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Book Reviews: Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing by Ian Bogost, Jet Plane: How It Works by David Macaulay, and Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things by Jane Bennett

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Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing by Ian Bogost. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Pp. 168. \$60 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Jet Plane: How It Works by David Macaulay (with Sheila Keenan). New York: David Macaulay Studio, 2012. Pp. 32. \$13.55 library binding, \$3.99 paper.

Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things by Jane Bennett. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. 200. \$74.95 cloth, \$20 paper.

Aircraft fairing, High-lift device, Vortex generator, Aft pressure bulkhead, Ballute, Monocoque, Fuselage, Flight test instrumentation, Drogue parachute, Empennage, NACA cowling, Accessory drive, Flight-data acquisition unit, Wire strike protection system, Duramold, Air data boom, Skin, Arming plug, Auxiliary power unit, Airframe, M10 smoke tank, Air brake, Longeron.

Airbus A319 STL → PHX → LAS.

Well, don't you look at me like life don't hold you anymore mystery.

—Modest Mouse, “History Sticks to Your Feet” (2009)

The human experience of flight is thoroughly objective, driven, as it is, by the airplane as an object. But airplanes are not simply objects to which we, as subjects, attend. Airplanes lay claim on us, get their blades into us, and so modulate the way we think about and engage them. Broadly speaking, airplanes take part in how we think and talk about flight. They are objects that mediate our relationship with air, with gravity, and even with our own bodies. But airplanes are perhaps even more than this and for things other than us. What Ian Bogost argues with respect to computers is equally applicable here: “[F]or [it] to operate at all *for us* first requires a wealth of interactions

to take place *for itself*" (10). Jane Bennett resonates with Bogost in her insistence that things "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). Our critical engagements with flight must be about more than what Bennett calls demystification, which "presumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a *human agency*" (xiv).

What approaches such as Bogost's and Bennett's bring to critical air studies from their external vantage point is an insistence that in critically engaging flight we work not only to reveal, expose, or unveil the human in the cockpit, but also to find even more objects that enable both flight and our thinking of it. As Christopher Schaberg writes of what he calls "airport reading" in *The Textual Life of Airports*, "[T]his type of reading depends on the airport itself to have already emerged as a primary text of sorts, a legible space where there are . . . planes roaring into the air . . . (among many other informational signs, auditory cues, and aestheticized views)."¹ To think about airplanes is to already be with airplanes.

In this short essay, I review Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) and Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) alongside David Macaulay's *Jet Plane* (2012), which is devoted to a child's experience of airplanes. While composed for different audiences in traditionally discrete contexts, all

three books do critical, speculative work in providing explicit articulations and implicit performances of alternative ontologies from which critical air studies might benefit. Gathered around *Jet Plane*, *Vibrant Matter*, and *Alien Phenomenology*, we can get a taste of a speculative critical air studies: the philosophy of nondualist ontologies and the politics of distributed, material assemblages. I begin with Bogost, move to Bennett, and conclude with a reading of Macaulay's children's book, which productively, if implicitly, performs the philosophies of Bogost and Bennett.

Asking about "what it's like to be a thing," Bogost articulates other ways of doing philosophy while at the same time explicating his own unique strain of speculative realism. Bogost places his work in media studies and computer science in a line with object-oriented philosophers Graham Harman and Levi Bryant and sociologist-turned-all-things-for-all-people Bruno Latour. Primary for Bogost is the argument that "*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*" (11, his emphasis). This means simply that differences between humans and nonhumans are not ontological, but specific. For instance, our human capacity for language does not quantitatively set apart our being from a toaster's, but marks a (rather important) qualitative

distinction in our mode of being. The implications of this for philosophy (Bogost's field of deployment) are far-reaching. Of particular importance is Bogost's argument that philosophers must walk the narrow path between a realism that treats all matter as inert (i.e., a billiard ball reality) and an idealism that reduces all matter to what humans have to say about it (i.e., social constructionism). This troubling binary stems from the ontological distinction between humans and nonhumans. Bogost's alternative, strange realism acknowledges both that objects are more than we have to say about them and that their reality is not something we can crack open and fully comprehend; this is neither idealism nor standard realism.

Flying this narrow path, Bogost proposes "[t]he act of wonder," which "invites a detachment from ordinary logics, of which human logics are but one example" (124). Bogost means wonder in two senses: (a) "awe or marvel" and (b) "puzzlement or logical perplexity" (121). To wonder is to be drawn to objects, or what Bogost calls *units* (23), precisely by their ability to exceed our grasp. The work of wonder can take many forms, including *ontography*, *metaphorism*, and *carpentry*, the descriptions of which account for the bulk of his book. *Ontography* is the practice of ratcheting up logical perplexity to

reveal the operations and relationships of objects "without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind" (38): "It shows how *much* rather than how *little* exists simultaneously" (59). Examples of ontography include Latourian litanies (38–40), visual ontographs (45–50), exploded views such as those found in instructional manuals and children's books (50–52), and ontographic machines such as card games like *In a Pickle* (56–57). Ontography exposes the strange reality of all units by disrupting traditional human logics, which often work to simplify accounts of units.

In a similar vein, *metaphorism* is an attempt to understand nonhuman relations and operations that avoids the frequent reductionism of the scientific tradition. Whereas science is an attempt "to *define* the physical and causal relations between objects" (62, emphasis added), metaphorism operates by speculative analogy. Rather than making sense of how a bat relates to its environment by breaking down the components of its eye, which would get us no closer to seeing the world through them, metaphorism would argue that "the bat . . . operates like a submarine" (64). Bogost acknowledges that metaphorism can quickly become anthropomorphism in this regard; however, in the risk there is reward. Drawing on Bennett, Bogost argues that the very strangeness of the metaphor attends to the

difference between submarines and bats. Bats are not reduced by analogy but are actually made far stranger. Metaphorism, in this way, leads Bogost to *carpentry*, the practice of making things that do philosophical work. Carpentry, Bogost writes, is “constructing artifacts that illustrate the perspectives of objects” (109). The sonar signals by which bats navigate could, via carpentry, be morphed into something akin to a heat map—wherein closer obstacles show up red and distant obstacles blue—that humans could then move in response to. Bogost’s carpentry, like his metaphorism, resonates with the work of Bennett.

Moving through vibrant matter, Bennett enacts both a philosophical and political project. Bennett, who, like Bogost, works with Latour, additionally pulls from the work of Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially the latter’s idea of assemblages. Bennett (whose area of deployment is political theory) argues that our political and philosophical work needs to attend to the agency of assemblages and the vibrancy of matter, which she describes as “thing-power.” Bennett explores the force of things, or what she calls actants, such as minerals (chapter 4), fatty acids (chapter 3), stem cells (chapter 6), worms (chapter 7), and electricity (chapter 2). In each chapter, Bennett advances her philosophical project—by engaging

a series of thinkers who have taken up stuff—and her political project—by engaging a specific piece of nonhuman stuff. For example, she writes extensively on the 2003 North American blackout. Understanding the blackout as a vibrant assemblage requires that we neither boil it down to human motivations lurking beneath the behavior of electricity (e.g., the incompetence or greed of electric companies) nor pin it down conclusively via a reductionist realism (e.g., electricity has no volition). Bennett argues that we must address “the cascade of effects” that includes humans and nonhumans. As she remarks in an earlier version of the chapter, “[e]lectricity too contributed swerves and quirks.”²² Whereas Bogost’s project is squarely philosophical, Bennett’s project employs philosophy on the way to politics. “What difference would it make to the course of energy policy,” Bennett prods us to ask, “were electricity to be figured not simply as a resource, commodity, or instrumentality but also and more radically as an ‘actant’?” (viii).

The stakes of any ontology are high: ignoring the thing-power of electricity or fatty acids bears on how we approach public problems such as energy and obesity. Working as she does from Latour, Bennett echoes him in calling “for people to imagine other roles for things besides that of carriers of necessity, or ‘plastic’ vehicles for

'human ingenuity,' or 'a simple white screen to support the differentiation of society'" (30–31). The vitalism of her vital materialism sees that vitality as "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). Bennett's project asks us not to dig deep past the facades of objects, but to play with their surfaces to get at just how matter (or assemblages of matter) exerts agency and produces effects in the world. Taking matter at face value, "[w]e see how an animal, plant, mineral, or artifact can sometimes catalyze a public" (107). And there is more than just philosophical recognition at stake here: "[W]e might then see how to devise more effective (experimental) tactics for enhancing or weakening that public" (107). At stake in the philosophical recognition of matter as vibrant is the political necessity of activating such recognition. What a public (as an assemblage) is is not only human but nonhuman, as well.

Where Bogost raises the stakes for philosophy by crafting ways of engaging the nonhuman, Bennett doubles down on these stakes in attending to the political and ethical implications of nondualist ontologies: "I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten

my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose the wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests" (122). In order to chasten such fantasies, Bennett's project, like Bogost's, calls for experimental tactics fueled by naïveté and wonder.

The look and feel of the children's book *Jet Plane* activates precisely this wonder in and engagement with airplanes as vital objects important in their own right (and not simply as means to an end). *Jet Plane* (as an exemplar of a rather robust genre) relates a childlike view of the mechanics of flight that tends to leave us as we grow older, when airplanes become simply a mode of transport. I review this book not only for how it speaks to children but also for how it speaks to us as scholars—as a work that engages in thoughtful philosophical and political work.

Jet Plane opens to the image of a child gazing out at an airplane approaching the terminal. We are looking at the airplane through the eyes of a child, and it is with these eyes that we should linger over airplanes. Bogost writes, "Our job is to go where *everyone* has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger" (34). But this lingering, to which *Jet Plane* is devoted, is of a special quality, which Bogost describes as wonder. The lingering of *Jet Plane*, then, isn't mastery

but a mixture of “awe or marvel” and “puzzlement or logical perplexity” (121). This is the kind of lingering I’m promoting for critical air studies, and it is the kind of lingering we see performed in *Jet Plane*. This illustrated reader was written by David Macaulay (with Sheila Keenan), who is famous for his other books *Castle* (1982), *City* (1983), *Underground* (1983), and *Mill* (1989), which tell the stories of each of these places through narrative and complex line drawings often sketched from impossible, nonhuman perspectives. These, too, are books of wonder, which fascinated me as a child and continue to fascinate my son and me. Macaulay’s books are composed in wonder in order to cultivate wonder—to marvel at how much the world is full of and composed by strange, nonhuman matter.

Jet Plane is likewise narrative-based. A child is moved through networks of flight: from the terminal, through the gate, past the cockpit, into the cabin, away from the terminal, down the tarmac, up into the air, into the night, around a storm, down through the clouds, onto the runway, and back up to the gate. At each step, the part of the jet’s assemblage that makes such movement and experience possible is introduced: instruments and screens, air traffic controllers, engines, fuel, lift, drag, thrust, satellites, storms, landing gear, and grounds crew. *What you have*

experienced is a function of these (figure 1).

“A jet plane stands at the gate,” Macaulay opens the book (4). The jet plane is first an actant. This grammar of object agency is present throughout the book: “They [the pilots] are surrounded by instruments and screens. These tell them everything” (9). Bennett’s argument hinges upon the acknowledgment of this grammar: “[W]e are much better admitting that nonhumanity infects culture, for the latter entails the blasphemous idea that nonhumans—trash, bacteria, stem cells, food, metal, technologies, weather—are actant rather than objects” (115). As the child moves through the airplane, he is surrounded not by simple, inert objects, but actants that enable flight (figure 2).

Jet Plane fosters an acknowledgment of object actancy, peering into the world of flight on a child’s behalf: cutaways, miniscule details, exploded views. This work does more than explain the airplane or reduce it to component parts, but rather exponentially increases the airplane’s strangeness and its *airplaneness*. Airplanes are more puzzling when we linger over their minutiae. *Jet Plane* aims not at mastery or demystification but at intimacy. We are suspended in air by the slight curve of a wing. The sheer awe and puzzlement with which the child attends to the airplane opens up an entire world of

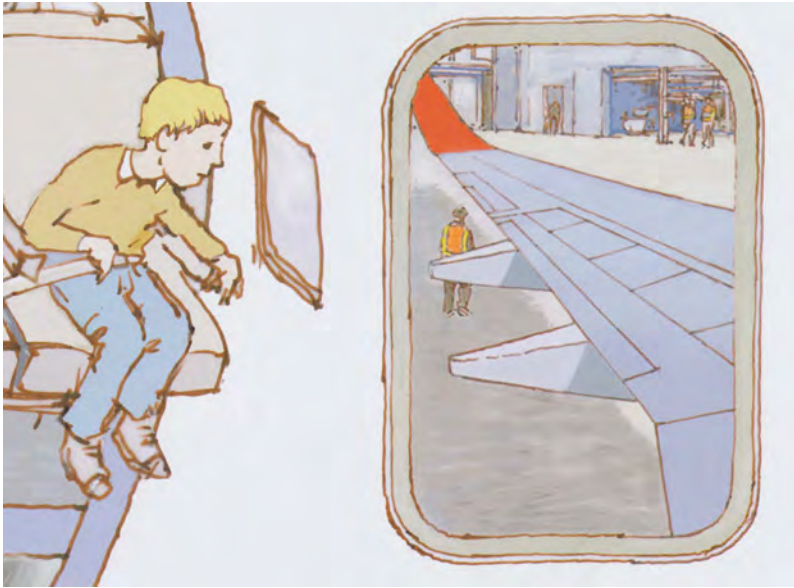


Figure 1. Illustration from *Jet Plane: How it Works*. The wonder of a child as he lingers over the airplane's wing through the airplane's window—a view itself already shaped by the airplane. From *Jet Plane: How It Works* © 2012 by David Macaulay. Reprinted by permission of Roaring Brook Press. All rights reserved.

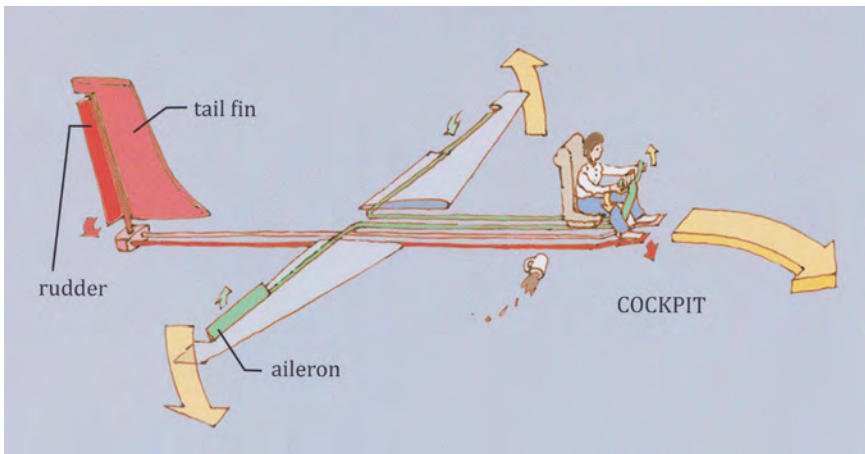


Figure 2. Illustration from *Jet Plane: How it Works*. A modified exploded view of an airplane turning to avoid a storm. As Bogost himself writes of children's books, "[A] child pores over the cutaway view of a submarine . . . not to learn how to operate it but to fathom a small aspect of its murky otherworldliness" (52). Note the dropped cup of coffee feeling the effects of the turn. From *Jet Plane: How it Works* © 2012 by David Macaulay. Reprinted by permission of Roaring Brook Press. All rights reserved.

objects and things. Bogost describes this kind of lingering as a job; for children, lingering is not a job but a pleasure-filled way of being in the world.

The payoff here is simple. In any critical engagement with flight, with air, we must attune ourselves to the vibrancy of airplanes. Airplanes must be more than a means to an end and other than signifiers, representations, cultural artifacts, or containers for human interaction. What a children's book like *Jet Plane* does is to engage the airplane with an eye neither toward the reduction of scientific certainty nor the reduction of cultural significance, but with an eye toward wonder and enchantment, which are surely critical tasks, as well. *Jet Plane* wants to suck us into and expose us to airplanes in their strange reality. In this book, airplanes are things to linger on and with.

What I find additionally compelling about such a speculative approach is the willful mixture of closeness and distance. It is a realism born not of critical distance, the usual way one obtains objectivity, but born of a kind of puzzled proximity from which things can then withdraw. *Objectivity* is an effect of intimacy rather than its opposite. The closer we get to airplanes, the stranger they become as an object. This strangeness, I'd wager, would serve well any critical engagement

with flight. To inhabit an airplane as a child is to attend to the airplane as an active ingredient in the experience of air. It is the critical compartment of wonder and naiveté: to believe that an airplane will never fully divulge its secrets no matter how long or intently we peer at or through it or how ever long we sit in it. Flight does not need to be demystified.

Our understanding of flight is predicated upon our *being* in airplanes, which are not simply a part of the experience of flight, but a necessary condition for our experience of flight as such. We are attuned to the air by the airplane: when our ears pop, as we chew gum, as we breathe the air, as we taste the food, as turbulence jostles the plane and our confidence in it, and as we take a cautious peak into the air-sickness bag. We cannot abstract our experience of flight from our material relations with airplanes. Our attitudes change with altitude. Designed by humans to be sure, but in response to any number of forces, human and nonhuman, airplanes are themselves an ongoing negotiation among humans, gravity, rain, wind, clouds, electricity and fossil fuels: airplanes are diplomats. They are objects we both *work* with and *are* with. Bennett and Bogost articulate this explicitly; Macaulay performs it implicitly.

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NOTES

1. Christopher Schaberg, *The Textual Life of Airports: Reading the Culture of Flight* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 12.
2. Jane Bennett, "The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout," *Public Culture* 17, no. 3 (2005): 445–65, quotations on 457, 451.