After the "Speculative Turn": Realism, Philosophy, and Feminism

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Published by Punctum Books

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The Crush: The Fiery Allure of the Jolted Puppet

Frenchy Lunning

O you whom I often and silently come where
you are, that I may be with you,
As I walk by your side, or sit near, or
remain in the same room with you,
Little you know the subtle electric fire that
for your sake is playing within me.—
— Walt Whitman, *Calamus X*

As an adolescent, I could mark time by the incessant epistemes of crushes I had experienced as I careened through junior high school, and beyond. Only a very small percentage of these emotional junkets were actualized as relationships, and most were only a subject of extreme embarrassment at the erotic obsession with an entirely inappropriate, or horrifyingly inexplicable, and thankfully, unsuspecting subject. The whole phenomenon of the crush puzzled me as it was always completely out of my control and never fully explained, except for a “wink-wink” moment in the special girls-only classes on menstruation and “love” that were *de rigueur* for young schoolgirls of the 1960s. But using the very particular apparatus of object-oriented ontology and its excellent mechanism of “allure,” I feel I can perhaps abolish some

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of the mysterious shame of my youth, and explain its periodic persistence. It is these ephemeral, inexplicable phenomena that are such excellent subjects for this speculative realistic mechanism: those things in the existence of subjects that defy all reasonable explanation.

I will use Graham Harman’s explanation of allure, “a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing’s unity and its plurality of notes somehow partially disintegrates,”2 as the staging ground for this discussion of the crush, and indeed, in setting up a rather special case of allure. The crush, which is defined as “a brief but intense infatuation for someone, especially someone unattainable or inappropriate”3 — to which I will add the conditions of “unrequited,” “unaccepted,” and hopefully, “unbeknownst by the beloved” — to further set the proscenium for this special performance of allure.

Caught in this tragicomedy, are two actor/objects: the “lover-object” and the “beloved-object” who fatefully come into a proximity in which the lover-object “recognizes,” then obsesses over, the beloved-object. The crush may be an immediate and intense moment that dissipates just as quickly by a change of venue; or worse yet, it may come as an entirely unexpected bolt of lightning after knowing the beloved-object over a longer period of time in which the beloved-object was simply part of a quotidian landscape, and an unknown (by the lover-object) buildup of passion simmering to a slow boil, which lasts for a very long time.

This “recognition,” is a recognition of the qualities that exude from the object, that is, the “visible symptoms,” beyond which a second layer of qualities appear, which Harman contends are born from a “strife between an object and its own qualities, which seem to be severed from that object,” further, that “if

2 Graham Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 143.
objects are what exude from us, qualities are simply defined as whatever does not recede, allowing us to bathe in them at every moment.” Harman’s sensual description of a “bathing” in the severed qualities of the beloved-object, certainly goes a long way in describing the initial experience in the real world of the lover-object’s erotic desire that becomes — through this initial visual and sensual proximity — the “production designer” of the crush. Harman also typifies these severed qualities as entities that break off as “dark agents” operating below the surface qualities of normal visual perception; they are the actors who enter the stage from the side, as the condition of allure directs the laying out of the backstage rigging for the complex ballet to follow: “Yet in normal perception, these objects” — for now the severed qualities have themselves become objects — “are bound up so directly with their carnal surfaces that we sense no distinction between the two realms.” Alas, the pathetic lover-object is clueless to the hidden caper that allure and its “enchanting effect not found in normal experience” is now putting into action.

It is helpful to conceive of the stage area of allure as filled with layers of notes and qualities that progressively recede from the highly visible footlights at the far front edge of the stage, where these visible surface qualities perform the initial lure to the action of the play behind the footlights. These surface qualities are very particular aspects of the beloved’s body — the nice lips, dark hair, and good “buns” — but it can also be an aspect of their personality or good humor. Yet as we move deeper into the playing area of the stage, behind the footlights, a complex drama ensues as those dark severed qualities begin to confront other objects exuding from the beloved-object, such as the notes. The notes, in Harman’s view are distinguished as “the traits of a thing” or, as “qualities of the objects themselves, quite irrespective of our contact with them.” That is to say, notes are qualities that maybe

4 Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 150.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 149.
8 Ibid., 153.
visual, but also may be aspects of the beloved’s conjunction of these qualities and notes, the mélange of known and unknown aspects of the beloved’s unity of objecthood. And at the very back of the stage withdrawn behind layers and layers of qualities and notes, lies the “shadowy master-object concealed in its inner sanctum,” the so-called “withdrawn object,” who Harman suggests “can never be touched,” yet its qualities that precede it “seem tangible.”9 And Harman describes this process as “the chain of sensual categories [that] is not a single pattern stamped into shapeless matter […] but resembles an endless knotted rope in which each thing is tied into its nearest neighbor, each form successively locked into further forms.”10

Yet in a rather poetic section of his book, Harman develops this “knotted rope” to be the “style of things,” which furthers an understanding in how these qualities are greeted at the moment of recognition in a crush. He begins with placing the erotic tinge of allure at the level of the fleshy body: “Through our physical bodies and their extension in the form of tools, we are folded into the world in almost lascivious fashion. Our physical bodies represent “a communication with the world more ancient than thought.”11 And further, that at that level, there is the substantial attachment to a sense of realness to our perception and reception of the sensual qualities that extend out into the ether, like feelers on an insect, reaching out in a receptive quest for attachment. This undeniable and inescapable sensual attachment to the real, makes “Our bodies […] the ultimate form of sincerity.”12 Harman quotes Merleau-Ponty extensively in his explanation of this sincere position within the sea of qualities: “To have a body is already to be folded into the things rather than stand at a distance from them […] Flesh is the intertwining, interlacing, interfacing of I myself with the sensible world: ‘the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my

9 Ibid., 73.
10 Ibid., 155.
11 Ibid., 48–49.
12 Ibid., 49.
And this “flesh-object” that presents a unity of specific notes and qualities that for the self, represents “the self,” and other objects as well—then become recognizable as exuding a specificity of those qualities that Harman denotes as style: “We can say of any object that it is not a bundle of specific qualities, nor a bare unitary substratum, but rather a style [...] A style is never visibly present, but enters the world like a concealed emperor and dominates certain regions of our perception.” That is to say, that although some of those qualities that extend visually from an object might present a certain set of related elements or aspects; style, as a sensible condition and recognition, made in the cognition of those visual severed qualities, seems to form a unifying linkage of resemblance, or at the very least, a sense of cohesion that becomes in allure, recognized as a “style,” or as Harman puts it, “a stylistic unit.” Style is not just visual qualities, but also a performative note. In the entirety of the performance of the object-unit as it intersects with the world-object, that unity of style is “a symbolism in the thing [object] which links each sensible quality to the rest [...] the style of a thing animate[s] its multitude of distinct and isolable qualities.” It is precisely that perception of the style of the beloved-object that is mis-recognized or mis-interpellated as a “match” for the “fool” — the pathetic lover-object in our drama, who is tricked into believing that she recognizes a style from her own script of desired erotic types. And unfortunately, the performance of this tragicomedy follows certain reproductive priorities as Harman describes this inevitable process:

The world is flesh or element, an electrified medium in which all entities, as elusive styles, generate surfaces of qualities that fuse together or signal messages to one another. In other words, the world is not just made of substances, objects, or styles: it is made up of

13 Ibid., 53–54.
14 Ibid., 55.
15 Ibid., 56.
16 Ibid., 57.
such styles and the flesh by means of which they come into contact, and which thereby serves as the only causal medium between them.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus this description of the stylistic unit of the beloved-object as made up of a series of stylistic “parts” that are qualities, notes, and objects radically enmeshed in the electrified medium, form the appearance of a cohesive stylistic unit. This sets up these “parts” as “players” in the drama on the stage for the performance of allure.

However, I propose that the crush represents a special case of allure — a “crush-allure” if you will — wherein the cohesion of these stylistic parts is imagined, “costumed,” and projected onto the beloved-object by the lover-object. This imaginary costume of the beloved-object’s style structurally resembles Metz’s notion of a “scopic regime” — in which “general systems of visuality constructed by a cultural/technological/political apparatus mediating the apparently given world of objects in a […] perceptual field.”\(^\text{18}\) In our case, this regime is mediated by the desiring lover-object, whose own notes construct phantom severed qualities of an erotic ideal which is produced from an excess of desire, and are then as “masked-severed qualities” fused onto the beloved-object’s notes in the play of the crush-allure. Harman describes something similar, paradoxically as an element of humor, as a “splitting apart of the typical immediate fusion between a living creature” and its “adaptable contact with their surroundings and fold back into special private destinies.”\(^\text{19}\) That is to say, the splitting apart of the beloved-object into its notes and severed qualities, which then disassembles and deterritorializes its unity, thus leaving it open for the lover-object’s consequent reassemblage and reterritorializing of a phantom unity according to the

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 58.


\(^{19}\) Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 151.
lover-object’s script of desire and expectations. But under the conditions of a crush-allure, the lover’s scopic regime of desire, whose own notes appear like costumers rushing in for a quick change, masks the unsuspecting beloved’s notes to suit the ideal character it needs to play. Harman states that at this point, “allure contends with objects and notes in separation rather than through the usual fusion of the two,” and this holds true, for the beloved-object is unaware that their notes are now actors in a drama that only the lover-object beholds, as “allure, with its severing of objects and qualities, is the paradigm shift of the senses.”

But what is the nature of this desiring regime whose drama is so profoundly experienced by the lover-object, and although the drama of the crush can extend for years, yet — so fickle — it can also be over in a day? It is tempting to position the crush as a fetishizing of the beloved-object, and perhaps, that can happen. But fetish as a practice has specific realms of object worship, that is, objects as parts divorced from their unity that operate via constriction, character, or effectuation, and whose adulation centers around that object as a locus of sexual gratification. It rarely engulfs an entire human object, and generally does not disappear with time. Yet the obsessional character of the fetish is apparent in a crush. And there is something so specifically personal in that obsession, which Harman suggests as an experience of beauty:

A similar cutting of the bond between an agent and its traits occurs in beauty, in which a thing or creature is gifted with qualities of such overwhelming force that we do not pass directly through the sensual material into the unified thing, but seem to see the beautiful entity lying beneath all of its marvelous qualities, commanding them like puppets.

20 Ibid., 151–56.
21 Ibid., 151.
22 Ibid., 152.
24 Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 142.
In fact, Harman earlier refers to the lover-object who is “enveloped in helpless or unthinking routines” of obsessive behavior as a “jolted puppet,” and a “universal stock figure of comedy,” which is an excellent description of the lover-object in the throes of the crush-allure, staring in the face of the constructed and costumed beauty of the unsuspecting beloved-actor-playing-a-part-object.

Also in this description, Harman acknowledges this split and inference as the reterritorialization of the beauty onto the entity lying beneath all of its marvelous qualities above. Timothy Morton describes this mask as an aesthetic dimension: “Intense yet tricksterish, the aesthetic dimension floats in front of objects, like a group of disturbing clowns in an Expressionist painting or a piece of performance art whose boundaries are nowhere to be seen.” The reterritorialized qualities of the beloved create through the illusion of style an aesthetic mirage, as a trickster who is a known crosser of boundaries, and overwhelms the perception of the bedazzled and jolted puppet-lover-object, matching its desire and longing to such an extent that it fails to see the seams and dirty shoes of the costumed mask of the severed qualities projected onto the beloved-object. Locked into a scenario or dance of crush-allure, the lover-object seems to be controlled by something beyond itself.

In discussing this phenomenon of the allure, Harman shifts through many words that imply a magical aspect to the effects on the lover-object in a state of the crush-allure: “bewitching,” “fascinating,” and “sorcery,” all indicating the condition of being “under the spell,” which is a perfect description of the condition of the lover-object in a performance of crush-allure. And Morton agrees: “To think this way is to begin to work out an object-oriented view of causality. If things are intrinsically withdrawn, irreducible to their perception or relations or uses, they can only

25 Ibid., 133.
26 Ibid., 136–38.
affect each other in a strange region out in front of them, a region of traces and footprints: the aesthetic dimension.”28 That “strange region,” outlines the mask itself; positioned in the center of the stage — in the “hot spot” of the stage lights, where its identity as the “traces and footprints” of its aesthetic, marks the blocking of the dance of the crush allure. Harman also notes this phenomenon of notes within a costumed presence that shields its identity with an applied mask: “Sensual objects are always completely present, they simply are not present in naked form, but instead are clothed in notes stolen from the other, contiguous sensual objects.”29 This dance of clothed sensual note-objects twirling in the center of the stage is indeed a masquerade. However as Morton suggests, “Things are there, but they are not there.”30 Indeed. It is the anxious ambiguity of the paradox between of a sense of unity of the notes of the beloved-object, sharing the stage with the projected and severed qualities of the mask, that pivots both the real and the face of desire in the crush, as in a state of crush-allure, the lover-object is obsessed with the intricacies of the beloved-object’s self. And through the revelation of desire, this obsessive need to perceive and attract the beloved-object, creates the “fool’-lover-object — a historically present character of comedic drama — who we watch in cruel relief that it is not we who are bewitched.

Yet the term that is also linked to bewitchery that seems to be most handy for Harman, is charm. This term and his adoption of it appear in his chapter on “humor,” as one of the two “mechanisms” within which he understands allure to operate. “Within the realm of allure,” says Harman, “there is a difference between humor, which feels superior to its object, and charm, which feels enchanted by it.”31 Charm is defined as: “a trait that fascinates, allures, or delights,” but also “a practice or expression believed to

28 Ibid.
29 Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 200.
30 Morton, Realist Magic, 16.
31 Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 142.
have magic power.” These two notes oscillate not only between a fascinating aesthetic and magic, but also between comedy and tragedy, a concept long ago associated with dramatic performance. The hilarity of the pathetic performance of the jolted-puppet-lover-object within the play of the crush-allure against the tragedy of impossibility and loss signifies the very kernel of humor, and is all part of the dramatic action embedded within the crush-allure’s scenario. It is this special prismatic effect and affect of these severed qualities and notes that dance center stage within Morton’s “aesthetic dimension” that characterize and place the charming jolted puppet within the realm of humor. As an aspect within the special case of the crush-allure — this becomes a sturdy foundation: as crushes are generally understood to be “charming” (as long as it is not happening to you), and “comic,” in addition to being “pathetic.” These are the very roots of “pathos”; toggling these states in rapid repetitive emotional volleys for the lover-object. Harman describes it as “a kind of magnetic force that realigns our nervous systems. There is often an ambivalence between comedy and this sort of charm, without their being the same thing. One moment I laugh […] and the next I am captivated by the sorcery of its being.”

Yet for the jolted puppet, who stands center stage within the masquerade, now deep in the thrall of the masked-beloved-object, a further humiliation arises with the classic theatrical trick of the hilarious-because-uncontrollable gigantic codpiece of revealed, naked, erotic desire which is firmly attached to the jolted puppet’s costume — for all to see and for the jolted puppet to suffer. This is a very particular note of the crush-allure: that of embarrassment. Embarrassment parses the rotating play of tragedy and comedy, juxtaposing a wicked exposure of desire, with the charm and sincerity that is the pathos of the lover-object as fool. Harman explains this as a mode of vicarious causation:

33 Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 137.
Humans do not really want to be recognized as free and dignified agents. Instead [...] [they] would rather be recognized as stock characters [...]. To be recognized solely as a bare consciousness is actually the root of all embarrassment. It is nakedness as such [...]. Humiliation strips a lowly central agent of its socially recognized powers, leaving only the hapless striving ego on stage [...].

However, for the lover-object, there is also another specificity to the crush allure, a set of conditions and notes that create the very profile of the crush, enjoining the tragicomedy and activating the heat of the crush-allure machine: it is “play.” Ludicity, “resides primarily in peoples’ relations and interactions [...] whether intra-personal [or] inter-personal [...] [play’s] varying manifestations gain their ludic character because of the initial pact established between individuals, which invests the behavior of the participants with this character.” A concept made famous by the book, *Homo Ludens* (1938), written by Johan Huizinga, “refers not to a set of specific activities, but to a context, a set of principles around which personal and collective experience is meaningfully engaged.” This set of contextual notes provides the motivations for the intense engagements between severed and masked qualities in dramatic action for the lover-object alone: the beloved-object — if playing by the rules of crush engagement — is unaware of the drama surrounding his/her/their body-object. In fact these rules are, according to Huizinga’s formula, essential for the existence of “play” notes to be activated. Further, according to these rules, play must lie “outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil.”

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34 Ibid., 213.
binary conditions of the real world by being “free”; that is, by being outside the cultural operations of the real world — being instead an “aesthetic parallel world” wherein style is constantly reterritorialized and reordered according to desire of the player-objects. As Huizinga suggests play “creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection.”

Yet the most profound note sounded — not only for Huizinga and the “play-notes,” but most deliciously for the lover-object — despite the agonizing yearnings, the sighs of longing, and the inevitable unrequited ending — is that this performance must remain secret (with the exception of best friends, of course) — if the beloved becomes aware, it is no longer a crush. Huizinga considered this secret aspect of exclusivity to be the key aspect of play:

The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy […] This is for us, not for the “others” […]. Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently.

The severed qualities of the quotidian experience are in fact in “play,” also masked; as elements — that is, as Harman would have it, as “the notes of sensual objects” which in the performance of a crush-allure, “coexist side by side rather than fusing together. Numerous elements are present in consciousness simultaneously.” So mechanisms of the elements from the real world are next to — or masked with — the elements of “play,” and so that the swiveling or vacillating of societally established rules versus the secret flaunting of those rules in “play,” create for the player, a sense of fun. It is the fun of this performance of

38 Ibid., 10.
39 Ibid. 12
40 Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 195.
crush-allure, that is the lived experience of the lover-object, and a key attribute of Huizinga’s theory.

But in considering the actual subjective experience of being the lover-object—a severely jolted puppet—within this ludic state of crush-allure, that hegemony of intensely erotic, poignant, and ridiculous emotion—always seems to be directed and controlled by some sort of superior source deep within the lover-object. It is shrouded by darkened mists of notes unknown and incomprehensible to the conscious reckoning, to a source way in the back of the stage, embedded within the very structural aspect of the theater itself. Harman describes this presence by its methodology:

This invocation of objects is even the typical stratagem of seducers and manipulators. The seducer mumbles something under his breath, refusing to repeat it when she asks him, drawing her ever further into the clutches of his sham secret—or perhaps the secret is real.41

Ignoring for the moment Harman’s sexist approach, nevertheless I have come to believe this seducer/manipulator can be no other than that great, elusive, untouchable genius: the “withdrawn object.” Not that we can ever fully apprehend it, understand it, or even really conceive the content of its objecthood, or the character of its being—nevertheless, this is no other than the “Grand Guignol”—the “Theatre of the Big Puppet” where;

People came […] for an experience, not only to see a show. The audience […] endured the terror of the shows because they wanted to be filled with strong “feelings” of something. Many attended the shows to get a feeling of arousal […] there were audience members who could not physically handle the brutality of the actions taking place on stage [as] Frequently, the “special effects” would be too

41 Ibid., 152.
realistic and often an audience member would faint and/or vomit during performances.42

Right? Is this not what having a crush is like? Harman insists we cannot ever apprehend the “great director,” as it is structurally impossible to turn around to face what is always on the other side of consciousness. Like a Derridean “trace,” the “withdrawn object” sits in binary opposition to our pathetic jolted-puppet-of-a-self, exerting absolute control over our strings, forcing our notes and qualities to skip in merry eroticism toward the beloved-object so totally wrong for us. Our adoration for the beloved-object is illusionary, but truly experienced, yet seemingly out of our control. Crushes are overwhelmingly considered to be a false love. But for the lover-object it is so agonizingly felt; so obsessively real. Morton explains it this way:

If there are only objects, of time and space and causality […] the emergent properties of objects—if all these things float “in front of” objects in what is called the aesthetic dimension, in a nontemporal, nonlocal space that is not in some beyond but right here, in your face—then nothing is going to tell us categorically what counts as real and what counts as unreal. Without space, without environment, without world, objects and their sensual effects crowd together like leering figures in a masquerade.43

Precisely. Yet who can understand the reasoning of the withdrawn puppeteer behind pulling the strings of the fool? It clearly emanates from the “withdrawn object” of the lover-object, yet as an aspect of the lover-object’s self, how can it be so cruel? Harman softens the blow by referring to this dictatorship as being “a strange sort of interference”44 that occurs “between two moments of a thing’s being, one that does not occur at all times

43 Morton, Realist Magic, 19.
44 Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 143.
as sincerity does, but one that simply either occurs or fails to occur.”45 This enigmatic statement is trying to parse how the power of the subterranean withdrawn object directs the process of allure, creating the “enchanted experience.” But how to protect ourselves from this comedy, or how to retain any pride in this ridiculous drama — we will never know.

Yet are there other moments or applications in the subjective experience where this same masquerade of crush-allure might also appear to cloud our judgment and create an erotic frisson within a lover-object? As an “aesthetic dimension,” it might very well explain the experience of the viewer/audience/fan in the thrall of the work of art. Harman states: “Art is granted a sort of magic power, allowing us to confront the impossible depths of objects. Or rather, art is only granted the power of seeming to be able to do this.”46 Exactly. The “crush” effect of the art-lover-object’s attraction toward an art-object acts in an analogous fashion as does for the lover-object toward the beloved-object — both sets of objects set off a condition of crush-allure, wherein the internal aesthetic notes of the art-lover-object’s desire projects a squadron of masking qualities as an obscuring veil center stage to wrap the art-object in a mask that reflects and resembles the art-lover-object — who/which already in some ways resemble certain of those referenced qualities of the art-lover-object’s desires.

As Morton points out, there are other realms of object relation and causality wherein this dance of the crush-allure with its masking notes appears between object relations: “Aesthetic events are not limited to interactions between humans or between humans and painted canvases[...]. When you make or study art [...] You are making or studying causality. The aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension.”47 In our case, that causal field is the melodramatic stage of the crush-allure. And the masking veil projected by the art-lover-object can be explained

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 105.
47 Morton, Realist Magic, 19.
this way: “the aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension, which in turn means that it is also the vast nonlocal mesh that floats ‘in front of’ objects (ontologically, not physically ‘in front of’)”.48 These objects can be both and either inside or outside the subject-object.

So it would seem to be that in the center stage area, the gap or spatial extension — which is perhaps an easier way to think of this phenomenon as a chōrismos, or “irreducible gap”49 as Morton as framed it — which is the very realm of this aesthetic dimension, and in the case of any condition of allure, also the moment of causality. Harman defines this moment as “a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing’s unity and its plurality of notes somehow partially disintegrates” and creates a “strange sort of interference between two moments of a thing’s being.”50 And it is in the condition of the crush-allure, and perhaps even all conditions of allure, that the distant hum of the amatory notes invisibly emitted from the dark, withdrawn suzerain directing the action, creates unique, even quixotic interactions that deliver the magical, if not embarrassing, effects of the crush. For the lover-object, it is the effect of a loss of control: reddened cheeks, speeding heart rates, and the inability to focus on anything but the beloved-object, which are signals emanating from the deep directorial authority of the Grand Guignol, the withdrawn object. For the condition of the crush-allure is indeed the “Theater of the Big Puppet,” and we as subject-objects in the moment of the crush-allure, are the jolted puppets in the throes of a vicarious — but fun — causation.

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 24.
50 Harman, Guerrilla Metaphysics, 143.