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## **Object-Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism Reading in the *Maze Runner Trilogy* by James Dashner**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO) and speculative realism theory in the *Maze Runner* trilogy by James Dashner (2009-2011) a dystopian science fiction set in the future when the population suffers a fatal virus. The story follows boys subjected to life-threatening trials by WICKED, a company seeking a cure. This article focuses on objects' roles and their interactions, opposing traditional human-centric interpretations. OOO determines that objects, possess their own reality, meaning there is no necessity for human involvement or interaction. Applying this theory to the series, the article argues that objects like the maze, the Glade, Cranks, and the virus are not merely plot devices but active entities that shape the narrative, challenging traditional perspectives. OOO also helps in understanding the characters and their relations with non-human objects. Speculative realism expands the discussion to include how the book's fictional universe challenges the definition of reality. Speculative realism argues that reality exists independently of human perception. Challenging the idea that our understanding of the world is how we subjectively experience it. Applying OOO and speculative realism to the trilogy can reveal how non-human objects in the books, are active agents that influence the narrative and characters' development.

*Keywords: Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), Graham Harman, James Dashner, Maze Runner Trilogy*

## 1. Introduction

James Smith Dashner is an American writer known for writing speculative fiction for children and young adults. He was born on November 26, 1972, in Austell, Georgia, one of six children in his family. He was raised Mormon. At age 10, he was typing on his parents' typewriter. He graduated from Duluth High School in 1991. From Atlanta, Georgia, he moved to Provo, Utah, and attended Brigham Young University, where he earned a master's degree in accounting. He lives and writes in the Rocky Mountains. He is most known for being a New York Times bestseller for *The Maze Runner* series and the *Morality Doctrine* series (Pavao, 2012).

The *Maze Runner* series consists of a total of 6 books, with the latest being published in 2022. Still, the main story takes place in the trilogy *The Maze Runner*, *The Scorch Trials*, and *The Death Cure* with the rest being a prequel or the story being told by another character. Published in 2009, the first *Maze Runner* novel in the trilogy is told by the protagonist of the story; a sixteen-year-old boy named Thomas. He wakes up not remembering who he is, where he is, where he has come from, and why about fifty boys are staring at him (p.3). Soon he figures out that he has been put into a prodigious place called the Glade and all his fellow 'Gladers', as they are called, similar to himself have no memory of their lives before being sent to the glade and that they have been trying to escape the place by going through the maze that has surrounded all around the glade; for over 4 years. He soon makes friends and foes while getting accustomed to life in the glade. Remarkably, however, the following day a girl is sent there muttering Thomas' name. She is the first and only girl to have ever been sent there and a note is stuck to her saying "She's The Last One EVER" (p.57). The rest of the story follows Tom and his fellow Gladers trying to find a way to escape the maze while being faced by terrorizing robotic giant-sized spiders called, Grievors. By the end of the book, they manage an escape, whilst fighting the Grievors and losing about 30 of the boys to unfortunate deaths (Dashner, 2009).

The second book in the *Maze Runner* trilogy is *The Scorch Trials* (2010). After the Gladers have successfully escaped the maze and been rescued by a team of anonymous soldiers, they are relieved that all the suffering is over; unfortunately, it turns out the second stage of the trials by WICKED has just begun. Teresa is gone and her place has been taken by a boy named Aries who claims to be from another maze consisting of only girls and him being the only boy similar to Teresa's story. They are all told to have the Flare virus and it will soon drive them to madness and inevitable death (pp. 1-62). The boys are given the mission to go through the scorch and a city filled with unexpected killer thunderstorms and bolts



of lightning, giant metal flying balls, more Grievors, and Cranks; in order to reach a place called “The Haven”, where a cure awaits them. The story follows their journey to the Haven; told through Thomas’ point of view and their confrontation with group A, the girl, the Betrayal of Teresa, facing deadly Cranks, and many more (Dashner, 2010). The third and last book in the *Maze Runner* trilogy, *The Death Cure* (2011), focuses on the protagonist, Thomas, along with three companions trying to bring down WICKED by escaping to Denver in hopes of finding a secret organization called the ‘right arm’, who are WICKED’s enemy and have been trying to take down WICKED for years. The story focuses on dilemmas, making the right choice, sacrifice, run-ins with old characters, and death (Dashner, 2011).

While discussing contemporary young adult literature, James Dashner's *Maze Runner* trilogy has come to be a significant work; being notable for its complex narrative and exploration of a dystopian world. This trilogy offers a narrative that intertwines human struggles, a dystopian future, and plot developments. The series is primarily constructed for a young adult audience; however, it provides ground for deeper philosophical aspects, especially when analyzed through the lens of Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Speculative Realism. Graham Harman, a key figure in the Speculative Realism movement, believes in the philosophical approach that argues equal importance of objects as to humans. Object-oriented ontology challenges the anthropocentric bias in traditional philosophy, positing that objects, both animate and inanimate, possess their own agency and exist independently of human perception and interaction. This theoretical perspective provides a novel approach to literary analysis, one that moves beyond human-centered interpretations and considers the narrative significance of non-human entities (Harman, *Ontology*, 2018, pp. 195-219).

Applying OOO to the *Maze Runner* trilogy, this article focuses on discovering the roles and agencies of non-human entities within Dashner's narrative. The maze itself, for instance, is not just a setting but an active participant in the story. Through the OOO lens, the maze functions as a background for human action, emerging as a dynamic entity with its own motives and effects on the plot and characters. These challenges in the given narrative help readers in understanding the trilogy's complexities. Furthermore, this study extends to other non-human elements in the series, such as the Flare virus, the robotic creatures known as Grievors, the Zombie-like creatures called Cranks, and the dystopian landscape of the Scorch. Each of these elements is examined for their qualities and their interactions with human characters. This approach aligns with Harman's emphasis on the importance of inter-object relations and how they contribute to the overall structure of reality and narrative (Behrens, 2019, pp.2-6).

In addition to exploring the trilogy through OOO, this research also sheds light on Speculative Realism. This philosophical movement, which Harman is closely associated with, challenges the traditional focus on human experience as what is known as reality. It supports a speculative approach to understanding the world, acknowledging realities beyond human speculations and imaginations. (Harman, *Speculative*, 2018, 3(C, D) 4(A)). Applying this theory to the trilogy explores how Dashner's narrative engages and challenges conventional notions of reality, truth, and human experience. This speculative approach opens up new possibilities, revealing how the trilogy not only tells a story of human survival and resistance in a dystopian world but also invites readers to reconsider their understanding of reality and the role of non-human entities in shaping narrative and experience (Bogost, 2012, pp.35-61). The aim is to determine the potential of applying Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism to young adult dystopian fiction and literary works such as the *Maze Runner* trilogy. By doing so, it seeks to enrich our understanding of Dashner's narrative, contribute to the field of literary criticism, and highlight the relevance and applicability of contemporary philosophical theories to the analysis of young adult literature.

## 2. Literature Review

Multiple newspaper columns and articles about the trilogy, the OOO theory, and Speculative realism have been written. We will take a closer look at these articles in this section. The *Maze Runner* trilogy, written by James Dashner, has become a significant work in the young adult dystopian genre, drawing attention for its blending of adventure, mystery, and science fiction elements. Critical reviews and academic analyses have explored different aspects of the series, from its narrative structure to its thematic content. By studying these works, readers will not only become familiar with Dashner and his writing style, but they will also uncover new layers of meaning and explore various philosophical aspects of the books. This approach allows us to view the novels as more than just another young adult fiction while assisting readers in understanding how the researchers of this article used the OOO theory and speculative realism to examine the books.

The article “Adventures Reflected in James Dashner’s *The Scorch Trials* Novel: An Individual Psychological Approach” by Elsa Parlina, Dewi Candraningrum, and Titis Setyabudi (2016), focuses on analyzing *The Scorch Trials* (2010) based on the theory of individual psychology. The research finds six aspects, which are fictional finalism, striving for success, inferiority, style of life, social interest, and creative self-based, in this novel. Another Article is called “Quest in James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* Trilogy” by Ali Akbar Zamani, Farideh Pourgivi, and Mahsa Hashemi (2021). The focus of this article is on the



books' dystopian theme. This paper takes a quest in Joseph Campbell's views of the hero's journey, including the steps to explore the archetypes of a journey in a dystopian futuristic world. The hero's journey is a metaphor for the unusual yet challenging inner human journey everyone experiences in their life.

Along with studies on Dashner's works, it is worth referring to studies that connect Object-oriented ontology and speculative realism with literature and art. There are notable contributions to the literature on SR and OOO. Some texts focus on the intellectual history and philosophical assessments of key figures in the movement, providing a deeper understanding of each philosopher's version of realism. The literature of Graham Harman's OOO and Speculative Realism reveals a diverse philosophical approach in which thinkers contribute their own perspectives to a discussion about the nature of reality, objects, and human understanding. Studying these sources; enables us readers to grasp a deeper meaning of OOO and speculative realism in order to explore the trilogy like the researchers. [Graham Harman in \*Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy\* \(2012\)](#), applies a speculative approach to the weird aesthetics of H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft's style comes to terms with the fact that there are a lot of things beyond human understanding in the cosmos and the incapability of human language to explain these gaps and uncertainties. Harman proposes an OOO analysis of Lovecraft's aesthetics, in hopes of justifying how he manages to hint at the weird reality.

[Harman's work, \*Speculative Realism: An Introduction\* \(2018\)](#), presents a comprehensive view of speculative realism, including major figures in this movement: Ray Brassier's "Prometheanism," Iain Hamilton Grant's "Vitalist Idealism," Harman's "Object-Oriented Ontology," and Quentin Meillassoux's "Speculative Materialism." This text serves as an accessible source for a complete understanding of speculative Realism, by offering a critique of different approaches associated with the movement. [Harman's work called \*Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything\* \(2018\)](#), rejects the idea of human superiority. The world, he argues, is not manifested for just humans. The idea is that objects, whether real, fictional, natural, artificial, human, or non-human are all autonomous. Graham Harman lays out OOO's history, ideas, and impact, taking in art and literature, politics, and natural science.

### 3. Method

Object-Oriented Ontology, a term presented by Graham Harman, is a school of thought within the broader philosophical movement known as Speculative Realism. OOO challenges the traditional anthropocentric approach to ontology,

which often places human experience and perception at the center of philosophical inquiry. Instead, it posits that objects, both physical and abstract, exist independently of human perception and have their own reality and identity. Harman's theory is particularly known for its argument that objects exist in a state of perpetual withdrawal, meaning that they can never be fully understood or accessed by other objects, including humans. This concept shifts the focus from human relations to the relations between objects themselves. Harman argues that objects interact with each other, influencing each other indirectly or metaphorically rather than through direct interactions. OOO situates itself as a counterpoint to both traditional ontologies and post-Kantian philosophy. Where Immanuel Kant argues that human experience is the limit of what can be known and understood from reality. However, OOO suggests that objects have agency regardless of human existence and actions. This approach not only reconfigures our understanding of objects but also challenges the anthropocentric biases in philosophy, science, and literature (Harman, *ontology*, 2018, pp. 195-219).

Speculative Realism is a broader movement of OOO that emerged in the early 21st century as a reaction against the perceived limitations of post-Kantian philosophy. This movement features thinkers such as Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Ian Bogost, and Iain Hamilton Grant. Despite their differing perspectives, they share a common interest in transcending human-centric thought. Speculative Realism argues for a reality that is not contingent upon human thought or existence. It speculates an alternative world that exists, which cannot be seen, approached, or even understood by human entities. Harman's OOO and Speculative Realism have significant importance and influences on various fields. In art and humanities, these theories offer new ways to analyze and explore literature, art, and culture; suggesting that objects within these masterpieces possess their own narrative and reality. In environmental studies and ecology, these theories provide a framework for considering non-human entities, like animals, plants, and ecosystems, as integral and active participants in the world, not merely as resources for human activity. Critics of OOO and Speculative Realism argue that these theories might lead to a form of obscurantism, where the focus on the unknowability of objects undermines the possibility of meaningful knowledge or action. Others question how these theories account for social, political, and ethical concerns, given their emphasis on non-human entities (Harman, *Speculative*, 2018, pp. 1-61).

Applying Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Speculative Realism to the *Maze Runner* trilogy offers a new perspective on its narrative and its elements. These theories suggest a world where objects and their relations have an existence and hold roles independent of human perception and



interaction, a view that can reinterpret the trilogy. In *The Maze Runner* (2009), the Maze itself emerges as an object with its own identity and role, significantly impacting the story and characters transforming human-centric narratives (Harman, *Object*, 2018). This perspective posits that the Maze is not merely a setting, but an influencing element in the story, which aligns perfectly with OOO's perspective on objects possessing their own agency. The shifting walls of the Maze, the robotic creatures called the Grievors, and the environment of the Glade are not present in the story for human actions but are active participants in the narrative. This perspective that objects are not passive entities but have their own reality and power to influence, is OOO's view. This approach shifts the focus from a human-centric narrative to one where human and non-human entities interact, challenging traditional storytelling and offering a richer interpretation of the trilogy (Morton, 2011).

Speculative Realism encourages us to consider the broader context in which these objects exist. The post-apocalyptic world, the catastrophic solar flares, the deadly flare virus, and the cranks are not just plot devices but are a speculation of a world where human and non-human entities are intertwined. These elements determine the conditions of human existence and drive the narrative forward, suggesting a world where the human perspective is not central but just one among many (Barnett, 2010). The trilogy's exploration of memory and identity, which are central themes in the stories, can be analyzed through various theories. In *The Maze Runner*, memories and identities are not solely human constructs; they are influenced by interactions with non-human entities, such as the Maze itself, the serum, and the chips implanted in the characters' brains. This dynamic interplay illustrates the relationship between humans and non-human objects (pp.1-4).

In *The Scorch Trials* and *The Death Cure*, the narrative goes beyond the maze into a broader social setting and environmental collapse, illustrating Speculative Realism's representation of the world. A world where human and non-human entities are inevitably linked (Morton, 2011). The distorted cities, the resistance groups, and the governing institute WICKED are not merely fictional elements for writing but work to determine the interconnectedness of all entities in the story. Thus, when viewed through the lenses of OOO and Speculative Realism, the *Maze Runner* trilogy delves into deeper levels of human struggle for survival. It becomes a narrative deeply rooted in a world where objects and environments mutually influence and affect each other's existence, while challenging the anthropocentric view of reality and storytelling. This approach interprets the trilogy significantly but also enhances our understanding of the contemporary philosophical discourse, offering insights into the nature of objects, agency, and the human condition in the world (Barnett, 2010, pp. 1-4).

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 *The Glade*

Harman differentiates between real objects and sensual objects. Real objects are inaccessible and drawn from all relations, while sensual objects are the ones we are in contact with. The Glade is a lush, green land featuring built-in houses, farming areas, a graveyard, and all essentials for survival. It was created by Wicked for psychological testing and is designed to resemble a forest, complete with rain, day and night cycles, trees, and survival tools. The inhabitants, known as the Gladers, consist of about fifty teenage boys, each sent to the Glade on a specific day of the month. These boys are expected to live in harmony while trying to escape by finding a way out of the maze that surrounds them. “This place is called the Glade, all right? It’s where we live, where we eat, where we sleep—we call ourselves the Gladers” (Dashner, 2009, p.9).

In the Glade, the Gladers can be seen as real objects, while the environment, the Maze, and the objects within are considered sensual objects. Harman's theory can be applied to understand the attraction of the Gladers to the Glade. According to Harman, allure is the tension between a real object and a sensual object, breaking down the relationship between things and their features, and revealing a hidden reality. In this case, the Glade, promises safety and freedom, which allures the Gladers away from WICKED. For instance, the Glade's structured laws and orders can be seen as an alluring aspect. The Gladers are attracted to the Glade not just because of its physical safety, but also because of the stability it offers to get through the chaotic circumstances they are stuck in (Dashner, 2009, pp. 22-26). These rules and laws of the Glade ensure that the Gladers are housed and fed properly, for the purpose of surviving and escaping the Maze (Dashner, 2009). “The shadows from the walls had lengthened considerably, already creeping up the sides of the ivy-covered stone faces on the other side. At least this helped Thomas know directions—In the exact middle of the courtyard, the still-gaping hole of the Box lay open as if inviting him to jump back in and go home” (Dashner, 2009, p.22).

Harman's Speculative Realism theory can be used to explore the nature of the Glade itself. According to Speculative Realism, the world is not only knowable but also intelligible, and it exists independently of our perceptions. In the Glade, this could imply that the Glade exists independently of the Gladers' actions and beliefs, and its true nature remains a mystery until the Gladers fully explore and understand it and are able to escape it. Analyzing the Glade through Harman's OOO and Speculative Realism theories provides a deeper understanding of the nature of objects and their interactions within the Glade, as well as the Gladers'



perspective and beliefs about it. “The wooden building crouched in the northwest corner, wedged in a darkening patch of shadow, the grove of trees in the southwest. The farm area, where a few workers were still picking their way through the fields, spread across the entire northeast quarter of the Glade” (Dashner, 2009, p.22).

#### 4.2 The Maze

The glade is surrounded by the Maze on all four sides. The Maze is composed of tall gray walls and features openings on all four sides, which only open during the day. Once the sun begins to set, these openings close, trapping the horrific creatures that roam the Maze. Each night, the Maze changes, creating a new pattern each day that makes it impossible for the Gladers to piece together a map for their escape. Analyzing the maze in the *Maze Runner* series through Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and speculative realism helps in understanding the maze as a set of objects with their own interactions and behaviors. The maze and its inhabitants are all objects within a larger setting, which is the central focus of OOO. This means that the maze, as a physical entity, possesses its own agency. It is not just a setting in the story, but an active participant in the narrative. Its changing layout and obstacles One could determine that the maze, with its changing layout, which is a complex set of walls, paths, traps, and the Gladers, represents its ability to adapt and evolve in response to the actions of the characters. “Thomas asked, the dread slamming into his gut. ‘You weren’t playing with me? The walls really move?’ Chuck threw his arms up, ‘I don’t know, they just move. Makes one heck of a grinding noise. Same thing happens out in the Maze—those walls shift every night, too.’ (pp.25-26).

These components have their own unique behavior, like being deadly, and they interact in specific ways to create the overall structure of the maze. The characters are objects too within this set. They have their own behavior and understanding, like being able to run or climb certain in order of survive, and they interact with other objects, like exploring the walls of the maze or the traps, in specific ways that shape their experiences within the maze (Dashner, 2009).

Speculative realism, another concept developed by Harman, suggests that we should consider all possible versions of the world, not just the one that is tangible for human understanding. In the *Maze Runner* series, this means considering alternative interpretations of the maze and the events within it. For example, one could speculate that the maze is not just a physical space, but also a metaphorical representation of a larger system or reality. For example, when the Gladers, try to control the maze and escape it, symbolize external forces or entities fighting

against the power and rejecting ideologies that influence a person just like the maze that influences characters' experiences and decisions within the maze. Harman's theories in the *Maze Runner* series reveal a rich interconnection between objects, each with their own understandings and behaviors.

And why do you live inside a freaking maze?" He felt a rattling pressure of uncertainty, making his head splinter with pain. A loud boom exploded through the air, making Thomas jump. It was followed by a horrible crunching, grinding sound. He stumbled backward, fell to the ground. It felt as if the whole earth shook; he looked around, panicked. The walls were closing. The walls were really closing trapping him inside the Glade. (Dashner, 2009, p.28)

### 4.3 *The Grievors*

In the *Maze Runner* series, the Grievors are portrayed as autonomous entities capable of causing destruction and death. They can replicate and spread, challenging the protagonists' survival. The actions and behaviors of the Grievors play a significant role in the plot of the *Maze Runner* trilogy. Grievors are large, monstrous, alien-like creatures designed and controlled by WICKED, and they appear throughout all three books. These robotic beings are virtually indestructible, attack mostly at night, and possess fatal stingers on their spikes used to sting the Gladers. Each Griever has a red light atop its head, which serves as its eyes, and they emit strange sounds that resemble a mix of moans, whines, clicks, and whirrs. Grievors keep the Gladers confined to the Glade and prevent them from entering the Maze at night when the Maze's layout changes. Their primary purpose is to exert control over the Gladers through fear, hindering their ability to map the Maze, making it a deadly environment. Additionally, they collect observational data to maximize intelligence and capture the patterns necessary for developing a potential cure. The Grievors' presence creates a constant state of fear and tension among the Gladers, pushing them to rely on each other and their wits to survive all throughout the trilogy (Dashner, 2009). Therefore, the Grievors' actions and behaviors not only waken the Gladers' survival strategy but also drive the plot forward, leading to the climactic escape from the maze and the revelation of WICKED's true intentions.

From an OOO perspective, Harman differentiates between real objects and sensual objects. Real objects withdraw from all experience, while sensual objects exist only in experience. The Grievors could be seen as both real and sensual objects. They are real objects in the sense that they exist independently of human action and existence while affecting the environment around them. At the same



time, they are sensual objects as they take the role of physical destruction and chaos in the novels. The Grieverers, interact with the maze and the Gladers, causing destruction and potentially influencing the course of events.

In terms of Speculative Realism, Harman's philosophy is characterized by the rejection of anthropocentrism and the support of metaphysical realism. This means that the Grieverers, like all objects, have an inherent reality that exists independently of human existence. Their actions and behaviors are not merely symbolic or representative, but actual events with real consequences. In conclusion, applying Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism theory to the Grieverers in the *Maze Runner* trilogy reveals them as complex, autonomous entities with an inherent reality that extends beyond human perception. Their actions and behaviors are significant and have real consequences, demonstrating the depth and complexity of their existence.

Large, bulbous creature the size of a cow but with no distinct shape twisted and seethed along the ground in the corridor outside. It climbed the opposite wall, then leaped at the thick-glassed window with a loud thump. It was too dark to make out clearly, but odd lights flashed from an unknown source, revealing blurs of silver spikes and glistening flesh. Wicked instrument-tipped appendages protruded from its body like arms: a saw blade, a set of shears, and long rods. The creature was a horrific mix of animal and machine and seemed to realize it was being observed, seemed to know what lay inside the walls of the Glade, and seemed to want to get inside and feast on human flesh. (Dashner, 2009, pp.38-39)

#### 4.4 The Sun Flares

The main plot hole of the trilogy is that the sun and a sudden rise in global warming have destroyed half of the world and its population, leaving the other half in chaos and panic. The sun flares play a crucial role in shaping the narrative of the *Maze Runner* series. They are an element of unpredictability, chaos, and survival; challenging the ideological order and forcing characters to adapt to new circumstances. One of the main ways the sun flares challenge the narrative is through their impact on human civilization. The sun flares were an abnormal, apocalyptic event that occurred about 15 years before the events of *The Maze Runner*. They devastated human civilization and brought irrevocable changes to both Earth's climate and environment for centuries to come. This event enviably changes the world that the characters live in, forcing them to adapt to a new reality. The sun flares are also the reason for the release of the flare virus by the

government for population control, causing severe suffering and transforming people into violent, crazed, and zombie-like creatures known as Cranks. This adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, challenging the characters' understanding of the world, their place in it, face difficult choices, and confront their own mortality. Furthermore, the sun flares and the Flare contribute to the creation of the Scorch, a barren, desert-like wasteland filled with the burnt-out remains of countless cities (Dashner, 2010).

In terms of speculative realism, Harman rejects anthropocentrism and correlationism, advocating for a metaphysical realism that acknowledges the existence and significance of non-human entities. In the context of the *Maze Runner* series, the sun flares can be seen as non-human entities with their own existence and significance. Their unpredictability and power challenge the anthropocentric assumptions of the characters and force them to confront the reality of their situation. In conclusion, analyzing the sun flares in the *Maze Runner* trilogy through Graham Harman's OOO theory and speculative realism reveals a

It started with the sun flares, the woman said, her gaze growing distant. The sun flares couldn't have been predicted. Sun flares are normal, but these were unprecedented, massive, spiking higher and higher—and once they were noticed, it was only minutes before their heat slammed into Earth. First, our satellites were burned out, and thousands died instantly, millions within days, countless miles became wastelands. Then came the sickness. As the ecosystem fell apart, it became impossible to control the sickness. The jungles were gone, but the insects weren't. People call it the Flare now. (Dashner, 2009, p.366)

#### *4.5 The Flare Virus*

The Flare Virus is a central element in the *Maze Runner* series. It is a mysterious and lethal virus that poses a threat to the protagonist and all characters. A group of scientists are put to a task, designing a virus for a global pandemic. However, before the virus is tested and shown results; someone spreads the virus in the air, making it impossible to be retreated. The spread of this virus is extremely fast and takes on the world in a matter of months. The virus appears without warning, causing immediate harm to the infected individuals. Despite WICKD's efforts to find a cure, the virus remains a constant threat, driving the plot forward and heightening the tension throughout the series. The Flare Virus serves as a symbol of the unknown and the unpredictability of their situation, reflecting the characters' struggle for survival and their fight against oppression. Flare Virus,



affects its victims' brains, leading to a range of unreasonable violence and fatal symptoms. An infected individual may experience symptoms such as sudden mood swings, paranoia, poor balance, headaches that intensify over time, irrational anger, and aggression, loss of reason, the ability to make sense of the world and language, and cannibalism (Dashner, 2010, 2011). These symptoms persist for approximately two to four months, but if the infected individuals are under constant stress, it can accelerate the infection rate of the brain. As the virus progresses, the symptoms worsen, leading to dementia, temporary memory loss, and Alzheimer-like symptoms. The rapid decay of the brain results in psychotic mental disorders appearing in the infected, stripping them of their humanity and transforming them into demented, cannibalistic, zombie-like entities. In severe cases, individuals lose complete sanity, a stage referred to as "The Gone" (Dashner, *Scorch Trials*, 2010, p. 32).

Harman's OOO suggests that everything, including fictional elements like the Flare Virus, is an individual object with its own actions and characteristics. These objects can be categorized into real objects and sensual objects. Real objects are inaccessible and infinitely drawn from all relations, while sensual objects exist only in experience. In the case of the Flare Virus, it could be seen as a sensual object, as it exists in the experiences of the characters in the *Maze Runner* series. Its existence is experienced and interpreted by the characters, and it doesn't directly interact with them, exactly like Harman's description of sensual objects. Applying Speculative Realism to the Flare Virus can help us determine the virus as a real object, existing independently of the characters' experiences and interpretations. It is a real object because it is not directly experienced by the characters, and it exists independently of their thoughts or feelings. The virus impacts the characters' behavior and decisions also the world around them because it is considered an object independent of human existence. "First, the delusions start, and then animal instincts begin to overpower the human ones. Finally, it consumes them and destroys their humanity. It's all in the brain. The Flare lives in their brains. It is an awful thing. Better to die than catch it" (Dashner, 2009, p.367).

#### 4.6 The Scorch

The Scorch is a significant location in the *Maze Runner* trilogy, appearing in both the first and last books and serving as the primary setting for *The Scorch Trials* (2010). It is described as a dangerous place inhabited by Cranks, located between the two tropics. In *The Scorch Trials*, the protagonist, Thomas, and his companions, known as the Gladers, are informed by a representative from WICKED, that they are about to face the Scorch Trials. These trials involve

navigating the treacherous scorched landscape filled with dangerous obstacles while avoiding the Cranks and humans infected by the flare virus (Dashner, 2010). The Scorch is depicted as a desolate and hostile environment, forcing the characters to confront their survival instincts and rely heavily on their teamwork and resourcefulness. This part of the story highlights the harsh realities of their situation. According to Harman, the Scorch itself could be considered a real object, as it is a physical entity that exists within the world of the story but remains largely mysterious and vague. It acts as a constant threat, pushing the characters to adapt and survive, but its true nature and purpose remains unexplained. Harman's concept of allure can be applied to the Scorch. Allure in OOO refers to the tension between an object and its parts, or between an object and its qualities. In the case of the Scorch, its allure lies in its violent nature and the fear it instills in the characters. Its mystery and unpredictability create a sense of tension making it a significant and central element in the narrative.

The Scorch presents a vision of a speculative future. When considering what life might be like 500 years from now, we often envision an apocalyptic event—whether a man-made disaster such as war or a natural catastrophe that leads to the destruction of two-thirds of the world. The survivors who face challenges and struggles to save humanity from extinction. Many books have been written on post-apocalyptic world, such as *1984*, *Brave New World*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The Road*, *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The 100*. What they all have in common is the distrusted world left behind. The buildings are destroyed, glass is shattered everywhere, and most of the ecosystem is gone, leaving a deserted environment covering the earth. Traces of fires are left behind, and a chaotic new united government or elite class attempts to control humanity. "The Maze Runner" is no different from these dystopian fictions. The imagery of the scorched landscape, with ruins and crumpled buildings, paints a picture of a post-apocalyptic world. Harman's Speculative Realism theory interprets the Scorch's role in the narrative. Speculative Realism argues that reality is not fixed or deterministic, but constantly evolving and subject to interpretation. In the *Maze Runner* series, the Scorch could be viewed as a symbol of this unstable reality. Its presence forces the characters to continually question and redefine their understanding of their surroundings, reflecting the fluid and ever-changing nature of reality.

It was a wasteland. Not a single tree. Not a bush. No hills or valleys. Just an orange-yellow sea of dust and rocks; wavering currents of heated air boiled on the horizon like steam, floating upward, as if any life out there were melting toward the cloudless and pale blue sky. A line of jagged and barren mountains rose far in the distance. In front of those mountains, a cluster of buildings



sat squatting together like a pile of abandoned boxes. It had to be a town, but it was impossible to tell how big it was. Hot air shimmered in front of it, blurring everything close to the ground. Judging by the labels on the food, they guessed they were in Mexico. Or what used to be Mexico. Now it's called the Scorch. (Dashner, 2010, p.95)

#### 4.7 The Thunderstorms

The storms play a significant role in the plot of the *Maze Runner series*, particularly in *The Scorch Trials*. They serve as a series of horrific events that shape the narrative and develop the characters. One of the most notable instances occurs when the Gladers are traveling through the Scorch, a desert wasteland. A terrible lightning storm strikes, resulting in the death of some members of the group. This event forces the remaining Gladers to quickly adapt to their surroundings, improving their survival skills, and deepening their understanding of the harsh realities they face. The storms in the *Maze Runner series* serve multiple purposes. They heighten the sense of danger and unpredictability, drive the plot forward, and create opportunities for character development and conflict (Dashner, 2010, pp. 131-138).

In the *Maze Runner series*, the thunderstorms can be considered sensual objects. These storms are experienced by the characters as a physical entity, but they also carry symbolic or emotional significance. They represent chaos, danger, and unpredictability, which are key elements in the narrative. Harman's concept of allure suggests that sensual objects, like the thunderstorms, can generate a tension between themselves and their sensual qualities, causing a hidden reality to emerge. This tension can be seen in the way the characters react to the storms. Despite knowing the danger, they pose, the storms also bring a sense of excitement and fear, creating a set of survival experiences. Harman's OOO and Speculative Realism theories provide a rich understanding of how these natural phenomena contribute to the narrative and character development.

Then came the lightning. When the bolts came from nowhere, the world erupted in light and thunder. They fell from the sky in jagged streaks, like bars of white light, slamming into the ground and throwing up massive amounts of scorched earth. The crushing sound was too much to bear, and Thomas's ears began to go numb. He screamed but couldn't hear himself. He landed on his back, the breath knocked from his chest. He gulped for air as he knew the dust-riddled air would choke him. Especially with the storm of lightning crashing to the ground all

around them, singeing the air, making everything smell like copper and ash. (Dashner, 2010, p.134)

#### 4.8 Cranks

In the *Maze Runner* series, Cranks refer to individuals who have been infected by the Flare Virus, leading to a state of degeneration and eventual loss of humanity. The term "Crank" originates from the slang used in the series, and "The Gone" refers to the stage of viral progression when a person is past humanity and has lost their sanity. Cranks are depicted as zombie-like creatures with strange decaying bodies. In the books, Cranks remain alive and can speak, although they are described as cannibalistic who speak absolutely nonsense. It has different stages and as it progresses, the symptoms worsen. Some humans like most of the Gladers are immune to the Flare, maintaining their human consciousness all through the three novels which is why they are being tested by WICKD in hopes of finding a cure (Dashner, 2010, 2011). In the films, Cranks are portrayed more as traditional zombies, lacking the ability to communicate. They are shown as fast and aggressive, attacking anyone who comes into their path. For instance, in *The Scorch Trials*, Cranks attack the WICKD compound, and later, they chase the protagonists through underground tunnels (Ball, 2015). Despite the difference in portrayal between the books and films, the underlying theme of the Cranks remains the same, they are former humans who have lost their sanity and become dangerous threats to others. This makes them a significant part of the narrative, contributing to the tension and conflict in the series.

Graham Harman's OOO suggests objects as having their own reality, separate from human existence or interpretation. It categorizes objects into real objects and sensual objects. Harman also introduces the concepts of 'bright objects', 'dim objects', 'dark objects', and 'rogue objects'. Bright objects heavily impact other objects, dim objects lightly manifest themselves, dark objects produce no local manifestations and do not affect any other objects, and rogue objects modify relations within the assemblages they enter (Graham, 2018). Applying these theories to the *Maze Runner* trilogy, we could consider the Cranks as 'rogue objects'. They break the norms and relations of the maze, challenging the established order and creating new relations that challenge, change, or cast off the prior assemblage. Their actions influence the characters' actions and decisions. Their actions cause a shift in the actions of the characters, forcing them to adapt and respond in ways that were not planned or initially practiced nor expected. This shift in action is a key aspect of Harman's concept of allure, where the sensual is separated from the real, in which here is the characters' actions and the actual conditions within the story. The introduction of the Cranks creates a new



reality influencing the characters' actions and decisions also bringing a change in the character's understanding of their own abilities and limitations.

A window looked out into a bright, blinding light. The glass was broke; a man stood on the other side, gripping the bars with bloody hands. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, filled with madness. Sores and scars covered his thin, sunburnt face. He had no hair, only diseased splotches of what looked like greenish moss. A vicious slit stretched across his right cheek; Thomas could see teeth through the raw, festering wound. Pink saliva dribbled in swaying lines from the man's chin. (Dashner, 2010, pp.6-7)

## 5. Conclusion

This paper analyzed, James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* trilogy in light of Object-oriented ontology and speculative realism philosophies proposed by Graham Harman. *The Maze Runner* series is a dystopian young adult fiction written from 2009 to 2011. The stories' themes are bravery, determination, survival, friendship, sacrifice, standing up against authority, and most importantly death provides a basic ground for applying the OOO theoretical framework. The focus; of this research was, looking into the story with the critical approaches; speculative realism, and its extended version, object-oriented ontology, presented by Graham Harman. OOO focuses on the position of objects and their relations, to each other and to us; opposing human-centric traditions. It suggests that objects, possess their own reality and power, meaning that there is no need for human involvement in their existence. By analyzing three novels and examining the series' dystopian world, we can appreciate how Harman's philosophies offer unique insights into the nature of objects and their relations.

By going through the stories with Graham's philosophical theories; we come to a better understanding of how the Maze, the Glade, the Scorch, the Cranks, and the Virus which are not just mere background settings or plot devices, but active units with unique qualities and capacities that directly influence the plot and the characters' destinies. OOO also helps in grasping a better perspective of the characters who are not only defined by their human characteristics but also by their interactions with non-human entities; revealing new meanings in the stories' interactions with the dystopian world. By considering these elements as independent agents, we can uncover new layers of understanding within the text. As mentioned, the maze, a seemingly inanimate object, becomes a powerful force that tests the Glader's resilience and survival instincts in responding to these non-human entities.

Speculative realism further expands the discussion to encourage readers to question how the books engage with reality itself. This analysis expands our understanding of the world we know and live in and how it may not be the only reality or better yet, our concept of reality. While being faced with a lot of unknown, weird, and monstrous creatures in the trilogy's dystopian world which are yet to exist, be invented, and discovered; our world or the creatures may just be a figment of our imagination and no more than a speculation. Whether we are talking about the present or the future, such, this speculation of reality and the unknown will remain be in question, the best we can do is broadening our minds and accept the fact that what we see and what we know as 'reality' and all the relations in the world is not limited to mankind. By confronting the unknown and the monstrous, we are forced to reconsider the limits of human perception and knowledge. The series ultimately suggests that there may be multiple realities, each with its own unique laws and possibilities.

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