

## IN TERMS OF DESCRIPTION

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On Composition and Object Oriented Ontology // Cultural Studies // 2GBX // CS2200 // Instructor: Todd Gannon

Recent turmoil and rapid flux in the world has left the architecture discipline, briskly searching for terms to describe contemporary work. What was once a twenty-year wave between concepts being in and out of fashion, speed up to a five year flip between ideas and now is undergoing fission, splitting into a whole range of eclectic and parochial theories.

Some see this fission and explosion of the curve as a problem and others see it as an opportunity for incredible diversity. One can argue that the recent fission of ideas is undermining the wave action of the curve, breaking it down into never ending tiny un-useful and unproductive parts. The converse argument describes contemporary work as a series of discrete objects each with their own qualities. Hence, a new conceptual way of thinking is being produced, which is no longer being overmined by the predictable wave of trends.

Objects in Graham Harman's terms are interesting as they are not completely knowable. He describes withdrawn objects as inaccessible by human consciousness. Withdrawn objects and their unknowability move the debate away from the predictable wave between fields and networks verses part-to-whole problematics, towards a holistic problem of discrete objects and their qualities.

Both Harman and Lucan, working for different disciplines and audiences, use certain vocabulary and terms to describe objects and their relations very specifically. They both dig up and reinvigorate historic terms that have been out of vogue and use them to support their contemporary attacks. This reinvigoration can once again be read as part of the wave action, where terms go in and out of fashion, but can also be read as a productive way of using old concepts such as metaphysics and composition, to describe and reinforce new concepts. An example of this is Harman's object oriented ontology.

The established wave moving back and forth between trends can be seen as an over simplification by historicists to find a way to describe the ups and downs of the discourse. However, there is always someone working against the curve, gaining traction and attention because of the way they are agitating the wave. Although Harman is gaining recognition in the field of architecture, he is still an oddball and agitator in his own discipline, working against the grain of more Humanist philosophies. In Lucan's narrative, Piranesi, characters at the École des Beaux Arts, Le Corbusier, Kahn and Herzog and de Meuron were all working against the curve, bringing objects and composition into focus when the discourse was moving away from them. There are a series of eerie but productive parallels and patterns in the way both Harman and Lucan describe objects using historic terms and examples to reinforce their position in contemporary discourse.

Lucan uses the term object when describing Le Corbusier's work defending composition, Le Corbusier was working against the grain of modernism which at the time focused on limitlessness, open order, non-composition and was anti-object. Lucan describes Le Corbusier's work as an architectural still life painting. He analyses the 'free dispersion of architectural objects and organs' and how they relate in Le Corbusier's work. Lucan uses an analogy describing Le Corbusier's architecture like setting a table, placing a number of different objects and carefully scrutinizing their relations and qualities. There are both known and unknown qualities in the setting of the dinner table. Some of the relations are measurable, the knife and fork can be moved a certain distance apart, like Harman's real qualities, and others are 'measures of life' and can only be studied after a dinner party and are imbued by the people at the table, like Harman's sensual qualities. Hence, fourfold pattern of Harman's quadruple object can be read in Lucan's description of Le Corbusier's organs as objects and their relations.

Harman spends a chapter of his book describing the benefits the four poles of the quadruple object. Once again he is using historical terms and references, including other quadruple theories (such as Heidegger's four poles), to back up his new concept. An interesting parallel is that Le Corbusier also had four compositions that were all different but all linked together in a variety of ways. Lucan recounts Le Corbusier's four compositions in terms of the objects and their relations, by describing how the organ relates to the envelope or framework. Unlike Le Corbusier's contemporaries who were investigating limitlessness or what today would be described as field conditions, such as Mies van der Rohe's bays at IIT and Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Houses, Le Corbusier was clearly working with the disposition objects and their relationships with in a confined framework. An example of this work is his Mill Owners Association building in Ahmedabad. The following portion of Lucan's book is titled Marriages of Objects, after one of Le Corbusier's paintings, which relates to his architectural composition of objects in Ahmedabad.

Following his discussion of Le Corbusier, who was pro-composition, Lucan flips the narrative to non-composition, describing its various movements from the 1930s to 1960s. Just as 'compositional problematics had become perfectly obsolete', Lucan inserts Louis Kahn into the narrative, flipping the curve back to pro-composition. He describes Kahn's work in terms of its monumentality, rationalism and as very element or object oriented, compared to Kahn's contemporaries the Metabolists who were working on field conditions. Archizoom criticized Kahn for being in a worn out debate 'on architecture and the laws of composition'. The struggle between Kahn's closed order and volumetric systems compared to the Metabolists' open endless networks, is another example of the historic wave of the discourse flipping between composition and non-composition, as well as, objects and field conditions.

Lucan again flips the debate away from Kahn and composition and makes another eerie parallel to the debate surrounding Graham Harman's theory. The title of this segment Comeback or regression?, provides another reference to the ongoing wave of concepts being in and out of fashion; A building conceived as an autonomous entity would break the link that should have it united to the city – a repudiation of “the object” theory we saw developed earlier by Rowe. To conclude, Lucan moves back to a pro-composition position and begins to describe objects and wholeness in Donald Judd's art and the Herzog and de Meuron's architecture.

In the contemporary debate, it is interesting to note how much of the discussion of objects is taking place in Los Angeles – a city of oddball architects working against the curve. Does this mean that the debate is merely a gang of people trying to agitate the historical wave, or does it have some traction as a method of describing the world in new (but old) terms? The parallels and patterns between Lucan and Harman's books suggest the later. Harman's recent essay regarding Los Angeles, tactfully reinforces the flip of the architectural discourse from the 1990s Deleuzian theories of becoming, fields, flocks, networks and more recently Schumaker's parametricism, to a discussion tolerant of an eclecticism and multiplicity of whole objects. Harman's suggestions for Los Angeles, mirror his object oriented ontology. He recommends 'de-rationalizing', 'detaching forms' and 'enabling a resonance between object and form', all reinforcing a multiplicity of objects over networks.

David Ruy uses Harman's terms to describe how object oriented ontology overturns field theories in architecture. Ruy repeats Harman's theory describing how relationism (fields and networks) leaves no room for excess, hence there is no ability for change. Where as, Harman's objects, are their own entities, can work alone, abandon the mind and reduce the human to merely an object. The real object is always withdrawn from accessibility, hence objects are more than the sum of their relationships and have qualities that can't be accessed. Making object oriented ontology sit outside the general wave between ideas.

The “productive indeterminacy” and “conceptual surprise” of the withdrawn object in architecture, is also described by Jason Payne's students studies of Disco Balls. Payne's article describes Harman's four poles. Payne uses the term ambivalence to describe the withdrawal of Harman's real objects. He also questions what it means for 'a thing to be looked at', which relates to Harman's sensual qualities, where the object is encrusted with the viewer's multiple perceptions. Payne questions whether or not an object should always produce the same effect or a 'plurality of readings', this relates to Harman's tensions between sensual objects, sensual qualities and real qualities.

Harman, Ruy and Payne all argue that field models and nature, are not objects and are no longer relevant. The object cannot be dissolved into a field of relations (undermining). If nature is not a real object, the question is how does architecture work without nature? Ruy suggests that Harman's dissolution of nature provides opportunities for architects to study the particularities of objects. When networks are no longer involved, greater interest and closer readings of buildings are in focus, generating an eclectic and strange range of objects in the discipline.

In his reinvigoration and tracing of the term composition and its ebb and flow of popularity along the historic curve, Lucan provides a useful in parallel to Harman. Lucan's narrative on composition shows how description using specific vocabulary and terms can at times align with trends and at other times agitate the wave and offer interesting multiplicities and surprises. For the moment, the pro-object gang is not only operating outside or against the curve but has agitated the wave enough to move the curve off course, flatten the hierarchy and split the curve into a flat ontology of multiple objects. This contemporary ontology describing whole object's particular qualities, has a level of "productive indeterminacy" due to the unknowability of objects and their "essential strangeness," which breaks the historic trajectory of the discipline flipping between part-to-whole and field / network conditions.

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