

Philosophical and Anthropological Explorations of Digital/ New Media Materialities

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Abstract

One of the oldest philosophical and theoretical constructs, both in Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, is materiality. What constitutes matter and form was dear to Aristotle as it was to the authors of the Sangam and post-Sangam¹ treatises. Contemporary discussions on the nature and trajectories of digital/new media require a rethinking at two levels with the help of the notion of materiality. These two levels are philosophical and anthropological. What constitutes digital/new materialities and how these materialities are shaping our being is the focus of this paper.

Key words: *Digital/New Media Materialities, Individuation, Form, Matter, Public and Private Digital Interfaces, ATMs, Mobile Phones*

Beyond Hylomorphism

At a time when the digital/new media cultures are growing rapidly in India, there is a need to engage with their contexts in terms of the material logic of matter, form and *being*. Aristotle conceives matter and form as interdependent. They are constituted by the factor of change or transformation which gives form to matter (Granger pp.138-141). All natural beings are *beings* because of the factors of the potential for change and the actual change. The change also proceeds from the need to fill the lack, the need for a substantial or accidental transformation. In the case of the former, the *being* becomes a new entity. In the case of the later, the change does not change the substantive character of the *being* but becomes a site of

accidental changes. In this scheme of Aristotle, the two changes can not co-exist in an entity. Either the change causes a new *being*, an entirely new form or entity or the change causes accidental changes in the form. They can not co-exist.

But, in the conception of the post-Sangam philosopher of Tamil Nadu, *Thirumoolar*, (Circa.600 AD), the two changes can also coexist in one plane, as a site of deceptive *beings*. In chapter 8 and poem 21 of *Thirumandiram*, he points to the need to think beyond the form and matter logic central to Aristotle's *Hylomorphism*. In *Thirumoolar's* conception, the form defies matter as much as matter defies form. Form becomes invisible as much as matter. This also brings in a new notion of subject-

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object dualism, wherein the concrete nature of form disintegrates at the site of its matter, even as another perspective allows the disintegration of the matter at the site of the form. This brings alive the later day Heideggerian disavowal of Aristotelian *Hylomorphism*.

The big elephant kept the wood hidden
The big elephant was hidden in the wood
The Supreme being is hidden by the things
(elements)
The things (elements) are hidden by the
Supreme

Chapter 8 and poem 21 of *Thirumandiram*

As mentioned earlier, here the form is no different from the matter and vice-versa, as they are caught up in the dilemma of *facticity*, as pointed out by Heidegger. *Facticity* is how we look at matter and form, rather than what these are.

“Coming into the lecture-room, I see the lectern. . . . What do “I” see? Brown surfaces, at right angles to one another? No, I see something else. A largish box, with another smaller one set upon it? Not at all. I see the lectern at which I am to speak. You see the lectern, from which you are to be addressed, and from which I have spoken to you previously. In pure experience there is no “founding” interconnection as if I first of all see intersecting brown surfaces, which then reveal themselves to me as a box, then as a desk, then as an academic lecturing desk, a lectern, so that I attach lectern-hood to the box like a label. All that is simply bad and misguided interpretation, a diversion from a pure seeing into the experience.

...In the experience of seeing the lectern something is given to me from out of an immediate environment [Umwelt]. This environmental milieu (lectern, book, black-board, notebook, fountain pen, caretaker, student fraternity, tram-car, motor-car, etc.) does not consist just of things, objects, which are then conceived as meaning this and this; rather, the meaningful is primary and immediately given to me without any mental detours across thing-oriented apprehension. Living in an environment, it signifies to me everywhere and always, everything has the character of world. It is everywhere the case that “it worlds” [es weltet], which is something different from “it values” [es wertet].” (Heidegger, 2000).

The idea of situatedness is tied to the anchors of spatiality of being there and the temporality of being before. The *facticity* of the elephant hidden by the wood and the wood hidden by the elephant is akin to the world in which we find ourselves with objects which are not objects we perceive them to be, with a concrete form and matter. They are as deceptive as our subjective experiences in a world where everything everywhere is a thinkable category and everything has the character of the world.

The notions of *being* and *facticity* are tied inextricably and in a complex manner in Heideggerian prose. “*Facticity*” is the designation we will use for the character of the being of “our” “own” *Dasein*. More precisely, this expression means: *in each case* “this” *Dasein* in its being-there *for a while at the particular time* (the

phenomenon of the “awhileness” of temporal particularity, d. “whiling,” tarrying for a while, not running away, *being-there-at-home-in ...*, being-there-involved-in ... , the being-there of *Dasein*) insofar as it is, in the character of its being, “*there*” in the manner of *be-ing*. [91 Being-there in the manner of *be-ing* means: not, and never, to be there primarily as an *object* of intuition and definition on the basis of intuition, as an *object* of which we merely take cognizance and have knowledge. Rather, *Dasein* is *there* for itself in the “how” of its own most being. The how of its being opens up and circumscribes [10] the respective “there” which is possible for a while at the particular time. Being-transitive: to be factual life! Being is itself never the possible object of a having, since what is at issue in it, what it comes to, is itself: *being*. ...Accordingly, “*factual*” means something which is of itself articulated with respect to, on the basis of, and with a view to such *afactual* character of being and “is” in this manner. If we take “life” to be a mode of “being,” then “factual life” means: our own *Dasein* which is “there” for us in one expression or another of the character of its being, and this expression, too, is in the manner of being.” (Heidegger, 1999).

Long before Heidegger, Eastern philosophers, particularly those who professed Tamil *Buddhism*, advocated a holistic approach to resolve the inadequacies of the Aristotelian approach to materiality. *Seethalai Sathanar*, the author of *Manimekalai* (Circa.300-500

AD), one of the five major epics in Tamil who dealt with materiality in terms of visuality. He said that there can be only two levels of logic. One logic posits direct sensory-based encounters with things. This may be termed as the logic of visuality. The second logic is based on intuitions, assumptions and ideas and, hence, is an indirect encounter. According to *Sathanar*, the second logic is the best one to engage with the world, to know that the *being* is a thinkable category and not just a category defined by our senses.

Towards an Anthropological Conception of Digital/New Media Materiality

In the Heideggerian notion of *Facticity*, the encounters of the *being* are in the situatedness of things “there” and “everywhere”, where all the things are caught up in their worlds as well as others’ worlds in a plane of immanence, It is a plane where our experience of things are secondary to how things matter to us. This is akin to what the pioneer of material cultural studies, Daniel Miller (1987), terms as the “humility of things”. Says Miller, “What I called ‘the humility of things’ (Miller 1987: 85-108). The surprising conclusion is that objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not ‘see’ them. The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are

unconscious of their capacity to do so. Such a perspective seems properly described as 'material culture' since it implies that much of what we are, exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us."

In simplistic anthropological terms, as per Daniel Miller's framework, a material is not materiality. Things do not matter to us in direct or visible modes. Things are important for forging indirect or invisible relationships in creating an environment of material cultures. They are, as *Sathanar* said, better revealed not through sensory experiences, but through our assumptions, ideas and intuitions. In sum, materiality is not the quality of being material. It is more than that. It is what constitutes relationships in invisible modes between the *being* and the things. Its purpose is not to create forms out of matter through the site of change. Its purpose is to create an external environment of material culture where the experiences of the *being* become sites of Heideggerian *transcendence*.

Another useful pointer in this regard comes from the author of the oldest available *Sangam* classic, *Tholkappiyam* (Circa.500 BC). *Tholkappiyar's* famous construct of materiality is rooted in the Eastern philosophy of ancient *Jainism*. His conception of the material world is anchored in two qualities of materiality, the coming together of the five natural elements/things (land, water, fire, air and sky) and the causation of the state of uncertain reality, *i.e.* world.

Land, water, fire, air and sky, the
Mix of these five is the world, the
uncertain reality

(Chapter on Conventions - 91)

In all the above-mentioned conceptions of materiality, what is important is the coming together of things/elements to provide us encounters of things "there" and "everywhere" of our material reality. In all these conceptions, materiality is not about the matter and the form. Materiality is about the world of things with a character of the worlds. Materiality is about the possibilities to engage with our cultures differently as material cultures.

Digital/New Media Materialities

If material cultures embody the invisible relationships engendered by things and their *beings*, what constitutes the material cultures of digital/new media materialities in our times is a moot question. Digital/new media materialities are contentious categories if we invoke the logic of Lev Manovich. While (Manovich,2003) questions the very basis of "digital" as problematic as he views what is outside the device as the "digital" and not what is inside the "digital devices." He said: "If we limit ourselves by focusing solely, as Mitchell does, on the abstract principles of digital imaging, then the difference between a digital and a photographic image appears enormous. But if we consider concrete digital technologies and their uses, the difference disappears. Digital photography simply

does not exist” (Mitchell,1992). However, let us work with even this inadequate site of materiality, digital, to bring alive the cultural dimensions of materials that are at once sites of *facticities* and anchors of our everyday life. It is important to understand how the digital/new media forms and matter result in digital/new media materialities as per the philosophical and anthropological constructs outline above.

Digital/new media materialities can be grouped, for the sake of a simple understanding of their states of existence as the “humility of things”, into three basic categories. I) Public Digital Interfaces and II) Private Digital Interfaces. The use of the word, *interface* is meant to bring alive the possibilities of multiple or countless sites of subjects-objects and their relationships, as posited by *Thirumoolar*. The philosophical construct of materiality, according to the example given by *Thirumoolar* in the poem quoted above, envisions a world of a material culture wherein there are at least three kinds of forms and matter (objects) with reference to the example of an elephant in the wooden sculpture. They are: I) the wooden elephant II) the elephant disappearing in the wood III) the wood disappearing in the elephant. Accordingly, there are three subjective positions to relate to the materialities of the three forms of matter and forms. Digital entities appear as homogenous/unified in their conventional states. But these are deceptive states. Digital entities can be better studied as *interfaces* between and among their

analog counterparts in the everyday lives of people.

Digital entities do not exist alone. They exist in a relationship with other things in a given space and time. Their relationships are as good as their *interfaces* which link them with their counterparts. ATMs and digital kiosks stand as good examples of the public digital interfaces. What is the *facticity* of these interfaces? What is the materiality of these interfaces? In the Indian context, they are the interfaces that succeed and fail simultaneously in constituting a certain material culture for their users. They succeed because of their instrumental functions. The ability to dispense cash and provide other banking services with the support of the aural, tactile, cognitive and visual faculties of the users in their unique sites of situatedness and temporality. They have a sense of *facticity*, in the Heideggerian mode, when they implicate us even before we experience the encounters with them. They are also having a character of the world in which they find their situatedness and temporality. This is, in the Indian case, a cultural character of India/Indians. This is a site of materiality that has difficulties in living with the litter that is spewed by the machine, thanks to the people who mediate the spewing of litter by the ATMs. This is also the site of materiality that does not work always, despite being digital and networked. This is also the site of materiality where the members of the oral society disregard the need to respect others’ privacy in public spaces. They

enter and leave at will. They enter, talk over their phones loudly and leave in a hurry, hitting others' bodies.

The examples of private digital interfaces are mobiles, tabs and laptops. Mobile phones provide very good contexts of engagements for Indians as members of an oral society that is raring to pick a quarrelsome conversation with a technology that is at once universal, in terms of its cultural neutrality and Western, in terms of its technological origin. These conversations are as much about the "humility of things" as about the "creative disruptions" of the "humility of things". The "creative disruptions" work at two levels, I) the innards of the applications, where the factor of "orality" subsumes the factor of textuality and II) the everyday practices with mobile phones.

As regards the first level, the factor of textuality takes new flights with a vengeance in applications such as *Whatsapp*. The "orality" of users takes advantage of the voice recording functions in myriad ways as if the phone is not meant for making voice calls. The applications and their users also spew as much a verbal/image litter as the ATMs. As regards the second level, mobile phones have come to define the visuality of their users, in a very limited, rather condescending sense, through the practices which engender group selfies and individual selfies and divorce the contextual realities of the selfies. Selfies have become sites of co-located, truncated human faces/bodies, for the sake of producing images which have a huge

deficit in terms of their archival value and screen life. Mobiles are also emerging as the lead anchor of everyday practices inside domestic spaces. As in buses, trains, work places, they are the sites of engagements for the people lost in the state of the strange coming together of an uncertain reality of *facticities of being*.

These interfaces are causing what Hui terms as the individuation of forms where the "materiality seems to come from elsewhere." Referring to the differences between the digital individuation of form and other individuations of the form (craft and machine based), Hui says, "The third individuation of form finds its materiality in digital writings. The form serves as the definition of digital objects as well as those relations that constitute the coherence of the system. In digital objects, relations are becoming more and more concrete and explicit. The existence of digital objects is constituted by the materialized milieu which gives it an identity, which does not come from the "matter" (considering a *Youtube* video), nor from the imposition of form, but by the relations in it, created by it, and that surround it. After all, we have to recognize that the materiality of form cannot be fully accounted for by the abstract notion of matter or the concrete material that the object is composed of. For example, a digital object and its relation to other objects cannot be explained by its representation on the screen of digital devices, neither by signals, or voltage differences. This materiality seems to come from elsewhere (a different reality or order of magnitude)" (Hui, 2014).

Notes

¹ *Sangam literature* refers to the earliest available ancient Tamil literature (2381 poems on the domains of love and heroism by 473 poets) that belongs to the last of the three *Sangams* (Academies). The third *Sangam* period covers 300 BC – 300 AD. The works made possible by the first two academies were lost during the earlier periods when unprecedented deluge washed away large parts of the Tamil country. The post-*Sangam* period refers to the period after 300 AD.

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