

OBJECTS AND AGENCY

Some Obstacles and Opportunities of Modernity

by
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Abstract: Objects from the 'past' are present all around us, everyday of our lives. It is through interaction with these objects that we glean an interpretation of 'things which came before'. But we must ask – can artefacts act? Can they speak? A new field of study has been put forth by scholars at previous academic meetings discussing the theory of object agency; however, at the same time, it is admitted that archaeological artefacts are inanimate and mute. Julian Thomas described the urge to interpret an object's existence in our present timeframe as evidence of previous human or sentient agency as the 'archaeological imagination'. In psychological terms, the externalisation of individual and social expectations for 'past' and 'meaning' onto inanimate objects (artefacts) creates images of the past. However, we can argue that the interpretation of an object and the creation of images of the past are all aspects of the broader psychological function of perception. These modern perceptions are what are used to bridge the existential crisis of sentient beings – fulfilling the desire for a notion of purpose and continuity with a greater lineage of agency. However, to what extent do our own methods of structuring and constructing perceptions and rendering meanings through methods of science and humanistic interpretation simply reify systems of supposedly synonymous modern dichotomies and dualities and modern paradigms? This paper is designed to engage with how the concept of 'object agency' obscures the phenomenon of the construction of images of the past through the viewing, interpreting and rendering of artefacts and objects in the world we inhabit. It will also suggest some possible ways archaeology can move beyond modernity through an engagement with the world not as materials but as media.

Preface

In a paper written by Tim Ingold pre-circulated for this session, he asked each of us to take a rock and submerge it in water and to place the wet rock on our desks while we read his paper (2007). Of course by the time, I had finished reading this paper, my rock had dried up, but the flow of ideas had not. Offering both a text and task simultaneously, Ingold's charge only too clearly recalled the similar request of René Descartes (1596-1650) in his *Discourse on Method*:

I would like those who are not versed in anatomy to take the trouble, before reading this, to have the heart of some large animal with lungs dissected in front of them (Descartes 1649 [1637]: 75-6).

Descartes asked his reader to do so in order to then 'walk' the reader through the different aspects of the anatomy of the heart. Ingold's 'walk' was much more theoretical, leaving me not with facts or observations but with more questions. Sitting at my desk, a rock, now dry, is perched on a pile of paper. Did the rock know I was observing it? Was this rock wilfully complicit in its submersion and subsequent task of holding down the overflow of paper on my desk? Or is this rock merely something I plucked from my garden assigning tasks as I so chose?

It is this series of questions which I believe were the inherent tasks in Ingold's charge. If we are to succeed in overcoming the modern invention of material culture, then we must engage all the possibilities emanating from these questions. In this paper, I will focus on the phrase 'object agency' and how it impedes investigations of humans in the world and guises modernist paradigms which reify the concept of material culture. I will also make some suggestions of ways we may be able to transcend these difficulties in an appreciation of the growing intermediated relationships of humans in the digital age.

Object Agency: A non-statement?

In a conversation with Andrew Cochrane, the proposition was made that presenting the terms 'object' and 'agency' as a single phrase, 'object agency', constructed an oxymoronic concept – a synthetic conflation of modern senses of activity and passivity into a meaningful 'catchphrase'. Even Alfred Gell (1945-1997), the proponent of agency in objects in all its

many and varied dispersed forms, noted that the notion of attributing agency to objects was a contradiction in terms – an oxymoron (1998: 19). A more extreme grammatical stance could be taken in the spirit of Stephanie Koerner's philosophy. With 'object agency', we are dealing with a non-statement. How can an objects do anything? How can they have affect? How can they possibly be agents?

Both the terms object and agency have long histories of use in the social sciences, but when fused together into one phrase, the history is significantly shorter and significantly more theoretically contentious. With object, we are dealing with a definition of 'something placed before or presented to the eyes or other senses' (Oxford English Dictionary). This is Descartes' heart and Ingold's rock. The term object also carries modern connotations of tangibility and manipulability. With agency, we are dealing with a definition of 'the faculty of an agent or of acting' or 'working as a means to an end; instrumentality'(Oxford English Dictionary). The structure of the 'end' is determined by a cause and effect relationships between the intentionality of the agent and the instrumentality of the object (Gell 1998: 16). Within a modern paradigm, this is where we find ourselves (bodies, minds, embodied minds, etc.) as beings bestowed with agency and, as some contest, objects. Fused together, the phrase 'object agency' attempts to unite what is a constructed separation between the role of humans as agents and objects as instruments wielded in the pursuit of a human-defined 'end'. At the core of this union of terms is the assertion that material culture is not simply a *tabula rasa* constructed to reflect human ideas or to complete human tasks. The objects of material culture are active agents in the negotiation of spatial, environmental, social and cultural contexts, structuring and affecting proceedings of events through the *gestalt* of their changing materialities. However, this attempt to fuse together what are in themselves contradictory terms is an exercise in intellectual futility – a demonstration of clever wordsmithing to avoid what is a much more fundamental problem with modern Western paradigms – the oxymoronic construction of material culture.

To illustrate this, it is important to return to a definition of terms. Perhaps a less articulated but significantly more interesting sense of 'object' is its adjective senses – 'exposed or open to injury, understanding, etc.' or 'situated in front of, against, or opposite to, something else – also opposed, contrary'(Oxford English Dictionary). This should be considered with the less frequently cited and more theoretical sense of 'agency' as 'action or instrumentality embodied or personified as concrete existence'(Oxford English Dictionary). Considering these senses, an oxymoronic impression stems from their fusion into a single phrase. While seeking to render itself intelligible, the object-as-agent simultaneously renders an internal dichotomy between what is its embodied persona as agent and its concrete existence as object. Gell noted this very problem when attempting to negotiate the issues of intentionality inherent to the understanding of agency (1998: 20). Simply put, although 'object agency' seeks to unite a constructed dichotomy between humans and the objects which constitute the matter of their observations, it simultaneously supports the dualistic paradigm of subject and object, of agent and object.

Objects and agents: Strategies of resolution for a modern world

Throughout the evidential discourse of human thought, people have grappled with existence and formulated different strategies to resolve their experiences of ontic crises in negotiating lifeworlds.

Psychoanalysing Objects: Object Relations Theory

For example, some psychoanalysts have utilised strategies such as internal object relations theory to construct a metaphor for the internal psychological relationships between individuals and the objects (both animate and inanimate) that they encounter which can be implemented in psychotherapy.¹ This strategy results not only in progressive coping systems and therapeutic treatments for individuals seeking to orient themselves in the modern world but also an assumption of modern dualistic paradigms (e.g. Cartesianism) relating to the mind, body, other entities and phenomena and the world.

Enchanting Objects: Projecting the Spirit of Humanity

In philosophical discourse, there is also the strategy of modern re-enchantment of the material world. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770-1831) philosophy mourned the loss of the spirit of artefacts and objects in our museums and cultural discourses:

The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown... the works of the Muse now lack the power of the Spirit, for the Spirit has gained its certainty of itself from the crushing of gods and men (1997 [1832]: 455).

Continuing this mourning of an idealised spirit vested into objects within the discourse of agency, as Ingold has warned, can tend towards the 'conjuring a magical mind-dust that... is supposed to set them [objects] physically in motion'. Furthermore, it is a well-rehearsed path from the search for spirit in the thought of Hegel to the utilisation of objects as *tabula rasa* in Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach's (1804-1872) theory of projection (1957 [1841; 1854]). These theories provided conditions for the modern development of *kulturkreis* and cultural historical approaches to the past practiced by such scholars as Gustaf Kossinna (1858-1931) (1911; 1921). These theoretical developments in prehistoric archaeology created the philosophical framework for the utilisation of material culture as a meta- *tabula rasa* onto which the meta-narrative of 20th century European nationalist ideologies were projected (Arnold & Hassmann 1995).

Reflecting Objects: The Reflective Metaphors of Philosophy

Many philosophers have utilised objects for illustrative metaphors in their discourses. Here again we find the illustrative and performative tasks of Ingold's rock and Descartes' heart. This tradition of reflective metaphor in philosophy is poetically evident in the recent English publication of Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2006 [1950]: 96-7):

When I had closed my fist around it and so far as I was able, made certain that I possessed the stretchable woolen mass, there began the second phase of the game, which brought with it the unveiling,. For now I proceeded to unwrap 'the present', to tease it out of its woolen pocket. I drew it ever nearer to me, until something rather disconcerting would happen: I had brought out the 'present', but 'the pocket' in which it had lain was no longer there. I could not repeat the experiment on this phenomenon often enough. It taught me that form and content, veil and what is veiled, are the same. It led me to draw truth from works of literature as warily as the child's hand retrieved the sock from 'the pocket'.

¹ There a number of theoretical approaches to Object Relations Theory within the field of psychoanalysis, but the foundational research has predominantly been undertaken by psychoanalysts in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. The works of Melanie Klein (1882-1960), W. Ronald Fairbairn (1889-1964) and Donald W. Winnicott (1896-1971) represent the schools of thought in the United Kingdom. The works of Edith Jacobson (1897-1978), Margaret S. Mahler (1897-1985) and Otto F. Kernberg represent the schools of thought in the United States of America. For a good discussion of different approaches to Objects Relations Theory in psychoanalytic literature see (Greenberg & Mitchell 1983).

We can sense the movement towards what Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1947; 1958]) later called for in philosophical reflection – an engagement with the everyday. Jean Baudrillard (1996 [1968]) began an exploration of the significance of these ‘everyday objects’ in the construction of systems of meaning. Some of Baudrillard’s reflective points, such as those about modern identification with one’s automobile, would be later articulated in anthropological literature such as Gell’s use of the concept of ‘car culture’ or ‘vehicular animism’ as evidenced in his *Toyota*, which he lovingly named *Toyolly* or ‘Olly’ for short (1998: 19-20).

Phenomenal Objects: Objects and the Humanistic Turn in Phenomenology

Published first in his seminal work *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) began his philosophical career with the articulation of a startling breakthrough in the understanding of objects. In his writings, he stated simply that we rely on objects all the time as they are silently taken for granted (e.g. the air, the earth, etc.). It was his idea that these objects did not enter into human phenomenological awareness until something went wrong – the machine malfunctioned (Harman 2005: 268). What is significant about this thought is that it opened new possibilities for philosophies of objects which transcended anthropocentric rationalism.

He led to the argument that we should not reduce objects or things to representations or presences merely for human awareness. As Ingold argues, they should not be considered *tabula rasa*. Later works such as *Das Ding* (The Thing) (1951) and *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (Building Dwelling Thinking) (1951) advanced his proposition that things were not things in themselves but they are what they are by virtue of relations to everything else (Rorty 2005: 274). This offered a great alternative to the scholastic tradition of Aristotelian substantialism. Despite the power of this relationalist and contextualist philosophy, Heidegger’s academic impact has focused more on the *dasein* or the specific study of human existence (Harman 2005: 269). Thus in the development of phenomenology from Heidegger’s work, there was a shift from a philosophy which allowed for a world rich with objects existing without the necessary attention of human beings to a philosophy of the embodied phenomenological experience of the sentient mind of humans, particularly evident in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) (1962 [1945]).

The significance of this turn in phenomenological research is that it allowed for the growth of a body of literature explicating and apologising for the romanticised plight of the sentient human mind presented with the problems of the material world. This created the space for the popular embracement of existentialist thought and literature, focusing on the exceptional qualities of the human being and its grappling with its sentience and resulting will and choice as either an exceptional gift or a burden.

Animating Objects: Object Agency in the thought of Alfred Gell

Returning to an exploration of Gell’s thought, in anthropological theory and archaeological theory, there is the concept of ‘object agency’. As has been previously discussed, it addresses the relationships between humans and objects in the discourse of agency. This strategy has largely developed out of the growing discipline of material cultural studies. In particular, we should consider the seminal effort of Gell in *Art and Agency*. Rather than simply re-enchanting or re-animating objects, Gell chose to develop a concept of dispersed agency (1998: 12-22). That is that primary agency was still located within the scope of human action, but that objects, as indices of human agency, possess secondary agency.

This notion of dispersed agency was immediately appealing within archaeological and anthropological discourse as it seemed to both redress the perceived imbalance between humans and non-humans but also create a perceptible universal similarity between modern material culture and that of past peoples or contemporary non-modern cultures. The power of Gell's metaphor of dispersed agency lies in its reflexive qualities of personal narratives of the development of his personal philosophy of art and agency. Perhaps heightened by his untimely death, Gell's unrevised text of *Art and Agency* carries a reflexive tone which reinserts himself as scholar within his own lived experiences and those of the communities which he has studied.

Alfred Gell and the limitations of object agency

Despite scholars', such as Gell, effort to bring into balance the relationship between humans and objects in the discourse of agency through the concept of dispersed agency, this does not move beyond the fundamental issue of human existential exceptionalism. Although Gell brings objects into play within dispersed agency as secondary agents, this does not overcome the modern 'ego' of human as primary agent. Thus objects, no matter how much secondary agency they can wield, are still reducible to indices of human act, will and choice.

Gell's contribution was quite useful in facilitating an understanding of contemporary Western communities of consumption and utilisation of complex machines (e.g. cars or guns) as similar extensions and indices of human will, empowerment, identity and expression. His work was particularly valuable for its ability to open the possibility of considering the direct parallels between these Western cultural patterns and past and contemporary non-modern relationships with objects. However, this does not overcome the issue of the enchantment of machines as objects. Although Gell's observations do serve to illustrate dominant trends in fetishisation of mechanics, his conception of mechanistic enchantment relies on a separation between expert and public understanding of mechanics and engineering in such a way that there are individuals who simply take machines or cars for granted. Indeed, Gell's use of the term 'vehicular animism' or 'car culture' could be read as an unintended apology for material culturalist discourses which define human communities along technological and materialistic guidelines by associating social units with materialised social agencies (e.g. Bronze Age, Iron Age and – lithic (stone) temporalities) (Gell 1998: 18-9).

How does this anthropocentric technological paradigm engage with other material entities and phenomena? Animals, weather-systems, ecological phenomena, all have enormous impact on the conditions and possibilities of experience within the world. For example, in a discourse over Heidegger's discussion of tools and objects, Graham Harman reminds us of the problem of understanding ecological phenomena within a object/agency politic (2005: 268-9). He takes the example of a hail storm and a cornfield. The hail storm may destroy the cornfield, but which is the agent and which the object? This example serves to remind us one of Heidegger's earliest articulations on materials, that is the myriad of invisible interactions which occur throughout this shared world – erosion, tidal patterns, cardiopulmonary systems, synaptic functions or gravitational force.

Considering Heidegger's conception of the appearance through failure of objects and things in human awareness as noted above, one could argue that since the Enlightenment, 'Western' traditions of human consciousness, expression and science makes blind assumptions about the structure of the world in order to place humans at the centre of the cosmos either as victims or agents. Yet in both cases, it is only when human consciousness has been made aware and deems it necessary to take action in relation to an object or phenomenon that the object or phenomenon is given status as a part of a lifeworld. The risk

of the adoption of this paradigm is that it may obscure and simultaneously affirm what is the fundamental desire of the dominant modern, 'rational' paradigm – the primacy of human will and choice. The risk of this primacy is that it can lead to projection of the idealised human ego-will through conflated dualities onto constructed 'others' or 'objects'. Thus it is critical to expose what is a modern hubristic assumption of human ego-consciousness, agency and power. Although the work of the natural, biological or medical sciences facilitates a rendering of these phenomena as intelligible within human communication – just as religious and faith systems have done for many years – they also reify the anthropocentric qualities of 'Western' rational thought. Humans are the beginning and the end of agency – holding all the cards and setting all the rules of the game.

Prime agents and prime movers

Gell articulated that he believed that there was a dispersal of agency through the world but that there were primary agents and secondary agents. The danger of this discourse is that it falls back into classical arguments over the notion of the prime mover. Plato (428/7-328/7 BCE) in *Timaeus* articulated the image of a demiurge responsible for the movements of the world. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) in his *Physics* asserted that there was a Prime Mover of the cosmos. Indeed, Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727) after Robert Boyle (1627-1692) returned to this concept in the 17th century in the image of the divine clockmaker who set the wheels of time in motion. As efforts to locate a kinetic starting point for agency and action in the world, Gell continued the socio-theological and cosmological argument for a hierarchy or chain of command in the causal relationships between agents and objects. Asserting the conception of a primary agent and the secondary agent still functions within the discourse of a search for a prime mover, and the tremendous risk of this position is that it merely replaces what were abstract conceptions of divine will with human will and choice. Thus, the questions and concerns of this debate are of a cosmological order in that they ask us to question how we position ourselves within the evident and experienced complexities of our shared ecologies, environments, architectures and worlds.

Options and oppositions

If our goal is to redress the imbalance between objects and humans on the scales of agency, then we have two distinct and radical options. The first has been somewhat rehearsed, but to phrase it simply, it is human exceptionalism – that humans are the prime movers and prime agents and the origination point of action whether or not there is dispersed agency. The second is to approach humans as constituent materials and functions, including them in the spectrum of objects and materials which compose the material world. Do we reduce humans to species and components of organic machines, or do we elevate humans above this discourse through a belief in the exceptional qualities of human sentience?

The hubristic position asserts humans as the point of origin of agency, as the prime mover of all objects. It also plays with a certain gnostic quality of human sentient awareness in the world of things. Supplanting God, humans now wind their own clocks. However, this position is untenable as has already been shown. It does not allow for the possibility of choice or will or action by animals and does not take into account the transcendental impact of those actions humans can not effect nor control such as earthquakes, erosion or gravity.

The humble position is best articulated in the words of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari:

It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said the *id*. Everywhere *it* is machines – real ones, not figurative ones... (2004 [1972]: 1)

By reducing humans to their constituent functions and materials, Deleuze and Guattari transcend the Freudian foundation upon human sentient exceptionalism and carry on the tradition of Darwinian materialism. They see humans as desiring machines, basely included in the inter-relationships of material entities negotiating a world obscured by the weight of their own sentience. The difficulty of this position is that it grates against the long-standing development post-Enlightenment of a cherished individualism. What are the implications of a human that is merely a machine?

Although, it is heartening to consider a point brought up by Ingold at the Theoretical Archaeology Group in December 2006; that is that there is nothing 'mere' about being an organism. From the perspective of science – the organism is one of the most beautifully complex phenomena in existence in this world. Although fear may have us retreat to our sentience as a defence, we need only be prepared to share a beauty which is inherent in all organisms from amoebas to plankton to racoons to humans but has been falsely individualised as an exceptional quality of human beings – will and choice.

Exorcising will and choice

For much of the history of philosophical discourse since the Enlightenment, we have been obsessed with the ability to exercise will and choice as exceptionally sentient beings, making the world into the most desirable image of ourselves. In contemporary Western culture, there is a tyrannical universality of the exceptionalism of human sentience when conceived as an entitlement to individual will and choice. Running counter to the flow of the devolution of religious authority over human potentiality in the world, the trend towards a universal appreciation of the 'ego' or 'I' as a brand of entitlement reconstructs an omnipresent human agency. From the perspective of humility, muscles are strong within this world due to their response to tensions between inter-related objects within a gravitationally bound existence. Within the scope of atomic theory, matter stays together due to strong and weak forces within the constituent particles of the atoms which compose material bodies. To utilise reflective metaphors, think of your chair, this earth, this air, gravity and the strong and weak forces that bind matter together. Considering these phenomena as aspects of our mediated 'selves', how different are our material interactions between ourselves and our bodies to that between a hail storm and a corn field? Is it that we believe that we exercise choice and will over the potentialities of our material?

The limitation of the ideal human

Within the humanities there is an underdeveloped appreciation of the multiple expressions of human form within the world. Only recently has there been a popular acceptance of the study of archaeology and 'disability' in academic conference settings (such as Tim Phillips' session on the Archaeology of Disability at the Theoretical Archaeology Group in December 2006). Indeed, most studies of humans or humanity inherently assume a fully endowed ideal human form. With the growth of casualties from theatres of war within Western societies and the subsequent growth in medical technology in the supplying of prosthetic limbs, the philosophical proposition of the ideal human is an increasingly untenable position. The recent feature article written by Neil Shea and illustrated by the photographs of James Nachtwey in the December 2006 issue of *National Geographic* illustrated the growing number of individuals surviving from theatres of combat but requiring advanced prosthetics to facilitate

their lifeworlds (see Shea 2006). The resonance of the theme of the article is normalisation of the medical prosthesis through the desire for enablement and the acceptance of this by others through unselfish declarations of love.

The alternative to this is to assert that the prosthesis which a human uses to walk or to move about an environment are mutually exclusive entities and that the human is reducible to that which has no prosthesis. I feel this proposition limits understandings of the possibilities of human lifeworlds. Ironically, academic conferences have no qualms about accepting the prevalence of eye-glasses – which could be equally described as a prosthesis of the faculty of human sight. In many respects, we merely accept the mediated enmeshed experience of a human with eye-glasses. I propose that this is the same attitude we must develop towards all media be they physical or digital prosthetics. By digital prosthetics, I am referring to the growing enmeshment, expression and enablement of human media within digital media in digital spaces and architectures.

The limitations of physical rhetoric

Beyond the philosophical difficulties in anthropological and archaeological theory that employ the concept of 'object agency', there are broader ramifications of object-based rhetoric in material culture. This is to say that the current obsession with material culture in archaeology and anthropology often focuses solely on the physical world, restricting appreciations for the parallels with non-physical experience. In an age where digital media are increasingly providing the forums for human expression and form human lifeworlds, the utilisation of an anthropological concept such as object agency which focuses on physical objects excludes the discipline from the enlightening parallels of experience within digital architectures.

Although these digital architectures are currently rendered through materialistic discourses of hands bashing on keyboards, these boundaries are being consistently tested and broken by medical science. For example, there is extensive research, such as has been undertaken by Jose Delgado, into the development of digital brain implants which act as biomedical prostheses which circumvent portions of the human brain disabled by strokes or traumatic head injuries (see Horgan 2005 or Berger 2005). Indeed, the work undertaken to develop digital components to enhance or repair human vision presents our discourse over observation and perception with a whole new dimension of the politics of spectatorship. It introduces the possibility of digital control.

Culturally, artists and writers have been imagining the possibilities of the digitisation and mutability of human consciousness and thus agency. The Manga *Ghost in the Shell* (1991) and its subsequent anime adaptation in 1995 present the startling possibilities of the increasingly sought after goal – the digitisation of the human mind. Blurring philosophical boundaries between the physical, mental and digital worlds, the manga written by Masamune Shirow provided a dramatic illustration of what is an increasing field of research within biomedical sciences – the braincomputer interface. The most notable success was in 2005, when a tetraplegic named Matt Nagle had the BrainGate chip-implant manufactured by Cyberkinetics Neurotechnology inserted into his brain, successfully controlling a right precentral gyrus (an area of the brain responsible for arm movement). Just by thinking he was able to control a robotic arm (Leigh et. al 2005).

Through this active research, we can see the practical and conceptual boundaries between mind, material and the digital space eroding. Indeed, if a mind can communicate to non-organic motorsystems, is it possible that a mind could be simply transferred to non-organic components, stored, deleted or merged with other minds? To some it invokes fear and for

others hope and possibility. Whatever one's emotive response, the simple fact is that it is occurring. Thus, perhaps it is time for anthropological and archaeological discourses to no longer assert the primacy of either humans or objects as agents, and instead, a new conception of the possibilities of humans and objects as media and mediation could be explored.

'Making Things Public': Assemblages and media

As a thoughtful contribution to this reflexive and reflective process relating to mediation, a recent collaborative exhibition at the Zentrum für Kunst und Mediatechnologie (Centre for Art and Media) organised by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel titled 'Making Things Public: Atmosphären der Demokratie (Atmospheres of Democracy)' charged a group of over 100 artists, intellectuals and academics to participate in the a move from objects to things – things in the sense of the original German and English meaning of the word as an assembly of people. In this way, assemblages of objects of art and assemblages of people can interact in participatory exchanges which develop new and dynamic groups and concepts with every individual who or thing which takes part. From the website of the exhibition:

It turns out that the oldest meaning of the English and German word for 'thing' concerns an assembly brought together to discuss disputed matters of concern. Hence the focus on the slogan FROM REALPOLITIK TO *DINGPOLITIK*, a neologism invented for the show. This major shift is reflected in the aesthetic of the show, in the ways in which the over one hundred installations and works of art are presented, and in the general physical and virtual architecture. What we are trying to do is compare modernist with non-modern attitudes to objects. In effect we are moving FROM OBJECTS TO THINGS [capitals original] (Latour & Weibel 2005a; also see Latour & Weibel 2005b).

The effect of this exhibition was a deneutralisation the exhibition and museum space, allowing the public to come into being through participation in the experience of representations of concerns and issues through inter- and intra-mediated assemblages of things (both animate and inanimate) and images whether visual, textual, digital, performative or other. Resonating both with Heideggerian theory and contemporary mediation theory, the exhibition rendered inert modern paradigms which reify dichotomies between assemblages of objects and assemblages of humans in public spaces, offering a powerful exposition of the possibilities of viewing humans themselves as media (see Russell 2006).

Humans as media (Humedia)

To move through this proverbial minefield of philosophical issues, I propose a mediation rather than a fight for agency. In the impending development of braincomputer interfaces and neuroprostheses, I propose a move away from the dynamic struggle over manipulative correlations between objects and agents to shared correlations between inter-mediated entities.

This is a step beyond agency to a discourse of mediation – to an understanding of humans not as prime movers but as a constituent media. Thus the barrier between our hailstorms, cornfields, humans and digital media dissolves as we accept our place in the dynamic ebbs and flows our shared uncertain world. The radical impact of this for considerations of global ecological risks is that it forces an awareness of the constituent role that humans play in ecological development and change without presupposing an ethical or moral position. It does not egoistically argue that we should take care of the world so that the world takes care

of us. Rather, it asserts an acceptance of position within the larger ecological phenomena of existence and urges participation rather than control as a means to engage these risks.

Given the growing amount of academic ink spent on articulating notions of permeability and partibility of personhood and the concurrent research developing on brain-computer interfaces, it is only too appropriate to explore what are the broader possibilities of humans as capricious media – as humedia.

More than simply an organism, humans are indeed weighed down by the evident task of self-discovery, revelation and understanding. Thus, the conception of humans as media has the added benefit in that it does not make a distinction between material functions of the human organism and the communicative functions of, for lack of a better term, the human mind. In an art historical sense, perhaps this concept should be articulated as human as multimedia. However, in seeking to transcend post-humanist discourse, I feel that the term multimedia is redundant if we are expressing human potentialities. It is redundant in that media is already plural. Thus the addition of the prefix multi- suggests that media inherently requires choice – towards one medium. I propose that humans are immediately and always have been present as media and are not reducible to any single medium. Following Ingold's illustrative metaphor, humans are one of the tangles of flows and webs of interrelated media, and thus we are a location for development and change and growth and discovery (2007).

My articulation of mediation may seem as if it gives primacy to 'practical' experience over the significance of sentiment in the world. Rather, though what I wish to emphasise is that the inter-mediated relationships between humedia and other media are not reducible to human emotive response. This is not to say that emotion is not a constituent aspect of humedia. Rather, I would assert that emotive responses are equally permeable, partible and sharable between intermediated entities. If agency is to be freed of its anthropocentric, egoistic shackles, then so too must emotive affect. Thus, assuming our place in the shared world as media is also an acknowledgement of participation and shared responsibility for emotion and sentiment.

Mediation and discovery

Coming to the discipline of archaeology, mediation has a significant impact on understandings of archaeological discovery. Under an anthropocentric, primary agency model, one could say she stubbed her toe. However, from the standpoint of mediation, this is a shared phenomenal exchange between the media of mutually non-exclusive, enmeshed entities – a human and a rock. Following Heideggerian theory, this mediation could be described as a moment of discovery as a growth of awareness of the potentialities of mediated participations. This is not meant to devalue the image of 'stubbing' or the associated sentiment. Rather, mediation highlights the narrative and poetic qualities of those images rather than the origination point of action or the ego-centricity of primary agency.

Applying this theory to archaeology it could be said that archaeology it is not so much about the archaeologist digging as it is an enmeshed intermediation of entities negotiating relationships in shared ecologies. This redefinition of archaeology allows for inclusion of digital media and digital lifeworlds within the scope of archaeological study (see *Metamedia* at Stanford 2007). Following the work and thought of Latour and Weibel considering groups of humans as things, it is not too far a step to include digitised avatars and enabled human expression in digital media and spaces within the scope of humans as media (Latour & Weibel 2005b). With this new understanding, archaeology could begin to be an applicable

mode of study within digital temporalities – studying, documenting, archiving, reconstructing and reimagining digital lifeworlds.

Archaeology and humedia

In Western education there is a general movement towards object-oriented learning. In following with this one could describe the growing fascination with archaeology as an interest in object-oriented argumentation. However, if we are to allow for full exploration of the potentialities of human lifeworlds in digital architectures, then we must turn away from the desire for manipulative correlations towards mediative correlations. Thus, archaeology can move from simply attempting to discern the potentiality of human choice and will through tracing the manipulation of objects. Archaeology could then instead explore evidence of mediated interrelationships of entities (Ingold, 2007). This will allow for a step beyond anthropocentric epistemologies which construct knowledge about the past through human action. Thus archaeology can embrace humans within enmeshed ecologies of mutually non-exclusive entities. Through this conception of humans as media, we can redirect archaeological enquiry away from anthropocentric epistemologies of the past and explore mediated narratives of experience of lifeworlds whether they are conceived of as past, present or future. The significance of this application of archaeology is that it allows for the development of archaeologies of 'traditional' media such as stone or pottery to be considered alongside archaeologies of new media such as the internet or other digital lifeworlds (see Metamedia at Stanford 2007). If the proposition of overcoming the modern invention of material culture is to be achieved, then this turn towards media can facilitate a transcendence of the material and the cultural in favour of an exploration of shared and mediated entities – unrestrained by sentience and unrestrained by physical form.

Concluding remarks

In this short article, I sought to explore some of the philosophical problems of the discourse of material culture. In particular, I elaborated on the discourse of object agency in order to illustrate many of the intellectual historical developments which confine understandings of humans and media in the world. I concluded with a consideration of contemporary scientific research on neuroprostheses and brain-computer interfaces and the implications for human epistemological relationships with modern material culture. I suggested that a turn towards an understanding of humans as enmeshed media in the world could solve the dichotomy between minds and bodies and materials while also preserving the subtleties of narrative and poetic expression within human experience.

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