

Speculative Realism and Its Allure

Marketing Within Philosophy

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Abstract: In discussing the developments of speculative realism for the past fifteen years, it becomes imperative to account for even the most wayward thoughts of its supposed thinkers. In this regard, philosophy and marketing are two disparate fields that seem to converge in the writings and views of Graham Harman. In this article, I trace Harman's view of the philosopher as a promoter and tie the convergence to his understanding of philosophy and its history in general. I then go on to argue that Harman is not driven by self-serving measures but that his promotional efforts are a performative aspect of his own object-oriented philosophy.

Keywords: Graham Harman; speculative realism; object-oriented philosophy; branding

Resumo: Ao discutir os desenvolvimentos do realismo especulativo nos últimos quinze anos, torna-se imperativo dar conta até mesmo dos pensamentos mais rebeldes dos seus supostos pensadores. A este respeito, a filosofia e o marketing são dois campos díspares que parecem convergir nos escritos e pontos de vista de Graham Harman. Neste artigo, traço a visão de Harman do filósofo como um promotor e vinculo a convergência à sua compreensão da filosofia e da sua história em geral. Prosseguirei então argumentando que Harman não é movido por medidas egoístas, mas que seus esforços promocionais são um aspecto performativo de sua própria filosofia orientada a objetos.

Palavras-chave: Graham Harman; realismo especulativo; filosofia orientada a objetos; marca

Introduction

Not only does philosophy and marketing seem to be mutually exclusive, but philosophy also seems to be extremely hostile towards the other. In *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, in the interview entitled “On Philosophy”, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze claims that the concept-production of philosophy in today’s age faces capable competitors: “These days, information technology, communications, and advertising are taking over the words ‘concept’ and ‘creative,’ and these ‘conceptualists’ constitute an arrogant breed that reveals the activity of selling to be capitalism’s supreme thought, the *cogito* of the marketplace”¹. Even if this is the case, and the development is wholly unwelcomed, Deleuze does not fear the eventual eclipse of philosophy by these modern innovators of concepts as he goes on to say that “[p]hilosophy feels small and lonely confronting such forces, but the only way it’s going to die is by choking with laughter”². Philosophy, historically faced with numerous adversaries—sophists, theologians, psychoanalysts, non-philosophers, theorists, natural scientists, etc.—will *also* outlast marketing and advertisers.

This is not the only time Deleuze touches upon the relationship between the two. Deleuze also, in conjunction with longtime collaborator Félix Guattari, writes about this in *What Is Philosophy?* Here, the pair comment on marketing’s appropriation of philosophy’s conceptual development and claim that what ultimately saves philosophy from the clutches of capitalism is how philosophy absolutizes capitalism’s deterritorialization and carries it out to a non-linguistic point where communication gives up³. What allows capitalism to capture philosophy in the first place is certain caricatural representation of it where concepts are exchanged in a way to stabilize consensus⁴.

The chatter around marketing and philosophy has flared up again in recent times with the emergence of speculative realism. It usually takes the form of a criticism aimed at speculative realism in general and philosopher Graham Harman in particular. In the introduction to *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects*, Peter Gratton coyly connects the term with a general trend in philosophy, a feared trend, which looks like “a bazaar of self-

¹ DELEUZE, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, p. 136.

² Ibid.

³ DELEUZE & GUATTARI, *What Is Philosophy?*, p. 99-100.

⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

branding academics pumping out articles and books and pushing new systems of thought with clunky titles (neo- *this*, meta- *that*)” and whose practitioners have “nothing more than a few months of thinking” under their belt⁵. More incisive and direct is Ray Brassier, one of the initial participants in the speculative realism conferences, who in the afterword to Peter Wolfendale’s *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon’s New Clothes*, aptly named “Postscript: Speculative Autopsy”, decries Harman’s efforts to brand “Speculative Realism” and makes the claim that in doing so he becomes the inventor of a new genre of writing, *philosophy-marketing*, as Speculative Realism never denoted anything that existed in the first place and because the books and articles it subsumes lack quality⁶.

As we enter the fifteenth year of speculative realism, maybe old endeavors have died, and new genres have emerged in their stead. Regardless of the critical standpoint, we have witnessed a much more intimate convergence of philosophy and marketing in the practices and self-understanding of Harman. Through Harman’s writings we have seen the emergence of a conceptual persona that can be called the philosopher-as-promoter who engages in branding strategies in an unapologetic fashion. These practices, and this view, seem to still be novel and exclusive to speculative realism and they do not follow the path of the Deleuzo-Guattarian production of neologisms, as Harman tends to favor concepts already in use. It is these phenomena I will analyze in the following.

In this article, I will first trace Harman’s understanding of the philosopher and her role, characterize it neutrally and without the usual intellectual opposition, and second, I will argue that it stems not from any self-promotional attitude, capitalist tendencies, or vapid charlatanry but, rather, that it follows from his very own ontology and is a performative aspect of object-oriented philosophy itself.

The branding philosopher

In a now-infamous article, titled “On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy,” Harman expresses the desire to let the moniker of speculative realism become a full-blown brand. He writes that the usage of the proper name should be followed by

⁵ GRATTON, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects*, p. 1.

⁶ BRASSIER, “Postscript: Speculative Autopsy,” in *Object-Oriented Philosophy, The Noumenon’s New Clothes*, p. 410-411.

a logo “designed for projection on PowerPoint screens, accompanied by a few signature bars of smoky dubstep music”⁷. This might seem like an unusual and polemical statement, especially for a philosopher, but Harman is being sincere. Prior to this quote, he also states that “[t]he brand is not merely a degenerate practice of brainwashing consumerism, but a universally recognized method of conveying information while cutting through information *clutter*”⁸. This falls short of a definition of the brand, which the article will arrive at, but it gives an insight into what the brand can do according to Harman: it can articulate an expectation of an intellectual endeavor by expressing this endeavor concisely.

Incipit the philosopher. Following such statements, the philosopher becomes a marketer who is disseminating an intellectual position through branding. In the blog post “Grant’s idealist turn?”, Harman expounds this view further, comparing the philosopher to the concert and boxing promoters⁹. The philosopher must take from these promoters the ability to forge disparate elements together and through this forging emerges a new style and way of philosophizing. Harman writes that intellectual promoters are needed, and, interestingly, he arrives at this notion through the language and references of philosophy itself: “If Latour teaches us anything, it’s that the rearrangement of concepts in one’s head is no different in kind from negotiations with a publisher or appearances on a talk show”¹⁰. In all instances, the promoter shuffles actants around, reordering them to make something new appear. This broadens the idea of what constitutes philosophical thinking as anything can be said to be a rearrangement of some kind. Philosophizing is tied to a life-practice. Ideas are actants which can be reconfigured, and philosophers should take upon themselves to promote their own *as part of* their philosophizing. Content and style, thinking and practice, merge for Harman.

Briefly contextualizing Harman’s points shows that the philosopher is already tied to the outcomes of her philosophizing. The philosopher always leaves a mark even if this is not done deliberately. Deleuze and Guattari write about how philosophical concepts always are signed: “Aristotle’s substance, Descartes’ cogito, Leibniz’ monad, Kant’s condition,

⁷ HARMAN, “On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ HARMAN, “Grant’s Idealist Turn?”

¹⁰ Ibid.

Schelling's power, Bergson's duration"¹¹. Concepts, whether they be scandalous or plain, are automatically signed by their inventors and retain a connection to them despite being used in other contexts and by other thinkers. The theorist McKenzie Wark takes this one step further and identifies citations and references with this quality in what she deems the private property of texts: "Text is always someone's property. If you use that property, the minimum rent you have to pay is the citation. You have to say whose property a bit of text is."¹² The philosopher already brands, she already leaves traces of herself. What Harman adds to this is the idea that the philosopher herself should brand more aggressively. And this addition is significant because there is a sense of loss of intellectual purity in doing so, as Harman remarks later in the blog post¹³. Philosophy becomes tainted, spoiled, and contaminated if the philosopher herself willingly promotes. The philosopher's hands remain pristine when someone else uses their work, proliferating it in the process, but not when she highlights it herself in various ways.

Harman pushes this link between philosopher and marketer even further. To him, the blogosphere will become one of several venues in which a writing philosopher will develop a brand and then be followed by people based on that brand. In a post titled "how open access might sell more books", Harman states that if people "like an author's general orientation, [they] tend to start following them, and that means automatically buying everything that they put out, perhaps making special efforts to see them give public lectures, and so forth"¹⁴. The philosopher begins to sound like a YouTuber or a podcaster, able to call people forth and bring them together based on a collective enjoyment of the philosopher's brand. Freed from her prison in the ivory tower, from intellectual purity, the philosopher writes and thinks alongside other competing philosophers and authors and needs to build a strong brand to get noticed. Abstract conceptual exercises must carve out a place for themselves on the market and what guarantees their legitimacy is the brand of the philosopher, not academic quality measures. In the same post, Harman writes that "if someone or something over-hypes itself– who cares? They won't get away with it forever, and there will even be a backlash. They will pay a significant price for

¹¹ DELEUZE & GUATTARI, *What Is Philosophy?*, p. 7.

¹² WARK, "No More Master Thinkers."

¹³ HARMAN, "Grant's Idealist Turn?"

¹⁴ HARMAN, "how open access might sell more books."

overhyping themselves”¹⁵. This is not to say that the blogosphere venue will be the only place where the future and quality of a philosopher will be determined but just one among many.

This promotional aspect not only invites but also demands interdisciplinarity to secure lasting success. In his *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, in a description of Brassier’s thinking, Harman claims that interdisciplinary readers are “so important to a philosopher’s sphere of influence” that Brassier needs to “show more sympathy with other types of cognitive performance than those that are showcased in the hard sciences”¹⁶. Harman is careful to tie his criticism to Brassier’s “style and content of his philosophy”¹⁷ and he seems to suggest that philosophical influence works in a similar way to influence on social media, in which interdisciplinary readers are potential followers, and the philosopher should tailor her thinking to this predicament. In other words, some ontologies and epistemologies are more popular than others, and the philosopher should take this into consideration if she wishes to influence.

Elsewhere, Harman softens this view through the history of philosophy. In a blog post, Harman emphasizes the historical high esteem of rhetoric:

“But marketing is misunderstood as mere manipulation, just as rhetoric is misunderstood as mere manipulation. The phrase “mere rhetoric” already shows a shocking decline from what people like Aristotle and Cicero understood by the term, or even Marshall McLuhan. The reason Aristotle spent half of each day teaching rhetoric to his students was not because we live in a regrettably corrupt world where certain people need to be snowed by something less than clear propositional truth. No, rhetoric is the art of the background, and there are good philosophical reasons why the background may be more important than the foreground”¹⁸.

Harman continually contests the idea that marketing is just a mischievous and dishonest capitalist practice. He insists it is a form of rhetoric which foregrounds the background, it brings to light what tends to recede, and does so again through the references to philosophers such as Aristotle and Cicero. In this post he does not explicitly state his reasons

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ HARMAN, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, p. 52.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ HARMAN, “how open access might sell more books.”

for why the philosophical background might be more interesting than the foreground, but an obvious place to look for an answer is his own philosophy of objects and their withdrawn essences. As such, Harman remains favorable to the infiltration of philosophy by marketing, insisting that marketing, despite its bad reputation, inheres in philosophical thinking and that the two activities carry similar traits. As will be demonstrated in the following, Harman's view on the philosopher-as-promoter is a necessary aspect of object-oriented philosophy and results from this foregrounding of the background, making it a practice founded upon an ontology.

The terrain of philosophy

What allows Harman to bring forth the connection between philosophy and marketing is first and foremost his emphasizing this quality through philosophy itself and of its history. Harman sees the history of philosophy as a field in which it makes sense to talk about changing trends and competitors. In an interview, he notes that the trends and movements of philosophy tend to emerge and vanish quickly, oftentimes returning as caricatures of themselves. After quipping about the clashes between Derrideanism and Deleuzianism in the ninety-nineties, he makes a general comment about the lifespan of philosophies:

“But this is how the life cycle of popular philosophers works: all are doomed to overthrow by some future young generation. The really great thinkers are simply the ones who can bounce back from the collapse of their fashion. People keep coming back to the great thinkers because there is no alternative—there is something in those thinkers that you can't forget, that you can't get from anywhere else, even when they are no longer the latest style. Over the next twenty to thirty years, we'll learn for the first time what Deleuze is really made of. Can he bounce back and remain an obligatory thinker even after Deleuzianism has become as dated as disco and lava lamps? Even now, we're in the midst of seeing whether Derrida can clear this hurdle. And if speculative realism is successful, then someday it will happen to us as well. Our words will all look like annoying, imprisoning clichés at some point in the future, and (assuming we succeed to that degree in the first place), we will be a new orthodoxy that one must overthrow to build anything new. Fifty to sixty years from now, our grandchildren can see if we're able to bounce back from that coming traumatic blow. And then Tristan Garcia and his peers will be fed through the same furnace a generation later. This is, inevitably, the price to pay for a successful philosophy.”¹⁹

¹⁹ VARN (SKEPOET2), “Marginalia on Radical Thinking: An Interview with Graham Harman.”

It is evident that philosophical success, vast influence across various fields of study and practice, is a mundane achievement to Harman. A philosopher will inevitably fade away and be replaced by another philosopher regardless of the former's success. The history of philosophy is a marketplace where old systems die and new ones rise, where some styles of thinking are *in*, fashionable, in vogue, or popular while others are not and these processes are in constant flux.

Harman adopts this view directly from the American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead famously states that “a system of philosophy is never refuted; it is only abandoned”²⁰ and that Western philosophy is “littered with metaphysical systems, abandoned and unreconciled”²¹. Harman takes these statements to be true. He claims that Parmenides' dualism was “left behind not because of some devastating argument made against it by a later Greek thinker, but because its sparse austerity leaves the vast majority of reality out of the picture.”²² To Harman, philosophies circumvent and supersede each other, not because they are disproved or refuted, but because their concepts are too inflexible or their explanations account for too little. And as material conditions change so do interests, scopes, and perspectives, which ends up strengthening certain philosophies and discarding others. These changes can be leveraged to a certain extent by a thinker so that a philosophical system appears inevitable.

Harman thus repurposes promotional strategies to fit a strictly philosophical framework. This is a sort of intellectual activism in that it insists on the inherent market aspects of philosophy and the tactical use of these to strengthen a philosophical position or brand. There are no rewards awaiting the philosopher who manages to do this successfully, it is done purely for the sake of philosophy itself and its internal logic of decay.

So far, this article has circled around branding practices and have paid little attention to Harman's view of the brand itself. In an interview on the metaphysics of brands, Harman gives a clear-cut definition of them as “charismatic objects” which “captivate you with

²⁰ WHITEHEAD, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, p. 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²² HARMAN, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, p. 131.

an allure”²³. Harman underscores yet again that brands to him are not about “the instrumentality of making money. It’s about announcing, ‘Here’s what we are,’ in a way that’s hard to put in literal terms. The brand is like a soul of the product”²⁴.

This is the crux of Harman’s unification of philosophy and marketing. Moving from the generalities of philosophy, he now utilizes the language of his own specific object-oriented philosophy. He calls the brand the soul of the product, and it should be understood as the product’s *eidos*. Within object-oriented philosophy, the *eidos* is constituted by “the deeper non-sensual features that [an object] cannot lose without ceasing to be recognized as what it is”²⁵. It is the sensual object encountering its real qualities²⁶. The brand is withdrawn, and the consumer engages with its sensual aspects. The sensual object is in contact with its real qualities, and this produces an attraction to the brand mediated by *allure*. *Allure* refers to the rift between the sensual object and the sensual quality²⁷. It “pinpoints the bewitching emotional effect that often accompanies this event for humans” as it simultaneously “merely alludes to the object without making its inner life directly present”²⁸. The brand recedes and its allure enables a caricature of it in the realm of intentionality and relations²⁹. In other words, it is exactly this inability to access the entirety of the brand, to exhaust its being, that draws consumers in, and it is this inaccessibility the brand may leverage through marketing.

Marketing logic and practices may originate in what Deleuze terms the cogito of the marketplace, but object-oriented philosophy is able to draw out and metaphorize the same logic and practices within philosophy by identifying an intellectual position with the brand and the thinking done by a philosopher with promotion. Thus, the Golden Arches logo never exhausts the McDonald’s brand while the Swoosh logo never fully exhausts Nike’s ditto. These are just partial instantiations of the brand, just various examples of its glittering features.

And within the intellectual realm the same logic goes. Speculative realism is never exhausted through the epistemological position of Brassier nor through the metaphysical one

²³ OLIVARES, “The Metaphysics of SUPREME: Decoding Branded Objects with Philosopher Graham Harman.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ HARMAN, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 106.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁷ HARMAN, “On Vicarious Causation,” p. 199.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ HARMAN, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, p. 143.

of object-oriented philosophy. It is not exhausted by the conferences' attendees nor the blogosphere's chatter. Nor does its journal, *Speculations*, or the various book series that revolve around it exhaust the brand either. These are all shimmering, sensual features in contact with the brand's real qualities. Speculative realism is an object capable of weaving all these disparate elements together through allure which afterwards can be dissected through thinking. With the emergence of the term came the announcement of a disruption of correlationism's chokehold over continental philosophy. To Harman, this major event merits more attention than smaller brands of challenge can muster as it marks a definite shift in the history of philosophy. Speculative realism is an intellectual outburst more than it is a coherent, definite position and this outburst cannot be exhausted fully.

Finally, Harman's metaphorizing of philosophy and marketing also highlights the non-criticality of object-oriented philosophy, or its initial naivety in analysis. Harman rejects the notion that "philosophy is a kind of critical thinking less attached to the world than other modes of dealing with objects, a style of cognition opposed to the gullibility of the unreflective"³⁰. To philosophize is to *be*. To let oneself be driven by worldly objects and to think on their premises, to embrace the 'ontic', is what distinguishes object-oriented philosophy's understanding of its own endeavor from other brands within speculative realism, and it is what allows Harman to fuse marketing and philosophical thinking while remaining within the field of philosophy.

Object-oriented philosophy stands at the intersection between theory and practice, between philosophy and marketing, as these distinct approaches melt together in the idea of the withdrawal of the object, its ability to draw people in through allure, and its naïve point of departure. Object-oriented philosophy comes embedded with a performative aspect expressed through the excitement of allure and the enigmatic essence of the object, drawing observers in, encouraging them to participate in the object. To think about objects is to deal with objects: it is to get one's hands dirty in handling them because objects are defined only by their autonomous existence³¹. No endeavor can ever be pure or unpolluted for object-oriented philosophy because it is always-already mired completely in the everyday objects of the world whether they be mental or physical. This discloses the embedded performative aspect of object-

³⁰ Ibid., p. 238.

³¹ HARMAN, *The Quadruple Object*, p. 19.

oriented philosophy in which engagement in objects is always an engagement with the ontic wonders of the world.

Phrases like the marketization of philosophy, or the convergence of philosophy and marketing, need not sound so ominous when expressed within the context of object-oriented philosophy. Philosophy and marketing encounter each other metaphorically through the alluring properties of both fields. This metaphorization reveals the inherent trendiness of philosophy itself and the philosopher's predicament to think in accordance with it if she should desire success. Consequently, philosophy might always have been dirtier than was imagined.

Trudging onwards

Reading Harman's efforts this way immediately produces two implications for future speculation on the matter. First, potential critics are wrong to dismiss Harman's promotional efforts on the grounds of self-serving charlatanry or attempts at fame. To be successful at philosophy is ultimately a mundane success as all philosophies will be toppled in the end. Instead, Harman's practice is the result of his own line of thinking, a particular object-oriented line of thinking. This means that any criticism of this practice must be carried out at a conceptual or philosophical level. Harman is thus not absolved, his views are not immune to criticism, but the reasonable critique is the one focusing on object-oriented philosophy as an enabler of this reasoning and as that which justifies it. This reading also maintains that Harman is not the inventor of a new genre of philosophy but that his philosophy is able to extend into other areas through metaphor and allure.

Second, the Deleuzo-Guattarian concern about philosophy's well-being following its collision with marketing is ultimately unfounded. In fact, philosophy might even be tougher than Deleuze and Guattari give it credit for being. Philosophy is spacious and resilient enough to absorb modern-day marketing techniques without succumbing to them. The creative marketing classes of capitalism may have preyed on its conceptual production, but perhaps the true subversive response is not to shy away from such capitalist measures but instead to utilize them for philosophy's own sake as they also inhere in philosophy in some variation. Harman's position marks a significant break from the purity of philosophy and remains a challenge to this conception.

Whether or not one agrees with Harman's idea of the philosopher, it would be hard to argue that philosophy has suffered because of it. It seems to have aided it. Where individual

philosophies and philosophers have waned since the conception of the term, speculative realism trudges onwards thanks to the work Harman among others has put into preserving it as a brand. It appears that Harman is right when he claims that his brand of philosophy is “the most widely popular brand of Speculative Realism at this point because OOO has simply *outworked* people”³². Saturating not only philosophy but also adjacent fields such as art and architecture, speculative realism will perhaps become the only thing not lost to time itself.

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³² HARMAN, “congratulations to Wolfendale.”

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