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Review: *Flat Aesthetics: Twenty-First-Century American Fiction and the Making of the Contemporary* by Christian Moraru, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023 268 pp., ISBN 9781501355264, h/bk £85.50, e-book £68.40

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Christian Moraru's *Flat Aesthetics* is a stimulating addition to the growing field of the environmental humanities. In turn, Moraru himself is one of several literary scholars to espouse interdisciplinarity in service of questions about being, materiality, and political ecology.¹ Taking both climate catastrophe and the emergence of 'post-truth' factions in media and politics as his prompt, Moraru suggests that the Anthropocene has given rise to a new age of ontological precarity for all things, human and nonhuman. This precarity is, he argues, the result of 'the growing and intolerable asymmetry between things' existence and their status or "eminence" – political, aesthetic, and so forth – over the last decades' (x). The book then presents readings of fiction by Ben Lerner, Michael Chabon, Emily St John Mandel, Joseph O'Neill, Mohsin Hamid, Colson Whitehead, Jonathan Safran Foer, Bruno Schulz, and Nicole Krauss, by means of which Moraru develops his hypothesis that the 'contemporary' is comprised of the particular 'shape and consistency' brought into being by objects' increasingly insistent presentation (xi). Of particular interest in what follows is Moraru's treatment of 'the ontological turn sweeping across the humanities in the new millennium,' in particular the problem of balancing objects' ontological totality alongside the need for change (203).

The 'flat' of the title refers to flat ontology, which serves as Moraru's theoretical foundation. Against centuries of western philosophy which hinged on the schismatic distinction between human and nonhuman elements, flat ontology collapses the binary between human and nonhuman, moving away from 'the implausible taxonomy between human thought on one side and *everything else in the universe* on the other.'² For Moraru, this also means that literature – and the world – does not *contain* objects, but *is* objects. In *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (2018), Graham Harman builds on the premise of flat ontology, but describes the latter as philosophically 'disappointing.'³ For Harman, OOO ('triple O') is a counterweight to the under- and over-mining methods of western philosophy; in other words, to the tendency to see objects as either the sum of their qualities or that which they *do*, respectively. OOO is also a self-professed interdisciplinary 'theory of everything' which draws on Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT), with the distinction that OOO 'rescues the non-relation core of every object'.⁴ This 'core' is the critical distinction in Harman and Moraru's view: while Harman writes that 'we cannot "extract" a form from a thing and express this form in mathematical or other directly knowable terms,' Moraru dismisses

¹ See Jane Bennett, Timothy Morton, Jack Halberstam.

² Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology* (London: Penguin, 2018), 56.

³ Harman, 55.

⁴ Harman, 256.

the differences between objects and the world, insisting that the world *is* objects and not their container.⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly, because *Flat Aesthetics* is a piece of literary criticism rather than philosophy, Moraru does diverge from OOO. The first and most obvious divergence is in Moraru's rejection of Harman's (grâce à Kant/Heidegger) idea that objects withdraw from us. Instead, Moraru states:

To the contrary, St. Elmo's fires, scratch-off lottery tickets, and even Martin Heidegger's fabled hammer step forward and show themselves more saliently as they 'fail,' with characteristic 'composure' and not infrequently with mute 'deliberation,' to do their job self-effacingly, 'transparently,' as crutches, tools, commodities ... and other vehicles, metaphorical or not, for concealed or remote actors, tenors, rationales, and ends. (7)

This is quite a gauntlet to lay down. Moraru now must prove that objects present themselves in their entirety while also avoiding the instrumentalizing methods which read them as some-thing/use other than themselves. Put differently, Moraru must avoid idealism and/or correlationism while also demonstrating that what is presented to a human object (specifically, the human object that is him) is all that exists of a nonhuman object. He must also account for the future (lest he be accused of nihilism), and must do so within a calcified structure in which objects are all there is, and all there is of objects is what is clearly admissible.

We will come to these issues, but firstly, I want to address Moraru's titular 'flat aesthetics.' Moraru's rejection of objects' withdrawal is also a divergence from OOO's theory of aesthetics, which Harman elucidates with the instance of metaphor. In his exemplar metaphor, 'the wine-dark sea,' the sea is the object. Specifically, it is a sensual rather than a real object, in that we are asked to imagine it – the image of the sea presented in the poem is a correlate of our prior experience of the sea as a 'real' object, existing in the world. However, the sensual object that is the sea in this metaphor cannot support the 'wine-dark' qualities assigned to it; our idea of the 'sea' does not correspond with these qualities. As such, a real object – a non-correlate, existing independently of our minds – is needed. With the real object that is the sea absent and withdrawn from the scene, the human onlooker becomes the real object substituted in to uphold the metaphor's sensual qualities. From this, Harman argues

⁵ Harman, 258.

that '[w]e ourselves,' rather than the named objects, 'are the real objects at stake in aesthetics.'⁶ He continues:

even though every image the [aesthetic] encounter gives us is just an outline or shadow of the inwardness of the thing itself, I myself am fully invested in all these experiences, and *inwardly* rather than as just a shadow or outline of myself. I myself am the sole real object in all experience, encountering any number of sensual things.⁷

Moraru's aesthetic theory, on the other hand, is, simply put, that objects make up the texture of the contemporary: it is their very presence that is the aesthetic of the contemporary. In Moraru's words:

literature is not a *representation* of a particular experience, let alone of a particular experienced reality. [...] Instead, *literature is that experience itself*, in its very form and *as such, qua* form. Neither a record nor a receptacle of experience, form does not just transcribe experience but inscribes it, *is it*. (44)

In Chapter One, he elaborates this claim with reference to Ben Lerner – specifically, the latter's writing on poetry. The poem is a flattening of world and object, form and content, resisting what Moraru calls a 'serial' reading of literature wherein words are exchanged for other words or ideas external to them. Instead, the poem-as-object presents itself, unapologetic in its limitations. In other words, for Moraru, 'the poem's "finitude" both "comprises" and promises the "infinite" formally' (36). Given his divergence from OOO's account of withdrawn objects, the very factor that enables Harman's aesthetic theory, Moraru presumably sees the poem's failure to connote beyond itself as the 'promise' of infinity. And so, the flattening of world and object which, for Moraru, is the aesthetic of the contemporary stems from the poem's sealed finitude. As an object-form which cannot signify – or be exchanged for – anything other than itself, the poem is, by the same token, *all there is* and, thus, *infinite*.

The issue arises in accounting for how this transition (or change) takes place beyond the semantic. There are various theories which give an account of change that is some way connected to the object's thingness: Jacques Rancière's 'redistribution of the sensible,' Lauren Berlant's loosened object, Plato and later Edmund Husserl's *eidōs* ('essence'), the transformation undergone by the human object in Harman's account of aesthetics, and so on. The problem, though, is that Moraru has rejected the integral

⁶ Harman, 85.

⁷ Harman, 85.

withdrawn element which enables transformation in the Platonic account, as well as in Harman. The idea that the human object is drawn to the poem *due* to its ontological intensity perhaps puts him closer to Rancière or Berlant, where the human beholder must relinquish both their autonomy (Rancière) and their hold on their object (Berlant) for change to occur, except that both ideas presuppose human agency above that of nonhuman objects. Moraru makes a point of noting that the object is '[s]haped by emotions, history, politics, and production modes,' is 'visibly "constructed" by them,' and is 'oriented' to other objects (6). This might gesture to ANT, but the principle that every object is already hybrid and that the *event* is the root of transformation is not compatible with Moraru's emphasis on the primacy of the undifferentiated object. Do we then read Moraru in terms of the uncanny, heterotopia, or hauntology? It is, in other words, difficult to account for Moraru's insistence on the object's ability to both present its entire being *and* present 'another presence and another present, another con-figuration and another time for the objects involved' (17).

Some of these issues appear again, in a slightly altered context, in the second section, subtitled 'Display.' Here, Moraru reads Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) in terms of 'object-thinking.' Carrying on from the idea of infinity in the finite, this refers to objects' liberation from instrumentalization to the ontological independence afforded by dormancy and uselessness. In Mandel's postapocalyptic world, objects associated with the world before the novel's near-total swine flu pandemic are collected and curated in a 'Museum of Civilisation.' Previously viewed in terms of utility to human activity or exchange value as commodities, these objects become hyperreal in the absence of the same instrumentalizing systems. In other words, the objects are now restored to agency by dint of the disappearance of the world *in which they were or could be useful*. Drawing on Harman's insistence on objects' resistance to literalization, Moraru posits the objects' intransigence – their unrelenting presence in no terms but their own – as the basis for transformative thinking about the world. In his words, the 'Museum of Civilization' is 'a dialectic of worlds, the birth of a *new* world from the flotsam and jetsam of the one [... centred on] the anthropocentrized object order' (87 emphasis added).

In this case, the 'newness' must arise from one of two options. Firstly, it is relational, arising from the assemblage created by objects, their histories (of materiality, labour, use, etc.), and their current context. Secondly, it derives from a bourgeois evaluation in which uselessness is an opportunity cost. Clearly, the second, more anodyne, option is nothing more than reification as a means of extracting surplus value. One could argue, that is, that this method of display is merely another – albeit bourgeois rather than utilitarian – means of conferring value derived from the same capitalist and

anthropocentric system which allows some and not others to purchase and consume obsolescence. The objects in the 'Museum of Civilization' are of interest, for example, to the novel's 'survivalists,' who seek to reverse object de-instrumentalization precisely *because* of the scarcity inherent to post-apocalyptic society. In this instance, the objects' 'newness' is merely the surplus value extracted from uselessness amid or despite need, such that uselessness carries the opportunity cost of this need.

If, however, we accept that the de-instrumentalization outlined in the novel is not bad-faith bourgeois apologetics, we might consider the first option, wherein the objects' 'newness' is the result of assemblage.⁸ This feels compelling, especially as Moraru stresses the objects' 'extract[ion] from the Anthropocene's relations of manufacturing and commerce' but does not expunge such relations from the 'historical record' (87). In the assemblage, a change to any constituent part changes the configuration of the whole. Similarly, while Harman gives an account of how change might occur from *within* the belly of the object and its refusal of instrumentalization based on that object's withdrawal. Moraru, on the other hand and as we have seen, insists that it is objects' very *presence in their totality* which invites 'futural' reflections (80). In their intransigence (and like the poem example), the collected objects are forms rather than contents (83), an idea which again seems to push against the idea of a fluid assemblage. It appears to me that Moraru has painted himself into a corner and is unable to account for from whence futural change, energy, outlook, or whatever one wishes to call it, arises. So: these objects are of the 'old world' but are not nostalgic, and therefore don't connote a desire for an-other, 'external' world; they exist in a new world in which they are liberated of exchange value and utility and in which their power arises from their *ur-ness* as pure form. In this context, we must conclude that the objects are hyperpresent *because* they have moved through the old world, not into an *external* world, but into a new one *born of the old one* in which previous relations and modes of being have transmogrified into utopia. This, in turn, leads to the question of whether Moraru is flirting with the loaded ideas of accelerationism.

I tend to follow Moraru's (and indeed accelerationism's) dismissal of an externality, alongside the tendency of post-1989 Marxist criticism to concede the loss of both modernism's 'outside' and what Harman might call 'truth' politics. Marx's hypothesis that capitalist history is inherently crisis-driven, undergoing various mutations before it inevitably reaches the logical conclusion of communism, might appear appealing,

⁸ This is the sort of theory espoused by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*, a work Harman considers to be related to his project, though he rejects the existence of 'matter' and objects to Bennett's conceptualisation of objects' transitive appearance amid a greater, ever-changing whole.

but has been largely discredited.⁹ In the mess that is the wake of modernisation, the circularity of postmodernism, and the stutter of the contemporary, recent literary theory has asked whether capitalism's current neoliberal iteration is normative or post-normative.¹⁰ What is at stake is this: if normative, neoliberalism has a set of principles which it (successfully) presents as superior to those of other systems. If normative, neoliberalism is a question of governance and subjectivization to which there are alternatives. If post-normative, neoliberalism is a body without organs; it is both form and content. We are all capitalism, and it is all of us: there is, in short, nothing external to it.

Why is this relevant? I fear that Moraru's approach places the climate crisis in the same bind as this latter scenario. Objects are form and content; there is no outside. But there is also no inside that is not immediately present, and thus there is no way to account for or imagine change. The climate crisis as both current reality and impending apocalypse wires *Flat Aesthetics* with political urgency, and has animated the humanities' material turn of the last decade or so. And yet, a flat ontological reading of objects, with no recourse to either the idea of withdrawn inner-being or an outside reality, leaves us with an identity politics of objects. We affirm and recognize their 'presence,' 'intransigence,' 'insistence' and wait for them to change the crisis of which their increasing insistence – in natural disasters, extreme weather etc. – is a symptom.

Happily, Moraru rescues the reader from this nihilism in the fourth chapter on revenants, and the fifth on kinship. In Chapter Four, Moraru gives a compelling reading of zombies in Colson Whitehead's fiction. Here, the zombie functions as the Lacanian Real which reveals itself to us both because it *is*, and because it is something we 'cannot discern on our own' (154). For Moraru, it is in 'extreme thing-incorporation that the Other plays its 'unveiling,' analytically othering role best, naming for us that which otherwise would remain 'unknown,' 'unimaginable' to us humans' (156). This aligns almost exactly with Harman's aesthetic theory and, thus, with the idea of the real's withdrawal from us. The zombie is a metaphor: a real object with sensual qualities. That is, a zombie is a human, but both dead and undead. As such, the real object withdraws from us, the sensual object (the 'human') cannot support being both dead and undead, and thus the real object that is the viewer/reader steps in and enters an aesthetic and transformative relation with the (zombie-as-) metaphor.

In a similar vein, Moraru outlines the idea that we ignore things – and specifically the Thing – in order to continue life as normal. Ultimately, though, when life as

⁹ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 113.

¹⁰ Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3–10.

normal cannot be sustained, the Thing must reveal itself to us, ‘shak[ing] us out of our analytically and socially inoffensive habits’ and highlighting ‘our own conditions of possibility’ (162–3). This line of reasoning is of a piece with Berlant’s writing on affect, which parses our desire for life in terms of our attachments to libidinal objects (both real and not real, human and nonhuman). Some of these objects – the family, for instance, or education – are largely positive and effective in facilitating our continued connection to ‘the good life.’ Other objects, however, are ‘cruel,’ serving to inhibit our survival, let alone our flourishing.¹¹ In this latter case, Berlant proposes a relinquishment of autonomy such that we come face to face with the question of how to ‘deal affectively with what is unbearable, the loss of our object world[.]’¹²

Again, what is at stake here is a question of framing: Berlant asks the human ‘subject’ (to borrow one of Moraru’s puns) to imagine new object worlds, whereas Moraru implicitly relies on the autonomy of (nonhuman) objects to shake us from complacency. This framing, though, seems important in the context of a ‘normal life’ which is demonstrably *unsustainable* in terms of the climate, and which is not only inhibiting human flourishing but also threatens the existence of various other objects. The final chapter’s consideration of Kafka’s literary afterlives initially maintains this (problematic) framing: ‘Across the Kafka family, animals oftentimes teach humans what it means to suffer the meaning of suffering, and with it the very meaning of being human’ (190). The chapter then shifts, albeit subtly, to a more workable emphasis on human responsibility, with Moraru charging us with ‘relearning humanity’ such that we can look the nonhuman in the eye (192).

In art, proteges are instructed to draw, not the object in front of them, but the negative space surrounding that object. For our purposes here, it seems to me that *Flat Aesthetics* is a painstaking rendering of the negative space around that which nevertheless emerges in the end: objects’ fundamental unknowability to one another as the source of all change. This book is part of a welcome and growing canon of work which takes things seriously, and which challenges us to push against inherited anthropocentric ontological tendencies. However, Moraru’s early rejection of object unknowability makes his logic difficult to sustain at times, especially when it comes to accounting for infinity emerging from finite objects. The emphasis on objects-as-world, as form rather than content, graphs directly onto our contemporary era of climate emergency – the ‘planetary thingness that we have been exploiting, overusing, polluting, discarding, or disregarding’ (210). The problem is that theories such as Moraru’s risk

¹¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹² ‘Public Feelings Salon with Lauren Berlant’, Barnard University Center for Research on Women, New York, May 10th, 2011.

proposing a politics of identity for objects rather than object-justice, where recognition is substituted for paradigm shifts. In a sense, what emerges from *Flat Aesthetics* most strongly is how flat ontology itself is *not* constitutive of the contemporary. Rather, flat ontology emerges as a 'futural' goal which requires concerted effort from human objects in conjunction with objects' 'presence.' Moraru's suggestion that an aesthetics which elevates nonhuman objects might well be part of the process of arriving there, but a flat ontology which declares objects' foundational equality does not adequately account for centuries of western philosophy which must be unravelled and, thus, puts the cart before the horse.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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