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“Get the Tone Right”: Reading with the Realism of Object-Oriented Ontology

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Abstract: This paper investigates the consequences of taking seriously the metaphysics of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), as defined by Graham Harman, in the field of literature. Acutely focusing on just one possible mobilisation and application of the theory, the essay deploys OOO to read two major writers of the late 20th century, Don DeLillo and Murakami Haruki, in novel configurations made possible by applying an Object-Oriented method to the genre of Magic Realism. Using this method, the essay unearths an unarticulated avenue for studying the genre and these authors against established national, cultural, and canonical boundaries in literature, putting into conversation various literary traditions based on formal characteristics found in the texts through OOO’s metaphysics, and suggesting wholly untested paths for literary study in the wake of Object-Oriented philosophies.

Keywords: Murakami Haruki, Don DeLillo, Object-Oriented Ontology, Magic Realism

This paper explores just one possible avenue for Object-Oriented thought in the study of literature. Literature is a discipline which remains for the most part committed to literary historicism, and even in those quarters more amenable to ‘theory’, still finds its patron saints in the different forms of critique offered by a combination of poststructuralist and Frankfurt school thought. Within this climate, the bold metaphysics offered by Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) serves as a breath of fresh air, not only offering the possibility of studying literature in a paradigm no longer wedded to the dogma of criticism, but also renewing enthusiasm for studying the literary work as a *thing-in-itself*, a wholly inverted interpretation of Derrida’s famous maxim that there be nothing outside the text. I look at how an Object-Oriented approach can be deployed within the particular genre of Magic Realism with surprising consequences for the limits of the genre and the writers I take on here. This paper will show how an approach centred on objects and rehabilitating the concepts of substance, finitude, and occasionalism as found in Graham Harman’s work can offer drastically novel avenues for reading literature across cultural boundaries, traditional genre boundaries, and in veins not offered by contemporary approaches to literary study.

This paper examines two late twentieth century writers from opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean in Murakami Haruki¹ and Don DeLillo. My impetus for selecting these authors is twofold. First, in reading these writers who share a time period but hail from disparate cultural climes and languages, I hope to address a problem in the study of literature usually addressed within the paradigm of so-called world literature. In his foundational *What Is World Literature?*, David Damrosch makes the point superbly that literature in today’s international and globalised market of translation and circulation is caught between two equally unpalatable extremes. On the one hand, critics and writers are more sensitive than ever to the specificity of culture and identity and thus national literatures in their particularity grow in currency. On the other hand, the great availability of work in translation combined with cosmopolitan aspiration concurrently sees a great increase in reading literary works across national, cultural, and geographic borders. Against

¹ I will preserve the Japanese convention of placing the family name ahead of the forename here.

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either of these polarities, Damrosch claims that ‘world literature is not at all fated to disintegrate into the conflicting multiplicity of separate national traditions; nor, on the other hand, need it be swallowed up in the [...] “global babble”’. With Damrosch, this essay wishes to contribute to the defence of literature as something other than either a thousand fractious localities or one burgeoning universal. Reading DeLillo and Murakami together here demonstrates the fruitfulness of an Object-Oriented method in crossing cultural (and in this case, spatial) boundaries while retaining a careful attention to each text in itself.

Secondly, the use of Murakami and DeLillo together here also serves to lend credence to Object-Oriented philosophy as a serious paradigm for the study of literature. Against claims of Anglo-centrism or Euro-centrism, a fate common to philosophies emerging from an English language or European context when applied to literature beyond this sphere, I contend that the use of OOO in literature can be accomplished without forcing peripheral literatures to take the shape of a dominant theory, cramming the square peg into the round hole, so to speak. My choice to read Murakami and DeLillo together supports the thesis that an Object-Oriented approach is perfectly capable of being mobilised beyond the bounds of its heritage in continental philosophy. When this philosophy is taken seriously, and not merely reduced to the overly-literal approach of paying attention to *objects* in just the sense of *non-human things* it may not only do justice to, but expand the range of specific works, authors, and genres in ways non-trivial for both OOO and the writings at hand.

1 More than its pieces, less than its effects

This paper does not assume a familiarity with Graham Harman’s OOO and as such, a few remarks will help to familiarise the reader with this philosophy before continuing. Founded by Graham Harman in the early to mid 2000s with the publication of *Tool-Being* (2002) and its sequel, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2007), OOO is a philosophy whose primary interest is in the split between objects and their qualities. By this, it is meant that every existing thing, all unified under the term ‘object’ for Harman, is ‘*more than its pieces and less than its effects*’³. This is ‘the only necessary criterion for an object in OOO’; ‘that it be irreducible in both directions’⁴.

This requires some unpacking. Throughout his work, Harman makes extensive critiques of what he calls ‘undermining’ and ‘overmining’; the two gestures, often found supporting one another, through which objects are reduced to either their parts or their effects. In undermining, ‘most objects are too shallow to be real’⁵. In other words, things deeper than an object, an object’s constituent pieces may be real, but things built from these pieces are not. These fundamental pieces may include small things such as atoms, large things such as the ancient Greek *apeiron*, or more abstract things such as the super strings of string theory. For undermining theories, only this one type or one scale of thing can be real, with every other type or scale of thing as derivative; somehow less fundamental. The gesture of overmining, as one might expect, entails the opposite position, that objects are ‘too deep’⁶ to be real. Finite concrete objects become fictions derivative of effects or events such as the actions of actor-network-theory, cognitive impressions of philosophy of mind, the play of difference of deconstruction, or the structures of power in the work of Foucault. For overmining theories, there is nothing more real beneath the surface level of effects, events, and phenomena of the world; nothing more fundamental. Why precisely Harman dismisses both of these positions and how he arrives at his conclusions are not discussions I will not go into here, and will refer the reader instead to Harman’s own work for the details of his argument. It will suffice to say that Harman very clearly argues that objects do exist, and any real object is something which is irreducible and resistant to both undermining and overmining methods. A real object is split from its qualities.

² Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 5.

³ Harman, *A New Theory of Everything*, 53. Original emphasis.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

A consequence of having such a broad definition of what qualifies as an object is that Harman is able to engage in what is known in his work as a ‘flat ontology’, a metaphysics which begins by assuming all entities are on the same level of existence ‘without prematurely eliminating some of these or impatiently ranking them from more to less real’⁷. In avoiding splitting entities into hierarchies in advance, Harman’s work aspires to examine all objects in-themselves as figures worthy of study in their own right. It should be noted that flat ontology is *not* a principle for denying the differences between entities, but rather for doing justice to each and every individual entity. Harman himself notes that flat ontology is a ‘starting point’ for his philosophy, but by no means its end point⁸. OOO is a philosophy which begins by taking all of its objects of study as sharing the same basic ontological features, but which still aspires to be able to speak candidly about what differences there remain between entities to make them precisely what they are. In other words, while an object may indeed be split from its qualities, an Object-Oriented method will still study the relations between objects and qualities to determine how certain kinds of objects, be they literary, artistic, scientific, architectural, social, or political, might differ from others and exist as they do in the world in their executant reality.

The reader may well have already noticed a number of confluences between Harman’s work and the example chosen from David Damrosch’s study of world literature. The two polarities from which Damrosch attempts to save world literature are identical in character to Harman’s under- and overmining. To attempt to conceive of literature as irreducible to either its constituents in a national or cultural origin, or its effects on a local or dispersed readership or critical community, is precisely the Object-Oriented approach of conceiving of literature as *object*. To begin the study of literature without prematurely placing firewalls of geography or language between different kinds of literatures or pre-emptively canonising or excluding from canon some literatures is no different to the use of flat ontology as found in Harman’s work. Taking OOO’s principles as a basic method in this way offers a philosophical clearing for entering into a study of literature with the focus on the work as a thing-in-itself, allowing a thorough re-evaluation of the position of the authors at hand with respect to each other, their genre, and their context – objects split from their qualities.

2 Quietude in the midst of general becoming

Of the two authors examined here, it would not be considered unusual to discuss one within the genre Magic Realism. As such, we will start with the other, whose writing is almost never considered Magic Realist in character. Don DeLillo is a North American author famous for such novels as *White Noise* (1985), *Mao II* (1991), and *Underworld* (1997). His novels are most commonly read as studies in consumerism and the postmodern condition in the late twentieth century USA. Consider this passage from *White Noise*, a novel revolving around a middle-aged, suburbanite university professor’s fear of death. This passage takes place during the novel’s centrepiece, a man-made ecological disaster known as the ‘Airborne Toxic Event’⁹:

We put on our masks and ran through the downpour to our car. Not ten yards away a group of men proceeded calmly to a Land-Rover. They resembled instructors in jungle warfare, men with lean frames and long boxy heads. [...] Their bumper sticker read GUN CONTROL IS MIND CONTROL. In situations like this, you want to stick close to people in right-wing fringe groups.¹⁰

A typical reading of such a passage in DeLillo’s fiction would rely upon a Baudrillardian ontology of a groundless hyperreal without referent, and look at the way brand-name identities mediate and obfuscate reality. Such readings foreground how this group of men are presented as a complete image, tied up with a branding and marketing machine within a fully consumerised space. Their identity is bonded to the name Land-Rover and the political position ‘gun control is mind control’. They consume and reproduce

⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 125.

¹⁰ Ibid., 183.

their identities based upon the mediated reality disseminated to them through the mass media machines of consumerism and postmodernity. A critic such as Mark Osteen in *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (2000) makes this the centrepiece of his argument concerning the novel: 'consumption turns persons into packages radiating and receiving psychic data,' he argues. 'We become spectacular commodities who consume everything we see, but most of all, ourselves¹¹'. When Osteen claims that the novel is 'a book of packages – a thesis on the kinds and uses of intellectual, linguistic, commercial, personal, and televisual packaging¹²', he identifies the agency found in images, representation, and the dissemblance of things in simulated form to produce identity. His analysis elaborates upon how 'packages', the performances and simulations which contain and which adorn people and objects of all kinds, absorb them, confer upon them a public identity, obliterate them in the language of product and consumption. Typical of such readings of DeLillo, the focus on image and simulation is pushed to the point where no real entities exist, and there are instead only events mediated through sign systems: 'advertising and television seem to exist for just such events, and create them as "events"¹³'. This is a familiar Baudrillardian ontology which eliminates the real altogether, 'a liquidation of all referentials¹⁴'; well trodden ground in DeLillo criticism.

Opposite such readings stand recent works such as Elise Martucci's *The Environmental Unconscious in the Works of Don DeLillo* (2005). Works such as this take explicit pains to divest themselves of the postmodernist style of reading which too easily defers to the Baudrillardian model of society in DeLillo. Rejecting what she calls 'dualistic modernist/postmodernist terms¹⁵', Martucci is able to bring out entirely new strains of interpretation in DeLillo. She focuses instead on an ecocritical perspective, elaborating on the role of the material and natural world in DeLillo, apart from the mere play of images and endless fluidity of commodity and identity. Martucci argues (against Osteen) that 'characters' integration within, or acceptance of, their immediate environment, while still maintaining an awareness of its natural origins' brings them 'community and sacredness¹⁶' – an escape from the hyperreal world of simulations proposed by Osteen's analysis.

Martucci relies on a materialist ontology in the vein of Jane Bennett to counter the Baudrillardian ontology found in Osteen's analysis. Emblematic of this style of literary critique, in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) Bennett makes the case for a kind of noticing, a heightened awareness and recognition of the way matter itself is enchanting, vivid, in a sense, living. She argues; 'if matter itself is lively, then not only is the distance between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects¹⁷'. Bennett describes her conception of vibrant matter as a not-quite-human force, likening nature as creativity to 'a process of morphing, of formation and deformation, that is to say, of the becoming otherwise of things in motion as they enter into strange conjunctions with one another¹⁸'. It is no great leap to see the link between this material flux of things endlessly melting and recrystallising into one another and Baudrillard's hyperreal, itself a flux of images and simulations without reference to any real objects. The two forms are nigh identical. Yes, the materialist model in the line of Bennett does find its realm of irreferential becoming in matter, in nature, in organisms, garbage and in physics, but trading one realm of flux for another does little but transplant the problems to a new site. If Osteen critiques consumer society for 'derealizing the real', dissolving its objects into a process of simulation and dissimulation, then why should a materialism which also dissolves objects into processes of morphing, formation, and deformation, be any better?

Here, Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is perfectly equipped to intervene. Even if we limit this to a problem of images and simulations, OOO produces novel readings. As will be familiar

11 Osteen, *American Magic & Dread*, 171.

12 Ibid., 167.

13 Ibid., 177.

14 Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", *NACT*, 1557.

15 Martucci, *Environmental Unconscious*, 16.

16 Ibid., 39-40.

17 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

18 Ibid., 118.

to Harman's readers, all objects come in two flavours: real and sensual. If we are discussing images, then the flavour of object pertinent to our conversation is the sensual object: an object which has 'no autonomy from consciousness'¹⁹. Sensual objects are objects which are immanent to consciousness, or rather, objects which are present in the perceptual interaction between objects. It must be noted that Harman does not limit the sensual to thinking or conscious beings, nor does he accord psyche to all entities in order to make the sensual possible, though this is not a topic I will take up in any great detail here.

What is pertinent for this reading is that *even if we were to accept* that DeLillo's novel was trapped within a Baudrillardian hyperreal ontology (and I don't accept this for a moment), Harman's theory of objects would still pay dividends. For even a sensual object immanent to perception retains 'a unified essential core surrounded by a swirling surface of accidents'²⁰, which is to say; it remains an *object*. On this view, the above passage escapes being read as the tragic, and all-too-cliché, tale of postmodern capitalist humans held in the thrall of the bewitching floating images of consumerism, slowly navel-gazing their existences away to the well-formed press image of themselves (in this case, a gun-toting, Land Rover driving, lean-framed, boxy-headed, right wing partisan). Instead, we are able to look at the scene as an arrangement of sensual objects, or, to use one of Harman's earlier terms: an arrangement of *styles*.

It is in the early foundational work of OOO, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, that Harman likens sensual objects to style²¹. In the same way that a sensual object, which appears only in perception, still remains divided from any given profile or instance of data which might disclose it, Harman argues that styles are divided from any given feature which might define them: 'Style is a reality exceeding all of the particular facts of any given situation'²². Further, Harman argues, through the writing of Alphonso Lingis, that styles, sensual objects, possess imperatives; finite realities which guide not only our very perceptions of them, but also our ways of using and interacting with them²³. With this in mind, we can argue that the litanies of brand-names which litter DeLillo's *White Noise*: 'Krylon, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil'²⁴, 'MasterCard, Visa, American Express'²⁵, 'Clorox, Velamints, Freedent'²⁶, 'Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida'²⁷, are not mere simulacra – names without referents – but rather stylistic units which engender certain practices purely by their sensual modes of expression. We can argue that DeLillo is well aware of the alluring and enthralling power of objects in this way, not simply as a condemnation of consumerism, but such that it matters immensely in DeLillo's novel whether a family drives a Datsun Maxima²⁸ or a group of men drive a Land Rover. These sensual objects, these styles, are not an endless flux of becoming in the material or simulated sense. Even if it is masked by an image, a brand, a multiplicity of reproductions, or a network of material agencies, a Datsun Maxima is not a Land Rover: each is its own concrete and finite *style*, which produces a causal effect on the overall image. Here we can appreciate for the first time not only DeLillo's craftsmanship in mobilising objects as units of style to create an overall image (our image of right-wing fringe boxy-headed men in the eyes of *White Noise*'s middle-class university professor protagonist, our prime example here), but also his Magic Realism. But this will take more work to unpack.

Consider these two passages from DeLillo's novel *Players* (1977). The novel revolves around a couple, Pammy and Lyle, both of whom work in the World Trade Centre. DeLillo is especially fine-tuned here in the way he transforms the iconic structure of the World Trade Centre into an object in OOO's sense. Pammy contemplates the towers thus:

¹⁹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 22.

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

²¹ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 55.

²² Ibid., 66.

²³ See Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, chapter 5.

²⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 186.

²⁵ Ibid., 119.

²⁶ Ibid., 229.

²⁷ Ibid., 181.

²⁸ Ibid., 150.

If the elevators in the World Trade Center were places, as she believed them to be, and if the lobbies were spaces, as she further believed, then what was the World Trade Center itself? Was it a condition, an occurrence, a physical event, an existing circumstance, a presence, a state, a set of invariables?²⁹

It is not a page later that we see Lyle – outside, but in the proximity of, the World Trade Centre – pair Pammy’s metaphysical exploration with his own in a remarkable passage worth quoting in full:

He sat on a bench in a plaza overlooking the river. He felt lessened somehow. Freighter cranes slanted across the tops of sheds in the Brooklyn dock area. It was the city, the heat, an endless sense of repetition. The district repeated itself in blocks of monochromatic stone. He was present in *things*. There was more of him here through the idle nights than he took home with him to vent and liberate. He thought about the nights. He imagined the district, never visited, empty of human transaction, and how buildings such as these would seem to hold untouchable matter, enormous codifications of organic decay. He tried to examine the immense complexity of going home.³⁰

These two passages together are excellent for establishing the grounds for describing DeLillo’s writing as Magic Realist and pairing this interpretation with Harman’s form of OOO. I take my interpretation of Magic Realism from the art critic, Franz Roh. Writing in the 1920s, Roh was the first writer to coin the term, describing the genre of art he hoped would succeed expressionism as the leading style of its day. It was Roh’s foundational essay ‘Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism’ which José Ortega y Gasset translated into Spanish and launched the concept that became the now-familiar literary genre in the Latin American context.

For Roh then, Magic Realism or *Magischer Realismus*, is characterised more than anything else by how it ‘separates itself from Expressionism *by means of its objects*³¹, through a ‘calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces³²’. This is almost a direct reflection of the rallying call of the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, a call embraced by OOO: ‘return “to the things themselves³³”’. Magic Realism in Roh’s sense and OOO find themselves natural allies here, both concerned immediately with objects as reality and, furthermore, objects as concrete and discrete against the idea of reality as a pure flux or fluid background of reference or becoming. Roh argues that Magic Realism tries, above all, to represent the ‘miracle of an apparent persistence and duration in the midst of a demoniacal flux; this enigma of total quietude in the midst of general becoming³⁴’. For him, the Magic Realist focus on objects serves to bring out a particularity from within an unceasing mass, to express a finite determinacy within a background – ‘the background is the last frontier, absolute nothingness, absolute death, from which something emerges and vibrates with energetic intensity³⁵’. The exact same move is found in OOO in Harman’s critique of Latour and Levinas, and more prominently of Heidegger – Harman always writing against the idea that objects are reducible to an all encompassing holistic system: ‘[against Heidegger’s system of equipment] we might say that the different parts of a machine refer to and mutually determine one another, this mutual interrelation does not exhaust the reality of these parts³⁶’.

In DeLillo’s *Players* above, our first passage from Pammy admirably separates an object from its background, represents it as ‘quietude in the midst of general becoming’ through a mechanism familiar to Graham Harman’s readers as fission: ‘the qualities of the thing break off from the thing as a whole and seem partially distinct from it³⁷’. In other words, a division opens up between an object and the everyday impressions through which it is experienced. Pammy’s meditation plucks out the daily experiences of the World Trade Centre from their parent object; the static, cramped, and sweaty nowhereville of the interior

²⁹ DeLillo, *Players*, 48.

³⁰ Ibid., 49, original emphasis.

³¹ Roh, ‘Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism’, 16, original emphasis.

³² Ibid., 20.

³³ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 20.

³⁴ Roh, ‘Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism’, 22.

³⁵ Ibid., 20.

³⁶ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 43. For Harman’s critique of Latour, see *Immaterialism* 10, 18, and extensively throughout the book. For Harman’s critique of Levinas, see *GM*, 40-1 and an extensive treatment throughout chapter 3 of *Guerrilla Metaphysics*.

³⁷ Harman, *Weird Realism*, 242.

of an elevator, going somewhere while going nowhere; and the bright, airy caverns of the lobbies, crawling with flows of foot-traffic like streams of sand. These shades of the building are left unmoored, while the building itself comes into question: if it is incommensurable with even the way workers who visit it daily experience it, then how in the world can it be experienced ('a condition, an occurrence, a physical event, an existing circumstance, a presence, a state, a set of invariables')? This constructs Roh's sense of persistence and duration amidst demoniacal flux, quietude in the midst of becoming. In separating the building itself from the myriad flows through which it endures, the text accords it the status of a Magic Realist object in the terms we have described.

Meanwhile, Lyle's passage performs the opposite gesture, what in Harman's OOO is called 'fusion', in which 'an entity is described as having certain properties while also being said to resist description by those very properties'³⁸, 'allowing the hidden object to deform the sensual world'³⁹. The object of Lyle's passage is the city, or rather, the atmosphere of the city, something ineffable and unlocatable. It is an object of which he finds himself merely a part, but in which he finds himself constantly present, in the *things* of his experience. These everyday objects, units, all become mere repetitions, exchangeable and interchangeable pieces in the light of the city as a whole thing, a hyperobject in Tim Morton's sense,⁴⁰ not dissimilar to the Airborne Toxic Event of *White Noise*; a vast engulfing finitude which remodels the place of the self in terms of this devastatingly grand inhuman other. From his view Lyle can see the river, cranes, sheds and docks, he experiences the heat and intensity of urban repetition – all these entities become clumped together, and he himself reflected as a presence in all of them. The passage equates them, a jumble of misshapen, sprawled out bodies within one spirit: the city. Yet the city remains hidden. Even as Lyle attempts to picture it naked, imagine it outside the flux in which it is immersed, it withdraws, retaining something 'untouchable', a monumental life-cycle of its own, 'codifications of organic decay'. Even in and because of its invisibility, this reality – the city as hidden object – is able to 'deform the sensual world', throwing Lyle into a reality not wholly familiar to him, in some part both alien and alienating. This invisibility is also the figure found in Roh of 'mystery [which] does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it'⁴¹, a richness and darkness deeper than any possible surface manifestation. If we recall here from Harman that real objects are those withdrawn from experience, which 'maintain a guarded suburban privacy, locked away in gated communities to which no access is possible'⁴², then we can see that DeLillo's writing is simultaneously relating both the aesthetic of Roh's Magic Realism and the metaphysics of Harman's OOO.

I will take one more example from DeLillo to demonstrate the viability of reading his prose through OOO. *Mao II* (1991) is a novel centred upon a reclusive novelist, Bill. Bill has occasion to describe in the novel his own idea of what a great novel should look like. He contends, in the midst of a fervent argument with a Maoist sympathiser, that the great novel should be characterised by 'one thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints'⁴³. Bill's interlocutor defends the idea of 'total authority, total being'⁴⁴, suggesting that a Maoist politics of absolute leadership, subjecting all beings to one being in which they take part represents the ultimate political, or even metaphysical form. Bill's resistance to this stance is reflective of both Roh's Magic Realist aesthetic (in which discrete finite entities emerge as persistence in the midst of flux, resisting being absorbed into the background), and Harman's ontological demand that objects not be reducible to either overmining ('a thing's existence consists solely in its relation with other things'⁴⁵) or undermining (objects are 'too shallow to be the fundamental reality in the universe'⁴⁶). Furthermore, Bill hits on what Harman argues is the essence of great literature, that

³⁸ Ibid., 237.

³⁹ Ibid., 238.

⁴⁰ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 60.

⁴¹ Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism', 16.

⁴² Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 195.

⁴³ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 159.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁴⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.

is, that ‘no definite criteria can be given for aesthetic excellence’⁴⁷. This comment would be trite were it not for Harman’s already well-documented insistence on the way objects resist reduction to description by their qualities. Just as Harman argues in the case of an effective metaphor⁴⁸, and also in the case of H. P. Lovecraft’s monster Cthulhu (‘for every object, including Cthulhu, there is a “spirit of the thing” and “a general outline of the whole” irreducible to cheerful bundles of octopus, dragon, and human’⁴⁹), for a great aesthetic effect to take place, there must be a degree of vagueness, an insistence on not reducing the real object of representation to mere bundles of qualities. To reiterate this point again through Bill’s words; a great aesthetic effect must depend upon ‘ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints’.

3 Inconsistency can be more eloquent than consistency

I have thus far demonstrated the ample resources for reading DeLillo through an Object-Oriented approach inspired by Harman. As illustrated, mobilising Roh’s definition of Magic Realism along with Harman’s metaphysics allows a complete re-evaluation of the author’s works with significant ramifications on a broader scale in American literature.

But what of the other author mentioned? Murakami Haruki is a Japanese writer famous worldwide. It has been suggested by critics such as Susan Napier that ‘Murakami’s works are particularly good examples of contemporary Japanese magic realism’⁵⁰, particularly in that ‘Murakami’s use of the fantastic brings a fresh perspective to many of the problems of urban modernity, most of which are not restricted to Japan’⁵¹. While it is true that Murakami’s novels make use of the supernatural, spiritual, and fantastic in ways which estrange and enchant the reader in equal measure, it does a disservice to the writer to reduce his craft to the simple case of adding an exotic spice to the familiar dish of urban discontent. As I did with DeLillo, I will focus on how Murakami’s writing resembles the style of Magic Realism proposed by Franz Roh and further demonstrate how this vein can be mined more fruitfully by a faithful cross-pollination with Harman’s OOO.

In *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle* (1999), a story in which the protagonist seeks his vanished wife’s spirit in the in-between worlds of dreams, the bottom of a well, hotel corridors, and the back alley behind his house, a young woman named May Kasahara who befriends the protagonist writes these words:

We think it’s natural to get rice pudding after we put rice pudding mix in the microwave and the bell rings, but to me that’s just a *presumption*. I would be kind of relieved if, every once in a while, after you put rice pudding mix in the microwave, and it rang, and you opened the top, you got macaroni cheese. [...] that would feel, in some way, a whole lot more real⁵².

Here we immediately have a sense of how Murakami’s realism resembles Harman’s and DeLillo’s. The ambiguity and inconsistency of the rice pudding taking the form of macaroni cheese here is already the appropriate kind of vagueness capable of producing an aesthetic effect in Harman’s terms. In fact, this kind of reversal which divorces an object from any given set of qualities it might manifest, is precisely what Harman terms ‘allure’ in his earlier work: ‘allure, with its severing of objects and qualities, is the paradigm shift of the senses’⁵³. It bears mentioning here that, though allure generally describes all kinds of aesthetic experience in Harman’s work, from anxiety and humour to charm and love, it remains always the relation between a real object and its sensual qualities⁵⁴. Murakami here positively declares outright that the criterion of reality for him is precisely that a real object resist being reduced to any description by its given profiles.

⁴⁷ Harman, *Dante’s Broken Hammer*, 212.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 192.

⁴⁹ Harman, *Weird Realism*, 58.

⁵⁰ Napier, ‘The Magic of Identity’, 471.

⁵¹ Ibid., 473.

⁵² Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, 146.

⁵³ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 152, emphasis removed.

⁵⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 104.

This allows us to unpack a deeper play in Murakami's writing around this theme of realism. On the same page in the *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* are found these lines, voiced by the same character: 'Those people [my parents] believe the world is as consistent and explainable as the floor plan of a new house in a high-priced development'⁵⁵.

In a short story entitled *A Folklore for My Generation: A Prehistory of Late-Stage Capitalism*, Murakami's nameless narrator makes this statement:

When you listen to somebody's story and then try to reproduce it in writing, the tone's the main thing. Get the tone right and you have a true story on your hands. [...] Turn this around, and you could say there are stories that are factually accurate, yet aren't true at all.⁵⁶

In *Underground* (2013), Murakami's non-fiction account of the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo metro in 1995, Murakami makes this statement concerning how he treated the interviews he collected in the making of the novel:

The truth of "whatever is told" will differ, however slightly, from what actually happened. This, however, does not make it a lie; it is unmistakeably the truth, albeit in another form. During the course of my interviews I endeavoured to maintain the basic stance that each person's story is true within the context of that story, and I still believe so. As a result, the stories told by people who simultaneously experienced the very same scene often differ on the small details, but they are presented here with all the contradictions preserved. Because it seems to me that these discrepancies and contradictions say something in themselves. Sometimes, in this multifaceted world of ours, inconsistency can be more eloquent than consistency⁵⁷.

These rich passages together lend a deep understanding of Murakami's position concerning realism and representation. We can see clearly that Murakami prizes what we might call a non-empirical real above all. Especially in his comment on the methodology used in *Underground*, Murakami is startlingly clear that he wants to express a style of writing, in fiction and non-fiction alike, which accesses a real irreducible to factual reportage, sense data, or one big narrative incorporating all others. We can already see that this model of reality and its expression found in his writing cleaves very closely to Harman's maxims against undermining and overmining that reality is 'something over and above its more primitive elements [...and] irreducible upwards to its palpable qualities'⁵⁸. Instead, it is not the minute details which provide access to reality, but rather, the contradictions and inconsistencies – in other words the rift between objects and their qualities, Harman's category of allure, is precisely the device Murakami holds in highest esteem for representing reality in his work.

Further to this, consider how the passage from *Folklore* lines up with Harman's discussion of Cthulhu which we already referred to once: 'for every object, including Cthulhu, there is a "spirit of the thing" and "a general outline of the whole" irreducible to cheerful bundles of octopus, dragon, and human'⁵⁹. In this passage in *Weird Realism*, Harman is describing the work Lovecraft does to achieve the effect of a genuinely haunting aesthetic moment when the narrator describes an idol of Cthulhu. Just as Murakami's writing operates on the basic assumption that 'there are stories that are factually accurate, yet aren't true at all', so does Harman defend Lovecraft's monster from ridicule. Cthulhu is not merely the qualities of an octopus, dragon, and human stitched together, just as a good story is not merely a series of facts laced into a continuous tale. Rather, the way to properly represent reality, whether it be through literature, music, painting, sculpture, or philosophy, is to pay keen attention to 'the general outline of the whole', or rather to remain 'not unfaithful to the spirit of the thing'⁶⁰. To use Murakami's words; representing reality is about *getting the tone right*, in other words, it is about *style*. Would it be terribly surprising to learn that

55 Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, 146.

56 Murakami, 'A Folklore For My Generation' in *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, 81.

57 Murakami, *Underground*, 203-4.

58 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 16.

59 Harman, *Weird Realism*, 58.

60 Ibid., 24.

Roh, in his form of Magic Realism, argues that when representing objects ‘it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, *the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world* [... that is,] to discover objects beginning with spirit⁶¹’. As if the concordance between our authors, OOO, and Roh’s Magic Realism could be any closer, Roh adds icing to the cake when he holds that this Magic Realist work ‘almost always manifests itself in miniature form’, by which he does not mean smallness or shrunkness necessarily, but rather, ‘attempting to locate *infinity* in small things⁶²’. Just as Harman’s ontology litters reality with otherworldly little transcendences, and claims that ‘the entire field of reality is laced with infinity⁶³’, so too does Roh accord entities of all kinds with a withdrawn, transcendent infinity, an aesthetic of flat ontology.

We have again shown here the clear potential for mobilising OOO’s metaphysics in reading Magic Realist literature. But the attentive reader will have noticed we have yet to comment on May Kasahara’s words concerning her parents. This is to highlight the further potential for uses of OOO in reading Murakami – and this is particularly in the direction of reading his work ethically.

May Kasahara’s comments here are not idle insults to her parents, but rather a thread running through all Murakami’s work describing the ethical position of his oeuvre. Ethically, Murakami’s targets for condemnation are always the kinds of people who ‘believe the world is as consistent and explainable as the floor plan of a new house in a high-priced development’. Those who lack the attunement to allure, to the possibility of a *paradigm shift of the senses*, are the lowest in the Murakami ethical world. This is most clear from Murakami’s novel *Kafka on the Shore* (2005).

Kafka on the Shore is a novel which is unusually allusive (even within Murakami’s oeuvre) in its mode of representing reality, and most importantly, causality. Two main narrative lines run through the novel: an Oedipal curse borne by the fifteen year old Kafka Tamura and the journey of the diminutive Nakata whose main pursuit in life is searching for lost cats. To the end of the novel there is no conclusive totalising narrative key which would tie these two lines together in any more than a circumstantial way. The novel acts as if it could be telling two almost entirely separate stories. Murakami himself has characterised this novel as a series of unsolved riddles⁶⁴, and holds that it is through the interaction between the riddles that the possibility of a solution takes place. In other words, reading *Kafka on the Shore* is a matter of finding causal links across gaps which are in some sense unbridgeable. The narrative lines merely allude to causal possibilities; interact with each other as if by accident. Again, readers of Harman will be alert to the fact that the philosophical problem posed by this structure is identical to the one posed by Harman’s problem of vicarious causation, or the problem of Occasionalism.

In OOO, vicarious causation is a product of the fact that all real objects withdraw from contact with other real objects, and hence that ‘*no relationality at all* can allow one object to encounter another in person⁶⁵’. Hence, it becomes a problem for early OOO as to how relation between entities occurs at all. In historical forms of Occasionalism, schools which also maintained a gap in causation, God or mind would act as the causal mediator for events in the world⁶⁶. In *Kafka on the Shore*, this possibility is denied by the absence of a conclusive narrative ending. From start to finish, Murakami leaves the novel deliberately without any grand unifying factor which would act as a causal bridge between the only suggestively and tangentially linked events. In this gesture, the novel already refutes the possibility of an easy *one causal being to cause them all* solution.

Instead, the novel offers these riddles: the character Oshima utters these words to Kafka Tamura, the titular protagonist: ‘You’ll live for ever in your own private library⁶⁷’; “‘The world is a metaphor Kafka Tamura,” he says into my ear. “But for you and me this library alone is no metaphor. It’s always just this library⁶⁸”’. Toro the cat says to the truck driver Hoshino: ‘we are on the border of this world, speaking a

⁶¹ Roh, ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism’, 24, original emphasis.

⁶² Ibid., 27.

⁶³ Harman, ‘Phenomena & Infinity’.

⁶⁴ Murakami, Haruki. ‘Questions for Murakami about *Kafka on the Shore*’.

⁶⁵ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 169.

⁶⁶ Harman, *A New Theory of Everything*, 164-5.

⁶⁷ Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, 501.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 503.

common tongue; that is all⁶⁹. The ghost of a fifteen year old girl meets Kafka Tamura in a town ‘caught between one void and another’ and says: ‘When you’re in the forest, you become a seamless part of it. When you’re in the rain, you’re a part of the rain. When you’re in the morning, you’re a seamless part of the morning. When you’re with me, you become a part of me⁷⁰’.

The world is metaphor – that is, a place where one thing is another, where things are not themselves. However, there are libraries; places where things are themselves and retain their identity. The borders between worlds are where translation and communication between different kinds of beings – cats, men, stones, spirits – becomes possible: borders between worlds make possible the translation between libraries which otherwise remain isolated from one another, changeless, causally inert. This is the novel’s solution: every identity is like a library: inert, unchanging, otherworldly (just as for Harman ‘the thing is always elsewhere than the world, in some sense otherworldly⁷¹’). To communicate, these identities must enter into a world, a world of metaphor. In this world, things can no longer be themselves; through the translation something is lost. As Oshima points out: ‘every one of us is losing something [...] this is what it means to be alive⁷²’. However, at the borders between worlds, the places where metaphors overlap and may, even by accident, allude to more than they mean, causality is possible.

This reading is made possible by mobilising Harman’s OOO and his theory of vicarious causation. Indeed, for Harman, ‘vicarious causation is always a form of allure⁷³’, that is, a kind of *metaphor*, a *paradigm shift of the senses*, in which one thing appears as other than it is. It is also the case that ‘the relations of the world always unfold on the interiors of objects⁷⁴’, which is to say that objects must enter a shared world before interacting. Just as for change to happen in OOO (things must enter into a relation of metaphor and meet in a shared world), so too in *Kafka on the Shore* must the burden of change be taken on in a metaphoric world in the process of absorption on the inside of some other object: ‘When you’re in the rain, you’re a part of the rain. When you’re in the morning, you’re a seamless part of the morning’.

This is the point where Murakami’s ethical throughline becomes visible. For while entering a shared world (be it a dream, forest, or hotel) in the pursuit of changing one’s fate is invariably a major quest in a Murakami story, there are many characters who fail to take responsibility for what goes on in the shared world of metaphor. In *Kafka on the Shore*, they are indicted through Kafka Tamura’s reading a book likely to be Hannah Arendt’s *On the Banality of Evil*, detailing the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Tamura concludes from the book; ‘it doesn’t matter whose dream it started out as, you have the same dream. So you’re responsible for whatever happens in the dream⁷⁵’. The kinds of people who fail to take responsibility are described as ‘hollow men. People who fill up [their] lack of imagination with heartless bits of straw⁷⁶’. On the ethical scale within Murakami’s novels, the great burden of all the characters is being able to achieve and take responsibility for change, for an act of causation in a world of metaphor. The great failing, and invariably the trait of the real villains of a Murakami work, are those hollow men who remain either causally inert, or fail to take responsibility for the causal relations into which they enter; people who ‘believe the world is as consistent and explainable as the floor plan of a new house in a high-priced development’.

4 The spirit of the thing

This paper has demonstrated the rich possibilities and consequences for mobilising Object-Oriented thought and taking an approach to objects in literary study. This approach has avoided the overly literal method of attempting to pay attention to mid-sized, non-human entities in works of literature, a method

⁶⁹ Ibid., 482.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 472.

⁷¹ Harman, ‘Phenomena & Infinity’.

⁷² Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, 501.

⁷³ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 230.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, 142.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 195.

which cannot but prove limited in scope so long as literature continues to be written by humans, about humans. Instead, this paper has examined the vast potential of mobilising wider tenets of Object-Oriented thought in Graham Harman’s work, with the consequences of revitalising and redefining a genre generally consigned to an intellectual ghetto even within so-called ‘world literature’. I have engaged with the discipline of world literature and demonstrated the conceptual concordance between OOO and conceptions of literary studies in the age of global translation and additionally illustrated the merits of studying work across cultural, national, and geographical boundaries based on formal attributes identified through an Object-Oriented approach. Reading Murakami and DeLillo together has not only served to support the credibility of OOO as a literary method capable of deployment outside its natural home in continental philosophy, but also suggested a more-than-passing commonality between the two authors. If my analysis is correct in suggesting that both authors have independently developed startlingly similar aesthetic devices in response to globalised urban modernity, then it is at least likely that further comparative study of the two will prove fertile for reading the conditions of late-stage capitalism in which both Murakami and DeLillo continue to write. This is without mentioning the possibility of my Object-Oriented interpretation of Magic Realism serving as a more widespread literary aesthetic, one not yet unearthed in other writers responding to the concerns of the present age including, but not limited to, disenchantment, consumerism, the commoditisation of everything under the sun, and the global crises of the anthropocene. The full consequences of treating OOO seriously in disciplines beyond philosophy have hardly begun to surface, and I hope to have inspired and shown the potential for much more fascinating work in the field to come to light in the near future.

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