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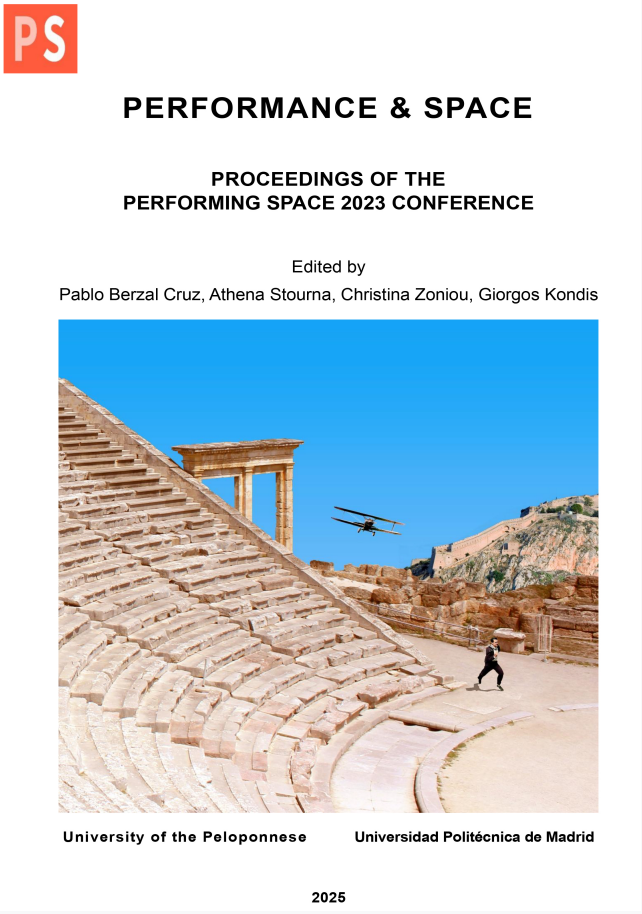

Posthumanist Performativity in Heiner Müller's Play Despoiled Shore Medea-Material Landscape with Argonauts

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Posthumanist Performativity in Heiner Müller's Play *Despoiled Shore Medea-Material Landscape with Argonauts*

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Abstract

In the present paper, Heiner Müller's 1982 play *Despoiled Shore Medea-material Landscape with Argonauts*[1] is explored through a *post-human* interpretation of the myth, where Medea *performs* her mythical story of destruction and loss by means of the landscape itself. In this framework, Medea *becomes* the 'despoiled shore', the polluted anthropogenic landscape that *acts* against its perpetrators, the 'Argonauts' of capitalist society. In the theatrical triptych images of environmental degradation bring to the fore the *non-human* and the *geological,* as components of the myth in Müller's post-modern version. Medea, appearing as Nature herself, becomes the protagonist of a drama that stretches from mythical space to the landscapes of late capitalism. How can Müller's play, and by consequence the myth of Medea, be interpreted through a *non-anthropocentric* notion of performativity; one that focuses on non-living things and landscapes rather than on human subjects? What messages do these entities convey as they act upon our lives?

By examining excerpts of Müller's text, the essay focuses on a renewed understanding of performativity through the lens of new materialist theory and more specifically through Karen Barad's term 'post-humanist performativity'. Working within the theoretical framework of agential realism, Barad offers "an elaboration of performativity—a materialist, naturalist, and posthumanist elaboration—that allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming". (Barad, 2003, 803) In the essay, Müller's *Medea* is associated with such notion of

[1] The current essay is part of my PhD research titled "Medealaboratory. Mappings and Survivals of the Myth of Medea in Contemporary Times. Towards a Redefinition of the Relationship Between Nature, Geology and Culture" conducted in the Architecture Department of the University of Thessaly. The research is conducted in the operating framework of the Center of Research Innovation and Excellence of University of Thessaly (Invitation to submit applications for the grant of scholarships to doctoral candidates of University of Thessaly) and was funded by the Special Account of Research Grants of University of Thessaly.

the performative. The analysis thus focuses on lyrics that reveal transformations in space, composite materialities, human-non-human alliances and the mediating role that inorganic entities play in the production of knowledge. This shift towards the 'post-humanist performativity' of matter ultimately aims to convey a renewed understanding of the contemporary environment as an active agent, rather than a passive space for appropriation.

Keywords: Heiner Müller, Medea, post-humanism, performativity, materiality.

Posthumanist Performativity in Heiner Müller's Play *Despoiled Shore Medea-Material Landscape with Argonauts*

Heiner Müller's 1982 play *Despoiled Shore Medea-material Landscape with Argonauts* is a post-modern version of the myth of Medea and the Argonauts, unfolding in three interrelated parts: two expansive descriptions of landscapes devastated by pollution and war and a dialogic part between Medea and Jason. In the essay, the play is explored through a *post-human* interpretation of the classical myth, where Medea *performs* her story of destruction and loss by means of the landscape and the material entities that comprise it. In the theatrical triptych images of environmental degradation bring to the fore the *non-human* and the *geological*, as components of Müller's version of the myth. These images, taking a variety of forms, follow a climactic structure that culminates in the catastrophe of the final scene. In the first part of the play, Medea *is* the "despoiled shore", the polluted coastal landscape that *acts* against its perpetrators, the Argonauts of capitalist society. In the second part, "Medea-material," the anti-heroine *performs* the murder of Glaece through her mythical poisonous gown—a *cyborgian* entity between an object and a body. Finally, in the last part of the play, she *manifests* herself as both the atomic bomb and the nuclear landscape that follows it. Through these ontological and material transformations, Medea becomes the protagonist of a drama that stretches from mythical space to the landscapes of late capitalism.

By which means could these performative aspects of the play be explored a new through a "non-anthropocentric" perspective? Could – beyond her traditional definition as a subject – Müller's Medea be understood as a *place*, as *material entanglements* or as a *techno-scientific* version of "Nature" in the era of the Anthropocene? After a brief overview of the term "performativity" and its genealogy, the essay focuses on its understanding through the lens of new materialist theory and more specifically through Karen Barad's concept of "post-humanist performativity". Departing from the fields of physics as well as feminist and queer studies, Barad offers "an elaboration of performativity—a materialist, naturalist, and post-humanist elaboration—that allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming" (Barad, 2003, p.803). In the essay, aspects of Müller's text are associated with such notion of performativity, with a focus on excerpts that reveal transformations in space, composite

materialities and human-non-human alliances. What the essay ultimately argues for is a renewed understanding of the environment as an active agent in the "world's becoming" (Barad, 2003, p.824) rather than a static scenery or a passive space for appropriation.

Heiner Müller's *Despoiled Shore Medea-Material Landscape with Argonauts*: Nature, Materiality & the Body

Despoiled Shore Medea-material Landscape with Argonauts is an amalgamation of the ancient myth of Medea and the Argonauts, 20th century history and the landscapes of capitalism. The three-part play, written by Heiner Müller over a period between 1950 and 1982, portrays "the catastrophes, on which humanity is working" (Müller, 2002) in the aftermath of WW II, colonialism and the realities of the Cold War division of Germany between the Western and Eastern bloc. Much has been written on Müller's post-modern approach to the myth as well as on the dramaturgical and performative[2] aspects of the text. Less examined, however, is the play's function as an environmental metaphor of an era defined by pollution, mass industrialization and nuclear war. If the textual tradition of antiquity illustrates the passage from the God-like status of Medea in Hesiod's Theogony and Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode to the anti-heroine's human status in the play of Euripides, Müller follows here another path, pushing the notion of the human to its boundaries. In the new setting of the story—in the era of the Anthropocene—the idea of humanity is shaken from the ground. As the essay argues, Medea while retaining her human voice in the middle part, ultimately *becomes* the landscape herself through a series of material transformations. The analysis thus moves away from the notion of subjectivity and the human and towards the triptych of "nature, materiality and the body" (Barad, 2003, p.812) as a new interpretative lens in order to explore the performative aspects of the text. If "nature" is placed here in quotation marks, understood as the techno-natural landscape that surrounds us, and the "body" refers to both human and non-human as well as inorganic bodies, it is the notion of "materiality" that binds those terms together. Seen from such a perspective performativity does not entail the representation of subjects or characters. Rather, it involves the expressivity of matter and its capacity to act *on* and *throughout* bodies and landscapes. It is through this non-anthropocentric framework that the essay examines the performative aspects of Müller's play.

Barrad's Post-Humanist Performativity: From Language to Matter

The term "performativity" was initially conceived as the capacity of *language* to effect change. Introduced as "performative utterances" the concept is first described by philosopher of language

[2] As the author himself states: "The simultaneity of the three parts of the text can be portrayed any which way", Heiner Müller, Introductory notes *Despoiled Shore Medea-material Landscape with Argonauts*.

John L. Austin (1979) when he refers to a specific feature of language: the capacity of speech and communication not only to describe the world but to act upon it or to consummate an action. In the years that followed it has come to define a wide range of principles ranging from anthropology, social studies, economics, linguistics, philosophy, and theatre studies, as well as in the domains of science studies and feminist and queer studies. Most known is the term's later use in philosophy by Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) as a means of legitimation of post-modern knowledge and also in post-structuralist theory by Jacques Derrida, who reinserts performativity in the very act of writing. In the field of gender studies, performativity became "a central practice for thinking about resistant identities in the feminism and queer theory of the 1980s and '90s" (Nealon, 2021, ix). Philosopher and feminist theorist Judith Butler introduced the concept of "gender performativity" in her analysis of gender development while Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's (2003) term "periperformative" describes queer performativity as an ongoing project for transforming the way boundaries to identity are defined.

What the above approaches have in common is a privilege of the discursive, even when the body is part of that discourse or even its main referent. A different reading of the term, one that primarily focuses on matter, invite the insights of new materialist theory and more specifically, the seminal text "Post-humanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter" by theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad. In her article, Barad offers "an elaboration of performativity—a materialist, naturalist, and post-humanist elaboration—that allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming" (Barad, 2003, p.803). Barad departs from what she calls a "diffractive" reading of the term that combines insights from the fields of science studies as well as feminist and queer theory in order to focus on performativity's association with both human and non-human worlds. She thus proposes a non-anthropocentric understanding of performativity—one that "relates to "all bodies" and "incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors" (Barad, 2003, p.808).

For this purpose, in her essay Barad examines the term's origins in the writings of Foucault and Butler, in order to critically engage while moving beyond their primarily anthropocentric perspective. While Foucault does not mention performativity directly, he nevertheless reveals in his writings, how the body becomes the locus of power that shapes the political subject. According to Barad, however, he fails "to offer an account of the body's historicity in which its very materiality plays an *active* role in the workings of power" (Barad, 2003, p.809). For Barad, it is not simply the contours of the body, but rather "the very atoms" (Barad, 2003, p.810) that constitute it that become active factors in further materializations. This assumption of matter's passivity is also criticized by Barad in Butler's notion of "gender performativity." In her seminal works, *Gender Trouble* (2006/1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler urged us to rethink gender not as an innate essence or natural quality, but as something

that “proves to be performative” (Butler, 2006/1990, p.33). As Barad (2007), however, observes:

> Butler's concern is limited to the production of human bodies […] and her theorization of materialization is parasitic on Foucault's notions of regulatory power and discursive practices, which are limited to the domain of human social practices. (p.145)

Barad’s emphasis on “performativity” thus goes beyond the construction of gender and its socio-political implications and also beyond the linguistic turn that seems has dominated theory for several decades. Reality and the body cannot be defined by language. Instead, what needs to be articulated is the active role *materiality* plays in the body’s historicity.

An intellectual precursor to Barad’s “post-humanist perspective” on performativity, is the notion of the “material-semiotic”, introduced by feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway. It is there that a new non-anthropocentric framework is first reiterated; one that breaks with the Nature / Culture divide that characterised contemporary discourse up to that point. As Haraway argues “the material-semiotic thinks the material, bodily fleshiness and the discursive-linguistic together” (Barad, 2003, p.810). In this theoretical framework, boundaries do not pre-exist in individual entities. Rather, if the latter are perceived as objects of knowledge “their boundaries materialize in social interaction” (Haraway, 1988, p.595). It is through Haraway’s “material-semiotic” that Barad, 2003) will elaborate the idea of “material-discursive”:

> There is a host of material-discursive forces—including ones that get labelled “social,” “cultural,” “psychic,” “economic,” “natural,” “physical,” “biological,” “geopolitical,” and “geological”—that may be important to particular (entangled) processes of materialization. (p.810)

Furthermore, inspired by Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge” – that is a partial, located and embodied form of knowledge – Barad proceeds with her own critique of representationalism, that is the artificial tripartite separation between knowledge, the known and the existence of a knower. In Barad’s posthumanist account the “knower” does not stand in a relation of absolute externality to the natural world being investigated. Rather, she argues: “We are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (Barad, 2003, p.828).

Critically engaging with the genealogy of theorists mentioned above, Barad’s thesis arises in the theoretical framework of agential realism. Crucial to this framework are two interrelated terms: “phenomena” and “intra-activity”. For the first term, “phenomena”, Barad takes the lead from Niels Bohr’s account in order to expand its meaning. If Bohr understands phenomena as “entanglements of objects and agencies of observation” (Barad, 2007, p.309) within the context of the laboratory, for

Barad they exist independently of human action and things. She argues that:

> the primary unit is not independent objects with independently determinate boundaries and properties but rather... "phenomena." In my agential realist elaboration (…) *phenomena* are the *ontological,* inseparability of agentially intra-acting components (Barad, 2003, p.815).

And here Barad introduces another key term, the neologism “intra-action” that the author uses in order to distance herself from the notion of “interaction” with presumes the existence of distinct entities. The term implies that there are no separate entities (x and y), but rather entities arise from intra-actions. As Levi Bryant discusses, “The concept of *inter*action suggests pre-existent entities that then enter into interaction with one another, whereas 'intra' signifies 'within' or 'inside of', and therefore captures the sense of a unitary event or process in which the components do not possess discrete existence” (Bryant, 2016, p.4)[3]. How do then the terms “phenomenon” and “intra-action” relate or emerge from one another? According to Bryant it is through the notion of performativity that the two terms manifest themselves: “A phenomenon, then, would be the unity of intra-acting components produced in a performance” (Bryant, 2016, p.4).

How can—using the concepts above—Barad’s notion of “posthumanist performativity” be summarised? The immediate consequence of an agential realist approach to performativity is that:

> All bodies, not merely “human” bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity—its performativity. This is true not only of the surface or contours of the body but also of the body in the fullness of its physicality, including the very “atoms” of its being. Bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties; they are material-discursive phenomena. “Human” bodies are not inherently different from “nonhuman” ones (Barad, 2003, p.823).

Or, as Levi Bryant summarizes Barad’s concept, “Far from denoting *fiction* or *representation*, performance denotes a series of material intra-actions that produce real and material qualities in things” (Bryant, 2016, 6). Post-humanist performativity thus invites for a new epistemological and ethical paradigm. Knowledge is not limited to individual things themselves but in their relation to the wider world in which they occur and with which they interact. At the same time, if the observer is understood as part of the phenomenon observed, there is always a degree of ethical responsibility involved. Knowledge and meaning are thus produced not only through words, but also collectively, through “material (re)configuring” (Barad, 2003, p.819) of both human and non-human bodies that play a mutual part in the “ongoing performance of the world” (Barad, 2003, p.821).

[3] “A performance, in Barad's (2016, p. 4) sense, is just such an intra-action among internally related components.”

Posthumanist Performativity in Heiner Müller's Medea

If Barad's project aspires "to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming" (Barad, 2003, p.812) how can it help us re-examine Müller's 1982 theatrical interpretation of Medea? As we already saw "post-humanist performativity" moves beyond the traditional context of theatrical performance where *x* represents something as *y*, that is beyond the articulation of a role and towards a material reality. In this sense, the notion of performance does not entail the idea of performers, that is of individual, pre-existing entities. It is not the individual body of the actor or the body of society, but rather the world as whole that performs. By focusing on phenomena and the primacy of matter, Barad's idea of performativity is thus expanded to include "all bodies", making no distinction between the *human*, the *non-human* and the *cyborgian.*[4] In the analysis of Müller's play, I interpret the three parts of *Despoiled Shore Medea-material Landscape with Argonauts* as instances of interaction between these states of being that compose what we name as "the environment".

Despoiled Shore

> Sea by Straussberg Despoiled shore Trace
> Of flaxen-haired Argonauts
> Bristles reeds Dead branches
> THIS TREE SHALL NOT GROW OVER ME Fish-corpses
> Shine in the mud biscuit-tins muck-piles
> FROMM'S ACT CASINO
> Shredded tampons the blood of the women of Colchis
> (Müller, 1982)

From the opening lyrics of "Despoiled Shore", liquid substances such as water and menstrual blood, human hair, vegetal organisms, animal corpses, industrial waste, mud, and excrement introduce the landscape of the first part of the play. Rather than the *human* occupying a privileged and clearly delineated position in respect to the other elements, all entities seem to 'float' on a horizontal plane, composing the common pool of *matter*. This matter, however, is not passive. As Barad (2003) observes:

> Matter is not a support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse. Matter is not immutable or passive. It does not require the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always already an ongoing historicity (p.821).

[4] The *cyborg,* first introduced as a term by Donna Haraway (1991, p.150) "is both a condensed image of imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility for historical transformation."

Seen from such a perspective, Müller's text reveals another aspect of the materiality of landscapes, one where life and death pertain everything; they are perceived as mobilizing forces in a process of composition and decomposition of substances and continuous chemical activity. The Earth is an active compost where traces of human civilization are devoured by geological forces only for new materialities to emerge. These materialities form the landscapes of the Anthropocene.

On the ground however Medea
[…]
She who is skilled
In poisons
(Müller, 1982)

In the midst of such a landscape and only in the final lyrics appears Medea. She is "On the ground". Müller, acknowledging Medea's chthonic origins, places her on a despoiled terrain, part of the components of the Earth. He introduces her as the one who is "skilled in poisons". The "poisons" mentioned here are not other but the substances occupying the first part of the play; by-products of industrial activity, of capitalism and colonisation. Such reference could be understood as a faithful reproduction of the ancient myth's association of Medea with witchcraft. But it can also be interpreted as a lyric that brings forth the *performative* aspect of Medea; her existence as a "phenomenon", a material manifestation of the world's "intra-actions", rather than a human being. From such a post-human perspective, it is not Medea herself that is the bearer of alchemist knowledge. Rather it is through the "intra-activity" of these different elements—Medea, the living and non-living elements of the landscape and the anthropogenic substances in the ground—that poisons *materialize.*

Medea-Material

The second part of the text "Medea-Material" has the form of a dialogue between Medea and Jason. However, rather than engaging in an analysis of the two characters or the extended monologue of the anti-heroine, the essay focuses on the *non-human* and non-linguistic element of the story, Medea's bridal gown. This hybrid entity, by means of its composite, active materiality *performs* the violent act of killing Jason's new bride.

The garb of love my other skin
Embroidered with the hands of the plundered
Out of the gold of Colchis and dyed with the blood
Of the wedding
(Müller, 1982)

The entity is presented as natural (“my other skin”), it is however a man-made (“embroidered”) construct, a mix of inorganic substances (“gold”) and traces of human fluids (“blood”). The gown is not a passive object, a dress that can be easily manipulated by its user. Rather, it is animated through its contact with human skin, acquiring an agency on its own. Seen from Barad’s agential realist perspective, however, agency “cannot be designated as an attribute of “subjects” or “objects” […] is not an attribute whatsoever—it is “doing”/“being” in its intra-activity” (Barad, 2003, pp.826-827). What Barad thus maintains is that agency has more to do with enactments of matter rather than with human will or subjectivity.

> The bridal gown of the woman-barbarian has a way
> Of fatally binding itself to a stranger’s skin
> Wounds and scars yield strong poison
> […]
> Now the gold of Colchis closes her pores
> Plants a forest of knives in her flesh
> (Müller, 1982)

The title *Medea-Material* alludes exactly to this type of agency (“has a way”) of something that is neither a subject nor a delineated object, but a sort of composite materiality—animated, unstable, dependent on impermanent assemblages. The properties of the dress do not pre-exist but are activated and defined through the “intra-action” with the victim’s body. New substances emerge from it, poisons that are transfused by means of the scars it creates on human flesh. This follows a new understanding of the mythic gown’s properties closer to a post-human notion of performativity. As Levi Bryant (2016) observes:

> We cannot think of properties or qualities as *fixed features* of individual entities that they possess inherently independent of their relations to other things. Rather, the properties of an entity are the result of a *dynamic genesis*, a becoming, in tandem with the world about them that produces these properties (p.7).

Next to the categories of the “human” and the “non-human’, the gown can be better understood as the “cyborgian” form of agency that Barad also refers to when speaking of performativity. Neither a subject nor an inanimate thing, it is rather a material body somewhere between the human and the artificial. A composite skin that manifests itself differently—as inert matter or animated entity—according to the “intra-actions” with its environment.

Landscape with Argonauts

In the third part of the text, “Landscape with Argonauts”, a new voice occupies the play. It is a collective ‘I’, that through the personification of Jason, represents humanity itself, or rather, its end. Subjectivity is articulated here as the collective (male) voice of human civilization. A civilization that finds itself in the face of extinction, in a hostile environment where death pertains everything.

Thin between I and ‘No longer I’ (Müller, 1982).

Throughout this part of the play Medea remains silent. She finally makes her appearance in the end of the text, not through spoken word but by means of an all-pervasive atomic blast. She becomes the ultimate catastrophe that Ivar Kvistad names as a *dea ex machina*, the atomic bomb that eradicates civilization. Müller’s Medea is a product of her times: a combination of nuclear energy, technological apparatuses and the violence of men, that she returns back as a large-scale explosion. She manifests herself both as a techno-scientific body[5] and as the landscape of catastrophe that emerges from the ruins. Medea as a “phenomenon” demonstrates how material bodies—humans, animals, inorganic matter and technological apparatuses—performatively materialize at sites of the Anthropocene. “Landscape with Argonauts” is such a site “where techno-logical, biological, technoscientific, (bio-)political, and economic forces intra-act” (Barla, 2019, p. 10) in “dynamic relationality” (Barad, 2003, p.820).

I felt MY blood draining from MY veins
And MY body transformed into the landscape
Of MY death
(Müller, 1982)

In Jason’s account of his death and transformation into the landscape, we thus see the ethical repercussions of Barad’s theory. The perpetrator dissolves into the landscape of his own device (“blood”, “body”, “landscape”, “death”). As Levi Bryant (2016) remarks:

> Insofar as the observer is not independent of the observed but is a component in the phenomenon generated in knowledge production, there is a dimension of ethical responsibility in inquiry. The manner in which we choose to 'actualize' phenomena involves a dimension of choice in which we are complicit. After all, we could always choose to actualize phenomena differently. (p.10)

[5] As Josef Barla (2019, p.10) argues “bodies as always already technologized bodies and technology as always already a part of ‘us’”.

This sense of responsibility in relation to the world that surrounds us is crucial in Barad's concept of post-human performativity. In Müller's Medea it is the lack of any ethical questioning from the side of the "Argonauts", that is human civilization, that culminates in the play's tragic ending.

Conclusion

In Müller's version of the myth Medea manifests herself as a "phenomenon" in Barad's sense, that first appears as all-encompassing coastal pollution, then as a toxic veil and, finally in the last part of the text, as both an atomic bomb as well as the landscape of destruction that follows it. Merging mythical elements together with apparatuses and materials of the Anthropocene the play creates a vision of the world where 'Nature' and 'Culture' are inseparable, one devouring, merging into the other in ever-evolving combinations and states of dissolution. Medea, appearing as a techno-natural force, becomes the protagonist of a drama that stretches from mythical space to the landscapes of late capitalism.

What environmental metaphors can the ontological transformation of the anti-heroine from an insurgent subject to a revolting landscape convey? And, what messages do these types of contemporary landscapes reveal as they act upon our lives? Barad's emphasis on the relation between entities, human and non-human, and their "intra-action" has fundamental political and ethical repercussions when it comes to understanding landscapes and the environment in general. It argues for a sense of responsibility in a world within which we *perform* together with other entities in the drama of life. Reading Müller's *Despoiled Shore Medea-material Landscape with Argonauts* through such a *non-anthropocentric* notion of performativity invites a new understanding of Medea's tragic story. If myths can activate new knowledge practices it is through their entanglements with the materiality of contemporary spaces; through these they can transmit the reality of the destroyed landscapes of the Anthropocene.

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