Object Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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The Coldness of Forgetting: OOO in Philosophy, Archaeology, and History

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Abstract: This article begins by addressing a critique of my book *Immaterialism* by the archaeologists Þóra Pétursdóttirr and Bjørnar Olsen in their 2018 article "Theory Adrift." As they see it, I restrict myself in *Immaterialism* to available historical documentation on the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and they wonder how my account might have changed if I had discussed more typical archaeological examples instead: wrecked and sunken ships, released ballast, deserted harbors, distributed goods, and derelict fortresses. In response, I argue that my account was not therefore non-archaeological, since ruins are the topic of archaeology only by accident: the real subject of the discipline is what Marshall McLuhan describes as "cold media," in the sense that they are low in information. McLuhan's distinction between hot and cold media is shown to be surprisingly analogous to Aristotle's difference between continua and discrete substances, and some consequences are drawn from this analogy.

Keywords: Object-Oriented Ontology; archaeology; Graham Harman; Dutch East India Company; Þóra Pétursdóttirr; Bjørnar Olsen; Marshall McLuhan; hot and cold media; Bruno Latour; Actor-Network Theory

In my book *Immaterialism*, I tried to develop a way of applying Object-Oriented Ontology (hereafter "OOO") to social theory.[1] The example used in that book was the Dutch East India Company, often referred to by its Dutch abbreviation, VOC. In a recent article, the archaeologists Þóra Pétursdóttirr and Bjørnar Olsen have raised an issue about my analysis of the VOC that is worth addressing, since it bears on the central themes of my work.[2] What makes their critique even more interesting is that it finds indirect support in a blog post by my OOO colleague, Levi R. Bryant. Among his many other virtues, Bryant has often been called the most substantive online philosopher since the birth of the internet. In the blog post cited by Pétursdóttirr and Olsen, Bryant reflects on the choice of examples found in my work: "How about Harman? His favorite examples are fire, cotton, and hammers. How might these archetypal examples inform his entire conception of objects? Would that theory be different if one chose a flower or waves or a factory?"[3]

Now, Bryant seems only to be musing on the philosophical impact of my choosing certain examples rather than others, not suggesting that I selected them with strategic cunning in order to rig my analyses in a particular direction. He specifically mentions my frequent reference to "fire, cotton, and hammers." It is easy enough to explain why these examples in particular are mentioned so often in my writings. "Fire and cotton" refers to occasionalist thought in early Islam, where the example of fire burning cotton was often used to argue that in fact only God burns cotton, with any direct contact between fire and cotton serving merely as a pretext for divine intervention. With the frequent use of this example, I meant to register

1 Harman, *Immaterialism*.
2 Pétursdóttirr and Olsen, "Theory Adrift."
3 Bryant, "Examples"; Pétursdóttirr and Olsen, "Theory Adrift," 100.

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an intellectual debt to Cairo, where my early career was based As for my even earlier use of "hammers" as a frequent example, this comes –as Bryant knows– from my doctoral work on Martin Heidegger, who made hammers and broken hammers famous to philosophers through the showcase example early in his *Being and Time*.[4] As for the example of the Dutch East India Company –not mentioned by Bryant in his blog post, but of direct interest to Pétursdóttirr and Olsen– I explain in *Immaterialism* that this example was chosen due to Leibniz's mockery of it in his famous correspondence with the Jansenist theologian Antoine Arnauld.[5]

But irrespective of whether my examples were chosen randomly, circumstantially, or by devious personal fiat, Bryant's question is a good one: does a philosopher's choice of examples overdetermine a theory according to the specific features belonging to a particular case? In its broadest form, this question lies well beyond the scope of the present article. More relevant for our purposes here is the specific example that concerns Pétursdóttirr and Olsen professionally as archaeologists, which they formulate as follows:

> Harman… employs the 17th-century Dutch East India Company (VOC) as an example of an "object," in order to outline central notions and concepts of his philosophy. Based on an exclusively historical study of the VOC and its documented development during its period of operation (1602-1795), Harman constructs an object theory, or [a] OOO methodology, with claimed general relevance to the study of any object.[6]

One can already sense an impending complaint that something has been left out, and the authors are not slow in delivering it:

> How would an archaeological approach to the VOC, which obviously also included wrecked and sunken ships, released ballast, deserted harbors, distributed goods and derelict fortresses, have affected [Harman's] theory? Would a concern with these tactile components of the VOC, with abandoned and derelict things, not have led to a somewhat different conception of objects and object careers, then one based on written records of a well-functioning and networked "social" VOC?[7]

Their use of scare-quotes around "social" in this passage resonates with the first endnote of their article, which takes me to task for not defining what I mean by "social objects" as opposed to other kinds. If I understand correctly, they are implying that the unexplained reference to "social" objects in *Immaterialism* goes hand in hand with an "exclusively historical study" of the "documented" development of the VOC, and that this is somehow at odds with the alternative archaeological approach they propose.[8] In one respect, Pétursdóttirr and Olsen are right: *Immaterialism* was written with the aid of historical source books, and unfortunately I have still never visited Indonesia, Malaysia, or other locations that feature in the book. And while I have seen a number of relevant objects in museums in Amsterdam, the book could have been enriched by considering a greater number of extant physical artifacts, and by a prolonged study trip to southeast Asia, for which I did not have sufficient financial resources at the time.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that they are not quite right in associating history with documents, and archaeology with ruined or abandoned objects. Instead, I will claim that the difference between history and archaeology is one between high- and low-density information, with "information" defined here –in Marshall McLuhan's terms– as the visible content of any medium as opposed to its concealed background structure.[9] For this reason, my attempt in *Immaterialism* to interpret the VOC by casting aside most historical detail and identifying five or six "symbioses" that made the VOC what it is, is significantly closer to an archaeology than a history of the VOC.[10]

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4 Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Harman, *Tool-Being*; Harman, "Heidegger on Objects and Things"; Harman, "Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger."

5 Harman, *Immaterialism*, 36-37; Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 89.

6 Pétursdóttirr and Olsen, "Theory Adrift," 100-101.

7 Ibid. 101.

8 For further background on how this issue functions in archaeology, see Webmoor and Witmore, "Things Are Us!"

9 McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*.

10 Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*.

In fact, earlier this year I published an article entitled "Hyperobjects and Prehistory" that bears directly on the concerns raised by Pétursdóttirr and Olsen.[11] To summarize briefly, the article uses Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects" –objects massively distributed in space and time by contrast with the human scale– to reconsider the difference between history and archaeology.[12] One of my findings in that article is that archaeology's tendency to deal with ruined fragments of objects rather than well-preserved documents is more symptomatic than essential. While this recourse to fragmentary evidence is often taken to be a weakness of archaeology by contrast with history, in an important respect it ought to be regarded as a notable strength of the discipline. Namely, the more limited information typically available to archaeologists than to historians puts the former face to face with what Marshall McLuhan calls a "cold medium," a situation of relatively limited data.[13] While it is certainly true that a historian –or journalist– can tell us most of the details of a recent story like the early 1990s hunt for Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, and that an archaeologist by contrast is often left to make highly general statements about the relative order of appearance of fire, the wheel, bread, glass, and domesticated dogs, there is an important sense in which this works to archaeology's advantage.[14] For it places this discipline on the side of philosophy and the arts, in their shared concern with the general background conditions of existence as opposed to the sometimes irrelevant detail in which the historian has to avoid being drowned.

For these reasons, I claim that the difference between history and archaeology is less about the distinct character of documents and ruins than about the contrast between detailed accounts of actuality on one side and slowly changing general conditions on the other. More importantly for the present article, it is also possible to argue the converse: that any inquiry into the slowly changing general conditions of a situation is itself archaeological rather than historical in character. But is this not already the case with OOO's use of Margulis's symbiosis theory to "cool down" the gradually unfolding historical detail of the VOC into a mere half-dozen or so moments of especial significance for the object? This is exactly why I explicitly denied in *Immaterialism* that the book aspired to be a "history," preferring instead to call it an "ontology."[15] I might even have called it an "archaeology" instead, if not that Michel Foucault has already cornered the market on that term among philosophers, and for purposes foreign to those of OOO.[16]

In what follows I will proceed in three steps, each the subject of its own section. First, I will briefly summarize McLuhan's concept of hot and cold media. Second, I will show the surprising link between these notions and the main themes of Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, and show further the relevance of this topic to the argument of *Immaterialism*. Third and finally, I will make the case for archaeological cooling –or forgetting– beyond the bounds of archaeology in the restricted disciplinary sense.

1 Hot and cold media

The great Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan is not uniformly admired in the intellectual world. While some readers –myself included– view McLuhan as one of the towering figures of the twentieth century, there are those who persist in regarding him as a mere pundit and a somehow less-than-serious figure.[17] This particular battle need not be fought here. I simply wish to add that one of McLuhan's ideas that is most often dismissed out of hand is the distinction between what he calls "hot" and "cold" media. Already in the opening chapters of *Understanding Media*, we learn that hot media are those with high information density, while cold media provide limited information and thus have a hypnotic effect on users, who are called upon to provide the missing information themselves. McLuhan's standard example is the difference between radio (hot) and television (cold).

11 Harman, "Hyperobjects and Prehistory."
12 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*.
13 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.
14 Bowden, *Killing Pablo*.
15 Harman, *Immaterialism*, 39-40.
16 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.
17 Harman, "The McLuhans and Metaphysics."

It has not been sufficiently noted that McLuhan's evaluation of various media as intrinsically hot or cold runs counter to his important claim that any medium can also be heated.[18] Indeed, he regards this as one of the most important mechanisms of history: a medium becomes hotter as it fills up with more information; eventually it becomes overheated, with the result that it reverses into its opposite. One helpful example is that the automobile is initially introduced as a medium promising greater speed and efficiency, but eventually reverses into the inconvenient burden of traffic jams, insurance payments, and expensive parking places that are sometimes even the cause –at least in today's United States– of violent gun battles. Although the notion of reversal already features heavily at the beginning of *Understanding Media*, it reaches mature form in the posthumously published *Laws of Media*, where it figures as one of the four poles of the "tetrad" structure of media.[19] According to this structure, any medium enhances one aspect of experience while obsolescing another, and also *reverses* into its opposite while retrieving an older medium as its content. Since reversal and retrieval both begin with the letter "r," the late Eric McLuhan increasingly tended to use the name "flip" for reversal, abbreviating it with "f" in the shorthand tetrad diagrams that he and his father would go on to produce for thousands of examples of different media.

Although hot and cold media are generally treated in non-hierarchical fashion by the McLuhans, and although heating has an important role in causing the eventual reversal of any medium into its opposite, coldness feels like the more favored term in their pair. For example, one of the frequent targets of the McLuhans in *Laws of Media* is the unfortunate modern supremacy of dialectic over their ancient peers grammar and rhetoric. The easiest way to explain the difference is that for the McLuhans, dialectic is obsessed with the content of any given situation, while grammar and rhetoric –which they never sufficiently distinguish from each other– are more concerned with its hidden background conditions. As even the most casual reader of McLuhan will recall, it is this hidden background that in his view bears the secret of media. His famous catchphrase "the medium is the message" means nothing if not that the content of any medium is trivial by comparison with the structure of the medium itself. As with so many important ideas, McLuhan is not alone in proclaiming it.[20] The entire philosophy of Heidegger hinges on the greater importance of the "ontological" (Being as our ever-hidden background) over the "ontic" (the surface-world of individual beings).[21] Meanwhile, in the visual arts, the celebrated critic Clement Greenberg makes the rather McLuhanesque claim that academic art –his greatest enemy– is "art that is unaware of its medium."[22] Against this tendency, avant-garde painting needs to be firmly aware of its medium –the flat background canvas– if it is to follow the glorious path of Picasso and Braque's Analytic Cubism rather than what Greenberg takes to be Kandinsky's wrongheaded abstractionist dogma.[23] In any case, the attention paid by McLuhan, Heidegger, and Greenberg to background medium over explicit surface figure represents an important cooling down of the heightened attention normally paid to the content of any situation.

2 Hot continuity and cold discreteness

One of the recurrent oppositions that appears almost everywhere in human thought is that between the continuous and the discrete. Most intellectuals are at least somewhat familiar with the dispute over whether evolution occurs gradually as for Charles Darwin, or in sudden jumps as in the work of Margulis, or for different reasons in the work of Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould on "punctuated equilibria."[24] Another well-known case is the continued deep incompatibility of quantum theory with relativity: the former concerned with nature as composed of discrete units, the latter with the continuous but variable bending of

18 Harman, "Some Paradoxes of McLuhan's Tetrad."
19 McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*; Harman, "The Tetrad and Phenomenology."
20 Harman, "The Revenge of the Surface."
21 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
22 Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 28.
23 Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 5.
24 Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*; Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*; Eldredge and Gould, "Punctuated Equilibria."

space-time that Einstein identified as the nature of gravity.[25] The first to consider both sides of this question equally was surely Aristotle, whose *Physics* treats time, space, change, and number as continua not made up of real individual parts, but whose *Metaphysics* deals with individual substances as discrete units not blended together continuously but separated from one another by gaps.[26] In recent philosophy, we have seen more radical efforts to consider everything as continuous, including individual entities, which are treated as mere fragments broken from a more primal whole. One ancestor of this trend is Henri Bergson, who has important heirs in Gilles Deleuze, Gilbert Simondon, and –in present-day America– Jane Bennett.[27] Even in analytic philosophy, the primacy of process and continuum can be found both in a classic author like Wilfrid Sellars and in more recent figures such as James Ladyman and Don Ross.[28]

This article is not the place to repeat my usual arguments for why individual things cannot be reduced to continua.[29] My point here is a new one: namely, an unforeseen link between the classical opposition between continuous and discrete and McLuhan's own distinction between hot and cold media. For I would note that in a continuum, everything exists in a certain proximity to its neighbors, and thus in principle the flow of information is not obstructed between any point in the continuum and any other. How could it be otherwise, since –as Aristotle already put it– there are no definite individual points in the continuum, but only potential ones, pinned down arbitrarily by whoever does the pinning?[30] Information can only be reduced, only cooled down, when there are genuine gaps between two different segments of reality. If the fork in my hand is nothing more than the sum total of its communications with my hand and anything else –as held by actor-network-theory– then the fork is pure information, as hot as hot can be.[31] But if we treat the fork instead as a quantum of reality partially cut off from its surroundings, then my information about it is immediately shown to be limited, and much is left to the imagination. The fork has thus been drastically cooled in McLuhan's sense of the term. More generally, any time a situation is quantized –broken up into a series of discrete elements– we have a cooled-down result in which the exact relations between all of the elements are not entirely determinate, or at least not entirely knowable.

I will now show that these considerations suggest that Pétursdóttirr and Olsen are wrong in their claim that *Immaterialism* opts for a historical approach while ignoring a more archaeological one; quite the reverse, in fact. Along with the various currents of thought rejected outright in the book, there is the more complicated relation with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in its Latourian version. It is widely known that OOO owes much to Latour, specifically to his ability to account for human and non-human entities in almost exactly the same terms: a point on which nearly all other post-Kantian philosophers have failed us, with the notable exception of Alfred North Whitehead.[32] Nonetheless, as I put it in *Immaterialism*, "in another sense ANT loses objects completely, by abolishing any hidden depth in things while reducing them to their actions."[33] This is not just a problem on the level of ontology, but has a significant defect for the purposes of social theory. For if we define an actor as the sum total of its actions, then in principle all actions are equal to all others in constituting it. Why worry ourselves over Caesar crossing the Rubicon, if the clipping of his fingernails or the changing of his toga is just as fateful in transforming the sum total of the dictator's properties?

Turning to the VOC, the central topic of *Immaterialism*, how are we to determine its most important aspects? If we aspired to write a history of that Company, we would be in roughly the same place as ANT itself. Surveying the entire list of incidents in which the VOC was involved, we would try to identify those

25 Smolin, *Three Roads to Quantum Gravity*.

26 Aristotle, *Physics*; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*.

27 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*; Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*; Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*; Bennett, "Systems and Things," 227.

28 Sellars, *In the Space of Reasons*; Ladyman and Ross, *Every Thing Must Go*.

29 See Harman, "Whitehead and Schools X, Y, and Z."

30 Aristotle, *Physics*.

31 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

32 Harman, *Prince of Networks*; Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*; Harman, "The Importance of Bruno Latour for Philosophy"; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

33 Harman, *Immaterialism*, 2.

which had the most impact, in the sense of the greatest number of implications for other entities. But as I put it in the book:

> If history is analogous to the plot of a novel, ontology is more like a study of the novel's central characters, whether they be human, corporate, or inanimate. While ANT always advises us to "follow the actors," object-oriented theory is also interested in following the dogs that did not bark, or the barking dogs at moments when they slept.[34]

The dogs that do not bark are only rarely the topic of history, a discipline more concerned with what actually happened than with what might have happened. When the latter does occur it is generally known as "counterfactual history": a sub-discipline with detractors as well as adherents, more beloved by fiction writers than scholars, and probably deserving of a different sort of name that does not include "history" as one of its elements. As for ANT, by definition it excludes the dogs that do not bark, since for Latour "there is no other way to define an actor but through its action, and there is no other way to define an action but by asking what other actors are modified, transformed, perturbed, or created by the character that is the focus of attention."[35] That is to say, for ANT it is automatically true that the barks of a non-barking dog affect nothing and therefore do not really exist.

To put it in terms introduced earlier, one of my goals in *Immaterialism* was to "cool down" ANT. Rather than make a list of everything the VOC did in its history and choosing the quantitatively most important, my purpose was to focus on the Company itself rather than its actions. I claimed that this was not an exercise in history –a discipline focused primarily on events rather than entities– but in ontology. Here we might also recall Aristotle's famous claim that poetry is more philosophical than history, since it communicates events that might have happened rather than those that actually did occur.[36] But this would make it sound as if I were denigrating history, when my real goal was to differentiate rather than hierarchize. The numerous histories of the VOC I cited in *Immaterialism* were not just invaluable, but necessary precursors for my book: how could one attempt an ontology of a historical object with no information about it at all? Yet this does not change the fact that history –biography is often an exception– is primarily relational in its approach to its subject matter. More specifically, to write a history of the VOC is to show how the VOC was important for other entities, but to write an ontology is to show what was important to the VOC itself. Paradoxically, to show us what any object is in itself requires subtracting from the knowledge we have about it: focusing austerely on its essential features rather than promiscuously on all of them, and playing both counterfactually and poetically with other possible outcomes.

Seen in this light, it begins to make more sense that Lynn Margulis ended up as the chief intellectual inspiration for *Immaterialism*, although she was an evolutionary biologist who never worked on such purely human subjects as a Dutch colonial corporation. Her Serial Endosymbiosis Theory (SET) treats evolution not as a continuum of gradual changes, but as a relatively rare situation in which one discrete living entity enters into biological union with another, leading to a biological "quantum leap" in which a new species appears quite suddenly. My use of this idea modifies it significantly, of course: not only by shifting it from the biological to the social realm, but by treating symbiosis as the mechanism for moving between different *phases* of one and the same object, rather than leading to a new object altogether. In the case study of the VOC, I was looking for irreversible links between the Company and other entities, links that moved it to a new stage of reality and closer to its final mature form. My hypothesis in *Immaterialism* was that all such objects are capable of at most a half-dozen or so symbioses before no further development is possible: primarily because objects tend to maximize themselves in a given historical environment, and the environment eventually changes in a way to which the object is unable to adapt. More specifically, I identified the following –in chronological order– as the symbioses of the VOC:

34 Harman, *Immaterialism*, 40.
35 Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 122.
36 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451B1-6.

- 1610: Appointment of Pieter Both as the first Governor-General of the Company, empowered to make decisions, wage battles, and sign treaties without direct guidance from Amsterdam.
- 1614: Authorship of *Discourse on the State of India* by Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen, which argued that the Company must not only enforce its spice trading monopoly against rival European powers, but must also monopolize trade between Asian nations as well.
- 1619: The founding of Batavia (modern Jakarta, Indonesia) as the Company's capital.
- 1623: Dutch massacre of the British forces at Ambon and resulting dominance of the important Spice Islands.
- 1625: Re-orienting the Company from round-trips to and from Amsterdam toward intra-Asian trade, with corresponding changes in the physical construction of its ships.
- 1641: The conquest of Malacca unifies the old Arab and Chinese trade routes into a single vast network.

Now, there is no question here of historical determinism. Other symbioses than these were surely possible for the VOC, and one might even attempt a "counterfactual ontology" in which the Company took rather different paths. Indeed, there is a bit of this in *Immaterialism* already. My point, instead, was that these six moments alone were those through which the VOC reached irreversible mature form. And just as with the maturing of a human being at puberty, we can see that these stages occur relatively early in the lifespan of the Company. Here, the first occurs roughly a decade after the birth of the company, and the next four happen over a span of fifteen years, which some observers –interestingly enough– take to be the length of a single human generation. There is only a single outlier: the belated conquest of Malacca sixteen years after the preceding symbiosis: the shift toward intra-Asian trade. But that gap is nothing when compared with the more than 150 years of continued existence of the VOC after its final symbiotic phase had been completed. What happened during that remaining century-and-a-half? Just what you would expect with any mature entity: it rose and then fell, ripening and decaying as it maximized relations with its environment before falling out of step with changes in that environment. More specifically, the Dutch fell as the English rose. In response to Latour's complaint that this amounts to an improper "biological" metaphor for social objects, I have responded in print that it is biographical rather than biological in character.[37] Biography tends to be the "coldest" form of history, since we are more inclined to speculate counterfactually about human life than about anything else, perhaps due to our intrinsic preoccupation with roads not taken– of which all of us have many. Few themes inspire more nostalgia, melancholia, or simple fascination in the human heart than this; whatever each of us is, and however satisfied we may be with what we are, we have all failed to become many other possible people: in at least a few cases, we all tend to think that we blew it. Thus, we are well aware of other possible human lives, and tend to be less deterministic about biography than such topics as economics or especially geology. In any case, we can see how the aspiration of *Immaterialism* to speak about the VOC itself rather than the sum of its deeds required a cooling down, a freeing of the VOC from excessive information. This is what led him away from the ontological social theorist Latour and toward the evolutionary biologist Margulis in my book: admittedly a strange crossroads for a philosopher to face.

3 Historical heating and archaeological cooling

On this basis it will be clear why, against the claims of Pétursdóttirr and Olsen, I see my book as aligned with archaeology rather than history, despite the admitted absence from it of ruined artifacts. It is true that my background research for *Immaterialism* involved the reading of history books, not the examination of the objects or sites usually favored by archaeologists. Nonetheless, the whole motivation behind my reading detailed (i.e., hot) history books was ultimately to cool them down into an ontology of the VOC, something I have already argued is opposite in kind from a history.

37 Latour, *Personal communication*; Harman, "Decadence in the Biographical Sense."

Archaeology, I would suggest, is as cold a discipline as can be found. Its original vocation of studying situations rather distant in time practically guaranteed it would deal primarily with low-information scenarios in which historians themselves would be unable to do much at all. Even in those cases where archaeology has turned to the excavation of more recent sites, it has naturally gravitated toward other situations relatively lacking in information. For example, Olsen himself is widely known to be involved with a World War II German military site in Norway. While outsiders might be faintly surprised that an archaeologist could be involved with something so recent, the surprise vanishes if we realize that the apparently trivial physical details of a military camp might not have been well documented by historians. It would be more shocking, of course, if an archaeologist were to attempt to write a total study of the Third Reich –as opposed to an archaeological compendium of various important Reich locations– given that so many detailed documents from that tragic period are still in existence, so that historians have always had a field day with the Hitler regime. In McLuhan's terminology, study of the Third Reich is already such a hot situation that the archaeologist would not quite be at home with such a comprehensive survey. The archaeologist's familiar skill set of piecing together narratives from fragmentary evidence would not be much in demand among those who already pore through the copious record of Nazi paperwork and documentary films, not to mention those who interview the many eyewitnesses still alive today.

The classification of situations as hot or cold is not necessarily static. Although it may seem unlikely, we can imagine the possible discovery of vast troves of information about, say, Saqqara in Egypt or Çatalhöyük in Turkey, in which case these sites might suddenly be transformed from archaeological into historical ones. Suddenly blessed with vast documentary evidence about these places, historians would pour in en masse, perhaps not without gloating over their ability to give precise answers to questions that decades of archaeologists had barely begun to fathom. Nor is this scenario purely speculative, since it has no doubt happened frequently in the past: think of the 1945 discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in Upper Egypt, which turned the study of Gnosticism from a speculative topic into a properly historical one.[38] There may be a similar relation between paleontology (cold) and biology (hot). If the melting permafrost of Siberia were unexpectedly to reveal tens of thousands of frozen dinosaur carcasses, precise autopsies could be done, so that the plaster casting of dinosaur bones would no longer be of much interest.

There are two general points I would like to make in closing. One is that the increase in information about something is not necessarily always a good thing. Although no scholar would turn down the chance to read well-documented histories written by the relatively elusive Etruscans or Native Americans, thinkers such as McLuhan, Heidegger, and Greenberg have shown the inherent disadvantage of increased information: an absorption with surface content at the expense of attention to the most basic conditions of any given situation. If Aristotle was right that philosophy is closer to poetry than to history, I suspect it is closer to archaeology than to history as well– with no slight intended against history. Perhaps it is even a grave mistake that there have been so many attempts at philosophies of history, but so few efforts toward a philosophy of archaeology.

The second point is this: we should not assume that everything flows from colder to hotter as more information is discovered, as if present-day research into the Boer War or the opium trade simply added to an increasingly accurate picture of what really happened. One of McLuhan's chief discoveries, we should not forget, was that the overheating of a medium leads to its collapse and its replacement by a form of pattern recognition. If we consider the extensive statistics kept by American baseball leagues, we find new information accruing each year, with constant computer-aided discoveries of increasingly obscure record performances: e.g., "Most home runs hit by any player on the first day of any month during his career." But with roughly 150 years of baseball record-keeping now under our belts, the historical amassing of statistics has begun to reverse into a form of pattern recognition. The sport can now be seen to consist of roughly defined eras, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Certain generalizations begin to be made about various types of players (e.g., "Tommy John-type pitchers," who are left-handed and tend to give up ground-ball rather than fly-ball hits) and their likely career paths and even chances of injury. The website www.baseball-reference.com even allows the reader to determine, for any individual player, the ten others in

38 Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*.

baseball history whose statistics most resemble his own. In this way, all the distracting individual detail about a given player is stripped away, and he becomes something more like a familiar, cooled-down, stock historical character. Paradoxically, then, the vast increase in baseball information has led not just to more hot baseball detail, but also to the discovery of cold baseball structures that silently govern the sport from a sort of ontological background. In short, the fact that any genre or medium tends to heat up with the increase in detail is only an indirect detour to an eventually cooler situation in which a historical approach gives way to something like an archaeological one.

In the end, this is why my not studying any literal ruins of the VOC does not prevent my approach in *Immaterialism* from being an archaeological one. If archaeologists tend to appear in ancient situations that are automatically cold through their lack of historical detail, we could say that ontologists function with a sort of "archaeology envy": staring out at a world of excessive detail and hoping to collapse it into a handful of important structures. Stated differently, whereas archaeologists face the coldness of newborn worlds, ontologists and poets adopt the artifice of suppressing much that is known but irrelevant. In this way, all seek the coldness of forgetting.

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