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*We tend to pay more attention to living beings than objects, failing to notice the complexities of the things that surround us, neglecting the differences between ‘the obsidian fragment, the gypsum crystal, the capsicum pepper, and the propane flame’ (Ian Bogost). But what if we are wrong to think of objects as inert and unimportant? What if objects can act? What if objects can help us to bridge the perceived gap between ourselves and the world around us? Our panel will consider the significance of objects between the personal and philosophical.*

My own introduction to the of the theorist quoted here, Ian Bogost, came as a result of my organising a conference several years ago at Falmouth University entitled, “Performing Objects.” Imagining that I would be coordinating a conference on puppetry, automata and toy theatre, I found that my Call for Papers yielded proposals for papers and performances coming out of a new philosophical wave, Object Orientated Ontology. This new philosophical perspective departed radically from traditional metaphysical philosophy in its shift from the conscious, thinking human Subject as the central proponent of Being, to a dispersed, de-centralized focus on objects, ever-multiplying objects, ever-interacting with each other, through myriad cause and effect. The Human subject was no longer recognized as the primary manipulator of objects. Objects moved, on their own, operating in units, in motion, highly generative as a consequence of their active relationality with other objects. Everything is object—as we heard so poetically in the list by Ian Bogost—and we as humans are equivalent objects in motion to the obsidian fragment, the capsicum pepper, the gypsum crystal, the propane flame. As the OOO theorist with an ecological message, Timothy Morton, characterizes this Being, we are all *hyperobjects*. While Object Oriented Ontology attracts an enthusiastic following of perhaps progressive scholars eager to throw off the historically and culturally entrenched prejudices of humanism, what I would like to question here is the danger of de-politicization once we as humans are only as responsible as a capsicum pepper. I wonder if, in today’s post-factual world, where language also acts an object of its own, as a kind of automaton, untethered from its speakers in its viral disregard of referentiality, whether we need to recognize a particular human responsibility with regard to the particular hyperobjectivity of language. I will look to theory and philosophy related to 18th century Romanticism, which also draws parallels between language and automata in that both of these entities brought forth an *uncanny* effect when faced with the possibility that they moved as objects of their own.

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To give some context to the quotation of Ian Bogost:

Ian Bogost is one of many theorists contending with a paradigmatic shift in philosophy which has been taking various forms for the past 10 years or so, whereby Existence or Being no longer emanates out of a central human Subject, but instead, is distributed outwards into “myriad objects.” This philosophy is known as Object Oriented Ontology, and its fundamental starting place is that it wants to pry apart Being from Thinking: this interdependence is a Humanist assumption that priveleges us—humans—over other operating “beings.” In these new object-oriented philosophies (there are different versions), “existence” takes place in the complex relationality between individual objects. These objects may anything at all: peppers, laptops, maple trees, graffiti, manifestos, paintings, novels—there is an infinity implied here—and these objects interact as discrete, material, unit operations with all the other objects. The structure is that of a complex, non-hierarchical network which is always active, in operation, both internally within each object but especially as it relates to all the other objects. This dynamic model of Being is what another OOO philosopher, Timothy Morton, understands as “hyper”—that is his way of characterising the constant intra-agency of myriad objects relating and responding to each other. Morton has been embraced by the field of ecological criticism. His most recent book is entitled, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (U. of Minnesota P, 2013)

You can see how a philosophical shift away from the centrality of the Human Subject into the domain of equivalent objects would be embraced as a theory of global ecology. Particularly prominent in this theory is the equalization of Human existence with other operating units on earth. For Morton, we humans have to give up our foundational investment in certainty and primary agency; we need, he says, to accept a new general position of perhaps uncomfortable “uncanniness.”

And I think that the new collective psychology of “Mindfulness” is related to this handing-over of “thinking” into the many-objects world. Indeed Morton and those who follow his work tend to express an EXUBERANCE which is very appealing and seems to be a progressive way of thinking.

OOO is the inevitable philosophical response to new forms of inter-active, inter subjective, inter-objective human existence based on our inseparability from the internet, an existence which does not obey former, pre-internet, logics of time and space, logics which would have been framed through the primacy of human intention.

Back to Bogost: most well known as a theorist of videogames, based on concepts of physics, Bogost posits something which he calls “Unit Operations.” In a nutshell, everything in a video game, and by extension, in the world, operates through a system of “cellular automata”: mechanized individual entities which each performs a single task but which also then connects to another such entity and so on and so on. It’s a pretty mechanical and geeky model of existence!

But for me, the term “AUTOMATA” is key.

What is an automaton? Automatons, historically, have been created by clock makers. They are machine-like entities which operate as an intact, self-generating, moving, system. They often appear to be human, but are not. Rising in popularity in the 18th century, awareness of automata disseminated through public performance events. These human-like machines fascinated that era’s philosophers and storytellers, because these mechanical objects seemed to move completely independently, from a mysterious, uncanny place completely outside of human consciousness.

Parallel this fascination with automata was a philosophical and literary enquiry into language, and of the human subject’s relation to language. Literary theorist Paul De Man read Romantic poetry and other literature as a negotiating ground for the recognition, and discomfort, with language operating as its own machine, separate from what the author intended, what de Man and other deconstructionists identify as the “machine effect” of language—this term comes from JJ Rousseau, who once made an excuse that he could not be responsible for things that he blurted out without thinking. The machine effect of language is the random or automatic dimension that exists in language completely separate from our intention. It operates, performs, completely outside of consciousness and thinking. It leads to a feeling of discomfort, of a lack of control.

Paul De Man seems to have gone a bit out of fashion, however, I think that it’s time to bring back his investigation into the primacy of language as operational object. The coincidence of the philosophical questioning of language and automata in the18th century indicates what I would say are the *healthy misgivings* that we, as human beings, feel when our words become untethered to their sources.

Today, language, like every other object, is indeed a hyperobject, operating as part of a larger economy of interactivity with other objects, made equivalent through the access to the internet of all information. While the Object oriented ontologists deliberately steered away from privileging language and text as the main material of human Subjectivity, I think that probably, unforeseen by them, we’ve reached a breaking point. Isn’t Donald Trump’s excuse of “locker room talk” a signal for us to heed? I wonder if, in today’s post-factual world, where language also acts an object of its own, as a kind of automaton, untethered from its speakers in viral disregard of referentiality, whether we need to recognize a *particular* human responsibility with regard to the *particular* hyperobjectivity of language.

Ultimately, what I would like to propose is the danger of de-politicization once we as humans are only as responsible as a capsicum pepper.

* Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, The MIT Press, 2006)

* “…exhibit their effects *interobjectively*; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects.” (Morton, 1)
* “The hyperobject is not a function of our knowledge; it’s *hyper* relative to worms, lemons, and ultraviolet rays, as well as humans.” (2)
* “I am scooped out from the inside. My situatedness and the rhetoric of situatedness in this case is not a place of defensive self-certainty but precisely its opposite. That is, situatedness is now a very uncanny place to be… The more we know about hyperobjects, the stranger they become.” (5, 6)
* A “disorientation of scale…from slippers to energy flash…” (50)
* “As we enter the time of hyperobjects, Nature disappears and all the modern certainties that seemed to accompany it. What remains is a vastly more complex situation that is uncanny and intimate at the same time.” (130)