

MAGIC REALISM AS METAPHYSICS: MURAKAMI HARUKI¹ AND THE RESISTANCE OF REALITY ITSELF

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AN IMPOSSIBLE PASTICHE OF SENTIMENTS

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Franz Roh, the German art critic who first coined the term *magic realism* as *Magischer Realismus* in the 1920s, disavowed the term in the late 1950s as a “retardation” of history (Zamora 21-22). Had he lived to see the 2000s and 2010s, he might have come to reavow it. Another name for Roh’s *Magischer Realismus* that was popular at the time was *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or *New Objectivity*. This term was meant to oppose the expressionism and abstract art embodied in such figures as Kandinsky and Malevich, and embodied a form of art which returned from the abstract to “representational” art, which, instead of working with geometry, colours, and “pure” forms, aimed to represent scenes, figures, and objects, but in a way that did not repeat pre-expressionist dogmas (Dahms 358). The *Sachlichkeit*, or Objectivity, in New Objectivity was just this: the use of objects and things in lieu of ideas and concepts as the subject of art: “an anti-expressive objectivity and sobriety” (Dahms 358). Through closely examining the work of Japanese author Murakami Haruki in conjunction with Franz Roh’s characterization of magic realism and a certain branch of contemporary continental philosophy, Object-Oriented Ontology, this article defends the importance of magic realism today considered both as aesthetics, and as metaphysics.

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Consider the first pages of Murakami’s novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985), rendered in English translation by Alfred Birnbaum (1991). The first six pages are dedicated to the description of the interior of a lift. This particular

lift is depicted as both deathly silent and still; its interior does not echo, it does not lend any indicator of motion or movement to its rider, and it lacks any buttons, displays, or controls typical of lifts, which might relay a sense of departure, destination, or decision to its inhabitant (1-2). The novel lends a very particular aesthetic to this “hermetically sealed” (2) space, as some indicative passages demonstrate:

Staring at these four blank stainless-steel walls, I recalled one of Houdini’s great escapes I’d seen in a movie. He’s tied up in how many ropes and chains, stuffed into a big trunk, which is wound fast with another thick chain and sent hurtling, the whole lot, over Niagara falls. (2)

I stood in that hermetically sealed vault for what seemed an eternity. The doors showed no sign of ever opening. Stationary in unending silence, a still life: *Man in Elevator*. (2-3)

The elevator was made, apparently, out of a miracle alloy that absorbed all noise. I tried whistling *Danny Boy*, but it came out like a dog wheezing with asthma. (3)

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in a highly exceptional reality—this ridiculously slick elevator a case in point—the non-exceptional can, for convenience’s sake, be written off as paradoxically exceptional. Could any human being capable of designing this Tom Swift elevator fail to keep the machinery in working order or forget the proper procedures once a visitor stepped inside? (5)

I spread my fingers to dry the sweat. Like Henry Fonda in *Warlock*, where he steels himself before a gunfight. (6)

What I would like to draw the reader’s attention to is the wild variation in aesthetic registers deployed here, by which I mean the varying aesthetic and tonal contexts that are used and the different effects these registers produce. The first passage references Harry Houdini, renowned illusionist and escape artist, which may be considered a reasonable enough allusion underscoring the sealed and inescapable nature of the lift with overtones of magic and sleight of hand. This allusion is not particularly related at all to the metaphor used in the second passage, which treats the scene with a painterly gaze, instead emphasizing the visually artistic characteristics of the space. Again, neither of these descriptions is especially reinforced nor detracted from by the allusion to the Irish folk ballad *Danny Boy* in the third passage, or the mention of the eponymous protagonist of the twentieth-century children’s adventure novel series *Tom Swift* in the fourth, or the reference to Henry Fonda’s role as mercenary gunman Clay Blaisedell in the 1959 cowboy movie *Warlock* in the fifth.

Rather than attempt any unification of this cacophony of images, it is this novel’s method, and indeed a key feature of Murakami’s aesthetic across his entire oeuvre, to represent them as unresolvably divergent. The novel presents these images and metaphors, these varying aesthetic registers, as if they simply happen to lay across one another here, but in no way do they do so as part of any unified or unifying design. In other words, the aesthetic developed in Murakami’s novel is one in which various registers are at play without being subordinated to an overall design in a sort of com-

munity without totality, a dialectic that never achieves synthesis. When considering the insistence with which this passage underlines the hermetically sealed nature of this space, this elevator, which lacks spatial continuity between its inside and outside, a hermeneutically opaque black box, explicitly dark to both the senses and intellectual interpretation, the reader senses the extent to which the text is preoccupied with aesthetics *as* hermeneutic opacity, with the space of perception and representation as both laced with aesthetic richness, but precisely through and because of this richness, *more resistant* to the interpretive gaze.

This resistance is not mere negativity, however. Resistance to interpretation should not be understood here as simply the suspension of judgement or the undecideability of meaning. There is, rather, a specific effect created by this hermeneutic opacity that is explicit in Murakami's writing. We may observe this effect at play in the figure of the woman who greets Murakami's protagonist—to whom I will refer as Watashi, the pronoun by which he is identified—at the end of his sealed elevator ride. The first thing to note is that the environment beyond the confines of the lift is no less aesthetically busy and resistant than within. The text calls this space “as long as Marcel Proust” (10), and also likens it to the impossible architecture and geometric forms of M.C. Escher's art (10), again making use of divergent aesthetic registers—here the literary and the painterly—formally doubling the interpretive resistance of the metaphors' content, as if it were not enough to be as labyrinthine as Proust's writing or Escher's prints. The numbers on the doors along the corridors follow no discernible pattern and the area as a whole seems as inimical to sound and echo as the lift, and is just as colourless and visually featureless (7).

In the midst of this space, Watashi is guided by a woman dressed in a full pink suit (6), who is literally voiceless: she makes the mouth-shapes for words, which Watashi interprets through rudimentary lip-reading skills, but produces no sound, and is immediately identified in the text as a “young, beautiful, fat woman” (8) and object of the narrator's sexual interest. If we read this figure of the female body along the lines drawn in Sianne Ngai's conception of the aesthetics of cuteness, we may come closer to understanding the aesthetics at play in Murakami's writing.

Ngai argues that the cute is an aesthetic that “depends on a softness that invites physical touching—or, to use a more provocative verb, fondling” (815), as well as an “exaggerated passivity and vulnerability” in the cute object, “intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle” (816). Ngai argues that “in its exaggerated passivity, there is a sense in which the cute thing is the most reified or thinglike of things, the most objectified of objects or even an ‘object’ par excellence” (834), emphasizing the vulnerability and non-agency of the cute object in the gaze of the viewing subject. In sum, for Ngai's definition of cuteness to apply, the cute object invites, provokes or elicits desire, particularly the desire for physical handling, gripping, seizing, and clutching, by its own supreme inertness, weakness, exposedness, and relative disempowerment. Cuteness is “a relationship to a socially disempowered other that actively transforms the speech of the subject who

imposes the aesthetic quality on that other” (828; emphasis in original).

Taking this schema, one might credibly read the pink-suited woman in the same way that Ngai reads the figure of Hello Kitty. Ngai holds that Hello Kitty’s form, which “has no mouth at all” (832), embodies an object “given just *enough* face to enable it to return our gaze” (833; emphasis in original), a quintessential cute object in its eliciting of the viewing subject’s desire from a place of silent disempowerment. In the same way, the pink-suited woman’s silence combined with the text’s unashamed, and certainly not unproblematic, emphasis on her physical form as a sexual object—“I could end up sleeping with her” (8) and “she was my kind of chubby” (9)—can easily be read as an instance of the dominant/dominated power relation that elicits the fondling and possession Ngai identifies.

However, a correct reading of the text should not be so quick to identify Murakami’s aesthetics with Ngai’s. A curious inversion appears in the relationship between Watashi as gazing subject and the pink-suited woman as perceived object: it is not
36 Watashi who imposes his gaze on her from a position of empowerment or agency, but she who not only directs, but indeed seizes and leads, even beyond his control, his very powers of perception by her objective form alone. The primary feature of Watashi’s experience is not arousal but “confusion,” arising from an imperative sense that “I am demanded to assume a posture towards her” (8). Once again, the text relies on an aesthetic *conflict* between different frames or registers to indicate its *resistance* to the interpretive gaze, its resistance to understanding. The pink-suited woman’s soundlessness does not disempower her but rather leaves Watashi at her mercy, thwarting his feeble attempts at conversation (9), reducing him to a figure led through an otherwise unnavigable space without any recourse to understanding its logic or communicating with it or its denizens; after all, she knows the way through the Proust-Escher corridors, unlike he. All attempts he makes at opening up a channel of communication or inserting himself into the woman’s and the environment’s hermeneutic frame are met with uncompromising resistance, embodied no better than in his failed attempt to interpret her soundless mouth-shapes: “*Tozum’sta*,” “*Sela*,” “*Saum’té, sela*” (10-11). In this space, by its very indecipherability, its refusal of interpretive approach, it is Watashi who is Othered, made vulnerable.

Formally, the way the text engenders this aesthetic may be observed in its description of the pink-suited woman’s scent, perhaps the most explicit early example of this feature:

A scent reminiscent of standing in a melon patch on a summer’s morn. It put me in a funny frame of mind. A nostalgic yet impossible pastiche of sentiments, as if two wholly unrelated memories had threaded together in some unknown recess. (Hard-Boiled Wonderland 9)

This “impossible pastiche of sentiments” is the status of Murakami’s entire aesthetic as deployed in every example we have identified in the novel thus far. The novel uses a scene within a scene, or one aesthetic frame to interrupt another—here, a synaes-

thetic scene, “standing in a melon patch on a summer’s morn”—and forces the scenes to subsist alongside, within, and piled up on top of, between, and around one another. Rather than identify objects from within one fixed frame—*the lift was very quiet; the woman smelt of melons*—the text instead insists upon its reality’s irreducibility to any single aesthetic frame of reference or mode of perception, a feature also apparent in the text’s choice of narrative voice.

Reading the text this way, we can argue that the figure of the pink-suited woman is presented with the same kind of mutually-divergent aesthetic frames observed elsewhere, and that these frames produce the effect of simultaneous allure and resistance, a sort of empowerment that overmasters perception but remains durable in the face of any attempt at interpretation. The more frames and lenses applied to an object, the greater the variety and volume of gazes used to try to describe and interpret an object, the more vast and more impossible the pastiche of impossible sentiments becomes, and the more resistant and alluring that object becomes. The object is not revealed by this aesthetic, but made both more present and less visible, even as visions of it multiply. In the same way that a black hole may emit some forms of radiation into the universe and exert its gravitational force on nearby bodies, but may never be directly observed, so too do objects in Murakami’s universe emit and interact with aesthetic forms of all kinds without ever being reducible to one. This form, in which all these things subsist together without being reducible, either to one another or to any totalizing vision or unified mode of perception, is the foundation for what I contend is both Murakami’s style across all his writing and a fundamental way of understanding magic realism.

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“A WHOLE LOT MORE REAL”

First, I must defend the sense in which I can call this aesthetic “realism” of any kind. Some writers consider the use of these techniques of pastiche in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, in particular pastiche using the hard-boiled detective and noir genres, postmodernist in character. Steffen Hantke, for example, argues that the use of the figures and tropes of noir in Murakami’s work constitutes a particular kind of postmodern pastiche founded on a sort of double dislocation (9) in which noir appears first as a foreign figure, American media invading a Japanese culture, then takes on the status of a universal or given, an unquestioned feature of the Japanese cultural landscape. Hantke argues that Murakami’s use of noir is a deployment of the genre only possible from this standpoint, “as someone removed from the genre’s historical and geographical origins” (11), able to approach it both as free-floating cultural anachronism and commodified object of desire. Crucially for Hantke, these formal features of Murakami’s writing are based on noir’s ontological emptiness and metaphysical insubstantiality: “there is no such thing as ‘noir’ predating the critical discourse about it” (11). Likewise, Hantke reads Murakami’s

postmodernist use of pastiche and noir conventions as a way of representing self-recognition and abjection as spaces that are also themselves nothing, insubstantial, ontologically evacuated (13-14). If we are to follow this reading, we would be hard pressed to call Murakami's style a realism, even a magical one, in any sense. We would instead have to argue that the spaces of resistance, the hermeneutically opaque seals, and impossible pastiches in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* are artefacts of, at best, a psychological Real, perhaps following Lacan's psychoanalytic theories, or a surrealism, a nothingness that is itself lacking in essence, blockaded with impassable walls to the symbolic order.

Indeed, such commentators as Matthew Strecher double down on this reading. Strecher contends that this writing style in Murakami's work should be considered a postmodern experiment with the commodification and objectification of signs, deployed at the structural level of his novels ("Beyond 'Pure' Literature" 364). He thus interprets *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* as a parable about the inexorable power of the postmodern state, its pastiches no more than formal representations of the sense in which information is objectified and traded as units of value, a parody of literary formula evacuated of substance and relation to its origin, floating freely in a post-modern space ("Beyond 'Pure' Literature" 365). Strecher is led later to interpret all of Murakami's oeuvre based on a thoroughgoing antirealism in which "there is no reality perceptible to us that we do not create ourselves through language," and "the realities we construct are not merely virtual, nor even potential, but as real as it gets" (*Forbidden Worlds* 32). One wonders how it remains possible to call Murakami a magic realist, as Strecher does (*Forbidden Worlds* 15), when the *realism* is so thin and frail as to be reduced to the mere linguistic play of the mind and its signs. It might be more accurate, if we followed Strecher, to call Murakami's writing a style of semiotics or psychoanalysis, or just plain old postmodernism, since there is no reading of Murakami possible from within Strecher's theoretical schema that does not reduce the novels to allegories for consciousness, the unconscious, and a Jungian collective unconscious, or a language game in which reality takes on the shape of whatever narrative structures and linguistic signs are applied to it from within a subject's self-forming narrative.

Abundant resources from across Murakami's oeuvre will make clear why I do not follow this reading. I have made these arguments elsewhere,² so will only repeat them briefly here for the sake of the reader. Consider this quotation from Murakami about his 2002 novel *Kafka on the Shore* (translated in 2005): "*Kafka on the Shore* contains several riddles, but there aren't any solutions provided. Instead several of these riddles combine, and through their interaction the possibility of a solution takes shape" ("Questions for Murakami"). *Kafka on the Shore*, considered in many ways the spiritual and formal successor to *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, makes narrative incompleteness, the refusal of meaning-making totality, dialectic without synthesis, its structural centrepiece. Like *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, the novel is split into two narratives, told in distinct narrative voices, which only loosely, by allusion and

metaphor, interact. *Kafka on the Shore* is the story of 15-year-old Kafka Tamura, an adolescent runaway with an oedipal curse, and Nakata, an elderly, psychologically impaired cat whisperer. The two narratives exert a sort of vicarious causal force upon one another; Nakata meets and kills Kafka Tamura's father, who appears in the form of cat-torturing scotch whisky mascot Johnnie Walker (160); over 600km away on the morning after the event, Kafka Tamura awakes in the grounds of a shrine, covered in blood (72), impossibly fulfilling the first step of the oedipal curse he has fled. At no point does the novel offer anything explicit that might explain, clarify, or give meaning to these narrative ellipses. They are simply left as the solutionless riddles that Murakami himself describes. Their interaction, and indeed, the lack of any solution which arises from their interaction, is the precise character of the novel's approach to narrative closure. Just as *Hard-Boiled Wonderland's* overlapping aesthetics are not meant to be synthesized, so too are *Kafka on the Shore's* narrative threads meant to be left unwoven; they are, in fact, unweavable.

Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World shares this overall structural feature with *Kafka on the Shore* as well: it contains two narratives that only interact by allusion, the hard-boiled noir narrative we have already discussed, and a romantic lyrical fantasy section. Again, just as on the microlevel of its style, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World's* overall structure is also composed of multiple aesthetic frames—in this case, two distinct genres—that do not achieve a totality and that resist interpretation. But is this a feature limited to these two novels alone, already identified as kindred within Murakami's oeuvre? Further examples will indicate that this is not the case.

In Murakami's novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994-95, trans. 1997), a side character writes these words:

We think it's natural to get rice pudding after we put rice pudding mix in the microwave and the bell rings, but to me that's just a *presumption*. I would be kind of relieved if, every once in a while, after you put rice pudding mix in the microwave, and it rang, and you opened the top, you got macaroni cheese. [...] that would feel, in some way, a whole lot more real. (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* 461, emphasis in original)

This issue here is *reality*; not perception, the mind, the unconscious, or language, but that which is "a whole lot more *real*." And the nature of reality is characterized very precisely: reality is *occasionally* unpredictable, or "every once in a while" disobedient, insubordinate, deviant. That reality would conform to an anthropocentric ruleset or a logic correlative to the structures of thought or language is cast as bizarre sort of complacency, a "presumption" equivalent to the baseless confidence of the middle classes in the stability and security of their social circumstances: "Those people [the speaker's complacent middle-class parents] believe that the world is as consistent and explainable as the floor plan of a new house in a high-priced development" (Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* 461). The following passage deliberates on this point further:

I bet if those tree frog³ parents of mine put rice pudding mix in the microwave and got macaroni cheese when the bell rang, they'd just tell themselves, "oh, we must have put in macaroni cheese by mistake," or they'd take out the macaroni cheese and try to convince themselves, "this *looks* like macaroni cheese, but actually it's rice pudding." (Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* 462)

Here, Murakami identifies and dismisses two strategies that attempt to explain the inconsistency of reality, to reduce the irreducibility of reality, to totalize the solutionless riddles, and to give narrative closure to disparate narrative threads. The first strategy is to reduce reality to its constituent parts, or rather, to ignore reality in favour of the conditions of its possibility: reality is macaroni and cheese from rice pudding, but the condition of possibility of mac n' cheese is mac n' cheese, so it must have been mac n' cheese all along! In other words, this strategy alters causes to match effects. It says that so long as we have all the pieces that led to the current state of affairs lined up and accounted for, any inconsistent features may be abandoned.

- 40 The second strategy reduces reality to its effects on perception, or rather, ignores reality in favour of whatever reality appears to be to a perceiver: reality is macaroni and cheese from rice pudding, but since it was rice pudding to start with, the mac n' cheese must be a false perception—it's all a matter of what we believe it to be! In other words, this strategy alters effects to match causes. It says that so long as we have all the effects, perceptions, and representations lined up in our heads and accounted for, inconsistent features must never have existed except as faults in those same perceptions.

Readers familiar with twenty-first-century continental philosophy will recognize themes consistent with the movement known as speculative realism, particularly the area known as Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). The main branch of OOO, founded by philosopher Graham Harman in the early 2000s, already bears myriad similarities with the aesthetic we are exploring in Murakami's work. Harman's OOO takes as its starting point the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl; indeed, a revolutionary reading of Heidegger was the sole subject of his first work, *Tool-Being* (2002), and the incorporation of insights from Husserl and the descendants of the phenomenology tradition in Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Lingis was the subject of his second major work, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005). The phenomenologists were most active in the early twentieth century, with OOO's keystone text, Heidegger's *Being and Time*, published in 1927. If we pay attention to the figures that appear in our passage from *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, Murakami's aesthetic takes root in precisely the same period, with the death of Marcel Proust in 1922 and the budding of M.C. Escher's career from the 1920s into the 1930s, the writing of *Danny Boy* in 1913, the first publication of the *Tom Swift* novels in 1910, the death of Harry Houdini in 1927, and the birth of Henry Fonda in 1905. Other examples abound; for instance, Jean-Luc Godard, pioneer of French New Wave Cinema, born in 1930, appears later in the novel (132).

Another writer of great significance for us here also found this period one of

great intellectual fertility. Franz Roh's foundational essay "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism" was published in 1925 and distributed to hispanophone audiences via the translation of philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, himself a disciple of Heidegger and Husserl, in 1927. It should also be noted that *Hard-Boiled Wonderland's* aesthetic has been compared to that of Japanese literary giant Junichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*, published in 1933 (Rubin 499). It is from this aesthetic climate, one that celebrates the *resistance* of individual things to totalizing narratives and grand teleologies, quietude, silence, and shadows, that Murakami draws his writing style, which is precisely the spirit of Roh's magic realism from the period. The following section develops the confluences between OOO, Roh, and Murakami and shows that they are far from trivial or merely coincidental similarities based on a loose influence from a vague historical point of reference.

To return to the point at hand, consider the following descriptions that form one of the essential features of Harman's OOO: the critiques of "undermining" and "overmining":

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[All undermining strategies] claim that objects are too specific to deserve the name of ultimate reality, and dream up some indeterminate basis from which specific things arise. They find it naïve to think of dogs as basic elements of the world, since dogs must be just aggregates of organic chemicals, or fragments of *apeiron*, or an active "dogging" rather than the stasis of some solid dog-thing, or the result of a long evolutionary struggle with climate and predators. All such strategies assume that a dog, candle, or army is built of some basic physical or historical element whose permutations give rise to these objects as a sort of derivative product. (Harman, *The Quadruple Object* 10)

As for "overmining":

[All overmining positions] overmine the object, treating it as a useless substratum easily replaced by direct manifestations. Though we claim to be speaking of objects, they are really nothing more than palpable qualities, effects on other things, or images in the mind. [...] If a house is encountered by three women, a child, a dog, and a crow in the same moment, each of these perceptions will have a very different character. And given a purely *relational* definition of what objects are, it would seem impossible to call all of them relations to the "same" house. The house itself vanishes into a mob of house-perceptions. (Harman, *The Quadruple Object* 12-13)

These critiques make up two of the essential pillars of object-oriented thought and have proved durable enough to travel widely in the thought of many thinkers beyond Harman, sometimes by direct influence and sometimes completely arising completely independently. In philosophy, some examples include Timothy Morton, Levi Bryant, Tristan Garcia, and Jon Cogburn, and there are also proponents in other fields such as architecture, business management, and the visual arts. Where undermining is considered a form of reduction downwards, overmining is reduction upwards. Where undermining reduces objects to things of which they are made, overmining reduces objects to things of which they are parts. Both strategies take the form of metaphysical hierarchies: in undermining, priority is given to the lowest level; the

lower we go—chemicals, atoms, the big bang, fundamental physical laws—the more fundamental, the more *real* a thing is, with everything else either less real, derivative, or not real at all. With overmining, priority is given to the highest level; the higher we go—perception, thoughts, the present, networks of actors—the more fundamental, the more *real* a thing is, with everything else either less real, a groundless hypothesis, or a nonexistent presupposition behind what is actually given.

42 These critiques take precisely the same form as the two identified in Murakami's *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* in the face of macaroni and cheese. What Murakami's novel, and indeed, his aesthetic across all his novels declares, is that reality is irreducible and contradictory. Real things take the form of rice pudding mix, which produces macaroni and cheese. People try to get rid of reality, get rid of the contradiction, by claiming either that there never was rice pudding, or that there isn't really any mac n' cheese. In the first case overmining is at work, which is to say that what is given and present takes ontological priority: there is macaroni and cheese before us, so the rice pudding can never have been there; the macaroni is here, so it's real; the rice pudding is not, so it isn't. In the second case, undermining is at work, which is to say that some substrate or origin point takes ontological priority: the rice pudding was there first, so this can't really be macaroni and cheese; the rice pudding was real, so the macaroni and cheese is somehow an illusion, unreal. The insistence from Murakami that consistency is merely a presumption, that getting macaroni and cheese from rice pudding mix is *a whole lot more real*, can be read precisely as an object-oriented contention in this light, about the irreducibility of reality to undermining and overmining. That is, for Murakami's aesthetics and OOO alike, reality is a zone explicitly characterized by the absence of metaphysical hierarchy, and is therefore, necessarily a zone impossible to narratively totalize.

PROXIMITY WITHOUT FUSION

If we want to pursue this direction further, exploring Murakami's aesthetics as if it has real metaphysical implications, and taking the "realism" in magic realism seriously, we will need to further explicate some of the metaphysics of OOO in order to draw out more important details. First, OOO identifies itself as an *occasionalist* philosophy. In other words, OOO considers itself of a kind with such thinkers as eleventh/twelfth-century Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazali and seventeenth/eighteenth-century Christian thinker Nicolas Malebranche in one very particular way. For these thinkers, causation cannot take place directly between worldly things. In the case of Al-Ghazali and Malebranche, this does not confine the world to stasis or fatalism, but instead indicates the necessity of divine intervention, not just for grand events and miracles, but for *every* causal interaction that takes place. Thus, no event occurs without a god directly serving as the occasion for said event, the universal mediator which allows interaction between entities.

In order for OOO to maintain its ontological flatness, its ontology without hierarchy, it must claim that anything can qualify as an object, be it large, small, singular, composite, natural, artificial, physical, or imaginary, an argument that is ubiquitous in Harman's career (see, for example, *The Quadruple Object* 5). However, if an object is not reducible to its relations or to its parts, neither relations nor parts can be used as *a priori* explanations of causality between objects.⁴ In fact, OOO is so insistent upon the irreducibility thesis and so committed to the equality between objects that it must claim that all objects are "withdrawn," or "withheld," their ontological reality preserved in a sort of hidden core that is impossible to make present in the world or in any relation at all. This is OOO's founding and singularly novel concept: "an object that both withdraws from all relation and yet somehow does enter into relation" (Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 89-90).

Since we have seen that OOO prohibits any ontological hierarchy that would give any single thing the privilege of being a sole universal causal agent, how, then, does it explain causality in an occasionalist vein without relying on a god or an equivalent über-being to connect equal but disparate beings in causal relations? OOO's answer is that causality has a structure akin to metaphor, which is often parsed as the catchphrase: "aesthetics is first philosophy" (see Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy").

This thesis has been perplexing even for specialists in OOO,⁵ so I will offer only the most relevant explanatory notes for it here. Harman draws heavily from Emmanuel Levinas in his explanation of causality. Harman is particularly interested in how Levinas resists the Heideggerian tendency to reduce objects to a universally connected system of equipment. In this view of Heidegger, "one object is plugged into another, and that one plugged into yet another; individual beings vanish in favour of the end they serve" (Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy"). It was this view that Levinas sought to challenge, conceiving of Heidegger's systematic totality as a philosophical counterpart to the violence of twentieth-century Naziism. Levinas's name for this system was *war*, "an order from which no one can keep his distance" (Levinas 21). Levinas's attempt to create an ethical system that offered an alternative to Heidegger's began in conceiving of beings as mutually and fundamentally separate, or Other to one another, while at the same time conceiving of a way they might share a world, a common place, without collapsing into a totalized system. Levinas found his answer in language as a community between terms alien to one another, only formed because the terms remain independent but also in common. On the one hand, "discourse is thus the experience of something absolutely foreign, a *pure* 'knowledge' or 'experience'" (Levinas 73), but equally, "to speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces" (Levinas 76).

In a movement typical of OOO, Harman radicalizes this anthropocentric principle to include beings of any kind: sentient, plant, animal, inanimate, big, or small. He argues that Levinas's principle can be read as the contention that all things take part in "sincerity," in which "everything is what it is, and does not pass elsewhere by means of relations; each point of reality stands in itself, candidly being just what it

is” (Harman, “Aesthetics as First Philosophy”). This character of all entities whatsoever can also be called “illeity, which ‘indicates a way of concerning me without entering into conjunction with me.’ This is what sincerity means: to be different from something even while taking it seriously. It is to touch a thing without fusing into it” (“Aesthetics as First Philosophy”; emphasis removed). Having flattened sincerity this way to include every and any conceivable thing, Harman is now able to contend that “communication occurs only through proximity” (“Aesthetics as First Philosophy”), with the caveat that “communication” refers to any contact between anything at all:

When avalanches slam into abandoned cars, or snowflakes rustle the needles of the quivering pine, even these objects cannot touch the full reality of one another. Yet they affect one another nonetheless. The only way for this to happen is for one object to *allude* to the reality of the other even while brushing against its surface. (“Aesthetics as First Philosophy”; emphasis in original)

44 This is the root of the claim that “aesthetics is first philosophy,” and that causation itself has an aesthetic structure, a structure that is allusive, non-direct, and metaphorical. One more stop on our detour through OOO will be illuminating for our discussion here. For, in order to describe the particular structure of causation and bridge the occasionalist gap, Harman relies upon the thought of José Ortega y Gasset, who is most known in literary circles for bringing Franz Roh’s magic realism to the hispanophone world, and was also a philosopher of no small significance in his own right.

Addressing Ortega’s early writings from 1914—Ortega also wrote a critique of Edmund Husserl in this year, responding again to the climate of phenomenology that has been ever-present in our argument—Harman first identifies in Ortega’s theory of metaphor a division between “execution and image” (Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 102; emphasis removed). The “execution” half of this equation allows for a sort of “true inwardness as ‘anything in the act of executing itself’” (*Guerrilla Metaphysics* 104) to belong to all beings such that we may speak of “an I-red, an I-water, and an I-star [...] Everything, from the point of view within itself, is an ‘I’” (Ortega, qtd. in Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 104). The ‘image’ half of this equation is the realm of language and the arts, which “makes everything a ghost of itself, placing it at a distance, pushing it beyond the horizon of the here and now” (Ortega, qtd. in Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 105). We can see here that Ortega’s theory flows from the same spring and addresses the same concerns as Harman’s interpretation of Levinas: everything has a protected zone, its inwardness, which cannot be expressed directly and only appears in ghost form when communicated.

But the equation changes in how Ortega and Harman consider objects as images, objects in perception and communication, objects in aesthetics. Harman draws on Ortega’s analysis of the metaphor: a cypress is a ghost of a dead flame. It is Ortega’s argument that a successful metaphor combines two objects *by successfully communicating their hidden inwardness*: “every objective image, on entering or leaving our consciousness, produces a subjective reaction, just as a bird that lights on or leaves a

branch starts it trembling” (Ortega, qtd. in Harman, *A New Theory of Everything* 85). In other words, the effectiveness of linking the terms *cypress*, *ghost*, and *flame*, is that all of them *retain* their hidden objectivity, their untranslatability, but are forced into union, confronting one another in tension, but not necessarily in conflict. Harman uses examples to clarify this point by way of contrast: “a [US] dollar is like 87.153 euro cents” is not a metaphor in exactly the same way that “a pen is like a pencil” is not a metaphor. The translation between the two terms is too direct precisely because there does not remain anything left of the original terms (Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 105-06). In other words, in unsuccessful metaphor the terms become *interchangeable* rather than resisting one another: a US dollar may, in fact, be completely interchangeable with 87.153 euro cents. These comparisons are too *obvious*, too *consistent*, and ultimately, too *reductive* to have any aesthetic effect at all.

Therefore, Harman via Ortega argues, metaphor is a particular kind of mediator, or a structural model for a particular kind of mediation, which allows beings to subsist together in a shared reality, a common place, while preserving their independence, their inconsistency, their resistance, their mutual otherness. A metaphor is a new thing, a whole and fully formed object in its own right, which deploys other beings in *sincerity*, without reducing them to mere parts or epiphenomena. Successful metaphor, on this reading, should possess the same durability, the same resistance to reduction and explanation as each of its terms. It should be a certain *je ne sais quoi*: “even when a metaphor is created we still do not know the reason for it. We simply sense an identity, we live executantly this being, the cypress-flame” (Ortega, qtd. in Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 109).

Harman contends that this is the structure of causation itself. For if every conceivable entity counts as an object and is not reducible to any part or effect it has, then any relation between two or more objects must encounter the same problems of resistance, of tension and independence that appear in the structure of metaphor Ortega discusses. Therefore, as far as Harman is concerned, all relations take place in an aesthetic structure, in which a metaphoric ghostly composite object appears between relata through which they interact without becoming merely interchangeable; flames and cypresses, not dollars and euros. This is Harman’s solution to the problem of occasionalism. Rather than ordain one godlike object to cause interaction between all others, he instead allows for any and all entities to withhold themselves from the world of interaction. By that very token, every being has the equal capacity to act and interact in causality, with the caveat that all those relations and interactions take an *aesthetic* form. For Harman, “the entire field of reality is laced with infinity, not with the single infinite of Alterity (that unattractive and paralyzing word), but with the countless infinities of water, silk, dynamite, airplane engines, sea mammals, and sugar cubes” (“Phenomena and Infinity” n.p.).

My own preferred metaphor to clarify this model is the concept of plasmogamy, a phase in the mating of fungi and other microscopic organisms. Single cells contain a nucleus, which stores the cell’s genetic data, their biological identity as individuals of

a species. This nucleus is contained within the cell membrane, in which other organelles are contained, which carry out the business of living and interacting with the exterior world. In plasmogamy, two genetic individuals meet and share membranes without combining nuclei. The two nuclei subsist alongside one another within a single membrane, two individuals in a common world. Harman's conception of metaphor, of aesthetics, and of causality, is just such a common place: an immanent shared zone that preserves its participants' independence, no less a thing in its own right for its immanence, in which beings interact without ontological hierarchy and share realities without sacrificing their own realities; proximity without fusion.

PERSISTENCE IN THE MIDST OF DEMONIACAL FLUX

- 46 We have already mentioned Franz Roh's understanding of magic realism as an aesthetic in visual art, characterized as a return to "representational" art that dealt with finite objects rather than abstract forms; "an *anti*-expressive objectivity and sobriety" (Dahms 358). With our understanding of Murakami's aesthetics and OOO's metaphysics, we now have a much firmer grasp of what this "anti-expressive objectivity" means. Insofar as Murakami's world is laced with overlapping aesthetic frames which refuse to collapse into a narrative totality, his writing speaks to a sense of reality—and indeed, as a representation of that reality, a sort of *realism*—in which there is silence between things; recall the extent to which *Hard-Boiled Wonderland's* opening sequence is filled with quiet, failures of communication, opacity, and hermeneutic impasses. Murakami's writing represents reality as irreducibly resistant to interpretation, nontotalizable, and insistently narratively incomplete.

In the same way, OOO is a philosophical realism which proposes that the very structure of the world is aesthetic. OOO represents aesthetics as the heart of reality; the very movements of causation take the form of metaphor, allusions, spaces of pastiche-like cohabitation, Proust in Escher, cypresses and flames. Reality is punctuated by the ellipses between beings: objects interact, to be sure, but that interaction is as haphazard and incomplete, inconsistent and unpredictable, as the smell of melon patches on summer mornings, as macaroni and cheese from rice pudding mix. The OOO world is made of objects, but these objects are, indeed, anti-expressive; their reality is precisely what they do not express, what cannot be expressed. While it could not have been what Roh was directly referring to when he coined the term *Magischer Realismus*, this reality, full of objects that largely refuse to express themselves, full of the gaps between objects in which myriad aesthetic modes of communication overlap and cross one another without any ontological hierarchy, without any one abstract universal to rule them all, is what I contend the "anti-expressive objectivity" of magic realism is all about.

Further descriptions from Roh illustrating the characteristics of his new aesthetic

will prove fruitful here. At a fundamental level, Roh resists the abstract and fantastical choice of subject matter favoured by the expressionists and surrealists, instead arguing for a magic realism that favoured “a much wider amalgam of colours, spatial forms, tactile representations, memories of smells and tastes: in short, a truly unending complex that we understand by the name of *thing*” (19). In his resistance to the surrealists who favoured formal distortions in order to represent psychological phenomena as depicted by Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud (Kostadinović 40), Roh confronts a psychological anthropocentrism, the idea that our reality is merely the movement of the conscious and unconscious and our perception, with a thoroughgoing realism which took to representing *things themselves* over any mental substratum, mystical realm, or otherworldly force. A perhaps unintended consequence of this focus upon things themselves, this insistence “that things already have their own faces” (Roh 20), is a spirit of liberal generosity with respect to what qualifies as an object. Referring both to what counts as an object worthy of art and objects in general, Roh’s “wider amalgam of colours, spatial forms, tactile representations,” his “truly unending complex that we understand by the name of *thing*,” has the consequence of producing the same kind of flat ontology that OOO defends. Anything can be a thing. Given that Roh also argues that “things have their own faces,” it is not hard to defend the concurrent view that the reality in Roh’s magic realism is one that is made of finite things that resist totalization in the same way Murakami’s reality does.

47

Roh further argues that magic realism must aim to conceive of its objects and depict them as the “miracle of an apparent persistence and duration in the midst of a demoniacal flux; this enigma of total quietude in the midst of general becoming” (22). Here again is the sense in which things, objects, finite and discrete entities, resist, endure, remain sincerely what they are, and do not succumb to the turbulence of the surrounding world. In OOO, it is an absolute rule that things are withdrawn, elsewhere than the world, not reducible to the things in which they take part. Roh’s objects exhibit the “pure inwardness” found in Ortega’s conception of objects; it is little wonder Ortega took so readily to Roh’s formulation. For us, persistence amidst flux is the formulation Jon Cogburn uses to describe all object-oriented modes of thought. What he calls “dialectics of persistence” is the sense in which competing forces, whether historical, metaphysical, hermeneutic, or anything else) never reach a synthesis that stabilizes and makes consistent all their contradictions. Rather, “the very tensions become constitutive of the kind in question” (Cogburn 53); being is a matter of inconsistency; a thing is *more* persistent, the more flux tries to wipe it out.

In Murakami’s *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, the romantic fantasy section of the novel takes place in a town; a “perfect,” “complete” town, which “has everything. And if you cannot see that, it has nothing. A perfect nothing” (*Hard-Boiled Wonderland* 86). In this town each thing has its exact use and no more; “everybody has a place, everybody has a job” (*Hard-Boiled Wonderland* 39). In this setting, there is nothing without use-value, nothing that is not absolutely reducible to its function, nothing that is not fully exhausted in its relationship with

everything else; we can perhaps credit Murakami for metaphorically anticipating the arrival of just-in-time capitalism from 1985 here. The protagonist of this half of the novel discovers the formula for divesting himself of this no-extraneous-parts mode of being: aesthetics. It is through teaching himself to play the accordion—indeed, the first tune he plays, recalled from memories of another world, is *Danny Boy* (368)—that he discovers memories from beyond the walls of the town, a part of his own being *exterior to the world*, to recall Harman’s reformulation of Levinas. This part of a being is embodied in the form of a fantasy object, the skulls of unicorns, which may be interpreted in a practice known as “dreamreading.” But dreamreading does not produce meaning; it is mainly the perception (or *aisthesis*) of “indistinct fragments that never merge into a sensate picture”; “between one fragment and the next there is nothing in common” (183-84); perhaps we ought to call it a “pastiche of impossible sentiments.” The only result of dreamreading is inwardness, the possibility of a kind of being that endures and persists in contradiction, refusing to be reduced to its mere usage, or, as the novel calls it, “quietude itself” (369)—“in the midst of demonical flux,” Roh might have added.

48

It is entirely appropriate to note here that in one of his few non-fiction works, Murakami writes that “inconsistency can be more eloquent than consistency” (*Underground* 204), when defending his editorial choice to relate accounts of the 1995 Tokyo sarin gas attacks replete with factual inaccuracy, narrative ambiguity, and outright contradiction. This reading of Murakami also allows an interpretation of his editorial method of *tatemashi* (“building up” or “stacking”). The word refers to an architectural style in which new sections are added on or “stacked” onto an existing building, and is identified in Murakami’s work as the publication of an initial text, marketed and sold as a finished work, to which is subsequently added perhaps as much as a whole *volume 3*, with the new extended edition eclipsing and overwriting the previous version (Katō 320). While only two instances of substantive *tatemashi* are identified in Murakami’s novels, our reading of his aesthetic suggests it is, in principle, an absolute and necessary possibility of *all* of them, since they must, if they accord with the style we have identified in his writing, remain *incomplete* and *unresolved*. Murakami’s feeling of “an urge from the work itself to stack it up” (Katō 334) is an essential feature of an aesthetic built upon the failure of totality, interpretive impasse, places where questions are met with quietude and silence. And we must not forget that it is *reality itself* here that is inconsistent: if aesthetics are to represent this reality, they must be as inconsistent, as paradoxical, as magical.

In my reading, then, a full picture of reality is produced at the crossroads between Franz Roh’s magic realism, Murakami’s aesthetics, and the contemporary philosophy of OOO. One might even—somewhat anachronistically, since I am not aware of any occasion on which an OOO proponent or Murakami has made any reference to Franz Roh’s work—argue that this interpretation of reality is Roh’s magic realism as *metaphysics*, a radicalized aesthetic theory as a picture of the world itself. In this world-picture, reality itself is composed of objects that are hermetically sealed, resis-

tant to interpretation, like Murakami's elevator, like Roh's things that have their own faces. Where these various hermetically sealed objects overlap, they produce an effect of contradictory aesthetic frames—Escher in Proust, or “infinity in small things” in Roh's terms (27). This contradiction is a feature of reality in itself and cannot be resolved without reduction to any knowledge or totalizing narrative. In this world the chain of cause and effect is itself obscure, and interpretation into narrative completion is never easy, if at all possible—rice pudding becomes macaroni and cheese.

My reading of magic realism has almost not-at-all focused on any sociocultural unity in the writers I have considered, except that they all take at least some inspiration from the intellectual atmosphere of early-twentieth-century Europe. My reasons for this are not to dismiss the importance of sociocultural origin, but to emphasize the neglected importance of formal characteristics. I have identified, or at least attempted to identify, formal features of magic realism that may be coordinated from sources all operating in the same spirit across a roughly one-hundred-year period from its origin to the present. In taking this method I am allied with such thinkers as Caroline Levine, whose project has been to rehabilitate formalism, defending a notion of forms that “endure across time and space,” “patterning, shapes, and arrangements,” which organize and affect contents and contexts while remaining stable (Levine 12-13).

Using this method affords me the possibility of finding magic realism in places it is not usually located, for example, in the work of Don DeLillo, whose magic realist credentials I have defended elsewhere. This interpretation of magic realism also allows me to skirt the cultural essentialism that emerges in such writers as Fredric Jameson, for whom magic realism belongs necessarily to precapitalist modes of production (311), which somehow always reverts to the logic of one aesthetic rule for the West, and another aesthetic rule for the rest. Rather, it is my claim that reading literature according to this aesthetic and this metaphysics insists upon literature's resistance to totality. This not only means resisting any teleological narratives or totalizing horizons that would seek to incorporate a literary world into a single consistent whole, but equally means refusing to reduce the literature we read to mere parts of an oeuvre or author's mind, or epiphenomena of a sociocultural regime. If we believe in the irreducibility of objects, we must count our literature amongst those objects too.

Reading this resistance to totality as a feature of reality itself allows an understanding of Murakami's critiques of everyday life under globalized capitalism and wider political critiques on both left and right in his work, which I unfortunately do not have space to reflect on in detail here. On the other hand, this aesthetic also insists upon the *communicability* between these different and resistant aesthetic registers: they must be able to conflict, overlap, and subsist within the same space. In this light, literature can neither divide into as many literatures as there are cultures nor submit to a single teleological universal. Readers familiar with David Damrosch's foundational work within the discipline of world literature will recognize allegiances here with his attempts to preserve world literature in his *What Is World Literature?*

(5). My reading is allied with this view as well insofar as I contend that world literature must learn to persist within the contradiction of different conflicting aesthetic frames and different literary cultures together, just as in Murakami's work Escher, Proust, and Tanizaki sit side by side, none subservient to the other, and not merely as playful postmodern irony. My insistence upon a formal, metaphysical reading of magic realism here aims to do justice to both the formal and cultural specificity of the literature at hand, as well as to free literatures to move beyond their cultural origins and be meaningfully examined in fields as far as their worth might carry them. This said, I am far from alone in investigating speculative realist and object-oriented valences with the East. Mikado Naruhiko and Chiba Masaya are two commentators developing a concept of the "non-interpretive" in this area, indicating the fruitfulness and non-triviality of the bridging of geographic boundaries my method uses and the potency of these concepts, which seem to reach across boundaries all the more vigorously even by the very breath with which they affirm their existence. In our judgement, it seems the method of ontological irreducibility may be said to *promote* rather than *prohibit* the translatability of ideas.

50

I have also tried to show that Roh was, perhaps, a century early with his magic realism. With the advent of speculative realism in philosophy, of which OOO is only one breed, and multiple thinkers completely independently producing object-oriented styles of thought—Harman and Garcia being the two principal wellsprings of these streams at the time of writing—there has maybe been no time more fruitful to take magic realism seriously as a dominant aesthetic in its own right, and for those sympathetic to OOO, in its inconsistency, opacity, tension, resistance, and irreducibility, possibly the most accurate picture of reality human aesthetics has produced. On my reading, magic realism can be considered a "special way of intuiting the world" (Roh, qtd. in Zamora 23), not because it tells us something factual or gives us a secret window into certain places, locales, or historical moments, but because it represents a space in which beings which retain their finitude, their singularity, their ipseity, their *thingness*, at the same time as they retain their equality, their equal place, without hierarchy. It is also in creating such a space and representing it, developing an aesthetic for it, making it *real*, that there has perhaps never been a better time for magic realism to be taken seriously.

NOTES

1. Here I follow the Japanese convention of placing Murakami's surname before his forename.
2. See my "Get the Tone Right" and "Mining for Reality in Late Stage Capitalism," for other iterations of this argument.
3. The speaker calls her parents "boring as tree-frogs" earlier in the passage.
4. A whig atomism (causality between things is actually to do with atomic forces and fundamental physics) is enough to see how parts are conceived of as prior to objects as agents of causation. The

contemporary work of Karan Barad is an example of an ontology which declares that relations are ontologically prior to things, suggesting that all interactions are really “intra-actions,” relations that occur in advance of their relata (Dolphijn and Van Der Tuin 55).

5. Indeed, the price for explaining causality this way has proven too high for such thinkers as Levi Bryant, who coined the name OOO and remains one of the central figures associated with OOO, who does not follow Harman’s method and prefers to work in a Deleuzian idiom instead.

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