

## INTERVIEW

Jonas Žakaitis talks with Graham Harman

JONAS ŽAKAITIS

While reading your books I found that it is strangely easier to understand the world you are describing than to actually imagine it. This world is like a non-finite uncontained cosmos of entities without any single structure to which things could be reduced. It reminded me of George Perec's novel *Life: A User's manual*—a book which is an endless list of things where any given object can resonate with all other objects, but none of them can ever become central. There is no consciousness, no transcendental principle which would orchestrate reality. But this is also what I find hard to imagine: isn't it the case that simply by indicating a thing (a tree, a memory, a box) you immediately imply a perspective? Trying to think a given thing in its absolute uniqueness and independency is almost like trying to draw a picture without a pencil, no?

GRAHAM HARMAN

I would say the opposite. To indicate is to point to a thing quite apart from any perspective I happen to have on it. Suppose that my dog Woody is visible some distance ahead of me. When I call out "Woody!", I am calling to a dog, not to a perspective. Woody is currently standing perhaps 35 meters ahead of me, with

his side profile visible and his head cocked to one side as he smells a deer in the forest, covered in the light of dawn. All of these aspects are part of my perspective on Woody, yet none of them are what is meant by his name. When I call out to him, I am calling out to a dog who can be at different distances from me and adopt different bodily postures and be visible from a variety of different angles in different sorts of light, which means that Woody is simply himself, not a perspective.

There is a tendency in philosophy to think that moving from "absolutes" to "perspectives" is a sort of progressive, liberating gesture. But in fact, all it does is imprison objects in the relations in which they currently happen to be involved. To explain how anything ever changes, there needs to be a surplus lying outside the present system of perspectives and relations. Concerning the world of isolated objects depicted by my philosophy, you say that it's easier to understand that world than to imagine it. My answer is that we don't even need to imagine such a world, because we experience it constantly. In everyday language we don't spell everything out, but merely allude to it, or speak of it without speaking of it. Aristotle thought this was the very essence of rhetoric: enthymemes. Why is

an argument often less convincing when stated in propositional form than when it is tacitly assumed? Why is a totally naked body frequently less exciting than a scantily clad body? Why is a joke ruined as soon as each of its steps is spelled out in literal terms? In *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, I argued for a general category of experience called “allure,” in which objects are split from their accessible qualities and seem to lie at an inaccessible distance despite our being able to sense that they are there.

As for your pencil analogy, it is true that I need a pencil to draw a horse. But that doesn’t mean that horses are made of pencils or graphite. The horse must be depicted through some medium, yet it is not the same thing as that medium.

JŽ

I certainly wouldn’t want to question Woody’s reality! The question I had spelt backwards would go like this: how can you both think about objects outside of any relations (even language, perception, etc.) and uphold their *specificity*? In your writings you point to myriads of concrete entities that seem to be necessarily linked to other things—like hallucinations to a subject, for example—and at the same time you maintain that they are completely independent. But thinking about your answer now I guess that’s where the notion of “allure” comes into play as an indefinite border between concreteness and abstraction. Like in a metaphor—one of the main instances of “allure” for you—where a house can lose all its qualities and coincide with a cloud, but still remain intelligible as a house.

GH

I think the problem here is assuming that things have qualities only through relations with other things. That’s certainly

true of what we normally call “secondary qualities:” the taste of cotton candy requires a tongue, and in some sense it doesn’t really exist in the absence of a tongue. But it doesn’t follow that cotton candy apart from all relations is the same thing as an onion apart from all relations. These foods can exist *for us* only because they *exist*. And insofar as they exist, they have qualities. Stated differently, just as my philosophy draws a distinction between real and sensual objects, it draws one between real and sensual *qualities* as well. The real qualities of an onion can never be directly encountered by my taste buds, but that doesn’t mean it has no qualities before being tasted.

As for the case of allure, you seem to be referring to the example I gave of metaphor in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, which is where I first introduced the theme. There I used Max Black’s boring example (from an otherwise wonderful theory) “man is a wolf.” Black’s point there, with which I fully agree, is that you cannot transform the metaphor into literal terms. You can’t make up a list of tangible wolf-qualities and say that they are being ascribed to humans. What happens instead is that the metaphor gives wolf-qualities to humans, but in a vague and imprecise way that resists any literal gloss. Deprived of its usual human-qualities, the human seems to lie at a mysterious depth beneath all qualities. It is given wolf-qualities to replace the human qualities, but these wolf-qualities are both vague and never quite believable when ascribed to humans. This is why metaphor only works when the two objects are *not* really alike, except in some trivial sense. As I have written, “a pen is like a pencil” is not really a metaphor, and neither is “a Euro is like a dollar and thirty-four cents,” and neither is “*bonsoir* is like Good Evening.” But just as this too-close proximity fails to generate

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metaphors, so too does the opposite extreme of too much distance. “A lizard is like the Russian Interior Ministry” probably fails unless in the hands of a supremely gifted poet who can prepare us to believe it, and so too does “Japanese cuisine is like the Arabic letter *Alif*.” Metaphor requires a certain *tension*, a mixed proximity and distance between two things. And what this generates is the sense that the object withdraws into inscrutable distance from a set of unusual yet vaguely believable qualities that are ascribed to it: the human withdraws as the wolf-qualities revolve around it, like disturbed moons circling an invisible planet.

And metaphor is just one form of allure. Allure occurs in all cases where an object is split from its qualities, rather than fusing together in the usual obvious and banal fashion.

JŽ

**OK, things are clearing up a bit now. But I want to learn more about the idea of this “inscrutable object” which for you never fully shows up and does not coincide with its perceptible qualities. It applies equally to material things as to language (concepts, representations), right?**

GH

Here a clarification is needed. I have often said things such as “we encounter a sensual dog, and behind it is a withdrawn real dog.” Debates then sometimes erupt over whether there is a withdrawn Popeye behind the cartoon character or a withdrawn monster behind the monster of which I dream at 4:00 in the morning.

But the real situation is that *everything* we encounter in the sensual realm could be described as fictional. We all know that the Aquaman and imaginary worlds in our minds are not copies of anything

existing in the outer world. But neither is a chunk of iron in my hand, or my parents and brothers, or the house in which I write this. These are all translations of withdrawn things, and they aren’t representational “copies” of anything in the outer world. They are translations, some better and some worse, of an original to which we cannot possibly have access, since the very act of encountering a thing makes it the thing-plus-me rather than the thing in isolation. Latour describes this beautifully as an *industrial* model of truth. To turn crude oil trapped in the geological seams of Saudi Arabia into the motion of a car in France, at least 6 or 7 steps of translation are needed, some of them occurring in refineries, others involving boats or trucks. That’s what truth is like. We preserve something of the original Saudi crude oil when we pour gas into a tank in France, but it’s not a “copy” of it. It’s a transformed version of it.

So, the situation is now as follows. Every object we encounter, whether consciously or even just causally, is a fiction. But these fictions, these sensual objects, all have real qualities, since all have hidden qualities that make them what they are for us and cannot be precisely articulated. And the important question is what relation these real qualities have to possible real objects. The sensual dog in my mind seems more related to some real object outside the mind than does an opium-based fantasy of evil mariners. But that’s not because the sensual dog “represents” a real dog while the band of fantasized evil mariners represents nothing.

To summarize, the sensual objects we encounter have no direct relation with hidden real objects. They have real qualities, and those real qualities may or may not link them effectively with real objects that actually do exist.

JŽ

In several of your writings you state that “aesthetics is first philosophy.” I also read you saying somewhere that a book on aesthetics is on your to-do list. If you had to write an abstract of that book right now, what would it be?

GH

Perhaps I should begin by sketching where aesthetics fits on my map of the world. Earlier I talked about the difference between the real and the sensual: the real is what exists whether anyone knows it or not, while the sensual exists only in someone’s (or something’s) experience. Along with that difference, the world consists of both objects and qualities, and each comes in two “flavors:” real and sensual.

Also, for me an object always exists in *tension* with its qualities, because it has them without being identical with them. And there are four basic kinds of tensions, which I should now explain.

First, a sensual object is in tension with its sensual qualities. I think Edmund Husserl is the one who discovered this. I can see the same candle, tree, or dog from numerous different angles and distances, under various lighting conditions and in different moods. In each of these cases the object has different qualities, yet we always think of it as the same object even though its qualities shift dramatically from one moment to the next. This is the real meaning of *time*, I believe, since time is about the interplay of endurance and fluctuation. To feel the passage of time is to experience the wildly sparkling surfaces of the objects surrounding us, which remain the same objects for us despite the kaleidoscopic whirl of their qualities as we move amidst them. But beyond this, there are moments when

we become explicitly aware of the gap between objects and their qualities, and the term I use for this is “confrontation,” though I’m still looking for a better word. What I mean by it is that we are sometimes confronted with the gap between a dog or house and the numerous faces it shows us from one moment to the next.

Second, a sensual object also has *real* qualities, and this was also discovered by Husserl: one of his most important discoveries, often overlooked. Even if candles or hailstones fluctuate wildly in their qualities from one moment to the next, underneath those qualities they aren’t just hidden featureless lumps. A hailstone and a candle differ from one another because they *really* have different qualities whether we see those qualities or not (and in fact, I believe it’s impossible to “see” real qualities, since they can only be alluded to). While the first tension was called “time,” this second one is called “eidos” by Husserl, a term borrowed from Plato. A sensual object nonetheless has real qualities that make it what it is. And here just as in the first case, there are times when we become explicitly aware of this gap, and that is what I call “theory.” To develop a theory about something is to try to isolate those features of it that are truly pivotal, without which it could not exist.

Third, there is a tension between real objects and their real qualities. This can only be deduced, since we never encounter real objects or real qualities directly; everything we experience is sensual. But we can deduce that there are real dogs, candles, hailstones, circuses, and armies, and that these must have real qualities or else they would be totally indistinct from one another. This tension has always been known as “essence,” and even though essence has been out of fashion in

philosophy for many decades, I see no way to live without it. And just as with time and “*eidos*,” there are moments when the tension between a real thing and its real qualities becomes explicit and there is an open fracture between them. No one and nothing can experience it, because there is no sensual component there. But it happens, and it has consequences. This is what is meant by “causation.” A real thing must be split from its real qualities in order for causal impact to occur.

Fourth and finally, we get to the one that is relevant to your question. There is a tension between real objects and sensual qualities. I hold that this is the meaning of “space.” Keep in mind that there is never any direct sensory experience of space, as John Locke observed. Our entire realm of sensory experience could be viewed as totally flat. Babies treat it this way when they try to reach for very distant objects like the moon: everything that is experienced is directly before me, and in that sense not distant at all. We learn to *infer* that the moon and a distant skyline are distant rather than directly touching our bodies. What space really means is that there are real objects at a certain distance from us, though we encounter directly certain qualities that seem to belong to them. This is the tension known as space. And when this tension becomes explicit, we have “allure” in the sense I described earlier. There are sense-qualities directly before us, but suddenly they seem enslaved to a distant object that withdraws from our access.

There is something terrifying and frightening about this experience, and we need to group the arts in this fourth category of allure. Not the arts alone, since here we should also put all the other alluring experiences that I described in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*: such as courage, betrayal,

jokes, trauma, and so forth.

My eventual work on aesthetics, therefore, will amount to grouping the various forms of allure and considering what each of these variations tell us. What is the difference, if any, between an installation piece and a joke? Or between a crystal goblet and an existential trauma, such as the sudden suicide of a friend? My claim is that a structure of allure lies at the basis of all these varied experiences, and they need to be systematically discussed. And of course I want to give a lot more examples from the arts than I usually do in my books, which are systematic philosophy books and therefore have a certain degree of abstraction.

But I hope one thing is now clear. Usually aesthetics is treated as a somewhat minor branch of philosophy—a pleasant hobby for philosophers who happen to like pretty music and pictures. For me, by contrast, aesthetics lies at the very core of reality, since allure is one of the four basic ruptures that can occur between objects and qualities.

