

Luke Turner, *The New Aesthetic's Speculative Promise*

(originally published on www.metamodernism.com 02/07/12)

The interweb has been abuzz of late with talk of The New Aesthetic. A never-ending stream of polemical blog posts and autobot-regurgitated twitter commentaries (hashtag #newaesthetic) bombards us from every angle. What is this new thing? Why does it matter? Where will it lead? Is it even a *thing* at all?

The stage was set in early 2011 with the eponymous Tumblr feed, an ever-expanding archive of technology-related imagery assembled by London-based digital creative, James Bridle. His collection set out to document evidence of the increasingly symbiotic relationship between man and machine, revelling in the often-unexpected beauty that arises when the human-digital divide is ruptured. A cornucopia of glitches, pixelations, render ghosts, face recognition failures, GPS anomalies and countless other digital artefacts serve to introduce novel visual forms, beguiling us with their strange, alien allure. Unimaginable just a decade or two ago, this new visual language has now been absorbed into mainstream culture, widely deployed by those working across the creative fields. The video for Kanye West's *Welcome to Heartbreak* from 2009 is a prime such example, utilising glitch effects to immerse us in lush new chromatic

textures; a psychedelic liquid light show for the digital age.

A question that has been posed by many, however, is whether the 'new' of The New Aesthetic is entirely justified. Are we merely witnessing a stylistic trend, an evolution rather than a revolution, that simply builds on an age-old relationship between technology and creativity? Machines have undoubtedly long been the subject of artistic intrigue and experimentation, and unexpected technological quirks and flaws all the more so. Half a century ago, musicians exploited the shortcomings of valve amplification, with hitherto unwanted sonic distortion at high volume suddenly becoming a virtue. Hendrix et al. never looked back. Similarly, the digital corruptions of today disrupt and subvert a linear utopian mechanical progression, acting as aberrations that provide us with alternative, arguably more potent and earthy sensations. There is a full-bodied materiality to the sound of distorted guitars, just as digital video glitches could be described as *gritty*, *crunchy*, *raw*, even *meaty*. Their errors and excesses would seem to spill out beyond the cool and austere boundaries of the virtual realm, their eruptions confronting us on a wholly more visceral level. The affective potential here is not in doubt, but at the same time there is perhaps nothing radical about the possibility of such phenomena

occurring within the limitations of any given technological framework.

Yet there is more to The New Aesthetic than simply digital quirks and anomalies. The underlying concern here is for the wider implications of the superabundance of technology, with contemporary culture attempting to come to terms with a new order of things, an order that is in constant flux. I am reminded (from a somewhat tangential perspective) of my experience of Zoe Leonard's recent camera obscura installation at Camden Arts Centre. The outside world was here mediated through a solitary lens mounted within the external wall of the gallery, projecting a vast inverted floor to ceiling image across the blacked out space. Though surely as faithful a pictorial reproduction as could be achieved, this fascinating image was accompanied by a lingering sense of peculiar visual disappointment. The view of the drab North London urban landscape beyond appeared to carry the familiar hallmarks of *digital* photography, the profusion of clarity unnerving and unnatural, its anaemic tones somehow lacking and unappealing. What was beaming through the aperture here did not seem to correspond to reality, or rather to the reality I had anticipated. That this antiquated apparatus produced such an apparently ultra-modern, unflatteringly high-definition depiction, devoid

of the saturated sparkle, velvety warmth and clichéd poeticism usually associated with vintage analogue imagery, led me to experience an odd sense of cognitive dissonance. Such an occurrence is surely symptomatic of the extent to which our expectations of the visual world have become increasingly muddled and deformed by the conflux of multitudinous technologies.

Perhaps, then, we should consider afresh how the term ‘new’ might be read today. Contemporary network culture facilitates the proliferation and transformation of imagery at an unprecedented and exponential rate. Our experience of the present has come to reflect the bewilderingly complex and diffuse temporal terrain in which we now operate. We no longer simply partake in a blinkered march towards the future, consigning the past to the scrapheap like some unloved beige-boxed bundle of obsolescence. We are nostalgists as much as we are futurists. We blissfully relive the 8-bit primitivism of a bygone age, preserved forever by the endless archival capacity of the internet, whilst utilising those same networks to shape the fantastical landscapes of tomorrow. We conflate the mechanical idiosyncrasies of disparate eras, basking in the hazy, saturated glow of Hipstamatic analogue simulations that render digital ugliness beautiful, whilst enjoying all the ease and immediacy of

the modern cameraphone. Furthermore, we harbour nostalgia for a *past*-future, one that never came to pass; for the promise of flying cars, jetpacks and hoverboards that failed to materialise (but that we secretly hope still might). We are thus cynics, and yet eternal optimists, our technologies driving our melancholia and invention in equal measure. The emergent metamodern condition allows us to face all directions in time at once, oscillating between the promises and pitfalls of the past, present and future. What is 'new' today is thus this empowering simultaneity as a position in and of itself, for which a potential new aesthetic might in part stand. Accordingly, conveying a spirit of irony and sincerity, as Bridle himself remarks in a sort of infinite bluff, *The New Aesthetic* "is a rubbish name."^[i] In the same way it is, of course, also highly effective.

Turning to the more speculatively weird and wonderful aspects of the current discourse, Bridle proposes that not only do we want technology to aid our day-to-day lives, but that we also wish to become more like machines ourselves. And, he suggests, this is a two-way street, since increasingly technology appears to foster a desire to become like us. As Jaguar's recent zeitgeisty advertising campaign proclaims, "There are machines that can do things for us, machines that can make things for us, machines that can see right through us, and machines that want

to be us, want to replace us.”[ii] Such talk of robot vision and mechanical desire is captivating, if not rather ominous, but aren't we getting ahead of ourselves here, given the relative inadequacy of current artificial intelligence? Though undoubtedly our physical and cognitive actions are increasingly shaped by the requirements of our high-tech surroundings, computers continue to merely carry out the commands of their human programmers with disinterested mechanical efficiency. Surely they cannot yet be said to have desires of their own, or to possess any aesthetic imperative? Might such traits, one wonders, be born only out of survivalist necessity, the evolutionary result of an essential need to replicate and self-propagate, the full potential for which we have not yet been able (or perhaps willing) to gift to any digital entity?

When asked the grandiose question of the meaning of life, Siri, Apple's self-proclaimed 'intelligent personal assistant', appears to confirm the enduring status quo. "I find it odd that you would ask this of an inanimate object", it replies. Yet, interestingly, repeating the same question elicits the following response: "Life: a principle or force that is considered to underlie the distinctive quality of animate beings. I guess that includes me.”[iii] Such a display of apparent existential schizophrenia creates an air of ambiguity in which we might enact the full

fantasy of artificial intelligence. Siri may soon reach the degree of sophistication necessary to breeze right through a Turing test, to fool us into believing we are conversing with another human being. (Who, for example, would regard a computer as being inclined to genuinely *guess* anything?) The aim of the Turing test is not to reveal an actual conscious entity, but a kind of computer-magician, a mechanical illusionist whose performance might fool and deceive us. There need not ever be any *real* magic at play here, if any such thing even exists. Consciousness, however, remains a persistent enigma to science. Could it be that its properties emerge simply out of brute force complexity, that there is a tipping point after which self-awareness is enabled, or is there some other essential kernel, of which we do not yet have knowledge? As living beings, are we fundamentally different from the stuff of the world, or are our brains merely machines, objects like any other? Perhaps, like magic, the effect of consciousness might somehow rely upon the suspension of disbelief.

here is a strand within the newly emerging Speculative Realist philosophies called Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) that seeks to place all objects, rather than man alone, at the centre of existence. Its speculations attempt to escape what has become known as the correlationist trap, described by Quentin

Meillassoux in *After Finitude* as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”[iv] The anthropocentrism that has dominated philosophical discourse since Kant’s Copernican Revolution, and the resultant split that such thinking necessitates between man and the world, is here being radically rethought. As Graham Harman states, “the human/world relation is just a special case of the relation between any two entities whatsoever.”[v]

Harman, alongside Levi Bryant, Tim Morton and Ian Bogost, proposes an object-oriented philosophy that would instate a flat ontology, removing the primacy of human-object relations, thus granting all objects similar ontological status. The worldview advocated by OOO approaches something akin to panpsychism, or as Harman prefers to call it, “polypsychism”, whereby all objects are considered to actually “perceive” their relations to other objects.[vi]

In his newly published book, *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost contemplates how we might engage with these ideas on a practical level, echoing a principle concern of The New Aesthetic, by posing the somewhat perplexing question, “What is it like to be a thing?” Likewise, Timo Arnall’s film of appropriated machine-vision footage, *Robot Readable World*,

asks, “How do robots see the world?” A montage of motion detection, traffic management, crowd tracking and face recognition visualisations, Arnall describes his video as an exploration of “the aesthetics of the robot eye.”[vii] We might, however, consider at this stage that the robot eye has no sense of aesthetics, has no preference for one sensory input over another. And yet we should also remember that the word aesthetics is derived from the Greek, *aisthēsis*, meaning *perception from the senses*. Modern computers, equipped with their abundance of digital sensors (optical, audio, thermal, gyroscopic, etc.) could thus be said to *sense* more than most objects. To a large degree, we design machines to sense the world in a similar way to our own bodies. The nature of the imagery we see output from computers is ultimately dictated by the limitations of human vision, packaged in graphical form, not straying far beyond the narrow band of the electromagnetic spectrum perceptible to our eyes. The ‘brains’ of machines are not, however, built like ours, and the implications of such differences provide fertile grounds for speculation. Might it not be, for example, those QR codes so loathed by Bridle[viii], in all their monochrome, utilitarian, orderly-chaotic elegance, that robots would find most beautiful?

Yet, were machines to become truly sentient, it is unlikely that we would ever be able to delve into their hidden inner worlds.

As Wittgenstein famously remarked, if a lion could talk, we would surely not understand him. If this is true of fellow carbon-based life forms, then what hope could we possibly have of empathising with the innermost experience of a silicone chip? OOO's theories, however, extend to all objects, animate and inanimate, physical and virtual, real and imaginary. The conception of a flat ontology here leads the art critic JJ Charlesworth to worry that "much contemporary western culture, theory and philosophy now harbours a sort of death-wish for the state of being human, or at least the kind of human which is the intellectual legacy of the enlightenment and the broader humanist project." [ix] And yet such fears should perhaps be allayed, for, as Bogost puts it, "*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally.*" [x] Far from signalling a bulldozing of hierarchies that would threaten our own place in the world, OOO instead attempts to offer a means by which we might begin to map out the myriad complexities of all existence. As Levi R. Bryant explains, "we need to recognize the inequalities among objects, the degree to which they unequally affect the world about them, if we are to properly understand the being of beings." [xi] Thus, he argues, "the point is *not* to stop thinking about humans...but rather to start thinking about the role nonhumans play in organizing our social relations in particular ways." [xii] As the aforementioned Jaguar advert

eventually concludes of machines, ultimately “they are *not* us.”

Given this heterogeneity, perhaps we can only ever pose the question of what it is *like*, rather than what it *is*, to be a thing. We are forced into the use of metaphor to transport us to the dark recesses of the inner worlds of objects. Harman’s concept of vicarious causation describes how real objects themselves can never actually touch, but instead “confront one another only by proxy, through sensual profiles found only on the interior of some other entity.”[xiii] He suggests, as Bogost puts it, “that relation takes place not just *like* metaphor but *as* metaphor”, which draws the question, “what if we deployed *metaphor itself* as a way to grasp alien objects’ perceptions of one another?”[xiv] Through an engagement with metaphorism, Bogost demands that a new aesthetic should create “fictions that speculate about the aesthetic judgments of objects. If computers write manifestos, if Sun Chips make art for Doritos, if bamboo mocks the bad taste of other grasses—what do these things look like?”[xv]

If this is how The New Aesthetic is to be defined, then the work of practitioners such as Benedict Drew, who fly the flag for this type of fantastical metaphorism, would surely be its embodiment. Drew’s art seamlessly melds the worlds of the physical and the virtual, at once incorporating crudely sculpted

lumps of clay and slick, high-resolution CGI renderings. Through these varied mediums, he concocts a sort of gritty neo-Bataillean digital base materialism, a heady mix of cerebral and sensory stimulation. At times, these works teeter on the precipice between the trashy and the profound, their vertiginously cool, fluorescent hipster-chic visuals rescued from the pit of vacuity by a bombastic, visceral potency and a nimble and sincere intellectual backbone. Works such as *Sludge Manifesto* (2011) employ a playful, extreme anthropomorphism in order to explore the question of technology's innermost desires. "We are the counterpoint; we are from the ground; we are the shit that is left over; we are amorphous; we shape-shift; we are connected", it proclaims. Anthropomorphism here, in its role as metaphor, is exaggerated not simply in order to reveal the absurdity of a technological animism. Rather, it facilitates the fantasy of experiencing an alien phenomenology, *as if* we were somehow granted access, through which we might begin to apprehend the very notion of its existence.

But metaphor alone can only lead us so far. After all, the niggling reins of common sense remind us that, at present, computers are concerned with writing manifestos no more than ants are interested in performing ballet. If a new aesthetic is to truly reflect an escape from the anthropocentric, correlationist

trap, to unmask the being of beings, how else could it be born? Here, we might turn to the ideas of another speculative thinker, François Laruelle. “A philosopher has never looked a man directly in the eyes”, he writes. “The philosopher is the man who turns his eyes away to look man in the eyes: he is a man with a distorted gaze.”[xvi] Laruelle seeks to banish this philosophical divide by endorsing a *non-philosophy*, an alternative path that necessarily entails a performative mode of enquiry, an enactment of radical immanence that would collapse the distinction between theory and action.

Applying these ideas to lens-based imagery in *The Concept of Non-Photography*, Laruelle asserts that “Photographic appearing is itself the immanent *that-which-appears*. The givenness is the thing itself *in-its-image*, rather than the image-of-the-thing.”[xvii] The capacity of the disinterested lens to objectively represent things in the world is thus argued to be of secondary importance here to photography’s capacity to embody the immanent condition of the world, of existence, of “the One” itself. Though Laruelle insists that all photography is blessed in this respect, he neglects to offer examples of specific works that best exploit its full potential (referring instead, in a somewhat odd move, to the fractal paintings of New York artist, Edward Berko). Thus, there is certainly room here for artists to explore

the further implications of Laruelle's ideas, and in doing so, formulate some kind of radically new lens-based aesthetic.

That Bridle's humble Tumblr stream has led us to engage in such far-flung speculations as these is surely its greatest achievement. The New Aesthetic has certainly proved itself to be a *thing*, and a thing of considerable value at that. The notion of newness acts as a byword for action, a call to arms. Yet at the same time it is entirely unsure of itself, of its goals. It jitters around, collecting and discarding ideas as it sees fit, creating loose associations, unaware of the full implications of those connections. It is a truly metamodern phenomenon, embodying a newfound impetus to speculate, to remain unresolved. The internet has provided a platform in which everyone may have their say, enabling the emergence of open-source movements such as this, in which direction can be perpetually indeterminate.

The passive, provisional, reflective nature of the Tumblr stream—which Bridle insists is *not* a manifesto—goes hand in hand with the desire to realign those same ideas with urgency towards a more emphatic, proactive mode. The need to deconstruct is today as present as the will to construct (a fact perhaps illustrated by my own *metamodernist manifesto*, proposed in healthy counterpoint to the predominantly reflective

intentions of this very platform). The name ‘The New Aesthetic’, in its brash, capitalised form, acts as a hook, a brand, a keyword that enables its ideas to spread virally throughout the channels of the social networks and beyond. Likewise, Graham Harman promotes the use of the term Speculative Realism to describe a similarly loosely assembled ‘movement’:

The brand is not merely a degenerate practice of brainwashing consumerism, but a universally recognized method of conveying information while cutting through information *clutter*. Coining specific names for philosophical positions helps orient the intellectual public on the various available options while also encouraging untested permutations. If the decision were mine alone, not only would the name ‘speculative realism’ be retained, but a logo would be designed for projection on PowerPoint screens, accompanied by a few signature bars of smoky dubstep music. It is true that such practices would invite snide commentary about ‘philosophy reduced to marketing gimmicks’. But it would hardly matter, since attention would thereby be drawn to the works of speculative realism, and its reputation would stand or fall based on the inherent quality of these works, of which I am confident.[xviii]

Earlier this year, Bridle shut down his Tumblr site rather abruptly. We were left to wonder whether this was a direct

consequence of the criticisms levelled by Bruce Sterling in his lengthy Wired article, in which he described the blog as nothing more than “a heap of eye-catching curiosities”[xix]. Or maybe it was instead a shrewd act of self-mythologising, ensuring further frenzied speculation. Either way, The New Aesthetic has already moved well beyond its original scope. It is now left to us to steer this vessel, with the continuing accumulation of opinion indicating that further exploration is deserved. The central paradox remains how we might ever begin to actually *think* or *sense* outside of ourselves. Is it at all possible to conceive of an aesthetic entirely alien to our own experience: a truly *new* aesthetic? Our best chance of success likely lies within some combination of the metaphorical and the performative. To invoke Wittgenstein once more, must we remain silent about that which we cannot speak? The answer is surely a resounding no, for here it has always been art’s promise, nay its duty, to speak the unspeakable.

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at-the-machines/

[ii] Jaguar Cars. *How Alive Are You?* 2012.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VyfmhTgPkQ>

[iii] MacRumors. 2012.

<http://www.macrumors.com/2012/05/23/apple-running-new-celebrity-iphone-4s-siri-tv-ads-featuring-john-malkovich/>

[iv] Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008. p. 5.

[v] Harman, Graham. *Realism Without Materialism*. Paper presented at the Twenty-first Century Materialism Workshop, 2009, Zagreb, Croatia. Audio recording at <http://materialism.mi2.hr/>

[vi] Harman, Graham. *Towards Speculative Realism*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010. p. 206.

[vii] Arnall, Timo. *Robot Readable World*. <https://vimeo.com/36239715>

[viii] Bridle, op. cit.

[ix] Charlesworth, JJ. *We are the droids we're looking for: the New Aesthetic and its friendly critics*. 2012.

<http://blog.jjcharlesworth.com/2012/05/07/we-are-the-droids-were-looking-for-the-new-aesthetic-and-its-friendly-critics/>

[x] Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology or What It's Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. p. 11.

[xi] Bryant, Levi. *Flat Ontology*. Blog entry, 2010.

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[xii] Bryant, Levi. *Worries About OOO and Politics*. Blog entry, 2012. <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/05/29/worries-about-ooo-and-politics/>

[xiii] Harman, Graham. *On Vicarious Causation*. In *Collapse II*, ed. R. Mackay, Oxford: Urbanomic, 2007. p. 184.

[xiv] Bogost, op. cit. p. 67.

[xv] Bogost, Ian. *The New Aesthetic Needs to Get Weirder*. 2012.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/the-new-aesthetic-needs-to-get-weirder/255838/>

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<http://fractalontology.wordpress.com/2009/11/21/new-translation-of-laruellesbiography-of-the-eye/>

[xvii] Laruelle, François. *The Concept of Non-Photography*. Trans. Robin Mackay. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011. p. 94.

[xviii] Harman, Graham. *On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno and Radical Philosophy*. In: *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Bryant, L., Harman, G. and Srnicek, N. Melbourne: Re.Press, 2010. p. 21.

[xix] Sterling, Bruce. *An Essay on the New Aesthetic*. Wired, 2012. http://www.wired.com/beyond_the_beyond/2012/04/an-essay-on-the-new-aesthetic