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Game of Objects: vicarious causation and multi-modal media

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Abstract

This paper applies philosopher Graham Harman's object-oriented theory of "vicarious causation" to an analysis of the multi-modal media phenomenon known as "Game of Thrones." Examining the manner in which George R.R. Martin's best-selling series of fantasy novels has been adapted into a board game, a video game, and a hit HBO television series, it uses the changes entailed by these processes to trace the contours of vicariously generative relations. In the course of the resulting analysis, it provides new suggestions concerning the eidetic dimensions of Harman's causal model, particularly with regard to causation in linear networks and in differing types of game systems.

Keywords

Object Oriented Ontology; Vicarious Causation; Game of Thrones; A Song of Fire and Ice

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Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

In *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005), the text which most extensively unpacks the theory of vicarious causation, Graham Harman very closely associates the underlying causal mechanics of his metaphysical argument with the topics of *media* and *communication*. A good deal of the book's intellectual labor is devoted to locating the "medium" whereby the Harmanian version of an *object*—a discrete unit of being whose full measure of existence is withdrawn from the relational domain of reality, subsisting in the ontological "vacuum" of an undisclosed, pre-worldly womb—is able to interact with and affect other objects.¹ As the search for this medium is pursued throughout the text, the transfer of causal force from one object to another is explicitly characterized as "communication." This occurs in a passage that discusses the preoccupation of medieval Islamic and early-modern European thinkers with the nature and pre-conditional bases of causal interaction:

The problem of causation by way of deputies rather than through substances themselves already dominated one of the great eras of systematic philosophy, the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in Europe. At an earlier time it had also played a role in Islamic theology. In Europe, what really links the so-called Rationalists and Empiricists is their shared puzzlement over the problem of communication, which initially seems so hopeless between the separate zones of the world. In the former group, God is invoked to serve as the link between disparate real substances; in the latter, the human mind is the medium that links together disparate qualities in the *hypothesis* of an underlying substance. In both cases, the problem is how disparate regions of the world manage to fuse together.²

Shortly after associating causal fusion with "the problem of communication," Harman reveals the manner in which the puzzlements induced by mediated impact inform his unique variety of Speculative Realist metaphysics. As the syncretic heir to both the Rationalist and Empiricist branches of European thought, "the Kantian settlement" of the first *Critique* preserves a concern with the question of communication; *but*, Harman argues, it does so in a drastically curtailed and circumscribed manner, reducing the manifold gaps that stretch between objects of every conceivable size, shape and ontological variety into the

¹ Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2005), 91.

² Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 92.

single gap separating the human subject from “whatever lies beyond.”³ In Harman’s view, this single, solitary gap is still the dominant preoccupation of contemporary, post-Kantian philosophy, and therefore continues to serve as the topical focal point for philosophical discourses about communication. As such, it is the philosophical motif to which Harman is most centrally opposed. Or, put more accurately, it is what he wishes to extrapolate into a more-than-human feature of all ontology, so that finite acts of communication across gaps of every conceivable sort can be granted their due as inherent, structural features of existence. In his pursuit of this larger agenda, Harman reintroduces the notion of “occasional cause” into his metaphysical system, translating a tweaked version of its conceptual underpinnings into his theory of vicarious causation.⁴

Due to its conflation of mediation and communication with causation itself, Harman’s philosophical project has inspired explorations of its direct relevance to the fields of media and communication studies. Harman has delivered a number of lectures comparing Marshall McLuhan’s four laws of media to Martin Heidegger’s fourfold theory of reality-as-a-whole.⁵ And in *Unit Operation: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (2006), Ian Bogost cites Harman’s notion of an object as an analogue to his ontologically-inflected definition of a computational unit.⁶ In his more recent *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (2012), Bogost also deploys the metaphorical elements involved in Harman’s model of vicarious causation towards an expanded phenomenological method, called “metaphorism,” which attempts to access the “experiences” of nonhuman objects, including technological artifacts such as the digital SLR cameras produced by Sigma.⁷

As of yet, however, such efforts have not produced a detailed, nuts-and-bolts attempt to put the technical dimensions of Harman’s causal theory to work in the analysis of a multi-mediated cultural product. This is the undertaking that

³ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 92.

⁴ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 92-93.

⁵ For example: Graham Harman, “The Medium of Being *Is* Itself a Being: Heidegger and McLuhan.” (University of Twente, Enschede, Netherlands, January 7, 2008); and “Greenberg, Heidegger, McLuhan and the Arts.” (Pacific Northwest College of Craft, Portland, OR, January 22, 2013).

⁶ Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) 5.

⁷ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or What It’s Like to be a Thing*. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2012). For Bogost’s discussion of the pan-experientialist elements in his approach, including his debt to Alfred North Whitehead in this area, see pages 10-11. The discussion of “Metaphorism,” including the analysis of a digital camera’s experience of the world, occurs in a chapter that goes by that name, on pages 61-84.

is pursued in this paper, albeit with a number of case-sensitive adjustments at the level of methodology and critical orientation. In what follows, I focus upon a specific group of closely related, mass-mediated products and texts, with an eye trained closely on the ways in which their causal relationships to each other can be modeled according to the theory of vicarious causation.

The texts to be analyzed in this way are members of the multi-modal media grouping that is popularly known as the *Game of Thrones* (or *GoT*) franchise. Altogether, this grouping includes a best-selling series of novels by George R.R. Martin; an extremely successful television series that is currently being produced and aired by HBO; a video game made for PlayStation 3 and Xbox by the ATLUS corporation; a strategic board game merchandised by Fantasy Flight Games; and a large number of other cross-marketed products, including a fairly typical smattering of toys, comic books, tee-shirts, and mugs. Although some of the philosophical insights to be derived from this particular nexus of products could be extracted from other, similar franchises (such as *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, or *Doctor Who*), there are a number of ways in which this particular textual and commercial cluster recommends itself to the type of analysis that is carried out here. Most particularly, this includes a salient relationship of the franchise's core narrative elements to actual historical events—specifically: to the fifteenth-century English dynastic conflicts known as the Wars of the Roses. As we will see, this relationship can be interestingly modeled in vicariously causal terms.

Throughout subsequent discussion, particular focus is given to the books of the series and the first three seasons of the television show, the latter of which comprise adaptations of the former.⁸ At points throughout, the video and board games are subjected to somewhat less detailed, more intermittent scrutiny, while collector's items such as action figures and coffee cups are more-or-less omitted from the discussion.

At the level of metaphysical analysis, subsequent argument treats various modes and adaptations of the *Game of Thrones* product nexus as specimens of what are called *objects* in Harman's Object Oriented Philosophy. That is: they are treated as discrete entities, possessed of a measure of ontological independence from the relational contexts in which they are enmeshed and from the parts of which they are made.⁹ Treated as such, these modes and adaptations are analyzed

⁸ The entire television series is simply titled "Game of Thrones," while the first and second books are entitled *A Game of Thrones* and *A Clash of Kings*, respectively.

⁹ This metaphysical characterization of objects is spread throughout all of Harman's current oeuvre, but for a pivotally important inaugural text, see Graham Harman, *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005). For a

according to the theory of vicarious causation, particularly with regard to this theory's technical portrayal of qualitative interaction between objects. In terms of scope, this analysis includes the causal relationships of these modes and adaptations to each other, as well as their relationship to the historical events by which they are partly inspired.

With all of that said, this is a convenient point at which to clarify the overall relationship of the type of media analysis that is engaged in here to Harman's object-oriented philosophy (OOP), and to Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) as a whole. The first thing that should be pointed out, in this regard, is that these terms are not synonyms. There is in fact more than one type of Object Oriented Ontology, of which Harman's version is only one specimen.¹⁰ Throughout this paper, I focus only on OOP, and do not delve into the rest of OOO. The former's relationship to the current work is that of a salient influence to an influenced party. As whole, this paper functions as a sort of experimental test-run for the ways in which certain Harmanian ideas can be applied to the study of multi-mediated texts, with *Game of Thrones* serving as something of a guinea pig.

As will become clear below, however, OOP's impact on this experiment is tempered by an important adjustments at the level of technical detail. This concerns Harman's general reluctance to allow any sort of positive characterization of an object's essential qualities, or any ontic parsing of essential and inessential traits. Although it is motivated by an understandable, politically-sensitive caution about the question of essence, this reluctance also serves to hamper the extent to which the theory of vicarious causation can be applied to empirical content as an analytical tool.¹¹ Below, I suggest a compromise approach, one that preserves the ultimate unknowability of essence while allowing for a greater degree of positive speculation concerning the ways in which relational or sensual qualities might be cautiously and tentatively tied to the real or even essential qualities of an object. In addition to this adjustment, I also propose a new subcategory of the metaphysical mechanism that lies at the heart of vicarious causation, which Harman calls "allure."¹² Called "mediational allure," this new category refers to what happens when one object affects the manner in

compressed, summary rendering of the ideas contained in several of his early texts, see Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011).

¹⁰ At the level of systematic philosophical differences, the most significant divergence is between Harman and Levi Bryant, whose version of OOO denies that objects withdraw into a vacuum. See Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011) 71.

¹¹ For Harman's take on the politics of essence, see: Harman, *Tool Being*, 172-173.

¹² See *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 141-144, and elsewhere throughout the book.

which a second object has a causal encounter with a third. Involving three objects altogether, this new variety of allure is able to include more objects than would seem to be allowed under Harman's "Binary Contact Principle," while still complying with its overall rule regarding the nature of causal impact.¹³

Its technical import aside, this paper also contains several findings with broad implications for the metaphysical modeling of media and mediational processes. Extracted from the empirical case study, these include several ways of describing impact in linear causal networks, including descriptions of the ways in which mediated formal causation can bypass chronological linearity. Also included are a few suggestions about the ways in which a transition from narratively predetermined to gamically open-ended textual outcomes might have metaphysical significance.

Before getting to any of that, however, the theory of vicarious causation will need to be briefly explained. For this reason, the bulk of the next section is devoted to a compressed summary of the theory's main processes and components. Once this explanation is carried out, we will turn to our analysis of *Game of Thrones* and begin to unpack its theoretical implications.

Vicarious Causation

The term, "vicarious causation," refers to the lack of full presence that, in Harman's model of the world, attends any encounter between beings. Harman holds that when two objects come into contact, neither plumbs the ontological depths of the other. On the contrary, they only ever touch via a metonymic process, through which one aspect or quality of a thing fills in for its full reality, thereby producing a relational result.¹⁴ One of Harman's favorite examples for illustrating this causal model—one that is also used by earlier, occasionalist thinkers—is the burning of cotton by fire.¹⁵ When this occurs, the fire does not relate to every sensual quality comprising the being of the cotton, such as its color, scent, or smell. Nor does it have a direct encounter with the ontological factor that holds the fire together as a being (the "real object"), or to any of the fire's qualities-unto-itself (its "real qualities"). What the fire touches in the cotton is only the sensual, relatable qualities of the thing that are relevant to *it*.¹⁶

¹³ Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009)

¹⁴ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 201; 206.

¹⁵ Instances of this example are spread throughout all of his books.

¹⁶ "[F]ire burns cotton and rock shatters window. And yet these objects do not fully touch one another, since both harbor additional secrets inaccessible to the other, as

Although the resultant encounter may transform or even destroy other sensual qualities in the thing, the actual point of contact is between the flammability of the cotton and the burning quality of the flame.

For Harman, this is the nature of all relation: things only ever make contact with other things as reductions, caricatures, or qualitative profiles of themselves.¹⁷ The basis for this metaphysical claim derives from the fundamental argument of Harman's work—namely: that the discrete entities of the world cannot be reduced to their relations to other things, but contain a withdrawn, non-relational nugget at the core of their being. In the absence of such an ontological factor, Harman argues, change would be impossible, and reality would be reduced to an endless game of hot potato in which relations are perpetually passed around without ever arriving at any sort of substantial anchor.¹⁸ Because every object that exists exceeds its relations of the moment, its encounters with other things are never fully able to compass its being. All interaction is therefore fundamentally mediated in nature, involving the limited participation of relational proxies. As we have seen, a causal location or event is itself defined as a *medium*:

A medium is any space in which two objects interact, whether the human mind be one of these objects or not. Human sense experience is only one particular zone or medium of the world, and possibly not even the most interesting one. The medium between objects is the glue that makes possible the entire carpentry of things—without it, the world would remain a set of noncommunicating crystalline spheres sleeping away in private vacuums. If substances cannot communicate directly, then there still must be some way in which they allow their traits to break free and act as couriers and emissaries, entering the world of relations as if into an illegal dance club.¹⁹

The chapters of *Guerrilla Metaphysics* comprise a cumulative search for the nature of this medium, throughout which the gradual accumulation of concepts serves as a set of stepping-stones to the answer. Although the resultant sense of mystery lends itself to an interesting reading experience, I will here take a reverse

when the faint aroma of the cotton and the foreboding sparkle of the fire remain deaf to one another's songs." (Harman, *Tool Being*, 170.)

¹⁷ This idea is initially developed throughout the first part of *Tool Being*, while its causal consequences are the focus of all of *Guerrilla Metaphysics*.

¹⁸ Arguments for this idea are also spread throughout Harman's body-of-work, particularly occupying the first and third parts of *Tool Being*. For a compressed rendition of the arguments, see *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, Chapter 6, "Objects," 73-87.

¹⁹ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 92.

approach to summarizing the outcome, giving the answer first, and then unpacking its explanatory components—a method that seems more fitted to a compressed explanation.

In short, the answer is: *the medium of relation for two objects is another object, inside of which they meet.*²⁰ This is accompanied by an important stipulation, which is that, *when two relating objects come together inside a medium, they produce a new object, which is the relation itself.* This proviso accords with an oft-repeated statement that occurs in Harman's work: "Every relation is also an object."²¹ Thus, even phenomena of a highly processual sort—such as avalanches, volcanic eruptions, and eclipses—all count as objects in an object-oriented framework.²² This is true all the way down the scale of spatial size, with autonomous objects folded into autonomous objects from galaxies to solar systems to atoms and smaller particles, each part of a larger thing that amounts to a separate being in its own right. The inclusive nature of this claim also applies to the entire span of existing time: every causal event is an object, with events of various size folded into each other across differently-sized spans of time. For this reason, Harman argues that efficient causation is really only a special case of formal causation. All objects are forms, and every efficient act is contained by them, comprising one of their formally configured parts.²³

The subcomponents and sub-processes comprising vicarious causation are fairly complex, involving distinct structural domains of existence. On the relational plane of reality, Harman argues that objects appear to each other as "sensual" manifestations.²⁴ A sensual being is inherently relational, only appearing when an object encounters another object. For example: when a graduate student has an office meeting with an adviser, the adviser does not encounter the entirety of the student, but a relational stand-in, made up from a combination of the student's sensual qualities. As a sensual object, the student himself is encountered via an abbreviated, singular "note" that compresses the

²⁰ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 189; 193.

²¹ See, for instance: Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 85: "But if every object can also be considered as a set of relations, it is equally true that *any relation must count as a substance*. When two objects enter into genuine relation, even if they do not fuse together, they generate a reality that has all the features that we require of an object."

²² Again: Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 85.

²³ "...it should be clear that objects encounter their neighbors as unified *forms*, not just as tiny pixels of tiny uncuttable matter... The story of the world is a tale of interacting forms or objects of all possible sizes at all possible levels, not of pampered scintillae of underlying material." (Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 170)

²⁴ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 214-221; *The Quadruple Object*, Chapter 2, "Sensual Objects," 20-34.

entire array of his relational being into a recognizable façade.²⁵ In this way, the sensual object serves as a realist version of Husserl's intentional object, a being which can be seen from a variety of angles yet still holds together as the same being despite the differing perspectives from which it is seen.²⁶ When this happens, sensual qualities never appear as pure qualitative data, but always as qualities of the sensual object to which they are tied. If the student is red-headed, for example, then the redness of his hair is never simply redness-as-such, but the red of *that particular student's hair*. This is true despite the fact that the is related to a part of the student that itself comprises an object—the student's head, or the hair itself, conceived as an object—because the form of the larger object that is the student unifies and inflects its qualities.

The same is true *all* of the student's recognizable traits. His vocal inflections, his eye color and quirks of personality: each derives its qualitative force from one of the student's subcomponents, and this subcomponent itself comprises an object incorporated into the student. Despite their plurality and distinctness from each other, the qualities of these components are combined in the intentional "note" that is the student's sensual profile. A strange type of unity-within-plurality therefore prevails within the sensual object. Harman holds that each of its qualities *is* the object encountered in relational acts. Capable of manifesting as *any* of these qualities, the sensual object is always less than the sum of its known features, or something that manifests entirely through each of them.²⁷ In this way, sensual objects behave like information compressing machines, siphoning qualities from the smaller parts of which they are made and combining them into the single, recognizable note that is *that object*.²⁸ In Husserlian terms, the tension produced by this formal unity is called the *eidōs*.²⁹

In the majority of ontological circumstances, eidetic unity functions as a background factor informing interactions between objects. Things simply coexist

²⁵ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 185.

²⁶ This characterization of intentional objects is spread throughout Husserl's *Logical Investigations, Volumes I and II*. Three of the investigations that are most relevant to object-oriented philosophy are *Investigation II: The Ideal Unity of the Species and Modern Theories of Abstraction*, in Edmund Husserl *Logical Investigations: Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 235-313; *Investigation III: On the Theory of Wholes and Parts* and *Investigation V: On Intentional Experiences and their 'Contents,'* both in Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations: Volume 2* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-45 and 77-334, respectively.

²⁷ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 216. This point actually involves a departure from Husserl, who argued that intentional objects are more than the sum of their parts.

²⁸ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 181.

²⁹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 100-102.

on the sensual plane of reality, taking for granted the identity of other objects with their qualities. In this mode of interaction, things are *adjacent* to each other, and possessed of *accidental* or *inessential* traits that spill over from the qualitative surplus of their parts.³⁰ In cases of adjacency, the proximity of some objects to others means that certain qualities can bleed together without thereby collapsing into a new object.³¹ On the windowsill next to the desk at which I currently write, for example, there sits a large curved terrarium in which a bed of moss, a few stones, a fragment of branch-wood and a small, bright green plant are arranged in a natural-looking tableau. Across the curved glass exterior of this object, light from a nearby lamp is reflected, casting a number of bright, yellow-white spots across the surface of the glass. Because these are purely sensual in nature, the interaction between the light and the glass does not render the terrarium something other than what it would be if I were to reach over and turn off the lamp. Even in darkness it would still be the same object. In this instance, qualitative interaction is merely a result of adjacency—the qualities of one thing bleeding over into another.

In the case of accidental qualities, a similar type of spillover occurs—this time from the component objects that comprise the larger object of which they are a part. If I notice, for example, that one edge of the terrarium’s mossy bed looks a bit withered and yellowed in comparison to the rest of it, this qualitative difference does not disrupt my ability to recognize the entire terrarium for what it is. This single detail is inessential to the overall coherence of the object’s intentional note, arising from one of its parts—the moss. From this we can see that, as a sensual object, the terrarium includes certain qualities from its constitutive units as essential, while rendering others inessential to its overall viability as a relationally coherent being. The seeping-over of inessential qualities into our perception of a thing is due to the fact that its parts always amount to more than what they are in their compressed rendering via the unified sensual/intentional note of the object.

Just as importantly, there is also a “real object” behind the sensual object. This is what the thing actually is unto itself, outside of its relations to other things. Throughout Harman’s oeuvre, the primary function of the real object is to serve as a principle of unity for the thing-as-a-whole. In its ontologically withdrawn capacity, it participates in a tweaked, realist version of what Heidegger called “readiness-to-hand” (*vorhandenheit*), a state of functional execution that refers

³⁰ For the technical breakdown of this terminology, see Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 182-183.

³¹ Harman’s technical term for an object that is seen in a single moment, encrusted with accidents and inessential traits supplied by its neighbors and parts, is “element.” (Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 194).

beyond any individual moment in time and can only be made present in a limited and reduced manner (*zuhandenheit*).³² As such, it also a revised version of Aristotle's "substantial form," in which the real object's ability to withdraw behind the moments of its existence fortify the coherence of its metaphysical function—meaning that the entire object, sensual and real, is the "substance" itself.³³

In this way, the real object is the most formalized element of the object-as-a-whole, holding an undisclosed, non-relational set of real qualities together as component pieces, and also seeming (in a less than precisely defined manner) to insure the formal unity of the sensual object with its own qualities. These functions are so purely formal in nature that the real object is said not even to be located in time or space. Rather, it is in some sense prior to time itself, subsisting in an immaterial, vacuum-sealed eternity, and its tensions with the sensual objects of the relational world are actually held to be the *cause* of space.³⁴ By serving as a principle of unity, holding the sensual qualities of things together in a manner through which they are respectively coordinated to each other in a formalized framework of interrelations, the real object interacts with the qualities of things in a space-producing way. Time, on the other hand, is produced solely by tensions subsisting on the level of sensual relations, leaving out the real object altogether; while the metaphysical *essence* of a thing is outside of both space and time, being the product of the tensions generated between the real object and *its* qualities.³⁵ In addition to these time-and-space-transcending features, the existence of the real object does not seem to depend upon the actual assembly of its parts at one place and in one time, despite being "caused" or "produced" by them whenever this occurs. As a pure formal unity, it appears to exist whether or not this happens at all.³⁶

As previously said, the majority of worldly interactions involve the adjacent and accidental seepage of qualities. The visages which things usually present to each other are "encrusted" with accidents and inessential traits, and this

³² For Heidegger's original explanation of these terms, see Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), Section 16, "*The Worldly Character of the Surrounding World Making Itself Known in Innerworldly Beings*, 67-83. For Harman's revisionist reading of them, see *Tool Being*, esp. section 3, "Equipment is Global," (35-44), section 4, "Reversal: Broken Tools," (44-49), section 7, "The As-Structure" (68-80), and section 8, "A Second Axis," (80-87).

³³ See *Tool Being*, Section 24, "Classical Milestones," 268-280.

³⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 99-100.

³⁵ See Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 100.

³⁶ "...an object is anything that has a unified reality that is autonomous from its wider context and also from its own pieces." (Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 116).

type of interplay surrounds them with “a *black noise* of muffled objects hovering at the fringes of our attention.”³⁷ Here, “blackness” refers to the fact that qualities are always attached to objects whose full being is withdrawn into the darkness of a non-relational sphere. Because the sensual proximities that result in this type of ontological noise do not result in causal interactions, they account for what Harman calls “buffered causation.” This is a state of affairs in which the nearness and infinite enclosed-ness of objects is not always or immediately generative—in which two or more objects can in fact be near to each other without causing anything to happen at all.³⁸ Because this is a common condition of reality, something is needed to account for cases in which causation actually occurs. As the filler of that role, vicarious causation is not a foil to buffered causation, but only its active counterpoint, the flipside of the same coin. It is causation that occurs despite the buffering, that which occasionally lifts the buffer.

The general mechanism for vicarious causation is called “allure.”³⁹ Possessed of numerous sub-varieties, it results from the inability of the object’s unified relational note to encompass everything that is contained in its parts. This inability creates structural weaknesses which allow qualities to partially break free from the qualitative unity of a sensual object. When this occurs, the quality that is freed becomes a causal agent that interacts with another object. The manner in which it does so involves an extremely significant technical point, one that will inform much of the subsequent analysis carried out in this paper. This is that, *instead of attacking this unity head-on, the vicarious cause strikes at it through the variable and inessential features exhibited by the object’s parts; i.e. through that which is not fully incorporated by the relational note.*⁴⁰ As a structural compression of various qualities, the eidetic note is itself a type of non-assailable form, not fully withdrawn in the time-transcending manner of the “real object,” but nonetheless fortified in its essential configuration against the vicissitudes of any sort of causal impact. Thus, the only way that new things can come into being is through the creation of *new forms* with new essential and inessential features of their own.⁴¹ In his lengthy explanation of this process, Harman

³⁷ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 183.

³⁸ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 208-209; 221-225.

³⁹ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 141-144, and at numerous points thereafter throughout the book.

⁴⁰ Harman maintains that the sensual object continues to be the “warlord” or dominating master of its notes even during processes of vicarious causation, but that nonetheless ceases to be “identical” with them, meaning that they have achieved a sort of semi-autonomy. (Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 176)

⁴¹ Harman does not exactly put it that way and I am engaging in a bit of interpretive extrapolation here; but this claim is firmly grounded in a close reading of *Guerilla Metaphysics* and I do not believe that he would object to it. One question that arises

focuses primarily on two phenomena from human experience, humor and metaphor, whose structure serve as generalizable analogues for vicarious causation as a whole. Building on essays by Bergson, Ortega y Gasset, and Max Black, Harman extracts underlying similarities from this pair of phenomena and uses them to account for causation-as-a-whole.

The nature of the account is as follows: in cases involving both metaphor and humor, a sensual quality is shaken free from the unified object of which it is a part. When it does so, it begins to act either as an overwhelmingly dominant feature of an object (humor),⁴² or as a metonymic stand-in for an object as a whole (metaphor).⁴³ Both of these processes comprise instances of allure, in which the loosened, semi-autonomous quality is forefronted as a feature of the thing, thereby becoming ontologically prominent and serving as a causal lure for other objects. As this occurs, the sensual quality begins to behave as an object in its own right—a move enabled by the fact that it really *is* the quality of another object, i.e. of the component part to which it belongs.⁴⁴ This process releases new forces into the world, resulting in the creation of new objects. Specifically: the forefronted sensual quality comes into relation with another object, and this contact produces a larger object of which both of the former are parts. Always amounting to more than these, this larger assemblage comprises a new, independent thing, possessed of its own withdrawn, non-relational form.⁴⁵ As such, it is the object that has been vicariously caused.

We now have a sense of the core terms and processes involved in vicarious causation. Before moving on to consider their relevance to *Game of Thrones*, however, I wish to highlight a few additional aspects of Harman's overall take on objects. The first of these concerns additional details on what

here is how *destruction* ought to be defined in Harman's version of the world. When the creation of a new object involves the radical reconfiguration of one of its ingredient parts to such an extent that the form of the part is completely changed, does that object actually cease to be, or does its form just completely withdraw from the relational plane of reality while still continuing to exist? And if the latter is the case, what sort of terminology should be used to describe this sort of withdrawal? Would the very concept of "destruction" have to be replaced with something else? And might the thing that is not quite "destroyed" be capable of entering into a new relational context in a different place and time?

⁴² Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Chapter 9, "Humor," 125-144.

⁴³ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Chapter 8, "Metaphor," 101-124 Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Chapter 9, "Humor," 125-144..

⁴⁴ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Chapter 10, Section A, "Severed Qualities," 150-152.

⁴⁵ For a numerically-sequenced breakdown of this process as it applies specifically to the case of metaphor, see Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 176-178.

counts as such. We recently saw that Harman holds objects to exist at every level of physical scale, with discrete ontological units descending downwards in a possibly infinite manner. Along with this general inclusiveness at the level of physical size, Harman's philosophical system also includes *ideas*, *fictions* and *abstract universals* as types of objects. In his version of the cosmos, things do not need to be materially embodied in order to exist, possessed as they are of ultimately immaterial form.⁴⁶ Hence, his system includes discrete ideas and fictions folded into larger discrete ideas and fictions at various levels of "size," each comprising a unique entity in its own right. This will prove useful to keep in mind as we begin to discuss fictional texts as types of objects.

The second point to be made here concerns the exact relationship between *mediation* and *causation* in Harman's theory. Above, we saw that Harman draws a technical distinction between *adjacency*, *accidents*, and *causal interaction*. In adjacent and accidental varieties of interplay, the qualities of things spill over onto each other without producing new objects, while instances of causation always result in the creation of new things. These metaphysical cleavages also apply to Harman's use of the terms *mediation* and *communication*. Both terms designate the transfer of generative or *causal* force from one object to another and exclude consideration of adjacency and accidental interaction. As one in a pair of alternate designators, *mediation* highlights the reduced, sensual, and qualitatively proximal nature of causation; whereas *communication* indicates the salience of the ontological gap across which one object affects another—the incomplete intrusion of one object into another object's withdrawn, vacuum-sealed reality-into-itself. In short: the vicarious causal model construes media and communication in purely *causal* terms, according to which the thing that is caused is always, constantly and categorically construed as an *object*.

A few disclaimers are necessitated by this point. Foremost among these is the fact that Harman's rather technical definition of these terms is not descriptive or diagnostically exhaustive, even within the parameters of his own system. In my previous example of the terrarium reflecting lamplight from its glass surface, it is possible to speak of an *adjacent* sensual quality as something that mediates my experience of the thing. The reflected lamplight, that is, has an effect on my perception of the terrarium, without necessarily producing a new object.

⁴⁶ Critiques of materialism occur in almost all of Harman's major books. For one of these, see Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 7-19. For an endorsement of abstract entities, see the following quote: "Virtue and love are real, if vaguely grasped; we define them in tentative fashion by way of attributes, but these traits never quite get at the thing itself. The power of a tyrant or rhetorician is insufficient, because these are merely superficial efforts at the mercy of a reality that only *wisdom* can probe, not power." (Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 93).

Contrarily, the visual tableau resulting from this adjacency might itself be definable as a quality that produces a new object through my experience of it. In either case, however, there is a manifest need to incorporate the topic of adjacency into discussions of mediation; for an adjacent quality *can* in some way serve as a mediator of the thing to which it is adjacent, and the same could be said of accidents. Given the complexity of Harman's metaphysical model and the technical alterations that are suggested to it below, however, this task is not pursued here, but saved for another day. For the remainder of this particular paper, mediation and communication are spoken of only in the strictly Harmanian sense, as matters pertinent to the subject of causation between objects.

Much of what has thus-far been said raises additional questions about the underlying nature of the "causation" that occurs during vicariously causal processes. Throughout this section, we have seen that the "real object" is in some way located outside of space and time (although a reference to "location" is problematic in such a case). We have also seen that every relation is an object; that causation between objects is always mediated, and that the category of "object" does not simply include bodies extended in space, but also ideas, fictions, and physical and psychological processes. A number of resultant questions arise (and have been extensively hashed-out in online discussions and flame wars around the subject of OOO). These concern the exact spatio-temporal location of a vicariously causal act (i.e. *where and when does it happen?*); the exact nature of the thing that is caused (i.e. *what exactly is an object?*); and the means by which ontology and metaphysics can be distinguished from epistemology in an object-oriented framework (*how do you know that any particular thing you're talking about is really an object at all?*).

The point to be made here is that, in Harman's version of OOO, there is no definitive answer to any of these questions. In fact, an underlying motivation of his entire philosophical project is to encourage an acceptance of the underlying ambiguities that flow from them. *Tool Being* ends by posing a question as to where, exactly, an object withdraws.⁴⁷ Since its publication, Harman has never answered it. As inherently relational factors of existence, he argues, space and time cannot fully encompass an object. But this does not mean that he is going to tell us exactly what exists outside them. In his view, we can never know with absolute certainty what is or is not a real object—yet he repeatedly refers to objects of every conceivable sort as if they were real things. Harman tends to

⁴⁷ Harman, *Tool Being*, 294.

present these ambiguities as general factors-of-existence that cast the ultimate nature of things in a somewhat occluded light, without catastrophically sabotaging our ability to speculate about their structure. Despite its move towards a somewhat more positive characterization of objects, the general spirit of this tendency is preserved in the current paper.

A specific structural point that needs to be further discussed on this front is the binary nature of vicarious causation. Because substances are discrete units, every moment of causal contact is ultimately dyadic in nature, even when multiple points of contact occur at the same time. When two objects mutually affect each other in the course of an encounter, this is actually not one event, but comprises two separate relations, or objects. In each of these events, one object always acts as the agent, and the other as the patient—and this division helps to account for why mutual impact has to be ontologically counted as two separate events in the first place. Harman calls this rule “*The Binary Contact Principle*.”⁴⁸ It will play a significant role in technical discussions below.

Another necessary disclaimer concerns the complex relationship of Harman’s causal theory to the history of discourses about communication and mediation, from Plato and Aristotle’s writings on these subjects up through the occasionalist, scholastic, and phenomenological commentaries on them. More recently, one could also consider its relevance to Peircian and Saussurian semiotics, post-structuralist theories of the sign, McLuhanite media theory and the various intellectual histories that have attended all of these. Here I will simply acknowledge that there is much to be said on all of these topics, and affirm a future intention to comment on them in a less empirically-focused paper. Before departing from such matters, however, I will briefly share my conviction that the classical elements in Harman’s work provide new ways of thinking about some of the epoch-spanning anxieties and dilemmas that have suffused Western discourses about communication, such as those discussed in John Durham Peter’s *Speaking Into the Air* (1997). Particularly relevant, in this regard, is Peter’s discussion of the main media-related anxieties expressed in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, i.e. the corrosive effects of writing on memory and on the authentically dialectical co-presence of human souls.⁴⁹ Put very briefly: Harman’s entire philosophy—and especially the theory of vicarious causation—speak rather forcefully to underlying longings that inform this variety of Platonic media-phobia. For Harman’s philosophical

⁴⁸ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 209.

⁴⁹ John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

position holds that nothing is ever fully co-present in the first place. Rather, everything is always-already mediated and reduced from the moment it encounters anything else. Thus, while retaining and fusing certain elements of Platonic and Aristotelian thought, his ideas also contain suggestions as to how one might negotiate the deep-seated pathologies of Western ideation on the subject of media.

Lastly, a final significant point concerns an issue that was briefly mentioned in the previous section. It is tied up with the overall relationship of Harman's work to the phenomenological tradition of which it is a realist-revisionist outgrowth. Above, we saw above that the definition of a sensual object involves significant appropriations from the work of Edmund Husserl. This comes, however, with an extremely significant departure on the issue of eidetic reduction. Husserl argues that it is possible to arrive at an intellectual intuition of an intentional object's *eidos* by considering it from a number of different angles and abstracting from their particulars. In keeping with his claim that the *eidos* is always immediately present in any apprehension of a thing, Harman explicitly disagrees with Husserl on this point, denying the possibility of any eidetic apprehension abstracted from an immanent encounter with an object's sensual qualities:

Late in the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl makes it clear that the *eidos* of an object is incapable of sensual presence; we have access to it only through categorical intuition, such that only the work of the intellect delivers the *eidos*. But in fact, there is no reason to assume that the intellect can make reality present in a way that the senses cannot... In other words, Husserl is wrong to distinguish between the sensual and the intellectual here; both sensual and categorical intuition are forms of intuition, and to intuit something is not the same as to be it. Hence the eidetic features of any object can never be made present even through the intellect, but can only be approached indirectly by way of allusion, whether in the arts or in the sciences.⁵⁰

Although Harman's position is perfectly consistent from a technical point of view, it does create certain difficulties when it comes to putting his ideas to work in the analysis of actual objects. For in his take on the *real object* that lies beneath the sensual or intentional one, Harman has always very forcefully denied the possibility of apprehending or otherwise encountering the withdrawn essence of a thing. When this understandable caution at the level of the real object is

⁵⁰ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 27-28.

coupled with the further, technically-motivated argument that the structural center of the *relational* object is also unknowable except through direct sensual apprehension, one is left wondering what exactly one can say about an object at all, other than that it exists and is held together by unknowable forms at the relational and non-relational levels of its being. This results in further dilemmas as to how the theory of vicarious causation can be brought to bear on the analysis of actual causal processes. Questions arise as to usefulness, and accusations as to “uselessness” erupt.⁵¹

The solution that I will here propose involves a specific form of “as if” speculation. It goes like this: when applying the vicarious model to various types of mediated causal interaction, I suggest a willing-but-conditional suspension of disbelief, whereby one can tentatively identify a particular quality of a thing as being somewhat inessential to its sensually manifest nature, and other qualities as comprising its more central or core components. This proposal involves the self-consciously unverifiable, cautious claim that certain intellectually-ascertainable qualities of a thing play *something* of central role in its relational structure. In doing so, these elements also share in the overall unity-within-plurality partaken of by eidetic qualities, but are possessed of a structural centrality or prominence of a different sort. As we will shortly see, the resultant empirical parsing of central and inessential qualities involves a speculative process of reverse-engineering through the comparison of causally-related objects, through which indexes of differing qualities are established and cross-referenced with each other. When this has been carried out, one can then attempt to trace the contours of vicarious transformations at the level of qualitative interaction.

When it comes to positing the exact relationship between the sensual qualities that have been analyzed in this manner to real qualities and essences in the non-relational domain, this approach holds that *the structurally central qualities of a sensual object are those that are most likely to have analogues—or something akin to analogues—in the real one*. In this way, one can preserve a degree of the caution for which Harman is a philosophical advocate, while also using his ideas to yield positive insights into the changes undergone by actual objects. This is the approach that I now apply to “Game of Thrones.”

Ice, Fire, and The Wars of the Roses

The shift to our empirical materials is best begun with a few paragraphs of introduction to the series of novels that serve as their ur-text. Unto itself, this

⁵¹ Here I will ask the reader to trust me regarding the contents of a few conversations that I have had with some skeptical interlocutors on certain social networking sites.

series is not known by the name *Game of Thrones*, but rather, “A Song of Ice and Fire.” The use of the former name as a designator for the cultural-phenomenon-as-a-whole has resulted from the popularity of the HBO series, which took an abbreviated version of the first book, *A Game of Thrones*, as an overall title across its seasons. For purposes of clarity, I will henceforth use “A Song of Ice and Fire,” or sometimes just “Song,” when referring only to the books, while using *Game of Thrones* to refer to the TV series and its cross-marketed spinoff products. The relationship of “Song” to the historical Wars of the Roses is the main focus of this section. We will turn to further adaptations in the following section. Before starting out, I hereby warn any concerned reader that this section contains massive spoilers. With that said, I begin:

Since the publication of the first book in 1996, the “Song of Ice and Fire” novels have experienced huge success as publishing phenomena. All but the first of the five current books in the series has topped the *New York Times Bestseller* list, and the publication of the latest installment in the series broke sales records for 2011, leading to speculation that George R.R. Martin was single-handedly saving the sale of print books.⁵² Though bolstered by the popularity of the television series, the bestselling status of the books was already well-established prior to HBO’s adaptation of the books. Given the already-existing nature of the resultant fan-base, the popularity of the series doubtlessly served as a motivation for adapting them in the first place.

In addition to their commercial success, the books have also garnered widespread critical acclaim. Reviewers have praised them for their incorporation of morally ambiguous themes, psychologically complex characters, and issues of contemporary social and political relevance into works of popular fantasy.⁵³ At

⁵² Carol Memmett, “Record Sales for George R.R. Martin’s *A Dance With Dragons*.” *USA Today*, July 14, 2011, <http://books.usatoday.com/bookbuzz/post/2011/07/record-sales-for-george-rr-martins-a-dance-with-dragons/176909/1>; and Charlie Anders, “Is George R.R. Martin helping to save print book sales?” *i09, We Come From the Future*, September 6, 2011, <http://io9.com/5837748/is-george-rr-martin-helping-to-save-print-book-sales>.

⁵³ To quote just one of the many, overwhelmingly positive reviews of the series, Lev Grossman wrote of the fourth book in *Time*: “What really distinguishes Martin, and what marks him as a major force for evolution in fantasy, is his refusal to embrace a vision of the world as a Manichaeian struggle between Good and Evil. Tolkien’s work has enormous imaginative force, but you have to go elsewhere for moral complexity. Martin’s wars are multifaceted and ambiguous, as are the men and women who wage them and the gods who watch them and chortle, and somehow that makes them mean more. *A Feast for Crows* isn’t pretty elves against gnarly orcs. It’s men and women slugging it out in the muck, for money and power and lust and love.” Lev Grossman, “The

both the popular and critical level, one reason for the success of the series derives from the finesse with which it accomplishes a double-edged task, introducing darkly realistic, contemporary overtones into the storyline while nonetheless managing to conjure the sense of adventure and enchantment that is expected from works of fantasy literature.

This double-edged objective informs every element of the story, from plot and characterization to its overall setting. The latter is a late-medieval world, located either on another planet or in an alternate universe. Known as the “World of Westeros,” it is somewhat atypical of settings in the mainstream fantasy genre, in that it appears to be fairly well-advanced down the path toward an early-modern phase in its history. At the time when the story begins, the old myths and legends have fallen under a pall of doubt. Magic no longer seems to work. Power is wielded in an increasingly cynical and instrumental manner. Rationalism, mercantilism, and a centralized state apparatus are all on the rise, and something resembling a Weberian disenchantment seems to be sitting on the near temporal horizon.⁵⁴ But just as this outcome begins to seem like a *fait accompli*, the situation radically reverses itself. All of the fading legends turn out to be true. Magic, mysticism, and mythological beings return into the world, affecting the outcomes of the series’ major conflicts and adventures.⁵⁵ The overall trajectory of history and reality seems to shift—as if the universe in which the story is set has made a different determination about the ultimate nature of existence.

Yet these developments do not unfold in the manner of a simple anti-modern fairytale. Throughout each of the books in the series, the resurgence of a mythic, pre-modern worldview is laced with elements of the modernity whose

American Tolkein,” *Time*, November 13, 2005. For more on the way in which the political and moral landscapes of Westeros resonate with those of modern America, also see Grossman’s NPR review of the fifth book: Lev Grossman, “George R.R. Martin’s Complex Epic for an Ambivalent Age.” On *NPR’s All Things Considered*, July 7, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/11/137652436/r-r-martins-sardonic-epic-for-an-ambivalent-age>. For other wholly or mostly positive reviews, see Jeff Vandermeer, “‘A Dance With Dragons,’ By George R.R. Martin,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2011; and David Orr, “Dragon Ascendant: George R.R. Martin and the Rise of Fantasy,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2012.

⁵⁴ This is especially the feeling of the first book. Although its narrative is bookended by a pair of fantastical scenes, it is otherwise dominated by its portrait of politics, statecraft and warfare in an apparently secularizing age. See: George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam, 1996).

⁵⁵ This process really gets under way in the second half of the second book and persists throughout the rest of the series. See: George R.R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam, 2011).

arrival it appears to forestall. Dragons, for example, are shown to be the fantastical equivalents of airborne WMDs, raining fiery mass death from the skies at the behest of conquering armies.⁵⁶ Giants and elfin forest dwellers resemble threatened indigenous ethnic groups. An evil supernatural enemy uses an army made up of those most soulless and metaphorically modern of monsters—zombies—to wage war against humanity; and this ultimate threat posed by this evil is a world-wide, potentially ecocidal climate catastrophe.⁵⁷

Along with this rather contemporary rendering of fantastical motifs, the more realistic elements of the novels are also loaded with modern resonance. The wars engaged in by the human characters result in events similar to recent instances of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Realistically squalid depictions of a society dominated by feuding noble houses bear a more-than-passing resemblance to a world run by over-mighty corporations.⁵⁸ Characters inhabiting this social landscape suffer from survival guilt, post-traumatic stress disorder, narcissism, megalomania, psychopathy, and cognitive dissonance. And throughout most of the series, human beings— and especially their political elites— demonstrate a repeated inability to rise above self-interest and reckon squarely with the potentially terminal threats by which they are collectively faced.

But despite the notes of modern complexity and ambiguity that these narrative elements introduce into Martin's fantasy world, they do not do so entirely at the expense of the story's genre elements; for through a combination of deft pacing, frequent and suspenseful shifts in perspective, occasional touches of larger-than-life melodrama and some willfully naïve indulgences of the story's more fantastical motifs, Martin is able to deliver on the affects typical of mass-

⁵⁶ This comparison was also made by one of the writers and executive producers of the *Game of Thrones* television show, D.B. Weiss, during an "Inside the Episode" interview snippet. See: "Walk of Punishment, Inside the Episode," *Game of Thrones*, first broadcast April 4, 2013, by HBO.

⁵⁷ Referred to as "Others" and "White Walkers," the monsters differ from modern zombies in that they are depicted as being pale and having cold blue eyes. But they are essentially animated corpses who spread their condition to the living like a plague, and are therefore essentially zombies. The climate threat is a supernaturally induced, apocalyptic ice-age that, if it happens, will kill everything in the world.

⁵⁸ In the same "Inside the Episode" sequence that was mentioned two footnotes above, Weiss explains the behavior of a powerful lord regent in the following way: "Like the C.E.O. that he is coming to run the company that he runs [i.e. the entire kingdom], he wants to show people exactly who's boss and he wants to put people off their guard and he wants to give... a contest between all the players of his council to see who sits where. And I think the way that they react to it tells him and tells us a lot about who they are." "Walk of Punishment, Inside the Episode," *Game of Thrones*.

market fantasy fiction while simultaneously deepening their resonances and implications.

This balanced combination of real and fantastical depiction is evident in a narrative aspect of the series to which we now going to turn, in order to flesh out its metaphysical implications. This is one of its most central conflicts: the war that occurs between the two main aristocratic families upon whom the narrative primarily focuses, the Lannisters and the Starks. In plotting this element of the story, Martin used the actual events of the first War of the Roses as a rough narrative template. For reasons that will shortly become evident, I will list some of the most basic resemblances here.

First off: the fictional setting in which the conflict occurs is a fantastical rendering of fourteenth-century England, in which the Isle of Britain has been magnified to the size of an entire continent. The history of this fictional continent—the name of which is “Westeros”—contains numerous analogues to the events of actual British history, including the eleventh-century Norman invasion, the establishment of a line of kings stretching forward from William the Conqueror, and the late-fourteenth-century usurpation of Richard II, whose counterpart in the series is also a mentally unstable tyrant. As in real English history, the fictional version of this usurpation sets off a royal legitimacy crisis that ultimately results in a bloody civil war; and this war involves two powerful families whose names (Lannister and Stark) clearly resemble those of the belligerent historical houses of Lancaster and York.⁵⁹

Along with these macrocosmic similarities, many of the smaller details of the fictional conflict resemble those of the real one, including the execution of one of the family’s powerful patriarchs and the ascension of his teenaged son (Richard of York in reality, Ned Stark in “Song”); as well as the presence of a highly ambitious and unusually powerful queen, whose enemies accuse her of having engaged in adultery and placed a bastard son on the throne (Margarate of Anjou in reality; Cersei Lannister in “Song”). These and other resemblances to the actual Wars of the Roses pervade Martin’s works, and are in fact so numerous that my own copy of Alison Weir’s popular history of the conflict is loaded with margin notes identifying the fictional counterparts of the real-world characters.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ My knowledge of the Wars of the Roses and the events leading up to it is derived from a reading of Alison Weir’s detailed contemporary account of the conflict. Alison Weir, *The Wars of the Roses* (New York: Ballantine, 2011).

⁶⁰ For example, in the margin-space next to this quote, “Margaret’s son, Edward of Lancaster, inured to violence at an early age, shocked his contemporaries by his callous precocity,” I have written “Joffrey,” which is the name of a psychopathically callous boy-king from the novels. (Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, xviii).

Before moving on to discuss the metaphysical implications of such resemblances, it will also prove useful to index a number of differences between the narrative of the books and the course of actual events. In terms of its relatively realistic, non-fantastical story-elements, “A Song of Ice and Fire” makes a number of significant changes. It compresses the timespan that stretches between the usurpation and the outbreak of dynastic war, and uses marriage arrangements to significantly complicate the number of newly-royal families involved in the overthrow of the old dynasty.⁶¹ In doing so, it raises the number of belligerent claimants to the throne, thereby magnifying the scale of the overall conflict.

The fictional version of events also resolves a number of persistent historical ambiguities. The queen, for instance, is definitively shown to be the mother of a bastard, while the historical record provides much room for doubt on that front.⁶² And despite its moral ambiguities, the series presents one of the belligerent families in a basically protagonistic manner while portraying the other as villainous. With one significant exception, the Lannisters are revealed to be a pack of vicious and arrogant killers, to whom the Starks provide a humane and noble contrast. According to informed contemporary opinion, the real-world houses of Lancaster and the York exhibited no such monopolies on virtue.⁶³

On top of these significant alterations to history, the story’s fantastical ingredients introduce a more dramatic set of changes. Martin’s version of events involves the establishment of a rival regime-in-exile by the heir of the originally usurped quasi-Norman dynasty. As their heir establishes her rule, she does as the owner and adopted parent of three young dragons, while commanding a horde of emancipated warrior-slaves and quasi-Mongolian horsemen.⁶⁴ Other fantastical elements include the previously-mentioned army of medieval zombies, as well as a number of sorcerers, wargs, giants, and mystical wood-dwellers, each of whom plays significant roles in the plot. It goes without saying that these are events and characters for which there are no parallels in actual English history.

⁶¹ In the second book in series, the continent of Westeros splits into five separate factions, each vying for power, with narrative consequences stretching in the later books.

⁶² In fact, Weir’s account of events Margaret’s marriage to Edward VI tends to cast this possibility in mostly dubious light. (Weir, *The War of the Roses*, 118)

⁶³ During the twentieth century, resurfaced facts about Henry V’s bloody campaigns in France did some damage to his erstwhile reputation as a hero-king. (Weir, *The Wars of the Roses*, 70). With regard to the other noble house, one need only to recall that the nephew-murdering Richard III was a member of the House of York.

⁶⁴ The name of this character is Daenerys Targaryan, and her rise to power begins in the third book. See George R.R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords* (Bantam: New York, 2000).

With all of these similarities and changes in mind, we can now consider their bearing on the topic of vicarious causation. There are a number of points to be made on this front. To start, I ask the reader to recall a point that was made in the previous section. This is that, in Harman's metaphysics, events and relations always count as objects. According to this stipulation, the Wars of the Roses can easily be identified as an object, the ingredient parts of which include people, families, battles, horses, weapons, egos, the tide of public opinion, shifts in military fortune and royal wills-to-power. Likewise, the "Song of Ice and Fire" can be identified as another object, whose parts are books, chapters, pages, characters, narrative events and component ideas. The fact that one of these objects is typically conceived as being "historical" in nature while the other is "textual" has no bearing here. According to the theory with which we are working, both are equally objects.

Considered in this light, the object known as "The Wars of the Roses" can be said to have a causal relationship to the "Song of Fire Ice," serving as an underlying structural template for the war between the Lannisters and the Starks. This claim does not entail the argument that the Wars are responsible for having "caused" the "Song" in its entirety, but rather indicates a more modest, inspirationally causative relationship to an important aspect of plot.

With that in mind, I ask the reader to recall another key point from above: Harman's argument that vicariously causal processes always cause change by utilizing the sensual qualities of an object, bypassing the general structure of that object's relational *eidōs* and its undisclosed, ontologically withdrawn essence. This claim can be interestingly applied, in a retroactive or reverse-engineered sort of way, to the causal relationship whose inter-relational details we have just examined. For in considering those details, we saw that while a great number of changes occur at the level of fact and fantastical inclusion, the one thing that is preserved from history to fictional text is the structural motif of a dynastic conflict carried out by a pair of aristocratic families, in which the ultimate stake is sovereign power.

My suggestion is that this structural motif can be construed, at the very least, as comprising a plausible candidate for *something truly essential* about the discrete ontological unit that is the Wars of the Roses. For although certain factual details may be alterable from one object to the other; although certain inessential parts, such as the exact identities of characters and the exact order of events might change; and although certain sequences may be susceptible to the grafting-on of fantastical elements, the *formal, structural* element of "aristocratic families fighting for a throne" remains the same. This suggests that, having survived a vicariously causal process of creation, this element has a prominent, or perhaps central, place in the eidetic structure of the object that is changed via its

mediation through a fictional text. If this were not the case, then the Wars of the Roses would no longer stand in a causal relationship to the fictional narrative pattern for which it is an inspiration; it would not be the thing on which that narrative is based.

Further support for this suggestion can be found in another significant detail. This concerns the fact that, despite the inclusion of additional royal claimants and the expansion of the overall scale of the conflict, the Lannister-Stark power struggle retains a clearly-delineated, noticeable autonomy in the midst of these larger narrative transformations, serving as a significant focal point for drama, antagonism, and narrative action. Although situated in the midst of an expanded civil war involving additional aspirants to power, that is, this struggle maintains an eidetic unity of its own, a core feature of which is its binary or two-party nature. Again, this suggests that something structurally central to the causal agent has been preserved in the patient through which it is mediated. Changes occur at the level of variable sensual qualities, while leaving something structurally intact. These sensual changes *and* this preserved structure are both part-and-parcel of the new object that is created. Because this new object includes both these changes *and* this preserved structure, it is more than either of them, and has a form of its own.

In making these claims, I wish to stress that I do not construe the structural motif identified here as the full-on essence of the real thing-unto-itself, nor do I claim that it amounts to the entirety of the sensual object's *eidōs*. My suggestion is more modest in nature, holding only that this particular motif has the *air* of something central about it, and *might plausibly* comprise a deeply structural feature of the object in question. As to where this structure ought to be located in terms of an object's metaphysical dimensions, my contention is that it is quite likely a regular or invariable feature of its *eidōs*, showing up consistently in different relational configurations and enduring the absorption of causal impact, while *possibly* maintaining a deeper connection to the withdrawn qualities and underlying form of the thing, perhaps having some analogue or parallel quality at this level. Through its deployment of such qualifiers as "might," "has the air" "possibly" and "quite likely," my advancement of these claims is informed by the negotiatory intentions mentioned at the end of the previous section. Here, I have attempted to show that something resembling a major structural quality can be provisionally identified without recourse to a full-on eidetic reduction—meaning that positive indications about aspects of a central structure can be made in the absence of complete access to it.

This analysis has a few implications for the ways in which the study of cultural and textual mediation can be put to work in the positive use of the vicarious causal theory. Most obviously, it implies that examining specific cases

of mediation can provide provisional methods for identifying what is knowable about the essential and inessential ingredients of an object's formal structure. Once the features that have been vicariously changed have been identified, focus can be brought to bear on individual parts and their qualitative variables, thereby providing the means for describing the contours of a vicarious transformation.

In the current case, for example, we can examine the specific changes that are made to the historical record, such as the definitive presence of an adulterous queen, the imposition of a protagonistic binary on the belligerent families, and the introduction of fantastical elements with contemporary resonance. Unto itself, this list does not tell us anything remarkable, and could have been formulated in the absence of a metaphysical theory. But when these changes are modeled according to the theory of vicarious causation, they provide metaphysical insight into the way in which one ontological unit brings informational filters, biases, agendas, and conceptual schema to bear upon another. This suggests, first of all, that there is *something more* to the object that has been mediated than its mediation by another object; that it is a unique entity that continues to be itself despite its mediation. It also suggests that the set of textual factors that mediate this entity comprises an entity in its own right. That is: the mediation of the Wars of the Roses by "A Song of Ice and Fire" is an object, possessed of its own allure.

This object is somewhat difficult to identify, ontologically speaking, having something to do with the intentions of a specific author, but also possessing a reality of its own. Nonetheless, it can be theorized and modeled as a discrete unit of being, and a number of its parts can be identified. The various narrative changes that were mentioned above can be counted among the latter, as can the authorial intention to make certain thematic points while telling an absorbing story with contemporary resonances. Furthermore, this mediating textual object can be construed as something that amounts to more than the sum of its parts—held together by an executant form that is never fully present at any of its moments—while itself being *only a part* of the larger text to which it belongs. For "A Song of Ice and Fire" does more than simply mediate the Wars of the Roses, comprising a complex, autonomous narrative in its own right. As a whole, it too is an object with a unique form of its own.

Mediational Allure, Causation in Networks; and the Metaphysical Significance of Open-Ended Games

Despite their potentially supra-human implications, we will continue to examine the specifically human-derived Wars/"Song"/*Game* nexus, in order to examine the ways in which it exemplifies a particular type of allure. Above, we saw that

allure involves the fore-fronting of a sensual quality belonging to one of the parts of a causal agent. When this occurs, the quality is partly loosened from the part to which it belongs and intrudes into the world of another object, coming into relation with it. This relation produces a larger object, the thing that is caused.

In cases of what I call “mediational allure,” the essential steps of this process are observed with a twist. Specifically: *one object (1) mediates the causal force of another object (2) to a third (3) via qualitative variations enacted on the mediated object (2)*. This might sound like a rather technical mouthful, but it is actually not that difficult to comprehend, especially when applied to our empirical case. Consider the following scenario: George R.R. Martin writes a series of books inspired by the Wars of the Roses, which are then read by a reader. Throughout the past section, we saw that when this happens, certain seemingly inessential details concerning the historical source materials are altered. Timelines are compressed, ambiguities are resolved, different events are rendered more or less consequential or complex, fantastical elements are introduced, and contemporary themes and concerns are overlaid onto the narrative. The results of these changes inform the events and narrative sequences of “A Song of Ice and Fire,” and are what the reader immediately encounters when she reads the novels. Thus, when the sensual or relational qualities of the novels becoming alluring causal agents in their own right, entering the mind of a reader, they do so as altered variations on the sensual or relational qualities of the Wars of the Roses, or as hybrids mixing aspects of the Wars with qualities of a different sort. In this sense, the reader has an inflected or mediated causal encounter with the Wars via the “Song of Ice and Fire,” which serves here as a causal mediator (1). Having partly inspired the events of the novels, the Wars (2) impact the reader (3) from one degree of ontological remove.

Because it involves a triadic situation, this causal process may seem to defy Harman’s Binary Contact Principle, which holds that there are only ever two objects involved in any causal act. But when one considers the different ways in which this particular transformation can be modeled, it becomes clear that this is in fact not the case. Before unpacking these perspectives, I ask the reader to keep in mind that they are not contradictory alternatives, but are rather compatible complements to each other, or different ways of looking at the same thing. With that said:

From one perspective, our example can be understood to comprise two separate, successive instances of Binary Contact. In the initial instance, the Wars are the agent and the books are the patient. This occurs when the Wars have a causal impact on the narrative of the books, serving as an inspiration for the Lannister-Stark conflict. This is followed by a second instance in which the books switch roles, becoming agents that have a causal impact on the minds of the

reader, who is the patient affected by the process of reading them. As mediating agents, the books present a mediated version of the Wars' events, in which certain inessential qualities have been altered.

But when we recall that the vicarious model of causation holds every relation to be an object, we can see that, from another perspective, these two cases of Binary Contact can actually be simplified into one. This is due to the fact that the relation between the Wars and the books is actually an object in its own right. Thus, when the reader reads the books, she is also having a vicarious causal encounter with the object/relation/mediation comprised by the Wars and the books. In other words, there is already a single instance of Binary Contact underway in a situation that also involves two separate instances of it, meaning that a triadic mediation is always simultaneously a dyadic encounter. Furthermore, the dyadic encounter can be modeled from yet another perspective, in which the Wars-books relation is one object, the books-reader relation is another, and the causal encounter is what unfolds between the two of them. Hence, at the same time that the reader is having a causal encounter with the books, the books-reader relation that results from this encounter is having *its own* encounter with the Wars-book relation. And finally, because every object is a relation, the Wars-books/books-reader relation is also a Wars-books-reader object. Or in other words, the object *is* the medium.

Again, these models do not contradict each other, but are perfectly compatible ways of looking at the same phenomenon. With their main import in mind, we can address a few potential objections to the manner in which they have been presented. These include the fact that the causal relation between the Wars and the books is itself not direct in nature, but mediated by the authorial labor of George R.R. Martin, and that Martin's relationship to the Wars is in turn mediated by other books that he doubtlessly read on them. Our answer is: of course this is the case, but every one of those sub-mediations is another instance of Binary Contact between objects, folded into Binary Contact between larger objects. The mechanics of mediational allure are therefore perfectly compatible with those of vicarious causation. As a designator, "mediational allure" simply highlights the way in which larger objects and relations are mediated through the smaller objects and relations that are their parts. In doing so, it also points out the inevitably hybrid nature of the qualities involved.

To illustrate: when a reader reads "A Song of Ice and Fire," she encounters the book series as its causal patient. But while this occurs, she simultaneously encounters the transformational relationship of the books' qualities to those of the Wars of the Roses. Thus, even if the reader knows nothing of medieval history, she nonetheless undergoes a causal encounter with the Wars' relation to the books every time she reads them. And quite literally, this

larger causal relation is a component of what is alluring about the books, comprising an ingredient element in their tension and drama. As such, they are included in what comes loose from their *eide* and takes on a life of its own in the imagination of the reader.

If there is the hint of a divergence from Harman here, it involves our prior inference that mediation itself might provide one way of (cautiously and tentatively) locating essential properties. What mediational allure adds to the overall theory of vicarious causation is that something like a causal encounter with real or fundamental qualities may also be involved in indirect impact. When one reads the “Song of Ice and Fire,” one has a positive perceptual encounter with a war between aristocratic families fighting for sovereign power, a narrative element which, we previously suggested, might possibly comprise an essential element of the mediated object. Interestingly, however, the nature of this encounter is itself mediated through smaller textual objects. We never encounter the war itself, but rather the characters who observe the battles and political calculations that comprise it. In this way, the war behaves in a manner similar to that of an underlying structural form, thereby seeming to support its association with deep structures.

These most recent findings interact interestingly with another implication of the preceding analysis. Most of what we have just discussed seems to involve a fairly linear process of causation, wherein one object mediates the qualities of another down through a chronologically successive line of impacts and effects. A more expansive sense of this can be gleaned by considering the ways in which “A Song of Ice and Fire” has been adapted in multiple media, through television, videogames, comic books, and more. The point to made, in this regard, is that such adaptations lend themselves to at least two types of causal modeling. The first is the type that we have already seen: cumulative linear impact stretching forward in time: the Wars of the Roses occur; Martin writes a series of novels that are inspired by them; these novels inspire and affect a major television adaptation; and this major television adaptation affects the manner in which a number of further adaptations are carried out, influencing their depiction of characters and events. In this chain of object-relations, each step along the way affects what comes after it. When playing the video-*Game of Thrones*, for example, the player is affected by the cumulative history of successive impacts, stretching from the Wars themselves up through the books. Although the storyline of the game actually unfolds during the run-up to the events of the books and show (comprising a kind of para-textual prequel to them), these still inform its contents, which is therefore impacted by the entire causal chain. To specify: important elements of the game-narrative anticipate a pending conflict between two medieval-aristocratic families fighting for a throne (causal impact of the Wars);

the families are named Lannister and Stark and occupy a detailed fantasy world whose features are derived from the books (causal impact of the books); and two actors from the television show do the voice acting for their characters in the game, and are designed to look like their televisual counterparts (causal impact of the show).⁶⁵ Ontologically speaking, this causal model could be characterized as a form of linearly networked causation.

There is another sense, however, in which every causal stopping point or node in this network provides its own, separate and unique mediation of each of the prior nodes, in a manner that is not reliant, in terms of its formally configured effect, upon the efficiently causal chain. To get a sense of this, consider the example of a player playing the *Game of Thrones* videogame. While this occurs, this player experiences a direct mediation of the Wars of the Roses through the game's anticipatory plot points. That is: events in the game storyline build towards a conflict between two aristocratic families. The game contains characters partly based on members of those families, and as a medium, has its own way of depicting those events and characters. Thus, whether or not the player has ever read the books or seen the show, she has a mediated causal encounter with the Wars of the Roses, enacted *directly* and *uniquely* through the game. As a discrete existent entity, the game imposes its own conditions upon the manner in which the Wars impact the player, exuding its own alluringly hybrid qualities compounded from itself and the Wars; and the manner in which it does so is determined by its *formal* configuration.

But as it mediates the Wars, the game is also, simultaneously, mediating the contents of the books and the contents of the show, and doing so as *separate acts of mediation*. In a scene from the fourth level game, for instance, a character tells a bleak, social-realist story about tragic events that led him down a sad life path—a very George R.R. Martin moment. While he does this, he is sitting in a brothel as a barely-clad prostitute gyrates like a stripper behind him—a very HBO/*Game of Thrones* moment. Again: the game is carrying out its *own* causal mediation of the Wars, the books, and the show, despite having been historically impacted by the causal chain that connects them in a successive network. In terms of their developmental history, these separate mediations may have causal relationships to each other, but in terms of their immediate efficacy and formal dimensions, their mediational actions are also unique.

As with previous findings, this discovery has broader implications for the fields of media and communications studies. With regard to the study of

⁶⁵ The actors are Conleth Hill, who plays the spy-master Varys, and James Cosmo, who plays Jeor Mormont, the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. See Atlus, *Game of Thrones*, 2012.

networked causation, it implies that a node in any particular causal chain can have a more complex relationship to its past than might be expected, serving as a direct mediator of distantly past content despite the presence of intermediary nodes in a linear causal process. When the notion of formal causation is taken seriously, the temporality of networks is significantly complicated.

To complicate matters even further, we will now shift to another adaptation: *A Game of Thrones: the Board Game*. Any reader who has been paying close attention to titles will notice a difference here: the presence of the article “A,” which was dropped from the TV series and the videogame. Its presence in the board game’s title is due to the fact that this game was adapted from the books in 2003, several years prior to the production of the TV series, and therefore escaped mediation through it. In this way, the board game comprises a different branch off of the linear causal network than the one that begins with the show. When compared to the other, later branch, it emits interesting metaphysical suggestions of its own.

We can get an initial sense of these suggestions from the “Overview” passage of the game’s rule book:

A Game of Thrones: The Board Game is a game for three to six players, based on George R.R. Martin’s bestselling *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels. In *A Game of Thrones: The Board Game*, players each control one of six Great Houses seeking dominance over the lands of Westeros. By mustering armies, conquering territory and forming alliances, each House strives to control the most Castles and Strongholds so it may ultimately claim the Iron Throne.⁶⁶

The metaphysical interest of this overview derives from what it reveals about the nature of the game, particularly as it differs from the *Song of Ice and Fire* and the other adaptations of it. What we see here, immediately, is that the board game emphasizes the relatively expanded conflict of the novels, with a greater number of noble houses competing for the throne than was the case in the Wars of the Roses. By making this change, it also omits the distinctness of the two-family power-struggle from its own internal structure. In other words: the game system does not revolve around a “Lannister-Stark” dyad, and unlike other adaptations, its drama and narrative tension does not hinge around the victory of one of the other of these two houses.

Interestingly, then, the board game omits a structural element which, in the previous section, was tentatively nominated as a likely candidate for being a central eidetic quality of the Wars of the Roses, and possibly a correlate to a real

⁶⁶Fantasy Flight Games, *Rules of Play for George R.R. Martin’s A Game of Thrones: The Board Game*, 2.

quality as well. When advancing this tentative identification, I suggested that if this structural factor were left out of an adapted text, this text could not be said to be based on the Wars of the Roses. As a text which omits this centrally important structural factor, *A Game of Thrones: the Board Game* would precisely be such a text. The question then arises: what *is* it based on? And the rule book itself provides the answer: “*A Game of thrones: the Board Game* is based on George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels.” This may seem fairly obvious at first, but the metaphysical implications are actually fairly subtle, and concern the manner in which certain *eide* are bypassed and eventually omitted from causal networks through the production of new objects, even as new processes of causation continues to transmit other eidetic structures down the line. For while the board game omits what appears to be a central *eidetic* structure of the Wars of the Roses, it *includes* what would appear to be a central eidetic structure of the *Song of Ice and Fire*. Here we should recall the prior claim that the *Song* is not just a mediator of the Wars; that it has qualities, carries out tasks, and conceals an ultimate form of its own. And just as the *Song* preserves a structure of the Wars, the board game preserves a structure of the *Song*—namely: a giant, continent-spanning war of *multiple families*. This also involves a change at the level of what might here be plausibly characterized as a minor or structurally inessential quality: the number goes up from five families in the books to six in the game.

When we consider the significance of these developments in light of previous findings, we see that the network-branch represented by the board game no longer provides a direct mediation of the Wars of the Roses. Certain qualities of the Wars, along with their attendant tensions and dramas, are no longer part of the game’s allure for players. Rather, what allures players about the game is the manner in which it channels, amplifies and modifies the larger-scale conflicts of the *books*. This is the nature of its mediational allure.

When compared to the other branch off the network—and particularly to the videogame—this alteration at the level of allure suggests something of metaphysical significance about the nature of relatively open-ended gaming. Here it should be acknowledged that the videogame is somewhat variable in its outcomes as well, but only in the manner of the limited, choose-your-own-adventure type ethical options typical of numerous contemporary videogames. All-in-all, its narrative sequence is highly deterministic, and there are only a few major choices and outcomes.

Although its winner-takes-all rule-code means that the board game can only have six final outcomes, it has a much larger and open-ended set of overall possibilities for player decisions, strategies and sequences of play. Given the relationship of these differing play possibilities to their differing eidetic contents—with the videogame sticking to a persistent structural feature of the

Wars *eidōs* and the board game moving beyond it—this would seem to suggest that relatively open-ended gaming tends to be productive of profound structural changes in the nature of causal networks and what they mediate. Here I will suggest that this is another feature of the current analysis that may have broader implications. Perhaps the shift from stable eidetic transfers to the production of radically new or different types of beings involves something like a shift from predetermined gamic sequences to relatively open-ended types of games.

Conclusion

Altogether, then, the results of our current analysis include prospective methods for locating the metaphysical means by which mediation occurs, for identifying the discrete ontological units and subcomponents that comprise a mediating object, and for describing the manner in which these components carry out their inflections of content. As we have seen, they also suggest provisional means for identifying certain of the invariable qualities of a mediated object, while still respecting the phenomenological caution that Harman extends to the ultimately concealed nature of things and their essences. In each of these ways, this analysis has implications that go beyond the immediate empirical content. With its emphasis on filtering, biases and the imposition of intentions and agendas, it is relevant to the metaphysics of human media in general, and may also have bearing on nonhuman forms of mediation.

As we saw in the previous section, the current implications also emit interesting suggestions concerning the nature and underlying dynamics of causal mediation. When one object mediates the causal force of another object to a third, exerting mediational allure, it does so as a discrete unit folded into the larger relation comprised by this very act, of which its causal patient or audience is also a part. Mediators are therefore subcomponents of the mediations in which they engage, and these mediations can themselves be modeled as substances, objects, or units. Although the history of cumulative impacts that conditions a mediational network or unit is an undeniably salient contributor to its relationally-realized form, this history does not encompass or account for the full mediational capacity of its various nodes, whose formal uniqueness and efficacy enables direct or non-networked mediations of prior content.

When it comes to the question of how radical changes in formal structures can be enacted in mediated causal networks, flexible or open-ended game systems seem to provide a promising avenue for preliminary speculative modeling. In this sense, our titular reference to a “Game of Objects” is more than simply a tip-of-the-hat to the empirical contents of this paper. For what we have ultimately learned from *Game of Thrones* is that creative shifts from one sort or game to

another may be an important source of newness in the world. The many objects comprising the *GoT* product-nexus are only one example in this regard. From a metaphysical perspective, the Game of Objects is much larger than the Game of Thrones. There may be no way to win or lose it in an absolute sense, but when it comes to beings, the options are nonetheless binary: you're either a player, or you *are not*.

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