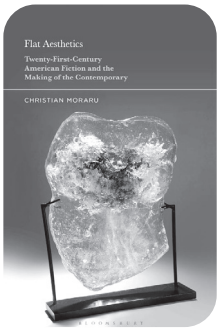
Christian Moraru, *Flat Aesthetics. Twenty-First-Century American Fiction and the Making of the Contemporary*, New York & London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023



Abstract: On account of the ontological turn whose influence has been felt all across the humanities after the turn of the millennium, both the new presence paradigm and Bruno Latour's work in connection to it have opened a sphere of critical debate to which numerous scholars have brought their contribution. It is in this light that Christian Moraru's 2023 monograph is dedicated to "flat aesthetics" – an intransitive and non-hierarchical manner of perceiving and interacting with objects. The volume argues for leveling the status of all entities and for recognizing the unique aesthetic potential and energy intrinsic in the presence of each.

Keywords: Christian Moraru; *Flat Aesthetics*; Object-Oriented Ontology; Contemporary American Fiction; Object Autonomy.

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A WORLD OF OBJECTS. THE INHERENT BEAUTY OF "BEING-THERE"

The Earth may be round, geographically speaking. But from an ontological and aesthetical perspective, in Christian Moraru's view, the world is actually flat. The present volume takes further his political, historical and theoretical investigation of contemporary American fiction, begun in some of his previous works – *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (2011), *Reading for the Planet: Toward a Geomethodology* (2015) and *The Bloomsbury Handbook of World Theory* (2022), and proposes "flat aesthetics" as the best suited critical approach to the post-2000 world. With a planet threatened by various environmental, social and geopolitical crises, Moraru deems flattening the worldscape essential for responsible measures to be taken about all ontological players, including those currently considered controversial or of secondary importance by some.

The non-anthropocentric character of this aesthetics is the main reason why it is called "flat" and why Moraru defines it as "an *ontoaesthetic* – an aesthetic of things that 'are' […], of what exists, of what is present and, in that, presents itself, regardless of what it is"[1]. In eliminating any ontological hierarchy between human and nonhuman beings, he follows Bruno Latour's "democratic" understanding of agency distribution among network actors[2] and aims to underline the independent existence and aesthetic impact of each thing in itself. It is argued that, within this "ideally flattened object ecosystem"[3], an aesthetic status should be granted to all entities

precisely because "aesthetics" acquires here the meaning of things' "inherently beautiful *thereness*"[4]. No longer dependent on the contemplation or appreciation of Graham Harman's human "beholder"[5], natural, cultural, crafted, artistic or mundane things are all equally beautiful because they are simply all equally present.

If the things' *being-there* is enough to give them meaning and their purpose need not convey anything beyond their own existence, Moraru considers the practice of flat, surface reading a necessary response to what flat aesthetics suggests in theory. This method draws from the patterns of close and distant reading simultaneously: it examines the object's form, its existence *as* form and any other objects which are situated in some relation to it, but it also tracks the presence of objects positioned at varying distances within larger, more complex arrangements. In both cases, however, the focus remains on the object (in) itself. Moraru's intention is to guide his readers towards no longer perceiving the object as merely a symbol, a substitute, or an exchangeable element for deeper or higher meaning or goal.

Instead, he argues for an outlook that poses objects as dynamic agents, offering valuable connections to other objects within their network. This interplay forms a "surface" that reveals itself through lateral connections, making each element of the arrangement readable in relation to others without any hierarchical layering. As a result, criticism's vertical, hermeneutical approach towards literature should be converted into a horizontal, ontological one as well. The critics should not "look deeper but around"[6], in an effort to observe and document what appears in the story's spatial or narrative configuration and to examine interactions and relationships among objects as they present themselves.

Moraru uses this type of analysis to paint a picture of the "contemporary" – understood as the post-Cold War or the post 9/11 era – and to underline its "heteronomous", "heterotopic" and "heterochronic" quality in terms of the "objectual matrix"[7] that composes it. In a context dominated by military conflicts, climate change, pandemics, widespread crises, and human excess, the author demonstrates how objects firmly affirm their existence amidst these threats of destruction and depletion, asserting a presence that stands resilient even as these forces often push them toward a state of irreversible loss.

Flat Aesthetics is written in a very dense but linguistically-playful style, one that seems carefully designed to make the readers "feel" the meaningful presence of every word. It consists of five parts, each focusing on one category in which the objects' existence has an essential role in mapping out different dimensions of the contemporary: language, display, exit, revenant, and kinship. Moraru's new reading of object-oriented ontology (OOO) proves his maintained interest for creating connections, namely for examining how his selected corpus of recent American fiction shapes today's understanding of the world. The writers included under his scrutiny range from Ben Lerner, Michael Chabon, Emily St. John Mandel, Joseph O'Neill, Mohsin Hamid and Colson Whitehead to Bruno Schulz, Max Blecher, Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss.

The first section is dedicated to exploring how language is not just a vehicle for describing or referencing other objects,

but a metaobject with agency, a complex world in itself. The 21st century American fiction affirms this objectual quality of language and literature, using it not simply to reflect the contemporary but to assemble it actively, constructing a present reality through unique linguistic and narrative structures. Within this context, the author draws attention to what happens when language things – words, phrases, quotes, literary compositions etc. – cease to perform their expected functions and to what kind of power do they derive from resisting conventional interpretation, depiction or significance.

Moraru's literary analysis starts with a look at Ben Lerner's meditations on poetry, as presented in *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016) and *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011). For a start, he highlights Lerner's antiutilitarian position on literary language. What Lerner critiques through it is the way literature's intrinsic value is undermined by commercial and academic forces, which attempt to transform it into literal or symbolic capital and thus threat the integrity and objecthood of the literary object itself. This exchange culture that dominates the post-Cold War era values poetry only to the extent that it can be measured, defined, or linked to something outside what it already is. In response to this tendency, Lerner proposes a liberation of language from the transactional logic of quantification and utility and an approach where it would be reimagined purely for its aesthetic worth, celebrating unexchangeable beauty and form for its own sake.

In tune with the author's flat reading practice, Lerner's works point towards the idea that poems' flatness results from their subject not being external to or different than their object, and from their form being the experience itself rather than just representing it[8]. *Leaving the Atocha Station*, for instance, is filled with poems that not only construct themselves, but also reflect on the process of their own creation. In a procedure where their guiding poetic principles also serve as a foundation for ontological exploration, the poems point to themselves "as both a meditation on and enactment of the energetic aesthetic of coming into presence"[9], thus constructing the(ir) contemporary through affirming the "being-there" of these acts of language as well.

After dedicating two thirds of this section to linguistic objects that took the form of various combinations of letters, Moraru concludes it with an investigation on numbers. To this end, he brings into discussion Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution*, a novella which combines crime fiction (inspired by two stories about Sherlock Holmes) with a kind of literature that "voices into presence"[10] the victims of the Holocaust. The readers can easily understand that the focus on numbers is connected here precisely to how these victims have been reduced to multiple variations of zero, but the detective, however, cannot. His "flat detection"[11] methods make him see the elements of his mystery not as elusive symbols hidden beyond the physical evidence, but as things embedded instead within the object network itself, forming parts of a visible, level puzzle that conceals nothing beyond its own surface. Reason thus prompts the detective to not associate numbers with secret codes or bank accounts but to see them as *just* numbers, an aspect that comments upon the limits of western rationality. Although this rationality was

also the source of the Holocaust, it proves to be unable to grasp the full implications of having simultaneously nullified millions of lives by reducing them to their "numeric shell"[12]. What Moraru achieves in this chapter is a proof of how arrangements of objects reveal historical truths and current struggles to confront them, despite efforts to obscure undeniable realities like the lethal digitization of humanity in Nazi Germany, and attempts to deny their ongoing impact in the present.

The volume's second part discusses two curatorial narratives from post 2000 American fiction, whose plots revolve around collecting and displaying objects – privately or in public. Their aim is to replace the patrimonial, nostalgic, politically conservative museal practices with a more postcapitalist, environmentally sustainable and future-oriented approach. The first one, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), addresses humanity's attitude towards objects whose functions have been completely changed or made redundant by a global pandemic. To the idea of rebuilding the destroyed civilization through reviving these objects from their dormant state and repurposing them as tools, consumables, or trade items, Mandel opposes a democratic, salvaging procedure which aims to admire them precisely in their uselessness. Following this logic, the protagonists' museum sheds a different light on various objects whose presence has been drained by the old world's "exploitatively transitive relationships" with them[13], highlighting the aesthetic worth they have acquired in the aftermath of these events.

If *Station Eleven* problematizes the concept of collecting and elevating non-artistic objects to arthood, Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014) catches Moraru's attention through acting in reverse: the book's characters build a museum out of damaged artworks which are now devoid of any market value and are thus reduced to mere objects, an aspect which paradoxically intensifies their objecthood in removing any utilitarian instrumentality from their existence. In Lerner's words, "an art commodity that had been exorcised (and survived the exorcism) of the fetishism of the market was to me a utopian readymade – an object for or from a future where there was some other regime of value than the tyranny or price"[14]. Lerner's and Moraru's implications would be that, within this post-capital future, art objects should return to an "ontoaesthetic flatness" and to the "fundamental dignity of intransitive beings that both *are* and are beautiful"[15].

Marking the transition from the concrete classes of language and display objects to the more complicated to come to terms with or abstract ones of revenant and kinship, the volume's third part is dedicated to various "exits" and other space-related issues. The first chapter of the section tackles the world-systems' relation to space, as noticed in Joseph O'Neill's *The Dog* (2014), as well as man's failed attempts to exit the networked spatiality which surrounds him. The book's protagonist has an intense fixation on his private space, seeing his apartment as an embodiment of isolation, a place which fosters relationships based on the separation of those living in it and encouraging a constant search for escape. However, this room cannot function as a way out due to his location being persistently known through geographical, electronic, and bureaucratic tracking systems. These surveillance tools continuously

re-anchor him, negating any attempt at exit by pinpointing him precisely within his apartment and chair – the same spaces he aims to flee.

The objects' power to locate their users is also observed in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). In this novel, the interest falls both on how exits function as thresholds or transformative mechanisms and on how the space occupied by non-human entities, despite their non-reasoned engagement with the political discourse, should be enough to make them world-making spatial actors in the eyes of the humans who interact with them. Hamid's characters use magical doors to teleport from poverty-stricken territories affected by armed conflicts to western, richer nations, but the narrative emphasizes the dynamic nature of these doors. Simultaneously an exit and an entrance, a fluid threshold pulsing with the energy of transition instead of a traditional "dividing line between one thing and another"[16], the doors become spatial objects in themselves that embody ongoing passage and that universalize the migrants' experience of being outcasts in the foreign places they arrive.

Maybe the most surprising and yet reasonably-selected category of objects to be addressed in a study about flat aesthetics is the one of zombies. The volume's fourth part demonstrates how they are actually the things which perform their "thingness" the most, namely their mechanical, soulless, repetitive, lifeless form which consists in a body reduced to a flat, surface-level structure, devoid of any depth or interiority. Wondering if there is something for humans to learn from the zombies' condition, Moraru reaches a conclusion where their frequent presence in postmodern media of all types could actually make us reflect back on the human rationality and consciousness, the very elements which they lack but which, at the same time, have created them. From their status of dehumanized humans, of mere physical façades which no longer incorporate anything, zombies are considered by Moraru the "'veritable' Other", whose presence is so uncanny that it brings along an entire process of cognitive defamiliarization in regards to our human "condition"[17].

The creatures' incoherent mumbling, which unleashes "an orality in which the distinction between 'biting' (devouring, mastication) and enunciation no longer operates"[18], is also translated into the concept of "things that tell us things"[19] in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011). While the novel's protagonist is busy eliminating the zombies still ravaging New York after a global pandemic, the few "zombified things of the past" – broken or obsolete but still active in one way or another – which have not disappeared in the cataclysm carry an inherent resilience, an enduring drive to preserve themselves and the pure form to which they have been reduced[20]. The fact that, in this way, these objects compose the contemporary and sketch a particular kind of future raises again the question of whether will humans succeed in making machines work again, but in a more organic, less structured and pre-determined manner.

Finally, the "kinship" from the volume's fifth section refers to the Kafka family – of both writers whose style or themes make references to Kafka and the animals and inanimate but not dead things from his works. This family constructs itself as an ontological-semiotic network based on "a

multifaceted relation of kin, kind, location, community, and tradition"[21]. Out of the several Kafkian writes whom Moraru discusses, Max Blecher, for example, is mentioned in relation to his practice of rubbing off the rational layer that surrounds his fictional objects, in order to reveal their bizarre and fantastic existence hiding under it. Throughout this chapter, Moraru also stresses the recurrence of Jewish cultural elements in these writers' oeuvre. Among them, the fact that the written Hebrew words can be given different meanings according to the vowels introduced between their consonants might be the most important. This is something reminiscent of the way in which the broken objects examined in other sections could assume new meanings as well: once stripped of their prior purposes, their flat form emerged and became their own content full of possibilities, which filled "the vacuum left by indefinite deictics"[22].

Each of these five parts is rich in textual examples which illustrate post-2000 American fiction's objectual approach towards making the contemporary, but it is also grounded in a solid theoretical framework that invites readers to rethink the human and the matter surrounding it in a global, geocultural and less anthropocentric system. If "the universe of things is not just available to us but increasingly unavoidable"[23], Christian Moraru's flat aesthetics suggests that we look at it through a lens which goes beyond instrumentalizing and which values ontologically and aesthetically the things' presence, form and autonomy. The energies released by objects through their mere existence, be they fictional or ordinary, are capable of exerting acts of volitions that influence the human and nonhuman/nonbiological beings around them. What is left to be done is simply learning to recognize them.

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Notes

1. Christian Moraru, *Flat Aesthetics. Twenty-First-Century American Fiction and the Making of the Contemporary*, New York & London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p. 2.
2. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 46.
3. Moraru, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
5. Graham Harman, *Art and Objects*, Cambridge, Polity, 2020, p. 174.
6. Moraru, *op.cit.*, p. 14.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 15.
8. *Ibidem*, p. 44.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 51.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 63.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 66.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 70.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 83.
14. Ben Lerner, *10:04,* New York, Picador, 2014, p. 134.
15. Moraru, *op.cit.*, p. 90.
16. Laura Waddell, *Exit*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2020, p. xiii.
17. Moraru, *op.cit.*, p 155-156.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 163.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 147.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 166.
21. *Ibidem*, p. 179.
22. Ben Lerner, "The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy", in *boundary 2*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2010), p. 206.
23. Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p. 43.