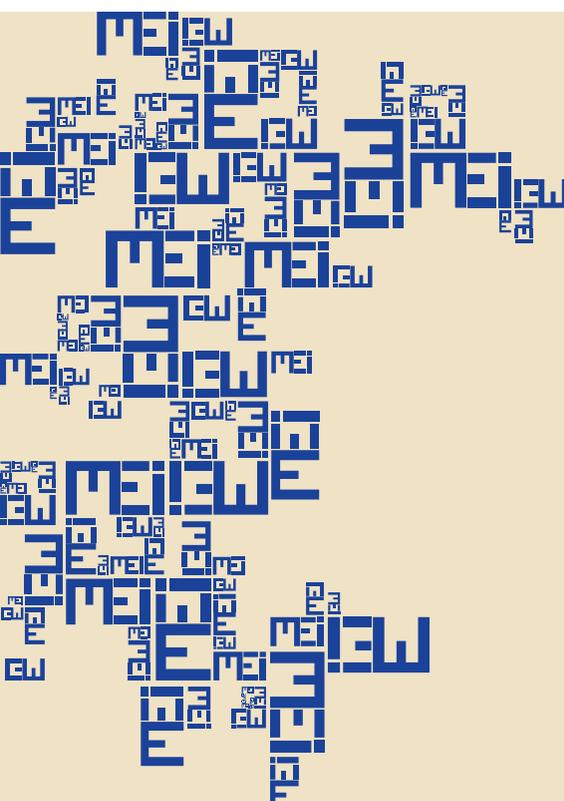


OBJETS & COMMUNICATION

Sous la direction de Bernard Darras
& de Sarah Belkhamsa

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OBJETS & COMMUNICATION

MEI N°30-31

L'Harmattan

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Monnaie Kushana, représentation de Miïro

Source : Hinnels, J., 1973. *Persian Mythology*. Londres : Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd.

Médiation et information, tel est le titre de notre publication. Un titre dont l'abréviation MEI correspond aux trois lettres de l'une des plus riches racines des langues indo-européennes. Une racine si riche qu'elle ne pouvait être que divine. C'est ainsi que le dieu védique Mitra en fut le premier dépositaire. Meitra témoigne de l'alliance conclue entre les hommes et les dieux. Son nom évoque l'alliance fondée sur un contrat. Il est l'ami des hommes et de façon plus générale de toute la création. Dans l'ordre cosmique, il préside au jour en gardant la lumière. Il devient Mithra le garant, divin et solaire pour les Perses et il engendre le mithraïsme dans le monde grec et romain.

Retenir un tel titre pour une revue de communication et de médiation était inévitable. Dans l'univers du verbe, le riche espace sémantique de mei est abondamment exploité par de nombreuses langues fondatrices. En védique, **mitra** signifie "ami ou contrat". En grec, **ameibein** signifie "échanger", ce qui donne naissance à **amoiaios** "qui change et se répond". En latin, quatre grandes familles seront déclinées : **mutare** "muter, changer, mutuel...", **munus** "qui appartient à plusieurs personnes", mais aussi "cadeau" et "communiquer", **meare** "passer, circuler, permission, perméable, traverser..." et enfin **migrare** "changer de place".

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Object-relics and their effects : For a neo-animist paradigm

Betti MARENKO¹

Our relationship with objects is far less clear-cut than a rational materialism predicated upon a subject/object distinction would have us believe. On the contrary, it is a messy and unpredictable one, electrified by emotional investments, often anxiety-ridden, never innocent or neutral, and always implicated in powerful identity-forming practices. This essay examines instances of contemporary animism in our relationship with object-relics by mapping the symbolic and affective investments these objects are charged with. The hypothesis is that their borderline ontological status defies simple categorization and that it might be better examined through the lens of a neo-animist paradigm able to express the complex, relational and negotiated engagement between us and the material world. The belief in the thaumaturgical power of object-relics is a persistent if irrational cultural that, precisely because it operates transversally and adheres to a wide array of commodities, can be the entry point for an investigation into how the meaning of things around us is generated and produces tangible effects in the making (and unmaking) of subjectivities. It is my intention to question the distinction between animate and inanimate objects, to privilege instead their opaque and enigmatic status, and the way in which they act as clusters of excess of meaning, as strange attractors of a surplus of significance quintessentially irreducible.

KEYWORDS : ANIMISM, RELIC, SURPLUS VALUE, BODY

Notre relation aux objets est bien moins claire qu'un certain matérialisme rationnel fondé sur la distinction sujet/objet voudrait nous le faire croire. Elle est au contraire instable et imprévisible, électrisée par les investissements émotionnels, souvent suscitée par l'anxiété, jamais innocente ni neutre et toujours impliquée dans de puissantes pratiques de formation de l'identité. Cet exposé examine les cas d'animisme contemporain que l'on observe dans notre relation avec les objets-reliques en cartographiant les investissements symboliques et affectifs dont ces objets sont chargés. Notre hypothèse est que leur statut ontologique borderline défie toute catégorisation simple et qu'il serait peut-être préférable de l'examiner à travers le prisme d'un paradigme néo-animiste capable d'exprimer l'engagement complexe, relationnel et négocié qui nous lie au monde matériel. La croyance dans le pouvoir thaumaturgique des objets-reliques est un topos culturel tenace, bien qu'irrationnel, qui, précisément parce qu'il opère de manière transversale et s'applique à un large éventail de produits, peut constituer le point d'entrée d'une enquête sur la manière dont le sens des choses qui nous entourent est généré et ses effets tangibles sur la formation (et la destruction) des subjectivités. Mon intention est précisément de questionner la distinction entre objets animés et inanimés en privilégiant leur caractère opaque et énigmatique et la manière dont ils agissent en tant que clusters d'excès de sens et étranges attracteurs d'un surplus de signification éminemment irréductible.

MOTS-CLÉS : ANIMISME, RELIQUE, SURPLUS, CORPS

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Paper

‘What are we going to do now?’ asked Tommy.

‘I don’t know what you’re thinking of doing,’ said Pippi, ‘but as for me, I’m not one who can take things easy. I happen to be a turnupstuffer, so of course I never have a free moment.’

‘What did you say you were?’ asked Annika.

‘A turnupstuffer.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Tommy.

‘Somebody who finds the stuff that turns up if only you look, of course. What else would it be?’ said Pippi, sweeping together all the flour on the floor into a little pile. ‘The whole world is filled with things that are just waiting for someone to come along and find them, and that’s just what a turnupstuffer does.’

‘What sort of things?’ asked Annika.

‘Oh, all sorts,’ said Pippi. ‘Gold nuggets and ostrich feathers and dead mice and rubber bands and tiny little grouse, and that kind of thing.’

Pippi Longstocking
A.Lindgren

Introduction

The objects we surround ourselves with are always intriguing, eloquent even when they are silent and still. Objects are materic-semiotic knots where matter and meaning converge, sites where sense(s) coalesce thickly, thin out, only to stratify and intensify once more. Objects are always saturated with cultural signification, in between being pure semiotic texts and brute clusters of tangibility. Our relationship with them is complex. We traffic in signs and symbols as much as in matter. It is in order to understand objects that we classify them. We do it by skinning them of their layered complexity and by isolating them from their background. This process often ends up with levelling their polisemy into manageable chunks, so that we can think them as separate entities that are, quite literally, *in front of us*.² However, this process, insofar as it radiates a delusional rationalism, tends also to annihilate the surplus of meaning, the excess of non reducible signification that objects, some more than others, possess.

Every object is susceptible to investments (and divestments) of meaning, of acquiring (and losing) a specific aura, of becoming encrusted with (or stripped off) affects, of enriching (or reducing) our emotional world. This has to do not

² The word *object* come from the Latin *ob-jectum*, literally “that which is thrown in front of me” where that me is taken to be the subject (latin *sub-jectum*). Object is therefore something presented to the senses.

simply with their variable biographies³ but, even more so, with the ways in which they become our own extensions, in a process that turns *stuff* into a prosthetic arrangement without which we would not even begin to be who we are. Indeed, our position in the world is always mediated and filtered by our relationship with objects. Through them we understand ourselves better; they give us the elements for a cartography of our own mutable identity. However, this relationship is never neutral. It instigates passions, desires and obsessions. It can describe eccentric orbits. It provokes, it flares, it coagulates affects, all the while carving paths of identity. This has not merely to do with aspiration or status. On the contrary, there is a sacramental aspect in our relationship with objects, a cult aspect even, that cannot be reduced to a mere matter of status. The constant dialogue with the objects in our life can often be compulsive, frantic and irrational, bringing us elation and comfort, as well as manifesting our obsessions and fixations. Ultimately, objects create behaviours. And it is the behaviours emerging from a peculiar family of objects that this paper intends to address.

Ex-votos. Celebrities' memorabilia. Holy relics of saints. Donors' eggs. Pieces of the Berlin Wall. Orlan's body fluids. World Trade Centre wreckage. Anti-wrinkle serums. What do these objects have in common? More to the point, are these elements of a bizarre *Wunderkammern* strictly objects? Can we call non living body parts, such as holy relics, "objects"? What about *living* body parts, like a donor's eggs destined to be implanted in another womb and, if successful, to grow into a new life? What is their ontological status? More specifically, how does this category of objects, what we shall define as contemporary *object-relics*, produce meaning? Can magic be invoked to capture the power and fascination they elicit in us?

One of the first questions that prompted me to write this paper was: How inanimate are objects? Taking into account the extent to which objects aggregate an enormous wealth of symbolic, affective and desiring investments, how do they communicate and produce effects? How do they come to have a life of their own?

In an attempt to answer some of these questions, I shall start with some definitions of fetishism and animism. I will then analyse the ambivalent status of holy relics, reflecting in particular on their surplus of value. I shall then propose a neo-animist paradigm able to articulate the emergence of a non-dualistic, non-representational, affects-based relationship with objects, an expressive animism able to account for the power of object-relics that, like constantly switched-on chargers, irradiate their unquantifiable and irreducible surplus of signification. This neo-animist paradigm is able to account for the emergence of objects as relational practices that continuously redesign our intellectual and emotional

³ On the notion of biography of objects cfr. Appadurai (1986)

landscape. Here it emerges the relational and negotiated character of objects that cannot be apprehended without placing them in the horizon of the practices that constitute them.

On fetishism and animism. Some definitions

Feticcio, *fetisso* or *feitiço* ('charm, sorcery') is a word used by 16th-century Portuguese seamen and merchants who came in contact with people of western Africa. It referred to those objects, such as charms, talismans and idols, worshipped by the locals and whose devotional status placed them above and beyond trading. However, other sources claim that the word may come from the Latin *facticus* ('artificial') or *fanum*, *fatum*, *fari* ('magic, enchanted thing'). Either way, the etymology of the word conveys the sense of enchantment emanating from these objects and the shared belief in their powers.

To say that objects have magical properties is nothing new. This is Marx's own territory.⁴ Precisely to make sense of the magical properties displayed by objects Marx introduces the notion of commodity fetishism: "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx). Marx's intuition was that there is something inscrutable, mysterious, enigmatic and downright magic and necromantic about commodities. Of course, what he was talking about was the schism between use value and exchange value, and the invisibility of the process of production. The fetishism of commodities is here taken as the apex of capitalistic consumption, when objects become alive, manifest an independent soul and begin a life of their own. In Marxist terms fetishism expresses therefore a sort of universal magic that impregnates objects, detaches them from the process of production and establishes them as independent, forever unattainable, entities.⁵

In becoming commodities objects become also autonomous. They literally take over our desires. Walter Benjamin, who was to give passionate voice to this metamorphosis in his description of Paris's *passages*, the temples of a modern new religion of goods, writes about the phantasmagoria of 'things' that traps human desire in a vertiginous spiralling dance with no end precisely because it hides the true origins of goods. For Benjamin, a consumer item "becomes a magical object, insofar as the labor stored up in it comes to seem supernatural and sacred at the very moment when it can no longer be recognized as labor." (Benjamin 1999:669). Following Marx, Benjamin talks about a "spectral objectivity" of things which

4 As well as Freud's of course, whose work however I will not discuss here.

5 It is certainly no coincidence that Marx developed his ideas on fetishism while in London in the mid 1800s where he witnessed the spectacular Great Exhibition (1851)

are now terminally animated. This spectral objectivity signifies ultimately that objects have assumed a life of their own.⁶

However, there is another way of understanding the animation that takes over objects, one that has to do with the anthropological notion of animism and that suggests that objects (and plants, and animals...) are imbued with life, with a soul, with an *anima*⁷. Could it be said that animism is the specular face of fetishism? Animism is probably one of the oldest and most widespread explanations of how the world works. As a conceptual paradigm, it has remarkable appeal. What if all the objects that surround us were to possess intelligence, a memory, maybe even a conscious will? What if they were able to affect us, to interact with us? What if they had *agency*? Clearly, this borders on Action Network Theory (ANT) territory.⁸

On relational epistemology and ontology

Anthropologist Nurit Bird-David offers an interesting perspective for a reconceptualization of animism. Taking a critical stance towards the canonical corpus of literature on animism, where animism is assessed as a failed epistemology, as an error or, at best, as an immature stage in the development of individual and society⁹, she argues instead for a relational notion of animism, able to account for its composite, pluralistic and situated aspects.

If the object of modernist epistemology is a totalizing scheme of separated essences, approached ideally from a separate viewpoint, the object of this animistic knowledge is understanding relatedness from a related point of view within the shifting horizons of the related viewer. Knowledge in the first case is having,

6 Tellingly, in her essay on the role of memory in Benjamin, Esther Leslie writes that in Benjamin "commodities are exposed as modern relics" (Leslie 1999:107).

7 The term animism is indebted to British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, the founding father of anthropology who first introduced it in 1871 in his seminal work *Primitive Culture* to describe a primitive stage of religious evolution. The positivistic overtones of this initial definition and its hierarchical implications are evident. The way I use the term animism here is to indicate the belief in non-human souls.

8 Action Network Theory purports the capacity of objects to have agency. Here agency does not coincide with life. See Latour (2005).

9 In her review, Bird-David examines animism in the context of the history of anthropology from Edward B. Tylor (*Primitive Culture* New York: Harper and Row, 1958) to Stewart Guthrie (*Faces in the clouds: A new theory of religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) as well as Durkheim (*The elementary forms of religious life* New York: Free Press, 1915) and Levi-Strauss (*Totemism* Boston: Beacon Press, 1962). The common denominator here is that animism characterizes both children and the primitives who are considered the best examples of animists, insofar as they are both unable to distinguish animate from inanimate, and they both have a rather delirious and deluded perception of the world.

acquiring, applying and improving representations of things in-the-world. Knowledge in the second case is developing the skills of being in-the-world with other things, making one's awareness of one's environment and one's self finer, broader, deeper, richer etc. Knowing, in the second case, grows from and is maintaining relatedness with neighboring others (...) Against "I think, therefore I am" stand "I relate, therefore I am" (Bird-David 1999:77).

She uses this relational epistemology to explain what happens when "we animate the computers we use, the plants we grow and the cars we drive" (Bird-David 1999:78). By reframing objects relationally, we learn "what they do in relation to what we do, how they respond to our behaviour, how they act towards us, what their situational and emergent behaviour (rather than their constitutive matter) is" (ibid). This position echoes anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's seminal work on Melanesian cultures. For Strathern there is a substantial difference between the Western and the Melanesian notion of the self. In the latter, individuals "far from being regarded as unique entities (...) contain a generalized sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them" (Strathern 1988:13). Briefly, in this perspective, any individual is defined by the total sum of his/her relations with others. It is worth remarking at this point how this collective 'otherness' is made up by humans as well as things: objects, animals, minerals, plants, natural events and so forth. Hence, there is an entire ecology of relationships, each of which will play a part in the constitution of the subject. On this ground, animism can be therefore reconfigured in terms of a 'relational ontology', that is, an ontology characterized by mutuality, emergence, situatedness and interobjectivity.¹⁰

On contemporary animism: Do objects have an *anima*?

Objects are never simply *there*. Objects are watching us. Anthropologist Franco La Cecla, an acute observer of the fluid narratives embodied in everyday objects, writes that the more objects proliferate, the more our culture pretends that they are dead, professing "*a strange metaphysics of neutrality and of non efficacy of things that it calls 'materialism'*" (La Cecla 1998:42). He defines materialism as the "*fearful precaution in front of the dangers of a world in which objects may be "singular", thus animated*" (ibid.). It is as if even seriality could not quite, no matter how hard it tries, prevent objects from expressing their soul.

¹⁰ With an appropriate wide range of references including chaos theory, Donna Haraway and Spinoza. On interobjectivity see Landowski E., Marrone G. (eds) 2002.

Is there a contemporary version of animism we can think of? How is animism expressed in contemporary objects? And in design? A significant signal in this direction is found in what architect and designer Andrea Branzi has written to mark the opening of the Milan Triennale Design Museum in 2007. In his review of the seven thematic clusters of the Triennale¹¹, the first of which is aptly called The Theatre of Animism, Branzi describes animism as the specificity and perhaps the very core of the success of Italian design. He says: “Our design (which has never had a unique style or a sole working methodology) uses technology for its artistic possibilities, and art for its technological possibilities. Its project philosophy maintains traces of Latin animism and pre-Roman mysteric culture which attributed to every object a soul as well as an exorcizing function and not just a role in utility and aesthetic.” For Branzi this specificity is actually what distinguishes Italian design from the rest of the world. He continues: “In Italy household objects, tools and interior design elements are co-protagonists of a bigger story, of superior events linked to culture, anthropology, religion and politics, to the point that our design is a fundamental part of the Italian history. It is design that offers a wealth of information about national patterns of behaviours and ways of thinking.” The Theatre of Animism brings together the notion of the home as a stage (where objects are like actors interacting with people and with other objects) with the idea that objects are our living interlocutors. Household objects are akin to ‘domestic pets’ capable of protecting the inhabitants from evil spirits and wrongdoers. They are the recipients of affections, companions, repositories of memories and emotions. In short, they are equals. Or, to use Bruno Latour, and his ANT terminology, ‘non living agencies’.

While Branzi refers to Italian design and the household objects that have come to epitomize it¹², this paper pursues more broadly the idea that a renewed conceptualization of animism might be used as a lens through which to look at the peculiar category of objects that makes up our *Wunderkammern* of object-relics. These are objects that act as our interlocutors and exercise power on our affective sphere. These are objects that, having witnessed extraordinary historical moments, are called upon to recount them *ad infinitum* (e.g. World Trade Centre wreckage or pieces of the Berlin Wall). These are objects into which we pour needs, desire, emotions and hopes for a better future (e.g. donors’ eggs or anti-wrinkle serums). These, finally, are objects that we imbue with special thaumaturgical powers (e.g. holy relics of saints or their contemporary equivalent, the grotesque artistry of Orland’s corporeal fluids for sale). Ultimately, these are objects called upon to perform as events. Culturally we believe in their capacity to take on board the qualities and affects of their owners; to be imprinted with a symbolic significance bordering on

¹¹ In a special issue of the magazine “L’Europeo” for Triennale Design Museum titled “Le Sette Ossessioni del Design Italiano” (The Seven Obsessions of Italian Design), pp. 45-52. My translation.

¹² See for instance the anthropomorphism of Alessi kitchenware (see Fabbri 1994). However, it is important to distinguish animism from anthropomorphism and not to collate them.

the hysterical¹³; to be stratified with layers of memory-based connotations. Several categories of bodily remains (entire skeletons, skulls, bones, teeth, hair, skin and so on) come back as objects imbued with a social life, packed with religious, cultural, political, scientific and aesthetic meanings. If their liminal status equips these 'objects' with a poignant significance for any reflection on death (and therefore on life itself), it is also true that they are particularly placed for an understanding of the process by which some objects are permeated with emotional significance thus acting as triggers for processes of constitution of subjectivity.

The ambivalent relic: a zone of indeterminacy

It makes sense then to begin my exploration of object-relics by referring to the cultural location of holy relics in Christianity. It would certainly be a mistake to think of them as vestiges of a distant and superstitious past. This might help us for instance to decode the ways in which Orlan's sacralised body fluids and the responses, practices and behaviours they elicit are, say, any different from the venerated relics of Saint Therese de Lisieux. Unsurprisingly, Orlan has never made a mystery of her appropriation of the religious iconography¹⁴ that provides the context for the elevation of fragments of her own flesh, tissues and fat (by-products of the surgical operations she underwent), to the status of art object-relics, emblematic of martyrdom, consecration and cult.

As I am writing this, as recently as October 2009, the relics of Saint Therese de Lisieux have been touring the UK, attracting crowds of thousands who queued for hours to be able to touch the glass case that contains the wooden casket that contains the sealed alabaster box inside which are preserved the remains of a thigh and other bone fragments of Saint Therese. Nobody can actually see the object of their veneration. They can only gaze upon the tangible encasement of their meta-belief, with a disquieting effect of *mise en abyme* that, more than offering glimpses of the holy body, it should (and does) tell us something about our contemporary sensibility, and the practices, and rituals we engage with in relation to these objects. Obviously, even today, relics are significant or, better to say, they are culturally allowed to be significant. They are believed to be powerful. They are believed to be magic and certainly they produce tangible effects.

As scholars of the cult of the relics (Brown 1982; Geary 1986) have pointed out, to understand this cult means not only to grasp something profound about our relationship with the dead and their bodies, but also to understand how a culture handles the relationship between life and death, and how this is manifest within the cultural and social aspects of a given historical time. Whereas in the past

13 A lock of hair from Elvis Presley auctioned in 2002 for \$115,000. Marilyn Monroe's «Happy Birthday Mr. President» Dress sold in 1999 for \$1,267,500.

14 See her famous work/performance *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* (1990 – 1993).

the cult, promotion and traffic of relics had clear socio-economic implications as it was tightly linked with acquisition of prestige, power, control and, ultimately, with economic revenue¹⁵, what I wish to investigate here focuses on issues of boundaries, specifically the culturally situated and ever-shifting boundaries between ‘body’ and ‘thing’.

As philosopher Roberto Esposito (2007) reminds us, it was classic civil law that stipulated the distinction between human body and thing. This distinction emerges from the Roman *summa division* between *persona* and *res* according to which the body cannot belong to anyone, neither to others nor to oneself, as it is something one *is*, rather than something one *owns*. Yet, there is a (remarkably wide) grey area where one finds entities that are certainly not things, but not quite persons either, such as embryos, ova, gametes, corpses, aborted foetuses (the latter likely to become hospital thrash) and so on. If any proof of these entities’ uncertain ontological status was needed, it can be found in the intricate law disputes that rise from any attempt to define clearly their status. Although this paper is not concerned with ownership of body parts, some of the questions that Esposito asks show how complicated the matter is: When exactly does a body become a corpse and a foetus become a person? Can it be said that before and after the “finite segment of individual life” a being returns to the status of thing? (Esposito 2007:115). Shall we talk in terms of “not-yet-person” and “no-longer-person”? More relevant is the idea that the increasingly sliding boundaries between the realms of the animal, vegetable and mineral under the combined pressure of technology and economy, points to a “new zone of indeterminacy” (Esposito 2007:118) where the ancient Roman division between person and thing is both confirmed and disavowed. It is precisely to this zone of indeterminacy that I wish to turn my attention now.

The category of the relic (or corporeal remains) is used by anthropologist Adriano Favole (2003) to look at the social life of bodies after death. As a paradigm, it serves him to bring together several fields of investigation, namely ethnography, anthropology and biopolitics, within an understanding of the cultural coding bodies are subjected to after death. For the purpose of this paper, this paradigm is useful to assess the relevance, influence and means of communication of objects whose ontological status lies in between different realms.

In fact, something that may be said of the family of objects listed above is that they all possess a borderline status in between different realms, for example, between the realms of living and non living things, between past and future, between here and elsewhere, between the visible and the invisible. The object-relic

¹⁵ The sphere of influence of relics expanded also beyond these realms. As Geary reports (1986) Charles the Great made compulsory the practice of searing oaths on relics, thus extending the function and the meaning of relics into the legal sphere. Also, as the medieval trafficking of relics fostered an industry, it became crucial to be able to acquire or to “discover” ever new relics.

must therefore be understood as a bridge of embodied memory straddling two worlds, as a mediator between presence and absence: a presence (its own) and an absence (skilfully and powerfully evoked).¹⁶ In describing the use of bodily residues in shamanic rituals, philosopher Jose Gil evokes this dialectic between presence and absence: powers are present precisely because there is an absence of signification. He writes that relics “hold tamed energies inside them” (Gil 1998:102). These ‘little things’, literally storages of energy, are in themselves insignificant. Their potency is directly related to, and expressed through, the contrast between their absence of signification and the presence of a power hidden within.

As pure rejects, remainders, tiny bits unrelated to anything whole but removed through sudden separation, these residues symbolize nothing, not a body, not a force or spirit, but present themselves rather as the outcome of the dissolution itself of the symbolic function. (...). This process of dissolution of the symbolic function, for which the residues are these “little things”, demonstrates the necessity, inasmuch as it can be imagined, for a material base for the floating signifier. And this, by the way, would make the sorcerer able to manipulate it. The little things would thus be the points of convergence for two series that disappear into it: a semantic function and a set of gestures. In this way the residue becomes the practical operator during a rite, a connecting lever between a number of energy apparatuses, as well as the store of memories of meaning and experience used by the person officiating. So they are not things, signifiers, or meanings, but they can in turn be any of them or all three at the same time, like the human body that they are immediately related to: the energy they carry is transmitted by contact, incorporation, and assimilation to the great sign exchanger (Gil 1998:102)¹⁷.

Take for instance the way pieces of the Berlin Wall or wreckage of the World Trade Centre (WTC) have undergone a process of transformation to become, respectively, the hunted souvenirs of an epochal transition, to the point of spawning a lucrative market of fakes¹⁸ or, as in the case of the WTC, have acquired status as potent icons of memory, transformation and resilience. In November 2009, a

¹⁶ See also Peter Brown's notion of *präsentia* i.e. the physical, tangible, yet invisible presence of the holy within the relic ensured by a strictly policed tension between proximity and distance (Brown 1982; also in Candlin F. and Guins R. (eds) 2009)

¹⁷ To use Gil's remarks in order to look at our family of object-relics means also to stress the ritualistic set-up of their usage.

¹⁸ Knight B. “Chipping away at Berlin Wall souvenir myths” 2009

new Navy assault ship, the USS New York, built with 7.5 tonnes of steel recovered from the WTC arrived in New York City¹⁹. Not only was this event reported by emphasizing the cathartic effect of turning tragedy and pain into remembrance and honour; tellingly, in describing this portentous process of recycling, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg described the ship as “*literally made from the heart and soul of the city that has sacrificed so much*”. Wreckage becomes vessel, tragedy becomes tribute, and the bridge that links them is the belief that matter indeed possesses an *anima*.

But how can we account for this surplus of signification? I must turn my attention to the *value* of relics.

The surplus value of object-relics

As Gil (1998) points out, relics signify nothing. Relics are the zero degree of value. What is certain is that theirs is not a symbolic value. Similarly, their powers are not symbolic. On the contrary, as the entanglement of myth and matter they are, relics are the opposite of a symbolic representation of the holy body they descend from. Even though they appear to be functioning metonymically, they do not represent or symbolize the whole/holy body. They *are* the whole/holy body.

There is therefore a marked differential between what these objects are and what they stand for. They possess an added value, a surplus of value and it is precisely this added value that has the power to engage at an affective level with the user. But where does this added worth come from? According to Patrick Geary (1986) holy relics have no other value apart from the value bestowed upon them by a specific set of beliefs. Therefore the transition from mere human remains to sacred relics becomes particularly relevant. Often performed through public rituals whose role was to ascertain the identity of the relics and to confirm their supernatural powers and their ability to perform miracles, this transition in value expressed the fact that the object is now incorporating a whole new set of parameters from which its value hinges.

In this regard, discussing forms of expression and materialization of the sacred, Nathalie Roelens (2008) argues that an object of ritual veneration, such as a stone worshipped as sacred, acquires a plus-value emerging from a set of practice-based beliefs and transforming it into something *other*. However, in this process of becoming sacred, a stone remains a stone, not at all dissimilar to all other stones. A sacred object, Roelens argues, is to be understood not as the opposite of a profane object, but instead as an object that is not useful. In other words, the sacred object is that which is devoid of usefulness. In its gratuitousness and grace the sacred

19 Hajjela D. “Ship built with World Trade Centre steel docks at New York” 2009

object is more akin to an *incorporeal event* in the sense discussed by Gilles Deleuze in his take on the Stoic philosophy.

The Stoics' strength lay in making a line of separation pass – no longer between the sensible and the intelligible, or between the soul and the body, but where no one had seen it before – between physical depth and metaphysical surface. Between things and events. Between states of things and compounds, causes, souls and bodies, actions and passions, qualities and substances on the one hand, and, on the other, events or impassive, unqualifiable, incorporeal Effects, infinitives which result from these amalgams, which are attributed to these states of things, which are expressed in propositions (Deleuze and Parinet 1987:63).

On one side, there are causes; on the other, effects. These effects must be considered not “states of things, but incorporeal events; they are not physical qualities, but logical attributes” (Deleuze 1990:281). In other words, the shift from everyday object to sacred object is marked by a transformation of the object into *event*.

To sum up, relics are a particular typology of objects for three reasons. First, they ontologically straddle categories. Second, their value depends entirely upon a set of beliefs. Third, nothing can differentiate them from any similar fragment or remains (both of the corporeal or non corporeal variety) apart from this set of beliefs. Relics are not simply objects of religious devotion. On the contrary, they are social events, predicated upon specific culturally based ideas of bodies, power and systems of belief. The point here is not relics *per se*, rather the network of behaviours they engender, the social and cultural practices and the activities that develop around them, the event they manifest. In other words, what is most interesting is not the question of their truthfulness (i.e., are they genuine or not?) or of their efficacy (i.e., do they perform miracles or not?) or, worse, a rationalist-based critique (they are superstitions). Rather, the key point is to ascertain the *effects* of such beliefs upon the behaviours of users, and how their power and sphere of affection is communicated and operates at changing subjectivities. In other words, what is important is not to question the belief in their ‘magical’ properties but rather to examine the effects these beliefs have on the practice-based construction and metamorphosis of the subjectivities involved.

Proposal: for a neo-animist paradigm

The more the field of material culture as a discipline is expanding, the more the agency of objects is acknowledged, the more an economic-recession-led critique

of consumption invites us to reflect upon our relationship with objects, the more it seems necessary to rethink the paradigm we use to think at objects with, so to be better equipped at understanding how objects hold their power, and exercise their evocation (and magic) on us. What is needed is a new way of thinking about objects, one that can account for the indeterminacy of affects they engender.

My proposal to look at objects through the lens of a neo-animist paradigm, which assigns a soul to non living agencies, has several implications. Firstly, it means to allow for emergence as constitutive of objects' multiple ways of making sense. Second, it means to question the subject/object division and any hierarchy it entails. Finally, it means to reposition our relationship with objects on a plane where affective investments (and their multiple, even irrational, returns) become central to our understanding of how objects communicate (and how design communicates too).

If it is true that every object is a potential for connection, then the desire for these objects does not lie simply in their material possession but precisely in the connections, the openings and the linkages that their material possession actually allows. We could invoke Deleuze here and the affects that "are transformed and circulate in an assemblage" (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987:70) to emphasize the centrality not of objects *per se* but rather of the connections they are capable of, the network of affects, the pathosphere they engender, as if they were the core of hubs where affects and effects intersect and produce reality. Drawing from Spinoza, Deleuze (1988) asserts that there is only a continuum of speeds and slownesses, the coagulation of which are apprehended as objects, which compose a multiplicity of different assemblages or machines. Every individual is first of all a singular degree of power, a specific capacity, a certain relation of speed and slowness, of motion and rest through which one lives and enters connections with things²⁰.

Open conclusion and lines for research

A crucial aspect of object-relics is their ambivalence. Not only are they suspended in between being and nothingness, the very notion of relic is far from culturally stable as my examples of contemporary object-relics suggest. This hybrid status is what imbues them with the extraordinary power that turns non-descript, arbitrary, utterly 'insignificant' fragments into precious and potent objects, sought-after commodities, compelling signifiers of our relationship with the world of things. Because they straddle different worlds, their status is ambiguous and pregnant with a signification that stubbornly rejects any dualistic paradigm to be conceptualized.

²⁰ Thus, a body should not be described "by its form, its organs, and its functions, and not as a subject either; you will define it by the affects of which is capable" (Deleuze 1988:124).

Their thaumaturgical power is believed to radiate from them as in a process of osmotic embrace. This power lies not in their material composition but in what that matter has witnessed. It lies in their history, in their biography, in the pathos they are made of. Object-relics are embodied memories destined to act as bridges, as conveyors of qualities, rubbing off on the new owners some of the extraordinariness of their previous incarnation. What matters with them is contiguity. Their value tends to be higher the closer they have been to the holy corpse or event they descend or emanate from. In this sense, object-relics are memory prosthetics to the extent to which the capital of knowledge, affects, emotions and identification opportunities they embody is reactivated by each new round of ownership. This process goes also against obsolescence in a symbolic way, i.e., manifesting the need to renew the pool of signs/symbols necessary for our ever shifting identity.

If the first step has been to use a neo-animist paradigm to look at object-relics, the next will be to examine a wider range of objects and practices, to start with, our relationship with brands. Certainly, my discussion of the surplus value emerging from sets of beliefs is extremely pertinent to brands and this line of enquiry deserves to be further explored. From here the ensuing question will be: Can this neo-animist paradigm change the way we look at design? Can it change the way we design things?

Epilogue

Undeniably, our world is populated by objects full of powers and personality, eliciting passions and projections. The animated object is a disquieting presence that captures our gaze, spellbinding us and plunging us deep in the enigma of things. It forces us into confronting the ultimate, inscrutable and utterly tangible event of us becoming, with death, objects ourselves. This is perhaps why to reflect on the ontological status of object-relics is to reflect ultimately upon our position in the world, a world populated by *things* - some of which speak louder about *magic* than others.

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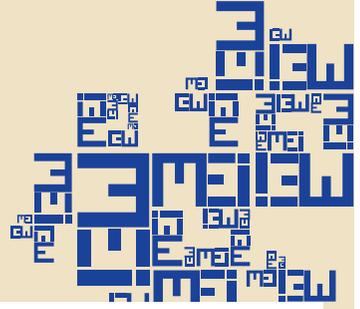
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