



# New Realism(s)

## Brief theoretical inquiry

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### ABSTRACT

Among the different tendencies in contemporary philosophy, the so called “new realism” is probably one of the most interesting. The “New Realism” is not simply a “back” to the reality, a banal and trivial recognition of the existence of the external world. Rather, it is a polemic (and therefore political) philosophical movement against the theoretical monopoly, especially in continental philosophy, ruled by the postmodern philosophical discourse. Therefore, New Realism is a sort of philosophical antagonist of postmodernity. However, we cannot flatten the New Realism on the critique of postmodernity. Indeed, New Realism is a multifaceted and stratified philosophical movement. There are several different New Realisms. These New Realisms include different authors, lines and paths of research, joined by the critique of postmodernity, but distinguished in many ways. The aim of this contribution is double. Firstly, I will trace briefly the theoretical history of New Realism. Secondly, I will focus my paper on the most important topics of new realism, and at the same time on the different philosophical theories (Ferraris, Meillassoux, Gabriel, Boghossian, Harman, Gratton) developed within the name of “New Realism”

**Keywords:** Realism, Postmodernity, Reality, Truth, Object

### RESUMEN

Entre las diferentes tendencias de la filosofía contemporánea, el llamado "nuevo realismo" es probablemente uno de los más interesantes. El "Nuevo Realismo" no es simplemente un "regreso" a la realidad, un reconocimiento banal y trivial de la existencia del mundo externo. Más bien, es un movimiento filosófico polémico (y por lo tanto político) contra el monopolio teórico, especialmente en la filosofía continental, gobernada por el discurso filosófico posmoderno. Por lo tanto, el Nuevo Realismo es una especie de antagonista filosófico de la posmodernidad. Sin embargo, no podemos reducir el Nuevo Realismo a la simple crítica de la posmodernidad. De hecho, el Nuevo Realismo es un movimiento filosófico mul-

tifacético y estratificado. Hay muchos Realismos Nuevos diferentes. Estos Nuevos Realismos incluyen diferentes autores, líneas y caminos de investigación, unidos por la crítica de la posmodernidad, pero distinguidos de muchas maneras. El objetivo de esta contribución es doble. En primer lugar, se rastreará brevemente la historia teórica del Nuevo Realismo. En segundo lugar, se pondrá el acento en las temáticas más importantes del nuevo realismo y, al mismo tiempo, en las diferentes teorías filosóficas (Ferraris, Meillassoux, Gabriel, Boghossian, Harman, Gratton) desarrolladas bajo la denominación de "Nuevo Realismo".

**Palabras clave:** Realismo, postmodernidad, realidad, verdad, objeto

## RESUM

Entre les diferents tendències de la filosofia contemporània, l'anomenat "nou realisme" és probablement un dels més interessants. El "Nou Realisme" no és simplement un "retorn" a la realitat, un reconeixement banal i trivial de l'existència del món extern. Més aviat, és un moviment filosòfic polèmic (i per tant polític) contra el monopoli teòric, especialment en la filosofia continental, governada pel discurs filosòfic postmodern. Per tant, el Nou Realisme és una espècie d'antagonista filosòfic de la postmodernitat. No obstant això, no podem reduir el Nou Realisme a la simple crítica de la postmodernitat. De fet, el Nou Realisme és un moviment filosòfic multifacètic i estratificat. Hi ha molts Realismes Nous diferents. Aquests Nous Realismes inclouen diferents autors, línies i camins d'investigació, units per la crítica de la postmodernitat, però distingits de moltes maneres. L'objectiu d'aquesta contribució és doble. En primer lloc, es rastrejarà breument la història teòrica del Nou Realisme. En segon lloc, es posarà l'accent en les temàtiques més importants del nou realisme i, al mateix temps, en les diferents teories filosòfiques (Ferraris, Meillassoux, Gabriel, Boghossian, Harman, Gratton) desenvolupades sota la denominació de "Nou Realisme"

**Paraules clau:** Realisme, postmodernitat, realitat, veritat, objecte

## 1. Anni mirabili

Unlike other philosophical trends, New Realism has a precise date and place of birth. The term "New Realism" was indeed invented the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2011 by Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris while he was discussing with German colleague Markus Gabriel in a restaurant in Naples. (Ferraris 2014b: xiii-xv). According to Ferraris, all the different philosophical perspectives, intuitions and theories that have in common a sharp criticism against postmodernism and the need to refer to a "solid" reality should be defined as "New Realism".

Such philosophical framework, far from being a simple change in words, has had an enormous impact on the academic community. New Realism and its different variations sparked new debates that stirred philosophical research within the continental tradition. Countless conferences, seminars, books and published researches have addressed and discussed new realist ideas. For this reason, we think that it should be considered more as a novel philosophical trend rather than a temporary fad.

As a matter of fact, few years after the name was invented we can actually see how not only the name has become widespread, but the philosophical movement as a whole. At the present day, New Realism is one of the prevailing trends in contemporary philosophy and one of the main theoretical frameworks that has allowed philosophy to create a dialogue with other fields of research – an interdisciplinary approach that, unfortunately, can't be accounted for in this paper for obvious limits of space.

In this essay we will attempt to give a general overview of the main thinkers that have heralded this novel philosophical trend and of the theoretical issues it tries to solve. Specifically, the common elements of those philosophers that for one reason or another may be considered as “new realists” will be stressed in our enquiry. Due to the very little space of the essay it will not be possible to describe the entire spectrum of authors and perspectives that are taking part in the New Realist debate<sup>1</sup>.

It goes without saying that “New Realism” can't be reduced to the aforementioned shared elements. Indeed, we think it is more correct to talk - as we will do in the present paper – about “New Realisms”, emphasizing on the plural in order to stress the different voices that are part of the debate. This philosophical trend can't really be considered homogeneous, since not only there is a wide variety of approaches to New Realism, but also because very different answers are given to the same problems. Therefore, it can't be properly defined as unique “School of philosophy” and for the same reason this paper can't be considered as conclusive. From our point of view, New Realism should be considered as a constantly progressing debate that is destined to have even a greater success in the future. One position or another will not be endorsed and no conclusive arguments for or against New Realism as a whole will be presented. Rather, a wider theoretical framework will be outlined in order for the reader to have a basic understanding of the main texts that may possibly be part of a New Realist bibliography.

## 2. New Realisms

### 2.1 Maurizio Ferraris' «Nuovo realismo»

One of the New Realisms' common traits is a critique of postmodern philosophy as a form of radical antirealism. Maurizio Ferraris, founder and key figure of New

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<sup>1</sup> See: Bryan, Srnicek, Harmon 2011; De Caro, Ferraris 2012; Gratton 2014; Ferraris 2014a; Gabriel 2015; De Sanctis, Santarcangelo 2017

Realism, in his *Manifesto of New Realism* defines postmodern as “the outcome of a cultural turn that largely coincided with modernity, namely, the prevalence of conceptual schemes over the external world” (Ferraris 2014b: 6). If one reduces postmodern thought to its essence – a philosophical argument often employed by Ferraris – it can be summarized as follows: we never deal with things per se, but only with their appearances, because objective reality is always filtered by subjective epistemic schemes. According to Ferraris, the postmodern perspective is nothing more than the radicalization of two theses that represent its theoretical core: on one hand, the Kantian theory presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason* according to which “thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (Kant 1998: B 75 – A 51); on the other, Nietzsche’s emblematic statement for which “there are no facts, only interpretations” (Nietzsche 1967: § 481). Starting from these two theories, the postmoderns have built a philosophical framework where reality (and facts) is always reduceable to its interpretation<sup>2</sup>. From Ferraris’ perspective, the radical nature of this thesis has the philosophical implication for which “there is no access if not through the mediation (which, in postmodernism, is radicalized and becomes construction) of conceptual schemes and representation” (Ferraris 2014b: 13).

Ferraris’ New Realism – which does not merely acknowledge the existence of an “external” reality – is characterized by: 1) a return to the *aisthesis* of perception; 2) a distinction of ontology from epistemology; 3) a theory of the social world; 4) a general realist ontology. In other words, Ferraris’ realist position does not limit itself to the obvious, the existence of reality itself, but it rather presents an ontological and epistemological theory: if reality exists in itself, then what is known can’t completely correspond to what exists. To put it differently, if reality is what does not depend from human knowledge (or even the knowledge of plants or animals), for this very reason our conceptual schemes can’t possibly modify reality. From this point of view, reality is what precisely resists to human concepts.

Ferraris’ thesis doesn’t intend to dismiss the importance of human epistemology or ignore the role of human activity in shaping our world. On the contrary, according to the Italian philosopher only a distinction between ontology and epistemology may admit that there can be a reasonable use of human faculties, whereas if there wasn’t such distinction everything would be reduced to word-play.

This crucial point marks the main difference between postmodernism and New Realism because they have completely opposing views on the being of what

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of the “philosophical genealogy” proposed by Ferraris see Cardani, Tamborini, 2017

Ferraris' defines as *natural* and *ideal* objects. As a matter of fact, in Ferraris' opinion, such objects do not depend on the subject's agency. Considering this with the relationship between knowing and being mentioned before, implies the antithesis between new realism and postmodernism: according to the former the fact that there are objects that lie beyond the subject's activity automatically means that these two domains are necessarily distinct; on the other hand, from a postmodern perspective, everything is subject to interpretation and filtered through knowledge and, therefore, epistemology and ontology to a certain extent tend to match completely.

As a consequence, in Ferraris' theory reality is not constituted and does not depend entirely on how humans are able to have gnoseological access to facts. This position entails a kind of ontological constructivism where what we know about reality corresponds to what is actually real, resulting in what Ferraris' defines as a "transcendental fallacy".

It must be noted that even Ferraris' theory lends itself if not to constructivism, at least to a hermeneutical approach when it attempts to define social reality, since, according to the new realist standpoint, social objects can be reduced to their inscriptions (Ferraris 2013). If the Kantian thesis for which intuitions that are not aided by concepts are blind is ultimately wrong when applied to nature, according to Ferraris it is still valid when dealing with the social, for it ultimately depends on the subject's actions, perceptions, cultural background and, of course, acts of inscription.

To conclude, it is important to note that Ferraris, especially in his last works, does distinguish postmodernism from idealism: the latter results in the aforementioned "transcendental fallacy", whereas the former ends in a "hermeneutical fallacy", that is, the non-distinction not only between epistemology and ontology, but also between axiology – in other words all that is considered important for human beings, such as language, history, documentality and politics – and ontology.

And this is point where Ferraris' theory reveals its political significance: acknowledging the limits of human activity in the constitution of reality is what impedes a Nietzschean view of human activity as a will to power that embraces the whole reality. The thesis for which "there are no facts, only interpretations" on a political level is completely resolved in what is stated by Thrasimachus in Plato's dialogues: "the argument of the strongest is always the best" (Ferraris 2014b: 3). In other words, Ferraris' New Realism decisive argument "is not theoretical but moral, because it is not possible to imagine moral behaviour in a world without facts and without objects" (Ferraris 2014b: 47). Admitting an independent ontological domain therefore becomes what makes moral responsible conduct pos-

sible. In an era dominated by the notion of “post-truth”, elected as the 2016 word of the year by the Oxford English Dictionary, Ferraris’ idea for which there are facts that are objective are in the end far from being considered pretentious or reactionary.

## 2.2. Speculative Realism

Considering the number of articles and text and, most of all, its impact on the academic debate, it is possible to say that we are now witnessing a “Speculative turn” (Bryant, Srnicek, Harman 2011) in contemporary continental philosophy. Even in the case of this particular type of realism there is a precise moment in time that marked its beginning and that is year 2007 when Iain Hamilton Grant, Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux e Graham Harman, some of the most influential authors of this movement, met at a seminar at the Goldsmiths College in London.

What defines this movement as ‘realist’ is the criticism towards any kind of correlationism, a term invented by Quentin Meillassoux in one of the founding texts of the movement, *After Finitude*. According to the definition given by Meillassoux, correlationism is the idea that there is no subject or object, but their relation.

By 'correlation' we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. We will henceforth call correlationism any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined. Consequently, it becomes possible to say that every philosophy which disavows naive realism has become a variant of correlationism (Meillassoux 2008: 5)

The “speculative” side, on the other hand, is, again, a reference to Kant’s *Critique of pure reason*. It is well known that in this text there is a distinction between the thing in itself (*noumenon*) and the same thing as representation (*phenomenon*). In this case, speculation is when reason attempts to know the thing in itself, as it is beyond its phenomonic appearance. Therefore, what is “Speculative” in this kind of “Realism” is the Kantian idea of using reason in order to try to investigate what lies beyond our perceptions.

### 2.2.1. Speculative materialism

French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux is without doubt one of the key figures of the speculative realism debate. Meillassoux’s position may be summarized as follows: “being is independent of thought and thought can think being”. In his perspective, being is something that exists independently from our experiential field and beyond the epistemic order that allows us to have a noetic grasp of re-



ality. This does not mean, however, that being can't be thought. From this point of view, Meillassoux's philosophy can be seen as mix of materialism and rationalism, or, as he defines it, as "speculative materialism", where matter is autonomous from thought, but at the same time mathematics and logic are the main access towards a knowledge of being.

As mentioned before, *After finitude* presents a radical critique against any kind of correlationism which, also according to Meillassoux, is a true "philosophical scandal" that originated with the Kantian revolution.

In this text, Meillassoux's main argument against correlationism is what he calls the argument of *ancestral time* (Meillassoux 2008: 1-27), according to which there is a period time that precedes the emergence of any form of consciousness where there couldn't be any relation between humans and objects, any form of givenness or, in other words, any kind of Kantian I think. In this case, how could the correlationist admit scientific propositions regarding such period of time where there weren't any human beings that could experience it. Since according to the correlationist subject-object relations are all that exists, this relation would be impossible in an ancestral time and for this very reason scientific facts would be completely meaningless.

Clearly, the key aspect of this argument is not that it recognizes a past humanity – a topic addressed by Kant himself in the Critique of Pure Reason – but rather a world preceding human itself, a time of which we are aware only for scientific knowledge. This ancestral world before humanity – and, therefore, before any kind of experience – poses a dramatic issue to correlationism, as it is simply unable to account for such ancestral time. As a matter of fact, it fails to recognize that there may be experience of something which hasn't been – or even can't be – experienced.

Another key aspect of this theory is the notion of the "facticity of the correlation" (Meillassoux 2008: 52). According to Meillassoux correlation is not necessary, in the sense that there is no reason for its existence. This "lack of reason" (*irraison*) means that phenomena and their relations can only be described, but not demonstrated. It may be true that we experience the world only as a correlation, but this does not imply that the correlation itself is necessary. Consequently, this entails that contingency is necessary – which, in other words, is what makes the facticity of the correlation – and such necessary contingency is what denotes reality and not what makes it knowable. To put it differently, the necessity of contingency or the facticity of the correlation – not the correlation itself – is Meillassoux's definition of the absolute. This means that there cannot be any kind of universal order. From Meillassoux's point of view, even the laws of physics are –

to a certain extent – subject to contingency, because nothing guarantees that things remain the same from one moment to another.

With these ideas, Meillassoux's metaphysics are trying to save two key concepts of the continental tradition: one is the notion of principle, and the other, as we have just seen, is that of absolute. The absolute principle, in Meillassoux's view, is that all things lack of reason and necessity and therefore they are contingent. This puts Meillassoux's theory as one of the most radical of the new realist philosophers, but, still, the critique towards correlationism allows him to be considered as part of the same group. Meillassoux's position is an attempt to maintain the idea of philosophy as speculation in the Kantian sense, while being realist even without the principle of sufficient reason.

The perspective we have just presented may be confronted with that of another speculative realist, Ray Brassier. Even according to Brassier there is no underlying reason that accounts for an order of things. However, even if existence is meaningless, human beings are still able to grasp the noumenon through scientific research, a theoretical position defined as "transcendental nihilism". This means that the nihilistic outcome of Brassier's philosophy does not imply the abandon of central notions such as truth or reality. On the contrary, it leads to a return to Sellars' view of a scientific image of the world where philosophy may be combined with neurology and neurosciences. According to Brassier, nihilism is the natural outcome of the abandon of continental philosophy's antirealism:

the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, is indifferent of our existence and oblivious to the "values" and "meanings" which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable (Brassier 2007: xi).

### 2.2.2. Object-oriented-philosophy

Another key figure of Speculative Realism is american philosopher Graham Harman. In his texts he develops what he defines as an object-oriented-ontology where the heideggerian notion of *Zuhandenheit* (Harman 2002) leads to an interpretation of the Kantian thing in itself as something that is inaccessible to humans and where the main focus is on non-human rather than human agency. Husserl's interest towards the "things in themselves" may be seen as a forerunner to Harman's thesis, but according to him the focus should not be on things, but rather on objects in themselves. As a matter of fact, in *The Quadruple Object* Harman argues that objects are "the root of all philosophy" (Harman 2011: 138), because, in a way that is not far off from phenomenology, the world itself is composed solely by objects. It is for this reason that they are "in themselves", for they cannot be reduced to other. This is where Harman's realism clearly emerg-



es: if objects are in themselves, then they cannot be reduced to their relation to human experience. Things do manifest to man and man relates to them instrumentally, but this does not correspond to the things' essence. Consequently, the world is not what manifests itself as such to human beings.

The subject-object correlation, the theoretical enemy of speculative realism, for Harman is nothing more than an anthropocentric relation, which is only one of the many possible relations and not the subject-object relation *par excellence*. In fact, objects themselves are related to each other, but we cannot experience such relation with nevertheless exists. For this reason, according to Harman “the more important principle is to put object-object relations on exactly the same footing as subject-object relations” (140).

Admitting that there is a relation between objects of course does not mean that this same relation encompasses the whole ontological domain. For Harman, there is no direct encounter between real objects, because they withdraw: “real objects cannot touch real objects” (Harman 2011: 75). There may only be an encounter between sensual objects, which are the images, or shadows, of objects: “a real object meets only the shadow of another” (Harman 2009: 147).

Even though it may seem that Harman stresses the importance of the relation between objects, he still can't be defined as a correlationist because one of the key aspects of his thought is precisely the idea that object relations do not correspond entirely with things in themselves.

This is what makes Harman's philosophy anti-anthropocentric. Our relation to things can't explain the whole reality, because we can't have access to the relations between non-human agents, like to rocks hitting each other during an earthquake, or what happens between the single raindrops and a tree in a middle of a storm. This means that reality can't be reduced to the way we access it epistemologically, because objects continuously withdraw from us and relate to each other only through their sensual images.

### 2.2.3. Liberal ontology

A particularly interesting thinker of the speculative turn is French philosopher Tristan Garcia, who wrote an important text in 2010 entitled *Forme et objet. Un traité des choses*. Garcia's ontology may be defined as 'liberal', because in his view all things have the same “ontological dignity”, because in the world there is nothing more but things. Garcia's liberal ontology presupposes an extremely weak ontological requirement that rejects any kind of transcendental perspective, because there is no a priori condition for the existence of things. From this point view, it is possible to say that the aim of Garcia's realism is to define an *ens infirmissimum*, a being so weak (in the sense that it has weak ontological

conditions) that nothing weaker can be thought through abstraction. The outcome of this theory is what Garcia defines a “solitary ontology”: an existence whose solitude is construed as the “minimal determination of singularity”. In this way, a sort of flat-ontology<sup>3</sup> is conceived where “to be something is primarily to not be no-matter-what. That which a thing is, at least, is ‘not no-matter-what’” (Garcia 2014: 52). Such liberal ontology implies the rejection of anthropocentrism which, as we have just seen, is a common trait to any form of correlationism. Ontological solitude is precisely what all the things that inhabit the world have in common, even human beings:

The world is the place of the formal equality of things and the place of their solitude. The world is where one is solitary, and one is solitary only in the world. [...] To be solitary in the world is therefore what is most common among things; the only common place of things, in fact, is their solitude in the world” (Garcia 2014: 55-56).

Consequently, in Garcia’s ontology nothing can be reduced to nothingness, because every single thing at least shares with all other things its ontological solitude, that is the very fact of being something.

#### 2.2.4. A return to Kierkegaard

Concluding this incomplete overview of some of the main New Realist thinkers, it is worth mentioning Lee Braver (2007). The choice of this author between many others may be arbitrary, but the case of Braver’s philosophy is particularly significant, because it clearly shows how this new wave of realists attempt to criticize the antirealism that dominated continental philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century from within, by finding arguments that are part of the same continental tradition. Braver’s philosophy is the attempt to keep together the recognition of our epistemological limits and the impossibility to conceive what lies beyond our experiential field. Braver does not limit himself in reading critically Kant, Hegel or Heidegger, just as other authors have done. He develops his “transgressive realism” mainly from Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard 1974). In this way, Braver tries to show that there is a fundamental compatibility between ontology and phenomenology. In fact, according to Braver, the realist perspective must confront itself with what transcends the possibilities of human knowledge and accept the anguish that stems from the experiences that do not fit with our expectations or that go beyond our epistemic order. By reinterpreting Kierkegaard’s existentialism and its phenomenological implications within the realist framework, according to Braver it is possible to maintain on one hand the Kantian view of the finitude of human experience and, on the other, the Hegelian necessity to experience what transcends these limits.

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<sup>3</sup> See DeLanda 2002

### 2.3. Hyperrealism

One author that is hard to position within the realist framework is German philosopher Markus Gabriel, who, even though he contributed to the definition of New Realism (Gabriel 2014), can't be regarded neither as a "New Realist" in Ferraris' sense, nor as a "speculative realist". In fact, Markus Gabriel's theory defended in the essay *Fields of Sense* (2015) is an ontological pluralism that he himself defines as a "neutral realism".

According to Gabriel, to exist means to exist in a certain "field of sense" or "ontological domain". This particular realist framework implies that there are plural entities that do and do not exist at the same time for the reason that they are part of different fields of sense. Hence the term "hyperrealism". Even though they are the same concept, Gabriel prefers the notion of field of sense, in order to avoid any possible constructivist interpretation that may stem from the concept of "domain", since this notion in the continental tradition has always been connected to discursivity. From this point of view a field of sense

provides objective structures and interacts with the objects appearing within it. [...] Fields are not horizons or perspectives; they are not epistemological entities or objects introduced to explain how we can know how things are. They are an essential part of how things are in that without fields, nothing could exist" (Gabriel 2015: 157-158)

An example may help clarify the notion of field of sense and how it relates to ontology. According to Gabriel's ontology, Harry Potter does actually exist, but only within the field of sense defined by literature and J.K. Rowling's novels. Therefore, existence is nothing more but appearance in a field of sense within various possible fields of sense. This implies that "existence is not an activity of objects" (Gabriel 2015: 135), and therefore it depends on their appearance: "Existence is a relation between a domain and its objects [...]. As a result, objects could not exist alone; they are not absolutes, but only exists as *relata*. Objects only exist relative to their domain, as existence is the property of their domain to contain exactly them" (Gabriel 2015: 140). According to the realism of Gabriel's pluralist ontology, it makes perfect sense to admit the existence of unicorns, because they do appear within the field of sense of fantasy literature, but at the same time it makes no sense to admit their existence within the field of zoology, because they don't appear in that field of sense.

The existence of an indefinite number of fields of sense has the crucial ontological implication of the non-existence of the world, that is a domain that contains all domains, because it still requires another field of sense exist. The true mean-

ing behind Gabriel's shocking statement for which "the world does not exist" is therefore the impossibility to describe an absolute totality.

Following his critique of the notion of world, Gabriel argues that there is a distinction between ontology and metaphysics: while the former answers to the question regarding the existence of something, the latter is a theory of totality, in other words a theory on the world as such. Per questa ragione la filosofia di Gabriel è radicalmente antimetafisica.

The main goal of Gabriel's thesis is the criticism against the antirealist claim that the outcome of realism is naturalism: as matter of fact, differently from Ferraris' perspective, Gabriel abandons the idea of the existence of external world for the very reason that it may be easily misunderstood as a form of naturalism, where the universe is the only possible domain for analytic research. This means that Gabriel's realism has nothing to do with making assertions on an 'external' world and, in this sense, it only relates to what is factual. According to Gabriel a realist position is indeed necessary because an enquiry on absolute facts simply can't be avoided. For this reason, we can't fail to recognize that some facts do exist – that is, that there is some truth about something – even though we can't know a priori which facts exist. Hence, the reason why Gabriel defines his realism 'neutral'.

### 3. Conclusions

In this paper, I attempted to outline the main contemporary realist theories in continental philosophy. It is only for reasons of space that many other important realist thinkers have not been considered.

As we have shown, all of the new realist philosophies have in common the idea that there are portions of the world whose existence do not depend on human knowledge or any other sort of perceptual experience. Even though the authors that are part of this movement agree on the antirealist character of 20<sup>th</sup> century continental philosophy, they nonetheless differ on the kind of criticism moved against postmodernism. For this reason, I think that these New Realisms shouldn't be reduced to a "fad", but rather as a stimulating and encouraging trend in contemporary philosophy.

Clearly, many authors have criticised both the wider philosophical foundation of New Realism as well as its single arguments and theoretical points. To conclude this overview, we will now offer a brief outline of such criticisms.

One of the main arguments against New Realism target its name specifically: what should be considered "new" in "New Realism"? According to most critics,

this realist movement does nothing more than affirming what is already in front of our eyes, the existence of a world that continues to live on despite our interpretations. Even if this may be the case, this argument does not consider two crucial points: first of all, as we have shown in this paper, even within New Realism there is not a univocal definition of reality; and, secondly, the main target of New Realism is not to admit the existence of an “external reality”, but to question the possibility of its reduction to subjective interpretation. For these reasons, these kinds of criticisms actually miss their mark.

Apart from this, there have been authors that have endorsed the new realist project in the beginning, only to dismiss it completely after. Specifically, Ray Brassier wrote poisonous words against the whole idea behind Speculative Realism:

the ‘speculative realist movement’ exists only in the imaginations of a group of bloggers promoting an agenda for which I have no sympathy whatsoever: actor-network theory spiced with pan-psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy. I don’t believe the Internet is the appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students. I agree with Deleuze’s remark that ultimately the most basic task of philosophy is to impede stupidity, so I see little philosophical merit in a ‘movement’ whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity” (Brassier 2011)

It’s not hard to see how pretentious this statement is, even though it has the merit to focus on the crucial role of digital media in scientific research, a point that must be addressed not only by the new realist movement, but by the whole academic community. In a world where all forms of communication are turning digital, the very possibility of making theoretical research more accessible without sacrificing its academic rigour indeed has to be put in question more than ever.

Others have criticised the hidden political dimension of New Realism, accused of being a kind of “philosophical populism” that aims at being approved by wider audiences (Di Cesare, Ocone, Regazzoni 2013). The problem with this criticism, apart from the fact that it focuses solely on Ferraris’ *Manifesto*, is that it doesn’t consider the variety of philosophical perspectives that can be found within the realist movement, of which most hardly can be defined as commonplace. Meillassoux’s notion of absolute, Ferraris’ reinterpretation of Schelling’s philosophy as a form of “positive realism” (Ferraris 2015), Garcia’s thesis of the ontological solitude shared by all things, the non-anthropocentric nature of Harman’s object-oriented ontology, the way in which Gabriel defines existence from his own concept of field of sense and Braver’s transgressive realism are all examples of how these new realisms are far from making philosophical thinking something trivial.

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In fact, they are not trying to make counterintuitive statements, but rather they all try to redefine problematically and critically a shared hypothesis that admits a world existing independently from human experience.

Although this does not imply that according New Realism the whole reality is completely separate from human beings. Social reality, as Ferraris shows, is closely knit to human action. Therefore, the existing power relations, conflicting interpretations, cultures and debates on morality are not denied, nor passively accepted. On the contrary, since society is the only part of reality where there is evidence of the central role of human epistemic activity, this means to assert even a higher responsibility for human agency. It may seem banal, but what needs to be stressed is not that in the world there are no social facts, but that there aren't *only* social facts.

Contrary to a strictly anthropocentric framework that considers man and his relation to the world as the only possible perspective on reality (Caffo 2014; Morton 2010), New Realism re-establishes what simply can't be reduced to human experience and withdraws from its epistemological order. The focus on objects, on the connection between existence and appearance within a field of sense or, as in Meillassoux's case, the attempt to conceive "a time of a radical inhumanity", all aim at showing that humanity and its epistemic relation to the world is not at the centre stage of reality. This, in my opinion, is not a denial of the value of human reason, but something that I define emphatically as "passion for the real".

The brief overview outlined in this paper does not intend to show that New Realism is the best contemporary philosophical perspective or if its underlying argument are sound or not. Rather it aims at recognizing that it is a real philosophical movement – with different authors and theses that are part of it – with a strong theoretical dignity that has become part of the academic discourse and, for this reason, can't be avoided or reduced to a quarrel between academics.

Clearly, these new realist tendencies will have to engage in the future with issues that still need to be solved, such as their ethical and political implications, as well as their relation to novel scientific or technological discoveries. Most of all, the way in which new realism may be connected to ecology seems to be one of the most promising perspectives, as shown by Timothy Morton's notion of hyperobject, namely things massively distributed in time and space relative to humans (Morton 2010; 2013) etc.

Apart from this, research within the new realist framework may also continue to confront and find new perspectives within the philosophical tradition, a path that – as already mentioned above – has already been set by Ferraris, who returns to Schelling's *Philosophie der Mythologie* (1837-1842) in order to theorize a



“positive philosophy”. Schelling’s philosophy, as a matter of fact, has also inspired another interesting new realist author, such as Iain Hamilton Grant (2006). Come ho detto all’inizio, i Nuovi realismi devono essere considerati un cantiere di problemi aperto.

As we said at the beginning of this paper, New Realism has to be considered as an unfinished work in progress whose future is still unknown. It is clear that if it wants to continue to be one of the most influential trends in philosophy, it has to address practical and political problems that are part of human existence. Only in this way New Realism will be a philosophical perspective capable of being a theoretical foundation and an ethical guide for human activity.

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