



Shattered Ethics: Abandoned Objects as Ethical Affordances

Adam Lovasz

Abstract: *This essay explores various manifestations of shatteredness and fractalized Being. Through a dense reading of recent social theory pertaining to ruins and abandoned, abject objects, I 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 its 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.*



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” (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 significance. There is not merely an object, where dirt is concerned, but a “system” (Douglas 36). Excluded, disposed materialities, such as those deemed “unclean,” are inseparable from systems of classification, according to Douglas’s hypothesis (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. The narrativity of ruined spaces has undergone a transformation of form that takes such places beyond any appreciation or sentimentality. They are positioned at the interstices of interpretation and non-interpretation, knowledge

and non-knowledge. 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, therefore, is a paradigm of social science through which we might conceptualize present absences.

Present absences are conceptualized in this essay as real virtualities, internal aspects of objects that are unopen to access. We bring with us a speculative realist ontological commitment to the integrity of inner relations; every object contains an outer and an inner aspect. “We might say,” writes Graham Harman, “that every object is not only protected by a vacuous shield from the things that lie outside it, but also harbors and nurses an erupting infernal universe within. The object is a black box” (Guerrilla 95). It is my view that a materially grounded ethics must take into account this basic ontological circumstance, the limited nature of access: no entity is capable of disclosing every secret. Harman has extensively criticized strands of new materialism that over-emphasize relations without taking account of non-relational internalities. The problem with an exclusively relational approach to materiality studies is that it allows “objects no surplus of reality beyond whatever they modify, transform, perturb, or create” (Harman, *Immaterialism* 10).

Yet surpluses, or excessive traces, are all around us. A fruitful and productive dialogue can be imagined between Harman’s speculative realism – intent as it is upon preserving the dignity of inaccessible things – and postmodern hauntological narratives of ghostly embodiment. Gillian Bennett and Kate Mary Bennett have convincingly shown through interviews that the dead too have presences. The remainder is there; it refuses to go away. Yet the dead are only partially open to access, and this is the source of their eerie character. They are even less accessible than the living. In the case of the ghost, we find a lack of access that presents itself as a presence, a matter out of place that should not be where it is. 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” (213). But relationality, it must be emphasized, is not enough. Otherness could never pertain to a world where objects lack hidden surfaces, clandestine potentialities, and internal secrets. What are ghosts if not “other creatures”? I propose an expansive, elastic definition of absent presences, defining any object or place that eludes representation. Such absent object 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. At this juncture, I equate the ruin with the present-absent virtuality of a shattered ethics. Ruins present an affordance for thinking about present absences. According to the view of ecological psychology, an affordance is an environmental aspect that allows for the possibility of movement within a hospitable terrain (Gibson 119–37). Alternately, affordances can also present themselves as negative possibilities: a steep slope, for example, affords death and injury. Rather than view industrial ruins 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 833). Ruins are affordances for a multiplicity of materialities and enactments. 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” (836). The ghost’s insubstantiability allows it to retain its plenitude, positioning it outside of any discourse, its properties those of an almost infinitely “other” series.

When we touch the walls of an abandoned building, we communicate our sympathy and complicity with the metonymically present absences that lurk inside, but never do these absent presences actually connect with the core of 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 213). Following the traumatic breakdown that is the evacuation of the scene of one’s life by the loved Other, the Other’s present absences return 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: “[W]hen people abstract themselves from situations, they lose not only presence but also agency” (Anton 170). Agency is not a given for Anton but an opportunity, a chance to participate in Being that may be lost at any moment. Agency is the ability to exploit the possibilities offered by an affordance.

Every environment is full of various potentialities. Particularity is essential to communication; it “provides its own horizons of agency and efficacy” (Anton 176). Agency is a process rather than a given ability in humans – or, for that matter, in all other social actants. The term actant here refers to all change-making agents that participate in any kind of network (see Latour). If actants lose their particularity, Anton argues, they abandon the actuality of their agency (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. (181)

Particularity need not entail any kind of discrete entity separable and abstractable from its environment, since the particularity of any agent is dependent upon the affordances of its environment. Indeed, the dilemma for any ecological 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. When we ourselves become haunted, when our gazes are transfixed by strange spirits, we become affordances for the return of the departed. As Lucas D. Introna and Martin Brigham emphasize, “communal proximity does not necessarily secure ethical proximity” (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 (3). Proximity to any kind of alterity is not without its dangers. Not only may the monster consume us, but we too can easily devour the undomesticated through domestication. Closeness and familiarity often serve to “circumvent the possibility of the ethical disruption and the putting into question of the Same” (Introna and Brigham 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” (69).

Everything is, in a sense, filthy; ghosts too may become forms of excess, waste matter that has been dumped but never completely eliminated (63). The ghost lingers and 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” (11). Spectres are inherently elusive; it is this very feature that

renders them hauntological. Any hauntologically informed material ethics must take into account the irreducibility of presence to access. The thinghood of the spectre is a re-turning, a subterranean operativity that resists any complete obliteration or integration of its materiality. There are no slip-slides into nothingness. Sinking through the strata, we almost reach contact with a non-human form of memory, a memory that clings to abandonment. It is this almost that renders such contact an impossible event. We can never fully 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, not the exception, and recognizing that “the eventuating ground of things is not itself present, visible” (Wood 215), would go a long way towards 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 Harman reminds us, “insofar as objects signal to us as a hidden summons or lure, we are never in direct contact with them” (Guerrilla 65). We can never come into direct contact with the spectre, nor even with the recent past. The elusive, haunted Thing “engineers a habitation without proper inhabiting” (Derrida 20). To this extent, any Levinasian “profound immediacy and inescapability of the other” (Introna and Brigham 174) constitutes a transcendental illusion. Others are, in conventional, anthropocentric modes of ethical investigation, situated in relation to us, but our mutual entanglement constitutes an indirect relation, certainly not any kind of direct participation.

While certain memories may be compiled and stored, alterity 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 837). The very scission of Self/Other would imply that there is some mode of operative compilation, be it on an implicit or an 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 recollections that we cannot distinguish from ourselves. Perhaps these obscure remnants, these dreamy shards of glass in our minds, were never ours to begin with. Ghostly remembrance is an experience of anonymity, a zone of contact with pre-subjective levels of memory. An eighty-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. (qtd. in Bennett and Bennett 148–49)

We cannot know (or not know) whether our dreaming pertains to the departed, the elusive thing, or some malignant entity. The eventuation of absent presence, even in its very singularity, is repetitive. It reveals the unmanageability of excess and mechanical repetition. Maurice Blanchot equates “the demand of the return” with “the demand of a time without present”; in the eternal return, “everything comes again” (16). But this re-turning, for Blanchot, is a revelation 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 (91–93). Such a description would benefit any serious scientific study of present absences. To meet with the ghost is to confront that which we do not know and cannot remember. Hauntology would be an agonistic mode of knowledge, a praxis that takes into account the finitude, precarity, and, yes, the superficiality of disclosure. There is a limit to how much we can know about a haunting Thing that “inhabits without inhabiting” (Derrida 21). Present absences haunt the territories

of Others, for they lack a territory of their own. By consequence of the object of study, hauntological investigations of materiality too must leave the territory of conventional social scientific inquiry. It is precisely this tendency to leave one's own place of habitation in favour of ruined and inhospitable liminal zones that makes many contemporary studies of materiality so enlightening.

Fragmentedness too is capable of presenting itself in the mode of an affordance. As the account of one physiologist bears testimony, fragmentation can become a window to alterity: “[O]ur pit became an opening to another world” (Kooyman R97). 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” (R97). Sinking into the depths of an otherwise 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 re-emerge once again at some hole in the ice. What else would the seal, this majestic and mysterious creature, be, if not an apparition, a spectre that haunts icebound seascapes? Many peoples, including the Yup'ik 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. (45)

According to this interesting, even profound, conception, we ourselves are archaeological sites, places of haunting where our descendants have been

reincarnated, returned to Being. There is hardly any way of differentiating between seal and human – they form a chiasmus, an intertwining. In the Yup'ik view, one can never be entirely sure whether or not the seal being hunted is 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, should they hunt the seals to extinction, they too would 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, unintegratable multiplicity. While the Yup'ik have an inkling of what they may expect – the seals do, in the end, return – we never quite know what to expect, either from ourselves or from our environs, when traversing a ruined, post-industrial landscape. 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 16). We exclaim incredulously, along with one of the eyewitnesses interviewed by Bennett and Bennett, “Father? Father’s dead!” (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: “[J]ust as one can be harmed by a spatially distant event, one can be harmed by a temporally distant event” (Fischer 352). Why is this the case? Why does the possibility of harm reside even in events that are 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 not one single world but a chaotic,

colourful multiplicity of worlds, all woven into each other but also internally divided, signalling various gradations of fadedness: “[A] level is a place from which objects are physically absent, but into which they phosphoresce all of their qualities, and by means of which they communicate with one another” (Guerrilla 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 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 between the strata, constant and ceaseless movement among these sediments.

Transformation is an inherent characteristic of such an ontology. Harman uses the term “style” to denote the various, ambivalent flows that radiate from within objects (Guerrilla 66–67). Things are not dead, inert, mute entities but, rather, animate actants. 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 post-industrial landscape by a variety of atmospheric and environmental factors. It is the end result of a long chain of convergences and divergences interacting with affordances. 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. (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" (Harman, *Guerrilla* 3). 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. Objects are entangled in one another's lines.

Philosophy too is perfectly capable of becoming a revenant, a bat that haunts abandoned mineshafts and subway systems, at least if we believe Derrida's line of reasoning in *Specters of Marx* (43–44). In order to take account of the unmasterable hidden reality that makes up each object, materiality studies too must become, to a certain extent, subterranean. We are always on the inside of one supervening object and simultaneously outside of countless others (Harman, *Guerrilla* 110). Ethics, therefore, must always be mapped out within uncanny zones of disconnection and discontinuity.

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 themselves within an infinitely regressive configuration. Much of

what passes as recycling is, in reality, “downcycling,” defined as “the reduction of material quality over time” (Sloane 86). Behind the world of apparent separation and mutual exclusion, there resides a “hinterland” where disparate fragments, obscure traces, marginal actants, and shards of shredded materials coalesce and bleed into one another. As Michael Sloane points out, in the hinterland (or, rather, hinterlands) that haunts the world of order, “trash is always already there, a contagion of traversing and mutating forms” (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 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 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” (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 844). Ruins afford an experience of alterity that transcends anthropocentric notions of agency. Our lungs are a place of habitation for homeless dust molecules. No longer do objects present themselves as banal possibilities for everyday, mundane use; rather, they serve as animate reminders of long gone activities, forms of work that

shall never again return to these sites, as well as new modes of activity that have nothing to do with human presence. The dust floats in the illuminated air regardless of whether there is an organism present and capable of perceiving this illumination. It is with acknowledgement and respect that we must approach the alterity of such objects. Þóra Pétursdóttir argues 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 578). Inclusion in social research need not entail the subsuming 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.

Alterity, to reiterate, is excess outside of access. Difference cannot be easily cancelled, for objects usually inhabit only one level of the world; simultaneous inhabitation is exceptional, although by no means impossible. Uncanny post-industrial landscapes are filled with what, following Derrida, we may describe as “exchanges and mixtures of revenants, the madly spectral compositions or conversions” (57). Meditation upon waste objects could very well constitute one method of healing what Morrison has deemed “our anthropocentric malaise” (134). Native American writer Gerald Vizenor underscores the importance of a contemplative approach to ecological awareness when he asserts that “landfill meditation restores the tribal connections between refuse and the refusers” (Vizenor 99). Between disposed and disposer, wasted and waster, there is an aboriginal affinity, an unbreakable chain of mutuality, an “overarching connectedness” (Sloane 88). In a sense, calls for the “inclusion” of objects are unnecessary, precisely because we never were “separated” from their alterity.

Difference does not just float around us – as though a scission between our flesh and the Other could ever have occurred!

Instead of a synthesis, there are various (and 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. The various complicated serialities and ethereal clouds of mutually black-boxed objecthoods contain excessive, inaccessible codes. John Scanlan writes perceptively that “garbage provides a shadow history of modern life” (36). Ghosts afford a rethinking of presence as always already infected with shadow histories and subaltern becomings. Every spectre is the shadow of an actualized presence (Derrida 121). 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, but is also constitutive of that very production. The haunting enacted by secretive entities is the ulterior aspect of productivity. Seemingly isolated and abandoned objects are teeming with signs, meanings, irradiating their surroundings with sensual ethers entirely of their own making. The forgotten mingles with the diseased, the absent presence infected with vacuity. Abandonment is a retroactive movement, a silence that is nevertheless independent of any living 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. (591)

The silence of machines that stopped operating decades ago bears testimony to the world of things, isolated objects that are absolutely foreign to 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, bizarrely, somehow to 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 communication 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” (Guerrilla 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 particular inter-objective composition. Too often, materiality studies has tended to focus upon the world of immanence, the world of relations, to the detriment of substances and hidden silences. But things have autonomous essences outside of their relations (Harman, *Immaterialism* 16). Perception always finds itself entangled in a meshwork of various anonymities, objecthoods that are anonymous in particularity. Their obscurity is visible, their silence discernible, their absence tangible. Inaccessibility does not necessarily entail nonexistence (Harman, *Guerrilla* 86). In fact, the thickness of objects portends the infinity of objective plenitude. Echoing Heidegger, Wood observes that “time as physics, as eruptive event, escapes representation long before it is party to expectations that are not met” (217). Similarly, it may be said that objects – these eruptive, radiating, obscure absent presences – escape representation. Through their escape, hauntological objects announce the thickness of their presence. Objects are vital players, actants full of animacy, retroactive enactments of memory. Even a

faded, worn object such as a comb is endowed with “thing power,” a mysterious ability to surprise and enchant (Pétursdóttir 592), and obscurity is the guarantee of objective autonomy.

In a hauntologically inspired speculative–realist material ethics, 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 eventual moral event. 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” (113). It is impossible to “read” ruins, yet such de–structurings nevertheless allow us to discern multiple “levels” and conflicts in the liminality of the ruinous interworld (113). This impossibility of reading allows for a de–growth of the moral subject. Who is it that enacts morality? Affordances themselves must be considered as constituting the primordial source of moral possibilities. And any movement that follows affordances must be considered as consonant with the demand of ecological ethics. This demand presents itself in the mode of the singular: we must follow the affordances of our environments. According to our ecological view, a moral action would be any conscious or unconscious movement that follows a trajectory warranted by some affordance. Immorality, by extension, would be any movement that runs contrary to the system of possibilities made possible by the environment’s affordances.

Ruination upstages any purist reading of ruins, rendering all language uses approximate and metaphorical when referring to abandoned places (Dale and Burrell 116). The temporality of the ruin is a strange tracing of non–linear time, a non–totalizing, fractalized temporalization of shatteredness. Previous functions have evacuated themselves from the hauntological scene. Jennifer L. Croissant, for example, has called for a “sociology of things that aren’t there,” an “agnotology” or “absentology” (18). Absence is never a singularity but a dynamic particularity manifesting itself in multiplicity. In spite of the singularity of the injunction

“follow your affordances,” what constitutes such a method of following is entirely perspectival. Similarly, there is no singular absence pervading all Being, for 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” (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, Guerrilla 109).

Locations are, simply put, not purely topological 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 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 (89), while Morrison concludes provocatively that “[w]ritings are the rubbish heap or composted waste of the mind” (199). Queer galleries of colourfully 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, in their particular actuality, be 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. 535–38). The time of emergence retreats towards ever more distant temporalities. Language and life alike are scattered on the ground, like leftover scraps. Things, be they “organic” or “inorganic,” all share what Wood terms “organized integrity” (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 “[t]hese complex, self-organized plasma structures exhibit all the necessary properties to qualify them as candidates for inorganic living matter” (qtd. in “Physicists”). Life need not be organic, but where does the border lie then between “organic” and “inorganic” objects? Ruins, too, similar to the phenomenon of inorganic life, allow us to question established binaries, for “ruins are a combination of stasis and dynamism” (Dale and Burrell 116). Emergence is never pure, never singular, but always a dirty, pollutive multiplicity that leaks meaning from its interiority, in the manner of a power plant 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 mixings and abominations” (Douglas 166). Alfredo González-Ruibal equates ruination with negation and ruined temporality, along with “the absence of time depth” (248), but I find this claim 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, non-human/post-human meanings

(Edensor 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 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” (582–83).

A laboratory 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’s directive to “re-member things” (87). 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 59). Wasted objects haunt perception, and their absent presences compose elegant hauntologies that keep on returning. Boundaries are real, but only as “sites of negotiation, of transformation, of sustenance” (Wood 220).

Excess materiality is the sustenance that distributes ruination within hegemonic networks. A fallen beam inscribes the possibility of heterogeneous dissolution into our own bodies. “Ruins,” write Dale and Burrell, “are the discomfoting reminder that all organising is futile and that the universe moves inexorably towards cold entropy” (114). Material heterogeneity 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 return to decompose material forms, in the context of a definitively infinite reduction. 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 other worlds 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 replaced by a language of junk, or language-as-junk (Sloane 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 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 beyond 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 abandonedness of their Being, the forlornness and angst of heterogeneous materials. The experience of pulsing, excessive materiality “is structured by repetition, the rhythmic and recurrent encounter with the basic material and

structural forms,” caused by their “horizontal and scattered character” (Nielsen 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. Perception is a prescient, nearly impossible redistribution among the strata of ruinous sites, where multiple slices 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 superfluity, if the ethical potential of alterity is to truly make itself present within the social. Such an ethical practice would constitute a non-violent abandonment of the will and the illusions pertaining 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; Introna). Such an ethics would open us up to the possibility of an infinite decentring of self. A dispersed, abandoned self is a particularity that is infinitely open to inhabitation, providing a place of indwelling to all spectres within its vicinity. It may even be surmised 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, I hope to have contributed to the construction of such a non-judgmental ethics, an ethics that would

transform society along the lines of infinite hospitality and corporeal generosity. Positioned among the countless materials of the world, having shattered our pretensions to egoism and narcissism, we shall have returned to an original, primordial affinity with this darkened world.



Works Cited

- Anton, Corey. "Agency and Efficacy in Interpersonal Communication: Particularity as Once-Occurrence and Noninterchangeability." *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, vol. 16, no. 3-4, 2008, pp. 164-83.
- Bennett, Gillian, and Kate Mary Bennett. "The Presence of the Dead: An Empirical Study." *Mortality*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2000, pp. 139-57.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Step Not Beyond*. 1973. Translated by Lycette Nelson, State U of New York P, 1992.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Crang, Mike, and Penny S. Travlou. "The City and Topologies of Memory." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2001, pp. 161-77.
- Croissant, Jennifer L. "Agnotology: Ignorance and Absence or Towards a Sociology of Things that Aren't There." *Social Epistemology*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2014, pp. 4-25.
- Dale, Karen, and Gibson Burrell. "Disturbing Structure: Reading the Ruins." *Culture and Organization*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, pp. 107-21.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. 1993. Translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, 2006.
- Diprose, Rosalyn. *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*. State U of New York P, 2002.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. 1966. Routledge, 1984.

- Edensor, Tim. "The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829–49.
- Fischer, John Martin. "Death, Badness, and the Impossibility of Experience." *The Journal of Ethics*, vol.1, no. 4, 1997, pp. 341–53.
- Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. 1979. Routledge, 2015.
- González-Ruibal, Alfredo. "Time to Destroy: An Archaeology of Supermodernity." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2008, pp. 247–79.
- Harman, Graham. *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*. Polity, 2016.
- . *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Open Court, 2005.
- Introna, Lucas D. "The 'Measure of a Man' and the Ethos of Hospitality: Towards an Ethical Dwelling with Technology." *AI and Society*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2010, pp. 93–102.
- Introna, Lucas D., and Martin Brigham. "Reconsidering Community and the Stranger in the Age of Virtuality." *Society and Business Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2007, pp. 166–78.
- Kooyman, Gerald. "Marine Mammals and Emperor Penguins: A Few Applications of the Krogh Principle." *American Journal of Physiology – Regulatory, Integrative and Comparative Physiology*, vol. 308, no. 2, 2015, pp. R96–R104.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Morrison, Susan Signe. *The Literature of Waste: Material Eco-poetics and Ethical Matter*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Nielsen, Tom. "The Return of the Excessive: Superfluous Landscapes." *Space and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2002, pp. 53–62.
- Nutman, Allen P., et al. "Rapid Emergence of Life Shown by Discovery of 3,700-Million-Year-Old Microbial Structures." *Nature*, vol. 537, 2016, pp. 535–38.

- Obeyesekere, Gananath. *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth*. U of California P, 2002.
- Olsen, Bjørnar. "Material Culture after Text: Re-Membering Things." *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2003, pp. 87–104.
- Pearson, Mike, and Michael Shanks. *Theater/Archaeology*. Routledge, 2001.
- Pétursdóttir, Þóra. "Small Things Forgotten Now Included, or What Else Do Things Deserve?" *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2012, pp. 577–603.
- "Physicists Discover Inorganic Dust with Lifelike Qualities." *ScienceDaily*, 15 Aug. 2007, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/08/070814150630.htm>.
- Scanlan, John. *On Garbage*. London: Reaktion, 2005.
- Sloane, Michael. "Poetry, Garbage, Gift: Assembling a Scrap Poetics in Contemporary North American Poetry." *Literature, Rhetoric and Values: Selected Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of Waterloo, 3–5 June 2011*, edited by Shelley Hullan, Murray McArthur, and Randy Allen Harris, Cambridge Scholars, 2012, pp. 85–109.
- Vizenor, Gerald. *Landfill Meditation: Crossblood Stories*. Wesleyan UP, 1991.
- Wood, David. "What is Eco-Phenomenology?" *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, edited by Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine. State U of New York P, 2003, pp. 211–34.

Adam Lovasz is a philosopher and PhD student in philosophy at Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest. His interests include phenomenology, speculative realism, comparative philosophy, and posthumanism. He has published numerous philosophy books, and his essays have appeared in various journals. His latest book, *The System of Absentology in Ontological Philosophy*, was published by Cambridge Scholars in 2016.

[RETURN TO CONTENTS \(LINK\)](#)