Introduction: Objects, Environments and Materials

Abstract: The iMedia industry is making up stories about the world that theorists of iMedia (or what is left of what Jodi Dean refers to as the ‘academic and typing left’ [2009: 4]) are in danger of being complicit with. How so? I argue that there is currently too much emphasis on what is, or is to come and on the failure or irrelevance of critique as something negative, uncreative and unworldly. In place of critique, there is a tendency to affirm and celebrate the existence of objects, environments and materials in themselves; to elide writing and other forms of mediation and to engage in disembodied knowledge practices. Disembodied knowledge practices tend toward both scientism (including physics envy) and masculinism. It transpires that there is no ‘we’ in t(he)ory. Where there is some degree of convergence, some compatibility between masculinist and feminist thinking about objects, environments and materials, there is also divergence, conflict and the possible opening toward a politics of iMedia. For me, this possibility hinges on the antagonism between a Harmanesque speculative realism and Harawayesque speculative fabulation/fiction/feminism and also on the non-dialectical relation of structure and scale, objects and relations, epistemology and ontology (2010; 2011).

Keywords: masculinism; materiality; materials; object oriented ontology; scientism; sf; speculative realism


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What’s the story – or, when is a list not not a story?

smartphone, smart watch, smart bra, translucent glass, driverless car, drone, robot, avatar, algorithm, database, data, data mining, BIG data, augmented reality mirror, smart toilet, speech recognition technology, face recognition technology, sensor, actuator, networked distributed intelligent computing, artificial intelligence, ambient intelligence, ambient media, infrastructure, smart environments, autonomous weapons, Willow Glass, TM Gorilla Glass, smart home, smart city, Siri, Google Glass (RIP), A Day Made of Glass, hologram, motion detector ...

Your apartment is an electronic orchestra, and you are the conductor. With simple flicks of the wrist and spoken instructions, you can control temperature, humidity, ambient music and lighting. You are able to skim through the day’s news on translucent screens while a freshly cleaned suit is retrieved from your automated closet because your calendar indicates an important meeting today. You head to the kitchen for breakfast and the translucent news display follows, as a projected hologram hovering just in front of you, using motion detection, as you walk down the hallway. You grab a mug of coffee and a fresh pastry, cooked to perfection in your humidity-controlled oven – and skim new emails on a holographic ‘tablet’ projected in front of you. Your central computer system suggests a list of chores your house-keeping robots should tackle today, all of which you approve. It further suggests that, since your coffee supply is projected to run out next Wednesday, you consider purchasing a certain larger-size container that it noticed currently on sale online. Alternatively, it offers a few recent reviews of other coffee blends your friends enjoy.

( Schmidt and Cohen 2013: 29)

What is a list? (What) is it of? (What) does it do? To what extent does it describe a world or perform it? Is it a genre, a kind of writing or, as Ian Bogost claims, a ‘flat ontology’ of multi-scalar things that are (2012: 18). For Bogost, writing is at odds with worldliness: the list; the inventory; the catalogue evincing ‘the abandonment of anthropocentric narrative coherence in favour of worldly detail’ (41). For him, a song or a photograph that lists, does not mediate, and a book of lists, by extension would constitute an ‘ontographic machine’ (52). For me, listing is a literary tradition, one that reaches an apotheosis in Georges Perec’s Life A User’s Manual (2003). In as far as this gestures beyond narrative and representation, it does so, and can only do so deconstructively, from within. Perec’s list does anti-literary work, performing an act of narrative creation and destruction. Bogost’s list pertains to be of the world,