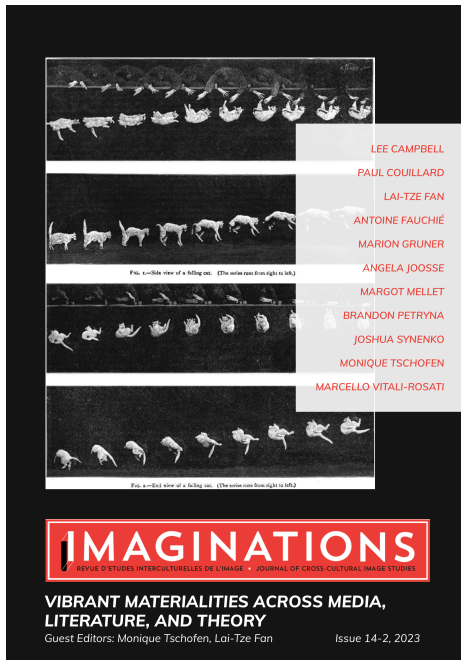


# IMAGINATIONS

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Media, Literature, and Theory**  
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Lai-Tze Fan**  
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INTRODUCTION: VIBRANT MATERIALITIES ACROSS MEDIA,  
LITERATURE, AND THEORY

MONIQUE TSCHOFEN

LAI-TZE FAN

*“Materiality thus cannot be specified in advance; rather, it occupies a borderland—or better, performs as connective tissue—joining the physical and mental, the artifact and the user.” (Hayles, “Print is Flat” 72)*

**T**his special issue of *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* takes materiality as the critical touchstone for a new comparative literary and media studies. We ask: How can an examination of the modes of inscription across media, platforms, and interfaces draw greater attention to what is often ignored in critical conversations about texts, objects, and bodies; how can such an investigation attend to the vitality of their materiality? Studies of materiality may occur of/in: images, texts, subjects, and objects; philosophical approaches to materiality and interrelationality; cultural considerations of user relationships to media materiality; mediums of scholarship, including critical applications in open-source publishing; critical making and research-creation; and experiences, interactions, and representations of digital spaces. Here, we take materiality to include actants, actors, inscriptions, assemblages, interfaces, objects, bodies, things and the things we think with, as well as their agencies and provocations. The papers reconsider the entanglements between inscription and representation and between inscription and world through theoretical frameworks that show that “matter matters,” using approaches that include code studies, critical

making, digital humanities, ecocriticism, feminism, Marxism, media archaeology, new materialism, and phenomenology.

It has become a commonplace to acknowledge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in recent critical introductions and this special issue of *Imaginations* is no different. *Vibrant Materialities Across Media, Literature, and Theory / Matérialités vibrantes à travers les médias, la littérature et la théorie* emerges from and illuminates a time during which the matters of bodies plagued by fatigue and crisis were always on our minds. Contributors to the volume and peer reviewers navigated recurring illness and ongoing responsibilities of caregiving for parents, children, neighbours, students, and colleagues. The volume also emerges from and illuminates the deliberate cultivation of an international community of scholars by the Media and Materialities Working Group of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association. In this sense, our work has materialized Donna Haraway and María Puig de la Bellacasa's understanding that "creating knowledge is a relational practice with important consequences in the shaping of possible worlds" (Puig de la Bellacasa 3). The articles here are thus the materialization of labours of love (Kittay)—practices of care and caring we described as "le penser-ensemble"/"thinking together," which include conversation, experimentation, and speculation, supported by embodied practices of organizing, soliciting, listening, reading, writing, recording, as well as waiting and anticipating.

This group's mission, first articulated in January of 2020, was to expand the contours of Comparative Literature in Canada to explicitly embrace the work of ourselves and colleague comparatists working in literary-adjacent disciplines such as cultural studies, Digital Humanities, fashion studies, film studies, game studies, media and communication studies, visual culture studies, and so on, and to solicit, mentor, and promote more innovative interdisciplinary and intercultural scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Driven by a commitment to use digital tools ethically, to build the scholarly infrastructures that support intellectual conversations across national and linguistic borders, the group's call read:

"This research group will look at historical and contemporary interconnections, relationships and entanglements between manifestations of thinking/writing across cultures/languages and their foundations in the materialities of media technologies. These materialities are determined by sociocultural contexts and relations to power, privilege, and ownership. Thinking literature/culture and media together should make it possible to think of culture as always inscribed, or even better, as an inscription in complex assemblages that inform our interpretation of the world. In order to explore these assemblages, the research group welcomes a multitude of comparative and theoretical approaches to literature, cinema, digital and networked culture, visual culture, and transmedia, including media archaeology, critical making, and comparative media studies. Literature study in particular brings a rich history and context to media study; it allows us to situate narrative and expressive forms in the otherwise cold methodology of communication theories, and therefore to engage with mediations as networks of relationships that are historically embedded in literary conventions and techniques, not divorced from them."

The working group ran workshops on how to use digital tools, drawing attention to matters of knowledge stewardship, ownership, regulation, protocol, and authority on platforms. We also held roundtables over Zoom, gathering early career and senior scholars from Canada, the United States, and Brazil, who presented papers on open-access publishing and editing, on visual materialities, digital materialities, and screen/ed materialities, some of which were revised to appear in this issue. Interdisciplinary conversations—conversations attuned to the overlaps and distinctions between approaches to the matters under consideration—proved again and again their value.

In this issue, we focus on the vibrancies of inscriptive processes. Our prompt comes from Marcello Vitali-Rosati, who writes,

« L'intérêt renouvelé pour la matérialité (que l'on pense à des mouvements tels que le new materialism) semble promettre

des pistes différentes. Il faut penser la matérialité de l'écriture. Ou mieux: la pensée n'est que cette matérialité. »

"The renewed interest in materiality (all the "new materialism" wave) seems to promise different paths. One must think about the materiality of writing. Or better: thinking is only this materiality."

« Penser littérature et média ensemble devrait permettre de penser une littérature toujours inscrite, ou encore mieux, penser que la littérature n'est qu'une inscription. »

"Thinking literature and media together should make it possible to think of literature as always inscribed, or even better, to think of literature as an inscription."

« À partir de ces considérations il semble évident que pour adresser ces questions il est nécessaire de partir d'une inscription: celle à partir de laquelle une pensée critique peut émerger. »

"Starting from these considerations it seems obvious that in order to address these questions it is necessary to start from an inscription: the one from which a critical thought can emerge." (Vitali-Rosati)

The title of the issue, "Vibrant Materialities," is a direct nod to political theorist Jane Bennett's concepts of "vibrant matter" and "vital materiality"—concepts which have reverberated in disciplines ranging from literary and media studies to architecture to environmental sciences to object-oriented ontology. Bennett explains that understood as "actants" (borrowing from Bruno Latour), all entities have "efficacy, can do things, [have] sufficient coherence to make a difference, product effects, alter the course of events" (*Vibrant* viii). We acknowledge that texts are located in and originate from a vibrant and vibrating network of actants; specifically, in this issue, we adopt a perspective of material relationality that helps to foreground actants in networks with oscillating vantage points. We "think about sticky

webs of connections” (Bennett, “The Force of Things” 365) and embrace the instability of the signifier flickering away; as subject encounters object, text is understood as object, subject is also text, object is shaped by medium, and medium can be subject. We celebrate and the tensions and harmonies that resonate between and therein.

Focusing on *material relationality* in this special issue opens up other dimensions as well. Jane Bennet’s focus on bodies and things, informed by phenomenology and picked up and expanded on by feminist new materialists, offers a potent reminder that the materialities of the subject are the materialities of the world. The “political potential” embedded in thinking about the relationships between human actors and non-human actors “resides in its ability to induce a greater sense of interconnectedness between humanity and nonhumanity” (Bennett, “The Force of Things” 22). Moving from the inscriptions of texts to their broader contexts, we track the “body-in-flux”—the dematerialization of textual embodiment and rematerialization in human and more-than-human embodiment. Finally, we explore what critical work can emerge from testing the affordances of digital tools, including by inquiring into the boundaries of digital media representation.

We identify material relationality in the contributions of this special issue in four sections: *Material Manifesto*, *Actants of Reading and Writing*, *Embodiment in New Materialisms*, and *Flickering Signifiers, Flickering Media*.

## 1. MATERIAL MANIFESTO

**W**e begin this issue with a manifesto as a thought piece in both theory and practice that prompts us to ask: What is the materiality of the text? From where? With whom? This manifesto «Pensée et collectif dans la matérialité de nos écritures» by Marcello Vitali-Rosati, Antoine Fauchié, and Margot Mellet was circulated in the Canadian Comparative Literature Association/ Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée (CCLA/ACLCL). It served as a guiding background and catalyzing theoretical framework for the Media and Materialities working group led by Vitali-

Rosati and Tschofen, prompting the group to explore the material factors that are not often considered in the inscription practices of various disciplines, collaborations, and writing platforms.

Vitali-Rosati, Fauchié, and Mellet's manifesto identifies a long-standing tradition of discounting the inscriptive *process* in favour of focusing on the final inscribed *product*. The problem with this practice, they note, is that it flattens and obfuscates a text's material contexts and conditions of production, distribution, and reception, whether in word, image, sound, performance, and so forth. Therefore, through a material lens, these authors shift our critical focus from the noun *inscription* (the inscribed thing) toward the verb *inscription* (the act of inscribing).

The manifesto opens with a discussion of the philosophical origins of inscription, which abstract the act of inscribing from the final consumed inscribed content. The authors then go on to describe a collaborative writing workshop organized at the annual conference of the CCLA/ACLC. The article details the theoretical background of the workshop, in particular the issue of the relationships between thinking and the matter of writing, between literature and media, and the preparation and technical set-up of the workshop. They note that the workshop was an opportunity to consider the collective materiality of our writing and how to represent a collaborative experience.

## 2. ACTANTS OF READING AND WRITING

Essays in this section deal with material understandings of text that also make reading and writing subjects involved as actants of the text.

Margot Mellet, in « La poursuite du fait littéraire. Plastique et technique du texte » / Chasing the Literature Phenomenon: A Plastic and Technical Perspective of the Text,” explores the phenomenon of literature as a cultural reality, approaching the text as a material agency of readable, visible, and technical dynamics. By studying the editorial content of several pre-digital creations (Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage*, Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard*, and



Carson's *Nox*), the article aims to decentralize a classical analysis of literature where text is a condensed form of abstract signs, to encourage another approach: one that finds the value of literature in the agency of matters of writing. This pursuit can be described by the notion of "plasticity," considering the phenomenon of literature as what emerges from vibrating interactions with matter.

Lee Campbell, in "Reading Like A Replicant: *Blade Runner 2049*, *Pale Fire*, and the Archival Embodiment of Literature / Lire comme un répliquant : *Blade Runner 2049*, *Pale Fire* et l'incarnation archivistique de la littérature," inquires into the agency of human and non-human readers and writers, and the fantasy of literature as a symbol of displaced humanity. Campbell offers a reading of the dystopian sci-fi film *Blade Runner 2049*, focusing on its unexpected and intricate appropriation of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*. A hardcover copy of the book appears briefly in the film, the text is quoted and alluded to several times, and its central image of reflected light recurs in varying forms as a visual meditation upon the precarious material affinities of literature and embodied life, which are both subject to contending archival logics. Ultimately, this interpretation suggests that practices of reading and writing "like a replicant" may serve to liberate life from techno-capitalist archival control.

### 3. EMBODIMENT IN NEW MATERIALISMS

If the previous sections draw attention to modes of inscription across media, platforms, and interfaces, this section locates vibrancy in things and in relations. Considering embodiment in performance art, dance, and cinema, the authors here center relational processes—"both human and non-human"—and their political potentials.

Paul Couillard's paper "Things, Assemblages, Worlds: Locating Vibrancy Beyond a Subject-Object Relationship (A Tale of Disposition) / Choses, assemblages, mondes : le vitalité situer au-delà d'une relation sujet-objet (Un conte de Disposition)" begins with the deeply held assumption in contemporary human culture that consciousness is somehow distinct from matter, often expressed in Heideggerian

terms as the difference between a “who” that has a “world” by virtue of its consciousness, and a “what” that can do no more than populate such a world. Couillard mobilizes Bennett’s idea of vibrant matter to challenge this assumption, arguing that vibrancy is not an inherent quality of either matter or consciousness, but rather an index of the relationality and connectability of worlds that both bodies and things manifest. His text begins with a series of theoretical arguments grounded in philosophy, then moves on to a more descriptive analysis of Adina Bar-On’s performance *Disposition* to consider how animateness—characterized as “acts of conscription”—can reveal and expand the relationality of distinct worlds.

Couillard stresses that “art actions can reorient our relational fields toward new possibilities of connectability.” Angela Joosse’s “Embodied Relational Process in P. Megan Andrews’ *the disorientation project* / Processus relationnel embodied dans *le projet de désorientation de P. Megan Andrews*” similarly examines the vibrancy of matter in relational terms. Joosse approaches her experience with Canadian dance artist P. Megan Andrews’ pandemic performance *the disorientation project* (2021) as an embodied relational process imbued with care, where care is understood as perceiving-with, altering and being altered without appropriating the other bodies with whom one is situated. According to Joosse, the question Andrews asks, “Where am I now,” both unmoors and reanchors experiences including somatic empathy, spatial levels, gestural sedimentation, opening to otherness, and being held in relation. Using Sam Mallin’s “body hermeneutics” to track the performance’s cultivation of perception, Joosse argues that *the disorientation project*’s procedures work to resist Western tendencies to appropriate all things and beings into a singular perspective while simultaneously working to open a space where we bend to and alter each other without attempting to incorporate the other into our own.

Monique Tschofen, in “Becoming Matter/Becoming Mother: Wilding in Ali Abbasi’s *Border (Gräns)* / Devenir Matière/Devenir Mère en *Border (Gräns)* d’Ali Abbasi,” draws from feminist ecological new materialist frameworks to reexamine the relational processes in a film that explicitly interrogates the borders between self and other and

nature and culture. She begins with Abbasi's own declaration that the film, despite being set at a border, was not about migrants but rather about trolls, that is, the more-than-human. Her analysis centers on the film's construction of the matter of non-human others, and zeroes in on what she calls "wilding" —a radical, jubilant, vibrant practice of worlding that restores the materialities of bodies-in-relation. Abbasi's wilding, she argues, preserves modes of epistemological openness necessary for the unlearning of anthropocentric epistemologies.

#### 4. FLICKERING SIGNIFIERS, FLICKERING MEDIA

This last section asks about the affordances and extensions of media materials, platforms, tools, and methods, and does so in two ways: first, through a critical examination of cinematic approaches that are impacted by digital media, and next, through representations of the processes of digital production in two works of research-creation.

Joshua Synenko's article "'Where Does This World End?' Space, Time and Image in Harun Farocki's *Parallel I-IV*" / « Où s'arrête ce monde? » Espace, temps et image dans *Parallel I-IV* d'Harun Farocki" is a dedicated exploration of Harun Farocki's last installation film, *Parallel I-IV*, which opens with a collection of video game landscapes grouped together by elements of earth, fire, water, and air, engaging a non-vococentric film essay style to reflect upon material transformations that occur through digital images. Through the affordances, limitations, and challenges brought on by using digital images, Farocki develops a unique curatorial approach to express both the power and the limits of digital image construction and the creative process, and emphasizes sharp historical perspectives. By challenging the dyad of realism and simulation and their associated narrative conventions, whether through film, video games, or art exhibits, Synenko holds that Farocki's brand of essay film provides critical insights into the affective and sociotechnical dimensions of the imaged world. Synenko notes, for instance, that "the impulse to narrate these changes [is] a core dimension of understanding the medi-

um’s material qualifications,” thereby suggesting “that Farocki’s explicit choice to engage in expressive documentary practices—in effect, to create data-driven narratives—is ontologically sutured with his broader interrogation of how images are made in general.” Ultimately, Synenko contributes a meditation on digital operational images through media-archaeological approaches, theories of voice in essay film, and methods of curatorial artistic practice.

Testing the boundaries of medium extensions, the next article attempts to play with the affordances of digital platforms and tools to mediate material histories of readership previously unseen.

Marion Gruner’s “Reader Worlds: Constructing Context for Historical Readers of Pulp Fiction with Google Earth / Reader Worlds : La construction de contexte pour les lecteurs historiques de littérature de gare avec Google Earth” starts with the observation that in the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries, reading as a cultural practice was deeply woven into daily life and informed critical aspects of society; however, there is little evidence available to reconstruct historical audiences of popular culture, and thus understand how these texts shaped readers, and the broader ideologies of the time. Gruner is acutely aware of how digital tools can increase public interaction and knowledge creation of hidden histories: her article documents her research-creation project Reader Worlds, which uses Google Earth (an interactive map interface of the world through which users can offer guided virtual tours about specific locations) to tell the stories of historical audiences of pulp fiction. Meanwhile, she explores how immersive technologies can offer layered meaning to the narratives of historical readers, as, she notes, “in Reader Worlds we might also interpret not only how the text informs the values or dreams of the readers (as we saw in their wistful letters about travel), but how their current context might inform the reading of the material, and how this same reading of the material might then, reciprocally, inform their views of their current contexts.”

Brandon Petryna’s “Animated Life Writing / L’écriture de vie à travers l’animation” observes the recent online phenomenon of creating animated life writing, which is the practice of visually representing

(auto)biographies and memoirs in animated images. Animated life writing, as Petryna describes, can be understood as the product of any life writing genre produced for animation. It occupies digital video spaces, favouring images and sound to enrich the narrative portrayal of a lived experience. He explores this method of storytelling to encourage further investigation of this practice, which shares similarities with graphic memoirs and other forms of life writing. In particular, Petryna argues that those who may be interested in animated life writing may already be involved in the study and practice of “a broader media ecology that is supported by graphic narrative theory, the field of study largely focused on the intersection between comics, graphic novels, and narrative theory.” Through the approaches of critical making and research in practice, this paper is accompanied by an original example of animated life writing—Petryna’s own research-creation experiment in creating a short animated piece about his life—to explore embodiment in life writing and the liveliness generated by cartoons. Recounting his process of design, his essay shows that “from ideation to editing, [the] video design project ultimately reinforces the appeal and application of animated life writing methods for sharing lived experiences.”

This issue has been an assemblage of actants. The articles we have featured and the four themes foreground what is valuable about both material thinking and relational thinking. Authors gathered in this issue expand what we mean by textuality as they attend to how form and meaning interrelate. Thinking about what matters in materiality—as medium, agent, context, and ground—involves, first, understanding the idea of “actant” in dynamic ways. Second, it necessitates understanding dynamism as something that can traverse disciplines and practices. Third, it asks for an expansion of comparative studies that centers interdisciplinary as well as applied and practical approaches to theory, and models one possible pathway for Comparative Studies in literature and media to evolve, where the methods of comparative literature, comparative media, media archaeology, new materialism, and research creation interilluminate. Last, it provides evidence of the ways the humanities can deviate from prioritizing and even rewarding individualist models of research. In response,

collaborative humanities efforts can align in a shared mission during a time of crisis, prioritizing unconventional critical thinking that is firmly anchored in “le penser-ensemble”—thinking-together—and, through that, thinking of matters that include the more-than-human.

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## NOTES

1. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth's 2018 special issue of *Comparative Literature* "The Material Turn in Comparative Literature: An Introduction" similarly makes a case for centering comparative media in comparative literature. ↵