

## Diffraction & reading diffractively

Geerts, Evelien; Van der Tuin, Iris

DOI:

[10.1344/jnmr.v2i1.33380](https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v2i1.33380)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Geerts, E & Van der Tuin, I 2021, 'Diffraction & reading diffractively', *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 173-177. <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v2i1.33380>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

---

## Diffraction & Reading Diffractively<sup>1</sup>

**Evelien Geerts**

University of Birmingham

**Iris van der Tuin**

Utrecht University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnrm.v2i1.33380>

According to classical physics, diffraction is a physical phenomenon that comes into being when a multitude of waves encounter an obstacle upon their path, and/or when these waves themselves overlap. Waves in fact always already overlap and extend into one another, so even in the classical rendering, when pushed to an extreme, “we can understand diffraction patterns—as patterns of difference that make a difference—to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 72). Seen through the perspective of quantum physics, however, we are invited to think about the inherent diffractivity of sets of waves, of single waves, and of single particles, under the right (experimental) conditions.

In contemporary feminist theory, diffraction is often employed figuratively, to denote a more critical and difference-attentive mode of consciousness and thought. Both literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha and feminist science studies scholar Donna J. Haraway have engaged with the metaphor of diffraction in their oeuvres in relation to thought, difference(s), and alterity. This engagement matters to the tradition of new (feminist) materialism because the new materialist tradition approaches difference as making a difference in terms of both genealogy, figurative conceptualisation, and of matter coming to matter (Butler, 1993; Barad, 2007). Although Minh-ha does not explicitly refer to diffraction as such, it is clear that her philosophical approach towards identity and difference is a relational, diffractive one, as it radically steps away from what she understands to be the apartheid-based, segregational type of difference, or, put in different terms, the traditional modern Western philosophical approach in which

---

<sup>1</sup> This piece is a slightly edited republication of the original New Materialism Almanac entry. See Geerts & van der Tuin, 2016.

difference is seen as to-be-captured, to-be-assimilated, and, eventually, to-be-wholly-eradicated (see e.g., Minh-ha, 1997). Moving through and beyond such a reductive Hegelian Self/Other dialectics, Minh-ha's diffractive conceptualisation of identity and difference focuses on a non-dualistic, non-separational model of identity and difference, in which identity categories, identified groups, and even identified single entities, diffractively crisscross, interfere, and co-establish one another, and differences are respected and allowed to exist and flourish (also see e.g., Minh-ha, 1996). After all, the noun 'identification' and the verb 'to identify' come from the Latin *identificare*, which combines *identitas* and *-ficare* (from *facere*: to make).

Haraway follows in Minh-ha's footsteps when discussing diffraction for the first time in "The Promises of Monsters" (2004): Haraway here explicitly refers to Minh-ha's idea of inappropriate/d others—a notion that expresses how subjects are in a "deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality" (Haraway, 2004, p. 69). Part of her feminist critique and revisioning of objectivity within scientific thinking, diffraction for Haraway is a "more subtle vision" than the traditional reflective scientific forms of optics and thinking that actually spotlights "where the effects of difference appear" (p. 70). To rephrase this in more Irigarayan terms: Thinking diffractively steps out of the phallogocentric, reflective logics of producing the Same all over again by acknowledging the differences that exist, while at the same time pointing at where the problematic reductions and assimilations of difference have taken place. Haraway in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium* (1997, p. 16) expands on this new form of optics and way of thinking by using diffraction as "an optical metaphor:" Diffraction here is even more contrasted with the traditional way of producing (scientific) knowledge, namely "[r]eflexivity." Such a practice "only displaces the same elsewhere," according to Haraway, and creates oppositional distinctions between the real and the figural, whereas diffraction—now reformulated as seeing and thinking diffractively—is all about making "a difference in the world" by paying attention to "the interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies." This does not mean that Haraway wants to get rid of reflexivity: She keeps on working through and beyond reflective paradigms of science, social movements, and policy-making, but it is clear that she considers diffraction to be a more "critical consciousness" than reflexivity, as it gives us the opportunity to become more attuned to how differences are being created in the world, and what particular effects they have on subjects and

their bodies (Haraway, 1997, p. 273). Seeing and thinking diffractively therefore implies a self-accountable, critical, and responsible engagement with the world.

It is exactly this aspect of diffraction that has been picked up by feminist new materialist philosopher and fellow feminist science studies scholar Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). For Barad, reading (and theorising) diffractively expresses what a self-accountable feminist type of intellectual critique and textual engagement ideally should consist of: Rather than employing a hierarchical methodology that would put different texts, theories, and strands of thought against one another, diffractively engaging with texts and intellectual traditions means that they are dialogically read “through one another” (p. 30) to engender creative, and unexpected outcomes. And that all while acknowledging and respecting the contextual and theoretical differences between the readings in question. This methodology thus stays true to Haraway’s idea of diffraction: Rather than flat-out rejecting what has been theorised before, the foundations of the old, so to say, are being re-used to think anew.

Reading diffractively therefore not only appears to transcend the level of critique, ultimately based in a Self/Other identity politics, but in Barad’s regard also can be regarded as a boundary-crossing, trans/disciplinary methodology, as it brings about “respectful engagements with different disciplinary practices” (2007, p. 93). Blurring the boundaries between different disciplines and theories to provoke new thoughts and theories, this methodology examines how and why boundaries between disciplines and strands of thought have been made and how they can be (re)made to matter more toward inclusion than apartheid.

## Bibliography

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

Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of ‘sex.’* Routledge.

Geerts, Evelien & van der Tuin, Iris (2016, 27 July). Diffraction & reading diffractively. *New Materialism Almanac*. Retrieved from: <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/d/diffraction.html>.

Haraway, Donna J. (1997). *Modest\_witness@second\_millennium. Femaleman@\_meets\_Oncomouse™: Feminism and technoscience*. Routledge.

Haraway, Donna J. (2004). The Promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others. In D. J. Haraway, *the Haraway Reader* (pp. 63-124). Routledge.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. (1996). An acoustic journey. In J. C. Welchman (Ed.), *Rethinking borders* (pp. 1-17). University of Minnesota Press.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. (1997). Not you/like you: Postcolonial women and the interlocking questions of identity and difference. In A. McClintock, A. Mufti, and E. Shohat (Eds.), *Dangerous liaisons: Gender, nation, and postcolonial perspectives* (pp. 415-149). University of Minnesota Press.

## Author Information

**Evelien Geerts** ([e.m.l.geerts@bham.ac.uk](mailto:e.m.l.geerts@bham.ac.uk))

Evelien Geerts is a multidisciplinary philosopher and Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, where she is working on the ERC-funded Urban Terrorism in Europe (2004-19): Remembering, Imagining, and Anticipating Violence project. She holds a Ph.D. in Feminist Studies and History of Consciousness (DE) from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research interests include new materialisms & Deleuzoguattarian philosophy, critical epistemologies, political philosophical questions of identity, difference, and violence, and critical and diffractive pedagogies. She previously has published in *Philosophy Today*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, and *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*—publications that can be found at [www.eveliengeerts.com](http://www.eveliengeerts.com)—and is a *Posthumanities Hub* affiliated researcher plus a *PhEMaterialisms* member.

**Iris van der Tuin** ([i.vandertuin@uu.nl](mailto:i.vandertuin@uu.nl))

Iris van der Tuin is Professor in Theory of Cultural Inquiry at Utrecht University (Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies). She is also Director of the School of Liberal Arts and Program Director of the interdisciplinary bachelor's programme Liberal Arts and Sciences. Iris is interested in the new and interdisciplinary humanities and in so-called 'SoITL:' the Scholarship of Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning. She co-authored *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012) with Rick Dolphijn, wrote *Generational Feminism: New Materialist Introduction to a Generative Approach* (Lexington Books, 2015) and edited *Nature* for

---

*Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Gender* (Macmillan Reference USA, 2016) as well as, for example, and with Adam J. Nocek, the special journal issue “New Concepts for Materialism” of *Philosophy Today* (2019). Iris chaired the COST Action New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on “How Matter comes to Matter” (2014-18) and worked in the H2020 project Ethics of Coding: A Report on the Algorithmic Condition (2017, chaired by Felicity Colman). Iris is founding editor with Rosi Braidotti of the book series *New Materialisms* of Edinburgh University Press. She is also editor of *Somatechnics* with Holly Randell-Moon.