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ANIMATED FILM AS AN ELOQUENT BODY: SETH BOYDEN'S *AN OBJECT AT REST* AS MATTERTEXT [1]

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ABSTRACT

This article primarily aims to present material ecocriticism as a newly emerging and paradigm-changing outlook in the studies of environment and literature. Extending the scope of literary and cultural studies to encompass the study of animated films, it first introduces material ecocriticism as a theoretical background in relation to ecocriticism's developmental steps. Then, by referring to the theories foregrounded by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, it analyses Seth Boyden's short animated film entitled An Object at Rest (2015) as a case in point. The film exemplifies especially what Jeffrey J. Cohen contends about stone as a narrative site. By highlighting the story-telling qualities of the stone, the article sheds light on how animated films with ecological orientations may be used as "heuristic strategies" to discuss human-nature relations in a posthuman context.

Keywords: *Animated film, material ecocriticism, posthumanism, An Object at Rest, Seth Boyden*

KONUŞAN BEDEN, ÇİZGİ FİLM: SETH BOYDEN'İN *AN OBJECT AT REST* ADLI ÇİZGİ FİLMİNİN MADDE-METİN OLARAK BİR İNCELEMESİ

ÖZ

Bu makalenin birincil amacı yeni oluşmakta olan ve çevre ve edebiyat çalışmalarına taze bir bakış açısı getiren maddeci ekoeleştiriyi tanıtmaktır. Edebiyat ve kültürel çalışmaların kapsamını çizgi filmleri de kapsayacak şekilde genişleten bu makale, öncelikle maddeci ekoeleştiriyi, ekoeleştirinin gelişim basamaklarıyla ilintili olarak ve teorik altyapıyı oluşturacak şekilde ele almaktadır. Daha sonra, Serenella Iovino ve Serpil Oppermann'ın kuramları ışığında, Seth Boyden'in An Object at Rest (2015) adlı kısa çizgi filmini örnek olarak incelemektedir. Bu film Jeffrey J. Cohen'in hikaye anlatıcı madde olarak öne sürdüğü taş figürüne dair yazdıklarıyla birebir örtüşmektedir. Taşın öykü anlatıcı özelliklerini ön plana alan bu makale, özellikle ekolojik yönelimleri bulunan çizgi filmlerin, insan ötesi bağlamda

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insan-doğa ilişkilerini tartışmak için "faydalı stratejiler" olarak nasıl kullanılabileceklerine ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Çizgi film, maddeci ekoeleştiri, insan ötesi kuramcılık, An Object at Rest, Seth Boyden*

A. Introduction

The recent philosophical emphasis on how vibrant, agential "matter" *matters* has a special place in especially material ecocriticism. What Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann call "mattertext" (the coalescent body of matters and texts that are inherently embedded within one another) indicates the embedded narrativity within matter. Material ecocriticism thus signifies a "vast spectrum of creativity" which "extends into all networks of vital materialities" (Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism" 59). In other words, the "flesh of the world," to use Nancy Tuana's words, tells stories to the human observer, who is not independent from the stories s/he "reads." Indeed, from biological organisms to lithic compositions, mattertext is everywhere. The geological strata of the planet, for instance, which can be thought of as the bodily natures of the world, bear narrative capabilities in both material and textual forms, as the strata transmit the naturalcultural marks of every epoch that the planet has been through, enabling an understanding of the (hi)story of the world. Hence, in the polyphonic naturecultures of the planet, in its corporeal and inscriptional aspects, matter and text are always already enmeshed. Bearing in mind such narrative powers of mattertext, this paper focuses on the analysis of a short animated film as a case in point exemplifying the concept. Being posthuman environments that enmesh the human and the nonhuman, animated films, especially those with ecological orientations, can be considered mattertexts that possess agentic and eloquent bodies. Seth Boyden's *An Object at Rest* (2015), which displays discernible similarities with Jeffrey J. Cohen's analysis of lithic bodies as narrative sites, indicates how the agentic potentials of the nonhuman become visible through ecologically oriented animated films.

B. Theoretical Background to Material Ecocriticism

Material ecocritics have advanced the discourse that *everything is a text*, arguing that *no discourse can exist without matter*. Thus, what lies at the core of the material ecocritical argument is that there is an intrinsic link between the material and the textual. Playing a crucial role in shaping what I prefer to call "posthuman ecologies" to refer to the embodiment of these natural, cultural, technological, economic, political, social, historical, ecological, material, and textual aspects altogether, material ecocriticism underlines "an emergent interplay" within the ecologies that are within, around, and among us. This is what emerges through the relationality between the human and the nonhuman factors. Material ecocritics also see agency as "pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Introduction: Stories" 3). "From this dynamism," Iovino and Oppermann write, "reality emerges as an intertwined flux of material and discursive forces, rather than as complex of hierarchically organized individual players" ("Introduction: Stories" 3). Building their argument upon the Harawayan "material-semiotic" actors and the new materialists' theories that help us rethink nonhuman agency, Iovino and Oppermann "[examine] matter both *in* texts and *as* a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces express their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality" ("Introduction: Stories" 2; emphases in the original). In fact, in Oppermann's words, "situated in the conceptual horizons of the new materialist paradigm, material ecocriticism views matter in terms of its agentic expressions, inherent creativity, performative enactments and innate meanings. It asks us to rethink the questions of agency, creativity, imagination, and narrativity" ("Material Ecocriticism" 55).

Formulated as such, material ecocriticism provides a more easily understandable approach to mattertext, which is formulated like the inseparably bound categories of nature and culture under the term "naturecultures," which was conceived in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and extended in *When Species Meet* (2008) by Donna Haraway. Haraway's model of naturecultures redefines the beliefs in the separation of nature and culture, body and mind, and the material and the semiotic. Taking her core examples from dog-human relationships, an interaction which she centralises to her argument of companion species, Haraway emphasises that recounting the stories of dogs in the environments they are bred and brought up is of utmost significance to understand that biological studies are embedded in history, bringing together natural and social sciences, and hence, binding natures and cultures together. Before these concrete examples, Haraway's explication of the conceptualisation of naturecultures is primarily built upon her argument of material-semiotic actors in *Simians, Cyborgs, and*

Women: The Reinvention of Nature (1991). In this book, Haraway notes, "bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects" (200-01).

Following a similar pathway to the concept of naturecultures, mattertext likewise emphasises the inseparability of matter and text, thereby explicating the story-telling capacities of multiple life forms and the so-called inanimate matter. From biological organisms to igneous rocks, from volcanoes to hurricanes, from bee communities to whales, from metals to lithic compositions, mattertext is everywhere. The human DNA, for instance, encoded as "information" or "text" within proteins, as the material aspect of the human body, can be analysed by medical scientists to understand the medical history of a patient. It is through these encodings and their decoded analyses that the body, which is composed of both matter and text, creates narrative potentialities. This is the reason why material ecocritics highlight the idea that matter is always already storied.

The "storied-matter" or the stories of all these vibrant networks, then, as Oppermann writes, "enable us to discern the meanings of material intimacies inseparable from the human dimension" ("Material Ecocriticism" 59). "These stories, in the form of active creativity," as Oppermann proposes, "emerge through the interplay of natural-cultural forces, trajectories, and flows, forming constellations of matter and meanings" ("Material Ecocriticism" 59). In other words, what Nancy Tuana calls "a viscous porosity of entities" (200), becomes the enmeshment of human and nonhuman actors narrating stories all at once in material ecocriticism. In this sense, material ecocriticism is the ultimate form of a plurality of multiverses. It is the agentic voice of the nonhuman actors all at once.

C. The Analysis of Seth Boyden's *An Object at Rest*: Posthuman Entanglement in the Form of Storied-Matter

It is through such conceptual horizon that this paper analyses Seth Boyden's *An Object at Rest*. The main argument is that, like all the literary and material bodies, this animated film is also a posthuman agent that tells a story. It clearly exemplifies the concept of storied-matter as a case in point. The film not only does this through its narrative, but also its digital body, which materialises through the involvement of information networks and human cultural practices. It is therefore an example of storied-matter in the sense that its narrativity is doubled through an intertwined network of multiple agencies, both human and nonhuman, and both fictional and real, as the digitally emerging actors within the body of the animated text are also active agents of narrativity.

Thus, this animation can be likened to Baradian "phenomena," only in a smaller scope, as it also enacts agential cuts through its performativity, by which it provides a better means of understanding how the human species relate themselves to the rest of the living and the agentic world. For Karen Barad, the concept of phenomena refers to the smallest unit that forms reality, which "is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena, but things-in-phenomena" (*Meeting the Universe* 104). In other words, phenomena signify the embedded cementation of an object and observations of that object in question. Following this thread, it can be at least metaphorically argued that *An Object at Rest* displays its own performativity to the extent that it enables the audience – as humans – to relate themselves to rest of the living and the nonliving world. This is because it offers a challenging discourse to their pre-conceptualised perception of an objectively observable outside reality. In the most basic terms, it presents how a blend of the organic and the inorganic plays a crucial role in shaping of the world.

Therefore, *An Object at Rest* can be read as a symbolic epitome of mattertext. The film directly refers to a "dynamic materiality" in which every human and nonhuman form holds an equally important place in formulating the world. It follows an "agential realistic" account of matter, text, and ethics, as formulated by Karen Barad, envisaging how even the smallest unit of existence, perhaps imperceptible by human sensitivities, can play a crucial role in the intertwined network of the biosphere. Through a reflection of "becoming," the film highlights a posthumanist ethics since a disrupted body of an organism may re-emerge in the form of another, while human experience remains only to be yet another factor determining the nonlinear causality. This resonates with Barad's understanding of ethics:

> Ethics is not simply about the subsequent consequences of our ways of interacting with the world, as if effect followed cause in a linear chain of events, but rather ethics is about mattering, about the entangled materialisations we help enact and are a part of bringing about, including new configurations, new subjectivities,

> new possibilities – even the smallest cut matters. (Barad, "Queer Causation" 336).

Hinting at a posthumanist ethics as such, *An Object at Rest* indicates that matter *matters* in a new materialist and a material-ecocritical sense. It substantiates what Jeffrey J. Cohen validates in reading Barad's agential cuts, stating that "the smallest cut to the smallest nonhuman matters in a double sense, both of which are profoundly ethical: *creates* (that is, materializes) and *possesses* significance" (Cohen, "Queering the Inorganic" 152; emphases in the original). Likewise, in one of their essays that theorises material ecocriticism, Iovino and Oppermann use the metaphor of the "diptych" to indicate the intermingled nature of the material and the discursive. Being "a painting on two panels, or an ancient writing tablet made of two hinged leaves" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Theorizing Material" 448), a diptych is composed of both a material and a discursive side – one that makes up its body, the canvas and the wax, and one that indicates the message it carries. In this, it is possible to bring together the enmeshment of the innumerable facets of "the flesh of the world." Several fusions of literature and theory are intermingled, as Iovino and Oppermann also point out:

> In view of the increasing attention ecocritics are paying to the many ways material realities are enmeshed with meanings and narratives, our "diptych" provides an articulated vision about the key concepts of what can be called a "material ecocriticism." Interlacing reflections on oceanic plastic, trash, subatomic particles, toxic bodies, semiotic emergences, and discursive practices, we propose to approach this interpretive model from two converging angles: that of the new materialist theories and of ecological postmodernism. ("Theorizing Material" 448)

Like a diptych with both material and discursive aspects, *An Object at Rest* is also composed of a bodily and a conversational angle. In both angles, it is eloquent, which means it enacts a narrative, and it is in this sense that it is an example of *Natura Loquens*, that is, eloquent nature, endowed with the potentiality of speech and story-telling. It not only helps us envisage the entangled relations between its own materiality and discursivity, but also holds a mirror up to these relations with the messages it carries within its body.

Exhibiting the agentic qualities of matter by narrativising matter's "inherent creativity" (De Landa 16), it is a posthumanist endeavour that seeks to highlight the fact that the enmeshed relations within posthuman ecologies "emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature" (Alaimo 2). Indeed, as Charlene Spretnak points out, even the smallest and seemingly negligible units and elements matter, when it comes to creating an effect, be it edifying or deadly:

> [t]he entire planet is now imperiled by climate destabilization and ecological degradation, resulting from the modern assumption that highly advanced societies could throw toxic substances 'away' somewhere and could exclude staggeringly unnatural levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into our atmosphere without ill effect. (1-2)

As can be seen in Spretnak's observation, there does not exist a possibility of "getting rid of" our waste or any toxic body, so the agentic power of what we consider to be nonliving or abiotic cannot be disregarded. Although there is not a straightforward indication of such toxic ill-effects in *An Object at Rest*, implications as such are still vital to understanding matter's agentic and narrative potentialities. The film, hence, highlights the encoded creativity of matter within "stories of cosmology, geology, history, ecology, and life embodied in every form of materiality" (Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism" 57). Therefore, it resolves into an entangled formulation of matter and meaning, underlining the significance of our ecological and ethical responsibilities towards ourselves as well as our mutual relations with nature. Being basically "about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself" (Braidotti 2), the film showcases significant methodologies in embracing interactionist ontologies.

An Object at Rest, ironically entitled after Isaac Newton's first law of motion, also known as the law of inertia, opens with a view from the ocean depth and shifts to terrestrial life, where the story of an anthropomorphised stone becomes the locus. The plot "follows the life of a stone as it travels over the course of millennia, facing nature's greatest obstacle: human civilization" ("Today's Best" n.p.).

The stone in *An Object at Rest* is not only embedded in human culture and life through an anthropomorphic portrayal, but along with its narrative and creative capacities, it is also endowed with "patience." The rock has long been there, long before the human is. Overcoming the human hubris that accelerates environmental degradation, the stone recurs, re-emerges, and re-builds the making of the world through its patience. As Cohen emphasises, "[s]tone is primal matter, inhuman in its duration" (*Stone: An Ecology* 2), and it is through its inhumanness, which overshadows the human time spent on this earth, that the stone becomes that story-telling agent, as Cohen also builds a comparison between the liveliness and the inanimacy of the stone:

> [D]espite its incalculable temporality, the lithic is not some vast and alien outside. A limit-breaching intimacy persistently unfolds.
>
> Hurl a rock and you'll shatter an ontology, leave taxonomy in glistening shards. (*Stone: An Ecology* 2)

In an analogy to Cohen's words, *An Object at Rest* displays how the ontology of the stone is shattered through different phases of the human impact, and yet, it also exposes how the stone returns to its primal state of being "at rest." Thus, echoing the taxonomies that shape Cohen's introductory "geonarratives," which follow "Like a Rock," "Like a Mountain," and "Like a Rolling Stone," the protagonist of Prosser's film, the lithic mattertext, unfolds a history of naturecultures that involves both human and nonhuman stories within. In this, "the object at rest" reveals that it is actually "the object in motion," triggering and catalysing narrative agencies of the nonhuman.

Within this juxtaposition, inevitably, one recalls Cohen's allusion to Aldo Leopold, who introduced the phrase "thinking like a mountain" into ecocritical studies. By philosophising on the Leopoldian terms, Cohen poetically explicates further the "resting" and "mobile" sides of the stony diptych:

> Climb a mountain to seek a vista and its native prospect will give you ontological vertigo. To think like a mountain requires a leap from ephemeral stabilities, from the diminutive boundedness of merely human tales. [. . .] 'Thinking like a mountain' extends the ambit of critical

> inquiry by yoking two figures neither settled nor fully known: a geologic formation that does not remain still and a creature of unstable history, easily undone. (*Stone: An Ecology* 3)

As can be followed from this quotation, flowing between its resting and primal state and a venture of narrative mobility, the stone in *An Object at Rest* unfolds the several centuries of humankind and their endeavour to "control" nature.

On the humanly scale, that "control" might have been successful, and yet, discarding the agentic potentials of the material, humans have blinded themselves to an inherent connection between the human and the nonhuman narratives, which are always already enmeshed within another. On the literal level, "the epic tale of a rock [. . .] told over millions of years," as Rob Munday puts in his review, "*An Object at Rest* takes it viewers on a journey through time as we witness our stone protagonist battle against the forces of nature… and mankind" (n.p.). The film, however, when analysed in depth, also raises the very same question that Cohen asks: "If stone could speak, what would it say about us?" and the lengthy answer that Cohen provides is basically the same as Boyden's comic approach to the story of the stone:

> *Stone would call you transient, sporadic.* [. . .] *Stone was here from near the beginning, when the restless gases of the earth decided they did not want to spend their days in swirled disarray, in couplings without lasting comminglings. They thickened into liquids, congealed to fashion solid forms. [. . .] every one of your migrant continents conveys rocks of at least 3,500,000,000 years. A fortunate animal endures perhaps for 70. Do the math: it is inhuman. These ubiquitous boulders, not even the eldest of the earth, possess the lifespan of million upon millions of fortunate animals. They will persist into a future so distant that no human will witness their return to liquids and powders.* ("Stories of Stone" 57; emphasis in the original)

Implying a similar account of the stone given by Cohen, *An Object at Rest* displays a very brief history of this seemingly inanimate matter by re-vitalising it, especially using a human face attributed to the stone. Indeed, while Boyden seems well aware of the fact the story of the stone surpasses and overshadows the deceptively “proud” history of humankind, it is also worth noting that the director enmeshes the human cultural accounts into the natural histories inscribed into the body of the stone. Rob Munday’s email-interview with the director reveals how Boyden’s personal history as a human body with memory and experience is integrated into the story of the stone and into that of the flesh of the world.

From a material-ecocritical perspective, Boyden’s body can also be read as a site of a living text, as it is also encoded with matter and meaning. He explains considering his story in the American Midwest, and writes: “Thinking about the boulders that were ground into tiny pieces and scattered on the street, I wondered where those rocks had been before, and where they would go after the road was gone.” Such thinking has led Boyden to reach at a point where he meets, with his animated film, Cohen’s way of thinking. He continues:

> This sort of began the perception of ‘rock time’ where everything that happened over centuries of our human history would probably just be seconds from the perspective of a rock. [. . .] Most of the choices for scenes were determined by experiences from historical locations that I remember visiting from when I was young. All that was left was to weave the rock character into these moments to give it a narrative context. (Boyden qtd. in Munday n.p.)

Pointing out the stone’s narrative agency through his deliberately anthropomorphic depiction, Boyden characterises his posthumanist approach in a method similar to what has been theorised by Iovino and Oppermann. Maintaining that “thinking about local natures means thinking about landscapes,” for instance, Iovino argues that landscapes are not to be taken as “mere scenery,” but rather should be thought of “as a balance of nature and culture stratified through centuries of mutual adaptation” (“Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric” 31).

Similarly, Boyden’s experiences in the American Midwest are reflected in *An Object at Rest* to highlight the stratification of the ecology of the stone and human culture. This stratification here is not only in the physical sense, which might be misunderstood as an inherent hierarchy of things and beings, but it rather indicates a sense of enmeshment, an intertwinement, or a fusion. When thought this way, "human history is," to reprise Lawrence Buell's often-quoted words, "implicated in natural history" (6). If human history is fully connected to the history of nature, then the story of the stone is, at the same time, the story of the human as can also be perceived in Boyden's animation. The film is, in a sense, to use Oppermann's words, an "attempt to dehierarchize our conceptual categories that structure dualisms and determine our oppressive social, cultural and political practices" ("Material Ecocriticism" 67). "Destabilizing such artificially naturalized systems of meaning," Oppermann continues, "is a precondition to resolve many complex issues, such as climate change, and to update our logocentric and anthropocentric discourses" ("Material Ecocriticism" 67), and when considered as such, *An Object at Rest* re-works these human-centred assumptions by offering an alternative way to formulate our environmental, ethical, and political problems at hand.

After all, by critiquing the instrumentalisation of "lively" and "agentic" matter, Boyden seems to concur with Jane Bennett's concept of "vitality," by which she also deconstructs matter's assumed passivity or inertia. For Bennett, "quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations" (vii). She continues to argue that "the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (ix). Challenging this belief in matter's passivity, *An Object at Rest* defies what Bennett also criticises, and thus, it successfully shows what Simon C. Estok reminds us when he notes that "things that are not us have agencies that determine us and are themselves emergent narratives" (137).

Starting its emergent narrative "life" as a huge hill, the stone in *An Object at Rest* is like a never-dying tragic hero that undergoes several changes of millennia through which it witnesses the shift from and to various geological epochs. Affected by the environmental changes from the Cretaceous period to the Ice Age, it is eroded into smaller pieces, and different plants start growing on it. With the human impact that causes deforestation, the stone is then used for several human cultural practices. Every time the stone manages to save itself from human hands and wishes to go back to its "inert" state, it is disturbed by yet another human endeavour to "tame" it and "employ" it for their own purposes.

Needless to say, the stone's desire to go back to its inert state should not be taken as a wish to embrace a mechanised view of nature. Instead, it should be considered as a comic attempt to critique human interference with nature, which often has alarming consequences for the rest of the living and nonliving world. In addition to this, by giving the stone an ability to move, the director calls into the question what we often take for granted as a "natural" categorisation: that we, humans, are active and mobile, while the stone and the rest of what we consider to be inanimate are passive and immobile. Boyden, thus, subtly criticises our boundary-producing mindset, which prioritises action over stasis. Moreover, although we often tend to believe that the figure of the stone is fixed and rigid, the stone itself has proven to be more active than we originally supposed. Along similar lines to this deconstructive strategy by Boyden, Jeffrey J. Cohen contends:

> All stone is possessed of hydrous motion, and that mobility might even be said to constitute an agency, a desire, posing a blunt challenge to anthropocentric histories. *Human* immediately becomes *posthuman* as a consequence of the enlarged temporal frame that geology demands. Such a stone-etched counter-vision invites reflection on what it means to inhabit a world that is potentially indifferent to humanity and yet is intimately continuous with us. ("Stories of Stone" 58; emphasis in the original)

Indeed, with the facial expressions of the stone, even that kind of potential indifference is turned into a comic advantage in the film, and this anthropomorphism is there as a "heuristic strategy," to borrow Oppermann's term. It clearly helps us overcome our binary thinking. It helps the audience to empathise with what is otherwise emotionless. Thus, it guides us through nonhuman agency at work, and functions as a useful tool to find correlations between the human figure (as a posthuman body enmeshed in a network of relations) and the stone figure (as a posthuman body intermingled and agentic in the very same network). It also leads us through an understanding of detrimental human cultural practices and their altering effects on the environment. Although the multi-faceted cause-effect cycle, by which the stone is also influenced, pre-dates the emergence of humankind, the stone's facial expression alters from neutral to unhappy when the human interference in its natural state begins and grows larger. This is significant in the sense that it could be read as a critical assessment of humankind and its deliberate attempts to mechanise the natural through a self-imposed segregation from nature. To clarify, although the natural and the cultural can never be disentangled, and there is no possibility of attaining a wild and pristine nature in its "uncontaminated" and "pure" state, the film is an indirect critique of human-centred worldview that is sustained by human hubris to control and dominate nature.

By anthropomorphising the stone, therefore, the film challenges the idea that nature is passive because such an idea lies at the heart of so-called human mastery over nature. As such, this animation re-vitalises what was once thought to be inanimate, and thus, signposts "inorganic matter" as "much more variable and creative than we ever imagined" (De Landa 16).

From several urban and rural landscapes, the journey of the stone continues in a naturalcultural entanglement. However, more importantly than this, what requires attention here is the apparent battle between the stone and the human. As Cohen maintains, the human-stone relationship has not always been a simple matter of human domination over the stone. Indeed, human control over any inanimate "thing" is possible as long as "the thing" allows such control, and thus, "the resisting powers" at work delineate our reality:

> Whether in the form of stones or bodies, reality is not infinitely pliable. We cannot squeeze water from a rock because we 'socially construct' the lithic as the aqueous. Although we can find stone that will float like a ship [. . .], we do not fabricate naval vessels out of boulders because something in rock resists such transformation. That does not, however, mean that stones are so immobile that they will not reveal their fluid tendencies when viewed in a nonhuman historical frame. [. . .] rock is quite a flexible material. Reality is a time and context-bound meshwork of alliances that unites human and nonhuman agents. A diamond becomes a precious gem because its rarity, lucidity and durability can sustain a strong confederation with human and inhuman forces, tools, economic and aesthetic systems – coalitions that pumice cannot maintain. ("Stories of Stone" 61)

This account of the alliance between human and stone as agentic forces is also revealed in *An Object at Rest*. Towards the end of the film, after having endured several occasions in which it is changed into different forms by human impact, the stone is moulded in a space laboratory into a piece of glass, and it starts to function as a co-labourer with the human agents. As the mirror that reflects the required images from far-away galaxies, this now-glass stone even travels to space in a mission craft sent by humans. By the end of the film, the stone-glass manages to remove itself from the satellite it is attached to, enters the atmosphere again, starts burning, and crashes onto the surface of the earth where it re-emerges as a stone again, along with other living and nonliving forms.

This long and tiresome journey of the stone, as a story-telling potential in the making, reminds one of Nancy Tuana's concept of "viscous porosity," by which Tuana explains how the bodily natures (of the human and of the world) are interacting as membranes that change the course of events. The stone, emerging as a life-giving source among many other organic and inorganic elements, stands not only for the social implications of human history (as text, written on the body of the world), but also for the natural history, of which it is a part. As such, the stone is symbolically a mediator between the natural and the cultural, the animate and the inanimate, and the material and the discursive. As Tuana writes:

> There is a viscous porosity of flesh – my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect the interactions. These membranes are of various types – skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. They serve as the mediator of interaction. (199-200)

Following from this idea, the interaction of the natural and the cultural (as is the case with the human practices and the stone's changing body) lies at the heart of new materialist and material-ecocritical posthumanisms. It can be argued that the film also resonates with the idea of change, be it positive or negative, in the human body, as both matter and text: "Our essential social being is written in our bodies in terms of flourishing or [. . .] illness" (Wheeler 12). If our bodies are both matter and text, then so is the body of the stone, and likewise, so is the body of the world. As such, as Iovino argues, "life and non-life, human and nonhuman, are only different forms through which matter emerges in its agentic capacity. Human and nonhuman, like organic and non-organic forms, are differential becomings in the entanglements of agentic matter" ("Steps to a Material" 141).

Boyden's film, taking these intermingled relations as its core, and carrying "vitality" through its images, ironically teases the mechanical understanding of the world, as it climaxes the idea that "matter is not an inert or passive substratum, but it is a site of vibrantly 'vital' processes where meanings coalesce with material dynamics" (Iovino, "The Living Diffractions" 70). Despite its Newtonian title, this animated film calls into question the very foundations of Newtonian mechanics, and instead offers a quantised account of matter and meaning, discursively and materially intermingling with one another. As such, it echoes Karen Barad's agential realism, and it undergirds the material ecocritics' central idea that every form of materiality, due to its telling capacities, "can be the object of a critical investigation aimed at discovering its stories, its material and discursive interplays, its place in a world filled with expressive – or *narrative* – forces" (Iovino, "The Living Diffractions" 70; emphasis in the original).

Building up its storyline on the visual theory that images are "lively," as W.T.J. Mitchell also contends on animated films, *An Object at Rest* re-frames notions of "agency, motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity, or other symptoms that make pictures into 'vital signs'" (6). In fact, these images are "not merely signs for living things," but rather are "signs as living things" (Mitchell 6). As Cohen also admits, "the allure of stone is primal," and "stone can clearly be historic" as well as "erotic," since "rock, earth, and metal have long been molded through art to reflect and incite human sexual desire" ("Queering the Inorganic" 154). This definitely shows anthropomorphic qualities engraved into stone, which function to indicate its agential potentialities. Still, anthropomorphised drawings of the stone (as in Boyden's animated film) can be argued to have their own limits, as Mitchell emphasises:

> It would be disingenuous […] to deny that the question of what pictures want has overtones of animism, vitalism, and anthropomorphism, and that it leads us to consider cases in which images are treated as if they were living

> things. The concept of images-as-organism is, of course, 'only' a metaphor, an analogy that must have some limits. (10)

Although Mitchell's seemingly apt urgings can be extended to the credence that anthropomorphism is just a means of translating human intentionality into matter, Iovino disputes this when she maintains that "matter possesses an eloquent and signifying agency, which articulates itself in the differentiating of its forms" ("The Living Diffractions" 70). Along similar lines, Oppermann contends that matter has "expressive" and "creative" capacities, and notes that an approach as such "invites feeling empathy with all objects, human and nonhuman entities, and forces that constitute the matter of Earth within which human and nonhuman natures intertwine in complex ways" ("From Ecological" 27).

Advancing from Iovino's and Oppermann's arguments, one can argue that the same is valid for Boyden's *An Object at Rest*, which helps the audience to empathise with the stone, while at the same time, it guides them through a rethinking of the boundaries of human intentionality. At the end of the film, the stone becomes one of the many creative, triggering, and life-starting forces, embedded in the natural and the social flesh of the world, and exhibits matter's "self-organizing dynamics" (Swimme and Tucker 48) in a comic fashion that not only draws upon the emotive aspects of the audience, but also displays a delightful picture of the inanimate.

Considering its power in bringing together the critical and the comic, thus, *An Object at Rest* blurs some of the boundaries that we often tend to assume to exist. In this regard, Greta Gaard's approach to new materialist and material-ecocritical readings of texts and matters is also quite useful in handling this animation. Starting from Alaimo's argument that "trans-corporeality denies the human subject the sovereign, central position" (16), Gaard explains the necessity of viewing "other-than-human animals as not merely homogenized species but also and simultaneously as *specific beings* – neither subordinate nor less important than the humans, but simply different," and by doing so, she underlines the importance of not repeating the same dichotomies between nature and culture, and human and animal, over and over again (297; emphasis in the original). Advancing this view, it might well be stated that *An Object at Rest* does the same for what we consider to be inanimate matter, by specifically focusing on the stone and its narrative-creative agency. After all, stone is an inorganic body, just like any other inanimate form. However, in its origins, stone is the hybrid mixture of various biotic and abiotic forms on whose bodies several stratifications of text and matter are inscribed. It is formed by the fossilised human and nonhuman bodies, magmatic molten, and several other earthly components.

As such, stone, as a material-textual body, matters. Whether it is boulder, or granite, or amethyst, also matters in its cultural embodiments in the human realm. The social, political, historical, and environmental conditions it has been shaped under matters, for it could be thought of as precious with monetary and spiritual value. But regardless of the human valuation, every stone is unique in its own sense, too, because it carries its own meanings and desires. "The smallest cut" in the stone, as Cohen and Barad would say, "matters." Therefore, by underlining the unique origins of the stone, as originally a posthuman hybrid entanglement of matter and text, Boyden might have intended to ascribe a more powerful role to his protagonist than it is revealed at first glance. This animation is, hence, a strong way of "diminishing and distorting" all the possible "centrisms and hierarchies" (Gaard 297).

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