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Non-Representational Methodologies

Re-Envisioning Research

Edited by
Phillip Vannini

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Non-Representational Methodologies

Non-representational theory is one of the contemporary moment's most influential theoretical perspectives within social and cultural theory. It is now widely considered to be the logical successor of postmodern theory, the logical development of poststructuralist thought, and the most notable intellectual force behind the turn across the social and cultural sciences away from cognition, meaning, and textuality. Yet it is often poorly understood. This is in part because of its complexity, but also because of its limited treatment in the few volumes chiefly dedicated to it. Theories must be useful to researchers keen on utilizing concepts and analytical frames for their personal interpretive purposes. How useful non-representational theory is, in this sense, is yet to be understood. This book outlines a variety of ways in which non-representational ideas can influence the research process, the very value of empirical research, the nature of data, the political value of data and evidence, the methods of research, the very notion of method, and the styles, genres, and media of research.

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Foreword

Tim Ingold

One night, a few years ago, I woke from a dream with the following lines in my head:

*Often in the midst of my endeavors
Something ups and says
“Enough of words,
Let’s meet the world.”*

I do not know who put these lines there. Certainly, I did not invent them. But immediately upon waking, and before they had time to evaporate, I rose from my bed to write them down. They remain, pinned to a notice board in my office, and every so often I take a look at them, to remind myself of the message they contain.

They could perhaps be taken as a manifesto for a non-representational way of working. This is not exactly a theory, nor is it a method or technique as commonly understood. It is not a set of regulated steps to be taken towards the realization of some predetermined end. It is a means, rather, of carrying on and of being carried—that is, of living a life with others, humans and non-humans all—that is cognizant of the past, finely attuned to the conditions of the present, and speculatively open to the possibilities of the future. I call it *correspondence*, in the sense not of coming up with some exact match or simulacrum for what we find in the things and happenings going on around us, but of *answering* to them with interventions, questions, and responses of our own. It is as though we were involved in an exchange of letters. “Let’s meet the world,” for me, is an invitation—an exhortation or command even—to join in such a correspondence. It is, at the same time, a complaint against the cowardice of scholars who would preferably retreat into a stance that I once heard described as “tangentialism,” in which our meeting is but a glance that shears away from the uncomfortable business of mixing our own endeavors too closely with the lives and times of those with whom our researches have brought us into contact. Indeed, correspondence and tangentialism are precise opposites, and they entail quite different understandings of what is meant by scholarly research. This book sets

out, by precept and example, just what this difference is and how it impacts upon the way we work.

"Enough of words," my muse declared, and I sympathize. We are suffering, in academic life, from a surfeit of words. It would not be so bad if these words, like good food, were rich in flavor, varied in texture, and lingering in the contemplative feelings they evoke. Carefully selected and well-prepared words are conducive to rumination. They enliven the spirit, which responds in kind. But the fact that word-craft of this kind has been hived off to a restricted domain, known as poetry, is indicative of where the problem lies. If writing had not lost its soul, then what need would we have for poetry? We go there to find what otherwise is lost. Relentlessly bombarded by the formulaic concoctions of academic prose, weighed down with arcane vocabulary, honorific name-calling, and ever-extending lists of citations, my muse had had enough. So have I. But I would not want to go the whole way, and to give up on words altogether. Words are, indeed, our most precious possessions and should be treated as such, like a casket of sparkling jewels. To hold such a jewel is to hold the world in the palm of your hand. We *can* correspond with words, as letter-writers used to do, but only if we allow our words to shine.

The challenge, then, is to find a different way of writing. That's what this book is about. Every chapter is in the nature of an experiment: it is a matter of trying things out and seeing what happens. These experiments-so-far, however, are necessarily constrained by the conventions of the printed word. These conventions make writing seem like an act of verbal composition, rather than one of inscriptive performance. With a keyboard wired up to a mechanical printer—the typical apparatus of the academic writer—the expressive possibilities of the word, as a concatenation of marks on paper, are sorely limited. To be sure, one can vary the font, and use various means of highlighting, but these are nothing compared with the continuous modulations of feeling and form in a simple calligraphic line—a line that registers every nuance of the hand that draws it. If our words are truly to shine like jewels, must they not be restored to the hand?

Surely, our reflections on ways of working cannot be confined to matters of style and composition. They must also extend to the instruments we use, and their orchestration. How does the keyboard compare with the pen, pencil, and brush? Let's try them out and see. Perhaps, then, we will find that working with words, the writer can once again become a draughtsman or an artist, or even a musician of sorts. We might cease our endless writing *about* performance, and become performers ourselves. The art of correspondence demands no less. It could be because of our addiction to the keyboard that we academics are so taken with the idea of tacit, embodied knowledge. We think, like my muse, that the only way to join with the world—that is, to participate in its unfolding from the very inside of our being—is by escape from the domain of the word, of representation. It seems to us that words are always on the outside: they articulate, specify,

make explicit. As such, their role is to pin things down, to define them and render them immobile.

Yet behind these tapped-out words of ours, the beating heart of the tacit continues to animate our movements and feelings, and to show its hand in voice and gesture. Why, then, should this voice and gesture be wordless? Only because we start from a notion of the word from which all traces of vocal and manual performance, of expression and affect, have been stripped away. This is the kind of word we academics are used to, and it puts us in league with the professions for which an academic training is deemed essential: statesmen, bureaucrats, lawyers, doctors, and managers. But this is not the word of poets, singers, actors, calligraphers, and craftsmen. For them, the word is performed, often noisily and turbulently, in skilled and sensuous bodily practice—not just in the practice of handwriting, signing, singing, or speaking but also in reading aloud. If this is the domain of the tacit, then the tacit is neither wordless nor silent. It is raucously verbal. It is in the realm of the explicit, not the tacit, that silence reigns. Here alone, adrift upon the printed page, the word has lost its voice. Tacit is to explicit as voiced is to voiceless, not the other way around.

Perhaps, then, we need a new understanding of language, one that brings it back to life as a practice of “*linguaging*.” In a living language—one that is not semantically locked into a categorical frame but endlessly creating itself in the inventive telling of its speakers—words can be as lively and mobile as the practices to which they correspond. They can be declarative, as when the practitioner cries out with the satisfaction of a job well done, inviting others to join in its appreciation, or alternatively, when things go off course, leading to error and mishap. And they can be discursive, as in their use in narrative and storytelling. But in neither case are they joined up, or articulated, in explicit, propositional forms. Does that make them any less verbal? Who, other than those whose lives are confined to the academy, would be so pompous, and so limited in their imaginative horizons, as invariably to put the word “*articulate*” before the word “*speech*” or “*writing*,” in such a way as to relegate to the sublinguistic or non-verbal any utterance or inscription that is not syntactically structured as a joined-up assembly? In truth, it is articulation that has silenced the word, by drawing it out and fixing its coordinates of reference, independently of the vocal-gestural currents of its production.

Let’s not be afraid, then, to meet the world with words. Other creatures do it differently, but verbal intercourse has always been our human way, and our entitlement. But let these be words of greeting, not of confrontation, of questioning, not of interrogation or interview, of response, not of representation, of anticipation, not of prediction. This is not to say that we should all become poets or novelists, let alone that we should seek to emulate philosophers who, when it comes to their worldly involvements, have signally failed to practice what they preach, and for whom neither coherence of thought nor clarity of expression has ever been among their

strongest suits. But it does mean that we should work our words as craftsmen work their materials, in ways that testify, in their inscriptive traces, to the labor of their production, and that offer these inscriptions as things of beauty in themselves.

Aberdeen, March 1, 2014

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1 Non-Representational Research Methodologies

An Introduction

Phillip Vannini

There are, and there will always be, miserable days in the lives of researchers. These are the days when the inevitable realization that our work is utterly inadequate at apprehending the intricate textures of the lifeworld subjects of our analysis and description strikes with its mightiest force. These are the days when reading again one's writings, playing back one's video or audio documentaries, staring at one's photos, or recalling one's performances pushes an author over the depressing abyss of self-insufficiency and doubt. These are the days when researchers wish they had chosen an art career devoid of the pretensions of accurate representation. For some of us the doldrums of these forlorn days fade away with the next long-awaited book contract or the prospect of a jaunt to an exotic conference destination. But the awareness that our work is invariably partial, simplistic, or even unimaginative and inauthentic is bound to resurface again, and again. Depiction—it seems—is futile.

Should we then surrender? Or perhaps come up with a new scientific method? Or maybe, given the zeitgeist, a cute new “app” for our journals? Maybe we could. But we will not be doing any of that here. This book is not a self-help manual for the sufferer of a midlife epistemological crisis. It does not promise handy solutions, formulas, procedures, or codes for a more accurate representation of disparate lifeworlds. And because it does not aim to offer original laments over the crisis of representation or the death of the author it does not hope to lend a shoulder to cry on either. So, you might wonder: what exactly are these sheets of paper good for? Well, for a more radical solution, really: to quit—hopefully for good—our obsession with representation. Let this volume be a manifesto for the ethos of *non-representational research*.

Non-representational research—the skeptical reader might immediately react—sounds like the most apropos synonym for non-funded and non-published research. How can, after all, research—which is the very process of describing, understanding, and explaining an empirical reality—deny its very *raison d'être*? How can people whose job responsibility is to be all but fiction authors pretend to be able to obliterate the single criterion that separates them from the domain of fantasy?

Admittedly, these are not ungrounded, unsympathetic, or merely cynical critiques. And to complicate the picture even further, non-representational authors themselves may even have deep and fundamental doubts about the value of non-representational “research”—and for some the scare quotes here are absolutely obligatory. Some may indeed question the very idea of research and of method, for example, or deny the value of a body of knowledge—epistemology or methodology—exclusively dedicated to doing research more accurately. Yet all of us writing in these pages in the end hold the belief that the research we all do has at least some merit and promise. Is our denial of representationalism the true answer to the crisis of authority and representation then? Non-representational research methodologies—of which this book provides a panoramic gaze—offer, if not definitive, at least compelling responses to this interrogative.

But let us back up for a second. What is all this fuss about non-representational research? Our quest for non-representational methodologies is born out of the growth of non-representational theory. Briefly, non-representational theory (or as it is sometimes referred to, “more-than-representational” theory; see Lorimer, 2005) is one of the contemporary moment’s most influential theoretical perspectives within social and cultural theory. As evidence of this popularity, simply consider Nigel Thrift’s (2008) instant classic *Non-Representational Theory: Space/Politics/Affect*. Only five years after its publication the book, according to Google Scholar, has been cited 646 times. Non-representational theory is now widely considered to be the successor of postmodern theory, the logical development of post-structuralist thought, and the most notable intellectual force behind the turn away from cognition, symbolic meaning, and textuality.

Non-representational theory is popular and influential, but it is controversial and often poorly understood. This is in part because of its complexity, but in large part also because of its limited application in research practice and because of its many unanswered methodological questions. How actually powerful and useful non-representational research is, in this sense, is yet to be fully appreciated. This book proposes to tackle this very subject by outlining a variety of ways in which non-representational ideas can influence the research process, the very value of empirical research, the nature of data, the political value of evidence, the methods and modes of research, the very notion of method, and the styles, genres, and media of research. The chapters to follow, therefore, aim to serve as a launching point for a diverse non-representational research “agenda.” Such parliament of perspectives, we hope, will spearhead a long-lasting non-representational research tradition across the social and cultural sciences. But let us proceed by outlining first the nature of non-representational theory.

NON-REPRESENTATIONAL THEORY

As Lorimer (2005, p. 83) concisely puts it, “Non-representational theory is an umbrella term for diverse work that seeks to better cope with our

self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds.” With roots in the fine and performing arts, solid foundations in human geography, and expansions across cultural studies, the humanities, and the social sciences, non-representational theory is a mosaic of theoretical ideas borrowed from fields as different as performance studies, material culture studies, science and technology studies, contemporary continental philosophy, political ecology, cultural geographies, ecological anthropology, biological philosophy, cultural studies, the sociology of the body and emotions, and the sociology and anthropology of the senses—to name only a few.

Theoretically, non-representational theory stands as a synthesizing effort to amalgamate diverse but interrelated theoretical perspectives, such as actor-network theory, biological philosophy, neomaterialism, process philosophy, speculative realism, social ecology, performance theory, poststructuralist feminism, critical theory, postphenomenology, and pragmatism. Its typical reference lists therefore tend to feature names of philosophers like Michelle Serres, Bruno Latour, Michel de Certeau, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Erving Goffman, Alphonso Lingis, Brian Massumi, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Tim Ingold, Emmanuel Levinas, Alfred North Whitehead, Isabelle Stengers, Maurice Blanchot, Jean Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Gilbert Simondon, Nigel Thrift, and probably most commonly of all Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

Due to its eclectic character it is quite difficult to summarize non-representational theory’s diverse ideas succinctly. Thrift’s (2008) work is quite helpful in this regard. In a difficult but remarkably clear, well-organized, and contagiously enthusiastic opening chapter to his foundational volume on the topic, Thrift outlines seven core principles, or ideal qualities, of non-representational theory. Thrift is quick to point out that his intent in territorializing non-representational theory is not to systematize it but rather to outline the potentials of a new experimental genre: a hybrid genre for a hybrid world. His seven principles, therefore, are to be understood as a tentative formation of a new intellectual landscape that is liable to enliven—through the “application of a series of procedures and techniques of expression” (p. 2)—a new hybrid: a science/art that works as an interpretive “supplement to the ordinary, a sacrament for the everyday, a hymn to the superfluous” (p. 2). Neither laws nor root images, the principles work as exercises in creative production and as “practices of vocation” (p. 3) meant for an imprecise science concerned more with hope for politico-epistemic renewal than validity. And—opportunistically—the principles very much aid our brief overview.

According to Thrift, non-representational theory’s first programmatic tenet is to “capture the ‘onflow’ . . . of everyday life” (p. 5). Life is movement—geographic and existential kinesis. Movements of all kinds are profoundly social activities that are both perceptive of the world and generative and transformative of it (Ingold, 2011). Life is a viscous becoming in time-space moved by the “desire to do more than simply squeeze meaning from the world” (Thrift, 2008, p. 5). Existence is marked by an instinctive intentionality—a Deweyan qualitative immediacy of sorts—that transcends

consciousness, and by an effervescent energy unharnessed and unprogrammed by thought. Non-representational theory therefore rejects the cognitive tendencies of radical empiricism, representational identity politics, and the post-modern obsession with deconstructing textual meaning (Lorimer, 2005). It emphasizes instead the power of the precognitive as a performative technology for adaptive living, as an instrument of sensation, play, and imagination, and a life force fueling the excesses and the rituals of everyday living.

Second, “non-representational theory is resolutely anti-biographical and preindividual” (Thrift, 2008, p. 7). Autobiography “provide[s] a spurious sense of oneness,” whereas biography offers a “suspect intimacy with the dead” (p. 7). What Thrift—borrowing here from Freud—seems to fear is biography’s ambition to find, as well as construct, an artificial sense of individual wholeness and hermeneutic coherence in the past, whereas non-representational theory is truly anchored in the present of practice. Of all seven principles this is arguably the most obscure, as Thrift fails to specify what precise types of biographical work he is most inimical toward, what further reasons he has—besides the battle cry remarks reported earlier—for conflating biography with humanistic whole-ism, and whether his criticism extends to more contemporary poststructuralist forms of narrative inquiry. In spite of the cryptic meaning of this point, together tenets one and two constitute non-representational theory’s criticism of methodological individualism and a strong incitation for complexity and relationality, a point taken up later in this chapter and in several chapters of this book.

Third, non-representational theory concerns itself with practice, action, and performance. Non-representational theorists are weary of the structuralist heritage of the social sciences and suspicious of all attempts to uncover symbolic meaning where other, more practical forms of meaning or even no meaning at all exist. Relying primarily on performative approaches to relational action and on postphenomenological and Deleuzian philosophy, non-representational work puts a premium on the corporeal rituals and entanglements embedded in embodied action rather than talk or cognitive attitudes. As Lorimer (2005, p. 84) puts it,

The focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions. Attention to these kinds of expression, it is contended, offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation. In short, so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become.

Fourth, non-representational theory is built on the principle—borrowed primarily from actor-network theory—of relational materialism. Material

objects are no mere props for performance but parts and parcel of hybrid assemblages endowed with diffused personhood and relational agency. “The human body”—Thrift tells us—“is what it is because of its unparalleled ability to co-evolve with things” (p. 10). In this sense material objects are to be given the same conceptual and empirical weight that is warranted to their human companions. Things form a “technological anteconscious” (p. 10) with the human body’s nervous system, and therefore non-representational theory ought to reject any separation between corporeality, materiality, and sociality. Going even farther than Thrift, Ingold (2011) argues that materiality is a useless abstraction: it is a concept we impute to things because we do not bother to hold them in sufficient regard for what they are and what they do. The actual “materials, it seems, have gone missing” (ibid., p. 20) from social scientific analysis because the symbolic qualities of the “objects” they make up unduly take precedence. But upon close examination non-representational writers realize that materials are active: “they circulate, mix with one another, solidify and dissolve in the formation of more or less enduring things” (ibid., p. 16). Materials are their doing and it is through their qualities, movements, and force that they exert their life.

Fifth, non-representational theory is meant to be experimental. Non-representational theorists feel a deep antipathy for the hyper-empirical conservative tendencies of the traditional social sciences, for the conventions of realism, and—obviously—for any manifestation of positivism. By invoking the expressive power of the performance arts, Thrift calls on social scientists-cum-artists to “crawl out to the edge of the cliff of the conceptual” (Vendler, 1995, p. 79, cited in Thrift, 2008, p. 12) and to engage in a battle against methodological fetishism and in a “poetics of the release of energy that might be thought to resemble play” (p. 12). By refusing a social science obsessed with control, prediction, and the will to explain and understand everything, Thrift calls for a sense of wonder to be injected back into the social sciences (also see Ingold, 2011b). Non-representational work tries to be restless and willfully immature. It seeks to push limits and strives for renewal. Indeed, as we will discuss throughout this entire book, non-representational work aims to rupture, unsettle, animate, and reverberate rather than report and represent.

Sixth, non-representational theory stresses the importance of bodies. Thrift (2008) views bodies not as subjects for microsociological empirical attention but as the engines of political regeneration, driving the new politics and ethics of hope that he proposes. Bodies are especially important because of their affective capacities. Affects are “properties, competencies, modalities, energies, attunements, arrangements and intensities of differing texture, temporality, velocity and spatiality, that act on bodies, are produced through bodies and transmitted by bodies” (Lorimer, 2008, p. 552). Non-representational theory’s attention to affect and its derivatives—moods, passions, emotions, intensities, and feelings (Anderson, 2006)—transcends the human, focusing on relations amid inanimate objects, living, non-human

matter, place, ephemeral phenomena, events, technologies, and much more (McCormack, 2006). Thus non-representational theorists posit affect as an uncircumscribed force unbounded to a whole self and unanchored in human subjectivity (McCormack, 2006).

At last, the seventh tenet of non-representational theory stresses an ethic of novelty suggesting “a particular form of boosting aliveness” (p. 14) and a promissory, regenerating Jamesian potentiality: a “jump to another world” (p. 15). Traditional ethical systems will not suffice for non-representational thinkers, built as they are on traditional humanistic principles of a univocal human subject, “transparent, rational, and continuous” (p. 14). A new ethics built on the craftsmanship of everyday life and existing on the “interstices of interaction” (p. 15) is liable to “build new forms of life” in which “strangeness itself [is] the locus of new forms of neighborliness and community” (Santner, 2001, p. 6, cited in Thrift, 2008, p. 14).

Non-representational theory’s seven tenets are meant to sensitize social scientists to the fact that “they are there to hear the world and make sure that it can speak back, just as much as they are there to produce wild ideas,” “to render the world problematic by elaborating questions,” and to open research and theorizing to “more action, more imagination, more light, more fun, even” (Thrift, 2008, pp. 18–20). These tenets are points not only of theoretical departure but also of methodological inspiration, as we will see next.

NON-REPRESENTATIONAL RESEARCH

Representation is a tricky affair. Doel (2010, p. 117) explains,

Ordinarily, representation is bound to a specific form of repetition: the repetition of the same. Through representation, what has already been given will come to have been given again. Such is its fidelity: to give again, and again, what has already been given, without deviation or departure. Such is its fidelity to an original that is fated to return through a profusion of dutiful copies; an original whose identity is secured and re-secured through a perpetual return of the same and whose identity is threatened by the inherent capacity of the copy to be a deviant or degraded repetition, a repetition that may introduce an illicit differentiation in the place ostensibly reserved for an identification.

In wishing to do away with the repetitions, the structures, the orders, the givens, and the identities of representation, non-representational theory is quite ambitious. It seeks novelty and experimental originality. Rather than to resemble, it seeks to dissemble (Doel, 2010, p. 117). It wants to make us feel something powerful, to give us a sense of the ephemeral, the fleeting, and the not-quite-graspable. It hopes to give life to the inanimate and