

# THE HOUSE HAS EYES

OR HOW OBJECTS HAUNT OUR PRESENT



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**ABSTRACT:** *Human beings cannot bear the thought of no longer being the center of the universe; Martin Heidegger's ontology validates the construction of a world that subjugates non-human objects to a role which reinforces our own position. In this paper, two personal experiences of objects which contradict traditional construals of "subjectivity" will be explored and analyzed in light of contemporary uncertainty around Heidegger's ontology. Ultimately, I seek to complicate and show the radical dependence humans have on the constructed—or, "second"—subjectivity of objects and how we use them to validate the world as we wish it to be seen.*



*"There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in."*

*- Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 108.*



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## THE OBJECTS

In my house, there is an armchair that used to be my grandfather's. A strange mixture between wingback and turned chair, upholstered in a green fabric creased where his head used to lay. For a long time, it smelled like his house, like pancakes and the smoke of a fireplace—but now it smells a little more like mothballs. There are times I wake up in the middle of the night, stumbling downstairs half-asleep, only to find a large and imposing lump where the chair used to be: a black hollow which sucks up space imperceptibly. I startle awake at its sight, but it is only the chair. In that moment between dream and reality, I am back in my grandparents' cottage, the last attendant of a long-forgotten sleepover.

This chair haunts me. It reminds me of a loss from which I can never recover, a love that bubbles up inside of me recalling my grandfather's laugh, remembering being told not to sit in papa's chair. This chair looms at me unexpectedly, seeming to judge: "what have you done to remember?"

Other objects in my house loom at me like this. A yellow couch, for instance, whose corduroy fabric and sleek, tapered legs reek of the sixties—an impossible find from Goodwill, cushions still surprisingly plush, colors un-faded by time. My roommate and I fell in love with it, bought it on the spot, and lugged it home to marvel at its well-preserved beauty. We built a story around it of a widow whose entire living room was yellow corduroy. How careful she had been to clean and cherish this couch; perhaps it too reminded her of a loved one now gone. There are times I look at this couch and feel a melancholy so great that I can but grasp the edge of the fabric, its bristling skin pressing into mine. The widow becomes real, not an imaginary character but part of the couch itself; it becomes a fictional couch, whose presence I can no longer deny.

**1** It is not the aim of this paper to definitively establish the ontological subjectivity of objects; it will suffice to rely on the claims of others—primarily Graham Harman—as to this end. What this project is first and foremost interested in is the *implications for the human subject* of this implied dual subjectivity of the object.

**2** In this paper, "first subjectivity" will be used to designate the distinct subjectivity of the object itself—one formed independent of human relationships; "second subjectivity" will be used to designate the constructed and false subjectivity of the object, given to it intersubjectively by human relationships and stories.

**3** Emphasis added, Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2006), 14.

These objects take on qualities beyond their facticity; they transcend themselves, gain attributes beyond the physical. They take on the gaze, *haunt* our present as subjects in their own right. The gaze unlocks the object, activates portions previously unknown to us—not as pieces of a thing but as living, breathing, confrontational material. But the gaze is not taken up as a surrogate for a person; no, we must understand the object existentially as a subject with its own ontological existence to whom we tie our history in such a way that a second, distinct subjectivity is fabricated.<sup>1</sup> This second subjectivity is false, constructed by assumed histories given so that the object can validate our existence as we wish it to be seen. The first subjectivity chafes against the second, threatening to collapse the stories we connected them to—threatening to collapse our identity.<sup>2</sup> What must be understood is that the object does not depend on our existence for it to be given a life, a subjectivity; it already has one. What must also be understood is that we are dependent upon the objects' acceptance of our false second subjectivity to validate the world as we wish it to be seen.

## A STRIKING CHARACTER

What allows the object to be a subject? This is an issue Jean Baudrillard sought to answer about the family home:

The primary role of furniture and objects . . . is to personify human relationships, to fill the space that they share between them, and to be inhabited by a soul. . . . Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value—what might be called a "presence."<sup>3</sup>

In the privileged space of the home, its contents become symbolic—everything in harmony or disarray in proportion to the inhabitants own interrelations. These objects in the family's absence—serve as surrogates for them; the child can take comfort in the solidity of their parent's chair or in the fine porcelain they stack in the cupboard. The family gives these objects agency, imbues them with possible meanings which weigh them down—they are now laden with a role: they represent me. Here, the object is assumed to behave as a subject only intersubjectively. That is to say it is a second subject; without the family to imbue it with history, it would be mute—a non-subject. According to Baudrillard, my

grandfather's chair possesses its strange qualities *only because it represents* a relationship now lost, a ghost which remains permanently in the chair—a ghost which no amount of detergents or mothballs could ever scrub out for me.

This account of the object's significance does not extend, however, to the yellow couch. How can this couch *haunt* me like the chair when the familial relationship it once signified is unknown to me? To answer this, we cannot rely on Baudrillard. To him, the object gains subjectivity—what I call second subjectivity—merely through its representation of a relationship. Yet this couch has no relation to me beyond the one I have with my roommate—a relationship quite distinct from the one established by the family. Ours is a relationship of need while the family's is bound by sociocultural practices—the object's substance to Baudrillard. If the object represented *only the relationships I have established*, then the couch should only represent a convenient necessity: my roommate and I wanted a place to sit, so we bought a couch. But we did not buy just *any* couch; there was something more about this couch; it *struck* us in a way no other couch could. It had that quality Roland Barthes describes of the photograph—a *punctum*.

Occasionally, a "detail" attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph . . . this detail is the punctum. . . . However lightning-like it may be, the punctum has . . . a power of expansion. . . . I perceive the referent (here, the photograph really transcends itself. . . . To annihilate itself as medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?)<sup>4</sup>

A detail about the couch struck us: it was clean. Too clean, in fact. This detail is what made us fall in love with it, but it arose only because of the relationship the couch once signified. The detail revealed a portion of the couch's history, the origin of its second subjectivity. Like the annihilation of the photograph Barthes describes, suddenly the couch was no longer a symbol of my relationship with my roommate but became the fictional family couch again with all its significance, carrying its symbolic status over into the present.

This *punctum* allowed us to build the narrative of the widow around it, but it does not matter if she ever truly existed. What matters is that something about the couch

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010), 42–45.

5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1993), 343–45.

allowed us to tell that story, to build a second subjectivity around the object. The *punctum* is what allowed me to feel the corduroy bristle under my hand, what manifested the widow not as mere representation but as *actual lived experience*.

How powerful this quality, the *punctum*, is: it bridges the past and the present; it manifests *fiction as reality*. When I feel the presence of the widow, it is not that this fiction has become reality, but that I have become more fictional; a portion of myself gets caught up in building the narrative of the couch, in holding it down to second subjectivity. Thus, the *punctum* confuses the reality of the object and my fictional story in such a way that I feel its contradiction personally. This same confusion is active in my grandfather's chair. Although I have a personal connection with this object, it is one I now experience only through memory—and memories can be quite fictional, particularly nostalgic ones; we remember what we want to about the object, forgetting unimportant qualities in order to be filled up with those which remain *striking* to us—a *punctum*.

## THE SUBJECT/OBJECT PROBLEM

Even understanding the *punctum*, we are still left with the problem of the experience. There must be something else stirring up these events, causing me to focus sharply on the details and narratives which otherwise sink into the background. These events, where the chair judges or the couch looms, resemble the feeling Sartre describes originating from "the Other."

The Other is first the permanent flight of things toward . . . an object at a certain distance from me but which escapes me inasmuch as it unfolds about itself its own distance. . . . there is a total space which is grouped around the Other, and this space is made with my space; there is a regrouping in which I take part but which escapes me . . . the . . . relation of myself to the Other . . . [is] a concrete daily relation . . . at each instant the Other is looking at me.<sup>5</sup>

Objects take on the presence of the Other and reorient the space I am in, stealing my space away from me and folding it into new configurations. There is an

unmistakable vertigo which results from understanding the object as Other, explainable only in terms of it taking on the “gaze”—the unshakeable feeling that at any time I might be being looked at, might have my world stolen from me. This fear is the possibility that the second and constructed subjectivity I have given to the object—which defines and reflects a portion of who *I* am as a subject—is being misunderstood, that my identity is at risk of being seen by the object as merely an objective quality rather than my very transcendence of the objective.<sup>6</sup>

When I stumble across the chair in its transmuted state, I perceive this fear not because the chair *changed*, but because I become aware of its *first subjectivity*, its existence in- and for-itself. I become aware that the second subjectivity represents—in the Baudrillardian sense—a relationship fundamental to an aspect of who I am and that the memories I have tied to the object do not represent it fully; without me, it has existed, has engaged in other histories which imply that it has a distinct subjectivity. The fact that the object has only *now* entered into my presence leaves open the possibility that the chair could transcend all of the events that I have attempted to ascribe it to. What I know of the chair is only a partial knowledge made up of bits and pieces of time I have mistaken for a complete history—a history I have filled in with my own constructed narratives. The chair’s assumption of the gaze allows it to reorient my space for its own, to assert its first subjectivity. This unfolding of the first subjectivity, which at most times remains tightly shut at the edge of the object, stuns us, forces us to let our guards down. In these unguarded moments, we leave open the possibility of the second subjectivities falsity, that the chair might in fact be a subject in-itself—and so it takes on the gaze.

## A. EYES

It seems, based on the experiences recounted, that the object’s ability to haunt us is primarily because it takes on the gaze, a representation of first subjectivity; yet the proposition that an object might have a separate and distinct subjectivity feels initially quite absurd. The theories we have relied upon thus far assert that full subjectivity is reserved only for human beings, not objects—though the object can be *imbued* with apparent subjectivity through intersubjective relationships (what

6 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 301–03, 341–49.

7 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 346.

we have called “second subjectivity.”) For Sartre, the gaze can be felt only if it originates from the human subject, but allows, like Baudrillard, that the human gaze might be *represented* by an object. Sartre depicts a white farmhouse caught in a war; an infantry hiding in the brush fears the house because it represents the possibility of an Other’s presence and thus the possibility of a gaze.<sup>7</sup> The house takes on the gaze as if it has been *lent a set of eyes* by an adjacent human agency; the house has eyes only as a representation, not because it is seen as a subject in-itself: a first subject.

If we take Sartre at his word that the object cannot have first subjectivity, how might we change our readings? We could understand the experience of the chair at night as a misreading of it, brought on by the dark, interpreting it momentarily as human—a full subject in Sartrean terms. This would account for the strong emotional content of the experience, but this cannot explain the situation of the couch sitting before us in broad daylight. I perceive it fully *as a couch*: an object severed from subjectivity, no longer in the widow’s home, cut off from the relationship which might lend it eyes. Even when the *punctum* replaces it with the fictional family couch, it remains severed, unable to take up the gaze; it sits in *my* living room, unfolding its own space around itself. It is difficult to see how the subjectivity of the deceased, fictional family could remain potent here; I understand that they are gone, that the *punctum* operates only through my perception of it as present.

We could consider the gaze of the couch as a representation of my own eyes; it was, after all, my story which built its second subjectivity. In this account, my subjectivity would be displaced by the detail and turned back on myself. While this would explain my emotional experience, it would also require an overly complex understanding of the object; I must simultaneously perceive the *punctum* as a representation of the object’s history *and* displace my subjectivity into it, thus severing me from myself. I become both the perceived and perceiver of the Other. This state of dual-perception would likely disintegrate the detail: I would be so bound up in the act of perception that I might not notice the very *punctum* which caused the experience in the first place.

## THE OBJECT AS SUBJECT

If we bind ourselves strictly to Sartre and Baudrillard, we face a problem: the object must be a first subject, but cannot be. This limit originates from Sartre's problematic reading of Martin Heidegger's ontology. In his equipment-philosophy, Heidegger develops a rich subjectivity for objects before ultimately concluding that they are activated only by the human hand.<sup>8</sup> This second supposition is questioned by Graham Harman, who believes that Heidegger truly opens the object to first subjectivity and that his overemphasis of humanity's role was driven by an inability to conceive of a world not fully centered on the human perspective. This presents a problem to Harman in that Heidegger appears to give the object a place of power only to later make it subservient.<sup>9</sup> Heidegger's inflation of human subjectivity ontologically is the foundation of Sartre's own viewpoint, which then faces the same problem: objects become silent servants of the human will. In response to this problem, Harman proposes that we simply level the playing field; Heidegger gives the object a rich foundation of subjectivity, and so if we understand the human as another *kind* of object, then we would maintain our place of power while also allowing other objects to gain their own first subjectivity.

What Harman wishes us to realize is that the world does not unfold around human beings, nor are they the only true subjects—a perception arising only from our point of view; if we instead consider the chair's point of view, its ability to affect itself as a place to sit creates the situation in which we are able to affect our own effect. Without the chair's ability to take up first subjectivity, Harman strongly believes that it would not be capable of the very effects that allow us to engage with it as a chair. Further, he asserts that being capable of creating effects is the only requirement of subjectivity for all objects.<sup>10</sup>

If this is true, then there are no chairs, only chair-effects; however, the chair is not limited to affecting itself as this place to sit: like humans, it is capable of other effects. It can affect itself like a place of power, like a fire, like a bird's nest—like anything at all.<sup>11</sup> There is no constraint to the object's subjectivity that would make it dependent on us. Without us it would continue to unfold the world about itself. If no human subject existed, then

**8** Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ed. Dennis J. Schmidt, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 59–106.

**9** Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 18–24.

**10** Harman, *Tool-Being*.

**11** When the object engages with objects that are not human, it is important to remember that *it is still engaging its effects*. To Harman, this means that the object *must* be a first subject. Even if it becomes, as implied, little more than a rotting nest for a bird, it remains a first subject because the effect of “bird’s-nest” is implicated in the objects range of affective capabilities.

the chair would *remain a first subject*: with our constructed second subjectivity forgotten, the chair's effects would continue to engage and disengage with other effects in ways which—in a human-centered ontology—we cannot even begin to comprehend. Objects are not trivial things contingent upon our use of them but *entire worlds* capable *in-themselves* of existence.

## HAUNTINGS

What are we to make of Harman's conclusion? The world is full of objects, each capable of first subjectivity. If this is true, then no object can be truly inert to us; we live in a universe of haunted objects, bound to a constellation of our own making. We tie down a finite number of objects' first subjectivity in service to our own identity in ways we do not fully comprehend, we erase their first subjectivity in favor of a constructed second one. Our history haunts them; they are relegated to live as the symbols *we want them to be*, not just any chair but *my grandfather's chair*. Oh god, please remain my grandfather's chair; what would I do if this object lost its significance, if I could in fact wash out the ghost of my own memory? The chair would be freed from me and the second subjectivity I have tied it to—but I would be changed forever. There would be a wingback-shaped hole stretching across my memory, a blank space in every photograph of my grandparents' living room. I might lose the very memory of my grandfather; what is a memory but a collection of *punctums*, the pertinent details which caused us to become aware of the situation of the world, the construction which we call *place*?<sup>12</sup> Without this chair, I might not remember my grandfather because an object-effect I used to tie him to my memory is now dead.

When we lose touch with objects, empty our childhood homes and put them into boxes, we begin to forget them, begin to forget ourselves. Only moments we can link with the second subjectivity of objects remain salient to us, but their first subjectivity remains intact. Inevitably, our construction slips past the object, fractures as we remove ourselves further and further from the thing itself; memory and time slowly erases our construction, filling in the details with false truths. The true chair exists in reality for only a finite period of time, but in my memory it will exist forever in an inert state—the

**12** For more on the human construction of space, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

state I *need it to be in* for it to unlock my memory. This is the weight of what it means to tie an object down to second subjectivity: we kill the object's first subjectivity or bury it so deeply that it is easily replaced by our second subjectivity;<sup>13</sup> we construct a tightly-adhering skin that mutes the identity of the object, transforms it into a memorial to ourselves.

Now we must face the fullest conclusion of this narrative: we are the ones who haunt ourselves. Without me to give out these second subjectivities, there would be no ghost in my grandfather's chair, no widow perfuming the couch with roses. I depend on the attribution of these stories to those objects in such a way that when I recognize that they in fact have their own first subjectivity, that they do not depend on me to exist, I feel fear: I realize that the false objects I have made give a portion of myself back to me, allow me to validate the way I exist in the world. But this chair will one day fold in on itself, and a bit of me will have been lost along with it.

For this reason, we must fear the wrinkling of the fabric, the dirtying of the carpet, the staining of the walls. How *fragile* this world we believe we have constructed for ourselves is; perhaps one day the yellow couch will be so dirty that its *punctum* will cease to operate, its second subjectivity now illegible: there is no more widow, she has died. However, the object continues to exist, affecting itself quietly on the world. And so we must clean them, preserve them, tell their stories as often as we can in order to hold down the objects to this constructed history—in order to hold onto *ourselves*. It is this fear which drives us to collect history in great repositories: to build monuments, to keep graves, to document and archive the past “in case of emergency;” we cannot bear the thought of a world not built the way we remember it, but, like the libraries of Alexandria or the palaces of Rome, this too shall burn. It is no wonder that Heidegger struggled to remove himself from the center of the world. How terrifying it would be to assert that we cannot control it, but rather only a thin veneer built over the reality of the world—a veneer in need of constant maintenance. When it crumbles, the symbolic relationship we have constrained the object to will no longer be important, but the object will remain in existence as a reminder that we cannot make it live as we want it to. So we must continue to be the ghosts who

**13** Perhaps this is in fact the role of all traditional ontologies, to assert the centrality of the human so as to allow the covering-over of the object's first subjectivity—a mission that Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology squarely rejects. For further reading on his unique take on ontology, refer to Graham Harman's book, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London, UK: Pelican Books, 2018).

breathe out these histories and fix them onto objects so that others can see us as we desire, so that others might tell these stories too.

One day someone might stumble across the yellow couch, transfixed by some aspect of it, a *punctum* only they can see; maybe they will tell a story about two roommates so in love with its plush corduroy that they just *had* to lug it home immediately: “can't you see the crack in this foot right here?” Other second subjectivities will be given to the couch, allowing me to continue to exist parasitically through it. The histories we construct are inflicted like wounds upon the object, wounds which become new *punctums*. These wounds continuing to haunt the object, preventing it from existing as it wishes itself to be. Objects become monuments to ourselves—because this too can justify our lives: each time someone exclaims about how odd the green chair is, or how beautiful the yellow couch is, I get to confirm my existence, look at the history I am making for myself. Let us sit down to tea from my grandmother's kettle: won't you listen to my story?

After the cup is empty, we will sit quietly transfixed by the false objects, the second subjects around us. But the chair will begin to grow black, the couch emitting the slight scent of roses as you shift from left to right; three sets of eyes fix themselves upon you—a strange sense of vertigo.

“What has happened?” you ask.

“Simple, these objects haunt you now too.”