

Ecocriticism and “Thinking with Writing”: An Interview with Tim Ingold

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Abstract

Over the course of an influential career spanning several decades, Tim Ingold, Professor Emeritus at the University of Aberdeen, has established himself as a preeminent voice in the field of Social Anthropology. Author of studies including *The Perception of the Environment* (2000), *Being Alive* (2011) and *The Life of Lines* (2015), this interview was inspired by the potential of his wide-ranging scholarship to unearth some fascinating avenues for research in literary studies. The breadth of his writing on habitation, perception and skilled practice, suggests myriad applications for his thinking beyond the purely anthropological, and particularly for bridging the concerns of literary and environmental studies. The philosophical depth of his work, apparent in his analyses of processes of growth and formation in both biological and socio-cultural domains (indeed questioning the supposed divisions between these fields), proves that his scholarship provides a refreshing counter-narrative to many prevailing schools of thought in current literary theory, especially to much of the discourse of New Materialism and Speculative Realism. In addition, this interview contains his views regarding certain emerging issues in literary studies, such as the material practices of reading, and the ascendancy of the computer screen over the printed book, areas where his anthropological perspective is both stimulating and revealing. As a renowned scholar who has recently surveyed the changes in the academy and in disciplinary relationships throughout his long career, his observations provide valuable insights into the capability of the arts to guide us into a wider, more interconnected world. Crucially, his responses also speak to the world of academia, and how we can foster a practical awareness of ecological issues within the often-rarefied spheres of academic research and practice.

Keywords: Tim Ingold, anthropology, literature, ecology, materiality.

Resumen

A lo largo de varias décadas de influyente trayectoria, Tim Ingold, profesor emérito de la Universidad de Aberdeen, se ha consolidado como una de las voces más importantes del campo de la antropología social. El autor de obras como *The Perception of the Environment* [La percepción del ambiente] (2000), *Estar vivo* (2011) y *La vida de las líneas* (2015) accedió a esta entrevista, inspirada en el potencial de sus amplios escritos, la cual pretende desvelar algunas posibilidades de investigación fascinantes en lo que a los estudios literarios se refiere. La amplitud de sus escritos sobre los asentamientos, la percepción y las habilidades prácticas sugiere una infinidad de usos para sus reflexiones que van más allá de lo meramente antropológico y que se refieren, en especial, a su relación con las cuestiones de los estudios literarios y medioambientales. La profundidad filosófica de su obra, que resulta evidente en sus análisis de los procesos de crecimiento y formación, tanto en ámbitos biológicos como socioculturales (y que, de hecho, cuestionan la supuesta separación entre ambos campos), demuestra que sus estudios ofrecen una novedosa contranarrativa a las corrientes de pensamiento predominantes en la teoría literaria actual, sobre todo

frente a gran parte del discurso del nuevo materialismo y del realismo especulativo. Además, esta entrevista incluye sus opiniones sobre determinadas cuestiones emergentes en los estudios literarios, como las prácticas de lectura y la mayor relevancia de las pantallas frente a los libros impresos, ámbitos con respecto a los cuales su perspectiva antropológica resulta tanto estimulante como reveladora. Al tratarse de un académico de prestigio que ha examinado los cambios en el ámbito académico y en las relaciones interdisciplinarias durante su dilatada trayectoria, sus observaciones sobre la capacidad de las artes para guiarnos hacia un mundo más amplio e interconectado resultan de gran valor. Asimismo, y de forma fundamental, sus respuestas se dirigen al mundo académico y se refieren a cómo fomentar una concienciación práctica sobre los problemas ecológicos en las rarificadas áreas de la investigación y la práctica académicas.

Palabras clave: Tim Ingold, antropología, literatura, ecología, materialidad.

Antonia Spencer. *You have garnered a reputation as a leading interdisciplinary scholar, through the breadth of your reading and the ways in which you draw on multiple disciplines in your work. This interdisciplinary emphasis is perhaps exhibited most clearly in the connections you make between Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture in your book Making, but also in your earlier work, where you have argued that disciplines such as Anthropology and Psychology are not as distinct in their objects of study as they might at first appear. How far do you identify with this term "interdisciplinarity" and what role do you think it has played in your career?*

Tim Ingold. Personally, I don't much like the notion of interdisciplinarity. It tends to reproduce the colonial idea of the discipline as a bounded terrain of knowledge with an exclusive claim to represent a particular segment of the world. In just the same way, the international order reproduces the idea of the sovereignty of the nation state over its territory. As the world is carved up geopolitically between nations, so it is divided intellectually between disciplines. Dealing with other disciplines calls then for treaty negotiations, as in interdisciplinary conferences. But real disciplines are not like that. They are more like conversations. Each conversation is composed of multiple lines which, while converging in some regards, diverge in others. In practice these bundles of lines have no boundaries, nor do they lay claim to territories. Each line is rather looking for a way through. There is nothing to stop anyone from departing from one conversation in order to join another. One has to cross no boundaries in order to do so.

I've been part of lots of different conversations, and have been greatly enriched by them. But I have never set out deliberately to 'do' interdisciplinarity. I have merely followed my nose, sniffing out whatever lines of inquiry look promising, and as one thing leads to another—be it by way of personal contacts, bibliographic references or meetings attended—I have found myself drawn into conversations and literatures I might never otherwise have known about. This has been exhilarating but also daunting, when I have blundered unawares into fields I know virtually nothing about, and have had to pretend that I have something significant to say. But this has not been driven by any coherent strategy. Most often I have arrived into other conversations more or less accidentally, by the back door, often because people working in other fields happen to have read my work and want to educate me in their own subjects.

I am beginning to think that the key thing we should be pushing for is not so much interdisciplinarity as accessibility. One of the ways scholars close ranks against intruders like me is by writing in an idiom that speaks only to others familiar with the same code, and who read and refer to the same sources. Much of this writing is impenetrable to outsiders. I find it irresponsible. It is our responsibility, as scholars, to make our work accessible. This does not entail simplification, let alone popularisation. It is reasonable to assume that our readers are as intelligent as we are, that they are equally capable of handling complex ideas, and keen to make the effort. But we cannot assume that they have read the same works, or have been trained to use the same idioms.

So we don't really need interdisciplinarity. That only creates boundaries where none were there before. What we need is accessibility, responsible scholarship, and conversation.

A.S *The importance you place on accessibility in scholarly writing is embodied in your own work, which has allowed me, as a literature scholar, to engage with your thinking in a way that is often prohibited by the critical idiom of other writers in the social sciences. Yet many in my own discipline are also guilty of such inaccessibility. As someone outside of the current "boundaries" of literary studies, what do you think it is that literary criticism can contribute to the conversation you would like to see promoted between the disciplines?*

T.I. That's a tough question! What I'm against, I think, is the figure of the "critic" whose self-appointed task is to act as a kind of gatekeeper between works of literature (or art, music, theatre or architecture) and the people who might read or otherwise enjoy them, and who take it upon themselves to interpret or explicate the works in question so that the rest of us might understand what they mean. Even anthropologists have not been immune to this attitude, setting themselves up as the interpreters and explicators of other people's lives. That's an exercise in academic vanity. What I've been advocating for my own discipline is an anthropology that is willing to join *with* other lives, to think with them and learn from them, rather than treating them as objects for ethnographic analysis. By the same token, I would love to see a form of study that joins with and thinks with writing (or art, music, etc.), that shows how—by joining and thinking with it—we can open up differently to the world and perceive things to which we paid no attention before.

A.S. *Your notion of studying "with" literature as a practice of broadening our attention implies a need for literary studies to be more responsive to a wider reality. This might seem incongruous alongside the image of the literary critic embedded in the insulated world of the text. However, your book *Being Alive* (2011) contains a chapter titled "Ways of Mind-Walking" which suggestively compares the movements involved in acts of walking, painting and reading. Could you expand a little on your conception of the kinship between the activities of reading and walking, and whether it can aid us in reconceptualizing acts of reading literature?*

T.I. I have been inspired by accounts of practices of reading in medieval times, when it was assumed that reading was a performance that involved the use of the voice—just as

walking is a performance that involves breath and feet. I think there is much to be said for bringing this back. It would mean giving greater value to words as ways of telling, of conversing. Academic scholars often complain about the written word, arguing that it blocks out feeling and affect, that it is disembodied. To plumb the depths of human experience, they say, it is necessary to go beneath the words, or behind them. But the complaint is misdirected. Words, especially when they are written by hand, are feelingful, they well up from the body in manual gesture, and as every poet knows, they are laden with affective resonance. The complaint should be directed against the way words have been incorporated as tools of academic discourse. They have been sterilised, sanitised, cut off from the world whose praises they sing. We should not blame words for their academic incarceration.

But we also have to rethink the meaning of imagination. It is not a good word, since it contains "image" inside it. The meaning I am looking for has nothing to do with images. The image captures what is already seen, and "plays it back" to us for subsequent interpretation. But what I want to call imagination always evades capture, always escapes the grid of conceptualisation. It is because of imagination that thinking goes beyond the limits of the already thought. And it is what enables life to carry on. Reading literature can and should be imaginative in this sense. It is a matter of the reader joining company with the writer in the ongoing life of the work.

A.S. *Within literary studies we are seeing an increasing emphasis on the physicality and history of the book and a movement away from a conception of the printed page as passive and homogenous. Yet we are simultaneously faced with a digital landscape that has engendered a proliferation of new interactive textual forms, resulting in many of us engaging with texts via a screen rather than a printed page. How do you perceive the role of technology in transforming our modes of reading, and leading us away from the sonorous and performative reading practices of the past?*

T.I. I have been thinking a lot recently about the page and the screen, and about the different experiences of reading from them. For that reason it is difficult for me to answer in brief—there is too much to say! My sense is that ever since the more or less contemporaneous inventions of linear perspective and the printing press, in the fifteenth century, we have been caught in a contradiction between alternative conceptions of surface, both of which differ fundamentally from the medieval understanding of the text as a woven fabric, the lines of which were literally written into the parchment as are footpaths in the ground of a meadow. In one conception, the surface is a transparent window that we look *through* in order to recover the words and their meanings that lie behind. In the other the surface is an opaque sheet that the writing is impressed *upon*. The window has a near-side and a far-side, and serves as an interface between the two. But the printed page, like the ground, has no far side. It is not an interface but, like the mythical Janus, faces both ways, front and back.

The computer screen (deliberately branded as offering a series of "windows") has apparently resolved the contradiction unequivocally in favour of the former. Yet it only

seems to have ignited a reaction in the form of a renewed interest in the physicality of the book as a printed work, in its typographic design, its binding, and in the texture of its paper. Threatened by extinction, these aspects of the book—which once we had taken largely for granted—have come to matter as never before. Only time will tell how this will play out. Will screens win? Or the printed book? Will both carry on side by side, as now, in uneasy coexistence? Or will we return to a conception of both screen and page, redolent of medieval times, as a woven texture or path-strewn landscape? It is too soon to tell.

A.S. *There is I think a consistent dualism in the way in which literary critics tend to think about the relationship between the standardized, reproducible "text", and the sensory, material "book". While what is often described as the "material turn" still holds sway in much critical thinking in literary studies, this gap between textuality and materiality is one which we have yet to fully close. Your own work carves out a more critical position within much of the current discourse on notions of materiality. I was wondering what for you is most problematic in contemporary critical approaches that appeal to notions of materiality?*

T.I. The general mantra of the so-called "new materialisms" is that we should take materials seriously. I agree, and I have argued the same myself for many years, specifically in opposition to the prevailing attitude in material culture studies, which was to focus on objects and their consumption rather than on the materials from which they are produced. I nevertheless find myself out of sympathy with much contemporary new materialist writing. Worst, in my view, is the fashion for so-called "object-oriented ontology" (OOO). Though this is a position actually trumpeted by very few, its advocates are nevertheless armed with such powerful tools of self-promotion that its importance has been hugely exaggerated. OOO presents us with a fossilised world in which everything you care to name is sunk into itself; where nothing moves or grows. The rain doesn't fall; the wind doesn't blow; the sun doesn't shine. All things exist, they say, except time, which doesn't. So there can be no growing, falling, blowing or shining. Why anyone should treat this nonsense seriously defeats me. It is not as though it is news that material things can affect and have meanings for one another even if there are no human beings around: what have ecologists, geomorphologists or soil scientists been studying all these years? For me, taking materials seriously necessarily entails a focus on the existential becoming of things, not on their essential being. I'm happy to sign up with those who take their bearings, instead, from the vitalism of Bergson or the processualism of Whitehead: I was reading both back in the early 1980s, when they were otherwise shunned by philosophers, and they have been very influential for my thinking. But I still find the style of many who write in this vein tiresome. If the idea is to think with materials, why do self-styled theorists run as far as they can from having anything practicably to do with them? Why do they keep bombarding us with lists of odds and ends, culled from the safety of an armchair (or from behind a screen) rather than from direct experience? And why are they so careless in having resort to the catch-all concept of "assemblage", habitually confusing the jumbling of odds and ends with the ways materials go along together in their formation?

A.S. *The boundaries we have considered between disciplinarity and accessibility, and between materiality and textuality, also relate to ecocriticism. This is a branch of literary studies that focuses on the ways in which the material world, and human relations with this world and with the earthly beings that inhabit it, are reflected in written texts as well as in the media of visual art, music and film. Do you see your own thinking on the materiality of human environmental relations as possibly contributing to ecocritical approaches?*

T.I. I would hope so. What an exclusively critical focus on literary and other cultural expressions tends to forget, in my view, is that the activities of writing, or of artmaking, composition or filming, are themselves critically attentive, environmentally situated and materially consequential. So too are the activities of the farmer and the forester. Does not the farmer cast a critical eye over his fields, and the forester over the woods? In my work I have been trying to approach writing, above all, as a practical activity on a par, in this regard, with farming and forestry. It is one of the manifold practices by which I and others, as the living beings we are, correspond materially with our environment. If we take ecocriticism to mean what it says—a critical engagement with the world around us—then there’s no reason why it should be confined to literary scholars, or even to those who study music, art, film and other media. Perhaps it’s a question of rescuing criticism from the clutches of “critics”. Could it be because of their desire to keep criticism for themselves that the boundaries between the worlds of letters and of real lives keep coming back, despite our best efforts to abolish them? An ecocriticism that would genuinely do what it says on the tin would surely bring the environment as a whole into the field of its critical practice rather than narrowing it to its literary (or artistic, filmic or compositional) manifestations. It would then have to admit other domains of activity as equally deserving of admission to the fold of critical practice. Wouldn’t it be nice if the farmer and the forester, along with the geologist, the botanist, the painter and the poet, could join the ranks of ecocritics? Do they not all, each in their own way, question their environment and answer to it? This is not just about broadening the field of criticism to include all kinds of works—fictional and non-fictional, textual and non-textual—in its analytic purview. It is about recognising that the environment itself is a work in progress, and that the perception of the environment, for human as indeed for nonhuman beings, is a critical practice.

A.S. *One of your recent endeavours is a British Academy funded project titled “Solid Fluids in the Anthropocene: A Transdisciplinary Inquiry into the Archaeological Anthropology of Materials”. Can you say a little about how you interpret and employ the concept of the Anthropocene, which has made such a deep impression across the humanities, and whether you consider it a valuable tool for “transdisciplinary” scholarship?*

T.I. Like many, I have mixed feelings towards the idea of the Anthropocene. As a scientific concept, it is a trifle bizarre, and there is something almost comical about the earnest efforts of scientists to verify the onset of the new era as objective fact and to establish internationally agreed standards for its recognition. As a rhetorical concept, designed to draw public attention to the potentially catastrophic consequences of human-induced

environmental change, the idea has been exceedingly effective but also extraordinarily misleading, hiding the culpability of global corporate capitalism and state-sponsored militarism behind an appeal to universal humanity. However the idea has had one benign effect, namely to initiate all kinds of conversations across the divide between the arts and humanities and the natural sciences that were simply not happening before. Our project on "Solid Fluids" was designed, in a small way, to further these conversations—for example between glaciologists, seismologists, archaeologists and anthropologists. And that's a good thing, regardless of whether the concept of the Anthropocene makes intellectual or political sense. I am inclined to think that it does not.

A.S. *In your article "From Science to Art and Back Again: The Pendulum of an Anthropologist" (2016), you demonstrate through the maturation of your thinking what you feel has been a steady moving away from the hard sciences and towards the arts in your work. You also argue that it is art, rather than science, that is currently "leading the way in promoting ecological awareness" (Ingold, "From Science to Art" 19). Is it your position that the arts currently offer a more effective approach than science to furthering ecological awareness?*

T.I. I do think the arts have taken over the mantle of ecological awareness that the sciences have abdicated. Of course, the popular discourse on climate change repeatedly refers to what it calls "the science"—as though it were all one thing—to validate its predictions, and scientists have been at the forefront in warning us about the consequences of climate change and of the urgency of taking steps to mitigate them. Yet in its resolute demand for objectivity, and in its obsession with measurement and quantification, science continues to treat the world as its object rather than its milieu. The world belongs to us, according to science, and it therefore behoves us, for the sake of future generations, to use it wisely. But this world, in its scientific projection, is not one to which we ourselves belong. In the image of the global environment, the world is one that we have surrounded, not one that surrounds us. It is in this regard that contemporary global science lacks a truly ecological awareness. "Do we love the world enough", Hannah Arendt once asked, "to assume responsibility for it?" (Arendt, "The Crisis in Education"). Only if we do, Arendt foretold, can there be hope of renewal for generations to come. But science does not teach us how to love the world. It is left to art to bring us to our senses, to show us how to open our hearts and minds to what surrounds us, rather than turning our backs on it in the name of objectivity. Art rekindles wonder and astonishment. This is not the pre-packaged, commoditised wonder that is marketed in the media and put about by big science as part of a well-rehearsed public relations exercise. Nor is it for art to serve as a messenger on science's behalf, by bringing its conclusions, for example about climate change, into the arena of popular consciousness. That would be to reduce art to propaganda. But I do think that art can and should rekindle the senses, so that we can learn to attend directly, even lovingly, to the world around us, and to respond in kind—with precision, sensitivity and wisdom. That's what I mean by ecological awareness.

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