Diedrich Diederichsen

Animation, De-reification, and the New Charm of the Inanimate

1. The Grin and Smile of the Inanimate

My three-year-old nephew plays with toy cars and model trains just like I did fifty years ago when I was his age. I recently wanted to give him a present, and so, thrilled with nostalgic anticipation, I walked into the toy department at a large store for the first time in decades. I was truly baffled by what I saw there: there was not a single car, not a single locomotive, crane, truck, construction vehicle, sports car, or tractor without eyes, a nose, and a smiling mouth. These simpering objects moreover bore first names, and little stories about them were printed on the packaging. Now, everyone knows that children have been animist creatures for as long as the concept of animism has existed. They are the ideological complement of the so-called savages or the so-called primitive peoples, matching their animism. For only if we can ascribe an ultimately familiar form of humanity – that of children – to those peoples, can we at once also deny them full – which is to say, developed – humanity. They are like us, but different, and that is the principle proposition on which any culturalizing, any ideology that supports segregation by marking some as others, rests. Such ideology is particularly careful never to mention the absolutely Other, which for now abides in a select few (of the better) science-fiction novels – or among the "Old Ones" from H. P. Lovecraft's "Call of Cthulhu," among other stories, in their "blasphemous" ugliness.

My childhood also knew an animist zone peopled by teddy bears and other stuffed animals, but it was fringed, however, by a second zone of games and toys that gestured toward reality, towards the world of inanimate things that functioned rationally and could be controlled. I would almost say that the animate zone and the realistic zone (to use a tentative name) were interdependent. What was important about the toy cars and model trains in the realistic zone was that they referred to the concrete world of existence. They were hard, made of metal, designed, authentic, robust. Recognizing specific car brands from the street and being able to sort and categorize them was part of the point: these were *things*. Today, however, it seems that an overarching holistic sphere of *animae* fills the world of children and, to a degree, that of Harry Potter–reading, esoterica-believing adults. Animist toys have triumphed over the technological toys of the Fordist and industrialized world. The current generation of educators (and the culture industry that caters to them) twists Jean Piaget's maxim of infantile animism – namely, that the child animates things according to their function – into its opposite.[1] For the children Piaget observed, things did possess a soul and

consciousness, but they actualized them solely for the action that corresponded to their special function: the wind knew that it must blow, the chair, that it must support me, and so forth. In contrast with this instrumental and Taylorist animism, today's animism holistically multiplies its esoteric parents.

Stereoscopic snapshots by 3Erd.

There is nothing new about teaching children about the world by animating things. What is new, however, is that the world of cranes, locomotives, and model planes now grins and talks at us. As far back as the 1920s, Paul Valéry had a presentiment, an eerie vision of a future world under the total rule of the culture and music industries, though he had in fact experienced the same vision as a child:

> I am reminded here of a fairy play that, as a child, I saw in a foreign theater. Or perhaps I only fancy I saw it. In the Sorcerer's palace the furniture spoke and sang, took a poetic and mischievous part in the action. A door opening set off the piping or solemn tones of a village band. If anyone sat down on a pouf, it would sigh politely. At a touch everything breathed forth a melody.

Valéry concluded the thought with a view to a public sphere that was, to his taste, over-animated by music and advertising (even in 1928): "I sincerely hope we are not moving toward such excesses in the magic of sound."[2]

Children no longer know what to do with this world. There is an old educational idea of confronting animals and anthropomorphic candidates for animation with a hostile technological world of hard matter – one that we need tools to come to grips with because songs and kind words won't do – and this idea no longer works. The pseudo-de-instrumentalized reason of the post-Fordist and post-industrial condition

is meant to train "soft skills" and human-resources leadership techniques, but it doesn't always work out. On occasion, this attitude will fall into its other – into love.

The fifth Berlin Biennial featured a work precisely about a person's love for an object. The Norwegian artist Lars Laumann had built an installation that included a documentary about Eija Riitta-Berliner-Mauer. At fifty-seven years old, Riitta-Berliner-Mauer describes herself as "object-sexual" and objectophile. Objectophilia is distinct from fetishism, she claims, in that it is directed at things themselves rather than things as something else. As early as 1979, she had fallen in love with the Berlin Wall, and had soon married it. Both Riitta-Berliner-Mauer and her portraitist insisted on presenting her case as non-pathological, arguing that her sexual orientation was simply unfamiliar to most people.[3]

One might think of my nephew and Ms. Riitta-Berliner-Mauer as opposing cases. In the first instance, objects must evince features signaling humanness – faces, mouths, voices – to be considered animate; in objectophilia, the object is sexy precisely because it is not human, not soft and full of liquids, but instead hard, hard, hard – though also a bit porous. But both cases are about objects coming to a new life in relation to their counterparties – subjects, people, *wetware*. Still, both are about subjects engaging with objects, whose new status is merely attributed to them by the former. In Jane Bennett's view, by contrast, the new charm of things is rooted in their being seen as things, which begins when they are no longer objects for subjects.[4] They then become available not only for animist animation and sexual desire, but also for a third relation: as objects of identification, as avenues toward what is ultimately a de-animation, a form of de-subjectivation or critical complication of subjectivation. Hito Steyerl may have had something like this in mind when she wrote in *e-flux journal*:

> Traditionally, emancipatory practice has been tied to a desire to become a subject. Emancipation was conceived as becoming a subject of history, of representation, or of politics. To become a subject carried with it the promise of autonomy, sovereignty, agency. To be a subject was good; to be an object was bad. But, as we all know, being a subject can be tricky. The subject is always already subjected. Though the position of the subject suggests a degree of control, its reality is rather one of being subjected to power relations. Nevertheless, generations of feminists – including myself – have strived to get rid of patriarchal

objectification in order to become subjects. The feminist movement, until quite recently (and for a number of reasons), worked towards claiming autonomy and full subjecthood.

But as the struggle to become a subject became mired in its own contradictions, a different possibility emerged. How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why *not* be a thing? An object without a subject? A thing among other things?[5]

In his currently much-debated novel *Dein Name*, Navid Kermani charts a literary path of such self-reification or self-objectivation.[6] Kermani, who is the narrator and protagonist of the novel, describes his life as it is shaped by a marriage in crisis; the everyday occupations of a journalist, literary writer, and academic, and his work in the public spotlight. In the course of the novel he drafts a book about dead people he knew, reads his grandfather's autobiography, and studies Jean Paul and Friedrich Hölderlin. The many names and terms Kermani invokes are used in constant alternation, and each describes only a function in relation to the respective settings in which he finds himself. In the novel, Kermani doesn't exist independently of these functions: he is the son, the father, the husband, the grandson, the friend from Cologne, Islam (whenever he participates in a public debate as the Muslim representative), the traveler, the user, the consumer, the son of Iranian immigrants, the poet, the scholar – the first-person pronoun appears only in meta-textual references to the "novel I am writing."

His novel is by no means an attempt to revive modernist literary techniques (such as the objective registering of events by the narrator) or to construct a polycentric multiplicity of perspectives. It is in the end always the same Navid Kermani the book is about. But he tries to turn himself into an object by denying that he has any primary essence and by describing himself as secondary and relational through and through, as someone who is something only for others. This effort to comprehend all the relations he maintains with others demonstrates, paradoxically, that he does in fact possess a quality that sets him apart from everyone else: he is the only one who can tie all these people together; he is a special node in a network of relations. And only the combination of these relations affords him a particular spot in the world. It is therefore also what furnishes the central maxim guiding the narrative project: to bring out the improbable connectedness linking the point I now find myself in to all other points in time and space.

A debate pitting Bruno Latour against the American philosopher and academic Graham Harman was recently published under the title *The Prince and the Wolf*.[7] Harman identifies as both a Latourian and a Heideggerian and is moreover considered a leading exponent of a new school of philosophy labeled "Speculative Realism." Despite considerable differences of opinion, this group, the so-called speculative realists (Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, Ian Hamilton Grant, et al) share one fundamental idea, which they derive from Quentin Meillassoux's book *After Finitude*: the rejection of "correlationism" – the term Meillassoux and his followers use to designate all those philosophical positions according to which the world and its objects can only be described in relation to a subject.[8] Meillassoux argues that, on the contrary, it is not impossible to grasp the thing in itself. As in Jane Bennett, what is at issue in this thinking is something like the self of the object; yet unlike in Bennett, the goal is not to merely think this plane or to observe it in contingent everyday experiences, but to place it at the center of a sustained epistemological inquiry.
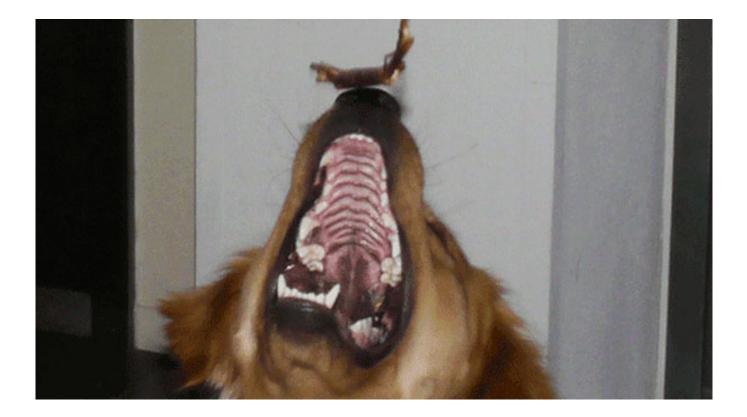
Harman himself uses yet another label to describe his work: "object-oriented philosophy," or "O.O.P." for short. This is where his thinking converges with Latour's, whose object-orientation is likewise one that leads to the things, even if to things in relations rather than things as such – yet in Latour's view these things are agents no less than other, animate or human, positions in the web of interconnections: whence his well-known idea that a "parliament of things" must be convened as a necessary extension of democracy. So Harman and Latour find themselves very much in agreement on this point. Where they disagree is the question of whether things – among which we count traditional and non-traditional things, which is to say, persons – possess qualities that are non-relational. At this point, Harman drives at a possible conjunction, as it were, between speculative realism in a wider sense and Latour's sociological project. Do things have qualities that exist outside their relations? Latour thinks the question is irrelevant; Harman offers examples, trying to describe relational things without relation or even defend a residual existence. Interestingly enough, most of his examples concern things one would traditionally call persons. Kermani, then, is ahead of Harman by not ascribing such qualities to himself; the objects of speculative realism, by contrast, which are out there or millions of years away, do in fact depend on existing outside relations: that

is where the things that win a seat in parliament separate from those whose origin is in ancestral spheres, which, in Meillassoux's view, indicate that there must exist a sphere of things beyond the objects that exist only either, in correlationist fashion, for subjects or, in the Latourian manner, for other objects.

Here, I am interested in this matter insofar as it bears on art, literature, and politics. I harbor no ambition to resolve epistemological questions for epistemology's sake; they concern me only with a view to their implications for literary narrative and the artistic constitution of objects, e.g., in minimalism, the readymade, and psychedelia. In this regard, the following example has bothered me since my Latin classes. As everyone knows, the subject of Ovid's classical epic poem *The Metamorphoses* is none other than what modern vampire movies call shape-shifting. Entities of all kinds – gods, nymphs, satyrs, humans, birds, lions, dragons, statues, rivers, and celestial bodies – perpetually transform, in episode after episode, into different kinds of entities. The Ovidian narrative guarantees the permanent translatability of any mode of existence into any other, which is to say it is set in a Latourian world. But it also understands, first, that bridging the differences between these modes requires immense power (it takes a god to do it,

which is to say that these differences are significant), and second, that it matters whether one exists as a river or a nymph or a chunk of marble. These entities would never sit down at a table with each other to establish a parliament; any particular form of existence amounts to a life sentence. By being forced to live as one or the other, the individual is condemned to a defined and enclosed sphere. So in the end Ovid's world is not a Latourian one.

What I always found profoundly unsettling, however, was something else: How could Ovid claim that a being that has changed form – a human who has become a stone, or a god who has turned into a bird – is still the same thing and must therefore be called by the same name? The time someone spent living as a flower and the time that same someone spent living as a woman are part of the same fate, and make sense within the horizon of that fate. That, apparently, is exactly the meaning of the principle or the concept of the narrative in general: building a relation, and indeed a relation that can even take the form of identity, between two completely different things. The stone and the woman are the same. It is tempting to assume that there is an eternal soul here, a spiritual object that exists beyond all objects and survives all forms. Yet we may also say that narrative is the name of a mode of continuity that

permits the building of interconnections between dissimilar things, to the point where they are translated into, and identified with, each other. The entity in the narrative is composed of the narrated relations and is nothing outside these interconnections. And the latter survive even the translation, at which point two relations coincide. Not a single molecule remains when a woman is turned to stone, but her relation to her lover, her enemy, and the jealous goddess to whom she owes her metamorphosis persist through transformation. The relation survives thingness and personhood; it transposes both into the same world of possibilities.

My nephew, Eija Riitta-Berliner-Mauer, Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, Navid Kermani, Hito Steyerl, and Ovid: they all seem to contribute different nuances to the same sentiment. This sentiment seems to say, with regard to things, that they have changed and, with regard to *us* – whomever that includes – that we are no longer fundamentally different from them. We either turn them into persons or fall in love with them precisely because they are not persons; we want to be loved the way they are because we are sick of being loved as persons or because we are only loved the way things are anyway. And if the latter is at least done to us in an adequate manner, we experience something almost like the authenticity of a thing – almost as though we were a person. Or we cross over into a world beyond the distinction; whether there is a price to pay – that a thing can be distinguished only by reference to its relations – or instead a payoff – that things are finally free of their correlativity – remains to be seen.

But the question is perhaps not so much why this is happening – why things are fashionable, why sociality, personification, subjectivation, and individualization are suddenly applied to objects that heretofore existed on the other side of what seemed like a stable distinction. The question, it seems to me, is rather this: By overcoming the prejudices of anthropomorphism and biocentrism, have we indeed crossed another epistemic threshold on the path of intellectual progress? Or might this not be the revival of a very different philosophical fashion, one that was in style a hundred years ago? Is this the return of the philosophy of life, of energy and the *élan vital*, the age of Nietzsche and Bergson, only with the difference that its central reference has turned by a hundred and eighty degrees: from life and its energy to thinglikeness and cosmic chill? On the level of cultural critique – though not necessarily on that of epistemology – we might then dare to draw a connection between the heyday of *Lebensphilosophie* between 1870 and 1930, at the height of industrialization, urban

modernism, and Fordism, and the present era, in which the primacy of the idea of coldness and object-orientation seems to have become plausible under conditions of biopolitics and the exploitation and commercialization of aliveness. To pursue this connection, I will first go back in history to the situation around the beginning of the twentieth century, when thinkers used the concept of reification to try and get a critical handle on the relations between subjects and objects.

2. Reification and De-reification
The emergence of separate and separable things – the fact that a living relation becomes a thing, which classical critical theory calls reification – rests on a slightly different idea of thing and thinglikeness than the contemporary version I mentioned above. There, the goal was always to sketch a mental zone in which the different entities might coexist irrespective of their status with regard to a distinction that has become questionable. In the critique of reification, that zone of coexistence already exists; only it is located in an idealized past. The critique of reification argues that the capitalist mode of production generates a separation between humans and their products, such that the former can no longer recognize the latter as something they have produced and instead take them to be something utterly disconnected, to be things. This separation occurs on several levels: the level of the economy as well as the practical organization of labor, the commodity-form, the division of labor, and finally, commodity-fetishism. In pre-capitalist societies, whether real or imagined, this umbilical cord between producer and product had not yet been severed; there existed a connection between producer and product – but of course it was not embedded in a networked and multidirectional community; it knew only one line and direction. Nonetheless, we have critical theory on our side when we say that the moment of reification, the inception of an existence of the thing as thing by virtue of its separation from the one who produces it, marked the end of an earlier coexistence, of a zone they jointly inhabited.

And not even the directionality of their relation follows of necessity from critical theory's critique of reification. It is Adorno and Horkheimer's famous argument, after all, that instrumental reason, the source of reification, begins with any purposive use of an object, which is to say, with the use of an object or thing that consists primarily in a relation not to that object but to another, third, virtual thing, the object of a plan that will exist in the future and that, we might say, is preferred to the primary object or thing in an "unfair" act.[9] That in fact

sounds as though Adorno and Horkheimer already envisioned not just the human subject as alienated in the Marxist sense of the term – wandering through a forest of things that don't tell him that he made them all – but also, beyond such anthropocentrism, the object as an entity of equally complete emancipation that suffers damage from the instrumental employment of reason. This proto-Latourian component, of course, is lost as the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* proceeds, and not entirely without reason; still, it seems important to point out that this version of the critique of reification observes injuries inflicted by reification not only upon the human subject, but also upon the things themselves.

The classical critique of reification stands in need of revision today, not so much because of its native anthropocentrism, but because capitalist production has changed, imposing a different sort of compulsory relation between humans, their products, and the effects of industrial production. Put simply, we might describe the current state of the capitalist logic of exploitation as one of de-reification rather than reification, the only constant being the commodity-form. In bemoaning the worker's alienation from her product, the classical critique of reification referred to a situation in which the laborer was utterly dependent on the decisions of others: her superiors and other representatives of those to whom she had sold her labor-power. This alienation was not entirely defined by its objective causes – Taylorism, the division of labor, surplus value, which ultimately amounted to no more than different modes of non-ownership, of non-control over the product the laborer produced. The sense of alienation also concerned the hierarchy of the workplace, the customary practices of large disciplinary units such as factories, major operations where all decisions were made elsewhere, by others, and in opaque fashion. To maintain a psychological balance under these Fordist-industrial labor conditions, the worker had to mentally travel: she had to dream. Fordist workers severed their laboring bodies from their dreaming minds, which drifted elsewhere while their hands, here, tightened screws and stamped sheet metal. This increased the distance between the objects they produced and the energies, desires, and fantasies they might have projected onto them, with which they might have appropriated them – for these energies were involved in scenes of fierce escapism set elsewhere. Such separation intensifies a disconnect that has long existed: the things are unrelated to their producers and their users. Thus, the world of manufactured things – the famous "second nature" – has the same status

as the world of natural things: they are both unattainable.

We might ask, by way of a digression, whether the insistence in speculative realism that the thing in itself is within reach – or at least not beyond reach, that nature can be experienced as a wholly other "outside" – represents a circuitous attempt to undo the consequences of reification. It might be argued, after all, that reification shares a common historical origin with a reason that professes itself incapable of objective cognition of the thing in itself. We might say that the second nature, too, is a *grand dehors*, to use Quentin Meillassoux's term, or that the two do not in fact differ on this point. On the other hand, perhaps speculative realism is, quite to the contrary, an attempt to win full metaphysical (Heideggerian) honors for reification?

Yet in today's capitalism of immaterial labor, the capitalism that exploits knowledge and commercializes aliveness in the service industry, tourism, the beauty industry, and the mass-production of courteousness and subservience, the primary quality demanded of workers isn't technical skill or physical stamina; it is that they identify with their work and their workplace, that they be authentic. The persuasive presentation is more important than practical ability; being trumps application. This robs the wage-laborer of any place to which she might escape. Old-school alienation at least left room for the daydream. Now it has no place in the contemporary management of the self. In this regard, the old demand for the sublation of alienation has been met – but its realization has of course taken the wrong form, that of self-compulsion. We might also say that its symptom, industrial labor, has been abolished (or is approaching abolition); but its cause, the commodity-form, has not.

So what we experience today is the sublation of the old distance between reified labor and alienated laborer, but not by way of a reconciliation between living work and dead product: instead, the product has come to full life just as the worker has been transformed into the product itself. The latter is now human, alive, biological, sexual, and emotional. The worker is the object of her own subjective labor, which is nothing but her self, which is nothing but a product. This process traces a perverted dialectical logic of negative synthesis, or bad sublation.

This situation makes it seem appealing to efface the animate self altogether. That is because it has become far too much work to be a subject under neoliberal capitalism; as many critics (most prominently Alain Ehrenberg) note these days, the neoliberal subject is exhausted

by its double function as responsible agent and object of the action.[10] So why not affirm the inanimate, be it in one's own self or in the beloved other? Why not choose a self without essence or history, as nothing but a conjunction of relations in the here and now?

3. Thing and Cooperation: Psychedelia and Sexuality

There are two fields in which the struggles for liberation and emancipation of the past fifty years have reaped success (though often limited): on the one hand, the field of sexuality, gender politics, and sexual orientations; and on the other, what I would like to call psychedelia. Of special significance to both areas is the relation to the thing and to objecthood. In sexuality, affirming the scripted nature of sexual relations and being able to experience ourselves as objects without fearing that we therefore risk becoming objects in real life (to paraphrase Adorno's famous definition of love) is part of an expanded conception of freedom; in psychedelia, the aim is to perceive objects beyond their functional and instrumental contexts, to see them where, in Jane Bennett's words, they cease to be objects and begin to become things.

In psychedelia, where there is no unified discourse, the status of the object has remained more or less stable over the past fifty years. This status is characterized by a tension between, on the one hand, the psychedelic thing as a metaphysical thing in itself, and on the other, the psychedelic thing as a laughable commodity. Do we take hallucinogens to laugh ourselves silly about the world, or do we take them to finally get serious? By contrast, in the realm of sexuality the status of the object has undergone revision over the same time period. The original discourse of sexual liberation, as the passage from Hito Steyerl illustrates above, was about becoming a subject, about taking one's fate in one's own hands and representing oneself. Gradually, however, a new idea emerged, partly due to the influence of queer studies: true sexual freedom consists not so much in my realizing my desires, but rather in my ability to experience something that is not owed to the controlling, framing, and planning faculties of my subjectivity – but instead made possible by the assurance that no sexual script, however surprising, subjecting, or drastic it may be, has consequences for my social existence. The old freedom to do something that had heretofore been prohibited, to break the law or call it into question, is a very limited freedom, depending on one's constant control of the course of events, when losing such control is the point of the scriptedness of sexuality: it is the script that determines sexual lust, not the lusting ego that writes the script.

Only if we can give ourselves over to the script – which includes objectification and reification (but they crucially do not need to be related to our personal practice outside the script) – and only if we are things and not things can we be free. It is only then that we have good sex.

In light of these considerations, it would indeed be undialectical and regressive to seriously imagine oneself as a thing utterly reducible to the network of its relations, entirely like a one-dimensional Facebook existence, without any locus of self-command: Is not the renunciation of self-command perfectly meaningless and unappealing when there is none to begin with?[11] Being a thing works only when you are not *really* a thing, when you merely *embody* a thing. But what about the other side of this relation, the act of attaining, recognizing, touching the thing, the step into the great *dehors* – the psychedelic experience? How do we experience the thinglikeness of the thing, and how is it the basis of our own becoming things?

In this context, I would like to take a brief look at a concept of psychedelia that may be understood traditionally – that is, with regard to the use of certain hallucinogenic drugs – but also with regard to certain aesthetic experiences in movies, the visual arts, or music. In the classic psychedelic experience, after taking some LSD, peyote, mescaline, or even strong hashish, the user will often perceive an object thoroughly defined by its function in everyday life – let's say, a coffeepot – as suddenly severed from all context. Its function not only fades into the background but completely eludes reconstruction. The emptiness of the figure that emerges (or its plenitude) prompts incredulous laughter, or inspires a sense of being overwhelmed in a way that lends itself to religious interpretation. Sublime/ridiculous: this pure figure reminds us of the way we used to look at minimalist sculptures, but without someone nearby switching on the social conventions of how to look at art. The shape strikes us as part awe-inspiring, part moronic. A thing without relational qualities is not a thing; it is not even a glimpse of a Lacan-style unrepresentable Real. It is just very, very awkward.

But would not this thing without relations be exactly what Graham Harman fought for in his debate with Bruno Latour? This thing that, according to my slightly sophistic observation, is usually tied to a person, the speaker himself or another human being? Would not the thing without relations, after we have said farewell to the soul and other essences and substances, be the locus of the personal, or even the person – at least in the technical sense defined by network theory? Psychedelic cognition would then have grasped the thing without soul, or perhaps I

should say, the soul of the thing – which must first be stripped of its relations and contexts. Our psychedelic responses to things are similar to our usual responses to other human beings in works of art and fiction: empathy, sarcasm, admiration.

In the heyday of psychedelia, of course, there were other interpretations. The most widespread construal at the time was the spiritual one. By becoming aware of the jug stripped of its function, we peer behind the veil of maya, seeing what is beyond the illusion of matter. Occasionally there would be phenomenological readings, variants of phenomenological reduction and the so-called *epokhé* – by cutting off the connections to the world of functions and instrumental applications, by subtracting them, one by one, from our sense perception, we attain an object we could never perceive as such with our senses (although, according to Husserl, we can calculate it, as it were). Psychedelia provides us with the result of this philosophical computation as sensory intuition.

Yet there is a third explanation that I have always liked best. Objects we engage with in our daily lives do not initially appear to us as functional things whose use value we realize when we employ them. They appear first and foremost as commodities that have exchange value. The internal relation between their exchange and use values – a relation neither of pure dominance nor one of adequacy or representation, but one that appears time and again as the frozen form of their genesis, of the history of their production – renders them the monstrous things Marx describes in the first chapter of *Das Kapital*. The psychedelic experience would then not just lift the veil of maya, it would also reverse the distortion generated by the false rationalization of exchange value; the poor commodity would stand in its pathetic nakedness before one who sees it while tripping, be it under the influence of hallucinogens or the pertinent art.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno returns to the debate over reification that he initiated in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* twenty years earlier. He criticizes Lukács's theory of the reification for implying an aboriginal pre-capitalist purity, an extra-instrumental adequacy in the way humans engaged with things. Against such daydreaming, Adorno calls for the "primacy of the object," insisting on its non-identity with the rational terminology that instrumentalizes it.[12] "Not even as an idea can we conceive a subject that is not an object; but we can conceive an object that is not a subject."[13] Here Adorno, too, seems to take what we might call an anti-correlationist stance. In an essay on the reification debate, the

philosopher Dirk Quadflieg proposes that we identify the sources of this turn in Adorno's thought in order to resolve a conflict that continues to occupy critical theory to this day.[14] On one side, there is Adorno's position, virtually aporetic in terms of political consequences; on the other, there are his younger theoretical descendants like Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, who discern the solution to the problem in strengthening the intersubjective aspect of the human-thing relation, hoping to find between subjects what will lift the individual subject's blindness. Yet such intersubjectivism can do entirely without things if need be; nothing but "systemic imperatives" (Habermas) prevents people from cooperation. By contrast, Adorno's source, a passage from Hegel's Jena manuscripts, declares that the thing is the precondition for cooperation; rendering oneself a thing for the other is explicitly described as the basis of cooperation and freedom.

We might conclude that the contemporary tendency in a wide range of fields to declare things to be (ghostly) beings and to call for their emancipation is a response to a contemporary capitalism of self-optimization, with its imperative to produce a perfect self as a perfect thing. This response would roughly parallel the enthusiasm for vitality in the philosophy of a hundred years ago, when capitalism extracted surplus value through the exploitation of man's repeatable, external, materially based, physical-vital skills. The reified soul yearns to finally become a thing through and through, just as the exploited body sought to become pure physicality and energy. Of course, this tendency is also an attempt to salvage the thing as the embodiment of alterity, which we urgently need for the production of a self. The contemporary subject must permanently engender itself as an ostensible subject and yet a consumable – edible, we might say – and legible self; a contradiction it resolves by conceiving itself as a thing for other things and passively regaining its ability to cooperate outside the domain of the laws of the market – where the capitalist imperative of permanent activity rules supreme.

Yet the wish to be thinglike can also be read, finally, as an attempt to leave the commodity behind. Reification, after all, produces not things but commodities. Commodities are not things but rather undead entities, hence their notorious tendency to wink and wave, to draw attention to themselves. My nephew's model trains and toy cars are accordingly not animated things but commodities that do not conceal what they are. To regain the thing would mean to rid oneself of the commodity. To the extent that we ourselves become commodities, rather than merely living

beneath their dictate, we then want to not just *attain* things, but to *become* things ourselves – or at least sleep with them.

    ✕

Diedrich Diederichsen was editor of two music magazines in the 1980s (*Sounds, Hamburg; Spex, Cologne*) and taught at several academies in the 1990s in Germany, Austria, and the U.S. in the fields of art history, musicology, theater studies, and cultural studies. He was Professor for Cultural Theory at Merz Academy, Stuttgart from 1998 to 2006, and is currently Professor of Theory, Practice, and Communication of Contemporary Art at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna. Recent Publications include *Utopia of Sound, Vienna 2010* (co-edited with Constanze Ruhm); *Rock, Paper, Scissor – Pop-Music/Fine Arts, Graz 2009* (co-edited with Peter Pakesch); *On Surplus Value (of Art, Rotterdam/New York 2008;Eigenblutdoping, Cologne 2008; Kritik des Auges, Hamburg 2008; Argument Son, Dijon 2007; Personas en loop, Buenos Aires 2006; Musikzimmer, Cologne 2005.*

1

Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 169–252.

2

Paul Valéry, "The Conquest of Ubiquity," in *Aesthetics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 228.

3

Frank Thadeusz, "Drang zum Ding," *Der Spiegel* 19 (2007), 160.

4

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*(Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

5

Hito Steyerl, "A Thing Like You and Me," *e-flux journal* 15 (2010), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing-like-you-and-me/.

6

Navid Kermani, *Dein Name: Roman* (Munich: Hanser, 2011).

7

Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Peter Erdélyi, *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2011).

8

Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

9

Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991).

10

Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. David Homel, Enrico Caouette, Jacob Homel, Don Winkler (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2010).

11

One cannot but think in this context of the post-privacy movement, which not only misapprehends – reads literally – the longing to become a thing, a pure intersection of relations, but moreover politicizes it, declaring privacy to be obsolete.

12

Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1997), 188.

13

Ibid., 183.

14

Dirk Quadflieg, "Zur Dialektik von Verdinglichung und Freiheit," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 59 (2011), 1–15.