

## BOOK REVIEW SERIES

**Where The Wild Things Are**  
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**HENARE, AMIRA, MARTIN HOLBRAAD and SARI WASTELL (Eds).** *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically.* London: Routledge, 2007, x + 233 pp. Paperback £22.99.

Can one think without things? Perhaps we would like to think so. We might even suppose that things get in the way of contemplation that the ideal conditions for thought would be to think in the absence of things altogether. After all, consider that iconic image of cogitation, Rodin's *The Thinker*: his head bowed, and his body bound up in the activity of silent and solitary meditation, the closed circuitry of introspection. No things impinge on thinking here – not even the unwelcome impediment of clothing! But perhaps even Rodin's figure is still too heavily sensuous. If only we could take the next step, and slip free of our skins, abandoning our bodies to ascend to the pure plane of frictionless cognition, unmediated by things...

And yet, matters are obviously more complicated than that, because 'things' can neither be solely, nor straightforwardly, associated with mere matter. Cartesian philosophy, for example, offers a particularly powerful version of the thing/thought dichotomy – or, more accurately, the metaphysical division between matter and mind – but both matter and mind are designated as 'things' (*res*) so that the mind is described as a 'thing that thinks' (*res cogitans*). So what, then, is a 'thing'? This book, *Thinking Through Things* (henceforth, *TTT*), does not tell us, but that is quite deliberate, for its aim is not to provide a general definition or a global theory. The argument is, instead, that the 'things' which anthropologists encounter in the field should be allowed to generate their own

theories particular to them. Hence, what counts as a 'thing' may be more or less anything, as the various contributions to the book demonstrate: divinatory powder used in Cuba, Māori claims over 'cultural property', cigarettes in a Papua New Guinean prison, received law in Swaziland, Darhad shamanic apparel, and so forth. The term 'thing', therefore, operates as a kind of empty concept that awaits its activation in the empirical encounters that constitute ethnography. From a conceptual perspective, the configuration of 'things' in *TTT* calls to mind an older and well-known metaphysical account of 'the thing'. Not the essay by Heidegger, but the horror film by John Carpenter. For, similar to the alien entity that features in Carpenter's *The Thing*, the notion of a 'thing' in *TTT* lacks any prior shape or definition, and is therefore capable of assuming multiple forms – with less horrible consequences, of course!

It is this analytical openness that, I think, distinguishes the project of *TTT* from some of the other object-oriented approaches that are currently so prominent in the social sciences. Thus, while on the face of it, a volume such as Lorraine Daston's excellent edited collection, *Things That Talk* (2004), seems almost identical – looking like *TTT* to a T, as it were – the difference is that the 'things' in Daston's book are understood in the more straightforward sense as 'objects' (even if these are anything but elementary). Likewise, the methodological programme outlined in the introduction to *TTT* sounds rather like Bruno Latour in places, but, as the editors themselves point out (p.7), Latourian theory has global pretensions. If Latour's elevated aspiration is for a 'parliament of things', then the editors of *TTT* intentionally aim for something much lower; something more like a mini-cab office of things perhaps, in so far as you never know what kind of thing will come through the door, but when it does, you will have to take it wherever it wants to go, for it is the thing that gives directions on the journey to be taken.

While on the subject of the differences between *TTT* and other seemingly similar enterprises, I feel it worthwhile to draw attention to a comparable research programme currently underway in Japan: namely, the *monogaku* series of studies, headed up by Kamata Tôji of Kyoto University. Loosely translated, *mono* in Japanese means 'thing', and so *monogaku* – the

term newly coined by the group to describe their endeavours - means 'thing studies', or *mono*-logy. But, although the word 'thing' is useful precisely to the extent that its range of reference is so open, the meaning of *mono* is perhaps even more elastic still, since it also comprises a spiritual dimension (as is evident in such terms as *tsukimono* (spirit possession), *bakemono* (ghost, monster), etc.) in a way that 'thing' does not. As such, by drawing out these animistic aspects of the term, the contributors to the *monogaku* project are able to make a virtue of what Martin Holbraad - in a recent reflection on the tenor of *TTT* - has suggested is a possible shortcoming of the volume, which is the attention paid to the overly magical character of the things (shamanic jackets, powerful powder, and so on) that featured in it.

But, these considerations aside, let us briefly introduce the method as presented in *TTT*, since it is methodology, and not theory, which the book claims to promote. The methodological argument at the heart of *TTT* takes off from the last line of a lecture series given by the Brazilian anthropologist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, at Cambridge in 1998, when the editors - Holbraad, Amiria Salmond (formerly Henare) and Sari Wastell - were graduate students there. In his concluding remarks, Viveiros de Castro observed that, 'All I know is that we need richer ontologies, and it is high time to put epistemological questions to rest' ('Cosmological perspectivism in Amazonia and elsewhere', p.94). Hence, the method advocated in *TTT* is a turn away from epistemology, towards the ontological. As the editors argue in their introduction, one of the problems with epistemology is that, when applied to problems of ethnography, it tends to assimilate them into the order of representation. Accordingly (to take as an example the ethnographic conundrum which is the particular concern of Holbraad's chapter) when Cuban diviners say, of the *aché* powder which they employ in their practices, that it is an instantiation of the 'power' that makes their divinations possible, the epistemological reflex would be to assume that, since the claim that 'powder' equals 'power' cannot be literally true, the powder must somehow index, or represent, or otherwise symbolize, an 'idea' of power. A further instance of this kind of thinking would be Ernest Gellner's argument (expertly deconstructed by Talal Asad in his *Genealogies*

*of Religion*, 1993) that Moroccan Berber 'saints' (*igurramen*) cannot be chosen by God, as claimed by his informants, but must in fact ('in reality', says Gellner) be chosen by the people. As in the case of the epistemological switchover that occurs in the 'powder' = 'power' problem, 'God', in Gellner's solution, is assumed to represent, or do duty for, something else intelligible (read 'real'), such as societal interests.

The ontological move advanced in *TTT* is, by contrast, to take the 'is' of such native claims as 'powder *is* power' completely seriously, and to explore the conceptual consequences that would follow. Thus, the various contributors to *TTT* attempt to investigate what certain things *are* in terms of what they *do* in particular places, so that, to summarize some of the chapters all too crudely, cigarettes are generative of sociality in a prison in Port Moresby (according to Adam Reed), or that specific objects on display in domestic settings in Mongolia are a means of making present relations to otherwise absent relatives (in Rebecca Empson's chapter), or that a 19<sup>th</sup> century British colonial treaty signed by Māori chiefs was charged with chiefly *mana* so that, for Māori now, it just *is* (rather than merely represents) the efficacy of the ancestors (or so goes, in part, the argument of Amiria Salmond).

The ontological approach on display in *TTT* is both inventive and refreshing, but it does, I think, give rise to a certain ambiguity, which is the question of the relation between ontology and culture. That is to say, to what extent - if at all - are they consonant? Certainly, Holbraad, for one, has subsequently, and quite forcibly, argued that ontology and culture are not in any way synonymous (see Holbraad, in *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 30 (2) 2010). And yet, in the introduction to *TTT*, while the editors (of which Holbraad is one) express doubts about the culture-ontology equation (p.10), on the previous page - in a favourable précis of an argument of Viveiros de Castro's - they speak of 'the ontology of modern Euro-Americans', which, even if it isn't exactly an endorsement of the ontology equals culture thesis, sounds rather close to one. But I mean this as less of a criticism than as an observation of possible differences in viewpoint, since there is no reason to suppose that the other editors (or contributors, for that matter) need necessarily

share Holbraad's view of the matter. (Although, Wastell, for one, does distance her own account of the 'thing-like' nature of received law in Swaziland from what she implies would be Marshall Sahlins-like cultural-ontological identifications.)

If there is a fault with the book, it is, I think, that the argument of the introduction partially succumbs to what Bruce Kapferer once diagnosed as that tendency of anthropologists to overemphasize the radicalism of their arguments at the expense of earlier approaches. This is not to say that the argument as presented is neither novel nor important – it is both – but simply that the 'revolution' (albeit a 'quiet' one) it claims to usher in is, I suggest, an attempt to realise the incipient potential that anthropology already possessed from its professional inception. For one thing, the important claim that the project of anthropology should be less a matter of comprehending how natives think than it ought to be one of 'how we must think in order to conceive a world the way they do' (p.15, original emphasis) seems to me to be pretty much what Talal Asad was calling for, when he argued strongly in favour of a foreignising type of translation that would scandalise 'our' language of analysis (see his 'Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology', *Genealogies of Religion*, 1993). But equally, we might remind ourselves that anthropologists have been thinking rather radically through things for quite a long time. A classic example of which would be Lévi-Strauss' *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962) – a pun categorically lost in the dreadful English rendition of the book's title, 'The Savage Mind', but one which, in French, means both 'wild pansy' and 'wild thinking', and was intended to be emblematic of things thought through, in the sensuous 'logic of the concrete'. And, to recall a further example of ancestral radicalism in terms of thing-thinking, did not Evans-Pritchard say that it took the Nuer to make him 'cattle-minded'?

These gripes aside, if *TTT* doesn't exactly constitute a revolution, it is, in my view, still a significant redrafting of current anthropological priorities. As I understand the matter, epistemology (as conceived by *TTT*'s editors) is opposed to ontology as sameness is to difference. As a mode of making sense, epistemology discloses a tendency to function

as recognition, or the recapitulation of what we know already; the promise of ontology is that it draws on a completely different paradigm of understanding altogether. Or, as Gilles Deleuze (who seems to be something of a subterranean influence on the editors of *TTT*) has proposed: 'the new – in other words, difference – calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognised and unrecognisable *terra incognita*' (*Difference and Repetition*, 1994, p.136). It seems to me that *TTT* goes some way towards realising this other model, a model that emerges from the territory of alterity.