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**Book Review**  
*Theory of the Image*

Thomas Nail, (2019), *Theory of the Image*, New York: Oxford University Press. 416 pages  
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In *Theory of the Image*, kinetic materialist philosopher Thomas Nail opens by stating that “we live in the age of the image” (1). The author convincingly shows from a process materialist perspective that traditional Western aesthetic theories are no longer adequate now that digital media have “unleashed the largest flow of digitally reproduced words, images, and sounds the world has ever witnessed” (1), an “equivalent of a Copernican revolution of our time” (1). Nail is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Denver in Colorado, USA and this current work emerged in relation to his previous new materialist theorization of an ontology of movement in *Being and Motion* (2018). In *Theory of the Image*, the author’s goal is to provide “a new aesthetics for our time, *an aesthetics of the moving image*” (3), that is, a *kinesthetics*. His central question is “what does the mobility of the image say about the nature of images and aesthetics more broadly?” (4).

Nail argues that qualitative structural changes occurred with this digital revolution and that “none of our senses has remained unchanged” (3). The aesthetics of the twentieth century modeled on human agency and structures such as psychology or linguistics are too limited. Nail’s objective “is to locate the real and historical conditions for the emergence of the con-

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temporary mobility of the image" (5) in contrast to old paradigms of images as static representations. Nail offers a non-anthropocentric material theory from the perspective of the image's own mobility to view earlier images in new ways and glimpse what has been hidden prior to this "new historical-aesthetic regime" (2) of electrical flow as motion. The author succeeds in showing the reader how images move and circulate as matter and what they *do*, not what they *mean* and Nail's kinesthetics provides a much needed comprehensive aesthetics framework from a new materialist perspective. Those wanting to know where Nail places his kinesthetics in relation to other contemporary theorists such as Erin Manning, Brian Massumi, Mark Hansen, Ossi Naukarinen, and Simon O'Sullivan (365) will find more information in the extensive end notes.

The book is organized into three parts. The conceptual framework for kinesthetics is explained in part I, while parts II and III shows the application of the theory to Western and Near Eastern art history. The intended audiences are philosophers of aesthetics and art historians and Nail anticipates in the introduction that readers from these different disciplines may be tempted to read only the parts that seem related to their fields (13). Nail urges an openness to the holism of his theory as a new way to think about art and aesthetics and encourages experiencing the entire text.

In addition to these intended audiences, *Theory of the Image* provides a framework for artists who desire to theorize their creative material processes, as well as for those theorizing arts-based research methods (Rosiek 2018a; 2018b). Scholars working in visual and cultural studies may also find the work insightful and stimulating. While stunningly brilliant and exciting, groundbreaking ideas can be difficult to comprehend so the conceptualization in part I may be intimidating for some and require patience and diligence for those readers unfamiliar with new materialist concepts, traditional Western aesthetic theories and art history, and Newtonian and quantum physics, which Nail utilizes to show how kinesthetics is applicable to this new age of digital images. However, Nail is correct that greater understanding does occur through applying kinesthetics to the historical and contemporary examples in parts II and III.

While explaining his own concepts in the introduction, Nail clearly points to two problems with existing Western aesthetics from which *Theory of the Image* attempts to differentiate itself: stasis and ahistoricism (4-10). An objective ahistorical static concept of images is entangled with the Platonic idealism, copy, and representation, while subjective stasis concepts derive from Kantian philosophy that declares subjective notions of beauty are unchanging, universal, and fixed in the human mind. Nail argues that these

anthropic constructivisms leads to a distrust of our senses and situates the material world of nature as merely a “prompt for us to discover the beauty of our own aesthetic and phenomenological faculties” (7). Nail’s theory uncovers kinetic paradoxes in traditional aesthetics that ignore the agency of images and their “growing mobility that shifts back and forth *between* objects, subject, copy and model, transforming and modulating them in a continuous feedback loop” (3). However, these critiques of Kantian aesthetics and phenomenology are not the primary focus of Nail’s work and in the end notes he offers other works that have covered these arguments, such as those by Karen Barad, Tom Sparrow, Manuel Delanda, and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (367).

An important key point is that Nail’s material kinetic conception of the image includes *all* matter, not just works of art, which is explained in the introduction and first three chapters on the flow of matter, the fold of affect, and the field of art. Nail’s use of the term “image” includes visual sensing but also “sonic, haptic, olfactory, and gustatory” (11). Process materialism theorizes matter as creative unstoppable motion that is not predictable or measurable. The movement is emergent rather than causal, “pedetic and indeterminate” (21). Nail clearly separates himself from vital materialism, which he argues metaphysically fetishizes life or vitality as a physical force that is retroactively applied to matter (22). Instead he offers an additive historical theorization of events from which to examine images while showing that material sensing occurs first and then metaphysical meaning making follows (49-54). Indeed, in part II, Nail uses the kinesthetic field of the ancient Greeks, Mesopotamians, and Egyptians to show the material historical processes in which human thought and reason came to be perceived as the source of all perception, instead of the actual physical material world (131-183).

In kinesthetics, images are matter that emerge in iterative patterns that bodies sense, and when repeated in turbulent cycles of randomness, a temporary order of metastable material states emerges, giving an appearance of stability and stasis. Drawing on Heraclitus and Virginia Woolf, a helpful analogy Nail offers is of an eddy in a river (48-49); the eddy appears as a stable *thing* that can be perceived as different from the river itself—it is a meta-stable recognizable pattern. However, the eddy is constantly reproduced with new water, made of individual molecules of hydrogen and oxygen in a form that produce a quality of liquidity that we sense visually, audibly, tactilely, etc.

Degrees of qualities make perceivable the differences of “things” in each loop and sensation is the “kinetic difference between sensibility and the sensed” (49) as matter flows iteratively. Aesthetic qualities do not reside within things themselves (54-61). Rather, qualities are kinetic agential motion in the material form of gases, solids, liquids, and atomic forms that are in continuous motion and sensed through taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight. It is the folding of matter repeatedly into conjunctions that the combination and arrangement of qualities and quantities emerge, which creates a thing that appear discrete but is not (62-68).

Works of art are not reified, static objects. They are kinetically active material processes that are continually emitting material flows for light, sound, and scent, as well as receiving material flows and being transformed in turn. The work of art is an entire ecological system, aesthetic field, or feedback loop between flows of matter that compose it and its environment, all flows that leave its body, and all the flows that return to and affect it (84).

Readers should be aware that the concepts in part I of *Theory of the Image* emerged with Nail’s ontological theory of motion and are explained in greater detail in his previous book *Being and Motion* (2018). Part II is organized by and describes four dominant material and kinetic Western aesthetic regimes: The functional field of prehistory; the formal field of the ancients; the relational field of the European Medieval period, and the differential regime of the modern period. The conceptual kinetic patterns Nail describes related to each historical era are centripetal, centrifugal, tensional, and elastic, respectively. Each chapter has conceptual and historical parts that defines and illustrates the patterns using historical images and Nail includes a breathtaking wide range of modalities as examples, such as architecture, stained glass, perfume, food, theater, and cinema, to name but a few. As an example, Nail identifies six main aesthetic fields for the centripetal Prehistoric Image explored in Chapter 5, including the body, hearth, cave, vessel, wind instruments, and the house. Nail deeply explores the relationality of these fields with specific aesthetic material movement such as the relation between the cave and painting (114-118).

Part III offers a historically sensitive reading of digital and contemporary images that Nail conceptualizes with two dimensions: the hybridity of all previous regimes covered in part II and kinetic generative images. Nail argues in Chapter 15 that it is not that the old historic patterns are inaccurate now, but rather that they are still in use as hybrids and remixes. How digital electronic material flows offer kinetic interaction that is generative, including by introducing disorder, randomness, and feedback, are explored in

Chapter 16. While part II provides an interesting new take on the images from Western art history and is helpful to show the theory, Nail's inclusion of contemporary art brings the concepts full circle back to demonstrate his claim that a new aesthetics is needed.

The author clearly lays out the limitations of the work in the introduction (13-15) and recaps them in the conclusion while offering ideas on how to further apply kinesthetics (363-364). Nail transparently acknowledges the Western and Near Eastern cultural and historical narrowness of the art history utilized and begs for patience in his acknowledgement that not all historical periods or works are as comprehensive nor symmetrical through the book due to practicalities. Rather, the purpose is "to unsettle already settled histories by tracing a different history beneath them" (14).

Nail also intentionally works within his own European linguistic and cultural background and the geographical limits of the examples (14), while suggesting ideas for future work in the conclusion that reiterate movement across borders (364). While remaining in the Western lineage, he offers that Western aesthetics are historically and kinetically influenced by Eastern and colonial worlds while also materially influencing these worlds, including through exploitation. It would be an act of colonialism to appropriate non-western worldviews into Western paradigms but applying a critical lens to detect and queer universalizing principles and assumptions in Western theory (Barad, 2015) is ethically crucial in new materialism. While motivated out of humility and avoidance of colonial moves, the categorical neatness the author uses to limit the work unintentionally reifies Western categories of difference, and given the nature of kinesthetics, these divisions seem somewhat out of place. Nail acknowledges this discrepancy and explains in the introduction that the coexisting and remixing paradigm was too large for the current work and indicates future work in this area (14).

Nail's theorization and demonstration of kinesthetics is a stunning contribution for the growing interdisciplinary interest and application of new materialist theories and succeeds within the philosophical scope of the book, that is, Nail clearly places his own work within the Western philosophical canon. And his knowledge of Western art history and contemporary art are extensive enough to supply his kinesthetic theory with visual examples that greatly aid in understanding, ranging from visual conceptual models to art, historical, and scientific images. However, it would be interesting to see what the author could accomplish in the future with interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and collaborative endeavors and the use of creative modalities to show the application of kinesthetics in the material world.

## Works Cited

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