

Speculations I

Response to Peter Gratton

Tim Morton

I'm very grateful for Peter Gratton's thoughtful review of *The Ecological Thought*. I'm putting myself through Speculative Realism (SR) and Object oriented ontology (OOO) boot camp at present as I return to the Deleuze that everyone but me has been seeing in my work since I stopped writing in a Deleuzian style! SR and in particular OOO are refreshing, powerful and very good for thinking with. I'd certainly rather be thought of as part of SR than as part of posthumanism—even if posthumanism is anything other than just a label in a record store. There is some real rigor there. And almost everyone seems to write so beautifully. *The Ecological Thought* is in very good company then. The funny thing is I kind of backed into SR via deconstruction. It seems to me that there's a lot more to deconstruction than the dreaded correlationism. For instance, deconstruction provides a view of language as non-human—even when humans are using it. It would be a big mistake to think that deconstruction is a form of nominalism or idealism. The concept “strange stranger” is a way to think about life forms but as Peter Gratton and Levi Bryant have argued, there is no problem with thinking non-life this way too.⁸ There's a sense in which the strangeness of the stranger is precisely the withdrawal of objects according to OOO. I'm particularly pleased with Gratton's use of *Mitsein* as this had been occurring to me recently—right after the presses started whirring...

OOO seems to have a little more trouble with the other concept in *The Ecological Thought*: the *mesh*. Contemporary physical theories of matter tell us that the entire Universe is what in chapter 3 I call a hyperobject, massively distributed in spacetime in ways that far outstrip human capacities to know or imagine it. In this sense the idea is Spinozan—there is really only one substance, modulated in different ways. This doesn't appear too dissonant with some thinking in OOO. I'm not sure I am a relationist if that means that relationships are real, or more real than other things. For instance, relationality might go all the way down, which means that

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we are living in an infinite Universe. In a strict sense there would no single solid substance that could truly “relate”: relations are always a kind of abstraction. I think this brings me in line with OOO, who probably see relationism as a mode of correlationism (well it’s in the word, isn’t it?). I might differ from OOO to the extent that for me relationality and unicity go hand in hand. Yet relating is epiphenomenal. I believe I was careful to say that the mesh doesn’t exist apart from the entities that directly *are* it.

The question of objects is a matter of supreme ethical and political urgency, not just a good idea, and we need as much thinking about it as possible. The BP oil spill is evidently a hyperobject. How we allow plutonium into social life will be an issue for the next 24,100 years—the time it takes plutonium’s radioactivity to decay.

Some issues remain in thinking what I do alongside SR and OOO. Hyperobjects are a good way to understand my concept of *mesh*. Of course one of the aspects of the hyperobject called Universe is (human) consciousness. Until OOO is able to account for “mind” (did I say “human”?) it will be incomplete from the standpoint of contemporary physical science. The concept “wild” that Peter Gratton juxtaposes with *mesh* fits with a conclusion I’ve been drawing about some forms of SR—that they’re sophisticated versions of the kind of environmentalist language that I’ve critiqued in various places. In essence “wild” is something that happens beyond our control and/or awareness “over there.” The “beyond our control” part is not so much of a problem for me—it’s self-evident. The “over there” part is, because it reproduces an aesthetic distance that is precisely the subject-object dualism that we are all trying to think outside of at present. It’s a way to reify objects and it imagines them precisely in a correlationist way. There is an aspect of the “beyond our control” meme that fits well with the resignation and defeatism expected in this phase of advanced capitalism. Substitute *automated* for *wild* and you will see what I mean. It’s not so much the idea itself as the attitude it codes for. The recovering Marxist in me sees this as a big problem with SR. Some SR thinkers have already critiqued my notion of “responsibility”—the more

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nihilist SR says, “Why wouldn’t an accurate view of reality bankroll irresponsibility? After all, it’s beyond our control.” The only big difference between this mode of SR and eco-phenomenology is that the latter is somewhat theistic, while the former is nihilistic. Both are forms of belief, except that one believes that it’s not a belief (guess which one). That’s not honest. If we truly want to think beyond correlationism we must think beyond belief.

One final word: the real problem is not humans but selves.

NOTES

¹ Tim Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, p 7. Henceforth all citations from this book are indicated in parentheses. Other citations will be provided in these endnotes.

² Here, I’m left to wonder about the status of this mesh vis-à-vis the human/nature split. At times, Morton can sound like Merleau-Ponty, who argued that overcoming the dualism of man and world meant enfolding them in on one-another—thus his flesh of the world where time is always “correlated” to human being-in-the-world. Linguistically, this is a tough conceptual distinction to make: not to enfold the old dualism in a hybridized human-world reality while also not naming some extra-human reality that reifies a “nature” Morton rightly critiques.

³ This raises the question of whether an “ecological thought” can provide something of a “method” for new forms of reading and taking on texts. Morton at times suggests that it is, but he is more apt to perform this than to cite an explicit *modus operandi* that he is following.

⁴ I take this up soon enough, but here Morton moves quickly between a quasi-epistemology (what we “perceive”) and the ontology of the mesh as such. I think he is making a double claim: (1) the ecological thought is *new* in history and is a disseminative perception of the things themselves; (2) that *reality* is itself mesh-y and we’ve finally caught up to this fact of existence.

⁵ Here, he explicitly joins his work to the “vibrant materialism” of Jane Bennett. See her *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), as well as Tim Morton’s “Materialism Expanded and Remixed,” presented at a March 2010 conference on Bennett’s book (available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/25830212/Materialism-Expanded-and-Remixed>).

⁶ Morton, “Materialism Expanded and Remixed,” 3.

⁷ Morton, “Materialism Expanded and Remixed,” 4.

⁸ Levi Bryant, “The Ecological Thought,” larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/06/16/the-ecological-thought/, accessed June 23, 2010.