

# What’s the Matter with Materialism?

by Andrew Payne

The following is an excerpt of a seven-day email dialogue between two speakers on the contemporary meaning of matter. The speakers are named here **S1** and **S2**, what follows is the first day of that conversation. The complete text of the seven-day dialogue is set to be published in full at a later date.

## DAY 1: WHITHER MATERIALISM?

**S1: So what’s the matter—with materialism, I mean?**

**S2:** Your question of course alludes to a conversation we had some months ago in which I cast suspicion on contemporary claims to the materialist position, and suggested that, through too wide and habitual a use, the term “materialism” was in some danger of bursting at the semantic seams. Though no doubt rashly dismissive of the claim that “matter” and its cognate terms (materialism, materiality) continue to make on our intellectual attention, the questions I posed to you and the suspicions I expressed were intended, among other things, to point to the increasing importance of the “immaterial” in discussions of the epistemo-ontological, technological, and political-economic disposition of the present.

**S1: Can you say a little more concerning what you imagine this crisis of materialism—if we can call it that—to imply?**

**S2:** An important indication that something might be shifting in our conception of what the materialist position entails in view of contemporary realities was Jean François Lyotard’s “Les Immatériaux,” an essay that was first circulated in 1983 before being published in *Art & Text* in 1985, the same year in which it became the basis for a major exhibition organized by Lyotard at the Pompidou Centre. In this work Lyotard develops certain themes from his earlier discussions of the dominance of techno-scientific thinking within what he was then attempting to describe as a postmodern condition. Citing the neo-Leibnizian turn in contemporary thought and the postmodern preoccupation with complexity, Lyotard argues that these are symptoms of an ongoing dissolution of the mind/matter distinction that had organized the Cartesian trajectory in modern thought. According to this account, postmodernity would amount to a Leibnizian counter-modernity in which mind and matter are conceived on a continuum, for which the term “Immatériaux” would serve as the name. As Lyotard puts it in a paper he gave at a conference sponsored by the London ICA in that same year:

What is remarkable (to me, at any rate) in the so-called ‘new technologies’ is that

the machines involved are not substitutes for mechanical operations, but for certain mental and/or linguistic operations. For example: calculation; storage and circulation of information; storage and availability of rules, or literary compositions, and so on. These sorts of machines assume a high level of analysis, not only of the mind, but also of matter: that is to say a merging of hard sciences (or sciences of matter generally) and soft sciences. An effect of that merging is that the principle that mind and matter are two different substances (as conceived in Descartes’ philosophy for instance) is less and less convincing.

The overlapping of mind and matter in contemporary techno-science is the aspect we were particularly concerned to emphasize in the exhibition Les Immatériaux. We were trying to exhibit, not the unrepresentable, and to that extent it is not a sublime exhibition, but the retreat of the traditional division between mind and matter. Maybe the human mind is simply the most complex combination of matter in the universe...Maybe our task is that of complexifying the complexity we are in charge of. Perhaps this is a materialist point of view, but only if we see matter not as substance, but as a series of invisible elements organized by abstract structures. So we can be materialists today and in a sense maybe we must be. But within this horizon, the development of techno-science induces a slow but profound transformation of our conception of the relationship between man and nature.<sup>1</sup>

The “immaterial” has been understood by any number of thinkers following in Lyotard’s wake as a useful term for describing the new modalities of labour and consumption that follow from the techno-scientific developments he associates with postmodernism. For instance, In *L’Immatériel* (2003), André Gorz, drawing on a burgeoning literature on the new “post-material” economy, links the concept of immaterial labour to both the Lyotardian theme of the “postmodern” and the emergence of a new “knowledge economy”:

Modern capitalism, centred on the validation of large quantities of material fixed capital, is increasingly giving way to a postmodern capitalism centred on the valourization of so-called immaterial capital, which is also termed ‘human capital,’ ‘knowledge capital’ or ‘intelligence capital.’ This change is accompanied by new transformations of work. The simple abstract labour which has, since Adam Smith, been regarded as the source

of value, is giving way to complex labour. Material productive work, measurable in units of output per unit of time, is giving way to so-called immaterial work, to which the classic standards of measurement are no longer applicable.<sup>2</sup>

Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have offered similar prognostications on the dematerialization of the labour process that has occurred with the shift from a Fordist economy based on heavy industry to a post-Fordist “service economy,” a shift in which computation is again seen as having a crucial role to play:

Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labour involved in this production as an *immaterial labour*—that is, a labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, communication...Even when direct contact with computers is not involved, the manipulation of symbols and information along the model of computer operation is extremely widespread. In an earlier era workers learned how to act like machines both inside and outside the factory. We have learned (with the help of Muybridge’s photos, for example) to recognize human activity in general as mechanical. Today, we increasingly think like computers, while communications technologies and their model of interaction are becoming more central to labouring activities.<sup>3</sup>

As Negri observes in his response to Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, these political-economic transformations have ontological and epistemological preconditions and corollaries. Hence dematerialization, or, at any rate, immaterialization (but let us not be too quick to assume that they are equivalent phenomena) involves not merely a political-economic transformation, a new calibration of the relationship between use, exchange, and surplus; it also implies a new understanding of Being itself, an understanding informed by the idea of the spectre or *revenant* that would be paradoxically prior to and a condition of the Thing of which it is putatively the ghostly remainder or trace. What Negri stresses, pointing to what he imagines to be the political limits of deconstruction, is the relationship between this spectralization of Being and new modalities of “exploitation”:

In reality, in Marx’s work in both *The German Ideology* and *Capital*, the non-spectrality of the productive subject opposed the conditions for constructing capital’s spectrality: the former was indicated through the activity of demystification and was expressed in the will to reappropriation, each and every time the movement of exchange-value clashed with the irreducible independence of ‘use-value,’ therefore with a heterogeneity capable of generating an alternative. But where can heterogeneity be found? Where can use-value and subjectivity be found at present? Today, the labour paradigm has greatly changed (in particular the division between intellectual and manual labour and the alternatives linked to different projections of forms of value). In as much as it concerns labour, the postmodern is not simply an ideological image, but the recording of a deep and irreversible transformation in which all traits of the Marxian critiques of value—more precisely, that theory of spectres—stop short. “These seismic events come from the future, they are given from out of the unstable, chaotic, and dis-located ground of our times. A disjointed or dis-adjusted time without which there would be neither history, nor event, nor promise of justice.” Derrida’s first conclusion is powerful. It introduces us to the new phase of relations of production, to the world of change in the labour paradigm...

If the law of value no longer works in describing the entire process of capital, the law of surplus-value and exploitation is, in any case, constitutive of the logic of production. The fact that some commodities occupy productive space and articulate its order (more so than do the masses of commodities) does not remove the other fact: that these discursive sets are themselves the products of industrial capitalism, both cause and effect, circularly, of a general exploitative device. Taking this situation into account therefore means recognizing that... human labour, both mental and manual, is increasingly implicated in exploitation, prisoner of a world of ghosts producing wealth and power for some, misery and discipline for the masses. Together, in an indistinguishable manner, both exploitation and discursive universes travel the Internet, constructing themselves through commu-

nitive networks while fixing expropriative dividing lines therein. Accumulation nowadays consists in that kind of acquisition of knowledge and social activity taking place within these communicative horizons. At the same time, if those mechanisms of expropriation do not follow in the footsteps of the exploitative devices of industrial labour’s old ontology, then they suppose new ways—immaterial and ghostly ones. On the one side, we have communication and the wealth that accumulates therein; on the other we have solitude, the misery, the sadness, the exodus and the new class wars that define this exploitation of labour in a world of immateriality and spectral production.<sup>4</sup>

So from these few scattered indications (Lyotard, Gorz, Negri, Derrida) a composite portrait of our age begins to emerge, one in which techno-scientific and political transformations (resulting from the prevalence of mnemotechnical aids within the processes of production and consumption) affect massive transformations in the concepts of labour, value, and, indeed, Being itself. These are all subject to a process of immaterialization in which entrenched divisions between material and mental regimes start to collapse. Here we enter a world in which the solid difference between something and nothing, reality and its simulation, appears to give way; it is the world of the specter or *revenant*. Of course, a claim such as this begs all kinds of questions concerning the relationship between its historical and ontological dimensions, and in all of these accounts of the present we can observe a certain slippage between historical and ontological registers. That is, on the one hand we are told that Being is, and has always been, “hauntological,” to borrow Derrida’s nonce term; on the other hand, we are told that this hauntological character of Being is the product of, or at least only fully reveals itself in, the present, and in response to the techno-scientific and political-economic transformations that affect the dis-jointure specific to our time. In Derrida’s interpretation of Shakespeare avec Marx, the time that is out of joint in Hamlet’s famous phrase is not this time or that time, it is time as such; what is “out of joint” is time in general and each time out.

**S1: Could you say a bit more about the ontological implications of this shift?**

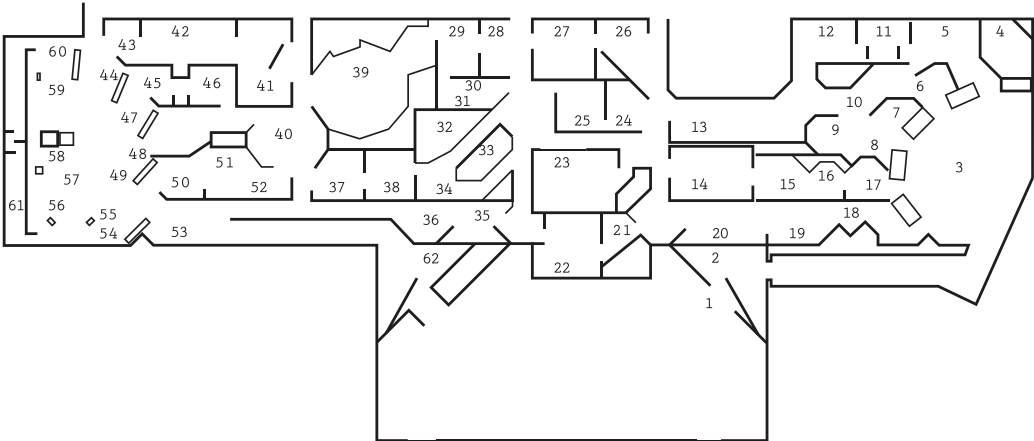
**S2:** Well, using Negri as our guide, we have already observed a degree of affinity between Lyotard’s figure of the “immatériaux” and Derrida’s “revenant.” To these two notions we could no doubt add Deleuze’s concept of the “virtual” and Baudrillard’s description of “simulation.” In the cases of Lyotard, Derrida, and Baudrillard, it is, all differences aside, a question of a fundamental torsion within and intensification of the processes of de-realization that Marx anatomizes in his description of commodity fetishism and capitalist exploitation of the superabundance of the human subject’s labour power with respect to its needs. The case of Deleuze’s “virtual” is more complex. But your question is one about the ontological implications of this torsion. What would a materialist ontology look like on the other side of Lyotard’s re-conception of matter “not as substance, but as a series of invisible elements organized by abstract structures?” Over the next several days I want to suggest—with specific reference to the work of Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Derrida—that such an ontology must be an ontology of the letter. I would then like to propose Gilles Deleuze’s ontology of life, whose fundamental gestures I will undertake to unpack, as the only serious rival to this ontology of the letter. In our final conversation, I would like to link my discussions of the ontological perspectives of these four thinkers (Lacan, Badiou, Derrida, Deleuze) to the various speculations on the “immaterial” reviewed above. In addition, I would like to say something about the implications of these critical engagements with the materialist legacy for the cultural disciplines generally, but for architecture most especially.

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### Notes

- Jean-François Lyotard, “Complexity and the Sublime.” *ICA Documents 4: Postmodernism* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986) 10.
- André Gorz, *The Immaterial: Knowledge, Value and Capital* (London: Seagull Books, 2010).
- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 290.
- Antonio Negri, “The Specter’s Smile,” *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx* (London: Verso Press, 1999) 7-8, 10-11.

plan de l'exposition



Philippe Delis, architecte DPLG

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|-------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Acces                | 22. Négoce peint           | 43. Toutes les copies             |
| 2. Vestibule d'entrée   | 23. Musicien malgré lui    | 44. Logique artificielles         |
| 3. Théâtre du non-corps | 24. Langue vivante         | 45. Architecture plane            |
| 4. Nu vain              | 25. Jeu d'échecs           | 46. Petits invisibles             |
| 5. Deuxième peau        | 26. Corps éclaté           | 47. Mémoires artificielles        |
| 6. Touts les peaux      | 27. «Infra-mince»          | 48. Volées d'escaliers            |
| 7. Habitaclé            | 28. Surface introuvable    | 49. Jus d'orange                  |
| 8. Homme invisible      | 29. Indiscernables         | 50. Référence inversée            |
| 9. Mangeur pressé       | 30. Variables Cachées      | 51. Profondeur simulée            |
| 10. Ration alimentaire  | 31. Matricules             | 52. Visites simulées              |
| 11. L'ange              | 32. Auto-engendrement      | 53. Mots en scène                 |
| 12. Corps chanté        | 33. Irreprésentable        | 54. L'objet perdu                 |
| 13. Tous les bruits     | 34. Images calculées       | 55. Trace de voix                 |
| 14. Lumière dérobée     | 35. Terroir oublié         | 56. Les mots sont des objets      |
| 15. Espace réciproque   | 36. Tous les auteurs       | 57. Contes et chansons modulaires |
| 16. Trace de trace      | 37. Arôme simulé           | 58. Epreuves d'écriture           |
| 17. Ombre de l'ombre    | 38. Odeur peinte           | 59. Texte dématérialisé           |
| 18. Vite-habillé        | 39. Matériau dématérialisé | 60. Machines Stylistiques         |
| 19. Les trois mères     | 40. Creusets stellaires    | 61. Temps différé                 |
| 20. Préparlé/Précuisiné | 41. Peinture luminescente  | 62. Vestibule de sortie           |
| 21. Monnaie du temps    | 42. Peintre sans corps     |                                   |

Exhibition plan, *Les Immatériaux*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985