

Spiritual Materialism

Jim Andrews
vispo.com

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It's commonly observed that a great deal of contemporary art/writing involves a double sense of *the material*. The term is understood to refer not only to the *subject matter* (the 'standard' understanding in writing) but also the *matter* of the media in the piece, the *material embodiment* of the piece. It's also commonly observed that the latter awareness of and approach to composition not solely by ideation, meditation on the subject matter, but also through operation on the material embodiment, has come to be much more widely understood as a part of reading than it was a generation ago. When we encounter work that does not follow the grammars and approaches traditionally associated with work, we look into the methods of composition, the approach to materiality, and look for relations between those methods and approaches and the subject matter, or look for the subject matter in the light of those things. And so read differently, thereby. And in this way, we now read some literary work in ways that are closer to how we approach a great deal of visual art.

But what I want to get at is something that isn't so commonly observed, at the moment, but may be in the next generation. And that's the relation of awareness of the materiality of writing/art to our ideas of who and what we are. That's awkwardly stated. What I'm trying to get at is this. The whole emphasis on materiality is involved in a larger movement to explore how things like ideation, imagination, the spiritual, beauty, truth, goodness, justice—all our ideals and things normally associated with the immaterial—operate in the material world.

In this sense, we might say that the whole contemporary awareness of materiality in art is part of a larger *spiritual materialism*. I googled that term, after it occurred to me, and I assure you I'm using it in a different sense than Chögyam Trungpa, who uses it "to describe mistakes spiritual seekers commit which turn the pursuit of spiritualism into an ego building and confusion creating endeavor" (Wikipedia). Instead, I'm referring to a relatively common sort of philosophy in which the material substrate of ideation—and even the spiritual—is affirmed and its relations with even the flightiest of fancies are explored. Not to *denigrate* or dismiss things like spirituality but to *explore* how they operate materially.

Perhaps more evidently, now, this is also related to philosophies of mind in which the materiality of thought itself is affirmed—as a chemical and informational process, however emergent—and the brain and the mind that emerge from its processes are conceived as fully embodied in the material. So that the idea of being able to create thinking machines (however unlike us) becomes a real possibility. And we are conceptualized as nature's (near?) ultimate machines. And machines are conceptualized not as the simple things we once thought they must be but as often very complex biological creatures that, nonetheless, are embodied in the material world and are, therefore, subject to the constraints and possibilities of machines in the material world.

To wrap it up, we now see the relation between contemporary artistic emphasis on the materiality of writing/art and the larger moment of 'spiritual materialism'.

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I'm sure *spiritual materialism* could mean any number of things. That's part of its poetical if not philosophical appeal, as poetry is the art of being profoundly vague. So one doesn't like to *disambiguate* too strongly. However, here's a bit more about what I had in mind. Others will have their own, different notions of what it might mean.

Many of us, as writers and/or artists or whatever, find ourselves working with *the material* in ways that we weren't, earlier on. With less emphasis on transcribing our 'inner thoughts and feelings' and more emphasis on what the words are saying. And yes there are often things we want to get them to say, if we can (like now), but we observe that not only are we not entirely clear what that might be, until we find the words, but that even when we do, they aren't quite what we thought they might be and are often better as something we didn't anticipate at all via not mindless manipulation of symbols but through a process of writerly/artistic discovery that involves mind and mindless, material and material, material and spiritual. Via engaging with the material both in an objective manner, as things on a page subject to choice and cutup, random and thoughtful selection...and all the compositional techniques we use.

And this different engagement with *the material* is part of what I had in mind as a kind of *materialism*. Of course the term *materialism* has a very interesting history going back to Indian and Greek atomism and into the contemporary world in many different ways. Usually the *material* is atomistic. Matter. A philosophy of the composition of matter and the generation of the ten thousand things.

Only recently has it been associated with consumerist zeal and denials of the importance of feelings, emotions, and so on. A blip on the map.

Usually there's a scientific element, often a strong one, to materialisms. They often seek to apply an Occam-like razor to eliminate assumptions that are not required or to eliminate attribution of causes to supernatural agents. Materialisms usually do their best to appeal only to reason and material evidence in their theories.

But of course, as artists, we are by no means in the business of appealing solely to reason. We don't produce many theories of the universe and everything but, instead, are basically wordy minstrels singing into the black hole of mind and media. And, for lack of a better word, there is a *spiritual dimension* to what we talk about, what we do, how we go about it, and so on. Emotion, feeling, mood, tone, connotation, subjectivity, all these are normally important to art.

Yet our approach, or the approach of many of us, to writing and/or art or whatever, in our

current age, does involve this *materialism* I mentioned that does indeed have a scientific dimension in that we do try to keep our eye somewhat objectively not on what we ourselves are feeling and thinking about what we're creating but on what others might also get from it and, beyond that, in our approach to working with the material as recombinant, as involved in the processes of network cutup, reassembly, and our sources of the material can be spam or texts recovered from net searches or whatever and our methods of composition can involve the algorithmic and so on. Kedrick James's term for all this is 'writing post-person'.

But, even so, we are not so much interested in creating interesting language machines as in the human appeal of these machines made out of words. So that a contemporary, writerly materialism usually involves some sort of meditation on our relations with language and machines. Not to dehumanize but to locate and explore our humanity in relation to mind and mindlessness, the intention and the unintended, the machine and the human.

There's that Kurzweil book *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. With emphasis on artificial intelligence. And that's interesting, but typically our emphasis is not on artificial intelligence but on our own intelligence extended, changed, dwarfed, zoomed, augmented, pounded, filtered, twittered, frittered, coerced, directed, freed, drugged, blasted, spliced, diced, googled, ogled, bamboozled, frugalled, layered, informationalized, playered, stirred, blurred, penetrated, iconized, infiltrated, visualized, datafied, search enginized, tokenized, blip bopified, ding donglered and piece-wise transformed via our engagement with language and contemporary language environments. Our own intelligences are somewhat artificial. And we operate in a material combinatorium of language not as in a meaningless concourse of atoms but in our own very purposefully processual cyclotrons, intent upon both the material and energy of its release.