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Things That Matter. Agency and Performativity

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Abstract. In contemporary human and social sciences, it has become almost a commonplace to attribute to objects and artefacts the features of personhood and subjectivity. In the last decades, significant attempts have been made, in different disciplines, to show how things and material realities have the power to act upon the world and to transform human cognition as well as social processes. In order to describe the transformative power of things, scholars have then recurred to the semantic sphere of action and will, to stop seeing agency anthropocentrically as a solely human property, by recognizing to inanimate entities, if not intention and desire, at least the role of social «agents» or «actors». By focusing on the recourse to the notion of «agency», I will single out some of the internal tensions that still inhabit this scientific trend, and, by drawing on the notion of «performativity», introduced by J.L. Austin and developed by Judith Butler, I will suggest a way to develop further the entanglement between material culture and the construction of identity.

Keywords. Agency, performativity, animism, anti-anthropocentrism, Judith Butler.

1. WHAT THINGS DO (TO US)

In contemporary anthropology and more in general in human and social sciences, it has become almost a commonplace to attribute to objects and artefacts the characteristics of personhood and subjectivity. After all, it is not just in ancestral beliefs and apotropaic rituals that things are addressed as being inhabited by invisible spirits, even in our contemporary technologized culture, we often find ourselves acting and relating to objects – especially props and devices we rely on – as though they were animated. Interrelated to our cultural and social structure, things cannot be understood merely as commodities, as properties of the person, or, as instruments of social exchange, they also mediate social agency and have themselves a social life (Appadurai [1986]). Inanimate objects appear to be endowed with a life of their own, to have a certain ability to act, or, at least, a «secondary agency» (Gell [1992], [1998]). In the last decades, many scholars have insisted on how, in different cultures, things can be perceived as living and animated beings (Severi

[2017]), on the power of human artefacts not just to reflect, but to influence and even engender anthropological and epistemological processes (Freedberg [1989]; Gell [1998]; Elkins [1996]; Malafouris, Renfrew [2010]; Coolidge, Wynn [2016]), and on how non-humans in general can act and participate in the construction of social systems (Latour, Woolgar [1986]; Latour [1991], [1993], [2005]).

Significant attempts have been made to show the entanglement between symbolic cultural practices and materiality, and to demonstrate how objects, technological artefacts and more in general material entities, should never be considered as passive and determinate products of a culture, since they exist only in relation to the intermingling of bodies and society that make them possible and, that, at the same time, they make possible. Things – and especially that particular classes of things that are artworks and technological artefacts – have the power to act upon the world and to transform human cognition, ultimately affecting *who we are* and playing a fundamental role in *how we become ourselves*.

Such an understanding of the assemblages of elements and people, in a transcultural perspective, radically puts into question the way Western thought conceived its own culture and beliefs, its uniqueness and specificity, the way of approaching alterity and subjectivity, or, to put it in a nutshell, describing the fundamental overlapping of nature and culture that characterises the fact of being human.

This scientific trend in the humanities is part of a broader theoretical trajectory that implies the double attempt of accounting for the interactions between humans and things in an anti-anthropocentric or anti-narcissistic way – although anthropocentrism be justified on the basis of the human being's «impropriety», i.e. by relying upon the absence, finitude and lack of being [*manque-à-être*] of the human (de Castro [2009]: 44) – , and, at the same time, developing further the permanent exercise in the decolonization of thought, major concern in contemporary anthropology and global biopolitics. Thus, the effort of describing

the interactions between humans and things in a non-anthropocentric way is driven by the effort to undermine the ontological partitions of our intellectual tradition, namely the dichotomies that oppose nature and culture, subject and object, and especially «humanity» from the «environment» (Ingold [2000]), in search for a different ontology, one that be able to undo, to decentralise or to redesign such dualisms.

For instance, we could reformulate this claim by taking up Philippe Descola's partition of human ontologies and respective ontographies – in which the French anthropologist distinguishes between four different ways of identifying the entities in the world, and forming relations with them, mainly depending on how humans attribute to beings the characters of «interiority» and «physicality» (animism, naturalism, totemism, analogism) (Descola [2005]: 122). In this perspective, what is at stake in the development of the theoretical pattern hitherto presented is the attempt to overcome the dominant tendency of (Euro-American and ethnocentric) «naturalism», with the ultimate goal of undoing the nature-culture binary opposition.

Such a discussion of material animation and anthropomorphism brings about the idea that non-human entities too can be seen as «actors» (Latour [1993]), for they not just incline human thoughts and desires, but rather «interact» with them and do realise «acts» (Bredenkamp [2007], Manovich [2002]). In order to restore this dimension, for a long time largely neglected as regards inanimate beings, scholars have then recurred to the semantic sphere of action and will. The redefinition of the capacity of things, of their transformative power, has been carried out especially through the notion of «agency» (Freedberg [1989]; Gell [1998]; Ingold [2006]; Severi [2017]), aimed at overcoming too narrow a separation between (active) subjects and (passive) objects, by recognizing to inanimate entities, if not intention and desire, at least the features of social «agents».

Now, if we examine more closely the theoretical trajectory that underpins multifarious contemporary scientific endeavours, in fields as diverse as ethnography and computer science, art his-

tory and cognitive archaeology, it appears to be also hindered by certain inherent risks and flaws. In particular, I shall emphasize two opposite problematic outcomes: on the one hand, the risk that the fact of recognizing to things and inanimate entities transformative powers and even the constitutive features of animation and personhood, may result in an empathic *projection* of human properties and faculties on them, in a sort of «communicating vessels» process occurring between subjects and objects or the environment (see Pinotti [2011]; Griffero [2014]). Letting appear imaginary or metaphorical affordances, this one-way movement would leave the primacy of human subjects unchanged, remaining ultimately attached to an anthropocentric view. On the other hand, speaking of agency of things or inorganic entities would entail the risk of accomplishing a simple *inversion* of the two polarities by turning the relationship between objects and subjects upside-down. Such an approach would change Western anthropocentrism into an animism (or panpsychism), accomplishing a monistic turn only in appearance, and ultimately keeping the dualism intact by simply reversing the terms of the relation.

In this regard, relying on the literature devoted to the point at issue, I shall contend that, instead of preaching the abolition of the borders that separate persons and things «by bending every line of division into an infinitely complex curve», we shall rather focus on «folding and thickening them, diffracting and rendering them iridescent» (de Castro [2009]: 45). In what follows, instead of seeking to erase the contours between the two orders or variations of being – humans and non-humans, animate and inanimate – I will try to formulate a way of thinking of the entanglement between material culture and the construction of identity.

Each of the aforementioned approaches, deriving from and developed within multiple disciplinary areas, should deserve an in-depth analysis, that is beyond the scope of this paper. In order to investigate these questions, I will focus in particular on the recourse to the notion of «agency» – as

referred to things and inanimate entities and not to humans¹ – or to the category of «interactivity», as they are particularly symptomatic of the internal tensions that still inhabits the extremely vast and complex question of how things and inanimate entities can exert power on us by influencing our behaviour, our beliefs and intersubjective relationships, and more radically of how they take part in the construction of our bodily functions, cognitive abilities and consciousness.

I will try developing further and overcoming some of the theoretical challenges raised by the term of *agency* and the constellation of its semantic variations (composed by *actor*, *act*, *interactivity*) by drawing on the notion of *performativity*. After situating this concept, as regards its philosophical history and plural theoretical context, with particular reference to the work of J.L. Austin and to Judith Butler's further elaboration, I will single out some of the most relevant aspects for the point at issue, to argue that the notion of performativity would allow us to tackle some of the problems outlined above, and especially the unsolved dichotomy between activity and passivity.

2. ANTI-ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND ANIMISM. THE AGENCY OF THINGS AND MATTER

As I suggested, in contemporary social and human sciences it is possible to assess a vigorous trend that can be described as a propensity to emphasize the capacity of inanimate beings to do things, to act upon the world, triggering social and cultural processes. While it is common sense to agree that agency should be understood as an exclusively human subjective experience, in the last few decades, a consistent body of works geared to challenge the dualism inherent in this conception, and to stop seeing agency anthropocentrically as a solely human property.

¹ Here I will not take into account the agency-structure dichotomy developed in sociology. For an analytic review of the notion as regards human agency see Emirbayer, Mische [1998].

Such an epistemological shift has also been driven by the necessity to deal with software or robotic agents, and, more recently, with artificial intelligence, raising both ethical and theoretical problems as regards the kind of action and responsibility that can be recognized – socially, philosophically, but also legally – to those entities. Nevertheless, the capacity of acting and incline human actions can be extended, and not just limited to artefacts that are specifically designed to be human-like agents – such as robots – or to embody anthropomorphic features – such as statues, puppets or dolls, for instance.

Both in anthropology and archaeology, but also across multifarious disciplines, including computer science, philosophy, cognitive science, and sociology, agency has become something of a buzzword, even though, at the same time, this notion still lacks of a systematic theorization (see Dobres, Robb [2000]; Knappett, Malafouris [2008]).

The tendency to consider agency as a broader situated process in which material culture is entangled, by opposing a human-centred view, can be traced back in the history of social science, especially starting from the influence of ethnographic explorations, such as Marcel Mauss' seminal study on *The Gift* (1925), that significantly prompted researchers to decentralise Western-oriented anthropological conceptions, by getting in touch with cultures that are characterised by a greater fluidity of the boundaries between persons and things, and their capacity to produce social consequences as well as to embody social agency.

In a way, such theoretical movement can also be connected to Leroi-Gourhan's approach to technics, making no essential distinction between the tool as technical organ and the organ as bodily element. For the author of *Gesture and Speech*, a technical instrument, such as a stone tool, emerges from the sensible matter in the same way as the hand, insofar as they both are a «secretion of the body and the brain» (Leroi-Gourhan [1964]: 132). In so doing, Leroi-Gourhan implicitly establishes a fundamental continuity between the organic and the inorganic, between our living body and its

technical prostheses, inseparable from the development and historical evolution of the living body.

However, it has been primarily in the last two decades that «the idea of decentralised agency has gained momentum across the social sciences» (Knappett, Malafouris [2008]: XI). From the mid-1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, archaeology and anthropology witnessed the emergence of a *material cultural turn* (Hicks [2010]), catalysed by works such as Ian Hodder's *Symbols in Action: ethnoarchaeological studies of material culture* (1982), Daniel Miller's *Artefacts as Categories* (1985) and *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987). Combining ethnoarchaeology² with structuralist approaches to the interpretation of symbols and categories, these works laid the foundations for the vast and interdisciplinary field of *material culture studies*³. Rather than simply reflecting cultures as passive by-products of social life, objects were considered in their social implications, in that they are actively and meaningfully used in and, thus, able to mediate social relations and embody social symbolism, an approach that had been later extended in an archaeological approach to present phenomena, extending anthropological ideas into the modern world and especially the culture of consumption.

Taking on this interdisciplinary trend, different studies have called for a new focusing upon things, placing the objects in the centre of culture theory and implying a movement of extension or distribution of human social agency. In this regard, particular attention must be drawn to the great influence of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Callon [1986]; Law [1987]; Latour [1994], [2005]). Conceptualizing agency as variously distributed and possessed in relational networks of persons and things, ANT approach posits a symmetrical participation of human and non-human agents, without accepting any primacy of human

² That is, the comparative archaeological study of contemporary human societies to inform the archaeological explanation of the past.

³ See also the *Journal of Material Culture* (UCL), founded in 1996.

actors – individual or collective – over non-human actors, as they equally are the products or effects of networks. For an entity to be an «actor» in this sense it is not required to have intentions nor mental states, but to be able to perform actions as a kind of behaviour. Therefore, in this perspective, no distinctions between human and non-human entities can be sustained in terms of agency.

Developed further within different methodological approaches, the notion of «agency» has been predominantly informed by Alfred Gell's 1998 *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, largely influenced by ANT, although the British anthropologist does not directly refer to Michel Callon and Bruno Latour's work (Callon [1986]; Latour [1987]). In his posthumously published volume, Gell shows how art objects embody complex intentionalities and can play an extensive role in shaping social agency: an artwork can be seen not just as a locus of agency, and a means through which the agency of others may affect the subject, but it is also the locus of an «'autonomous' agency of its own» (Gell [1998]: 18). Yet, concerned about clarifying his position as regards the intentional nature of agency, Gell establishes a distinction between «primary» agents, that is, «intentional beings who are categorically distinguished from “mere” things or artefacts», and «secondary» agents, «through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective» (Gell [1998]: 20). Despite this classification, the agency attributed to inanimate beings shall not be understood metaphorically as a manner of speaking⁴: what Gell hints at is the possibility to think of agency as «relational and context-dependent» (Gell [1998]: 22), namely the result of a broader interaction of subjects and things, as both an extension of the agency of the subjects and as «embodiment

of the *power or capacity to will their use*» (Gell [1998]: 23). But, unlike ANT, Gell's argument did not aim to extend agency to non-humans, and, instead, retained humans as the proper object of enquiry for anthropology, suggesting that objects could be deployed by social actors as «indexes» of human agency, his perspective remaining ultimately anthropocentric. As I indicated above, despite defining things as «social agents», such an approach risks to reduce the account of the animation of things to a mere *projection* of human properties and faculties on them, without completely accomplishing an ontological turn.

Since then, in the wake of these seminal works and ground-breaking theories, many disciplines have embraced a similar turn, or have developed parallel contributions that can be attributed to the same theoretical trajectory, that has been variously described as a materialist, animist, object or «thingly» turn (Verbeek [2005]).

Some prominent fields in cognitive science and philosophy have sought to outline a new model in the conception of self, and to redefine the boundaries of the mind, not only by seeing cognition as an embodied and socially embedded process, but also including the role of the material world for the development of consciousness, so establishing a more loose distinction between the individual and the environment, that entails novel ways to understand the agency of artefacts (Hutchins [1995]; Kirsh [1995]; Clark [1997]; Norman [1988]).

In particular, the theory of the *extended mind*, opposing at the same time the classic internalist model of consciousness – according to which cognitive contents depend solely on the individual's intrinsic properties – and a pure externalist conception – considering that contents of mental states are conditioned also by external and historical elements, in relation to which consciousness is passive – , proposes to think of objects and artefacts in the environment as being themselves integral parts of consciousness – thus supporting a form of *active externalism* (Clark [1997], [1999], [2001], [2003]). Discussing the idea of a primacy of the brain over the extended body, in the mate-

⁴ «In speaking of artefacts as “secondary agents” I am referring to the fact that the origination and manifestation of agency takes place in a milieu which consists (in large part) of artefacts, and that agents, thus, ‘are’ and do not merely ‘use’ the artefacts that connect them to social others», Gell [1998]: 21.

rial mechanisms of cognition, the *extended mind* approach argues that the environment can drive and also partially constitute cognitive processes (see also Clark and Chalmers [1998]; see also Noë, [2004], [2006]). Then, cognitive processes must be understood as including not only the human body, but also objects and human artefacts, which count as «external vehicles» of cognition, that is, «a part of the world [that] functions as a process which, were it done in the head, we would have no hesitation in recognizing as part of the cognitive process» (Clark and Chalmers [1998]: 8).

Other approaches, mainly grounded and revolving around the field of British anthropology and archaeology, stems from the same scientific material-oriented attitude, and aim to investigate the symbolic power of objects and their impact on human social relations. This view underlies, for instance, *material engagement theory* (Malafouris, Renfrew [2010]; Malafouris [2013]; Parisi [2019]), that carries out an exploration of the relationship between humans and the material world, by focusing upon the use and the status of material objects, in an attempt to join the physical and conceptual aspects of materiality. This approach suggests to conceive «material agency» not just as an alternative to human agency, but to think of it as a relational situated process, also emphasizing the role of archaeology in raising a «wake-up call» for social scientists to consider agency non-anthropocentrically (Knappett, Malafouris [2008]: XII).

A somehow parallel movement underpinned the recent developments in the domain of picture theory and visual culture studies, concerned by a radical epistemological turn – the so-called *iconic* (*ikonische Wende*, Boehm [1994]) or *pictorial turn* (Mitchell [1992], [1995], Burda, Maar [2004]; Paic, Purgar [2016]) – inaugurated, both in the Anglo-Saxon and in the European context, by scholars who sought to reverse the linguistic paradigm that dominated the study of art and more in general of iconic contents, to lay the foundations for an intrinsic and autonomous logic inherent in images. In this context, it took shape and spread the idea that images not only have an impact on the beholder who observes them, but that they

are able to transform them (triggering love, hate, desire or fear) and to act upon the world. In different ways, scholars have sought to highlight the capacity of images to move and to influence human reactions (Elkins [2005]), but also to *stare back* at us (Elkins [1996]; Didi-Huberman [1999]; Boehm [1994]), to perform *acts* (Bredenkamp [2007]), and, thus, tried to outline the specific traits of the agency of images: their *powers* (Freedberg [1989]; Bakewell [1998]; Griffero, Di Monte [2008]), their peculiar modes of *presence* (Gumbrecht [2003]; Van Eck [2015]), and even their *desires* (Mitchell [2006]). Contributions in different fields of image studies have, then, come to share the same effort, affirming the need to no longer classify images as exclusively visual objects of an anthropocentric and subject-centered vision (Sobchack [1991]), but to see them as living beings, «marked with all the stigmata of personhood» and intentionality (Mitchell [1996]: 72).

As Arjun Appadurai argued, in his influential edited collection, the very idea of a social life of things – but also the idea of a «desire» of pictures and that of a «material agency» – requires a degree of «methodological fetishism», or, shall we say «animism» (Perniola [2004]; Harvey [2013]), for «even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with meaning, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context» (Appadurai [1986]: 5).

The different approaches surveyed above – that could be extended to other scientific fields and domains – converge in the attempt to shed light on the intertwined nature of human and material life and to question the a priori distinction between human and non-human actors, between humans and objects or things⁵. Returning our attention to the things themselves by illuminating the concrete, historical circulation of things, all those endeavours have taken on and reformulated the idea of an agency of things, but they have seldom developed systematic analysis of this notion,

⁵ About the distinction between objects and things see Ingold [2013].

being more concerned with understanding agency as a situated process rather than debating what is agency and what or who is an agent.

Now, we can first notice that, by encompassing manifold scientific domains, the notion of agency has come to cover a very broad spectrum, ranging from the capacity to influence human social agency, to affect the construction of social systems, on to shaping human consciousness and identity, as well as informing the structure of the brain. To circumscribe our analysis from a philosophical point of view, developing it beyond the specific goals with which the disciplines mentioned above are concerned, we can wonder whether this concept – which has the merit of having called the attention on the necessity to deconstruct a certain anthropocentrism and to set up a decolonization of thought – , actually succeeds in moving away from the dualism it aims to overcome (subjects/objects, nature/culture, activity/passivity, etc.), a risk that I evoked at the beginning of this article, hinting at the possibility of accomplishing a simple projection of human agency over the matter. At the same time, another question arises: is the notion of agency effective in order to bridge over causalist way of thinking, or does it risk to restore a new form of determinism, ending up in a simple inversion of the roles, through the attribution of Durkheimian conception of social agency to objects and inanimate entities? In the perspective of social ontology, this would produce a mere shift from the classic opposition between human agency and social structure to the opposition between human agency and material agency.

Thus far, the concept of agency, as referred to things and inanimate entities, has been contested mainly on the basis of an anthropocentric perspective, to the extent that agency, in the proper sense of the word, is a property of human beings: being coterminous with intentionality, agency has been understood as an attribute of the human individuals, «the only true agents in history» (Giddens and Pierson [1998]: 89). But, for the same and opposite reasons, the notion of agency poses problems also in the attempt to show the permeability of boundaries between humans and

non-humans and to demonstrate how subjects and objects are emergent. In fact, it inherits contradictions and tensions of classical sociological agency-structure dichotomy – which distinguishes subjects who act from the structure in which that action plays itself out – , that sociology has repeatedly tried to mitigate (see Giddens [1984]), moving away from axiological or ontological hierarchical oppositions.

Even from an etymological point of view, the term «agency» from the Latin «àgere», «to do», «to act», essentially linked to the paradigm of action, still implies the reference to the binary opposition between passivity and activity. Hence, the use of this notion, coming from the root *ag-*, connected to the idea of «moving», does not completely solve, but ends up simply postponing the problem of establishing a prime mover of the action, by displacing it, as I suggested above, from the subject to the object, by reversing the opposite attributes of active and passive, which still entails the understanding of the implied notions of nature and culture as a polarity. As a result, the validity of this materialist anti-anthropocentric approach is jeopardized in some respects by a problematic tendency to determinism, that prevents it from successfully developing a non-hierarchical relation between human and non-human entities.

To account for the emergence of world as assemblage of human beings and things, of meaning and matter, we shall illuminate, at the same time, how things act upon the world and how we enact knowledge. As Dan Hicks argues – referring to the disciplinary specific stakes of anthropology and archaeology – to show that things are not just expression or reflection of meaning, but rather production of meaning and action, we should be able to think of things *both as events and effects*. Inspired especially by current thinking in historical archaeology, Hicks suggests, on the one hand, to pay equal attention to the unexpected, apparently non-coherent but far from insignificant changes of which life histories of things at any scale consist of, and, on the other hand, to incorporate the material practices of the researchers as

an object of enquiry in the account of material culture, that is to include the production of theory in the account of things (Hicks [2010]: 81-87).

Taking the cue from this insight (thinking of things both as *events* and *effects*), and considering it beyond the intradisciplinary debate in which it is embedded, I aim to take it a step further and think through the questions raised by the notion of agency by drawing on the concept of performativity.

3. PERFORMATIVITY AND THE TEMPORALITY OF IDENTITY

The notion of performativity has to be traced back to J.L. Austin's speech act theory (1975). In his study of ordinary language, the philosopher introduced the term «performative» to define a new category of utterances that cannot be said to be either true or false, since, instead of simply describing reality, they rather *act* upon it. In speech acts and circumstances such as promising, swearing, betting, or the words pronounced in performing a marriage ceremony, the very fact of uttering the sentence *is* «the performing the action» (Austin [1975]: 6). The uttering of the sentence does not *cause* the action in question, but *constitutes* the act of doing itself. In contrast to the logical positivists' focus on the verifiability of statements, Austin's performatives are addressed as they are not constative statements, but express the power of language to effect change in the world, to «do things with words», their successful outcome depending on a number of conditions (*felicity conditions*) that must be met for the utterance to be effective.

In the further elaboration of his theory, Austin rather focussed on the circumstances and conditions that must be provided in order to issue an utterance, and ended up discarding the original distinction between performatives and statements, in favour of a terminology able to describe three different dimensions of speech acts: *locutionary* (the fact of performing a meaningful utterance), *illocutionary* (the communicative intention of an

utterance), and *perlocutionary* (the effect of the locutionary and illocutionary act).

Thus, having been abandoned by Austin in his speech act theory, the term «performative» was taken up and developed in multiple directions, that extended its domain of application far beyond its authentic Austinian meaning, sometimes eventually betraying or diverting its original scope. The notion of performativity has been articulated further and reformulated not only in linguistics and philosophy (see for instance: Searle [1969]; Benveniste [1971]; Derrida [1988]; Lyotard [1979]), but has been transferred within various disciplinary fields, as different as anthropology, economics, gender studies, and law (see for instance: MacKenzie [2006]; MacKenzie et al. [2007]; Appadurai [2015]). In recent years, it has become an extremely productive theoretical tool used in various disciplinary contexts, often overlapping the domain of *performance studies* (Schechner [2002], [2005]; Féral [2013]; Cappelletto [2013]).

Notably, Judith Butler has delved into this direction of research, pushing further her analysis so as to embrace the question of identity. She situates the notion of performativity at the very core of her reflection on gender and her conception of the subject. Butler's approach of performativity draws on Austin's formulation of speech act theory – not without assuming Derrida's critique and interpretation (1972) –, and combines it with the notion of *performance*, deriving from theatre studies and performing arts.

For Butler, it's the very identity of the subject to be *performative*, meaning that the subject is involved in a movement of continuous construction and reconstruction of their identity, that relies on internal mechanisms as much as on the relationship with others, with the social and intersubjective dimension, in terms of gender, race, culture, and so on. It should be highlighted that, by extending this notion to the process that underpins the formation of subjectivity as such, Butler's account significantly includes in performativity not only speech acts, but every form of *bodily discourse*, and even hints at something like a dis-

course of the *matter*, as it contributes to enable and construct identity (Butler [1993]: 7).

The performative theory of gender elaborated by Butler (Butler [1988], [1990], [1993]), developed in the wake of phenomenology, psychoanalysis as well as Foucault's research on the history of sexuality, stems from the feminist debate of the 1980s and 1990s, and aims to describe how the categories of gender and «sex» are socially and culturally constructed, through the social linguistic and bodily dimension.

Deconstructing the idea of gender identity as normality and as the inner (already given) core of the individual, Butler aims to lay bare the normative and historically determined process that allows its fabrication. Gender is not a way of being, but always a doing: it is inseparable from the subject's and society's performing of certain acts and adhering to discursive practices, that conform to a gender norm. Thus, it is the constant reiteration of those performances throughout the course of one's life that constitutes and constantly reinscribes the subject as gendered (Butler [1990]: 25).

Hence, performatives are reinterpreted by the philosopher as the forms of linguistic and embodied behaviour that are «inserted in a citational chain» of conducts, they play as forms of constant interpellation of the subject, that are imposed to them and that the subject is called to re-enact to become socially intelligible as a sexed or gendered individual. In this respect, the dimension of citation and re-iterability of the performative – already emphasized by Austin and particularly by Derrida – are key here, for every speech or bodily act is involved in a temporality that both «precede[s] and exceed[s] the momentary occasion of its enunciation.» (Butler [2015]: 176).

According to Butler, there is not a «real» or primary gender identity that has to be discovered under or beyond gendered conducts that are informed by the dispositive of power. There is no «inner» or «authentic» sexual identity, because identity is itself performative, it is an illusory fabrication manufactured through corporeal signs and discursive means, and so it is every gendered

gesture, act or conduct that concurs to construct it. Gender is what emerges through the reiteration of such performances, not in the sense of a simple assumption of a role to be played, but as a repetition that is «at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established», functioning at the same time as «the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation» (Butler [1990]: 178).

Therefore, to affirm that gender is performative suggests that gender identity it is not separable from its manifestations, this is to say that «it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality» (Butler [1990]: 173). In other words, there is not a «self» that pre-exists the gendered self: the self constitutes through the reiteration and sedimentation of gender performances in the contexts of existing norms, repeatedly performed by others. Thus, for instance, drag performances show, through a parody of gender attributes and stereotypes, the performative nature of gender: in imitating gender, drag, cross-dressing and other stylizations of gender identities implicitly reveal that gender has an imitative structure and depends upon historically determined norms (Butler [1990]: 174-175). In those cultural practices the parody of gender identity becomes a parody of the very idea of an original or primary gender identity. The original is always derived, it reveals to be a copy, a mythical ideal that can never be completely embodied, *never given apart from its contingent articulations*. On the contrary, if we can talk of gender identity, identity here should be understood as «an imitation without an origin» (Butler [1990]: 175), an expression without a pre-existing meaning, a construction without a preliminary foundation.

Through her analysis of gender, Butler comes to put into question the structure of institution and origin, trying to conceive identity not as a stable locus of agency, but as the temporal becoming of a groundless ground. To borrow Merleau-Ponty's terms that Butler seems to take on, we may say that, gender is not just, as she argues, a *stylization of the body* (Butler [1990]: 179), but also the effect of a *stylizing body*, a body that has the power to

stylize the world, gender being understood by Butler as a «style of the flesh» (Butler [1990]: 177).

Through the reference to gender, Butler articulates the relationship between individual identity or agency and the structure of society. The subject's identity is neither an effect nor a cause of the social processes, but an event in formation and gender can be said to be performative in that it participates in the historical and contingent construction of the (social and intersubjective) sense:

[I]f gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an «I» or a «we» who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of «before.» Indeed, it is unclear that there can be an «I» or a «we» who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the «I» neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves. (Butler [1993]: XVI)

Throughout her writings, Butler hints at performativity as a powerful way to think of the structure and temporality of institution (Merleau-Ponty [2003]) and more in general of the emergence of sense in the sensible matter. In her later works, the philosopher elaborates further the notion of performativity, that dramatically transforms in the development of her reflection, also in connection to contemporary theories that, as the philosopher points out, often look at performativity as «a way to think about “effects”», and especially to supply an «alternative to causal frameworks», with the goal to counter both metaphysical presumptions and «a certain kind of positivism» that presupposes already delimited understandings of social and cultural structures – in terms of gender, rights, politics and so on (Butler [2010]: 147). Performativity, then, comes into play to think of «effects» as they are anthropological or ontological implications of a certain process or phenomenon.

Thus, for example, in *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), Butler intro-

duces a different use of the notion of performativity, aiming to account for the emergence of recent political movements, from the Arab Spring to *occupy* and on to the *indignados* movement. Drawing on her influential theorisations of performativity and precarity, the philosopher brings out the strong connection between these political formations and the physical places of gathering, for protest, encounter or occupation. Butler examines in particular the capacity of these geographic locations to catalyse the togetherness of bodies, so that they have become synecdoches through which we commonly refer to those movements and uprisings (Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti Park, Taksim etc.). The philosopher argues that the bodily assembly in public spaces brings together a multitude of different people, often being simply bodies, since, in a post-ideological context, they are united mainly by their collective physical presence, but, in a performative way, the physical assembly has, in turn, the power to hint at and even to enable the prospect of a most inhabitable world.

Meeting the stakes of material culture and material agency, in this context performativity coincides with the poietic capacities of assembly – its agency – but with a significant focus on the way its temporality is articulated, since in fact, performativity is understood as the power to virtually engender the conditions of its own political action, and, through this very process, start to realise it. To put it otherwise, here performativity defines the dynamic structure of co-constitution – of reciprocal institution – of the bodies in the public space, once again a way to elaborate a conception of identity in formation, rather than one that relies or is based upon a pre-existing ground.

Thus, to think of the transformative power of things and of the relationship between human and non-human entities in terms of performativity – instead of agency – would help us: 1) overcoming the passive/active opposition still implied by the notion of agency and its reference to action; 2) affirming the primacy of the relationship, rather than of the identities of the terms involved in it; 3) thinking the production or the emergence of

meaning and identity as a process of reciprocal constitution, without establishing a hierarchical opposition.

4. CONCLUSIONS

What agency sought to describe is an action that does not entail an actual intentionality and volition, that is, a way of acting that corresponds to the very movement of sense in its making, a sense that is made without us making it, in the attempt to overcome the dominant anthropocentrism in Western thought and the dichotomy between subjects and objects it tends to reaffirm. In particular, what the notion of agency, and its derivatives, points at is a non-discursive production of meaning that constitutes in the dimension of historicity and that can only be accounted by observing the fallouts and consequences it produces. Nevertheless, we can argue that, because of the vast spectrum it covers and the reason of its connection to the sphere of activity – traditionally uniquely referred to humans as subjects – the notion of agency still lends itself to misunderstanding and ultimately risks to keep the dualism undone.

Now, what is at stake in the notion of performativity, as it is outlined and creatively reinterpreted by Butler, is the possibility to think of the relationship between identity and facticity. Beyond the reference to gender theory, Butler's analysis sheds light on the way in which discourses and conducts, as «techniques of the body» – to borrow Marcel Mauss' expression (1936) – produce *effects* of identity, that exceed both the intentions of the subjects that are involved by them, and the manifold socially enacted meanings that are already contained by those reiterated practices and conducts.

Thus, to think of the power of things and the matter to act upon the world and to affect human identity and consciousness through the notion of performativity would allow us to avoid to conceive agency ontologically as a property or faculty of things and never consider it unless in connection

to its effects – also from a methodological and epistemological point of view. Performativity aims to grasp the reciprocal movement of co-implication between humans and non-human entities, and seeks to outline their temporal process of codetermination, without affirming any chronological, hierarchical or axiological primacy. Identity then emerges in the envelopment of material situated processes as assemblage of sensible and symbolic, in which a part of the sensible world turns back upon itself, regrasps, and expresses itself.

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