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The Ludic Life of Things: Explorations in the Vitality of the Ludic Object in Contemporary Narratives

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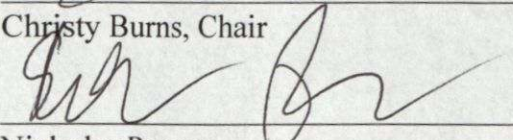
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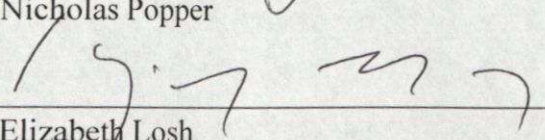
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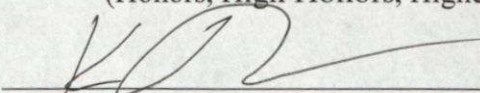

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The Ludic Life of Things: Explorations in the Vitality of the Ludic Object in
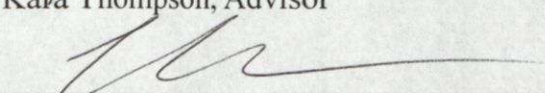Contemporary Narratives

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by

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I. <u>To the Context: Introduction Towards an Object-Oriented Literary Criticism</u>

> "*But as it is, we notice that before our eyes*
> *Many things are moving various ways throughout the skies*
> *Above our heads, and on dry land, and in the briny ocean.*"
> — Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*

This project seeks to make a detailed analysis of the activity and vitality of the material culture present within contemporary American narratives. Drawing upon new ideas of Being developed by Object-Oriented philosophers, this work aims to divert literary analysis's focus from the non-material, Jamesonian mode of the 'Political Unconscious' to a re-energized grappling with the 'Material Unconscious' that pervades contemporary texts. It is, in other terms, an effort to go *to* the object, with all that that entails.

On the face of it, the call to the objects may seem facile or innocuous— a relic of an old Joseph Addison tale or an ethnographer's toolkit— but it carries within it a powerful idea. If we heed the command, if we make our focus object-oriented, we discover a weirder and more complex world than we might otherwise expect. The things around us, so often seen as meaningless signifiers or abased vessels, can be recognized as *vital* things, concealing within themselves an activity that we cannot appreciate. The hierarchies of action and behavior, the hierarchies of being, that our current ontological vision has constructed can be re-calibrated and flattened. To go *to* the objects, then, is to attempt to recover a vital space that has been long unimagined.

Taking the 'objects' of contemporary society as the goal of inquiry is a contentious and difficult subject. To go *to* the objects, though, necessitates engagement with ongoing philosophical perspectives on ontology. Much of historical and

contemporary ontological thought has operated to undermine their legitimacy (and at times even their existence). Even as one tries to understand an object on its terms, critics from these positions are making every effort to destabilize it—deliberately or not, to undercut its material presence. Some are wont to claim that the object is simply a manifestation of some deeper underlying force (Harman, *Quadruple Object* 10-13). Others, swayed by the sign, attempt to undermine the object, subsuming both it and our reality in the mind or the post-structuralist frameworks of discourse or power (8-9). Neither ontological position is of much use in an effort to grasp the vitality or activity of the material object.

Worse than that, though, these pre-existing ontological interpretations actually threaten one's ability to consider and to access the Being of the material thing. Caught between these eddies of undermining and overmining, the objects after which the critic seeks to chase can seem Protean forms, retreating not only within themselves but also within the vision of the world. The critic can reach out to grasp them only to see them evaporate into language. She can wrestle the words to the ground only to find it, and herself as well, transformed into some new Heraclitean fire. The critic can retreat into high-flung prose and complex analogies, losing the object under the weight of obscurantism. Then, the critic cannot go over the objects and cannot go under them. To go around the objects would be folly. Rather, this project argues that a critic may go *to* them, and treat them, bridge included, as they are.

If those ontological positions are flawed, the critic interested in grappling with questions of the object must instead embrace a developing branch of Speculative Realist

philosophy called, fittingly enough, Object-Oriented ontology. This movement, led by

American philosophers Graham Harman and Levi Bryant as well as theorists like Jane

Bennett and Timothy Morton, conceives of a flat ontology, one in which the role of the

object as independent actant is highlighted and developed. Rather than undermining the

object's existence, Harman and Bryant argue that each individual object must be

recognized as always already withdrawn within itself.[1] Conceiving of each object in this

manner significantly alters one's vision of subject-object' and 'object-object'

relationships, making both networks spaces of vicarious mistranslation, but also revises

the perceived epistemological break between the being of *humans* and the being of *things*

(Morton, 'Here Comes Everything' 4). From an Object-Oriented perspective, the two

categories are in fact one democracy of objects, full of vibrant and vital matter.

The philosophical basics of Harman's Object-Oriented philosophical position are

made clear in his 2011 work *The Quadruple Object*, wherein he invites scholars to reject

their traditional visions of ontological epistemology.[2] Harman's ontological vision is

founded upon a re-appraisal of Heidegger's famed analogy of the hammer. In Section 1.3

of *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops an ontological vision of the world based on the

concept of the *Dasein*. Heidegger's conception of the *Dasein* is a reworking of the

traditional Husserlian vision of transcendental consciousness and object intentionality. To

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[1] Bryant's argument for the withdrawal of the immanent object— that is to say the existence within each individual object of an unknowable and unreachable surplus of being— is rather complex (befitting his training as a Lacanian psychoanalyst). In its most basic form, it differentiates "the ontologies of presence and transcendence and withdrawal and immanence" to reveal that the transcendent is always self-present while the very immanence of the vast world of objects reflects a withdrawal of each from the other (Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 269).

[2] Harman's perspective is privileged within this work as his 2004 book *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* stands as the primary progenitor of the movement.

Husserl, it is the thinking ego which both creates the subject's consciousness of objects

and makes all objective inquiry possible. For Heidegger, the *Dasein*, contra

transcendental consciousness, is a kind of mode of being, whereby one is inherently and

pre-consciously social and *in-the-world.* The *Dasein* operates with a necessary openness

to the world and a kind of pre-intentional conception of being that is radically distinct

from the transcendental consciousness imagined in Husserlian thought.

In explicating the *Dasein*'s interactions and encounters in the world, Heidegger

develops an analogy to the common usage of equipment, specifically of a hammer. He

argues that humans encounter the hammer in two main and incommensurable manners: as

it is in use, when it is "ready-to-hand" (*zuhanden*), and when it is considered from afar, as

an object of study, as "present-at-hand" (*vorhanden*). As Heidegger puts it, "the

hammering itself uncovers the specific "manipulability" of the hammer...No matter how

sharply we just look at the 'outward appearance' of things in whatever form this takes, we

cannot discover anything ready-to-hand" (Heidegger 98). Moreover, in Heidegger's view,

there is one state of thing-being which allows the difference between these two categories

to be crystallized, that of "unreadiness-to-hand." Per Heidegger, the unusability of the

tool that breaks, the hammer that can no longer nail, is discovered "not by looking at it

and establishing its properties, but rather by the circumspection of the dealings in which

we use it" (102). This "unreadiness-to-hand" makes the object "conspicuous," which has

"the function of bringing to the fore the characteristic of "presence-at-hand" in what is

"ready-to-hand" (104). In other words, when the hammer breaks, its existence as

hammer, previously integrated into the working whole of the equipment at hand, jumps out at the user precisely because of its obstinate failure to work.

This is one of the most discussed philosophical analogies of the 20th century, but Harman has a unique and incisive reading of the passage. As he first explicated in his 2003 text *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Heidegger's vision of "presence-at-hand" and "readiness-to-hand" reveals that objects withdraw from analysis, leaving part of themselves in a kind of "subterranean," unreachable, reality (Harman, *Tool-Being* 1-2). Just as the "presence-at-hand" of the tool (which is kept hidden until its degradation) remains secreted within the object while it is "ready-to-hand," the real qualities of each object remain withdrawn within themselves. One can look at a giraffe at the zoo or the seatback in front of them, but one cannot grasp the whole of their being, the entirety of their reality. Rather, one is trapped in what the philosopher of mind Thomas Nagel would term "the subjective character of experience—" the manner in which individual consciousness withdraws from and exceeds its physical components (Nagel 436).

This manner of withdrawal constitutes a kind of 'hidden surplus,' the cache of real qualities that are untranslatable, within each object. Amongst the Object-Oriented thinkers, Timothy Morton likely develops this conception of the 'hidden surplus' in the manner most pertinent to literary criticism. In *The Ecological Thought*, he develops a conception of all objects being what he terms "strange strangers"— things which are alien both existentially and phenomenologically— while nevertheless remaining totally entangled with each other in the "Mesh" (Morton 46-47). These dual facets of existence

render the world a weird space, one in which all things and places are uncannily

connected— and indeed Morton draws upon Freud's "the Uncanny" in his formulation of

the ecological thought— and yet also haunted by ungraspable surpluses of being (52).

Morton's vision of the object, then, plays with the "irreducible" sign of the Barthesian

reality effect, inverting its evacuation of meaning from the material thing to create an

open, ghostly presence within it. If this seems a strange way of characterizing the world,

that is how Morton wants it. To him, and to his theoretical companions, ours is a strange

world, one full not only of "uncertainty" and "ambiguity," but also vibrant activity

(59-60).

Crucially, the existence of this 'hidden surplus' extends past the causal relations of

human beings and objects. The withdrawn-ness hold true for all entities and all

interactions, from humans and hammers to snowflakes and streetlights (Harman, *Tool-*

Being 2). As I stare at or rustle within the seatback pocket in front of me, the pocket itself

withdraws from my interaction. At the same time, though, its interaction with the seat

itself must be similarly shadowed by a surplus value.

From this vantage-point, every interaction of objects occurs as a kind of

transformation, whereby the sensual qualities of the *actors* transmute each other. My

rustling through the seatback pocket anthropomorphizes it. My interaction with the

pocket is purely upon terms of human phenomenon: skin-based feelings of the texture of

the fabric and the gloss of the in-flight magazine. The same must hold true, though, for

the pocket's sense of my hand; it must, in a way, *pocket-omorphize* my skin. Its

interaction with my hand, its stretching reaction to my spatial invasion, must develop from distinctly pocket phenomena.[3]

This vision of objects necessarily decimates Heidegger's own stubborn insistence on the central importance of *Dasein*. Or, to put it in a different manner, it expands the idea of *Dasein* to include all objects, rendering each thing unique and irreducible. In a ghostly world recognized as populated by ever-withdrawn objects, the centrality of the human being— of any one perspective— evaporates into a decentralized vision. The ontological vision recalls Bachelard's rumination on the roundness of a tree; it "has countless forms, countless leaves" but it "is subject to no dispersion" (240-241). Gone is the totalitarian vision of the exceptional *homo sapiens sapiens*, replaced by the alliances of a flattened, democratized object world. The post-Kantian chasm between human and world that has for so long defined ontological argumentation must now be replaced by consideration of the gap between, as Harman puts it, "objects and relations" (*Tool-Being* 2).

An embrace of an object-oriented perspective places the nature and modality of the object in question. If each object is made up of atoms, or quarks, or vibrating strings, doesn't the thing itself explode upon consideration? Isn't it our own interaction with the object which defines it? These questions risk returning one's perspective to a kind of dangerous correlationism, whereby the only way an object can exist is by means of relational interaction or observation (Morton, "Treating Objects" 60-61). An object is not

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[3] Indeed, the pocket must have a kind of alien phenomenology all its own. For more consideration of the nature and implications of such phenomenologies from an Object-Oriented perspective, see the first chapter of Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (1-34).

invalidated by the presence of smaller objects within it; as Timothy Morton says, "[t]hat a

lifeform is made of atoms does not mean that the lifeform is less real than atoms" (59).

Rather, the ghostly nature of withdrawn objects means that no object is reducible to any

of its consistent parts. In fact, the object can exert a kind of "downward causality" on its

constituent parts, influencing them in much the same way that they influence it (Bryant,

The Democracy Of Objects 286-87). Larger objects can only be accounted for in terms of

their own assemblage, not in terms of their smaller parts, so that each object then exists

on its own terms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this Object-Oriented, flat perspective on the nature of

things has met with some resistance. Many critics of the concept have characterized the

idea of "withdrawn-ness" as mystical pablum or Sokelian, postmodern blather.[4] However,

and to no fault of Object-Oriented Ontology, modern research in the physical sciences

serves to reject these criticisms and defend some of the movement's most striking claims.

Consider, for example, the quantum mechanical problem of entangled atoms.[5] Current

(peer-reviewed) research has finally allowed physicists to create the atomic relationship

that physicists from Einstein to Podolsky to Schrödinger have theorized since the birth of

quantum mechanics— singular atoms and particles have been isolated in various labs to

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[4] This critique is evident in Peter Wolfendale's *Object-Oriented Philosophy (*the quote is drawn from pages 342-343), and is also present, if better articulated, in Christian Thorne's blog-post "To the Political Ontologists." The theorist Alexander Galloway holds a related position, arguing in "A response to Graham Harman's 'Marginalia on Radical Thinking'" that Object-Oriented Ontology's use of postmodern language is not only blather (an Orwellian "koan") but is in fact deliberately misleading from its inherently conservative roots.

[5] This is a favorite example of Object-Oriented philosophers and their Speculative Realist ilk. For further expansion on the ontological importance of quantum entanglement, see Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, especially p. 247-352 and Timothy Morton's "Treating Objects Like Women." Barad's work is especially useful, as she delves into the mathematical and experimental underpinnings of the subject in-depth.

the point that their individual characteristics can no longer be independently described (Horodeck). It appears, instead, that the individual particle is instantly influenced by different, distant particle in spite of their disparate locations. Such behavior has been viewed in particles the size of photons to 30 micron long metal paddles (O'Connell). The only way for an observer to view the entangled particles is in the phenomenon of their *interaction*, so that the phenomenon becomes the ontological unit (Barad 347-49). The nature of these entangled particles—at once separate and inseparable, at once distinct and indistinct— is revelatory not only of the strange nature of quantum mechanics, but also of an unseen (and possibly unseeable) *vitality* within all things.

The ability of things to interact in this manner (on the quantum level) renders even the most basic particles, most foundational sub-atomic pieces of the universe, *actors*. Although this is, as Ian Bogost would have us say, a kind of "alien" agency, one that seems far removed from typical acts like typing keys or shooting a basketball, it is an agency nonetheless (Bogost 1-8). Objects, then, act, although perhaps it is better to say they *interact*, and they do so constantly. The inability of the human observer to conceive of, to understand, the activity of objects— like the inability of the scientific observer to capture or differentiate the entangled particles of the quantum experiment— is due to the fact that they do not manifest the actions we expect them to. They do not act in the human-manner, or the Newtonian-manner, but in the alien-manner of a ghostly object.

Moreover, quantum entanglement must force one to reconsider the position of the human observer in the ontological field. Just as the conception of the "withdrawn" object flattens the ontological field, removing the epistemological break that has theoretically

enabled our ability to claim an epistemological break between *actors* and objects, entanglement forces us to understand that we exist within and in concert with a whole plane of vital matter. As Karen Barad argues in breaking down her closely related theory of agential realism, entanglement allows us "not [to] position human concepts, human knowledge, or laboratory contrivances as foundational elements of the quantum theory," but instead to see human beings as "emerg[ing] through specific intra-actions" between entangled actors and phenonema (Barad 352). In other words, the field of ontological observation is not only flat, but interwoven.

For the literary critic, the reconsideration of Being which an embrace of Harman's Object-Oriented perspective requires can be of vital importance. Objects have always fascinated and haunted literature— from the rusty armor of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* to the magic jade of *The Story of the Stone*— but the material culture present in literature has long presented something of a problematic for critics and theorists. Indeed, literary criticism has often been wary of investigating the multitudinous curios that people their stories. This perspective on the material culture within literature is well articulated by Barthes in his seminal essay "The Reality Effect." The objects that fill up the small crags of literature, the barometer resting mid-sentence in Flaubert, are to Barthes "irreducible residues" defined by their "very absence of the signified" (142-148). Rather than acting as signs of their own materiality, the objects of literature merely serve to represent reality itself; they are evacuated of interior meaning. Although Barthes's vision of 'the reality effect' can be incisive, its application to many texts can operate to obscure rather than elucidate the impact and meaning of the material culture there represented. Indeed, as Bill

Brown has demonstrated, even in Flaubert, even along Barthes's semiotic term, the

particular barometer resting on the particular table denote a variety of vital information

about the society that created it and the activity of the 'residual' object itself (Brown, *The*

Material Unconscious 16).

Moreover, even when the object if brought front-and-center, there often seems to

be a natural reaction to pull away from the simple thing and to seek out the metonymic of

the human subject in its treatment. Consider, for example, the case of Addison's

"Adventures of a Shilling." In that 1714 essay, Addison depicts the piece of currency as

actively narrating its day-to-day life, from its birth in Peru to its misadventures being

traded around in England. It would seem, on its face, to be a prime opportunity for an

object-oriented analysis, one in which the material thing cannot be semiotically discarded

as a residue or emptied sign. Yet, critics have historically been quick to do just that,

ignoring a consideration of the materiality of the story in favor of viewing the shilling's

narrative as a metonymic commentary on the English public in late Stuart England.[6] The

object, rather than being the subject in these analyses, becomes obscured and de-centered.

Critics seem wont to pull material culture away from any suggestion of its own existence

and towards an anthropocentric consideration of its humanity.

This problematic of material culture in literature first came to light in reaction to a

larger academic movement that sought a reconsideration of the importance of the object

in human interaction commonly called "Thing Theory." Building on the work of

influential anthropologists and cultural theorists, Thing Theorists have sought out what

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[6] See for example Amy Witherbee's essay "The Temporality of the Public in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator,"*
in Volume 51 of *The Eighteenth Century*.

Bill Brown calls "the material unconscious" in literature, the "repository of disparate and fragmentary,…even contradictory images of the material everyday," so as to detail both the influence objects have upon texts and the impact those texts have in "formalizing… the heterogeneity of lived life" (*The Material Unconscious* 4).[7] The Thing Theorists thus allow(ed) themselves to consider the material objects in their texts in the terms of their materiality. They made it so that objects, then, could be allowed to be considered as objects. Rather than, as Elaine Freedgood puts it, "indenturing" the material object to the human "subject," Thing Theorists' analysis allows the object to be treated in terms of its own properties and place in society, revealing new and understudied imaginaries within well-worn literary texts (Freedgood 12-13). Through their readings of literary objects, objects are allowed to retain (although it is often figured as an act of gaining) an individual significance within the work and the culture from which it developed.

Furthermore, the consideration of the circumstances and the labor folded within the 'material unconscious' of those texts has allowed Thing Theorists to develop a more energized politics of the object. Reading the literary object as object, which means of course considering its material history and societal significance, allows critics like Freedgood to consider the aesthetic differentiations between the metaphoric and the metonymic in the hermeneutics of Eliot's *Middlemarch (*136-138). It also, though, creates the space for a re-consideration of the object's place in the social life of the world, highlighting its formation and context as a commodity (Appadurai 13). A consideration of

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[7] The influence of anthropology on the literary pursuit of Thing Theory can perhaps not be overstated. The impact is apparent even in Bill Brown's liberal use of the term "Deep Play" in his reading of gambling in 19th century American literature.

the material unconscious of literature, influenced as it is by the Jamesonian pursuit of the political unconscious, can serve to retrieve and clarify the colonial, class and gendered politics of literary texts in a manner otherwise impossible, drawing upon historical truths and metonymic readings to uncover new interstices and vectors of power relations in texts like *Maggie* or *Jane Eyre* (Brown, *The Material Unconscious* 205, Freedgood 31-36).

At the same time, though, these analyses of the Thing retain many of the flaws that their manner of readings set out to remedy. Even while championing the object, while championing 'the material unconscious,' Thing theorists often appear unwilling or unable to accept the object on its own terms. Rather, they continuously return the human subject to the center of their analysis, rendering the object itself merely a commentary or symptom of humanity. Their analyses cannot escape from being anthropocentric in outlook and focus. Brown, when analyzing resorts and amusement rides as they appear in the fiction of Stephen Crane, cannot help but ceaselessly bring the material objects back to their human impact. Their importance, in his analysis, exists solely in their ability to quench people's "eternal desire for more experience," in their ability to act as a vessel of human emotion or signification (Brown, *The Material Unconscious* 51-52). The thing, which these analyses have set out to unearth and validate, thus disappears into the discussion of human activity.

Indeed, the possibility for the object to be an agent, to be more than a vessel of human signification, remains strangely absent from the vast majority of Thing Theory analyses. Although Thing theorists attempt to champion the importance of the material

commodity within literary texts, they can do so only in terms of undermining the activity of the object and reinforcing the divide between the subject and object. The object in Appadurai's writings slinks into the ideologically potent but oddly still form of the commodity, where its significance lies more in what it denotes to the human observer than to its actual activity within the world (Appadurai 40). In Douglas Mao's *Solid Objects*, perhaps the best current exegesis of the Thing in Modernist literature, the focus is on the subject's ideological and physical "production of objects" (Mao 11). As he says of Virginia Woolf, Mao "seems more concerned with the process and difficulty of making than with the destiny of the made;" he is more concerned with tracing the character's determinations and creations of objects than of the objects themselves (63). Moreover, Mao upholds a troubling distinction between the acting "subject" and the passive "object world" with which he/she interacts, defanging any kind of vitality or power that the Thing Theory approach may have had in championing the centrality of the object (20). Thus, through these anthropocentric analyses, then, the potential power of their object-focused analysis is blunted, and the revolutionary aspect of their approach dissipates.

At times, it appears that Thing Theorists themselves are attempting to buck this mode of undermining the object. Freedgood's reading of the Victorian object along metonymic lines, her embrace of metonymy's "ability to disrupt meaning, to be endlessly vagrant and open-ended," points to some effort to advance a flattened, non-anthropocentric analysis (16). Her metonymic analytical tack provides the possibility of "mahogany" or "pewter" functioning as actors within the Victorian World, pushing against the anthropocentric staleness of allegorical reading (15-17). Unfortunately, even

while appearing to recognize this potentiality, Freedgood, like Mao and other Thing

Theorists, appears incapable of making the leap to recognize the activity of the objects

she hopes to discuss; almost as soon as she crafts the powerful vision of an open-ended,

disruptive reading, she returns to a more pat, more hierarchical vision of the object as a

"social hieroglyph," a human vessel (28). Indeed, at no point does Freedgood appear to

consider that her hieroglyphic things could be actors, could be vitally active, themselves.

This work, then, sets out to revitalize the analysis of the Thing Theorists by

pushing their conceit past the anthropocentric boundaries theorists like Mao or Freedgood

have placed around it. It takes Brown's conception of the "material unconscious"

seriously, perhaps even more seriously than he does, as it welds his vision of material

culture to the Object-Oriented ontological framework of Harman and Morton. The union

of these analytical perspectives necessarily inculcates an embrace of the democracy of

objects, an embrace, therefore, of a flattened field of objects and subjects.

II. <u>To the Texts: Thoughts on an Object-Oriented Method</u>

> *"More then anough we know; but while things yet*
> *Are in confusion, give us if thou canst,*
> *Eye-witness of what first or last was done,*
> *Relation more particular and distinct."* — Milton, *Samson Agonistes*

Developing a vision of an Objected-Oriented literary critique, especially one focused on contemporary narrative and texts, poses a variety of major methodological quandaries for the critic. The focus on the thing renders many traditional or popular critical methods, especially those overly caught up in characterization or semiotic questions, counterproductive even as it creates unique critical quagmires around questions of determination and interpretation. Crucially, the Object-Oriented critic must grapple with questions of scope (perhaps better termed as limitedness), focus, and form in developing a coherent method for the analysis of modern texts. This section attempts to outline potential solutions to these quandaries while also delineating the larger structure of this work's analysis.

Any literary analysis *to the objects* immediately risks a swift collapse into the absurd. If the pervasiveness of material culture, of the thing, is one of the underlying motivations for an object-oriented approach, its preponderance risks drowning any criticism to the object before it has even begun. An analysis of a page in Gaskell, for example, could get pulled in a dozen different directions in a couple sentences, dragging one now from a consideration of an "unglazed window" to a scarlet "cloak" and then to the contents of a small "grocery" and a "butcher's shop" (Gaskell 23). An effort to encompass all of the objects in an analysis would be doomed to capture none of them. While each of these objects play an intriguing and vital role within the ecosystem of

Sylvia's Lovers, the ability of any analysis to capture the activity and alliances of all the various things within texts is limited. Thus, any object-oriented literary analysis must be a self-consciously *limited* analysis— just as one within a flattened world, it must delimit its analytical alliances while recognizing the power of those things which rest outside of its bounds.

It is well and good to say that an object-oriented analysis will be a *limited* analysis, but the more important act of delimiting must come in defining how to analyze, how to read, *to the objects*. As discussed above, a metonymic reading of textual objects— a consideration of the scarlet cloak denoting at once the British textile industry and the widespread nationalism of the Napoleonic era— too easily evacuates the objects in question of their vitality, rendering them mere 'social hieroglyphs.' A metaphoric reading of the objects— an investigation of the scarlet of the cloak in terms of the folkloric uses of the color or the implications of menarche— would be equally harmful to the objects themselves, almost erasing them from the frame of reference. A more apt analytical framework would appear then to be to borrow from the playbook of Science and Technology Studies, and specifically from the ideas of Bruno Latour.

Latour has argued persuasively for a conception of scientific change and development in terms of alliances. As explained in his influential work *Science in Action*, it is alliances between various human and non-human actors which operate to craft networks and advance scientific opinion and development (Latour *Science in Action* 83-84). These alliances, though, cannot subsume or envelop the entirety of the various actors that compose them. Rather, they envision each one acting externally, and in their

own interests, so as to craft an alliance of opinion and/or action; Latour famously

develops an example of fishermen, Japanese scientists, and scallops operating in alliance

in the St. Breuc Bay in Brittany (202-203). From an object-oriented perspective, this

vision of alliances is imperative. Its ability to allow one to envision non-human objects *as*

actors, without also envisioning them as metonymic vessels, expands the potentiality for

recognizing their *vitality*. Suddenly, the scarlet cloak can be seen as acting, in alliance

with Molly Corney's opinions, the natural ecosystem of Northern England, and Sylvia's

actions themselves, to craft the girlhood of Sylvia Robson, to create a cultural conception

of both the girl and the lover. An analysis *to the objects*, then, must also always be an

analysis to the networks and alliances of objects.

While a Latourian network focus allows for an object-focus that does not

compromise the withdrawn nature of the thing, it also indirectly highlights the

importance of form in any Object-Oriented analysis. After all, if an Object-Oriented

analysis is attempting to delineate and analyze networks of object engagement, it must be

always aware of the meta-textual network developed between the medium of the text—

the book, the screen, etc…— and the reader. Just as the object within the work impacts its

networks of alliances, the textual medium actively affects one's engagement with the

narrative. While this concept may seem obvious, a matter of general acceptance at least

since Landow's publication of *Hypertext*, the embrace of a flat ontology radicalizes its

import; the medium is not just the message, but the actor itself.

Within those parameters, this project seeks to explicate and demonstrate the

manner in which a potential object-oriented analysis could occur. As shown above,

object-oriented analyses can be used to derive and explore whole new constellations of meaning within social texts. This work, though, will limit itself to the consideration of the ludic object, the object of play, within the contemporary texts of late capitalist society. In contemporary American culture, the ludic object has both a prime placement and a pervasiveness that is unparalleled. As play has become the prime mode of behavior in the modern space, the material of play has abounded. Basketballs and footballs bounce through our advertisements and clutter our closets; the ludic material of video games rest like relics within the shrines of modern living rooms. Moreover, this pervasiveness extends far into the cultural productions of the current moment. One need only briefly scan the works of the most innovative and influential authors of the last quarter-century— David Foster Wallace, LeAnn Howe, Junot Diaz, to name a few— to discover a panoply of ludic objects. These objects, like the ever-gripped tennis balls of the Enfield Tennis Academy, do not only crop up haphazardly within the texts, but rather are centrally located within their networks of action and signification. Thus, an object-oriented analysis to the ludic object, can escape possible criticisms of the form as being inessential or tertiary to greater concerns. The centrality of the ludic makes such arguments ring hollow.

Moreover, the activity of the ludic object is generally more easily (if implicitly) accepted by late capitalist subjects. While most commodities are viewed as lifeless or appendage-like (which is to say given life by humanity), the material objects of play are given far more credit for activity and influence. This is partly a product of what Huizinga terms the "Magic Circle;" in the ritual space set apart for play, the rules of life and the

rules of behavior are altered significantly (47-48).[8] Still, even outside of that space, there

is a prevailing societal and linguistic tendency to envision 'the breaks of the game' and

the 'bounce of the ball' as vaguely independent operators. The focus on the ludic object,

then, can hopefully allow skeptical or unclear readers easier access to the concept of a

flattened ontology and a vital materiality.

Finally, the choice to focus this critical survey on objects of play is useful on the

level of form. In the contemporary world, it is not absurd to broadly characterize textual

engagement as a ludic activity and the formal network developed between reader and

medium as a ludic one. The ever-increasing importance of video game texts in the larger

sphere and the *gamification* of more 'literary' texts in the age of the hyperlink makes the

act of literary engagement seem to be almost as much a matter of play as of reading

(Bissell 34-35). Further, even more standard literary novels, like the subject of this

work's third chapter, *Underworld*, mimic this movement towards the ludic, inviting the

reader to quasi-hypertextually play with the book itself. Thus, a focus on the ludic object

within the text can provide one easier access into the ludic nature of the textual object,

operating as a useful and edifying bridge for broader analyses within and beyond the

present work.

The manner in which the Object-Oriented focus on ludic object allows for unique

insights into the activity of the literary medium works in much the same manner in

reverse. As Latour says, in focusing on the materiality of the object one should "have no

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[8] However, an Object-Oriented perspective must alter the traditional sense of this 'state of exception.' While for Huizinga, the "magic circle" exception for societal norms of behavior, it must also reflect an exception from human norms of recognition. As this project will demonstrate, in the interactions of the ludic, the common occlusions of alien phenomenologies are done away with, and the ontological field is recognized as more level.

hesitation in highlighting the text itself as a mediator" (*Reassembling the Social* 124).

The various textual forms of contemporary society each impact the manner in which the

activity of the ludic object can be perceived. In a video game, where the medium itself

operates as a "magic circle," the vitality of objects is more readily graspable for the

player; playing on a computer, one is often more surprised when an object is not an actor

within the narrative than when it is. Counterintuitively, the medium of the video game is

perhaps unparalleled in giving one access to the vitality of things and the democracy of

objects that more traditional narratives and perceptions operate to obscure. The television

screen, for its part, allows the viewer to better understand the continual withdrawal of the

object, realizing the phenomenological divide between the real and the sensual qualities

of the withdrawn in its intercession.

These factors provide compelling reasons for the expansion of a traditional

literary analysis to include the consideration of these more 'non-traditional' textual

mediums. Unfortunately, even now, the critic feels compelled to defend their decision to

include the video game (and, to a lesser degree, the television show) within the space of

literary texts. While the value of the video game, and other under-considered forms, as

text(s) is clear from an Object-Oriented position, its status as literary still remains oddly

contested in the larger sphere. There remains in our society an instinctive effort to

separate the basely commercial form of the video game from the aesthetic qualities of

great literary texts (Bogost IX). The anxiety over the medium manifests itself in a general

failure of academics to teach on video game texts as texts. There are few colleges

currently either willing or able to teach courses on games outside of computer science

programs.[9] Thus, it remains necessary to defend the validity and utility of video game research in the literary sphere.

To start, it is quite necessary to return to earlier rejections of the rather hoary aesthetic insistence on strict limitations as to what counts as a literary text. As Fredric Jameson persuasively argues in his essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," efforts to limit critical analysis to works of high culture misunderstands the value and influence of mass cultural texts and defangs the potential power and significance of literary studies, while efforts to champion mass cultural productions create a veneer of faux-authenticity (123-124). Rather, per Jameson, the reader-as-critic must embrace both mass culture and high culture in a "genuinely historical and dialectical approach" (128). By reading all manner of texts, a true(r) understanding of the societies that produce them may be possible. Such a democratic approach cannot but be appealing from an Object-Oriented position. In other words, a refusal to limit one's analysis to the high cultural or the mass cultural is to flatten the cultural playing field by rejecting the idea of a meaningful aesthetic break between the two cultural modes. In the terms of Levi Bryant, this allows for something of a *democracy of texts*, for something of a flattened corpus.

Moreover, though, video games have an inherent literary value beyond merely being useful for a "dialectical approach" to criticism. As Ian Bogost persuasively argues, video games as texts must be given "respect and attention" by critics both because of their mass cultural appeal and their ability to "create abstract representations of precise units of human experience" in a way that rivals the productions of more traditional forms

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[9]A quick glance at the Virginia public university system, for example, reveals that there are no courses taught on video games as texts at any of the state's large universities.

(114). In many ways, too, the video game fits naturally into the lenses and structures of literary analysis already developed. As Bogost points out, the nature of video games as "procedural systems" allows for a pertinent extension of Benjamin's "unit-operational" logic of film (114). The manner in which game engines are borrowed and evolved allows one to recognize something of the "anxiety of influence," if mediated, within video game texts (61). Thus, many of the aesthetic signifiers of the literary are evident and inherent in the media itself, and a greater understanding of their operations within video games would allow for a beneficial expansion and evolution of traditional critical lenses.

In the specific case of this work, the utility, indeed the necessity, of critically analyzing a video game or a television show is grounded in all of these factors. The forms themselves quite clearly impact the ability of the reader to engage and to understand the ludic object, and the mediums present unique benefits in recognizing the vitality therein. Moreover, the popularity of the forms, both in the general sense and in the specific cases of the texts analyzed in the chapters to follow, allows for a more incisive and inclusive vision of contemporary society than would a more limited perspective. It is partly for these reasons that chapters four and five of this work consider the ludic object within the handheld video game *The World Ends With You* and the television series *Friday Night Lights*.

The goal of this work is not, though, to simply explicate an apolitical, conservative approach to literary criticism. Although some Object-Oriented philosophers, like Bryant, believe that one "should never evoke a political or ethical reason to critique" through an Object-Oriented lens, such conservatism ignores the manner in which the

ontological positions of the movement cannot but energize particular political

configurations ("Political Ontology"). As mentioned above, a political Object-Oriented

Ontology is most commonly seen in ecological terms. However, understanding the ludic

object in contemporary narratives can present a different means of politically energizing

the critical lens. As the subsequent chapters of this project reveal, in following that kind

of object's activity in contemporary texts one is able to grasp a new sense of the modern

"material unconscious," one in which Jameson's "Utopian strands" of community are

manifested in the figure of the ball ("Reification and Utopia" 145).

III. <u>Community and the Baseball in Underworld</u>

> *"Such Russian stuff, and here was Marvin today looking for a baseball. But he wasn't*
> *inclined to make light of his preoccupation. It had its own epic character…"*
> — Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

Don DeLillo's vision of American society is inextricably intertwined with the depiction of and engagement in sports and play. However, little critical thought has been spent considering the importance of DeLillo's discussion of the ludic, and even less on his treatment of the ludic object. While countless efforts have attempted to explicate his vision of television and radio in *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*— or *Americana* and *Great Jones Street*— they rarely stop to consider the manner in which DeLillo's presentation of media often serves to return to questions of play and sport.[10] Similarly, the importance of the ludic in the formation of characters like Murray Jay Siskind, a sportswriter first introduced in DeLillo's pseudonymously published *Amazons* who returned as a "visiting lecturer on living icons" in *White Noise*, often evaporates in analyses more focused upon "contemporary religious rituals" of pop culture (Osteen 4).[11]

This erasure of the ludic in DeLillo is most obvious in critical responses to his 1997 opus, *Underworld.* In his opus, DeLillo threads the history of the second half of the American century through the stitches of Bobby Thomson's home run baseball. Although the novel sprawls out from this focus on the ball, stretching like the Arizonan desert it

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[10] Consider for example Peter Boxall's excellent essay "DeLillo and media culture," where the manner in which media in *Underworld, End Zone,* and even *Players* serves to represent or reflect play gets nary a mention (43-52). Consider, as well, the general lack of critical interest in DeLillo's pseudonymously published novel *Amazons*.

[11] Similar arguments to Osteen's are made in Philipp Löeffler's "'Longing on a Large Scale Is What Makes History": The Uses of Baseball and the Problem of Storytelling in Don DeLillo's Underworld," Kathryn Ludwig's "Don DeLillo's "Underworld" and the Postsecular in Contemporary Fiction," and in David Yetter's "Subjectifying the Objective: *Underworld* as Mutable Narrative."

details to encompass bombing raids and Eisenstein films, the object never seems too far

from the novel's center. The focus upon it renders much of the work a kind of baseball

fiction. As the critic Timothy Morris argues, "baseball fiction…is about an assimilation to

an American way of life," and the activity of the ludic object throughout the novel seems

fits this traditional narrative (Morris 3). The baseball continues to emerge throughout the

various stages and spaces of DeLillo's late capitalist America, operating to manifest the

unconscious anxiety of the postmodern psyche and to craft the imagined community and

culture to which the various Americans of the text pledge allegiance.

      The ludic object's role in the construction of the imagined nation is first made

clear in the novel's prologue, "The Triumph of Death," the majority of which was

originally published (in a slightly altered state) as the stand-alone story under the name

"Pafko at the Wall." The section opens in quasi-mythic form with the invocation not of a

distant Muse but of a collective second person: "your voice, American" (DeLillo 11).[12] In

typical DeLillo fashion, the text is quick to undercut the epic (and nation-building)

ambitions of this entrance. The voice, the invisible third person, is revealed to be spoken

not by an American Odysseus or Brooklyn Aeneas, but by a black, "scrawny tall" kid,

"Cotter Martin by name" (12). The only heroic attribute he appears to retain is a stubborn

individuality; in the larger group of turnstile-hopping gamins, themselves a small part of

an "assembling crowd" in the urban space, Cotter remains strangely isolated, a "he"

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[12] The use of the second person in the prologue's introduction foretells the novel's continued narrative mutability. The novel jumps freely between the object and the subjective, the third and the second-person, until, as David Yetter says, the "integrity of each point of view fades into the other" (Yetter 36). The overall effect of this general fading, as is evidenced even in the opening invocation, is the establishment of a folkloric narrative vision, wherein the objective facts of history are rendered as subjective connections of a community, and the voice of the author is rendered the voice of the community.

amongst the unformed "they" (11-12). The interplay between the three pronouns in these opening lines— the collective, vaguely situated 'you,' the formless, "witless" 'they,' and the "uncatchable," unstoppable 'he—' operate to reveal a fundamental isolation within the heart of the crowded urban space (13-14). Cotter, although marked as gamin, although marked as part of the urban bustle, remains strangely alienated from the larger community around him.

Cotter's alienation within the urban crowd outside of Polo Grounds, his stubborn individuality before the reader's gaze, serves as prototype for the continual fragmentation of the individuals who make up DeLillo's (under)world. Each of them presents that distinctly modern symptom that Lukacs finds in the capitalist novel, the "estrangement from the outside world" (Lukacs 66). The feeling of alienation pervades Klara Sax who in the city feels "humanly invisible," unable to connect with (ex-)husbands or new friends and must retreat into the physical isolation of the desert before (and after) the novel begins, (DeLillo 372). The aching "I" of Nick Shay, which cannot but "withhold the deepest things from those who are closest," able only to express them to "a stranger" in the faceless realm of "a numbered room," rests imprisoned within itself (301). In the novel, even the psyche of Lenny Bruce, appears alienated from his "fellow citizens," separated by his Jewishness and his sickness and his "postexistentialist bent" (507). Indeed, each character, in his or her own way, rests alienated within the fragmented time (between the opening in the early 1950s, to 1992, and then back and forth between the decades of the American century) and space (it is no surprise that Part 1 of the novel opens in motion, with a Lexus driving "through rustling wind") of the novel (63). The

collective— either the hinted-at "you" of the opening lines or some larger community—

is unattainable, replaced by the first and third-persons of their narratives, by the

fragmented individual.

It is important, then, to understand the manner in which *Underworld* succeeds

(however briefly) in integrating both Cotter and the reader into the larger community of

the crowd. After his successful escape into the Polo Grounds, the novel tracks Cotter's

movement the architectural space, the "crossweave of girders and pillars and spilling

light," as he attempts to break through to the baseball diamond itself (14). Suddenly, the

novel tracks him cutting into the grandstand and both Cotter and the reader are made for

the first time aware of their inhabitance of the ludic space by the "warm-up pitches" that

"crack into the catcher's mitt" (14). As if entranced by the baseball's flight, the reader, the

collective "you," loses first Cotter and then themselves "in the crowd," becoming a part

of the "thirty-five thousand" whose chatter is beamed out softly in the background of the

radio feed (14). The liberation, the "noise and joy," of the embrace of the crowd's

community is explicitly allowed by the appearance of the ludic object on the scene (60).

Only when it appears can the alienation of the many spectators find a common identity

and a shared language. Where before there were many conversations, now the Polo

Grounds has only the liturgy of the radio-man intoning *"The Giants win the pennant…*

The Giants win the pennant" (43).

It is imperative to stop and note here that the unification of the crowd by the ludic

object does not mean the erasure of hierarchies within the crowd. The multitude of the

crowd, like the ballpark, remains vertically defined. Cotter's alienation is tied inescapably

to his blackness; as a young African-American boy in the fifties, his position within the collective is always already debased, his mind always already estranged in a double consciousness. His entrance into the multitude of the community does not erase the class and gender prejudices he faces; there remains a reason he is sitting in the outfield bleachers while Hoover dreams of Bruegel right on top of the action. Rather, the activity of the ball creates an alternative network, one in which the mythic American promises of fraternity in difference— *all men created equal* — can be embodied. Despite different vantage-points, each member of the crowd is part of the "everybody watch[ing]," connecting, with the ball (42).

Many critics have been quick to point out the connection between DeLillo's portrayal of the pennant game between the Giants and Dodgers and the production of a larger community, of a shared national identity. Molly Wallace incisively argues that the advertising pages, representing "baby food, instant coffee, encyclopedias and cars, waffle irons and shampoos and blended whiskeys," falling out over the baseball diamond provide "a sense of belonging to a larger social system" predicated upon the consumption of commodities (Wallace 367). The critic Patrick O'Donnell reads the lingering objects of the baseball game as producers of a subject that can be integrated into the "system of reality" (O'Donnell 116). These are perspicacious readings, and the broad strokes of both arguments— that the commodified objects that first appear in the prologue and then echo down throughout the rest of the novel operate to develop the community, American, that ostensibly produces them— make sense, but they fail to recognize the activity and withdrawal or retreat of the objects, and especially the ludic object, themselves.

The power of the baseball whipping around the diamond does not lie, as both

Wallace and O'Donnell appear to believe, in the significance outside subjects imbue

within it. Rather, it exists as an independent actor within the field of the novel, operating

with its own alien phenomenology. The ball — the "five-ounce sphere of cork, rubber,

yarn, horsehide and serial stitching—" resists the reader's impulse to pull it into the realm

of simulation and signification; it is stubbornly material and stubbornly independent

(DeLillo, *Underworld* 26).[13] Within the magic circle of the diamond, moreover, the

baseball, like the papers falling from the rafters, is able to display its own activity— it

"bounce[s]" and "arc[s]" until "everything submits to [its] pebbleskips" (34-35, 27). As

player and spectator both bend themselves to the motions of the baseball, its position as

an actor within the network of the ritual space is made explicitly clear.

Indeed, the ball's power is accepted even linguistically within the confines of the

novel. Its activity reshaped the Polo Grounds into its image, into a "ballpark" (21).[14] This

may seem a semantic and insignificant change— are not the two names used

interchangeably in common parlance?— but the linguistic shift in the novel is noteworthy

in that that specific name, rather than "stadium," or "rust-hulk," or any of the other

phrases used in its place, arrives only after the ball does. The idea of the grounds-as-

ballpark appears to follow in the wake of the ball itself. When it is finally corralled, not

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[13] Here one may be inclined to ask, though, wasn't it human (or human-created machine) hands that produced the structure of the baseball itself, that entwined the cork and rubber and yarn? And thus isn't the baseball explicitly produced by human subjects? Although this assertion is, on the face of it, true, its valence in discussing the activity of the produced object as object is relatively limited. An effort to determine the nature of object along the lines of their material producers would quickly lead to the disintegration of any object or subject. Moreover, as Levi Bryant better explicates in *The Democracy of Objects*, each object is both irreducible within itself and without itself, so that neither "endo-" nor "exo-relations" can disintegrate its being (214-215).

by a ballplayer or a businessman but by Cotter, it is the ball moving, "pulsing in his hand," rather than the boy (49). In these moments, it is clear that the baseball is not determined by the human subjects around it, but that in fact it operates on the same, flattened level of activity as they do, an equal partner in the perturbation of the space within which it moves.

Moreover, the ludic object's vitality extends out onto the very structure of the page, of the text, itself. While DeLillo's writing style is languid and metaphoric in its description of the stadium and of the crowd, full of paragraph-long sentences and endless clauses, when the ball appears on the page the writing quickens. In place of long paragraphs comes short sentences and pointed clauses, often eliding a verb or a subject: "Fastball high and away" or "See the ball. Wait for the ball" (35, 40). The clipped, hurried nature of these phrases reflect the vitality of the ball's activity itself. The manner in which the object is placed as subject within the lines, "coming free" from the crowd and "dipp[ing] and disappear[ing]," further reinforces the ludic object's impact on the text's structure (45-46). The uncontrolled, uncontrollable motion of the ball— which has forced the submission of both players and spectators— appears to impact the text's structure itself, forcing *Underworld* to skip and arc in congress with its own actions.

The independence of the ludic object within the scene is also preserved in its continual withdrawal within itself. Although it is constantly interacting with the various other actors of the ritual space of the diamond on the material (or "sensual," to use Harman's term) level, it remains utterly enclosed from the determination of others (Harman, *The Quadruple Object* 114). This reading of the ball is a sharp departure from

the vision of the object found in traditional Thing Theory, where the thing's "intersubjectivity" is generally read as evacuating any possible signs of vitality (Mao 57). The baseball's withdrawal is most clear in its pennant-winning, home-run flight into the grandstands. As it jumps from the bat of Thomson, the object disappears from view entirely. The crowd, "everybody, everybody," is left "thinking where's the ball;" despite their best efforts, they are unable to access even the ball's physical qualities, let alone its interior vitality (DeLillo 42). The withdrawal of the ball from view manifests the object's constant retreat within itself, its invisibility mirroring the constant imperceptibility of its real qualities. Even when the ball re-appears, its "stitches visibly spinning," the sense of its invisibility and withdrawal lingers (42). When Cotter manages to grasp the ludic object, its flight and roll at an end, he seems incapable of interacting with the ball itself. Initially, he can feel only "the heat and sweat of the rival [person's] hand" as he clasps it (48). Untranslatable and distant, the baseball here is clearly revealed as more than a mere evacuated sign. It is not a determined product of subjectivity, but a closed-off and withdrawn object all its own.

As such, the ability of the ludic object to operate as connecter between the alienated individual of Cotter and the crowd at large cannot be understood along the non-ludic, non-Object-Oriented lines that traditional critical responses seek to use. The baseball operates not beneath or under the influence of Cotter, Russ, or the crowd, but rather allies with each of these actors in a cohesive community. Its nature as an actor is not dependent upon its ludic nature, but it is clearly the ludic space which allows its activity to be most easily seen. As referenced above, the appearance of the ball on the

diamond intertwines the perspectives of Cotter, the reader, and the crowd at large, re-working the initial structure of fragmented alliances— crowd/stadium, Cotter/stadium, reader/Cotter— into the unified force of the baseball crowd. The pull of the baseball's activity upon said crowd, its ability to make "everybody, everybody watch," deepens the ties between each part of the multitude, rendering them a unified network. It is due to this network that a common language of the announcer's voice can be incanted. With the baseball's flight, the individual perspective thus becomes fully subsumed within a shared identity, lost not in an estranged mind but in a unified community.

While the baseball is able to craft a shared identity within the magic circle of the field of play, of the Polo Grounds, once it is taken out into greater space of New York City— the place that gives rise to the refuse of those advertising pages falling from the sky— its unificatory capacity is fragmented by the alienating impulses of late capitalism. Although Cotter rejects the pull to render the material object into a commodity— stating definitively "I'm not selling it or trading it—" the baseball cannot long escape a collapse into an abased, commodified form (56). Taken back to Cotter's home, the activity of the ludic object is rendered in explicit capitalist terms, with Cotter's father Manx arguing that it would be crazy "to let the thing sit here and do nothing and earn nothing" (146). As the ball travels through the marketplace, as it is sold by Manx under the shadow of the stadium and traded about between collectors and obsessives like Marvin Lundy, it is transformed from a unificatory actor into what Nick Shay calls an "object…all about losing" (97). Loss, of course, is built into the nature of the ludic; the differentiation of the winner and loser is as important for play as the definition of ritual-rules or the delineation

of space. Once *Underworld* leaves the Polo Grounds behind, though, the ludic object of loss does not serve to differentiate the victors from the vanquished, the Thomson's from the Branca's. Rather, the baseball's activity serves to realize the loss of mass identity and community within late capitalist America.

The first loss, the first isotopic decay, that the ludic object experiences is in terms of its identity. Entered into systems of monetary signification, the material reality of the baseball is effaced and the object is rendered a strange shadow, a simulacrum. Within the confines of the ballpark, within the ludic space of the baseball diamond, the reality of the baseball is never in doubt. It is, after all, the center of attention. Once Manx brings the ball to market, though, the object can no longer legitimate itself, can no longer simply be "the ball." The first man Manx attempts to sell it to makes this threat of illegitimacy, of simulation, clear: "you can't prove nothing," he says, speaking to Manx but arguing at the baseball (359). The object's new-found status as commodity perversely inverts the embodied manifestations of the ball's reality. The smudges upon its horsehide, the imperfections which present first-hand its activity and reality, become signs of its simulation. The commodification of the ludic object renders it a simulacrum. "The [ball's] all smudged up," which is to say the ball is real, and thus the market cannot recognize it as such (359). Manx himself reifies this sense of simulation by refusing to allow the customer "to touch the ball," hiding it within his pocket and removing the possibility of interaction (359).

This shift in perception of the baseball does not render the ludic object itself a simulacrum. Even as it is perceived as unreal, both text and reader recognize its material

reality in its physical consistency and clear lineage. Rather, the ball manifests the manner in which late capitalist consumption crafts simulation out of reality in contemporary society; while it is here the activity and history of the object, rather than the productive labor behind the commodity, which is effaced by the late capitalist market, the net effect is the same. As Jameson says, quoting Rimbaud, the postmodern commodity "faut être absolument moderne" (*Postmodernism* 310-311). In other words, it must enter into the meaningless, simulated category of the new. As such a commodity, the baseball can be consumed, can be bought and sold and bought and sold, but it cannot be "sympathetically participat[ed]" with or recognized for its true materiality (317).

The ludic object's commodified shift towards simulation in the novel leads to a fundamental loss in its manner of interaction. While it remained a non-commodified agent within the ballpark, the ball's activity could directly impact the space and the actors around it; Cotter could grip the ball and hear its thunk in the catcher's mitt, could participate in its construction of a unified network. As a commodified simulacrum, the ludic object's activity can no longer occur in the manner. In place of unificatory participation, the baseball creates difference and estrangement. When Charlie Wainwright acquires the ball, "bought from a guy who claimed it was the very object Branca had hurled," he places it statically in "a sort of baseball shrine" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 528-29). Charlie imagines enlisting the object as a means of connecting with his son, forging a community between himself, his child and the ball not unlike the multitude developed in the ballpark. The commodified nature of the ball, though, denies that possibility; Charlie cannot "truly believe[] the ball [is] authentic," and his doubts seep

through the network from the "real or fake" ball to the possibility that his son may abuse his trust (531,535). When he jams the baseball "into the pocket of his topcoat," when he occludes it again from view and interaction, it is clear that the commodified object is serving not to unite the father and son, but to estrange them (535). That the ball is to Chuckie even more of a simulation, something "vague and unstable" to be "accidentally dumped with the household trash," can come as no surprise (611-612). His interaction with the ball, like his interaction with the other member of the network, is necessarily alienated from the real.

This localized network reveals the manner in which the ludic space itself allows one to recognize the activity of the (ludic) object. In the magic circle of the baseball diamond, the object-oriented principles of activity and withdrawal are relatively easy to recognize— the ball's vitality is recognized in its movement within the ritual space and its retreat is evidenced by the inability of the spectator to fully determine it. In Charlie's "baseball shrine," though, its position as an actor is far more occluded. Still, though, the vital matter of the baseball is undeniable in the manner in which it intercedes between the father and the son. The baseball is not a mere vessel for the father's doubts about the son, but instead produces them through its own "smudged" nature. Chuckie's memory of his father is thoroughly intertwined with his memory of the ball: "he [can't] think of…the one" without thinking of the other (611). Tellingly, he thinks of his father and then the ball; neither is solely sign-vessel or signified, but rather both are actors mediating the same network of estrangement. Thus, although it is less evident than within the ballpark,

the baseball's vitality remains clear in its participation within and production of new networks.

Staring at the baseball in his possession, Marvin Lundy says, "there's an ESP of baseball, an underground… consciousness" (179). Having obsessively tracked the ball down trough the decades since the game at Polo Grounds, Marvin, and the reader, must acknowledge the ludic object's vitality. Moreover, though, both must recognize its manifestation of the material unconscious of its society. By tracing the ludic object's "underground consciousness," by tracing its interactions and manifestations across the decade of the novel, one can begin, then, to understand the twisted nature of the postmodern American psyche.

In *Underworld*, postmodern existence, and the mass-market capitalism that undergirds and produces it, is typified by decay. As the critic Paul Gleason argues, DeLillo envisions late capitalist American society as "a culture whose phenomenology is rooted in waste" (Gleason 133). The novel is full of spaces and objects of decay, from the tankers of trash trawling the Atlantic to a former Soviet nuclear site on the Kazakh steppe, but it is the ludic object "all about losing" which serves to carry the cultural decay and waste of the American psyche across the American century. Rather than being merely signifier of decay, though, the ball actively interacts with the systems of waste that *Underworld* highlights. The novel's occupation with the destructive, wasteful nature of American consumption— tracked from Nick's Lexus to the vast waste-lands of the trash depots— is actively embodied by the ludic object's degradation into a commodified simulation.

The baseball's legacy of loss, its status as an object "all about losing," also mirrors the larger forces of personal and political alienation the novel tracks through the years, standing (or rolling) as an embodiment of the dissolution of Nick Shay's marriage and the estranged wanderings of Klara Sax. The object's drift into perceived simulation, its de-realization in its materiality in the fact of the market, reveals and reinforces the novel's (and DeLillo's) fascination with the centrality of the simulacra to the postmodern condition.[15] As Freedgood envisions the furniture of *Jane Eyre* as statically reflective of the Victorian's eras unconscious anxiety over and need for the products of slavery, the ludic object within *Underworld* actively envisions and embodies the alienation and simulation that rest at the core of the postmodern American psyche.

The material estrangement of the ludic object in the late capitalist market-space is not the only material unconscious potentiality the novel develops, though. As Jameson argues in "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," the utopian seed is ever built (if also ever occluded) within the cultural productions of a late capitalist system, and the realist space of *Underworld* is no exception to the rule. As the critic Robert McMinn argues, the novel is pervaded by "an irresistible impulse to connect," both for its characters and its readers (37).[16] This impulse to connection, and therefore to community, serves as the

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[15] The baseball's rhetorical slide from "the ball" to "the ball claimed to be" is matched in many ways by the rhetorical drift of Klara's name through the decades, from Sachs to Bronzini then back to Sax, "with an *x*, if only publicly" (483). DeLillo's exploration of post-modern simulation is even more acute in some of his later novels, perhaps reaching its apogee in *Falling Man*. There, the great crisis of 21st century America is refracted through the titular character's guerrilla simulations, and the danger of the terrorist mastermind is re-directed through the identity of "Bill Lawton."

[16] Within the text, the impulse to connect is evident not only in the aforementioned missed connection of the Wainwrights *pere* et *fils*, but is also reflected in the couplings and failed couplings of Nick Shay, Klara Sax, and their various partners. Metatextually, McMinn incisively argues that the manner in which "the narrative itself consists of connected sections with quasihypertexual anchors placed throughout" leads the reader to jump between chapters and sections, to become "a slave to connection" (37).

dialectical utopian mirror to the alienation of postmodern life in the text. Indeed, the

decay and estrangement that pervades the long sections of "Cocksucker Blues" or "Elegy

for Left Hand Alone" seem to drive the novel's characters to seek connection ever more

desperately. And, crucially, the enduring will to community felt within the pages always

turns back to the ludic object, the primary source and creator of connection within the

logic of DeLillo's (under)world.

　　While the baseball's connecting activity is occluded by its commodified decay, it

always meta-textually remains a means of hyper textual connection between the spaces

and times of the novel. Finally, near the novel's temporal end-point, the home run ball is

freed from the shackles of the market-place and its manifestation of the unconscious

desire for community returns. As Nick Shay finally comes into possession of the ludic

object, both he and it are restored to a community beyond themselves:

> "I had the baseball in my hand. Usually I kept the baseball on the bookshelves…
> but now I had it in my hand. You have to know the feel of a baseball, going back a while,
> connecting many things, before you can understand why a man would sit in a chair at
> four in the morning holding such an object, clutching it—how it fits the palm so
> reassuringly, the corked center making it buoyant in the hand, and the rough spots on the
> old ball, the marked skin, how an idle thumb likes to worry the scuffed horsehide
> (131)."[17]

The physical network constructed between Nick and the ludic object finally allows the

ex-con to feel a connection beyond his alienated self. Like Cotter almost a half-century

before him, Nick's material connection to the ball allows him to recognize the object's

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[17] This moment is echoed in the novel's epilogue "Das Kapital," wherein Nick again clutches the baseball, "squeez[ing] it hard," and feels connected to "nearly a half-century of earth and sweat and chemical change," to a half century of history (809).

vital activity in a manner that its previous commodification had obscured— he does not enshrine or obscure it, but instead clutches and "squeeze[s] the baseball" (133).

Just as in the prologue, the passage's play with pronouns, the rhetorical glide from "I" to "you," and eventually even "we," operates to reinforce the sense that this is a moment of connection (132). Recognized finally in its materiality, the ludic object is no longer a simulation, but is in fact a real actor, one which can connect Nick Shay to Branca— "from him to me—" and to the larger history of American society "going back a while" (132). Although this moment lacks the clear national implication of "your voice, American," the manner in which the ball's vital activity allows Nick's mind to flit from Arizona to New York and to flit from his own voice to the memory of Russ Hodges's "old radio voice" makes clear the manner in which this too is a national connection (132).

In this quiet moment, then, the redemptive nature of the ludic object and the material consciousness it manifests are on full display. Affectively, through the baseball, Nick becomes "calmer," becomes "all right" (133). More importantly, though, both actors find their connections to their larger historical community. Gone are the alienations and estrangements which have (literally and emotionally) jailed Nick, and gone is the decaying commodification that plagues the baseball's existence. Instead, both actors are equally able to interact with the other, and with the larger community they conjure, so as to discover the sought-after collectivity of the "we."

IV. <u>*The World Ends With You* and the Ludic Object in "Any-space-whatever"</u>

"What the hell kind of game is this?" — Neku Sakuraba, *The World Ends With You*

Insofar as they provide open and evident access to the vitality of things, video games have a special valence from the object-oriented perspective.[18] After all, the construction of the Huizingian 'state of exception,' the ludic magic circle, within the medium renders the activity of objects clearly visible (12-13). The vast majority of games rely upon active player interaction with the in-game items that populate their game-worlds; *Mario Kart* drivers must chase for 'Item Boxes' and players of *The Legend of Zelda* must seek out musical instruments and powerful attire. Frequently, it is this interaction which drives the enjoyment of the game-play itself. As Nageristani puts it in *Cyclonopedia*, "there is no pleasure more extreme than to be transfixed before a new item or to find a new weapon in video games" (xii). While that affective statement may be overly broad, the sentiment is easily recognizable to anyone who has picked up a controller; objects in video game narratives are potent actors, not mere evacuated hieroglyphs.

Although the preponderance of visibly vital items in the medium is important from an apolitical object-oriented perspective (like the onticological position of Bryant), the utility of analyzing video game narratives from a politicized object-oriented position can often appear less self-evident. While, for example, the 1s and 0s behind the digital soccer-ball in the latest iteration of the *FIFA* video game franchise may provide a critic with an interesting vision of the commodification and gamification of *homo economicus*

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[18] It is perhaps for this reason that critics like Ian Bogost appear to have arrived at an Object-Oriented philosophy through their work on and with video games.

in late capitalist society, the game's overwhelming disconnect from other social structures make it difficult to access conceptions of community within its ludic boundaries.[19] Although the Object-Oriented 'state of exception' within the game-world allows one to recognize the ball's activity, the game's conscious and unconscious remove from world-building and narrative render it a less interesting political text.

Some games, though, have narrative and ludological functions that compel analysis along politicized Object-Oriented lines. Amongst these games— the list of which must include games as diverse as *Chrono Trigger*, *Scribblenauts,* and *World of Warcraft* — one in particular stands out as a useful case study of the activity of the ludic object within a contemporary narrative: *The World Ends With You.*[20] The game's innovative setting and gameplay force the player to consider the activity of the ludic object from new angles, presenting a vision of the object that is often concealed in the outside world. This chapter seeks to trace the activity of the central ludic object of *The World*, the 'pin,' within its urban setting in an effort to better understand the manner in which the game's manifestation of late capitalist society negotiates community and space.

The acclaimed Japanese video game developer Square Enix released *The World Ends With You* in 2007 for the Nintendo DS console.[21] Like the majority of the games

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[19]To expand upon the sense of societal disconnect in the *FIFA* franchise: although players may ostensibly choose where to play— in Madrid, in London, etc…— there is no sense that any of the games are actually occurring within these urban spaces. The stadiums appear to exist in a universe all their own.

[20] In fact, *Scirbblenauts* has been much discussed along Object-Oriented lines, as Bogost analyzes it thoroughly in *Alien Phenomenologies* (40-45).

[21] The DS console was Nintendo's follow-up to its string of wildly successful Game Boy handheld consoles, which allowed players to take video games like Tetris, Super Mario Bros., or Pokémon on the move. The DS was (and is) notable for its use of a dual screen (hence the D.S. nomenclature) set-up that including a touch-screen for gameplay.

produced by the developer, it is designed as a role-playing game (RPG), a game which

asks its players to embody characters in a fictional universe of the game's creation. As in

Square Enix's popular *Final Fantasy* series of RPGs, game-play is structured around the

exploration of the game-world and the fighting of non-player character (NPC) opponents.

These activities lead one to both develop the embodied player-character and progress the

game's narrative. Like most RPGs, *The World's* basic units of progress (its narrative

development) is traced in terms of statistical growth; the game's menu can be accessed to

reveal a variety of progress bars and statistics that depict the player-character's growth

over the course of play. Those with experience with the genre (or with its table-top

ancestor *Dungeons & Dragons*) could easily look at the bare-bones description of the

game's ludological nature and recognize a fairly rote addition to the RPG library.

This work's interest in *The World*, though, derives not from its standard plot, but

from two key innovations it makes to the formula of the traditional RPG. The first of

these innovations is in the game's setting. While the most traditional RPG setting is the

magic-and-monsters high fantasy of a *Dragon Quest* or *Skyrim* and the currently most

popular variant of the genre takes place in the space operatic setting of a *Mass Effect* or

Knights of the Old Republic, *The World* sets out to depict the urban world of the Shibuya

neighborhood of Tokyo, and to do so as realistically as is possible in the genre. This

unique setting influences all of the game's design choices. The player character— who

one may expect to be a space pirate or high priestess— is in fact a teenage Shibuyan

sporting the (relatively) normal name of Neku Sakuraba. Potential NPC allies and

enemies for the character are similarly drawn from a cosmopolitan vision of the modern-

day: a skateboarding punk, a young woman attached permanently to her cellphone, a nerd in skinny jeans. These depictions make clear that the game wants the player to imagine herself inhabiting the real city, further muddying the "half-real" divide of the video game form itself (Juul).

The effort to capture the real world of the contemporary urban space is further evident in the game's graphics. *The World*'s design aesthetic, ripped from the pages of Japanese and American comic books and kept in a semi-two-dimensional graphical state in-game, is a thinly veiled attempt to mimic at an urban art-form. Its static backdrops feature large and eye-catching skyscrapers, most of which exist solely as simulacra in the game-world. On the other hand, the player can stop into buildings like the "The Burger Shop," a multinational fast-food establishment clearly aping McDonald's, if they are feeling hungry (*The World*). Those few backdrops which eschew skyscrapers, like those in the game-area called *The Underpass*, prominently feature graffiti, cementing (assuredly in the game designers' minds at least) the game's urban and modern nature. However, even while realizing this effort at simulation, these design choices operate to obscure the idiosyncratic facets of Shibuya. The skyscrapers appear generic, as does the graffiti. The general aesthetic makes the player feel at many points that she could be traversing any global city, eating at any McDonald's or walking beneath any metro overpass, and yet, paradoxically, as if she was virtually inhabiting none of them. The game succeeds, then, in simulating not Shibuya but rather a perfect Deleuzian "Any-space-whatever," wherein the seemingly familiar late capitalist place— the cityscape— is

replicated in fragments so as to be at once strangely recognizable and troublingly alien (Abbas 245).

Past these elements, though, *The World Ends With You* also seeks to mirror modern urban spaces through the distinct focus placed upon consumption in the game's intricate and all-pervading item collection system. While all RPG video games require item collection— the hoarding of weapons, armor, and potions that provides Nageristani's great "pleasure"— *The World Ends With You* is rather unique in rendering its items true modern commodities, objects not only to be bought and sold but to be branded. In keeping with its modern aesthetic, the game replaces the traditional fantastical armor and magical gear of RPGs with streetwear clothing lines and high-end accessories. For example, one of the most expensive and powerful items in the game is a chic black handbag. The vast majority of these items, and every one of them which is desirable from a gameplay standpoint, must be bought from in-game stores defined by their specific fashion labels.

Each item is branded by the fictional, presumably transnational corporation which has sold it to the player. These brands range from basic stand-ins for teenage sub-cultures — the goth brand, the skater brand, the jock brand— to high-end luxury lines that make oblique references to Armani and Prada. The commodifying and branding impulse present within this system extends even to the game's soundtrack, which can be changed based on the player's purchase of CD's from the Virgin Megastore stand-ins that are present in the overworld. In enacting the familiar real-world behavior of branded consumption within the virtual space, the game succeeds in furthering its effort to

simulate an urban, crafting a realism that extends past image to what the game critic

Alexander Galloway would call " realism in action" ("Social Realism"). This is a hardly a

positive, though, as the simulation of postmodern commodity fetishism and consumption

also recreates the negative, alienating aspects of the practices within the game-world. .

     As in *Underworld*, the video game thus reveals a cruel irony in its effort to

simulate the late capitalist urban space. Within the context of its drive towards

consumption, the game's representation of Shibuya is transmuted into a third-order

representation, a simulation of a simulation. The "Any-space-whatever" of the game-

world and the commodities within it are fragmented and estranged by the very act of their

representation. In this vision, the world of *The World* embodies and expands DeBord's

proposition that "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (thesis

1). In the modern urban space of estrangement, all that was once represented becomes

mere fragmented echo.

     Thus, the setting of *The World* is rendered as a perfect late capitalist space, where

the 'logo'-centrism of the multinational brand and the commodifying impulse of the

market-place predominate. At first glance, one might anticipate that this innovation in

setting would lead players to feel more entangled and invested in the game-world. As

Edward Castronova notes in *Exodus to the Virtual World*, "the verifications of society" in

digital game-world should lead players to feel more connected to the virtual space (42).

Although he is talking specifically of online multiplayer games, his idea seems equally

suitable for the urban simulation of *The World*. The creation of the game's Shibuya as a

Deleuzian "Any-space-whatever," though, serves to leave both player and player-

Fig. 1 *A prototypical pin in* The World Ends With You

character more alienated from the setting around them. Just as the commodifying and de-

realzing impulses of the late capitalist market-space in *Underworld* operate to create a

sense of estrangement, the simulation of the urban in *The World* develops a feeling of

radical alienated, one in which the most common form of interaction is, suitably, combat.

The constant impulse to consume the branded commodities leads the player-character,

like the Marcusian one-dimensional man, to be "swallowed up by [his] alienated

existence" (Marcuse 11). The ludological systems of the game reinforces this feeling. If

the player wants to seek out connection, the best ways to interact with the game's other

characters are by either buying goods in their branded stores or fighting them.

The game's innovative efforts to produce a contemporaneous urban setting has a pointed impact, too, on its second crucial innovation: the ludological and narratological focus it places on the ludic object of the "pin."[22] The focus on these objects is clear from their presence on-screen at all times (at least during game-play) and their ubiquity within the game-world. A pin is both the first item a player interacts with and the first thing a player acquires in-game, and pins are found in each of the game's many stores. Interestingly, the pins in the game are graphically represented, as in Fig. 1, as both clothing accessories and balls; frequent in-game conversations about them oscillate between treating them as status symbols and as ball-like play-things. In the terms of the game itself, though, they represent the ludic object *ne plus ultra*. Interacting with the pin is *the* way the player, and Neku, plays the game.

To understand the manner in which *The World*'s pins function as ludic objects both within the narrative of the game and meta-textually, it may be useful to consider the text itself as an assemblage of units. As Bogost has demonstrated, envisioning games as collections of these unit operations—interlocking units of action and meaning— can provide new visions into the ideologies and constructs present within the text (*Unit Operations* 53-54). In the traditional RPG, *Square* Enix's seminal *Dragon Quest* series, for example, the game is generally made up of units of grinding. Narrative and player development both occur through the matrix of random combat encounters, encounters which take on the form of a kind of repetitive erosion. Combat itself replicates this

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[22] Although modern game studies appears to have thankfully moved away from the tired debate over the merits of analyzing video games ludologically (as in Aarseth's *Genre Trouble*) or narratologically (as in Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*), it may be worthwhile to here explicate that this paper follows Bogost in rejecting the apparent divide between the two approaches, preferring to view the game as a text of systems in which gameplay and narrative intertwine and produce each other.

action, as the player is asked to repetitively press specific inputs so as to slowly erode the

enemy's health bar. These units thereby serve to inculcate the importance of work ethic

and steadiness and uphold traditional values of contemporary society.

The World's focus on pins revolutionizes the unit operations within it. In the

game, narrative and player development are almost completely dependent upon

interaction with the ludic object of the pin. Indeed, the pin is so important that one should

discuss the base unit operation of the game as a unit of connection (an operation, most

often, of connection with the pin). In-game action— exploring the game's overworld and

underworld, engaging in combat, fighting in combat— takes the form of player and

player-character connection to the pin. In more Latourian terms, then, the base unit of the

game is the production of networks between Neku and the ludic object, networks which

reflect the activity of both participants. In understanding the unit operations of the game

in such terms, the vitality and withdrawal of the pin, like that of the baseball of

Underworld, can be recognized.

The unit operation of connection is immediately apparent in the manner in which

the player performs the narratively-required task of exploring the game-world. In general,

the player operates in the game's overworld, moving Neku across the "Any-space-

whatever" of the city. To progress in the plot and to develop one's character, however, the

player must shift from the peaceful overworld to the dangerous, demon-haunted space of

the setting's underworld. It is only there that enemy non-player characters can be

encountered for combat. Although at times the game's narrative attempts to situate this

shift as deriving from the actions of written NPCs, the ludological action of the maneuver

Fig. 2 *By activating the network of the pin in the bottom right-hand corner, the normal game-world of the left picture is transformed into an otherworldly, yet still urban, underworld of the right, replete with enemies (the red animal heads). Note the way the pin is prominently glowing in the photo on the right.*

places it firmly at the (metaphorical) feet of the pin. To move from the one space to the other, the player must mechanistically connect with the pin on the touch-screen. The glowing of the pin in the bottom right-hand corner, as seen in Fig. 2, makes clear at once that Neku has interacted with the ludic object, and that it is the latter who serves as the primary actor in the shift to the underworld. Thus, exploration in the game can be seen to be at base an operation of connection and interaction with the pin, one in which Neku, the player and the pin enter into a clearly defined network where the pin takes the role of the central actor.

In-game exploration, though, is only useful in-game insofar as it goes hand-in-hand with the other vital action: engaging in combat. Where in traditional RPGs, combat encounters are generally random, gaining events, in *The World* they are based upon

actions of connection. One must press one of the on-screen pins to reveal a variety of

free-floating enemy units, which must then be pushed towards the gravity of the pin so as

to begin combat. The primary action of the traditional encounter overworld— player/

protagonist finds and fights enemies— can thus be rewritten in *The World* as a Latourian

network: the player/protagonist interacts with the pin which in turn interacts with the

enemies so as to create combat encounters. Moreover, just as in the exploration of the

game's underworld, this unit of connection reveals the activity of the pin itself. The

central role of the pin in the network of the non-random combat encounters reveals that it

is the ludic object, rather than the human protagonist Neku, who violently interacts with

the enemies of the game-world.

The same unit of connection is evident in the game's combat mode, and operates

to much the same effect. The ludic nature of the pins is most evident in combat, wherein

they serve as stand-ins for the traditional weapons of the genre. Unlike those weapons,

whose utility is straightforwardly tied to a simple button-press or trigger-pull, the pins-as-

weapons refuse a facile "ready-to-handedness." Rather, the game's combat reflects the

pins as both objects and agents within a network of interaction. Their agential vitality is

most obviously clear in their in-game "psionic" abilities, which allows them to create

walls of fire, energy bullets, and a variety of other attacks to destroy enemy units (*The*

World). These "psionic" abilities are activated by the player through the use of the

console's touchscreen, and occur without Neku moving on-screen. Graphically, the game

underscores the interaction and activity of the pins by shading them as they are used,

giving them the impression of ball-like motion as they are activated by the player. The

gameplay of fighting is thus totally dependent on the player and player-character

connecting to the pin, both narratively and mechanistically.

Understanding the game as an assemblage of units of connection and interaction

— whereby both *The World*'s action and meaning are dependent upon the ludological and

narratological impulse to connect— can thus allow one to recognize the vitality of the

ludic object within the game. Moreover, it can allow one to recognize the manner in

which said object, operates at its base to manifest an impulse towards connectivity.

Taking part in these unit operations leads Neku to connect with human NPC allies in the

game, many of whom are themselves quite preoccupied with pins (one even goes by the

alias of Doctor Pin!) (*The World*). These narrative friendships are themselves units of

connection, but they are also networks centered on and contingent upon the activity of the

ludic object. It is fitting that in *The World*'s end-game mode, many of these allies can be

found partaking in recreational games built around pins like "Tin Pin Slammer" (*The

World*). Thus, through all of these units of connection, the pin acts to manifest the larger

impulse towards community felt by the alienated characters of the game-world.

However, this understanding of the ludic object in T*he World* is constantly

troubled by the pins' entanglement with the "Any-space-whatever" of the game's late

capitalist setting. Unlike DeLillo's baseball, which is allowed to exist at least at first as a

purely ludic object within the Polo Grounds, the urban space of *The World* ensures that

the pins are always-already perverted by the commodifying nature of the market-space in

which they live. Indeed, within the game-world the ludic objects operate as the prime

examples of the marketplace, and serve as manifestations of the unconscious impulse

towards commodifying consumption. Chief among the branded objects for sale in the game's various stores are the pins.[23] For most players, the majority of in-store purchases will be for different branded pins. And what's more, the branding of the pins creates its own unit of connection— each area of the game has different brands that are "in style" and/or "out of style" within them, and the fashionability of a pin's brand has a proportional effect on the power and effectiveness of its abilities. Connecting with properly branded pins in the right areas of the game provides significant combat bonuses, while using undesirable pins will result in diminished returns. The game's central focus upon the ludic object of the pin thus takes on dangerous overtones. When Neku interacts with the branded pins in combat, he is connecting as much to the dictates of the alienating marketplace as he is to any imagined community.

The ever-present commodification of the pin by the late capitalist space of the game operates in turn to pervert the units of connection that make up its gameplay into dark and dangerous activities. For one, the pin's activity and interaction with the game-world creates and sustains the demons that haunt *The World*'s cityscape. The commodified pin's central role in allowing exploration must as equally be seen as its creation of the enemy characters. Sans pin, the quiet overworld would remain a peaceful space and the underworld would remain non-existent. By having the ludic object act as the center of the network between the overworld and underworld, the game makes it so that the ludic object is in fact the creator of the demons that haunt the city. That it is the pin which serves to attract the enemies in the game's underworld— pulling them towards

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[23] In proper late capitalist fashion, the branded pins come in all styles, ensuring that all identity groups can be equally induced to consume.

it so as to create combat encounters— reinforces the twisted sense in which the ludic

object acts as a progenitor of the game's urban violence and the characters' estrangement.

Of course, the ludic object of the pin, while vital, is not a force of violence and

evil in and of itself. Such a quasi-Situationist reading of the ludic object's activity would

necessarily undercut both the evident independence of the pins as actors. Rather, one

must view its negative role in the narrative and mechanics of *The World* as a result of its

place in a network of commodification in the game's self-consciously late capitalist

space. During the game, there are no possible networks outside of Shibuya, outside of the

"Any-space-whatever," in which the reverse can be imagined. The only option the player

has to combat the problems of alienation, to seek out community, is through the purchase

and usage of other pins, other commodities. The market-space of *The World* thus models

the marketplace of the world, filled even with the 'infinite' profit machine of late

capitalism.

This is a grim picture, but the ludic object of the pin does at times provide a small

glimmer of escape, and of community. While the activity of the pins is fairly evenly

evident throughout the game, the withdrawal of the ludic object is clear mainly in the

combat phases. As mentioned above, combat occurs in the game largely through player

and player-character's interactions with various pins, so that it is the pins which serve as

the central actor in the network of fighting. At times during combat, though, different

pins will "cool-down," will stop working for a certain amount of time (*The World*).

Mechanistically, this serves as an increased challenge for the player. More importantly,

these moments of brokenness, operate to bring the player face-to-face with the

withdrawal of the object even while it is present— the pin remains on the screen, but it is occluded and unmoving.

In these moments, the object is an almost perfect example of Harman's reading of Heidegger's broken tool. In the contest of the late capitalist space of the game, though, the forced recognition of the alien and of the unknowable serves a powerful imaginative function beyond that imagined by the theorist. In these moments of phenomenological de-centering, one recognizes the possibility of broken-ness itself, and the pull of an alterity grounded not in consumption, but in play. The glimmer of hope, then, is found in the embrace of the ludic object's continual withdrawal, in the embrace of the radical sense of a democracy of objects.

V. <u>Enmeshment, Ecology, and the Ludic Object in Friday Night Lights</u>

> *"And then also, again, still, what are those boundaries, if they're not baselines, that*
> *contain and direct its infinite expansion inward, that make [the game]… beautiful and*
> *infinitely dense?"* — David Foster Wallace*, Infinite Jest*

Partly due to its relative youth and partly due to its status on the fringes of the

American monoculture, cultural critics have only lightly considered *Friday Night Lights*.

While on the air from 2007-2011, the show was the prototypical much-talked about,

little-watched American drama, and its lack of monocultural impact has likely hindered

critical interest.[24] In part, this is due to a general critical aversion to the market-sullied

texts of the television medium. Although recent years have seen an uptick in interest in

the format, especially for those work like David Simon's *The Wire* which benefit from the

prestige-granting seal of the pay cable domain, *Friday Night Lights* has been largely

doomed to critical silence. The only critical volume published on the series, *A Friday*

Night Lights Companion, is a cloying recapitulation of online reviews and personal

essays.

Just as Bogost agitates for increased attention to under or ill-considered shows

like *Ace of Cakes* or *Good Eats* as tools for greater access to alien phenomenologies, this

chapter argues that *Friday Night Lights* represents a prime and vital example of

contemporary society's material unconscious (Bogost 115-119). There have been few

texts, let alone television shows, produced in recent memory that have allowed for a

better vision of the vitality of the object than Peter Berg's drama. Its focus on the ludic

space of the football field and the negotiated ecological space of the West Texas plains

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[24]The show so struggled with viewership that its final two seasons were aired in an experimental joint-format between NBC-Universal and DirecTV so as to allow it to stay financially afloat.

actively forces the viewer to recognize and grapple with the activity of non-human actors in a way few narratives do. At every turn, the construction of the show's small town of Dillon is revealed to be heavily dependent on the entanglement and activity of objects as large as the ecosystem and as small as the football.

For the purpose of the present analysis, the show's grounding within the environment of high-stakes high school football renders it doubly important. The entire structure of the show is built around the activity of the ludic object— nary an episode concludes without the intercession of a football, and nary a character appears who is not directly implicated within larger networks built around the sport and the object. As in *Underworld*, the ludic object in *Friday Night Lights* serves to manifest the utopian unconscious desire for community in the society within which it operates. Moreover, the ludic object acts to extend this desire onto the physical landscape around the town, revealing an ecological bent within the show's unconscious desire for community.

Like *Underworld* and *The World Ends With You*, *Friday Night Lights* depicts a recognizable and realist vision of a late capitalist space. However, the show's setting is distinguished by its focus on an image of modern American society in the rural rather than the urban or X-urban context. The show's introductory title sequence, appropriately scored by Austin-based band Explosions in the Sky, immediately reveals the show's focus on late capitalist space. While many of the sequences focus on intimate images, of marital connection between Kyle Chandler's Eric Taylor and Connie Britton's Tami Taylor for example, the montage interjects these warm images with a variety of more troubling landscape shots. These shots, of electric towers over West Texas plains, beat-up one-story

ramblers, and closed fast-food restaurants in vacant parking lots, serve in part to establish

the viewer's geographic and socio-economic location—Dillon, Texas well after the oil

crash— and to convey a sense of realism unto the melodramatic proceedings of the

serial.[25] The slight shake of the hand-held cameras used by Berg and his crew serve to

underscore the feeling of verisimilitude and economic malaise imparted by the images.

The introduction immediately reveals that *Friday Night Lights*, like *Underworld*

and *The World Ends With You*, carries within it a tension between the alienating forces of

modern society— does any image better capture the sense of estrangement than the

closed-down fast food joint?— and the "utopian impulses" of the desire for community

(Jameson, "Reification and Utopia" 143). The interjections of the two categories of

images, the cuts between the domestic bliss of the household or the unity of the locker-

room and the malaise of the ramblers and, creates an internal sense of opposition between

them, even while the cascading interlayering of the theme song attempts to tie them

together.

As the intro smuggles in this tension, it also provides the viewer with the

narrative's recurring solution to it. As the montage fades to a close— as the guitars hush,

the series's name appears, and the "Executive Producer" tags arrive on screen— it lingers

on one final image: the titular lights of the football field stark against a cloudy yet

benevolent sky. The construction of the landscape seemingly presents the dual focuses of

the image, the man-made ludic space and the cumulus manifestation of the environment,

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[25] While Dillon is a fictional locale, it is clearly based upon Odessa, the town at the center of Buzz
Bissinger's non-fiction book *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream*. The show itself was shot
on location in Austin, with the city suburbs standing in for the expanse of the town ("Clear Eyes, Full
Hearts, Couldn't Lose").

as harmonized and mutually constitutive. The equipoise of the shot— stadium and sky entangled within each other— holds out the possibility for a similar harmonious connection between the disparate elements of the montage that preceded it; in the entanglement of the two spaces, the quasi-dialectic between the private and warm and the public and modern of the earlier shots is strangely synthesized. The fact that it is the ludic space's connection to the environment that provides this resolution is telling. Just as in *The World* and *Underworld*, the ludic here appears to carry within it a distinct Utopian impulse.

If this seems a far-fetched conclusion to reach based upon the single still of the introductory title sequence, it becomes a more sensible position to take as it recurs within the show's narrative. While *Friday Night Lights* is not a procedural show along the lines of a *Law & Order*, its structure (built around the quasi-episodic, weekly Texas high school football season) generally follows a certain formula.[26] While the overarching melodramatic plot-lines of the show weave in and out of each 40-minute installment, the viewer can generally expect an internally cohesive episodic narrative built on tensions developing within either the macro-community of Dillon or the micro-communities of the characters' various families which are then emotionally resolved in either the 'magic circle' of the football field or its double, the natural fields of the West Texas plains. While these resolutions are always necessarily temporary, a fact acknowledged both by the viewer aware of the episode to come and the characters aware of the games still to play,

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[26] There are, but of course, a number of exceptions to this rule— one need only think of the handful of episodes that take place during the football team's bye-weeks to see alternative episodic structures. Still, the formula holds true for the majority of episodes.

Fig. 3 *A screenshot of a typical in-show depiction of the ludic space. Just as in the intro, the presentation of the stadium appears to be mutually constitutive with the dual natural expanses of the field and the sky. Also of note is the manner in which the camera's subjective point of view embraces the viewer herself as a member of the crowd. Taken from "Nevermind," Friday Night Lights, Season 1, Episode 11.*

they continuously mirror the harmonizing operation of the intro's closing shot. As in the prologue of *Underworld*, the movement to the ludic space of the stadium invariably serves to bring the various individuals of the narrative together in the form of a crowd— a fact that the show underscores through frequent cross-cuts between the game unfolding and various enraptured characters. It further reinforces this sense of community through the use of the voice of a generalized radio-man as voice-over in place of the noise of the crowd.

The show's recurrent movement towards resolution on the football field, though, appears just as predicated upon the space's ecological nature as its ludic one. Although the football field (and the stadium which encircles it) is marked off from the natural plains around it, demarcated by its white lines as the "hallowed… play-ground" of

civilization's demesne, once the game begins the dichotomy between its current status as a man-made ritual space and its prehistory as boundless grassland become blurred (Huizinga 10).[27] As can be seen in Fig. 3, the limits of the television screen (and the hand-held cameras being used) mean that the viewer rarely gets a full encapsulation of the ludic field. Rather, it appears to mirror the expanse of the night sky, stretching beyond the edges of the screen. Ironically, through the activity of the game, the ludic nature of the field thus appears to dissolve into the larger sense of its natural location. The two separate natures of the space are thus revealed to be utterly interobjective, so entangled within one another as to be almost mirrors of the larger entanglement of the crowd.

How, though, is one to interpret this strange, entangled phenomenon smuggled within the structure of the narrative of *Friday Night Lights?* The community produced (with)in the ludic is merely temporary, sure to be erased by the next episode or the one after that. Furthermore, even in the momentary connections of the ludic space, it is clear that the late capitalist forces that originate the alienation and fragmentation of the community are not solved by the routine high school football games being played.[28] To attempt to explicate the strand of Utopian resolution manifested in the show, it is necessary to focus on the vital activity of the ludic object within said space and to draw upon Timothy Morton's conception of the "Mesh."

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[27]This blurring of the dichotomy is further reinforced by the show's frequent act of doubling the field with the semi-arid grasslands that surround the town. The manner in which these spaces mirror each other is made most evident in the show's final episode, "Always," in which Taylor Kitsch's star football player Tim Riggins is seen immersed within the plains landscape in a way reminiscent of his position in the field of play.

[28] Indeed, neither the show nor its source material shy away from discussing the manner in which even high school football is a space where harmful and alienating hierarchies of race, gender, and class are enacted upon both participant and observer.

In Morton's ecological vision of an object-oriented ontology, the "Mesh" stands as a metaphoric encapsulation of the interobjectivity of all things in the world system, thereby operating to greatly expand upon Heidegger's idea of the "contexture of equipment" (*Hyperobjects* 82-85). For Morton, the "Mesh" allows for a figuration of causality within the world's flat ontology; through it, one can develop an understanding of "the strange interconnectedness of things, an interconnectedness that does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences" (83). The gaps between the links of the mesh allow Morton's Object-Oriented worldview to envision causality even while retaining the withdrawn nature, the "strange strangeness," of the individual object (83-84).[29] As Morton's treatment of the "Mesh" in *The Ecological Thought* reflects, the idea is equally useful in allowing one to simply understand the entanglement of humans and/or objects in the larger ecological sphere. Conceiving of the environment as a manifestation of the "mesh" itself, the human actor (or any subject) is forced to recognize his own interobjective connection to it (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 94). In this recognition, the Utopian desire for community is expanded out across the entire democracy of withdrawn objects.

In light of the concept of the "Mesh," the momentary resolutions within the ludic space in *Friday Night Lights* can be better understood as moments of recognition, as well as harmony. Consider, for example, the treatment of the ludic object within the episode

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[29] One may be wondering at this point what differentiates this conception of the "Mesh" from the principle of entanglement discussed in relation to Karen Barad in Chapter 1. The primary difference between the two conceptions is the emphasis each puts upon the figure of interaction. To Barad, being occurs in the process of intra-action while to Morton, the latter merely rests upon the prior ontological existence ("Treating Objects" 64-65). Morton's position upholds the conception of the uncannily withdrawn object so as to preserve the central tenets of Object-Oriented Ontology.

"Mud Bowl" from the first season of the show. In that episode, a chemical spill (an

ecological disaster) in Dillon renders the football field unusable for the scheduled game.

Working tirelessly, the coach and his team succeed in transforming a pastoral field on the

outskirts of town into a new ludic space in which they are able to play their playoff game.

The dramatic tension of the plot rests in the deep resistance that various residents of

Dillon have to the idea of the pastoral field being a suitable ludic space. Motivated by

capitalist greed or mere cynicism, they view the two valences as ever-estranged from one

another, the field a mere "cow pasture for lease" (*Friday Night Lights*).

The anxiety over the boundary between the two spatial valences pervades much of

the episode, bleeding into subplots about motion and relationships that similarly straddle

the liminal. As the field is constructed over the course of the episode, the tension of

liminality slowly dissipates, but it is only truly extinguished when the football appears

and the game itself can officially begin. In this moment, the true center of the community

(and the resolving impulse that births it) is revealed to be not the ludic space, but the

ludic object. The ability of the ball to demarcate the valences of the field— to invest the

pastoral space with the connectivity of the ludic football field—renders it the prime

mover in the network of the football crowd. The vision of its activity is thus congruent

with the vitality of the baseball in *Underworld,* which similarly defined the space of the

ballpark through its networked activity.

But, crucially, the football's activity extends past the alliances formed by

DeLillo's ludic object. In demarcating the valences of the field, in rendering the ludic

space from the natural space, the ball paradoxically succeeds in revealing the larger

enmeshment of the network in question. Although the ball's presence allows for the field

to operate as a ludic space, the actual activity of the object on the field, the play centered

on its tumbling and fumbling about the "magic circle," leads the natural state of the field

to re-emerge— the episode is not called 'Mud Bowl' for nothing. As in the intro montage,

the visual representation of the scene then highlights the overlapping of the (civilizing)

ludic space and the natural one. Player, ball, and field all take on the same grimy brown

hue on the screen, blending amongst each other so that it appears that all three objects are

on the same team.

In a sense, the activity of the football unearths the ontological fact that they are.

Through its dual functions of delineation and unearthing, the object as actor reveals the

manner in which the two separate valences and the various members of the crowd are all

already entangled. Through it, one can clearly see the manner in which the ludic space

and the natural space are mutually constitutive— the one lurks ever within and beside the

other, appearing to require only the enactment of a connective network to be co-revealed.

This revelation, in turn, extends out from the mud onto the crowd. Living up to the

episodic formula outlined above, the creation of the football field in 'Mud Bowl' leads

the town to momentarily connect into the collective of the crowd, allowing the episode to

close with the happy (if corny) image of the coach fraternally bonding with his old

quarterback on the field of play.[30] This resolution, this ephemeral fulfillment of the

impulse to community, is necessarily bound up with the ludic object's network of

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[30] The dark subplot that mirrors this event— the attempted assault of a high schooler in the town's empty streets— tragically reinforces and contrasts the sense of community in the ludic space and the alienation of the modern boulevard.

connection; without the object, there could be no field, without the field, no collectivity. Thus, the interobjectivity of the field's ludic and natural valences is also present within the crowd. Their Utopian resolution is constituted by (and constitutes) the mud of the field just as much as the cheers of the fans. In other words, the ludic object's enactment of this network makes clear the manner in which the show's recurrent Utopian resolution is an embrace of the "Mesh." The interconnectedness of things here, as in Morton's formulation, is not perfect—indeed, it is strange and marked by absence— but it is present nonetheless.

The revelation and embrace of the "Mesh" in this moment fundamentally alters the nature of the Utopian impulse in *Friday Night Lights*. While the activities of the football in the show can be seen to be relatively congruent to those of the ludic objects studied in previous chapters, the ball's revelation of enmeshment renders its manifestation of the desire for collectivity necessarily inflected through the ecological sphere. As the crowd is interobjectively connected to the environmental space in which it operates, it cannot collectively resolve itself without the consideration of the environment's activity. The vitality of the object thus gives way to the embrace of the multitude of the natural world.

This vision of an enmeshed Latourian network also significantly expands one's conception of the activity of the ludic object in contemporary narratives. Whereas this project's tracing of the personal networks of *Underworld* and the consumptive networks of *The World* revealed the vitality of the ludic along the lines of a social material unconscious, the football's enactment and revelation of the interobjective "Mesh" reflects

that the ludic object's unconscious is as much a negotiation of the ecological as the social.

Or, put in other terms, that its activity reveals that neither valence, neither sphere, can be

separated.

VI. <u>Conclusion: The Politics of the Ludic Object in the Democracy of Objects</u>

> *"Queen: What sport shall we devise here in this garden,*
> *To drive away the heavy thought of care?*
> *Lady: Madam, we'll play at bowls.*
> *Queen: 'Twill make me think the world is full of rubs,*
> *And that my fortune rubs against the bias."*
> *— Richard II, Act iii Scene 4*

"The function of play," according to Huizinga, "can largely be derived from the two basic aspects under which we meet it: as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something" (13). The function of the play-thing, unfortunately, cannot be so succinctly devised. This project has attempted to derive the political function of the ludic object through an Object-Oriented analytics. It has explored the congruent actions of various objects across three separate mediums to trace out the networks and alliances formed by the activity of the ludic object. In *Underworld*, the home run baseball enacts and manifests the Utopian impulses of the alienated inhabitants of the American century, allowing for the possibility of the formation of a true community. In *The World Ends With You*, the simulated realism of the "Any-space-whatever" enters the pin into networks of commodification and simulation. In the object's withdrawn alterity, though, both player and player-character can glimpse the possibility of a separate structure, one built on networks of collectivity, rather than estrangement. In *Friday Night Lights*, the vitality of the football connects the natural space of the West Texas plains to the social community of the town, revealing the thorough entanglement of both spheres. In so doing, the ludic object also extends the conception of the collective established in the show's imaginary, redirecting the Utopian impulse out towards the natural world.

These objects, like the "strange strangers" of Morton's "ecological thought," can then be seen to function not as significations but as signifiers, as forces that engender and enact the Utopian impulse towards an unbound community (*The Ecological Thought* 135). Moreover, the vitality of these objects can be seen to expand the Utopian impulse itself. The ludic object's stubborn withdrawal— the way it disappears in flight in the Polo Grounds or refuses operation in the simulated Shibuya, the way it reveals itself to be mistranslated— forces a confrontation with an alterity that cannot but de-center one's subjectivity. In the wake of the object's bounce or spin or bubble, the clutter of the everyday cannot but appear teeming and vibrant, compelling recognition and connection. In the face of this, the social Utopian impulse must be extended out to include all the "strange strangers" of the democracy of objects; the network created between the ball and the crowd must be replicated and expanded. In the face of the estrangement of the contemporary market-place, the ludic object thus teaches us the lesson of *Mao II* with a twist: "the future belongs to crowds," yes, but crowds not only of humans but of the whole panoply of the democracy of objects (DeLillo 16).

And this vision, in turn, freights its own political functionality within it. The expansion of the Utopian strand to include the object-world must mean the recognition of the latter's alien phenomenology. As is evinced in *The World*, acknowledging the alterity and the activity of the ludic object is always also recognizing the limits of one's own subjective perspective. It teaches one to recognize that each actor's perspective on the networks within which they operate is necessarily partial and subjective. The strangeness of the ball's vitality, its "pulsing in his hand," manifests the bewildering sense that one

cannot grasp the withdrawn object, but merely mistranslate its fragments. The limits of one's subjectivity, in turn, necessitates the self-chosen alliance, the collective, of the fragmentary so as to create the whole. The inherent subjectivity of the individual within the democracy of objects then becomes not a problem but a possibility: the untranslatable being of each object a promise of an embodied alternative and a future community.

For the literary critic, this understanding of the inherent subjectivity may be the more important function of the ludic object. If the recognition of objects' alien phenomenology means the recognition of the limits of one's own subjectivity, for the critic it must equally mean the acknowledgement of one's own fragmentary perspective. Take, for example, the limited subjectivity of this project. In following the flight of the home run baseball, it has largely neglected questions of gender and sexuality present within Klara Sax's engagement with the materiality of the art world. In unearthing the football's enactment of the Utopian fantasy in *Friday Night Lights*, it has occluded the show's negotiation of race and class in the landscapes of East Dillon. The invisibility of those problematics and perspectives within this analysis does not mean that they do not exist, it merely means they operate in networks alien to those of the ludic object, networks that the inherent perspective of this project cannot access.

The subjectivity of this project, the subjectivity of any critical position, is not a bad thing, though. Far from it. It is necessary and inescapable; to ignore the borders of the alien would be to return the material object to its undermined, evacuated critical state. Rather than being decried, the limits of the critical perspective should be seen as energizing and even Utopian. The recognition of the fragmentation of critical perspective

is also the recognition of the need for future complementary analyses— of Gaskell's

scarlet cloak and Klara Sax's airplanes and a universe of things— and future critical

collectivity. If the coming times are to be defined by the alien clamor of the democracy of

objects, they should be met by a community of critics.

    Eamonn deLacy

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