

# *De rouille et d'os*: Rethinking the body and the body of film

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the subject and object not as separate things, but as having an intra-active relation. Taking this term from Karen Barad, this paper takes on a different understanding of agency that might change the way agency and disability relate. Through a thorough analysis of the film *De Rouille et D'os*, these ideas are touched upon whilst discussing the problematic of representation. This paper argues for the impossibility to distinguish between a medium, image and body that allows for an object to move, act. This approach to objects might be productive for the discourse on disability regarding prostheses to “enhance” one’s mobility. The use of prosthesis will be inquired simultaneously with how to think of another person as prosthesis.

## *De rouille et d'os: Rethinking the body and the body of film*

To take a film as an object inquiry while avoiding a discussion of representation forces us to rethink the boundaries between subject and object, observer and observed. While these boundaries often suggest the distinction between subject and object, observer and observed, this paper sees them as separate entities that do not exactly entail a relation of absolute exteriority, but rather illustrates an enactment of boundaries that seem to be given. As Karen Barad writes, these boundaries are a contingent fact of history, and a Cartesian habit of mind, for we have granted language and discourse too much power (2007:806). Like Karen Barad, new materialists have been working on a robust account of the materialization of all bodies – human and nonhuman – and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked (810). Drawing further upon these (new) theories on bodies, this paper deals with the seemingly impossibility but yet urgency for a different understanding of human and nonhuman, subject and object and observer and observed, while taken disability as a central issue.

An often discussed theme within Disability Studies is the way technologies can be seen as technical aids to enhance people with disabilities. Think of the way a prosthetic leg can help someone walk (again), or a perhaps more discrete aid: glasses and lenses to improve visual impairment. Different disability scholars try to not see these immaterial aids as attachments to a body, but as something that becomes part of the subject. One of the most well-known books that discusses the relationship between technology and the human body is Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1991). Donna Haraway distinguishes herself from essentialism and naturalism approaching subjects in their ongoing becoming (83). This influential manifest complicates the separation of body and object and sees a prosthesis, for example, as a part of the subject. This

assemblage is what she calls a *cyborg* (122). Her theory has been taken up within Disability Studies whereby room was created for a person with a prosthesis not to be viewed as having an un-whole body that needed to be fixed by attaching a technical aid, but as a subject – like any other – that is not fixed but always in the process of becoming<sup>1</sup>. However, these discussions hardly deal with the way agency functions for a disabled person with a prosthesis and leave these technical aids as immaterial objects without questioning the relationship of subject and object and their fixed separation.

A form of movement appears to be crucial for someone to claim forms of agency because theories on agency all emphasize the necessity of movement. Form of agency are subscribed onto technologies such as a prosthesis, or a pace-maker; these objects become part of the subject. Additionally, this paper tries to find ways to see another person as a prosthesis for someone else. This requires a rethinking of the concept of prosthesis; to see a prosthesis as something that is also material, matter. Firstly, while taking on the prosthesis as a concept, this paper analyses how the prosthesis could be extended to other domains such as the realm of affect, relationality, care and the body. Secondly, how exactly can agency appear within the entanglement of two bodies where one of the bodies is incapable of independent movement? If a prosthesis can make someone (re)gain a form of agency, then perhaps another person can be seen as a prosthesis that allows for agency to happen within that relationship.

The film *De Rouille et d'os* (Jacques Audiard, 2012) is the object of inquiry which examines, complicates and challenges questions of agency and the relation of the body and prosthesis. The film centres around the relationship between Alain

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<sup>1</sup> "Becoming-in-a-world-with-others, a term taken from Gilles Deleuze that emphasises these fluid boundaries of subject and object.

and Stephanie in Antibes, France. Alain is trying to make a living for himself and his son by working several security jobs and filling the rest of his time with boxing and participating in street fights for money. Stephanie is a killer whale trainer. During one of the shows she falls into the water and a killer whale bites off her legs. Right before this accident Alain and Stephanie met and when she is finally out of the hospital she calls him again. They meet up and this is the start of a relationship that is not only romantic and sexual, but also a care relationship. The analysis of the film will focus on several things. Although the tagline of the film says “a love story begins, when both worlds, fall apart”, the film shows the opposite of ‘falling apart’. It shows that their relationship is a process of becoming for both subjects. Objects in this film - such as the prosthesis - illustrate that they are not ‘just’ objects attached to a body, but become part of the subject. Also, the relationship between the subjects complicates the idea of there being separate entities that just come together, because it seems that the affective relationship that Stephanie and Alain develop, is what makes them inseparable. Here affect, desire and sexuality play a role. Secondly, the camera-work emphasises that both characters are viewed as having a damaged, un-whole body. Therefore, agency seems to happen between the two characters due to their entanglement with each other and different objects. Additionally, the term prosthesis has to be rethought as being material instead of an immaterial object.

The first part of this paper will give a short historical overview of how the term prosthesis has been used and developed and see how we can think of it as material: a body. Hereafter, several ways of dealing with agency will be touched upon from a new materialist perspective to see which approach can be productive for the discourse on disability. Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010) will be central in this part because her notion of distributive or confederate

agency might work productively in understanding another body as prosthesis in the discourse on disability.

The second part of this paper will scrutinize the relationship between the observer and observed: myself as the analyst and the film as the object of inquiry. This paper makes an argument for a different approach to the subject-object relation, and therefore it is important to be critical of using a film as the object of scrutiny when trying to avoid a discussion of representation. Representation isolates the object and deprives it from its (own) ability to move. Criticism of representationalism is best elucidated by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). She explains: “representationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representation and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing” (804). With Joseph Rouse’s<sup>2</sup> criticism on representationalism she goes on questioning how we assume there is one language that magically enables us to reach out directly to its representational content. Karen Barad proposes a performative understanding of things, which shifts the focus from linguistic representations to discursive practices (807). Relating to this, in “Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology” (2004) Hans Belting developed a new vocabulary for dealing with representation. He articulates a different approach to the relationship between the image, medium and body that is interesting in combination with the focus of this paper on the subject and object within Disability Studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Rouse, Joseph. *Knowledge and Power: Toward a Political Philosophy of Science*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 1987.

## **Part I: The body**

In "The prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthetic Trope" (1999) Sara S. Jain starts off with giving a clear overview of how the term prosthesis developed throughout the years. The term has a long history where it was first used in 1553. During this time it meant "attached to" or "adding a syllable to the beginning of a word" (32). Only in 1704 it became related to the body having the meaning: "replacement of a missing body part with an artificial one" (32). This is up until today the most dominant understanding of the word. The idea of an attachment to (most likely) a body seems inherently connected to the term. As Mark Wigley writes in "Prosthetic theory: The disciplining of architecture" (1991): "a prosthesis is always structural, establishing the place to which it seems to be added" (38). This quote shows that it is impossible to think of the prosthesis without thinking of the body. A prosthesis has no meaning on its own for its main function is to replace a part of someone's body. A prosthesis serves a function. In "The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future" (2006) Vivian Sobchack writes that she has difficulties with the post-human discourse on the prosthesis whilst it takes away the practicalities of what a prosthesis means for people that have to deal with the use of it in everyday life. She concludes the article by saying:

Indeed, I remember long ago attending that first meeting of the support group at which my prosthetist proudly showed a video of amputees (without Cheetah legs) racing the Special Olympics. As I sat there, I watched the people around me – and knew that all they wanted, as I did, was to be able to walk at work, to the store, and maybe on a treadmill at the gym. In sum, I've no desire for the 'latest' in either literal or figural body parts. All I want is a leg to stand on, a limb I can go out on – so I can get about my world with a minimum of prosthetic thought. (38)

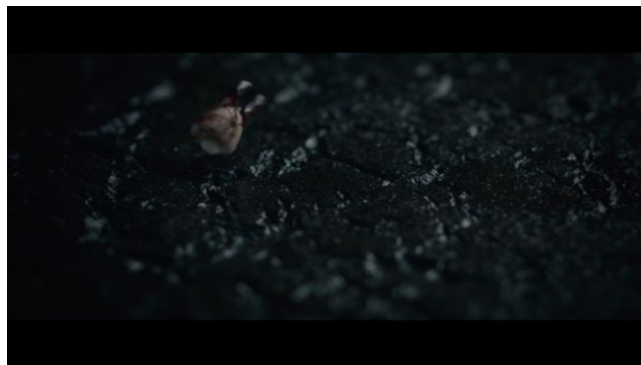
This quote emphasizes that although the prosthesis is nowadays highly connected to ideas of creating a human with more capacities than before (being

able to do things that people without a prosthesis cannot), it also expresses that in the end a person with a prosthesis 'just' wants to get through life with the least possible thought about that prosthesis. Therefore, we can argue that if the prosthesis stays too much within a post-human discourse – primarily connected to enhancing the human body - a person with a prosthesis will always be viewed as un-whole, with the prosthesis as a substitute for a missing piece of the body. Proposing a different way of dealing with the prosthesis in relation to the body is in place, namely by moving away from the distinction between the object and the subject, in order for a prosthesis and body to come together.

If a body is necessary for a prosthesis to exist, the material of the prosthesis and the body are very much linked. Within Disability Studies prosthetic theory deals with the assumptions that a body becomes whole again due to the prosthesis. Therefore, as Sarah S. Jain argues, "a double logic operates in the cultural understanding of machinery through a simultaneous *self-extension* and *self-cancellation* of both the body and human agency" (33). What she means by this is that the prosthesis is extending the human body, fills a gap of a limb that used to be there, which 'cancels' the body in its wholeness and the suggestion that agency only operates within and through the body. This understanding of the cancellation of agency is problematic whilst it disables a person with a prosthesis to claim any form of 'acting'. An analysis of one scene of the film allows for this thought to develop. On the one hand the scene might disrupt the given idea that a prosthesis is 'only' a technical tool attached to a body, on the other hand the scene shows that another person can also be seen as a form of a prosthesis for another person. These ideas might contribute to a different understanding of disability, the notions of a fixed and whole body and the relationship between bodies and objects.

The close reading of *De rouille et d'os* will mainly focus on camera work and the narrative of the film. This focus may seem as not such a logical choice because you can end up discussing representation quickly. Nevertheless, this is precisely why this focus could be a valuable contribution for this analysis because it challenges the ideas of the subject-object relation mentioned earlier.

Simultaneously, a focus on camera work and narrative gives space for the object to move, interact, and perhaps a certain form of agency can happen. This focus goes beyond the fixation on representation.



(Image 1, 01:16:18)

The first scene opens with this tooth that rolls on the floor (Image 1). The movement of the tooth suggests that it has just been knocked out of someone's mouth. This shot shows us two things. First, it refers very literal to Alain's street fight that we are about to see and predicts that it is going to be a rough fight. Second, this zooming in on one part of the body forces the viewer to think about the fragility of a body – how easy things can fall out, or break. After this shot we see a wide overview shot of the street fight. There are many men present at the fight; yelling at Alain and the other fighter. Hereafter we see that Alain is lying on the floor being hit and kicked by the other street fighter. From above the camera shows his face that is full of blood. The viewer realizes that the tooth that was just shown is Alain's. We see that Alain is giving up (or losing consciousness) because he is not fighting back anymore. Then the camera shifts to a close up of his face: we see him moving his eyes and looking at the car where Stephanie is



watching the fight. The next shot is a point of view shot from Alain showing the door of the car that opens, and Stephanie is getting out (Image 2, 3).



(Image 2, 01:18:16)



(Image 3, 01:18:18)

Although in the previous scene Alain told Stephanie to stay in the car and when he is getting kicked and hurt a close up of Stephanie's face is shown that expresses that she feels hurt by what is happening to Alain, which can be interpreted as that she also feels the pain that he is experiencing, she gets out of the car. In the beginning of the film the men around Alain made jokes about Stephanie's way of walking, but never saw her prostheses. This scene is the first time Stephanie shows this part of her in public. We could make an argument for this act being interpreted as her 'overcoming' her shame and fear for being judged by others. However, this paper proposes that her decision emphasizes how the prosthetic legs are part of her as a subject giving her as much strength to get out of the car as any other part of her body. Additionally, these two shots that are shown one after another illustrate how Stephanie can be seen as a prosthesis for Alain allowing him to find back his strength. They are tied together by their relationship whereby Stephanie's decision influences Alain in the fight. When Alain sees that Stephanie gets out of the car he regains his strength, gets up and wins the game (Image 4, 5).



(Image 4, 01:18:25)



(Image 5, 01:18:27)

To conclude, in this scene there are two 'actions' that happen. First, Stephanie gets out of the car, which is not an action of overcoming her disability. The prostheses are as much part of her as other parts. Her agency appears through her movement of getting out of the car. The second action is Alain who wins the street fight, suggested that he finds his strength through Stephanie's movement. It can be argued that these actions were not possible or perhaps did not happen if they were not undone by each other. Their relationship is affective and they empower each other through it. It seems that their bodies are in dialogue with each other: influencing the other by the movement of a part of them. The agency is relational, distributed in the space. Agency happened, but is this located within one of the subjects, in their relationship, or can it be seen as something that appeared because they are affected by each other? The next section examines what forms of agency can be productive for this way of seeing another body as a prosthesis. It is important to explore the relationship between agency and movement, the body and subjects and objects.

Various theorists bended their heads over the complexity of the concept of agency. It can be political, social, discursive, material, distributive, confederate and even affective. Some argue that agency derives from power, others emphasize the necessity of movement. For the purposes of this paper it is not important to cover all these different ways of discussing agency. This paper

stems from a new materialist perspective whilst exploring how agency is distributed and relational. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) Jane Bennett poses to see agency as distributive/confederate. Although she fails to provide an adequate account of the differences and similarities between distributive and confederate agency, her understanding of agency demands notice. First of all, it is important to understand her notion of 'matter'. In her book she argues for the blurring of the boundaries between human and nonhuman. For her, agency is always a human-nonhuman working group by which agency is located in an encounter or relation, not in the capacity of a unitary subject to act (23, 134). All bodies play a role in the enactment of agency, which she calls the 'actants'. Taking this term from Bruno Latour<sup>3</sup> she sees agency as being distributed through the assemblage of things. This ties in with Karen Barad's idea of intra-activity which emphasizes the dynamism of agency. Although in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) Karen Barad introduces the term Agential Realism for understanding agency as material-discursive (803), these two approaches to agency are interesting to look at together. Both Jane Bennett and Karen Barad put emphasis on the necessity of matter for agency to happen. Their idea of matter does not derive from an essentialistic and materialistic ontology, but they both see all things as matter. This statement makes the demarcation between a subject and object becomes less clear and it creates room for agency to not be restricted to a subject. Jane Bennett's distributive agency that she subscribes to all things allows for agency to happen in-between (xvi). Although agency has the connotation of being very subject centered, Jane Bennett and Karen Barad formulate an understanding of agency that includes possible nonhuman actors. Acknowledging here that an object cannot move independently out of an intention that comes from within, it is important to note that because the human and nonhuman bodies accumulate in the assemblage,

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<sup>3</sup> Latour, Bruno. "Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.

all bodies create movement. If we now look back at my analysis of the scene from *De Rouille et d'os* it can be argued that movement is necessary, but independent movement of a subject is not crucial for agency to happen. Therefore, when looking at a care relationship where there is a body that is incapable of independent movement, agency can happen by the movement of a prosthesis: this being a prosthetic leg or, another body. This approach to agency allows for a new understanding of agency within Disability Studies that does not deprive a disabled person from agency since it is not something that one has, but that appears in the relationship with other bodies (human and nonhuman).

## Part II: The body of film

The second part of this paper will focus on the relationship between the film and the viewer. As mentioned earlier, while taken on a new materialist approach to the subject-object relation it is necessary to also discuss the way a film can be an object of inquiry without isolating it, and making it a passive thing that only gets meaning through the analysis. The first part of this paper dealt with the blurred boundaries between subject and object which makes it impossible to talk about the things a film might represent. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad is critical of representationalism and argues for an alternative way of reading (cultural) objects. According to Karen Barad, the deeply connected way that everything is entangled with everything else means that any act of observation makes a “cut” between what is included and excluded from what is being considered. Although there are no pre-existing entities still she acknowledges that it is possible to gain knowledge by examining an object without falling into the “trap” of representationalism. In the following quote the problems regarding representationalism are best explicated:

If we no longer believe that the world is teeming with inherent resemblances whose signatures are inscribed on the face of the world, things already emblazoned with signs, words lying in wait like so many pebbles of sand on a beach there to be discovered, but rather that the knowing subject is enmeshed in a thick web of representations such that the mind cannot see its way to objects that are now forever out of reach and all that is visible is the sticky problem of humanity's own captivity within language, then it begins to become apparent that representationalism is a prisoner of the problematic metaphysics it postulates....Representationalism never seems to be able to get any closer to solving the problem it poses because it is caught in the impossibility of stepping outward from its metaphysical starting place.(811,812)

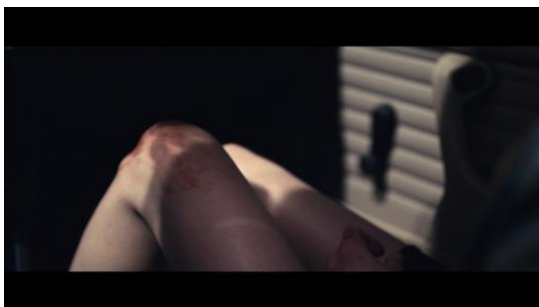
In this quote Karen Barad delineates the problem of representationalism showing that it isolates the object. The problem begins with having a wrong starting place: the assumption that there is a pre-existing entity that needs to be discovered. The example of the pebbles of sand lying on the beach is striking because they seem passive, having no agency. Karen Barad utilises Judith Butler's concept of performativity to yield a new understanding of the relationship all things in the world have. First of all, this focus on performativity emphasizes that the relationship happens in the act of doing, as a constant process of becoming. Second of all, it shifts the focus from linguistic representations to discursive practices. Therefore, Karen Barad argues for a material-discursive understanding of agency where all the actors involved correspond with one another. Their relation is intra-active.

This intra-activity is interesting when focusing on the viewer and the film. In Hans Belting's "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology" (2004) he deals with the relationship between these three actors and explains how the distinction cannot be made so easily. He writes:

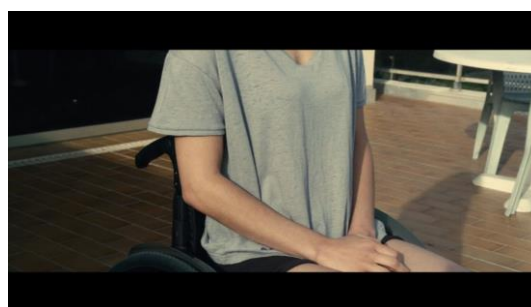
*Medium*, here, is to be understood not in the usual sense but in the sense of the agent by which images are transmitted, while *body* means either the performing or the perceiving body on which images depend no less than on their respective media. I do not speak of media as such, of course, nor do I speak of the body as such. Both have continuously changed (which allows us to speak of a history of visual technologies, as we are also familiar with a history of perception), but in their ever changing presence they have *kept their place* in the circulation of images. Images are neither on the wall ([n]or on the screen) nor in the head alone. They do not exist by themselves, but they happen; they take place whether they are moving images (where this is so obvious) or not. (302)

Hans Belting asserts that through the relationship of medium, image and body it

is difficult to make a clear distinction between them. This is also something that should not be done because through the constant shifts of place in the assemblage these actors get a different place and meaning allowing for the process of becoming to be constantly moving. In his article he directly touches upon the idea of the prosthesis not being a technological tool attached to a body, but how all actors in an assemblage can be put in the place of the prosthesis. He writes: "Visual media not only act as the body's prosthesis but also serve as the body's reflection, which lends itself to the body's self-inspection. The most advanced technologies today simulate bodies in the guise of fleeting shadows or of insubstantial mirror images, which are expected to liberate us from the laws of gravitation that we are subject to in empirical space." (309). For a medium to function as the prosthesis for the subject makes it subjective, allowing for reflection and self-inspection. The images visualize parts of bodies and bodies can become the medium through which these images are acted out. The shifting of places is performative, constantly changing, an open-ended becoming. This is exactly where the potential of an analysis of film lies: by zooming in on one part of the assemblage knowledge can be gained, understanding how the actors in the assemblage play a role. The next analysis will illustrate this by showing the different ways of how the legs of Stephanie are being visualized.



(Image 6, 00:14:07)



(Image 7, 01:09:00)



(Image 8, 01:09:48)



(Image 9, 01:30:48)

Image 6 shows her legs before the accident. She is in the car with Alain who takes her home after she got into a fight with a guy at the club where he works. When this image is shown Alain makes a comment to Stephanie saying that showing that much of her legs makes her look like a prostitute. The image of the female through the male gaze is illustrated by the narrative and camera. In image 7 Stephanie sits on the balcony in her wheelchair. This is one of the most powerful scenes wherein she feels strengthened for the first time after her accident. She just met with Alain before this scene who did not ask anything about her accident or said something about her amputated legs. She enacts the choreography that she used to do in the killer whale shows and shortly after this goes back to her former working place (image 8). Here, she walks in with her prostheses that are in this shot imaging the accident. It can be argued that the medium is actually the big hall where her body is just a small spot in the audience. She became the viewer of her own show and accident, also visible in image 10.



(Image 10, 01:32:58)

Both images are from a scene where Stephanie and Alain are having sex. Firstly, Stephanie is on top. In the other scenes she was still filmed from above: the



medium plays with the idea of a vulnerable body and image. Secondly, in this scene the stereotype of the vulnerable disabled body is there but through the medium and its form – camera – the image changes – it creates a new image and body. There is constant movement of the medium, image, and body without discussing representations.

In this part claimed that the idea of representation fixes the distinction between the subject and object and that if we look at the medium, image and body as being related and constantly in dialogue, the claim that the film is representing something of society cannot be made so easily. Maybe the image is society, and the body the medium. Hans Belting's text complicates the seemingly oppositional relationship that the subject and object have.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to disentangle the complexities of the use of prosthesis in correspondence with a new materialist account of agency. The assemblage of human and nonhuman bodies allows for agency to be distributed amongst the different actors involved. The concept of movement in relation to agency still needs to be further examined. For this analysis took for granted the necessity of movement although argued for an understanding of movement that does not require independent bodily movement but can happen within the assemblage by any of the actors involved. Therefore, a disabled person that is incapable of independent movement can still experience agency; which happens in relation. An intra-active relationship where the distinction between subject and object is complicated. This approach to the subject-object relation is productive in the discourse of disability because a person with a technical aid is not viewed as having an un-whole body that is fixed by the use of this object, but the object becomes part of the assemblage that is formed together. The emphasis on the prosthesis and disability will shift, while the coming together of human and nonhuman bodies can create a different understanding of disability.

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