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Dirty Windows and Troublesome Things: The Problem of Object-Orientation in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*

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Abstract: This article investigates the representation of objects in *La Jalousie* (1957), a novel in the *nouveau roman* tradition written by French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet. If the 'new novel' sought to render the material world with objective clarity, and positioned itself against traditional fiction, with its reliance on metaphor, allegory, and other 'projections,' this article argues that such an aesthetic program is undercut by its own assumptions about the power of description and the primacy of the visual. In an analysis which hybridizes three separate strands of criticism—object-oriented ontology, Heideggerian phenomenology, and the models of 'resonance' proposed by Brian Massumi—I will argue that such a treatment of objects, with its exclusive reliance on visual description, measurement, and enumeration, ends up depriving objects of the vitality and dynamism that would justify such a fictional project in the first place. However, traces of this dynamism do survive the flattening sweep of Robbe-Grillet's narration, and indeed offer from the cracks and fissures of the novel's otherwise smoothly controlled style the possibility of an alternate 'object-orientation'—one, I will argue, which suspends its cool optical detachment to allow, however briefly, the eruption of a messy, entangling register of touch.

Keywords: experimental fiction; avant-garde fiction; *nouveau roman*; French literature; the non-human; object-oriented ontology; phenomenology; textual criticism; affect theory; tactility



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1. Introduction

In “Une voie par le roman futur”, published in 1956 and later collected in *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963), the French novelist and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet mourns an Edenic state of immediacy that we have squandered through our need to make projections onto inert matter. A “continuous fringe of culture”, he writes, has been “added to things”.¹ This reflective layer obscures objects by styling them in our own image; when we look at a landscape, we see it only as “austere” or “calm”, and are blind to its actual contours and properties.² Yet this veil can slip, if only fleetingly, and when it does, so we are given a glimpse of the world without our projections:

All at once the whole splendid construction collapses; opening our eyes unexpectedly, we have experienced, once too often, the show of this stubborn reality we were pretending to have mastered . . . Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things are there. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, intact, neither suspiciously brilliant nor transparent. All our literature has not yet succeeded in eroding their smallest corner, in flattening their slightest curve.³

Objects suddenly appear, inscrutable and alien, on the horizon; with the veil of signification pulled away, the world of things is, simply, “there”—inert, unsignifying, obstructive to conventions of meaning.

Robbe-Grillet holds that the new novelist must avoid the temptation to cast off this surface layer of objects in order to access their more apparently rich and resonant depths. It is to these bare surfaces that Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman* directs itself, seeking in them

a richness which can support a new kind of fiction, freed from the “animistic” illusions of inner significance. This calling into question of the dialectic of surface and depth will, at our point in time, feel quite familiar; what is unusual, however, is the absolute manner in which Robbe-Grillet rejects all depth as phantasmagorical. Surface, he asserts, is all there is, and a writer who attends to the depths of objects is lost in a private fantasy—the fantasy of “signification”, in which meaning is supplied by the author and projected onto an ultimately meaningless material world. “Instead of this universe of ‘signification,’” he writes,

we must try, then, to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it first be by their presence that these objects and gestures establish themselves. Henceforth, on the contrary, objects will gradually lose their instability and their secrets, will renounce their pseudo-mystery, that suspect interiority which Roland Barthes has called “the romantic heart of things”.⁴

The *nouveau roman* is thus styled as a re-orientation away from the hidden and towards the apparent; away from ideas, and towards things; away from the “pseudo-mystery” of speculation, and towards “solid” perception—with an ostensible objectivity that is tied firmly to the act of seeing and describing. The model of the “new novel” constructed in Robbe-Grillet’s writings puts forth vision as a neutral medium through which the object may be recorded and presented, and with an accuracy that is unavailable through other, more distortingly “poetic” approaches. Sight, Robbe-Grillet claims, is the “best weapon” at the writer’s disposal.⁵

The novels that result from this program, then, are fittingly mundane—yet their success in actually presenting the object world “as is” is limited at best. It is possible that Robbe-Grillet’s fictional practice simply shifts this mystery, this romantic investment, from the depth to the surface. As Peter Brooks states in his review of the Grove Press editions of *For A New Novel* and *La Maison de Rendez-vous* (Brooks 1967), while Robbe-Grillet “has sought to destroy the ‘romantic heart of things,’” he is nonetheless “constantly fascinated by the romanticism of surfaces”—an unquestioned and highly libidinal attachment that often reduces surfaces to an “exotic banality”.⁶ In other words, Robbe-Grillet does not ask whether surfaces are necessarily any more immediate, any less signifying, than depths—nor does he ask whether vision is indeed the most accurate, or the most reliable, of available tools. Just as he criticizes Albert Camus for his use of the catch-all category of “the absurd” to subsume all that falls outside of signification (Camus 1972), he creates his own unqueried category—the category of the “immediate”, which he feels he can conjure by attentive, exhaustive descriptions. There is a troubling paradox in such a yoking of immediacy to the product of writing. Is it possible to access the objective through visually descriptive prose, and in so doing allow the objects to “establish themselves”, without the projection of human values? If sight truly is the “best weapon” a writer has for portraying objective reality,⁷ the transparency of this medium begs examination. What is at play, it seems, is the assumption that the essence of objects is written on their outermost layers. Yet are objects really reducible to their optical surfaces? Put differently, by what phenomenological bent does vision become the inevitable and inarguable standard?

Robbe-Grillet conflates what a thing ultimately *is* with what a thing looks like, and in doing so puts forth the visual as the most immediate of sensory modalities. Yet, one could imagine an equally successful literary depiction of an object that treats its objective reality as what it feels like, smells like, or tastes like—and, indeed, much could be argued for the heightened immediacy of these more embodied senses over the relatively removed experience of vision. More troublingly, it is possible that a fantasy of communion with the immediate can be mistaken for immediacy itself; one may perceive not a three-dimensional object, but an elaborate *trompe l’oeil*. This is, of course, if the objects do not burst through the screen of their own volition, making their presence incontrovertibly known.

In my analysis of Robbe-Grillet’s frustrating and negatory novel, *La Jalousie* (1957), I will raise the possibility that the *nouveau roman*’s challenge to conventional aesthetic

values is buttressed by an undisclosed regime of classical, even conservative, aesthetic detachment. The built-in conservatism of this program complicates Robbe-Grillet's radical gesture by bracketing the potency of this obstruction, and of the objects that might "do" the obstructing; it does so in the service of a model of authorial mastery and subject-object dominance that is precisely what the *nouveau roman* set out to dismantle.

This very supposition of an easy, instrumental relationship, however, has the paradoxical effect of making the novel's inevitable frictions and contradictions more productive than if these slippages were readily announced, ideologically welcome, or, indeed, intentional. One expects the epistemological crisis at the center of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (Sartre 1964); one does not expect it in a novel that has otherwise presented itself as a catalogue of interior décor. Indeed, even the novel itself seems surprised, caught off guard by the interruption in its smooth object-oriented regime. *La Jalousie* is thus stuck in a state of oscillation between the new and the old, poised at an impasse between contact and detachment, caught in the process of falling apart. As such, Robbe-Grillet's work has much potential for recuperation in service of radically new ways of thinking about, and relating to, the object-world—and not despite of, but because of, its complications and conservatisms.

2. Surface Study

La Jalousie is set in an unnamed French colony, at a house on a banana plantation. While earlier novelists may have described this plantation house by way of its particular history, the story of its construction and occupation, or its situation in a larger economic and imperial context, the house of *La Jalousie* is dislocated from such received histories of meaning and presented as geometrical fact—as nothing more than a set of physical realities, of columns, flagstones, windows, and banisters, each overlapping with the other. Under the scan of Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman*, the house is condensed into an exercise in geometry:

Now the shadow of the column—the column which supports the southwest corner of the roof—divides the corresponding corner of the veranda into two equal parts. This veranda is a wide, covered gallery surrounding the house on three sides. Since its width is the same for the central portion as for the sides, the line of shadow cast by the column extends precisely to the corner of the house; but it stops there, for only the veranda flagstones are reached by the sun, which is still too high in the sky. The wooden walls of the house—that is, its front end and west gable-end—are still protected from the sun by the roof (common to the house proper and the terrace). So at this moment the shadow of the outer edge of the roof coincides exactly with the right angle formed by the terrace and the two vertical surfaces of the corner of the house.⁸

Many novels may begin with such an "objective" account and may periodically return to a register of abstract mathematical precision—the geometrical diagramming of sunrise and sunset that divides the sections of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) is one example—but *La Jalousie* stays in this register for the duration of the work. These are objects freed from the burden of plot, of narrative or thematic support; Robbe-Grillet's columns are, in a sense, free-standing, liberated from their conventional function. As such, we experience their "column-ness", and the facticity of the entire structure, much more than were they subsumed to the status of illustration.

Robbe-Grillet's descriptive specificity creates the infrastructure for plot and drama but leaves this infrastructure bare. If the apartment block of Georges Perec's *La vie mode d'emploi* (1978) or the prisons and garrets of Jean Genet's *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1943) helped their authors smuggle in a dense network of social signification, Robbe-Grillet's plantation house is conspicuously lacking in such content. It is not a dollhouse or diorama, but an architectural model—and one whose human figures seem to be there to simply establish scale. One character, given the cypher "A . . .", is a woman who appears to live in the house; the other, a man named Franck, visits the house under numerous occasions—or, possibly, the same occasion in numerous retellings—under the scrutiny of a nameless and voiceless narrator, whose presence can only be inferred through counting table settings

or examining the arrangement of chairs. Such visual scrutiny is indeed the narrator's modus operandi; while A ... and Franck engage in trivial activities and make brief, inconsequential conversation, the narration tracks uneasily around the margins, its gaze constantly frustrated by louvred blinds, walls, and imperfections in glass.

La Jalousie is, at base, a novel about encounters with obstructive surfaces. It is punctuated throughout by depictions of impeded surveillance, blocked vision, and imperfect transparency. It is a novel of surveillance; however, despite being written in a particularly charged time for such tropes—especially given the involvement of mid-century France in heightened imperial and colonial intervention in precisely the climes in which the novel sets itself—its depictions are resolutely apolitical. If Robbe-Grillet gives obsessive attention to the physical infrastructure of French colonial rule, this scrutiny has little to do with critique. It is forensics without resolution, and without an ethical or judicial mandate; it is a literary aesthetic whose very point is the avoiding of such attachments.⁹ In the absence of such ethics, *La Jalousie* is pure methodology, pure surface.

As a result, Robbe-Grillet's novel becomes a stumbling block in itself, imposing on us a stubborn and frustrating opacity that is the product of its insistence on things. Pages are spent detailing the geometric array of banana trees, the weathered patina of a painted handrail, or the position of cutlery on a table. Objects here are obstructive, are perceived as such through their obstructiveness. This is as it must be, at least according to the *nouveau roman* program: if these objects were more transparent pathways to meaning, if they were mobilized in some larger plot or metaphorical structure, they would cease to be objects—they would, in a sense, cease to be visible or at least demarcable against the smooth weave of narrative.

As Elaine Freedgood notes in *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006), objects in fiction typically serve a subordinate role, as metaphoric extensions of characters themselves—markers of quirk, eccentricity, or status—or as “reality effects” that index, and convince the reader of, a novel's location in time or a place. In both cases, the objects effectively disappear, subsumed as mere demonstrations of a larger reality; this seamless weave is precisely the “splendid construction” of literature that the *nouveau roman* intends to destabilize and deconstruct. It is then crucial to the project of the *nouveau roman* that the novelist does not appear wholly in control of his objects, which are meant to be felt as pre-existing their usage at the hands of the author. Each object ought to be capable in its own way of asserting itself, or, as Robbe-Grillet states, “let it be first of all by their presence that objects and gestures impose themselves”.¹⁰ Yet, the manner in which Robbe-Grillet performs this negation of authority is not wholly satisfying. In working out the fraught relationship between the human and the non-human, the novelist relies on a particular sense of instrumentality that wants to “have it both ways”—the object is somehow both under our control and autonomous at once. It is telling that the metaphor that Robbe-Grillet uses to illustrate this relation to objects is that of a tool, the most friendly and acquiescent of objects:

Man grasps his hammer (or a stone he has selected) and pounds on a stake he wants to drive into the ground. While he uses it in this way, the hammer (or the stone) is merely form and substance: its weight, the striking surface, the other extremity which allows him to hold it. Afterward, man sets the tool down in front of him; if he no longer needs it, the hammer is no more than a thing among things: outside of his use, it has no signification.¹¹

Objects under Robbe-Grillet's rubric are somehow both familiar and defamiliarized at once; they are both ready-to-hand, and beyond our mastery. While in use, the object-as-tool is “merely form and substance”, its materiality reduced to those elements that serve our ends; when we put the tool down, it is as if we never picked it up in the first place: by a process of magical transubstantiation, the stone reverts back to its original, alien self. Outside of our immediate use, Robbe-Grillet declares, the object has “no signification”, no relation to the human subject.

This certainly cannot be the case. Robbe-Grillet's model of object-orientation asserts that the discarded object would bear no traces of our use, as though in being discarded, both the object and our memories of the object were wiped clean. Yet surely the hammer, or the stone, would bear some remnant of its recent subsumption as a means to our ends, even if that remnant is purely epistemological. Once we have handled an object, incorporated it into ourselves as an extension of our will, can it truly go back to being "a thing among things"?

In elaborating his own object-oriented philosophy, the novelist borrows heavily from the language of Martin Heidegger's phenomenology of objects, particularly that expressed in *Being and Time* (Heidegger [1927] 1962). Robbe-Grillet appropriates these concepts in order to establish an object-orientation that allows for prolonged contact with the object without the accumulation of knowledge or "signification", or, at least, without signification conventionally figured. The issue at hand is when object orientation addresses not simply objects but objects with purpose: tools, utensils, and "equipment".¹² As Heidegger writes,

equipment can genuinely show itself in dealings cut to its own measure (hammering with a hammer, for example); but in such dealings an entity of this kind is not grasped thematically as an occurring Thing, nor is the equipment-structure known as such even in the using. The hammering does not simply have knowledge about the hammer's character as equipment, but it has appropriated this equipment in a way which could not possibly be more suitable.¹³

As in Robbe-Grillet's account, even though the hammerer grasps the hammer, he does not "grasp" it; in fact, it is the process of hammering itself that is responsible for the conceptual invisibility of the hammer. In the act of using it to drive a wooden stake into the ground, the human subject has "appropriated" the hammer in such a way that the contours of the object perfectly line up with the contours of intention—and, just like that, the hammer vanishes into its own function.

In Heidegger's formulation, however, this disappearing act is irreversible. The more one puts objects to use, the less one is able to perceive them as anything other than tools, which is the same as not truly perceiving them at all. Heidegger phrases this in terms that play productively off of the friction between these optical and tactile registers of meaning. "The less we just stare at the hammer-Thing", he writes, "and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment".¹⁴

Through our alloying of its "form and matter" with "purpose", the hammer or stone is transformed from its singular and particular materiality into the generalized category of "equipment". Eventually, all objects treated in such a way vanish into what Heidegger terms their "readiness-to-hand": a category of deeply intimate perception that coats them in successive layers of familiarity until they are virtually indistinguishable from ourselves. It is crucial for Heidegger, and for our reading of Robbe-Grillet, that we understand these layers of human contact as remaining—whether they are actively in use, or resting on the shelf. Robbe-Grillet's phenomenology lacks this concept, and only offers the binary states of an object that is in use, and an object that is not; the "readiness" of Heidegger's objects short-circuits this tidily binaristic model and implies that objects may indeed have an orientation towards *us*.

Robbe-Grillet wants to maintain an avenue of access to the material world and is willing to radically simplify the nature of objects in order to do so. His vision of the new novelist is someone who "does not thereby refuse all contact with the world", but "consents on the contrary to utilize it for material ends"—as though using an object for material ends, rather than metaphysical ones, will protect it from contamination by the human referent. "A utensil, as a utensil, never possesses 'depth'", he asserts; "a utensil is entirely form and matter—and purpose".¹⁵ This troublesome final element is left unquestioned.

Robbe-Grillet's habitual orientation towards the inanimate and non-human treats objects as fundamentally static and passive, as props and furnishings that are exploitable

for literary effect. These objects, furthermore, are viewed as external to the human subject, with no cross-contamination occurring between the human and non-human. As such, he suggests, one may “dip into” contact with the unsignifying world, and then retreat, unscathed, as though one merely picked up a tool, used it, and then returned it to the bench.

There is, however, no such thing as a safe and non-contaminating relation with the object world; indeed, Robbe-Grillet’s own exemplary novel will soon make this clear. *La Jalousie* shows us, against its own intentions, that we cannot prophylactically bracket objects off in such a way, especially once we contaminate their materiality with our intention. If we familiarize ourselves with a particular curve of the stone which fits our fingers, or with a rough texture that allows our grip, those elements of its materiality will signal our relation even after we have put the object down. It will bear the traces of our interference like a visible handprint upon its surface.

Furthermore, this contamination is a two-way process. To borrow Bill Brown’s phrasing of object-oriented ontologies (Brown 2001), Robbe-Grillet seems to only consider the ways in which objects serve “constitutive” roles in the formation of human subjectivity, and not how objects may disrupt such constitution.¹⁶ His is an object orientation without threat, without the possibility that objects may refuse their domestication as “utensils” and rise up to disrupt our easy relation. For it is also the case that, even when the stone or hammer is in use, it still harbors an alien quotient that escapes sublimation. The communion between subject and object is never perfectly harmonious; objects refuse to stay wholly transparent and reducible to the epistemological surface of their use value. The hammer’s handle splinters and cuts our hand; the stone crumbles against the stake and exposes a crystalline geode at its center. There is something inside of objects that evades capture.

Accepting this autonomy seems particularly difficult. Robbe-Grillet’s object-oriented project is complicated by, on the one hand, his understanding of the object-world as a primarily visual phenomenon, and on the other, his instrumentalizing of objects, his over-inscribing of their passivity, and their subordination to active human subjects.

It is crucial that we view these two issues as linked. Robbe-Grillet’s methodological fetish of visual description serves to keep objects at a distance, and, as a result, the vibrancy of the object-world is so often reduced to a banal science of delineation and measurement. Certainly objects are not only their size or position; surely they cannot be accounted for in their entirety in such an easy manner, and with such ready-to-hand tools. In Brown’s language, such an instrumental bias transforms dynamic, agential “things” into inert objects. Put otherwise, the aesthetic program of Robbe-Grillet’s *nouveau roman* looks out on the material world, and sees simply a storeroom of props.

What Robbe-Grillet has shown, perhaps inadvertently, is that objects only reveal their autonomy when they stop working for us, when they become opaque. The object becomes one—or, to use Brown’s terminology, it becomes not an object, but a *thing*—when it begins to obstruct, when in the course of its regular use, it becomes errant, defamiliarized, and alien. Yet this going astray of objects is a problem for the *nouveau roman*, whose entire literary aesthetic is based on the ordered marshalling of objects into an impressive parade. The “jealousy” of *La Jalousie* is, as Zahi Zalloua cannily puts it, a matter of “dispossession”; the novel’s anxiety is that its “objectivizing consciousness [might] fail to contain the objects that fall within its horizon of intelligibility”.¹⁷ The threat of unintelligibility triggers a possessive reflex that seeks to mitigate the waywardness of the “thing”, to reintegrate it under the system of control.

That Robbe-Grillet is not wholly successful in this reintegration of the troublesome object does not rid the impulse of its problematic content. It is no coincidence that *La Jalousie* is the product of colonialism, both in its narrative and in the provenance of the narrative material itself. The furnishing of the novel’s environment was the result of a kind of fieldwork, conducted on site in the Caribbean by Robbe-Grillet during his previous career as an agronomist. The novel is, in this manner, wed to French colonial rule, tied intimately to an intervention of state power which, like the *nouveau roman*, found much use in the imposition of a rationalizing visual regime.

The baggage of Robbe-Grillet's object-orientation is, of course, signaled from the first page of the novel by the objects among which the narration orients itself. Robbe-Grillet's privileged things are the planes and surfaces of colonial architecture: fixed objects of imported infrastructure around which he can pivot, adjusting his narrative vantage point as though he were some manner of three-dimensional scanning device. His object-orientation is resolutely optical and marked by a firm control; these objects are deployed on a grid, regulated by a strict, Cartesian geometry, and—most importantly—they are securely fixed to the ground. Robbe-Grillet's novels give us the drone's-eye-view of architectural phenomena, and never so much as in *La Jalousie*, whose narrator obeys one of the prime directives of paranoia: never make contact, but record, record, record. The narration clings to the surface of the built environment, obsesses over the manner in which these surfaces might impede surveillance, all the while giving it a rich field of play, full of varieties of transparency and opacity, of passage and blockage. Such obstruction, however, remains in a sense fantastical, imaginary, and staged in the register of the disembodied image; such objects are made to stand still.

This is to underestimate the unruliness of objects. Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* is at its most engaging when it inadvertently breaks from its program, its objects drifting out of narrative control and into strange states of distortion and agency; its material world is at its most vibrant when there is a disruption of the smooth visual order, and the rushing-in of other sense modalities.

Robbe-Grillet's object orientation is one that operates at a distance; it is as anti-interventionist and detached as his novel's neurotic voyeur. How could the objects of *La Jalousie*, given the sanitizing and abstracting operation of their narrator, find an opportunity to act out, to work against the smooth ordering of their master? How could obstruction figure at such a remove? What troubles this order is proximity—when objects do not respect this distance, but instead break through the abstracting screen of visual description and, at last, make contact.

3. Troublesome Things

The metaphor of the hammer that Robbe-Grillet deploys in the theorizing of his object orientation suggests that such a relation plays out on an intimately embodied scale, and along the registers of touching, grasping, and feeling; this is rarely the case. Things are not literally ready-to-hand in *La Jalousie*, but are instead “ready-to-eye”. Critics of the *nouveau roman* gave the movement the nickname of “école du regard”, the school of the gaze; Robbe-Grillet's fanatical adherence to the optical apparatus, and his confidence in the fidelity of that instrument, does much to warrant such a classification.¹⁸ This assertion of the visual regime is not only positive, but is also buttressed by a staunch negation of other senses: Robbe-Grillet's critique of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* makes much of the author's reliance on touch, that most “intimate” of senses, to generate its shocks of alienation.¹⁹ We see a similar mockery of touch in *La Jalousie* itself: the despised interloper Franck cannot sit down onto a chair without oafishly exclaiming, “That feels good!” Touching, and the close proximity that it requires, are suspect; the true avant-garde novelist, it seems, would reject such intimacies and operate solely—and, I will argue, *safely*—at a distance. This repression of tactility from Robbe-Grillet's novel has a particularly explosive outcome: when the objects of *La Jalousie* do cross over from the register of sight to that of touch, the results are catastrophic.

The most troublesome moment in *La Jalousie*, if its critical reception is any indication, is a recurring scene in which a centipede is crushed against a wall. This scene is the focal point of much scholarly work of the novel—from Bruce Morrisette's psychological analysis in *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (1963) to Jacques Leenhardt's radical and post-colonial interpretation of the novel in *Lecture politique du roman: La jalousie d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Leenhardt 1973). As a moment of heightened tension—and, as one of the novel's few passages which could be said to contain anything resembling “action”—the crushing of the centipede stands out in the numbing textual flow of *La Jalousie*, and demands our readerly and critical attention.

The scene takes place inside the plantation house, where the narrator, his wife A . . . , and, as always, Franck, have gathered for dinner. In the middle of the meal, A . . . spots a centipede that has climbed up one of the walls, and cries out in disgust; Franck then stands up, and, with his dinner napkin, squashes the insect against the wall. It falls to the floor, and he continues his attack, stomping the centipede with his feet, while A . . . looks on, clutching the tablecloth. The pest dispatched, Franck returns to his seat, and the dinner continues.

Much can be taken from the relational aspect of this scene—the quadrangle of attraction and repulsion between the invisible narrator, the heroic Franck, the disgusted yet captivated A . . . , and the unfortunate centipede. This rare moment of interpersonal complexity offers a promising interpretative foothold, and as such features largely in much of the scholarly work conducted on the novel. The dynamics of power and control that play out in the crushing of the insect are at the center of Bruce Morrisette’s analysis of *La Jalousie*, an interpretation so canonically well-seated as to be included as a preface in many of the novel’s English publications. Here, we find this disruptive scene read as the unequivocal focal point of the novel:

The scene of the crushing of the centipede against the wall, which is repeated at crucial moments in significant variants throughout the novel, forming the emotional center of the novel, raises once more the question of symbolism. The centipede incident grows in the narrator’s mind (and in ours), taking on monstrous proportions full of erotic meaning.²⁰

The crushing of the centipede becomes, in this account, an incident of symbolic castration over which the narrator obsesses. The scene is placed “at the center of his complex, where it persists as the very image of the possible sexual relations between his wife and Franck”—a hermeneutical kernel that is mirrored by Morrisette’s own reading from a central absence.²¹ The crushing of the centipede could stand in the narrator’s mind as evidence for marital infidelity, as it indexes this betrayal in a metaphorical fashion: because, if one accepts the reality of the affair, such a symbol would perfectly fit the allegorical pattern. This is paranoiac logic folded backwards onto itself, and is, as such, a compelling interpretation of the scene, especially given Morrisette’s framing of the novel as a work of psychological realism. The distortions of the textual surface of *La Jalousie* are thereby understood as the product of a pathologically jealous mind, a subjectivity that contaminates the ostensibly objective prose with enlargements, hallucinations, and neurotic wish-fulfillment.

My reading of this scene will diverge from such allegorical or psychological interpretations of *La Jalousie* and attempt instead to account for how this repeating image of unusual drama and affective charge might function within the object-world of the novel itself. This moment does seem, whether or not imbued with a “monstrous” eroticism, to be nonetheless suffused with a threatening tactility that is absent from the rest of the text. The novel’s negotiation of this impinging tactility—the reflexes by which it attempts to direct this sensory and affective surplus into safer channels—reveals much about the contours, and limits, of the *nouveau roman*’s orientation towards objects.

The centipede first appears as an image. One of the effects of the novel’s reordering and fragmenting of chronology is that, in many cases, its effects precede their causes; it is in such a way that we are introduced to the centipede, which has already vanished and been replaced by its trace, its stain:

The details of this stain have to be seen from quite close range, turning toward the pantry door, if its origin is to be distinguished. The image of the squashed centipede then appears not as a whole, but composed of fragments distinct enough to leave no doubt. Several pieces of the body or its appendages are outlined without any blurring, and remain reproduced with the fidelity of an anatomical drawing: one of the antennae, two curved mandibles, the head and the first joint, half of the second, three large legs. Then come the other parts, less

precise: sections of legs and the partial form of a body convulsed into a question mark.²²

This is a highly stable and ruly representation: the live and mobile insect is flattened into an image, an “anatomical drawing”, whose components can be enumerated and placed within a hierarchy. The stain left on the wall by the centipede is easily subsumed to an item of visual knowledge. Further encounters with the centipede, however, work against this reduction to flat optics. When the centipede appears the second time, its entrance is announced with an exclamation:

“A centipede!” she says in a more restrained voice, in the silence that has just fallen.

Franck looks up again. Following the direction of A . . . ’s motionless gaze, he turns his head to the other side, towards his right. On the light-colored paint of the partition opposite A . . . , a common *Scutigera* of average size (about as long as a finger) has appeared, easily seen despite the dim light. It is not moving, for the moment, but the orientation of its body indicates a path which cuts across the panel diagonally: coming from the baseboard on the hallway side and heading toward the corner of the ceiling. The creature is easy to identify thanks to the development of its legs, especially on the posterior portion. On closer examination the swaying movement of the antennae at the other end can be discerned [. . .]²³

This second iteration of the centipede, too, yields to a visual order. It is enveloped in the logic of looking: we follow, as though in a cinematic pan, Franck’s field of vision as he glances up at A . . . , and then follows along the direction of her “motionless gaze” until the centipede enters the frame. It can be “easily seen”, as it is stationary, and the walls, though in shadow, are painted white; it is “easy to identify”, due to its distinctive shape; and, upon “closer examination”, the slight motion of its antennae “can be discerned”. This language of certainty and ease strips the insect of its threatening alterity and renders it an immobile and stable object, yet another piece of furniture to be catalogued. That is, until someone approaches the insect:

Franck, who has said nothing, is looking at A . . . again. Then he stands up, noiselessly, holding his napkin in his hand. He wads it into a ball and approaches the wall. A . . . seems to be breathing a little faster, but this may be an illusion. Her left hand gradually closes over her knife. The delicate antennae accelerate their alternate swaying.

At once, there is a shift in the tone of the narration. First, the sound drops out: Franck “has said nothing”, and when he gets up, he does so silently. Gone, too, is the element of detailed visual description that dominated the previous paragraph: it is hard to imagine a sentence more stripped of adjectival description, rendered in more bare and physical terms, than “He wads it into a ball and approaches the wall”. The language of intellection and extrapolation, with, which by the “orientation” of the centipede, we are able to discern its intended diagonal path from floor to ceiling, has been replaced by a different kind of narration, one held in a rapt and tense spectatorship that is wholly confined to the present tense. Actions are related, not things.

What is most crucial in this scene, however, is the sudden rushing-in of imagery relating to touch. Franck holds his napkin in his hand, and then crumples it “into a ball”, while A . . . ’s hand grips the handle of her knife. The centipede, too, joins this sudden intensification of tactility, probing the air with its antennae in an increasingly rapid manner. This conflagration of touching and feeling reaches its fever pitch at the climax of the scene:

Suddenly, the creature hunches its body and begins descending diagonally toward the ground as fast as its long legs can go, while the wadded napkin falls on it, faster still.

The hand with the tapering fingers has clenched around the knife handle; but the features of the face have lost none of their rigidity. Franck lifts the napkin

away from the wall and with his foot continues to squash something on the tiles, against the baseboard.²⁴

The description sanitizes as best it can the repulsive aspects of the unfolding events. The “wadded napkin” descends upon the centipede as though it were falling on its own, and not clutched by a human hand; when the insect falls to the floor, it falls too out of the category of “the creature” and into the less threatening and less squeamish status of a “thing”. As soon as we make contact with the centipede, it effectively vanishes, disappearing from under the napkin like in a magic trick. This concealing of the tactile revulsion of the action itself—the disgust of crushing the hunching body of a tropical centipede with a napkin held between one’s fingers—is executed by a hurried retraction into the safe register of the visual. We do not see the insect as it is crushed underneath the soles of Franck’s shoes; the narration fixates instead on the wall, where the now vanished centipede has left its trace. “About a yard higher”, above the baseboard, where the centipede is still at this moment being squashed, “the paint is marked with a dark shape, a tiny arc twisted into a question mark, blurred on one side, in places surrounded by more tenuous signs”.²⁵ The distancing logic of the novel holds: the stain of the centipede is easier on the eyes, and stomach, than the centipede itself. It is as though there is an overloading of tactile sensory input, and, in a reflex of self-preservation, the narrative system resets. The scene ends with the description of the insect’s trace upon the wall, a faint and abstracted stain “from which A . . . has still not taken her eyes”.²⁶

In this way, A . . . models for us the novel’s optical reflex, its reaction when confronting objects that short circuit its sensory wiring. This encounter is truly obstructive, and can only be approached edgewise, peripherally, through a distanced optics that bends asymptotically away from the thing itself. There is little room in the cool geometrical abstraction of Robbe-Grillet’s *nouveau roman* for a sticky, squishy, and unmanageable embodiment; such an alien presence can only be met with resistance—and, alongside this resistance, a disoriented and enthralled captivation, a short-circuiting of sensory pathways.

The centipede implants within this novel of vision a charge of radical tactility. Its name—which, in French, is “mille-pattes”—indexes a surplus of embodiment that is as numerical as it is visceral. A creature with a “thousand” feet, with so many appendages that we cannot count them, is the calculatory *nouveau roman*’s worst nightmare. This is especially the case considering the function of such appendages: a centipede is, it seems, all feelers—it is a creature of pure touch, pure tactile proprioception. Its limbs are always in motion, even when it is standing still, ever-active in their enterprise of feeling and sensing. Confronted with such a tactile and unfixed “thing”, the narration of *La Jalousie* stumbles, repeats, becomes stuck; we feel, in its recalibrations and rephrasings, the overheating of its “orbiting module”.

La Jalousie contains much depiction of texture—the crackling paint on a balustrade, the braiding of hair, even the distortions and imperfections of window panes—but until this point, texture has remained visual. What the scene of the crushed centipede shows is the activation of surface along a different sensory register. The dead and crushed body of the centipede carries a tactility in excess of its image, and this tactility contaminates whatever it touches.

The centipede is grotesquely amorphous, eluding a stable description; in the first iteration, the insect’s body is a mere two inches long,²⁷ but by the final telling, it has swollen to the size of a dinner plate.²⁸ As an animal, it occupies a liminal role between human and object, a divide that it is always, and often literally, traversing. If the other critters of *La Jalousie* move about along orderly trajectories—such as the small flying insects that revolve around a lamp placed on the veranda, or the unseen animal whose cry is heard as it circles the house—this creature’s movements are chaotic and disorderly. The centipede crosses liminal spaces quickly and easily, moving between the planes of Robbe-Grillet’s architecture: at one moment, it is on the floor; then, it is across the wall, heading towards the ceiling, or, possibly, towards us. This is, indeed, precisely the content of our revulsion towards insects, our orientation away from them: we are afraid that they will

touch us, or that we will have to touch them. We can barely manage the centipede as an optical phenomenon; that it may become a tactile experience is too much to bear. It is more tolerable, as both the narrator and A . . . know, to simply look away.

The stain saves us from having to look at the pulverized body of the centipede itself; it is a kind of shadow, a secondary phenomenon, scrubbed free of the troubling excess of embodiment and tactility. In the stain, we see the object made into an image, the disturbing and excessive “thing” rendered flat, inert, and manageable. Yet, the stain also calls into doubt the smooth mechanics of surface that buttress the novel’s worldview. If the crushed body of the centipede is able to leave a stain upon the wall, this trace is not, cannot be, simply visual. If it were, it would not be a stain. A purely optical register lacks the material texture that allows such marking: these avenues between surface and depth, the “micro-topology” of a roughened or porous surface, belong not to vision but to touch.

At the novel’s midway point, the centipede is crushed yet again, and, while again the actual impact of the crumpled napkin is occluded, we are given a startlingly direct view of the insect itself:

Suddenly the anterior part of the body begins to move, executing a rotation which curves the dark line towards the lower part of the wall. And immediately, without having time to go any further, the creature falls onto the tiles, still twisting and curling up its long legs while its mandibles rapidly open and close around its mouth in a quivering reflex.

Ten seconds later, it is nothing more than a reddish pulp in which are mingled the debris of unrecognizable sections.²⁹

The violence is, again, subtracted from the scene, but its remains are rendered with revolting clarity. If our first encounter with the centipede shows us the discrete and abstracted stain left by its crushed body on the smooth, whitewashed wall, now we see the marking implemented: the “reddish pulp” of the pulverized insect, an uneven mash of lymphatic juice, and bits of crushed leg and antennae. The centipede’s ability to leave a trace is entirely dependent on the wetness, the stickiness, of this residue. It can only make an image *because it is not one*. At the same time, this image-production is dependent on the willingness of the wall to serve as a substrate, the readiness with which its texture absorbs and holds the pigment. In the following scene, the narrator attempts to remove the stain of the centipede from the wall, through the use of an eraser—as though the centipede’s remnants were a piece of writing, a graphical mark to be effaced. Yet, while the rubber eraser is able to dislodge the larger pieces of insect stuck to the wall, it is unable to remove the stain itself. It “seems indelible”, having “no relief, none of the thickness of a dried stain which would come off if scratched at with a fingernail”; it has permeated the finish itself, “like brown ink impregnating the surface layer of paint”.³⁰

The issue posed by the stain’s stubbornness in clinging to the wall, its penetration of the whitewash, is more than simply practical. If the “brown ink” of the crushed centipede is able to penetrate the wall, surfaces must, then, be permeable—and a permeable surface is a problem. Just as the “dirty” window complicates the ordering of visual logic, the stained wall shows that there are active, if obscured, pathways that short-circuit surface and depth. What if what we think of as the discrete space between the apparent and the hidden was, in fact, continuous? How would we think of surface differently if it were imagined not in a dialectical opposition to depth, but instead as taking part in a multivalent feedback loop?

At the moment in which the centipede is crushed against the wall, the outermost surface of this plane and the sleeping matter of its depth are thrown into a new, compromising relation, by which the dominion of each is gravely challenged. In trying to abolish the troublesome stain, the narrator shaves at the wall with a razor blade. This excavation reveals, behind the stained paint, a rawer, “paler” layer: a new surface, softer and rougher than the first, more pocked and striated, and, thus, even more permeable than before.³¹ If a surface itself has “depth”, how could we presume, like Robbe-Grillet, to patrol the limits of surface? And, furthermore, if what we think of as depth is instead an infinite series

of nested surfaces, according to what conceptual value do we maintain the category of “depth” at all?

If Robbe-Grillet’s *nouveau roman* was meant as an attack on the “mythic depths” of past literature, and a replacement of these depths with surface, this scene, and its telltale stain show the insufficiency of such a binary in the first place. What the staining of the wall shows is that even the most meticulously prepared and safely guarded surface is still shot through with depth—that there is, in the seemingly flat planes of this visual architecture, a whole universe of texture. To think of surface in this way is to replace the binary of surface and depth with a gradient, a molecular topography of matter, of peaks and valleys of “micro-surface” and “micro-depth”. It is this texture to which the stain adheres, and in adhering, reveals—for if this wall were simply surface, the stain would not hold.

Robbe-Grillet’s novel offers us edgewise glimpses at the complex channels by which materiality circulates, the short-circuits between the apparently “manifest” surface and the allegedly “latent” depth, and it does so despite a rigid, depth-abolishing fixation on surface, an insistence on the absolutely superficial. The truly revolutionary moments in *La Jalousie* come “under cover”, as it were, working against the novel’s strict phenomenological program. If this is a novel about what surfaces look like, we are nonetheless able to access a fleeting sense of what surfaces might feel like, and what this textural register might teach us. It is as though the centipede, crushed against the wall, activates this surface as more than simply visual: it creates a “portal” through the hollow geometry of the visual order, into the amorphous, full, and non-Euclidean register of touch. It is up to us to pass through this portal, and to follow this sensation where it leads.

The *nouveau roman* seeks to invert the evaluative hierarchy of surface and depth, but perhaps the more radical move is not simply to privilege one term over another but to instead do away with this binary structure altogether. One must stop thinking in terms of fixed states and start thinking about processes; one must replace stasis with a circulatory movement of matter.

Short-circuits such as these are a key term in the affect theory of Brian Massumi, whose *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Massumi 2002) challenges the inability of contemporary theory to contend with such movement. Massumi argues that our inherited hermeneutic is incompatible with motion, instead conceiving of all processes as an enumeration of fixed states. Nature and culture, subject and object—these artificial binaries petrify what is in fact a fluid, omnidirectional process. This shuttling still has its polar extremes, but Massumi insists that we take these twinned terms “not as binary oppositions or contradictions, but as resonating levels”, a model of short-circuiting that echoes closely Bill Brown’s conception of the “thing”.³² Just as the object is neither wholly familiar nor wholly alien, but instead both at once, Massumi’s oscillating process “takes place on both levels—and between both levels, as they resonate together”, in a feedbacking whose intensity is that of pure chaotic cross-contamination.³³ Traditional hermeneutics speak of points on a matrix of hermetically isolated states; Massumi instead speaks of intensities that are divided “by dynamic thresholds rather than by boundaries”, zones that are defined not by their exclusions but by their overlapping all-at-once-ness.³⁴ If *Parables for the Virtual* uses this approach to enrich the theory of affects, we may, too, use it to provide a much more productive manner of reading an object’s materiality. By restaging this circulatory model along the contours of object orientation, we are able to account for a richness absent from the binaristic view of surface and depth, obstruction and passage, attraction and repulsion.

This richness is, of course, revealed by touch: to come into physical contact with an object is to understand the smoothness of surface as an illusion—as, in Brown’s words, nothing more than a “swarm of electrons”.³⁵ Coursing through every apparently smooth surface is a turbulent spectrum of movement, sensation, and texture. To put forth this sense of texture and gradient as a critical paradigm troubles more effectively the cult of depth, and does so without simply establishing a cult of surface. To attempt to look straight through the object’s surface in search of its hidden depths is no more negligent an object

orientation than to fetishize the light bouncing off of its outermost layers; if both are a kind of optical hermeneutics, then the way forward is to reject optics as the base unit of interpretation.

It is to the developing of this more complicated and complicating sense of surface that further work on the *nouveau roman*, and other object-oriented literatures, must dedicate itself—in order to work towards a critical model which is capable of maintaining a constant and vital proximity to the texture of events, of cultivating a sense of implication, of urgency, and of the risk that comes with getting close enough to touch and be touched.

4. Towards Touching

What are the contours of an object-orientation that is able to contact things in this way? It would not be a system of hard-edged, geometrical forms, but one that welcomes the amorphous, the messy, and the indistinct. It would not maintain a cool, sanitary divide, but would instead strive towards an aesthetic of proximity, implication, and embodiment. It would replace the logic of critical distance with the logic of touch. This aesthetic theory would be vigorously opposed to the visual chauvinism of the *nouveau roman*; indeed, it would spring from the failures and ruptures of this model. Such an object-orientation would adhere to the cracks and fissures of the “objective” and would find in these moments of inconsistency not destruction, but reparation. Outside the narrow capacity of aesthetics of mastery and control, such crises may be productive rather than simply disruptive; for in welcoming the inherent risk of any too-close object orientation, such disorientation may be figured not as a threat to constitution but as a *constitutive threat*. This disruption would, then, be made generative.

How would obstructions figure under this model? It is important to avoid yet another provocative yet simplistic inversion, in which we announce the productivity of the unproductive. Co-opting the resistance of “things” in this way is yet another fantasy of mastery. Objects must instead be allowed to go astray, to work against our constructions, to obstruct our efforts at meaning-making; it is imperative that things continue to slip out of our grasp. By relinquishing our desire for control, we could then learn to fumble with objects more “feelingly”, with greater attention to the texture of this encounter. Obstruction and frustration experienced with such intimate closeness might become not a deadlock, but instead something of a pedagogical event—a contact which might leave a positive trace.

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Notes

¹ (Robbe-Grillet 1965a) Alain Robbe-Grillet, “A Future for the Novel”, *For A New Novel*. p. 17.

² Ibid., p. 17.

³ Ibid., 19.

⁴ See note 1 above.

⁵ (Robbe-Grillet 1965c) Alain Robbe-Grillet, “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy”, p. 74.

⁶ Peter Brooks, “A La Carte”, *Partisan Review*, pp. 129–30.

⁷ See note 5 above.

⁸ (Robbe-Grillet 1965b) Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, p. 17.

⁹ For a sense of Robbe-Grillet’s disdain of “engaged” social realism, see “On Several Obsolete Notions”, collected in *For A New Novel*, in particular the critique of Sartre under the heading “Committment”.

¹⁰ See note 1 above.

¹¹ (Robbe-Grillet 1965c) Alain Robbe-Grillet, “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy”, p. 59.

- 12 The German phrase is “das Zeug”, which, as translators John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson note, could also be understood as “implement, instrument, or tool”. (See following footnote for citation.)
- 13 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. p. 98.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid., p. 58.
- 16 Bill Brown, “Thing Theory”, p. 6.
- 17 (Zalloua 2008) Zalloua, p. 23.
- 18 Arthur Babcock, *The New Novel in France*, p. 14.
- 19 (Robbe-Grillet 1965b) Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, p. 63.
- 20 (Morrisette 1965) Bruce Morrisette, “Surfaces and Structures in Robbe-Grillet’s Novels”, collected in *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy & In the Labyrinth*. p. 8.
- 21 (Morrisette 1975) Bruce Morrisette, *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet*, p. 146.
- 22 (Robbe-Grillet 1965b) Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, p. 62.
- 23 Ibid., p. 64.
- 24 See note 14 above.
- 25 See note 14 above.
- 26 See note 14 above.
- 27 (Robbe-Grillet 1965b) Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, p. 96.
- 28 Ibid., p. 112.
- 29 Ibid., p. 96.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 96–97.
- 31 Ibid., p. 97.
- 32 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, p. 33.
- 33 See note 14 above.
- 34 Ibid., p. 34.
- 35 Brown, “Thing Theory”, p. 6.

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