



Material Culture after Text: Re-Membering Things

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Why have the social and human sciences shown such disinterest in material culture? How has this neglect affected archaeology? How do things and materiality at large relate to human beings and 'social life'? These questions are addressed in this article which also critically examines social constructivist and phenomenological approaches to material culture. Arguing against the maxim that 'all that is solid melts into air', it is claimed that to understand important aspects of past and present societies, we have to relearn to ascribe action, goals and power to many more 'agents' than the human actor — in other words, to re-member things.

INTRODUCTION

In his book from 1987, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Daniel Miller refers to material culture as 'a surprisingly illusive component of modern culture', which 'has consistently managed to evade the focus of academic gaze, and remains the least understood of all central phenomena of the modern age' (1987:217). Twelve years later, Michael Schiffer wrote that social scientists have 'ignored what might be the most distinctive and significant about our species: (that) human life consists of ceaseless and varied interaction among people and myriad kinds of things' (1999:2). Neither of these statements is based on world-wide surveys,¹ of course, and there are probably also some elements of 'tribal songs' attached to them. Nevertheless, I think it can still be argued forcefully that the materiality of social life has been marginalized — even stigmatized — in scientific and philosophical discourses during the 20th century.

Why has this marginalization taken place?

Why has the physical and 'thingly' component of our past and present being become forgotten or ignored to such an extent in contemporary social research? And how has this attitude affected those disciplinary fields still devoted to the study of things, most notably archaeology? With the possible exception of the last one, these questions are of course not novel to material culture studies (cf. Miller 1987:3ff., Dant 1999:9ff.). My own motivation for readdressing them is partly based on the simple fact that few convincing answers have been provided so far. More importantly, however, is that these questions are pertinent to a fundamental ontological inquiry central to my research: how do things, objects — the material world in general — relate to human beings and what generally is thought of as 'social life'. I am revealing no great secret if I admit that this research has been provoked by an increasing discomfort not only with the dominant anti-material conception of culture and society within the human and social sciences, but also

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with the way archaeology and the ‘new’ material-culture studies (including landscape studies) — despite their self-proclaimed success (cf. Miller 1998:3, Buckli 2002) — have moved away from thing’s materiality and subsumed themselves to hegemonic anti-material and social constructivist theories.² Thus, the following observation made by Schiffer constitutes an adequate starting-point for my discussion:

... beyond being marginalized material-culture studies often suffer from a more severe problem: they simply project conventional ontology and theories into new empirical domains, treating people-artefact interaction as secondary to processes of culture. The manufacture and use of artefacts is regarded, for example, as just one more arena in which people negotiate culturally constituted meanings ... (Schiffer 1999:6).

NOT ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS INTO AIR

First, a few confessions: My approach is a realist one in the sense that I do believe the material world exists and that it constitutes a fundamental and lasting foundation for our existence. Things, objects, landscapes, possess ‘real’ qualities that affect and shape both our perception of them and our cohabitation with them. A large proportion of recent studies in archaeology and the social sciences, however, seem to have been guided by a kind of ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Ricoeur 1970), in which ‘all that is solid melts into air’,³ including the hard physicality of the world which sometimes is reduced to little more than discursive objects or ‘phenomena’ of the subjects’ cognitive experience (e.g. Holtorf 2002).⁴ Despite the timely advent of the body in social studies, one often gets the feeling that the human body is the only flesh of the world and that this spiritual lived-in body continues to roam around rather unconstrainedly in an intentional world held together almost solely by human cognition (e.g. Williams & Bendelow 1998, cf. Atfield

2000:16, 42, Ingold 2000:40 for related criticism).

I propose a more egalitarian regime, a symmetrical archaeology, founded on the premise that things, all those physical entities we refer to as material culture, are beings in the world alongside other beings, such as humans, plants and animals. All these beings are kindred, sharing substance (‘flesh’) and membership in a dwelt-in world. They are, of course, different, but this is a difference that should not be conceptualized according to the ruling ontological regime of dualities and negativities; it is a non-oppositional or relative difference facilitating collaboration, delegation and exchange. However far back we go into ‘talkative history and silent prehistory’ (Serres 1987:209), humans have extended their social relations to non-human agents with whom they have swapped properties and formed collectives (Latour 1999:198; cf. Shanks 1998:22–23). If there is one history running all the way down from Olduvai Gorge to Post-Modernity, it must be one of increasing materiality — that more and more tasks are delegated to non-human actors; more and more actions mediated by things (Fig. 1).

Today it has become a commonplace to say that society is constructed, even far outside the relativist settlement (cf. Hacking 2001 for a general discussion). However, few have devoted time to analyse the building materials — the concrete and steel, rebar and pillars — involved in its construction; the brigades of non-human actors that constrain, direct and help our day-to-day activities; the material agents that constitute the very condition of possibility for those features we associate with social order, such as asymmetry, durability, power and hierarchy (Latour 1999:197). As Michel Serres has noted (1995:87), ‘Our relationships, social bonds would have been airy as clouds were there only contracts between subjects. In fact, the object, specific to the Hominidae, stabilizes our relationships, it slows down the time of our revolutions’. To understand how collec-



Fig. 1. “If there is one history . . .”. Bay Bridge and San Francisco. Image by: Wernher Krutein/photovault.com.

tives — societies — work, we have to relearn to ascribe action, goals and power — or to use that old mantra, *agency* — to many more agents than the human subject, as well as to ballast epistemology — and ontology — with a new and unknown actor; the silent thing (cf. Latour 1993:83).⁵

What about archaeology . . .

But has my *mise-en-scène* thus mortified the quartz, drained it of any material vitality, its very shimmer dulled by being subjected to an archaeological epistemology where its role, within this too harmonious scene we call history, is never to be itself but always, always to represent something else? (Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things* (2003))

Saying that material culture has been ignored in the social and human sciences, leaves out one discipline that has stubbornly continued to deal with things: archaeology. Recently,

material culture studies have also been reinvented in the compounds of anthropology and cultural studies, and I shall visit these sites briefly.

Archaeology is, of course, the discipline of things *par excellence*. There was a time in the past when archaeologists loved material culture — one might even recall a certain obsession. In fact, it was a concern shared by several disciplines. However, as soon as our former allies abandoned the world of things and embraced the world of cultures, social systems and ideas, accessible only, as we were told, through dialogue and participant observation, a certain embarrassment was associated with those who studied ‘just things’. Gradually, a change could be discerned in the archeological rhetoric: the material was only a means to reach something else and more important — cultures and societies: the lives of past peoples. The social

scientists remained rather unimpressed, however, and even after the discipline had turned 'new', Edmund Leach continued to instruct us that 'in the last analysis, archaeology must be concerned with people rather than with things' (Leach 1973:768) (at least if it should harbour any hopes of attention from British social anthropologists. . .).

Irony aside, looking back on the past 40 years of theoretical discourse in archaeology, two main identities ascribed to material culture can be discerned: one concerned with its functional, technological and adaptive importance, the other with its social and cultural meaning (its role as sign, metaphor, symbol). Although the differences between them were considered to be essential — as the vague memories from the science war remind us — what was shared in most processual and post-processual approaches was a longing for realms beyond the material itself. Material culture became a contradictory term for reaching a culture that is not material. Things are studied primarily as a means to reveal something else, something more important — formerly known as 'the Indian behind the artefact'. The material is a source material, an incomplete representation of the past, traces of an absent presence — not part of the past (or society) itself.

The following quotation may be seen as representative (if not exhaustive) of the general archaeological attitude towards material culture:

The main aim in archaeology is to write culture history. Our primary data for this reconstruction are the artifacts, or the material remains of past human activity. This material is the product of people's ideas (culture). To understand the relationship between the material remains and the cultural processes which produced their distribution is the critical problem in archaeology (Håland 1977:1).

Thus, things are primarily studied for methodological and epistemological reasons, to reveal the extra-material cultural processes that produced them (behaviour, action, mind).

Contrary to the accusation of being too concerned with things (pace Leach), I claim that archaeology rather suffers from being undermaterialized. The materiality of past societies is mostly seen as the outcome of historical and social processes that are not in themselves material, leaving materiality itself with little or no causal or explanatory power for these processes.⁶

Some familiar memories: In the early 1980s we learned about material culture as active and communicative, as symbols in action. Later on, pots, megaliths and rock carvings were written into the limitless text of post-structuralism and late hermeneutics. Literary analogies abounded: reading the past (Hodder 1986), reading material culture (Tilley 1990), material culture as text (Tilley 1991), and so on. Now don't get me wrong, I think this development was an important intellectual enterprise towards maturing the discipline — and at least it made us realize that practically all material culture conveys social meanings and — perhaps more importantly — that the production of meaning is an ongoing process, depending as much on the reader and the reader's context as on the producer(s). Unfortunately, this knowledge did little to help us understand what material culture is, the 'nature' of it so to speak, or to understand the role it plays in human existence on a more fundamental ontological level. Although the textual analogy was important and productive, we come to ignore the differences between things and text: that material culture *is* in the world and plays a fundamentally different constitutive role for our being in this world than texts and language. Things do far more than just speak and express meanings (cf. Joerges 1988:224); and at some point it just stopped being fun conceiving everything as a text that writes itself, the past as a never-ending narrative, an endless play of signifiers without signifiedes (e.g. Olsen 1987, 1990).

It is true that a shift away from this somewhat one-sided focus on the symbolic-communicative and representational aspects

of material culture gradually emerged, particularly reflected in studies of landscapes and monuments in compartments of British archaeology (see also Shanks 1995, 1998, Boast 1996, Pearson & Shanks 2001). Based partly on phenomenology, partly on a wide range of social theory running from Bourdieu to Foucault, several archaeological studies from the mid-1990s onwards seem to be founded more on people's practical being-in-the-world (e.g. Barret 1994, Bradley 1998, 2003, Tilley 1994, Thomas 1996). Attention turned towards how materials and landscape, through active interaction with humans, served to shape experience, memories and lives. This is clearly an important and promising move, though there is still a tendency in many studies to overemphasize the human-subjective and mental dimension of how people relate to landscapes and monuments.

In introducing her edited book, *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*, Barbara Bender states that 'Landscapes are created by people — through their experience and engagement with the world around them' (1993:1). In a recent paper she claims that 'An experiential or phenomenological approach allows us to consider how *we* move around, how *we* attach meaning to places, entwining *them* with memories, histories and stories, creating a sense of belonging. . . We have seen that landscapes are experimental and porous, nested and open ended' (2002:136–137, emphases added). In their edited book, *Archaeologies of Landscape*, Ashmore and Knapp announce that "today . . . the most prominent notions of landscape emphasize its sociosymbolic dimensions: landscape is an entity that exists by virtue of its being perceived, experienced, and contextualised by people" (1999:1). But what do landscapes and places have to offer us? How do *they* make us move around and affect our being-in-the-world? (Fig. 2) In the celebration of landscapes and matters as plastic and always constructed ('. . . as something open-ended, polysemic, untidy, contestational and almost infinitely variable', Bender 2002:137), there

seems to be little concern for the properties and competences possessed by the material world itself — qualities that become 'effective' through people's concrete and entangled cohabitation with it.

. . . *and consumption studies?*

Some words, too, about the new interests in material culture studies in anthropology — after all, we are no longer alone in the trade.⁷ Probably the most influential brand of anthropological studies of modern material culture are consumption studies (also performed in several other disciplines than anthropology) (cf. Miller 1987, 1998a, 1998b, 2002, Dant 1999, Attfield 2000, Buchli 2002). A main concern has been how artefacts, primarily consumer goods, are actively used in social and individual self-creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others. According to advocates of this approach, people appropriate objects from the manipulative forces of production and commerce and turn them into potentially inalienable and creative cultural products vital to their own identity formation:

The key (criterion) for judging the utility of contemporary objects is the degree to which they may or may not be appropriated from the forces which created them, which are mainly, of necessity, alienating. This appropriation consists of the transmutation of goods, through consumption activities, into potentially inalienable culture (Miller 1987:215, cf. Miller 1998a:19, 2002:238–239).

This and related approaches to modern material culture within anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and other disciplines have produced a wealth of studies of important matters such as graffiti, kitsch, surfboards, rugs, greeting cards and home decoration — filling up the pages of the *Journal of Material Culture*. Increasingly so since the late 1990s, when consumption studies became more and more narrowed towards shopping, the exchange of goods, the desire for objects, their aestheticization and the media image of them



Fig. 2. How do landscapes make us move around and affect our being-in-the-world? Stetind, Tysfjord, Northern Norway. Photo: Marte Spangen.



Fig. 3. Harbour materiality. Port of Murmansk, Northwest Russia. Photo: Nordfisk.

(cf. Miller 1998b), rather than their uses and the ways material objects are *lived with* (Dant 1999:37, cf. Attfield 2000:136ff., Brown 2003:4). As noted by Glassie (1999:77–84), within anthropology and modern material-culture studies, things are read as *goods* — as commodities and possessions (cf. Appadurai 1986, Miller 1998).

It seems that very little can be said about the hard and dull materiality that we are engaged with: walls, streets, fences, parking spaces and landfills. How do we consume a highway or a subway system? How do we ‘sublate’ the sewer pipes or a rusty harbour terminal in a northern Russian port? (Fig. 3) The critical comments are few, but in a brave one the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren questioned the overwhelming focus on the particular and the symbolic: ‘In these studies

of teenagers, home-makers and shoppers’, he writes, ‘you sometimes feels that you are drifting through a symbolic forest or watching an exhibition of signs and messages. . . And in this focus on the symbolic, there is also a total dominance of sight as the medium through which we experience the world. Like flaneurs and tourists — we are not in the world, we are only looking or gazing at it’ (Löfgren 1997:102–103, cf. Welsch 1997, Ingold 2000).⁸ For Löfgren, it is a paradox that the return to material-culture studies did not bring back the material to a greater extent. At the same time as our lives are increasingly caught up with the material, studies of material culture are increasingly focused on the mental and representational — material culture as metaphor, as symbol, icon, message and text — in short, as something other than

itself (Löfgren 1997:103). Actually, many studies of modern material culture make themselves strangely vulnerable to Simmel's critique of the modern tendency to fragmentize and aestheticize the material world (as a means to escape it) (1907):

The present vividly felt charm for the fragment, the mere allusion, the aphorism, the symbol. . . place us at a distance from the substance of things; they speak to us 'as from afar'; reality is touched not with direct confidence but with fingertips that are immediately withdrawn (Simmel 1978:474).

There is a line of argument running deeply through consumption studies and 'social' archaeologies of different kinds: that social relations are objectified — or 'embodied' in artefacts or monuments.⁹ People establish 'quasi-social' relationships with objects in order to live out in a 'real' material form their abstract social relationships (Dant 1999:2). So when we encounter burials, figurines and landscapes — or home decorations — what we are confronted with are really nothing but ourselves and our social relations (Latour 1999:197). Things just 'stand in for' and become nothing but a kind of canvas for the social paint we stroke over them to provide a cultural surface of embodied meanings (Boast 1996:174). As noted by Tim Ingold,

the emphasis is almost entirely on meaning and form — that is, on culture as opposed to materiality . . . culture is conceived to hover over the material world — but not to permeate it . . . culture and materials do not mix; rather, culture wraps itself around the universe of material things, shaping and transforming their outward surfaces without *ever* penetrating their interiority" (Ingold 2000:340–41).

Matter becomes nothing but a thin transparent film situated between us and our culture.

WHY THINGS WERE FORGOTTEN

Shifting the focus back on my own worries: why is it that things, the material world, have escaped the attention of the contemporary

social and human sciences? One reason frequently given is that things do not call attention to themselves — they are so integrated in our lives, being at the same time the 'most obvious and the best hidden' (Lefebvre 1987:8). Even if this undoubtedly is relevant for our everyday dealing with things, it is difficult to understand why this should make scholars ignore precisely them. Most of us do not see Y-chromosomes, witches or social structures, we are not conscious of grammar, the transcendental Ego, not to mention the unconscious, but nothing has prevented science and philosophy from producing tons of research on these issues.

Another and more convincing line of argument is the very strong negative attitude in modern critical (and not-so-critical) thinking towards the material (e.g. the Frankfurt school, Heidegger, Popper, Sartre). The machine, the instruments, the cold and in-human technology became the incarnation of our inauthentic, estranged and alienated modern being. This attitude produced a powerful and persistent definition of freedom and emancipation as that which escapes the material (cf. Latour 1993:137–138, 2002). This again, of course, is closely related to the whole notion of reification and the problem of the fetish running deep in modern critical thought all the way from Marx: objectification, reification, *versachlichung* or *dinglich machen* — making into a thing — absolutely the worst that could ever happen to a person or a social relation. To be too closely embedded with things may cause you to confuse social relations, reserved for humans only, with object relations and to ascribe human properties to objects! As noted by Miller, most critics of mass culture and technology tend 'to assume that the relation of persons to objects is in some way vicarious, fetishistic or wrong; that primary concern should lie with direct social relations and "real people"' (Miller 1987:11).

There is something strange going on here. We all know that we can feel affection for an

artefact, fall in love with a jacket, a new Porsche 911 or a teddy bear — we mourn when they fall to pieces — when they die (cf. Gell 1998:18–19). One thousand years ago the Vikings ascribed personality, intention and social identity to their swords, giving them names such as *Tyrving*, *Kvernbit*, *Gram*, *Skrep* (Gansum & Hansen 2002:16–17). However, all this can be written off sociologically as fetishism — that we — and they have misunderstood the world and have projected onto empty things properties and relations that can correctly only be attributed to human beings. On the other hand, no suspicion arises when we establish intimate relations with a human subject, fall in love with a girl, or honour our parents. No misplaced emotions, no conspiracies here. So we have one set of relations that are taken for granted as real, authentic and honest; another set that a priori are false. The falseness seems to arise when we transgress a certain border, between the ‘us’ and the ‘it’, projecting relations prescribed for one realm onto another. In my opinion, it is precisely this border that more than anything else needs to be examined as a possible suspect in the ambivalent attitude towards things in the social sciences.

In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour writes that the advent of modernity (or the modern) led to the creation of two fundamentally different ontological zones: that of human beings, on the one hand, and that of non-humans, on the other. This ‘Great Divide’ placed the power, interests and politics of humans at one end of the pole, while knowledge about objects and the non-human was placed at the other end. Latour writes that modernity has been celebrated as both the origin and the triumph of humanism, as the ‘birth of man’ and the subject. But, he claims, there is less talk about the fact that it also meant the simultaneous birth of non-humanity, of things, that is, of objects and beasts as something fundamentally different from ‘us’ and securely separated from the human and social realm (Latour 1993:13ff.).

From this moment on, the human and the non-human were drafted into different ontological and disciplinary fields. Things ended up on the other side of the rift, securely separated from the free society of speaking and thinking subjects, from those concerned with the power and interests of humans-among-themselves. This brutal deportation also produced another fence: it created a new border, separating us, the modern, from the rest. The pre-modern did not understand how to draw the first line and messed it all up in an appalling mixture of people and things, cultures and natures (Latour 1993:97–103). Unaware of their ontological blunders, the Saami reindeer herders of northern Scandinavia hugged and greeted the pine tree on their return from the mountains to the winter pastures in the forest; had long conversations with drums and stones; treated the brown bear as a relative and buried dead bears as humans (Demant-Hatt 1913, Myrstad 1996, Kalstad 1997). Unable to recognize where reality ends and its metaphorical representation begins, it was left to the anthropologist to draw the dividing line, to purify this entangled mess, and to reassemble the entities in their proper places (Ingold 2000:44). It is because we are able to distinguish between people and things, culture and nature, that we differ from them.

Despite the fact that our society is increasingly based on mixes of cultures-natures, on increasingly more complex hybrid relations (in fact, the mess has never been greater — thus ‘we have never been modern’) — the modern regime came to acknowledge only those entities that can be firmly situated; that is, as dwelling either in culture or in nature. This ‘discrepancy between self-representation and practice’ (Latour 2003:38) has been made possible by applying the same acts of purification that social scientists have used to cleanse the illusions of those ‘others’ who claim to inhabit but one world — encompassing relations with humans, animals and things on an equal footing. Thus, the modern attitude is characterized by cleansing, by splitting the mixtures apart in order to extract

from them what comes from culture (the social, the episteme, the *Geist*) and what comes from nature (Latour 1993:78).

This desire for an immediate world emptied of its mediators, assigned to things an ambiguous position within the modern constitution. They are located outside the human sphere of power, interests and politics — and still not properly nature. Although prescribed for the non-human side, material culture ended up with not occupying any of the two positions prescribed by the modern constitution, as either culture or nature. Being a mixture of culture-nature, a work of translation, and itself increasingly mediating such relations, material culture become a matter out of place — part of the ‘excluded middle’ (cf. Grosz 2002:91–94).

REMEMBERING THINGS: PHENOMENOLOGY. . .

In trying to overcome this rift and the constraining ontologies of modern thinking, phenomenology has lately become an importance source of inspiration for many archaeologists and anthropologists (cf. Gosden 1994, Tilley 1994, Feldt & Basso 1996, Thomas 1996, 1998, 2000, Karlsson 1998, Ingold 2000). Phenomenology, after all was launched as a way of ‘relearning to look at the world’ (Merleau-Ponty), a return to ‘the things themselves’ (Husserl), that is, to a practical, lived experience, un-obscured by abstract philosophical concepts and theories. Even if to most of us the experience of reading Heidegger appears to be a continuous falsification of that statement, there are some very valuable insights even in his dense version of phenomenology. Such as his notion of ‘throwness’: that we are always-already in the world, the world is part of our being — not something external, ‘out there’ to eventually be embodied. We are not detached observers of objects, but concerned users of things: ‘. . . in everyday terms, we understand ourselves and our existence by way of the activities we pursue and the things we take care of’

(Heidegger 1982:137). These things are so close to us, our being-in-the-world is so enmeshed in networks of things, that we do not see them unless they call attention to themselves by breaking down, are in the wrong places or are missing. Heidegger’s concept of ‘care’ relates to all beings we engage with, our being is a ‘dwelling alongside’ (and a ‘being towards’) other beings. Despite the limitations of his philosophy (such as the nostalgia for an authentic *Heimat* and his reactionary contempt of modernity, masses and mass culture), Heidegger clearly challenges us to consider our attitude towards things and the anthropocentric ontology it is based on.

Far more influential, however, is the more readily digested phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, attractive especially among those large crowds recently preoccupied with the body. Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with our practical experience of being-in-the-world and the body is the site of this experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962). It is through our bodies that we as human beings are placed in a world, and this bodily being-in-the world must be understood through tasks and actions that have to be carried out, and through the spatial and material possibilities that are open to the body. Merleau-Ponty claims that prior to the Cartesian ‘I think’ it is necessary to acknowledge an ‘I can’ or ‘I do’; that is: a practical, non-discursive consciousness which governs my relationship with the world and which is expressed in routinized practices and actions, in bodily habits (Merleau-Ponty 1962:137ff, Macann 1993).

According to Merleau-Ponty knowledge is stored in our bodies, once learned we only need a short time to familiarize ourselves with a new city, a new car — another archaeological museum. The time is too short to develop completely new sets of conditioned reflexes — our familiarity with organized spaces, with materiality and things; in short, our material habitual competence permits us to project a potential for movement and actions which can rapidly be modified to

accommodate specific differences (such as coming to a new city) (Merleau-Ponty 1962:145–147, Macann 1993:176). As the famous American phenomenologist John Travolta stated after returning to America after three years of fieldwork in Amsterdam: ‘It’s the same as here, but different’ (J.T. teaching his gangster buddy about cultural differences in *Pulp Fiction*, cited after Löfgren 1997:106).

All this sounds good. However, there is something missing in Merleau-Ponty (as well as in most papers on the body which you will find in journals like *Body & Society*, cf. also books such as Williams & Bendelow (1998)): the materiality that the body relates to; the material world it is being-in. One only vaguely realizes that this world has other inhabitants than the humans. Merleau-Ponty talks about an oriented space in which the body is situated (1962:99ff), but he does not seem very concerned with what orients it. The material inhabitants provide a context, but sit in silence, have no purpose or agency; much like the servants in the Victorian novels: *there*, but unaccounted for except as a useful part of the setting (Said 1989:219).

Consider the concept of habit memory, a very important concept we owe to Henri Bergson (Mullarkey 2000:48–55, see also Merleau-Ponty 1962:22, 137–45, 264–266). Habit memory refers to how memories are stored in the body, as practices or habits. In contrast to so-called cognitive or re-collective remembering, habitual memories are lived and acted, rather than represented (cf. Casey 1984, Connerton 1989). Biking is often used to exemplify this type of memory: even after a long pause we master the ability to bicycle again — our clever body still remembers how to bike ten years after we climbed off the bike. But again, something is missing in this story: *the bike*. The other half of the story is entombed in this celebration of the body and we are once again left with the ‘sound of one hand clapping’ (Bateson). But try to bike without a bike; try to think of your day-to-day practices without things. Think how the

routines, movements, and social arrangements of our daily lives are increasingly prescribed, defined and disciplined, as well as helped or encouraged, by networks of material agents. Acting increasingly imperatively, these agents tacitly demand certain behaviours, impose certain socio-spatial configurations (Johansen 1992:108–125, Joerges 1988). All we need to do is to think about moving around a house, a university campus or a city, to realize how they prescribe programmes of action that schedule and monitor our day-to-day activities (Boast 1996:188). In this respect a late 19th-century sociologist like Emile Durkheim was more sensitive and humble towards the material world than his later fellow sociologists and philosophers (cf. Joerges 1988:224). In *The Suicide* (1897) Durkheim wrote that

... it is not true that society is made up only of individuals; it also includes material things, which play an essential role in common life. The social fact is sometimes so far materialized as to become an element of the external world. . . in houses and buildings of all sorts which, once constructed, becomes autonomous realities, independent of individuals. It is the same with avenues of communication and transportation, with instruments and machines used in industry and private life. . . Social life, which is thus crystallised, as it were, and fixed on material supports, is by just so much externalised, and acts upon us from without (1951:313–14).

For Durkheim, artefacts were also social facts.

In all fairness it should be added that in his latest and unfinished works, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty seems to accommodate the material world in a more symmetrical way (Merleau-Ponty 1968). He now insists that even to speak of ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ implies a gap between them, such that the relation between them can only be that of contemplation. The concept of being-in-the-world has more radical implications, it is not at all talk of a relation between ourselves and our world, since our own being cannot be separated from that of the world we

inhabit (Matthews 2002:161). He refers to the ‘crude’ experience of being in direct contact with things: a wild, uncultivated and barbarian experience (talks about carnal beings, and the flesh of the world). We can touch and be touched, see and be seen, act upon things and at the same time being acted upon by them — all this due to our common ‘fabric’ as flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1968:133–147). This intimacy is nicely captured in a scene in Henry James’s novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, where Mrs Gerets explains to her son how her attention to objects is mediated: ‘They’re living things to me, they know me, they return the touch of my hand’ (cited after Brown 2003:149).

Being flesh among flesh, the limits between the body and the world break down: ‘Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968:138). Merleau-Ponty (ibid.:146) talks about ‘the pact’ between us and the things, the intertwining, the chiasm (the intersection or cross-over). As beings of a tactile world, belonging to ‘their family’, we are intimately connected to things, our kinship welds us together; and ‘things themselves’, Merleau-Ponty now says, are ‘not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that. . . would coexist with them in the same world’ (ibid.:136).

Well, like most philosophers he died when he started to become interesting — leaving us with a pile of incomplete notes to ponder over. And perhaps it would not have differed that much if he had completed his work, beyond making our claims better ‘networked’ by having another ‘citation friend’ to help us on the rhetorical battlefield (cf. Latour 1987, ch. 1). As Latour argues (1999:176), perhaps the lines of philosophy are just too straight and clean to prove very helpful when we come to those muddy and crooked paths of things and soil?

. . .and beyond

Then, don’t you have any theory? No — I

don’t have a theory, but an important source of inspiration for my work comes from the network-approaches (formerly known as Actor-Network-Theory, ANT), developed within science studies (Latour 1987, 1993, 1999, 2003, Callon & Law 1997, Law & Hassard 1999, Law & Mol 2002). According to John Law, network theory may be understood as ‘a semiotics of materiality. It takes the semiotic insight, that of the relationality of entities, the notion that they are produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to all materials — and not simply to those that are linguistic’ (Law 1999:4). Instead of reducing the world to the regime of two opposing ontological realms, culture-nature, this approach claims that nearly everything happens between the two extremes, happens by way of mediation and translation, by heterogeneous networks linking all kinds of materials and entities. Reality is not to be found in essences, but in imbroglis and mixtures, the seamless and rhizome-like fabrics of culture and nature that link humans and non-humans in intimate relationships. It is a democratic and inclusive regime, everything can become actors (or actants) by being included into a network and assigned properties to act. It is a regime that cares for the hybrids and those hybrid relations that other systems (be they social or natural) largely have ignored. Thus, it suits material culture, the thing, very well. A home at last. The forgotten transcending and gathering properties of the thing are finally released. Properties so well expressed in its etymological roots (the Old Norse/Old English *þing* and Old High German *Thing*): *assembly, gathering, duration* (Falk & Torp 1906:903, Bjorvand & Lindeman 2000:939ff., cf. Heidegger 1971:170–172, Glassie 1999:67–68). Thus, the thing is that which gathers, which brings together and which lasts: in other words, it relates qualities in time and space: the ideal node in a network.

Let me exemplify all this with a well-known archaeological example. In his book, *In Small Things Forgotten*, James Deetz (1997) discusses important changes that took

place in the colonies along the eastern seaboard of North America from the second half of the 18th century onwards. In his masterful dealing with the material culture he shows a clear tendency: the communal and common was losing ground to the individual. This production of a society that increasingly cared for personhood, privacy and purity, is identified in a number of changes taking place in burial practices, architecture, furniture, ceramics and eating habits. For instance, the communal infrastructure of eating was replaced by individual plates and cutlery, and by individual chairs for people to sit on around the table. As this took place, congested communal burial grounds were gradually replaced by small, individual family graveyards. Houses were divided into separate rooms, separating public spaces from the private. Bunks were replaced by beds. Clothes became increasingly differentiated; people acquired personal effects, chamber pots, musical instruments, books, etc.

Deetz saw this as an idea of individuality and privacy being carved out and embodied in solid materials — that a mental concept existed prior to (and consequently was the reason for) its material realization (see also Deetz & Deetz 2001:173). Within the perspective outlined above, the notion of ‘prior to’, become quite meaningless, and at least far less important than the ‘how to’. How could a subject-centred society emerge; how many different kinds of actors were gathered, what culture-natures were mobilized? Instead of a central hero subject, we should envisage a whole brigade of actors: plates, forks, grave-stones, humans, garbage pits, chamber pots, law books, musical instruments, etc., acting together in a relational web. Through processes of delegation and translation, forming many and complex hybrid relations, these actors effectuated and over time stabilized a new social configuration. They made new bodily practices necessary, prescribed new programmes of action. Any mental conception of the individual, the private, and the pure, may as well be seen as the outcome of



Fig. 4. *Alone to the South Pole? Resting actors depicted by two of them. Reprinted from Kagge 1993.*

these programmes rather than their cause (cf. Olsen 1997:211–216). Such ideas would anyway have been as ‘airy as clouds’ without the collaboration of material actors, creating innumerable webs also ranging far beyond the local communities. Thus, and not without a certain irony, the individual was made possible by the collective work of a brigade of actors.

According to network theory, a characteristic aspect of networks in the process of stabilization is that important parts of their functioning become hidden (‘blackboxed’) and the focus is directed toward a few actors that receive all the rewards and fame for the work done by all those sweating along the assembly lines (think of the attention (not) given to telephone lines, roads, printing machines, geological surveys and trigonometric points in nation-building). An anecdote exemplifies this: In Norway there is a certain obsession with re-enacting our past as

a polar and explorer nation, re-living the hero-spirits of Amundsen and Nansen, in which young men and woman commit themselves to insane tasks such as skiing across the Arctic or the Antarctic. Some years ago, one of the bravest published his account as “Alone to the South Pole” (Kagge 1993), advertised as the account of ‘the first solo and unsupported expedition to the South Pole’. And you start to wonder — alone? Solo? Unsupported? Didn’t he have the help of a pair of skis, the company of a sledge, the protection of some clothes, the comfort of a tent and a sleeping bag, nutrition from some freeze-dried food, the ‘eyes’ of a navigator, communication links to some satellites crossing the sky above his head, etc, etc? (Fig. 4) Of course he had — but all the honour and fame is once again claimed by a single actor, the human subject, when in reality a whole company of actors actually crossed the Antarctic.

CONCLUSION

Archaeologists should unite in a defence of things, a defence 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 (Latour 1993:82). As noted by Michel Serres (1987:216):

You can’t find anything in books that recounts the primitive experience during which the object as such constituted the human subject, because books are written to entomb this very experience, to block all access to it, and because the noise of discourse drowns out what happened in that utter silence (cited after Latour 1993:82).

Just consider how the history of archaeology is narrated. Like all such historiographies it becomes the history of thought, a history of how great minds — or society, politics and ideologies — have invented theories, shaped discourses and created paradigms. The many non-humans mixed into our collective disciplinary life through fieldwork, museums and laboratories are rarely assigned any role in the story (see, however, Yarrow 2003). Think of the socialization and disciplining — and the transmission of knowledge and skills — that take place in the field through relational webs linking instruments, people, theories, methods, localities, soils and artefacts in intimate and translating practices. 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. This mundane trivia of the practical world, this repugnant kitchen of dirt and soil, becomes a source of embarrassment for a discipline aspiring to the ranks of the social sciences. 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 1993:12), becomes ever more evident.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several people have commented on earlier drafts of this paper. I especially thank Ewa Domanska, Bill Rathje and Chris Witmore for their toil. I thank Ewa for making me aware of Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things*. Previous discussions with Hein Bjerck, Terje Brattli, Axel Christophersen (in the ‘material culture work group’) and Kerstin Cassel have also been of great value. I also thank Einar Østmo for providing etymological information. The paper originates from a presentation given at Stanford University in May 2003. I thank the Archaeology Center, SU, for granting me

access to their facilities during my sabbatical in 2003.

NOTES

¹ Within Scandinavian sociology, for example, there have been scholars focusing explicitly on the relationship between material structures and social conditions (Østerberg 1975, 1985, 1986, Andersson et al. 1985, Johansen 1992).

² This clearly includes a good portion of my own work (e.g. Olsen 1987, 1991).

³ The phrase originates from Marx but has taken on its own 'effective history' since then.

⁴ In this paper Cornelius Holtorf states that in an earlier work about megaliths (Holtorf 1998) he came to the conclusion that 'whatever we do *with*, and *to*, these monuments today is simply our own contribution to their lives (. . .) Like others before us, we 'happen' to ancient monuments or indeed other things, making sense of them and reinterpreting them *as we like*' (2002:54, last emphasis mine). This, however, 'was perhaps not radical enough. . . the material essence of the things remained unchallenged. We may be able to interpret and 'construct' the meaning of a thing in any way we like, but we are seemingly unable to construct the thing "itself"' (op. cit.). Thus he now claims that things are 'much more contingent', and makes the following points to support his position '1. Material identities of things can change quickly and without warning, right in from of our eyes — think of magician's show. . . 2. Widely known material identities of things can begin or end by a few people saying and arguing so. . .' (Holtorf 2002:55). Paraphrasing Judith Attfield, the material world has become dematerialized to the extent that we can no longer 'believe our eyes' (Attfield 2000:42). In fact, it comes close to a kind of Berkeleyan idealism — matter is mere surface, has no powers or potentials. According to Berkeley, matter is not unreal (Holtorf's 'magician' even contests this) but all qualities and ideas about it have to be located in the thinking human subject (cf. Hacking 2001:24, Pearson 2002:142–144).

⁵ As noted by Serres, it is rather ironic that while things are seen as characteristic and diagnostic of humanity ('humanity begins with things;

animals don't have things') they play no role in the study of this humanity. Thus, 'in the current state of affairs the so-called human or social sciences seem at best to apply only to animals' (Serres/Latour 1995:165–166,199–200).

⁶ This is a paraphrasing of Edwards Soja's closely related claim that 'even the field of urban studies has been underspatialized until recently, with the spatiality of urban life predominantly seen as the mere adjunct or outcome of historical and social processes that are not in themselves intrinsically spatial, that is, with spatiality in itself having little or no causal or explanatory power' (Soja 2000:7).

⁷ For some reason 'material culture studies' in anthropology seem very reluctant to assign archaeology any credit. Thus, the 'social' study of material culture is narrated as an almost non-archaeological field (cf. Appadurai 1986, Miller 1987:110). Although claimed to unfold in a 'healthy interdisciplinarity', archaeology is rarely listed among the allies (cf. Miller 2002:240). This despite the fact that, for several decades, archaeological approaches to material culture have also included analyses of contemporary societies. One pertinent example is William Rathje's garbage project (Rathje 1984, 1991, 1996).

⁸ This criticism is relevant also to recent 'phenomenological' approaches to landscapes and monuments in archaeology, which despite acknowledging perception also as a 'somatic engagement', continue to privilege visual perception and contemplation (cf. Tilley 1994, Tilley et al. 2000).

⁹ With the possible exception of 'agency', embodiment has become the main mantra for those who delight in adding the affix 'social' to their approaches. This process of inscribing personhood, culture and society in something concrete — things or human bodies — seems to imply that there was a prior phase of separation ('non-embodiment') when mind and matter existed apart. That things and bodies, originally, were not part of the social, but may eventually be included and endowed with history and meaning by some human generosity: a donor culture! It is, at least partly, due to a preconceived ontological split (subject-object) that we can talk of embodiment.

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