Roland Végső*

The Conspiracy of Objects[1]

> "Die Antwort auf die Frage: was teilt die Sprache mit? lautet also: Jede Sprache teilt sich selbst mit. Die Sprache dieser Lampe z. B. teilt nicht die Lampe mit (denn das geistige Wesen der Lampe, sofern es mitteilbar ist, ist durchaus nicht die Lampe selbst), sondern: die Sprach-Lampe, die Lampe in der Mitteilung, die Lampe im Ausdruck."
>
> Walter Benjamin: "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen"

The Language of the Lamp

Objects speak. Does this proposition present a fact or a fiction? Can the speech of objects reveal something about fictionality in general as a mode of existence? And when objects speak (provided that they do indeed speak), do they relate facts or do they create fictions? And who do they speak to? As Walter Benjamin asked: "To whom does the lamp communicate itself? The mountain? The fox?"[1] Putting aside the intricacies of Benjamin's answer to this question, we could nevertheless argue that the way he framed the problem of language here remains important for contemporary discussions of objectivity as well. To put it simply, the distinction between "language as such" and the "the language of man" opens up the theoretical possibility of identifying a certain idea of language with the very problem of objectivity. In this expanded sense, "language" is no longer the naming language of the human being but, ultimately, a dimension of being itself. The language of the lamp, then, is simply the ontological dimension of its constitution as an entity that the lamp is capable of communicating to other entities by virtue of its very existence. This is certainly not the

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way we usually understand human language as a tool of verbal communication, since this human language is now merely one particular instantiation of a much larger understanding of "language" that is grounded in a specific definition of being itself. Abandoning Benjamin's conclusions, we could nevertheless argue that this identification of language with an aspect of being remains an operative principle in much of the philosophical discussions of the object today.

Of course, the speaking object is a fictional character that we are more or less familiar with from philosophy. Various objects have already spoken to philosophers in a number of different ways. The invocation of the language of objects is in fact an old philosophical *topos*. So many non-human characters have already been interrogated and forced to speak. Why not objects?[2] For example, as is well-known, for Marx, the theory of commodity fetishism itself appears to be based on the fiction of such a speaking object. What does the commodity say? It explains the theory of "commodity fetishism" to us. Fetishism, after all, is precisely a mechanism to make objects speak.[3]

This fetishism, therefore, could be described as a form of "fictionalization": although we know very well that objects do not speak, we decide to act "as if" they wielded a language (and, on some occasions at least, not without poetic

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[2]   Of course, the contemporary practical manifestation of this figure (the speaking object) is the so-called "internet of things," which allows an increasing number of objects (for example, a refrigerator) to address us in human language. See, Samuel Greengard, *The Internet of Things*, MIT Press, Boston 2015. While we are already suspicious that our gadgets are listening to us, soon we might be relieved of the burden of having to invent fictions of speaking objects. This is why Achille Mbembe writes about the return of "animisim" in contemporary capitalism. See, Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics,* trans. Steven Corcoran, Duke University Press, Durham 2019, pp. 177–183.

[3]   Here is the famous passage from the first German edition of the first volume of *Capital*: "In order not to anticipate, however, let another example concerning the commodity-form itself suffice. It has been observed that in the relationship of commodity to commodity (e.g., of shoe to shoe-shine boy) the use-value of the shoe-shine boy (i.e., the utility of his real, *material* properties) is completely irrelevant to the shoe. The shoeshine boy is of interest to the *commodity,* shoe, only as form of appearance of its own value. So if commodities could speak, they would say: 'Our use-value may be of interest to a man. But it does not inhere in us insofar as we are things. It is our exchange-value that inheres in us as *things*. Our own circulation as commodity-things proves that. It is only as exchange-values that we relate ourselves to one another.' Now just listen to how the economists speak forth from the very soul of the commodity." See, Albert Dragstedt, *Value: Studies By Karl Marx*, New Park Publications, London 1976, p. 40.

excesses). What is at stake here, then, with this fetishism is the very separation of the fictional from the objective. The traditional definition of the ontological status of "fiction" holds that the latter, in a specific sense, must be described as non-objective (in the sense of being "counter-factual"). The fictional, therefore, is never "objective" enough, and it is only recently that we have become sensitive to the position that, for example, "unicorns" are also objects. The "fictional" in this limited sense as the counter-factual is, in common parlance, something like the opposite of the "objective." The objective cannot be fictional: fiction in this sense is relegated to the side of the subject (as non-factual representations without direct referents in objective reality).

As a result, philosophical "realism" itself is often implicitly defined as the elimination of fictionality from the field of objectivity. While we do have to account for the ontological possibility of fictional objects, realism provides us with the principles necessary to sort things out properly. Thus, traditional realism often holds that objects do not really speak—or, at least, they do not speak like human beings do. For the fact remains that, even for realists, it is quite evident that objects somehow do "communicate" themselves to human beings and, possibly, to other entities as well. The fact that objects show themselves to us and that they do interact with each other even in our absence seems to imply that some kind of "information" is being exchanged in their mutual relations.[4] Whether the best way to approach this type of manifestation and interaction is through the example of human language remains a question.

So, when objects begin to speak, regardless of what they actually say to us in our imagination, the larger message of the mere possibility of this imagined speech becomes clear: fictionality cannot be fully separated from objectivity. The realism of a pure objectivity without fiction still needs speaking objects—even if the

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[4] A common point of reference for establishing this point is Alfred North Whitehead's theory of "prehension." According to this position, "every prehension consists of three factors: (a) the 'subject' which is prehending, namely, the actual entity in which that prehension is a concrete element; (b) the 'datum' which is prehended; (c) the 'subjective form' which is how that subject prehends that datum." The point, of course, is that the prehending subject can no longer be identified with the human being. In this sense, even objects prehend other object in their own "subjective form." See, Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Macmillan, New York 1978, p. 23. For a discussion of the interaction of object in terms of an "information," see Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Open Humanities Press, Ann Arbor 2011, pp. 153–175.

realist knows that objects do not really speak. This is the fetishism at the core of any kind of philosophical realism that pins its hopes on knowable objects. In this sense, the disavowed fiction of the speaking object remains the metaphysical presupposition of realism even today.

But if the field of objectivity is traversed by fictions (be they benign, neutral, or sinister), some of the phenomenological "sincerity" (presupposed by Husserl) is necessarily compromised.[5] What do these objects talk about when we are not listening? Is it possible that they talk about us behind our backs? What if they say the kind of things that are not true or, even, potentially defamatory? A contemporary realism founded upon the dual metaphysical principles of talking objects that forever withdraw from full human knowledge sets up a world that can hardly be described anymore as a "democracy of objects."[6] This democracy is now forever marked by the fiction of a necessary complement: the conspiracy of objects. We find here a philosophical echo of the paradigmatic Kafkaesque experience: "Someone must have slandered Joseph K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested."[7] The subject is always already slandered by the order of things. For it is not a far-fetched suspicion that Joseph K. was not maligned by a particular person: it was the very constitution of the field of objectivity in which he found himself embedded as a "subject" that positioned him as someone accused of an unnameable crime.

Fictions of Teleology

It appears that Kant already had at least an inkling of this conspiracy, since he formalized its basic principle as a necessary metaphysical fiction.[8] In order to de-

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[5] This is the famous "principle of all principles" in phenomenology: "No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the *principle of all principles: that every originary presentative intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition*, that *everything originarily* (so to speak, in its 'personal' actuality) *offered* to us *in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being,* but also *only within the limits in which it is presented there*." See, Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*, *First Book*, trans. F. Kersten, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1982, p. 44.

[6] See, Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*.

[7] Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell, Schocken, New York 1999, p. 3.

[8] Of course, Kant was neither the first nor the last one to confront this issue. As is well known, already at the supposed dawn of philosophical modernity, Descartes had to grapple with the same problem when he raised the issue of "hyperbolic doubt." The hypoth-

termine the fictional structure of "objectivity," we would have to revisit the Kantian distinction between aesthetic and teleological judgments.[9] The entire point of the Kantian theory of the teleological judgment is that the field of objectivity (in this specific case understood as "Nature") must be construed by the mind in reference to a fiction: we must already judge objectivity *as if* it served some kind of teleological purpose. Without this assumption, the human mind would not be able to provide rational descriptions of Nature. Thus, science needs this preliminary fictional constitution of the field of objectivity in order to be able to justify the lawfulness of nature, while religion needs this purposiveness in order to be able to establish the existence God. In this sense, in the very field of objectivity, a certain "reference" or directionality is inscribed: Nature always points in the direction of some kind of a final purpose (*Endzweck*) that, strictly speaking, lies outside of nature. The current state of Nature points in the direction of an as yet unrealized purpose that is nevertheless its basic organizing principle.

Based on this Kantian insight, therefore, it might be possible to argue that, before "fictionality" becomes an "aesthetic" experience, it is already an "objective" quality of things in general. As a result, we might have to work our way backwards through the Third Critique. What happens when we move from the teleological judgment to the aesthetic judgment? In other words, what happens when I first determine that objectivity must be structured by the assumption of a final cause; and only then do I pass an aesthetic judgment about a specific field of this objectivity? Nature serves a purpose and is beautiful: but this beauty becomes visible only when the purposiveness of nature is suspended (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*). The reduplication of fictionality (of the Kantian "as if") is significant here: the fiction of the purposiveness of nature meets the fiction of the absence of purpose in the aesthetic judgment.

In this sense, the two forms of judgment are in a strange inverse relation to one another. The teleological judgment is supposedly a logical judgment that dis-

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esis of the "evil genius" speaks to this issue quite clearly: the fiction of the conspiracy of objects must be evoked only to be dismissed in the name of the self-evidence of truths. Furthermore, this Cartesian move is the foundation of Lacan's argument that the structure of modern scientific knowledge is fundamentally paranoid. See, Jacques Lacan, "Science and Truth", in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, Norton, New York 2006, pp. 726–745.

9   See, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett, Indianapolis 1987.

covers that it needs fiction to establish its own consistency. The aesthetic judgment is a judgment of taste that, nevertheless, wants to speak with the authority of a logical judgment (at least in the sense that it claims universal validity—albeit subjective universal validity and not objective universal validity). In other words, for the teleological judgment the "as if" functions as the necessary link between the universality of reason and the singularity of sense experiences (it is only by a fictional assumption that science can move beyond an empirical description of nature to grasp the system of its laws), while for the aesthetic judgment the "as if" guarantees the transition of the singularity of taste to the universality of reason. What is common to both, therefore, is the following: they both need the moment of fictionalization to assert a move toward the universal.

Thus, following this logic, one of the unintended consequences of the inclusion of the moment of fictionalization into this scheme seems to be that it makes fetishists of us all. On whatever level we might want to locate purposiveness (and Kant seems to give us plenty of choices here, thereby creating enough confusion among his readers), this fictionalization nevertheless appears to be a precondition of teleological judgments in general. We know that this purposiveness cannot be objectively attributed to the totality of nature, yet we must act as if Nature itself had an ultimate purpose. One of the questions that emerges for us today is whether it would be possible to elevate the stakes of this fetishism: in the contemporary setting, it is obvious that a fetishism of this nature is very easily captured by specific cultural forces in service of the vast machinery of knowledge that is being put into operation on a global scale. In this context, we would have to conclude that the teleological judgment makes conspiracy theorists of us all: the requirement of seeing nature as purposive asks us to project a design where there is no design. To put it simply, there is something about the Kantian theory of the faculty of judgment that constitutively inscribes the possibility of these fictions in the subject. Before we become scientists or advocates of whatever obscure God, we have to become conspiracy theorists (albeit in a discreet manner). The structural proximity of science, religion, and conspiracy theory can be located on this level.

Arguably, at least some of this Kantian teleology survives in contemporary discussions of the "object"—even if in a displaced and reduced form. Accordingly, one of the fundamental presuppositions of the various philosophical discussions of objectivity today is that the category of the "object" itself has to be ex-

panded in order to include all possible entities. In this sense, one of the meta-physical presuppositions of realism today is that everything is an object (even the subject is an object). This expansion of the category of the object, therefore, presupposes a new way of constituting the field of objectivity. In this sense, the identification of an entity as an object works like a minimal teleological judgment of sorts that is, nevertheless, universalized. The object (in the sense of the objective status of an entity) is now a *telos* of a judgment that functions as a necessary preliminary fictionalization. Every entity is an object—even if the category of the object can no longer function as a "monad" since objects are imagined today as always being part of other objects. In other words, objects are assemblages of assemblages with mobile identities and boundaries. To designate a specific entity as an "object," we must pass a judgment that separates this entity as an individual object from the infinite domain of all other possible objects. Thus, the identification of an entity as an object (regardless of whether this process is carried out by a human consciousness or by another object) has its own temporality: the concept of the object is presupposed as the starting point and, then, the actual identification of an object follows as the outcome of this judgment. We always already have to proceed "as if" objects existed.[10]

So, what is the status of the proposition "everything is an object" in this context? What kind of a judgment is this? First of all, we can approach it from the perspective of the Kantian notion of "subjective purposiveness," which holds that objects of experience are subjectively purposive for our own cognition (in the sense that phenomena were meant to be cognized by us).[11] The expansion of the concept of the object to include all entities, however, also necessarily implies the expansion of this notion of purposiveness as well. For the point is no longer that "everything is an object" for the human being but that "everything is an object" for everything else that exists. In other words, objects are possible objects of prehension for all other objects. This position, therefore, implies that a certain type of "subjective purposiveness" is structurally inscribed in the very

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[10] Arguably, this is one of the reasons why some like Ian Bogost argued for abandoning the very concept of the object. He proposed the concept of the "unit" and that of "unit operations" to replace the object. See, Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2012, pp. 23–26.

[11] For a discussion of the distinction between subjective and objective purposiveness, see Kant's introduction to *Critique of Judgment* (especially, section VIII). See, Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 32–35.

field of objectivity. We proceed by assuming that objects prehend each other because they were meant to prehend each other.

So, as an example of a possible interpretation of this problem, we could briefly evoke the argument according to which everything is a tool.[12] What happens in this generalization of "tool-being"? First and foremost, this position starts with a certain simplification of Heideggerian categories (*Vorhandenheit*, *Zuhandenheit*, *Dasein*) in the sense that ontology is now reduced to two fundamental options: everything is either a tool (withdrawal) or a broken tool (exposure to presence). The important point here, however, is that this ontology undermines the traditional "objective purposiveness" of man-made tools. In other words, this generalization of tool-being does not mean at all that all entities exist in relation to the human being. To the contrary, by universalizing this relation between withdrawal and manifestation, tool-being denies the very possibility that the human being could be the ultimate purpose of Nature (something within nature for whose sake all other things within nature exist). Rather, the point is that every entity relates to all other entities in these tool-like terms. Every object "experiences" the other objects that it prehends as a broken tool. In that case, however, teleology is not simply eliminated from this metaphysics without a totality but universalized in its negative form. Failed purposiveness is the precondition of any relation.

The Idealism of Objects

One of the most virulently anti-Kantian strains of contemporary thought can be found in "speculative realism" and object-oriented ontologies. Arguably, one of the foundational philosophical acts of any kind of realism is the rejection of the Kantian metaphysics of the subject in order to reveal the "object" as it really is (without the fiction of the subject). What is objectionable for these thinkers about Kantian "correlationism" is that the latter coordinates the fiction of the subject with a fictional version of the object in such a way that makes knowledge impossible. But when "realism" itself is declared to be "speculative," we encounter a situation that might appear to be paradoxical. On the one hand,

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[12] For this argument, see Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects,* Open Court Press, Peru, Illinois 2002; *The Quadruple Object*, Zero Books, Winchester 2011.

realism means that the philosopher is now ready to see the object as it is without the mediation of distorting fictions. At the same time, this object without subjective fictions is declared to be knowable—real knowledge of the real object is possible. On the other hand, the mode of this knowledge is still "speculative": in other words, it is a kind of knowledge that is real but retains something of this otherwise repudiated fictionality. Real knowledge still passes through the detour of fictional mediations.[13]

This tension between the real and the fictional can be directly mapped on to the way speculative realism treats the problem of "language." In a first step, this kind of philosophizing opens by rejecting the twentieth century's obsession with language (both in its "continental" and "analytic" versions). Phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction: all contributed to this epochal blind wondering in the world of objects. Since these thinkers saw language (and only language) everywhere they turned, they were blinded by its bright glare and could not see the objects themselves. And yet, in a second step, the entire metaphysics of speculative realism is based on an elevation of the concept of "translation" to an ontological concept.[14] To put it differently, the return to objectivity promoted by speculative realism is based on a double move: it simultaneously downgrades the ontological status of human language and raises the ontological status of translation. The foundation of this double move is the Whiteheadian notion that "objects" are "prehensive" entities that "experience" and "interpret" the world around them.

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[13] In fact, Ian Bogost defines "speculative realism" in terms that turns these objects into "poets" themselves. Arguing against a traditional definition of philosophical "speculation" (which simply designates metaphysical claims that cannot be verified through science), Bogost tries to locate "speculation" in the field of objectivity itself. In other words, following this logic, speculative realism is not simply a kind of philosophy that plans to speculate about things, but a philosophy that tries to define objects as speculative entities themselves: "Speculative realism names not only speculative philosophy that takes existence to be separate from thought but also a philosophy *claiming that things speculate* and, furthermore, one *that speculates about how things speculate.*" Describing this speculation as "educated guesswork," Bogost goes on to say the following: "Speculation isn't just poetic, but it's partly so, a creative act that beings conduct as they gaze earnestly but bemusedly at one another." See, Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, p. 31.

[14] For more on the role of the concept of "translation" in this kind of philosophy today, see Roland Végső, "Current Trends in Philosophy and Translation", in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Philosophy*, ed. Piers Rawling and Philip Wilson, Routledge, New York 2019, pp. 157–170.

As an example, then, let us briefly examine here the relation between the idea of a "flat ontology" and the ontological concept of "withdrawal." This metaphysical conjunction (where the idea of flatness and withdrawal meet) is certainly worthy of our interest because it also marks the point of imbrication between metaphysics and politics in the discourse of philosophical realism. To put it differently, the "egalitarian" ontological principle captured in the expression "flat ontology" finds its immediate correlate in the concept of a "democracy of objects."[15] The usual point of reference remains here Ian Bogost's formulation of the problem in the following terms: "all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally."[16] In other words, the ontological equality of all things somehow functions as the ground of the phenomenological and political inequality of all things. How is this possible? Why does the metaphysics of equality not immediately translate into a generalized equality on the phenomenological level? How can we ground the phenomenological certainty of inequality in the ontological equality of entities? The answer has to do with the idea of "withdrawal," which now clearly functions as the hinge between the two halves of this asymmetrical statement.

According to this argument, things are equal in the sense that their very being is marked by withdrawal: things withdraw from themselves just as much as from each other. Given that it is a universal principle of being, withdrawal applies equally to every single being. But the way things withdraw determines the manner in which they appear or manifest themselves in particular environments of being. This is where the phenomenological inequality of beings comes from: the forever hidden structures of beings create a flat ontology with an uneven phenomenology. Withdrawal, therefore, becomes simultaneously the metaphysical guarantee of equality as well as of inequality. The political appeal of this argument is easy to see. Facing the phenomenological evidence of inequality, the democratic subject will always have recourse to a "deeper" principle that promises equality. In other words, withdrawal becomes a non-phenomenal point of reference that allows us to question any unequal distribution of relations among

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[15]   While I borrow this term ("the democracy of objects") from Bryant, in the current context we could have also evoked the idea of the "network" here, since much of contemporary realism is at least inspired or touched by Bruno Latour's "actor-network theory." The "conspiracy of objects" in this sense is precisely the hidden network of non-human agencies that determines particular constellations of being.

[16]   Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, p. 11.

things. What is striking about this argument, however, is that it joins together two contradictory principles: phenomenological manifestation and ontological withdrawal are put into a more or less clearly articulated relation with political democracy and secrecy. In spite of all the appearances, the idea of a political democracy is kept alive by reference to the metaphysical secrecy of things.

This is why the problem of "relation" emerged in this kind of philosophy with such urgency. If it belongs to the very being of things that they withdraw from each other, what we need to be able to account for is their relations. While this problem has received radically different treatments from a number of thinkers, what remains common to these theorizations of objects and their relations is that it is always assumed that some kind of a "distortion" takes place in these interactions.[17] In Graham Harman's memorable expression, the autonomous reality of objects (which must exist outside any external relations) is "caricatured" in these relations. In this sense, all relations are equal in that they are all limited. This insistence on both the impossibility and necessity of relations also explains why the idea of "translation" is so central for realism today. Simply put, translation is used here as the general term for a relation that communicates some information about other entities but does so in a limited or distorting way (hence the popularity in these circles of the proverb *traduttore, traditore*). The common assumption is that objects translate each other—but they do so by reducing the reality of other objects to their own languages.[18] The speech of objects is this endless murmur of translations that animates the whole of being.

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[17]   The idea of "relationism" was already an important part of Bruno Latour's critique of "absolute relativism." See, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 111–114. But as an example of these metaphysical debates, I will refer here briefly to the disagreement between Graham Harman and Levi Bryant. Simply put, Harman argues that real objects do not touch each other. This is why he finds the proper model for any relation in "occasionalism" (the idea that entities only interact through the mediation of God). This is the foundation of his concept of "vicarious causation." See, Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, pp. 70–78. At the same time, Bryant argues that objects must be capable of perturbing each other. In order to account for the way objects relate to each other, he relies on auto-poetic systems theory. See, Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, p. 70, pp. 136–175.

[18]   For different examples of the way "translation" is used in these arguments, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, p. 108; Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, pp. 174–185; Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 44, pp. 119–120.

Thus, the fetishism of speaking objects operates here through this expanded concept of translation.

The conclusion that we can draw from this situation is quite interesting. We could argue that object-oriented ontologies tend to invert the idealism/realism opposition that they deploy in order to lay the foundations of their own attacks on idealism. On the one hand, they prescribe the position of the anti-idealist "realist" for the philosopher (or, for whatever is left of the "subject" for this philosophy). On the other hand, their new metaphysics of the object prescribes a strange, inverted "subjective idealism" for the object. While the human being is asked to confront the object through the assumption of "realism," the theory of the object at the foundation of this program is based on a new fetishistic fiction of translation grounded in a disavowed purposiveness: the objects themselves are asked to become pure idealists who do not really know themselves or their environments as they are only capable of producing their own "subjective" translations of the world they exist in. For this kind of realism, therefore, objects themselves are not realists but blind idealists. In their radical withdrawal, objects remain Kantian correlationists.[19]

Between a Flat Ontology and a Flat Phenomenology

In what sense, then, is philosophical "realism" (especially in its speculative form) a contemporary form of thought? The most obvious first answer is clear: it is predicated upon the rejection of the paradigms inherited from the previous century—especially those that showed some kind of an affinity with various forms of "linguistic idealism." Quite clearly, then, "realism" today is driven by a desire to belong to the present in a way that marks its difference from its immediate predecessors (which, of course, does not mean that it severs all its ties

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[19] Bryant, for example, articulates this complication when he tries to explain the similarities and the differences between "speculative realism" and "object-oriented ontology" (or what he calls his own "onticology"). On the one hand, there is a general agreement between these two groups on the necessity of a certain type of philosophical realism (reality has to be conceived of as existing independently of human consciousness). On the other hand, as Bryant argues, OOO also rejects traditional realist epistemologies that concentrate on a single gap between the human being and the rest of beings. Rather, the point is to infinitely multiply these gaps by recognizing that objects do not have direct access to one another and, thus, each object translates other objects with which it enters into non-relational relations. See, Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, pp. 26–28.

with the past since it does need to construct its own genealogies). In this sense, it presents itself as a "generational" phenomenon. But if it is truly our contemporary, it might be possible to argue that the idea of a "speculative realism" goes well beyond the actual philosophical school that has still relatively recently given rise to this concept. Through the tension inscribed between its two terms, the expression captures something of the way knowledge is being historically transformed today. Breaking with the strictly philosophical use of the expression "speculative realism," I intend to evoke here the widely acknowledged fact that the terms "speculation" and "realism" circulate widely in various theoretical, political, economic, and aesthetic discourses. Therefore, the question that emerges here is in what sense is our historical moment that of "speculative realism" in this extended meaning of the term.[20]

It is widely acknowledged that the contemporary global circulation of knowledge can be described in terms of a series of disorienting experiences. In spite of the unevenness of its distribution, what seems to be a sign of our times is the unprecedented accessibility of an overwhelming amount of knowledge (of whatever nature and value). To put it differently, knowledge is increasingly "democratized" in the sense that more people have access to more knowledge than ever before in human history. At the same time, however, rather than reaffirm the symbolic framework for the interpretation of our historic experience, this democratization produces a genuine state of general "disorientation": the amount of knowledge available is overwhelming for individuals who do not necessary feel equipped to process all this information and, thus, see the current state of the world in terms of irreconcilable truth-claims that are presented with apparently the same amount of authority. Furthermore, the experience of this excess of available knowledge is often quite explicitly tied to an openly discussed awareness of the manipulation of the mechanisms of the distribution of knowledge. People know that accessibility is determined by algorithms and various more or less explicitly stated political interests. As a result, people experience the accessibility of knowledge through the certainty of its opposite: yes,

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[20]   For example, breaking with the strictly philosophical meaning of the term, we could use "speculative realism" to describe certain trends within contemporary capitalism as well. We already know from Mark Fisher that capitalism requires us to be "realists" today. But this kind of realism also proceeds in the name of a "speculative" strain within neo-liberalism that celebrates uncertainty as a chance of genuine self-realization. See, Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, Winchester 2019.

too much knowledge is available; but what really counts still remains hidden from us. To put it in terms of a simple formula: access to knowledge is torn between excess and secrecy.

If the above is, in fact, a correct outline of the way we experience knowledge today, it is not surprising that the terms we invent to name this experience bear the marks of this confusion. As Fredric Jameson famously quipped already in the late 1980s: "Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content."[21] Three decades later, the continuing validity of this insight is supported by the undeniable proliferation of "conspiracy theories" that has intensified to such a degree that that the very existence of "facts" seems to be threatened. The source of this confusion is quite easy to identify: on the merely "formal" level of the construction of arguments, the production of conspiracy theories and that of scientific truths has become increasingly more difficult to tell apart for increasingly wider segments of society. The way arguments are put forward by different groups seems to resemble each other: "research" is followed by the construction of "theories" that supposedly explain the way "reality" really is—even if this explanation goes against common sense or what presents itself to the senses as self-evident.

These reflections, then, provide us an opportunity to slightly update Jameson's formula. What the previous discussions suggest is that today conspiracy theory is the poor man's speculative realism. In this juxtaposition, the secrecy of power finds its inverted metaphysical correlate in the secrecy of things. The same way that the metaphysics of the democracy of objects is based on an ontology of secrecy, in contemporary conspiracy theories the secret core of world history has remained the totalizing force determining all the public phenomena of history. When history itself is reduced to the status of "fake news," what we encounter is not a genuine form of skepticism but dogmatic assertions of a truth in perpetual withdrawal. The structural difference is of course that the withdrawal of things in philosophical realism is a permanent foundation, while conspiracy theories

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21   Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, Urbana-Champaign 1988, p. 356.

retain a messianic dimension (once the truth is revealed, the true democracy of people can begin).[22]

Thus, we can at least speculate whether it is more than a coincidence that the "flat ontologies" of philosophical realists and the conspiratorial visions of so-called "flat earthers" evoke the same imagery.[23] They certainly appear to be mirror images of each other and not only in the sense that they could be described as ideological opposites. Speculative realism holds that behind the infinite diversity of the visible world, there is a flat metaphysical reality. In other words, the realists hold that phenomenological difference is rooted in ontological sameness. Being looks uneven, but, in reality, it is flat. At the same time, in the domain of politics, this secrecy is the guarantor of a possible politics of equality. The other camp assumes the opposite when it tries to eliminate the distance between phenomenology and ontology. Flat earthers start with the phenomenological truth that the earth reveals itself as "flat" to everyday experience.[24] Their conclusion, however, is that in that case the Earth must really be flat. In this respect at least, they do not want to admit to a distance between ontology and phenomenology—they are naïve realists. This is what we could call their "flat phenomenology" that is, ultimately, based on a hierarchical ontology. Once this phenomenological assumption is tied to a critique of "globalist ideologies," however, political secrecy reproduces the same split: the appearance of Western democracy hides a secret conspiratorial core. The phenomenology of democracy hides a hidden totalitarian core. This is when their version of realism becomes "speculative"

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[22] In the United States at least, this principle often finds its Biblical justification in reference to Luke 12:2: "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known."

[23] In this context, we should also mention that various critiques of globalization also depend on this same metaphor. See, Thomas L. Friedman, *The Earth is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, Picador, New York 2007. Here the "flatness" of the Earth is not the hidden truth of a historical conspiracy but the cultural levelling effect of globalization.

[24] For Husserl's argument that the Earth does not move (but, rather, it is the entity in relation to which everything else moves), see Edmund Husserl "Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenality of the Spatiality of Nature: The Originary Ark, the Earth, Does not Move", in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2003, pp. 117–131. For a recent discussion of the contemporary significance of this Husserlian argument, see Kelly Oliver, *Earth and World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions*, Columbia University Press, New York 2015, pp. 20–26.

in nature. In an age declared to be that of "post-truth" epistemologies, after all, everyone seems to know that truth is a secret that we can actually discover.

It appears, then, that today we are caught between a flat ontology and a flat phenomenology. It is in this context that a crucial aspect of the Kantian lesson comes to light: we might have to reconsider the way we commonly use the terms to "objectivize" and to "aestheticize." As is often the case, the first (to "objectivize") is usually taken to mean that we reduce something to the status of an object of study by science or turn something that is not really an object into an object. But what Kant shows is that turning something into an object of knowledge does not mean that we see it deprived of all cultural "fictions" as a mere object. Quite to the contrary, to objectivize something in this sense is already to fictionalize it through a teleological judgment. The moment an entity is framed as an object, it is fictionalized through the assumption of purposiveness (as it forms part of a purposive totality called Nature). To put it differently, objectivization is a form of fictionalization. At the same time, then, "aestheticiziation" cannot be simply treated as a form of fictionalization of an otherwise non-fictional object. Quite to the contrary, it is now aestheticization that designates a certain suspension of a constitutive act of fictionalization. In order to be able to judge an object beautiful, we have to suspend the original teleological judgment without rendering the latter completely ineffective. The very idea of a "purposiveness without purpose" means that the original fictionalization must be thematized in a purely formal sense: the mere form of purposiveness itself has to become visible to the judging subject. The aesthetic experience should contain a dimension that reveals that there is no purpose at work in the object other than the thematization of purposiveness itself. The very condition of objectivization manifests itself here in an empty and suspended form.[25]

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[25]   In this regard, it is possible that we have reached the historical point where we will need to displace the terms of the choice offered to us by Walter Benjamin when he opposed the fascist "aestheticization of politics" to the communist "politicization of aesthetics." In this context, then, the aestheticization of politics would mean the suspension of the purposiveness that supposedly constitutes the field of politics itself (before a concrete political program is formulated). One model for this contemporary gesture was provided to us by Giorgio Agamben's conception of politics as a "means without end." See, Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2000.

What does this all mean today in the age of conspiracy theory and speculative realism? Going beyond Kant's actual concerns, we could say that the act of objectivization amounts to an inscription of entities into a field of objectivity that is haunted by its own fictional constitution. As a result of this fiction, the very experience of objectivity is haunted by the dual possibility of the democracy and the conspiracy of objects. Where the realist sees a metaphysical democracy, the "poor man" sees a political conspiracy. So, the contemporary function of the aesthetic judgment must be interpreted also in this context. To put it differently, to aestheticize something is no longer simply to fictionalize it. To the contrary, to aestheticize the objects of contemporary historical experience means that we suspend the fiction of their purposiveness. To judge them aesthetically means that we do not see them exclusively in terms of either a democracy or a conspiracy of objects. Rather, what this suspended purposiveness reveals to us in an aesthetic experience might very well be that the democracy of objects is nothing but the failed conspiracy of objects—a conspiracy that does not want anything specific from us anymore (a design that does not serve any purpose other than being a design). This might very well be the meaning of a "realist fiction" today.[26]

Thus, what the aesthetic suspension of purposiveness accomplishes is not a simple negation of purposiveness but a way of framing the question of the necessity of teleological judgments. Since one of the most far-reaching metaphysical propositions put forward in the name of speculative realism has been the radicalization of the idea of contingency, it might be important to note that Kant himself defined purposiveness as the "lawfulness of the contingent."[27] If it is

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[26]   Along these lines, as one possible literary example, we could imagine here a present-day Joseph K. who is constantly frustrated by the fact that, in spite of his explicitly stated libidinal investments in various conspiracy theories, he happens to live life in a more or less dysfunctional democracy where people and objects are mostly indifferent to his existence. In this state, what he comes to discover is that, while there are conspiratorial forces at work in his life, he tends to misrecognize them as they do not at all function effectively and, sometimes, in their failures they are to be blamed for the petty moments of happiness that he is granted in life.

[27]   I mean to refer here to the thesis proposed by Quentin Meillassoux according to which the only necessity is that of contingency. As Meillassoux argues, even the laws of Nature must be understood as fundamentally contingent. See, Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, Continuum, London 2009. For Kant's discussion of the "lawfulness of the contingent," see Kant, *Critique of* Judgment, §76, p. 287.

true that the only necessity is that of contingency, then this thesis must hold true for the law of a flat ontology as well. In other words, the law of the democracy of objects must itself be contingent. What follows from this hypothesis is that, whatever apparent "lawfulness" this democracy has, it has to come from somewhere else other than its inherent contingency—it is the result of a teleological judgment. A different way of putting this point would be to say that the democracy of objects cannot be "originary": it is always secondary, a product, an accomplishment. A flat ontology will always require some work of flattening and, as such, it will always be a product. Its principle must be located at the level of the minimal purposiveness attributed to the contingency of being. But this is why the conspiracy of objects itself must also fall under the rule of the same law. Thus, under the sway of this contingency, the conspiracy of objects can be defined as merely one possible (contingent) name for the contingency of the democracy of objects itself.

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