

2016 Vol 16 Issue No. 1 — Thing Theory, Material Culture, and Object-Oriented Ontology

> EDITORIAL

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2016 begins with the world exponentially more digitised than it was at the turn of the millennium. E-readers supplement and compete with hardbacks and paperbacks for a share of reading audiences. Digital streaming music and video services generate more revenue for media producers than physical CD and DVD/ Blu-Ray sales. Photographs are seldom glossy paper printouts of processed film stock, but rather incorporeal assemblages of Photoshopped and Instagrammed data to be viewed on one's tablet, cell phone, or computer. And should one need a street directory to map one's way through an unfamiliar territory, why, there's now an app for that; quite likely complete with pop-up recommendations as one's journey unfolds seamlessly onscreen.

In this era, where material form is increasingly no longer tied to fixed content, this special issue of *Transformations*, with its focus on thing theory, thus presents as a timely and relevant collection of scholarly essays. As Bill Brown states in his foundational paper on the subject, "things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects" (5). Similarly, John Frow considers the social relationships between people labouring under, and living in, societies organised along the logic of commodity fetishism and finds that "what characterises things in capitalist production and exchange is thus not at all their thingness, but the opposite, an abstractness which *takes the form of a dense materiality*" (emphasis in original 274). Things, then, are examples of the breakdown of a particular subject-object relationship. In such a breakdown – where an object is removed from human-centred social contexts and circuits of creation, distribution, use-consumption, and display – the corporeal materiality of a thing confronts its human users due to such a removal:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy... The story of objects asserting themselves as

things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 6)

So one sees from the scholarly work of Brown and Frow that the relationship between particular humans and particular things/ objects is akin to an interpersonal one – these relationships evince periods of ebbs and flows, enthusiasm and indifference, and familiarity and estrangement on the part of humans. But this is not to say that things do not possess their own power. Brown ends his essay with the caveat that the boundary between things and objects is fluid, for “persons, too, count or can count as things. This is the real strangeness: that persons and things are kin; the world is many, not double” (285). This shifting boundary, in sum, is part of a larger network of symbiotic processes which not only at turns dissolve and crystallise relations between particular things and objects, but also inflect upon other things and objects in the overall weave.

Jane Bennett’s work in “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter” accordingly contends for an awareness of “thing-power,” or “the vitality, wilfulness, and recalcitrance possessed by nonhuman entities and forces” (347). For Bennett, the moments where drills, cars, and windows do not work are when one glimpses “the recalcitrance or moment of vitality in things” (348). Thing-power, thus, is “a relational effect, a function of several things operating at the same time or in conjunction with one another” (354). It also emphasises the materiality of things, accounting for the ability of the material world to emotionally move humans within the network of unstable relations which both occupy (Bennett 354). Hence, for example, the affective force of William Carlos Williams’s free verse modernist poem about the red wheelbarrow:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens. (Williams 224)

Much of the affective power of Williams’s famous poem stems from the poet’s unrelenting use of enjambment. The materially fragmented placement of the words of a single sentence upon the page forces a slow consideration, and exacting formation, of the overall tableau in

front of the reader. In this instance, form is meaning – quite appropriate for a piece which, as per Brown, Frow, and Bennett, estranges, revealing the material thing-power of its quotidianly bucolic terms and items. The postmillennial turn towards digitalisation, similarly, offers new opportunities toward – and new importance for – a manifold study of thing theory and its associated shifting networks of affects and powers. This turn is an ongoing object lesson which shows that new forms and locales can transform existing content into new figurations, and can engender new relationships between humans and things. As John Plotz notes, valuable work in the field of thing theory not only tracks “the movement of objects within the realm of symbolic circulation, but [also] the limit cases of different epochs and locations, the examples that pushed and pulled at the problem of where an object’s ‘meaning’ ended and its ‘materiality’ began” (118). When these boundaries are understood as contextually shifting constructs, the varied processes by which things transform into objects – and into other things – take on an increased and necessary importance when interpreting or investigating the place of things in the world.

There are nine papers in this issue of *Transformations*. Each individual exegesis, following the logics of thing theory, accounts for the intertwined liminalities of meaning and materiality, and demonstrate an awareness of the symbolic and geographical networks in which things circulate. Professor Richard Read’s invited contribution, “Possibilization and Desuetude: the Politics of the Reversed Canvas as Thing-Object,” is extended from his keynote speech at The University of Queensland’s School of Communication and Arts “The Life of Things” Work-in-Progress conference in September 2014. In it, Read uses the pictorial motif of the reversed canvas to illustrate that the object that has become a thing through losing its function can become a liminal object-thing by being repurposed as an unusual object of contemplation – it is at once art and not art. Read additionally reflects upon multiple contemporary examples of the reversed sides of paintings, and finds that they are powerful political forces for they induce reveries about ineffable hyperobjects – global warming, capitalism, the genesis of the Great Financial Crisis and so on – and accordingly new forms of political constituency. [2]

Chari Larsson similarly deals with images and representation in her article “Thinking Things: Images of Thought and Thoughtful Images.” She reads thing theory against the French philosopher Didi-Huberman’s claims that the montage technique creates forms that think. Larsson cogently argues for montage as not simply a set of principles involving juxtaposing different elements with each other and predicated upon soliciting the spectator’s participation in its unfolding of meaning. Rather, montage can liberate the image from art-historical discourse, creating new meanings and understandings such that “the image becomes a theoretical object, a thing that ‘thinks.’”

Sushma Griffin's work, "Territory of the Visual: Photographic Materialities and the Persistence of Indo-Muslim Architecture," also focuses on the visual image. Her scholarship charts the relationship between the production of space in nineteenth-century photographs of Indo-Mughal monuments and the legitimisation of British colonialism in India. Griffin figures her case studies – photographic albums produced and circulated around the time of rebellion against the powerful East India Company – as assemblage points where affect and materiality intersect. Such a figuration allows for these photographic albums to serve as witness testimonies to the political reconfigurations of the Indian subcontinent's spaces during the era of Empire.

The history of India is again examined in Prateek's "Hubble-Bubble of Transcultural Encounters: A Study of the Social Life of the Hookah". This paper is a cultural biography of the social life of the hookah pipe from the Nawabi period (1722–1856) until just after India came under British rule in 1857. To wit: the hookah was initially a popular tobacco pipe, but was transfigured into a symbol of wealth, etiquette, and courtesy when adopted by – and affiliated with – the culturally powerful Nawabi court, and was finally used as an inciting symbol against which the idea of Hindu nationalism could germinate.

The next two papers use thing theory to interact with literature. Nick Lord considers the *House of Leaves* literary text, and Hanna Kuusela critically contemplates the book as a material object. Lord, in "Movement in the Motif: Semblances and Affective Criticism," argues that the playfully variegated assemblage of textual and narrative spaces which characterise *House of Leaves* can be productively thought of in relation to the connection between potentiality and form. The chaotically intertwining paratexts of *House of Leaves* offer a reading experience that affectively mimics the unstable labyrinth that opens up in the novel's diegetic world. Understanding *House's* labyrinthine motif as an entrapping "semblance" where potential movement is suspended, though, allows scholars and lay readers to better comprehend how affect is deployed such that it fosters an interpretative engagement with the novel's plot.

Hanna Kuusela, in "The Forms and Uses of Contemporary Books: Studying the Book as a Mass Produced Commodity and an Intimate Object," is concerned with the manifold nature of the book-object's materiality. Books are long-standing mass-produced commodities but simultaneously also singular things used, reused, and often marked by their readers. Books, thus, present as transformable objects, the social lives of which reveal varying aspects of the communities around them.

This effort to understand the characteristics of a community through the materialities of its thing-objects is echoed in "An Ontography of Broadband on a Domestic Scale," a paper

authored by a team of researchers headed by Michael Arnold. This paper contributes towards a scholarly understanding of the changing configurations of media and communications technologies in the home. The researchers achieve this by combining ethnographic data from domestic environments with an object-oriented ontology. Such an approach decentres the historical emphasis on human agency in studies of household media, and hence presents a complementary and counter-focused perspective on a contemporary cultural practice.

Susanne Gannon's paper, "Schoolgirls at Truck Stops: Tracing Place, Things, Bodies and Fictions," likewise takes a contemporary place – albeit through the lens of drama – as its starting point. Her work looks at a scene from a recent play set in western Sydney, Lachlan Philpott's *Truck Stop*, in which schoolgirls discuss selling sex. Gannon considers not only the playscript of *Truck Stop*, but the materiality of its setting along the transport routes of Western Sydney and the gendered nature of a space in which young women can all too easily become *things* – commodities or detritus. Key to Gannon's analysis, then, is reading the microparticulate movement of human and nonhuman others – gravel, garbage, darkly portentous trucks – with the geographic proximity of a school to a highway. In doing so, she charts how the materialities of place exert their thing-power on these girls, turning western Sydney into a place which produces at-risk youths.

Lastly, Jean Skeat does a close reading of Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* in order to argue that its depictions of the environment, animals, and objects altogether afford it a strong pro-environmental message and a communitarian poetic. Skeat deploys the concept of slow violence – the sort of violence which takes a creeping, attritional toll on its subject-victims such that it is overlooked in the contemporary milieu of spectacularly kinetic media images – to great effect, showing how it is a necessary tool for thinking critically about the hyperobject that is climate change not only in *The Swan Book*, but also in global media. Skeat further points to *The Swan Book*'s repeated displays of non-human agency to illustrate that the book provides impetus for re-imagining humanity's relationship with the material world.

This collection of articles spans art history, literature, theatre, and media studies, demonstrating the versatility of thing theory and its diverse applications to the study of material culture and the ontology (or ontology) of objects. These articles represent an alternative way of looking at the world – even as new technologies and cultural practices foster digital networks, the world remains an embodied and inextricably material experience.

Endnotes

1. Issue 27 was co-edited by Jane Stadler and Wilson Koh. The Editor's Introduction was written by Wilson Koh.
2. As per Timothy Morton, hyperobjects have a broad and viscosly inescapable spatio-temporal reach across time and space so much so that the more one finds out about them, "the more you figure out how enmeshed you are in them. The more you know about them, the stranger and even more terrifying they become. They occupy a high dimensional phase space so it's only possible for humans to see pieces or aspects of them at any one time" (207-8).

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