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Are you lonesome tonight or is this as you like it?

an object oriented ordering of self

2013

“What philosophy shares with the lives of
scientists, bankers, and animals is that all are
concerned with *objects*.” (Harman 2010, 5)

Graham Harman insists that the main objective of philosophy throughout the ages is its rendering of objects. If our understanding of objects is what defines us in our current paradigm, I want to look at our changing relation to them in order to try and grasp the epistemological shift that I feel is taking place. To get a better view of them, I suggest we identify what mirror society has in place in order to (mis-)recognize¹ itself in, and start by looking at how objects are treated within that confined frame. I propose that the real-time, linearly narrative metaphor of the stage is in the process being replaced by the screen and its particular rhizomatic backdrop. Where the physical affect around a thing, its potential in structuring of narrative, its quality in resonating aura once authenticated our world, the screen’s flattening of experience into a litany of objects gives way to an alienated and hollowed out identity.

Shakespeare’s condensation of classical and mediaeval sources into a concise, economic and instantly recognisable structuration of life’s narrative survived as a forceful metaphor for centuries, feeding into perhaps the most culturally solidified rendition—and quite possibly the endgame of the metaphor—in Elvis’ *Are You Lonesome To-night*, (1960). From:

All the world’s a stage/And all the men and women merely players/
They have their exits and their entrances/And one man in his time plays many parts/

To:

Someone once said the world’s a stage and we each play our part.

¹ As Michael Kaplan suggests, misrecognition cannot simply be an ideological effect (as in Brecht for example), nor a psychologically necessary dysfunction (Lacan), nor an impending critique (Foucault). Rather it is a mechanism that in its essentially mismatching reveals rather than masks: “In the work of theorists as different as Jameson, Laclau and Žižek, misrecognition persists in the mode of a nostalgia for a lost object which, though fictitious, is therefore deemed indispensable [...] and that the appearance of misrecognition is the very mode of performative efficacy and legitimating force characteristic of reflexive operations comprising social life. (Kaplan 2012)

The world a stage, the stage a world – a mirror image of our experience and its context. So we're merely players, can take on more than one role in a lifetime. But how do we construct a flexible identity that can play more than one part and stay "I"?

Let's see—from here through the looking glass onto the stage: An actress tells me that her figure is created in stitches. An intellectually constructed postmodern assemblage that is to be authenticated by the physical interaction with the stage world, the objects around it, the Props becomes the character's identity².

Stage objects behave in a particular way, they sit within a chain of pro- and regressive functioning in two directions. They are Props: Properties. This introduces a confusion that's inherent to post-theatre objects: they *have* and they *are*. Bert O. States suggests we operate a binocular vision, "one eye allows us to see the world phenomenally; the other eye enables us to see it significantly." We perceive the stage object as representing something else as well as the thing in itself.

Such objects are Properties of the narrative in that they allow the figures to constitute themselves through them, the plot to push itself off them, the actors to navigate around them, and the audience to perceive and see meaning within them. They *are* **P**roperty to that particular time, space and resulting narrative. They *have* **p**roperties that allow them to distinguish themselves from other Properties hence giving them their specific identity that points to all other identities of this class, an action Eco termed "ostension" (Sofer 1980, 7). They become a referent, a sign, while simultaneously remaining unique in their being. Their having of properties defines *them* and their lending themselves *as* Property to the figure defines *it* in *its* identity³. They are metaphors, yet what distinguishes them from the linguistic trope is their physicality. They are full and empty at the same time—originals that

² The inability to construct and inhabit a character, to create identity, 'actor's block', is traditionally released with the right prop and a following improvisation in which the actor manages to perceive the physicality of his character, engage with or onto the objects and construct a valid figure through it (Douglas 2008).

³ This behaviour of Properties on stage is not unlike the way objects perform in Actor Network Theory, wherein material-semiotic networks congregate both as and through a complex set of relations. The clusters of actors in ANT are both materially actualized and conduct signification, much like Deleuze's rhizomatic self-organizing spontaneous "machinic assemblages of diverse elements," which through their virtual complexity actualize material forms "connected with the emergence of novelty keeping the world from closing" (DeLanda 2013). The same is true of coded-objects in object-oriented programming, where such objects look both ways in a hierarchy—down towards the raw code; up towards their function in an algorithm. In these worlds as in the stage world, the Properties are both metonymies and metaphors.

physically and indexically stand for themselves as a sum of others of their kind, as well as point at an altogether different idea.

Establishing Props as being and having, however, does not really go far enough. The crucial notion is that “they speak and they perform” (Jean Alter 1990, 34). This notion of performing is essential since through the work of performance “props are defined by how they mean, rather than what they are” (Teague quoted in Sofer 2003, 13). Going even further, psychoanalyst Winnicott augments the performative aspect stating that “wherever a prop exists, and actor-object exists. Irrespective of its signifying function(s), a prop is something an object becomes, rather than something an object is” (Winnicott quoted in Sofer 2003, 12). Of course the having of property is what turns them into a perceivable object in the first place, yet their being a Property, is what makes them perform, i.e. take on a role in constructing the grander picture. They can only become a Property by being used as a physical metaphor.

Now a metaphor is a construction that doesn’t deny its original essence, its original signified, yet allows a new meaning to enter it temporarily. The linguistic metaphor is an abstract entity, that we can “rethink” at the same time as holding onto its firstly evoked thought. Lakoff and Johnson argue that “a metaphorical concept, structures (at least in part) what we do and how we understand what we are doing” (1980, 5) when we use language, and that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. [...] The concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured” (1980, 5). A metaphor, then is, in effect, a pointer, a direction, not a stable entity in itself, it was made to conduct attention towards a concept outside of its semiotic function yet within its system. It’s a temporarily hijacked lexeme.

A physical metaphor is more than that. The first thing it points at is not something outside of its function, but at its being itself. It is, undeniably, a material force inexplicably thrown into existence, not unlike ourselves. We can accept it as a peer mass that takes up space in the same realm we take up space in. Its own properties designate its unique specificity in time and space, yet it, as Property, undeniably points at something outside of its apprehensible presence: it points at an abstract concept. A bottle of Evian is a fountain, a towel designates a beach; a skull is death, heavy metal, an ashtray.

The Prop is at once materially present, full of physical *thereness* and at the same time a vessel for temporary meaning non-inherent to its *in-itself-ness*. That *thereness* of the Prop is constituted by its own properties just as the figure's *thereness*, the scene's *thereness* is constituted by *its* Properties, which in turn are the Props, our physical metaphors. The members of the Prague school claim that all that is on stage is a sign. They consider a chair on stage a "chair", a purely linguistic concept and with that construct a whole semiotic system outside of material presence (Sofer 2013 7).

I disagree and insist that what makes Props different to linguistic signs is that they are not abstract concepts rendered in an abstract semiotics but abstract concepts rendered in real life presence. These abstract metaphors are physically available in a unique object that was chosen to share. Given that they are performing metaphors, they are made to stand for something other than themselves at the same time as physically standing for themselves. Thus props are always already doing two things: namely coming into being from object-hood to in-themselves-ness and signifying something extrinsic to this intensive becoming, namely the metaphorical relation they signal.

Paradoxically, then, having an empirically provable materiality they become penetrable by us. Props generously allow the actress to charge them with her projections, injections, even, inflict meaning, inflict traits onto and into them, that then help establish the identity of the figure. This is a two-way system. As she inflicts herself onto them, she simultaneously inflicts them onto herself and physically as well as conceptually defines herself through them:

Props establish points of contact between actor/character and mise-en-scène; they localize dramatic activity materialize it in scenic terms. By extending and physicalizing the body's operation on the material environment, props situate the body more firmly within it. (Garner 1994 89)

Rather than virtually suspend disbelief, I'd argue they physically transpose belief. In the theatre, our physical body is not compromised, we're not entering an abstract realm where all that is shifted is concepts, we are in an abstract physical space where we are implicated, where our bodies in conjunction with the actors' and their Properties serve to authenticate the abstraction, lodge it into affected physicality.

Like figures on stage, I constitute my off-stage identity through the inanimate stuff around me⁴, Properties of my existence. Property not in quantitative, binary terms of possession, as in to have or not to have, but in qualitative terms of characteristics, as in infinite scales of becoming lodged between to be, or not to be. Objects are a condensed extension of space in which my inflictions on them and their infliction on me mix. We are both temporarily stable in our physical there-ness and hence reach out and interact without the fear of dispersion or liquidisation. I could call it anthropomorphising, though you could equally say I objectify myself in the process. We constitute one another⁵ —

Objects are generous bearers of history, of past involvement. They allow me to give extension to all aspects of what constitutes me into their existence, they keep this safe, hold it in, pass it down, through my lifetime, to future generations, even. Of course, not all objects are equally generous. There is a balance of safe identity, past inflictions, something like an aura (though not restrictively the Benjaminian one) and openness for being yet another physical metaphor, becoming a Property of mine, defining me by turning into a carrier of my projections. I think of my precious things, how I charge them with notions about myself, what I like, what I saw, where I was, who I knew. I want to receive the outcome of my mixing, I want to watch them perform their object-ness injected with a bit of me and then leave them to it, knowing that I can always come back to this physically grounded aspect of myself. Where else would I store this virtual definition of ME? Objects are my flexible, spatial filing system. I need physical entities to hold onto me so I don't disappear, and my objective is to continue existing in identity, and like the actor with his prop, I use the objects around me to help me in this.

In theatre there is someone called “Master of Props”, or “God of Props”, or even just “God”— In my world, I don't know who placed that stuff before me; it comes from all angles, but the fact of its having been placed or having placed itself is essential. It's there! It allows me to expand into space, not in an abstract virtual fashion but physically, by temporarily embodying aspects of me, by temporarily entering into a contract with me (Sofer 2003). My physical translucent metaphors. Together we set a

⁴ As Fauconnier and Turner suggest “material culture is suffused with conceptual blends of a type that typically employs everyday objects as material anchors” (2002, 195).

⁵ Actor-network theory suggests a model for a non-anthropomorphising lending of agency to objects.

scene that holds what is now at the same time as referring to multiple histories, wishes, memories, alternative realities. A scene that becomes dynamic in meaning yet stable in existence.

OK enough drama, it's becoming repetitive and frankly Old Hat! If only I could put on my white, black, grey or even blue hat I could speak from the more emancipated position of someone who has access behind the scene of the screen.⁶

Theatre as a medium is no longer a valid metaphor to use, let's be honest.

And these objects I keep thinking of are hard to get hold of and hold onto.

I'll go to my laptop, my personal screen that seems to mirror my condition these days.

What about Facebook? Doesn't that hold a lot of stuff about me? Or instagram? Or iPhoto?

My voice recordings?

They are all stuck behind a translucent veil, though. And that's the thing.

I have no physical, spatial relation to them.

Contrary to my abandoned mirror—the theatre stage—the Props in this currently apt mirror of the scene don't expand me in physical space, and rather than transpose belief they suspend physicality.

Though I trust their visually accurate representation of things, their mimesis, I don't feel them affecting me, constituting me physically.

Props

Props is a configuration class to specify options for the creation of actors, think of it as an immutable and thus freely shareable recipe for creating an actor including associated deployment information (e.g. which dispatcher to use, see more below). Here are some examples of how to create a Props instance.

```
1.import akka.actor.Props
2.val props1 = Props[MyActor]
3.val props3 = Props(classOf[ActorWithArgs], "arg")
```

The last line shows how to pass constructor arguments to the Actor being created. The presence of a matching constructor is verified during construction of the Props object, resulting in an `Illegal-Argument-Exception` if no or multiple matching constructors are found.

<http://doc.akka.io/docs/akka/snapshot/java/untyped-actors.html>

⁶ These differently coloured hats describe different types of hackers
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hacker_\(computer_security\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hacker_(computer_security)) - Black_hat

So virtually, too, Props help constitute an actor. The key difference is this: the virtual actors and their props aren't visible to us—more than that, they are inaccessible to us, hidden, not negotiable or negotiating in a physical fashion, in a potentially tactile way. There is no embodied presence upon which to map meaning and which in return radiates that in various wavelengths. Virtual objects are not what they seem: whereas we shared a physical space, an actual condition with what went on on stage, the coded actors of the screen have withdrawn into a fully abstract system.

Ironically in e-talk, “props” stands for “proper recognition”, as in respect due. Can I assume that now the mirror doesn't constitute me as an independent physical individual I receive or achieve proper recognition vs. misrecognition? How or as what do I recognise myself, then if all materiality disappears?

Whereas the two-fold physical metaphors of the theatrical objects served to bridge the gap between thought and body, physicalized abstract concepts for us to navigate around in space that authenticated our physicality, united the schism between conceptual thinking and physical being, the objects in the screen are doubly abstract, virtual, to be precise. One would think they can therefore double their power in at least authenticating our reality as intellectual beings, but no, they make that impossible, too, by tricking us, by assuming a costume of mimesis, when their actual, *quantitative*, i.e. numerical properties are unrelated to the seemingly *qualitative*, characteristic “Props” they project onto our screens while the program runs. The screen Props are fluid, intangible clusters, performing not themselves but what we long to see – yet when the screen is shut they withdraw into their numerical array, a monster of zeroes and ones. No memory to attach to that, the screen is slick and keeps us away from any possible original surface we could accept as fixed enough to load our essence into. The paradox, again, is that the skin of these objects, code, is, in contrast to physical Props, permeable, yet not penetrable by us.

Their true properties hence lie in their genetic coding, invisible to all but the programmer, the creator, the master of props –or god⁷. But what a different god he is, not generously distributing objects to be charged, to prop up identity, to flexibly aid the plot. This one is suspicious, hides it all

⁷ And to the fool “in the hat”, the hacker, the one that sees through the system, that cracked the code we abide by, be it language, for the Shakespearian fool or code for the guy in the white, grey, black or blue hat.

away, creates a make-believe world, an intangible illusion that can never be authenticated and can never authenticate us. The link between having and being is broken. These objects *have* properties but they *aren't* Properties available to us; instead, they live in hidden solitude, untouchable, indefinable by anything other than their name.

They are the true objects of Harman's universe: forever withdrawing. "Why should they be anything other than withdrawing you anthropocentric woman," Harman may say. Well, because I need to be authenticated and, frankly, I am not happy being tricked; it's no fun to be held as fool, no matter how wise he's meant to be, he's not taken seriously, and I'm not him and that's that. The generous colleagues we had, we interacted with or onto are disappearing, giving way to objects that have been generated by a large system of zeroes and ones. Liquid Modernity, I hear it named.

[Liquid Modernity: Amazon.co.uk: Zygmunt Bauman: Books](#)

[www.amazon.co.uk](#) › ... › [Cultural Studies](#) › [Postmodernism](#) ▼

Trade in Liquid Modernity for an Amazon.co.uk gift card of up to £4.75, which
partners in shared prison. whereas in liquid modernity, **liquid capitalism**, space ...

Properties no longer connote an idea of qualitative characteristics but only assign quantitative value, something we as physical entities have trouble relating to. The flow of data, a superfluid economy is beyond the horizon of our (mortal) engagement. If we do in fact build identity through objects à la Freud's object relation theory⁸, or Winnicott's notion of props then we're in trouble now. The screen bounces off our projections, the slick surface throws back and we have no points of attachment, no anchors. No stuff to hold onto and that holds onto us. No physical order we can rest the abundance of self in.

"Someone once said the World's a Stage"

No!

⁸ Freud's object relations theory suggests how the developing infant attaches emotional and psychic development to objects which are internalized images of external relations or actors. The objects are retained from childhood into adulthood, and some psychoanalysts see a misbalance or dysfunctional array of objects as the source for psychic disorders.

“Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism“ (Jameson, 2003, 76). If we assume the screen to be the reflection of our condition this makes sense.

The hammer that experienced usage, manual labour, sweat, the hammer my dad passed down to me. That thing that constitutes our family, holds some physical truth about us belongs to a realm wherein objects, properties were measured in a linear, narrative, qualitative way. I travel down the line, together with that hammer — down to a different future. But if our objects assume a digitally virtual identity, they become elements in a rhizome. And there is no beginning and no end in a rhizome. It is easier to imagine the destruction of the entire rhizome, than it ending at some point, because, by definition, it never does⁹.

What does that mean for the empirical objects around me? I so dearly want to hold onto my trainers as something that defines me, bears my sweat, all the parks I’ve run through, dogshit I stepped in, my wish to be slim, all the suitcases they’ve travelled in, the unusually friendly Swiss man that sold them to me while chatting about photography. I know fair well that it’s their corporate backbone constructing this illusion through advertising, and that his smile was produced by something called affective labour: *They’re Props, they’re yours to fill, to navigate around in, you are what’s being constructed through them, they define you, you make them what they are, they accompany you on your journey etc. etc.* But really, they bear nothing other than a sweet sickly smell. They come out of a system in which properties have been replaced by a form of value that is quantitative. They have no proper surface, they don’t belong to an era that holds objects to be carriers of past treasure. They will never be handed down, because their value disallows it. They will be replaced, by something that is functionally the same thing.

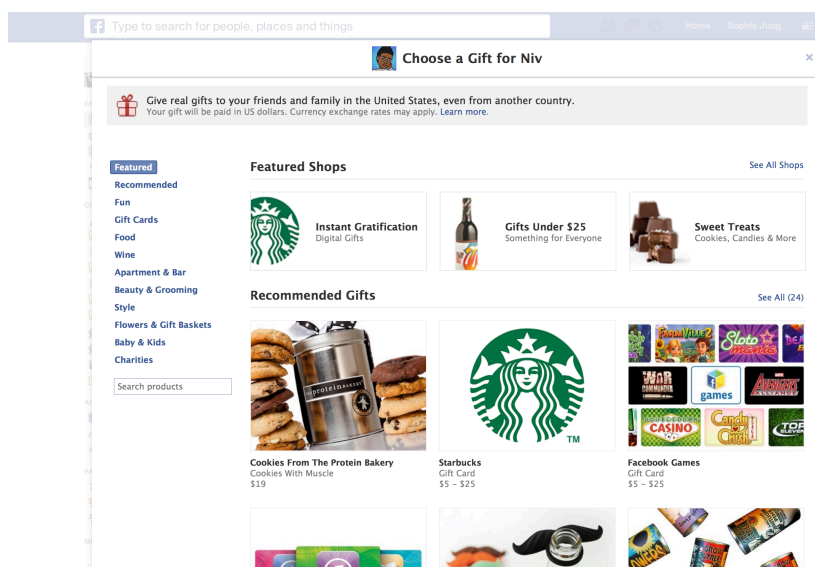
Just as the objects on the screen as I reopen it. Impostors. They look the same but their original, physical engagement with us is missing. They are not safe entities to trust with parts of my life story, I’d rather give my right or left arm (doesn’t matter these days, I haven’t used a pen in ages and the keyboard can deal with both) than to trust them to map me out in physical space. Their origin is

⁹ Principle of asignifying rupture: against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure. A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. (Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari 2004 [1987], 9)

hidden from me, who knows what their objective is! It is their numerical props that really constitute them, and those were made by a suspicious superstructure, the master, who doesn't allow me near the essence of what I wish to hold.

Such screen objects are only virtually physical, they are carriers of capital, not story, they temporarily hold quantitative value not qualitative narrative: they are objects of speculation. A bag of wheat is not a bag of wheat, it's got the shape of a bag of wheat but that's a temporary role. A painting is not a painting, a house is not a house, a golden tooth is not a golden tooth. They are all speculative commodities, characterized by their value rather than their presence. Their actual identity is inaccessible to us. They are forever withdrawing.

It's my friend Niv's birthday tomorrow and facebook suggests I *schedule a present* for him – *Give real gifts to your friends and family in the United States, even from another country*. Well, I contest that they are equally real, but accept that they are equally gifts. So I can choose anything in a long line of unequally real objects, that are nonetheless all objects (Harman, 2010) from cookies to Starbucks vouchers to a vintage inspired skinny tie to Oxfam America to a WTF button to a home brewing kit to facebook games to a thinking-of-you-box.



The fact that an object oriented ontology comes into existence precisely now is no coincidence, but a depressing consequence of where late capitalism has taken us. While double O ontologists might see their philosophy as a move away from an egotistical view of the world arguing: “come on, woman, stop projecting yourself onto all there is around you—give credit to what there is prior to, contemporary with, and long surviving your snivelling existence!”, they dangerously prescribe an

individualist ideology in which the only tie one object has with another is the comma that separates them. Their short-sighted damning of all that is constituted in the human mind fails to see that all categories they shout out, unicorn, cup, blini, Boeing, pixie, square circle, sailboat, whatever, are linguistic concepts, developed and agreed upon by the uniquely human tool of *language*. Like code they are not tied to actual physical entities; instead, anything that is computable (by a system we established and that now establishes us) counts. OOO's objects do not exist outside of that unless you invest in their qualities, and by doing that you will have to read them not as formal sounds but as identities, that can only ever be accessed through our understanding of them, our projecting onto them. This can be a generous, authenticating move and doesn't necessarily do them injustice. There are multiple ways to engage as such, a hostile takeover by human mind is different to a neighbourly exchange of washing powder, spare mattresses and empathic bed-stories, none of which forces either neighbour out of their home into a dictatorshiped commune.

“Objects need not be natural, simple, or indestructible. Instead, objects will be defined only by their autonomous reality” (Harman 2010, 19). Autonomous to the degree of utter solitude. OOO's notion of withdrawing objects, existing only in flexible lists (of the mind, if it doesn't hurt too much to point that out), (just like in computer code,) alienates each object from the next in that it will never experience any shared space, any interaction which, makes them “essentially uncontrollable: at the limit so indeterminable that anything can be connected with anything” (Anderson 2012). Many many many alienated objects, only alive through the name on their doorbell, Mr Blini, Mr Airbus, Mister Bushfire, which no one will ever ring. A perfect metaphor for the late capitalist era introduced by Thatcher with the ideology there is no such thing as society.

They discount the work of human activity and place it alongside a soporific litany of naturalised objects – a method that points less at the interconnected nature of things, and gestures more towards the infinity of sameness, the gigantic of objects, the relentless distanceless of a total confusion of beings (see Harman 2009a for a discussion of things and objects). In short, experience as passive, disoriented and overwhelming, what Heidegger described as the “terror” of pure unmitigated flatness. (Berry, 2012)

This flattening establishes not the magical wonder of things that Harman so desperately seeks but utter alienated boredom. No anchors to authenticate anything by, no pools of interaction from which new objects can arise, only inaccessible names, empty concepts as objects whose place in the system is fluid, uncontrollable and ultimately outrageously uninteresting. All magic that a physical thing holds, the fetishizable object, whose qualities rub off onto me and which I inject with self, which withdraws constantly and shares constantly, this thing that is a bit like me in that we are both just here without any justification, my companion that has been places, seen things, is denied, with the pretext of safeguarding it from anthropocentric takeover while its brilliance is flattened to an arbitrarily linear liturgy.

And I can't help relate it to the way the system, the master of virtual props, is treating us and our comrades. No more outliving stuff: What I get today is replaced by its clone tomorrow.

The post-internet object replaces traits with values and rather than performing itself, it simply indicates performance.

Not **P**roperty but possession.

Not **p**roperty but function.

Those virtual objects of OOO's litany's can appear before us as anything from *loneliness* to *doorstep*, all computable within the screen, within our mind, yet none of them available for further inspection.

Constantly re-established by zeroes and ones there is no materiality I can get into.

And maybe that's the point, and maybe that's where Proper Recognition happens, and maybe that's all we are: flat, borderless virtual data and the screen is in fact not a mirror in which to misrecognize ourselves in but a pane through which we disperse into our real nature.

To quote Elvis' catharsis in his final act in one last appeal to my beloved objects:

But I'd rather go on hearing your lies

Than go on living without you.

Now the stage is bare and I'm standing there with emptiness all around.

And if you won't come back to me. Then make them bring the curtain down.

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