

## Towards Katherine Behar (Ed.), *Object-Oriented Feminism*

Katherine Behar (Ed.), *Object-Oriented Feminism*  
(Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota  
Press, 2016) [Stanimir Panayotov

### Bionote

**Stanimir Panayotov** is a PhD Candidate in Comparative Gender Studies at the Central European University, Budapest. He works at the intersections of continental and feminist philosophy, non-philosophy, and Neoplatonism.

Central European University  
panayotov\_stanimir@phd.ceu.edu

Katherine Behar's collection is the result of a series of panels hosted by the annual conferences of the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts in the period 2010-2012. Her edited volume *Object-Oriented Feminism* will be of particular interest for readers in feminist theory, philosophy and poststructuralism as they intersect with curatorial and art practices, and thus also being interesting for artists, curators and cultural workers navigating their ways in the worlds of theory and philosophy (which does *not* mean that the book is a contribution to philosophy proper). It will also deserve the attention of anyone who has a continuous interest in the revival of various

forms of realism and materialism in philosophy and cultural studies and who would like to see a more lively connection between those areas, on the one hand, and hard and life sciences, on the other hand, regardless of the latter being in conjunction to arts or not. The volume manifests that for those facing those connections, turning a blind eye to a feminist perspective of object orientation would amount to self-induced oblivion into the sacred categories of feminist concern (embodiment, the body, even gender and sex proper). On the volume's account, this is a concern that has exhausted its principled focus on social constructivism. Whether object orientation has always been a feminist concern is a problem I will return to at the end of this review.

Object-oriented feminism (hereafter OOF) was instigated in and around the theoretical phenomenon of so-called "object-oriented philosophy" (hereafter OOP), which first spurred on the internet, and subsequently spread among academia, as a result of the specific hijacking of Bruno Latour's work, done by Graham Harman. There was a Heideggerian twist in this process, with Harman claiming Latour as a "philosopher."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is in itself a problematic consensus that few have addressed. It is not the place here to pursue an objection to that end. Suffice it to say that one is flabbergasted by the very fact that Latour would license Harman's act. In the context of the book reviewed here, however, this is an important move, since this

When the term “object-oriented philosophy” first appeared, and the subsequent brands of “object-oriented ontology” (hereafter OOO; the conflation of OOP with OOO is sometimes problematic, too) and “onticology” surfaced under the pens of Ian Bogost and Levi R. Bryant, many of those already used to the tenets of scientific and critical realism experienced the phenomenon as a ludicrous theoretical crescendo unencumbered by its own pretension of revising post-Kantian philosophy. Back around 2008/9, the terms sounded as odd as the suggested OOF would sound (at least to the unreconstructed feminist post-structuralist), spearheaded here by Behar and her collaborators. It remains to be seen whether OOF will continue to bear the air of oddity *within feminism* alone, or will it be normalized in the general OO parlance and the related literature. For it has by now become clear that inducing yet another theory “turn” is a relatively easy job, but the feminist skepticism in us should remain in place when it comes to the consequent processes of reception. This is all the more important since the field of OOO, as well as the related “speculative/new realism” (hereafter SR), has been under the unfriendly fire of a plethora of feminists.

Upon reading this book, the present reviewer felt that it was divided in two parts:

---

Harmanian retooling and rebranding of Latour allowed the unproblematic identification of OOO with philosophy. Latour’s consent is by now irrelevant to this problem.

the editor’s Introduction, on the one hand, and the remainder of texts, on the other. Apart from the Introduction, the book gathers ten contributions from authors, including Behar’s own chapter, that come from fairly different fields and backgrounds, and not all of them have been involved in the SLSA events, thus giving platform to more voices. With the Introduction as a stand-alone text, the book seems to feature three groups of chapters, so strictly speaking I will try to navigate between those four possible units. Chapters 1 to 3 by Irina Aristarkhova, Timothy Morton and Frenchy Lunning seem to provide ideas to serve as the theoretical backbone of OOF. Chapters 4 to 7 by Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Katherine Behar, Adam Zaretsky and Anne Pollock appear to be demonstrations of what OOF could do in action. This group of chapters traverses both arts and curating as well as issues of bio- and necropolitics. Because the approximation between this intersection with a more robust treatment of OOF’s politics is already present in this grouping, it is then relatively easy to transition to the third group, i.e., Chapters 8 to 10 by Marina Gržinić, Karen Gregory and R. Joshua Scannell, chapters which, with the odd case of Gregory, provide explicit commentaries on OOF’s political consequences, and related theory turns.

Behar’s Introduction is ambitious, very well informed of the historical mutation it at-

tempts to enact and the dangers around it, not to mention her capacity to survey theoretical phenomena and waves as they intersect and what would that entail for the project of OOF. This might come as a banality, but it is also a very *well-focused* introduction. It is itself a work of theory: far exceeding the purpose of an introductory text, but without losing sight of its primary purpose, and without being read as the usual mapping of the chapters ahead. Behar has done anything in her powers to comprehensively conceptualize every theoretical moment that contributes/has contributed to what would OOF be and become. All of this is noteworthy because the theoretical and political implications of constructing something like OOF are nearly gigantomachic. This is even truer considering that the internal criticisms within the feminist hive mind are already as harsh as it gets. Behar, to my opinion, has left very little to no space for the reactive feminist to mount an attack against her project.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that OOF is safely sanitized from theoretical feminist scrutiny of whatever origin, or any other scrutiny for that matter. It means that fundamental conditions for offering OOF are met. What is more, these are conditions that could also justify the singular use of "feminism" in the volume's title. In the current climate of feminist studies worldwide, the use of "feminism" rather than "feminisms" is a move that alone could cause fire and fury, with little to no knowledge or curiosity as to why singularity (or universality) matters for feminists. My praise has nothing to do with OOF's alleged imperviousness to criticism and has everything to do with its elaborate argumentation against, globally

The first group of chapters (1 to 3) opens with Aristarkhova's "A Feminist Object," which for the most part is a meditation on Heidegger's views on aesthetics, poetry and art, and what these entail for the "object." Aristarkhova's view is that it is philosophers and artists who are left to *listen* to objects. Her chapter offers a detailed account of the logic of possession of an object, as opposed to an unpossessive epistemology more appropriate for OOF. But the problem with Heidegger, which I already mentioned (see above, note 1), is most pressing in this chapter. Because the Harman/Latour tandem is framed as a philosophical one, OOF is automatically streamlined with post-phenomenological philosophical thought and philosophy proper, allowing little space for OOF to be examined and projected from non-philosophical, that is to say, non-reductionist, angles. Just as "feminism" does not equate "philosophy," so "OOF"/"OOF" should not equate "philosophy." *The identification already presupposes a deficiency within OOF.* However, some of the chapters do express certain allergy to phenomenology. Without an intention to devalue the many qualities of Aristarkhova's chapter, who seems to operate with precisely this identification in mind, sadly, her chapter is an example that the identification has already been taken for granted within OOF itself. One can only hope that the speaking, the ongoing feminist adversarial imaginary.

legacy of the OOF volume will bring about the questioning of Harman's rebranding act. (Part of that hope comes from OOF's allure to the arts.) Timothy Morton's and Frenchy Lunning's chapters are both contributing to this problem, with the added value of Harman's thesis on aesthetics as first philosophy. Both chapters discuss the process of "withdrawal," which is fundamental for Harman's OOP. In Morton's case, withdrawal and deviancy of objects are paralleled. The quality of "deviancy" is redolent of the theological "overflowing" of the One. It comes as no surprise that Morton's suggested "weird essentialism" is indeed an essentialism: it does have quasi-theological overtones, despite his oft comic phrase. Both the object and thinking are defined via deviance. Object-oriented reality is "withdrawn" and as such it is intimately facial ("in your face, your face," 71). Lunning's work attempts a crossover between Harman and Kristeva. Indeed, there has been little engagement with the "abject" ever since SR and OOP became "things," and Lunning's chapter fills a gap in the literature. She, too, employs an implied intimacy, already present in Harman's notion of "allure." Her crossover concerns the "potential for agency" (90), and she tries to demonstrate this potential by engaging with Victorian and turn-of-the-century female sexuality and imagery, a field she is expert in. She then moves on to discuss Morton's "hyper-

object" as the end game of modernism precisely in the context of abjected subject/object relations in Victorian culture.

The second group of chapters (4 to 7) begins with Povinelli's treatment of Harman's allure of the object, which "solves Kantian correlationism via *aesthetic* rather than ethical or logical means" (108). Trying to apply features of Harman's aesthetic theory to the Karrabing Film Collective's work, Povinelli explains that what is most important in this choreographing of OOP is that despite the impasses of correlationism strong or weak, we can still at least know that objects *are* objects. The human-world relation, *pace* Harman, is on a par with the object-object relation, which means that any access to truth is aestheticized. Behar's chapter takes as its object the cosmetic phenomenon of Botox, and thus speaks to Morton's "in your face" OO reality. She claims that there is a fetishization of liveliness, often caused by the posthumanist rehashing of animism and panpsychism, whereby OOP is "poised to smuggle anthropocentrism back into the game" (124). This also means that the condition to qualify the subject as an object is her being alive. Behar wants to move away from this condition without having to parade with some sort of ethics of extinction, and she has found a way in the applications of Botox. Her analysis responds to the Latourian idea that only objects

that *do* things qualify as agential, which, from an OOF perspective, entails that OOs would re-lapse in anthropocentrism. As with Povinelli, this chapter also highlights the problem that so long as the subject is not treatable as an object, all ontoepistemological pretensions to “distributive agency” (or Lunning’s “potential for agency,” for that matter) are false flags of anti-correlationism, idolizing life in what she wittingly calls “vivophilia” (127). Behar’s ethics-oriented answer is the Botox-centered necrophiliac orientation to objects, something she sees as already present in the tradition of feminist body art. Adam Zaretsky’s text has many qualities but none of them includes tangibility. It is meant to confuse and diffuse rather than offer a use of OOF. As a practicing maverick of bioart, Zaretsky is in the position to ridicule and perform object orientation at the same time: after all, he has practiced this orientation for many years by now through bio and body art. Brimming with original and memorable ironic and parodic phrasings, one should extract from his *opus ludens* the critique of “listmania” in OOP (see 155, 159-60). The second point to single out is Zaretsky’s understanding, which happens to overlap with the reviewer’s, that “OOO claims to be nonobfuscatinal while reeling in utter phenomenological glazing” (154) and that the affective listma-

nia does not count as “newness.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, as Behar, he too singles out the fetishization of liveliness (his term is “vitalmania,” 170). With vivophilia and vitalmania already spelled out, Pollock’s chapter interprets the scientific fixation with life and reproduction in animal homosexuality, and more specifically, climate change and pollution as they correlate with affecting species’ sexuality. The chapter explores how critiques of climate change can tend to re-naturalize heterosexuality by normalizing animal sexuality. Pollock has gathered arguments from the weakest to the most radical ones and offers a correction to feminist understandings of the problem which carry on the logic of what Lee Edelman defined as “reproductive futurism.” Again, as in Behar, the author does not necessarily want to subscribe to an ethics of extinction in order to be theoretically in tune with the near subliminal deification of anti-anthropocentrism. Rather, what she offers here is an apology of artificial queerness: if animal queerness could be caused by pollution, it should not be ruled out as an aspect of vivophilia/vitalmania. Nor should animals serve as the better role model for human sexuality for the reason that they are helpless victims of man-made climate change.

---

<sup>3</sup> Similar arguments have been proposed by Dan Zahavi, specifically with regards to Harman, in less playful and in strictly scholarly parlance. See Dan Zahavi, “The End of What? Phenomenology vs. Speculative Realism,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2016), 294-6.

The last group of chapters (8 to 10) opens with Gržinić's reconsideration and historicization of the present reorientation of politicized feminism, or, to be exact, academic feminism. Much of what Gržinić says in this chapter has already been spelled out elsewhere and part of her arguments are rather repetitive.<sup>4</sup> Her thesis is that new materialist ontologies in particular are a *symptom* of the "humanization of capital" (208-9). She attempts to both maintain the critique against the "allergy to 'the real'" and expose the "dark side of new materialism," but carefully explains that she does not hold accountable these ontologies alone for repudiating the human as responsible to this humanization. Gržinić does not offer an exit strategy, but only a worry that neoliberal capitalism offers fertile ground for the post/non/human. As a result, the proliferation of the agential does not contain an agenda for political subjectivization, only an agenda for the agency's political depotentialization.<sup>5</sup> Gregory's chapter on the cultures

of Tarot cards is an odd example of doing OOF in general, and in effect has little to no relevance to OOF, in my understanding. Yet it does join the discourse on capital in the context of Gržinić's thesis. In a way, she offers an account of the withdrawal of speech into the object (the cards), and their enigmatically autonomous "work" (233). In an argument similar to Morton's essentialism, she suggests that this practice drives humans' orientation toward objects as a "natural gift." Tarot is here seen as a model of letting the object *speak* (Aristarkhova has already tried to make the case of the human *listening* to it), even whisper, to the subject, in a game of randomization that does live up to the idea of lowering anthropocentrism and the subject to the status of an object. Scannell's chapter is the last one and it, too, has little relevance to the F in OOF. He mongrelizes Puar's critique of intersectionality and Haraway's notion of the cyborg in a discourse on big data. His thesis is that the assemblage of the cyborg goddess, which he identifies, is the behavioral model for big data governance and "is in fact an organizing principle of an emerging logic of algorithmic governmentality" (248). In a vain similar to Gržinić, Scannell provides evidence that big data governmentality is purely mathematics- and not human-oriented. But while Gržinić complains that there is little to no resistance to the

<sup>4</sup> See Stanimir Panayotov, "Neonecromicon," *borderlands*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2014), 1-16. I would advise the reader to read Gržinić's contribution together with her chapter "Who Is the Other Woman in the Context of Transfeminist, Transmigrant, and Transgender Struggles in Global Capitalism?," in *After the "Speculative Turn": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism*, ed. by Katerina Kolozova and Eileen A. Joy (Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2016), 107-16.

<sup>5</sup> Gržinić's thesis is in sync with the critique offered by Jordana Rosenberg, see more below in note 7.

humanization of capital, Scannell does attempt to draft at least a strategy to understand the indifference of the mathematical model to the embodied world. The fact that big data algorithms are real does not mean they are human. He coins the notion “deep managerial time” to describe the “ontological stabilization of populations” (251) in a move he calls prehensive (or, Whiteheadian) sociology (of data management). The cyborg(ed) goddess of Puar is the “emergent object” of algorithms in deep managerial time: “Objects are [...] only as real as their capacity to be made computational” (263). Scannell, too, is skeptical about our ability to provide meaningful analyses of this emergent object predicated on the phenomenology of the body. Whether this body’s informational status is not phenomenological might be an open question, but it is refreshing that the volume features such phenomenological skepticism toward the status and the epistemology of the body. Scannell’s chapter has too many excellent qualities and dimensions to list. His definitional brilliance is extraordinary, and contributes greatly to the volume. This is especially true when he derives from the Puar-Haraway assemblage what he calls “digital mysticism,” in a sort of neoscholastics of info-flows. However, I remain unconvinced his chapter has much to do with feminism or OOF.

Similarly to Katerina Kolozova and Eileen A. Joy’s *After the “Speculative Turn,”* Behar’s *Object-Oriented Feminism* does not offer sections that give keys to interpreting the texts *en bloc*, which is why I decided to review her volume with my own compartmentalization. This is a curious decision that might suggest that in Behar’s view all of the contributions make a whole, which is not the case (the same is true of Kolozova and Joy’s volume). The book would have gained more consistency if it tried to organize the texts in sections, because, even though the intertextual flow is more or less smooth, not all texts seem related and focused on OOF proper and it is sometimes confusing to understand the sequence (for example, I do not see any reason to have Gržinić’s text before Gregory’s, but the other way around would work way better).

Let us return to the question whether object orientation has been a feminist concern to begin with, and that thus no anamnesis is needed, which would, paradoxically, question the very label OOF. In and of itself, the volume alone does not provide evidence that object orientation has been a feminist matter from the get-go. I do not think the editor intended to prove this point, although she herself has addressed it partially (see Behar’s “An Introduction to OOF,” note 1 on pp. 29-30), but overall the volume does not manifest the

tendency to historicize such a thesis. This matter has been, however, addressed by Katerina Kolozova and Eileen A. Joy's *After the "Speculative Turn": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism*,<sup>6</sup> which came out around the same time in 2016, and Behar's volume should be read (as working) together with it (and the other way around). The point here is not comparison but complementarity. In light of the specific feminist complaints against novel forms of feminist objectivity and rationalism that revise some poststructuralist complacencies and the over-emphasis on textuality and discursivity, the very academic term of "feminism" arrived at a

<sup>6</sup> See Stanimir Panayotov, "Speculum of the Pruning-Scissors. Review of Katerina Kolozova and Eileen A. Joy (Eds.), *After the "Speculative Turn": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism*," *The Minnesota Review*, Issue 88 (2017), 132-8; Bogna M. Konior, "Review of Katerina Kolozova and Eileen A. Joy (Eds.), *After the "Speculative Turn": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism*," *Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy*, November 27, 2017, [www.c-scp.org/2017/11/27/katerina-kolozova-and-eileen-a-joy-eds-after-the-speculative-turn](http://www.c-scp.org/2017/11/27/katerina-kolozova-and-eileen-a-joy-eds-after-the-speculative-turn). The editors of both volumes knew of each other's work, see specifically Behar, "An Introduction to OOF," note 25 on p. 32. Behar, Lunning and Gržinić are all contributors in the two volumes. It is also noteworthy that both Behar and Kolozova and Joy have been published and promoted by Joy's open-access Punctum Books. The relevance of this should not be underestimated, since Punctum Books was the host of SR and OOF/OOF books and journals since the very inception of those "turns." Punctum also published Behar's preceding work, which she herself mentions as a defining moment in her work towards OOF, see Katherine Behar and Emmy Mikelson, *And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art* (Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2016).

new crisis which is vigorously denied. Kolozova and Joy's volume revealed that it would be futile to embrace something like a "new" feminist and scientifically rigorous objectivity and universality in SR, while at the same time reframing academic feminism as a field that has no other choice than accommodate scientific data in ways it has stubbornly avoided to do ever since poststructuralism became a recognizable theory pin. Having said that, both Kolozova and Joy's volume and that of Behar have never aimed at antagonizing the cultural turn and the postmodern matrix of poststructuralism from a "disinterested" position: but that does not exclude the idea of maintaining a "view from nowhere." In fact, while Kolozova and Joy and their collaborators corrected the flawed idea that there is now a new stage of feminist objectivity, Behar and her collaborators demonstrate that objectivity is both a feminist and cultural concern. The very fact that the OOF volume is edited by an artist and curator and features other artists, as well as numerous examples from the arts world, should be telling for a specific *turn within* the epistemology of the cultural, not outside it.



In this sense, both these volumes, and here in particular Behar's OOF project, defy the expectation and, in some cases, the theoretical presupposition<sup>7</sup> that a feminist SR or

---

<sup>7</sup> See Panayotov, "Speculum," 132-3, where I have already reviewed this problem. Rosi Braidotti's attack on the "sausage fest" of SR and OOP/OOF, in Timotheus Vermeulen, "Borrowed Energy (Interview with Rosi Braidotti)," *Frieze*, August 12, 2014, [www.frieze.com/article/borrowed-energy](http://www.frieze.com/article/borrowed-energy), neither discriminates between those fields, nor knows the literature, nor looks in the most obvious resource to check her own assumptions, that is, Katerina Kolozova, *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 24-7, 117-20, who has already proved that Braidotti and feminist poststructuralism, and even posthumanism, implicitly, in light of the works of Barad, Bennet, Kirby and their cohorts of followers, can work together with something akin to feminist objectivity and universalism. I have addressed these very problematic omissions in Stanimir Panayotov, "The View from Nowhere and the View from Somewhere: Embodiment in New Realism and New Materialism" (unpublished paper presented at Sixth Annual Conference of the New Materialism Network: New Materialist Politics and Economies of Knowledge, Faculty of Law, University of Maribor, Slovenia, October 2, 2015). For a more informed, if even more scathing critique, see Jordana Rosenberg, "The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present," *Theory and Event*, Vol. 17, Issue 2 (2014), who has the gall to dismiss SR and OOF under the common rubric "the ontological turn" while reducing all these fields to misinformed and latent Marxisms, but does manage to explain what of *dialectical materialism* is dismissed under the operative umbrella term the "ontological turn." Unfortunately, the consensual reference on the matter of how Marxism and dialectical materialism (would) relate to a "feminist" SR and OOF (of which I, in turn, would use the umbrella term "feminist objectivity") has become Pheng Cheah, "Non-Dialectical Materialism," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 70-91, which is cited

OOF are figures of theoretical-feminist self-loathing burning in the heart of the sacred category of embodiment. On the contrary, some of the criticisms espoused against the all-male theory turns of SR/OOF, while partially true (see again Behar's note 1), are intentional misnomers defending an undefendable monopoly over the category of embodiment, and its political idolatry thereof. Thus, the attacks mounted against feminist object-orientation and/or objectivity have, at best, shaky ground and, at worst, no theoretical references to their cause. Behar's volume puts an end to a long-held feminist certainty and objection.

---

several times across Behar's volume. Rosenberg's 2014 critique, despite its vitriolic and often off-putting language, deserves at least an elaborate mention, which is not the case in the present volume. It is not cited anywhere in Kolozova and Joy's volume, too, which is generally unfortunate.