

thing theory

anth G6085. spring 2006

[home](#)

columbia university

[home](#)

instructor: sev fowles

(sf2220@columbia.edu)

office/phone: 956 schermerhorn ext.

(212) 854-7465

office hours: tuesdays, 1-3 pm

and by appointment

time/place: room t.b.a., mondays

9-10:50 am (bring coffee)

course description

The context for much of the current interest in material culture is a fear.

It is a fear of objects supplanting people.

– Daniel Miller (1998:169)

Is it really true that the world is becoming emptied of things?

– John Frow (2004:357)

An intensified concern with “thingness” and materiality has emerged in the past decade as an explicitly interdisciplinary endeavor involving anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, literary critics, and philosophers among others. The new material culture studies that has resulted inverts the longstanding study of how people make things by asking also how “things make people”, how objects mediate social relationships—ultimately how inanimate objects can be read as having a form of agency of their own. In this seminar, we will explore many of the recent foundational works by Daniel Miller, Alfred Gell, Bruno Latour, Lynn Meskell, and others who have situated their work at the increasingly blurred boundaries between such “things” as object and subject, gift and commodity, art and artifact, alienability and inalienability, as well as at the disciplinary boundaries between ethnography, archaeology, art history, and literary studies.

object ethnographies

Seminar participants will not be asked to compose a traditional academic term paper. Rather, each participant will construct a series of three short "object ethnographies". Unlike the classic ethnographic methodology in which the cultural world is approached through the thoughts, experiences, and actions of human agents, these mini-ethnographies will follow in the spirit of Barthes's *Mythologies*, offering quick sketches that rely upon *object agents* as their entrée into the cultural. The primary ethnographic gaze should be upon an object individual, a class of objects, or a discrete community of objects—what Appadurai has referred to as a "methodological fetishism" in which one accepts that "it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context." Beyond this core focus on the object world, participants will have the latitude to use these ethnographic sketches as platforms for commentary on issues of identity, meaning, structure, social critique, materiality, immateriality, etc. as they move through object agents to an analysis of the human agents with whom these objects interact.

Object ethnographies will be presented periodically throughout the seminar. The format of these short presentations will be at the discretion of the participant, although use of photography and video to illustrate objects and their contexts is strongly encouraged. (Equipment for such documentation is available and there are human resources on campus to help with this sort of thing). Depending on our abilities and inclinations, we may decide to develop a website to further present and share our work.

readings

The following required texts will be available for purchase at Labyrinth Books:

Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Clarendon Press, New York.

Godelier, Maurice. 1999. *The Enigma of the Gift*. University of Chicago Press.

Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift*. W. W. Norton, New York.

Meskell, Lynn. 2004. *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present*. Berg.

Miller, Daniel (editor). 2005. *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*. Duke University Press.

We will also be reading substantial portions of the following texts which you may opt to purchase off the web:

Baudrillard, Jean. 2005 [1968]. *The System of Objects*. Verso, New York.

Brown, Bill. 2004. *Things*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Weiner, Annette. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

A coursepack of additional readings will be available at Village Copier within a few days following our first meeting.

syllabus

Session 1 (1.23): Introduction ("Ponderable Objects")

Session 2 (1.30): The Gift

What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?

– Marcel Mauss (1990:3)

Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift*. W. W. Norton, New York.

Thomas, Nicholas. 1991. Chapter 1: Objects, exchange, anthropology. In *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, pp. 7-34. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Weiner, Annette. 1992. Introduction, Chapter 1, and Afterword. In *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, pp. 1-43 and 149-156. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Related Lecture (2.2):

Michael Herzfeld will be presenting on "Global Hierarchy and

Comparative Critique: Bodies, Objects, and Values" as part of the Society of Fellows in the Humanities lecture series. Thursday, February 2, 12:00 in the Common Room of the Heyman Center.

Session 3 (2.6): Sacred Objects, Substitute Objects

Godelier, Maurice. 1999. *The Enigma of the Gift*. University of Chicago Press.

Miller, Daniel. 2001. Alienable gifts and inalienable commodities. In *The Empire of Things*, edited by Fred R. Myers, pp. 91-115. School of American Research Press, Santa Fe.

Session 4 (2.13): Materializing Ethnography

Baudrillard, Jean. 2005 [1968]. The non-functional system, or subjective discourse. In *The System of Objects*, pp. 75-114. Verso, New York.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1990 [1970]. The formal liturgy of the object. In *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, pp. 25-36. Sage Publications, London.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1998 [1983]. Extract from "Revenge of the Crystal: an interview with Guy Bellavance". In *Revenge of the Crystal*, edited by Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis, pp. 18-19. Pluto Press, London.

Geismar, Haidy and Heather A. Horst. 2004. Materializing ethnography. *Journal of Material Culture* 9(1):5-10.

Gosden, Chris and Y. Marshall. 1999. The cultural biography of objects. *World Archaeology*. 31:169-78. Special edition on "The Cultural Biography of Objects".

Kopytoff, Igor. 1986. The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, pp. 64-94. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Supplementals:

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2003. The Berber house. In *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, edited by Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, pp. 131-141. Blackwell, Oxford. [Orig. 1971]

Cetina, Karin Knorr. 1997. Sociality with objects: Social relations

in postsocial knowledge societies. *Theory, Culture, and Society* 14(4):1-30.

Tilley, Christopher. 2001. Ethnography and material culture. In *Handbook of Ethnography*, edited by P. Atkinson et al., pp. 1-22. Berg, New York.

Session 5 (2.20): Presentations I

Session 6 (2.27): Technology

In a way, I do not want to move one inch from my intransigent position that the study of technology alone... is scientifically sterile. At the same time, I have come to realise that technology is indispensable as a means of approach to economic and sociological activities...

– Malinowski (1935:460)

Any invention or technology is an extension or *self-amputation of our physical bodies*..

– Marshall McLuhan (1964:45)

Barthes, Roland. 1993. The new Citroën. In *Mythologies*, pp. 88-90. Noonday Press, New York.

Graves-Brown, Paul. 2000. Always crashing in the same car. In *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, edited by Paul Graves-Brown, pp. 155-165. Routledge, New York.

Ingold, Tim. 2001. Beyond art and technology: the anthropology of skill. In *Anthropological Perspectives on Technology*, edited by Michael B. Schiffer, pp. 17-31. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Latour, Bruno. 2000. The Berlin key or how to do words with things. In *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, edited by Paul Graves-Brown, pp. 10-21. Routledge, New York.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1994. The gadget lover: Narcissus as narcosis. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, pp. 41-47. MIT Press, Cambridge.

Pfaffenberger, Bryan. 1988. Fetishised objects and humanized nature: Towards an anthropology of technology. *Man* 23(2):236-52.

Supplementals:

Lemonnier, Pierre. 1992. *Elements for an Anthropology of Technology*. Anthropological Papers No. 88, Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan.

Pfaffenberger, Bryan. 1999. Worlds in the making: technological activities and the construction of intersubjective meaning. In *The Social Dynamics of Technology: Practice, Politics, and World Views*, edited by Marcia-Anne Dobres and Christopher R. Hoffman, pp. 147-166. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.

Session 7 (3.6): Object Worlds

Meskell, Lynn. 2004. *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present*. Berg.

Session 8 (3.20): Thing-Persons

... the belief in thing-persons produces a general metamorphosis of reality and an inversion in the way one thinks the real relations involved. Objects are transformed into subjects and subjects into objects.

– Maurice Godelier (1999:106)

Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Clarendon Press, New York.

Supplementals:

Mitchell, W. J. T. 2004. Romanticism and the life of things: fossils, totems, and images. In *Things*, edited by Bill Brown, pp. 227-244. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Myers, Fred. 2005. Some properties of art and culture: Ontologies of the image and economies of exchange. In *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*, edited by Daniel Miller, pp. 88-117. Duke University Press.

Pels, Peter. 1998. "The Spirit of Matter: On Fetish, Rarity, Fact and Fancy." In Patricia Spyer, ed. *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*. New York: Routledge, pp. 91-121.

Session 9 (3.27): Presentations II

Session 10 (4.3): Beyond Objects, Beyond Subjects

COLLECTIVE: *Unlike society, which is an artifact imposed by the modernist settlement, this term refers to the associations of humans and nonhumans. While a division between nature and society renders invisible the political process by which the cosmos is collected in one livable whole, the word "collective" makes this process central. Its slogan could be "no reality without representation."*

– Bruno Latour (1999)

Latour, Bruno. 1999. Chapter 6: A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans. In *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, pp. 174-215. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Miller, Daniel. 2005. Materiality: an introduction. In *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*, edited by Daniel Miller, pp. 1-50. Duke University Press.

Pinney, Christopher. 2005. Things happen: or, from which moment does that object come? In *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*, edited by Daniel Miller, pp. 256-272. Duke University Press.

Related Lecture (4.6):

Bill Brown will be presenting on "Commodity Nationalism and the Lost Object" as part of the Society of Fellows in the Humanities lecture series. Thursday, April 6, 12:00 in the Common Room of the Heyman Center.

Session 11 (4.10): Materiality

Küchler, Susanne. 2005. Materiality and cognition: the changing face of things. In *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*, edited by Daniel Miller, pp. 206-230. Duke University Press.

Renfrew, Colin. 2005. Towards a theory of material engagement. In *Rethinking Materiality: The Engagement of Mind with the Material World*, edited by Elizabeth DeMarrais, Chris Gosden and Colin Renfrew, pp. 23-32. McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, Cambridge.

Rowlands, Michael. 2005. A materialist approach to materiality. In

Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture), edited by Daniel Miller, pp. 72-87. Duke University Press.

Supplementals:

Buchli, Victor. 2004. Material culture: current problems. In *A Companion to Social Archaeology*, edited by Lynn Meskell and Robert W. Preucel, pp. 179-194. Blackwell, Oxford.

DeMarrais, L. J. Castillo, and T. Earl. 1996. Ideology, materialization and power ideologies. *Current Anthropology* 37:15-31.

Graves-Brown, Paul M. (editor). 2000. Introduction. In *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, edited by Paul M. Graves-Brown. London.

Meskell, Lynn (editor). 2005. *Archaeologies of Materiality*. Berg.

Session 12 (4.17): and Immateriality.

Frow, John. 2004. A pebble, a camera, a man who turns into a telegraph pole. In *Things*, edited by Bill Brown, pp. 346-361. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Keane, Webb. 2005. Signs are not the garb of meaning: on the social analysis of material things. In *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*, edited by Daniel Miller, pp. 182-205. Duke University Press.

Maurer, Bill. 2005. Does money matter? Abstraction and substitution in alternative financial forms. In *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*, edited by Daniel Miller, pp. 140-164. Duke University Press.

Slater, Don. 2001. Markets, materiality and the 'new economy'. Paper delivered to the *Geographies of New Economies* seminar, Birmingham, Oct. 17, 2001.

Supplementals:

Keane, Webb. 2001. Money is no object: Materiality, desire, and modernity in an Indonesian society. In *The Empire of Things*, edited by Fred R. Myers, pp. 65-90. School of American Research Press, Santa Fe.

Session 13 (4.24): But the Thing is...

Brown, Bill. 2004. Thing theory. In *Things*, edited by Bill Brown, pp. 1-22. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Heidegger, Martin. 2001. The Thing. In *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, pp. 165-182. Harper Collins, New York.

Latour, Bruno. 2004. Why has critique run out of steam: From matters of fact to matters of concern. In *Things*, edited by Bill Brown, pp. 151-173. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Schwenger, Peter. 2004. Words and the murder of the thing. In *Things*, edited by Bill Brown, pp. 135-149. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Supplementals:

Clinton, Alan. 2005. Review of "A Sense of Things" and "Things". *Reconstruction* 5.2.

(Online at <http://www.reconstruction.ws/052/clinton.shtml>)

Sessions 14 (5.1): Presentations III

[home](#)