

## Object-Oriented Discussions in Philosophy and Literature: A New Narratology?

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### English Abstract:

In their book, Marie-Laure Ryan and Tang Weisheng aim to lay the foundation for a new narratological approach for the use and representation of objects in narrative, exploring object as a basic category of narrative and the theoretical function of objects in narrative. To do so, they draw on the premises of what they summarize as “new object philosophy” that focuses on the agency of objects. The central goal of the book is to reconceptualize the object as a core concept of narrative theory and to lay the foundation for a broad new field of research.

Objekt-Orientierte Diskussionen in der Philosophie und Literatur. Eine neue Narratologie?

### Abstract:

Marie-Laure Ryan und Tang Weisheng präsentieren einen neuen narratologischen Ansatz zur Verwendung und Repräsentation von Objekten in Erzählungen. Dazu postulieren sie das Objekt als narratologische Grundkategorie neu und entwickeln eine Reihe von theoretischen Funktionen von Objekten in der Erzählung. Für ihre Analyse stützen sie sich auf philosophische Prämissen zur Handlungsfähigkeit von Objekten, aus was sie als „Neue Objekt Philosophie“ zusammenfassen. Ihr Ziel ist es, das Objekt als zentrales Konzept der Erzähltheorie neu zu definieren und den Grundstein für ein neues Forschungsfeld zu legen.

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The object has played a central role in materialist traditions, such as phenomenological approaches that ask how the subject accesses the world through objects, or, in Marxist traditions, by approaching the object as a commodity. In recent years, the so-called nonhuman turn has brought up a new paradigm in object philosophy. A core premise of all theories under the umbrella of the nonhuman turn is that objects are independent of and ontologically equal to humans. Marie-Laure Ryan and Tang Weisheng connect to this idea and take it as a premise for their book *Object-Oriented Narratology* (following OON). The title alludes to object-oriented programming (a type of programming that organizes its software around objects) and object-oriented ontology (following OOO). In their book, the authors aim to address the research gap on the use, representation and functions of objects in narrative with a new narratological approach to objects as a “general semantic component of narrative, comparable to character, setting and sequence” (p. 208).

In the introduction, the authors provide an overview of materialist traditions in the context of the current so-called material turn. Ryan and Weisheng discuss the two dominant movements of the 20th century and a new paradigm regarding questions of materialism: the phenomenological/ontological, the Marxist/sociological/semiotic, and most recently what they summarize as “new object philosophy” (p. 12). When discussing ontology, the authors connect it to phenomenology, discussing primarily Heideggerian and Husserlian traditions. They do not address other schools of ontology, like physicalism, which is one of the dominant paradigms in ontology in analytic philosophy. Phenomenological approaches/new object philosophy are often juxtaposed with physicalist theories and are in tension between continental and analytic philosophy. However, Ryan and Weisheng do not state that they

focus on continental traditions of materialism, which, I would argue, makes the absence of physicalism, specifically, an oversight.

In chapters 1 and 2, the authors develop a theoretical foundation for their OON by addressing two fundamental questions: how objects are represented with the mimetic function, and what role objects play in narrative meaning-making with the thematic, strategic, and structural functions. The thematic function describes how objects in a text can acquire new meanings that lie outside their common properties (p. 24). The strategic function refers to the object's role in the plot, and the structural function (which can be considered a type of strategic function) is concerned with how objects can connect "relatively autonomous episodes" (p. 25). Ryan and Weisheng's functions are useful in the sense that they are operational and can generate new knowledge: they are overall specific enough to describe something distinctly and broad enough to be expanded. Nevertheless, their concept of the object remains somewhat unclear, as they use different meanings of object in the chapters without always making this explicit. In the introduction, they state that they are primarily concerned with "human-scale objects" (p. 22), but the authors also include animals and natural objects in several chapters with different reasoning. For example, it is not clear why Lady Madeline's reanimated corpse in *The Fall of the House of Usher* is considered an object and a personification of "the evil power of things" (p. 90), but body parts such as hair are not considered objects in a close reading of a passage in *Madame Bovary* (p. 38). A distinction between different meanings of object in narrative would have made it clearer to the reader which concept of object each chapter was dealing with.

In chapters 3–9, the authors apply their theoretical concepts in combination with other narratological concepts and showcase the variety of functions that objects can have in narrative meaning. Chapters 3 and 4 present two different approaches to discussing the tension between otherness and the interwovenness of the human and the nonhuman. In chapter 3, they consider the philosophical concept of flat ontology in relation to Rick Bass's environmentally themed stories that negotiate and blur the human/nonhuman animal divide. Ryan and Weisheng argue that "attempts at using nonhuman perspectives for de-anthropocentric purposes easily turn out to be new kinds of anthropocentrism in disguise" (p.

75), providing a perspective that has so far been underexplored in research. In chapter 4, on the other hand, the authors analyze how Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* evokes an atmosphere of horror by emphasizing the "withdrawn" (p. 88) character of objects, realized in their analysis by the combination of Gothic aesthetics with "thing power," connecting to Jane Bennett's concept of vibrant matter, among others (p. 89).

Chapters 5–7 are mostly descriptive, using various case studies such as Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* to examine how material objects shape human experience and attitudes towards the world. While the authors state that these chapters are "largely free of philosophical influence" (p. 23), I would disagree with this assessment. Among other things, the chapters emphasize how the agency of objects is negotiated in the different case studies (p. 124; p. 137), and they take Jean-Paul Sartre's *Le Nausée* as a case study and connect the analysis to Heidegger (p. 134).

The final two chapters broaden the scope of their work by exploring areas beyond traditional Western categories of narrative and notions of the material object. In chapter 8, Ryan and Weisheng describe the role of objects in classical Chinese literature. They discuss three Chinese traditions that are concerned with thinking and writing about things: Bo Wu ("literally, recording of strange things" (p. 28)), Gan Wu ("literally, feeling with things" (p. 28)), and Guan Wu ("literally, looking for thingness in things" (p. 28)). Connecting these traditions with ideas of new object philosophy, they argue for the shortcomings of narratological categories rooted in Western literature. Chapter 9 is concerned with real-world objects and how they can be agents of storytelling, expanding therefore towards a multimodal dimension of OON. In their case study of *Important Artefacts* by Leanne Shapton, Ryan and Weisheng analyze in what ways objects can provide information about characters and contribute to the narrative. In the conclusion, they thoroughly situate their work within current narratological research. Ryan and Weisheng distinguish between formal, methodological, ideological, and phenomenological approaches in contemporary narrative theory, and make the interesting point that OON "does not fit into any of these categories" (p. 208), which poses questions about the current discourse in narratological research and the constitution of the field.

Looking at the chapters and how they fit the objective of the authors, I noticed some problems with the (philosophical) premises of the book, especially with regard to how OON relates to new object philosophy. The authors emphasize that OON is not “chained to any particular philosophy” (p. 210), which I would disagree with. They note that new object philosophy opens new perspectives on the narrative functions of objects, on which they subsequently build their theoretical framework (p. 23). Their framework is therefore rooted in premises of new object philosophy. They further accept the premises of Graham’s OOO for the real world, distinguishing between narrative objects as highly dependent on humans and real objects as autonomous (p. 210). The interwovenness of OON and premises of new object philosophy are also evident in the analysis of the case studies, which I already alluded to in my critique regarding the philosophical influence in chapters 5–7 and the missing physicalism. I would therefore argue that Ryan and Weisheng’s attempt to detach OON from a particular school of thought was not successful since even though they do not explicitly address new object philosophy, their theoretical framework and arguments are still built on its premises. The book would have made a stronger case if it had worked with its philosophical foundations rather than against them.

Overall, *Object-Oriented Narratology* has great potential, but like all new (foundational) research, it has some shortcomings. The book presents innovative ideas and sketches the broad outlines of a new field of study with a diverse range of case studies. They broaden the explanatory scope of their discussions by looking beyond Western literature to classical Chinese literature, balancing the discussion of the recognition of different literary traditions and structural similarities. Ryan and Weisheng make a compelling case for a new approach to objects in narratology and position themselves critically and effectively within current strands of narratological approaches, demonstrating the potential for future research on objects in narrative.