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The Sewn-Together Humanities

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is a straightforward one: to step back from the increasing use of assemblage in recent debates and to attempt to take stock of what assemblage thinking offers to humanities. I relate the answer to this question to the title concept of "sewn-together" humanities, which has a tentative and *ad hoc* character. The starting point is the analysis of the video installation realized by Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, entitled *Assemblages*, which relies upon the concept of assemblages proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Assuming that research practices and theories combine assemblages of ideas of both abstract and practical nature, I analyse examples of the application of assemblage thinking and action at the levels of a method, methodology, and onto-epistemology, tracing the goals that humanities achieve by means of this approach to research.

Keywords: assemblage thinking, new humanities, decentred subjectivity, "sewing-together"

Assembling

In the Spring of 2018, the Museum of Art in Łódź (ms1) presented a 3-channel, 62-minute video-installation entitled *Assemblages*. The installation, created in 2010 by Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, was an intriguing summary of an audiovisual research project dedicated to Félix Guattari – a project focusing on the problem of subjectivity that the French philosopher posed anew. As it was the case in Guattari's writings and his psychiatric practices at the experimental clinic La Borde, the researchers entangled the issue of subjectivity with reflections on animism and ecosophy, which informs it with a new meaning. The contributors to the project were numerous, ranging from documentary filmmakers (Fernand Deligny and Renaud Victor) to academics – being friends with Lazzarato – who gave interviews conducted as part of the project (Érik Alliez, Jean-Claude Polack, Barbara Glowaczewski, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Peter Pál Pelbart), to artists (such as Jean-Jacques Lebel), to the psychotherapist Syley Rolnik, and Angolan Capoeira champion Rosângela Castro Araújo.

The paramount aim of the project was to demonstrate the decolonisation of the thinking strategy linked to the concept of a transcendental Western subject

exercising power over the environment – and attaining it by distancing themselves from both the world of objects and, above all, from the natural world. Instead of a centralised, authoritative subject, an assemblage of subjectivity that is not easy to describe, blurred in time and space, appeared in the video-installation. Rejecting the dualistic tensions between culture and nature, psychosis and art, thought and action, the spiritual and the material, science and life practices, while at the same time tapping into cosmological beliefs, the assemblage was formed through flowing sequences of montages. Melitopouos and Lazzarato transformed the assemblage approach that Guattari adopted in his work with his patients into a formula of one's relation to heterogeneous reality, to which John Law, as early as in *After Method*, had given the perverse name of the "method assemblage."[1]

Like Law and Guattari, also Melitopoulos and Lazzarato (following in the French thinker's footsteps), attempted to provide tools to describe decentred subjectivities, taking into account their geographical complexity and diversity. Law believed that this was a task equally challenging to anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and human geography,[2] none of which disciplines deal with what the scholar calls "mess," or relative disorder in global flows, by resorting to conventional methods. Moreover, the conventional notion of a research method manifests itself as increasingly less applicable to these fields of study. In the evoked project, both the assemblage thinking and activity were intended to support not only the decolonisation-oriented thought, but also the decolonising political practices, generally exercised on a micro-scale, and rooted in the realities of life in Brazil. In the process of its making, however, the assemblage would increasingly hint at the suspicion that social sciences and humanities formed in the Western tradition actively contributed to the formation of the colonising thinking, and so the video-installation, complemented by the commentary that Melitopoulos and Lazzarato supplied with it, appeared to be an attempt to likewise decolonise and decentralise the notions of the "method" and of "theory," as well as the social impact of the academic disciplines most actively involved in reporting on reality.

Melitopoulos is a well-known author of video-installations, video-essays, documentaries, and theoretical texts exploring contemporary experiences of migration, anti-capitalist movements, anti-fascist resistance, and anti-psychiatry. Her research goes against the grain of traditional methodology pertinent to the humanities, which emphasises the dominance of interpretations employing narratives. The fact that she works with moving images, and, to a lesser extent, with verbal media, marks only the beginning of a shift. We have already become

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1. John Law, *After Method. Mess in Social Science Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 41.
2. Law, *After Method,* 5.

accustomed to such experiments, owing, among others, to Mieke Bal, whose point of departure was the philosophically rooted notion of inter-subjectivity as applied to the human world, ultimately employed for the purpose of the exploration of the relationships between different forms of narration and the "art of viewing."[3] Uniquely, however, in Melitopoulos's work, moving images and texts (interviews) co-function disregarding syntax, observing no narrative principles, and defying the known concepts of discourse; they frustrate any temptations to exercise semiotic reconstructions and question the rationale of possible suggestions of "deep" meanings. Her works are dense, but not because they are convoluted: they are saturated with information, yet remain non-narrative; they are constructed, but not constructivist; they are real, yet fuelled by non-Western – and non-normative – references to objects and activities that remain beyond our recognition as we view them. Melitopulos's assemblages constitute fascinating, mesmerising spectacles, constructed with the help of the tools of contemporary visual art. Representative instances of this mode of artistic activity, which often belong in the realm of committed, politically engaged art, may be found in contemporary art galleries around the world. The above notwithstanding, the collaboration between Melitopoulos and Lazzarato produced an altogether new effect. To the chaos and disorder, the pleasure and pain of being immersed in the images of people and trees, places and practices, rubbish and water flowing from the screens, the artist added the non-verbal "statements" of the dispersed, yet graspable and personal (which does not necessarily mean human) subjectivities, "sewing" them all together with linguistically sophisticated commentaries of the invited scholars. Their remarks are neither more nor less important than the expressions of non-human subjectivities: they work brilliantly with the images to produce the assemblages referred to in the title of the installation.

In this way, *Assemblages* "grow out of the gallery" and relentlessly expand into philosophy and anthropology, ecosophy and political ecology, humanistic geography and psychiatry. On first viewing, their contents perhaps come closest to the themes addressed by environmental humanities. However, environmental relations (biological, social, mental, technological, aesthetic) overlap in them with the cosmology of animist societies. Environmental humanities will not take the latter into account, seeking inspiration in cultural materialism, new realism, political ecology, cultural sociology, and thus remaining within the realm of sciences. Focusing on diffuse subjectivity, the discipline refrains from proposing the search for post-proto-subjectivity as a path to a new ontology, contradicting the ontology pertinent to the Western civilisation that rests upon the distinctions between the animate and the inanimate, the human and the non-human. In both

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3. Mieke Bal, *Looking in the Art of Viewing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

cases, however, as a result of the assumptions made, the animate world expands. The nature/culture opposition, which, after all, continues to restrain our thinking, is undermined by streams fed by cultural and religious traditions that are different from those of the West, albeit it does manifest itself, for example, in the question: "How must we conserve nature while discovering ourselves?"

Assemblages have been shown in the form of a vertical triptych made up of screens of various sizes, combining images, sounds, and text. The elements of the composition are in constant motion, skipping, flowing downwards, as if yielding to gravity. This movement enforces intense perceptions based on the modality of the senses and actions: seeing, hearing, touching, and reading. However, when confronted with Melitopoulos and Lazzarato's installation, all conventional reading/watching patterns turn out to be inadequate in relation to its matter, proving too rigid, too slow, too linear. It is also impossible to re-narrate the experience to oneself or one's interlocutor after one's visit in the gallery ends. The onto-epistemic concept of the assemblage, activated in the eye-wandering from top to bottom, leads to perceptual events focusing on the central text. Reading it, we return to the question formulated earlier by Law: "What happens when social science tries to describe things that are complex, diffuse and messy?"[4] And we expand it by adding another: "What happens when humanities tries to describe things that are more complex than text, image, movement, and sound? Are they diffuse, messy and fluid?"

Drawn into a stream shimmering with shreds of unreconstructible wholes, we get a sample of the kind of effort that Guattari and, further on, Deleuze require of their readers. A puzzling parallel is revealed between the wandering of the gaze, hypnotically focused on the movement of images, and the problematic reading of philosophical texts that draw readers into the movement of concepts and pictorial metaphors, materiality and non-materiality, hiding "something" for which no satisfactory discursive pattern exists. This difficulty accompanying the reading of Deleuze and Guattari's work has been raised as a fundamental flaw of the assemblage approach in the field of urban studies,[5] as there is no doubt that this mode of communication is about something different than the scientific narrative. It is also difficult to draw parallels with well-known artistic strategies, such as the assemblage techniques of the Surrealists, based on unexpected combinations of matter, the unconscious, dreams, references to psychiatry, automatism, improvisation and, above all, on the recording of what lies beyond the commonly understood reality by means of unique film editing routines. All these strategies

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4. Law, *After Method,* 2.

5. Michael Stroper and Allen J. Scott, "Current Debates in Urban Theory: A Critical Assessment," *Urban Studies* 53, no. 6 (2016).

have in common is the persistent search for alternative orders beyond the limits of the Western culture (Guattari, Melitopoulos) or those surfacing between variants of the culture of the West and emerging in particular historical periods (Surrealists). Or, more precisely, what they share is an onto-epistemology that deceptively aestheticizes the subject's (researcher's) desire to transcend boundaries, the expansion of which within the Western paradigm proves impossible – just as the seemingly omnipresent narrative of the social sciences (and humanities *sensu largo*) becomes impossible due to its colonising nature.

Lazzarato's starting point as a social scientist was similar to Deleuze's. He was interested in the issue of the statement and assemblage expression, the idea which he took over from the work of Deleuze and Guattari.[6] In his commentary on the video-installation, written jointly with Melitopoulos, we read: "The problem of assembling enunciation would no longer be specific to a semiotic register, but would cross over into expressive heterogeneous matter (extra-linguistic, non-human, biological, technological, aesthetic, etc.)."[7] Like Deleuze and Guattari, he has oriented his research towards a critique of neoliberalism, the division of labour and immaterial work in cognitive capitalism, although his books and essays maintain the conventions of the art of argumentation formed on the boundary between sociology and philosophy. His interest in the construction of decentralised subjectivity within contemporary economic and political state practices runs through virtually all of his published work to date. A well-known culmination of this exploration is reflected in the concept of "the man indebted," describing the economy of the subjective production of neoliberal societies.[8] In it, too, Lazzarato draws on the concepts developed by Guattari and Deleuze, this time formulated in *Anti-Oedipus*. Focusing on their view on debt (which refers to Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*), he carries out his critique of capitalism employing many of the concepts introduced by the French philosophers.

His critical analysis of capitalist production is particularly strong in his book *Signs and Machines*,[9] in which he again addresses the issues reported in the assemblage thinking project. He writes, among other things:

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6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1988).

7. Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato*, Assemlages/Asamblaże* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2018), 29.

8. Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).

9. Maurizzio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014).

Now, capitalism reveals a twofold cynicism: the "humanist" cynicism of assigning us individuality and pre-established roles (worker, consumer, unemployed, man/woman, artist, etc.) in which individuals are necessarily alienated; and the "dehumanizing" cynicism of including us in an assemblage that no longer distinguishes between human and non-human, subject and object, or words and things.[10]

In this book, Lazzarato starts from Guattari's observations on the crisis of subjectivity in the Western world, formulated during the latter's seminar "Crise de production de subjectivité," held on April 3rd, 1984. By upholding the thesis of the capitalist production of subjectivity generated like other "goods," he shows how subjectivity is not only deterritorialised, but also directed against itself. For by equating political economy with subjective economy, capitalism proves incapable of building a relationship between the two. Assemblage thinking, in Lazzarato's terms, is therefore not a postulated *modus operandi* in the conditions determining the contemporary state of the world – neither in its criticism of colonising thinking, nor of the capitalist production of signs and subjectivities. It would be more accurate to say that it emerges in the transitional sphere between untenable social and semiotic orders and chaos itself, which, as heir to Marxian critical thought, he cannot accept.

The project by Angela Melipoulos and Maurizzio Lazzarato should therefore first be placed within the framework of new methodological explorations carried out at the intersection of social sciences, humanities and art.[11] This cross-boundary thinking is developed today, among other things, by means of the concepts underlying, and worked out within, arts-based methods. Patricia Leavy, who has devoted several books to them, points out that "Arts-based practices are particularly useful for research projects that aim to *describe, explore, or discover.* Furthermore, these methods are generally attentive to *processes*."[12] They also work well at every stage of sociological research, although particularly attractive proposals concern summarising research process and extending its social impact beyond academia. From this point of view, Melitopoulos and Lazzarato's video-installation can be considered an excellent example of a research report that is not intended to be a conventional report, but neither does it lend itself to being reduced solely to its functioning in the field of art.

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10. Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 13.
11. Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art. Arts-Based Research Practice* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2009).
12. Leavy, *Method Meets Art*, 12.

Art, we should add, is understood in the spirit of Guattari, who seeks in it the most powerful means of enacting certain aspects of "chaosmose."[13] This is possible, among other things, because art, like neuroses and religious experiences, allows an immersion into a space of exploration *below* or *before* the object/subject divide. Leavy, however, in emphasising the importance of combining the sciences and the arts in research procedures, uses a very traditional, genre-based operationalization of it. She draws most readily on the narrative arts in her research. Guattari, on the contrary, looks primarily for inspiration in the animisms of South America and Japan and in neurotic phenomena while questioning culturalist concepts of semiosis. He does not make animism a specific anthropological category, nor does he focus on any particular historical period (of illiterate, ungoverned societies). He derives the unique background for his concept of subjectivity from animistic thinking. "Aspects of polysemic, transindividual, and animistic subjectivity also characterise the world of childhood, of psychosis. Of amorous or political passion, and of artistic creation."[14]

This difference allows Melitopoulos and Lazzarato's project to transcend the assumptions and ambitions of arts-based methods. *Assemblages* do not respond exclusively to the methodological challenges formulated in Law's book, quoted above. On the contrary, they seek a balance between ontology and epistemology while revolutionising the method. Adopting the most straightforward approach, we observe in *Assemblages* an attempt to build a new type of an archive based on assemblage documentation of minority histories inscribed into excerpts from documentary films, film essays, and radio interviews. Emerging from the background of the assemblage is a surprising cartography, on which dominant political geographies can be revised, that is, above all, they experiment with new accounts that form "emancipatory assemblages,"[15] which lay the fundaments for "assemblage geographies."[16]

All this means that assemblage thinking has recently been gaining popularity in different types of research, beyond philosophy, sociology, or theories of visuality. An excellent example of this can be seen in the take-up of the notion of assemblage thinking by human geography and other fields of geographical research seeking

13. Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose. An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Paris: Galilée, 1992).

14. Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, *Asemblages/Asamblaże*, 27.

15. Steve Hinchliffe, *Geographies of Nature: Societies, Environments, Ecologies* (London: Sage, 2007).

16. Paul Robbins and B. Brian Marks, "Assemblage Geographies," in *The Sage Handbook of Environments, Ecologies*, eds. Susan J. Smith, Rachel Pain, John Paul Jones III, and Sallie A. Marston (London: Sage, 2007); Paul Robbins and Brian Marks, *Assemblage Social Geographies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 176–194.

that are more sensitive to the complex condition of social-spatial theory and environmental studies. These include, for example, urban studies. Human geography uses assemblage thinking as a concept, ethos (oriented toward the "instability" of interactions, and the concomitant potential for novelty and spatiotemporal difference[17]), and descriptor (for thinking the relations between stability and transformation in the production of the social[18]). It is construed not so much as a route to a distinct onto-epistemology, as in urban studies, but is located within the "relational turn" as an alternative response to the problematic "relational" thought.[19] The authors of the article "On Assemblages and Geography" list four dimensions in which assemblage and relational thinking converge:

(1) an experimental realism orientated to processes of composition;
(2) a theorisation of the world of relations and that which exceeds a present set of relations;
(3) a rethinking of agency in distributed terms and causality in non-linear, immanent, terms;
(4) and an orientation to the expressive capacity of assembled orders as they are stabilised and change.[20]

In other applications of the concept of assemblage thinking, questions will recur about its relationship to realism, to empirical research, to the issue of agency (engagement) and materiality (critical urban studies), the realism–constructivism impasse, the linear and non-linear models of causality[21] (psychology), and critical learning (urban studies).

Frequently quoted in the latter context, Colin McFarlane describes how assemblage thinking participates in the construction and extension of critical urban theory. He draws his readers' attention to empirical urban research and dense description as a methodological approach that requires a focus on the adventurous processes and practices in which urban life is produced. He links it to the problem of human causality connected and extended to the causality of infrastructures, money and goods. The materiality of the city is not captured in McFarlane's work as a passive background to urban life. Material objects actively shape urban life and help connect it to political action. McFarlane thus sees critical

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17. John Allen and Allan Cochrane, "Assemblages of State Power: Topological Shifts in the Organization of Government and Politics," *Antipode* 42, no. 5 (2010): 1071–1089.

18. Colin McFarlane, "Translocal Assemblages: Space, Power and Social Movements," *Geoforum* 40 (2009): 561–567.

19. Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, and Swanton, "On Assemblages and Geography," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012).

20. Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, and Swanton, "On Assemblages and Geography," 8–37.

21. Rhys Price-Robertson and Cameron Duff, "Realism, Materialism, and the Assemblage: Thinking Psychologically with Manuel DeLanda," *Theory and Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2016): 58–76.

learning as the "distributed assemblage of people, materials and space that is often neither formal nor simply individual."[22] However, opinions on the assemblage approach are divided among specialists in critical urban studies. In particular, the hopes of constructing a new ontology of urbanity based on the notion of the assemblage transferred from the writings of both Deleuze and Guattari, as well as DeLanda and Latour, are questionable. The reconstruction of these three versions of assemblage thinking points to important differences, but at the same time reveals the point of departure for a common worldview, which is substantiated in the research of the following scholars: Latour (ANT, reassembling), McFarlane (learning assemblage), Deleuze, Guattari (agency), DeLanda (assemblage theory), Hardt and Negri (assembling of multiple voices[23]), etc. Assembling emerges from these studies as a method and theory.

Sewing Humanities Together

This paper's purpose, then, is a straightforward one: to step back from the increasing use of the assemblage within social, urban and geographical debates and to attempt to take stock of what assemblage thinking offers humanities. The answer to this question is related to the concept of the "sewn-together humanities" presented in the title, and is tentative, *ad hoc*, and open-ended. I apply it to at least a few practices emerging in the humanities at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. I give it neither a diagnostic nor, still less, a descriptive meaning. On the contrary, I am rather asking about the legitimacy and possibilities of re-formulating some of the goals set by "traditional" humanities. This is still practised and doing well. Traditional meaning of "humanities" divided into disciplines that emerged by the 1960s and were largely the product of the 19th-century drive towards specialised research that underpinned the expert movement.

In contemporary humanist works, however, emphasis is rarely placed on the expansion and deepening of knowledge, accompanied by a refinement of standards of scientism, adherence to prevailing methodologies and the prevailing *epistemé*. Understanding, interpreting, explicating, subjugating and creating representations and rules of expression no longer suffice. Interpretative strategies, which come in many variants, promise less and question more. In explaining the world, humanities, including philosophy, must cooperate with a swarm of new disciplines that navigate between the complexity of expectations and their own paradigms,

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22. Colin McFarlane, *Learning the City. Knowledge and Translocal Assemblage* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2011), 3.

23. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

patterns, and institutional constraints. In fact, the world of statements, images, sounds and texts, immersed in intertextual games centralising the humanities, is invaded by questions coming from outside. These questions are brutally linked to life, environment, action, politics and technology, climate and economics, capitalism or/and neoliberalism, and cannot be ignored if the humanities is willing and able to be useful to societies.

Unfortunately, *ad hoc* and immediate questions are not compatible with the slow narrative of the humanities, which is comfortable with a safe distance from its subject, however broadly it may be conceived. At the same time, they demand the formulation of arguments that are difficult to find in expert conversations and commentaries that would not be reduced to the colloquial circulation of information. Humanists already know that they will not be saved by alliances with art, which escapes "classical" definitions and looks towards political activity and scientific experimentation. Above all, however, the crises shaking the global oecumene are forcing a change of thinking that will involve all sides of the multi-voiced, monstrously multitudinous global chorus that asks about the future of the world. This is where the proposal of assemblage thinking comes in, making it possible to build bridges, while escaping attempts to reduce its application to artistic experiments and scientific generalisations. Straddled between a passion for collecting, sometimes reminiscent of the idea of cabinets of curiosities, and action, emphasising the importance of practices in scientific research, it protects the local, the individual, the peculiar, the marginal, and the rejected. At the same time, it irritates those who seek general rules, methods, and theories that are generally imposed aggressively on a disorderly world. It introduces confusion into the lexicons of the humanities, questioning the meaning and hierarchies of terms and concepts established in long-standing practices. It proposes its own lexicons based on critical thinking.

What would this difference in thinking entail and what are we doing to bring it about? Without deciding on the efficacy of this action, I call it "sewing-together," albeit – as we will discuss in a moment – assemblage thinking is just one of many examples of "sewing-together" currently occurring in the humanities. To be clear, in the present context assemblage thinking is the most interesting. Characteristically, the "sewing-together" began in the last decades of the twentieth century with the rash of prefixes: post-, neo-, re-, de-, etc. – and it has received appropriate criticism. It was accompanied, above all in philosophy and literary studies, by the proliferation of conjunctions and brackets interjecting into concepts and names that multiplied the meanings and contexts of the words thus modified. These practices demonstrated the destabilisation and uncertainty of conceptual language, the lack of certainty in the choice of words for concepts, the enigmatic nature of object references. These conjunctions stopped at the past and the recognised

while taking a cautious step forward, because their adherence to the present, to contemporary life, left everyone unsatisfied and often aroused disbelief. Indeed, sewing the past and the present together is not easy, although, as schematic attempts made in everyday language as well as in political and educational practices demonstrate, they are very necessary. Assemblage thinking, however, does not involve the use of graphic staples, so the practices mentioned do not represent it.

So what to do to move forward? How do we dare think assemblage without losing sight of the humanist tradition which exceeds the individual's perception? Where to look for appropriate forms for such thinking? From whom to learn? All these questions, only to some extent, distinguish the humanities from other fields of knowledge. Among those disciplines that formulate these questions consciously and deliver their proposals, the humanities today seek allies. This primarily leads to the blurring of the boundaries between the humanities and social sciences in the practices of cultural anthropologists (socio-cultural anthropology) and cultural studies (cultural sociology, critical cultural studies) scholars. It also occurs in cultural urban studies and cultural geography. Attempts to administratively force them into the framework of the humanities are met with resistance and opposition. Let us note that the names of these disciplines have already been "sewn together" with elements that do not necessarily refer to the humanities.

Let us leave the problem of "sewing together" disciplines for a moment. An interesting, but revealing difficulty in the practice of "sewing together" is the idea of writing books in the form of dictionaries defining terms that are "hot" at a given moment, and to which researchers representing different disciplines readily refer. I am primarily thinking of books published within the last forty years, such as *Keywords* by Raymond Williams (1976), *Urban Theory* edited by Mark Jayne and Kevin Ward (2017), and *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities* by Iris van der Tuin and Nanny Verhoeff (2022). The latter two place assemblage and assembling among the contemporarily dominant concepts, albeit each derives these terms from different traditions. There is a need both for gathering and coherence.

It could be fruitful to associate the ideas behind these books with the notion of travelling concepts articulated by Mieke Bal[24] – under a number of conditions. A bundle of common assumptions may, of course, be the justification for citing this concept here: the relegation of the study of regularities to the distant background; the focus on what violates regularities rather than on what eludes them; the distrust towards the hard-to-accept universalism of the great systematic theories of the West today; the search for the evidence of the "travelling" nature of reality constructed from practices; the conviction that the study is always an

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24. Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

event (such as, for example, Melitopoulos and Lazzarato's project). To this list of convergences we must also add the withdrawal from endeavours to establish a history of the philosophical or theoretical development of concepts and, perhaps most significantly, the conviction that what we do with concepts in science is subject to pressures exerted upon us by the world around. It is therefore not just a question of coherence in the languages of science, but of reaching back to the very origins of critical reflection and the language's causal relationship to reality. The critical reflection, on the other hand, is less and less pursuing anthropocentric and ethnocentric projects going beyond "traditional" humanities.

Besides, there are more differences. Bal is primarily interested in analysing the causality of the theoretical object organising the work around it. She emphasises evoking the most appropriate concept by the object and the inter-subjective relationship between the object, the concept, and the interpreter. It is the theoretical object that evokes the concept most needed by the researcher and interpreter, and then sets it in motion. It provokes the crossing of boundaries between disciplines, genres, and media. Bal searches for concepts that are relevant to more than one discipline, hesitating whether it is legitimate to posit of transdisciplinary or rather interdisciplinary analytical practices. Thus, concepts such as "a narrative" or "visuality" take on a travelling meaning because they do not function identically in various disciplines. This movement never ends, and concepts may travel in any direction. What concept travelling has in common with assemblage thinking is that the latter seeks to minimise the presence of linear constructions and does not conform to reconstructions of the journey trajectory, postponing the realisation of the goals of the chosen analytical procedures in time. It remains, however, influenced by the narrative duties of humanities.

The epistemology of travelling practiced by Bal tests the causality of concepts towards single, carefully selected theoretical objects, aiming at depth. This is epistemological and political problem: how to produce concepts about the world that would carry critical thought. On the contrary, assemblage thinking strives to encompass all theoretical objects, while the assemblage itself relates back to forms of empiricism that reveal the contingency of arrangements. Deleuze, in the conversation with Parnet, outlined this difference in great detail, without, of course, mentioning the idea of travelling concepts. He writes thus:

> It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a "sympathy." It is

never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.[25]

In Guattari's approach, however, the issue of assemblage speech does not belong exclusively to the semiotic register which Bal navigates. He shows linguistic semiotics, which is a tool for the division between the human and the non-human, as a system of hierarchisation and subordination hidden within the human. Humanities cling to this semiotics not yet ready to embrace the asemantic, agrammatic, and asyntagmatic semiotics discovered by Guattari. Lazzarato and Guattari call it a non-linguistic semiotics: a semiotics pertinent to archaic societies, to the mentally ill, to children, to autistic children, and to artists. Very importantly for assemblage thinking, this semiotics transfers to heterogeneous expressive matter (non-linguistic, non-human, biological, technological, aesthetic, etc.). The question remains whether it can still be called semiotics if it uses signs in which there is no separation between the real and the imaginary, mediated by the symbolic order.

If we return to the aforementioned theoretical books formulated in the form of terminological dictionaries, each of them opens with a reflection leading to an answer to the question: "Why vocabulary?" Williams explains this primarily by the desire to navigate the area in which several disciplines converge, but, in principle, there is no real encounter between them. *Keywords* indicate the availability of the disciplines and thus facilitate their convergence.[26] Williams's point of reference is *Oxford Dictionary*, but he modified the meaning of words, added his own examples, and emphasised the open structure of entries without wishing to give his work the title of "a dictionary" or "a glossary." Above all, he selected terms central to his own cultural studies project based on cultural materialism, developed in his earlier works. He wrote: "The alphabetical listing on which I have finally decided may often seem to obscure this, although the use of cross-references should serve as a reminder of many necessary connections."[27]

Keywords forms what we would call a biography of the first stage in the development of cultural studies. This is why, among other things, this book is read today as an abridgement of his concepts, giving direct access to notions such as capitalism, city, country, fiction, ideology, image, literature, materialism, ordinary, popular, realism, society, theory, tradition, etc. It provides a glimpse into what is hidden in the extended themes of Williams's most important academic monographs, revealing

25. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London, New York: Continnum, 2002), 52.

26. Raymond Williams*, Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), 17.

27. Williams*, Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society,* 25.

the mechanisms of thinking in the both materialist and culturalist perspective. Today's research primarily revisits Williams's pioneering connections between *culture, nature*, and *ecology* in cultural studies. Melitopoulos and Lazzarato's project is an example of such a connection, yet developed in a philosophical perspective different from that of Williams's. Although it does not connect directly with cultural materialism, the materialist concept of subjectivity allows it to meander between the various onto-epistemological implications of this orientation.

Jayne and Ward's selection of texts opens with an alphabetical table of contents comprising 26 entries written by various authors. Most of them, including Ignacio Farías, author of the chapter entitled "Assemblages," are known in the field of urban studies as leading contributors to the recent urban theory. The label "urban theory" encompasses diverse research practices that follow new ideas aspiring to evolve into critical theory. It is the theory, and not the conceptual inventory, that requires some "sewing-together." For it is theory, according to the authors, that allows not only the creation and performance of scientific knowledge, but also determines the impact of this knowledge on life outside the academy.[28] It should be added, however, that urban critical theory extends to disciplines such as anthropology, architecture, cultural studies, economics, environmental studies, geography, history, planning, sociology, psychology, etc. What "sews" them together is, of course, the subject, that is, the city. The largest part of the book is a survey of the possible critical theories of post-industrial, global urban realities. The editors of the book seem to have intended to search for a less obvious links then capitalism, globalization, gentrification, etc. They reached for concepts from the liminal space shared by humanities and social sciences, whose critical potential allows scholars to transcend the thresholds of the academy and form what the editors call "urban assemblage thinking."[29] As a desirable type of critical thinking, however, the assemblage approach immediately met with criticism leveled at it by representatives of other schools of critical thought, especially those originating from Marxism. In his critique of the assemblage approach, Neil Brenner called it "assemblage-theoretical intervention"[30] refusing to admit its theoretical independence and accusing it of eclecticism. He wrote: "In explicitly rejecting concepts of structure in favour of a 'naïve objectivism,' it deprives itself of a key explanatory tool for understanding the socio-spatial 'context of contexts' in which urban spaces and locally embedded social forces are positioned."[31]

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28. Mark Jayne and Kevin Ward, eds., "Introduction," in *Urban Theory. New Critical Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 1.

29. Jayne and Ward, "Introduction," 16.

30. Neil Brenner, David. J. Madden, and David Wachsmuth, "Assemblage Urbanism and the Challenges of Critical Urban Theory," *City* 15, no. 2 (2011): 225–240.

31. Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth, "Assemblage," 225.

The critical position adopted by Brenner, one of the originators of the planetary urbanisation concept, is clearly important – above all for the scholars of cities and urbanisation processes. Moreover, it divides the representatives of cultural urban studies. However, it is worth tracing the discussion that took place between 2011 and 2016 in urban studies to compile a list of accusations that can be levelled not only at assemblage thinking, but also at other forms of "sewing knowledge together." Brenner's argumentation also applies to the third of the previously mentioned books: *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities* by Iris van der Tuin and Nanny Verhoeff. The book's primarily target audience consists of academic humanists, art curators, activists, performers, designers, and artists, who use a set of incoherent, often redefined, terms and neologisms, whose common denominator, supposedly, is their rootedness in both critical and creative thinking. In this book, the authors have tried to develop a set of vocabularies for thinking about socio-cultural practices.

The theme of critical thinking therefore returns once again in a new setting. This time it transpires in the context of the search for "creative methods," in which practice-based research characteristics of the "creative humanities" are of importance.[32] The process of "sewing-together" in this case involves research practices, and practices entering the academy with the expansion of the humanities, such as activism and art, design and curatorship (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato's project is once again a case in point). "At the same time the book aims to plot some coordinates and contours for a present (and future) formation of a new generation of scholars, students, and educators – a generation which we are also already in part"[33] – Iris van der Tuin and Nanna Verhoeff claim. The result of the author's work is a glossary of terms used in the above-mentioned field (academic humanities, curatorship, art activism, design) that is primarily of educational and community interest. The micro-theories that accompany the entries do not even refer to a basic reading list, which is easy to check, for instance, by looking up the term "assembling." They do, however, have the power to build a community of thought, which in a distant future may be based on assemblage thinking.

The "creative humanities" project is reminiscent of the career that "new humanities" have enjoyed in Poland. The "new humanities" owe their popularity primarily to Ryszard Nycz,[34] the leading Polish journal *Teksty Drugie*, and the Institute of Literary Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IBL), the publisher

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32. Iris van der Tuin and Nanna Verhoeff, *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefirld, 2022), ix.

33. Tuin and Verhoeff, *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities*, 1.

34. Ryszard Nycz, "The New Humanities in Poland: A Few Subjective Observations, Conjectures, and Criticisms," trans. David Schauffler. *Er(r)go. Theory–Literature–Culture, Auto/Bio/Graphy* 43, no. 2 (2021): 315–338. Guest-edited by John T. Matteson. https://doi.org/10.31261/

of the New Humanities monograph series. Two conferences dedicated to the "new humanities" were held in 2016; the first of the post-conference issues of *Teksty Drugie* included some of the papers presented at those conferences. In the introduction to the issue, Przemysław Czapliński listed the following lines of research as forming the "new humanities" as a distinctive area: "post-colonial and post-dependency studies, affective studies, object studies, digital humanities, cognitive humanities, gender studies, memory studies, visual culture studies, performatics and the vast spectrum of posthumanities (from *animal studies*, *water studies* or *plant studies* to ecocriticism or Actor-Network Theory)."[35] We could list more of them today or update the labels of the fields already listed.

Czapliński proposed a tangle as the external form of these proliferating directions (New Directions in the Humanities Research Network reports on this reassembling very well), in different variants of the meaning of the term "tangle." Directly, of course, this proposal alludes to *Reassembling the Social*[36] by Bruno Latour; however, Czapliński does not exploit this convergence. Meanwhile, it is Latour who is one of the patrons of assemblage thinking that does not stop at the centrifugal impulse[37] and expands ANT in longing for a hidden order. The tangle, after all, is the realisation or initiation of some pattern inseparable from matter and action. Is the Polish project an example of "sewing humanities together"? More answers to this question can be found in Nycz's paper opening the issue, which carefully reconstructs the connections between the fields of research listed by Czapliński. In his endeavours, however, he does not go as far as the editors of the anthology *The New Humanities Reader*, which is the predecessor of the Polish findings. In the Introduction to the *Reader*, they write as follows: "If the humanities are going to survive, they must be understood in a new way: not as a particular area of knowledge but as the human dimension of *all* knowledge."[38] Sewing the humanities and science together as a condition for the survival of the former, as a common strategy. It exceeds the limits of the assemblage thinking that I adopted at the onset of this text.

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errgo.11711. The original version of the text is: Ryszard Nycz, "Nowa humanistyka w Polsce: kilka bardzo subiektywnych obserwacji, koniektur, refutacji," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2017): 18–40.

35. Przemysław Czapliński, "Sploty" [Tangles], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2017): 9.

36. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

37. DeLanda, adopting a different *modus operandi*, attempts to overcome the same limitations. See Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

38. Richard E. Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer, eds., *The New Humanities Reader* (Wadsworth, International Edition, 2012), xxi.

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"Sewing the humanities together," both as a concept and as a spontaneous research activity, points towards at least three practices. First, it is sewing-together something that has become damaged, torn, disjointed. Then, sewing up becomes, first and foremost, a *repair* carried our both within and across disciplines, affecting the relations between them and securing their mutual respect. It is meant to lead to the preservation of valuable scientific and scholarly achievements, and manifests itself mainly in the field of epistemology. Secondly, sewing-together occurs when, as in a patchwork, we combine interesting elements coming from different disciplines: humanist, social, biological, geographical, etc. Such an activity is accompanied by the hope that these seemingly incongruous fragments, if properly composed, will add up to an original, unique, new object. This way of proceeding is most clearly manifested in the area of methodological exploration. There exists, however, the third type of "sewing-together," which begins with the selection of a dominant element and continues to develop as the latter is supplemented by new elements. This is how new subdisciplines are created, which asymmetrically explore borderlands: human geography, environmental humanities, cultural sociology, etc. It is not difficult to see that the criteria of this division, drawn from everyday activities, do not yield disjointed types of academic practices. This does not mean, however, that they do not lead to specific proposals or that they do not energize new currents of research, nourishing contemporary humanities. The aims of these scholarly practices are selfish (to survive as academic humanities), altruistic (to save the world as we know it), and critical (to change the human thought) at the same time.

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