Reviewed by Sandy Alexandre, Massachusetts Institute of Technology


What does it mean to ruminate on and indeed end up insisting upon the limitations of human understanding, particularly with respect to what turns out to be the human impossibility of ever knowing what it must be like to be a thing? The approximation suggested by the word ‘like’ and that word’s simultaneous evocation of the figure of speech known as simile, in the book’s very title, offer something toward an accurate description of this human inability to apprehend in Ian Bogost’s pointedly circuitous *Alien Phenomenology.* According to Bogost, humans (who are also things, which are renamed “units” in the book) get closer to understanding these nonhuman units and their internal systems of operation through human manipulation of language. Metaphors, in particular, are used to facilitate and finagle the kinds of inter-unit relations that Bogost imagines can at least help remind humans that the world does not revolve around us. These metaphors can also begin to help us imagine and express what intra-unit relations among nonhuman objects might look like.

In five chapters, Bogost proceeds with his aim “to put things at the center of a new metaphysics.”¹ He appoints himself a capable amanuensis of things based on his many years of experience working with computational media. But perhaps the more accurate title for Bogost’s self-assigned position would be ontographer—that is, one who “uncovers the repleteness of units and their interobjetivity [and reveals] object relationships without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind.”² Bogost discusses the ways in which the activities of cataloguing and classifying things, as well as putting disparate parts together to form a working system—either through words, images, objects, or a combination of all three—allow us to glean a better sense of how objects relate to one another. The book’s main thesis is that things *can* and *do* dictate the direction and style of human language, perception, and imagination. The world of things reminds us of our human cognitive limitations, but thinking about what that world must be like also stretches us by making greater demands on our imaginations and our skills of speculation. Bogost effectively contends that when humans concede that they cannot *represent* something, their only alternative is to piece together—through object relations and associations—what that ontological existence might actually be like.
From the point of view of a literary scholar, such as I am, the book’s emphasis on metaphor (as enabling approximation on the one hand and revealing human limitation on the other) excites my bellettristic sensibilities. This emphasis, which I reflexively gravitate toward, also directs my approach to reading Bogost’s philosophical tract. Thus I use the term “pointedly circuitous” to disclose two things: 1) that my focus in this review is on my experience of reading Bogost’s book as a textual narrative with a distinct writerly style, and 2) that his achievement is in writing his way (consciously or not) into a verbal depiction of human disability and humility—what it means for humans never to be able to know if, how, or what an object perceives. As if to model how objective access to the experiences of a nonhuman unit is impossible, Bogost writes around the bush as it were—transforming himself into someone who is truly “once removed” from that unit’s perceptual schema.

Although I summon up and adapt a timeworn aphorism to make my point here, I am not trying to be facetious. If Bogost intends to demonstrate convincingly that human comprehension is actually deficient in some way, his insistence on that (human) inability must register somehow, and it does—stylistically. In other words, it would seem that simultaneously writing about while not knowing what it is like to be a thing is an exercise in adopting a combination of a stance of unabashed disability and courageous speculation as a writing style. Bogost himself calls this a “benighted meandering,” and in several examples, he explains that such a style can take the form of different permutations of possibilities: such as lists à la Bruno Latour, catalogs à la Herman Melville, reconfigurations à la Scribblenauts puzzles, webs, chains, litanies, and other sequential modalities. Bogost suggests that this style of speculative realism “draw[s] our attention toward [objects] with greater attentiveness.” This book about an object-oriented ontology (OOO), which “puts things at the center of being,” does not consequently or simply relegate humans to the margins. Rather it assigns humans an important task; it exhorts us to make philosophical things. We must be fruitful and multiply nonhuman things.

Much like the ending of a nineteenth-century novel in which, to reconcile the predominant warring ideologies, either a marriage is proposed, a wedding ceremony is performed, or a baby is conceived between the two formerly dissenting characters, Bogost’s text also proposes a marriage/love-child between human comprehension and the thingness of things qua things. Bogost christens this baby “carpentry”:

I give the name carpentry to this practice of constructing artifacts as a philosophical practice [...] carpentry entails making things that explain how things
make their world. Like scientific experiments and engineering prototypes, the stuffs produced by carpentry are not mere accidents [...]. Instead, they are themselves earnest entries into philosophical discourse.\(^7\)

In other words, carpentry pays thoughtful homage to the culture of things. Caring is creating. But I wonder about this call to a proliferation of stuff: Does Bogost see humanist forms of creation—criticism, the poems and prose fictions of creative imagination, a dance performance, for example—as worthy of the name carpentry, which he has appropriated here for his rethinking of metaphysics? Do British i-narratives, fictional stories in which the protagonists are animals or inanimate objects, constitute an alien phenomenology? Does Pixar’s *Toy Story*? Does *Alien Phenomenology*? Indeed, is Bogost’s book enough to qualify as a form of carpentry or does it need a nonbook to supplement its credibility as an empath of (or to) other objects? At the very end of the book Bogost deploys a Charles Bukowski poem as something that “reminds us of the awesome plenitude of the alien everyday,”\(^8\) suggesting that—yes—these humanist forms *do* suffice. Taken together, Bogost’s book effectively constitutes an exhortation to humans to “stop and smell the aliens”—to allow the experience of attempting to think outside of a human conceptual framework to facilitate new ways of thinking that are based in speculation and analogy.

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**Footnotes**

2. Bogost, 38.
4. Bogost, 34.
5. Bogost, 45.
8. Bogost, 134.