Shattered Ethics:

Abandoned Objects as Ethical Affordances

Abstract

In this essay, we explore various manifestations of shatteredness and fractalized Being. Through a dense reading of recent social theory pertaining to ruins and abandoned, abject objects, we hope to show that an appreciation of ruined, wasted materiality can contribute to generating an ethics of hospitality and corporeal generosity. To contemplate the Other, we must resist the temptation to appropriate their alterity. Rather, the irreducible alterity of shattered objects should be recognized. Objects are independent of our own intentionalities. Abandoned objects and sites constitute ethical affordances, opportunities for an ethical practice predicated upon abandoning ourselves to these multiplicities. To be is to be always already entangled in meshworks of dense meanings and significations. The ruin, far from being an impoverished site or non-place, is an excessive place rich in materiality and meaning, though its qualities are, for the most part, inaccessible to human actants. By recognizing the independence (and interdependence) of objects, we too may become hospitable agents.

Keywords:

**ethics, excessive place, materiality, ruins, speculative realism, waste**

Shattered, ruined places and objects assume a material presence that presents us with a seemingly formless, ungrounded chaos. Dirt, as Mary Douglas famously asserts, is „matter out of place.” (Douglas 1984 [1966]: 36) Dirt is the quintessential „shattered object”, always manifesting itself in the mode of the plural. Even formless, ungrounded chaos is always material, endowed with its own properties, overtly or covertly positioned in a plenitude of signigficance. There is not merely an object, where dirt is concerned, but a „system.” (ibid) Excluded, disposed materialities, such as those deemed „unclean” are inseparable from systems of classification, according to Douglas’ hypothesis. (Douglas 1984 [1966]: 41) But what happens after classification is gone, after intelligent animals such as humans have left the scene, so to speak? What happens to ruination, to fractalization after the classifiers have disappeared? The plenitude of the ruin is one that precludes direct contact with its essence. Ruined spaces have a narrativity that has undergone a transformation of form that takes such places beyond any appreciation or sentimentality. They are positioned at the interstices of interpretation and noninterpretation, knowledge and nonknowledge. We are capable of presenting stories relating to abandoned places or derelict settings, but these cannot penetrate their variegated layers. Materiality is far more plentiful, far more diverse than to yield to discourse. What we need, in our view, is a paradigm of social science through which we may conceptualize present absences. Bennett and Bennett, for instance, have convincingly shown through interviews that the dead too have presences. (Bennett and Bennett 2000: 139-157) The remainder is there, it refuses to go away. The ghost is an ineffable heritage that interrupts our own narratives, fragmenting our supposedly stable ontologies. Once dead humans are accounted for by social theory, even the presence/absence dichotomy comes into question. Where do we draw the line, which objects cannot be integrated into social theory and the social sciences? An eco-phenomenological perspective, writes David Wood, demands „the pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures.” (Wood 2003: 213) What are ghosts, if not „other creatures?” We would recommend an expansive, elastic definition of absent presences, defining any object or place that eludes representation. Such absent abject objects are beyond the scope of presence. Their disappearance, however, allows for an intensive return, a re-turning that is potentially infinite in its possibilities. Rather than view industrial ruins, for instance, as impoverished places, Tim Edensor prefers to think of ruins as constituting „spaces of surplus materialities and meanings” that „swarm with the ghosts which have been exorcised elsewhere.” (Edensor 2005: 833) A primary characteristic of ghostly ruins is that they

*„...evoke sympathy from those they haunt and (...) are largely indeterminate absent presences who disrupt sensibilities and cajole conjecture. Through this insubstantiability, the ghostly resists interpretation and thus retains its power.”* (Edensor 2005: 836)

The ghost’s insubstantiability allows it to retain its plenitude, positioning it outside of any discourse. Its properties are those of an almost infinitely „other” series. Once we touch the walls of an abandoned building, we communicate our sympathy and complicity with the metonymically presenting absences that lurk inside. But never do these absent presences actually connect with our own Being. Every connection is precarious; even the ethical relation to the Other is „contested by the powers of interruption, interference, and breakdown.” (Wood 2003: 213) Following the traumatic breakdown that is the evacuation of the scene of one’s life by the loved Other, their present absences returns to haunt the One, the survivor who, inexplicably and irredeemably, lives. The Being of the survivor is put into question by the present absence that haunts his or her dreams. Corey Anton connects the faculty of abstraction with disappearance: „when people abstract themselves from situations, they lose not only presence but also agency.” (Anton 2008: 170) Agency is not a given for Anton, but an opportunity, a chance to participate in Being that may be lost at any moment. Every single moment is full of various potentialities. Particularity is essential to communication; it „provides its own horizons of agency and efficacy.” (Anton 2008: 176) Agency is a process, rather than a given ability of humans or, for that manner, all other social actants. Under the term „actant”, we understand all change-making agents that participate in any kind of network. (see Latour 2005) If actants lose their particularity, argues Anton, they abandon the actuality of their agency. (Anton 2008: 170) Recognition of our own particularity, of the singularity of each and every one of our moments does not entail some kind of unfounded ethical individualism. Rather, Anton suggests that we view particularity and community as synonyms. Community, in other words, is predicated on a particularity that is always already ecological in nature:

*„To exist as particular is not to be a unique object discretely parceled off at the skin’s boundaries. It is to be a clearing of horizons, sensations, situations and engagements, a nexus of both concrete and abstract relations, a host of once-occurrent and noninterchangeable particularities.”* (Anton 2008: 181)

Particularity need not entail any kind of discrete entity separable and abstractable from its environment. Indeed, the dilemma for any environmental ethics is the rejection and erosion of narcissistic individualism, without thereby compromising particularity. The presence of the ghost allows us as ethically-bound actants to understand ourselves as hosts of ghosts, clearings that give room for strange Others. As Lucas D. Introna and Martin Brigham emphasize, „communal proximity does not necessarily secure ethical proximity.” (Introna and Brigham 2007: 173) Presence is not necessarily obtained by coming into contact with the Strange Other, even a monstrous, deformed alterity. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that the monstrous bears a close affinity with the abject, exposing the „extimacy” of identity. (Cohen 1999: 3) Proximity to any kind of alterity is not without its dangers. Not only may the monster consume us, but we too may consume the undomesticated through domestication. We may easily find that closeness and familiarity may in fact serve to „circumvent the possibility of the ethical disruption and the putting into question of the Same.” (Introna and Brigham 2007: 173-4) Only through a disordering and questioning of our own categorizations may we come into a non-binding and non-judgemental proximity with the particularity of the Other. More often than not, especially in the case of ruins, the Other presents itself as a negativity, a dead, wasted space, a sensual melange of rottenness. Susan Singe Morrison aptly remarks that „waste, itself an excess, proliferates, creating even more waste in an uncontrollable spiralling process.” (Morrison 2015: 69)

Everything is, in a sense, filthy; ghosts too may become forms of excess, waste matter that has been dumped but never completely gotten rid of. (Morrison 2015: 63) The ghost lingers, it keeps coming back: „a specter”, asserts Jacques Derrida, „is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back.” (Derrida 2006 [1993]: 11) The thinghood of the specter is a re-turning, a subterranean operativity that resists any complete obliteration of materiality. There are no slipsides into nothingness. Sinking through the strata, we reach contact with a nonhuman form of memory, a memory that clings to abandonment. We can never explain dead space, space that has become dead to our intentionality. Disappearance is a wish that is never entirely fulfilled. While it may seem trivial, it must be underlined that no object is ever, in a strict sense, „visible.” Invisibility is the norm and not the exception. Such a recognition that „the eventuating ground of things is not itself present, visible” (Wood 2003: 215), would go a long way toward clarifying contemporary debates relating to the presence/absence dichotomy. The invisible is the norm, for no object eventuates itself in Being without leaving at least some of its sensuality in reserve. As Graham Harman reminds us, „insofar as objects signal to us as a hidden summons or lure, we are never in direct contact with them.” (Harman 2005: 65) We can never come into direct contact with the specter, nor even the recent past. To this extent, any Levinasian „profound immediacy and inescapability of the other” (Introna and Brigham 2007: 174) constitutes a transcendental illusion. Other are situated in relation to us, but our mutual entanglement constitutes an indirect relation, and most certainly not any kind of direct participation. While certain memories may be compiled and stored, aliterity cannot be anything other than involuntary. Such is the case with involuntary memories, which „surge with vigour but are not categorisable precisely because they never were subject to deliberate compilation.” (Edensor 2005: 837) The very scission of Self/Other would imply that there is some mode of compilation operative, be it on an implicit or explicit level. True alterity eventuates itself from underneath categorization, in the manner of lava erupting from a volcano. Sinking through our memories, we are confronted by involuntary memories we cannot distinguish from ourselves. Perhaps these obscure remnants, these dreamy shards of glass in our minds were not even ours to begin with. Ghostly memories are, above all, ambiguous, hardly distinguishable from normal ones. An 80-year old widow interviewed by Bennett and Bennett mentions the singularity of her experience:

*„Well, I have SEEN my mother sometimes, occasionally. But whether that’s occasions that she’ s been on my mind or something.*

*[G.B. How did you come to see your mother? Did she...?]*

*It was in the night. Whether I was dreaming about her I don’t know. I saw her quite plainly. It only happened once to me. But whether she was on my mind or not I don’t know, and I can’t remember whether perhaps I was a bit low.”* (Bennett and Bennett 2000: 148-149)

The event of absent presence, even in its very singularity, is repetitive. It reveals the unmanageability of excess. Maurice Blanchot connects equates „the demand of the return” with „the demand of a time without present.” (Blanchot 1992 [1973]: 16) In the eternal return, „everything comes again.” (ibid) But this re-turning, for Blanchot, is a revealation of the absence of any present. In the view of Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, archaeology is the science of ruins and the abandoned, of fragments and death. (Pearson and Shanks 2001: 91-3) Such a description would befit any serious scientific study of present absences. To meet with the ghost is to confront that which we do not know and cannot remember. As the account of one physiologist bears testimony, fragmentation can become a window to alterity: „our pit became an opening to another world.” (Kooyman 2015) The pit in question is a hole bored into Antarctic ice by those intent on finding seals and penguins. One interesting finding is that the lungs of marine mammals, especially those such as seals that regularly dive, are „definitely different from terrestrial mammals in the degree of armoring.” (ibid) Sinking into even a familiar environment demands a degree of caution, some level of self-protection that prevents the organism from dissipating into nothingness. Seals dive into the depths, only to reemerge once again at some hole in the ice. What else would the seal, this majestic and mysterious creature, be, if not an apparition, a specter that haunts icebound seascapes? Many peoples, including the Yupik people of Siberia, believe in species sentience, a fundamental spiritual affinity linking humans and animals. As Gananath Obeyesekere summarizes,

*„In Yup’ik conception animals have* yua*, the spiritual entity that is contained in the bladder; in the elaborate Bladder Festival the hunters put the bladders of the seals they have killed back into the water to ensure the seals’ reincarnation. In addition, both animals and humans possess* ella *(awareness) resulting from experience and giving them a sense of control over their destiny. They also believe, as do many Inuit and Amerindian peoples, that animals are direct descendants of mythic ancestors.”* (Obeyesekere 2002: 45)

According to this interesting, even profound conception, we ourselves are archaeological sites, places of haunting where our descendants have reincarnated, returned to Being. There is hardly any way of differentiating between seal and human; they form a chiasm, an intertwining. In the Yup’ik view, one can never be entirely sure whether the seal one has hunted is not the reincarnation of an ancestor. The point of the aforementioned Bladder Festival is to ensure the return, to maintain the eternal returning of these animals. Through this ritual, the community of hunter and hunted is kept in balance. While the seal is, undeniably, fated for slaughter, this murder is an eminently ethical act, one that demands symbolic reparation. There appears to be some kind of implicit understanding between the souls of men and seals, a spiritual commonality that connects their fates. The Yup’ik know, or at least knew, at some point, that if they hunt the seals to extinction, they too shall disappear. Dead space is what remains after impropriety has gained the upper hand; after the rituals are abandoned, excessive negativity is the sole remainder, albeit as a chaotic, unintegrable multiplicity. While the Yup’ik have an inkling of what they may expect (the seals do, in the end, return), when traversing a ruined, postindustrial landscape, we never quite know what to expect, neither from ourselves nor from our environs. After meaning has evacuated itself from the landscape, after sovereignty is gone, after God is dead, „everything” returns, „save the present, the possibility of a presence.”(Blanchot 1992 [1973]: 16) We exclaim incredulously, along with one of the eyewitnesses interviewed by Bennett and Bennett: „Father? Father’s dead!” (Bennett and Bennett 2000: 150)

The recent past exerts a force upon thought and sensibility. John Martin Fischer has argued that the „badness” of death is irrespective of its temporal or phenomenal distance from our perception: „just as one can be harmed by a spatially distant event, one can be harmed by a temporally distant event.” (Fischer 1997: 352) Why is this the case? Why does the possibility of harm reside even in events that are far distant from our bodies? Material presence is more complex than to be reducible to mere proximity. In Harman’s speculative realist ontology, the world is composed of various levels. There is no single world, but a chaotic, colorful multiplicity of worlds, woven into each other but also divided, singalling various gradations of fadedness: „...a level is a place from which objects are physically absent, but into which they phospheresce all of their qualities, and by means of which they communicate with one another.” (Harman 2005: 67) Communication is always an indirect process, taking place upon the surfaces of things. Crushed bricks call out to us, but barriers separate us from their insides. Waste is „an alien reality, an (...) element, to be sloughed off and negated.” (Douglas 1984 [1966]: 165) But all negation can do is push various materials deeper into the world. Instead of disappearance, what we have in the pluriverse of multiple world-levels is constant communication among the strata, constant and ceaseless movement among these sediments. Transformation is an inherent characteristic of such a cosmology. According to the „animist” viewpoint, there are no fixed, stable objects, but rather flows that „continue to be swept up in circulations of the surrounding media that alternately portend their dissolution or (...) ensure their regeneration.”(Ingold 2011: 29) Harman uses the term „style” to denote these various, ambivalent flows that radiate from within objects. (Harman 2005: 66-7) Things are not dead, inert, mute entities, but living actants. Rather than conceiving of them as frozen fragments, the speculative realist and animist position alike understand objects to be „possessed of spirit”. (Ingold 2011: 29) Wild arrangements exhibit a real and tangible agency in the world, transforming existing networks, reshaping landscapes, and forming new assemblages. The crushed brick we step upon has been woven into the postindustrial landscape by a variety of atmospheric and environmental factors. It is the end result of a long chain of convergences and divergences. Even seemingly limitless fragmentation is never final, for there are always newer and newer levels of the world into which an abandoned object may fall. For all its abjection, the crushed brick is a point of place, even if disconnected from (human) networks and the global market economy. The plenitude of the world confronts us with an infinite regress. Rather than viewing this as an aporia to be excised from philosophy, Harman accepts the possibility that there could very well be an infinite amount of world-levels:

*„What we are confronted with is an infinite series of sealed chambers, but chambers showing countless trapdoors, slides, and portholes allowing movement from one entity to the next. Stated more classically, there is no opposition between a single dank cave filled with shackled prisoners and a single well-ventilated outer wall where real objects are carried and from which they project their shadows. Instead, the universe resembles a massive complex made up of numerous caverns, outer walls, alleyways, ladders, and subway systems, each sealed off from the others and defining its own space, but with points of access or passage filled with candles and searchlights that cast shadows into the next.”* (Harman 2005: 233)

Instead of a dualistic world of Platonic ideas on the one hand and dirty materiality on the other, speculative realist ontology understands the world to be composed of a wide variety of wild arrangements and mutual disconnectivities. Every form of communication between these chambers presupposes an original disconnectivity between the various nodes of the meshwork. It is noteworthy that Harman’s „caverns” are never entirely isolated from one another. Rather, they bleed into one another’s realities, being partially connected by „alleyways”, „ladders” and „subway systems.” Such a metro line, replete with bats and caves would be no small engineering feat! And yet, the world seems to resemble such a work of chaotic engineering... Ingold, drawing much the same conclusion, highlights the impossibility of complete separation among entities. In Ingold’s opinion, particularities and individuals are „not so much nodes as knots in a tissue of knots, whose constituent strands, as they become tied up with other strands, in other knots, comprise the meshwork.” (Ingold 2011: 70) The meshwork is denser, thicker than any network, for a network would imply that entities are cleanly separable from one another. For both Harman and Ingold, objects are entangled in one another’s lines. (Ingold 2011: 71; Harman 2005: 3)

Distinction and unity alike are always merely transient phenomena, moments in the internal lives of objects. In this world, the peculiarities of site identify the substantial, inner sources of materiality, ceaselessly composing and decomposing an infinitely regressive reconfiguration. Narrativity, in such a context of co-constructive worldling, cannot be anything other than dissonant. Of the texture of the world is a „tangle” (Ingold 2011: 71), then narrative too poses no exception. Much of what passes as recycling is, in reality, „downcycling”, defined as „the reduction of material quality over time.” (Sloane 2012: 86) Behind the world of apparent separation and mutual exclusion, there resides a „hinterland” where disaprate fragments, obscure traces, marginal actants and shards of shredded materials coalesce, bleeding into one another. As Michael Sloane points out, in the hinterland (or rather: hinterlands) that haunt/s the world of order, „trash is always alread there, a contagion of traversing and mutating forms.” (Sloane 2012: 87) Disposal fails to get rid of excess. Rather, ruination spells the final destruction of ordering. Ruinous sites, peculiar juxtapositions and queer metaphors alike contribute to the undoing of separation. Things suddenly come back into focus, our attention becomes concentrated once more, when these Others achieve reanimation; „when the over and done with comes alive”, we are brought back into the hinterland, this homeland of filth. (Edensor 2005: 842) Marginal locations, far from being impoverished, blighted landscapes, are saturated with meanings and hidden operativities. Such saturated, „excessive” sites are actually „the most densely haunted spaces of the city.” (Edensor 2005: 843) The uncanny makes its advent through shattering the unity of our own subjecthood.

Involuntary memories come back to us, when our bodies return to ruined, disposed, shattered, maligned hinterlands. We look at the dump with a contemplative gaze, and these abandoned objects follow our steps with strange noises, such as the creaking of floorboards, drops of water that seem to almost anticipate our approach and specks of dust illuminated by the sun, seemingly gravitating towards us, begging us to breathe them in and take them with us, safely stored in our lungs. Material traces, in uncanny places of abandonment, escape not only disposal but also the banality of everydayness. (Edensor 2005: 844) No longer do they present themselves as banal objects for everyday, mundane use, but rather as reminders of long gone activities, forms of work that shall never again return to these sites. It is with acknowledgement and respect that we must approach the alterity of such objects. Þóra Pétursdóttir has argued for an ethical approach to objects that „does not require the abolition of things’ otherness or unfamiliarity in order to render them useful but accepts the possibility that things themselves may be the source of their own signification.” (Pétursdóttir 2012: 578) Inclusion in social research need not entail the subsumption of things under merely human forms of signification. They are already beyond any such (re)integration. True, a recovered, salvaged object may be synthesized with everyday, mundane objects, but, depending on the amount of time it has remained separated from use, such an actant will always tend to retain an alterity with regard to its fellow network nodes. Difference cannot be easily cancelled, for objects usually inhabit only one level of the world; simultaneous inhabitation is exceptional, although by no means impossible. Meditation upon objects could very well constitute one method of healing what Morrison has deemed „our anthropocentric malaise.” (Morrison 2015: 134) Native American writer Gerald Vizenor underscores the importance of a contemplative approach to ecological awareness: „landfill meditation restores the tribal connections between refuse and the refusers.” (Vizenor 1991: 99) Between the disposed and the disposer, the wasted and the waster, there is an aboriginal affinity, an unbreakable chain of mutuality, an „overarching connectedness.” (Sloane 2012: 88) In a sense, calls for the „inclusion” of objects are unnecessary, because we never were „separated” from their alterity. Difference does not just float around us, as if a scission between our flesh and the Other could ever have pertained!

Instead of a synthesis, there are various, at times absolutely divergent pressures and intensities within places and spaces, dictated by the presence of objects and their sensualities. Defacement and ugliness are merely aesthetic moments of movement. Aging structures and black boxes inscribe different messages upon one another. The various complicated serialities and etherial clouds of objecthoods contain excessive, inaccessbile codes. Any true synthesis is always already chiasmatic, inseparable, reconfiguring itself and others to the point of absolute fallenness. John Scanlan writes perceptively that „garbage provides a shadow history of modern life.” (Scanlan 2005: 36) Contemplation of waste matter allows us to remember that waste is not merely an abject objectivity that manifests itself after productivity is gone, after manufacture has been submerged under the strata, bur rather constitutive of that very production. Seemingly isolated and abandoned objects are teeming with signs, meanings, irradiating their surroundings with sensual ethers enturely of their own making. The forgotten mingles with the diseased, the absent present infected with vacuity. Abandonment is a retroactive movement, a silence that is nevertheless militantly independent of human presence. Often, when visiting hinterlands of abandoned, ruined world-levels, we find *ourselves* in need of explanation, in need of a language that is adequate to explaining, even excusing, our intrusion upon this secret, esoteric empire. Such an uncanny sense of hauntedness pervades Pétursdóttir’s account of an abandoned shrimp factory in Iceland:

*„Lined along the wall, overlooking the other machines in the hall, as well as me in front of them, they looked almost militant. Nowhere in the hall could I evade their suspicious eye. I felt we had invaded their premises, that my informant’s detailed descriptions of their function were disturbing their silence— that it was much rather me, my informant and our unasked-for visit to this world of things that needed explanation.”* (Pétursdóttir 2012: 591)

The silence of machines that stopped operating decades ago bears testimony to the world of things, isolated objects that are absolutely divergent from human intentionalities. Never again shall they participate in our world. Such abandoned objects communicate to us through their silence: it is we who lack the language required to reach their interiorities. But even if we were to, bizarrely, somehow communicate with, say, the oil centrifuges observed by Pétursdóttir, what kind of knowledge could we possibly impart to one another? Among the ruins of modernity, contemplation seeks an interactivity with nothingness and silence. But this silence is not that of some unidentifiable background noise. As Harman points out, „there is not some global totality of the world (...) Instead, each [object] has its own ever-new depth.” (Harman 2005: 41) It is not we who break the world’s anonymity down into fragments, incoherent bits and pieces. Anonymity and silence are always the anonymity and silence of a particularity. Perception always finds itself entangled in a meshwork of various anonymities, objecthoods that are anonymous-in-particularity. Their obscurity is visible, their silence is discernible, their absence is tangible. Inaccessibility does not necessarily entail nonexistence. (Harman 2005: 86) In fact, the thickness of objects portends the infinity of objective plenitude. Echoing Heidegger, Wood observes that „time as physis, as eruptive event, escapes representation long before it is party to expectations that are not met.” (Wood 2003: 217) Similarly, it may be said that objects, these eruptive, radiating, obscure absent presences, escape representation. Through this escape they announce the thickness of their presence. Objects are vital players, actants full of life and retroactive movement. Even a faded, worn object such as a comb is endowed with thing-power, a mysterious ability to surprise and enchant. (Pétursdóttir 2012: 592) Obscurity is the guarantee of objective autonomy.

Once the divisible is equalised, once the mystery gains concretion, the world is unveiled as a collection of stacks of retroactive movement, moments of eruptive surprises lying in reserve, waiting for an affordance that leads to an evental advent. As Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell highlight, „ruins problematise structure, even the structure of language. Ruins escape the segregating function of language because they are not discrete and distinctive entities.” (Dale and Burrell 2011: 113) It is impossible to „read” ruins, yet such destructurings nevertheless allow us to discern multiple „levels” and conflicts in the liminality of the ruinous interworld. (ibid) Ruination upstages any reading, rendering all language uses approximate and metaphorical. (Dale and Burrell 2011: 116) The temporality of the ruin is a strange, a tracing of non-linear time, a variability of non-totalizing fractality. Previous functions have evacuated themselves from the absentological, hauntological scene. Jennifer L. Croissant has called for a „sociology of things that aren’t there”, an „agnotology” or „absentology.” (Croissant 2014: 18) Absence is never a singularity, but a dynamic particularity manifesting itself in multiplicity. There is no singular absence pervading all of Being; existents are their own absences. Fragmentation is never restricted to a single instance or one unfortunate, wasted existent. Fragmentation and ambiguity infect language, including the language of those who engage in philosophical or social scientific discourse relating to waste and disposed space. Pétursdóttir emphasizes that the „fragmented quality” of the things she encountered during her visit to Eyri was not restricted to „things broken” but also made itself present as „fragments of text.” (Pétursdóttir 2012: 592) Such narrative discontinuity disperses meaning across the landscape, saturating even minute, unimportant objects with meaning. We are always „adrift in a world of attributes of objects.” (Harman 2005: 109)

Instead of inert, stable locations, an animist ontology recognizes that „beings do not exist at locations”, for they „occur along paths.” (Ingold 2011: 72) Locations are, simply put, not locational, but trajectorial. Through contemplating objects, we contemplate their surface attributes, a spatio-temporal slice of their movements, a queer gallery of their changing forms. Underneath one level of the world, there resides another system of topologies, and so on, ad infinitum. Time is not somewhere „out there” but lies „buried and hidden in the landscape.” (Crang and Travlou 2001: 170) Distinction is provisional, as is affinity. Both exist in the form of heterogenous strata, masking various movements and trajectories flickering between the levels. Sloane connects the realm of poetic language with the queer fragmentation that is so characteristic of trash. (Sloane 2012: 89) „Writings”, Morrison concludes provocatively, „are the rubbish heap or composted waste of the mind.” (Morrison 2015: 199) Queer galleries of colorfully abject objects retain a significance beyond intentionality, remaining distinct from the mind. But Morrison’s conclusion may be elaborated and developed further: could our minds be, in their particular actuality, variegated forms of dirt? Is the mind itself a pollutive entity, a „rubbish heap”? Are individuals in general the evolutionary leftovers of self-assembling evolutionary biological processes, the remnants of emergences that have long ago disappeared from the Earth? The time of life’s first appearance in a terrestrial setting is being pushed back to ever earlier dates. Recently, researchers working in Greenland unearthed 3.7 billion year-old stromatolite fossils, making these organisms the oldest known lifeforms to date. (Nutman et.al. 2016) The time of emergence retreats towards ever more distant temporalities. Langauge and life alike are scattered on the ground, like leftover scraps. Things, be they „organic” or „inorganic”, all share what Wood terms „organized integrity.” (Wood 2003: 219) Even disorganized, dirty and fragmented objects need some measure of integrity in order to be able to present themselves, to make their surfaces present, in however a restricted way. It is only in the degree of integrity that objects differ from one another.

Indeed, recent discoveries in particle physics have made the organic/inorganic dichotomy questionable, to say the least. Clouds of „plasma” particles are capable of division and bifurcation, and even copying one another’s structures, leading physicist Vadim Tsytovich to conclude that "these complex, self-organized plasma structures exhibit all the necessary properties to qualify them as candidates for inorganic living matter.” (Institute of Physics 2007) Life need not be organic. But where does the border lie then between „organic” and „inorganic” objects? Ruins too, similarly to the phenomenon of inorganic life, allow us to question established binaries, for „ruins are a combination of stasis and dynamism.” (Dale and Burrell 2011: 116) Emergence is never pure, never singular, but always a dirty, pollutive multiplicity that leaks meaning from its interiority, in the manner of a powerplant leaking radiation. Interactions between inside and outside overwhelm separation. We inhabit a world that is quite literally overflowing with „different kinds of impossibilities, anomalies, bad mixingss and abominations.” (Douglas 1984 [1966]: 166) Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal equates ruination with negation and ruined temporality. (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2008: 247-279) For us, this approach is rather simplistic, for it maintains the equation of ruination and abandonment with negativity, whereas ruins, as we have seen, can be excessive, and even productive of new, nonhuman/posthuman meanings. (Edensor 2005: 846) Approaches that would view messy materialities such as those exhibited by ruins exclusively in terms of symbolic poverty or material impoverishment miss the point. Matter is heterologous and excessive precisely because „it has not been formed or ’in-formed.’” (Nielsen 2002: 58) While we would not deny the, at times, negative nature of superfluity in general, negativity need not exclude heterology or multiplicity. Places are never vacant, never absolutely empty, but full of excess, saturated by messy, insubordinate objects. In the Eyri storage house’s laboratory, Pétursdóttir encounters

*„...test tubes in different shapes and sizes, gloves and jars with strange liquids in the laboratory; everywhere floors are covered with things, broken, crumbled or pulverized. No matter where you turn you will turn to things.”* (Pétursdóttir 2012: 582-583)

A laaboratory with test tubes containing „strange liquids” is quite a disordered, messy laboratory! Where are the scientists, the lab technicians? For a chemist or a materials engineer or a biologist, such a laboratory is undoubtedly an „empty”, impoverished, disorderly place unsuitable for scientific research. Significance is independent of any work. Even after spatial relations have become unworked, being situated outside of economic affairs, heterogeneous materials nevertheless remain. These „strange liquids” remain in their test tubes, until some point in the future when the whole place shall be demolished, or until the roof collapses and the walls cave in. Interactions have an enduring power that stains the walls and the surfaces of glass test tubes. Ruins remind us to take heed of Bjørnar Olsen admonition to „remember things.” (Olsen 2003: 87-104) We must learn to contemplate trash, to see waste objects as living entities, endowed with post-vital inorganic life. Soft, smelly, rotten garbage pulsates underneath our boots: „the pulse is the seemingly endless repetition of the same.” (Nielsen 2002: 59) Wasted objects haunt perception; their absent presences compose elegant hauntologies that keep on returning. Boundaries are real, but only as „sites of negotiation, of transformation, of sustenance.” (Wood 2003: 220)

Excess materiality is the sustenance that distributes ruination within hegemonic networks. A fallen beam inscribes the possibility of heterogenous dissolution into our own bodies. „Ruins”, write Dale and Burrell, „are the discomforting reminder that all organising is futile and that the universe moves inexorably towards cold entropy.” (Dale and Burrell 2011: 114) Material heterogenity is, in short, the dead space that infects our own insides, threatening the peculiarity of our vulnerable, organic lives with a rival dynamic (in)organism. The properties of the haunting re-turn decompose material forms, in the context of a definitively infinite reduction. As Ingold stresses, „wherever there is life there is movement. Not all movement, however, betokens life.” (Ingold 2011: 72) Some movements herald death and dissolution. Once borderlines disappear, holes are left within excess soil, burrowings of invisible agents and subversive, non-determinable, ineffable creatures of the night that consume everything they can. Penetrating through a pit, into an ice hole, we are led into otherworlds replete with alien meanings, sovereign alterities that look back at us with captivating, dark eyes. Regimented linearity is gone, once use fades into a distant memory. Wholeness is re-placed by a language of junk, language-as-junk. (Sloane 2012: 97) Outside artificial order and positivist scientific modes of categorization, there is a „new/old continent” of dark vitality, alive with „the reality of things.” (Wood 2003: 220) Such a non-representational, autonomous continent has always been present underneath world levels accessible to human perception. It is only we who have forgotten the reality of things over the centuries; they have not forgotten us. Things are the substantial sources of the contemplative gaze that reflects back upon them. One may even say that abandoned Being contemplates nothing aside from its own self. We are always already surrounded by objects, alternative, excessive materialities that compose their own sovereign repetitions, their own temporal spaces and serialities. Presence shines through the abandondness of their Being, the forlornness and angst of heterogeneous materials. The experience of pulsing, excessive materiality „is structured by repetition, the rythmic and recurrent encounter with the basic material and structural forms”, caused by their „horizontal and scattered character.” (Nielsen 2002: 59) The perception that receives the abyssality of the ruin into its interstices attaches itself to the particular non-identity of ruination, of each ruined Being it encounters. Encountering metonymically presented absences, perception becomes dispersed in the landscape. Presence is a prescient, nearly impossible redistribution among the strata of ruinous sites, where multiple forms of time float around, bathing in one another’s sensuous ethers. Immediate presence is impossible, for it is located over there, within the space of the impossible, the place of repetition. That which is spent is never consumed, but returns, assuming a spectral form, as unwanted, undesired, unwarranted, unnecessary.

Every landscape is, in a sense, superfluous. We must let ourselves be overrun by dense, thick landscapes of superfluousness, if the ethical potential of alterity is to truly make itself present within the social. (Nielsen 2002: 62) Such an ethical practice would constitute a nonviolent abandonment of will and illusions pertainint to the presence of any self, any non-anonymous particularity. Only a particular anonymity, an anonymous contemplation of abandonment would remain, without desire, without attachment, without meaning, an ungrounded chaos of multiplicity that generously gives home to the infinity of signification which is the multiverse. Such a relationship to Otherness could take the form, in a practical, non-theoretical sense, of what some understand as „corporeal generosity”, a peaceful and calm state of acceptance, a hospitality that does not fail to give. (see: Diprose 2002 and Introna 2010: 93-102) Such an ethics would open us to the possibility of an infinite decentering of the self. A dispersed, abandoned self is a particularity that is infinitely open to inhabitation, providing a place of indwelling to all specters. It may even be surmized that such a self shall have itself become a ghost, an elastic, haunting present absence, a trace of humanity that has been reduced into an oblivion of unfamiliarity and intermingling. In foregrounding the reality of objects, we hope to have contributed to the construction of such a nonjudgemental ethics, an ethics that would transform society along the lines of infinite hospitality and corporeal generosity. Positioned amongst the countless materials of the world, having shattered our pretensions to egoism and narcissism, we shall have re-turned to an original, primordial affinity with this darkened world.

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