

Material Culture Essay 2024

This essay aims to investigate the 'object' in various contexts, exploring methodologies and theories of unpacking and understanding the relationship objects have with both other objects and subjects.

Objects being subjective:

As humans our lives revolve around 'objects'. The chair I'm sitting on to write this. The candle burning to the right of me. The hat on my head. The keys on my computer to write **t-h-i-s** very word.

Objects are made of objects. And OUR everyday relies on certain object working in a way in which we predict.

For some, this reliance is more literal. Objects such as pacemakers, wheel chairs, medicines, prosthetic limbs, allow people freedom and independence. A life that allows them to explore, to experience, to meet, to play, to live...

For others, objects are more of a distraction. Something to scroll on, gawk at, whilst on the tube.

In this sense, the definition of an 'object' will be subjective. Subjective to our interpretation, experiences, relationships morals...etc. All those things that differ me from you. We only consider objects in relation to ourselves. **Our** objects. The objects in **our** everyday.

Objects live under our 'human gaze'.

Objects possessing potential:

Harman describes that an object possesses 'actual potential' within itself, without the necessity of subject perception or interaction. He feels that it is this object agency that constitutes for the world in which we live in. This theory is named 'Object Orientated Ontology' or Triple O. An object is often described as something that is unconscience, inanimate or not sentient. But why do we, as humans, get to decide the definition of conscience or unconscience. Can the wall of a room breathe? Communicate? Feel or Think? Not by humans standards, no. But what if those standards could change?

If you were to ask a child if snakes can talk, they'd most probably say no. And in some sense they are correct. Can a snake talk like human, no. But can they communicate? Yes.

As humans, time and time again we are proven the lesson of 'just because you can't see it, or don't understand it, doesn't mean it doesn't happen...'

Similar to my snake example, it may be possible that these 'non-human entities experience their existence in a way that lies outside our own species-centric definition of consciousness?' (What Is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World,)

Object Mining:

Harman describes two ways in which humans try to understand these non-human entities. People either undermine objects. Or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, over-mine objects.

When you undermine an object, one simplifies it into the materials it consists of.

‘Oh what is that’...

‘well I think it’s some sort of mixture between brass and nickel?’

Although not wrong, this description neglected the fact that these materials have been treated in certain ways and shaped into a form that allows it to unlock the front door to your house...

Equally, an object can be subject to over-mining... deeply thinking over the concept, definition, existence, relationships etc of objects. Do objects exist? Are we objects? (Dominik Finkelde - Hochschule f. Philosophie, 2018)

The ‘OBJECT’ spoken of in Triple O theory, exists between these perceptions, as Harman describes objects to be “a thing-in-itself that cannot just be paraphrased into either its constituent elements or the sum of its actions on other objects.”

He describes how “the world is not the world manifested by humans, to think a reality beyond our thinking is nonsense, but obligatory”. A humans we often understand things by exerting power over them. We observe, we inspect, we open up, break down, simplify and over complex. Humans have dominated objects, since monkeys smashing rocks on rocks to open nuts. (Harman, 2010)

Object - Subject relations:

However, objects also have the potential to overpower the subject. Overpower in both positive, and negative ways. Art for example often holds the potential to bring people to tears. Happy tears. And sad tears. Although the subject in this example is imprinting its emotion on the object, it is from the object internalised potential, that have created these tears.

All these objects have actual potential. A ten pound note has the potential to be exchanged. The potential to be burnt. The potential to be rolled up and places in ones nose. Triple O Theory would diagnose this potential as being owned by the object. The object is the entity in any situation that’s owns its potential. De-centralising the human within the world that we live in can seem to be an ‘un-necessary’ task, as we as humans are the ones experiencing our own existence.

“So what if objects can experience their own existence? Doesn’t affect me?”

As a human I struggle to look past an object as anything but how I or my world relates to it. I feel that Zizeks view of ‘The object is always an object for a subject and the subject is always a subject for an object,’ is one I can relate to, and understand. From my understanding, Zizek often says that Triple O leaves little room for subjectivity. (Slavoj Žižek on Objects)

I don’t want to wear a pair of socks, if another person has died in them. Why? Materially they are the same. There just socks? But my subjective perception of this object is negative.

I don’t want to wear them. Don’t make me.

In this section of the essay, I am going to analyse two 'objects'. Between these two objects, a garden has been built. Because of these two objects, a garden, has been built.

Im currently writing this, from a cabin. A cabin I had ventured to, far from London, by bicycle and train. A cabin, overlooking the Dungeness landscape.

To my right three large buildings, a nuclear power station only 2.2 miles away, looms over the land.



On my left, the ocean. Choppy and rough, intoxicating all the same.



Between these two 'objects', lies the UK's only desert. A Barron land filled with more objects.

Old fishing machinery, now with a thick layer of forgotten patina, tattered flags navigating aggressive winds... and a garden.

A garden made by a man.

A man living his last 4 years of life.



It was at this cottage, named 'Prospect Cottage' that Derek Jarman, artist, filmmaker, writer, gardener, among many other things, decided to spend the last years of his life, after finding out he had been diagnosed with HIV, in December of 1986.

For Jarman this garden was more than just a pastime. It symbolised all time he had spent, was spending and would spend on this earth. With this small patch of land, "overlooked menacingly by a power station" "It evokes resilience and an uplifting sense that if a garden can be made here" that anything could survive, regardless of the aggressive conditions of the surrounding environments. (Derek Jarman: My garden's boundaries are the horizon - Garden Museum)

I believe the existence of this garden as an area of 'object collection/ re-purposing' is most interesting with the application of Object Orientated Ontology. This is mainly due to the ambiguity of the object in Jarman's garden, which allows for space of imagination. You find yourself questioning the origins, the story of how the objects came to be in front of me, in this curated, organised chaos.

In this Garden, Jarman would re-appropriate objects he would find. Both from the sea and the 'waste land' space shared by his cottage and power station.

He would incorporate these objects, often entangling them to either match or juxtapose the organic nature of his plantation.



For many, the garden, and the objects that make it, is a memorial. An ever-changing time-capsule of a man that did so much for so many.

My question, is what happens to these emotionally charged arrangement of objects, when all that emotion is removed. When the subject, is removed or repositioned from the object.

As humans, I believe we can only truly understand something, when it is in relation with human existence. This is why, as humans we have such an attraction and intrigue when objects interact with other objects, with no trace of subject interaction. Two examples of this would be:

Stonehenge, Utah Monolith.

As much as I would like to treat Jarman's garden with the same ambiguity as these two phenomena, I don't feel I can. However, I do feel applying Triple O theory to an object in Jarman's garden is possible.

These sculptures so clearly emulate the atmosphere in Dungeness. There's a sort of tense, on-edge feeling created by the looming power station, which so strongly contrast with the peaceful nature, which so prominently breaks through. The beige and violence of the shingle is at constant war with the green grass and vegetation breaking through on the land. This is one reason why Jarman's garden was such a symbol of hope and resilience. The survival and flourishing of any garden in an environment so harsh, so open - inviting to strong winds and coastal storms, is an object orientated act of resilience, which disregards the subjects influence. However, I feel its important to include, when that material, object resilience is considered along side the subject resilience Jarman showed whilst fighting his illness, the impact of both are amplified.



The chain. A common motif found in the garden, is an object that peaked my interest. Coated in a immobilising layer of rust, I wondered, who, where, what about this object?

In doing so, I de-centralised the human, and gifted all actual potential, all emotion and captured time, to the chain. The object. Not the subject.

All objects in the garden were found. As 'he collected more, slowly and laboriously assembling' the garden grew. (Art Fund, 2022)

This chain had been the owner of many different subjects, and objects. In my imagination, the chain had worked on a boat, in harmony with other equally important objects, all owning the subject (a fisherman). This chain allows this fisherman to anchor his ship, catch fish to later sell, and pay his mortgage.

The chain, at some point in time, felt it were time to move on. Where it then chose to keep another man alive. The chain gave Jarman the gift of creativity. A day of investigation, as Jarman search for objects, to re-install them.

On the 19th of February 1994, the chains subject sadly past away. The chain, among the other collective objects in Jarman's garden kept him alive 8 years after his diagnosis. Almost 7 years more than the predicted 15 months.

And with the passing, the chains duty changes. Its objective is no longer alined with aiding the survival of a subject, but the preservation of memories and time.

In 2018, £3.7 million was raised in a campaign led by Art Fund. This money was to buy the property, of 'Prospect Cottage', renovation where necessary and upkeep. Gardeners tend to the garden, as the objects lay still, many still residing in the place Jarman would have arranged/positioned them. These objects, the chain, own these memories. Own these positions. The chain now allows others to view it. Engage with it. And absorb the time in which it is encapsulating. The intent of the subject in this situation is mostly related to Derek Jarman. I doubt many people visit this garden, disregarding Jarman. But this does not, alining with Triple O theory, defect, weaken or undermine the importance of the objects existence in that situation.

Conclusion:

My entire trip to Dungeness relied upon objects. I relied on my bike, one of my favourite objects, to get there. I then stayed in an object, walked over objects, took photos of objects, so on...

Triple Os importance lies, in my view, through the questions it raises, and the revised answers people give. It has forced those, like Zizek and other modern philosophers to re-visit the concept of 'the object', which in a world where objects dominate every inch of our existence, its important to re-evaluate our relationships with these things.

Seeing objects that hold so much emotion, through the sense of Triple O was an extremely strange but illuminating experience. Decentralising the human in the perception of object existence is a key part of the theory. Although important, I believe this is more so creating access to a way of thinking which still incorporates the subject, but from an objects point of view.

The object providing the potential to be found, re-used and allowing for survival.

Not the other way round.

In this, somewhat humbling sense, it raises a human centred arrogance that we as subject imprint on almost all objects, especially that of which we consider to 'own'. By removing this human status, it allows us to gain hind-sight, a holistic view on our imprinted status normally. This way of thinking has somewhat followed me home, as I reside back into the route of this London bubble. I have always seen my self being an object orientated person, loving craftsmanship, adhocishm and design using objects to both question and explain. But before this essay I had never considered the objects, in complete isolation to there purpose or materiality. An existence, outside of human realm. I do feel awakened to this existence now, and feel I should respect objects in a way that isn't just to do with their maker, or the price tag associated with it. Or even my own biases towards such an object, but to respect it as its own entity, existing in a world just as I am, with its own actual potential, and even the way perhaps this object would view me as a subject?

Next time you use your toilet brush, say thank you, because I don't like the alternative.

References:

Slavoj Žižek on Objects. (n.d.). Alex Reid. <https://profalexreid.com/2016/02/25/slavoj-zizek-on-objects/>

Art Fund - Art Fund. (2022, September 12). Art Fund. <https://www.artfund.org/our-purpose/news/the-story-of-derek-jarmans-prospect-cottage>

The British Society for Literature and Science · Graham Harman, Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory. (n.d.).

Derek Jarman: My garden's boundaries are the horizon - Garden Museum. (n.d.). Garden Museum. <https://gardenmuseum.org.uk/exhibitions/derek-jarman-my-gardens-boundaries-are-the-horizon/>

Derek Jarman's garden: a heart of creativity | Art UK. (n.d.). Art UK | Home. <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/derek-jarmans-garden-a-heart-of-creativity>

Dominik Finkelde - Hochschule f. Philosophie. (2018, December 7). *Graham Harman and Slavoj Žižek: talk and debate: On Object Oriented Ontology* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0k8Gm2SPRrA>

Harman, G. (2010). *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays &*. Hunt Publishing Limited, John. *What Is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World*. (n.d.-a). Artspace. https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/the_big_idea/a-guide-to-object-oriented-ontology-art-53690

What Is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World. (n.d.-b). Artspace. https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/the_big_idea/a-guide-to-object-oriented-ontology-art-53690

Woodward, C. (2020). *Derek Jarman: My Gardens Boundaries Are the Horizon*. Unknown Publisher.

ZIZEK AND OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY: a non-scientistic critique. (n.d.). AGENT SWARM. <https://terenceblake.wordpress.com/2016/06/17/zizek-and-object-oriented-ontology-a-non-scientistic-critique/>

The Democracy of Objects by Levi Bryant: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj0otvOue-EAxUIVEEAHSpZAJsQFnoECBEQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fquod.lib.umich.edu%2Fo%2Fohp%2F9750134.0001.001%2F1%3A7.5%2F--democracy-of-objects%3Frqn%3Ddiv2%3Bview%3Dfulltext%23%3A~%3Atext%3Dfor%2520%25C5%25BDi%25C5%25BEek%252C%2520objects%2520are%2520split%2Cnever%2520be%2520identical%2520to%2520themselves.&usg=AOvVaw2EP7cCwR-by1ZFB7KRuabj&opi=89978449>

All photos are taken by me.