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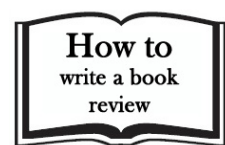
## Book Review: Media|Matter: The Materiality of Media, Matter as Medium edited by Bernd Herzogenrath



*In the collection **Media|Matter: The Materiality of Media, Matter as Medium**, edited by Bernd Herzogenrath as part of Bloomsbury's *Thinking Media* series, contributors explore how media can be thought of precisely as, and through, materiality, traversing topics such as theory, text, film, art and sound. While he is cautious about over-emphasising the material, Niall Flynn welcomes the book for encouraging us to question preconceived understandings of the relationship between media and matter.*

**Media|Matter: The Materiality of Media, Matter as Medium.**  
Bernd Herzogenrath (ed.). Bloomsbury. 2015.

Media, matter. Two words that can be played with in numerous ways: media used as singular or plural; matter used as a verb or a noun. Here is another: *media|matter*. This is the title of a new collection edited by Bernd Herzogenrath (Professor of English and American Studies at the University of Frankfurt), which is the inaugural title in Bloomsbury's *Thinking Media* series on media philosophy. The title inserts a break between the words. Are they to be read as separated by the line, or recombined by the slash? Either way, they work on us subtly, forcing us to question, as this



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book does throughout, what we thought we knew about media and matter – separately or together.

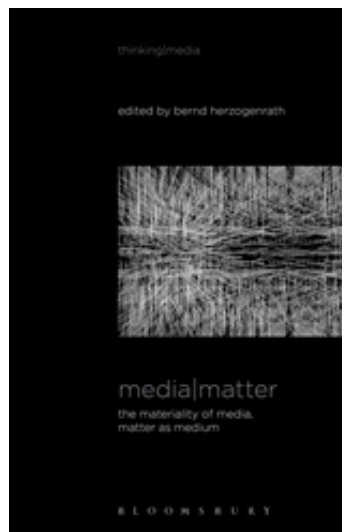
The book participates in the ongoing rethinking of media in philosophical terms – Media Studies’ ‘exotic charm’, as Katerina Krtilova puts it (29). It is no longer adequate to say that media simply transmit information from one source to another. That is a superficial notion. The media concept has been expanded: media are no longer understood as the cultural and artificial objects that we assumed they were. Rather, they lie in-between bodies and things, and are the inconspicuous means by which we perceive these things. What a medium is, and what a medium does, are now up for grabs.

In this light, mediation is a composite of multiple complex relations and processes. This has given rise to various more or less established research approaches, including various kinds of new materialisms and media ecologies. *Media|Matter* is conversant with these debates. In Herzogenrath’s words, the book is about:

*the modeling of systemic processes and dynamics that underlie both culture and nature: the materiality of biological and social systems seen as self-organizing aggregates that allow for the emergence of newness (2).*

In plainer words, that is, we need to think about how media are both natural and cultural at the same time, rather than belonging exclusively to either sphere. Materiality, broadly conceived, is the arbiter and lowest common denominator in this relationship, and the essays in this book put forward a position that thinks media through it – thus the ‘phonic chiasm’ (Garrett Stewart, 48) of the portmanteau ‘Media|Matter’.

The book is split into five sections, each considering media and matter’s relation to theory, text, film, art and sound. The first section on theory lays out the perspectives and backgrounds



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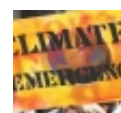
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being dealt with; the subsequent sections work through some of these ideas. The essays engage throughout with materialist themes of performativity, relationality, objectivity and the post-human. We usually study the representation of things through media. The essays here, however, suggest that we can look at the materiality of the media itself. This can take place without a human orientation. Things, too, have force and agency.

Film theory is privileged in the book, and part three, 'Film|Matter', is the largest section. Well-illustrated, it includes a photo-essay of images from the films of American artist Bill Morrison.

Herzogenrath's own essay in the collection follows this, offering a closer look at one of Morrison's works, *Decasia*, a found footage film from 2002. Gilles Deleuze's philosophy appears here – as in other essays in the book by Krtilova, Lorenz Engell and Stephen Zepke – and as a privileged reference across recent film and media studies. Deleuze explores the relations between film, materiality and time, beyond the logics of representation. He categorises cinema into the 'movement-image' and the 'time-image', which correspond respectively to classical and post-war cinema. Herzogenrath's own category, the 'matter-image', explores the effect of time and decay on the nitrocellulose medium of film. This material focus is supposed to free cinematic media from its repression by representation.



Image Credit: 35mm film strip stock ([mannyisdead](#))

*Decasia* enacts these concepts. Herzogenrath shows that Morrison's point of departure is the materiality of the film medium, rather than its capacity for representation: 'the temporality and

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thingness of the material *itself* is the center of his work, not the forms and shapes it *represents*, but the shape and form it becomes' (124). Film's matter-image is thus an '*image-producing materiality*' (125), rather than mere representation of reality. Alongside Deleuze, Herzogenrath cites other prominent theorists of film's indexical conditions and its ultimate decay: C.S. Peirce, Walter Benjamin, André Bazin and Paolo Cherchi Usai. These sources could be further developed in light of Herzogenrath's vision of (new) materialism, though that would require a more focused work.

There are reflections throughout the book on the recent critical interest in materiality – the 'material turn'? – in the Humanities, and in cultural studies particularly. For instance, Florian Hoof in his essay attempts to overcome problematic dualisms between representation and technology in media philosophy. He draws on the concept of 'material semiotics' from social scientific approaches to technology's effects. It focuses on matter's relations to other objects, technologies, and so on. Hoof offers his own concept, 'media boundary objects', which addresses the methodological difficulty in determining a scale of study. Hoof writes that 'the question of boundary work, how and under which theoretical premises to scale a relational network and to emphasize specific parts of a network, seems unanswered' (187). His concept extends the relations between media and discourses often expressed through network metaphors, where there is interplay between images and technology, but also where there are nonrelational aspects. Often, indeterminate and external aspects that lie outside the network become significant later on. Hoff's essay is a useful reflection on an important disciplinary issue.

*Media|Matter* is a great start to this promising media philosophy series. But the book's materialist emphasis has its dangers. New materialist cultural theory has been criticised for animist tendencies, investing the whole world with subjectivity (**Slavoj Žižek's criticism**). For those such as **Sara Ahmed**, this potentially risks a dangerous kind of anthropomorphism that renounces important political and feminist concerns and instead fetishises

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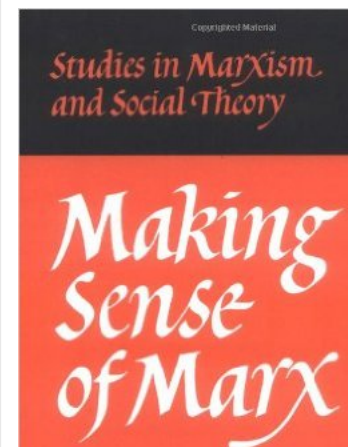
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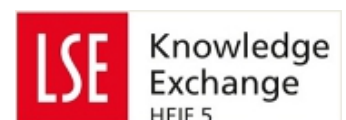
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matter, showing the extent to which the human framework of understanding goes. Indeed, the expansion of the media concept has to be welcomed, but with caution. Taking it too far, understanding everything as media or technology, would be a counterproductive critical move, risking a lapse into metanarrative once more.

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**Niall Flynn** is a PhD candidate at Lincoln School of Film & Media, University of Lincoln. His research offers a critique of ecological and materialist approaches in recent media theory. He has forthcoming publications in *Open Library of Humanities* and *Networking Knowledge*. He welcomes correspondence at [nialljf@gmail.com](mailto:nialljf@gmail.com). [Read more reviews by Niall Flynn](#).



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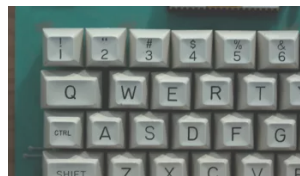


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