

## The World Is Flat and Other Super Weird Ideas

If a common thread can be said to connect the diverse schools of speculative realism (or, speculative materialism), that thread would be common abhorrence of Immanuel Kant's influence on metaphysics and critical theory. Kant's correlationalism is the *bête noire* of the speculatists and the defeat of correlationalism their common purpose. Steven Shaviro observes that "to do away with correlationism" most have tried "to eliminate all [human] thinking about the object, in order to allow the object just to be, in and of itself."<sup>1</sup> Shaviro's own solution for how to sidestep the correlationalist trap is to intervene in how we think about thought: "We need to grasp thinking in a different way; we need, as Deleuze might put it, a new 'image of thought.'"<sup>2</sup> "We need to recognise that thought is not, after all, an especially human privilege. This is one of the driving insights behind panpsychism. Also, recent biological research indicates that something much like thinking—an experiential sensitivity, at the very least—goes on in such entities as trees, slime mold, and bacteria, even though none of these organisms have brains."<sup>3</sup> Other forms of existence might not think like humans think, that is, apprehend through the semiotic forms of human cognition (categories and reason). A noncorrelational approach to thought—pulled from Charles Peirce's model of the interpretant or George Molnar's concept of aboutness—seems to exist in all things.<sup>4</sup> But advancing such a mode of thought "means developing a notion of thought that is pre-cognitive (involving "feeling" rather than articulated judgments) and non-intentional (not directed towards an object

with which it would be correlated).<sup>5</sup> Here Shaviro finds himself in agreement with Graham Harman, a founder of object-oriented ontology. Rather than miring oneself in a philosophical contradiction, *thinking* how objects can be let to be *without human thought* transforms first philosophy into aesthetics.<sup>6</sup>

Shaviro's agreement with Harman on what philosophy becomes when it returns to the object in a precognitive nonintentional manner stands out because of his disagreement with Harman on so many other substantive issues. Whereas Shaviro finds conceptual inspiration in the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze, and understands objects as, originally, assemblages, Harman has been a scathing critic of "postmodernism" and understands objects as autonomous and independent even as they are withdrawn and unknowable.<sup>7</sup> For Harman, all objects are objects in a robust sense, that is, each is an independent and autonomous entity with its own unique and independent essence. But all objects, including human subjects, distort their essence in relation to other objects and themselves. As a result, objects are withdrawn from each other (they elude knowledge) and absolutely irreducible to the qualities they manifest in any specific relation with other objects. The qualities they express only allude to what is foundationally eluded. Thus while real objects are posited as absolutely, truly existing, they can never be known. But objects do not merely elude other objects and allude to themselves in the distorting contact with other objects; they also allure other objects.<sup>8</sup> The allure of objects solves Kantian correlationalism via *aesthetic* rather than ethical or logical means. As Katherine Halsall notes, the "aesthetic reflection takes advantage of aesthetic experience and offers the promise of glimpse of reality *beyond* experience."<sup>9</sup> But as Svenja Bromber notes, this understanding of aesthetic sense and judgment seems, ironically, to reboot the Kantian project in order to unplug it.<sup>10</sup> For all the anti-Kantianism that defines the speculatists, it is Kant who posited aesthetic judgments as a mode of universal truth that is not subsumed under a concept (the categories) or reason (the syllogisms). Thus we judge something as "beautiful" not because it conforms to a set of concepts and reasons—it might also do so—but because the judgment results in a disinterested pleasure; it is purposive without a discernable purpose (no determinate cognition). For Kant, aesthetic judgment experiences a form of truth (beauty) freed from *our* purpose. And this

is primarily the purpose of aesthetics for object-oriented ontology: to provide us with a sense-perception of objects independent of our cognitive capture.

In this short chapter, I want to pull out three strands of Harman's object-oriented ontology and place them in conversation with three fictional pieces produced by members of the Karrabing Film Collective. The three strands are, first, Harman's claim that objects *are* and reality *is* the way theory describes it independent of the thought-mediated nature of the theory itself. In other words, although we cannot know objects and thus reality, and trying to know them reproduces the correlational fallacy, we can know that they are objects because, and this is the second strand, we can encounter the truth of the theory through an aesthetic experience. The third strand is in a reciprocal relation to this second. Because the human-world relation does not fundamentally differ from other object relations, all objects relations are aesthetic relations. Thus not only are all existents (objects) made to be the same kinds of things, but all relations between objects are also the same. And this might well be put in another way: to experience the truth of object relations, one must make all objects and their relations the same. The world must be a flat world—we must, in other words, homogenize before we equalize. Then we can know the alluding allure of things. The three fictional pieces are a short film by the Karrabing Film Collective, *When the Dogs Talked*; a short story created by a member of the Karrabing, Sheree Bianamu, "That Not Monster"; and a short animated film, *The Origins of Bigfoot*, that I made for another Karrabing member.

Let me first say a few words about each Karrabing piece before putting them in conversation with this strand of object-oriented ontology's approach to truth, aesthetics, and leveled worlds. *When the Dogs Talked* tells the tale of an extended Indigenous family who must find a missing member if they are not to lose their government housing. In the process their truck breaks down, and they find themselves stranded in their bush outstation. An argument breaks out about whether they will take their boat back to the city to save their housing or continue with a GPS project to map the travels of the Dog Dreaming—a series of geographic formations created by ancestral dogs who walked and talked like humans. As the adults argue, the young kids try to decide how the geographic powers of ancestral talking and walking

dogs make sense in their contemporary lives. Bianamu first told “That Not Monster” in a tent when members of the Karrabing were out bush. She was trying to get a toddler to go to sleep. The story begins with an infant being placed in a basket by her parents as they are about to perish at sea. An Indigenous woman discovers the basket and its contents at the site Mengentha (Orphan) Dreaming. Thinking it is a small monster, she tries to drown it. Her husband intervenes, saying, “That is not a monster; it is a small human being.” They decide to name it Parrabat, but also to call it Beth if white people are around. The couple’s other children are jealous of the new addition—“maybe because there is not enough food and tea”—and so they decide to push Parrabat/Beth back into the sea. Their father intervenes once again, swatting them on the bottom. After that everyone gets along. *The Origins of Bigfoot* was my response to a question Sheree’s brother, Ricky, asked me on a long night out bush, in the middle of shooting *When the Dogs Talked*. After listening to several stories about the adventures of the ancestral dogs, Ricky asked me if Bigfoot was real, and if so where did it come from? *Bigfoot* tells how *Homo sapiens* viciously descended on Neanderthals, spearing entire tribes until the last surviving family had been driven to the edge of a



Figure 4.1. The Karrabing Film Collective, *When the Dogs Talked*, 2014. Film still. Courtesy of the artists.

vast swamp. The Neanderthal elders said that they had two choices, die or go into the swamp. But if they went into the swamp, they would have to eat raw food so that the *Homo sapiens* would not be able to see their fire, and they would have to grow their hair long to survive the cold of the night. They go into the swamp and become Bigfoot. But the elders also say that the world is actually a gigantic porcupine produced from all the spears the *Homo sapiens* have thrust into the body of the Earth and that, one day, the Earth would shake them off.

If we approach these stories from a text-external perspective, then none of them seems oriented to aesthetic sense and judgment. Each text is purposive insofar as each seems to account for, or at least describe, a causal relationship between objects in order to answer a factual question about reality. In other words, they seem oriented to a logical, maybe ethical, judgment rather than an aesthetic one. What caused these holes? (Ancestral dogs made them while trying to light a fire to cook cheeky yams.) Given that she is white, where does Beth come from such that she calls my father, Trevor Bianamu, and they behave like other siblings behave? (Our grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations transformed her from a monster orphan into a merely potentially dangerous human being, just like, though very differently from, all Indigenous siblings.) If Bigfoot is real, where did it come from? (Vicious colonialists drove perfectly peaceful beings to the edges of existence.)

But as these texts circulate through the world, they also produce an aesthetic experience (or let's just say they do). They produce a sense experience of a purposiveness without purpose (or let's say there is)—an object that is simultaneously alluring to universal truth and alluding to any capture of its essence in thought (as categorical or relational truth). This may be due to how, in the various stories, the central object is obscured rather than revealed by its encounter with other objects (including discourses). The narratives do not attempt to subsume their objects in a categorical concept or even a singular relational logic, but instead allude to an entire assemblage of attributes and qualities that are expressed and withdrawn, actual and emergent, when the object comes into contact with other objects. In *Dogs*, for instance, the film is less interested in deciding what made the holes than in the various ways in which their presence elude, allude to, and allure other objects—wind, rain, excavators, fire-sticks, ghosts, people—and their cognizable

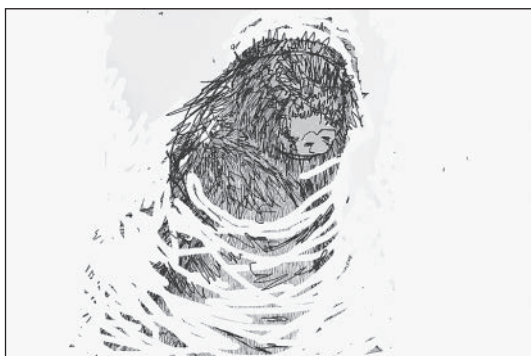




Figure 4.2. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Origins of Bigfoot*, 2013. Stills from animation. Courtesy of the artist.



powers. It is the capture of a drama about what might have made the holes and how this drama manifests the full if nontotalizable topology of power that interests it. Similarly in “That Not Monster,” the object Parrabat/Beth is an occasion for revealing the circulatory insufficiency of available concepts (categories) and reasons (syllogisms) to account for awkwardly emergent social relations. And *Bigfoot* brings evolutionary reason and colonial reason in contact through Bigfoot in order to create an encounter with a “hyperobject” that cuts through and knits the two together.

Of course, part of the aesthetic experience derives from the relationship between the “I” producing these narratives and the narratives as statements. That is, in this case, the authors of these objects (the texts as objects and the object referred to in the texts) are also objects that allure and allude to other objects (subjects) and thus are part of the larger field that is producing an aesthetic experience and judgment. The Karrabing Film Collective is itself an object that alludes and allures insofar as it is primarily but not exclusively Indigenous, nor are the Indigenous all members of one tribe or one perspective. Indeed, their films center on the various ways that an object presents its qualities depending on what other objects it encounters—including the array of human forms and formations. As a young female, Sheree Bianamu’s enunciation of “That Not Monster” likewise foregrounds the field of objects as continually eluding even as it continually presents itself in any particular surrounds. And in *Bigfoot* the author, a white aunt, is part of what is indexed and preserved in the expression, retreat, and desire of the object-text. Obviously the author-object-audience assemblage in these cases includes far more than mere humans and their textual excretions. Vocal cords, computers, projectors, lighting, sun, and weather are all within the things called “Dogs,” “Monster,” and “Bigfoot.” And the eluding, alluring, and alluding nature of this field of objects only intensifies as one moves from the restricted area of author-text-audience to “hyperobjects” (or let’s just say it does) of colonialism and capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Here we see the author-text-audience is not before these hyperobjects but an effect of them, creating these as kinds and qualities vis-à-vis the contact and creating a withdrawal of what they are or might be in the wake of the relationship.<sup>12</sup> In other words, these hyperobjects continually intrude on the expressive



facets of these objects (geological formation, social formation, species formation), separating them as kinds of things even as they provide an aesthetic feeling of *somethingness thereness*. But this *somethingness thereness* is the experience of a deranged arrangement or an arranged derangement—the constant disturbance produced by the multiple arrangements and derangements of their composite objects. This dynamic-as-truth is felt not because we place all objects (and subjects) on a level conceptual field but because we allow them to be, or express, the concept-interpretant as itself produced by the unequal relations between objects.

This leads directly to the third strand of object-oriented ontology, namely, the dance of truth made possible, or sought, after the relations between objects have been leveled. I am not interested in the content of that truth but rather the truth as a kind of object that is everywhere all the same and autonomous, alluding and alluring in the same way. Remember Harman and other OOOs and speculatists are making truth claims. Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier engage in very different conceptual and rhetorical tactics to overturn Kantian correlationalism. Harman distinguishes between his approach and Meillassoux's speculative realism in how they approach two Kantian propositions: first, that "human knowledge is finite, since the things-in-themselves can be thought but never known," and second, that "the human-world relation (mediated by space, time, and the categories) is philosophically privileged over every other sort of relation; philosophy is primarily about human access to the world, or at least must take this access as its starting point."<sup>13</sup> Harman sees the main difference between speculative realism and object-oriented ontology pivoting on their opposite answers to these two propositions. Speculative realism disagrees with the first proposition but agrees with the second; object-oriented ontology agrees with the first and disagrees with the second. Nevertheless, and uncontroversially, Harman's philosophy is claiming to truthfully (represent) how things are in the world—things *correspond* to his description of them. Of course, I hear what I am saying, that is, I am noting how his approach to objects iterates a certain correspondence approach to truth—the very *bête noir* of speculatists and object-oriented ontologists. I am less interested, however, in this simple gotcha moment, when a human thinks the defeat of



Figure 4.3. The Karrabing Film Collective, *When the Dogs Talked*, 2014. Film still. Courtesy of the artists.

thought, than in the social status of truth claims in and among the speculativists, that is, in how truth claims function as demands to treat objects in a specific way.

Take for instance, *When the Dogs Talked*. It presents the viewer with competing truth claims (the various interactions of objects and potential objects that might account for a geologic feature). Indeed the film is, in a significant way, about how the various truth claims maintain their force in the world as it is currently constructed. And it expresses how a truth claim, as a kind of object, withdraws and expresses itself differently depending on its context. (The truth claim that ancestral dogs made these holes might morph from a factual statement to a cultural one—rather than true in a natural science correspondence of dog and hole, it is true in a cultural recognition of the truth of the social nature of believers and disbelievers.) Of course, no one making the film or in the film is claiming that these ancestral beings created all geologic features. That is, the film's truth claim is of a more restricted nature than Harman's, although we could say that one strand of the film is saying all things may well be like this in the sense that we should be cognizant that all things might be the result

of similar kinds of interactions (ancestral geologic, settler colonial, and capital). In contrast, “Monster” is *not* a truth claim. Indeed people like the story Bianamu authored but are quick, as she is, to disclaim it as just a made-up story, not true. It has real people and real places, but these things did not happen, even though their happening seems more likely than huge, ancestral walking and talking dogs. Finally, *Bigfoot* seems most like *Dogs* in making a causal claim about two objects, Bigfoot is what remains of Neanderthals. But it is framed as a made-up story in the same way as “Monster.” It might provide an aesthetic judgment, but no one in Karrabing thinks it is producing a truth claim of equal weight as certain positions in *Dogs*.

But does this truth claim (as a sort of object) encounter a level flat world with other truth claim objects? Certainly not for one protagonist in the speculatist field. In *After Finitude* Meillassoux begins by trying to persuade his readers that they actually already have an intuition of absolute knowledge freed from correlationalism by placing his readers in a trap. The jaws of the trap are “ancestral statements” and the “arche-fossil.” Ancestral statements refer to any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species or any other form of life on earth. Arche-fossils include all materials indicating the existence of this anterior reality or event.<sup>14</sup> In philosophical terms, arche-fossils are traces of being before givenness; ancestral statements are statements about being before being-given (for) humans or life—being outside or before or after givenness or (human) thought. Ancestral statements could certainly also include all statements indicating an existence long after human beings vanish, such as the future archaeologies imagined by Trevor Paglen’s *The Last Pictures*, in which the artist created a visual archive of contemporary human life for a satellite that will remain within the Earth’s orbit long after humans are gone, or Katherine Behar’s *E-Waste*, discussed in Irina Aristarkhova’s chapter, “A Feminist Object,” in the present volume.<sup>15</sup>

When Meillassoux asks his reader, don’t *we all* agree, that at the minimum, science is making a true statement when it claims that what arche-fossils were existed prior to human existence, he reminds his reader what she will become if she answers in the negative. She will find “herself dangerously close to contemporary creationists: those quaint believers who assert today, in accordance with the ‘literal’ reading of the Bible, that the earth is no more than six thousand years



Figure 4.4. The Karrabing Film Collective, *When the Dogs Talked*, 2014. Film still. Courtesy of the artists.

old, and who, when confronted with the much older dates arrived at by science, reply unperturbed that God also created at the same time as the earth six thousand years ago those radioactive compounds that seem to indicate that the earth is much older than it is—in order to test the physicists' faith."<sup>16</sup> Or she will become a primitive who thinks fossil caves are communicating to her when they are revealed by kind tides. Much pivots on the idea of the arche-fossil as a *trace* of being before givenness; that these arche-fossils are indifferent to us; that we can know them nevertheless. But Meillassoux is not indifferent to what a way of thinking makes things—fossils and ourselves. And Meillassoux is canny enough to mobilize this intense self-involvement. The existential terror evoked but then directed by another equally terrifying prospect: if we do not allow human existents to be one entity on a temporal line of entities, then we will become a creationist; maybe a primitivist, an animist, an irrational buffoon. If we are not to become them, we must admit that what we touch here and in this place is radically indifferent to us. To be sure, Meillassoux, as opposed to Harman, is seeking to know reality in and of itself. But Harman agrees with Meillassoux that the realm of objects is independent and

indifferent to us. They are acting before and beyond being given to or for us. Meillassoux includes in this indifference an indifference to reason—that the truth of reality is that it can change at any moment *for no reason*.

What should we make of this indifferent action? On the one hand, the films themselves posit a realm of objects behaving for their own reasons—this is especially clear in *Dogs*. That is, the world is best and most truthfully understood when agency/interpretation is extended to all object assemblages. And *Dogs* expresses the truth that no object is known by us or any other objects but only expressed as an allusion at the point of contact. But we also find that the reason certain qualities or facets of “objects” are expressed in encounters with other “objects” is not because they are evidence of the same ontological status but because they encounter different material forces. And objects do not stay one thing but become other things because of these forces of shaping and shifting and assemblage. And thus the real question is not merely, or even primarily, how objects withdraw, allude, and allure but also, and perhaps more important, why it is that there are object-assemblages that are enticing and being (not) encountered. Aesthetic experience and judgment exist, after all, nowhere but in whatever assemblage of objects are being encountered and judged. And this world is not flat when viewed from the unequal forces redrawing and demanding certain formations as the condition for an object’s endurance, extension, and domination of interest. This is not to make humans the center of the object-assemblage world or to make other things passive. Rather, it is to make the forces that produce centers and passivities the name of the game. And part and parcel of this force is, of course, whose arguments about truth and persuasion gain the power to affect our relation with objects and reality—those who are careful to abide by the noncontradictory mandates of a certain mode of reason; those who abstract a universal equivalence among objects in reality in order to decenter human politics and social conditions; or those who attempt to experience truth through a maximal saturation of the possibility of the object and its assemblage via all the unequal forces of its constitution?

## Notes

1. Steven Shaviro, "Non-Phenomenological Thought," *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism* 5 (2014): 50, [http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1181229/24797439/1398712509557/02\\_Shaviro\\_Non\\_Phenomenological\\_Thought.pdf?token=PX%2Bfs2uGCQOfaZUrMTTrqkYOYRaM%3D](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1181229/24797439/1398712509557/02_Shaviro_Non_Phenomenological_Thought.pdf?token=PX%2Bfs2uGCQOfaZUrMTTrqkYOYRaM%3D).

2. *Ibid.*, 53.

3. *Ibid.*, 52.

4. George Molnar, *Powers: A Study in Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72.

5. Shaviro, "Non-Phenomenological Thought," 56.

6. Graham Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," in *Collapse Vol. II: Speculative Realism*, edited by R. Mackay (Oxford: Urbanonic, March 2007), 187–221.

7. "Real objects withdraw from our access to them, in fully Heideggerian fashion. The metaphors of concealment, veiling, sheltering, harboring, and protecting are all relevant here. The real cats continue to do their work even as I sleep. These cats are not equivalent to my conception of them, and not even equivalent to their own *self*-conceptions; nor are they exhausted by their various modifications and perturbations of the objects they handle or damage during the night. The cats themselves exist at a level deeper than their effects on anything. Real objects are non-relational" (Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* [Melbourne: re.press, 2009], 195).

8. According to Harman, the notion of allure "pinpoints the bewitching emotional effect that often accompanies this event for humans, and also suggests the related term 'allusion,' since allure merely alludes to the object without making its inner life directly present" ("On Vicarious Causation," 215).

9. Francis Halsall, "Art and Guerilla Metaphysics," *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism* 5 (2014): 382–410.

10. Svenja Bromber, "Anti-Political Aesthetics of Objects and Worlds Beyond," *Mute*, July 25, 2013, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/anti-political-aesthetics-objects-and-worlds-beyond>.

11. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

12. We can consider these as meta-indexical relations. From this perspective, the type of thing a token expresses (the indexical relation between instance and kind) does not predate a meta-indexical level that mediates the appearance of all tokens via preexisting figurating types. Thus we are not dealing with concepts and logical relation but with figures, figurating forces, and habitats.

13. Graham Harman, "The Road to Objects," *Continent* 1, no. 3 (2011): 171–79, <http://www.continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/48>.
14. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay of the Necessity of Contingency*, translated by Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 10.
15. Amelia Barikin, "Arche-Fossils and Future Fossils: The Speculative Paleontology of Julian Charrière," in *Julian Charrière: Future Fossil Spaces*, edited by Nicole Schweizer (Milan and Lausanne: Mousse Publishing and Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, 2014), 18–29.
16. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 18.



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*Katherine Behar, Editor*



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