IAN BOGOST (2012) *ALIEN PHENOMENOLOGY, OR WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A THING*. MINNEAPOLIS AND LONDON: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS. ISBN 978-0-8166-7898-3.

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> *As philosophers, our job is to amplify the black noise of objects to make the resonant frequencies of the stuffs inside them hum in credibly satisfying ways. Our job is to write the speculative fictions of their processes, of their unit operations. Our job is to get our hands dirty with grease, juice, gunpowder, and gypsum. Our job is to go where everyone has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger.* (Bogost, 2012: 34)

Alien Phenomenology is a short, 166-page book that introduces its reader to Ian Bogost's take on Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). Bogost is an established digital games critic and designer as well as a Professor of Digital Media and Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Readers expecting the kind of rich empirical work found in Bogost's collaboration with Nick Montfort (Montfort & Bogost, 2009) on *Racing the Beam* will be disappointed. Instead, *Alien Phenomenology* adapts his earlier work on digital games into a much more ambitious metaphysics based, for the most part, on the work of the speculative realist Graham Harman. The book makes for a light and straightforward introduction to OOO and speculative realism as emerging philosophical trends, drawing on its critique of 'correlationism' to argue for a way of being in the world that Bogost summarises as 'wonder'. It is a treatise for appreciating the alien in everyday life: the multitudinous and unfamiliar experiences that make up everything, not just the human everyday but also quite literally *every thing*. To achieve this state Bogost prescribes novel methods for producing this productive or positive alienation that serve as the

starting point for practicing OOO as 'the philosophical study of existence' (5).

The early sections of the book lay out the basic tenants of OOO: all things need to be understood as existing on the same level as humans. By awarding experience only to humans, Bogost believes one is guilty of 'correlationism' – of imposing human experience as the absolute point of reference, as our ontology. The culprit for this particular state of things is the discipline of philosophy, particularly Emmanuel Kant's transcendental idealism. Bogost does not spend much time elaborating why correlationism is a problem beyond that it represents a limited understanding of things. As a way to address this apparent problem, he turns to the Object Oriented philosophy of Graham Harman. The book provides only a cursory discussion of Bogost's predilection for Harman over other speculative realists like Quentin Meillassoux or Iain Hamilton Grant. Harman's own books, from *Tool-Being* (Harman, 2002) to *Prince of Networks* (Harman, 2009) will better serve those seeking a more detailed discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of his work. (I mention these two because Harman's re-interpretations of Martin Heidegger in the former and his re-interpretation of Bruno Latour in the latter appear throughout this book.)

To fully embrace Harman's metaphysical project requires that our understanding of experience include any and all things on an equal footing, it must 'become *everything,* full stop' (10). This theoretical perspective is variously framed as 'flat ontology' or 'tiny ontology' which requires an understanding of the experience of things while maintaining an ambivalence regarding their relationships to other things. To grapple with this perspective Bogost argues for the substitution of terms such as 'object' or 'thing' with something less burdened with philosophical baggage. His solution is the 'unit' (23). For those familiar with his excellent earlier book *Unit Operations* (Bogost, 2006), the term is a repurposing of Bogost's work on Alain Badiou's set theories. While *Unit Operations* developed a dialectical model between unit operations and system operations (used to describe conventional media forms and genres like films, novels, and the like), here unit operations refer to how things exist without understanding them as part of a human-centred context:

A unit is never an atom, but a set, a grouping of other units that act together as a system; the unit operation is always fractal. These things *wonder* about one another without getting confirmation. This is the heart of the unit operation: it names a phenomenon of

accounting for an object. It is a process, a logic, an algorithm if you want, by which a unit attempts to make sense of another. (28)

The importance of this distinction for Bogost is made clear in his discussion of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) where Latour's 'imbroglio' and John Law's 'mess' as means of conceptualising relations between multiple actants are discarded for their overly sophisticated understanding of relationships. Bogost's critique of Latour is that ANT focuses on action, leaving no room for the essence of an object's experiences. Speculation is what things do and alien phenomenology is about the practice of speculating with things. By making such quick work of covering so much theoretical ground, Bogost implicitly reminds us that he is not as interested in supporting his views through argument so much as 'doing' ontology. For this doing, Bogost prescribes three different methods for partaking in his brand of metaphysics, namely: ontography, metaphorism, and carpentry.

The first of these methods, 'ontography' is defined as 'an aesthetic set theory, in which a particular configuration is celebrated merely on the basis of its existence' (38). The most basic example of this method is making lists like those 'litanies' Bogost finds in Latour's writing: 'A storm, a rat, a rock, a lake, a lion, a child, a worker, a gene, a slave, the unconscious, a virus' (38). These lists are not produced for the reification of tests or the imposition of order but as random catalogues that emphasise disjuncture and complexity between units. Bogost uses them to embrace multiplicity in the material world without attempting to link them with each other. They also, just as importantly, require that each unit be treated equally, consciously eschewing any order or meaning in what is selected or excluded. Where Bogost seems most adept at presenting this method is with what he calls ontographical machines (53). He uses examples of different kinds of games like the videogame *Scribblenauts* (52-55) and the card game *In a Pickle* as examples of systems in which people produce recursive associations between the properties of objects and therefore begin to perceive how unit operations function.

From my perspective as a media and communication scholar, the concept of 'play' seems to me to be a useful way to interpret the significance of these different methods. It may strike the reader as a facile association considering this is a book written by a digital games critic. But I use play in the sense defined by Roger Silverstone as a constituent part of mediation:

> Play is a part of everyday life, just as it is separate from it. To step into a space and time to play is to move across a threshold, to leave something behind – one kind of order — and to grasp a different reality and a rationality defined by its own rules and terms of trade and action.[…] Play is 'as-if' culture par excellence. (Silverstone, 1999: 60)

I read these methods as attempts to interrupt the high stakes relationships between things – the grave, the essential, the serious — so that we may speculate about other possibilities – to explore mediation using an ''as-if' culture' in which relations of power are, for a moment, no longer central. But whereas Silverstone articulates how play can be understood as part of mediation within a wider ontology of everyday life, Bogost leaves no such clues for the reader.

His second method, metaphorism, is also inspired by Harman's work as a way to capture a unit operation's being. It theorises that since experience is no longer limited to humans but to all things, then all things must also have a way to perceive their relationship to other things. Bogost's detailed discussion of the Sigma camera's digital Foveon censor and its relationship to other objects is about the mysterious life of things within other things – the guts of infrastructure. At first, metaphorisms seem to be about helping us to understand what role the Foveon plays in the production of images. Bogost convincingly argues that one can use the analogy of traditional film emulsion photography as a means of appreciating the way in which the Foveon sensor experiences contact with beams of light. Through this metaphor, we gain insights into the specific qualities of this particular type of sensor. But just as soon as they become clear, Bogost insists that such insights must necessarily always be once removed. As relationships between things multiply — the sensor to the beams of light, the beams of light to the lens, the photographer to the camera, etc. —so too does the impossibility of understanding all of these metaphors together. Here Bogost provides us with another playful approach, the 'daisy chain' as a kind of game of telephone (what the English refer to as 'Chinese whispers') to represent how all of these metaphorims co-exist: 'One metaphor clarifies a single relation, but when it becomes overloaded with the metaphor used to describe another relation its clarity clouds, resulting in distortion and confusion' (83).

Metaphorisms are an infinite gibberish of mediation – everything is grasped as a caricature of everything else. The closest thing to interpretation is always limited to an individual relation between unit operations. Unfortunately for the reader, it seems that the best way to begin to grasp these arguments is not by reading this book but by actually encountering the examples it catalogues. Having never seen any of Bogost's actual works in person other than those available online, I am left to wonder what his works like *I am TIA* would be like in person. It is this limitation of the book as medium that brings us to the final method, 'carpentry', and how it can be used to do philosophy instead of reading and writing.

Bogost has two criticisms of philosophy's dependency on the written word (90): first, philosophers are not very good at writing, and second, their dependence on reading and writing leads them away from doing philosophy and instead encourages them to focus on argumentation. OOO represents an alternative. Bogost quotes Harman's 'carpentry of things' as a synonym of OOO and as a job description for the metaphysician. Carpentry is not an art or a tool but 'philosophical lab equipment' (100) for creating a 'machine that tries to replicate the unit operation of another's experience' (ibid). It is a way to make things that produce ontographies or metaphorisms.

The principle examples of carpentry are 'Latour litanizers'. These are designs of online applications that use Wikipedia or Flickr as repositories of words and images in order to generate random lists of objects. In an account of designing one of these litanizers for an OOO symposium website, Bogost writes how it inadvertently shocked a visitor to the site by randomly generating a sexist image of a scantily clad woman on the symposium's main page. Bogost's response to the visitor's complaint was to modify the code for his litanizer so as to exclude these kinds of images. For me, this encounter and subsequent compromise is where carpentry becomes most interesting. If carpentry is about exploring how things playfully hang together, the point where this hanging breaks down or encounters resistance would seem to me to be of particular interest. Instead of recognising this disruption and attempting to develop a means through which carpentry can address this challenge, Bogost is happy to have the litanizer simply raise thorny questions 'in a unique way' and vents his frustration that resolving the complaint means compromising its flat ontology of objects.

Having briefly examined each of these three methods, one notices an order of priority running through their application: the further away

one gets from human intervention, particularly from any human intervention claiming to provide an insight into the human condition, the better. But for all his attempts to argue for an ontology that does not privilege the human subject, Bogost nevertheless insists on tying these methods to the very human discipline of philosophy: 'It might seem silly to talk about making things as if it's a new idea. Designers, engineers, artists, and other folks make things all the time. But philosophers don't; they only make books like this one' (99).

This tautological definition of his philosophical work seems particularly self-defeating. Not only does he turn his own book into a straw man, undermining his efforts to convince readers by minimizing the very form he has chosen to engage them with, he also caricatures disciplinary distinctions whose boundaries have always been far more blurry than he would have one believe (the work of conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth comes to mind as only one example of an artist doing philosophy). Why does Bogost insist upon classifying these methods as part of philosophy if the discipline is so mired in correlationsim and the human-centric practices of reading and writing?

The final chapter attempts to answer this question by delving even further into the history of philosophy and its treatment of 'wonder'. Bogost reclaims this state of being from the likes of Socrates and Francis Bacon, who define it in relation to the (human) production of knowledge, in order to redefine it as the starting point for the conduct of alien phenomenology. He writes, 'To wonder is to suspend all trust in one's own logics, be they religion, science, philosophy, custom, or opinion, and to become subsumed entirely in the uniqueness of an object's native logics—flour granule, firearm, civil justice system, longship, fondant' (124).

This definition once again seems to fit within my earlier reading of alien phenomenological methods as play. But there is no clear discussion of how to suspend this state of wonder or to relate it to other states of being. The alien phenomenologist, it seems, does not play well with others.

This disconnected state might not be such a problem until Bogost transposes wonder into the context of pedagogy (124-131). Education in the sciences and humanities, he claims, erodes the child's latent wonder for the world of things that surrounds her. And so the qualities of wonder get closer and closer to ontogenesis rather

than ontology, its purposelessness an intuitive and childlike experience of the world that should be nurtured and protected. Understood in this light, the project of alien phenomenology seems closer to the art school tradition of the 'innocent eye' that Howard Singerman (1999: 97-124) traces back to John Ruskin's 1857 work *Elements of Drawing,* through to the Bauhaus, and John Dewey's pragmatist influence on American art teaching. Singerman's analysis leads him to argue that while this approach to form and creativity did democratize artistic practice in America to some extent, it also helped foster the very kind of professionalization of its subject that Bogost wants to avoid. This isn't to say that wonder as presented in this book is identical but that without a clearer understanding of how wonder relates to other states of being and institutional practices, it remains unclear how to take this project further. As with the quote presented at the beginning of this review, Bogost is able to articulate the job description of the Alien Phenomenologist, but he does not provide the means of assessing whether or not the fruits of her labour is or isn't 'credibly satisfying'. In making his case for these philosophical methods without a way to engage with criticism of their results, Bogost implicitly makes the case for a subject who avoids critique (without being exempted from it).

No genre of writing better exemplifies the 'academic punctiliousness' (91) that Bogost decries as much as the book review. In my attempt to interpret the author's thesis, consider his points, and respond through my own set of arguments, I have followed an established set of conventions that privileges argumentation as a way of engaging with the ideas presented in this book. But these same conventions also ensure a kind of level playing field in which the author and other readers are able to respond and challenge my own interpretation. With this in mind, I submit this book review as a modest way of celebrating this book's unit operation, despite my own reservations as to the ideas it contains.

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