

Death and the Skeuomorphic Remains of the Teacher

MATTHEW BARKER

Faculty of Education, RMIT University & St Leonards College Melbourne

Abstract

*This paper examines the idea of what remains after the death of the teacher through its skeuomorphic representation made by the student. The theme of 'what remains' is taken from Derrida's questioning of the possibility of death in *Aporias* and will be situated within the framework of the Object Orientated Ontology of Graham Harman. This investigation will begin with the provocation of the death of the character Joseph Knecht in the novel *The Glass Bead Game* by Herman Hesse. The narrative is structured around the biography of the schoolmaster Knecht that concludes with his sudden death in an accident with his student Tito. Knecht's life and death is presented by Hesse as a lesson whereby his death is the continuation of an intellectual awakening which Tito ultimately bears witness. From this provocation, this paper will consider the nature of the what remains after the death of the teacher through its skeuomorphic representation of the experience produced by the student. The death of the teacher will then be positioned as an epistemic object that takes on its own life beyond the finitude of the teacher following the Object Orientated Ontology of Graham Harman which posits the autonomy of objects from humans. Finally, this paper will propose the potential value of educational subjects as a futural project that may not be realised within the lifetime of the teacher.*

Keywords: skeuomorphism, epistemic object, Object Orientated Ontology, Hesse, Harman, Derrida

The Story So Far...

Oh! he thought in grief and horror, now I am guilty of his death. And only now, when there was no longer need to save his pride or offer resistance, he felt, in shock and sorrow, how dear this man had already become to him. And since in spite of all rational objections he felt responsible for the Master's death, there came over him, with a premonitory shudder of awe, a sense that this guilt would utterly change him and his life, and would demand much greater things of him than he had ever before demanded of himself. (Hesse, 1970, pp. 403).

The conclusion of Hesse's *The Glass Bead* leaves the reader with an uncertain ending to a novel set in the distant future within a community of monastic scholars pursuing the perfection of knowledge free from worldly concerns. The central narrative follows the biography of Joseph Knecht as he ascends from a novice to the head of the order. In this position, he proves to be highly successful and venerated by his colleagues yet he feels dissatisfied with his isolation from the world and the limitations of his vocation which he perceives as restricting his intellectual 'awakening'. He resolves to leave the order to become a schoolmaster of laypersons to continue his journey in the here and now. Knecht achieves this goal in the final chapter of the book when he accepts a position as a private tutor of Tito, the son of a provincial politician, who provides the point of view for the concluding pages of the story.

The final pages are set in country house of Tito's family situated on the banks of a glacial lake from which Knecht was scheduled to commence his teaching. On Knecht's arrival,

before any of the lessons commence, Tito decides to go for a swim in the lake. Inspired by Tito's youthful abandonment, Knecht enters a race with him across the lake. During the race Tito looks back to see the progress of his Master only to realise in dismay that Knecht had been consumed by the icy waters. Knecht never achieves the 'awakening' he sought or even to fulfil the humble roll of a schoolmaster. This abrupt ending concludes with a grief-stricken Tito, plagued by guilt for feeling responsible Knecht's death and having not received a single lesson. Yet, through bearing witness to this death it seems that Tito had received his own 'awakening'. He feels changed by this encounter and that he will be needed for 'greater things'. It appears Tito had been transformed by a teacher of which the only lesson was that of witnessing his death.

Incompleteness and the Aporia of Death

Knecht had left his scholastic order to continuing his 'awakening' and the moment that he set out on this task he fails, left incomplete, appearing to have thrown it all away for nothing. Yet Tito's transformation suggests his death was not for nothing and may also imply the possibility that this event was essential for Knecht's manifestation of his own essential 'awakening'. That is, if it would be to consider that the ultimate state of 'awakening' includes the totality of what is knowable within the potentiality of his being as Dasein. For Heidegger, Dasein always remained incomplete as there is "undeniably a constant 'lack of totality' which finds an end with death" (1962, pp.286). Therefore, Knecht's death could be seen as providing the totality of the knowable that permits the completeness of his being. Yet, is this totality and commensurably his awakening accessible by Knecht?

Not according to Derrida (1993) as he views death as an aporia between being and nonbeing, an impossible threshold on which Knecht could not stand on either side of to take view of the other. That is, the impossibility of knowing the totality of being excluding death and the impossibility of death to be included in life. Derrida explains an aporia is a "matter of the nonpassage, or rather from the experience of the nonpassage, the experience of what happens and is fascinating in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in the separation" (1993, pp.12). Knecht's death remains oscillating in this nonpassage in a state that defers knowing, paralysed in an irresolvable polemic. Derrida continues to ask "is my death possible?" (Ibid, pp.21) problematizing death and repositioning it as something that is not necessarily in possession of the one who has died. It seems the possibility of 'my death' is limited to becoming 'mine' as I must be alive to give account of it. This leaves Knecht muted and unable to account for his own death.

However, Tito is still present and is actually the one giving the account of this death. Within Heidegger's analysis of death, he suggests that "the deceased has abandoned our 'world' and left it behind. But *in terms of that world* those who remain can still *be with him*" (1962, pp.282). This leaves Tito as the one who remains to give an account of Knecht's death; to be with him in his death, yet also to be within the world. Tito himself is unsure of the actual significance soliciting his 'shudder of awe' however, he seems aware that his witness is an imperative to 'demand much greater things' of himself. As Derrida observes following Heidegger that after the event of death that there is "something undecided to remain" (1993, pp.53). This conjures the idea that this undecidability has drawn Tito into the experience of the nonpassage of Knecht's death. Derrida provides affirmation for this notion as he states near the conclusion of Aporias; "The death of the other, this death of the other in "me," is fundamentally the only death that is named in the syntagm "my death," (Ibid, P.76). Therefore, Tito's 'awakening' and Knecht's only lesson is the witnessing of the death of the other. Tito sees the potential of his own death (as 'my death') through Knecht yet still remains in the world.

To Continue on as the Other

What then remains with Tito after the death Knecht and how is it possible to make an account of this witnessing? Levinas proposes that “the fear of dying is the fear of leaving work unfinished” (Levinas, 2000, pp. 100). For Tito perhaps, inscribed within his guilt, is his concern for having left Knecht with unfinished work. As such Tito carries not only witnessing of his Knecht’s death, the potentiality of his own awakening but also the unfinished works of the teacher. Here, the event of the death of the teacher, rather than concluding the lesson, multiplies and saturates the student. Levinas invites us in addition “to think of death as a moment of death’s *signification*, which is a meaning that overflows death” (Ibid. pp. 104). This meaning thus overflows through Tito, surging and gushing with a fluvial force that carves at the material of his being. For Lingis the force of death’s signification on the other includes the radical realisation that:

One day one will not be there, and the student, lawyer, corporation executive, patient, parent, male or female one was, will be enacted by another. The positions, the performances, the gestures will not die with one; they are configurations on a wave of the current of anonymous life where birth replaces dying. (Lingis, 1994, pp. 166).

Here, as the fluvial metaphor persists through the ‘wave of the current’, and if there is a moment of redemption for Tito it may be through the realisation that Knecht’s unfinished work does not necessarily end with his death. Knecht may also just be one among anonymous others whose unfinished work was a configuration within a multiplicity of possible expressions of the essential position of which Knecht’s being was perhaps just a medium to suspend its contents. The imperative for Tito, that task which demands more of himself, his account of Knecht’s death could then be seen as an enactment within the continuity of a community of others of which Knecht was a temporary representation. As Lingis succinctly expands “I find the shape of my own destiny in the outline of enterprises that the others traced in the world but did not have the time or the power to realize” (1994, pp. 171). Here then, the lesson that remains for Tito may be the shape of his destiny as an actor within a larger project; an enterprise that had transcended Knecht and will inevitably also transcend Tito.

To make an account and to give shape to Knecht’s death would suggest to give form to the materiality of Tito’s witness. He must take the meaning which overflows and to cast it into something that might carry forth Knecht’s unfinished work. For Tito, what remains after the death of the teacher is the lesson which instructs him act beyond himself. The knowledge from this lesson becomes an object that Tito must form from the medium of his teachers being as death. The end of Knecht’s knowing becomes the ‘awakening’ of Tito’s project. Therefore, it seems to appear for Tito, as the witness of the death of the other, that the totality of being is the elliptical promulgation to seek the ‘awakening’ of what lies beyond what is knowable. What then is the character of this object which is what remains after the death of Knecht that Tito might form?

On the Skeuomorph

To form the representation of an event can entail the translation and copying of this experience into a structure that as best possible resembles the object of representation. Rendering the object of Knecht’s lesson of death requires Tito to assemble the historical

recollections of this event alongside his current mood during production with an awareness that object may exist in the future. The materiality of Knecht's death, that which moves and can be felt by Tito must also exchange with the materiality of Tito's representational sculpting of the event. The object of what remains is a model of the negotiation between the temporal and material condition of its creation. A model that stands for and speaks of the other as a copy yet also exists as its own entity skewed by the perceptual shifts and parallax displacements that occur at the moment of transcription. Transfigured by the entropic alignment of all that could be in the moment prior to the organisation of the assemblage and the polysemy of significance after that moment; the copy or skeuomorph is thus thrown into existence.

The term skeuomorph describes the copying of objects between groups of people and the process whereby materials and signification of the object contribute to the continuity and modification of its form. As Gheorghiu observes in a study of artefacts from Chalcolithic period a "skeuomorph is a special case of the substitution of material, being a copy of one object in a different, usually more common, material. The reverse occurs when a common material is used to copy one of higher value" (pp.228, 2012). Citing examples of objects such as stone arrow heads and axes placed near similar copper objects he concludes that "although the models copied still preserve Neolithic shapes and symbols, a new material began to take over, slowly modifying the old models and suggesting new shapes" (Ibid, pp.291). Therefore, it could be considered that as Tito substitutes the materiality of Knecht's death with the materiality of his witness, his skeuomorphic representation may also preserve and reconfigure within the gesture of reproduction.

Another utilisation of the word skeuomorph functions to describe design metaphors within digital user interfaces. Oswald & Kolb observe within the design of smart phone icons the imitation of real objects such as books, bins and sliders which they describe as affordances that let users "figure out what an object allows us to do with it, by mere visual exploration" (2014, pp.2). Skeuomorphic design thus aspires to use such affordances to allow understanding to occur between digital objects through the contextual metaphor used for the virtual artefact and its probable relationship with the embodied action of its real equivalent. As such, the skeuomorph produced by Tito of Knecht's death might also carry affordances loaded with metaphors for suggesting modes of understanding the significance of this event for those who encounter Tito's model. Tito's experience of the nonpassage of death of the other thus becomes a vessel to transport the medium of Knecht's lesson through such affordances beyond the temporal horizon of the event. Knecht never ceases dying; his lesson continues to contort and unfold through those who encounter the skeuomorph produced by Tito.

Fleming & Brown (2015) use the concept of a skeuomorph to explain the development of virtual cameras as used in contemporary cinema. Through an exploration of new technologies developed for the film *Avatar* (James Cameron, USA, 2009) they analyse how green stages and experimental technology were used to manufacture and film virtual locations. Importantly, Fleming & Brown note that the camera device used by the director resembled a traditional camera yet even though from a purely functional perspective this resemblance was mostly unnecessary (2015, pp.91). This resemblance might also be considered as a kind of affordance and they also suggest:

The skeuomorphic dimensions of the technological object thus point to both a real and mediated dimension, as well as a past and futural pole. Indeed, the familiarity of the object in its simulation of past technological artefacts is here counterbalanced by

the introduction of a range of novel features that were not anticipated or remediated in the older form. (Fleming & Brown, pp.91-92, 2015).

While the skeuomorphic camera may have kick started the filmmaking process and suggested a manner of production; through the mediation of new technologies a hybrid was formed. Both witnessing of the past through the imitation of moving with and moving for the optical camera while projecting forward a vision of the transcendent medium which is neither here nor there. The new medium both carries and morphs the message from the past of an ancestral being that is a testimony and a perpetual exegesis. The object formed by Tito remaining after the death of Knecht, considered as a skeuomorph, might then take on those characteristics of substituting materiality, making affordances as well as provoking an indeterminate morphology that throws open new forms to negotiate its lesson.

The Lesson of Death as an Epistemic Object

Writing on the experimental-systems research in the empirical sciences Rheinberger defines an epistemic object as that “badly defined something that is the very target of a particular experimental research endeavour” (2008, pp.21). Epistemic objects may include tools, processes and concepts which are indeterminate in character yet nonetheless drive the experimental system. These objects can be understood in contrast to technical objects which are devices are highly determined with known properties and functions. Over time, if the epistemic object becomes more defined with clear instrumental parameters it may be appropriated or transformed wholly into a technical object. Rheinberger gives the example of conceptions of what genes might be and do for the life sciences during the twentieth century as an epistemic object while how they have functioned as macromolecules in post-genomics since the 1980’s as an example of their transformation into a specific technical object (2008, pp.22-23). He notes that “as technical objects, however, what they gain in terms of identity and determination, they lose in terms of their quality of transcendence” (ibid, pp.23) and then continues to expand:

In a world of experimentation, the handling of epistemic objects can take the form of a modelling activity. As models, epistemic things participate in the game of switching media. The model, as a rule, displays a different form of materiality than the thing it is taken to stand for. And as models, epistemic things thrive from the tension created by the fact that they always leave something to be asked. (Rheinberger H.-J. , pp.26, 2008).

Within Hesse’s *Glass Bead Game*, Tito’s witness of Knecht’s death, as discussed in this paper as a skeuomorph of the event, might also be seen by analogy as an epistemic object. The experience of death switching media between the two characters and as a skeuomorph this change in materiality morphs its identity and it becomes different than what it stood for. Tito’s sense of ‘awe’ of those ‘greater things’ that will be ‘demanded’ from him which are never disclosed by Hesse can only leave behind something to be asked. The death that was Knecht’s, as an aporia, a nonpassage and also the totality of being that he cannot know is disclosed to Tito. Tito’s skeuomorph casts into the negative space of this aporia, mapping Knecht’s absence, not so much as knowledge, but as an imperative to fill the void; to give testament to the potentiality of the totality of being. This imperative may then be considered an epistemic object of Knecht’s lesson of his death. The unfinished work of the other might be then seen as an affordance suggesting the reconfiguration of the ‘awakening’ which Knecht had sought. As such, his death deferred beyond his finitude, bears a ‘quality of transcendence’ gifted to his student Tito which might likewise be perpetually reconfigured

through those who give witness to Tito's testament. How then could this epistemic object be encountered ontologically and what could this say more generally about what remains after the teacher?

OOO and the Finitude of the Teacher

Within Graham Harman's sense of Object Orientated Ontology (OOO) he recommends that "an entity qualifies as an object as long as it is irreducible both to its components and its effects" (2016, P.41). Parts and the effects of the object may exist in other entities however, it is the particular relationship between parts and effects which suggests the singularity of the object in question. Additionally, his understanding of an object rests on the idea that they have an autonomous reality that occurs beyond the grasp of an observer because "while there may be an infinity of objects in the cosmos, they come in only two kinds: the real object that withdraws from all experience, and the sensual object that exists *only* in experience" (pp.49, 2011). The sensual object exists in the mind of the human observer while the actual object itself continues to exist in its own reality independently of its sensual observations. Furthermore, the interrelationship between multiple objects may produce a new object when they are "arranged in such a manner as to give rise to a thing that exceeds them" (ibid, pp.117). He views this as an occurrence of symbiosis whereby objects are transformed. Within his theory knowledge can also be considered an object and he continues "things are simply not converted into knowledge, or into any sort of access through our "practices," without significant transformation" (2016, pp.29). Therefore, Tito's sculpting of the epistemic object as a skeuomorph might then be considered as practice of transformation within Harman's schema of OOO.

Interestingly, Harman has also constructed the situation of a posthumous education to explain Object Orientated Ontology (2010, pp. 140-169). Here, he asks the reader to imagine that he has been offered to tutor a young student named Beatrice on metaphysical issues of space and time. However, in this narrative, after accepting this task, he is diagnosed with an illness which he will die in from in the following weeks (ibid, pp.144). Hypothetically, he explains that his education of Beatrice will therefore be incomplete yet the object of his lesson has still come into a relationship with his student. Harman then asks the reader to consider:

An object is no seamless fusion, but is fatally torn between itself and its accidents, relations and qualities: a set of tensions that makes everything in the universe possible, including space and time. To map these rifts more closely is the mission of object-orientated philosophy, a task that will largely be left to the future school of Beatrice and her friends. For my time on earth is nearly finished. (2010, pp.150).

Within this example, the educational object is presented as a futural project to be realised by the student. Beatrice can only account for her sensual experience of the object and construct a skeuomorph of his teachings. Yet the reconfiguration of this object produces knowledge and a new object. As such the transformative and underdetermined nature of the lesson resonates as an epistemic object. Here, Harman's fictional lesson continues to act within the world, beyond his finitude, autonomously, cast off as what remains of the teacher. Ontologically the lesson exists on its own as a real object separated from both the teacher and the student; and also, simultaneously as a sensual object to be represented and recast as a new object by the student. The parallels between the example of Harman's little scenario and the Hesse's narrative surrounding Knecht and Tito might then serve as parable of the potential of educational experience to appreciate the continuity between knowledge practices as well as rupturing hegemonic structures to generate new knowledge.

Conclusion

A question that persists in the closure of *The Glass Bead* after the larger part of novel focuses on describing Knecht's ascension to the highest position within his order is whether Knecht's death was worthwhile; had he thrown it all away for nothing? In part, Tito's witnessing of his death and the affect that this has on his personal development and the potential that he will carry Knecht's unfinished work suggests otherwise. Returning to Derrida's *Aporias*, he remarks that "it is also knowing whether *to give* is something other than *to waste*, that is whether "to give one's life by sharing it" is in sum something other than "wasting one's time" (1993, pp.4.). Perhaps in this sense Knecht had given his life that ultimately shows he has not wasted his time and that his life had been worthwhile. Is this not what a teacher might do in their most essential – to give their life to their work because their work is worthwhile?

The example of Knecht's death helps to demonstrate that the worthwhileness of an educational subject might not be realised in the lifetime of the teacher. Its value may not always be measurable in the present yet could be essential to the development and continuation of knowledge practices. It is possible then, at the closure of any lesson the teacher and student depart yet the skeuomorph formed by the student as it transforms the subject produces epistemic objects to sustain the creation of new knowledge as a futural project beyond the finitude of the teacher. This paper has been interested in the idea that the educational outcomes of a more distant future are as important as those of the present. In such a situation, it is difficult to find evidence and this evidence might only serve as a history lesson of what had happened in the past. Is it time then, to sink into the abyss of a glacial lake beckoning our own finitude to make way with fear and trembling before the ineffable death of the old subject to make way for the new?

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