

## Introduction

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Why objects? A title like this is likely to provoke a scatter of associations, so broad is its range of meanings: material things, art works, an aim (“the object of the exercise”), philosophy’s antithesis of the subject, the psychological “other,” objects of fetishism, political causes. Our aim is to produce new alignments among these different objects. Through the bringing together of this constellation of meanings, presented here from a range of different discourses (political theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy, art, literary and film theory), each of them, we believe, may shift focus, take on different resonances. If late modernity has been dominated by the crisis of the subject, the last decade, it seems to us, has witnessed a dramatic return of the object in new and multiple forms. Samuel Beckett predicted such a shift as early as the 1970s when he entitled one of his plays *Not I*, highlighting the overpowering “dull roar” of thoughts and words in the skull<sup>1</sup> as well as the servitude of these mental objects to a subject only able to grant them existence in negative terms (*not I*).

Many contemporary authors have picked up on Beckett’s prescient insights to explore the way all objects (things, others, words, concepts) only ever operate in a psychic space. Philosophers have argued that if belief maps the world, it is desire that targets it by providing us with objectives, things at which to aim (Wollheim 13). Rooted in desire, objects project both back and forward: back to the most foundational of human encounters (that of the infant with its first object of identification), forward to the objects (materi-

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1. “[S]he could still hear the buzzing . . . in the ears . . . dull roar in the skull . . . straining to hear . . . make something of it . . . and her own thoughts . . . make something of them . . . all - . . . what? . . . the buzzing? . . . yes . . . something buzzing in the brain . . . raving away on its own” (Beckett 217-20).

al, aesthetic, erotic) perpetually sought to protect the subject from the impossibility of loss. To talk about objects, whether material (“out there”) or the internal (psychic) objects they are linked to, is thus to broach the most primitive of all topics, to raise questions of primal confrontations.

As the papers in this volume demonstrate, the conjunction of the categories in our sub-title (the material, the psychic and the aesthetic) has particular relevance for a cultural investigation of late modernity. It is a conjunction also to be found, however, in one of the great texts of early modernity, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a play which incidentally gestures at the deeper historical roots of its concerns by setting the scene in ancient Athens. As we all know, Shakespeare’s play is an archetypal exploration of the relations of fantasy and desire. These psychic concerns, however, are subtly interwoven with their aesthetic and material-political correlates, all of which are laid out in a neat pattern of concentrically-circled, inter-connected plots, one within the other. In the first, outer layer is the plot of Theseus, Duke of Athens, and his lavish preparations for marriage with his rather reluctant betrothed. The second plot gives us two sets of Athenian lovers, whose role it is to follow the course of true love (which never does “run smooth”) until the comic resolution. Within these two realistic plots is the fantasy story of the fairies, Titania and Oberon, who mirror reality’s dissatisfactions by crossing each other’s desire at every turn. Finally, embedded within all this, like the kernel in the fruit, is a fourth plot, an unelaborated little *ur*-play put on by the local artisans to entertain the Duke. A crude attempt, both in acting and content, it is confined to two small scenes, presented like single images. In the first, two lovers, separated, whisper through a chink in a wall, with all the emphasis on the chink, represented by the character Wall holding up his fingers to form a hole. In the second scene, the lovers attempt to meet face to face, but after a misunderstanding involving a lion, end up committing separate suicide.

In this crude little sketch, Shakespeare is making a primitive point about objects which the elaborations of the outer plots have covered over – that love is sustained by a hole in a wall, the removal of which spells its end. The meeting of subject and object is possible only in fantasy. The object can only be glimpsed through a hole (in fragments) and then fleshed out by fantasy; as a “whole,” it is impossible. The hole and the wall, therefore, have protected the lovers from the traumatic encounter with the real of loss.

Many of the essays in this volume circle around the idea demonstrated in this little play, that culture is the product of a struggle between the too little and the too much, between what’s seen only through the chink in the wall

and what's experienced when it's removed. The point to be noted, however, is that Shakespeare's play as a whole positions the sketch in such a way as to emphasize what emerges from this struggle. After the performance, Theseus announces that in spite of being "palpable-gross," the play has "well beguiled / The heavy gait of night" (122) - has provided, in other words, a charm against the invading forces of darkness. This is the role of cultural objects: to "beguile."

Objects also, the play reminds us, lie at the primal intersection of humans and their environment. The artisans, dubbed by Puck "hempen home-spuns" (74) and "rude mechanicals, / That work for bread upon Athenian stalls" (79), sweat and slog to produce their theatrical piece, just as they do to earn a living. "Hard-handed men," they're described by Philostrate, the smooth Master of Revels, "that work in Athens here, / Which never labored in their minds till now; / And now have toiled their unbreathed memories / With this same play" (111). Their play, in fact, is presented as an extension of their manual working, labouring and toiling, with the vocabularies of their trades (as carpenter, joiner, bellows mender, tinker, etc.) carried over to emphasize the point. Nick Bottom the weaver, who plays the lead male Pyramus in the little play, calls on the Fates to "come, come / Cut thread and thrum" at his last hour (119). As communal artifact, their play is inseparable from what they make for their physical survival.

Bottom's weaving of cultural products recalls Marx's famous discussion of labour and production in the first volume of *Capital*. Woven cloth must be regarded, he argues, as a materialized objectification of bodily labour: "Yarn with which we neither weave nor knit is cotton wasted" (289). Living labour "awaken[s things] from the dead, change[s] them from merely possible into real and effective use-value" (289). Through labour, things are "infused with vital energy" for the performance of their functions (289). By setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature, human beings are acting on and changing the external world, and at the same time changing their own nature (283). Through these projections and introjections, we could say, all objects, both material and cultural, function at the crucial point of intersection of humans and their environment. At the same time, all objects, whether material or immaterial, acquire desirable metonymic status through their implication in a complex dialectic of desire that can be formally delineated without reference to their substantive content. A commodity, as Yannis Stavrakakis reminds us in his essay in this volume, is defined by Marx at the beginning of *Capital* as "an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of

whatever kind" (Marx 125). Crucially, however, "[t]he nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach or the imagination, makes no difference" (125).

This plasticity (of the drive) came to function as a cornerstone for the Freudian and Lacanian theorizations of the object. Absent cause of desire, object of the drive, both lure and obstacle, simultaneously lack and excess, the Freudian-Lacanian object sheds light on a variety of social attachments and hegemonic orders. Dave Lewis offers here a concise presentation of the way this particular object functions in Freud and Lacan's theorizations of the drive, using as an illustration Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*. Calum Neill discusses its place within fantasy - providing, incidentally, another theoretical model for the reading of the role of fantasy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Yannis Stavrakakis employs the same Lacanian orientation in his analysis of advertising and consumerism, an approach made possible by the homology between Marx's surplus-value and Lacan's notion of surplus-enjoyment, located at the heart of the latter's problematic of the object (Lacan, *Séminaire XVII* 19). If Marx was eventually to proceed in a different direction,<sup>2</sup> contemporary political theory has restored to central position the impossible/necessary object - embodying an ultimately unachievable fullness - in social and political life. Ernesto Laclau, for example, has repeatedly insisted on the deep connection between the desire for fullness informing the hegemonic relation - "making a [partial] object the embodiment of a mythical fullness" (115) - and the object of psychoanalysis. We are dealing, he argues, "not with casual or external homologies but with the same discovery taking place from two different angles - psychoanalysis and politics - of something that concerns the very structure of objectivity . . . The logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical" (116).

It has long been recognized that it is through the fetishism of the object that Marx meets Freud, a synthesis proposed by the earlier generation of Frankfurt theorists (Adorno, "Sociology and Psychology" 67-80).<sup>3</sup> Whether

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2. Slavoj Žižek's view is that Marx went on to disavow the paradoxical status of desire in favour of a "vulgar evolutionist dialectics of productive forces and the relation of production" (53).

3. For Adorno the structure of fetishism provides the pivotal mediation between capitalist production and the individual psyche in the sense that every psychological satisfaction depends on the social substitution of exchange value in the place of use value ("On the Fetish-Character" 279). Sexual and economic fetishism, he argues, are essentially the same thing; indeed, he goes as far as to argue that commodity

or not we should be talking about some sort of “identity” (as Laclau would have it) between psychoanalytic and political concepts of the object, however, is a matter of considerable debate - not least among the authors of this Introduction. The counter-argument runs something like this. For Marx, the value of a commodity resides not in its utility but in the amount of labour time required to produce it, a quality realised only through its exchange. But in the process of exchange, a social relation between producers takes on the appearance of an objective relation between things (products). This is what brings about the mystification of the commodity form - the transformation of a social relation among producers into a relation among objects. As with Freud, fetishism for Marx “arises from the form itself” (Marx 164). In contrast to psychoanalysis, therefore, where the focus is on the investment of excessive value in the object, Marxism is concerned with the failure of the “real” value of the object to be inscribed upon it, as well as with the process through which the phantasmatic value of exchange comes to be established in its place.

It would be facile to attempt a resolution of this fundamental difference over the question of the inscription of value upon the object. Rather more agreement, however, can be reached about the way that Marxism, psychoanalysis and contemporary political theory distance themselves (albeit in rather different ways) from postmodern reflections on the status of the object in the hyperreal world of late capitalism (Jameson 1-54). Within postmodernist theory, the object is eclipsed by representation, is drained of materiality - as is evident in Jean Baudrillard’s early critique of Marxian political economy and Saussurean linguistics. According to Baudrillard, writing in 1968, consumption should not be analysed as a material practice. Rather, it is a signifying structure, “*an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs*” (*The System of Objects* 200). To illustrate this, Baudrillard gives his well-known analysis of the objects in a room described in Georges Perec’s novel *Les choses*. These lush consumer items (“sign-objects”), he contends, are laden with references to each other, defined in terms of their difference from each other, like arbitrary signifiers, and bear no trace of their *symbolic* value, their relation to humans - as they would, say, in a novel by Balzac. For Baudrillard, therefore, the only way to move beyond a political economy grounded in need and to understand the commodity structure of consumer society is to argue that there is no longer use value as such, only exchange value.

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fetishism in the field of art finds its “exact correlative” in the psychological economy of the self (*Aesthetic Theory* 13).

Baudrillard insists that the arbitrariness of the sign resides not in the relationship between the signifier and the referent (object) but rather within the sign itself, between the signifier and the signified. Just as Baudrillard came to see use value as merely a projection of exchange value, he now argued (and here he went one step further than Lacan, who had sought to retain some role for the subject which was not wholly determined by language) that the referent is no more external to the sign than is the signified; both are internal to it, the referent/object being a projection of the sign itself. That is to say, what we are left with is not “reality” but a mere reality effect. Thus Baudrillard avoids the metaphysical illusion of a separation between the sign and the real, as the real-in-itself does not exist as an independent concrete reality but only as “the extrapolation of the excision (*decoupage*) established by the logic of the sign onto the world of things (onto the phenomenological universe of perception)” (“For a Critique” 87). The hyperreal world of consumer society and postmodernism, this volume attempts at several points to argue, makes the fundamental mistake of collapsing the real into the symbolic and thus abolishing the object completely. Although the capitalist utopia is predominantly a virtual utopia, as Stavrakakis puts it, the symbolic conditioning of desire cannot function without a real support (this volume 94, 96).

At first sight there might appear to be much in common between postmodernism and the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis developed in a number of the articles here. Certainly, the object of representation for psychoanalysis is always absent, its meaning not pre-given but constituted in the process of representation itself. But this by no means implies that the object is merely the effect of the symbolic. The object of psychoanalysis is a much more complex and ambiguous affair than this. As Themistoklis Katrios argues here, Freud’s late definition of childhood trauma (what “make[s] the most powerful contributions to the stamping of character” [this volume 76]) is that which is never remembered or repeated, and thus never enters the dynamics of representation. This not-repressed, Katrios argues, unapproachable by interpretation, makes its presence felt in the analytic situation as something missing, “a void in the network of representations” (78).

The notion of repression, key to the understanding of the unconscious, has been highly contentious in recent debates within psychoanalysis. The “essence of the process of repression,” wrote Freud, “lies, not in . . . annihilating the idea which represents an instinct [drive], but in preventing it from becoming conscious” (167). It is through the first act of primal repression, in fact, that the unconscious comes into being. The notion of repression therefore draws together the two essential characteristics of the psyche for

Freud, that is, that the unconscious consists of “ideas” or “representations,” and that these are linked to the drives. To designate the registration of the drives in the psyche, Freud coined the neologism *Repräsentanz* or “psychical representative.” As Paul Ricoeur puts it, in spite of the barrier separating the systems unconscious and conscious, there is something that links them, a “common structure [which] is precisely the function of *Repräsentanz*” (135). For Freud, then, the unconscious *is* representation in that it contains memory traces of past traumas and experiences; it is the psychical representative of the drives.

The difficulty with Freud’s formulation is that it compounds *Repräsentanz* - the psychical representative or expression - and *Vorstellung* - representation.<sup>4</sup> Lacan, for his part, insists on maintaining the separation of these two terms and on the need to acknowledge that they refer to two distinct levels of signification. Representation refers to an idea, and as ideas operate at the level of thought, thus to the level of the signifier. *Vorstellung*, on the other hand, refers to that which is represented by signifiers but not the signifiers themselves. *Vorstellung* is a real presence that can never be rendered into words or images, and therefore operates at the level of the unthinkable, the unnameable, the unspeakable (Fink 227). Freud had shown in *The Interpretations of Dreams* that the complex significations that constitute the dream are in fact the disguised representations of an unconscious wish or desire. The desire itself is not directly present, but must be deciphered from the various signifiers of the dream. At the same time, however, there is an impenetrable core to the dream, the navel of the dream, which he saw as being uninterpretable. This is what Lacan sees as *Vorstellung*, that which is missing in the symbolic and returns in the real. There is always a core of the real that is missing; all other representations are no more than attempts to fill that gap. In this sense *Vorstellung* designates the original lost object or *das Ding* (in Lacan’s later formulations the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire), the implications of which are explored by Sean Homer in his paper on filmic representations of the Roma. Challenging the critical reception of films by Roma directors that emphasises their representational authenticity and truth status, Homer shows how Tony Gatlif’s acclaimed film *Gadjo di-*

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4. The compound term used by Freud was *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* (ideational representative) (179). *Vorstellung* is generally translated into English as “idea” but can also be translated as “representation.” All mental states, therefore, are either ideas or ideas plus affect. But whereas Freud speaks of unconscious ideas, unconscious representations, there can “strictly speaking” be no unconscious affects (179). Repression severs the original idea, representation, from its affect.

lo (1997) problematises the issue of representing *the* Roma. In advanced consumer societies the subject is increasingly driven by a desire to experience the real, a moment of authenticity, but is condemned, like Gatlif's crazy stranger, to return repetitively to the site of an absence "in the hope of obtaining the *real Thing*, and yet forever missing it" (Fink 228).

But what, after all, about subjects? In focusing on how objects are used to make meaning and shape fantasy, are we not simply shifting the terms around? Several papers in this volume would suggest otherwise. In his re-reading of Hegel, Slavoj Žižek calls for a new and radical displacement of the Kantian subject as actively synthesizing (conferring meaning on) content. The Hegelian subject as cleansed substance (Lacan's  $\$$ ) is thus not the agent but the site of deployment of the object's potential, of the object/System's "autopoietic self-organization" (this volume 24). This new formulation has nothing to do with a mega-subject controlling the dialectical process, but on the contrary, at its most radical, allows for the emergence of a "pure subject *qua* void" (26). Within the terms of late modernity's culture of consumption, Hegel's (and Žižek's) digestive metaphor seems more relevant than ever. What it allows, Žižek argues, is that we "turn around" the standard critical reading of the Hegelian Substance-Subject as thoroughly constipated (retaining the swallowed content) and let the object drop. Such a Hegelian move allows for the timely release of the other from the self, of nature-as-object from the voracity of human appropriations. To "let nature go," therefore, may be our greatest potential. "*The supreme moment of the subject's freedom*," as Žižek puts it here, "*is to set free its object*" (24).

In similar terms, Simon Critchley takes a stand here (through the poetry of Fernando Pessoa and Wallace Stevens) against the subject's obfuscations and mystifications of our relation to objects and argues for the need to see things as they seem, without "meaning." Poetry, he writes here, "produces felt variations in the appearances of things that return us to the understanding of things that we endlessly pass over in our desire for knowledge" (122). Of all art forms, it was perhaps the still life painting which drew attention to the release of nature from subjective appropriations. "Is this not," Žižek asks in this regard, "the very definition of the birth of modern art proper, [that it should be] no longer subordinated to the task of representing spiritual reality" (this volume 23)? Following a similar trajectory, Sylvia Karastathi explores the way still life paintings of the Dutch School destabilize hierarchies between subjects and objects, drawing attention to the ousting of the human subject from the centre by the mass of things that impinge upon it. Peter Greenaway, she continues, gives this early modern



point a postmodern twist by situating his films in the cross-fire of debate between an allegorical (iconographic) reading of material objects, and its refusal - an insistence on the paintings (and his own filmic objects) as pure visual surface. Indeed, the implication seems to be, these two seemingly antithetical arguments are in fact part of the same phenomenon. As pure surface, objects that refuse our constant striving towards figuration, that cannot be co-opted in the service of the subject's self-consciousness, only serve to remind us of our own otherness to ourselves. From a similar angle in her essay on contemporary Iranian cinema, Joan Copjec argues that what causes anxiety and shame is the experience not of loss, but of there being an "unassumable object which sticks to us like a semi-autonomous shadow" (this volume 173). Shame "exposes the unobjectifiable object which decenters me from myself" (180).

Another way of viewing this shift is provided by theories of the object in post-Kleinian psychoanalysis, a point underlying the papers by Jacobus, Parkin-Gounelas and Katrios. Psychology and philosophy have long since recognized that all perception is apperception, that the object which escapes mental or psychic investment is a contradiction in terms. But as Ruth Parkin-Gounelas points out, much recent Kleinian theory has helped us understand the way psychoanalysis has focused too much on the projective uses of objects. Christopher Bollas, for example, has called for the need to understand the "evocative integrity" of internal objects, their ability to "structure us differently." It is this power that lies at the root of aesthetic experience, a moment of psychic intensity in which, according to Bollas and others such as Meg Harris Williams, it is the *subject* which experiences a sense of being "used" by (internal) objects - very much as poets have traditionally felt themselves under the control of the Muse (Parkin-Gounelas, this volume 147-48). Like other recent object-relations theorists, Bollas is referring not to some stable or knowable object of fixed identifications, but rather to operations within a psychic space which is always already inter-personal or other-directed, in a complex dialectic of the real and the phantasmatic. In this respect, it could be argued, our understanding of their work has brought Kleinian and Lacanian theory closer today than ever before.

In a different but related vein, many of the essays here follow a phenomenological view of the life-world's organic agency. Husserl's challenge to Kant on the subject's access to objects echoes throughout these pages - in Peter Costello's descriptions of the mutual interpretations of people and objects, in Ruth Parkin-Gounelas's return to Heidegger's (and Lacan's) descriptions of the jug, and in Mary Jacobus's musings, via Merleau-Ponty, on

the way clouds challenge the phenomenology of the visible. Like several other essays in the volume which are concerned with the representation of the visible and the spatial, Jacobus turns to recent theories of painting, in this case those of Hubert Damisch, which emphasize the way painting combines the material and the ephemeral, moves from representation to illusion. For Constable, she argues, clouds provided an opportunity to reflect on fundamental problems of space, depth and form, as well as to offer a “language for inner activity” (this volume 223).

Over the last decade, objects have demonstrated a new resilience or defiance, repudiating their status (as Jina Politi clarifies here) as “mytheme[s] of Origins” (133), demanding a different distribution of the visible and invisible, and parading their “unobjectifiability,” to use the terms of Joan Copjec’s argument. In the autumn of 2001, a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* was dedicated to what its guest editor Bill Brown calls “thing theory,” which examines material culture and its representations, in particular in relation to the Modernist aesthetic.<sup>5</sup> Our volume carries forward this project (and that of others such as Arjun Appadurai in his influential volume on *The Social Life of Things* [1986])<sup>6</sup> through a more specifically focused preoccupation with objects rather than things, the products of labour and creativity, of sensation and cognition, of phantasmatic investment. Confronting the absence of cherished concepts of interiority, the impossibility of self-consciousness, the late modern subject is coming to terms with the experience of self-objectification - a condition, in the final analysis, beyond the terms of the debate over whether objects are constituted by or constitutive of subjects. Poised as it is upon the paradox of the phantasmatic real, of immaterial materiality, late-capitalist globalized culture confronts us with an aporia. Through its capacity to enchant, channelling desire in very specific directions, contemporary consumer culture has effected a significant shift in the way the social bond is structured. It is this enchantment which constitutes its

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5. Much of Brown’s work, as well as that of others like Douglas Mao (*Solid Objects*, 1998), has centred on authors such as Woolf, Henry James, Pound and Stevens, and on Modernism’s emphasis on “how inanimate objects constitute human subjects” (Brown, “Thing Theory” 7). An early example of Brown’s work was his essay on “The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)” (1999). A more recent volume is his *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003), which gives a useful list of publications in this field over the past couple of decades (190-91n16).

6. For an assessment of Appadurai’s work, see the review essay by Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou in this volume.

power. The dilemma, therefore, is how to de-mystify the lure of objects, remain alert to their possible insidious manipulations, and deflate their fantasmatic promise of fullness, without renouncing the partial drive - how, that is, to sublimate the struggle between excess and lack, whose beguilement constitutes the very fabric of our humanity.

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