

Object Lessons: Things to Think About in Thinking About Things

1. From Object to Thing

As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.

Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), p. 4

2. *Das Ding* and Nothing

Das Ding is that which I will call the beyond-of-the-signified...The Thing is not nothing, but literally is not. It is characterized by its absence, its strangeness. ...Today I want simply to stick to the elementary distinction as far as a vase is concerned between its use as a utensil and its signifying function. If it really is a signifier, and the first of such signifiers fashioned by human hand, it is in its signifying essence nothing other than of signifying as such...If you consider the vase from the point of view I first proposed, as an object made to represent the emptiness at the centre of the real that is called the Thing, this emptiness as represented in the representation, presents itself as a *nihil*, as nothing.

Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Book VII, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992), pp. 54, 63, 120, 121.

3. The Murder of the Thing

If there is a murder of the thing by the word, then, this does not definitively annihilate that thing; it only transposes it to the scene of an interminable haunting of language

Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 33

4. Man Comes From Things

From the beginning, we exist as humans by means of something other than the word, indeed by the thing, irreducible to the word. The subject is born of the object. The hominid appears in front of that which is there, given. An animal has no object any more than it has death, even though, sometimes, it makes use of language... Human being appears in front of the object that has been abstracted or separated from these relations, that is free, come from elsewhere like a stone fallen from the sky. We invent it, we receive it, what matter, we were only there to decide upon it, we were born, in the beginning, from its epiphany. Man comes from things, he knows it yet....I imagine, at the origin, a rapid vortex in which the transcendental constitution of the object by the subject grows just like, in the other direction, the symmetrical constitution of the subject by the object, in dizzying semi-cycles endlessly renewed, leading all the way back to the beginning.

[t]hat which lies under that which lies before it, holds itself back: attentive, concentrated, humble, silent. Subject. This word retains the trace of an act of humility. The subject subjects itself to the dominion of that which forms and loses it. Yes, kills it. Only the object exists and I am nothing: it lies before me and I disappear beneath it...[t]he subject will appear if and only if it disappears, rendered nothing by the object before which it appears...I think therefore I consent to die of the object, to lie under the stone, interred. I think therefore I vanish (Serres 1987, 211, 212)

Michel Serres, *Statues: Le second livre de fondations* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), pp. 208, 209, 211, 212 [translation, Steven Connor)

5. The Quasi-Object

The quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. He who is not discovered with the furet in his hand is anonymous, part of a monotonous chain where he remains indistinguished. He is not an individual; he is not recognized, discovered, cut; he is of the chain and in the chain. He runs, like the furet, in the collective. The thread in his hands is our simple relation, the absence of the furet; its path makes out indivision. Who are we? Those who pass the furet; those who don't have it. The quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual. If he is discovered, he is "it" [mort]. Who is the subject, who is an "I," or who am I? The moving furet weaves the "we," the collective; if it stops, it marks the "I."... This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of "I." The "I" in the game is a token exchanged. And this passing, this network of passes, these vicariances of subjects, weave the collection... The "we" is made by the bursts and occultations of the "I." The "we" is made by the passing of the "I." By exchanging the "I." And by substitution and vicariance of the "I."

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 225, 227.

6. Everything Happens in the Middle

on the left, are things themselves; there, on the right, is the free society of speaking, thinking subjects, values and of signs. Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two , everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 37.

7. Getting Objects to Talk

How long can a social connection be followed without objects taking the relay? A minute? An hour? A microsecond? And for how long will this relay be visible? A minute? An hour? A microsecond?... 3

In their study, sociologists consider, for the most part, an object-less social world, even though in their daily routine they, like all of us, might be constantly puzzled by the constant companionship, the continuous intimacy, the inveterate contiguity, the passionate affairs, the convoluted attachments of primates with objects for the past one million years.

Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 78, 82

8. Objects Are Actors

if we stick to our decision to start from the controversies about actors and agencies, then any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant. Thus, the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference?

The rather common sense answer should be a resounding 'yes'. If you can, with a straight face, maintain that hitting a nail with and without a hammer, boiling water with and without a kettle, fetching provisions with or without a basket, walking in the street with or without clothes, zapping a TV with or without a remote, slowing down a car with or without a speed-bump, keeping track of your inventory with or without a list, running a company with or without bookkeeping, are exactly the same activities, that the introduction of these mundane implements change 'nothing important' to the realization of the tasks, then you are ready to transmigrate to the Far Land of the Social and disappear from this lowly one. For all the other members of society, it does make a difference under trials and so these implements, according to our definition, are actors, or more precisely, participants in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration.

Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 71

9. Object Cultures

By *object culture* I mean to designate the objects through which a culture constitutes itself, which is to say, too, culture as it is objectified in material forms. A given object culture entails the practical and symbolic use of objects. It thus entails both the ways that inanimate objects mediate human relations and the ways that humans mediate object relations (generating differences of value, significance, and permanence among them), thus the systems (material, economic, symbolic) through which objects become meaningful or fail to.

Bill Brown, 'Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)', *Critical Inquiry*, 36 (2010), p. 188

10. Object Cosmology

Objects surely don't talk. Or do they? The person in that living-room gives and account of themselves by responding to questions. But every object in that room is equally a form by which they have chosen to express themselves. They put up ornaments; they laid down carpets. They selected furnishing and got dressed that morning. Some things may be gifts or objects retained from the past, but they have decided to live with them, to place them in lines or higgledy-piggledy; they made the room minimalist or crammed to the gills. These things are not a random collection. They have been gradually accumulated as an expression of that person or household. Surely if we can learn to listen to these things we have access to an authentic other voice. Yes, also contrived, but in a different way from that of language.

[S]ocial science, and especially the version of it which took form around the notion of 'post-modern', seems entirely mistaken in assuming that the decline of society and culture would lead to disordered fragmentation. On the contrary, among the things once accomplished by religion or the state but now increasingly delegated downwards, to individuals and households, is the responsibility for creating order and cosmology. It will sound cryptic when it is put so tersely (the sociologist Habermas provides the detail), but dialectical philosophy regards modern people as just as authentic as those of the past. An order, moral or aesthetic, is still an authentic order even if one creates it for oneself and makes it up as one goes along, rather than just inheriting it as tradition or custom.

Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 2, 203

11. The Politics of Things

It's not unfair to say that political philosophy has often been the victim of a strong object-avoidance tendency. From Hobbes to Rawls, from Rousseau to Habermas, many procedures have been devised to assemble the relevant parties, to authorize them to contract, to check their degree of representativity, to discover the ideal speech conditions, to detect the legitimate closure, to write the good constitution. But when it comes down to *what* is at issue, namely the object of concern that brings them together, not a word is uttered. In a strange way, political science is mute just at the moment when the objects of concern should be brought in and made to speak up loudly.

Contrary to what the powerful etymology of their most cherished word should imply, their *res publica* does not seem to be loaded with too many things. Procedures to authorize and legitimize are important, but it's only half of what is needed to assemble. The other half lies in the issues themselves, in the *matters* that matter, in the *res* that creates a *public* around it. They need to be represented, authorized, legitimated and brought to bear inside the relevant assembly.

What we call an "object-oriented democracy" tries to redress this bias in much of political philosophy...We simply want to pack loads of stuff into the empty arenas where naked people were supposed to assemble simply to talk.

Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik – or How to Make Things Public', in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 5-6.

12. Things in Motion

The relays between these object forms might finally disclose the life and longing of the constituent materials; the oscillation enchant dyed leather into a thing that drifts in excess of any object form. It allows us to imagine, I think, a world where the material around us—the denim of your jeans, the glass of your watch crystal, the wood of your chair seat—has, as the object of its desire, perhaps, the desire to be some other object. It is as though Jungen's work begins to expose a newly animate world, a secret life of things that is irreducible to the object forms with which we have constructed and constricted our world. And it is the recognition of that life, I think, that holds some promise for transforming life as we know it.

Bill Brown, 'Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)', *Critical Inquiry*, 36 (2010), p. 217

13. Thing-Power

The notion of thing-power aims...to attend to the it as an actant; I will try, impossibly, to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power. I will shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology, from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not –quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter). I will try to give force to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, in the process absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism.

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 3