In Focus

The Object Gives Rise to Thought: Hermeneutics of Objects in *Disco Elysium*

MICHAŁ KŁOSIŃSKI, University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland;
email: michal.klosinski@us.edu.pl

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ABSTRACT

The article presents an analysis and interpretation of *Disco Elysium*, an award-winning videogame published by ZA/UM studio in 2019. The main problem explored in the research concerns the ontological basis upon which the game builds the complex personality of its protagonist and his relationship with the storyworld. The main theoretical works utilized in the analysis and interpretation are Object-Oriented Ontology by Graham Harman and Existence and Hermeneutics by Paul Ricoeur. My thesis is that *Disco Elysium* presents time, events and history as the effects of various tensions between the protagonist and the objects. In doing so, the game offers a non-anthropocentric perspective on human being and gives rise to questions about objects as a basis for rethinking the human condition. The article concludes with the formulation of a possible new hermeneutical approach founded on Object-Oriented Ontology.

This article examines the innovative use of objects in *Disco Elysium*, a detective story in an alternative, dystopian world (Schulzke 2014; Farca 2018; Kłosiński 2018) which allows players to incorporate (Calleja 2011) the character of Harrier 'Harry' Du Bois. The fictional storyworld (Ryan, Thon 2014; Maj 2019) serves as a postcolonial (Mukherjee 2017) setting for the murder case and protagonist's journey of self-discovery. Awarded at the *The Game Awards Festival* 2019 in the categories of narrative, Role Playing Game, independent game of the year, and distinguished by *BAFTA Game Awards*, *Disco Elysium* offers a new approach to storyworld ontology which is best seen in the animalisation and anthropomorphisation of objects and Harry's abilities. The world of *Disco Elysium* literally speaks to the protagonist, innovating on and paying homage to the classical Role-Playing Games such as *Planetscape Torment*, *Baldur's Gate*, or *Fallout*. My inter-

pretation focuses on three areas in which objects are important nexuses of meanings (Mantzavinos 2005: 132). First, objects build a temporal framework for the detective investigation. Second, objects serve as a foundation of a self-reflexive narrative on memory and identity. Finally, objects mediate the historical experience of a fictional postcolonial city. These three key areas are analysed through two distinct philosophical perspectives, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics (1960; 1969: 347), which offers a discourse on objects as meaningful and existential narrative devices, and Graham Harman's flat ontology (2002; 2011; 2017: 54), that presents objects as autonomous and independent entities. This analysis highlights the role of objects in redefining the figure of the protagonist, undermining the anthropocentric perspective, and offering a new existential ontology. The article concludes with a reflection on the importance of objects as presented in *Disco Elysium* for

the possibility of revitalizing hermeneutics with use of flat ontology.

OBJECT GIVES RISE TO TIME

In *Disco Elysium* the flow of time is strictly correlated with dialogues, which means that one can roam the space available in game as if it was ripped out of the stream of time. The sun is still, and all Non-Playable Characters (NPC) have been captured in short sequences of looped movements, for example: the boy going by the name Cuno ceaselessly throws rocks at a dead body hanging behind Whirling-In-Rags diner – the object of our investigation. Time flows only when we initiate and pursue dialogue, phenomenological interaction with objects or when Harry gets sucked into those by his intuition, awareness or scripted in game events. The flow of time is correlated with the length and intensity of the text presented in the form of dialogue between our protagonist and things, senses, mental abilities, feelings. ZA/UM studio used a narrative technique which binds the story time to events (Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2008: 120-122), thereby limiting the feeling that the storyworld is “live” (Zagal, Mateas 2010: 11; Hansen 2018: 21). The temporal framework of events does not overlap with the simple exploration of game world in the form of walking or running (Zagal, Mateas 2010: 5-6). Outside of dialogues, time is still. This mechanic is common to adventure and detective games (Hansen 2018: 139), and functions as an inter-ludic element of the genre pattern (Denson, Jahn-Sudmann 2013; Heilmann 2014). This allows ZA/UM to construct and properly present the stakes of the game: the state of the world as the investigation is conducted in the atmosphere of political, social, and economic tensions in post-revolutionary (42 years), nationalistic city of Revachol under outside governance of ‘the Board.’

In the murder-mystery that Harry must solve, the victim is a mercenary sent by the pacification forces, supposedly lynched by the local workers, striking against their exploitation by foreign capitalists. If Harry

is unable to solve the case, the Board will use extreme force against the workers and level the town which still remembers recent warfare. Therefore, the investigation turns into a race against time, as searching for clues, interviewing witnesses, constructing hypotheses, and reflecting on the shape of the world, all of which inevitably drains the available story time buffer (Zagal, Mateas 2010: 7-8). This mechanic serves a fundamental ontological function. Time in *Disco Elysium* has been reduced to the tension between objects and Harry’s intentionality, or as Harman writes: “Time is the name for this tension between sensual objects and their sensual qualities” (2011: 100). Time in *Disco Elysium* flows only when we experience the intentional acts of the protagonist, for it is only then that tension is produced between the things he perceives and the changing qualities of these objects. Therefore, objects give rise to the time, which the game problematises by relating the temporal flow to Harry’s intentionality (Ricoeur 1991: 13), or to the acts by which he constitutes objects, time and space in his consciousness. This means that the temporality of the storyworld in *Disco Elysium* is dependent on the player’s engagement with the cognitive acts of the protagonist. This engagement with the world shapes his narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992: 140) here, especially in relation to Harry’s existential drama and suffering (cf. Vella 2015: 287-288) as he must renegotiate his experience of selfhood and sameness (cf. Gandolfi 2016: 724-726). By using this procedure ZA/UM grounds the world’s temporality in the phenomenology of detective narration, strengthening the player’s orientation on meaningful choices and *idem*-oriented, self-reflexive agency (Gandolfi 2016: 741, 744). Time flows only when Harry is in dialogue with the world of objects, and these are also, but not limited to, phantasms, people, animals, and tools. Therefore, *Disco Elysium* already incorporates in its mechanics the first gift of objects, which is the reflection about temporality and oneself. The objects pull us into the time understood as this tension between what

they are, what they were and what they will be. Thus, the game does not present time as an independent stream in which the objects are immersed, but realizes the idea that time is enabled because there is a tension at the level of their sensuality when they are intended by the protagonist.

SOLILOQUY – THE SCENE WHERE THE OBJECT SPEAKS

One such intentional meeting with an object can be seen in the interaction with the statue of Fillip the III:

HORSEBACK MONUMENT –

An old monument stands in the middle of the traffic island, pointing toward the sea. It looks as if it's been reassembled piece-by-piece, secured and mounted in the air with the aid of numerous ropes and rods.

YOU – Who is this?

HORSEBACK MONUMENT –

A silver plaque on the statue's pedestal reads: "I am Filippe III, the Squanderer, the Greatest of the Filippian Kings of Revachol; Son of Filippe II, the Opulent; Father of Filippe IV, the Insane."

PERCEPTION (SIGHT) [Medium: Success] – As you look up, you notice something about the statue. There are some odd indentations on the King's chest piece...

ENCYCLOPEDIA [Medium: Failure] – What did he do? You have no idea what *you* did a week ago! How would you know what this guy did many centuries ago?

HORSEBACK MONUMENT – High above you, the king stands triumphantly oblivious to your memory trouble.

This presents the situation of meeting and conversing with objects, in which the different cognitive abilities of *Disco Elysium's* protagonist are set in motion. Harry's intentional acts turn into a soliloquy, a staging of internal dialogue or monologue (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989: 249). Moreover, specific objects, among them also abilities such as 'perception' or 'encyclopaedia' become the interlocutors, which produces a narrative paradox fragmenting Harry's subjectivity so that, in this entire dialogue sequence, he gets to ask just one question. The internal monologue opens up a space for simultaneous enabling and restriction of Harry's subjectivity, best seen in the distancing references to him as the addressee from the order of his own perception and encyclopaedic knowledge. This narrative formula depicts Harry not as a subject using his abilities and senses, but merely as an interlocutor, which makes him literally experience his own otherness (Ricoeur 1992: 327). Fragmentation of Harry's subjectivity with use of soliloquy reveals the theatricality of this narrative procedure (Murray 1997; Kłosiński 2018: 63-80). The way that objects are staged serves a pivotal role in *Disco Elysium*. The staging of objects both reveals the game mechanics based on the performativity of speech acts and agency in general, which can be seen in specific cues supplementing perception '[Success]' and Encyclopaedia '[Failure]', while also fragmenting Harry, allowing him to meet the objects which are presented as actors and interlocutors of a soliloquy.

By using this narrative technique *Disco Elysium* makes the gameworld a scene for ontography – a process of producing detailed lists of beings (Bogost 2012: 38; Harman 2011: 124). Therefore, soliloquy enables the staging of all ontological tensions enumerated by Harman in his *The Quadruple Object*. Harman distinguishes real and sensual objects as well as their real and sensual qualities. Their configurations form four poles of every object, or a fourfold depiction. Harman names four types of tensions between them: time, space, eidos and essence (2011: 99–102).

For example, by looking at a bird in motion we experience temporality: the tension between a sensual object and its sensual qualities. When we observe the bird in the sky or on the bridge, we also experience space: the tension between real bird and its sensual qualities. However, when we reflect upon the phenomenon of the 'bird-ness' of the bird, we experience the tension between the sensual object and its hidden real qualities: the eidos. Lastly, we have no experience or insight into the essence of our bird, as it is the tension between the real object and its real qualities, which always withdraws from any relation.

The situation of complete withdrawal from any relation has been used in the introductory dialogue of *Disco Elysium*: its background is a black screen, which introduces the atmosphere of isolation. The soliloquy has a disturbing undertone as the "ancient reptilian brain" addressing the protagonist is reminiscent of the oldest, primal elements of human brain on one hand (MacLean 1990: 15) and various reptilian fantastic races on the other.

ANCIENT REPTILIAN BRAIN –
There is nothing. Only warm,
primordial blackness. Your con-
science ferments in it – no larger
than a single grain of malt.
You don't have to do anything
anymore. Ever. Never ever.
(Disco Elysium, 2019)

These words are spoken slowly by a screeching voice. The enunciation ends with the first dialogue option which constitutes an existential choice to take upon oneself, the decision to keep existing (Gualeni, Vella 2020: 18, 26) as the protagonist, and thus to keep playing:

1. – Never ever ever?
2. – (Simply keep on non-existing.)
(Disco Elysium, 2019)

The game opens with an existential soliloquy, depicting the protagonist in a state of alcohol delirium and debilitation. This

simulates the Heideggerian situation of being thrown into the world, building the sense of embodiment and incorporation (Gualeni, Vella 2020: 40–41; cf. Calleja 2011). The black background of the screen reveals the detective film convention also adopted in the game menu – the dialogue frame is stylised as a film tape and characterized by the inscription: 'FELD PLAYBACK FILM' (Disco Elysium 2019). Therefore, the basic element of game interface has a diegetic, world building function. That is, soliloquy, interactions with objects, conversations with NPCs, choosing options and navigating through game menus, are all presented as enclosed by the frame of the film tape. Sequences staging objects as partners in dialogue are thus already an allegory of the cinema grammar (Galloway 2006: 106), their initiation designates the moments of cut and action proper to the film narration. As such, the procedure remediates cinema and literature as part of the game's dialogue with their conventions (Bolter, Grusin 2000: 56, 59–62), essentially adding to an existential metaphor of life as a cinema.

The opening sequence also depicts an ontological procedure, the fission of Harry's subjectivity and transformation of specific cognitive functions into scenic objects. Here appears the 'limbic system,' which discourages him from waking up and experiencing corporeality, referred to as 'the meat thing':

LIMBIC SYSTEM – An awareness
creeps up on you. A mass lies
hidden in your dead angle, soak-
ing in some lurid, acidic sauce. It's
bloated and shameful, a ball of
meat surrounding you... This is a
terrible line of questioning, and it
will only lead to more awareness
of the meat-thing. (Disco Elysium
2019)

The context for this warning is the returning memory of Harry's former lover. Workaholic-alcoholic, Harry is a victim of his own addiction, which caused brain damage and amnesia. He doesn't know who he is

and what he did for the past fifty years of his life. This strengthens the narrative of a detective with shattered personality and the goal of searching for the lost identity (Gualeni, Vella 2020: 45–46). This is the narrative dominant in *Disco Elysium*; that the investigation challenges players to reconstruct both the story, and Harry's narrative identity. Therefore, players are engaged in dialectics of two hermeneutic styles: reconstruction and suspicion (Ricoeur 1963; Scott-Baumann 2009: 70, 175–176). The teleology of detective story is strictly linked with personal quest for lost identity, constructing or reconstituting Harry's personality as an existential endeavour. Existential investigation is strengthened by the function of objects as identity mirrors, illustrated in the meeting between Harry and the mailbox:

PERCEPTION (SIGHT) [Medium: Success] – A faint sticker on the side reads: „RCM Emergencies Desk no 8-100-2“, with a slogan: „Mankind, be vigilant!“

YOU – “Good mail delivery box.”
(Pat the box.)

MAIL COLLECTION BOX –
The box seems happy.

PERCEPTION (SIGHT) [Easy: Success] – “Eat shit, pig!”, “FUCKED BY THE CUNN” and “Saint-G” with a crown have been scribbled on it. “Jennie is a WHORE” and “*Baise cette* mailbox!” also.

YOU – Been there, *Poste L'Aventurier* mail collection box... been there.

MAIL COLLECTION BOX – The mail collection box seems cathartic, thankful even. So do you. You shudder. Then you swallow.

The mailbox is an object with past, bearing marks of harassment, insults, and aggres-

sion. It is also described as an adventurous heroine, ‘Poste L'Aventurier’ (more so as the object in the eye of the beholder). By showing empathy towards the mailbox, Harry experiences catharsis and enters a community of the excluded, exploited, and reviled. Thus, *Disco Elysium* illustrates a reversible relationship with an object which initiates and participates in Harry's cathartic reflection on his own identity. The object gives absolution, gives rise to thought about shared mutual conditions, and offers a reflection of the self and others. Staging this meeting is based on the discreet understanding conveyed by enunciations animating the mailbox, making it a participant in dialogue in language understandable only to Harry, which explains why its affects are presented with uncertainty: “seems happy”, “seems cathartic.” The ability to hear the discreet voice of objects therefore seems a key competence in the ontology illustrated by *Disco Elysium*.

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur writes that “man is essentially speech” (1967: 340). The existential stress he puts on language, speech and dialogue is crucial for conceptualising the significance of the conversations with objects in *Disco Elysium*. The game stages objects as kernels of speech and participants in dialogue, therefore giving them a place in what might be called a great dialogue of beings. New hermeneutics (which aims to consider Harman's flat ontology as its basis) has to recognize this existential shift in objects as partners and equals. Only through this gesture of absolute openness to their speech and their silence can this project produce a hermeneutic made to measure the narrative of *Disco Elysium*. From this moment, the notion that “man is essentially speech” is extended to all beings and ceases to mark the impassable horizon of hermeneutic anthropocentrism and logocentrism which shunned non-human entities as exiles from dialogue. As *Disco Elysium* illustrates, objects speak, quarrel, banter with each other, tell stories and exchange experiences. ZA/UM used this to bolster the detective narration and make it into a prime

example of interrogating and listening to objects.

Objects play pivotal roles as clues and traces, literal food for thought for Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. But Holmes does not speak with objects, he reads them as an inscription left by the perpetrators, frozen history of human actions written on the fabric of the world. As a modern subject of power-knowledge (Foucault 1998: 92-102; Kelly 2013: 134) he speaks with the dead using the language of contemporary anatomy and medicine (Wagner 2006). *Disco Elysium* transforms this model of questioning and investigation, which can best be seen in the dialogue with the hangman. Reflection on the victim does not boil to an intelligent calculation or logical deduction. Harry literally speaks with the dead body, which – as if that was not enough – mocks and ridicules him. This conversation would not be possible if Harry occupied a privileged position. In contrast to Holmes, Harry is staged as a subject deprived of power and knowledge (he wakes up with amnesia, without his badge), symbolically castrated (Abbott 2002: 170–172) as he lost his weapon-phallus (Kimmel *et al.* 2014) and the police ledger, affectively named 'ledger of failure and hatred.' Moreover, in an alcoholic rage, Harry has crashed his police vehicle and flushed the case files in the toilet. Thus, the new ontological situation is made possible only after the hero loses all attributes of power – knowledge, and himself becomes objectified and depersonalised, which brings him closer to the level of the hangman and enables their meeting: object to object.

YOU - Why *do* I love questions so much?

THE HANGED MAN – Because you're a copparooni. Look at all of them go! Do you want more questions?

YOU – Yeah, give me questions.

THE HANGED MAN – Here you go, you loonie!

YOU – Why do I feel like I've forgotten something terrible?

THE HANGED MAN – Because you *have*.

YOU – Is my name Roonie?

THE HANGED MAN – Fuck no, you're no Roonie.

YOU – Roonie is obviously not who I am.

THE HANGED MAN – Between you and me, your name is probably Harry.

YOU – I felt like I've been getting a lot of Harry lately...

THE HANGED MAN – You might be on to something there.

The dialogue tries to convince us that the hangman knows Harry better than he knows himself. Here, another gift of the object is revealed, as the objects offer knowledge about the protagonist's narrative identity. This can be seen in the familiarising position the hangman assumes towards Harry when he speaks: "Between you and me, your name is probably Harry". This "between you and me" marks the space of dialogue, an exchange between objects linked by a common thread of lost identity. Therefore, the object gives rise to a common ground, effectively transforming ontological assumptions about subjectivity and eroding the subject of power – knowledge. This is a very delicate moment when Harry questions the very possibility of this dialogue and the hangman gives him an unexpected rational answer:

YOU – What is happening?

THE HANGED MAN – What do you mean?

YOU – I'm talking to you.

THE HANGED MAN – It's the power of your... (Black, frothy liquid starts bubbling on his lips...)

IMAGINATION.

The meeting takes place in Harry's imagination, at least that is what his interlocutor suggests, which brings us to another gift we receive from objects: they stimulate and fuel imagination. All in all, the imagination seems to be their most important gift. Therefore, the object is responsible for opening a hermeneutic rift in subjectivity when it meets the uncanny. Similarly, to Doyle's stories, object gives rise to thought, but *Disco Elysium* supplements this notion with another dimension, as the relationship with the objects turns out to be reversible, mutual (Sendyka 2017: 88), and cannot be reduced to a simple one-sided investigation.

OBJECT GIVES RISE TO HISTORY

Objects also highlight the problem of historical narrative. Objects give history because they open up a space for exploring memory, which is an element of their "biography." As stated by Ewa Domańska, objects have "material identity, and sometimes multiple identities, which change in time and with context; they have a life, which begins in point A and ends at B; in this life something happens to them" (2008: 14). Ontological reflection on objects in *Disco Elysium* corresponds with such biographic perspective, as exemplified by the dialogue with the hangman and the mailbox. In this perspective, objects are not just archaeological artifacts (Reinhard 2018), or vehicles of history (Chapman 2016: 174, 266), but its actors and co-creators. In this sense, the story of *Disco Elysium* is fuelled by the necrotic agency of the hangman, the dead body, *nekros* (Domańska 2017). It's plausible to say that the history behind Harry's

investigation is a gift from the body hanging behind Whirling-in-Rags, body-object, *corpus delicti*. The hanged man – *nekros*, besides his intimate conversation with our protagonist, is also an object of forensic procedures, which involve probing the body, determining the cause of death, writing a report which Harry fills with data according to players choices. Therefore, the history presented in game is strictly linked to the ontology of dead body. The hangman's body gives rise to thought precisely as an object entangled in history, as its agent and its victim. As the investigation develops, we learn that the tattoo of a map on victim's body is essential for the rituals of Oranje, a maritime culture, which used tattoos as diaries of their journeys. Afterwards, this rite was adopted by mercenaries to mark the history of conflicts in which they participated. The profaned and hanged body of the mercenary gives rise to thought about the victim and the perpetrators, but it also tells us about the culture, history, and the world as it fulfils a central role in building the ontogenesis of the storyworld (Maj 2015: 257–262; Maj 2019). The hanging body also fuels the affective dimension of its dehumanization (Domańska 2017: 43), which is the key factor in the revenge planned by the mercenary's team on suspected dock workers.

What objects give in *Disco Elysium* is, therefore, the *allohistory*, a kind of alternative history, grounded in various worldbuilding procedures ancillary to the pure act of creating a different world (Maj 2015: 229–231). This reveals the rich history of Revachol, written with encyclopaedic scrutiny alongside Harry's investigation into himself. Experiencing the postcolonial history, as a fundamental and constitutive element of the ontology and epistemology of the game world, allows us to question his privileged position in relation to the subaltern (Mukherjee 2017: 69). Finally, history will also serve as the indispensable factor in explaining the killing: the hangman was shot by figure of a "cursed soldier", Iosef Lilianovich Dros, an officer of *Le Parti communiste d'Insulinde*, who refused to lay down his weapon after the fall of

revolution and for forty years lived in hiding in abandoned military installations. Political frustration, hunger, loneliness, and sexual fixation on a mercenary's lover, led him to take his last shot in a private war against capitalism, ending the life of Ellis Kortenaar. Entanglement of these characters in the *allohistory* finds confirmation in the hangman's answer to the question about his killer. "Communism" answers Kortenaar's body. Defiled *nekros*, kneeling before Harry, seems to have its own narration, if not immediate access, to historical truth (Domańska 2017: 115). The storyworld of *Disco Elysium* literally emanates remains, evidence, or traces of history (Ricoeur 2006: 13–15), from a crumbling and shot monument of the overthrown king after bombing of Martinaire by pacification forces, to post-revolutionary waste depicting the imperial logic and postcolonial misery (Mukherjee 2017: 104). Therefore, we are constantly surrounded by broken rifles hidden in cellars, forgotten facilities filled with pre-revolution junk, rags of propaganda posters and omnipresent ruins. These objects produce the grim atmosphere of *noir* style criminal stories, presenting a rotten and degenerated world. But the poetics of *Disco Elysium* also remind us of hyper-modern retrospective proper to the retro criminal stories engaged in fictional explorations of memory and history, especially in post-communist Poland (Buryła 2018: 113; Darska 2018: 131–132). Therefore, objects give rise to the experience of *allohistory*, expanding our understanding and cohesion of the storyworld. Objects offer traces and clues that call for an interpretative uncertainty proper to the hermeneutic circle, while also function as evidence for the case, driving the forensic and judiciary discourse, suggesting there is an objective truth (Domańska 2017: 115–116; Mukherjee 2017: 96). This tension between the ambivalence of traces and objectivity of evidence exacerbates *Disco Elysium*'s aura of uncertainty and fuels the political disputes at the background of the investigation. Such positioning causes Harry to function as an agent of historical politics (Chapman 2016:

232, 245–246), as his investigation problematises the history of the storyworld, and mediates our stance on the political dilemmas presented in the game. Harry himself is both the tool (of power, politics, justice), and the object of investigation (of his own memory and past), which further amplifies the game's *allohistorical* dimension. Thus, objects invite reflection on the fictional historical politics played as drama and experiment (Pötzsch, Šisler 2019: 5–6). By problematising traces and evidence in the light of memory, history and forgetting, they transform the subject of the investigation from truth, to the ways truth is constructed. In this respect *Disco Elysium* deconstructs the utopian vision of scientific inquiry, based on the idea that truth is extracted from objects through objective, scientific methods. In-game objects do not necessarily falsify this utopian vision of *sci-fi forensic realism* (Domańska 2017: 116–118; Kirby 2013), but as active participants in the investigation, they tell stories in their own name. While objects do enable various forensic procedures as evidence, they also behave like witnesses in *hardboiled* criminal stories (Tuszyńska 2017: 208; Abbott 2002; Mizejewski 2004), requiring the intuition of the detective to assess the reliability of their claims (Kirby 2013: 101).

CONCLUSION: NEW MYTHOLOGY OF THE OBJECTS

The maxim "symbol gives rise to thought" has two postulates: betterment of existence and enabling reflection which uproots human beings from the distress of modernity (Ricoeur 1969: 352). In this sense, hermeneutics of symbols serves demythologisation, which aims to reclaim the sacred through the critique of ideology as false consciousness of history (Ricoeur 1969: 353). In this article I focus on three different gifts of the object: time, existential self-reflexivity and *allohistory*. Conjoining these is the figure of fragmented subject (Jameison 1991: 14) rooted in the founding myths of western anthropologies (Ricoeur 1969: 282, 292). *Disco Elysium* reformulates this figure by using soliloquy to present a new

amnesiac subject born from the fall, thrown into the world as an object, waste, who is anchored in a nostalgia for the lost love and community. In this existential drama objects become interlocutors in dialogue. Their gift is parallel to the gift of symbols, problematised by Ricoeur, who underlines the ontological transformation inscribed in them, the “situation of man at the heart of the being” (1969: 356). For Ricoeur symbols are kernels of presence which, however, never exhaust things themselves: “Thus, the symbol-thing is the potentiality of innumerable spoken symbols which, on the other hand, are knotted together in a single cosmic manifestation” (1969: 11). Symbols always open a matrix of meanings, leading to understanding oneself via interpretation, and I argue that objects in *Disco Elysium* have a similar function. Here the objects are not just a pretext, food, or impulse for thought, rather they force Harry (and players) to produce new objects.

To think about objects in the way proposed by *Disco Elysium* requires the reformulation of the hermeneutic existential project around the non-anthropocentric foundation offered by object-oriented ontology. Object gives rise to thought; new hermeneutics must take this effort. *Disco Elysium* indicates a possible horizon for meeting between hermeneutics and object-oriented ontology; while Harman rejects hermeneutics because he believes it overly stresses and privileges anthropocentric interpretation (2002: 123).

Like Harman's perspective *Disco Elysium* explores the secret life of objects that is inaccessible to anthropocentric perspective and constitutes the basis for object-oriented ontology, which bars the intentional acts from accessing the essence of things. In this sense, a human being is also an object which withdraws from all relations and mutual cognitive acts with objects like stones, monkeys, raindrops and video tapes. Ricoeur comes to a similar conclusion when criticizing the idea of self-reflection as an act of abstracting oneself from the world. His work on symbol brings him closer to flat ontology as he writes that “the task of the philosopher guided by symbols would be to break out of the enchanted enclosure of consciousness of oneself, to end the prerogative of self-reflection. The symbol gives reason to think that *Cogito* is within being, and not vice versa” (1969: 356). Object-oriented ontology is able to revitalise new hermeneutics precisely because it offers the breakout of the “enchanted enclosure” of anthropocentrism, which privileges *Logos* and *Cogito*. Ricoeur's finding is without precedent here as he states that the gift of symbol cannot be reduced to intentionality. In this fragment, symbol functions as a call from being. When Ricoeur suspends the anthropocentric perspective proper to hermeneutics and postulates the return to “the heart of being” as the vector for humanities, he creates a possibility of relating existential ontology to Harman's flat ontology.

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