The return to things

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This text analyses the so-called "return to things", a movement which appeared in the humanities and human sciences in the late 1990s. The author attempts to move beyond both the positivistic and the semiotic approaches to the description of things and discuss the so-called "new material culture" and "technoscience studies" (Don Ihde's "material hermeneutics") as approaches which inspire this field of inquiry. The author claims that the "enchantment with things" can be placed within the context of the prevailing discourse of the Other and the ongoing attempts to create counter-disciplines, such as counter-history, counter-archaeology, *etc.* In such counter-disciplines, things, which hitherto have been silent and reduced to passivity, are allowed to speak in their own voice or manifest themselves in their individuality. However, even if scholars claim that things should be incorporated into history as something other than passive recipients of human actions, they appear to remain unable to transcend conventional epistemologies. To illustrate this claim, the author analyses the "biographical" approach to things and concludes that this approach is characterized firstly, by the personification of things that results from anthropocentrism and provides a way of neutralizing the threats posed by nonhuman entities; and secondly, by a kind of genealogical and genetic thinking, which by no means helps us create an alternative epistemology of history but, on the contrary, revives in a different context the fetish of origin.

It appears that a discourse in defense of things (and in general of non-humans) is in the end a discourse in defense of the human being. Things are coming to be existential, "stable" markers that help unstable humans to orient themselves in the world.

KEY-WORDS: things/objects; defense of things, agency of things, biographies of things, ethics of things

The anthropocentric character of history construed as "the science of people in time" (Marc Bloch) and the constructivist view of the world prevailing in recent history have resulted in the neglect of things. Today, with the development of "counter-history", the history of victims, and insurrectional and repossession history, things should also be incorporated into history as something other than passive recipients of human actions.

I formulate these ideas in the context of the so-called "return to things", "back to things" and "turn to the non-human" which has became visible in the humanities since the late 1990s. (see for example: Brown 2003; Brown ed. 2004). Actually,

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it comes as no surprise that after the long-lasting dominance of deconstruction, constructivism, and narrativism, we have finally began to long for reality as such. However, the perception that constructivism may have taken us too far away from "the real past" and from reality in general can only partially account for the return to things. I would like to distinguish five main tendencies underlying the recently renewed interest in things, important for my argument: 1. the critique of anthropocentrism (rejecting the idea of the supreme importance of the human being and turning to other, equally important forms of existence, such as animals, plants, and things); the critique of humanism; 2. the changing conception of the dichotomy between spirit and matter, or the mind and the body, in which matter is no longer perceived as inferior to spirit; 3. the crisis of identity: at the **general** level, re-addressing such questions as what does it mean to be human? what is the difference between the human and the non-human? what is organic and what is inorganic? Things (relics of the past, keepsakes) can be used to help us determine who we are; the thing becomes the "other" of human being; the thing participates in creating human identity, legitimates it, and becomes its guarantor; it also marks changes in human identity. At the **collective** level, things help build and strengthen interpersonal relations as they serve to connect people (as in the gift – Marcel Mauss); 4. the critique of consumer society, and an attempt to see things as more than commodities or tools for use; 5. rejection of constructivism and textualism and a longing for what is "real", where "regaining" the object is conceived as a means for restoring contact with reality.[1]

Of course, the very definition of a thing is problematic. In dictionaries a thing is defined as an entity having material existence; the real and concrete substance of an entity; an entity existing in time and space; an inanimate object. The word object is used as a synonym ("object" is defined as a "material thing"; a "tangible and visible entity that can cast a shadow"). We also differentiate between *res* and *persona*. A *persona* – as the civil law stated – is a subject of rights, while *res* – is an object of rights (this understanding is challenged when we talk about "the rights of things"). Archaeologists often use the word **thing** interchangeably with **artefact** (Latin *arte+factum*), which means "a manmade object" or, in a broader sense "any material remnant of human activity". In this sense, the artefact is in binary opposition with an "ecofact", that is a natural object produced by natural processes without human intervention. Thus, if we do not want to think of things in terms of binary oppositions, the concepts of artefact and ecofact will act as a hindrance. What concept would subsume "artefact" and "ecofact"? Could it be the concept of production?

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[1] I might add that another factor in the return to things were the traumatic events of 9/11, which reminded us of the harshness of reality. In this sense, we might say that the reality of 9/11 itself constituted a critique of constructivism with its idea of the world as produced by a variety of discourses.

I should note that many of the scholars interested in "things studies" are referring to Martin Heidegger's distinction between an **object** (a material entity present-at-hand) and a **thing** (useful thing; a material entity ready-to-hand). Heidegger was interested in useful things that are "encountered in taking care" and in their being. For example, a hammer's being reveals itself by its handiness; this handiness, in turn, is discovered in the act of hammering. By objects, however, Heidegger means entities that are objectively present and about which we can reflect and make statements. Thus, handiness (*Zuhandenheit*) reveals itself when a useful thing is utilized, whereas the objective presence (*Vorhandenheit*) of an entity as "occurrent" or "at-hand" (*vorhanden*) requires a distance in order to look at it and speak about it. Thus, the thingifiers are not interested in recreating debates about Kantian "things in themselves", but rather in the things around us, in the being of things, in how things manifest themselves, in putting things in relation to humans and treating them as active agents of social life.[2]

Speaking of the "return to things" I do not mean, of course, that things have been totally neglected by history. On the contrary, the study of things is the principal task of the history of material culture. Nonetheless, as mentioned above, I would like to find a way of moving beyond both the positivistic description of things and the semiotic approach to the thing as text, symbol, or metaphor. One such possibility is afforded by the so-called "new material culture", developed by British archaeologists who in 1996 founded the interdisciplinary "*Journal of Material Culture*". The journal's studies of materiality reject constructivism, narrativism and textualism as approaches which have "dematerialized" things by comparing the thing to the text and research to reading, and by perceiving the thing as a message or sign. In an attempt to reverse those negative tendencies, "new material studies" point to the agency of things, accentuating the fact that things not only exist but also act and have performative potential.[3] Of course, the notion of the agency of things does not mean that things have intentions but that things enjoy a particular status in their relations with people. For scholars inspired by Marcel Mauss's idea of the gift, things perform a socializing function, they solidify interpersonal relations, they participate in the creation of human identity at the individual and collective levels and mark its changes. On the other hand, scholars influenced by Bruno Latour are interested in how humans and nonhumans interact through various processes of mediation and form collectives; how through various crossovers they exchange their properties.

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[2] According to Heidegger, things (things-at-hand) are important for *Da-sein* to exist since *Da-sein* is always already also *Mit-sein* – being with and for the others. "A return to things", following his approach, would mean to study a way of being of things (what a stone is as a thing?; what is its being?) and investigate how to let things uncover what has reminded hidden. See: Heidegger 1996: 62–71, 1970; *cf.* also works by a representative of the so-called "Heideggerian archaeology" (Thomas 1996).

[3] Addressing the agency of things, scholars often cite the works of Bruno Latour (1999) and Alfred Gell (1998).

We should not be considering artifacts as things, writes Latour – "they deserve better. They deserve to be housed in our intellectual culture as full fledged social actors".[4]

Another way of moving beyond both the positivistic description of things and the semiotic approach to the thing as text, symbol, or metaphor is proposed by "technoscience studies". One of its representatives, Don Ihde, develops what he calls a "material hermeneutics". Ihde claims that the belief that the natural sciences (positivism) and the social and human sciences (hermeneutics) have different methodologies is outdated and that an expanded notion of hermeneutics might cancel this "Diltheyan Divide" (as he calls it). "The main point of an expanded hermeneutics – writes Ihde – is that what the natural sciences teach us is that there are ways, through instruments – technologies – by which things can show themselves. A material hermeneutics is a hermeneutics which 'gives things voices where there had been silence, and brings to sight that which was invisible'". He is interested in how tools relate and influence the production of knowledge. In his approach, mediation has replaced alienation as the key concept for analysing technology.[5] Technologies should not be conceived solely as instruments to estrange people from themselves and their world, but also as the means that mediates their existence and experiences.

Ihde examines the case of Ötzi the Iceman. The frozen remains of a man who lived 5,300 years ago were discovered in 1991 by hikers on the Austrian-Italian border. Ihde describes how through various instruments (microscopes, spectrographs, radio-carbon dating, *etc.*) Ötzi's history has been re-constructed and what could not have been seen suddenly became visible. Ihde's argument is that the Ötzi story could have been uncovered without the aid of textual hermeneutics and thus, that material hermeneutics is not a supplement to, but rather a necessary part of, fragmentary textual hermeneutics (Ihde 2003; see also: Ihde 1999). Instruments enable scientists to perceive aspects of reality that cannot be perceived without them. The history of Ötzi the Iceman is co-shaped by the instruments with which he is studied. This means that instruments co-constitute the reality studied by scholars. Their role is not simply instrumental, but hermeneutic: they shape the ways that people gain access to reality. In such an approach we witness an expansion of hermeneutics from

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[4] In the case of non-human, Bruno Latour prefers to use the word "actant", which is borrowed from semiotics, or "social actor," than "agent." Actor for Latour has a specific definition: "An 'actor' in ANT [Actor-Network Theory – ED] is a semiotic definition – an actant – that is, something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general. An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action." (Latour 1996; *cf.* also: Latour 1999: 180 and 214).

[5] On the role of mediation in archaeological research, see: Witmore 2004: 60. For Christopher Witmore, "mediation is a mode of engagement, which takes us beyond narrative. [...] I argue, following Michael Shanks, that it is a way of rescuing the ineffable. Moreover, mediation is a process that allows us to attain richer and fuller translations of bodily experience and materiality that are located, multi-textured, reflexive, sensory, and polysemous".

texts to materiality. Human interpretations of reality are not to be understood in terms of textual and linguistic structures only, but also as mediated by artifacts. In the same vein as Latour, who claims that the social sciences have too exclusively focused on humans and forgotten about nonhumans, it can be said that hermeneutics has only been using half its capacity, occupying itself only with texts and neglecting things.

In the next part of the paper, I will not continue to explore the potentiality of techno-science for including things into history but rather indicate where my suspicion toward "thing studies" begins and why I intend to claim that things considered within a framework of social sciences ties us to a modernist epistemology.

IN DEFENSE OF THINGS

In his manifesto "in defense of things", Bjørnar Olsen writes:

Archaeologists should unite in a defense of things, a defense of those subaltern members of the collective that have been silenced and 'othered' by the imperialist social and humanist discourses. I am tired of the familiar story of how the subject, the social, the episteme, created the object; tired of the story that everything is language, action, mind and human bodies. I want us to pay more attention to the other half of this story: how objects construct the subject. This story is not narrated in the labile languages, but comes to us as silent, tangible, visible and brute material remains: Machines, walls, roads, pits and swords. ... It is interesting, and probably rather revealing too, that the discipline known as the discipline of things, even as the 'discipline of the spade', devotes so little time, so little place, to its own instruments, equipments and dirty practices, when recollecting its own past. [...] Instead, attention turns to thought, meta-theories, politics and society, in short, to the 'noise of discourse'. Thus, the need for a new regime, "a democracy extended to things" (Latour), becomes ever more evident".[6]

We might ask on what assumptions does Olsen presuppose that things should and need to be defended? Do objects/things have rights? Should people act as advocates of things and speak in their name? What kind of change in human-things relations does this manifesto suggest?

Gísli Pálsson describes three paradigms of human-environment relations: orientalism, paternalism and communalism. **Orientalism** establishes a fundamental break

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[6] Olsen 2003: 100; *cf.* Latour and Weibel eds 2005. Latour asks the question "how would an object-oriented democracy look like?" Latour notices that *Res-publica* is not interested in *res*, he – on the other hand – is interested in things that create a public around them. To indicate this shift of interest, Latour introduces the German neologism *Dingpolitik* as a substitute for *Realpolitik*. For him politics is no longer limited to humans, but extends also to things; parliaments are extended to various gatherings and forums like supermarkets, computer networks, scientific laboratories, churches, markets, *etc*. For Latour politics is about things and he is interested in how a public gathers around things and how things attract various gatherings.

between nature and society; it legitimizes anthropocracy (humans are masters of nature) that engenders an exploitative attitude toward nonhumans and an aggressive colonization. Things are seen as usable objects that, because they have no rights, can be treated in any way whatsoever. In this kind of relationship with things there are no ethical considerations. **Paternalism**, on the other hand, presupposes a protective attitude toward things. It still implies human mastery and relations of hierarchy, but presumes a certain responsibility not only toward other humans but also toward nonhuman beings. In this approach people act on behalf of things thereby fulfilling a "protective contract". Such an approach still promotes a colonizing discourse in which a thing is treated as the fragile and victimized other in a vein similar to that of women, children, and the disabled; however, it is not as aggressive as the case of the orientalist approach. **Communalism** rejects the separation of nature and society, and it is characterized by the notions of contingency and dialogue. It suggests generalized reciprocity, engagement, and an ethical attitude toward the nonhuman based on close, even intimate relationships. Pálsson stresses that communalism does not mean a return to the pre-Renaissance, Medieval idea of humans as the integral centre of the world, or to naive Romanticism (Pálsson 1996).

Let's illustrate these three paradigms by examples:

1. Orientalism

Recently psychologists devoted their attention to a phenomenon that is called "computer rage". They claim that more and more often men and women express their anger and frustration with computers by performing various acts of violence on them. Kent Norman, who directs the Laboratory of Automation Psychology and Decision Processes at the University of Maryland, conducted an online survey last year in which nearly 20 percent of the respondents admitted they had thrown a computer on the floor out of anger. They described smashing, microwaving and cursing at their computers. One confessed to urinating on his. Another said he had thrown his laptop in a fryer. At least three claimed to have fired shots at their hardware. Reading comments of respondents to the computer rage survey conducted by Norman, we encounter statements such as: "I once shot a computer with a .50-cal BMG sniper rifle"; "I took great pleasure throwing an old monitor into a dumpster hard enough to smash it completely"; "Taking a hockey stick to an old monitor is very satisfying"; "Poured gasoline on a computer and set fire to it".[7] Norman proposed various techniques for handling rage, such as bashing, burning and barbecuing old computer parts. There are also so-called Geek Squads (which follow a specific dress code, for example, wear clip-on ties and white socks) that offer help in repairing a computer (Seligman 2005: A19 and A21). Certainly, it is all about

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[7] Norman's survey can be found at www.lap.umd.edu/computer_rage

saving men/women from the kind of frustration caused by computer failure and not about saving computers themselves.

2. Paternalism

As noted above, we differentiate between *res* and *persona*. *Persona* – as stated by civil law – is a subject of rights, while *res* is an object of rights. Thus, if we talk about the rights of things, we transgress an old dichotomy between *persona* and *res*. And yes, certain things have rights that are guaranteed by, for example, the 1954 Hague Convention that protects objects of special cultural importance for the heritage of humanity during armed conflict. Unfortunately, this convention has not always been effective, as the case of the Dubrovnik bombing has shown; and to prevent similar destruction in 1999, the so-called second protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention was introduced. This protocol establishes individual criminal responsibility for violations of the Hague Convention. It says that a state party must either prosecute or extradite any person found in its territory who has been indicted for serious violations of the Hague/Protocol II rules.

On 31 January 2005, Pavle Strugar, a retired Lieutenant-General of the then Yugoslav Peoples' Army (JNA) was sentenced to eight years imprisonment for crimes committed on 6 December 1991, in the course of a JNA military campaign in the area of Dubrovnik in Croatia in October, November and December of 1991 (Jungvirth 2005). The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia charged Strugar (case no. IT-01-42-PT) not only with "murder, cruel treatment and attacks on civilians" but also with "unjustified devastation, unlawful attacks on civilian objects, destruction or willful damage to institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, historic monuments and works of art and science". The bombardment on 6 December 1991, which lasted more than 10 hours, destroyed much of Dubrovnik's protected Old Town, which had been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1979. An analysis conducted by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, in conjunction with UNESCO, found that, of the 824 buildings in the Old Town, 563 (or 68.33 per cent) had been hit by projectiles in 1991 and 1992. Six buildings were completely destroyed by fire. In 1993, the Institute for the Rehabilitation of Dubrovnik, in conjunction with UNESCO, estimated the total cost for restoring public and private buildings; religious buildings; streets, squares, and fountains; and ramparts, gates, and bridges at 9,657,578 US dollars.[8]

In the context of such expressions of hostility, rage and physical violence against things like cities (buildings, monuments, *etc.*) and computers we might ask: what kind of rights do we have in mind when speaking about the "rights of things"? Do

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[8] At the same time, the head of UNESCO was attempting to intervene and stop the destruction of ancient Buddhist statues in Afghanistan by the Taliban authorities. On the new international rules for the protection of cultural heritage in war, see: Sandholtz, forthcoming.

things also have obligations and liability for the damage they might do to us? As Latour points out, some things have acquired the properties of citizenship. They have the right not to be enslaved. Considering a thing as a *persona* in legal terms (personification of things) allows human beings to treat it in a certain way that may also have negative aspects: things might be arrested, prosecuted, sentenced, exiled and executed (Tamen 2001: 79).

History provides us with many interesting examples of the personification of things and their treatment as responsible beings. Pausanias in his *Description of Greece* (6.11.2–9), for example, tells a story of a bronze statue of the famous athlete, Theoganes, erected on the island of Thasos, his home city. The statue was whipped by his former enemy every night, until, finally, it fell on its oppressor and killed him. The sons of the deceased prosecuted the statue for murder. It was put on trial, found guilty and sunk in the sea "following the view taken by Draco, who, in the laws on homicide which he drew up for the Athenians, enacted that even lifeless things should be banished if they fell on anybody and killed him", wrote Pausanias (*Pausanias's Description…* 1913: 298–9; *cf.* also: Hyde 1916).

Cases of trials of things, as the one told by Pausanias and connected to the animistic conception of nature, and the destruction of objects belonging to a cultural heritage related to modernist thinking have shown that certain things (such as monuments) appear to have not only rights, but also legal standing. In these approaches human beings are still mastering the world of nonhumans and claim rights to control them and speak in their name ("paternal contract"). What we need, however, is to make the next step and establish a human-nonhuman relation based on a non-anthropocentric approach and a relational epistemology, as proposed by the paradigm of communalism.

3. Communalism

The principles of communalism are found in hunting and gathering societies, says Pálsson referring to work by Nurit Bird-David on the Nayaka in South India. Her work should be of a particular interest for thing-scholarship since she reformulates animism and considers it as a relational epistemology. For Bird-David this epistemology is marked by an absence of the ontological dualism of nature and culture and body and mind that are characteristic of Western thought; self and personhood are relational, and not separated from the world, but rather the self is in-the-world. The world in this approach is a heterarchical one, rather than hierarchical.[9]

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[9] The term "relational epistemology" is also used by Latour, especially in his Actor-Network Theory. Referring to the collective of humans and nonhumans, this epistemology – as it is in Bird-David's approach – rejects the positivist view of objects or actors as closed and separated from the world of individuals, existing in themselves prior to any participation in ecosocial and semiotic networks of interactions (including the interactions in which they are observed, named, *etc.*). See: Latour 1996.

The traditional understanding of animism defines it as a characteristic of "primitive peoples" who believe that certain beings such as trees, rivers, animals and non-organic things possess a spirit or animating power and thus, are not only alive but possess something approximating to personhood. Bird-David states that modernist notions of personhood misunderstand animism, taking it as a simple religion and a failed epistemology. She wants to rescue the practices connected with animism thereby liberating animism from identification with religion, while holding onto the distinction between religious and scientific knowledge. She proposes a non-modernist concept of a person and seeks to demonstrate its possibility in her studies of animistic practices. She borrows from Marilyn Strathern the notion of the "dividual" (a person constituted by relations, as against the notion of the "individual", a person regarded as a single and closed entity that exists prior to all relationships). Bird-David's analysis shows how the Nayakas believe that personhood is constituted by sharing relationships both with humans and with members of other species. "I relate, therefore I am", writes Bird-David, describing the intimate engagements of the natives with their environment. For the Nayaka, a person is someone or something with whom one shares. Bird-David, does not reify the notion of "relationship" into an entity but prefers to talk about "'relatedness', meaning two beings/things mutually responsive to each other".[10] For Bird-David, animism "involves responsively engaging with beings/things, then perceiving them as persons". She proposes to treat animism as a "relational epistemology" and a performative act of knowing, which allows her to focus on what is done in animistic acts rather than what is represented in it.

This short description of Bird-David's understanding of animism and personhood that focus on relatedness with other beings and engagement with them directs us to a possible model of relations between humans and nonhumans that is also found in the works of such advocates of things as Bruno Latour and Bjørnar Olsen. However, while the paradigm of communalism seems to project a utopian future, the paradigm of paternalism still constitutes the dominant approach in thing-studies. I will investigate its positive and negative sides in more details in the next parts of this essay.

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[10] In a traditional objectivist paradigm, speaking about mutual responsivity between beings/things does not make sense, but in Bird-David's approach it is explained as follows: "If 'cutting trees into parts' [like botanists do in order to study the tropical forest – ED] epitomizes the modernist epistemology, 'talking with trees', I argue, epitomizes Nayaka animistic epistemology. 'Talking with' is shorthand for a two-way responsive relatedness with a tree – rather than 'speaking' one-way to it, as if it could listen and understand. 'Talking with' stands for attentiveness to variances and invariances in behaviour and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them. To 'talk with a tree' – rather than 'cut it down' – is to perceive what *it* does as one acts toward it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility" (Bird-David 1999: 77; see also her: 1990).

THE THING AS "OTHER"

One of the most visible approaches to things in the framework of the paradigm of paternalism is the biographical approach. It has recently become popular in the human sciences.[11] But this approach involves an ineluctable anthropomorphization of objects: they are said to have identities (scholars speak of a material identity (Holtorf 2002: 64), or many identities which change in time together with the change of context[12]); they are said to have their lives and biographies which begin at point A and end at point B and in the course of which something happens to them; for example, they are excavated and described by an archaeologist. Note that the biographical approach has two features typical of traditional epistemology: firstly, the personification of things that results from anthropocentrism and provides a mode for neutralizing the threats posed by nonhuman entities; and secondly, genealogical and genetic thinking, which by no means helps us to create an alternative epistemology of history but, on the contrary, revives in a different context the fetish of origin, one of the foundations of traditional historical thinking so vehemently contested by Michel Foucault. Thus, while the biographical approach is certainly attractive as a research interest, is still based on a rather conventional epistemology.

Notwithstanding its epistemological conservatism, the biographical approach puts forward the interesting idea that things have agency and can influence interpersonal relations. The conception of things as active participants in life processes redefines the relationship between people and things. In fact, it is only innovative in that it shifts attention **from subjects** who create relations **to the relations** created by subjects. Moreover, the biographical approach perpetuates thinking in terms of difference, namely, the difference between the human being and the thing. That difference is hierarchical insofar as the human being is a reference point and model for how the thing should be perceived (in this respect it resembles the so-called feminism of difference).

The "enchantments with things" observable in today's humanities can be placed within the context of the prevailing discourse of the Other and the ongoing attempts to create counter-disciplines, such as counter-history, counter-archaeology, *etc*. In such counter-disciplines, things, which hitherto have been silent and reduced to passivity, are allowed to speak in their own voice. Counter-history or counter-archaeology becomes part of the insurrectional and repossession discourses, in which things are perceived as Others who demand their place in discourse. The object is no

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[11] The 1999 thematic issue of "*World Archaeology*" was titled *The cultural biography of objects;* Gosden and Marschall eds 1999; see also: Kopytoff 1986; Holtorf 2002 and 1998; Hamilakis 1999; *cf.* also a fresh and inspiring approach to material culture offered by Lynn Meskell (2004).

[12] For discussions of identity in terms of race, class, and gender, see the essays included in "*Archaeological Dialogues*", vol. 11, no 1, June 2004 (debate about Adam T. Smith's essay *The end of the essential archaeological subject*).

longer seen as a subaltern other: the choice of the word "thing" instead of "object" in Heideggerian archaeology attests to this change.[13] Ironically, however, the thing conceived as other shares the fate of those others who cannot speak for themselves, such as animals or the dead. Living people speak in the name of things, which mean that the discourse of things is always incorporated in our discourse, our needs and expectations, and our pragmatics, such as gaining knowledge, the discourse of mourning, the discourse of reconciliation or of justice. A question arises whether such an apparent defense of things is not a means for neutralizing and taming their threatening otherness; or whether it is not a perverse method of disciplining things by the way of their domestication. Things as others are welcomed insofar as they are somehow "integrated" into a dominant discourse; but only if their difference can be neutralized. The dual process of anthropomorphization of things and the reification of humans proves the adage: "become like me and I will respect your difference" (see a criticism of the politics of difference by Alain Badiou, 2003).

"THE OBJECT-IN-PROCESS" OR "THE PROCESSUAL OBJECT"

Contemporary theories of subjectivity and identity shape our understanding of the identity of things. Just as with human identity, the identity of things is said to be changeable rather than stable; manifold and diffused rather than unified and homogeneous. Thus, Gell speaks of a "divided identity", while others speak of "hybrid identity" or "diasporic identity"). These ideas, wittingly or unwittingly transferred to scientific research, seem to reverberate in Holtorf's proposal that instead of focusing on what things **are**, we should focus on how things **have become** (in case of his research – ancient) artefacts (Holtorf 2002: 55). It is noteworthy that the emphasis here does not fall on being but on becoming.

Paraphrasing Julia Kristeva's (1986, 1998) term, we might say that this kind of research is interested in the "object in process" (or the processual object), that is, the object as it is manufactured and transformed, as it wears out and acquires meaning. Just as in the prevailing conceptions of subjectivity, the object is not seen as stable and closed but as changing and open. This conception of the object is marked by the still dominant constructivist approach, which supports and legitimates the postmodern condition with its affirmation of change, recovery, and reconstructive capacities. This way of thinking underlies Holtorf's approach, too, despite his promising declarations. His goal is to examine the transformation of a thing into source evidence, that is, to investigate an object in process. The thing as such, situated outside of pragmatics, is not his focus of interest.

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[13] True enough, counter-archaeology departs from the simplistic approach to things in terms of their functionality and usefulness, and the new archaeologist sides with things as active creators of social life. However, is counter-archaeology anything more than a clever move on the part of the dominant system of knowledge which attempts to incorporate and neutralize all potentially threatening discourses?

Like any "other", things can be approached in a twofold manner: We can either treat their otherness as pathology and try to normalize them, making them resemble people; or we can perceive them as a "culture" (or cultures), autonomous and self-contained in their non-human otherness. In archaeological research, the former approach is exemplified by social anthropology with its preference for writing "biographies of things", while the latter approach is manifested in Heideggerian archaeology, which, more or less successfully, attempts to preserve the autonomy of things. However, things are discussed in a manner similar to people: they have empires, they form relationships, they have their lives, they are affirmed or humiliated; research in the field of cultural heritage emphasizes the need to protect things and take care of them. Sometimes things are made infantile, since they require the kind of care that children do.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the obvious fact that taking care of someone involves a hierarchy, since the person who is taken care of is regarded as weaker, while the caregiver is in the position to exercise control. Indeed, care means control in the case of both people and things. We tend to see things from a pragmatic point of view; the thing is important inasmuch as it serves people and can be used by them in a variety of discourses: scientific (the thing as a source of knowledge), legal (things and remains used in genocide trials), aesthetic, religious, *etc*. The pragmatic approach to things predominates.[14] The most conspicuous example is the treatment of human remains. Even the archaeologist of death Mike Parker Pearson, whose works display thorough knowledge of contemporary problems and great intellectual sensitivity, says that "dealing with the dead, recent and ancient, inevitably must serve the living" (Parker Pearson 1999: 192; Domańska 2005).

Arguably, all the approaches to things discussed above are permeated by the politics of "colonization", the conquest of unknown and exotic territories. Significantly, in such a book as, *e.g.*, *The empire of things* by Fred E. Myers (2001), the very title with the term "empire" implies thinking in terms of imperialism and conquest. An empire is a sovereignty, which raises the question of who or what rules the "empire of things". Is there a hierarchy of things?

ETHICS OF THINGS

When a thing is considered as an other, it is possible to raise the issue of an ethical relation between humans and things and to speak of an ethics of things in general. Silvia Benso's book *The face of things* is an attempt to save things from oblivion. She does not intend to anthropomorphize things but to "thingize" ethics

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[14] This is why "defenders of things" seek help in Heidegger for whom "using" does not mean exploitation; using is preserving a thing in being, it gives a thing its destination and purpose; see: Heidegger 1972: 187.

(Benso's term). "The inspiration of this work", writes Benso in the introduction, "is the conviction that not only the Other, but also the other of the Other – things – must become the (nonthematic) theme of love of philosophical discourse". Inspired by Martin Heidegger's understanding of things and Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of the Other, Benso writes about the encounter with things in their facialities (not faces).[15] For her, ethics is the dimension within which "a nonviolating encounter with a nonhuman other takes place". She also, like Latour, tries to protect things from their reduction to objects. To be sure, there is no place for nonhuman others (and especially for things) in Levinasian ethics, but Benso's project aimed at filling this lack by turning to the later Heidegger's understanding of things as conditioners of other things and of what is gathered within them. As Benso writes: "things are the place where the gathering of the Fourfold (the mortals, the gods, the earth, the sky) occurs" (Benso 2000: xxxvi). What is important in her interpretation is that there are no relationships without things; things as gatherers open up the place of a relationship. Thus, things are in a way places, and not merely belong in space.[16] In this context, ethics is considered not as set of rules or principles but as a locative description, a place where "what is good is defined in terms of what preserves the maximum reality from destruction, whereas what is bad is what works against reality, for its destruction and annihilation" (Benso 2000: 131).

The interesting approach to ethics offered by Benso, does not, however, rise above the paradigm of paternalism. It seems that a fundamental problem of this paradigm resides in the concepts of "otherness" and "difference" that have been adopted by various discourses concerning relations with humans and nonhuman others and that tie us to a modernist way of thinking since they were developed in its framework. Perhaps we should look for other concepts to describe our cohabitants in the world, for the concept of the Other seems to be more and more oppressive.

An overview of the intellectual trends which purport to defend things in the framework of the paradigm of paternalism demonstrates that just as in the other disciplines in the humanities, those trends cannot rise above the categories of modern philosophy without coming up against the aporias of anthropocentrism. Representatives of these trends continue to think in terms of hierarchical difference, in various ways objectify the things they study, and treat relations in terms of the "economy of exchange" (pragmatism). Perhaps Derrida is right when he says that we can only resort to deconstruction, which exposes the foundations of modern philosophy and

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[15] For Susan Benso (2000: xxx), "facialities evoke the possibility of the existence of faceless faces, which, despite their facelessness, are yet endowed with the intimating power of the face to demand an ethical response".

[16] According to Heidegger, originally the word "thing" denoted a gathering. Benso (2000: 113 and 118) reminds: "It is the event of gathering that Heidegger assumes as the being of things. A thing is a thing, rather than object, insofar as it gathers – when it gathers, the thing things, Heidegger claims".

prepares us for what is to come. Perhaps this time practice will substantiate theory rather than being constructed by it.

Recently a biotronic transformer was constructed which combined organic tissue with a microprocessor. The binary opposition between the organic and inorganic was thus dissolved, with the result that theory had to come up with a new idea of subjectivity to describe this product. Similarly, the opposition of the human being and the thing may soon be challenged. We must be receptive to what is to come, and this receptivity is only possible if we realize that modern thinking has exhausted its potential and that contemporary reality poses problems which modern thinking has a difficulty to handle (I mean such specific attributes of modern thinking as thinking in terms of binary oppositions and anthropocentrism). The alternative trends in contemporary social sciences and humanities demonstrate that scholars are perfectly aware of the limitations involved in traditional epistemology and try to transcend it. Such approaches as, for example, Heideggerian archaeology, techno-science studies, or revised animism create potentialities for new approaches.

Meanwhile, a conclusion drawn from the above considerations might be that a discourse in defense of things (and in general of non-humans) is in the end a discourse in defense of the human being. Things are coming to be existential, "stable" markers that help unstable humans to orient themselves in the world. Stories about things are "rei-fictions" about unique identities and biographies of things.[17] We can only hope that thanks to things we might become more human in the future (Droit 2005).

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[17] The term "reifiction" was coined by a Polish literary critic, Przemysław Czapliński. He describes it as a process of creating things by giving them textual reality; giving things a narrative autonomy and reaching in this way the limits of a literary representation of things. See: Czapliński 1999: 234.

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