

A Thesis of Object Immateriality

The Thing with Thing Theory

Symptomatic of the revived interest in material culture, Bill Brown (2001) published an article entitled "Thing Theory." In this article he focuses on the matter of objects, or rather, objects as things. He does so by means of an exploration of the object/thing dialectic. Within his writings Brown offers a dynamic conceptualizing of the object defining the thing as follows:

Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects) But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else.* (Brown 5, author's emphasis)

Brown notes that within anthropology the employed methodology to study things tends to neglect matter. He accuses Arjun Appandurai, amongst other theorists, of a "methodological fetishism." He finds that they have in order to pay proper attention to the object as thing, ironically, turned away from matter,

examining subject-object relations instead (Brown 6-7).

My aim is to explore the role of matter in material studies. More specifically I look at the intricate relation between objects as matter and objects as the embodiment of ideas. From this I formulate a thesis of object immateriality. It goes as follows: objects are condemned to a perpetual oscillation between *materialization* and *dematerialization*. This is symptomatic of the subject's desire for an immaterial object. Although presently vague, this proposition will be clarified in relation to the concepts of immediacy and hypermediacy formulated by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (2001).

To begin, I investigate three academic accounts that demonstrate a similar interest to that of Brown in the object as matter. These accounts examine consumer products. More precisely this entails a discussion of the work of Peter-Paul Verbeek and Petran Kockelkoren (1999) and incorporates the analysis of McCarthy (2001) on the "site-specificity" of television. In addition, I turn briefly to Bruce Sterling (2005) who interrogates subject-to-object relations in consumer capitalism with a specific, and in light of his relational interest, fascinating concern with the material object.

Subsequently I deal with the criticism of the methodological fetishism expressed by Brown. I explore the work of archaeologist Carl Knappett on animacy, agency and personhood. Within this account I am critical of the blurred boundaries that are said to arise when conceptualizing a networked relation between subjects and objects. When the dichotomy is collapsed, there is a tendency to neglect the material properties of objects. These properties equally shape relations. Herein I argue that "functionality" within

commodity objects is in tangent with “animism.” Objects are goal-oriented entities and obtain animacy, or rather function, for a limited amount of time dependant on the *role* they assume. In accordance with my thesis, the human agent aspires a transparency to objects, yet the objects in their own right demonstrate resistance and challenges that announce their materiality.

Consumer Products and the Environment

Philosophers Verbeek and Kockelkoren perceive of an environmental crisis in Western society. This environmental crisis is symptomatic of the vast quantities of consumer objects produced, consumed, and rapidly dispensed. These dispensed *material* objects translate into pollutants. The interest in sustainability within the scope of the essay before you is one pertaining how we relate to the materiality of objects.

The article “The Thing that Matters” by Verbeek and Kockelkoren was published three years prior to that of Brown, but they already showed a great concern with matter. Verbeek and Kockelkoren find that in both modernism and postmodernism the object came in second place. This is referred to as Platonic approach to things and concerns the subordination of the materiality of objects to the ideas that these objects embody. It is about the attachment that subjects have to these objects based on these ideas (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 31).

Verbeek and Kockelkoren set out to provide an approach to material culture that takes matter seriously. They do so against the prevailing and persistent Platonic approach. The approach has them examine two

“technological intentionality,” a concept they borrow from Don Ihde.

Technological intentionality implies looking at objects in their own right and not simply being blind sighted to the human side of the human-to-object relation.

In other words, things are constructed in context because “they themselves co-shape the use that is being made of them” (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 36). The conviction is that the intentions of the designers, called the “scripts,” and the sign-character are inadequate to comprehend the effects of an object. To understand these effects it is necessary to look at the thing. For the matter of the object “co-shapes the practices around it by its very *functioning*, instead of the qualities it *refers to*” (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 37). How does one go about directing the attention to the functioning of the thing itself, away from the qualities that refer to it? In answer to this question, Verbeek and Kockelkoren provide an example of the threshold by revolving doors. They write:

Those thresholds and doors should not be seen as nonhuman substitutes for guards who keep disabled people outside. They perform in a way we did not ask them to. To keep out the draft is the task we delegated to them, not to keep disabled people outside as well. Things do more than we tell them to do. (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 35).

The specific concern of Verbeek and Kockelkoren is how we relate to the thing as things rather than as a set of ideas. They focus on two forms of

technological intentionality that looks at how we relate to objects as things rather than as signs. One of the intentionalities is found within the work of Martin Heidegger and the other within the work of Albert Borgmann.

The Dirty Window

The first technological intentionality Verbeek and Kockelkoren discuss relates to the Heideggerian distinction between objects as “ready-to-hand” and “present-to-hand.” An object becomes a thing when it stops working for us. Brown provides the example of the window that when dirty presents itself as thing. The configuration of the relationship between the subject and object is, in this instance, present-to-hand. When the object is working properly, a clean window, and we are unaware of it, it is ready-to-hand. Ready-to-hand objects facilitate engagement with the world, it is as if we “embody the object.”

For a durable relationship to exist with the object it needs to be ready-to-hand. It is therefore imperative that once objects become present-to-hand that the object can be fixed and reassume the ready-to-hand status (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 38- 40). In effect, reflecting back on Brown in relation to this distinction he two claimed that "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" (4). This transition and oscillation of the status of the object is a dominant phenomenon in contemporary culture. It is the crisis of the object as thing that I aim to evaluate throughout this essay.

Anna McCarthy ties in neatly to this notion of objects *materializing* once

they malfunction. She provides keen insight in her essay “From Screen to Site: Television’s Material Culture and it’s Place.” Herein she discusses the ongoing tension between the geographical and ontological notion of place in the discourse on television. To illustrate this tension she employs the case study of the video installation (the *Rio Videowall*) in Atlanta, Georgia.

The ontological approach to the installation reflects on its virtuality and space-binding capacities. These qualities pervaded in the writings on the installation that McCarthy read. However, on a visit to the installation, rather than being presented with the medium as “taking place,” McCarthy encountered “The video wall blank and dark, surrounded by stacked plastic chairs and tables” (107). The confrontation led her to understand the installation as influenced by and situated in geography. This realization extends to properties of television beyond its mere ontological status. The installation transitioned from ready-to-hand to present-to-hand. Reformulated, the installation was realized as a thing by McCarthy, within the actual (the geographic site).

The conclusion that McCarthy drew from her experience is that the television needs to be understood as “site specific,” existing within the social relations between individuals and amongst things (109). When operational, the installation was ready-to-hand. The matter of the medium was subordinated to the ideas it embodied: virtuality and space-binding. In other words, a Platonic approach to media rather than the material insight that McCarthy now leaves us with.

The Excess of Things

In the manifesto *Shaping Things*, Sterling examines historical changing relations between human and object as a result of evolving technocultures. Initially, the criticism of Brown seems justified in that Sterling directs his attention at relations. However, as becomes apparent in the paragraphs that follow, Sterling is very much concerned with the materiality of objects.

Contingent with technological transformations Sterling chronologically presents objects as first Artifacts, Machines, Products and Gizmos. These “technocultures” correspond respectively to the Hunter and Farmer, Customer, Consumer, End-user and Wrangler. Machines did not replace Artifacts, nor were they themselves replaced by Products. Each new technosocial order thus co-exists with the previous technosocial order, building a palimpsest of technosocial orders. However, once in the technoculture of the Gizmo, society is unable to return to a society dominated by Products.

Sterling interest is very similar to that of Verbeek and Kockelkoren. In his manifesto objects surface as things, as material objects, as they are increasingly proving to be environmental hazards. Present-day objects are referred to as Gizmos. These Gizmos have a limited lifespan: they are consumed and thrown away. To Sterling this has resulted in an unsustainable material culture. Within his analysis contemporary consumer products demand only a “disengaged consumption” (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 42) and the longevity of the satisfaction of this consumption is diminishing under the pressures of innovation.

Sterling predicts that in the future material objects will become Spimes. Spimes will be tracked in space and time (his neologism is thus a portmanteau of the primary characteristics of the object). This tracking of the object will allow it to be injected back into the production line when it transitions from being an *object* to being a *thing*. Or, reformulated, it will be reabsorbed in the production line as soon as it malfunctions, becomes present-at-hand.

My interest lies with Sterling's conceptualization of future objects as Spimes. These Spimes are defined as "a set of relationships first and always, and an object now and then" (Sterling 77). In the case of the Spime, the virtual labels and tracks objects within the physical world. In this capacity it can facilitate flows of matter in the actual. The Spime will enable sustainable society because "In the end of its lifespan the Spime is deactivated, removed from your presence by specialists, entirely disassembled, and folded back into the manufacturing stream" (Sterling 77). The existence of the object is guaranteed only by its ability to execute a given function or service. Information assembled about the Spime expands the duration of its use and guarantee that the matter of the object, its machinery, is not simply thrown-out, but recycled at the end of its run.

Sterling explores the Spime as the everyday object. However, it exists virtually on your desktop until you give the command for its production: "Until you express your desire for this object, it does not exist" (Sterling 76). As soon as the Spime is materialized, it is traceable in space and time. The object is constantly monitored. As a Wrangler of the Spime you are informed of any

reparations or updates the object needs.

Within the Sterling's manifesto then, it is not so much the material properties themselves that are significant and that shape relations to the human agent, but rather the threat the object poses, as a whole, to the environment. His assessment of this relation is focused on the prevailing treatment of objects as the embodiment of ideas. As will become apparent, Borgmann makes an important distinction between things and devices. It will become clear that Sterling has concerned himself with devices.

Focal Practices

Verbeek and Kockelkoren offer a radically other alternative to a sustainable society than Sterling. They explore the "engaging" capacity of objects by building on Borgmann's theory of technology. Within this theory, Borgmann makes a distinction between things and devices, technological objects.

Devices are seen to change the way people engage with each other and the world. The device has two components: the machinery and the commodity. The former refers to the object as matter, and the latter to the function of the object, the technological product when taking place. Devices mandate the practice not of engagement, but consumption.

Within consumer culture the machinery of devices is obscured, withdrawn, facilitating a more immediate access to the commodity (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 39-41). Borgmann is particularly concerned with the diminishing involvement and knowledge of the machinery of devices as he envisions it changes our relation to the world. In devices the machinery is said

to be inaccessible and as user of a device we are removed from its operations. This has two consequences: when a device breaks down, it becomes present-to-hand and we will be unable to make it ready-to-hand. Secondly, we merely experience a disengaged consumption.

An alternative to disengaged consumption is engagement (42).

Engagement can be found with a machine where we are *engagers*, investing in the functioning of the machine. This investment is what makes the handling of machines a focal practice. Borgmann wants a return to “focal practices” defined as “things that ask attention and involvement” (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 41).

Having explored the two technological intentionalities through Heidegger and Borgmann, Verbeek and Kockelkoren conclude that designers should create “engaging objects.” These are objects that demand involvement: “the engagement it [the object] asks for does not make it unusable. It functions, but is more than functional; it engages but, nevertheless, it can be ready-to-hand. “(Verbeek and Kockelkoren 42). The example they provide of an engaging object is a heating device of which the ceramic plates can be (re)arranged. Reformulated, the machinery of the object is made apparent. The subject is persistently asked to translate the status of the object back from present-to-hand to ready-to-hand. The object and subject enter a recursive relation of which a lasting bond between the two is supposedly established.

Present-day (Western) society is increasingly flooded with devices as opposed to things that obscure their machinery, favoring direct consumption of the commodity. In Sterling we have seen how this is a process of historical

change. More importantly, he proposed that ones we pass from one technoculture into the next, we cannot return to previous orders. This is because the technoculture is "an infrastructure of human support, irrevocably bound to and generated by the class of people who are necessary to create and maintain that infrastructure" (Sterling 8).

Moreover, Sterling explores the wine bottle as an object that shows traces of multiple technocultures in the analysis of its barcode and label showing how objects are changed under pressure of the new. It is within this frame of analysis that the proposition of a return to engaging objects, a return to Borgmann's things, is plausible within the current technoculture.

In light of the work of William J. Mitchell I briefly want to further problematize the idea of focal practices. In *What Do Pictures Want?*, explores totemism, fetishism and idolatry as different relations to things as opposed to object categories. In an attempt to delineate their distinction he proposes that we examine what the object "says and does." (Mitchell 189). Mitchell approaches the concepts through triangulation. This to further support his proposition that they are related. What binds them into the triangulation, their nexus, is that they are all "things that want things" (194). This wanting of things reminds me of the definition of focal practices. In totemism, fetishism and idolatry this has little to do with a material engagement, but rather the ideas the material embodies, returning us to the criticism of the Platonic approach.

Material Culture

The status of the object is muddled further in the focus on the human-to-object relation. In *Thinking Through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* Knappett introduces the question of how to distinguish between human subjects and material objects. He explores the often-used criterion for categorization, namely animacy and references examples of organisms (such as coral and worms) that challenge pre-existing definitions of what an organism as a closed entity. Knappett concludes that organisms do not have fixed boundaries and that the animate is often found to merge with the inanimate as is the case in the aforementioned examples (Knappett 16).

When the subject and object form a network, they form a hybrid that collapses their distinct categories. In a similar vein to Knappett, writing on Egyptian culture Meskell states, "Recent writing on specific contours of agentic objects or fetishes, as interlocutors between persons, things, and worlds, undermines the fixity of our imposed boundaries"(51). Through pyramids, statues and mummies the Egyptians made "doubles of the self," more so they were able to "improve" the life of the self and to extend its trajectory, materializing the immaterial for good (Meskell 53).

Brought to the present-day consumer context, the pyramids at the Luxor Casino in Las Vegas signify the ongoing fascination with the spiritual and material achievement of the Egyptians (70). In Vegas the pyramid is justified as a signifier of the accomplishment of the Egyptians, a dislodging of its initial significance, and further translated to consumer culture. It is at this level that a subject relates to the pyramid. In the execution of these two functions, that of

the Egyptians and as a contemporary symbol of capitalism, it can be perceived of as ready-to-hand.

Knappett uses animism as a term used to express the organism as biologically alive. In order to examine the human organism as psychologically and socially alive, however, he finds that we need to look at agency.¹

Knappett explores agency in relation to Latour, which I will return to further on. First, however, I look at *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* by Alfred Gell. I find herein Brown's critique of anthropology's blind eye to the physical properties of objects validated.

Gell aims to develop an anthropological theory of art. For him such a theory can be defined as "social relationships in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency" (7). Hereby he perceives of "art as a system of action, intended to change the world" (6) focuses in agency, intention, causation and transformation in the course of his examination. Important for my purposes is that Gell, within his theory, conceives of artworks as indexes that prompt viewers to make abductions, or inferences, about social agency. Gell holds a relational notion of agency. Herein "agents" act on "patients" stating that "To be an "agent" one must act with respect to the "patient": the patient is the object which is casually affected by the agents actions" (Gell 26).

The formulation of agency offered by Gell differs from that of Bruno Latour in that his understanding of agents is not symmetrical. He does not

¹ A popular definition of agency is provided by Janet Murray: "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (121).

treat the agents of the subject-object network as equal by distinguishing between self-sufficient agents and secondary agents. The self-sufficient agents are recognized to have intentionality, whilst the secondary agents are granted agency from another source.

Despite not giving agents equal weight, which Latour does, in Gell's anthropological theory aesthetics is downplayed. In the theory of the art nexus the art nexus becomes a *thing*. It is an empty vessel, a placeholder for any object. Gell hereby makes, the object of study, the artwork, irrelevant in it's aesthetics. In direct extension of this, he is inappreciative of its unique material manifestation.

The Agents in Agency

Knappett proposes agency exists in both human organisms and artifacts, but intentionality is solely a human trait. Intentionality relates to the psychological dimension of the human organism, but it can manifest as a "distributed phenomenon." The main argument is that the bio-psycho-social human is hybridized by the artifactual and the artifactual is hybridized by the human. Knappett finds the term relationality a key to understanding agency in the subject-to-object network (22-29).

Knappett investigates relationality between subject and object in the work of Latour on agency. Latour proposes a symmetry that attributes equal weight to the agents within the network. It overcomes the subject/object dualism. Latour uses the example of the human and a gun. When someone shoots something/someone with the gun, Latour applies the symmetry of

agency and establishes a new actor that is a hybrid of the gun and the human agent.

Pierre Lemonnier is critical of this symmetrical approach that Latour employs. Knappett, who explains that the criticism is targeted at the sociological nature of Latour's approach, summarizes this. In the analysis of the situation of the man and the gun, Latour does not account for the material constraints of the gun. To Lemonnier, the material properties of the gun forms opportunities and constrains that are important and need to be examined.

Latour responded to this criticism, stating that "It is analytically harmful to separate the "technical" from the "social," because these never exist as pure forms; the "physics" of the gun cannot be simply isolated as objective, asocial facts" (30). The technical addressed here is the physical properties of the gun. The alternative offered by Lemonnier is "to analyze these material traits in detail, then combine the two to create an interconnected entity" (Knappett 32). The fault in the symmetry of Latour, is that it fails to look at *things*.

Bringing this example back into the theoretical domain explored by Verbeek and Kockelkoren, it relates to the example they look at of the typewriter, originally explored by Idhe. This example makes the role of the material in the interaction with a human agent, apparent. It traces the transition from when people wrote with pen, slowly and deliberate. To the use of typewriters, which changed writing in that it allowed for a faster pace, more in resonance with the flow of the spoken word. Word processors, lastly, allow for a recursive process of writing, stylized (Verbeek and Kockelkoren 36). The material properties of the medium are obvious to change the result of the

interaction with the human agent. This is precisely the kind of analysis that Lemonnier would argue in favor of.

In conclusion to the discourse between Latour and Lemonnier, Knappett takes no real sides in the matter. He acknowledges the mutual contribution to social interactions of the subject and object that is advocated by Latour. However, having said this, he recognizes that the properties of the subject and object are different (Knappett 32). Again, in Knappett then, we return to what was earlier identified as the crisis of the object driven by a desire for the object to be transparent.

Verbeek and Kockelkoren conclude their essay with the aphorism “matter matters.” As they have rightfully pointed out, and Sterling has underscored, we should pay due attention to objects. These objects have are appropriated to the challenges of the spatial and temporal context. Objects provide resistance as things, to which we respond and re-appropriate. Lemonnier’s solution of looking at the physical properties and then contextualizing it to an interconnected entity is a static approach that would not entirely capture the dynamic dialogue between object and subject.

A Thesis of Object Immateriality

The crux of the problem in the discussion between Latour and Lemonnier is that they are both right, making Knappett equally right to acknowledge both insights. In clarification of how this is possible, I have to further define my thesis of object immateriality that rests on the idea of the crisis of the object. I do so through the introduction of a concept from the field of media studies, put

forward by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin in the domain of media studies. The roots of the concept is found with the dictum “the medium is the message” articulated by McLuhan. Herein the content of one medium is always another medium.

Within the theory of remediation as postulated by Bolter and Grusin, the development of new media is aimed at achieving an authentic experience. It is this aspiration to an authentic experience that proves interesting for my thesis of object immateriality. According to Bolter and Grusin this is done according to the double logic of remediation: immediacy and hypermediacy. Effectively remediation establishes that new media refashion old media. With the refashioning of media there is an ambition to make the process of mediation invisible, the strategy of immediacy, or to multiple and underscore the mediation process, the strategy of hypermediacy. Immediacy and hypermediacy can be thought of, respectively, as transparency and opacity. Media oscillate between these strategies and they can work to enhance each other’s effect.

To my mind, objects face a similar, trivial fate to that of new media. This is the thesis of object immateriality. If we consider Bolter and Grusin, and leave their teleological tendencies in media archaeology aside, the strategies of remediation are highly relevant to discuss the status of objects. What is particularly fruitful is that immediacy/hypermediacy are, in their conceptualization, not antagonistic as these “logics of remediation,” reinforce each other. Knappett suggests this same idea, on an implicit level, when he concludes that there is a fuzzy boundary between the body and the object

(32). Thus, in contemporary society the status of object is made problematic in the aspiration to direct consumption of the commodity. The material object, however, provides its own resistance and proves an equal partner in the relation to the human agent. Equally, the material properties of the object allow for its handling and operations, designed in a fashion, however, that makes this as fluid, immediate, as possible.

The Thing About Thing Theory

Brown asserted that the thing usually tends to express the subject-object relation rather than the material object. Within the notion of agency we see the object struggle for recognition (a resistance to immediacy) in its relation to the subject. And even when symmetry in agency is not upheld, as is the case with Gell, the subordination of the object eliminates assessment of how the physical properties of the object shape the practices surrounding it.

As expressed in Heidegger the fate of the object is, for the human subject, to be ready-to-hand. In our material culture objects are media, in the McLuhan sense of the term, in that they facilitate engagement to the world. The material world reflects the desires and needs of the subject. Objects are always mere facilitators, materializations of ideas, and are defined by the subject-to-object relation. This explains the reason that these two are often conflated. The human subject is constantly struggling to have objects be ready-to-hand. Even the Spime demonstrates this desire. As soon as the device malfunctions, its matter needs to be absorbed back into the production stream.

The desire towards immediacy is, however, not without its own challenges. Matter, as has been pointed out, provides resistance in its own right. Verbeek and Kockelkoren explore this resistance through the example of the thresholds by revolving doors that not only prevented a draft, but also kept disabled people from getting inside. This example established how artifacts themselves shape practices. To my mind, however, the threshold traversed from ready-to-hand to present-to-hand. The unforeseen contribution of the threshold will be, in dialogue with the subjects, “fixed” in order to become ready-to-hand once more. This dialogue constitutes the troubled status of the object in contemporary Western society.

In conclusion, my proposition is that subjects aspire to immateriality symptomatic of a consumer driven society that threatens the status of the object. This aspiration to immateriality can be understood through the persistent reference to the subject-to-object relation rather than the object itself. We have seen this in the work of Sterling whose technocultures aim to grasp the historical evolution of this relationship.

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