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**Elizabeth Grosz. *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. viii + 264 pp.**

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**Abstract**

Review of Elizabeth Grosz. *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. viii + 264 pp.

**Keywords**

Darwinian evolution, feminism, art

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In her most recent book, accomplished feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz offers a provocative, thoroughly researched, and beautifully written exploration of the question of difference in its material, political, and aesthetic dimensions. This study, which interweaves diverse perspectives from animal studies, evolutionary biology, poststructuralist thought, and gender studies, represents a significant contribution to the growing body of posthumanist and material feminist scholarship marking what Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman identify as the “material turn” in contemporary critical theory (2008). Primarily concerned with articulating a new ontology of sexual difference that takes materiality seriously, Grosz refuses to privilege culture, representation, and the human at the expense of nature, the real, and the nonhuman. Borrowing Charles Darwin’s terms, Grosz asserts that the space between humans and nonhuman nature constitutes a difference of degrees, rather than one of kind; the human is irrevocably entangled with the animal through “the fundamental continuity of reason, morality, affect, and all the defining qualities of the human with the animal” (118). Grosz argues that we must rethink the category of the human as well as the limits and scope of the humanities in order to account for the vast continuity of capacities that extends via sexual difference and sexual selection into the realm of politics and art.

Grosz begins by examining the Western philosophical tradition concerning difference, tracing its evolution from the writings of Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson through the work of twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Luce Irigaray. A common genealogical thread linking these diverse thinkers is their understanding of difference as an ontological category. Difference is the primordial generative force that produces a constant proliferation of variations and that accounts for all biological and cultural diversity. As a force of change, difference elaborates itself in every dimension from material objects, forces, and organisms to social organizations and cultural phenomena: “[e]very thing, every process, every event or encounter is itself a mode of becoming that has its own time, its own movements, its own force” (2).

The author’s discussion shifts toward sexual difference, the engine of all variation and diversity. Engaging with Darwin’s writings, particularly *The Descent of Man* (1871), Grosz interprets sexual difference as the condition for the emergence of all other existing differences—including those which are not directly linked to sexual dimorphism (or polymorphism)—through the dynamics of sexual selection. Since the processes of sexual selection enact the exuberance and indeterminacy of individual taste, attraction, and pleasure, its irrational

operations are irreducible to the adaptive and functional mechanisms of natural selection. Through her careful analysis of Darwin's writings, Grosz elaborates a complex and sophisticated account of sexual selection that challenges reductive interpretations of Darwin's theories arising from many of his followers within sociobiology, genetics, and other fields, as well as from scholars within feminist and queer studies. For example, Grosz emphasizes sexual selection's complementary strategies of competition and choice, and she affirms that nonreproductive heterosexual and homosexual encounters, as well as diverse sexual interests and bodily forms, are themselves implicated in the variation-maximizing operations of sexual selection (126, 130).

Grosz's perspicacious analysis of Darwin's writings not only invalidates the reductive readings of many of his interpreters, but it also portrays Darwin's understanding of sexual difference as a "dynamic, open-ended, ontologically complex account of sexual divergence" which, as she argues, is compatible with the principal goals of contemporary feminist thought (116). Grosz develops this claim, perhaps the most compelling and original of the book, by examining the unexpected congruities between Darwin's work and that of Luce Irigaray. Both philosophers understand sexual difference as an indelible ontological force, the spontaneous and unpredictable engine of variation and the condition for the emergence of all biological, social, and cultural forms. Darwin and Irigaray provide complex, non-essentialist and non-reductive accounts of nature and material bodies that cast them as historical, dynamic, and inextricably entangled with culture. Furthermore, Irigaray presents sexual difference as a prism through which all other lived differences, including ethnic, racial, cultural, and economic categories, are filtered and refracted. Similarly, Darwin contends that the specificity of differently sexed bodies "deflect[s] all other forms of evaluation and selection through the inexplicable, incalculable vagaries of taste, desire, appeal" (Grosz 166). Although their projects differ significantly insofar as Irigaray's analysis centers on human relations and Darwin primarily addresses nonhuman life, Grosz argues that Irigaray's understanding of sexual difference is deepened through Darwin's theory of sexual selection and, likewise, interpreting Darwin's work through a feminism of sexual difference reveals its radicalism and relevance to the interests of contemporary feminist thought.

Grosz concludes with a discussion of the intimate relationship between sexual selection and aesthetics. The author argues that the excessive products of sexual selection—the sounds, colors and shapes that entice and excite—expand life beyond the struggle for survival and give rise to nature's artistry. Sexual selection furnishes the raw materials for the arts by giving objects new functions and contexts; a leaf might become a sexual prosthesis for a courting bird, thereby acquiring a new life beyond its practical functionality for the tree. While Grosz claims that what separates the "animal arts of seduction" from the human arts is

the former's lack of deterritorialization and framing (187), this insistence on what appears to be a difference of kind slightly undercuts an otherwise radical and vibrant posthumanist argument about the web of continuities that intertwines the human with the nonhuman.

*Becoming Undone* is a fascinating project, not only because of its invaluable contribution to the discourses of posthumanism and material feminism, but also due to its convincing interpretation of Darwinian theory as an intricate philosophical worldview. Through rigorous interdisciplinary research that renders her book relevant to scholars within and beyond the humanities, Grosz offers a compelling account of sexual difference as “an ontology, that encompasses and reconfigures both nature and culture, both body and mind, both reproduction and the nonreproductive, both animal and human” (117). Grosz points toward a new humanities that at once includes and extends beyond the human.

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