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Incorporeal Conditions: Elizabeth Grosz's Ontoethics

Elizabeth Grosz (2017): The Incorporeal. Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism. New York: Columbia University Press (€31.99, 322 pp.)

As a leading theorist in feminist body theory and feminist materialisms, Elizabeth Grosz's turn to the ethics and politics of the incorporeal in her new book *The Incorporeal. Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (2017) may surprise many of her dedicated readers and followers. However, the continued concern with ethics and politics provides the connective tissue among her previous publications, all the way back to the foundational volume of feminist theory *Volatile Bodies*, published in 1993. Grosz's multifaceted philosophical works have explored Darwinism and evolutionary theory, time and space, embodiment and materiality with a focus on gendered and sexed relations that has remained steadily political and ethical. In that sense, *The Incorporeal* is perhaps more surprising for its lack of explicit engagement with gendered and sexed experience than for its interest in what Grosz terms the "incorporeal conditions" of corporeal and material life. The author herself admits in the introduction that the themes she addresses throughout *The Incorporeal* are only tangentially relevant for feminist thought, although I would argue that few issues are more topical for women's and gender studies today than thinking through the ways the material and the immaterial, as mutually constitutive forces, structure our ethical and political relations.

One of Grosz's concerns is that materialism has verged on a reductive monism that ignores the participation of incorporeal and immaterial forces in the shaping of the world we live in. Speaking of *extramaterialism* as the presence of "ideality, conceptuality, meaning, or orientation", Grosz defines the incorporeal as "the subsistence of the ideal *in* the material or corporeal" (5), and is quick to clarify that her project is not an antimaterialist one, but rather "an attempt to produce a more complex, more wide-ranging understanding not only of materiality but the framing conditions of materiality that cannot themselves be material" (5). Throughout the book, Grosz remains committed to exploring this "entwinement of the orders of materiality and ideality" while avoiding falling into the culprits of classic dualist or monist models. The ideality of the incorporeal becomes then the necessary condition for thought to emerge as a corporeal, material process, a distinct yet inseparable plane. For Grosz, the monist conflation of the ideal and the material realms remains just as unsatisfying as the dualist foundational schism between matter and form, body and thought.

One of the ways Grosz disrupts these monist tendencies is by considering futurity and becoming, or the orientation towards the future and how it is conceived and actualized in the present moment. Futurity, by lacking an immediate material form, allows Grosz to disentangle the ethics and politics of her ontological analysis from a reductive monist materiality. In its place, futurity and becoming encapsulate how politics and ethics shape the world we live in, as the

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author articulates the incorporeal and the immaterial as forces that participate in the commonality of our being in the world and in the collective shaping of future becomings.

Throughout the six chapters of *The Incorporeal,* Grosz traces a lineage of Western thought addressing the incorporeal and how materiality "exceeds materialism" via a philosophical genealogy she describes as "erratic," clarifying from the start that she is not "undertaking an analysis of a coherent history" but rather looking for turning points and for the "strongest and clearest expression" of what she provisionally terms "the incorporeal"(4-5). Encompassing a thorough engagement with the works of Spinoza on substance, Nietzsche on *amor fati*, Deleuze and Guattari on immanence, Simondon on the preindividual and Ruyer on autoaffection, the book tracks this strand of thought all the way back to the Greek and Roman Stoics, for whom matter necessarily required extramaterial conditions through which it is framed, thought, and articulated.

Searching for ways to think materiality and ideality together, Grosz begins by engaging with the Stoics in Chapter One and their attempt to bring together an understanding of the world beyond human experience with "an ethics of existence and an art of living well, beyond received accounts of morality" (6). In Chapter Two, she turns to Spinoza's monism to look into how human and nonhuman affective connections with the world come to shape an ontoethics actualized in relations that either enhance or diminish the striving to persevere, or what Spinoza calls *conatus*. In Chapter Three, Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati,* the love of fate, propels Grosz to reconsider the energetic forces at work in the development of an affirmative ethics where the material world, along with its immaterial underpinnings, orients all life forms towards their creative fulfillment. In Chapter Four, Grosz tackles incorporeality via Deleuzian thought, both in his collaborations with Guattari and in his single authored books, placing it at the core of her philosophical genealogy of "the impossible division between the material and the immaterial" (131). For Grosz, the "quasi-concept" of the plane of immanence, which Deleuze and Guattari introduce in *A Thousand Plateaus* and further develop in *What is Philosophy?,* becomes crucial for elaborating the incorporeality she is concerned with, a conceptual corporeality populated by concepts, understood as the "philosophical elementary particle" (142), emerging historically but requiring no material formation to exist. Finally, in Chapters Five and Six, Grosz departs from household names in Western philosophy and contemporary critical theory to consider the contributions of two lesser known authors: Gilbert Simondon, whose ideas on individuation provide insight into how ideality and incorporeality might function across biological processes like ontogenesis, or psychological ones like the individuation of the subject; and Raymond Ruyer, a philosopher of science whose work focuses on the movement towards finality that marks "every mode of materiality with a sense, direction or orientation that we can understand as ideal" (210), whereby even the most elementary particles are always already immersed in and capable of generating ideality.

I would have liked to see Grosz formulate in more detail how the incorporeal might function not only as the *condition* of the corporeal, but how materiality

also shapes and provides the conditions for incorporeal events and structures. Managing to avoid either a monist or a dualist impulse, Grosz demonstrates how matter and form may jointly provide the ontological conditions for the development of human and nonhuman consciousness, and comes remarkably close to demonstrating how this oddity may occur, but seems to me on several occasions to give primacy to the incorporeal conditions underlying the material. In my view, the incorporeal and the corporeal are mutually constitutive forces that cannot be reduced to one or another, nor kept radically separate, and this constant conjoining of still distinguishable realms is what I understand to be politically and ethically productive for analyzing power relations within new materialist ontologies. Grosz makes a substantial contribution to rethinking how the incorporeal participates in our material, corporeal lives, and *The Incorporeal* makes for a riveting and rewarding read – no doubt a game changer for the field of new materialisms and material ontologies.