

CHRISTIAN MORARU, *Flat Aesthetics. Twenty-First Century American Fiction and the Making of the Contemporary* (New York-London: Bloomsbury, 2023)

---

During the past decade, objects and material culture have come to play an increasingly prominent role in literary and critical studies. Yet, there have been hitherto no significant attempts to assess whether this trend constitutes, in American fiction, a new literary and cultural movement worthy of the name. This is the question that Christian Moraru asks and answers in the affirmative in *Flat Aesthetics*. He demonstrates that the thematic focus on the object has been a consistent preoccupation of several important American novelists, with remarkable results.

The premise of the book is clearly expressed: that the world is ontologically flat, which translates into an aesthetic flatness. Flatness is, as Moraru defines it, the absence of all hierarchy resulting in an absolute democracy in the realm of objects. His is therefore “a literary aesthetics that strives to place all objects on the same level”. In his view, we live at a unique time when objects assert themselves as never to date, “stepping forward” in a “historically unmatched show of presence” (x). He goes to great lengths to render such presence apparent without having to explain it or translate it so as to avoid altering its *de facto* untranslatability, its “intransitivity,” as he puts it. The objects around us institute full presence – “[a]ll things surrounding, making, and preoccupying us *are*” and the language employed to express it should reflect this vigorous presence rather than weaken it in any way. We are thus far from the postmodern “weak thinking” and from the idea of presence as never fully attained, as deconstruction postulated it. Being the force that they are, material objects institute the world rather than being contained by it: “[t]he world *is* the objects, not their container”.

The aim of *Flat Aesthetics* is primarily of a temporal nature. The author is concerned with the way contemporaneity is literarily shaped by the constellations that material objects form. The contemporary, in the author’s perception, shares in the same material consistency as the objects themselves: it is “*manufactured*, and *things make it*” (author’s emphasis). The present borrows the consistency of objects also in the sense that it becomes a matter of form: “the contemporary is not to be viewed, or not primarily, as a temporal category, let alone as the «present.» As objects present themselves in this present or «now,» they engender certain *thingconfigurations* that together make up the *form* of – and more basically just make – the contemporary” (my emphases). The author is careful to underline this “material fabric,” this “coarsegrained” “texture” (6) of the contemporary that “obtains and presents itself in and through objects.” “Coarsegrained” suggests both the layer that objects form in the world and the nascent contemporaneity as not yet fully discernible. The present paradigm is not only the product of objects, it is, moreover, born *simultaneously* with them. As such it does not exist

prior to the objects or the novels investigated here, since objects are the very actors that “aggregate the contemporary” (5).

Historically speaking, the period under investigation extends from the Fall of the Berlin Wall onwards, a time during which one witnessed the move away from postmodernism to “the dawn of a new paradigm”, the present one. Aesthetically, the age is characterised by a type of “avant-garde effervescence” that recalls the birth of modernism itself (25). What the author articulates here is no less than a new philosophy of objecthood: he proposes we prioritise much more than those items that currently need our attention (the environment, the spreading of epidemics, geopolitical conflicts, etc), namely everything else, “all objects, be they central to the welfare of world-systems or not” (4). What Moraru actually offers for consideration is a total renewal of our relationship with objects. Only through honouring *presence* in all its shapes, will one be then able to understand what needs to be done, “what this presence requires from us” (4). It is the intensity of objects’ presence that the author draws attention to, what he designates their “hyperpresence” and the consequential “strong ontology” (5; 6; 8).

Moraru further shows that it is in and through American literature that such “hyperpresence” is made apparent. Investigating the mechanisms of this revelation would thus help us “get a more granular, ontologically demotic handle on the ever-elusive contemporary American fiction” (ix) which, as a process in full speed, would be otherwise difficult to grasp. The word “granular” perfectly renders both the palpable texture of the objects under analysis and their detailed investigation in the present study.

Objects are seen relationally, as compositions, “ensembles” and “conglomerates” (xiv) rather than as monadic individualities, the perspective thus differing from that a material thinker such as Graham Harman. The book “cut[s] across object classes, looking at the ways in which remarkably different things *assemble over and over again* into arrangements whose formation tells us, as *process and structure*, something about this momentous shift” (my emphasis).

Flat objects request a flat type of reading. Such reading is both close and distant at the same time. It is close to the object’s form which it never loses sight of, and close to other objects related to the object’s form. It is distant as it constantly takes into account “ampler ensembles” of “viscous materiality” (12). It is close – and slow – reading as it does not transcend form for meaning and depth but moves along the “sticky” surface of the textual object (12). The author insists on form as the cause that most perfectly captures an object: “This side, the only there is, then, is the side of the thing’s presentation, where the thing, rather than receding, at once is and appears. What appears *is*, a priori” (8; 9).

Divided into eleven chapters, with an Introduction and a Conclusion, the volume groups the chapters thematically into five sub-headed sections: Language, Display, Exit, Revenant, and Kinship.

The first chapter of *Flat Aesthetics* focuses on language itself as object. The author is fully aware that language is a special kind of object, one that establishes referential relationships with the world. It employs a substitutive type of logic that is ultimately transcendent rather than flat. On the one hand, language describes things, thus referencing other objects – it is a “metaobject” (30). On the other hand, language and literature are

themselves *objects* with their own “intrinsic materiality” and agency (30). What the author underlines are precisely this agency and objecthood of language and literature, their “flat” attributes. Such are also the features that are reaffirmed by recent American literature. The author focuses here on Ben Lerner’s poetry criticism, on his novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) and on Michael Chabon’s novella *The Final Solution* (2004). They are texts that exhibit an important metafictional dimension, the sign of a lingering postmodernism, according to the author. Yet the same texts are also vividly contemporary, as they contribute to the construction of our times. While disclosing their own *poietic* architecture, they offer glimpses into “the architecture of the contemporary” (32) which they actively shape and embody.

Keeping his focus on verbal and textual language as object, the author sets forth Lerner’s manifesto *The Hatred of Poetry* as a key for the whole of the novelist’s fiction. Moraru sympathises with Lerner’s criticism of “paraphrase” and “literalization” of a literary text: whoever assigns an original text a specific utility, through interpreting, criticising, historicizing or in any other way utilizing it, implicitly doubles and thus reduces the respective text. Through such “utilizations,” the text becomes part of an “exchange regime” that denies and ultimately empties its initial form, “jeopardiz[ing] the literary object’s *objecthood*” (35; my emphasis). Poetry is particularly well-armed to resist being exchanged for “a preexisting and exterior equivalent” (36) owing to its visionary abilities and capacity for anticipating novelty. Solidly anchored in the present and anticipating the future, poetry institutes total presence. Although a flat entity, in its depths resides the linguistic object as a “truer song” (38). Hatred and contempt for poetry are themselves accepted as means to greater authenticity once they are transmuted into poetic substance, as a “*via negativa* for the authentic” (39; author’s emphasis). It is an aesthetics that recalls modernism’s violent radicality, its bordering on silence (as in Cage’s silent music or in Archibald MacLeish’s “palpable and *mute*” poem), or even on absence in its quest for absolute originality. Moraru sees a paradox insofar as Lerner also adopts intertextuality in his writing, even “hyperintertextuality” (40), thereby bringing postmodernism to mind. Yet Moraru explains that this is still part of the novelist’s quest for authenticity, not a denial of it. Repetition is the main mechanism that sets Lerner’s hyperintertextuality in motion, since form itself lends itself to reiterations.

Moraru analyses Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) in the second chapter. He shows that despite its intricate display of intertextuality and intratextuality, the novel manages to institute full presence, supreme and non-referential. Both art and literature in particular play crucial roles in the novel, with the novel projecting a new, post-postmodern view of both. Art is the embodiment of reality rather than its reflection, while literature does not *represent* a certain experience but is “that experience itself” (44). Moraru then explains the crucial role that form plays in the process. Form is that which crystallizes experience through a massive discharge of energy. Form *is* the content, leaving no “about,” transitive alternatives (“A poem should not mean/ But be”, in the words of modernist Archibald MacLeish). The process of creation institutes objecthood, being “intransitive, unparaphrasable, and otherwise unexchangeable for a meaning or object deeper, more «profound» than the object itself” (44). How does then intertextuality fit the equation? Moraru holds Lerner to be fully aware that

poems are connected to a context and other texts that precede them (49). While accepting intertextuality, the novelist still manages to move beyond it and institute absolute novelty, brought to being by the “form’s here and now” (49), by its immediacy as intense self-authentication and completion, therefore flatness (49).

The third chapter is dedicated to Michael Chabon’s novella *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* (2004). Moraru explains how the work’s simultaneous recycling of Holmesian detective fiction and contemporary U.S. Holocaust literature relates to his own concept of flatness. Flatness resides here on the one hand in the novel being substantially intertextual, thus dismantling ideas of an outside “reference, communication, (...) and interpretation” (63). On the other, the detective methods work not vertically, as in unearthing a deeper truth, but laterally and horizontally, as in the recomposition of a (flat) puzzle. The clues “hide” in plain sight, awaiting recomposition. The picture resulting is revealed in the end only and provides information on both the Shoah’s historical truth and on our contemporary efforts to accept its revolting reality. The novella brings into discussion the digitisation of human beings during Nazi Germany/the Shoah, digitisation employed to render people easier to annihilate both symbolically and physically.

The theme of the subsequent two chapters is object display. Moraru therein detects a new, rejuvenated, non-patrimonial view on objects and museality in recent American literature. He identifies it in novels such as Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) and Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2015), which he deems “curatorial narratives” (76). In chapter four, Mandel’s postapocalyptic *Station Eleven* is shown to add significantly to the body of contemporary literature as well as flat aesthetics. In a novel where the few survivors of a deadly pandemic continue to live through collecting, through art and creativity, Moraru underlines how the objects outlasting the collapse lose their status as mere tools to turn ontologically intransitive. Liberated from their use value and therefore fully present, “hyperpresent” even (86), they are kept in a “Museum of Civilization” where they shine with a “beauty of uselessness” (84). Moraru depicts how, through its focus on object constellations and “objectual practices such as amassing, organizing, and showing in [...] storing and exhibiting sites from museums to backpacks,” the novel contributes to the literal construction of the present paradigm which it also opens up to futural temporalities.

In Ben Lerner’s *10:04*, Moraru puts on display the dynamics of objects becoming “flat”. Two situations render objects “flat” in the novel: various forms of damage and the resulting loss of their initial “formal integrity”; and scarcity in shops owing to an impending hurricane. In both situations, objects are shown to escape the capitalist monetary system that condemns them to an exchange regime, reducing them to commodities. Instead, damage and scarcity “deserializ[e], decommodif[y], and «flatte[n]»” the items. Moraru thus echoes Benjamin’s notion of a regained auratic presence (98). Once they turn dysfunctional and cease to perform their assigned roles, objects gain not only full objecthood but artistic status as well. “[P]resence and aesthetic standing” (89) as a result of uselessness secure them a place in the Institute for Totaled Art in the novel. Moraru highlights the future holding of objects in the novel, as they transcend “the capitalist present” (94).

Space is the focus of the next two chapters. Moraru therein makes a case here for a more democratic view of space, one that should include nonhuman entities. He contends that human beings are not the sole agents to shape space but holds that “all manner of things participat[e] in space making and remaking” (114). He illustrates his contention by consideration of Joseph O’Neill’s *The Dog* (2015) and Mohsid Hamin’s *Exit West* (2017), concentrating on the idea of exit in both of them. In *The Dog*, Moraru discusses the impact of our globalised world on the protagonist’s psychology. The analysis pinpoints “the planet’s all embracing networks of exchange, capital, trade, migration, labor, and communication” (115) and the resulting homogenous, suffocating, “exitless spatiality” (115), one in which individuals are easily traceable. Such explains, at least partially, the main character’s obsession with a private space of his own that insulates against human connection and responsibility. That space is, in Moraru’s view, the cocoon of the “liberal, supposedly autarchic and «unattached» subject”, “the spaced-out subject” (126) that the protagonist impersonates. The latter’s choice of Dubai as a possible (in fact illusory) “exit” is significant. Dubai is itself a space of jealous affluence resulting in a divided geography of power and privilege, on the one hand, and “gated neighbourhoods, indigence, [and] surveillance” (122), on the other. Exiting can only be illusory in a world of total traceability.

His second analysis of space focuses on Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) more specifically on delocalization, disorientation and exit tactics as Hamid’s narrative signature. Moraru identifies three key narrative procedures. He calls them “inclusive”, “exclusive,” and “transclusive” (132-3). They render Hamid’s prose particularly complex and contemporary in the sense that it goes beyond both the realistic and colonial traditions. The inclusive narrative “adduces information that squeezes ... the bigger world... into smaller places” (136); the exclusive one eliminates geopolitical signposts, and the transclusive transits the protagonists from one location to another. Transiting in the novel is made possible by doors, as well as “passages, pathways, windows, portals,” etc (136) which, as material objects, constitute the main focus of Moraru’s discussion. As he explicates, it is with the help of such material items, Hamid’s famed doors in particular, that people evade imposed spatial locales and freely travel from one distant place to another. Such “exit objects”, as the critic designates them, act as magic portals in the novel. Yet, as Moraru astutely observes, the idea of total freedom and exiting are ambiguous in *Exit West*; some of the objects – phones, drones and satellites in particular – simultaneously deny absolute exiting as they perform operations of geopositioning, tracking individuals in space and thus rendering them “implacably discoverable” (128). Despite Moraru’s best efforts, the exit objects’s use value cannot be entirely denied in this case. It is through use – even if magically transformed – that they permit humans to transit.

Zombies are at the core of the next chapter. They are discussed as the thing, the “it” dimension of the human being deprived of its human attributes and thus turned intransitive. In a substantial, memorable excursus on spectrology that summons figures from Hamlet to Heidegger while also taking into account recent films and graphic novels, Moraru explains zombification as a process that overdramatizes the body. The body is flattened into a mere surface, its objectual dimension further reinforced through the “abjectual” or cadaverous

(152). The author proposes that this be not a downgrading to object status but a form of expanding knowledge. On one hand, the (zombie as) body is an instrument of (self-)knowledge, with the Other “awaken[ing] us to our material embodiment and related conditioning” (156). On the other, it is a form of social knowledge and criticism: with their future insight, zombies return to our present “which they revisit so that we might *revise* it” (163; my emphasis). More specifically, what they encourage us to revise is our “vulnerability to the affluent-consumerist mythology of freedom, free will, and agency” (164).

In his analysis of Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011), Moraru casts light on the connections between objects, politics and time. As the author shows, in a postapocalyptic New York, a government that insists on rebuilding the American future through getting rid of post-pandemic zombies with a view to re-establishing things as they were is bound to reiterate the old structures of meaning and power. More specifically, this would revive “social reflexes, affects, and other repetitive practices and dispositions swirling around race and racism” (169). Rather than pointing to a genuine future, such would be a harkening back to a destructive past. Indeed, the anti-zombie governmental campaign proves to be a mere disguise for “classist, anti-immigrant, repressive, and outright racist ploys and policies of gentrification, exclusion, and purification” (70). Under such circumstances, the landscape of entropy at the end of the novel – a flood of disintegrating objects literally inundating the city – is only apparently a sign of ultimate destruction. Borrowing the water imagery, it is in fact a cleansing process that opens the way to a more authentic future, “germane to life and change” (173).

The tenth and the eleventh chapters have kinship as their focus. They start from Moraru’s reconsideration of Kafka’s influence on authors ranging from the twentieth-century Polish-Jewish Bruno Schulz and Romanian-Jewish Max Blecher to contemporaries Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss. The tenth chapter in particular tries to condense into a single chapter material that would be worthy of a whole book. Not only is it dedicated to all of the above authors save Krauss, but it also deals with the crucial Jewish contribution to the avant-garde literature in this part of the world, whilst supplying copious information of a geographical and historical nature. Fascinating as this may be, it has a rather jarring effect on the reader of a book whose other chapters discuss one novel only. Both Kafka’s “human family,” namely the authors that he influenced, and his “nonhuman, animal family” of inanimate things in his prose (180) are taken into account. A key point in the discussion is the notion of “rubbing” as revealing the older texts underneath one’s own, which hints to intertextuality and the anxiety of influence.

In a comprehensive analysis dedicated to Schulz, Moraru draws attention to the stamp album in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937) as an example of worlds within worlds, of intertextuality and *mise-en-abyme*. As a book that opens multiple, interconnected spatial and cultural horizons to the narrator living in a small Polish town, the stamp album delocalises the human being through integrating it into larger spatial and ontological networks. The author employs it to criticise modernity itself, with the “isolationism and exceptionalism modernity’s imagination has often deployed to centre the human ontological hegemon and unplug it from the horizontal grid of the same life energy” (184).

Moraru discerns an acutely, organically perceived interconnectedness of the nonhuman and the human in Max Blecher's prose. While analysing Blecher's unique perception of space and objects, Moraru pinpoints the way the writer's illness expanded his view of a world he intimately connected to through physical suffering. In Moraru's own words, "as we suffer, we share in the world's common physicality and, as we are threaded by the same vitality in crisis, we find ourselves anthropologically dethroned and repositioned within the spectrum of an animality stretching beyond the human and the animate" (186). The fantastic and the absurd in Schulz's and Blecher's prose are the result of their non-hierarchical, "flat" view of the world in which the organic and inorganic are co-determinant (189). For Moraru this constitutes both their novelty at the time and equally their relevance for the current paradigm. Together with several other Jewish Romanian authors, they are all "harbinger[s] of a new world" (188) as they marked the birth of avant-gardism as well as non- and post-humanism in the experimental early-mid-twentieth century.

Concerning Safran Foer, Moraru addresses the theme of mourning and post-traumatic "letting go" in *Here I Am* (2016), the writer's most recent novel. What Moraru focuses on is the allusion to the Abrahamic sacrifice in the novel's title. Commenting on Abraham's readiness to let go of his son, the author draws our attention to the ram, itself present at the sacrificial scene. It is the voiceless ram that in the end replaces Isaac and that makes possible through its sacrifice the renewal of humankind's contract with the divine. Moraru thus brings forth the idea of co-presence and the animal's crucial role "in the very making of the human" (192). The scene is only alluded to by Foer, in whose novel it is the family dog about to be euthanised that teaches the characters to learn to let go.

The book closes with an analysis of Nicole Krauss' novel *Forest Dark* (2017). To complete his canvas, Moraru sets out here his most complex view of material items and the way they are intertwined with our lives. This intertwining occurs through the paradoxical absence, emptiness and incompleteness of things that the author identifies at the heart of *Forest Dark*. Yet this is but another dimension of things as containers of rich possibilities, "absence simmering with presence in potentia" (196). In the case of the female protagonist's writer's block and despair at the thought of her failed marriage, the absence and lack of things proves ultimately beneficial and stimulating: "[s]he builds on the incompleteness or lack with which [things] present her [...] and she mines that space of absence for possible worlds" (196; my emphasis).

A substantial Conclusion ends the volume, with the author providing a highly useful glossary where he further expands theoretically on the key concepts employed in his study. Though he seems merely to describe an age, the author in fact also constructs one, "composes" it (xiii), gives it factual existence. The result is a user-friendly theoretical text written in a clear, solid and assertive style that itself borrows the qualities of an (intransitive) object. A book worthy of celebration and study.

ANAMARIA SCHWAB

schwabana@yahoo.com

ORCID: 0009-0009-2358-3118

doi: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2023.28.2.16>