LOST IN TRANSLATION: A FILM ABOUT GRAHAM HARMAN'S OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

Nick Dziadyk



Still from Lost in Translation dir. Sophia Coppola

ABSTRACT

This article deals with Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO). It explores the tensions in Harman's quadripartite notion of the object and how aesthetics provides an indirect mode of access to the object. This principally comes by way of metaphor and theatricality, the rift and transposition of the sensual from the real. A good illustration of these concepts can be found in

Sofia Coppola's film Lost in Translation. Reading Lost in Translation through OOO, we can see the theory enacted, and understand how the of the spectator interacts with the film, the reader with theory. Through this aesthetic prism we can approach the both the object of the film and the theory even in the face of their very retreat. All objects, films, theories, and even this article, become lost in translation. Everything, in any relation, is condemned to mediation. Nevertheless, there are still remain intimations of the real to be had both beyond and through the sensual and literal. This article is an attempt to explore this relationship.

Keywords: Graham Harman; object-oriented ontology; aesthetics; film theory, Lost in Translation, Sofia Coppola

Reel One

Sophia Coppola's Lost in Translation is about alienation and disjuncture. The protagonists – the young Charlotte and the older Bob Harris – find themselves together in a strange city – Tokyo –where the theme of dislocation and near misses is explored. This theme can be found in the line often attributed to Charlotte when she allegedly says, "I just feel so alone, even when I'm surrounded by other people." This line in a film about dislocation also serves as an access point to object-oriented ontology and what it means to be translated.

Actually, despite the attribution, Charlotte didn't say that line in the movie nor in any version of the script. Trey Taylor, writing for *Dazed*, traces the misattribution to the Tumblr community. He goes further and cites a doctoral thesis by Nicole Dizon Witkin which identifies that "extraversion was significantly higher in Facebook users than Tumblr users. This finding supports the view that Facebook connects users to real-life friends, while Tumblr connects users with their inner selves."² Be that as it may, the connection here is that Tumblr is seen to be a space of disconnected connectivity where users, blogging and 'reblogging,' and near-missing, can be lonely and together in a way just like in the film. It is the breeding ground which gives birth to the misattributed line. So while the line is not a part of the film, it actually is.³ It is the very object of a film. about loss of contact and meaning. We can read this as an allegory for object-oriented ontology. This is the story of Graham Harman's OOO and *Lost in Translation*.

Let's begin with a translation of the film into painting. *Lost in Translation* is like a kinetic rendition of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. Light and dark contrast through a lurid field of artificial light.⁴ Visually framed behind glass and partitions, there are no clear exits. What is outside the resturant is desolation. The well-lit interior is just a different version of the same. No one makes eye contact or physical contact. They are together, yet alone. All are objects that are only related in a tenuous way. The angular leanings allow it to be a slice into the outside, but this is just redoubled irony. The patrons, the space within, the space without. A cell within a cell of potentially indefinite reticulation.⁵ Relations without relations. A comment on capitalism? On the human condition? *Lost in Translation* enacts many of the same themes.



Nighthawks⁶

The film frames Bob and Charlotte often behind windows doubled in reflection. They are cut off within spaces and then lost in the movement

of open space. The streets of Tokyo are a whir and blur of hypercapitalism.⁷ Culture shock is mobilized to the point of caricature. Bob is nonplussed by the lower showerhead. He cannot figure out the treadmill. Japanese lambdacisms are a point of consternation. Bordering on racism, the twisted stereotypes serve to put the unrelated into a system just like his face plastered all over the marketing for Suntory whiskey.

Bob knows who he is. He is a movie star. However, his family, his place in life, his craft have all lost immediacy. He is virtual. For him cultural and technological Japan symbolizes his dislocation as everything recedes. His family and agent are always on the other side of a fax or phone. He exists in images and reruns. Systematic distortion ironically becomes an organizing principle where what is lost does not become found, but gets thematic expression.

Charlotte is the opposite. She doesn't know who she is or should be. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to be. I thought maybe I wanted to be a writer... but I hate what I write, and I tried taking pictures, but John's so good at that, and mine are so mediocre ... and every girl goes through a photography phase, like horses, you know dumb pictures of your feet ...".8 If Bob is an image, Charlotte is not an entirely different kind of object. From pictures of her feet to the opening scene of a sustained shot of her derrière, 9 she is equally as much an object in a sea of other objects. There is no solace here. A newly wed, yet her photographer husband John has become a stranger and is always, so to speak, just out of frame. Moving through Tokyo, and through Kyoto, she drifts without anchorage. Japan for her is a landscape without mooring where she just 'bobs' along. 10 It is an object that cannot be deciphered, just like the indistinguishable options on the shabu-shabu menu. 11 Of course, this is just symbolic. Japan is as real and unreal as anything else. 12 It is what allows the film to function as film. On many levels, we have verisimilitude masking withdrawal.

Like the figures in the *Nighthawks* diner, these ships both do and do not pass in the night. In the painting we can think of an inverted *Ode* on a *Grecian Urn* of present but impossible relations. ¹³ But we are now translating a translation of a translation. This is the beginning of our

indirect artistic access to the inaccessible. Redoubled impossible relations. This is the way it must be. For, if objects had direct relations they would fully comprehend one another and would thereby be fully deployed in their actuality. There would be no *potentia*, nothing in reserve. This is a argument Harman often uses to show that both change and actuality would be impossible. No object is fully present to itself or to others. The lovers of the *Grecian Urn*, the isolated of *Nighthawks*, our Bobs and our Charlottes.

The film, involves chance meeting upon chance meeting. Bob comes close to sleeping with a red-headed jazz singer, and then experiences the rejection of a blonde woman, before finally meeting the strawberry blonde Charlotte. These relations are partial, vicarious. As for Charlotte, he is able to touch her feet, to brush her lips. The inaudible whispering into her ear in the final scene is merely an extension of the gaps depicted in their evenings out in the Tokyo nightlife. Even the seemingly impossible age gap is itself an inflected synecdoche of just that: a gap, a part for a (w) hole. Nevertheless, there is contact, but of what kind? This is where we will turn to object-oriented ontology and see how it can be read through the movie and the movie can be read through it.

Harman finds great facility in Heidegger's tool-analysis. In Harman's reading of Heidegger, ¹⁵ we are always already immersed in the world, and the default position is ready-to-hand (*zuhandenheit*). It is an attitude of receded relation. This is equipment and it is never singular. Equipment interrelates through praxis in a kind of preconsciousness. Bob can sit on his bar stool on the upper floor of the Park Hyatt, suspended above the Tokyo streets, cigar and whiskey in hand without needing to be particularly attentive to any of them. The interrelations function. The cigar slowly burns without threat. He does not wonder about the engineering feat placing him in the sky in an earthquake resistant structure. Everything is as it should be. For Heidegger, it is only when something does not work or is broken that it becomes the object of theory. This is present-at-hand (*vorhandenheit*). When Bob has to do the Suntory Time commercial, take after take, he becomes more and more frustrated. All

he wants is a whiskey, but whiskey in his prop glass is fake. The failure of the production comes to the surface as he tries take after take. Both whisky and the production of a whiskey commercial become mere objects of theory. For Bob, this is comprehensive as the system no longer works as relations fall away. For Heidegger, this would give rise to *Angst*, and this fits well with our reading as such, but in Harman's OOO, something else becomes stressed in the tool-analysis.

For Harman, this does not make present-at-hand meaningfully different from the ready-to-hand. The present-at-hand maintains a relation to me as I observe it. This is what keeps Heidegger stuck at the level of surfaces as subjective framing is required. Harman sees Heidegger as being on the right track, but not pushing the theme far enough. Simply put, there is no direct access to objects. When Bob looks to the fake whiskey, when he contemplates the oppressive and inscrutable logic of the photoshoot production, these objects are no more present to him then they are to each other. Objects withdraw and only make contact indirectly, partially. It is like the director's longwinded directions that Bob's translator renders into improbably short and terse English. "That's all he said?". ¹⁶ Something is lost in translation.

In fact, for Harman, all objects are lost in translation. His favorite example comes from Asharite Occassionalism.¹⁷ The example given concerns fire and cotton. The argument runs that fire cannot make contact with all of the qualities of the cotton such as its smell, texture, etc., etc. Mediation is required. For the Asharites, this mediation comes through God. European modernism starts with Descartes and finds mature articulation in Kant.¹⁸ The transition is merely from God as mediator to human subjectivity. Whether God or the human subject, philosophy requires comprehending agency. Harman's issue is that objects are not given their proper ontological share. Since Kant the human subject dominates ontology. Harman contends that we are objects just as much as other things are objects. We must move away from the privileging of transcendental thought and correlationalism.¹⁹ While fire does not make complete contact with the cotton, I too, witnessing the flame, do not make

complete contact with the cotton or the flame. It is only partial, indirect. Objects can only render other objects through translation and this takes us on our first step toward Harman's fourfold structure.

Harman's argument runs as follows. Objects only make contact with certain qualities of others. This is why there are not just objects, but objects with qualities. Conversely, qualities can only interact through objects. Let us unpack this. He argues that there must be sensual objects (SO) with sensual qualities (SQ) as there are real objects (RO) with real qualities (RQ). These are all modalities of any given 'object'. The reasoning here is that for something such as our fire and cotton to be related at all there needs to be translation. Both must relate to the other through profiles irreducible to their real qualities as real objects. To do this, there is always a sensual-real bridge which can only be manifest in caricature. This is the phenomenal variation in kind that takes place in experience.²⁰ The fire's interaction with the cotton is different than a sharecropper's, a cotton gin, or a boll weevil's. ²¹ If we take them both to be real objects with real qualities, these remain somewhat like Kantian noumena. This is where the rot starts. The Kantian inheritance is the contradiction of an unknowable unknown that Harman traces as the origin of idealism. Idealism sought to resolve the contradiction by discursively situating the noumenal in the fold of subject. Harman sees that we have never been able to get out.²² Worse, this is seen as human finitude which really just masks hubris. Why just humans? All objects are subject to finitude.²³ There have been thinkers in this realist tradition that have made headway, but they have never been able to remove themselves from the inextricable circularity. If only, Harman would have it, we could return to the days of Leibniz, of metaphysics with a capital M, and move forward with what could have been a German Realism instead of Idealism. Since we cannot. what we can do is draw from the tradition at its points of resistance. These moments find configuration in Harman's fourfold structure where he draws from insights of the past. These are indirect points of contact.

Indirect access can be indirectly in-directed. If we take Heidegger's tool analysis and cobble it with thinkers from yore to shore, we have a

Harmanaic mosaic. There is quite a roster starting from the pre-Socratics on up. Yet, it really rests on two shoulders. Through Husserl and Heidegger, we get Harman.²⁴

Harman points to Hume's bundle theory of experience where an object appears to us through its qualities. These qualities are associative and become established through recurrence. There is no object given as such, but it is inferred qualitatively. Husserl rejects this and sees the denuded, intended object as prior. This Husserl's object becomes Harman's sensual object. A combination of the Humean bundle theory and Husserl's phenomenological reduction to the eidetic inform Harman's sensual qualities. However, within the Husserlian enterprise, Harman sympathizes with the phenomenological endeavor and would like to credit Husserl with intimations of real qualities even if the project lacks the type of transcendence for which Harman is looking. The immanent tension of object and quality within phenomenology is a starting point. If Husserl can find appropriate tensions within his idealist realm, Heidegger can take us to the beyond. He needs to be combined with Leibniz though for us to properly move away from idealism.

Leibniz brings the fourfold structure together. His monads are real objects with real qualities. Their relations are the qualities that allow for difference and the individuation between monads. Without distinction, as we have already seen, the situation would be meaningless. Husserl, as noted above, ties the sensual object with the would-be real qualities just as he ties the sensual object with the sensual qualities. This leaves Heidegger to connect sensual qualities with the real object. There are other permutations of interrelation among these coordinates, and one may rightly wonder why we did not use *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* as our movie to illustrate all of this, but this will take us too far afield. The central insight is that all objects are 'accessible' to each other through the same prism. Humans do not have a special vantage point. The ontological problem is that all objects for other objects are lost in translation. That is their only access. This is done vicariously. For humans, this is done through metaphor (viz. the figurative).

In both talks and writings, Harman often uses the same examples to illustrate the mechanics of OOO. When it comes to metaphor, one example he uses in particular is Homer's wine-dark sea. This introduces his idea of theatricality. For Harman, metaphors are always asymmetrical. The qualities of wine are conferred on the water to descriptive effect. Mystery, danger, drunkenness, etc. The reverse would yield a different object. Through this metaphor, the wine and the sea do not come in contact, but they do. Through me. I would stand in as the real object for these two sets of sensual qualities. Through this, I can approximate those real objects in their retreat. The non-literal suggestiveness of metaphor is what affords the transition. The reason for this is that the object cannot be reduced literally by description. Doing so is just a literal construal and leaves us stuck on the level of sensual qualities and no closer to the real object. Evoking Cleanth Brooks, as Harman does, paraphrase is heresy.²⁷ This is part of the cheap trick pulled at the beginning of this article with the line of 'minimal paraphrase' for Lost in Translation. The literal reduction is a betrayal of the particularity of the object. Perhaps like what this article is doing right now to Harman's thought. But, is it? Harman believes real object cannot contact real object. Ditto for the sensual. Like magnets, negative pole can only connect to positive. This is where aesthetics and theatricality step in and allow a type of bridging to occur in the very separation of objects and qualities. This happens performatively, on a number of levels, in the film and through us via the film.

Reel Two

The object of the movie is in retreat. The minimal paraphrase may not satisfy addressing the object. It may be an injustice, but it is a resonance. In the film dialogue, Charlotte grew up in New York but moved to Los Angeles.²⁸ Bob is from New York. The bar in which they meet is called New York Bar.²⁹ Fittingly *Unheimlich* as they are truly dis-oriented in Tokyo. Tokyo is a sustained metaphor for their own lives where home is a dislocated backdrop that intrudes in its absence through its distorted, withdrawn presence.³⁰ The problem is that we now have a

series of relations of unrelation. But, do we?

Bob and Charlotte cannot sleep.³¹ Tokyo is like a dream. If New York is the real world, it is because it is real. Tokyo is not. If they felt the rift of distance to home, that is because it is real. It takes Tokyo for them to, so to speak, realize it. That does not give them direct access to anything though. If they play their part, they will still inevitably fail. But, it is a success in failure like the Freudian symptom. Tokyo allows the real to link in a sensual assemblage where together they can act like children in the hospital, like adolescence in the streets and arcades. Together they play 'jail-break' to get out of the hotel and their obligations, they act up at karaoke with friends. Codes are played upon and enacted in caricature as when Bob is asked at the shoot to be like James Bond.

Director: Loger Moore. You know Loger Moore?

Bob: Roger Moore?

Director: Yeah

Bob: Okay. I—I—I always think of Sean Connery. Seriously.

Director: No, No.

Bob: Didn't you get the Sean Connery one over here?

Director: No. Loger Moore.

Director: Yeah, okay. Good. More please.

Bob: You mean "more" or "Roger Moore" again?

Director: Yeah, yeah. Good. And sexy!³²

If Tokyo brings them together, it only does so in this metaphorical way. There can only be proximity at a distance. It is the same with the 'minimal' paraphrase as we step into the cinema and watch the film. Caricatures of people, places, and relations. We become the real object that the film can represent for us and to us. The film as object is lost, and yet there it is. The sensuous and the real dance until the whispered ending. In the script, when they make their final embraces, it reads,

Bob: Why are you crying?

Charlotte: (sincere) I'll miss you.

He kisses her, hugs her good-bye

Bob: I know, I'm going to miss you, too.

He holds her close.33

But that's lost to the cutting room floor.³⁴ The scene was shot with different, almost inaudible, lines. You might be able to hear Bob say, "I have to be leaving, but I won't let that come between us. Okay?".³⁵ Even that is pretty much lost. Yet, in that very moment of parting, you have indirect points of contact with Bob and Charlotte, Tokyo and New York. Their lives there in Tokyo, their lives at home in New York. The same applies to the various object positions of theory, movie and article. We have them in a certain way through performance but, at the end of the day, they are all lost in translation.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ . Trey Taylor, "How Lonely Are You: Lost in Translation vs Tumblr," Dazed, last modified September 18, 2015, accessed February 1, 2022, https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/26449/1/how-lonely-are-you-lost-in-translation-vs-tumblr
- ² . Nicole Dizon Witkin, The Role of Personality, Attachment, and Narcissism in Regards to Social Networking: An Examination of Social Network Users (San Diego: Alliant International University, 2014), quoted in Taylor, How Lonely Are You: Lost in Translation vs Tumblr.
- ³ . Or script for that matter, which is markedly different from the filmed version. Taylor identifies eleven occurrences of 'alone', but none is uttered dialogue. Every instance is in stage directions. Coppola, Sofia. Lost in Translation. (2002), quoted in Taylor, How Lonely Are You: Lost in Translation vs Tumblr. 'Alone' recedes into the visual field, cinematic and indirect.
- ⁴ . The chromatic breakdown of Lance Acord's cinematography of Lost in Translation shows a palette of somber grays through to darker and duller tones. For a spectral analysis see Roxy Radulescu, Request Week 8: Lost in Translation, 2003. Movies in Color, last modified October 29, 2013, accessed February 1, 2022, https://moviesincolor.com/post/65445836763/request-week-8-deletemyself-lost-in-translation
- One is tempted to think of the film "The Matrix" where Thomas Anderson wakes up and comes out of his pod to see an unbounded series of other pods. To borrow from the intended idiom, physical separation of the res extensa and yet indirect contact of the res cogitans when in the Matrix program.
- ⁶ Hopper, Edward, Nighthawks, painting, public domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nighthawks_(Hopper)#/media/File:Nighthawks_by_Edward_Hopper_1942.jpg
- ⁷ Here the emphasis is on the mundane rather than the hyperbolic cyberpunk of someone like William Gibson.
 - ⁸ Sofia Coppola, Lost in Translation, 2002, 49.
- ⁹ "Melodramatic music swells over the Girl's butt in pink sheer underwear as she lies on the bed. Title cards over image." Coppola, Lost in Translation, 1.
- There is a great interlude where Charlotte goes by train into Kyoto wearing big headphones. They set the tone, so to speak, as it initiates a kind of montage with Alone in Kyoto overdubbed by Air. From the train she goes on to visit Shinto temples and the like through the rest of the musically accompanied sequence. Now, as Harman writes, "Alphonso Lingis [who was Harman's teacher] argues that even inanimate objects demand that we treat them in some particular appropriate way, so that it is somehow ethically wrong to eat expensive chocolate while drinking Coca- Cola, and just as wrong to listen to popular music on headphones during a beautiful snowfall at a

temple in Kyoto." Alas, there was no snowfall in the scene. Harman, Object-Oriented Ontology, 67.

- Another good example is the swatches sent to Bob from the States by his wife in order to determine the colour scheme of his study. Same-same, but different.
- One might think of Eliot's The Wasteland where the "unreal city' is both at the same time the City of London and Dantean underworld. A place of living death and shades.
- ¹³ Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,/ Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;/ She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,/ Fore ever wilt though love, and she be fair!
- Another way to work this is that total presentation, total intelligibility would be meaningless at best and death at worst. Nothing is equal to itself without comprehending relations. At a minimum, x = x requires the framework of equality. The particular is always supervened.
- This is first laid out in Harman's PhD dissertation which he in turn published as his first book as Tool-Being. It is the foundation for his subsequent thought.
 - ¹⁶ Coppola, Lost in Translation, 4.
 - 17 Passim.
- "Descartes thought that animals were on the dead matter side. So, if you torture a monkey with a knife [making thrusting gestures] and it screams, it doesn't matter. It's just a machine that eats grease." Graham Harman, "Why Architecture and Beauty Need Each Other," lecture, Tallinn Architecture Biennale Symposium, September, 13, 2019, Kultuurikatel, Tallinn, MP4, 1:10:10, 0:30:30. He actually said that, but clearly it is lost in translation. Perhaps a Freudian slip conflating mechanics through machines with monkeys (grease monkeys)? Whatever. It's funny.
- ¹⁹ A term coined by Quentin Meillassoux, one of the four original speculative realists, to express the postmetaphysical, postcritical philosopheme. After Kant, the thing-in-itself is off the table. All epistemology is sustained in subjectivity and we cannot get access to any beyond, to anything outside of our subjectivity. This is a book-length issue. See Meillassoux's After Finitude.
- Levi Bryant highlights this in Harman as there being only a difference of experience in degree, not kind. That means, when we try to think outside of our subjectivity we can, to a degree, posit a phenomenology-for. As Thomas Nagel argued, we cannot know what it is like to be a bat. This would be a phenomenology-of. However, we can make a lot of inferences through observation and measurement. This need not be arrested at the level of the animal kingdom. We can, by way of sympathy, achieve a type of phenomenology-for. Or, so the argument goes. Levi Bryant, "Larval Subjects," Larval Subjects (blog), November 10, 2012, https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/11/10/thoughts-on-posthumanism/.

- The first two clearly are historically suggestive. The problem with Harman's ontology is that it is ahistorical and fails to appreciate ideology which can have profound implications for how an object can relate. As we will see, relation is problematic for Harman no matter how you cut it. Still, the object can never reveal itself in all of its profiles and we always see it in retreat.
- Harman styles this "philosophy of access". It is a species of idealism rests on the following founding principle. "[W]hen we think of the noumena we thereby convert them into phenomena, and hence philosophy can deal only with the phenomenal." Graham Harman, The Quadruple Object (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2011), 82.
 - This is the sin of Kant's Copernican revolution.
- Whitehead via Latour is actually as important and represents an intersecting axis.
- Real qualities will remain outside of the purview of this paper for economy sake. However, they can be likened to Thomas Kuhn's paradigms. This finds elaboration in Harman, The Quadruple Object, 189-90., and elsewhere.
 - ²⁶ This is illustrated by diagram in Harman, The Quadruple Object, 64.
- ²⁷ Graham Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," New Literary History 43, no. 2 (2012): pp. 183-203, https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0016, 188-89.
- 28 In the script it is D.C. and then she was a bit itinerant. Coppola, Lost in Translation, 51.
- They actually meet in the elevator, but Charlotte does not remember. This is appropriate as the first meeting is a non-meeting, a non-relation.
- A poignant expression of this withdrawn presence, this excess of the object, is when at karaoke Bob is singing Roxy Music, fittingly off-key, and directing it to Charlotte: More than this/ You know there's nothing/ More than this/ Tell me one thing/ More than this/ Ooh, there's nothing
 - 31 Sleep is mention sixteen times in the script.
 - ³² Lost in Translation (Universal, 2004).
 - ³³ Sofia Coppola, Lost in Translation, 74-74A.
- ³⁴ Just like the scene in the Shooting Draft of the frenetic scene where Bob is on a gameshow doing an Iron Chef competition. Sofia Coppola, Lost in Translation: Shooting Draft, 2002., unpaginated.
- For a forensic take, see Vid Vidor's captioning attempt. Lost In Translation (Bill Murray's WHISPER Revealed), n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MV7Sym8bIQ.

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