-digital actualization and resignification. These concepts also point to the continuous in-betweenness that has always/already characterized conceptualizations of the gift and gifting.

Distributed agency

> *Technology... is a queer thing. It brings you great gifts with one hand, and it stabs you in the back with the other. ~C.P. Snow, New York Times, 15 March 1971*

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[31] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meanin* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). 375.

[32] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

[33] Ibid.

[34] N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Andrew Mackenzie, *Cutting Code: Software and Sociality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

[35] Jussi Parikka, "New Materialism as Media Theory: Medianatures and Dirty Matter," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2012).

The quote above can be unpacked to reveal many interesting and important issues. Foremost, it points to the dual nature of technology – a notion that has been further developed by Fuller and Goffey[36] in their exposé of the "grey zones of evil media". In their account, technology is usually not as easily categorized as either a gift or a stab in the back; but rather, technologies create confusing and ambiguous effects, in-between good and evil. One such effect is the so-called glitch. The glitch is a moment of unpredictable immanence. In the words of Goriunova and Shulgin: "A glitch is a singular dysfunctional event that allows insight beyond the customary, omnipresent, and alien computer aesthetics."[37]. By distributing loss of control, departures from the straight route, and irrational momenta, over human and non-human relations, the glitch opens up to new insecure possibilities:

> *In a society that conditions the public to find discomfort or outright fear in the errors and malfunctions of our socio-cultural mechanics—illicitly and implicitly encouraging an ethos of "Don't rock the boat!"— a "glitch" becomes an apt metonym. Glitch Feminism, however, embraces the causality of "error", and turns the gloomy implication of glitch on its ear by acknowledging that an error in a social system that has already been disturbed by economic, racial, social, sexual, and cultural stratification and the imperialist wrecking-ball of globalization—processes that continue to enact violence on all bodies—may not, in fact, be an error at all, but rather a much-needed erratum. This glitch is a correction to the "machine", and, in turn, a positive departure. This glitch I speak of here calls for a breaking from the hegemony of a "structured system" infused with the pomp and circumstance of patriarchy, one that for all too long has marginalized female-identified bodies, and continues to offend our sensibilities by giving us only a piece of the pie and assuming our satisfaction.[38]*

In an age where the sheer number of digital virtual objects we engage with increase, and material objects and bodies become saturated with superimposed information, the gift is an attempt to install an awareness of a system that, on its road to 'evergrowth', corrupts the relations between nature/culture, self/others, evil/good and success/failure. As such, the gift is also an attempt to reinstall an

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[36] Fuller and Goffey, *Evil Media*.

[37] Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin, "Glitch," in *software studies - a lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 114.

[38] Legacy Russell to Cyborgology, Dec 10, 2012, http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2012/12/10/digital-dualism-and-the-glitch-feminism-manifesto/.

acknowledgement of the socio-material conditions of our existence, by providing a glitch.

However, the acknowledgement of the glitch should not be taken as the idea that technology is completely independent from human intent. Rather, this points to an interpretative relation between humans and machines. This relation can be conceptualized in many ways[39], and van Doorn suggests the notion of a distributed agency "which recognizes agency as a process that is allocated to human as well as non-human actors who depend on each other for their respective efficacy"[40]. Remembering the notions of evil gifts (Vaughan) and evil media (Fuller & Goffey), we may put new light to the, as I see it, commonplace ideological effort to try to keep technology free and neutral from any evil or good capacities – an ideological stance that assumes a disembodied and universal technology. Rather, if we are to treat technology as (parts of) situated and augmented realities, or assemblages or phenomena, with distributed agencies, then evil is also distributed, and augmented, in all parts of the phenomena, technology included. Seeing the digital, technology-augmented gift as also existing in-between good and evil adds a new analytical dimension to gifting theory.

Virtual-digital actualization

Moving on to discussing the relation between technology and the gift there is reason to continue on the trail set up by van Doorn, who builds on Hayles idea of phenomena as "materially real, socially regulated, and discursively constructed"[41] and proposes a reconsideration of "the virtual":

> *This suggests a convergence of the virtual and the concrete in digital space, in which the 'immaterial potential' of the virtual is materially actualized in the form of digital objects[42]*

Consequently, the virtual has potential to be actualized as a material object, but also as a digital object (which is, through mediating technologies, part of a phenomenon). The gift follows a chain of performance that traverses the virtual,

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[39] Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al., "Agency Reconsidered" (paper presented at the Digital Games Research Association, London, UK, 2009).

[40] Niels van Doorn, "Digital Spaces, Material Traces: How Matter Comes to Matter in Online Performances of Gender, Sexuality and Embodiement," *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 4 (2011): 536.

[41] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*: 291.

[42] van Doorn, "Digital Spaces, Material Traces: How Matter Comes to Matter in Online Performances of Gender, Sexuality and Embodiement," 534.

the digital and the material. As such, it might be appropriate to speak of code-gifts (rather than word-gifts). When taking on the notion of code-gifts, we must however reconsider Vaughan's needs-based approach. User needs have a tendency to be projected from improving the current system, making it more useful (or making the user/client/consumer more adapted to the norms of the system). Instead, a way forward is "not through attempting to co-opt design to particular ends, but by promoting design which is spaceful, oblique and occasionally mischievous."[43] and by considering how a queer interest in technology can support actualizations of cloaking, paradox and never-being-the-sameness[44]. Taking into consideration the potential for code to play out differently, it is important to consider the situated actualization and how it yields different outcomes for different stakeholders. For example, when considering the interference of gifts and technology, technology also shows how it sometimes works to not create grey zones, but rather to create clear-cut dichotomies. The ambition to aggregate, quantify and commoditize the social relations of the online gift economy is fulfilled in social networking services (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), often with the consenting help of happy users. This points to a technological streamlining and reification of social relations (and the gift paradigm that underpins it). As such, it may be useful to consider how Vaughan's idea of language as the primary object for change can be tactically applied through the notion of resignification.

Resignification

Returning to the previous quote by C.P. Snow it is worth noting that this quote also points towards a process of resignification (i.e. the "process whereby a pejorative way of naming […] is given a new – positive – meaning as part of a political movement resisting hegemony and stigmatization."[45]. While C.P. Snow's use of 'queer' was probably just a way for him to indicate the paradoxical workings of technology (by which I concur), I also want to note that 'queer', as a concept, has undergone a process of resignification, turning it from a derogatory term into an affirmative and activist identity position (that still, at least theoretically, retains a fondness for the paradoxical though). It is within this process of resignification of the queer that I want to put forward the potential resignification of gifts as (queer) failures[46]. The gift, conceptualized as a

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[43] Ann Light, "HCI as heterodoxy: Technologies of identity and the queering of interaction with computers," *Interacting with Computers* 23, no. 5 (2011): 431.

[44] Zach Blas, "On Queer Viralities," *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About_* 1, no. 2 (2013).

[45] Lykke, *Feminist Studies*: 210.

[46] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

commodity that fails, illustrates the queer meaning of failure as a resignification towards something positive. At this point, we can propose the reading of the gift in contemporary society as oscillating between success and failure. The stratagem of queer failure makes possible a reversal of the normativity of this dimension, where a new reading of the context can turn both success and failure on its head. So, in an attempt to paraphrase, albeit not as eloquently, C.P. Snow in his original quote, I would like to state that:

> *Gifting… is a queer thing. It is, on the one hand, continuously commoditized, reified or annulled in late-modern liberal capitalism. On the other hand it is also an unruly, anti-capitalist, queer failure comprising a playful, flexible, open-ended site for imagining and enacting alternative futures.*

At this point it becomes interesting to read Vaughan and Diprose in parallel to Braidotti[47], who also finds that we, as bodies, have persistent needs. Like Vaughan Braidotti proposes that we have let "alien" needs (mainly advocated by neo-liberal capitalism) create a dissonance and alienation of ourselves. These artificial needs are now so ubiquitous that it is hard for us to break, resist or fail them without it being very discomforting for us. We surrender to hegemonic models of being and becoming due to a fear of failing, and media technologies often catalyse this capitulation (e.g. social media business models reifying relations, values and other-orientation). Much like the notion of queer failure, Braidotti proposes a transformation (and acceptance) of the negative aspects of failure into positive. This transformation is the root of a sustainable ethics for the future. Failing is a necessary activity and experience, part of a broader dimension (a grey zone) in-between complete fatalism and the hegemonic tyranny of neo-liberal success.

Adding to this theorizing of futurity, sustainability and gift-related economies, Stiegler proposes a turn to an economy of contribution, which is based in a social counter-tendency that "consists in causing the technical tendency to "diffract", to deflect, and even to reverse its direction […]"[48]. According to Stiegler, technologies (much like Fuller & Goffey conceptualizes of them through the concept of "evil media") are pharmacological, meaning that they can constitute both poison and cure. As such, digital networks have a potential, a tendency, to diffract and make lots of sustainable alternatives arise. For this to happen, the current short-termist, illusionary, disposability-oriented, careless capitalist economy must however be reworked through the notion of care-fulness.

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[47] Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of "Life Itself" and New Ways of Dying," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[48] Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*: 111.

This includes a consideration of the transductive relations between a psychosomatic level, a technical level and a social level (i.e. body, technology and discursive practices). A capitalism that "has made carelessness into the very principle of its organization"[49] threatens to separate these levels, alienating them from each other. The solution is then to accentuate positive externalities coming from a re-orientation towards social, rather than exchange, economies. According to Stiegler, this move also augments the relations between the three levels, indicating a socio-material view where borders are commonly traversed. While Stiegler is not fully clear on the practicalities of a working towards a care-oriented and thereby sustainable future, it is striking how many commonalities that link all the various theoretical approaches in this paper, including Steigler's.

A conceptual model of the performative gift

The literature review shows a common emphasis of the importance of gifting, generosity and alternative economic perspectives and theories. Because the gift is so clearly a product of both social and material processes, an updated coherent model that takes both these parts into account seems timely. The proposed model helps in the description, analysis and communication of similarities and differences relating to different gifting practices. Most importantly, the model acknowledges how virtual, digital and material dimensions come to co-inform one another. This analytical capacity is central since digital and computational media now permeates so much of our everyday lives, shaping and archiving the personal information we share.

This paper argues that performativity provides a good starting point if one wants to advance gift theory into a new materialist or posthumanist thinking. Performativity takes into account how objects that appears mundane, self-evident and non-spectacular, can be conceptualized as imploded objects[50] or phenomena[51]. From this assumption, analysis can move on to a genealogical tracing, or mapping, of different dynamic processes of transduction. This paper has proposed that three such important processes are actualization, agency and resignification. Below is an attempt at relating these three processes in a conceptual model.

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[49] Ibid., 126.

[50] Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*: 338.

[51] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of how Matter Come to Matter."

Socio-material Performativity Gifts as imploded objects (Haraway) or phenomena (Barad)		
Virtual-digital-material Actualization	Distributed Agency	Resignification
Considers if and how gifts traverse the borders between the virtual, the digital and the material and what consequences this may have. Sub-concepts could include e.g. virality, injustice and word-gifts.	Considers how agency is distributed between human and non-human actors. Sub-concepts could include e.g. glitch, performativity of code, design and technological non-neutrality.	Considers how (normative) conceptions are reworked (even reversed) to allow for new agencies and forms of actualization. Sub-concepts could include e.g. queer failure, care-fulness, evil media.

Table 1. The performative gift: a conceptual model

The model presents a straightforward socio-material perspective, which considers both discourse and matter, and the mediated traverse between them. Drawing from work on gifts, feminist materialism and digital media theory, this model provides an integration of information from different disciplines into one unified conceptual framework. While it needs to be put to empirical testing to prove its analytical strengths, it postulates a new basic framework for thinking about the gift in the digital age.

Discussion: the gift in the digital age

In a new materialist conception, the gift is only one possible identity of the object. However, it is an identity that both withdraws from explicitness and remains ubiquitous in the formation of social relationships and communities. It is mundane and self-evident, but also regarded with both suspicion and (highly situated) joy. On an economical level, the gift has for long been co-opted by individual sovereignty, property ownership, occasion centric obligation and the commercialization of our calendar (i.e. time). However, digital media technologies arguable posed a challenge to that view, by allowing digital-virtual objects to multiply, and thus become points of convergence for technical, social and juridical discussions. Still, echoing the previous quote by C.P. Snow, the digital also provided for a burgeoning measuring, commodification and surveillance of online activities and digital-virtual objects as well.

It is a common assessment that computational processes now penetrate how we experience time and space, how we express identities, how we work and

rest, how we maintain social relations, how we organize, how we learn, how we manage small and large-scale finances and how we create and share cultural objects. It is also clear that the popular personal media technologies of today augment an extreme form of practical representationalism where individuals are constantly concerned with how they are represented. The design of many digital media technologies supports a hegemonic view where the underpinning assumption is that these representations (e.g. profiles) represent real persons and have an agency to augment the social identity as it becomes actualized in different contexts. While this is correct to a certain extent, the question rarely extends to *why* we should tag, film, friend, like, sponsor, tweet, endorse and follow, but *how* (i.e. what is the best way to do it successfully). As such, current technological design, emphasizing (individual) needs and usability, obscures wider political issues. This creates a development where normative errors are perpetuated and augmented. Short-term efficiency, as infused in so much social media, may cause us to lose track of sustainable ethics of technology use and design. As Light so aptly proposes, technology should introduce elements of queerness - sluggish, opaque, mischievous, absent, dumb, insignificant elements – in order to support social justice, long-term thinking and ethical sustainability.

On a final note, it could be that our fascination with the digital has come to pass[52], but that is not to say that the digital is not ubiquitous in many environments. Rather the opposite, digital media technologies are now so mundane that we only come to notice them when they fail. In the words of critic and memoirist Clive James: It is only when they go wrong that machines remind you how powerful they are. As many of the theorists included in this paper propose, the current 'machine', or system, is on a route towards an epic fail. Unlike Derrida, who sees the (genuine) gift as a "possible-impossible aporia", we shall treat the gift as a persistent anomaly – or glitch – in a system that continuously tries to annul or commoditize it. The success of the machine will lead to ultimate failure. To this straight route, guided by a paradigm of growth, many scholars now suggest alternative lines to follow – lines that are instead guided by glitches, stratagems and queer failures, of which the gift is a particularly compelling way to make the 'machine go wrong'.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the theories covered in this paper have very different origins (and vary in scope and disciplinary background), but as I hope I have shown, there are more points of convergence than divergence. The gift paradigm is clearly more

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[52] Kim Cascone, "The aesthetics of failure: "Post-digital" tendencies in contemporary computer music," *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (2000).

ubiquitous than it is usually given credit for. Too often it is dismissed as nostalgic attempts to reinstall a naïve pre-consumerist archaic economy. However, this objection is directed at a ghost. Rather, it seems that gift economies are extremely pervasive. Because they are constantly reworked in different ways, we need a unified model to begin understanding the different shapes it can take. What I conclude to be a common emphasis of for example Vaughan, Diprose, Stiegler, Braidotti, Russell, Halberstam and Fuller & Goffey is an anticipatory, future-oriented desire to change the current system (and to divert from the limited view of Mauss and followers). Notably, this goes against many other notions of "failing" in contemporary society, where the main drive is retro-conservative: to go back; that change has "gone too far"; and that everything was better in the old days. At the same time, the anticipatory approach is also long-term, ethically sustainable, and intersectionally oriented. When comparing the theoretical approaches in terms of technology, they show how technology can bring forth as well as obscure (in the ways Heidegger, Chun and Fuller & Goffey points out) but more importantly, how it can diffract.

Because the gift always had an in-between quality to it (e.g. between the virtual and the material[53], between the market and social relationships[54], between good and evil[55], between the normal and the queer[56]), this paper has argued for a conceptual model that can cut across social and material levels of the gift and analyse its transversal relationships[57]. The purpose of this paper has been to explore what analytical traction can potentially be gained from interlocking theories of the gift, feminist materialism and digital media. As such, we can conclude that there is an interesting conceptual interchange developing between these three areas. A basic socio-material perspective, considering both discourse and matter, seems to permeate all three. From the feminist theorizing of the gift we take on board notions of corporeality, word-gifts and structural injustice. Feminist materialism provides the concepts of performativity and resignification. Recent theorizing on digital media postulates terms such as non-neutrality, distributed agency and glitch. More interestingly, however, is how we from this can deduce an interconnected vocabulary for the digital gift. For example, performativity connects both to the socio-material in-between-ness of the word-

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[53] Vaughan, *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*.

[54] Avner Offer, "Between the gift and the market: the economy of regard," *Economic History Review* 3(1997).

[55] Fuller and Goffey, *Evil Media*.

[56] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

[57] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

gift and the distributed agency made possible by computer code. Injustice is conceptually, and practically, connected to the non-neutrality (even potential evilness) of technology. Glitch feminism presents a tactical resignification in order to deal with this non-neutrality. The previously strict borders of the body are challenged by corporeal generosity as well as digital-virtual actualizations. While it is still premature to propose a coherent theoretical model based on this tentative, yet compelling, network of concepts, this paper has shown how the gift forms a productive nodal point for thinking through the new facets of socio-material communication.

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