Reconceptualising Material Culture in the Tricontinent:

When Objects Write Back

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Edited by

Minu Susan Koshy and Roshin George

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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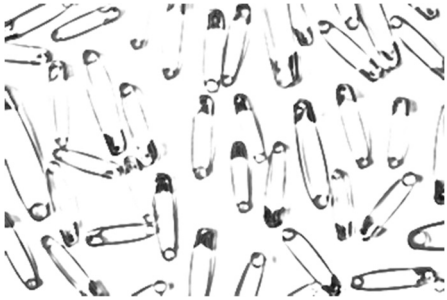
To,
My Appachi, for being my grandfather, for all the colours and balloons and *appooppan thaadis*!

and
My Ichayan, for the unexpected magic of love and for all that you are! . . .

and
To those who showed me the enchantment of “things” . . .

I



“All these objects . . . how can I explain?”
—Jean-Paul Sartre

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book, the work for which began several years back, is a very special one, not just in terms of its content, but also in terms of the background against which it took shape. The publication is nothing short of a miracle, considering that it was initiated at a time when I was facing severe setbacks. When the editing was almost complete, Kerala was hit by severe floods and the manuscript was washed away, forcing me and Dr. George to redo the entire work. Covid-19 was the next calamity, which led to extreme delays in the progress of this work. In the period that elapsed, we repeatedly thought of quitting this entire venture owing to personal tragedies. It was only God's grace that enabled us to complete this work. The fact that the book has reached this stage makes me believe in miracles! I thank all the powers in the universe that worked together to bring our efforts to fruition.

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—Minu Susan Koshy

INTRODUCTION

Material culture assumes great significance in cultures across the globe by virtue of its ability to trace everyday life and its nuances through the signifying metaphor of objects. The historical trajectories of nations, cultures, and communities function in tandem with that of the prevailing material culture(s) in as much as transformations in the latter sphere inevitably represent ruptures or shifts in the former. The stories that objects recount surpass the boundaries of time and space as they transcend both. They function as signifying metaphors, carrying multiple significations of lives lived through and with them. Material culture and object-oriented ontologies have occupied significant space in academia, contributing immensely to tracing alternate histories of communities and cultures.

Theoretical paradigms on material culture have explored the object and its relationship with the human subject as well as the social order in which it manifests itself at intersections of the spatial and temporal axes. The history of the object is also the history of the social order that produces it. As such, "thinging" the object also "things" the social order that produced it in the first place—that is, it foregrounds what had hitherto been relegated to the background. Theorists such as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood elaborated upon and highlighted the potential of objects to foreground "culture." Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai's contribution to the field of material culture studies and object-oriented ontologies also becomes significant from the vantage point of the object in as much as it possesses agency and a "life" of its own. Theoretical paradigms on material culture ranging from the Marxist approach to structural and semiotic approaches and the cultural approach among others have delineated material culture studies as an academic discourse carrying the potential to enable a tracing of alternate histories.

One of the major lacunae in material culture studies is the Eurocentrism that characterises the theoretical models. "Thinging" and "commoditising" were analysed in the context of Western countries and the models failed to consider the scenario in other parts of the globe, especially in the erstwhile colonies in the tricontinent comprising Asia, Africa, and Latin America—the three geopolitical entities characterised by a shared history of colonialism and a similar present as Third World countries. After the Tricontinental Conference of 1966, held in Havana, there was a heightened

sense of fraternity between the three locales and the commonalities came to be highlighted. As nations with a shared history of having borne the burden of imperialism, Asia, Africa, and Latin America have followed similar trajectories in their movement towards integration into a global, and now "glocal," economy. As such, the material culture in these erstwhile colonies reveals marked traits of a colonial past and neo-colonial present, with the socio-political realities modifying and being modified by the rapidly transforming "objects" and "things" utilised by postcolonial subjects. The edited volume is an attempt at shaping a predominantly tricontinental model of engaging with material culture, marking a shift from existing Eurocentirc theoretical frameworks.

The first chapter, "Meaning of Objects in a Naturalistic *Lebenswelt*," locates objects as part of the naturalistic life-world, with the religio-metaphysical world becoming an entity satisfying the human desire for embeddedness that imparts meaning. The following chapter, "The Biography of a Stolen Benin Bronze Casket," attempts an object biography, tracing the Benin Bronzes and their journey, locating them at specific points in history, thereby throwing light on the peculiarities of African art. "Locating Latin American Matters through Francisco De Goya's *Linda Maestra*" is an attempt to highlight how books and bodies in Latin America have reclaimed agency and dignity. It further addresses how the Indian Hispanists may also do so through an embodied and a conscientious reading, arguing that Francisco de Goya's *Linda Maestra* becomes a metaphor of translation, transgression, and transduction. "No Signs and Graffiti in Contemporary Medellín: Significant Paradoxes in the Time of Peace" outlines a brief history of graffiti in Colombia and Medellín, reflecting on the relationship between graffiti and the discourse performed by urban norms and the peace settlement in Colombia. The essay "When a House is More Than a Home: The Liberatory Life of Objects in a Post-Apartheid Future" locates the house as a site where the disconnect between national politics and daily life manifests itself, pointing to the move away from a combative national politics to the politics of dispossession in a racist social order. "'Matter Out of Place': The Ontologies of Waste in Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief*" attempts a scatological reading of Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief*, examining how objects (and subjects) gradually exceed their utility value, transforming into objects of abjection.

Chapter 7, "Decentring the Centre: Examining the Materiality of Connaught Place," examines the indexical and symbolic materiality of Connaught Place, engaging with the question of whether it functions simply as a sign of colonial rule or whether its materiality and symbolic meaning have undergone transformations over the years. "Goalporia Folksongs as an

Epistemic Cultural Resource for Understanding the Postcolonial Uncanny" investigates the Goalporia Lokageet of Western Assam, specifically with regard to songs by Pratima Baruah Pandey, locating them within the greater discourse of the culture, ethnicity, folk consciousness, and history of the colonial past of Western Assam, examining how these folksongs are glaring manifestations of the exclusion of Koch Rajbongshis. "Biographies of Yaksha: Object, Style, and Agencies" interrogates the biographies of objects, tracing the transformations an object undergoes from being a product of cult practices to an object of art, with specific reference to the stone sculpture of Yaksha Manibhadra from Parkham. Cult practices are located as distinctive iconographical exercises, dictating the modes in which the life history of the object is reconstructed in diverse cultural and spatial contexts. "Food and Food Habits of the Tribals of Chotanagpur in Colonial India: Writings, Perceptions, and Discourse" explores the modes in which the food cultures of the tribals in Chotanagpur were recorded by colonial authorities, leading to the formation and consolidation of stereotyped notions about the community, further shaping the policies of the Empire in India. In "Conflict between Rights and Obligations in Food Commodification," the authors adopt a Gandhian approach to the issue of food commodification and patenting, interrogating the role of the state and policymakers in ensuring food security.

"'They Too Have a Story': Tracing the Biographies of the Looms at Suraiya Hassan Bose's Workshop" locates the looms at the House of Kalamkari Durries as sculptural objects and cultural artefacts, and explores its engagement with the weavers in the industry through their narratives, memoirs, and visuals. In "The Spiritual and the Material: Insights from Sarala's Mahabharata," the author traces the intersections between the material and the spiritual, examining how the two realms mould human existence and in turn are moulded by it, through a reading of Indian folktales. "Making of a 'Transgressive' Substance: The Case of Cannabis in Himachal Pradesh" investigates how cannabis assumes the status of a 'transgressive' object in the Kullu region of Himachal Pradesh and how the local subjects engage with it, through the theoretical framework of material sociology. The final chapter, "Perambulating Reeds: An Analysis of Tapan Sinha's *Harmonium*," traces the biographical life of a harmonium as it appears in the 1963 Bengali movie *Harmonium* by Tapan Sinha, locating it within the paradigms of postcolonial modernity. Through its multiple transformations, the harmonium becomes "different things in different scenes" (Brown 9), functioning simultaneously as a quasi-subject and quasi object (Latour 51).

On the whole, the book seeks to formulate an alternative view of material culture emanating from the tricontinent, altering and modifying existing theoretical paradigms to arrive at a better understanding of what "objects" signify in a postcolonial and polycolonial context through readings of literary and visual texts. The potential of objects in the tricontinent to write back to the centre constituted by Eurocentric notions of material culture, thereby highlighting the possibility of a tricontinental theory of material culture, is explored. The book engages with the potential of the "object" to define and redefine postcolonial subjectivities, along with its significance in the "glocalised" context to which the tricontinent has shifted.

MEANING OF OBJECTS IN A NATURALISTIC *LEBENSWELT*

JIBU MATHEW GEORGE

Historico-Philosophical Backgrounds

Beginning with definitions is a double-edged move. On the one hand, it serves the purpose of clarity, and helps set the terms of discourse. On the other, it sometimes renders the discourse itself vulnerable to getting bogged down in definitional issues, and, consequently, the discussion seldom makes substantial headway. As we know, many philosophical/theoretical discussions fall prey to such tendencies. Philosophical naturalism is no exception. Though all may not agree, doing philosophy, or any intellectual endeavour for that matter, involves much more than linguistic nitpicking and checking the semantic/syntactic validity of propositions. We need semantic clarity, nevertheless. Seeing such a double bind of mandatory conceptual clarity and nitpicking unfruitfulness, David Papineau, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, begins his own definitional endeavour contextualising naturalism with reference to "self-proclaimed" American naturalists of the first half of the early twentieth century—John Dewey, Ernest Nagel, Sidney Hook, and Roy Wood Sellars. With a view to aligning "philosophy more closely with science," "they urged that reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing 'supernatural,' and that the scientific method should be used to investigate all areas of reality, including the 'human spirit'" (Krikorian; Kim). According to Papineau, "naturalism can be separated into an ontological and a methodological component. The ontological component is concerned with the contents of reality, asserting that reality has no place for [the] 'supernatural.' . . . By contrast, the methodological component is concerned with ways of investigating reality, and claims some kind of general authority for the scientific method."

What matters to us here, especially with regard to the question of meaning, is the ontological component. For the present purpose, an understanding of naturalism as a non-supernaturalistic world view suffices. Naturalism denies any meaning beyond this world. This implies that the

world view (*Weltanschauung*) could be, and historically once was, a supernaturalistic one, and there indeed occurred a transition to one that was not. We are familiar with this long-established narrative of the Occidental intellectual and cultural trajectory as a linear succession of world views. With a phrase borrowed from Friedrich Schiller,[1] the "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*), Max Weber (1864–1920), a German sociologist, political economist, and philosopher, outlined a process that Western civilisation had been experiencing for several millennia, and which reached a highpoint with the scientific revolutions of modernity. In Weber's work, the phrase denotes, on the one hand, a development within the domain of religion from magic to paths to salvation completely devoid of magic, and on the other, an understanding of the world's occurrences increasingly by reference to natural forces—which are humanly controllable by rational calculation, physical laws, and mechanical principles—rather than to magical and supernatural powers (Weber/Kalberg xxii–xxiii). Charles Taylor contests the notion of secularisation, a concept that is not the same as but includes disenchantment,[2] as a simplistic narrative wherein science got rid of the supernatural element—which he categorises under "subtraction theories" (the supernatural just peeled away and the world became "natural"!). Instead, Taylor traces the origins of secularisation to the gradual emergence of an "exclusive humanism" (19). The "great disembedding" (146), as he calls the development, refers to a world view wherein this world suffices in itself ("the immanent frame"), without recourse to anything transcendent for a sense of "fullness" (5).

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[1] Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), poet, playwright, philosopher, and historian, in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), used the phrase to designate a shift from the holistic world view of the ancient Greeks to the fragmentation characteristic of modernity.

[2] Indeed, religion, supernaturalism, and enchantment are not identical but show overlaps and divergences. Marcel Gauchet sees disenchantment as a shift from the ubiquitous enchantment of what Weber calls "mysterious, incalculable forces" (322) to personalised and externalised gods, who are amenable to human influence. Similarly, Hans Joas points out that "the meaning of 'disenchantment' . . . is certainly not—as has frequently been assumed—secularization (what ever that exactly means), but 'demagicization,' a process that occurs when processes in the world lose their 'magical meaning'; they happen but do not 'mean' anything" (20). Nevertheless, the presence of a strong magical element in medieval Christianity and its co-existence with belief in a personal God problematise such a schematisation. This essay is premised more on the distinction between naturalism and supernaturalism than between two kinds of supernaturalism, namely that of magical forces and of personal gods.

A minor but significant qualification, however, ought to be made between a naturalistic world view and religious naturalism. According to Jerome A. Stone, religious naturalism "asserts that there seems to be no ontologically distinct and superior realm (such as God, soul, or heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world, but that *yet religious significance can be found within this world*" (1, emphasis added). Religious naturalisms abound in variety: pantheism, panentheism, panpsychism, materialism, monism, holism, process theology and emergentism, religious humanism, idealism, integrationism, contextualism, biotheology, naturalistic mysticism, operational theism, and Owen Flanagan's *eudaimonistic scientia* (a science of human flourishing; a neuro-scientific version of what Charles Taylor calls "exclusive humanism"). Feelings and concerns such as wonder and compassion, and meanings attached to entities in this world, which may as well be characterised as religious or spiritual, can be immanentised from a religious-naturalistic perspective. In other words, some of the meanings even here may have religious overtones but are innate to the world. Paradoxically, from such a historical perspective, naturalism is a back-formation, though it is certainly not so morphologically or etymologically. In part, this is a movement from the metaphysical to the cultural delineations of the larger entities and frameworks (we shall return to this theme shortly) that give meaning to the particulars of our *Lebenswelt*—literally, "life-world" in German—that is, reality as actually (often unconsciously) organised and experienced by an individual subject.[3] I say "in part" lest the alternative narrative be a gross simplification. The religio-metaphysical world view was meaningful to many, in the sense that it satisfied the human *penchant for embeddedness*, the desire or need to see one's experience as part of a larger framework, phenomenon, ensemble, or narrative—the horror of the "left to itself." The absence of the larger meaning-giving framework is the condition of the absurd. The immanent human world also has a penchant for embeddedness, for meaning, perhaps in a greater degree. This essay explores the dynamics of an alternative, secular embeddedness that imparts meaning in a naturalistic world. But in order to understand this alternative dynamics, we need to clarify its non-secular antecedents, though to some of us these may seem past their age of interest.

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[3] *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines *Lebenswelt* as "the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, as sharply distinguished from the objective 'worlds' of the sciences, which employ the methods of the mathematical sciences of nature; although these sciences originate in the life-world, they are not those of everyday life. The life-world includes individual, social, perceptual, and practical experiences."

I show in Chapter 1 of my book *The Ontology of Gods: An Account of Enchantment, Disenchantment, and Re-Enchantment* (2017) that if the term "supernatural" is to denote what it literally means—that is, beyond the established course of nature—it has to encompass a broader semantic field than assumed in ordinary usage. Then, the terminological reach of the supernatural covers not only entities such as deities, angels, demons, fairies, ghosts, and spirits but also heaven and hell, or any form of after life for that matter, and concepts such as *mana*, an impersonal power that can be transmitted or inherited; the law of *karma* (self-contained causality or fate); rebirth; and the transmigration of souls (metempsychosis)—even any underlying purpose, design, or intelligence guiding the world process, including human destiny. Strictly speaking, these are all *supra-empirical posits* (1, italics original).

Is any framework of meaning devoid of anything in the above catalogue a naturalistic one? When Śaṇkara posits the Brahman, the ultimate reality according to the *Advaita* (non-dualism) school of Hindu philosophy, or a Transcendentalist such as Ralph Waldo Emerson proposes an "over-soul" we are still within the discourse of non-theistic supra-empirical entities. While in the former case of metaphysical monism, the appearance of objects qua objects itself is an illusion (*maya*), in the latter case, the meaning of objects derives from their being permeated by the reality of "the over-soul" (or similar entities in other non-theistic formulations of ultimate reality).[4] R. Puligandla has argued that the concept of *adhyāsa*—the "superimposing on the formless, nameless non-dual Brahman [of] various forms and names" (616)—in Śaṇkara's *Advaita* is comparable to the kind Immanuel Kant envisions as the function of "categories" in creating "phenomena." In all these cases, that is, across the spectrum of supernaturalistic (in the above broader sense) world views, the meaning of particulars draws upon an enveloping general narrative—a meta-narrative, if you like. In the above case of non-dualism, even the meaninglessness of particulars—a meaningful meaninglessness—owes itself to the general narrative of meaning and meaninglessness. As a corollary, the source of meaning of objects is the fact (or assumption) of their being part of a larger narrative. My contention is that the meaning of objects in the naturalistic world view also owes itself to being part of larger narratives, life-worlds, and frameworks of meaning.

[4] In their edited volume entitled *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher present a "philosophical exploration, critique and comparison of (a) the major philosophical models of God, gods and alternative ultimate realities implicit in the world's religions and philosophical schools, and of (b) the ideas of such models and doing such modeling *per se*" (1).

These meanings emerge from the objects, which are at the confluence of several trajectories—historical, material, existential, cultural, and so on.

It is certainly not the case that the meanings under a religious world view were exclusively supernatural. Take, for example, the European Middle Ages, generally considered a paradigmatic age of faith. Not everyone was a believer, but the general character of the age was religious. Charles Taylor's description of the medieval world view and its rationale are succinctly striking:

> One important part of the picture is that so many features of their world told in favour of belief, made the presence of God seemingly undeniable. . . .
>
> (1) The natural world they lived in, which had its place in the cosmos they imagined, testified to divine purpose and action; and not just in the obvious way which we can still understand and (at least many of us) appreciate today, that its order and design bespeaks creation; but also because the great events in this natural order, storms, droughts, floods, plagues, as well as years of exceptional fertility and flourishing, were seen as acts of God, as the now dead metaphor of our legal language still bears witness.
>
> (2) God was also implicated in the very existence of society (but not described as such—this is a modern term—rather as polis, kingdom, church, or whatever). A kingdom could only be conceived as grounded in something higher than mere human action in secular time. And beyond that, the life of the various associations which made up society, parishes, boroughs, guilds, and so on, were interwoven with ritual and worship . . . One could not but encounter God everywhere.
>
> (3) People lived in an "enchanted" world. . . . The enchanted world in this sense is the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in. (25–26)

In short, the ordered cosmos, the occurrences therein, and a hierarchically ordered society confirmed the supernatural narrative, which, apart from the God of Christianity, also included angels, fairies, spirits, demons, and other similar entities. But even in the God-framed Middle Ages, people resorted, as their ancestors had done, to agricultural practices that were rational from an earthly point of view, fought battles using weapons and methods that were quite this-worldly, and, on occasions of ill-health, took recourse to medical solutions alongside spiritual "cures." It would be more accurate to say that the natural and the supernatural outlooks co-existed, inevitably and pragmatically, even in pre-secular life-worlds. Perhaps the former was enveloped within the latter, but had an autonomy of its own, however limited that might have been. Conversely, just as the meanings under a religious world view were not exclusively supernatural, we cannot rule out

religious affinities and affiliations for the meanings we derive, create, or assign under a naturalistic order of things. Further, contemporary delineations of what is natural, supernatural, or "subnatural" could be a product of our own historically conditioned thinking. Contemporary criteria in this regard may be the result of naturalised (that is, taken-for-granted) Enlightenment perspectives.

In any case, the immanence of meanings in the world, that is, without reference to any theological or metaphysical framework, is the premise of the present discussion. Those who are familiar with the history of Occidental thought may recognise at least two milestones in this movement: one from ancient Greece, and the other from the transitional phase of European thought from the medieval to the modern. The first is the Aristotelian revision (a rejection, for hard-core Aristotelians) of Platonic notions of reality. According to Plato, the particular things in the world derive their reality from participation in the transcendental, universal world of Forms or Ideas. For Aristotle, the forms are immanent in the particulars:

> Aristotle turned Plato's ontology upside down. For Plato, the particular was less real, a derivative of the universal; for Aristotle, the universal was less real, a derivative of the particular. Universals were necessary for knowledge, but they did not exist as self-subsistent entities in a transcendent realm. Plato's Ideas were for Aristotle an unnecessary idealist duplication of the real world of everyday experience, and a logical error. (Tarnas 59)

The second milestone is deism, one of the powerful instruments of modernity and a harbinger of naturalism. Deism restricted the role of the deity to creation, envisioning a universe that works on its own uniform and impersonal laws, and is knowable through human reason. Deism paved the way for empirical exploration of the world for its own sake, and scientific discoveries that characterise modernity, which in turn, have led to naturalistic concerns in the wake of scientific explanations, including the question of whether there can be a post-supernatural (or non-supernatural) religion. The following sections of this essay will examine the trajectories of meaning on which secular attention came to be focused, and the philosophical implications and assumptions thereof. I argue that the meaning of objects derives from the ways in which reality is organised and experienced by historical subjects, the existential dynamism of the life-worlds of which they are part, and also the historical processes of which these objects are palimpsestic indicators.

The Subject and the Object

What is meaning? What does it mean to mean? In common parlance, we understand meaning as something that a word, a text, an action, an event, or the like expresses, indicates, or signifies. In our own post-structuralist critical climate, it is a commonplace that though meanings are mostly a matter of convention, they can vary from person to person and from culture to culture. More importantly, meaning is a matter of interpretation. If we may confine our discussion to objects for the time being, what could objects mean? Here, I use the word "objects" as synonymous with things. To reuse an orthodox example, a rose has a different meaning for a botanist than it does for a couple who have lost a child and have found a rose on the coffin.[5] Contrary to popular ideas, the former is not a detached, "meaningless" perspective. Martin Heidegger, one of the foremost philosophers of the twentieth century, distinguishes between two attitudes to the world and its objects: *present-at-hand* and *ready-to-hand*. The former is a detached, "scientific," observing attitude towards something without regard for the use it has for *Dasein*'s purpose. The latter is *Dasein*'s involved, ordinary, and often unconscious use of something to achieve his purpose. For Heidegger, however, there is no negativity attached to the *ready-to-hand* attitude. But the *present-at-hand* attitude is also not completely disinterested or neutral; it has a "mood."

The encounter between the subject and the object has been the chief concern, and one of the perennial fascinations, of epistemology. René Descartes, with whom modern philosophy is widely believed to have emerged, viewed it as a detached and disinterested relation between an autonomous subject and the object that is out there in the world. Heidegger, in his philosophical magnum opus *Being and Time* (1927), contested the Cartesian ideas of the subject and its epistemic endeavours. To Heidegger, knowledge and interpretation (*Auslegung*) are ontologically grounded in prior structures of understanding, which he called *Vorstruktur* (translated into English as "fore-structure"). These structures are a function of "being-in-the-world," of the *Dasein*'s having projected himself *there* (*Dasein* literally means "being there"). In other words, the "totality of involvements" (Ormiston and Schrift 121) in the world underlies knowledge and interpretation. The mode of knowing is part of the way of being. A German peasant's view of, and meaning for, a piece of hewn wood is embedded in the project of making a wine barrel. The modern idea of the unavoidable

[5] Alternatively, one can also make a distinction, as E. D. Hirsch does, between meaning and significance.

"interest-edness" (bias, if you like) of knowledge and understanding flows from Heidegger's fundamental ontology. We may use this ontological foundation of knowledge as the point of departure for further discussion.

Except in a pristine childhood, there is no ground zero for approaching anything under the sun. The subject is conditioned prior to the encounter with the object. This is no inherent epistemic disability but one of the conditions to be factored in, in understanding the dynamics of the subject–object encounter. In fact, the (meta-) knowledge of prior structures has been a liberating development in the history of ideas. The "perspectival" conditioning of the subject is not, however, the only factor that problematises the encounter. Characteristics innate to the object render it complex. The object is multidimensional. One cannot perceive or understand all the aspects of the object, at least all at once.[6] Change of metaphor—facet, dimension, part, side, or feature—does not help here; language is fundamentally metaphorical, and even while dealing with non-physical entities is compelled to rely on the physicality of the physical world for its metaphorical extensions. Quotidian experience teaches us that one cannot apprehend all the dimensions of a physical object. Probably, there *is* such a thing as what Immanuel Kant called the *Ding an sich* (the thing in itself), but access to it can only be selective, and, in Kant's objective idealism, mediated. Our perceptual apparatus has its limitations. But our cognitive apparatus, aspiring though it may be, with a broader field to grapple with, is even more limited. This is so not only because cognition is conditioned and "biased," as stated earlier, but also because thoughts, beyond our calculations, interact and create links, even remote ones, that bear on the understanding of the object under consideration. Our discussion here, particularly when it takes up cognition, operates in an area that is beyond Kantian "categories," which are more about the "basic" processes of perception and understanding.[7] Selectivity vis-à-vis the features of the object is one of the organising principles of cognition, analogous to the principles of perception.[8] If we survey the knowledge of the world generated

[6] Theoretically, it is possible sequentially, though not simultaneously.

[7] Kant's twelve categories are divided into four sets of three: (1) of quantity: unity, plurality, and totality; (2) of quality: reality, negation, and limitation; (3) of relation: substance-and-accident, cause-and-effect, and reciprocity; (4) of modality: possibility, existence, and necessity (qtd. in Russell 708).

[8] The Gestalt principles of perception include the figure–ground relationship (humans focus either on the figure or on the background against which the figure rests), the law of *prägnanz* (humans tend to interpret ambiguous or complex images as simple and complete), uniform connectedness (elements with uniform visual features are perceived to be more related than those with disparate characteristics),

in the history of humankind, we may discern that most of it stemmed from a pragmatic imperative.[9] The Greek word *pragmatikos* means "fit for business or action" (from *pragma*, meaning "deed" or "action"). The purpose for which knowledge is created, or to which it is appropriated, often determines the production of knowledge itself, and, as the Heideggerian example shows, inadvertently (to Heidegger, inevitably) solves the multidimensionality problem as well.

The Object as Work and Text

The above characterisation of the subject–object interface can persuade us to consider the meaning of an object as analogous to that of a (literary) text. We may even say that the object is a text. According to Roland Barthes's critical narrative, the transition from conventional criticism to post-structuralism is a movement from "work" to "text"—that is, a shift from looking at a novel or a poem or a play as an entity with fixed meanings, mainly decided by the author for eternity, to a view of the same entity as an endless play of linguistic signifiers, whose meanings are open. The work is about the past, to the extent that you want it to be. The text is about limitless future potential. The work is anchored in literary archeology. The text is futurological. As far as practical criticism is concerned, this distinction between the work and the text is one of the *données* or conceptual frames of reference. We say different sets of things—each set being internally diverse as well—on the same piece depending upon our decision to view it as either a work or a text.

The object in the work mode is about its history—production and labour. Since the history of the object does not terminate, as we shall see soon, with its reaching a finished state of production, we can even call the production history its "pre-history." Material objects indicate their points of origin (the production processes) as well as points of circulation and consumption, where they create or affect the life patterns of people. In Chapter 4 of my book *Ulysses Quotīdiānus: James Joyce's Inverse Histories of the Everyday* (2016), entitled "'Something Feeble in a Civilization': A Material History of the Everyday," I argue that

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closure (humans tend to look for a single, recognisable pattern), proximity (elements placed close to one another are perceived to be more related than those placed apart), and similarity (similar things are perceived to be more related than dissimilar things).

[9] In the *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle made a distinction among *epistêmê* (theoretical knowledge), *technê* (craft), and *phronesis* (practical wisdom and ethics).

> The many everyday objects and material practices that are mentioned or ruminated on in [Joyce's] *Ulysses* trace a material history. They have a double character—synchronic and diachronic. At the synchronic level, these objects and practices give a "slice" of the material life of a city at a certain point of time in history at a specific location—Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century here. . . . At the diachronic level, such pictures are diurnal specimens that bear the signatures of a longer material history. . . . The everyday accumulates and showcases previous work processes. Its commodities and practices register the slow evolution, achievements, and even deteriorations in lifestyle. (114–15)

For instance, "[Leopold] Bloom's thoughts on the silk industry in Ireland (8.621–3)[10] are a silent tribute to centuries of ordinary life at the two ends. On the one hand, they point to the history of silk production and the lives of silk workers. On the other, they indicate the changes in sartorial culture" (118). A typical Marxian argument concerned the concealment of the alienating production process, at the end of consumption: ". . . often finished products and their immediate exchanges conceal the relations of production from the terminal consumer. Bloom's ruminations on Ceylonese tea tell us nothing about the plantation workers on the island, though he thinks of 'Cinghalese spice-islands'" (13.1018).

The comparatively new paradigm of the text irretrievably dismisses an authorial cogito and replaces it with a reader cogito. Since language is "plurisignificative," as Jacques Derrida would have it, since the signifier and the signified have only a gliding relationship, readers have the freedom to derive new meanings, even those that the authors are incapable of dreaming. But the reader is not as autonomous as is assumed. Codes of interpretation are culturally acquired, and, therefore, envisage relativism only of a collective type. At the collective level, however small the collective may be, the olive branch signifies reconciliation; the white flag symbolises (symbolism being extended signification) surrender. Simple and otherwise inert objects can become potent symbols due to their being part of collective signifying systems. Consider, for instance, how cloth became an object of political discourse during the Indian independence movement. C. A. Bayley analyses Mohandas Gandhi's manipulation of the meaning of indigenously produced cloth as an instrument for sending political messages. This was possible because the influx of machine-made foreign cloth, made cheaper by 30–50 per cent through a discriminatory tariff regime, had ruined the indigenous weaving sector. Besides the production side, cloth is part of

[10] In keeping with the tradition of using the Gabler edition of *Ulysses*, episode and line numbers are cited instead of page numbers.

a "biomoral symbolism" (287) in India. It is also a ritual sign of class in the traditional social order.

At the individual level, the meaning of objects, like that of meaning of texts, is a matter of symmetry—between the subject and the object/the reader and the text. Not only meaning and interpretation but also our whole response to texts, even the very decision to pick a book from the racks (provided we have a modicum of "pre-understanding"), is a matter of experiential symmetry, real or imagined, between the text and ourselves. The idea of symmetry has witnessed a dramatic change since the enthronement of the reader in the place of the "dead" author. As Jenefer Robinson illustrates, "If I read in a novel a description of a handsome young fighter-pilot who dies in the Second World War, and fall into a tender reverie about my fiancé who flies a plane for Fed-Ex, my feelings of tenderness may have nothing to do with the way the fighter-pilot is depicted in the novel" (71). Robinson's theory leans towards the subjective side of the reader–text interface. Contemporary literary theory is right to a great extent in hailing the text as a network of reciprocal effects. Texts *for us* are partly about themselves and partly about ourselves. The reader–text symmetry may be explained in terms of meaning or succour to our lives, intellectual stimulation, antidote to ennui, and so on. In other words, the effects are a matter of encounter between the subject and the object. It is both constitutive of, and a result of, our *Lebenswelt*.

The encounter with the text is the cumulative climax of the reader's individual and collective experiences. The antecedents of this encounter include more factors than are often assumed. Many components synthesise and mutate to form our world view (and text-view)—heredity, history, tradition, codes, religion, class, education, linguistic and cultural repertoire, cultural and ethical norms, psychohistories, beliefs, interests, motives, tastes, moods, interpersonal relations, what others read (and watch), calculations, childhood experiences, and the spider and the moonlight. The last two are Nietzsche's items in his theory of eternal recurrence. Reading revives more ghosts than can be enumerated! Since many of these factors change in the course of a person's life, the symmetry is not a static one, but a dynamic, shifting, progressive symmetry.

Just as readers can appropriate texts and read meanings into them, so consumers can make meaningful use of what is offered to them, sometimes in contrapuntal ways. Consumers derive pleasures from commodities, which fulfil many functions in their individual lives. In the *Ulysses* example,

> [t]he material repertoire becomes a resource for everyday life. A cup of creature cocoa, Epp's mass-product, promotes comfort, fellowship, and hospitality. Similarly, Gilbey's invalid port and Plumtree's Potted Meat

> stimulate desire between Boylan [Molly's concert manager with whom she has an adulterous affair] and Molly [Bloom's wife]. One may argue that these commodities are designed to penetrate private experience, and are meant to be domesticated and personalized. It is certainly so. But . . . the experiential history of ordinary people asserts itself within an impersonal material structure. Use can invest inert material objects with personal meanings and experiential value. Thus they have a prehistory and a personal, experiential history. . . . In course of time the commodities assume the status of experiential testimonies and tokens. They get associated with memorable experiences, pleasant and unpleasant. Food, clothing, utensils, furniture, and their like tell the tale not only of survival and material comfort but also of joys, passions, regrets, and the limitations upon each life. Living human relationships get embedded in them. Bloom fondly remembers the American soap that added the cosy smell to [his daughter] Milly's bathwater during a tubbing night (8.170–3). His drawer contains a Vere Foster's handwriting copybook with Milly's drawings (17.1775–8). Likewise, Molly's elephant grey dress is a vivid memory and a token of happy times past for her husband. But perhaps the most important object in this category is the warm chewed seedcake that Molly passed into Bloom's mouth on the day of the proposal (8.907). These objects are like "objective correlatives" of specific emotions and experiences for the human subjects in whose minds and lives they appear and play a part. They are metonymic indices of these complex emotions and experiences, and take on such a symbolic role by participating in the lives and thoughts of ordinary people. The lamb wool corselet that Molly knitted for Rudy, and with which she buried him (14.269); the new boater straw hat that Rudolf bought before his suicide (17.629–32); and the bowl of china into which Stephen's mother vomited the bile in her deathbed (1.108–10) are experiential tokens of a life that is unknown, in other words, of an unaccounted history. (146–47)

I would like to single out the new boater straw hat for further discussion. As I argue elsewhere,

> [t]hat Rudolf Bloom purchased "a new boater straw hat" (17.629–32) before his suicide speaks volumes about his inner life, which contrasts with the matter-of-fact manner in which Joyce makes Bloom recollect the scene of the bureaucratic inquest. The reality of inner life which precedes a death possesses an experiential intensity which is not accessible to another person. . . . even objects partake of the intensity of death.
>
> Like Rudolf Bloom's hat, objects such as the lamb wool corselet and the bowl of china, strictly speaking, are "not memento mori, in the sense these are not reminders of mortality. They are reminders of a life. The operating factor is that they are framed by loss, by absence. Little things of ordinary human life matter because they are *framed by mortality*." ("James Joyce and the 'Strolling Mort'" 67–68, emphasis added)

My larger point is that objects in a naturalistic life-world derive their meaning from being at the meeting point of several meaning trajectories. I have illustrated only some of them; the above example may be characterised as existential. If we may alter the metaphor, the meanings arise from being part of several lived spaces. Owen Flanagan, whom I mentioned as the naturalistic proponent of *eudaimonistic scientia*, in his book interestingly entitled *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* (2007), discusses six zones or *spaces of meaning*—art, science, technology, ethics, politics, and spirituality (7). As said earlier, human beings, in their search for meaning, have a penchant for embeddedness, the desire or need to see one's experience as part of a larger framework, phenomenon, ensemble, or narrative. And human ingenuity is such that the frameworks, ensembles, narratives, and spaces keep multiplying and expanding. While there is a view abroad that secularisation took away a profound and time-tested framework, and created an absurd, that is, meaningless, world (the horror of the "left to itself") devoid of the old metaphysical moorings, the complexity of existence and human creativity have ensured a proliferation of frameworks—multiple avenues of embeddedness. The story of secularisation is, in fact, one of heterogeneisation of meaning-giving frameworks, ensembles, narratives, and spaces, a development that is arguably not limited to Flanagan's sextet.

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THE BIOGRAPHY OF A STOLEN BENIN BRONZE CASKET*

RUSSELL MCDOUGALL

In *The Roth Family, Anthropology, and Colonial Administration* (Left Coast Press, 2008), edited by Iain Davidson and me, we explored the relationship between anthropology and colonial administration through the lives of the remarkable Roth family: Walter, Henry, and Felix, three brothers, and their sons, George and Vincent. My own chapter in the book had a double focus: first on Felix's role in the sacking of Benin during the British invasion of 1897; and second, on his brother Henry's publication six years later of *Great Benin; Its Customs, Art and Horrors* (1903). The punitive expedition of 1897 is a foundational event in Nigerian history; and *Great Benin* is a foundational text in the development of European understandings of Africa. But there is one aspect of Felix and Henry Ling Roth's contribution that I had neither time nor space to consider, and that is the impetus for this chapter: their role in the collection and sale of the cultural and artistic treasures of the Oba's palace in Benin City—including the famous Benin Bronzes, created by the Edo people of present-day southern Nigeria in the time of the Benin Empire.

The British looted some four thousand objects from the Oba's palace, which were subsequently donated or sold and gradually dispersed around the world. (Admiral Rawson's report to the Admiralty recorded the seizure of almost a thousand bronze plaques from the palace, two hundred of which the British government reserved as a gift to the British Museum.) But this, as William Fagg notes, was only "the official booty," which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office put up for sale in London "to defray the cost of the pensions of the killed and the wounded" (21). There were of course also a substantial number of bronzes, ivories, woodcarvings and ironwork shared out among the officers, as was "the custom of war in the nineteenth century" (Fagg 21). This "unofficial loot" was not reported to the Admiralty; and

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