

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Communicating with Objects: Ontology, Object-Orientations, and the Politics of Communication

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This essay engages with recent work in Object-Oriented Ontology, beginning with Alexander Galloway's claims that object-oriented thought is inherently neoliberal. While I agree with Galloway's critique, his discussion demonstrates some shortcomings of ontological thinking in contemporary media and cultural studies. Building on my response to Galloway, I argue that the problems of object-oriented thought have less to do with its dismissal of politics than with its problematic conception of objects themselves. In their strict avoidance of "the social," object-oriented thinkers ignore fundamentally important features of objects in general and media objects in particular. I conclude with suggestions toward an onto-materialist theory of objects, which seeks to understand how political economic and other broadly social matter are ontologized in objects.

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What is the object of communication inquiry? Depending on our perspectives on communication this question may have a history that dates back at least to Socrates's arguments with the Sophists. While Gorgias saw communication as a contingent set of practices that could be molded to different situations, Socrates believed in a transcendent truth of which communication offered only vague gestures. The question of communication's object has been given a new importance by recent work arguing over the status of objects as such. Coming under such names as speculative realism, alien phenomenology, and object-oriented ontology, these recent approaches seek to challenge previous conceptions of objects within philosophy and the social sciences. In particular, much of this work aims to establish equivalences between various kinds of objects as well as between objects and humans. By establishing a "flat ontology," in which computers, forks, chicken wings, people, and any number of other animate and inanimate objects occupy the same metaphysical plane, these approaches claim to

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sidestep a series of problems that object-oriented theorists attribute to contemporary social and philosophical thought.

Object-oriented theories have already found their way into communication, especially through the work of Bruno Latour, whose actor–network approach to science and technology explores objects in ways similar to more recent object-oriented accounts. Such developing areas as “Mediatization” theory (Couldry & Hepp, 2013) have drawn on Latour and object-oriented approaches more generally. Graham Harman, a central figure in object-oriented philosophy and a vocal proponent of Latour’s work, was a keynote speaker for an International Communication Association pre-conference exploring phenomenological approaches to media. This interest might seem in contradiction to Latour’s (2005a) criticisms of social theory, which offer a particular challenge for the social theory heavy area of critical-cultural communication, but strike still more deeply at the field’s sociological roots. Despite Latour’s criticisms and object-oriented thinkers explicit attempts to displace humans from the center of inquiry, however, the uptake of object-oriented approaches has been especially strong in what might traditionally be-called “humanist” approaches to communication. In fact, growing numbers of scholars are turning to an object orientation precisely for its critique of the humanist project—seeing it as a way around a variety of problems that seem to plague liberal humanism more generally.

Keeping this recent interest in mind, this essay focuses on the implications of object-oriented thought for critical and cultural approaches to communication. I begin with a debate instigated by media theorist Alexander Galloway, who criticizes object-oriented theories for their dismissal of politics in the service of a flattened ontology. While I ultimately agree with much of Galloway’s discussion, I complicate his particular formulations of this critique. Implicit in both his criticisms of object-oriented approaches and his larger body of work is what I call *an ontology of affective formalism* that defines the political being of objects in terms of the affective energies they are presumed to contain. Despite the many strengths of Galloway’s analysis, this approach is guilty of some of the same ahistorical decontextualization that Galloway rightly attributes to object-oriented thought. If Galloway’s implied ontology betrays elements of his explicit politics, then the object-oriented theorists I discuss have an implied politics that betrays elements of their explicit philosophy. As I discuss below, a central problem of the object-oriented approach comes not only from avoiding politics proper, as Galloway suggests, but from ignoring important aspects of the material reality of the objects its practitioners presume to make the center of their study. I conclude by suggesting a third way of thinking about politics and ontology in the analysis of communicative objects. Putting forward what I call an *onto-materialist* approach, I offer an understanding of communicative objects that is sensitive to the multiply materialist dimensions of those objects as well as their situation within a particular political and cultural milieu.

The ontology of 24

A central claim of object-oriented thinkers is that anthropocentrism has colored philosophy and social thinking for much of the modern period. Whether in the form of Kantian transcendentalism or in social constructionist assertions that our realities are formed through human language practices, object-oriented thinkers argue that we continue to view the world through a narrow human perspective that does a disservice to the variety of objects that populate the world. Meillassoux (2008) calls this position “correlationism.” For the correlationist, there is a direct relationship between thinking and being, such that the only way to know the being of any object is to view it from the position of a subject (pp. 10–11). Subsequently, humans are seen as having a unique ability to construct and make sense of the world.

A chief consequence of correlationism, according to object-oriented thought, is an ignorance of the material realities of non-human objects. Speaking specifically of the “discursive-turn” in social theory, Bryant (2014) argues that the reduction of objects to signifiers or various linguistic relations that characterized structuralism and post-structuralism made it “nearly impossible to investigate the efficacy of things in contributing to the form social relations take” (p. 3). That is, in thinking about sidewalks, ocean waves, or television signals only in terms of how they were shaped by language practices, discursive correlationists had either missed or grossly underestimated the material forces these objects play in the everyday world—not only for humans, but for other objects as well. For object-oriented thinkers, sidewalks are not merely signifiers of certain social relations. They interact with shoe rubber, dog paws, bicycle tires, and other objects in—quite literally—concrete ways that give them an important agency and power.

Elements of this argument should sound familiar to communication scholars. Media historians often take a similar approach, dwelling on the technical details of media technologies in order to show how those details shape a medium’s capacities. McLuhan’s (1964) mantra that “the medium is the message” might be said to have object-oriented tendencies as well. Rather than emphasizing the content of a given message, McLuhan argued that we should focus on the material details of the medium of communication itself. For him, the orderliness of printing and the mosaic characteristics of television were more important than individual books or television programs (McLuhan, 1962, 1964). For object-oriented thinkers, however, such positions are often viewed as correlationist. Bryant (2014) sees McLuhan’s conception of media as “Extensions of Man” as a decidedly anthropocentric perspective that overlooks the various other sorts of objects that media extend (p. 33). Likewise, media historians’ commitment to situating media technology within a dense social and cultural context would likely strike Bryant, Harman, and other object-oriented thinkers as a too discursive take on their subjects, focused on relations rather than on “objects themselves” (Harman, 2002, p. 1).

This uneasiness with social context hints in the direction of Galloway’s criticisms of object-oriented thought, which he sees as dangerously unreflective about its own

historical situation. For one, Galloway (2013) sees object-oriented thinkers as guilty of a kind of syllogistic sin. According to Galloway, the work of such thinkers as Bryant, Harman, Meillassoux, and Latour shares a set of assumptions with such object-oriented computer languages as Java and C++. Noting the close association between these computer programs and a variety of 21st century capitalist modes of production—from the search engines of Google to the credit monitoring systems of Equifax—Galloway asks: “Why do these philosophers, when holding up a mirror to nature, see the mode of production reflected back at them? Why, in short, is there a coincidence between today’s ontologies and the software of big business?” (p. 347).

Part of Galloway’s answer to this question relates to object-oriented thinkers’ rejection of correlationism and, with it, questions of political and social context. In focusing so heavily on decentering human subjectivity, writes Galloway, the object-oriented approach “claims that ontological speculations must be separated from political ones” (p. 357). While object-oriented thinkers might see this as a neutral act, Galloway stresses the various consequences of this separation:

Recall what must be discarded when overturning correlationism. One must discard phenomenology certainly, but one must also throw out social constructivism and the various fields that rely on a socialconstructivist methodology including much of second- and third-wave feminism, certain kinds of critical race theory, the project of identity politics in general, theories of postmodernity, and much of cultural studies. (p. 357)

In casting suspicion on the social constructivist project, Galloway argues, object-oriented thought offers implicit support for a range of ideologies that buttress contemporary capitalism.

Galloway (2012b) extends this critique in a piece directed at Harman and written for the humanities blog site *An Und Für Sich*. Here, Galloway speaks directly about the anti-politics position of object-oriented thought in general and Harman in particular. Quoting from an interview with Harman, Galloway works to show Harman’s specific indifference toward politics, which Galloway describes as the standard liberal bourgeois position “of the dot-com exec, the Obama supporter, the OOO philosopher, those who ultimately desire a kind of capitalism-with-a-friendly-face” (n.p.).

The crux of Galloway’s argument hinges on Harman’s description of his own presumed political-awakening in regards to the “Arab Spring.” Teaching in Egypt prior to the protests, Harman explains, “one could always agree with these criticisms while still thinking that ‘for now, Egypt is probably better off than it might be under other circumstances.’” After the aggressive response by the Mubarak administration, however, Harman claims that he began to see the situation quite differently:

Mubarak became for me, retroactively, something terrible that always had to be thrown out all along. The Revolutionaries showed me this through provoking a brutal response that showed the truth of the situation in Egypt, which I now see that I had accepted too lazily as a given. Indeed, I had been guilty of a failure of

imagination, which is what philosophers should always be ready to avoid.
(Harman & Varn, 2014)

Forced to see the world differently by the situation of his moment, for Harman: “it took the events on the street to shake me from slumber, and I have not yet recovered from that experience.”

Galloway challenges Harman’s claims to personal enlightenment and self-reflection. Making much of the fact that Harman “only expresses revulsion *after* the confrontation with the state has taken place, after he witnesses the excesses to which the state will go to hold on to power,” Galloway calls Harman’s experience of the Arab Spring “a classic case of liberal neutralization, (‘don’t rock the boat,’ ‘we just need to go along to get along,’ ‘this is the best of all possible worlds,’ ‘ontology shouldn’t be political,’ etc.)” Because Harman was apparently fine with the treatment within Egypt before his self-assessed epiphany, Galloway argues that Harman’s reaction is “merely an affective emotional response at the sight of blood.” Writes Galloway, “such palpitations of the ‘sensitive’ bourgeois heart, no matter how reformed, do not a politics make.”

Galloway’s dismissal of Harman’s claims to personal epiphany says as much about his own conception of ontology and politics as it does about Harman. In an important sense, for Galloway, Harman is ontologically anti-political — endlessly stuck in a liberal bourgeois mode of neutralization. Galloway cannot grant Harman his moment of epiphany precisely because Harman is in need of such a moment in the first place. For Galloway, if Harman was not already of the mind to critique the excessiveness of state power then his anti-state politics can never be genuine. Given this framing, it is Galloway as much as Harman for whom affective responses are central. Harman’s particular affective investments, at least as Galloway reads them, presumably tell us all we need to know about his political being. Ontology here becomes a question of enduring emotional investment. Harman is what he feels — deep in his affective core — regardless of any professed political position he might take.

I will call the approach that guides Galloway’s comments here *affective formalism*. It works by identifying a set of affective commitments within a given artifact — in this case, Harman’s comments, if not Harman himself — and then connecting those to larger structures of affect, such as the ambivalences of neo-liberalism. Galloway’s investment in this approach is not restricted to his response to Harman or object-oriented thought. Rather, affective formalism inflects broader aspects of Galloway’s research, providing an important perspective into his own ontology of objects. Galloway’s (2012a) analysis of the 21st century American television program *24*, for instance, is framed around a question of both politics and ontology: “Is *24* a political show?” (p. 101). Galloway’s affirmative answer depends upon using close reading to demonstrate how *24* reflects feelings and anxieties that are central to contemporary American political life. Not only do the show’s stories of impending attacks on the US evoke post-9/11 fears of terrorism. Galloway argues that the heavy use of technology within the show and the nonstop labor of its counter-terrorist characters — who work

constantly to prevent the act of terror that centers the “24 hours” of the program’s season — also reflect the tensions and anxieties of postfordist economic culture. Presumably like the at-home viewer, the workers of the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) are crouched over their laptops in a constant state of fearful labor.

As on target as this analysis of *24* may be, Galloway’s reading suffers from an over-reliance on its representational paradigm. The statement “CTU is the sweatshop of the new millennium” (p. 107) can only be true representationally; although the tension within the show might suggest otherwise, no one literally dies on *24* (though even the representational value of this sweatshop analogy may be suspect, as it requires us to equate the suffering of dot-com workers with that of factory workers in the third-world and elsewhere). But *24* is not only a representation of economics. It is a literal economic product that directly enacts the political economy of the early 21st century. Galloway gets closest to this point when he discusses the “missing time” of the program. Despite the moniker *24*, a season of the program is not actually 24 hours long. Including advertisements, the program generally ends up being 16.8 hours. In this missing time, writes Galloway, “we are able to see here the media-formal imprint of capitalist modes of production and distribution on the semiotic logic of the medium” (p. 110).

Galloway’s reading of this missing time conceals as much as it reveals about the capitalist modes of *24*. For one, Galloway never considers how the time of the program fits within the broader time of television or media production and consumption more generally. *24* was created during the so-called post-Network television era (Lotz, 2007, 2009; Spigel & Olsson, 2004), when traditional television economics were experiencing a series of significant changes. From the 1990s onward, television ratings dropped (Staiger, 2000) as programs increasingly had to compete with other forms of entertainment. This period also saw a decrease in syndication money, which resulted from new economic configurations in which the companies that produced a program, the network that aired it, and the network that showed it in syndication were often owned by the same corporation (Malin, 2010). With these traditional revenue sources in decline, television producers sought other ways to recoup the cost of their programs, with such things as DVD sales becoming a crucial piece of this new economic environment (Bennett & Brown, 2008; Kompare, 2006).

Against this background, many of the narrative practices of *24* take on dimensions that Galloway misses in focusing exclusively on the show’s status as a political representation. For instance, Galloway discusses what he calls the “disingenuous informatics” of *24*, in which the program offers up some piece of information as a factual statement within the narrative only to demonstrate later that it was actually false. “The avowed threat becomes a spoof. One minute Jack is a traitor, the next minute it was all an elaborate lie. Every few minutes, the plot of the show flips radically, as unceasingly as the ticking clock itself” (p. 112), Galloway explains. If the program’s creators aim to keep people off guard in this manner, they also work to draw coherence across individual episodes by placing a singular dramatic event at the center of

each season — “the nuclear bomb explosion in season 2 ... an assassination attempt, the infection of patient zero, or something else” (p. 119).

This combination of factual slights-of-hand and the privileging of singular, intense events may well reflect aspects of postfordist economics, contemporary life with technology, or “the essential grammar of the control society” (p. 119). However, these practices also embody the technological and economic logics of post-Network television. For example, as DVD sales became essential to recouping money lost on syndication, television producers employed narratives that encouraged viewers to make this additional investment. This meant, in part, creating programs for “loyals” — those coveted audience members believed to spend the greatest amount of money on the products they consume (Jenkins, 2006, p. 63). *24*'s combination of twists and turns and elongated, cross-episode story-arcs is exemplary in these regards. Watching a single episode from the middle of a season of *24* will likely leave a viewer feeling extremely confused. Rather, the program encourages and rewards the kind of close viewing that is made possible — both economically and technologically — by the emergence of the DVD box set and video streaming. *24* and its parent company News Corporation require that viewers watch and re-watch, catch-up on missed episodes, and seek out any number of additional narrative and revenue streams connected to the program. *24* is built around the very dot-com era economics Galloway presumes it to represent.

There is nothing about the specific economics of *24* that necessarily disproves Galloway's representational reading of it. In terms of Galloway's position toward object-oriented thought and his own understanding of media, however, this emphasis raises several political and ontological issues. In relationship to the speculative realism of Meillassoux and Harman, Galloway (2013) considers himself to be pursuing a form of materialism that he frames specifically as “historical materialism, that is, the materialist philosophy of history found in Marx and subsequent Marxist theory” (p. 359, note 18). “Subsequent Marxist theory” may be the key phrase here, as Galloway's inattention to concrete economic matters positions his analysis as a variant of a later 20th century thread of Marxist thought that eschewed specific economic issues in favor of broader cultural and ideological questions. Freeman (2010) refers to this as a “Marxism without Marx,” and asserts that it became popular in the mid-20th century as economic approaches came to be seen by many as a “dispensable embarrassment.” “Recoiling from the — arguably mechanical — Marxism of the Second and Third Internationals,” writes Freeman, “western Marxists were drawn to dissident ideas on philosophy, politics, sociology or aesthetics,” and away from more concrete economic analysis (p. 87). Freeman is critical of this development and believes that re-emphasizing economics will allow contemporary Marxism to better account for a range of 21st century economic issues — such as the various financial crises that have characterized the period.

The problems of Marxism without Marx are especially strong in terms of questions of media and technology, as the gaps in Galloway's analysis of *24* should demonstrate. American post-network television is a product of the deregulatory decisions of the mid to late 1990s, including the repeal of the *Financial Interest and*

Syndication Rules, which held that a broadcast television network could only own a small percentage of the programs it broadcast, and the passage of the deregulatory *Telecommunications Act of 1996*. These and other policy changes have created a highly concentrated, oligopolistic media environment that resonates with much of so-called neoliberal economics (McChesney, 1999). *24*'s status as a post-network television program—as illustrated in its particular narrative structure—is thus not only an example of the new economics of 21st century television. Coming to viewers in DVD boxsets or via some streaming video site, *24* is a concrete and material embodiment of neoliberal ideology that encourages viewers to materially engage in a set of economic practices that are central to the newly deregulated media environment.

Seen in this light, the materialism that Galloway professes and this more originally Marxist take on historical materialism, are more than simply two different ways to demonstrate the neoliberal or postfordist dimensions of *24*. From the standpoint of the second materialism, the politics of *24* cannot be exclusively or even primarily understood as a general set of ideological values presented through the narrative themes and structures of the program. Regardless of their readings of the program's narrative or their "belief" in its ideological themes, when viewers buy DVD sets of *24*—or even pay for the Internet connection they use to illegally download them—they are assenting in various ways to the neoliberal, deregulatory economics that *24* celebrates in its capacity for economic success. An explicitly political take on the program must account for these concrete economic conditions and their material invocation of neoliberalism. Failing to do so risks ignoring this central bit of social context and thus at least implicitly reiterating elements of the program's regressive political stance. In ignoring these economic factors, elements of Galloway's affective formalism offer the same sort of decontextualized, politically problematic claims he attributes to object-oriented thought. A more robust theory of communicative objects must account for the materialism of concrete economics, not only for the political reasons Galloway maintains, but also for a series of philosophical reasons raised by object-oriented thought itself.

Flat worlds and empty objects

Galloway's claim that object-oriented thought ignores politics or social context would likely strike most object-oriented thinkers as unproblematic. Latour (2005a) specifically aims to "dispute the project of providing a 'social explanation' of some other state of affairs" (p. 1), claiming that "it is no longer clear whether there exists relations that are specific enough to be called 'social' and that could be grouped together in making up a special domain that could function 'as society'" (p. 2). Object-oriented thinkers such as Harman and Ian Bogost take this still further, arguing that, in fact, Latour's approach is itself too social, putting emphasis on the networks of relationships between things rather than on things themselves (Bogost, 2012, p. 7; Harman, 2011, p. 12). In line with these object-oriented thinkers critique of correlationism, any

approach that attempts to impose the social—in whatever form—on a given object, works to rob that object of its individual identity and agency.

While I agree with Galloway about the problematic politics of object-oriented thought, I want to direct my criticisms at the basic ontology of objects that these thinkers presume, then work back to show the political and philosophical implications of these thinkers' approach. Indeed, in line with the above critiques of the idea of "the social," the flat ontology offered by object-oriented thought is an explicitly anti-social ontology of objects. Through this ontological stance, object-oriented thinkers attempt to avoid correlationism by bracketing out the networks of relations that Galloway and others, including myself, see as central to the human experience of objects. With "the social" subtracted, it is easier for object-oriented thinkers to assume a flat field of relations among a wide range of human and nonhuman objects. As long as society is given a special priority in defining these relations, things such as cars will likely always be elevated above things such as mosquitoes, despite the interesting forces of gravity (Bryant, 2014) that each exerts on the world.

But can the social be equally subtracted from every kind of object? It is relatively easy to show how social explanations are unnecessarily imposed on inanimate objects such as rocks. Obviously humans make choices that influence our experiences of rocks and other naturally occurring objects. Certain rocks, such as granite, are valued as material for gravestones or kitchen counters. The idea that people should collect fossilized rocks or otherwise use rocks as a means to understand the age of the Earth—a central concern for Meillassoux—is imbued with social and political values, as evidenced by debates between evolutionary science and creationism. Such social motives do not change the literal material or contour of rocks, however, as Samuel Johnson helped to emphasize in his famous refutation of Bishop Berkeley's idealism (Boswell, 1833, p. 209). The force of Johnson's foot upon a rock was evidence of that rock's relatively self-contained, material rock-ness.

Nonhuman beings such as vampire squids provide a slightly more complex example of the autonomy of objects, as Flusser and Bec (2012) have helped to demonstrate. Like rocks, vampire squids, which live in some of the deepest depths of the ocean, maintain an autonomous existence without regard for human values. "We would be crushed by the pressure of its abyss, and it would suffocate in the air that we breathe," write Flusser and Bec. In fact, "when we hold its relatives captive in aquaria—both to observe them and to infer things about it—they kill themselves: they devour their own arms" (p. 5). Vampire squids are less obviously self-contained than rocks, however. Although rocks certainly interact with such natural phenomena as water currents, which polish and shape their surfaces, at any given moment a rock's outer edges are fairly straightforward, allowing a relatively clear distinction between what is of the rock and what is outside of it. Vampire squids have a much more porous border. For vampire squids, "objects are free floating entities in a current of water they happen to tumble upon" that they suck into their body via their tentacles and other bodily orifices. Given this constant sucking of the world, Flusser and Bec argue that vampire squids experience the world as "a discriminating and critical injection

of the world into the bosom of the subject” (p. 39). If we try to analyze a vampire squid in isolation from its life environment—ignoring its stomach full of seawater, for instance—we will only be dealing with an abstract idea of a vampire squid, rather than “the thing itself.” Vampire squids are ontologically interactive, their being extending beyond themselves even as it encompasses elements of the outside world brought within them.

Technologies raise similar questions of both interactive ontology and sociality. A bridge, one of Harman’s (2002) favored objects of analysis, has some material similarities to a rock. The steel cables and beams of the Golden Gate Bridge have physical properties that are themselves relatively indifferent to human values. But what is left of these cables and beams, or the bridge more generally, if we subtract their social elements? As Bennett (2010) explains, metal itself is in many ways a broadly social phenomenon, since it is “always an alloy of the endeavors of many bodies, always something worked on by geological, biological, and often human agencies” (p. 60). Likewise, each cable, beam, bolt and stroke of paint was put on the bridge by some human being at some point in time. Unlike rocks or vampire squids, which can simply find themselves at some place in some moment in time, bridges are planned, designed, and built through a range of complex human processes. How do we approach bridges in a non-correlationist manner?

Harman’s answer to this problem is to abstract the bridge from those physical features that raise questions of correlationism. According to Harman, a bridge is “a basic piece of infrastructure” whose reality:

is not to be found in its amalgam of asphalt and cable, but in the geographic fact of “traversable gorge.” The bridge is a bridge-effect; the tool is a force that generates a world, one in which the canyon is no longer an obstacle. It is crucial to note that this is not restricted to tools of human origin: there are also dependable earth-formations that provide useful caravan routes or hold back the sea. (p. 21)

If the core of the bridge is really its “bridge-effect,” then indeed there is no central difference between a human-built bridge and a naturally occurring rock formation that can be used as such; there is also no particular reason to be concerned about this or that bolt, since the bridge-effect presumably operates independently of such specific materials.

But what sort of bridge does Harman help us to analyze? In infrastructural terms, we can talk about at least two different kinds of bridges. The idea of a bridge, including the general concept that bridges can be used or made and the specific idea for how one might build a suspension or other type of bridge, is an example of a “nonrival” good. Nonrival goods can be used by multiple users without depleting the good itself (its opposite is a rival good, such as an apple, which, if eaten by one person, cannot also be eaten by another) (Frischmann, 2012, pp. 24–30). If one person uses the *idea* of a suspension bridge to build a suspension bridge, that does not prevent other people from doing the same. The physical bridge, in contrast, is a partially (non)rival good

(Frischmann, 2012, pp. 30–33). It is in theory open to everyone who wants to cross it, but as more people attempt to use it, the more people's usage becomes limited, as anyone who has tried to cross the Golden Gate Bridge on a sunny afternoon has observed.

In centralizing the bridge-effect, Harman focuses on the nonrival bridge-as-idea. Indeed, this is the only bridge available to the hard-core non-correlationist Harman wants to be. In order to discuss the bridge as a partially (non)rival good, which is to say as most anyone will actually experience it in their attempts to traverse a particular gorge, Harman would have to deal with a range of social realities that attach to the bridge. This includes such physical features as the literal bolts on the Golden Gate Bridge, but is more than this, and extends even to nonhuman made bridges. Bridges, like vampire squids, have an interactive being. Of what Golden Gate Bridge do we speak if we do so without reference to tolls, traffic jams, construction, and sidewalks full of pedestrians and bicyclists? Natural Bridges State Beach in Santa Cruz, California, can likewise become congested if tourists visit in great numbers. The fact that birds and other animals also make use of both human-built and natural bridges does not eliminate the question of bridges as an infrastructural good. If these animals are using literal bridges, particularly those also used by human beings, they will experience many of the same issues that humans do. To deal with these bridges as particular kinds of objects available to a range of beings is to deal with the specific and literal kinds of interactions in which they are entangled.

This dismissal of the social has especially strong implications when media technologies are at issue, as Bryant's (2014) discussions of video games and other media help to illustrate. Bryant reports that playing *SimCity*, a videogame in which players make decisions that impact how their virtual city grows, helped him realize the autonomy of objects and thus converted him from a social constructionist to an object-oriented thinker. Writes Bryant:

What *SimCity* taught me is that the signifier, meaning, belief, and so on are not the sole agencies structuring social relationships. [...] To be sure, there are social relations here insofar as it is people that produce all these things and people that are flocking to this city, moving away, or voting you out of office, but the point is that the form the city takes is not, in these instances, the result of a text, a belief, or narrative alone. It is a result of the real properties of roads, power lines, pollution, and so on. (p. 5)

This might make sense if Bryant were talking about real roads, power lines, and pollution. Those of *SimCity* are not real, however; they are programmed into the videogame — by groups of human programmers — as digital representations that work under the logic of the game rather than that of actual physical objects. Of course, there might be a lesson to be learned about the obstinacy of computer-generated objects, but that would require Bryant to theorize *SimCity* as an actual videogame, which he fails to do.

Bryant's discussion of news offers a similarly decontextualized conception of media. Taking the newness of news as its central defining characteristic, Bryant writes that "for the news system, information is that which deviates from the norm." This means that news producers "must perpetually find that which is the exception rather than the norm to continue its operations." As a result of this constant search for new stories, Bryant argues, "rather than tarrying with an issue and working through it, the news machine instead favors constant change" (p. 161). What Bryant seems to suggest is an ontologically central characteristic of the news as an object—or machine in his terms—is in fact deeply social and historical. In the 18th and early 19th century, newspapers did "tarry with" and "work through" issues. In fact, some early papers devoted entire issues to a single story. It was only after the introduction of the telegraph, which helped turn information into a kind of commodity, that newspapers began to print multiple, shorter stories in the way that happens today (Carey, 1989). With similar economic and technological pressures still at work, news remains a thoroughly social object that cannot be easily isolated from its larger historical and economic context. Like Harman's bridge, however, Bryant deals with news only as an abstract idea without attention to its specific material realities.

Latour's (2005a) explicit dismissal of social explanations in *Reassembling the Social* creates similar media-related problems. As the critiques by Harman and Bogost suggest, Latour should be seen as an influence on recent object-oriented thought more so than a direct practitioner. Latour has long committed himself to exploring the very networks of relationships that Harman sees as problematically correlationist. According to Harman (2009), Latour's willingness to take objects on their own terms "[opened the gate] for an object-oriented philosophy"; however, Latour's "rejection of non-relational entities is an unfortunate curb on the spirit of such a philosophy" (99). While Latour sees the importance of a flat ontology, in which various entities occupy a similar plane of existence that cannot be explained through recourse to "the social," in his emphasis on relationality he is not necessarily anti-correlationist in the way that Harman advocates.

Although this contrast to Harman should suggest the possibility for a more relational conception of the media, Latour's (2005a) discussions of photography in *Reassembling the Social* decontextualize photographic images similarly to Bryant's video games. Here, Latour includes a photomontage of a woman, Alice, going through the process of voting in a general French election in 1997. Juxtaposing images of her reading the newspaper, visiting her polling place, and casting her ballot with images of television commentary about the election itself, the photomontage, Latour argues, shows the relative flatness of Alice's presumed "local" practices and the more supposedly "global" world of France writ large. According to Latour, "Once we realize that none of the successive images in this photomontage can be smaller or bigger than any other, the key feature of their *connectedness* becomes fully visible" (p. 222).

While it may be the case that Alice's voting practices are not distinctly "smaller" than the television commentary about them, Latour's use of this photomontage demonstrates the kind of media-related problems that result from removing the social

from his analytical framework. Similarly to Galloway's analysis of *24*, Latour treats this photomontage as a kind of direct reflection of both Alice's life and the French electoral process—as if their representations prove the flatness of the social. However, these photographs do not merely document Alice's voting or show connections between various portions of French politics. They actively participate in these practices in ways that need to be contextualized alongside the images they communicate. How did a photographer come to shoot an image of Alice across what appears to be a breakfast table as she reads the French newspaper *Le Monde*? Another image offering a close-up of Alice's hand as she signs a voting ledger would have required the photographer to impose his or herself into the polling place in some significant ways. Yet another of the photographs, which depicts Alice as she turns in her ballot, is the only hint of the larger context in which these pictures take place. Here, a poll worker looks over Alice's shoulder, apparently smiling at the photographer. As this image perhaps most clearly suggests, photographs are motivated frames of looking that take place in specific contexts. If critiquing social explanations means ignoring how these contexts matter—effectively ignoring the camera through which these photographs were captured—then Latour's (2005b) claim to an *object-oriented* democracy seems deeply suspect.

Still more so than Latour, Harman would likely not see a problem with the claim that object-oriented thought ignores those elements of objects that are broadly “social” or “relational,” as escaping these is central to his critique of correlationism. According to Harman (2011), approaches such as Latour's—and no doubt the one advocated here—that stress relationality “overmine” objects, in that they always define objects as something outside of their core being. Harman argues that such approaches misunderstand the reality of objects because “what we encounter in experience are unified objects,” rather than the “isolated points of quality” to which relationalists and other overminers reduce them (11). People watch television programs, Harman would presumably assert, not economic strategies or technological systems. In fact, from Harman's perspective, which he derives from Heidegger, the particularities of objects always withdraw from us, such that we can never know their true essences anyway. As he puts it, “things-in-themselves lie beyond all possibility of human access,” and thus “the things-in-themselves can be thought but never known” (Harman, 2012, p. 185).

But are these unknowable “things-in-themselves” really the objects people “encounter in experience?” Although drivers on the Golden Gate Bridge do not necessarily encounter each car in their traffic jam, this does not mean that those cars are superfluous to the bridge or to drivers' experience of it. Likewise, the economic strategies behind *24* have a palpable impact on the narratives of the program, even if each strategy does not announce itself in directly obvious ways. In this sense, while it might seem tempting to attribute the political faults that Galloway sees in object-oriented thought to a too strong focus on objects, we might better say that object-oriented thinkers focus on objects too little. Harman's anxiety to sift out the sociality from objects results not in a “weird realism” (Harman, 2012, p. 188) but a weirder idealism—one that claims interest in literal objects while only engaging their ideas.

Bogost, a media scholar as much as an object-oriented philosopher, offers a welcome exception to this tendency of ignoring the technical and material features of objects. In discussing the Atari Video Computer System (VCS), for instance, Bogost (2012) explains that “a running Atari VCS program involves an interface between ROM data, processor state, and graphics-sound interface during every moment of every line of the television display” (p. 102). Such features then become elemental to Bogost’s attempts to theorize the perspective of such a display. Stopping at these narrowly technical features, however, Bogost’s approach repeats some of the political shortcomings that Galloway notes within object-oriented thought as a whole. One of Bogost’s central arguments is that in order to really know objects academics and others need to actively engage in making them. His examples of this “carpentry,” however, are non-reflexively Neoliberal and Bourgeois: a brand consultancy company turns Bogost’s books into pixel art; Alex Galloway creates a videogame based on the thinking of Guy Debord; the chef at a London restaurant practices “nose to tail” eating (p. 110). Without an attention to politics, it is easy for the material features of objects to dissolve into this kind of narrowly technocratic — even hipster — expertise. Of course, a politics without attention to these material details faces similar problems, as Galloway’s analysis of *24* demonstrates. The political and the material need to be seen in relationship to one another, and this means in large part not rejecting out-of-hand those social and political aspects of the material itself.

Toward onto-materialism

Meillassoux (2008) uses the phrase “the correlationist circle” to refer to the ways that contemporary thinking seems to constantly turn back toward questions of human value and meaning. Its newly developing counterpart might be “the correlationist cloud,” in which the first whiff of correlationism, feared to be everywhere, must send us running in the opposite direction. Along these lines, Bennett (2010) is explicit about her own avoidance of historical materialism. “I pursue a materialism in the tradition of Democritus-Epicurus-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze more than Hegel-Marx-Adorno,” she writes. “It is important to follow the trail of human power to expose social hegemonies (as historical materialists do). But my contention is that there is also public value in following the scent of the nonhuman, thingly power, the material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts” (p. xiii). This understanding of historical materialism, which she also equates with “demystification” (p. xiv), could be linked further to Althusser and Galloway. This is the perspective of “Marxism without Marx,” in which “the material” of historical materialism is seen primarily as an issue of representation and ideology—a set of interpellative discourses that needs to be interpreted and seen through. As valuable as this project is, it should not exhaust the potential of historical materialism and reactions against it should not prevent us from seeing the value in the broadly political economic forces at play in and around different objects.

In addition to avoiding correlationism, there are at least two other reasons why object-oriented thinkers might want to avoid a historical materialist approach. The first connects to the supposed economic determinisms of “Vulgar Marxism.” If economics are seen as the defining force for all relations between and among objects and people, then object-oriented thinkers might rightly argue that the autonomy of these other objects is being ignored. In the transition from news as a kind of tarrying-with a story to the more rapid fire, novelty version that came after the telegraph, to what extent can we clearly privilege the economics of capitalism over the technical features of the telegraph itself? The second objection is a kind of inversion of the first and connects to the linkages between economics and language practices or the extent to which economics operates as a particular kind of rhetoric. Especially in the fog of the correlationist cloud, economics can fairly easily be seen as a site of human-constructed hyper-discursivity, the evocation of which inevitably privileges human language practices over and above the many other objects that populate the world.

Claims about economic determinism should not run far afield of much object-oriented thought. If emphasizing historical materialism commits us to some form of economic determinism, then object-oriented thinking must necessarily commit us to technological determinism. Rather, both should appreciate the complex interplay between materialisms, determinisms, and agencies, as technologies, economic forces, natural objects, and human beings all intertwine, interact, move toward, and pull away from each other. Likewise, the fact that the political economic forces that should interest historical materialism exist in such discursive forms as laws, money systems, bank sheets, television ratings, and advertising strategies should not prevent them from being seen as the objects that they are. As Bennett suggests, we should not let the fact that “it is hard to keep one’s mind wrapped around a materiality that is not reducible to extension in space, difficult to dwell with the notion of an incorporeality or a differential of intensities” (p. 58), prevent us from exploring the complexly incorporeal materiality of something like political economic objects.

Despite my criticisms of object-oriented thought, I believe there is value in thinking about communicative objects in ontological terms similar to those developed by object-oriented thinkers. Schrag (1986) has asked whether scholars of philosophy and communication “have available the resources of an ontology of subjectivity which might in some manner deliver the being of him [sic] who speaks, writes, and acts” (p. 139). Following object-oriented thought, we might ask this same question of telegraph wires, television programs, printing presses, and videogames. Can we understand the being of these objects, including in their capacities to influence each other as well as speaking, writing, acting subjects? This question is equally valid for the less tangible objects that play into communicative processes. Despite its differences from a bridge or videogame, a court decision matters both in the sense that it exerts specific kinds of pressure on a range of objects and in the sense that it becomes a material trace—a piece of vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010)—in the objects it informs. Like the bolts on a bridge or the seawater in a vampire squid’s stomach, technologies, court cases, economic strategies, and media “texts” are highly intertwined and interactive

with each other. The capacity of VHS tapes made it economically and practically infeasible to release entire seasons of a television series for at-home viewing (viewers and video retailers would have needed substantial shelving to hold them all). But DVDs changed this, as did the various regulations and legal decisions that helped issue in the post-network television era. *24* bears the marks of these historical materialist relationships, just as a rock might bear the marks of years of sedimentation. These objects and marks do more than simply tell the story of their development. They perform that story in their very shape and being.

Even if historical materialism is compatible with an ontology oriented toward objects, there is an additional question of whether and to what extent ontological questions are compatible with historical materialism. As Murphy (2003) explains, “ontology has traditionally been a relatively static form of philosophy, an account of the essence that remains unchanged beneath the superficial appearance of historical transformation.” For this reason, “it has often been attacked by Marxist criticism as the very template of ideology, and even theology, in the service of domination” (p. 168). Murphy addresses this issue by highlighting the ontological theories developed by Marxists Georg Lukács and Antonio Negri, who imagine ontology as something flexible and historically variable that does not necessarily run counter to historical materialist concerns. For both Lukács and Negri, “Marxist ontology must necessarily be one of historical change rather than static Being or essence, and as such it must be largely unlike any of the traditional ontologies that constitute the philosophical tradition” (Murphy, 2003, p. 164).

We can also find a compatibility between historical materialism and ontology in the work of Marx himself, and here we might derive it more directly through a kind of Marxist object-oriented thought. In a passage from *Capital*, Marx (1992) addresses technology in a way that bears striking similarities to Heidegger’s (1962) tool analysis from *Being and Time*, which Harman (2002) uses as the basis of object-oriented ontology. According to Marx, technological instruments show “traces of the labor of past ages” (p. 288). These traces are especially prominent when these instruments begin to fail:

It is by their imperfections that the means of production in any process bring to our attention their character of being the products of past labor. A knife which fails to cut, a piece of thread which keeps on snapping, forcibly remind us of Mr. A, the cutler, or Mr. B, the spinner. In a successful product, the role played by past labor in mediating its useful properties has been extinguished. (p. 289)

From Marx’s perspective, what “withdraws” within a functioning technology is not “the thing itself,” as Harman argues, but rather the traces of productive labor that make the thing possible in the first place. A materialist ontology of objects is about making sense of how these traces manifest themselves within and across the world’s objects.

Thinking of these traces as ontological to their object highlights the various kinds of forces they exert both on objects themselves and on the world in which objects

participate. The capacity of DVDs or the economic practices of post-network television are ontological to *24* in the sense that whatever else the program is or does necessarily responds to these technological and economic affordances. Discussing the history of lighting in film and other media, Dyer (1997) illustrates how the technical features of lighting equipment were designed under an assumption that they needed to illuminate white skin as well as possible. As a result, even today lighting “and the habitual ways of using it both produce a look that assumes, privileges and constructs an image of white people” (83). If film is, practically speaking, ontologically white, then film critics and theorists must find one manner or another to come to grips with this materialist racism at the technological and economic core of the cinema.

Recognizing the importance of such factors should not suggest that only narrowly technical or economic features can be ontological to a media object. Generic conventions, aesthetic techniques and even, following Galloway, ideological values might also occupy a given media object ontologically—inflecting its material reality in a variety of ways. By the same token, even those features of media objects that may not be, strictly speaking, ontological, still offer important opportunities for media analyses. In contrast to Galloway, however, the approach advocated here, which I am calling onto-materialism, aims to pay greater attention to the foundational roles of economic strategies, recording technologies, and other “non-discursive” features of media objects—especially when raising explicit questions of economics and politics. Challenging the messages of *24* cannot only be about critiquing its representational practices. We also need to understand and critique the infrastructural forces that help shape those representations.

At the same time, and as I have framed it in contrast to Harman and other object-oriented theorists, an onto-materialist approach aims to explore the materiality of various discursive entities in the context of a wide range of human and nonhuman relationships. From an onto-materialist perspective, court cases are no less important for being written documents of primary concern to humans. Of course, whatever approach we take to them will likely not apply as easily to rocks or vampire squids as it will to bridges, knives or television programs. But if we are serious about looking at objects as “things in themselves,” we need to be able to talk about the unique features and forces in and around them. Vampire squids withstand water pressures that television shows do not and television shows withstand political economic pressures that vampire squids do not. Still, both media programs and sea creatures interact with their environment in ways that simultaneously give shape to that environment and are refracted back through their being as a particular program or creature. Ignoring these interactions and pressures misunderstands the fundamental nature of these objects and their place in the world.

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