

Christian MORARU, *Flat Aesthetics. Twenty-First-Century American Fiction and the Making of the Contemporary*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, ISBN 978-1-5013-5526-4, 270 p.

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Following Bruno Latour's diagnosis in "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (2004), critique maintained its position among the pressing preoccupations of contemporary American letters, albeit primarily as a site to salvage and a practice to resuscitate. The two decades since have abounded in theoretical initiatives aimed at charting its (many) afterlives and, perhaps more urgently, at fine-tuning its heritage to the crisis-ridden world of the new millennium. Christian Moraru's work can be read in view of these disciplinary urgencies, as it scrutinises contemporary (American) literature with a persistent interest for its reactivity to the theoretical circuitry of the global present. Alongside *Cosmodernism. American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (2011) and *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the 21st Century* (co-authored with Amy J. Elias, 2015), the more recent *Bloomsbury Handbook of World Theory* (co-edited with Jeffrey R. Di Leo, 2021) and *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the Twenty-First-Century Conceptual Commons* (co-edited with Alexandru Matei and Andrei Terian, 2021) speak to this sustained interest and anticipate, in terms of themes and approach, the theoretical advancements of his 2022 monograph.

Prompted by "the growing and intolerable asymmetry between things' existence and their status or 'eminence' –political, aesthetic, and so forth– over the last decades" (xi), *Flat Aesthetics. Twenty-First-Century American Fiction and the Making of the Contemporary* does not lose sight of older concerns, such as the lopsidedness of the world-system or the categorial fickleness of the contemporary. It does, however, revisit them through a new (and, in a sense, totalizing) lens furnished by object-oriented ontology (OOO) and new aesthetics, subsuming them to the "political' asymmetry

skewing, with devastating effects in modernity and especially in the Anthropocene, world ontology” (4). It is to this end that the preface argues: “[b]orn ontologically free, things are everywhere in chains” (x). Beyond exemplifying the zealousness of Moraru’s theoretical prose (for that is what one might call it, straddling as it does the very edges of academic convention through its exuberant usage of metaphor and linguistic play), this claim premises much of the analysis it precedes. In it, disciplinarily autochthonous preoccupations such as genre, “globalization, world-systems theory, World Literature, postmodernism [...] periodization” (xiv) are hybridised with strands of contemporary philosophy in an attempt to formulate “a literary aesthetics that strives to place *all* objects on the same level” (x). Thus, Moraru’s reading of OOO, new materialism and speculative realism aims to locate their aesthetic implications and critical potential for and within literary studies, an enquiry which results in the central terminological bid of the volume: *flat* aesthetics. Referencing L. R. Bryant’s “flat ontology” (broadly understood as a rejection of any ontology of transcendence, a disavowal of the ontological primacy of any objects over others), it functions under the assumption that “[a]n aesthetics is not flat when it is tilted to some of its possible actors, and aesthetics as we know it has been largely lopsided, that is, theorized and practiced as a human prerogative” (2). To disengage itself not only from anthropocentrism, but from the ontological lopsidedness of the world *as such*, flat aesthetics operates under the guise of “equal presence” (2), recognizing the “aesthetic quality and capacity of all objects irrespective of what they are and whether they lie within or beyond the ‘artistic’ and the humanmade” (2). This displacement of human presence from the discourse and practice of aesthetics is necessary, claims Moraru (taking his cue from Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and other OOO proponents), not as a fabricated theoretical shift of which there have been many, but as a way (the only way?) to properly read (the literature of) contemporaneity in accordance with its „ontological facts” (4).

Conceived here as “something things of all sorts have been making for a while, as some-thing produced by them ‘out there’ in the world and whose production is variously reproduced and restaged” (xi), contemporaneity reads as less of a historical era or a cultural logic, and more as “a specific configuration of material culture, a cultural temporality fostered inside a certain historical temporality or interval in history. [...] an immanent configuration or schema of human and nonhuman actors acting on each

other, something *made* by their actions and interactions in the present and whose poiesis is for us to read” (15-16). Historically anchored by the end of the Cold War (or, as Moraru argues in *Cosmodernism*, by the September 11 attacks), contemporaneity entertains a precise and abundant relationship with the things that compose it; fabricated under the transactional logic of rampant neoliberalism, it only can be aesthetically navigated via its constitutive flatness. Its cultural signature “is objectual and derived from flat ontology, from an ontology of democratic and strong presence – from the ontology of a radical ‘is’” (211). Thus, to decipher it entails an acknowledgement of things as “carriers of the contemporary” (211), and an engagement of their intransitive objecthood, as it presents itself and interacts with fellow objects. Referred to as *flat* reading, this critical practice has a strong curatorial nature, insofar as it engages with the “object com-positions” (xiii) of the “con-temporary” (16) in a merely observing and non-hermeneutic manner. Its central ambition is to surpass surface reading in how closely and non-invasively it attends to its object, which “is no longer a symptom, a stand-in, or other fungible item to be traded for a revelation, disclosure, ambition, and other kind of subtextual or contextual knowledge, value, or aim, but the agent and site of an ‘energetic’ wink, enlightening and valuable, at other objectual links in the assemblage’s chain” (13). The methodological specificities of flat reading are described as follows:

Where ‘in-depth’ reading variously rehearses the old base-superstructure interpretation scheme and so ends up transgressing and even cancelling out its object in search of the foreordained ‘determining’ context, flat or surface reading reinstates the object as object, as ‘sticky’ form to be read as *such*. [...] But flat reading is ‘distant’ as well, in that it also gets a purchase on objects situated at various distances from that object inside ampler ensembles, whose ‘viscous’ materiality this kind of reading navigates unhurriedly. (12)

The author goes to great lengths to further establish two of his stances (and their consequences for flat reading as method). Firstly, that the so-called presence of objects does not entail transcendence or entering the territory of metaphysics (in a post-Heideggerian and/or Derridean key); instead, it comes down to “what objects present, to the presentation they make and what it does through their sheer *being-there*” (3). As he further emphasizes in the closing chapter: “presence is not an ontotheological fantasy

but to the contrary, a thing that presents itself materially, affirms its being-there, and impacts, refers to and otherwise engages with other things through its presentation” (204). Secondly, that this manner of “attending to things ‘on their own terms’ need not deactivate ‘critique’” (xv); presumably, critique is retained in the ever present effort to dismantle the logic of instrumentality all objects, from poems to cereal boxes, are enshrined in (even though, in the most essential of ways, critique rests precisely on the mechanism of ‘in-depth’ reading described above, which flat reading aims to amend, if not to avoid altogether).

As the five parts of the volume go on to exemplify, such reading guidelines, albeit theoretically pertinent when laid out in the Introduction, prove tricky to commit to when put to test across a corpus of contemporary American prose, comprising the works of those authors Moraru deems “contemporary twice: aesthetically and historically” (xii) (Ben Lerner, Nicole Krauss, Michael Chabon, Ben Lerner, Mohsin Hamid and Emily St. John Mandel, among others). Across their works, Moraru performs a minute reading of object compositions subsumed to five object classes (if one may call them that) – language, display, exit, revenant, kinship. Each of these objects is dedicated a three-chapter part which combines textual analysis and interpretation of a self-restrained sort, honing in, respectively, on the objecthood of linguistic entities (more precisely and most interestingly, literature); the transactionalism of the patrimonial museal assemblage and how a post-Duchampian curatorial logic might deactivate it; the legibility of spatial allotment in contemporaneity and how it reads against the processes of migration; the “zombie pedagogy” (xvi) permeating the contemporary American imagination as construal of the American polity; and, lastly, a shifting portrait of the “Kafka family” as it coheres across national spaces, hinting at the alternative ways in which literary history can be traversed. Although all five parts follow a common structure and, to a certain degree, exhibit a common commitment to flatness as “ontological datum” (2), one might argue that it is the first part, “Language”, that most consistently drives home the imperatives of flat aesthetics, given its coverage of how literature might undo the pervasive commodification of objects within the transactional regimes of contemporaneity.

Broadly dedicated to language *as* object and linguistic entities *as* metaobjects – “viz. an object naming, indexing, describing, and overall referencing other objects” (30)

– this first part asserts that twenty-first-century American fiction pushes back against the “the con ‘art of the deal’ and other kinds of Trumpian transactionalism [...] which threaten not only the material world commonly understood but also literature’s own, intrinsic materiality” by “reaffirming the objecthood of literature and of language largely” (30). Out of the abundance of examples (which range from DeLillo’s pre- and post- *White Noise* works to Jean Kwok’s 2010 *Girl in Translation*), Moraru scrutinizes Ben Lerner’s *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016) and *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), read alongside Michael Chabon’s 2004 novella *The Final Solution*. As examples of a “prose that punctuates language and the agency of linguistic acts and objects” (31), these texts are strongly contaminated by postmodernism and its strongly metafictional inclinations, while also supplanting it through how their clear participation “the making of the contemporary” (31):

this narrative material is contemporary not because it happens to be written and published during what is colloquially known as “the contemporary era,” but because it makes the contemporary. [...] literature and contemporaneity are intimately bound up with one another not because the former duly reports on the latter or because the latter is the shaping context of the former, [...] but because a poem or play’s composition is part of, brings to light, and offers systematically insights into the vaster composition – the making and the resulting makeup, the architecture of the contemporary. (31-2)

The argument which transpires here stages an optimistic (if not outright philosophically idealist) encounter with the aesthetic, which, long ago shunned from the main debates of the discipline, is now energetically recovered through the critical subterfuge of ontological flatness, which indefinitely expands the semantic limits of “beauty.” The invigorated elasticity of the aesthetic functions, in Moraru’s reading, as an antidote to the post-Cold War exchange regime, which had jeopardized the literary object’s objecthood “by cashing it out in actual or cultural currency” (35), forcing either author or critic to “literalize” it – in other words, to commodify it. That is why, starting from Lerner’s sharp observations in *The Hatred of Poetry*, Moraru elaborates a reading of the literary entity *qua* object, highlighting how, through its uselessness and linguistic

intransitivity, “real” poetry sabotages the instrumental logic of language and, almost metonymically, “de-perverts” the transactional mechanism which pervades it: “[t]he deceptively smooth ‘poetry’ of commerce [...] can be ‘de-perverted’. To do so, one must unyoke language from the transactional economy of the serial, the numeric, and the quantifiable and respect it for its own sake, aesthetically, on behalf of untransactable, beautiful form, and more generally, of beauty” (39). Chabon’s *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* is approached through the same theoretical enmeshment, in a labyrinthine reading which showcases how genre fiction (in this case, mystery) can employ its conventions to comment on the devastating logic of the transactional (in this case, the proto-digitization of human life in Nazi Germany). The first part reaches a conclusion which is strongly reminiscent of other recent accounts of literature as emancipatory and resilient in the face of global crisis (Wai Chee Dimock’s position in *Weak Planet* promptly comes to mind): “If it is to hold ontologically, to *be* and be received as such, literature would have to be relevant as literary form, historically and politically; it would have to tell, or rather *show* us, besides how our contemporary is made, how this storytelling might make a difference in the contemporary world.” (59)

It is within this rhetoric of theoretical resuscitation that the closing chapter also argues, with effective brevity, in favour of the volume’s central proposal: the theoretical acknowledgment of a new literary aesthetics, brought about by the depreciation of postmodernism and the rampage of American neoliberalism, which is necessarily “ontology-driven” (204) and thus flat and nonhierarchical, specifically equipped to approach things in their thing-ness. Vigilant to the striking (hyper)presence of objects as they assemble themselves across the fabric of the global present, such an aesthetics is singularly able to mine the contemporary for its openings of emancipatory futurity. The final paragraph is particularly revealing in its explanation of how a flat aesthetics might precede a Latourian object-oriented politics of a sorts:

Object assemblages constitute and illuminate political networks [...]. Quite revealingly in the ‘post-truth’ era of manipulatory relativism and populist demagoguery, this aesthetics rests on things that present themselves [...] true and undeniable in their raw existence, be they a historical reality still bearing on our lives today such as slavery or the Holocaust, a scientifically proven fact, an environmental disaster, an everyday

occurrence of minuscule proportions, a rock, an artifact, or any other thing we touch, move, think, or somehow handle. Flat aesthetics reawakens us to the imperative reality of things human and nonhuman, sentient and non-sentient.

This borderline utopic reimagining of the aesthetic as a fully-fledged, situationist-infused apparatus of “de-pervverting” objects of all sorts, pushing them outside the fraudulent logic of the transactional and into the pristine domain of their ontological truth, renders *Flat Aesthetics* commendable, as do its minutely conducted segments of flat reading. However, the volume may ultimately leave one wondering whether the accusations of commodity fetishism, leveraged by the likes of Joshua Simon against various OOO proponents, might not legitimately target it as well, despite its provisional commitment to the ethos of critique.