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The Decorum of Objects

In recent years, a number of rhetoricians have drawn upon work in speculative realist philosophy in order to build an object-oriented rhetoric (OOR). That OOR would, among other things, attempt to account for the rhetorical relations amongst objects. Though speculative realist philosophies continue to proliferate (indeed, it is often difficult to fit all of these thinkers under one umbrella), they all share one common project: they attempt to grapple with what Quentin Meillassoux calls correlationism. Correlationist thought relies upon "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from one another" (5). Meillassoux's correlationist argues that "we cannot represent the 'in itself' without it becoming 'for us', or as Hegel amusingly put it, we cannot 'creep up on' the object 'from behind' so as to find out what it is in itself" (4). Speculative realism is searching for a way to combat the correlationist argument and account for how objects exist, persist, and relate regardless of "human access." But these philosophers all have very different ways of grappling with the problem. As Graham Harman, who coined the term "Object-Oriented Philosophy," puts it:

Please note that the speculative realists *don't even agree about what is wrong with correlationism!* For example, what Meillassoux hates about correlationism is its commitment to 'finitude,' the notion that absolute knowledge of any sort is impossible. But he *doesn't mind* the correlationist view that 'we can't think an X outside of thought without thinking it, and thereby we cannot escape the circle of thought.' (He simply wants to radicalize this predicament and extract absolute knowledge from it...) By contrast, I see the problem with correlationism as the exact opposite. I don't mind the finitude part, which seems inevitable to me. What I hate instead is the idea that the correlational circle ('can't think an unthought X without

turning it into an X that is thought') is valid. I see it as flimsy.' (Harman, "brief SR/OOO tutorial")¹

This paper will not attempt to review and compare all of these philosophical arguments. Instead, my hope is to use the questions raised by the speculative realists to continue the task of theorizing OOR. Rhetoricians such as Scot Barnett, Jennifer Bay, Thomas Rickert, Byron Hawk, and others have already begun this task (Barnett; Hawk; Bay & Rickert). This paper is an attempt to continue the conversation.

Given this work in speculative realism, rhetoricians are asking: What might rhetoric have to say about the relations between objects? Rhetorical studies has had a great deal to say about the human-to-human relationship and the human-to-world relationship, but how often have we tackled the question of how objects relate to one another. Do objects persuade one another? Do they identify with one another? Is it possible to speak of rhetorical exchanges between objects? OOR as I'm discussing it here would build a vocabulary for understanding relations amongst all objects (humans included). This project is, for me, a thought experiment in the best way. It is speculation. It is an exercise in *dissoi logoi*. But it is also much more than this. It is an attempt to provide a richer understanding of what Jenny Edbauer-Rice calls "rhetorical ecologies" (Edbauer). It is an attempt to account for the persuasions and identifications that are happening all around us, in strange conversations that we may or may not be able to understand.

And so, my aim is to account for what I call the *decorum of objects*. Rhetoricians have had much to say about how speech or writing might be best fit to a particular occasion. My aim is to ask whether objects can be thought of in a similar light. If a rhetor chooses amongst various possibilities and fits her discourse to the situation, then perhaps we might consider how objects conduct themselves in particular ways for particular occasions. In the terms of Richard Lanham, I am attempting to account for how objects (human or otherwise) shift between "attitudinal worlds." To do this, I turn not only to speculative philosophy but to Lanham, who used the notion of decorum in his discussion of "the electronic word." Lanham's discussion of the digital is no doubt dated. Further, it would seem odd that I turn to Lanham, who is nothing if not a humanist. He is interested in "the electronic word" because it offers humans a model for rhetorical education. Still, Lanham's discussion of bi-

¹ One of the turn-offs of speculative realist philosophy (at least for me) is the insistence on bold, macho, and (often) abrasive arguments. Harman's discussion of what he "hates" about correlationism should not be taken too seriously, but it is an example of the kinds of bombastic claims that define much of the speculative realist discussion (in the blogosphere, in books, and in journals). Then again, it's entirely possible that this tone is a response to being accused over and over again of being a naïve realist.

stable decorum (what he calls *oscillatio*) and the electronic word presents a starting point for thinking about the decorum of objects.

Oscillatio and Objects

Writing in 1993, Richard Lanham was hopeful that digital technology could help humanists offer a strong defense of rhetoric. That strong defense would offer a convincing answer to what Lanham calls “The ‘Q’ Question” (named after Quintilian, its most famous non-answerer): Is the perfect orator also a good person? Lanham argues that the history of rhetoric is littered with weak answers to this question and, therefore, weak defenses of rhetoric. Those weak defenses typically argue that there is good rhetoric and bad rhetoric. Mine is good; theirs is bad. For Lanham, this weak defense makes rhetoric ornamental—something one hangs on their argument in order to make it persuasive and/or ethical. And he argues that we need a strong defense of rhetoric, one that recognizes how rhetoric creates truths and realities. The True is not “out there” prior to rhetorical action. Rather, *truths* are created by rhetorical action. Thus, a rhetorical education would not teach content (Great Books). It would teach a method of understanding how rhetorical realities are created. For Lanham, the electronic word offered hope that such a rhetorical education (one that had fallen out of favor after rhetoric’s various restrictions and banishments) could be revived.

Lanham argues that the manipulation of text on screen reminds us of how the electronic word draws attention to itself, forcing us to look AT it and THROUGH it. This toggling of AT (noticing surfaces and style) and THROUGH (reading for meaning) is, for Lanham, what a rhetorical education has always offered, a method that trains us to constantly shift between “attitudinal worlds” (6). Lanham does not argue that technology has created this situation. Rather, the electronic word has reminded us of what was always there. Still, his focus is on digital technologies. Lanham’s book, *The Electronic Word*, plays with fonts and typefaces to make this point, and it’s important to remember that the essay was first published in 1988. Lanham’s discussion of the electronic word is certainly dated. But his notion of AT/THROUGH or *oscillatio* still resonates today. In fact, he continues to make use of the concept in a more recent work entitled *The Economics of Attention*.²

² We can also see echoes of Lanham in Katherine Hayles recent discussion of “hyper attention” and “deep attention.” For Hayles, digital technologies are exposing a generational shift in cognitive modes: “Deep attention, the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities, is characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged,

But while Lanham discusses *oscillatio* in terms of how humans learn to shift between attitudinal worlds, he also opens up the possibility that *oscillatio* describes how all objects behave. That is, Lanham's discussion of technology allows us to theorize the decorum of objects. An example: Lanham sees digital textbooks as promising "not the spindled mutilation that the sixties feared but an incredible personalization of learning, a radical democratization of 'textbooks' that allows every student to walk an individual path" (10). That is, Lanham's digital textbook would shift between attitudinal worlds depending upon the student—it would deploy algorithms so that it might toggle amongst possibilities, adapting its discourse to its audience. And while this example still involves the relationship between technology and human interactor, I would like to make the speculative leap that considers how digital technologies would practice this same *oscillatio* in their relations with non-human objects. Throughout *The Electronic Word*, Lanham describes his "bi-stable decorum" of *oscillatio* as something that digital technologies do. That is, Lanham argues that the objects themselves oscillate: "A text or painting can present itself as 'realistic,' a transparent window to a preexisting world beyond...or it can present itself frankly as an invention, as pure fantasy...The object will invite a certain [reading] but we can decline the invitation [and] 'read' a fantasy as if it were a realistic description of a world as yet unknown, if we like" (14). It seems that *oscillatio* is not easily situated on the human side of the circuit.

It is unlikely Lanham would grant that such *oscillatio* happens in relations between non-human objects, and I am not trying to put words in his mouth. Instead, I am trying to follow a path that he opens up but does not pursue: If Lanham's AT/THROUGH oscillation happens in the human's encounter with the electronic word, then how much of this oscillation can be attributed to the technology and how much to the human? *Oscillatio* could be situated purely on the human side of this relationship, it could be posited as a purely technological, or it could be conceived as an emergent property of the encounter between human and technology. But the possibility that I'd like to pursue here is that *oscillatio* is everywhere at once. That is, it describes the existence of any object, human or otherwise. This is Graham Harman's argument when he describes all objects as "tool-beings." Drawing on Heidegger's famous tool analysis, Harman argues that Heidegger's discussion of

preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times. Hyper attention is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom" (187). Hayles argues that younger generations are finding it easier to operate in environments that cater to hyper attention, but educational systems are still very much invested in teaching modes of deep attention.

technology as “present-to-hand” and “ready-to-hand” is not just a trait of “equipment.” Instead, it is generalizable to all objects. Heidegger’s tool analysis is typically interpreted to mean that a tool is ready-to-hand while we are using it and present-to-hand when it breaks down. We can easily put this in Lanham’s terms: a text is ready-to-hand when we are reading it for meaning and present-to-hand when we notice its surface or style. But Harman provides a different reading of the tool analysis:

The key result of Heidegger’s analysis of tools is not that ‘equipment becomes invisible when serving remote human purposes’...the crucial insight has nothing to do with the human *handling* of tools; instead the transformation takes place on the side of *the tools*. Equipment is not effective ‘because people use it’; on the contrary, it can only be used because it is *capable of an effect*, of inflicting some kind of blow on reality. In short, the tool isn’t ‘used’—it *is*. (*Tool-Being* 20)

For Harman, all objects (including humans) move between present-to-hand (AT) and ready-to-hand (THROUGH). This means that all relations involve objects, which “withdraw” from one another: “All individual beings withdraw into the contexture of equipment, where they execute their cryptic reality” (*Tool-Being* 68). If both humans and technologies shift amongst attitudinal worlds, looking AT and THROUGH other objects, then we need not decide who owns *oscillatio*. Instead, we might take this as an opportunity conceive of a flat ontology, one in which the human is but one entity that engages in decorous activity. And if the electronic word exposes a bi-stable decorum that, in Lanham’s words, “happened everywhere else first,” then we know it’s not only about digital media (302). Lanham himself would grant this, for he is always offering historical precedents to his bi-stable decorum (from the Futurists to environmental artist Christo Javacheff). But there is something else we might draw from Lanham’s discussion: the bi-stable oscillation of decorum is not situated solely the domain of the human. It defines all tool-beings.

Carpentry

But positing a flat ontology in which humans are one object among many is only one part of theorizing OOR. The question still remains: How would one *do* OOR? And how would they do it without falling back into correlationism? In his forthcoming book, *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost offers us one possibility. Bogost admits that the speculative realist philosophies of Harman and others are difficult to put into practice. These theorists are focused on first principles and have not focused on ways to *do* speculative realist

metaphysics. Bogost is interested in pursuing the latter. He is seeking a “pragmatic speculative realism, not in the Jamesian sense, but more softly: an applied speculative realism, an object-oriented engineering to ontology’s physics” (34). This is not to say that Bogost is willing to skip past the problem of correlationism. Like other speculative realists, Bogost insists on attempting to understand the relations between objects without reducing those relations to human access. However, he also grants that our attempts to do so will mean that we can only ever trace “the exhaust of [objects’] effects on the surrounding world” (113-4). When pursuing the relations between objects, we do not find “thin, flat plate of glass onto which a layer of molten aluminum has been vacuum-sprayed” but rather “a funhouse mirror made of hammered metal, whose distortions show us a perversion of a unit’s sensibilities” (36).

Most importantly, understanding the relations between objects requires more than watching, listening, and reporting. It requires tinkering, or what Bogost refers to as carpentry:

The phenomenologist who performs carpentry creates a machine that tries to replicate the unit operation of another’s experience. Like a space probe sent out to record, process, and report information, the alien phenomenologist’s carpentry seeks to capture and characterize an experience it can never fully understand, offering a rendering satisfactory enough to allow the artifact’s operator to gain some insight into an alien thing’s experience.” (114)

As a videogame designer, Bogost’s brand of carpentry is computer programming. But this is only one possibility. The materials are less important than the practice itself. Rhetorical carpentry would construct objects (and conversations among objects) in order to demonstrate approximations of the strange, alien conversations happening around us.

And so perhaps the best way to begin an investigation into the conversations amongst objects is to make those conversations happen. An object reveals itself and conceals itself, and observing this *oscillatio* is one important part of understanding objects. But this is only the first step. By engaging with objects and putting them into relation with one another (and by understanding that we are *enmeshed* in this process rather than *in charge* of it) we can consider how objects act differently in different rhetorical situations. In a sense, this is counter-intuitive. An attempt to model object-to-object relations (conversations between, say, between falling rain and the basil plant in my back yard) would require inserting ourselves into that conversation. This is not a removal of the human

by any means. Rhetorical carpentry would be conducted in a way that paid close attention to how objects relate to, persuade, or identify with one another.

If all objects, humans included, exist by way of *oscillatio*, perhaps carpentry offers a way forward for OOR. This approach would offer a better account of how objects shift amongst attitudinal worlds and adapt to situations. It would attempt to understand how objects act upon one another in unpredictable ways, interlocking and releasing, oscillating and diverging in unpredictable ways. The project of rhetoric has always been tied up with trying to understand the attitudes and motives of others. In this sense, OOR is not controversial at all.

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