# The Silent Life of Things

# The Silent Life of Things:

## *Reading and Representing Commodified Objecthood*

Edited by

Daniela Rogobete, Jonathan P. A. Sell and Alan Munton

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# INTRODUCTION

# All Things Considered…

Daniela Rogobete

Life could not be conceived outside the realm of things no matter how uninterested in the material side of life we claim to be or how spiritually oriented we consider ourselves. Things and objects, if we are to stick to the distinction Bill Brown draws in his *Thing Theory* (2001), talismans and mementos, memorabilia and paraphernalia, family heirlooms and photo albums, identity documents, diplomas and certificates are an integral part of what we are, of how we define ourselves and how others perceive us, in short, of the luggage we carry through life though we pretend to be travelling light. This constant relationship with the materiality of our surrounding world has permanently shaped and reshaped our understanding of the world and of our own subjectivity.

We have always managed to find different ways to relate to objects and to interpret them, in more or less analytical, descriptive, normative or metaphorical ways, embracing anthropology, semiotics, sociology, philosophy, aesthetics or history in pursuit of a better assessment. When it comes to reading objects and understanding what they tell us, how we act upon them and, conversely, how they shape our mind, as Lambros Malafouris tries to demonstrate in *How Things Shape the Mind* (2013), we cannot overlook the multiple roles they are asked to perform and the diverse values they embody. These values, theorised by Jean Baudrillard in his theory of *object signs* (1981) and included in a system of exchange, difference and signification, refer to: functional values (pertaining to the capacity of objects to perform utilitarian tasks and fulfill human needs), exchange value (the capacity of objects to reflect their value on the market when participating in the circulation of goods), symbolic exchange value (residing in the relationship established between objects and a subject, mainly visible in gift circulation) and sign value (the symbolic value attached to objects by virtue of the social status they offer their possessors).

That things are incessantly talking to us and telling us their silent stories cannot be contested; there seems to be a tight connection between texts and material objects in terms of shared narrativisation. Like the text, placed by its etymology between the idea of its actual production (*textere* > Lat. "to weave") and the material result (text as a *tissue* woven of sounds, words, ideas, quotations, meanings and allusions), the object itself stands on the threshold between *noumenon* and *phenomenon* as Greek philosophy teaches us. The poetics/poietics of objecthood creates this metaphorical bridge between matter and idea.

That we long ago ceased to listen to things, in spite of all our theories and speculations, cannot either be contested in this age of rapid disposal. It is difficult to say when exactly our disenchantment with things occurred. In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Zygmunt Bauman placed it at the moment when solid modernity, oriented towards durability and security, turned into liquid modernity and when most of our certainties and fixed points of reference were accordingly "liquified" and reshaped by the instability of our never fulfilled desires and the insatiability of our newly engendered needs. Earlier, in *The Sane Society* (1955), Erich Fromm had called this disenchantment "alienation" and saw it as a moment of rupture between people and the things they produce, between consumption and the needs that initially engendered it. For his part, in *The System of Objects* (1968), Baudrillard placed it at the moment when objects stopped being judged according to their sign value, when they started being assessed according to their exchange value and when material culture mostly became a carrier of ideological instead of symbolic meaning.

Since there can be no agreement as to when our magical, unmediated understanding of things ended, when things lost their meaningful transparency and became opaque to us, we could just as well look for a metaphorical explanation and a moment in the history of humankind that might provide it. This moment could be the fall of the Tower of Babel. Whenever we think of that we think of the annihilation of "a state of union" given by a common language and a common purpose (building a heaven-reaching tower) and of the Babelians' fatal error, defined as a "craving to *have*" (Fromm 1984: 125), which led to the final destruction of their unity. We always see this Fall as resulting in the ultimate fragmentation of languages and selves and the ensuing misunderstanding that was to mar human relationships for ever. We never think of the amount of objects, possessions and belongings, amassed in that huge Tower, that must have been turned into a jumble of broken things, shards and scraps, remnants of a once coherent materiality that, from then on, lost its unitary meaning. What we got instead was a heap of fragments whose

symbolic values and meanings leaked into each other, forever changing our manner of understanding and representing them.

Still, as their users and possessors, we have always thought ourselves entitled to produce value judgements and make aesthetic assessments about objects, and to place them into categories that best suit our perception of things and our ideological stances. We have generally ranked them between instrumentality and adequacy, between craft and art, ready-mades and commodities, meanings and practices or copies and originals, and we have extensively theorised on the subtle borders that separate them. We are still looking for hidden meanings and untold stories behind things, we are still delving into the mystery of their impact on our subjectivity and even if we do not have all the answers, we have at least discovered, that "a thing of beauty is a joy forever".

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Without pretending to come up with any ground-breaking perspective on objecthood, our volume proposes an analysis of objects, always open to ideological and media-based interpretations, as participants in what we hope to be a newly defined negotiation between postmodern subjectivity and objectivity. By combining cultural, literary and material culture studies, this volume aims at answering several basic questions: Do objects or their representations passively surrender to commodification, when their "thingness" is engendered by a highly consumerist culture, or do they subtly resist it, and in the process redefine the relationship with their possessors? And if the latter is possible, in what ways do these strategies of resistance function and how are they culturally represented? Where are these objects culturally and historically located and, on the other hand, how is the dialectics objectivity/subjectivity historically determined?

As the title suggests, this anthology of critical and theoretical studies on material culture focuses upon the cultural treatment of materiality and the ever changing relationship between object and subject as determined by the intensified process of commodification and by what theorists called the irreversible "alienation" engendered by the postmodern society of consumption. The volume tries to explore in cross-disciplinary terms the manner in which literature and art—in various historical periods but re-read according to postmodern paradigms—have generally responded to the changing modes of representing material objects. The rationale for this book stems from the attempt to offer an answer to these questions, to provide a practical analysis of our "material habitus" and its tight relation to identity and human relations, and to make an assessment of the attribute

of "objecthood", which is situated on the threshold between everyday instrumentality, pure aestheticism and commodification. The eleven essays that make up this volume (some of them presented at the 11th ESSE Conference held in Istanbul in 2012) are all concerned with the ever wider scope of commodification and the analysis of its plural dimensions with a special emphasis on subject and cultural commodification.

The first chapter offers a theoretical approach to "things" and their basic values and connotations in relation to their possessors, socio-historical contexts and ideologies. The essay written by Maria Teresa Chialant, a specialist in the field of material culture, provides a survey of current trends in theoretical studies on things/objects and fetishes, mainly focusing upon the extensive Italian research in the domain and projecting it against the more general context of European and American material culture studies. The author refers to the manner in which the object has constantly been theorised and viewed as an instrument, an agent of mediation, a commodity or as "a narrative function, a symbolic element and a multi-purpose textual device".

In Chapter Two, Mihaela Irimia proposes a cultural incursion into what we generally assume to be the silent materiality of the world around us and attempts to give voice to the inaudible. The author aims at revealing the "historico-cultural embeddedness of things" in our vicinity, the subtle object-thing distinction that shapes our manner of envisaging them and the lessons they constantly teach us. Irimia refers to the subtle voice and insidious meanings things assume in their relationship with their producers, users and possessors, or in their passage from "hand to hand". She specifically refers to the "talking coin" or "speaking specie"—a recurrent motif in eighteenth-century European "object tales" or "it-tales"—that is eloquent not only of the circulation of objects, their subsequent accumulative symbolic value and their "power of assessing the human world" but also of the circulation of (in this case French, German, Romanian and Oriental) cultural ideas and their mutual influence.

Chapter Three narrows down the scope of the analysis of "thingness" from theoretical aspects to more specific problems. Dana Percec's study analyses materiality as represented by Stuart and Tudor culture and as appropriated and reinterpreted by twenty-first-century material studies. She pays particular attention to the material world—especially to food—depicted with "striking vividness and timeless relevance" in Shakespeare's plays. Her intention is not only to discuss Shakespeare's textualisation of the tight connection between objects and hierarchies and social roles, but also to demonstrate that the Bard's treatment of objects reveals an early version of consumerism, both material and cultural.

Developing the idea of cultural commodification's latent presence in history, in Chapter Four, Elena Butoescu analyses the crucial moment of the "making of modernity" from the perspective of an altered conception of "objectivity vs. Objecthood", choosing to exemplify it with the "Enlightenment Project", reinterpreted from Denis Diderot's perspective and rewritten by Malcolm Bradbury in his 2002 novel *To the Hermitage*. Starting from the syntagm that "books breed books", the article theorises the text/manuscript in terms of "collectable commodities" whose obsessive accumulations of historiographies, layers of alternative realities, texts and paratexts are collected in encyclopaedias, libraries and museums as witnesses of a "culture of display".

In Chapter Five, Jonathan P. A. Sell resumes the problem of cultural commodification in his discussion of two collections of short stories by Bridget O'Connor. "The critique of materialist culture and commodified identity" present in these short stories offers him the opportunity to comment upon the problematic relation between objects and their cultural connotations and upon their status of commodities in an era of quick disposal, as well as to formulate a mode of writing he terms "magical materialism". In the author's opinion one particular feature of our postmodern times, disposability, further complicates the issue of the connection between objective referents, absent objects, implied connotations and "textual archaeologists" in search of lost significances.

The third section of this collection makes the transition to more subject-oriented essays and to the specific relationship between objects and their possessors that has completely reformulated post-modern human identity and subjectivity. In this regard, Hande Gurses offers an interesting comparative analysis in Chapter Six of John Fowles's *The Collector* and Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*, from the perspective of the subtle link between "desire," "possession" and commodity value. Using a Lacanian reading paradigm, the article theorises the "effects that collected objects have on the creation and realisation of the beloved as fantasy".

In Chapter Seven, Pallavi Narayan also analyses Pamuk's fictional work, with a particular focus upon *The Black Book* and *The Museum of Innocence*. Her special interest lies in the problem of the neighbourhood regarded as a multiple interpretive site made up of material items, structures, images and objects that constitute a universal vocabulary of space. Narayan deepens the context of her study by discussing the palimpsestic texture of urban life through enumerations and analyses of objects and images and through various tactics of walking and experiencing the city. The author's final aim is to show that the strong Turkish attachment to "Western" objects, as apparent in Pamuk's novels,

results in a gradual transformation of the mental and emotional spaces of everyday reality and the Westernisation of the subject.

The section entitled "Postcolonial reifications" focuses upon the even more complicated problems of objectification and cultural commodification within postcolonial spaces—Indian, in this case—where different, and sometimes conflicting, cultural influences are at work. The difficulty arises when the objects under scrutiny start to resist the general trend of cultural levelling and their possessors find themselves caught between the opposite drives of both embracing and rejecting reification. In Chapter Eight, Mehmet Ali Çelikel views the process of reification, illustrated in postcolonial texts published during the second half of the twentieth century, as marked by a visible tendency towards Westernisation, globalisation and rejection of native identities and values. His analysis of postcolonial cultural commodification is applied to the fictional work of Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi and his essay theorises the resistance to cultural hybridisation and reification of identities. His main goal is to demonstrate that reification within postcolonial contexts sometimes leads to the commercialisation of ethnicity and, finally, to "multicultural uniformity".

Ludmila Volná's focus in Chapter Nine is on a similar phenomenon, the reification of *Indianness* and of India, in general, as apparent in R. K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. She analyses the symbolic representations of objects in the novel, their metonymic relation to India, and the overall metaphorical connection between possessors and their various belongings, the idea of *home* and *belonging* and their material representations by means of family objects, the interplay of traditional and foreign influences rendered by means of reified cultural values and identitarian symbols.

The final section of the volume is dedicated to analyses of the way in which subjectivity is restructured according to new forms of, mainly commodified, objecthood—mostly determined by market demands, consumerist habits and mass-media—and deals with various forms of reifying bodies, souls and identities.

Collectable items and their capacity to define identity are explored by Elisabetta Marino in Chapter Ten. Marino is particularly interested in the manner in which Victorian women were inextricably connected to the objects they were adorned with or surrounded by, to such an extent that their individuality was gradually erased and turned into a "graceful, albeit anonymous and mass-produced, shape of an hour-glass". Her essay aims not only to demonstrate how Victorian femininity was turned into an expensive commodity, as read by contemporary Neo-Victorian analyses,

but also to argue that this commodification was challenged by the sensation novel and its strategies of constructing and deconstructing the villainess.

Chapter Eleven, the last essay in the collection, focuses upon the new reconfigurations of post-capitalist subjectivity in relation to the exacerbated dimensions of material accumulation and consumption and to the problematic relationship between an objecthood neutralised by serial production and consumerist habits and this unstable subjectivity in constant transformation. The issues of the ultimate reification and commodification of people, human values, ideas and life itself—so much debated by sociologists and contemporary material culture theorists—are the main concerns of Daniela Rogobete's essay which tries to enlarge upon the idea of "life-after-consumerism". The essay analyses two postmodern productions, Will Self's novel *My Idea of Fun* and Michael Haneke's cinematographic production *The Seventh Continent*, from the perspective of an excessive consumerism and reification that dehumanises people, blurs identities, distorts reality and, in a final act of "subjective re-objectification" commodifies childhood itself. The sombre outcome of this failed transition between functionality and "hedonism" is a world of simulacra, of material surplus, addiction, lack of empathy and emotional transfer, that pushes humanity towards a final surrender to a shallow reality defined by brands, advertisements and trademarks.

All things considered, we have tried to offer our readers a rewarding journey into the world of objects located in various cultural spaces and diversely displaying their "objecthood". We have looked into their secret lives, untold stories and deceptive appearances in search of possible answers to the questions we initially formulated. Sometimes we found the answers we were looking for, sometimes things eluded us, tricking, deceiving and contradicting us, forcing us to search deeper and scrape away the layers of dust and habit that made them invisible. No doubt, they wanted to tell us something, but what it was exactly—that's another thing...

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# PART I

# ON THINGS AND THINGNESS

# CHAPTER ONE

# Things, Objects, Fetishes: The Current Critical Debate in Italy

Maria Teresa Chialant

> Recent years have seen in philosophy and cultural studies something like a thingly turn, a *neue Sachlichkeit,* a *nouveau chosisme.* For at least two decades, there has been a slow, incremental, but by now immense stirring of things. (Connor 2010: 1)[1]

## Introduction

Thing Theory and Object Studies have recently gained more and more ground not only among philosophers and cultural analysts—as remarked by Steven Connor in the above-cited passage—but also among a growing number of literary critics who, as shown by the vast extant bibliography,

[1] Connor refers here to the new interest in "thingness" which has emerged in the past decades, and to the new field of cognate studies in the humanities that has opened up. The secret histories of things, the social lives of things, the sense of things (to paraphrase some of the titles of books on the subject) have been investigated by anthropologists, historians and philosophers. In the area of anthropology, see: Douglas and Isherwood (1979); Appadurai (1986); D. Miller (2001, 2008, 2010). Among historians, see Roche (1997). A gender-oriented approach has been adopted in the following books: De Grazia and Furlough (1996); Kirkham (1996); Styles and Vickery (2006). In the field of philosophy, see: Foucault (1966); Baudrillard (1968); Latour (1993). Among Cultural Studies theoreticians, Bill Brown is probably the most relevant one; the founder of contemporary Thing Theory, he is the author of numerous works: Brown (1996, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2010).

read texts in connection with material culture and the concepts of commodity and fetish.[2]

Although Great Britain and the United States are the leaders in this heterogeneous field of studies, very interesting publications on things, objects and fetishes in such disciplines as philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, literature, media/visual/cultural studies have recently appeared in Italy too. But before starting a tentative survey of the state of the art in this country, a few general remarks need to be made.

First of all, even if *thing* and *object* are often used as synonyms, fine distinctions between these terms have been drawn by philosophers as well as Cultural Studies analysts. As Bill Brown puts it, "as they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects […], but we only catch a glimpse of things. […] We don't apprehend things except partially or obliquely (as what's beyond our apprehension). In fact, by looking at things we render them objects" (2001: 4). This position has been taken up and underwritten by Julia Breitbach who comments:

> The cultural transparency of objects is pitted against the opaque nature of things. […] Things seem to fall through the grid of legibility and escape the order of objects. […] things may be conceptualised as the "before and after" of objects, as the manifestation of "excess" and "latency", but in the final analysis such temporal succession has to give in to an "all-at-onceness". (Breitbach 2011: 34)

From these statements, there emerges what could be called a sort of uneasiness regarding such elusive, impalpable entities as "things", almost a sense of awe towards them, to which the more tangible, *hic et nunc* "objects" seem an apprehensible alternative.

Steven Connor, on the other hand, refers "at intervals" to the distinction between things and objects, but claims not to observe it, mixing instead his usages "promiscuously, as the demands of [his] argument, or of alliteration, dictate" (2010: 1). I personally prefer the more concrete *object* when dealing with literary texts—and therefore, with stories, figures and images rather than with abstract concepts.

Leaving aside the differences between Thing Theory and Object Studies, the critical material which has been produced so far seems to roughly fall within two main categories: academic research on specific

[2] Particular attention has been given to the Victorian age. See: Richards (1990); A. Miller (1995); Frow (1997); Lindner (2003); Freedgood (2006, 2009); Armstrong (2008).

topics in the various disciplines mentioned above, and books that present themselves as catalogues of objects accompanied by personal commentaries. The latter category can be further divided into two kinds of publications: actual lists of literary and artistic objects, and writings of an autobiographical kind on ways of looking at particular objects. The first kind includes a rather imposing volume, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (2010), by Neil MacGregor, who, as a scholar working at the British Museum, London—which has for over 250 years been collecting things from all round the globe—has the necessary knowledge and competence to perform such a task. The second kind includes a collection of essays edited by Sherry Turkle *Evocative Objects. Things We Think With* (2007), Steven Connor's *Paraphernalia. The Curious Lives of Magical Things* (2011) and Orhan Pamuk's *The Innocence of Objects* (2012).

The last three works explore the stories and meanings behind the everyday objects that shape our lives, and turn out to be idiosyncratic inventories of beloved things that are freighted with both ideas and passions. *Evocative Objects* consists of a taxonomy of objects grouped according to the tropes of "design and play", "discipline and desire", "history and exchange", "transition and passage", "mourning and memory", "meditation and new vision". The book's six chapters are accompanied by elegant black-and-white photographs. The authors, who are scientists, artists and designers (the editor herself is Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT), adopt an approach that tends towards a sort of nostalgia in dealing with commonplace objects which have a particular role in their personal lives (such as a cello, ballet slippers, a radio, a bracelet, a silver pin, a suitcase, apples, and so on). *Paraphernalia*, which is organised around eighteen discrete types of "fidgetable" things (bags, buttons, combs, glasses, handkerchiefs, pipes, plugs, sweets, paper clips, clips, batteries, keys, toys, etc.), is mainly interested "in the things we do to things", and probably tells us more about its author than the things themselves (Dillon 2011). *The Innocence of Objects* is a fine catalogue from the Museum of Innocence, which is named after Pamuk's 2008 eponymous novel, and was opened by its author in Instanbul in 2012. It presents short essays, novel excerpts, autobiographical notes, photographs and relics of twentieth-century Instanbul life. As such, it is not only the writer's guidebook to the museum he created to accompany his novel, but also a fetishistic and narcissistic gesture (like the museum itself) and a reflection on the act and art of collecting.

These books have been mentioned not only because they are fundamental contributions to the debate on things and objects, but also because of their readability and attractiveness which are due to different factors: in Pamuk's case, to his exceptional creativity; in Turkle's and Connor's, to their non-academic approach to the subject, in spite of their scholarly pedigrees; and in MacGregor's, to the extraordinary erudition that permeates his research. These works are, in fact, both entertaining and thought-provoking, both light and profound. They also testify to the material turn that is being currently being taken in the humanities as well as in the social sciences, where an increasing number of researchers are switching their attention to materiality and cultural artefacts.

## Lists, inventories, catalogues

Inventories and catalogues are other words for the rhetorical figure of *enumeratio,* or enumeration, which consists of itemising terms that are connected to one another either by asyndeton (a list without conjunctions) or by polysyndeton (a list with conjunctions). The resultant sequence or juxtaposition of terms which belong to the same semantic cluster is known to rhetoricians as the figure of *accumulatio*, or accumulation. Umberto Eco's *Vertigine della lista* (2009) is one of the most important investigations of the phenomenon of cataloguing and collecting. This lavishly illustrated volume sits squarely at the intersection of semiotics, art criticism and cultural history, and consists of an extensive work of research into "things" in verbal and visual arts.[3]

Eco's book starts with Homer's *Iliad*, the poem in which he identifies two ways of representation. One is description, as in the case of Achilles' shield, a self-contained, finite form, encompassed by its circular shape. The other, which suggests almost physical infinity since it neither ends nor achieves a formal closure, is the catalogue, or inventory, such as the list of Greek ships by means of which the poet wishes to give an idea of the immensity of the Achaean army but is not able to mention all the warriors

[3] The opportunity for this research was offered to the author by his work at the Louvre, when he was asked to organise a series of activities, in November 2009, on a topic of his own choice; on that occasion, he suggested the list of the objects contained in the paintings exhibited in the Louvre Museum. The fine volume that emerged as a result of the research is made up of selected passages from renowned literary works belonging to the Western tradition, as well as illustrations from well-known paintings. For a review, see Beard (2009).

who make up that mass of men. Eco observes that it is typical not only of primitive societies but also of medieval literature, the Baroque and the postmodern condition to have catalogues which contain items that are difficult to classify, or which blur the boundaries of the known and the describable, or whose objects are named at random, without order or hierarchy (2009: 18)[4]. These kinds of lists satisfy an artist's pathological need to mention and include everything in his/her text, and reflect an author's omnivorous ambition: Eco speaks, in fact, of the list's greed and its giddiness. When a writer or an artist chooses enumeration, this is due to his/her fear of ineffability when confronted with an infinity of words as well as of things (Eco 2009: 82). Examples are adduced from various writers, among them Dickens (with the well-known description of London at the incipit of *Bleak House*, with its megalosaurus, dogs, horses, foot passengers and fog), Joyce (with the list of rivers in *Finnegans's Wake*) and Borges (his attempt to represent an unlimited universe in *The Aleph*).

Eco was not the first critic to discuss the importance and meaning of this device in literature. He himself mentions a previous study by Robert E. Belknap, *The List. The Uses and Pleasure of Cataloguing* (2004). Even earlier, Francesco Orlando, a scholar of French and Comparative literature, had published what can be considered a pioneering book in this area of research, *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura* (1993) [*Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination*. 2006]. It is a dense, erudite book in which, adopting both a structuralist and a psychoanalytic approach, the author explains the appearance of catalogues and inventories of obsolete, useless and worn out objects in literature from the late eighteenth century onwards as "the return of the *anti-functional*" (original emphasis), thus interpreting this phenomenon in Freudian terms. Moreover, Orlando associates the manifestation of objects which oppose the very idea of commodity with the function of literature as the site of resistance to social order:

> According to Orlando things take a life of their own, and become endowed with a spectral life—a second life which reanimates them with the aura of emotions, and confirms their persistence despite their condition of decay, neglect and decomposition. […] Orlando's remarks move into the area of

[4] In this regard, Orestano has written: "The epistemological horizon of postmodernity has indeed been described as a panorama crowded by competing discourses (Lyotard), leaving it to readers themselves to decide among particulars which constitute true contributions to knowledge" (2011: 206). Orestano refers to Lyotard (1997).

> modern consumption, of the social life of obsolete things, and to this end he inserts a list culled from *Little Dorrit*. […] The way of assessing objects points to their condition as things that are used, worn out, and subsequently either aspire to the higher status of *objets d'art* or are forgotten, and turn into ghosts of their former existence. (Orestano 2011: 211-2)

Orlando notes that the rhetorical device holding these objects together is the list, which "does not include abstractions: no situations, conditions, valuations, consideration, or emotions, but rather *things* in the material sense of the word—physically concrete things presented on the imaginary plane of reality of the various literary works" (2006: 2).

The collection of essays edited by Gian Mario Anselmi and Gino Ruozzi *Oggetti della letteratura italiana* (Objects of Italian Literature) also belongs to the semantic area of the inventory applied to literature. The editors point out in their Introduction that "twentieth-century culture in Italy has always been accompanied by a reflection on objects, and has produced—as in the case of Futurists and Surrealists—significant creative interpretations" (2008: 7). The book focuses on meaningful objects in Italian literature and offers a classification of those which recur most often in literary texts, organising them in alphabetic order, from "Abiti e accessori femminili" (attire and women's accessories) to "Cartolina" (card), "Maschera" (mask), "Pianoforte" (piano), "Scarpe" (shoes), "Televisore" (television set), and so on. The aim of this volume is, on the one hand, to look at the social and cultural changes in a community through the things which inhabit the texts produced in specific historical moments; on the other, to identify narrative functions and archetypes related to particular objects. So, for instance, one of the authors points out various typologies of "boat" in some novels and poems: the enchanted boat; the boat as a shelter, an alcove, or a home; the boat as a metonym; the boat as a ghost, or a vision; and so on.

A book with similar aims and structure, but with a wider disciplinary spectrum, is *Estetica degli oggetti* (The aesthetics of objects) by the art historian Ernesto L. Francalanci (2006), who, ranging from literature to cinema, from architecture to photography and contemporary art, analyses five objects from everyday life—a chair, a table, a door, a window and a veil—in order to identify "the responsibility of postmodernism in the transformation of our relationship with reality".[5] Francalanci discusses the changes our post-industrial age has undergone in the field of aesthetics. In an age in which the world has become an immense, global commodity

[5] My translation from book cover.

experiment, things and objects—like events and phenomena—tend to conform to a widespread and popular idea of aesthetics in which content values, typical of modernity, are gradually substituted by the formal and spectacular elements that characterise postmodern ideology. Francalanci's main merit consists in his scrutiny of particular objects from a plurality of disciplinary perspectives. For instance, when he analyses "the chair", he juxtaposes such different works as Duchamp's *Portrait of Chess Players* (1911), Van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* (1888), F. T. Marinetti's first drama of objects *Vengono* (They come) written in the 1930s, Joseph Kosuth's experiment in conceptual art *One and Three Chairs* (1965), and Marlene Dietrich sitting astride a chair in the film *The Blue Angel* (1930)—an interesting example of textual contamination.

If we compare these works with those discussed in the previous section, we notice how in spite of their erudition, the English and American catalogues address a wide and not necessarily learned readership, while the Italian ones have been produced within academe and are scholarly contributions to such specific disciplines as literary studies, semiotics, art history and visual arts. The one exception is Eco's book which aims at a broader reading public thanks to its appealing layout and reproductions from museum collections.

## Fetishes, multimedia performances, objects in movement

Closely related to the works mentioned above, and characterised by its comparative approach, is a recent book by Massimo Fusillo, *Feticci. Letteratura, cinema, arti visive* (2012) (Fetishes. Literature, cinema, visual arts), which explores the function and meaning of objects whose investment with symbolic, affective and emotional values transforms them into fetishes. In the Preface, the author makes it clear that he does not attribute any negative connotation to the word "fetish"; on the contrary, he wants to rescue it from its traditionally low reputation. The term was first adopted by African colonialists to describe incomprehensible pagan rites such as the worship of wooden or stone objects; then its use spread to cover Western veneration of saints' relics. By the time of Marx and Freud, the fetish had been extended from anthropology to political economy and psychoanalysis. What is common to these different approaches is the idea of the inauthentic: the fetish is something that is worshipped but should not be, the symbolic surrogate of a pristine plenitude which has been lost—as argued by Charles de Brosses in *Du culte des dieux fétishes* (1760)—or the morbid attraction to inanimate matter.

Fusillo welcomes the new attitude to fetish which has emerged in the areas of Cultural and Gender Studies, of camp aesthetics and queer criticism, and mentions the German philosopher Hartmut Böhme (2006) who reaches the conclusion that fetishism is no longer an enemy to be exorcised, but something which lies within everybody and challenges us all to make difficult cultural analyses. Fusillo has chosen this topic for two main reasons: the existence of an important link between fetishism and artistic creativity, and the scarcity of critical research on the fetish in the field of literary studies and the arts. He maintains that "fetishism always works on details, […] and includes in its microcosm a whole macrocosm of passions and narratives" (Fusillo 2012: 9). [6] This means that, on the one hand, writers and artists use the object-fetish to project onto it symbolic and emotional values, thereby animating the inanimate world of things; on the other, objects as fetishes are present in literature and in the arts because of the strong attraction of anthropological origin exercised by inanimate, inorganic matter (Augé 1998) which finds its full expression during the twentieth century, from Marcel Duchamp onwards.

In his Introduction Fusillo remarks that the object in literature is not only a theme, but also a narrative function (mainly in mystery stories and fairy tales), a symbolic element (in poetry) and a multi-purpose textual device. He argues that contemporary philosophical reflection on objects is enjoying a new efflorescence, perhaps because in our time, things have come to constitute a fourth realm alongside those of animals, plants and minerals: they have become "partners with which we interact […] intelligent protagonists of a fluid and fragmentary landscape, a *mediascape*" (2012: 16). In his wide-ranging research, he explores the history and typology of the object-fetish: from the object of seduction (Jason's embroidered cloak in the myth of the Golden Fleece by Apollonius of Rhodes) to the "memorial" object, characteristic of the great tradition of the realistic novels of such writers as Goethe and Dickens; from the magic object (the dummy in Achim von Arnim's *Melück, Marie Blainville*) to the materiality of the object with an evocative function (the painted dishes with images from *One Thousand and One Nights* in Proust's *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*) and to the object-icon (the ball in the account of a baseball game in Don De Lillo's *Underworld*).

*Feticci* shares some features with Bruno Di Marino's *Film Oggetto Design. La messa in scena delle cose* (2011) *(*Film, Object, Design. The *mise en scène* of things), which deals with the centrality of objects in films and the visual arts. The book starts with a reflection on the importance of

[6] My translation.

both special and banal objects, and on their role in presiding over everyday life. Here, Di Marino most pertinently recalls Baudrillard's *Le Système des objets* (1968), from which he quotes a crucial statement: one of the conditions necessary for the transformation of an object *tout court* into an article of consumption is its becoming a sign, which implies a different relationship with a human being. Di Marino adds that, more than in real life, "it is within the boundaries of the audiovisual imagination that a process of transformation of the object into a sign takes place" (2011: 8). The texts analysed by the author are various and belong to different media. When he considers an object—whether produced by design, or present in a video, film or installation—he always tries to determine the reasons why it plays a leading role in that text. The history of cinema, in particular, is full of meaningful objects, from the globe Chaplin/Hitler plays with in *The Great Dictator* (1940), to the red shoes in the eponymous film (1948) or the telephone in Jean Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* and its film adaptation (the first episode of Rossellini's *L'amore*, 1948).

In Di Marino's book, theory and close reading of films intertwine felicitously. The author commences with vanguard artists and "found art", a term which describes art created from undisguised but often modified objects that are not normally considered art, mostly because they already have a non-art function. The object is rediscovered as a merely aesthetic object, the *objet-trouvè*, first introduced by Picasso, Braque and Duchamp. The use of found objects was quickly taken up by the Dada movement (Man Ray and Francis Picabia), by the Surrealists (Breton),[7] and later by Futurist cinema. In *La cinematografia futurista*, Marinetti speaks of "dramas of filmed objects", whose protagonists are "animate objects, humanised objects, with the same clothes and passions as humans; civilised, dancing objects which are taken out of their usual environment and put into an anomalous condition; this, by contrast, emphasises their incredible non-human life and structure" (in De Maria 1981: 193). The next step in the occupation of human space by objects in visual arts is represented by the introduction of the robot in science fiction films, the invention of technological gadgets in the James Bond's series, and the role of design in the Italian cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, with Marco Ferreri and Michelangelo Antonioni. It is no coincidence that Di Marino

[7] By the time of the Surrealist Exhibition of Objects in 1936 (held at the New Burlington Galleries in London), a whole range of sub-classifications had been devised—including found objects, readymade objects, perturbed objects, mathematical objects, natural objects, interpreted natural objects, incorporated natural objects, Oceanic objects, American objects and Surrealist objects.

concludes his book with a mention of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*, whose final explosion has to be read today, "not as a utopian message on the end of capitalism, but as the extreme exaltation of the object itself" (2011: 183).

Although Fusillo's and Di Marino's books differ in their specific disciplinary areas (comparative literature and audiovisual studies, respectively), they share similar theoretical premises and methodological approaches to the symbolic and emotional values of material objects.

## Philosophical perspectives

Besides film directors, artists and writers, the authors and works discussed above also refer to intellectuals who have explored things and objects from a philosophical perspective. One of them, Remo Bodei, a phenomenologist and one of the leading contemporary *maîtres à penser*, has written a fascinating book, *La vita delle cose* (2009) (The life of things) in which he discusses the major philosophical pronouncements on this topic from Hegel, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, through Simmel, Bloch and Heidegger to Benjamin. In the process he points out the connections between philosophy and art, giving examples of the meaning artists, writers and poets attribute to things from seventeenth-century "still lives" and Rainer Maria Rilke's poems early in the twentieth century, to Jorge Luis Borges' "Las cosas" (in *Obra poetica, 1923-1977*) and Pablo Neruda's "Oda a las cosas" (in *Libro de las odas*, 1972). Bodei draws a very neat distinction between objects and things:

> The meaning of "thing" is wider than the meaning of "object", as it includes individuals and ideals, and all that we care for […] Keeping persons in the background, I choose to speak only of material objects, that are made or invented by humankind […] Objects become things when individuals, societies and history project all affections, ideas and symbols onto them; objects become things when they are no longer commodities, mere consumer goods or exchange goods, or *status symbol* expressions. (Bodei 2009: 22) (My translation)

As a consequence, Bodei argues, when an object transforms itself into a thing, it manifests both the traces of the natural and social processes which have produced it, and the ideas, prejudices, tastes and attitudes of a whole society.

Bodei's mention of "traces" is reminiscent of philosopher Maurizio Ferraris' *Documentalità. Perché è necessario lasciar tracce* (2009) (Documentality. Why it is necessary to leave traces) in which he speaks of "social objects" (as distinct from "natural" or "ideal" objects) which "exist in space and time as dependent on subjects […] and exist only if at least two individuals think that they do" (44). So, social objects depend on a human subject genetically, but not structurally. Ferraris has recently started a debate with Gianni Vattimo (the philosopher of the so-called "weak thought") which questions postmodernism itself and calls for a return to realism in philosophy. On the premise that metaphysics considers the essence of the world, he argues that truth lies in facts and that empirical reality itself is coincident with truth. So, while for Vattimo metaphysics is only ideology and facts are only empirical and contingent realities, for Ferraris truth is coincident with objective realities. Major contemporary philosophers have contributed to this debate in the volume of ten essays co-edited by Ferraris, *Bentornata realtà. Il nuovo realismo in discussione* (2012) (Welcome back, reality! A discussion about new realism). Without entering the complex philosophical *querelle* on postmodernism *vs.* realism, what is important in the present context is the fact that contemporary cross-disciplinary interest in things and objects is probably part of a reaction to the postmodern wave.

Another important contribution in the field of philosophy, within the area of Material Culture Studies and from a gender perspective, is Wanda Tommasi's *Oggi è un altro giorno. Filosofia della vita quotidiana* (2011) (Today is another day. A philosophy of everyday life). This book, which intermingles philosophical argument with narrative, starts with an illustration of theoretical positions on everyday life (from Freud to De Certeau, Heidegger, Lefebvre, Wittgenstein and Agnes Heller) in order to analyse the work of such writers as Virginia Woolf, Marguerite Duras and Franz Kafka. The result is a reflection on the ways in which repetition and invention alternate in the symbolic creation of ourselves:

> We all construct ourselves symbolically by dressing in a particular way, wearing certain jewels, hanging paintings and posters on the walls of our rooms, decorating our homes, choosing some objects instead of others. By these acts of self-fashioning, we mould our identity day after day. This gesture of artistic shaping is daily, and lasts for our whole lives. (Tommasi 2011: 123) (My translation)

*Nuova filosofia delle piccole cose* (New philosophy of small things) by Francesca Rigotti (2013) deals with a similar topic. One of Italy's leading

scholars in the field of metaphors and the philosophy of objects, Rigotti has devoted most of her studies to an investigation of the sublime in the quotidian. This little book helps us recognise the meaning of the objects that mainstream culture considers meaningless but which have, nonetheless, a great importance in our lives. To the question "how can one practice a philosophy of small things?", the answer is by "taking a humble, banal object and drawing it out of usual perceptions and verbal mechanisms" (Rigotti 2013: 70), that is, discarding customary habits of mind and valorising such daily objects as a coffee cup, an iron, a colander, a bar of soap or a Smartphone, with the aim of finding the truth of great things in small ones[8]. This amounts to a new kind of philosophy (with several feminine aspects) that works on words and ideas through objects.

Also focusing on our relationship with the objects that inhabit our lives, but from a psychological perspective, is Giovanni Starace's *Gli oggetti e la vita. Riflessioni di un rigattiere dell'anima sulle cose possedute, le emozioni, la memoria* (2013) (Life and Objects. Reflections of a soul's junk-dealer on properties, emotions and memory). Drawing on psychoanalysis, anthropology and sociology, the author has written a dense and passionate narrative merging criticism and creative writing, in which literary quotations, references to clinical pictures and autobiographical fragments alternate to rouse the reader's identification. This book's theoretical horizon is well illustrated in the following passage:

> Starting from the premise that objects always speak of those who own them, it is necessary to consider them as the product of a mixture of matter and mind, in order to pursue a continuity of meaning between the inside and the outside. The outside—that is, the object, the matter—contributes to materialise and shape the inside (the psychic, the world of ideas). Between the inside and the outside, between individual conscience and objects there is a continuity of sense, as well as a discontinuity of substance: psychic substance and material substance. […] The mind leaves traces of itself everywhere, in any manifestation—from the most abstract to the most concrete one. Everything is impregnated by the psyche: […] words, bodies, objects and the places moulded by its actions. (Starace 2013: 31-33) (My translation)

This perspective is a sort of pantheistic materialism, where the borders between an individual and his/her environment, between the Self and the Other are much more blurred and fragmented than one would imagine. But *Gli oggetti e la vita* also carries a "political" message in its connection of

[8] See also Rigotti 2007.