

Research Article

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Superficiality and Representation: Adding Aesthetics to “Knowledge without Truth”

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Abstract: This article has two parts. The first one compares the ontological and epistemological implications of two main philosophical stances on how reality relates to appearance. I call the first group the “plane of superficiality,” where reality and appearance are the same; there is no gap between what a thing is and how it manifests itself. I call the second group “volume of representation,” in which reality is beyond appearances; there is an insurmountable gap between the thing and its phenomena. The second part of the article focuses on Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) as the second group’s contemporary position. Within the OOO epistemological model of “knowledge without truth,” Harman’s schema of the observer’s participation in the object’s knowledge production is questioned. Alternatively, based on the notion proposed here of “flat representativity” in which each appearance is equally valuable to represent different aspects of the object, I argue for the full spectrum of the sensual as the basis for “knowledge without truth.” In particular, the aesthetic method, excluded from Harman’s concerns about knowledge, is suggested as another contribution to the episteme.

Keywords: reality, appearance, aesthetics, knowledge, Object-Oriented Ontology, flat representativity

1 Introduction

The relationship between reality and appearance is an important point (if not the central one) in any philosophical system and its associated knowledge model. Although the topic has been addressed in multiple ways and exists in an uncountable gradient of theses, two main stances can be identified: (1) reality *as* appearance and (2) reality *behind* appearance. The distinction lies in whether or not there is some total or partial inclusion of appearances in the nature of reality: in short, whether or not there is an insurmountable gap in the thing between its reality and its manifestations.¹ By appearance, I mean any form of expression (manifestations, phenomena, qualities, representations, ideas, facts, reflections, capacities, profiles, or events) in any medium (physical, mental, or any other).

¹ Although this article focuses on the relationship between reality and appearance of external things to a beholder, it should be noted that the appearance–reality distinction can also be attributed to the subject–object relationship. In the latter case, the discussion would lie internal to the *subject* as if mind productions are appearances as reality or an underlying mental reality, i.e., if our ideas are the thing, or there is something behind such ideas. In both cases, the world outside the mind is excluded. For example, Berkeley’s epistemological approach of ideas finds the innermost reality for his ontological idealism in the divine reality of God. Therefore, we would still be discussing (2) reality behind appearance within idealism since one can account for a “tenable basis for a realistic stance for Berkeley...[that] leads to a realism about mind, human and divine.” Guyer and Horstmann, “Idealism,” ch. 3.

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When this opposition is accepted, each of the two models can encompass theories and authors of different and even opposing idiosyncrasies. For example, within model (1), modern philosophies such as idealism and empiricism (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) share common ground with their rival direct realism (Reid) or later theories of direct perception (Gibson). All of them involve appearance in the form of sensory or mental experience as a fundamental element in the definition of reality. (Obviously, each gains uniqueness through their respective policies on how to handle these appearances as realities.) For the same reason, and oddly enough, materialistic theories also fall into this category the moment they assume the possibility of bridging the reality–appearance gap, i.e., when they can epistemologically explain the nature of reality.² The alternative is to consider an elusive reality behind appearance. This is usually the subject of metaphysical theories in which reality is indescribable on a perceptual or cognitive basis. The positions to be included in this group (2) are also broad. Perhaps the most significant contrast within them is the ontologies of discreteness and continuity, meaning theories that account for finite realities against endless processes underlying their manifestations. Deleuze’s plane of immanence is a clear example of the latter. Everything falls under passing fluxes of differentiation in his monistic system, beyond the layer of the actual strata (appearances). On the contrary, Kant’s *thing in-itself*, or more recently, Harman’s *real object*, recognizes a finite and specific reality independent of its appearances and our perception of them.

Focussing now on Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), which is a discretized ontology of model (2), Harman refutes philosophies that claim direct access to reality (model [1]) and the continuous metaphysics of model (2). To this end, he coined the terms “undermining, overmining, and duominging” (the “miner” critique).³ In this way, any form of *literalism*, which claims that “any object can be adequately paraphrased by describing the qualities it possesses,” is rejected.⁴ On the contrary, OOO postulates that autonomous objects populate the world, each being a unique and withdrawn reality containing a finite plurality of qualities. However, none of these qualities or appearances is a direct exposition of its reality. Harman offers two epistemological approaches to objects within this ontological schema: *aesthetics* for indirectly addressing withdrawn, unitary reality, and “*knowledge without truth*” for the multiplicity of expressions.⁵ Although he is more interested in the aesthetic method, he also posits “a new definition of knowledge that incorporates elusive real qualities rather than directly masterable sensual ones.”⁶ This can be seen as a gesture to overcome his rejection of literalism concerning reality and knowledge, which means that there can be a type of knowledge not only attributed to propositions that are tangible and measurable by us. Nonetheless, Harman includes the observer in the production of knowledge about the object.

From these OOO arguments, two implications for the state of knowledge come into consideration, bearing in mind that no manifestation or knowledge can be a literal expression of reality. First, since the object has a multiplicity of appearances and knowledge is about qualities, any manifestation can contribute to knowledge. To this, there must be added that the diversity of expressions, sometimes incomplete or contradictory for our cognitive limits, can lead to the episteme’s instability. Second, if the aesthetic method is a way of indirectly accessing the elusive reality, why not use it also for the elusive qualities, meaning for the production of unmeasurable knowledge? If “the search for knowledge is [*not only*] a *literalist* enterprise,”⁷ aesthetics appears as a promising field that, besides referring to the withdrawn reality as OOO maintains, can also reveal non-literal qualities: for example, aesthetic impressions as another sort of expression of the object.

² More aptly, for materialism – at least in its physicalist version – reality is reduced to the smallest observed phenomena from which everything else is built; therefore, the reality of anything can be decomposed into a basic known entity (atom, quark, wave, or the like).

³ Undermining refers to what reduces the object’s reality to its appearance, what it is made of, or the process of creation. Overmining refers to what the object does (effects) or its mathematization. Duominging means employing the two forms simultaneously. See Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, and Duominging.”

⁴ Harman, *Art and Objects*, x.

⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, ch. 2 and 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75–6.

Within this framework, the present article has two primary purposes. The first is to add further arguments and examples to support Harman's "miner" critique of reducing the reality to their appearances and our knowledge of them. Different cognitive repercussions of the models mentioned above (reality as appearance and reality behind appearance) will be examined. This analysis also includes OOO's epistemological issues. The second, in connection with the OOO notion of "knowledge without truth," I will reconsider these perceptual/cognitive instabilities as epistemological opportunities for a model of knowledge that considers the entire spectrum of the sensual. To this end, the definition of the sensual also calls for a revision.

Based on a common perceptual situation between various objects, Section 2 will examine the cognitive implications of the model (1) under the here-called *plane of superficiality*, a regime in which appearances and reality become the same. Two scenarios will be contemplated: the thing exhibits a unitary expression, or multiple appearances. Section 3 will compare the cognitive repercussions of the opposite model (2), which recognizes a reality beyond appearances. More specifically, ontologies based on continuity and discreteness will be contrasted. I will introduce the concept of the *volume of representation* as that which stands for each reality and encompasses all its manifestations and capacities, and its epistemological ambiguity will be examined. Section 4 is devoted to the OOO model of "knowledge without truth," in which Harman's schema of including the observer's real qualities will be questioned. Alternatively, I will propose his aesthetic method as an additional form of knowledge. By way of conclusion, Section 5 will argue for a knowledge of objects that accounts for their complete multiplicity and a form of innocuous cognition for the object's phenomena.

2 Reality as appearance: plane of superficiality

Many philosophies take the reality of something to be the way it manifests itself in the world. Sometimes things are taken to be what the senses capture (direct realism and, to a certain extent empiricism as well) or as they appear in the mind (idealism); at other times, it might be what they do and their effects (ANT), or what they are made of (materialism/physicalism). According to Harman, these are forms of reducing the reality of things.⁸ They are forms that assume reality according to appearance and our access to it. The interior of a thing is like its surface as registered by someone/something, and *vice versa*, the surface of a thing is like its interior. More aptly, the thing has no interior because it flattens on to its surface in what can be called the plane of superficiality. This plane established a world of appearances that are, literally, realities. In such a regime of equality, the depth of something no longer counts because there is no independent depth. Things are shallow. The being of a thing is its directly exposed appearance, ready to be apprehended. In Berkeley's famous phrase "*esse est percipi (aut percipere)* – to be is to be perceived (or to perceive)."⁹

Within this context of "direct presence" theories, the nature of appearance for perception becomes fundamental. One may wonder if the appearance of something is singular or plural, and how it affects its notion of being and its observers. Does the thing remain consistent despite transformations in its appearances? Moreover, how many appearances does something have in a given moment? Can it be perceived differently by various observers and remain the same thing? This section will consider the perceptual implications of two possibilities within the plane of superficiality associated with those positions that accept encounters with reality in experience. In the first case, the thing exposes a *single* appearance for any given spatiotemporal circumstance (direct realism). The second case contemplates *multiple* appearances for the same space–time (from phenomenalism and bundle theory to phenomenology).

⁸ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 7–20.

⁹ Downing, "George Berkeley," sec. 2.

2.1 Direct realism

Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid claimed that when an object is perceived, it happens *directly*.¹⁰ Pre-existing premises or ratiocinative processes are excluded, since the perceptions are phenomenally not inferential but direct. On the one hand, his belief in immediate awareness of the outside world allowed him to criticize the skepticism of the time. On the other hand, directness implied that the reality–appearance distinction did not exist internally in the thing, nor between the thing and the subject. There is no gap at all. When something is perceived, it is the reality of the thing as such. Perception makes immediate contact with the world as it is, so Reid did not conceive of an ontological treatment separate from appearances or from the moment in which they are experienced. Along the same lines, and two hundred years after Reid’s assertions, we find the still influential James J. Gibson’s theory of visual perception.¹¹ For Gibson, the observer is directly involved in the perceived environment, a scheme he called “ecological psychology.”¹² In his theory, an object endures or persists thanks to “invariants of structure,” meaning that things have a single “essential structure” capable of being perceived through its invariants.¹³ The object is in the external world, rather than in the mind. What is perceived is already the thing, which has one form of expression at a given moment (although it can admit transformations in time). However, is there also only one likely form of perception for that thing?

For Gibson, different observers at various positions get different “optic arrays” of the object, but “[i]f a set of observers move around, the same invariants under optical transformations and occlusions will be available to all. To the extent that the invariants are detected, all observers will perceive the same world.”¹⁴ Therefore, to perceive the same object, which has only one set of invariants, any observer must perceive that object’s same consistent characteristics. How many invariants are necessary to capture the “same world”? It is not clear. Nonetheless, Gibson remarked that “there is also ignorance of occluded things,” i.e., of unperceived invariants, with the result that “you and I do not perceive quite the same world.”¹⁵ In other words, when multiple observers perceive different invariants within the same environment, they can refer to different worlds. That means that there can be an inconsistency between the object of perception and the thing perceived. Therefore, to remain uniform within direct perception, reality, appearance, and perception must be one.

Consider a stone, whose invariants and essential structure are in the plane of superficiality given the same space–time. When various observers register the stone’s invariants, they get the same reality of the stone. Quoting Gibson again, “[t]o the extent that the invariants are detected, all observers will perceive the same world.” The stone is subject to erosion and locomotion as the river’s flow changes shape and position, which entails that the invariants can change within the same structure. Thus, the structure admits of transformations over time, but the stone cannot hold several structures simultaneously. To perceive the same stone, which has a single appearance/structure independent of observers, each observer must experience the stone’s same constant features. If not, if the same stone is registered differently in the same space–time, then it will not be “quite the same stone.” To avoid the stone’s multiplication (one per different apprehension), the beholders’ perception must be the same for this object. The stone offers a single

¹⁰ He was one of the most representative voices against Berkeley’s and Hume’s idealism and empiricism in the 18th century. His direct realism rejected the argument that perception was an intermediate process between the mind and the objects of perception. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, sec. II.

¹¹ Although the psychologist does not mention Reid in his latest book, his arguments strongly favor direct realism. See Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Editorial Note.

¹² Gibson rejected cognitive processes that consider how a sense stimulus reveals to the mind because “[perceiving is] an experiencing of things rather than a having of experiences, [...] not of the mind or of the body but of a living observer.” *Ibid.*, 228–9.

¹³ For Gibson, the invariants are in the object (what he called “essential structure”), and the variants are the observer’s perspective for different positions. What Gibson does is link both concepts so that an observer perceives the object directly through the constant characteristics of its structure. *Ibid.*, 66–7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 190–1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

perceptual profile for any perceiver, regardless of the nature of their perceptual system. In this manner, a frog and a human who grasp the stone must do so in the same way; their perceptual apparatus overlaps as far as the stone's perception is concerned. Any perceptual deviation from the stone's invariant structure leads to another stone, or "not quite the same stone." Because it is not possible for the stone to manifest itself in different ways and it is assumed that both the frog and the human can perceive it, the perceptual apparatus of a frog and the human being must be the same concerning this stone. In other words, anything in the world that registers the same thing must have the same perceptual system for that thing. If not, the stone in question is not perceived. The stone cannot have different appearances for different perceptual systems, since its appearance equals reality.

But what about the stone itself? Gibson's theory only considers what he calls "perceptual systems" (that is, sentient animated entities) just as modern philosophy deals with only one type of entity: the human.¹⁶ However, why reduce philosophical attention to perceptual systems, especially to human systems only? If the frog–stone–human scene wants to open up beyond sentient beings, then perception and cognition must be understood in a broader sense that contemplates any *relationship* between objects within a flat ontological regime.¹⁷

When it is so and still considering a single manifestation scheme merging its being, the way a human being relates to stone is the same as how a frog relates to it and how another stone or even the perceived stone relates to itself. Therefore, if a thing can be perceived/related to itself, and there is only one form of perception/relationship for that thing, any external observer who can register the thing must have the same perceptual/relational faculties for that thing as the thing itself. Although some similarities in the forms of perception, cognition, and relation are admitted between a chimpanzee and a human, it would never be said that they are exactly the same for a given object. For the same reason, it is difficult to maintain the argument that the relational capacities of a stone, a human, and a frog are the same for a given appearance. Therefore, a plane of superficiality that retains the object's identity under a single manifestation leads to a *reductio ad absurdum*, since it equalizes its observers' perceptual faculties about what is experienced.

In conclusion, this model works under a hyper-rigid perceptual/relational system that can only capture a single apprehension. For the thing to be consistent, there must be only one relational profile for that thing.

Let us label this model *single appearance, individual being, single cognition*.

2.2 From phenomenalism and bundle theory to phenomenology

A plausible alternative to the previous model within the plane of superficiality is to admit that a thing can be perceived or known differently in a given space–time moment. That would challenge direct realism, since the thing cannot have simultaneous essential structures. Phenomenalism seems to fit the request, despite

¹⁶ Harman follows Latour's critique of modern philosophy on human-centrism, which "split[s] between human beings on one side and everything else on the other." Harman, *Immaterialism*, 4. See also Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Against this modern position, Harman claims that "[a]ll objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional." Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 9.

¹⁷ Attributing a perceptual or cognitive system to something non-human should not be understood as an anthropomorphic gesture. It is not intended to locate characteristics of the human sense and the intellectual apparatus in non-human objects. It does not mean that frogs, stones, or galaxies see, feel, and think like humans or have human consciousness. Admitting cognitive capacities to any object means that they have an autonomous ability to enter into a relationship with something else. The relationships between things are not exclusive to sentient beings. Perception/cognition, as understood here, means being able to relate in frog, stone, galaxy, or human fashions, each in its own way. In short, perception/cognition means *relationality*. And most of these encounters do not need human mediation. The way the frog relates to the stone is independent of human perception. What does the human have to do when the frog jumps on the stone? The stone–frog relationship is a subject-independent relational or cognitive object. Such autonomous capacity of each object comes from what is called *flat ontology* in OOO's circles, summarized in the phrase "*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*." See Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 11–9.

Reid's criticism for involving the mind in experiences. The former asserts that objects do not exist in themselves, but in phenomena or sense-data located in space and time. Unlike the objectivity of direct perception, the phenomenalist concept of reality in everyday experience stems from beliefs, convictions, and feelings, leaving the responsibility for accuracy to science. David Hume appears as a prominent figure in these principles involving the body and mind. Unlike Berkeley's version that only considered the mind, Hume still somehow accounted for external objects. According to his bundle theory, an object is a collection of sensed qualities. We perceive things as indiscriminate sets of perceptions based on their appearances, to which we attribute an idea or identity.¹⁸ In short, the bundle theory works under the plane-of-superficiality regime, since an object comprises nothing more than its properties (appearances) to be experienced, excluding any substance.

Once it is accepted that any beholder (sentient or non-sentient) has his/her/its ability to enter into relation with another object that admits several sensual or relational profiles simultaneously, the previous unification of relational systems is avoided. When the frog and the human can perceive the stone differently, their relational faculties with respect to the perceived object remain separated. However, the disadvantage is for the stone, which will inevitably lose its unitary identity. Why? Because when the reality is appearance, each appearance of the same thing is a distinct reality. The thing has multiple realities/appearances; the thing is multiple things. Although this regime allows the frog's relational abilities and perceptive apparatus to differ from the human one, there is no enduring stone but a separate one per each perception/cognition/relationship. That means one stone for the frog, a second stone for the human, and a third stone for the stone itself. There are as many stones as there are entities in the world that can register the stone differently. In short, the thing multiplies instead of pluralizing. Moreover, the problem for the stone's multiplication occurs between multiple beholders and for a single observer. If the same beholder captures various profiles of the stone, there will be multiple stones for that beholder. To avoid new realities for each new experience, the observer instead of the thing forces the unification of the different realities-appearances under his/her/its criteria. The reality of the thing then becomes subject-dependent. That means that of all the frog's possible expressions, the human captures a part of them to define what the frog is for him/her. This is Hume's maneuver, which provides a subjective image of reality to the individual or collective beholder with the same cognitive system at the cost of ignoring the object's own self.¹⁹

A critique of this model is found in phenomenology and Edmund Husserl's distinction between *intentional objects* and *adumbrations*.²⁰ For him, there is a unified and independent reality beneath its various appearances. Paradoxically, this reality only takes place in the observer's consciousness. Put differently, if for Hume the human defines the object's reality from the experiences of its qualities, for Husserl that reality is independent, even if imprisoned within the human. Unlike for Hume, the thing's unification is not a post-experiential human construct indifferent to the thing's reality, but there is a reality–appearance gap where human consciousness hosts the intentional object in the phenomenological sphere. As Husserl puts it,

one needs here a supplementary distinction between the *phenomenological* moments of unity, which give unity to the experiences or parts of experiences (the real phenomenological data), and the objective moments of unity, which belong to the *intentional objects and parts of objects*, which in general transcend the experiential sphere.²¹

For our present case, this means that the plane of superficiality is incompatible with Husserl's principles, because the unitary reality of the stone in the observer's consciousness does not merge with the multiple stone-adumbrations. Nonetheless, one can take the intricate path of arguing there is no gap but *two* different planes of superficiality, one in mind and the other outside of it. This is the path of Kasimir

¹⁸ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, pt. 1:4.

¹⁹ For the same reason, one must consider the scenario under which the same relational condition is assumed for the frog: when the frog is the observer, and the human is observed. Unfortunately, this reversed scheme is ignored by Hume, who, like many others, centered his studies only on the human subject.

²⁰ Husserl, *The Shorter Logical Investigations*, sec. V and VI.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

Twardowski. As Harman remarks about Husserl's coetaneous peer: "For Twardowski, a doubling occurs: there is an *object* lying outside the mind and a *content* inside it."²² However, this strategy further intensifies the multiplication of the stone. Not only does the stone stand out in various ways for each different cognitive system, but it also duplicates itself *within* each observer. The stone will always exist differently in the manifestations captured by the frog, the human, and itself and will be doubled once again for each beholder (inside and outside the mind).

From Hume to Husserl, the stone steps towards its independence as the object detaches itself from its qualities for a unification behind them. However, as a modern philosopher, the German thinker was still a long way off from recognizing any intentional object outside human consciousness. In his work, an inanimate observer has no possibility of being philosophically considered. For if the hypothetical assumption under which the previous relational capacities for any animate or inanimate entity – each thing has its autonomous way of entering into contact with something else – were implemented for Husserl's phenomenology, the frog, the human, and the stone would each have each their "intentional object." What would that mean for the stone's reality? In this context, the stone would exist for each different intentional object as the deepest ontological level. That means that the intentional object unifies appearances, but there is no unification of different intentional objects in connection with the same thing. In other words, to the extent that an intentional object is hosted in the beholder and depends on his/her/its cognitive system and "consciousness," the stone will multiply as many times as there are differentiated cognitive/relational/conscious systems upon it. In this scenario, when is an intentional object the same for these various apparatuses? Let us examine both extremes: a universal versus an individualized cognitive/conscious system.

In the present hypothetical case in which an inanimate observer can also account for intentional objects, Hume's and Husserl's distinctions become blurred. Depending on the cognitive/conscious abilities of each observer, one or another appearance will be captured and associated with one or another intentional object accommodated by one or another "consciousness." Therefore, the reality is still somewhat dependent on the object's qualities dictated by where the boundaries are between forms of cognition, relationship, and consciousness. In short, it is dependent on the precision of the taxonomy of beholders. And here we enter a vicious. The more general the classification, the better it will work; the better we understand better, the lower the stone's multiplication. Put it differently, the more different forms of cognition/relation can be unified, the less multiplication of the stone will occur. As can be quickly deduced, this argument's optimal scenario ends in the previous nonsensical cognitive model of single appearance/single reality: the stone has just one appearance that is registered in equal manners (or it is simply not registered).

On the contrary, if the criteria for taxonomizing cognition are to be opened up, where are the limits to form cognitive/relational groups with the same intentional object that refers to the same entity? The immediate answer that comes to mind is the classic division in the natural sciences of genus, genera, and species. The frog's kingdom has its own particularized reality–appearance gap with respect to the stone, humans have theirs, and the same strategy for the stone's world. However, the stone's reality is still multiplied. Cognitions within the same intentional stone would only occur for observers who can relate to the stone in the same way because they share the same type of sensory, cognitive, relational, or conscious apparatus. It is fine if the human cognitive apparatus is ontologically unified with a frog or a stone, but getting rid of their differences seems an excessive price to pay for preserving the object's unitary reality.

Furthermore, the problem worsens if the taxonomic division is refined not by groups but by individuals. What if the cognitive/relational abilities within members of the same species are considered unique? For the sake of clarity, let us reduce the problem to humans from our comfortable human position. That means that each beholder contains a different intentional object. Since each beholder carries a different reality (intentional object), each will register different stones. At such an extreme of cognitive/conscious differentiation,

²² Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 23. See also Twardowski, *On the Content and Objects of Presentations: A Psychological Investigation*.

partial overlays of our experiences are ineffective if we have different intentional objects. In other words, the moment there is a discrepancy in the intentional object, no matter how many similarities our perceptions share, we register different things. There will be as many stones as there are intentional objects in different cognitive systems. Communications between observers become a pronounced problem since they will never refer to the same thing. To avoid the multiplication of reality, an additional ontological level capable of unifying the stone independently of the beholder is still missing.

Let us label this model *multiple appearances, multiple beings, multiple cognitions*.

3 Reality behind appearance: volume of representation

The alternative to reality as appearance is the reality behind appearance. Here there is an insurmountable gap between what the thing is and how it manifests itself, which is the usual field of study of metaphysics. For example, Leibniz's *monads* distinguish between the changing qualities of something and its single indivisible substance. Immanuel Kant's criticism of empiricism led him to establish an ontological model that recognized the existence of a reality independent of its appearances and our perception of them: the *thing in-itself*.²³ As he puts it: "[t]he estimate of our rational cognition *a priori* at which we arrive is that it has only to do with phenomena, and that things in themselves, while possessing a real existence, lie beyond its sphere."²⁴ In the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger's *ontological difference* distinguished between *Being* as what is hidden or withdrawn and *beings* as what is present.²⁵ In opposition to the plane of superficiality that fuses the reality–appearance gap, I propose the *volume of representation* as the compendium of appearances that refers to its underlying reality. There is no relation of equality (reality is not the same as appearance), but only of correspondence (appearances translate or illustrate reality). Representation is never the same as what it represents. On the contrary, the appearance is an approximation to reality.

The primary debate among ontologists is perhaps the nature of such a reality, which entails different approaches to deal with appearances. One possible distinction is whether reality is continuous (Bergson, Deleuze) or discrete, and if the latter then whether it is singular (Heidegger) or plural (Leibniz, Harman).

In this context, this section will examine first the indeterminacy of reality (identity) in the metaphysics of continuity (Deleuze), and second the epistemological ambiguity of the ontological discreteness of singular realities, which claims multiple but limited forms of expression (Harman).

3.1 Ontological continuism

Metaphysical models of continuity normally reject any dependence on the subject and any finite essence that transcends appearance.²⁶ There is no ungraspable bounded nucleus upon which certain qualities appear on its behalf. However, unlike the philosophies discussed in Section 2, appearance also does not blend with reality. The ontological treatment arises from identifying reality as a *process* in which a monist limit is progressively fragmented in multiple directions until it becomes present. This is Deleuze and

²³ However, Kant's epistemology did not continue the ontological condition of the independence of reality. He did not capitalize on the reality–appearance gap but instead focused on an epistemological idealism that included *a priori* knowledge neglected by empiricism.

²⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, XXX.

²⁵ Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, sec. 22.

²⁶ For example, Manuel DeLanda criticizes the thesis of inexplicable characteristics that are necessary for a thing to be what it is, producing "a transcendent plane overflying that which the entities populate." DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 12.

Guattari's *plane of immanence or consistency*, as continued by DeLanda.²⁷ This model has been described as “an ontological vision of an asubjective realm of becoming.”²⁸ Put differently, appearance does not have a corresponding finite reality, but what is behind a thing's current state of material, expressive properties, and effects at a given moment is the historical procedure of its creation.²⁹ In short, reality is the continuous process of self-making.

On this basis, at least two questions arise: first, where does the identity (reality) of the thing lie if, as ontological continuists assert, it is not in its actual properties (or bundles of qualities), nor in an individualized inaccessible reality of the object? Second, can a thing have various forms of expression in the actual coming from the same self-making process?

As to the former, DeLanda answers: “it is the genealogical links of the present object with the past object (all the way to its historical birth) as well as the current interactions between its component parts, interactions that act as *maintenance* mechanisms for its identity.”³⁰ In short, the thing is its biographical history and its current state of properties, which are stabilized by homeostatic relations. If an object is its current state of appearance plus the accumulation of its history, meaning “the ontological status of objects as unique historical entities,”³¹ there is a moment in the life of any object that has no “history:” its birth (or moment of actualization). If what counts as a differentiation process is the history of the object, that would mean that the stone, the frog, and the human would be the same thing in their first appearance to the world. All of them have the same no-history. Two arguments can counter this criticism. First, although the object has no history, it still has its first current state of qualities and effects as a parameter of differentiation. However, how does this differ from the previously criticized bundle of qualities (Hume) and their associated plane of superficiality? Second, someone can claim that the history of the object does not start from scratch at the time of its birth since, to some extent, its generational descent already determines it before the thing is actualized. In this case, the reality of the thing is dislocated from its actual existence. The frog's pre-world life is a reality without associated appearance or properties. If one takes Darwinian theory and adds some metaphysical touches, that could mean that the frog already exists in her parents before the frog has any expression in the world. How far can this historical reality without attached qualities be traced? There would be some point in time when some actual thing(s) would contain the same frog's and human's reality, and further back, the stone would be included. If we continue backward, would the Big Bang be the ultimate reality of the actual for any moment?³²

However, as Bryant comments on the Deleuzian continuum, “[d]ifference comes from the domain of the virtual, *not the actual*.”³³ If we look at the virtual instead of the actual in search of an ontological answer, everything starts from the same “absolute horizon.”³⁴ The limit of virtuality already contains all possible actualizations and non-actualizations.³⁵ This implies that infinite entities coincide in the same monistic reality, i.e., the stone, the frog, and the human collapse as the same at some point (or more aptly, trajectory). In those moments our three actors, and the rest of the things in the cosmos, are the same ontological being. That gives us a model in which an individualized reality is neither in the unified moments of

²⁷ Manuel DeLanda describes this process of actualization as follows: things can “start in thought with an *ideally continuous* cosmic plane and then derive all [objects] (and their material and expressive components) as the products of a process of actualisation, a process that breaks up the continuous plane into discrete or discontinuous entities.” *Ibid.*, 109. See also Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, pt. 1.2.

²⁸ Bryant et al., *The Speculative Turn*, 4.

²⁹ For DeLanda, objects are “unique historical individuals, in which processes of genesis and maintenance are what ensure that the individuals are not mere bundles of properties.” DeLanda, in DeLanda and Harman, *The Rise of Realism*, 53.

³⁰ DeLanda, *ibid.*, 55.

³¹ DeLanda, *ibid.*, 58.

³² Nonetheless, some studies relate the Big Bang theory with Darwin's natural selection, see Lee et al., “Rates of Phenotypic and Genomic Evolution during the Cambrian Explosion.”

³³ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 99 [emphasis added].

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 38.

³⁵ In Deleuze and Guattari's words: “The plane of consistency is the intersection of all concrete forms.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 251.

ontological immanence nor in differentiated appearances. So the extremes of pure virtuality and strata (or actual manifestations) must be discarded for the question of the thing's reality. When this is the case, reality appears as the portion of virtual space (or so-called "phase space") between the first bifurcation of things and its maximum differentiation. In the latter, the thing gains a complete pre-individualization just before the realm of the actual. As Deleuze commented: "Difference is not phenomenon but the noumenon closest to the phenomenon."³⁶ However, is this process somehow related to its current appearance beyond determining how it is born? No, it is not. For Deleuze, the virtual image and the current image of an object do not resemble each other.³⁷ Therefore, gradual differentiation in the virtual process of self-making establishes an explanatory model of why something is individualized and led into its current state, but it does not fully sustain its existence. It holds only its historical virtual journey.

This lack of ontological support beyond the thing's current state is what Harman criticizes as the two ends of reality within an ontology of continuity, which for him results in a duoming of the object.³⁸ The thing boils down to its current state of properties and effects (overmining) and biographical history (undermining).³⁹

What remains open is the second question of whether a thing can be expressed differently in the same moment based on the same virtual process. Are two phenomena expressed in two different media related somehow beyond any epistemological connection a subject can make? As concerns our case, does the material stone have something to do with a photograph, a poem, or a human impression of it? If the subject is discarded as what unifies phenomena, then the underlying reality must hold things together. In this case, the answer will depend on where those objects are placed within the virtual diagram. If they are at the cosmic boundary, all appearances of the stone are related not only to each other, but to all other objects in the world. The physical stone would be related to its photograph in the same terms as it does with the frog, since they all come from the monistic corner.

Again, the alternative is that the objects' realities are in their moments of maximum virtual differentiation, meaning in "the noumenon closest to the phenomenon." However, their appearances have nothing to do with each other, since they have followed unique virtual itineraries. The physical stone and a photograph of the stone are different unrelated objects, each in its own medium of expression. Hence, objects are medium-dependent because although the continuous model may celebrate endless transformations within the same medium (one at a time), it does not contemplate simultaneous expressions in different media. Therefore, this scheme takes us back to Gibson's direct perceptual theory and the already discussed single perception/cognition/relationship problems. The proof of this connection is how DeLanda usually foregrounds Gibson in his texts.⁴⁰

Let us label this model for the two aforementioned ontological possibilities: *infinite appearances*, *monistic being*, *multiple cognitions*, and *individual appearance*, *individual beings*, and *single cognitions*, respectively.

3.2 Ontological discretism

The last model to be discussed is ontological discretism, or ontological realism, which postulates a world of finite and concrete realities beyond its multiple appearances and cognitions. Objects in the world are independent and autonomous from how humans or any other agent consider them, and any of their manifestations is insufficient to account for their ungraspable reality. Derived from the Aristotelian

³⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 220.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

³⁸ Harman, in DeLanda and Harman, *The Rise of Realism*, 80–1.

³⁹ For Harman's critique of the bundle theory, see Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 11. For Harman's critique of reducing the object to its biographical origins, see Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer*, 151.

⁴⁰ DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, 66; DeLanda in and Harman, *The Rise of Realism*, 99.

substances, the Kantian *thing in-itself*, and Heidegger's *ontological difference*, the last stand for a theory of essences (or objects) can be found today in Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). Especially relevant is how Harman extracts from Heidegger's concept not only the distinction between *Being* as hidden or withdrawn and *being* as present, but also the unity-multiplicity tension – respectively linked to the unveiled-veiled dichotomy.⁴¹ On this basis, OOO builds a theory of objects on two axes: object-qualities (a unitary reality with multiple appearances) and real-sensual (withdrawal-presence).⁴² In this section, I will first consider the cognitive repercussions of ontological realism on our three-actor scene. Second, there is the epistemological ambiguity of some cognitive scenarios caused by the ungraspability of the real. Third, we have the problem of infinite representations in Bryant's theory of onticology.

3.2.1 Unity and multiplicity

There are at least two main ways in which ontological realism differs from continuity ontologies: first, it recognizes an indirect relationship between reality and appearance, and second, the thing can be expressed differently in any given moment, and as will be argued, also in different media. Like any other object in the world, the former means that the stone is a unique autonomous being that is represented by a pool of sensual profiles.⁴³ Manifestations, qualities, or events do not comprise reality, but as Bryant remarks, each reality is a *substance*, “*which is not predicated of anything else, and which therefore enjoys independent or autonomous existence.*”⁴⁴ However, reality is not formless either. For Harman, it is a mistake “to assume that the real and the sensual are two fixed sites, so that anything real would be at the bottom of the universe and anything sensual would like at its surface.”⁴⁵ Reality is not a mystical, divine, and amorphous essence that operates from an indeterminate dimension nor an area of pre-individual potentials.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, none (not even the sum) of their appearances and qualities can determine any unitary reality. The substance of a thing does not manifest itself as such. However, for each object there is an *indirect* internal relationship within the reality–appearance gap by which a particular and finite volume of representation (the complete sensual domain) represents a particular object and not others. In this internal relationship of representation, any of these appearances emerges as an approximation of the reality it represents. A representation stands for or acts on behalf of reality; there is an internal delegation from reality to appearance. Each profile of the stone is a representative of its being but is never the stone itself. As Harman puts it: “The real objects that withdraw from all contact must somehow be translated into sensual caricatures of themselves.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, not only reality but also the volume of representation is independent of the subject. Although appearances and manifestations are the basis of experience, they exist without having to be experienced, as Bryant remarks.⁴⁸ The extreme form of this condition is Harman's *dormant object*, where the object exists, although nobody or nothing enters in relation to its surface.⁴⁹ Although the stone is perhaps a complicated case of a dormant object (the frog and the human may not experience it, but the river or the ground where it lies always do), some fashions or styles seem to be better examples since they come and go

⁴¹ As Graham Harman puts it, “[f]or Heidegger, Being is not just deeper than beings: it is also *one*, while individual beings are superficially plural.” Harman, *Art and Objects*, 108. See also Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 85–87. OOO expands Heidegger's singular Being to a plural state individualized for each object.

⁴² And their four poles: real object (RO), real qualities (RQ), sensual object (SO), and sensual qualities (SQ). See Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, ch. 2 and 3. See also, Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, sec. 22.

⁴³ For OOO, “object” refers to physical, immaterial, living, dead, real, fictitious entities, events or relationships on any scale.

⁴⁴ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 72.

⁴⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 110.

⁴⁶ Harman, “Strange Realism,” 5.

⁴⁷ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 75.

⁴⁸ See Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 88.

⁴⁹ In Harman words: “A dormant object is one that is really present but without effect on other objects, or at least not yet.” Harman, *Immaterialism*, 64.

without dying and being born as a new object every new time.⁵⁰ Hence, if the representations cannot encompass the fullness of a reality, much less can the observer's experiences, since there are fewer experiences than manifestations available. For our cognitive example, that means two things: first, the frog and the human's experiences of the stone are based on some of the multiple stone's manifestations, and second, no beholder can come into direct contact with the stone's essence. On the contrary, any representation or experience "translates" the stone. As Bryant claims, "all objects translate one another, the objects that are translated are irreducible to their translations."⁵¹ Within this framework, the flat ontology regime recognizes the observed object *and* the observer as autonomous entities. Any beholder can encounter another object without a third party's mediation. In the stone–human relationship, the frog is excluded as much as the human is in the stone–frog encounter. This is undoubtedly one of the chief contributions of OOO to the school of realism: the gap between reality and appearance is not exclusive to human limitation, but exists in any relationship between objects. In short, relationships between things do not need privileged mediators (whether humans, God, or anything else).⁵²

The second point of disagreement with the ontology of continuity is the medium of expression. Rather than having a single virtual trajectory as a reality for each actualization or appearance in *one* medium, each ontological-realist entity sustains multiple appearances in *multiple* media. Such a multimedia condition of the object can be linked to Alois Riegl's work,⁵³ reinforcing Harman's connection with formalism in the arts.⁵⁴ Within the colorful tradition of German aesthetics in the 19th century, Riegl emerged as one of the leading voices within the formalism of the time with his famous concept of *Kunstwollen* (artistic volition or the will of art).⁵⁵ For Lambert Wiesing, the Austrian art historian promoted a "polymorphous state of being,"⁵⁶ which implies the media promiscuity inherent in any object. As Riegl says, "each style [and medium] of art strives for a true representation of nature and nothing else and each has indeed its own perception of nature in that he views a very particular phenomenon of it."⁵⁷ In other words, each manifestation has the right to be a representation of what it represents. The specificity of what is represented is unique because each medium offers something exclusive in its terms. However, any representation, style, or medium has no authority to reduce the being of what is expressed. Each is simply one of the many expressions of an entity that can be expressed in many different ways.

This argument allows us to overcome the epistemological error of reducing objects to a particular privileged medium by the observer. For example, observers (people, in this case) can find more Venice in a Canaletto's *capriccio* or a William Turner's watercolor of the city than in the built Venice. These two-dimensional representations can infer deeper connotations of the reality at issue than the built city's culturally imposed readings. Suddenly, the fact that the city is "built," a medium of expression that we presume lays the foundation for the reality of cities and buildings better than any other, is superseded by other representations in another medium (in this case, the pictorial canvas). Consequently, a deeply rooted yet myopic epistemological assumption of reality opens onto an ontological issue. For this to happen, the paintings need not imitate the built Venice literally. Canaletto's *The Basilica di Vicenza e il Ponte di Rialto* includes three of Andrea Palladio's buildings that do not exist in Venice's physical environment. For the

⁵⁰ This means that not every object is a dormant object.

⁵¹ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 18.

⁵² See Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 150.

⁵³ Another link that requires attention is Robert Vischer's notion of empathy in relation to object-oriented formalism and the beholder's participation with the artwork. See Vischer, "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics."

⁵⁴ See Harman, *Art and Objects*, ch. 2.

⁵⁵ Moshe Barasch's description of Riegl's *Kunstwollen* has an evident OOO flavor: "whatever the specific subject, *Kunstwollen* always refers to something that is behind the immediately visible or tangible work. [...] This something that is behind the work and its style, is *Kunstwollen*. [...] We simply do not have direct access to the *Kunstwollen*." Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art 2*, 165. Also significant is Riegl and Harman's common rejection of materialist theories. Riegl found Gottfried Semper's advocacy for material and technique problematic, as they tend to replace art. See Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 4. Harman's rejection of the term lies in reducing things to the smallest physical unit or a continuous whole. See Harman, "Materialism Is Not the Solution."

⁵⁶ Wiesing, *The Visibility of the Image*, 48.

⁵⁷ Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 226, footnote 117.

same reason, it is irrelevant if Turner's gondolas are the exact ones that physically existed. The paintings are not representations of the built city, but the built city and the artworks are equal manifestations of the same object. Put differently, the built city is not hierarchically above the paintings within the whole sensual spectrum of the Venice-object. If so, the painting would be a representation of a representation.⁵⁸ On the contrary, both paintings and the physical city are some of the appearances (caricatures) that constitute the Venice-object's volume of representation. Each appearance reveals different aspects of the same withdrawn object. The same argument is valid for any object, including those of nature. That means that natural phenomena are not the only representation of their realities. As Wiesing continues to comment on Riegl's theory: "Nature does not have one form that is to be captured. [...] The polymorphous character of nature, its indeterminacy, makes a multiplicity of [appearances] possible."⁵⁹ This condition of equal manifestations within the object in different media can be called *flat representativity*.⁶⁰

Thus, compared to the other models examined above, the perceptual/relational consequences of ontological realism imply for our three-actor scene:

- (1) The frog, the human, and the stone itself can perceive the same stone without unifying their perceptual apparatus for that stone, including their respective intentional or sensual objects.⁶¹ OOO's extra unitary ontological level ensures the unification of Husserl's intentional objects while respecting their heterogeneity, meaning the beholder's identity.
- (2) The stone can be perceived differently in a given moment thanks to its several simultaneous representations (also in several media) without multiplying its reality.
- (3) Since every object has its own discrete reality, an experience refers to this particular stone and not to another object.⁶² This occurs because of the indirect internal relationship, or "duel" as Harman calls it, between the real and the sensual. Let us label this model *multiple appearances, single beings, multiple cognitions*.

3.2.2 OOO's epistemological instability

However, these conditions also have other epistemological repercussions derived from the indeterminacy of the object's surface and the beholder's cognitive limitations, which sometimes creates difficulties for the sensual object (SO). Once again, I will reduce the following considerations to the case of a human observer for the sake of clarity.

First, *different representations of the same object are not consistent with the observer's notion of such an object*. As per point (1), different observers produce different SOs of the same entity; each consciousness harbors some individually encoded sensual unification. The question is whether, for the same observer, several SOs could exist simultaneously. By Harman's definition, the SO is singular to a beholder. However, what if I apprehend two or more representations of the stone that are contradictory to me? That would mean that the same observer could encounter more than one SO, or conversely, the SO could accommodate

⁵⁸ This does not cancel out that the actualization of some representations may depend on the experience of other manifestations of the same object. The present case of the city and the painting (or a photograph) is an example of such a chain condition – a representation whose formal syntax triggers the actualization of another of the same sensual pool.

⁵⁹ Wiesing, *The Visibility of the Image*, 48.

⁶⁰ The notion of flat representativity, which does not assume a hierarchy of appearances within the object, may be in conflict with Harman's differentiation between real qualities and sensual qualities. In my opinion, such opposition has more to do with the spectator's abilities to structure the sensual domain, that is, what she/he/it considers relevant or disposable qualities, than an internal and independent distinction of the object. In any case, this point requires more detailed study.

⁶¹ Sensual object (SO) is OOO's alternative name for Husserl's intentional object. The sensual object is the unification of appearances (sensual qualities) in the beholder's consciousness. For more about SO, see Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, ch. 2.

⁶² Another thing is if the viewer is aware of such an ontological connection. This is one of the epistemological flaws described in Section 3.2.2.

differences that are opposite in the observer's consciousness. Hence, the SO would not be singular. When the former occurs – there are several SOs for the same observer – it can lead to the typical epistemological error of dividing the object into different real objects (RO), one for each contrary understanding of the observer. Since the object is subjectless for OOO, this problem does not affect the entity's ontological constitution. However, we (human observers) generate a false dislocation of the real for us, with all the epistemological repercussions that this entails. In these cases, the observer falls into an idealism that falsely associates this form in consciousness with a non-existent reality. The mind does not house the corresponding SO with its real object but produces a reality associated with a phenomenon that does not belong to it. In OOO terms, that would mean a conflict in the tension called *sincerity*, because the sensual object does not correlate with its real object.⁶³

Second, *the experienced representations do not sufficiently represent the object for the beholder*. This is Morton's central theme in *Hyperobjects*.⁶⁴ He takes global warming as an example of an object whose manifestations are so massively distributed in space and time that it surpasses the human cognitive capacity to realize such an SO for us. It is only from the last few decades that humans as a collective observer have formalized the first traces of such an SO.⁶⁵ In our terms, that means that the observer (human society) could not identify a sensual object (a unitary object for the mind) from the scattered and meaningless sensory appearances, despite being the human producer ("criminal," in Morton's words) of such an object. The denial of global warming as an object is the human inability to reveal the link between its phenomena and reality. But *that* is what is at stake: there are no free-floating manifestations, and there is no single representation of an object. If the conditions of an SO are that the sensual object is what appears in consciousness, and what provides its unity is some coherent unification in the mind (it must make sense), then the unrecognized global warming is an object without an SO for us as a collective observer. More aptly, global warming is an inactive, unexercised, *dormant* SO with active sensual qualities. The absent SO occurs when the cognized appearances are so complex, inconsistent, or insufficient that the observer cannot establish for him/her a coherent unity for that reality. Epistemology without SO leaves us with reality-orphan qualities. On the contrary, the other possibility of keeping the SO always present is to accept that it is not always directly accessible to consciousness, suggesting an SO lying in the unconscious. This point requires further investigation.

Third, *a manifestation represents more than one object*. This epistemological confusion occurs when the same appearance stands for several objects, so the object is partially involved in other objects. Consider the case of a company representative. She/he is the representation of a company-object that can never be fully apprehended, but simultaneously, the representative can be involved in other entities such as his/her family, the bowling team, and obviously him/herself. On a more complex level, this muddle is the usual reason for identity crises between disciplines. For example, for Clement Greenberg art *qua* art "has to be a material phenomenon 'before' it's art."⁶⁶ However, the art critic acknowledges that the same artistic phenomenon may also be subject to scrutiny in other fields. However, when referring to the artistic object, "[w]hat I do say is that we shouldn't assume we're talking about art or the esthetic when we're actually talking about *something else* for which the art at hand is just a pretext."⁶⁷ This multiple representation of a manifestation is also a consequence of the observer's prior lack of sufficient differentiation.

Perhaps an extreme example of multiple realities behind an appearance is the phenomenon known as *apophenia*, defined as the production of meaning and connections between unrelated things. For instance, when I see the frog in the shape of a stone or in a cloud, am I faced with the representation of the stone-object having frog-shaped tones? Or is it an impossible representation to my consciousness of the frog-object in mineral composition, but which maintains its frog shape? Or both? Such an unsolvable problem

⁶³ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 132–5.

⁶⁴ Morton, *Hyperobjects*.

⁶⁵ As Morton says: "The first global warming evidence was published in 1955." Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 35. The study that Morton remarks is Plass, "The Carbon Dioxide Theory of Climatic Change."

⁶⁶ Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, 62.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

establishes a history of ambiguity between form–meaning–reality that has been explored in many ways throughout history: from religion to psychological models of the early 20th century (Rorschach’s inkblots); from neurological studies (the term apophenia was coined by a German psychiatrist in 1958 to frame the initial stages of schizophrenia) to abstract art in general; or more recently, architectural explorations on the role of fiction production in the notion of reality.⁶⁸

Fourth, *similar representations are repeated across various objects*. In other words, when the experienced manifestations of different objects are too similar for the observer to be unable to discern between the two. Representation becomes a *type*. The assumption that the entire sensual domain of an object (volume of representation) is unique as a collection does not cancel the repetition of partial profiles in another object’s pool of appearances. When an observer recognizes the same form of something that belongs to two different things, it is what in linguistics is called a *homonym*: the spelling and pronunciation of a word are the same, but it has several meanings, which can refer to different objects. Again, this problem appears when our cognition cannot capture the singularities that would differentiate each object sufficiently.

3.2.3 Onticology’s problem of infinite representations

Before closing this review of ontological realism, it seems necessary to clarify a distinction between Harman’s OOO and Bryant’s onticology about the limits of an object’s sensual domain. To my knowledge, Harman does not conceive of an infinite number of representations of an object.⁶⁹ Bryant does, which is understandable given that his philosophical position is somewhere between Deleuze and Harman. As Bryant puts it:

Where the local manifestations of a substance are concerned, these manifestations are, in principle, *infinite*. There is no limit to the number of local manifestations that an object can actualize, precisely because there is no limit to the exo-relations an object can enter into and the exo-relations it can consequently produce.⁷⁰

This is contrary to Harman’s limitation of the relationships an object can enter. In his words, “nothing relates to *everything* else,”⁷¹ i.e., there is a limit of exo-relations within an object. If a thing’s manifestations were unlimited, there would be a single infinite sensual domain for all discrete objects. Each entity would contain or perform all possible representations or events of the others. It would not be a *finite volume* of representations but an *infinite plane* of representations. Each point in the unbounded plane would represent its object *and* any other object because this point of representation is also in all other infinite planes of other objects. At each point in the plane, the representations of all objects are coincident. The stone, the frog, and the human represent the same object and *all* objects. This model suffers from the same infinity problems examined in monism, but applied instead to each discrete reality. When something is open to be cognized, not everything can cognize it, as Harman says. Such *non-existent* relationships are responsible for making the entire spectrum of experientable manifestations of all possible relationships between objects finite. Why? Because the number of realities in the cosmos is also finite. If not, the model of infinite realities with infinite manifestations is even worse. In the oxymoron of infinite holistic realities, infinite objects multiply exponentially, since they would be simultaneously the rest of infinity and would be represented by infinite manifestations.

⁶⁸ Ruy and Klein, “Apophenia.”

⁶⁹ This can be deduced from Harman’s statement that objects have a limited number of interactions and from his notion of knowledge in which “every reality supports multiple types of knowledge, but not an infinite number.” Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 189.

⁷⁰ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 121.

⁷¹ Harman, *Architecture and Objects*, Introduction.

To avoid the problem of infinity, each reality and its volume of representation must be finite within the (non-existent) world.⁷² The object's sensual finitude is a limitation of the subject and the inherent condition of the subjectless object. If no cognitive entity can apprehend all the object's appearances, it is not because it has infinite manifestations. What remains consistent for Bryant and Harman is that, even if an infinite or finite sensual domain could be exhausted, "the being of objects is nonetheless radically withdrawn";⁷³ "only objects, deeper than all relations, are truly inexhaustible."⁷⁴ However, not because they are infinite, but because their finitude is ontologically ungraspable. On the contrary, if the volume of representation seems inexhaustible or infinite, it is an epistemological (cognitive) hoax, not an ontological condition. As Morton said, "[v]ery large finitude is harder to deal with than an abstract, ideal infinity."⁷⁵ Let us label this model *infinite appearances, single beings, multiple cognitions*.

4 An extended "knowledge without truth"

Although OOO's central concern is not epistemological, Harman also proposes a theory of knowledge and alternative ways of indirectly approaching the object through aesthetic methods. For Harman, "OOO is completely opposed to the idea of knowledge as direct access to the real."⁷⁶ Section 2 (reality as appearance) of this article supports this claim of the impossibility of grasping reality. Since the knowledge of things is based on qualities, "knowledge is always an imperfect translation of its object."⁷⁷ Thus, knowledge is about appearances and manifestations rather than reality.⁷⁸ For this reason, Harman expels "truth" from "knowledge" because truth demands an impossible direct revelation of reality.⁷⁹ That leaves us, as he puts it, with a "knowledge without truth." In this framework, two additional aspects must be highlighted. First, knowledge according to Harman is finite,⁸⁰ something consistent with the idea of delimited volumes of representation (sensual domains) for each object. Second, although knowledge is traditionally served in literal propositional expressions because "knowledge cannot be metaphorical but must be literal." OOO also "adopt[s] a new definition of knowledge that incorporates elusive real qualities rather than directly masterable sensual ones."⁸¹ That means that aesthetics and knowledge are for Harman two separate epistemological areas of the object.⁸² However, a non-literal form of knowledge beyond tangible and measurable manifestations is possible. For that, Harman uses the notion of a *paradigm*, in which the observer must actively participate.⁸³

My intention here is to argue, first, that Harman's approach to the concept of knowledge, which replaces the object's real qualities with those of the observer, can lead to a form of epistemological idealism. Second, aesthetics and knowledge can be interrelated for the benefit of an extended notion of "knowledge without truth."

⁷² I agree with Bryant's thesis that "the world does not exist," understanding the world as the last super-component that contains everything. See Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, ch. 6. However, this cannot imply that the number of realities has to be infinite, given what has just been argued.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷⁴ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 215.

⁷⁵ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 40.

⁷⁶ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 168.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 185, 192.

⁸² As Harman says: "I suggested that philosophy and the arts are forms of cognition without being forms of knowledge." *Ibid.*, 167.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 189.

4.1 The shadow of epistemological idealism

In order to create a model of knowledge detached from the literalism of undermining, overmining, and duoming, Harman proposes a scheme to indirectly address the real qualities in a way similar to how metaphor alludes to the real object: the knower takes the role of the withdrawn real qualities, as does the beholder with the real object in aesthetics.⁸⁴ If Harman calls the compound object (object + beholder) *aesthetic unit*,⁸⁵ the other can be called *knowledge unit* (object + knower). Both are *cognitive units/objects* in which an observer apprehends somehow an observed thing. Harman endorses the notion of paradigm within the knowledge unit, which he notes is borrowed from Thomas Kuhn. His purpose is to seek the subtle “hard core” within a scientific paradigm or program beyond the already known pieces of evidence and known sensual qualities.⁸⁶ In this sense, any object (scientific or not) is a paradigm, because there is always a surplus of manifestations behind its directly accessible qualities. The knower’s “commitment” is required to deal with this sensual background,⁸⁷ meaning an attitude acknowledging that something else about such an object can be known. For Harman, the real qualities’ background moves away from experience no less than the real object; therefore, he substitutes the object’s real qualities for those that the knower brings with him/her to the knowledge unit. As he puts it,

in what sense does the beholder supply real qualities for a sensual object? Practically speaking, the real qualities of any sensual object we encounter can be found in the unnoticed background *assumptions* that make it visible to us.⁸⁸

However, if the knower brings his/her real qualities to the assumptions about the object’s background, how is this model of knowledge safeguarded so as not to fall into a form of epistemological idealism? Put differently, in what way do these assumptions belong to the object instead of being an imposition of the knower? Does the knower construct the knowledge by assuming unclear pre-existing manifestations that may not belong to the object in question? Understanding how Harman treats the object’s capabilities could help the discussion if the same approach is extrapolated to the discussion of knowledge.

According to him, all the capacities or properties that an object can exert when interacting with several beholders do not belong to the object, but to the interactions that compose a new compound entity (object + beholder).⁸⁹ His argument is not to assign a multitude of pre-existing capabilities as possibilities. If one imagines a similar strategy for the question of knowledge, knowledge will belong to the composite knowledge unit (object + knower), and therefore knowledge will be different according to each of the multiple interactions object + knowers. Thus, knowledge is strictly separate from the object in question. Reality and some manifestations belong to the dormant object, but the experiences it offers and its associated knowledge do not – they are in the compound object. In this context, how can knowledge about something be unified if knowledge is always about objects that are a scalar level above, meaning not about the object itself but about multiple composite cognitive objects? In terms of our example, it would mean that there would be no unified knowledge about the stone, because the knowledge individually refers to each interaction-object that the stone enters into with different knowers. What can be known about the stone does not lie in the stone, but knowledge is about the different knowledge-units themselves, one level above the stone.

To avoid that, one could try to find the common denominator between all knowledge-units and look retroactively to see if such a piece of knowledge resembles the observed component in any way; at least,

⁸⁴ Ibid., 84, 184.

⁸⁵ Harman, *Dante’s Broken Hammer*, 197.

⁸⁶ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 190.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 192.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 189 [emphasis added].

⁸⁹ As Harman explains, “it’s true that [an object] can affect things differently from how it currently does, but my position is that when it does have these different effects, they do not belong to the [object], but to a new entity composed of the [object] and something else.” Harman, in DeLanda and Harman, *The Rise of Realism*, 69–70.

this is how Harman deals with the object's capacities for each interaction.⁹⁰ That would mean that the knowledge of each knowledge unit must be related in some way to the properties of the studied object. To this end, the OOO diagram of knowledge proposes that the knower's real qualities must be assumed as belonging to the object's background.⁹¹ However, in my opinion, the revelation of unknown characteristics and profiles cannot risk constructing phenomena coming from the knower that may not belong to the object. If so, this gesture is very close to (if not the same as) Kant's epistemological idealism. Especially his synthetic *a priori* propositions are not about objects that have some characteristics that we know *a priori*, but about premises that we, knowers, impose on our experiences regardless of whether or not they refer to the object in question.

For that reason, and being entirely in agreement with the notion of "knowledge without truth," I am inclined to recognize a model of knowledge in origin. What can be known about an object resides in the object itself, even though it implies that there will be a ridiculously large (but always finite) amount of trivial and unexercised pieces of knowledge about it. Indeed, I would assert that evaluating whether qualities or capabilities are trivial or relevant has no relation to the object itself. These are criteria that categorize our knowledge according to sociocultural circumstances, as to which features count as knowledge and which do not. Structuring qualities have more to do with how we, observers, handle the sensual domain than with any internal value system of the thing that favors or discourages its qualitative profiles. For this reason, following Riegl's theory, an internal regime of flat representability is proposed as the basis of knowledge in which any appearance has the right to represent the object in its own way and contribute to the episteme.

4.2 Aesthetics as an additional form of "knowledge without truth"

The second point of discussion is the separation of aesthetics from knowledge, on which I suggest that the OOO indirect aesthetic method to the real object can also address its other sensual profiles, with consequences for the knowledge of the thing. Harman's aesthetic concept of *allure*, or *allusion*, put into practice by the mechanism of *metaphor*, makes the object's withdrawn reality absentmindedly present through aesthetic experiences.⁹² Reality is present without being evident, i.e., the object reveals its unitary existence exposing no quality. On this basis, Harman correctly asserts that aesthetics and allure are impossible forms of knowledge, because reality has no qualities.

However, I posit that allusion is not the exclusive consequence of aesthetic cognition. Unlike Kant and Greenberg, aesthetic experience is not an end in itself,⁹³ but it has the additional capacity to induce a colorful range of impressions that are *other* forms of manifestation of the object. Emotional content is part of the reality's various representations, something that is clear for the early British formalism of Roger Fry or Clive Bell.⁹⁴ Alternatively, in the words of Heinrich Wölfflin: "We designate the effect that we receive the *impression*. And we understand this impression to be the *expression* of the object."⁹⁵ That means that the emotional content derived from aesthetic experiences belongs to the object's sensual domain, and the

⁹⁰ On whether an object's capacities reside in the object itself or in the composite object it forms with another, Harman claims that "any genuine relation forms a new object, and that this object often has a retroactive effect on its components." Ibid., 71, Harman.

⁹¹ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 184.

⁹² Harman describes *allure* "as a way of making the thing in-itself present without making it *directly* present." Harman, *Art and Objects*, 67. For more about allure and allusion in OOO, see Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, ch. 9c; Harman, *Weird Realism*.

⁹³ On how Kant and Greenberg claim that aesthetic experience is an end in itself, see Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 53; Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, 6.

⁹⁴ For the two scholars, emotional responses are various and internal to the artwork. See Fry, *Vision and Design*, 194; Bell, *Art*, ch. 1.

⁹⁵ Wölfflin, "Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture," 150.

human becomes another medium of expression of the object.⁹⁶ As I claim elsewhere: “While the [object]’s emotional effects are another type of [its] multiple formal expressions, the allusion/allure escapes analytical considerations; it cannot be formally explained.”⁹⁷ The proof that the impressions are plural and different from each other (each has its articulation and structure) in opposition to the single non-qualitative unity of the allusion becomes apparent when the sciences (psychology, anthropology, or sociology) count them as phenomena to study. Aesthetic cognition is twofold since the unitary allusion to the withdrawn reality unifies all aesthetic experiences on that object, canceling none of them as forms of expression. Aesthetic cognition refers simultaneously to the unity *and* the multiplicity of the object, to its substance and features. Therefore, emotional responses provide *qualitative* plural data that is sensitive to be incorporated into the body of knowledge about the object. To some extent, Harman sees it that way too.⁹⁸ Aesthetic information is certainly not a clear, literal, and measurable knowledge for us like other scientific propositions are. However, if the observer’s impressions show articulation, they reveal sensual aspects of the object in question. Obviously, not every object can represent itself in us. Aesthetic cognition as an additional source of knowledge does not apply to those objects that cannot instill emotional responses. In this sense, the aesthetic result depends on the medium of the cognized object. For example, painting produces a mental response. Emotional impressions must be translated in some way into another medium, so that others can grasp them and turn them into shareable data. On the contrary, the observer of a sculpture or an architectural space must move or act around or within the object. Such corporeal actions are both the production of the aesthetic experience and another expression of the artistic or architectural object. The person’s involvement is not only mental but also physical. Unlike the static partition in painting or literature, space art formats provide the expressions of the object in the spectator or user in a more evident way.

Therefore, based on the notion of flat representativity – in which all representations of an object stand equally for its reality – I claim that *any* experienced quality contributes somehow to our knowledge of the thing. This requires the same strategy as with the question of knowledge: to locate the emotional content in the object as such and not in the aesthetic unit. Harman would probably not agree with this, because it means that many non-actualized emotions will pre-populate the object. However, just as with knowledge, how can an object’s emotional effects be unified if they do not lie in itself? In the present case, the role of the object–beholder interaction is to make the expression evident to the beholder rather than create it. The surplus of the object is its unexercised qualities and capacities.

In this context, non-literal aesthetic knowledge emerges as a contribution to expanding OOO’s notion of “knowledge without truth:” a knowledge that never touches reality, but which circulates in several but finite forms around it.

5 Conclusion

When the reality–appearance gap is applied as a parameter for navigating philosophical positions, two large groups can be contrasted, each in turn with different cognitive implications. When the gap is denied or ignored, the philosophical arguments are framed within the *plane of superficiality* where reality is appearance. At least two general scenarios derive from this: either the thing endures at the cost of offering a single experiential profile with the subsequent and improbable unification of the observers’ faculties for that thing, or the thing’s reality is multiplied by each different form of perception/cognition/relationship with it. On the contrary, when the gap is taken into consideration, reality is beyond appearance. In this case as

⁹⁶ Harman uses the concept of “mimesis” to clarify that the aesthetic experience is based on the composite entity object + observer for what the beholder becomes the object. Harman recognizes the human as a medium in the following way: “aesthetic participants themselves provide that medium.” Harman, “Materialism Is Not the Solution,” 109.

⁹⁷ Vaillo, “The Knowable and the Ineffable.”

⁹⁸ As he puts it: “In some cases [philosophy and art] may produce knowledge as a byproduct, but unlike mathematics and the natural sciences, knowledge is not their principal aim.” Harman, “A New Sense of Mimesis,” 49–50.

well, two scenarios can be distinguished. First, if reality is a continuous process, either reality is monistic so that a single virtual limit supports all actual appearances. There is a problem of ontological identity and constant self-cognition, since what cognizes is the same reality as what is cognized. The alternative is to isolate each appearance, since each one comes from individualized virtual paths. The price here is that things can only have one form of expression. Second, if reality is finite and has multiple but finite forms of expression, the model relates to the *volume of representation*, in which manifestations are translations of reality. Here there is a regime of internal correspondences between the copious surface and the unitary reality, so that the observers' cognitions about the same thing do not merge.

The last case is the ontological discretism of OOO, which carries opposite consequences for the episteme. On the one hand, because reality can never be pinned down insofar as any of its experienced representations is sufficient for the task, reality can never be known as it is. However, the multiplicity of an object's manifestations does not mean that they must be coherent for the beholder, which creates an unstable epistemological regime. On the other hand, the beholder's cognitive limitations imply that there is always something to be known. The object's cognitive inexhaustibility stimulates a continuous "commitment" (Harman's term) to produce knowledge. That means that such epistemological instability invites us to reconsider the model of knowledge. For an episteme in tune with the object's natural diversity of representations and media, dogmatic, domesticated, reductive, and manageable models of knowledge must be abandoned. This does not imply rejecting literal or scientific knowledge. On the contrary, it demands a model in which both literal and non-literal knowledge *coexist*. Indeed, I argue that the degree of non-literality of an expression has more to do with our inability to realize its articulation than with the manifestation that lacks it.⁹⁹ Any appearance of the object is qualitative, and is therefore articulated, formed, and structured. The epistemological objective of such coexistence is the inexhaustible fullness of each entity's volume of representation – its sensual domain. In short, the source of the episteme is *all* of its forms of articulation and expression.

In general, our model of knowledge is inherited from the mentality of the Enlightenment that grouped disciplines and objects of inquiry by focusing on partial expressions around specific media. It has crossed sensual realms looking for similar expressions, ignoring and disaggregating the variety of the sensual and its supporting reality to offer us a stable superficiality. However, such a taxonomization is not coherent with the objects' realm of appearances and their "polymorphous state of being." An episteme concerning objects requires leaving behind strategies of capitalizing on specific phenomena or the medium of expression so as to study the thing's diverse and distinctive pool of sensual profiles. That would imply a knowledge based on flat representativity, which claims that "*all [representations] equally [represent], yet they do not [represent] equally,*" rephrasing Bogost's definition of flat ontology. Put differently, a model of knowledge where the object does not have a privileged type of manifestation or a singular medium of expression, but is trans-disciplinary and medium-promiscuous, allows for acquiring knowledge in unsuspected parts of the sensual. Art and architecture are already absorbing such circularity (flying around without perching) to establish alternative modes of disciplinary production.¹⁰⁰ Within this framework, the OOO model of "knowledge without truth" implies an episteme that can accommodate differences, contradictions, and ambiguities that reflect the inherent plurality of the object's nature.

To this end, knowledge must account for the vastly finite volume of representation of the object. That supposes at least two points of disagreement with Harman's model of knowledge. First, it is stated that all appearances (qualities, capacities, events, manifestations, etc.), whether or not actualized, are contemplated in the object rather than in the interaction with the knower. Thus, the knowledge about an object lies in the object as such, in all its possible appearances. The actualization of a manifestation corresponds to the

⁹⁹ For example, the cognition of the emotional expressions of an object in us as a medium has a difficult degree of articulation compared to the literal descriptions of science. However, it is argued that this is an epistemological limitation rather than an ontological condition of the object's representations.

¹⁰⁰ For some examples of the OOO influence on architectural discourse based on mystery, curiosity, and ambiguity, see Ruy, "Returning To (Strange) Objects;" Young, *The Estranged Object*; Gage, *Designing Social Equality*.

cognitive unit (object + beholder) but not the generation of additional properties attributed to the original object. If so, this would be a form of epistemological idealism. In other words, the inclusion of the knower to form the cognitive unit cannot mean that the unveiled qualities that are the basis of knowledge are exclusive to such a composite object and not to the entity itself. For that reason, the knower's contributing qualities are rejected as not necessarily being contemplated within the sensual domain of the observed object. That means that the purpose of the object + beholder/knower tandem is *extracting* (rather than constructing) appearances without affecting the observed object's constitution. What can be known about something is in its domain of unknown appearances. If an object's real and sensual domain is discrete, so too is what an observer does not know about it. Therefore, each object shows a particular unknown individualized to each observer.

Second, the difference in the observer's engagement with the object, be it for aesthetic or knowledge outcomes, is not so obvious. While it is clear that only aesthetic encounters are capable of indirectly approaching the substantial and withdrawn reality through allusion, aesthetic experiences can also reveal qualitative manifestations. Those expressions of the object are the impressions *in* the spectator. Following the principles of flat representativity, this means that (a) those impressions are appearances of the object in the beholder as a medium, which is different from the latter constructing unrelated expressions, and (b) such manifestations contribute to the knowledge about the object as they belong to its sensual domain. Therefore, the cognitive unit (aesthetic or knowledge) must be *innocuous* to the observed object.

On this basis, the manifestations and associated knowledge of an object are epistemologically inexhaustible not because the object has infinite manifestations, but because our biological and cultural limitations on it always have something to reveal from the object's intrinsic and vast finitude of sensual profiles. Since no cognitive system in the world has absolute access to the full volume of representation of any entity, objects always have a particular remnant of knowable qualities beyond those known. This cognitive constraint is what makes objects sensually inexhaustible.

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