

Agential Realism

Thinking with Things

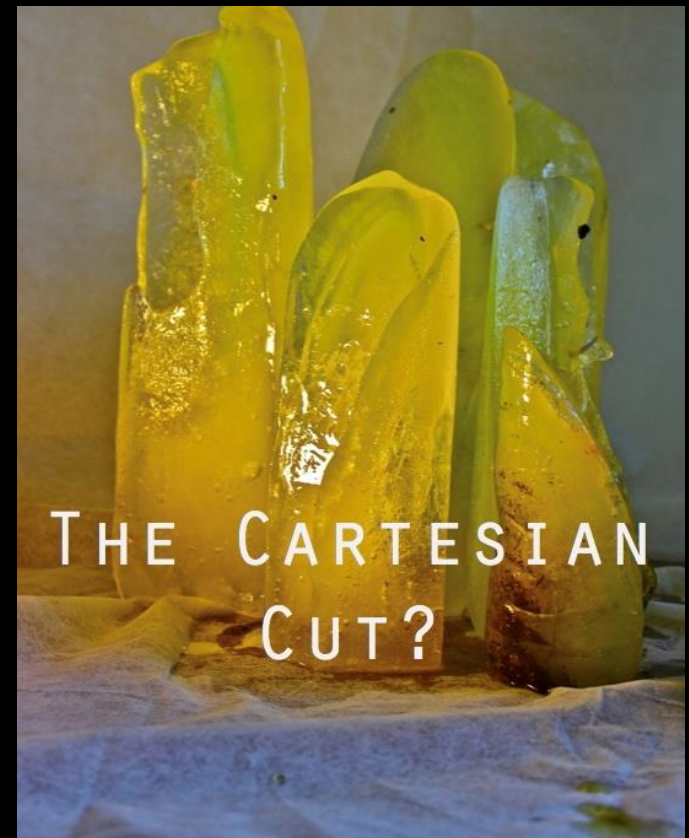
What is Agential Realism?

- A **relational ontology**
- Derives from quantum physics & developed by Barad (2003, 2007)
- Challenges **representationalism**
- “questions the conceptual validity of the thing as a basic entity” (Govier & Steel 2021, 304)



What is Agential Realism?

- “The global North – due to the enlightenment foundation of its knowledge base – tends to imagine the world as something compromised of discrete bounded entities” (Attala 2019: 39–40)
- Agential realism challenges this perspective: Barad’s **Cartesian Cut**
 - “...the primary epistemological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries & properties but rather phenomena” (Barad 2003: 815)



Agential Realist Approach

- Importance given to nonhumans as equal partners (co-constitutive) in the creation of social worlds)
- Rethinks matter & materials “as ontologically variable rather than a fixed backdrop to human action” (Marshall & Alverti 2014: 14)

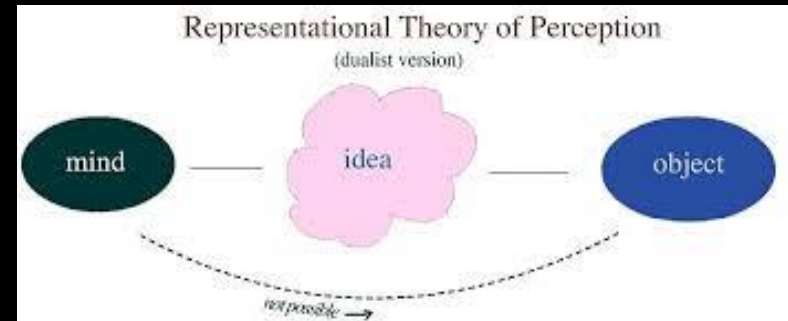


Thingification

- Thingification: the transformation of relations into things/entities
- This affects our understanding of the material world & our relationship to it
- For Barad this suggests a **distrust of materiality** & thus of the innate physicality/matter of the world
- Agential realism recognises the world is matter & moves away from Cartesian binaries
- Following Bohr:
 - Things do not have inherently determinate boundaries
 - Language does not mediate between things (subject & object)

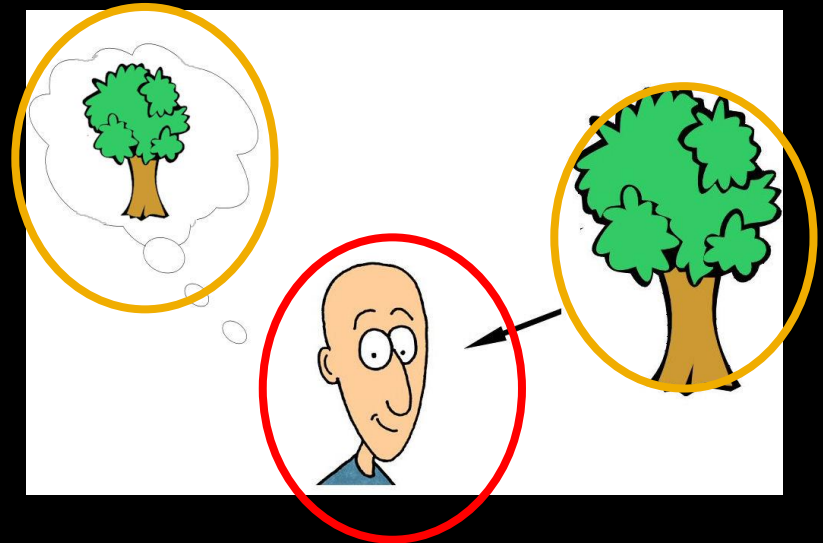
Representationalism

- How did language & culture come to be more trustworthy than matter? (Barad 2003: 801):
 - Why are peoples' symbolic & linguistic depictions of the world are prioritized over the physicality of matter
- Anthropocentric tendency to objectify & represent the world
- **Separates** us from the matter of the world
- Reinforces sense that the world is there for us to interpret & imbue with meaning



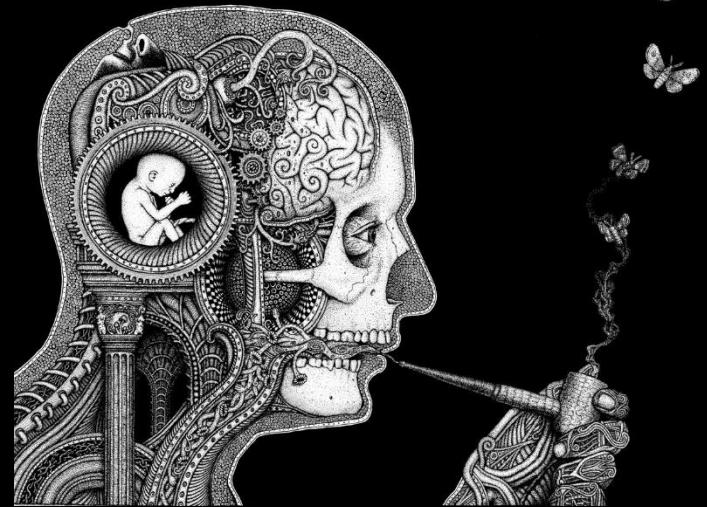
Representationalism

- Tripartite structure:
 - The represented (the known 'reality')
 - The representation (knowledge)
 - The **separated** 'knower' / 'thinking subject'
- Creates an ontological gap between human knowledge & the world:
 - Cartesian by-product / "habit of mind" (Barad 2003: 803)



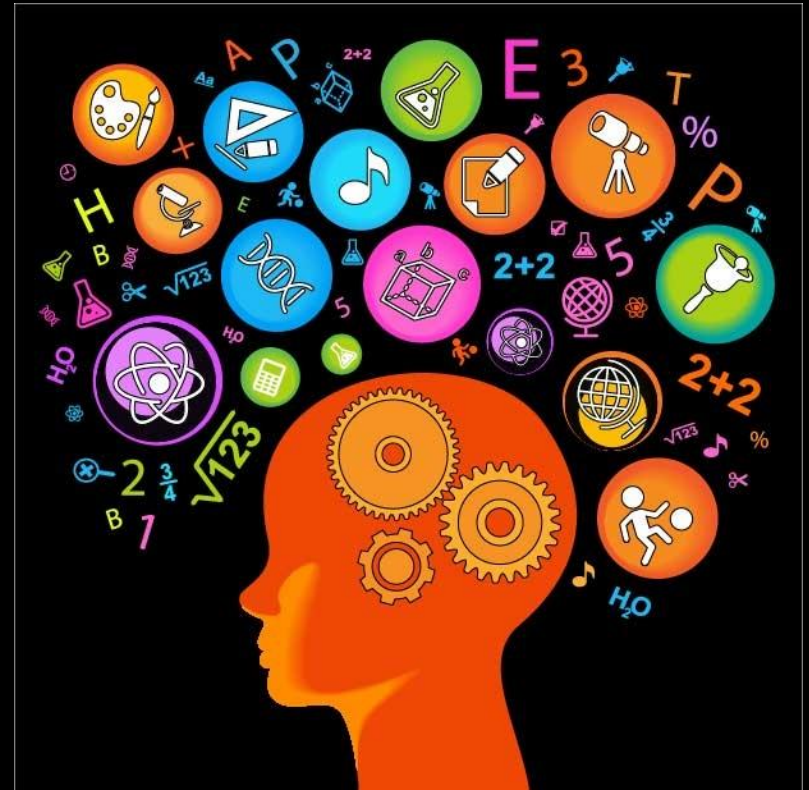
Representationalism

- “Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior... neither has privileged status in determining the other... matter & meaning are mutually articulated” (Barad 2007: 152).
- Emphasises a distinction between reality / the material world & representation



Science & Representation

- Science: critique of representations & knowledge production
- How this is **presented** mediates our access to the material world:
 - Theories, graphs, equations, photos etc.
- Does scientific knowledge represent the world as it is or is this the product of social action?



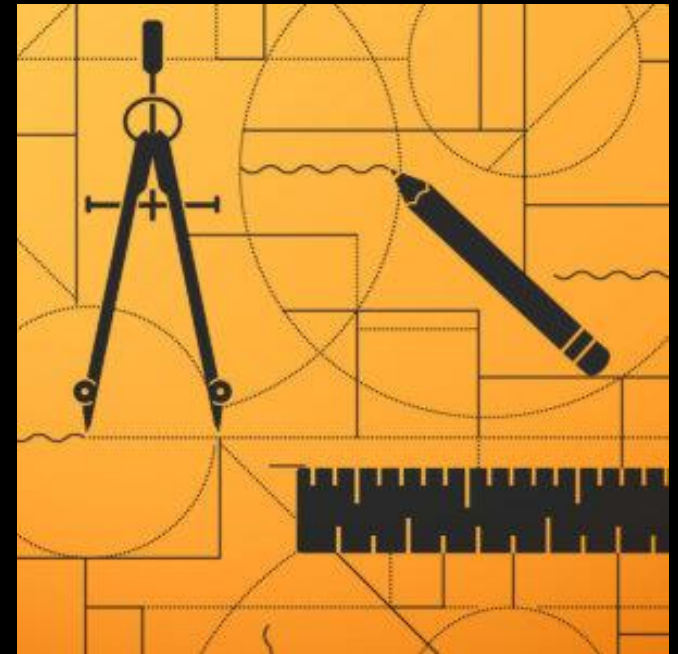
Measuring the World

- How we measure the world affects how we perceive it
- Scientific apparatus are dynamic:
 - Physical arrangements that give meaning to a certain concept & exclude other meanings
 - Enable & constrain knowledge practices & meaning
 - Produce the results that we perceive they measure



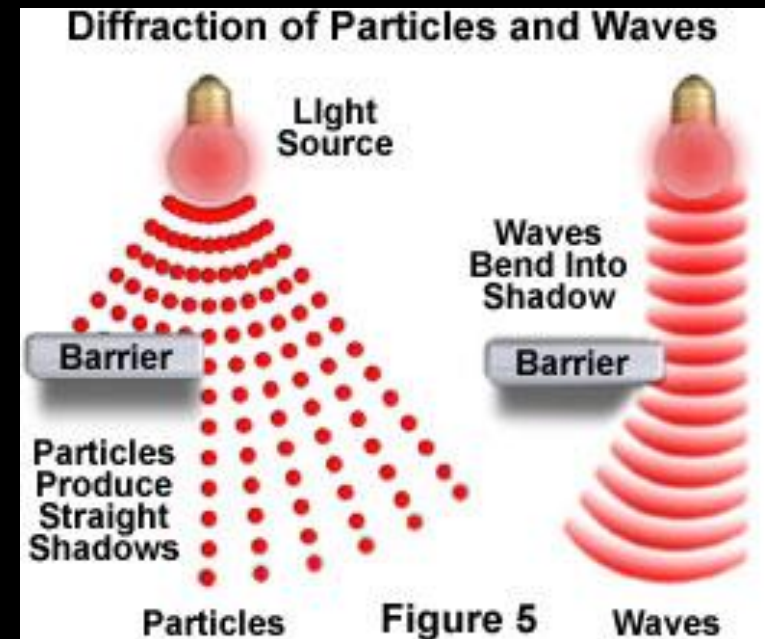
Measuring the World (Niels Bohr)

- Concepts such as momentum & position are specific arrangements not inherent properties of a thing
 - Position: only has meaning when a rigid fixed apparatus is used to measure
 - Momentum: only has meaning in relation to moveable parts
- Measurement & observations = a causal relationship between the apparatus & the phenomena produced
- Primary unit of knowledge = phenomena



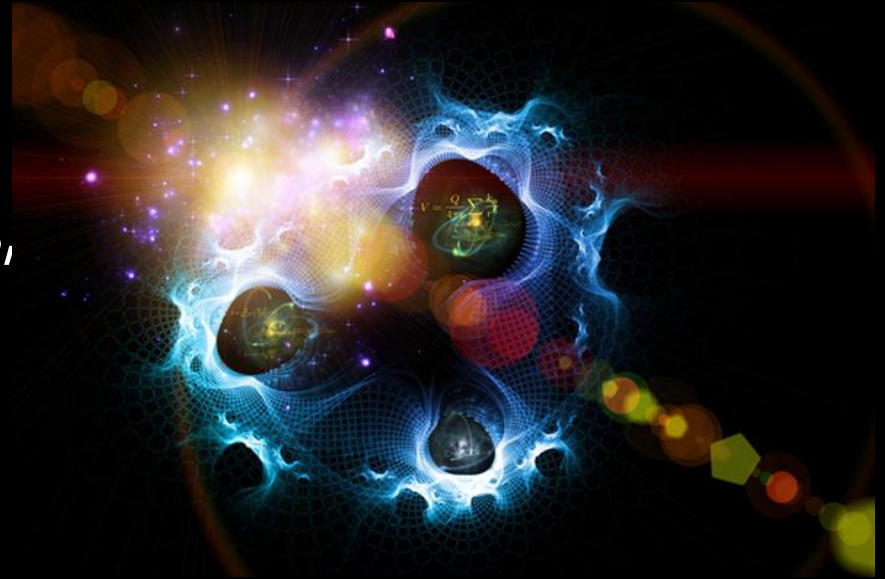
Measuring the World

- Measuring light (electrons):
 - Using one kind of apparatus, they are waves
 - But using another they are particles
- This is not simply some object **reacting** differently but **being** or **behaving differently**
- Apparatus & results are **intra-actions in-phenomena**



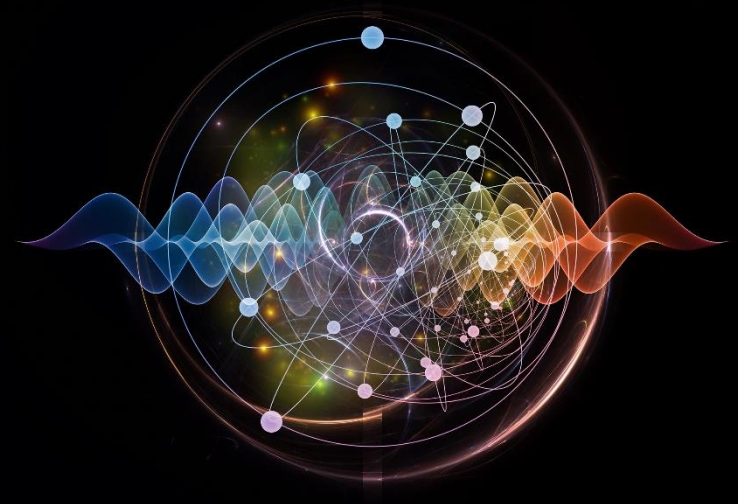
Things-in-Phenomena

- Questions the existence of bounded separate entities (things)
- Think about **relationships** between matter as it entangles, works together & co-produces: **intra-acts**
- The material world is 'composed not of things-in-themselves...but of **things-in-phenomena**' (Barad 2007, 140).



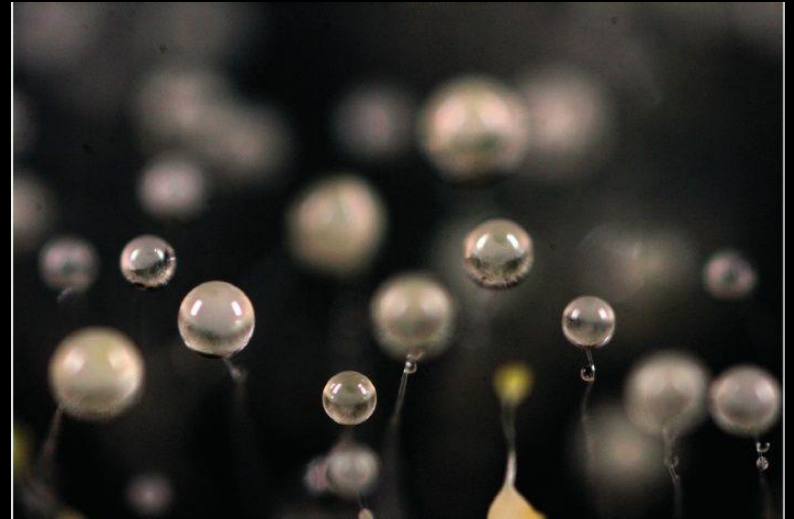
Things-in-phenomena

- Barad questions the conceptual validity of the thing:
 - Emphasises relationships rather than distinct entities
 - Nothing exists unless it is in relationship
 - Things-in-phenomena emerge from the intra-actions of matter
- “Things, then never pre-exist their relating, & the specific form & qualities of the things produced will depend on the material conditions that produce them”
(Marshall & Alberti 2014: 26)



Intra-actions

- Continuous materialization & ongoing becomings of matter which co-mingle to co-produce the material world
- Encourages us to think about **relationships** between matter as it **entangles** commingles, works together, co-produces
- **Blurs boundaries** between things: emphasises flows of matter & becomings



Archaeological Approach?

- Excavators unearth materials in the process of materialization:
 - Taphonomic process
 - Static snapshots of past human action frozen in time
 - Connected assemblages
- Archaeological record & matrix intra-acting
 - Biological, chemical & physical processes which “produce” what we excavate
- Removes the ontological separation of nature & culture & recognizes how humans are one of many relational matterings in the worlding



Body Matters

- Human remains: gendered body progressively marked by lifetime of gendered activities & material engagements
- Continual processes of working with things co-produce & shape the human gendered body:
 - Recursive relationship blurring boundaries between people & things



Anthropological Implications

- Ethnographies repeatedly highlight the fluidity, porosity & relationality of matter:
 - Blurring of body boundaries
 - Questioning separation of people from the environment
- Mun, Ethiopia: consubstantiality between the body & earthy matter as a 'fluency between persons, substances & place' (Fayers-Kerr, 2019: 123-4)
- *Net of Maya* in North India
- Hydrocentric infants in the Amazon



Xié, Amazonia: hydrocentric infants

Summary

- Agential realism questions ontological separation of representationalism
- The world is not made up of “independent objects with inherent boundaries & properties” (Barad, 2003: 815)
- Instead, things (in phenomena) emerge from the agency of matter
- Demonstrates how matter & substances come together in material entanglements
- Allows us to position the archaeological record & the wider environment, as things-in-phenomena
- Firmly positions humans as part of the material world