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A Different Theory of Modernity

Translated by
Anna Galt

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Translator's Note

I have attempted to track down the corresponding translations of all quotes in standard English editions where possible. Otherwise, all quotes have been translated by me, unless a translator is acknowledged in the bibliography. In very few cases, English translations exist, but were not available or accessible to me, in which case I have also translated them myself. Rarely, I have amended quotes from translations by others, usually only when text or meaning important for the argument is missing. In these cases my amendments are in square brackets. Again, in very rare cases, a German term that is particularly relevant, obscure or ambiguous has been included in square brackets to help the reader familiar with the original discourse.

Translator's footnotes have been used sparingly in the main text and only when an important additional semantic dimension would otherwise be lost. A brief comment on two important terms: the word 'thingly' may seem awkward at first, but it will soon become apparent to the reader why I have chosen this translation rather than 'material'. The adjective 'enlightened' also makes a regular appearance and, although I have chosen not to capitalise it because of its frequency, is intended to mean enlightened in the sense of a cultivated, rational, modern subject as related to the historical period of the Enlightenment, as it does in German, rather than a spiritual awakening.

As much as is possible, I have attempted to stick to the syntax and some of the punctuation of the original, for example, the frequent use of the colon and semicolon, in order to replicate the style and rhythm of Hartmut Böhme's lively prose in the best possible way, and because both are also integral to the structure of a scholarly argument. I hope that the English is nonetheless as readable as the original is.

Anna Galt

Introduction

Je sais bien... mais quand même.
(Octave Mannoni 1964, 1262)

Perhaps fetishisation provides
the key?
(Meyer 1908, 333)

1 The horseshoe

"Niels (Bohr, H.B.) closed the conversation with one of those stories he liked to tell on such occasions: 'One of our neighbours in Tisvilde once fixed a horseshoe over the door to his house [which was meant to bring luck according to an old local superstition]. When a mutual acquaintance asked him: "But are you really superstitious? Do you honestly believe that this horseshoe will bring you luck?" he replied: "Of course not; but they say it helps even if you don't believe in it."'" (Heisenberg 1971, 92)

This anecdote concludes Werner Heisenberg's account of his discussions on the relationship between "Science and Religion" with Paul Dirac, Wolfgang Pauli and Niels Bohr in the year 1927. Bohr's comment is clearly ironic, part of a conversation between modern scientists relaxing in a Brussels hotel after a conference, discussing their relationship to God and the supernatural. Horseshoes belong to the amulet or talisman class, a sub-group of magical things, which we sometimes also call fetishes, in this instance affixed to the house as a lucky charm. However, this is already a modern misinterpretation, because fetishes, whether placed under the threshold or above the lintel, had a mainly apotropaic function: they defended against sorcery and therefore belong to the category of fetishes whose function is territorial protection. As early as 1912, Robert H. Milligan (1912, 219) observed that the superstitious belief of German peasants in the auspicious properties of horseshoes could be compared to the fetish beliefs of West African "negroes".

But that does not concern us yet here. What is more interesting is the strange, paradoxical twist that Niels Bohr's neighbour gives in his answer. He does not believe in fetishes; but fetishes are things that supposedly can have an effect 'by themselves', objectively. Regardless of the subject's beliefs, magical powers are supposedly 'inherent' to them. Once again though, this is told ironically: as local lore that no one really believes in. Yet the horseshow is still hang-

ing there: so someone does believe in it then. This strange tension between non-belief and belief in the intrinsic power of things appears to me to be a characteristic of the enlightened modern subject. Octave Mannoni sums it up aptly in a phrase we will encounter more than once throughout this book: "Je sais bien... mais quand même: la croyance" – I know for certain... but yet: belief/credibility/plausibility. The horseshoe: we know for certain, but yet... We do not believe, but we act as though we do believe, and therefore believe without believing. We can therefore be ironic about ourselves, not quite certain of ourselves, without being entirely eccentric; neither completely enlightened nor completely unenlightened. And, considering this confusion, what about the things themselves? They are there – as whatever they are: rusty iron, a relic of our ancestors, junk, gifts,* things that do good, discarded functional objects having a second (symbolic) career, and so forth. It is not what the things are 'of themselves', 'for themselves' or 'in themselves' that matters, but instead the kind of relationships we establish to them. This view is reliable, enlightened, familiar to us. But are we really sure about it? Maybe it depends on the objects themselves after all? Are they not the very material foundation of our lives? Do they really do nothing to us? Are we not defined by them? Do they not have, as we are so fond of saying nowadays, agency? Do they merely serve us, or do we also serve them? We are modern, and that means that we dismiss these kinds of questions as an affront to our autonomous sense of self. Yet the anecdote, which clearly belongs to modernity, shows that this modernity is not always so one-sided and not without its contradictions. We are modern. That is certain. Yet it is somehow disquieting when a French sociologist of science writes a book entitled *We Have Never Been Modern*. Is it possible that both statements are true?

In this book, we will examine our premodern and our modern relationship to things, in particular to those slightly peculiar things that – possibly – have some sort of inherent power, power over us, we who know that we are the masters and the things the servants. We will investigate 'object relations', which in modern scientific terms means that we will analyse the positions and relationships that we adopt towards things; in other words, we will investigate ourselves. The results of this analysis of ourselves will be equally applicable to things. For objects cannot exist without in some way being the *relata* of our cognitive or practical activities. This is what we believe, but yet... In this book, we will,

* The German is *Leib-Gedinge*, which means 'dower' or 'dowry', but translates literally as 'body things'. 'Dower' can also mean 'gifts'. I have chosen this translation as gifts become important later in the book. *Gedinge* by itself also means 'piecemeal rates'.

in a way, turn this relationship on its head. We will permit things to have agency, or worse, magic and power. Almost all ancient cultures, including ancient European cultures, believed that they did. In the economy of things, modernity is the single only break from this there has ever been in the history of the world. We have distanced ourselves from things, things that in the past were somehow articulated, obtrusive, capable of acting independently, things that shared our existence in the wild and opaque confusion of life; but we have 'put them back' where they belong: back into a chain of causality that does not 'say' anything, does not 'mean' anything, but instead represents a sequence of processes involved in natural events as clearly as possible so that we can control and predict them. We know that. In this way, we are left in peace by things. But are we? In this book, we will trace the long history of the process whereby European culture rid itself of the meddlesome quality of things – through enlightenment. Yet there is another parallel history to this story. It tells of a growing but muted disquiet: to our horror – we proponents of modernity and enlightenment – the terrible grimaces and spellbinding faces of things, which we thought we had left 'out there' among the uneducated, savage, superstitious people, have appeared again 'in our very midst', in the very heart of Europe. Things have acquired a dangerous power. That alone is reason enough to rethink horseshoes and to not simply leave it at an amusing, ironic anecdote.

The anecdote is also revealing in another way. Many of my friends knew the story. But each time I heard it, it was different, and no one knew exactly where it came from. What is revealing is that in many versions Niels Bohr's neighbour disappears and the story becomes about Bohr himself. "Some other great physicist, maybe Wolfgang Pauli, once visited Bohr in his country house and saw that he had a horseshoe hanging above the door. 'Professor!' he said, 'You? With a horseshoe? But you don't believe in it, do you?' to which Bohr replied, 'Of course not. But you know, Herr Pauli, it's supposed to help even if you don't believe in it.'" That is how Harry Mulisch tells the story. Arnfrid Astel has the following laconic version: "Regarding THE HORSESHOE [sic] above his door, Niels Bohr was apparently known to explain to astonished visitors that it helped even if one didn't believe in it." Furthermore, the neighbour's Danish holiday house often transforms into an alpine chalet belonging to Niels Bohr himself. And so, out of an anecdote that Bohr himself told his physicist colleagues in Brussels about an acquaintance of an acquaintance, grew a story *about* Niels Bohr, the founding father of modern physics and a representative figure of modernity itself. The stories' meanderings and metamorphoses are in fact a typical feature of the same thing that they are also about: fetishism. Complex processes of transmission, sprinklings of quotation, obscure origins, mistaken identity and misunderstandings, hearsay and scattered dubious reports all seem to be closely linked

to fetishism ever since it first circulated throughout Europe as a word and a phenomenon. The lack of clarity too, about who is actually being spoken about in the horseshoe anecdote, who it is that is amazed, who it is that is the superstitious fetishist, is also a typical figure of the five-hundred-year-old history of the concept. Because no one knows for certain anymore whether it is 'the Africans' that are fetishists, or in fact the Europeans, who after all were the ones that got so worked up about African magic; whether psychoanalysis, which put all its efforts into reducing fetishism to scientific terms and causes, was in fact also a victim of fetishism; whether such a radical critic of fetishism as Marx actually produced the phenomenon he condemned in the first place. And so on. Perhaps, waiting at the end of the long history of fetishism, is something similar to the punchline at the end of the horseshoe anecdote: *we do not believe in fetishism, but yet we are fetishistic*. We know this, but yet... we cannot leave it be. If this is the case, something has to change in our modern, confident, enlightened sense of self. More clarity is needed regarding our relationship to things, and they should be assigned a much stronger position in the psychological and cultural economy than we have previously been prepared to give them. Fetishised, magical things are a part of modern culture. They have nothing to do with reprehensible primitivism, reification or perversion, shifted away from us, 'out there': to Africa, to superstition, to childhood, to perversions, to consumerism. It is always the other who is the fetishist – it has always been this way. But that is not how things really are.

2 Corrupt fetishism: a nineteenth-century invention

Ever since it took its place in the European languages, 'fetishism' has been a term used to describe a corrupt relationship to objects. From *an enlightened, secular position*, 'fetish' describes a thing that individuals or a collective of individuals ascribe meanings and powers to that have nothing to do with its primary qualities (in Locke's sense). Rather, they are attributed to it in an act of projection – and in such a way that the thing both incorporates and radiates these meanings and powers for the fetishists. However, this is considered self-deception. For fetishists, as a meaningful and powerful object the fetish-thing becomes an agent to which henceforth the fetishist is bound out of respect, fear or desire. The thing therefore assumes the power to effect and generate loyalty. This obligation, caused by a pseudo-objective force, prevents the realisation that it is the fetishist himself who creates the fetish and the relationship to it. The relationship to the fetish is therefore compulsive (or anancastic, as psychologists say); it functions,

but it is a delusion; it is a consciously handled mechanism whose internal structure remains unconscious.

It is evident that such an understanding of fetishism violates important principles of the European Enlightenment and science. That is why, when it is introduced in the philosophy of Charles de Brosses in 1760, fetishism is viewed as negative (before that it had been viewed as idolatry or superstition). Apart from a few exceptions, this negative view is reinforced right across the sciences during the nineteenth century. Fetishism becomes an increasingly indeterminate catch-all term, under which everything that can be viewed as an irrational, superstitious or perverse object relationship is subsumed.

It can be argued that the nineteenth century is also *the* saeculum of things. Statistics about things show that compared to the eighteenth century, the number of available things, for example in a household, vastly increased. Industrialisation led to the proliferation of artificial things in daily use and consumption, and not just in the upper classes. Newly appearing department stores were described as cathedrals of commodities, displaying hundreds of thousands of things to bewitch the customer in an almost ritually staged presentation. Increased consumption in the towns and cities led to enormous growth in the production of artefacts, but also in waste and pollution. The average person extended the borders of his or her self into more and more object-spheres too. Stronger forms of capitalism promoted the pursuit of property, which often led to, for example, the bourgeois apartments of the *Gründerzeit*, stuffed with an almost unimaginable number of things. Never before had the thingly environment been so dense, diverse, alluring, artificial, fascinating. People collected, traded, procured, desired, exhibited, consumed, used, bought and sold, hoarded and wasted, ordered and classified, evaluated and valued things with a mania and intensity unprecedented in the history of everyday life. *Natural things*, along with their spheres and localities, receded further away from the daily experience of the dominant classes in the cities and towns, as did the lasting hold of objects whose symbolic value had endured over generations in traditional society. It was in the nineteenth century that what Jean Baudrillard (1968/1996) would analyse one hundred years later as the "system of objects" first came into being. Or to put it another way: the biomass of artificial things increased exponentially, so that every space, from private to public, became more and more densely occupied by things. The significance of this shift, not only in the quantitative but also in the qualitative relationship of people to their thingly environment on the one hand, and of artificial objects to natural things on the other, cannot be overestimated for cultural history, yet it has barely been researched. The nearest we have are Walter Benjamin's studies (1927–40/1999), in which he endeavours to develop a physiognomy of the era out of an investigation into things.

How is such a hybrid proliferation of things possible? We must recognise that artificial things are also never just the *products* of people; taking this view assures us of our agency. Rather, the opposite is true: each thing also generates a formative force, which contains impressions, attitudes, imaginings, but also forms of use and action. In short, things do something to people (and not just the other way around). The denser the network of things surrounding people is, the sooner they will have the slightly disconcerting experience of being caught at the centre of a complex energetic field, by which, as a subject, one is also determined. We know this not only from literary accounts, ubiquitous around 1900, of things opening our eyes to an uncanny life of their own; a revelation that undermines the autonomy of the subject. We also know this from the sober analyses on the reification* of the subject in Marx or in *The Philosophy of Money* by Georg Simmel, a book which, like Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, was published in 1900 and in its own way is a summary of the entire nineteenth century (Simmel 1900/2004). Reification and alienation, along with the objectification of and alienation from the self, are the terms that were used to account for the repercussions caused by the tremendous ascent of things. It is no surprise that it is fetishism which made these effects clearly visible.

My thesis is: the reason for fetishism's astounding career in the nineteenth century is that it was a reaction to the other, hidden side of the fundamentally altered quantitative and qualitative dynamics of the 'society of things'. It should be remembered that in the beginning fetishism was a peripheral term to describe not yet understood and, from the Christian perspective, scandalous religious practices that had been observed by missionaries, merchants and travellers among the tribal societies of Central Africa. However, by the end of the nineteenth century fetishism had not only been expanded to include all forms of "primitive culture" worldwide (Tylor 1871), but had also migrated to the very heart of European culture. What had seemed to belong to the strange alterity of primitive cultures, suddenly leapt out from behind the shadows of every part of European culture itself. *Everything* could be suspected of being a fetish and *everyone* a fetishist, regardless of whether they were religious believers, sexual perverts, psychopaths, obsessive collectors of every kind, unthinking consumers, artists obsessed with their own work, children and their "transitional objects" (Winnicott), factory-owners ruling like tyrants, dandies, bourgeois sons, or servant girls. Growing out of discourses in early religious studies and ethnology, in just a few decades fetishism became a key concept that promised to decode the *phantasmagorias of the nineteenth century*. This peculiar bottom-up

* The German is *Ver-Dinglichung*, literally 'thingification'.

career of the concept is very interesting for us. For our aim is to reconstruct the stages through which fetishism changed status: from a term used to describe the *otherness of others* to a phantasm that was employed to track down, capture, name, isolate, classify, clarify, analyse, assess and above all get rid of the frightening *otherness of ourselves*. It became less about Africa, Polynesia or the North-American Indians and more about Europe and the modern subject, about which Jean Paul once wrote so wonderfully in *Selina oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* [Selina, or The Immortality of the Soul]: "But our measurements of the vast lands of the self are far too small or too narrow if we leave out the great kingdom of the unconscious, that true inner Africa." (Jean Paul 1827/1996, 1182)

3 How to philosophise with a hammer

As a framework for interpreting European society, fetishism is an invention of the nineteenth century. As a determinant of religious, economic, consumer and sexual behaviour, fetishism soon rose to become a model for every kind of alienation in modern society. In the twentieth century, the concept soon became a fitting description of many areas of mass culture and politics. In the personality cults of totalitarian societies, in the star culture of the mass media, in fetishistic forms of fashion, souvenir, amulet, tattooing and piercing practices, in the increasingly extreme fetishisation strategies of advertising and product aesthetics, in the fetish practices of many subcultures, from the football fan club to the Internet fetish group, fetishism has spread to all levels of modern society and everyday culture.

Intellectual criticism too became contaminated by fetishism. This is first evident in Marx. The form of fetishism that exists in capitalism – or perhaps only attaches itself to it – leaves its mark on criticism in the form of strange inversions. The obscure colonial origin of the concept of fetishism implants a dangerous connection to the object in our thinking, which must however be transcended. The gesture of criticism remains under control because of the exclusion of religion. Nowhere is this more clearly recognisable than in another leading thinker of the nineteenth century: Nietzsche. His aim was to initiate a "twilight of the idols" (1888/2005) against society's idolatrous and fetishistic practices, against its "lords of concept idolatry" (ibid., 167). Philosophy becomes iconoclasm, a "great declaration of war" (ibid., 155). It causes the "toppling of the idols", the title of a 1985 book on Nietzsche (Rippel 1985). For Nietzsche, very much in parallel with Marx and the ethnologists and sexologists of the nineteenth century, "the world has more idols than realities", "idols of our age" (Nietzsche 1888/2005, 155) that must be destroyed by the hammer of philosophy.

Nietzsche also informs us that German philosophy, culture and science are nothing but "crude fetishism" (ibid., 169). Reason and the self itself are fetishes. They function in a fetishistic manner, in that they project a substance onto things as if it belonged to the things themselves, although it does not. In Marx and in Nietzsche, but also later in psychoanalysis and cultural criticism, this critical vehemence becomes a movement that leads to the creation of new idols and fetishes. The power of their spell in the twentieth century may well have surpassed everything that has ever been considered the dark side of fetish in Africa. Europe is invaded by the very object of its criticism. It is precisely because fetishism becomes such a widespread concept that it is necessary to reconstruct the semantic and metaphorical meanderings of fetishism, its versatile, almost protean power, which seems inextricably bound to its African and Christian heritage. Perhaps then we can better understand why modern societies cannot do without the cohesive forces inherent to the fetish and idol cult, either practically or theoretically. If one could actually remove every form of fetishism and idolatry in modern society in one fell swoop – as critics like Nietzsche, Marx or Freud hoped to do – it would not usher in the reign of freedom, instead societies would collapse.

4 The contradictions of modernity

Modern societies view themselves as secular or post-religious societies. Key concepts associated with this model are differentiation, rational processes in administration and law, the democratisation of institutions, mechanisation and industrialisation, reflexivity and the spread of science to all spheres of life.

Associated with these are normative choices, namely for an enlightened society whose historical power is to be strengthened by the processes listed above. In contrast, the argument put forward here is that while premodern forms and institutions of magic, myth and cult, religion and festivities begin to disappear in the modern era, the energies and needs bound up within them do not. Instead they are released and now pervade all levels of modern social systems.

The initial observation that sparked this book is that while modernisation processes may provide structural integration in society, they do not offer anything substantial to identify with, which modernity provides ample evidence of. Many people, groups and subcultures have a distanced, utilitarian and correspondingly unstable relationship to modernisation. Lifeworld practices are drawn from cultural traditions that originate in premodern times and have been arbitrarily incorporated into the life economy under the auspices of modernity. This results in the frequently observed switching between heterogeneous or even contradictory patterns of action and orientation: functional efficiency at

work during the week, collective ecstasy at techno parties at the weekend; rational planning for the future one minute and the quest for dangerous thrills the next; precise economic calculation on the one hand, esoteric borrowings from foreign cultures or distant pasts on the other; participation in democratic processes and at the same time a quasi-religious merging with 'collective bodies'. Reason provides too few pleasures for us to be able to prevent our pleasures from being irrational.

My concern here is neither with individual pathologies, nor subcultural asynchronicities, but rather with multiple contradictions on almost all levels of the social process. The mass-media star cult moves into the parliament, gnosis into the Internet; the capitalist exchange of goods, the only form of the organisation of the traffic in goods for the time being, only functions because of fabulous borrowings from the leftovers of ancient myth and fetish; sport works in forms of magical participation; festivals imitate the lost power of sacred mysteries: rites, catharsis, sublime awe; the social imaginary is populated, in film for example, with monstrosities from every era; as the media becomes increasingly technically refined, it produces more and more staged archaisms; 'God is dead' does not pave the way to a secular society, but rather to the awakening of countless thousands of new gods; the "disappearance of things" (Langenmaier 1993) as rubbish is closely related to the cult of ritual storage; the deconstruction of sex and gender leads to the creation of sexual hybrids. And so on.

Today, with our experience of irrationality, mass-medial and political cult practices and the syncretic explosion of the religious and of political idolatry in the twentieth century, we can no longer be certain: does modernity survive on the contradictions of itself, or vice versa, do the cult forms of traditional societies feed upon modernity itself, thereby growing even stronger – particularly in the wake of the supposed secularisation of the world? Nothing seems more wrong than the assertion that the world has been disenchanted. Fetish, idol and cult forms today – in politics, in sport, in film, in consumer goods, in fashion, etc. – teach us that the very opposite is true, namely that disenchantment in the name of rationality has led to a surge of re-enchanting energies, one which is hard to control and consequently all the more effective. It therefore seems to be true that democracy needs cults, but cults do not need democracy. This asymmetry has not been analysed in terms of a theory of Enlightenment to date. The aim of this book is to redress this balance somewhat.

Thing relations in our industrial culture really do require the foreign perspective of an ethnologist. A culture, historically without equal, that has so consistently increased the population of things can only be met with astonishment. Why do we find them so irresistible? Why do we surround ourselves with thousands of things, turning our apartments into strange cabinets of lifeless objects,

in relation to which living things are in the minority? Why this excessive collecting, this "irrepressible passion" (W. Muensterberger)? Why do we find it so hard to let go of some things, but yet dispose of others so quickly – in the rubbish bin? Why do we need more than we need? Why does a lack of objects, emptiness, frighten us so much? *Horror vacui*? What is the reason for our attachment to things? Why do our possessions surround us like fortifications? Why does a barely altered thing – a Golf V instead of a Golf IV for example – always rekindle new desire? Why do we become anxious when things are not at our disposal, when they get old, when we lose control over them, when they are reduced to mere stuff, while an object from the eighteenth century, placed in specific location, fills us with pride and joy, and even belongs to our sense of security in the self? Where does this love and desire come from, this worship and awe of things that become fetishes, of people that become idols? Why the condescending smirk at the passion of the wine-cork collector, although one hoards stamps or books oneself? Why the "mourning of perfection" (B. Wyss) when faced with the beauty of objects that will outlive us and put us to shame? Why the desire and the compulsion to mark our sex and our ego with every vestimentary thing we carry on our bodies? How are we so emotionally affected by any image that gives us a feeling of closeness to the object of our adoration – from Lady Di to the Pope, from David Beckham to Nicole Kidman? What awe overcomes us at the Nuremberg rally grounds, at monumental Stalinist architecture, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington? What excitement exudes from the latest *haute couture* creations, a red Ferrari, from the fetishes in high-class dominatrix studios?

The list is endless. And gives one the impression that the real reason we are no longer permitted to identify anything negative in fetishism, and perhaps the reason for the desire to abolish the term altogether, is directly related to the fact that its practice has exploded in precisely the same way that the number of things has. No theory of modernity could be more wrong than one which identifies modernisation with a linear increase in rationality. In this context, Bruno Latour's statement, "we have never been modern", can only mean that the institutions in our society based on rational processes do not in fact possess the cohesive force that keeps the collective together and stabilises individuals. In an uncanny way, we as subjects and our culture are dependent on permanent enchantment in order to protect ourselves from dissociation, anomie and the loss of a sense of belonging.

I am convinced that it is in fact these universally proliferating fetishistic mechanisms that integrate modern societies in a rather blurry and, up until now, barely analysed way. If, however, modernity and fetishism belong together, then theories of fetishism that diagnose it as perversion, false consciousness, the commodity delusion, primitiveness or superstition, in short, as social pathology,

really must be re-examined. Criticism of the culture industry, supposedly based on a universal delusion and fetishism, is itself then merely a conspiracy theory, keeping alive the very thing it criticises. The clearly obvious licence fetishism has acquired in pop culture, in sport, in film, in fashion, in art, architecture, eating behaviour, the collector's passion, but also in politics or memorial culture – this by now factual freedom for something that was associated with the unconscious, with perversion, situated at the dirty edges of culture or in its underground, demonstrates a profound cultural change. Scholarship is simply catching up with this change.

5 Historical development

This book reconstructs the mental and cultural processes through which 'idolatry' and 'fetishism' have gradually become central categories in European culture's description of itself from biblical times to the present. Idolatry and fetishism were originally intended to explain the 'superstitious' and 'primitive' behaviour of pagan or non-European societies. Everything that seemed 'outside', 'distant', 'archaic' and therefore always 'other' and 'unenlightened' is however increasingly being discovered as being unintentionally present, part of us, close to us. The history of this discovery ("the heart of darkness" at the centre of European culture) can essentially be divided into the following stages: first, missionary and ethnographic travel literature. By transforming the concept of 'idol' it created the new term 'fetish', although there is no mention of 'fetishism' yet. The word then quickly spread from Portugal to Holland, Spain, England, France and Germany. The second stage was formed by the emerging academic disciplines of religious studies and ethnology (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries): 'fetishism' appears here not only as a category to describe primitive cultures, but also, for the first time in this period, evidence of fetishistic practices are identified in European culture itself. This surprising turn of events then spreads to discourse in general in the second half of the nineteenth century because of two important scientific developments: firstly Marx, influenced by his in-depth knowledge of the fetish debate in religious studies, demonstrates that political economy cannot be constructed without fetishism. This transforms fetishism into a macro-category for the analysis of *the* most modern aspect of society, commodity capitalism. Secondly, with Alfred Binet and Krafft-Ebing, sexual fetishism becomes a model for perversion. This is then picked up by Freud's psychoanalysis, making fetishism a fundamental concept for the analysis of the modern (i.e. neurotic) subject. This was also preceded by the fact that fetishism had long been practiced as an aesthetic process in art. Art is itself a fetish; it op-

erates in fetishistic forms and at the same time reflects fetishism in society (Simpson 1982; Apter 1991; Ian 1993; Böhme 1998, 2001, 2003).

By 1900, religious studies and ethnology, along with art, political economy and sociology (Auguste Comte), sexology and psychoanalysis, had reached the stage when a 'theory of modernity' seemed imminent, one which could clearly only function on the basis of fetishism. 'Africa' had finally caught up with modernity. This will be discussed here by examining several patterns of political and cultural development in the twentieth century: firstly, the example of political religion, the personality cult and the architectural idolatry of Stalinism; and secondly, aspects of contemporary popular culture (feminism, youth culture, consumerism, fashion, food fetishism, etc.).

Jon Stratton is wrong when he states (1996, 16, 26 – 53, 87 and elsewhere) that the fetishisation of the female body started around 1850, the same time as the beginning of the huge growth in the production of commodities in capitalist countries. Though it is tempting to draw the parallel, and it certainly is true that there is evidence of strong fetishism in the portrayal of femininity in the art and literature after 1850, the fetishisation of women in Western cultures is much older and not directly linked to commodity fetishism. It is precisely when, as Stratton does, one makes a clear distinction between cultural fetishism and commodity fetishism – and it makes sense to do so – that not only the systematic, but also the historical independence of fetishism from the development of the capitalist commodity economy is revealed. Only on the basis of this distinction can one begin to investigate the alliances formed between cultural fetishism and the principle of commodification. Even today, when the market has penetrated culture in a way unprecedented in history, the ubiquitous circulation of fetishism should still not be reduced to its economic functions. Judith Williamson has already shown this in her study of *Consuming Passions* (1986a). She repeatedly draws our attention to the tactical and parodistic manoeuvre with which women in particular free their consumerist desires from the dictates of commodity fetishism while serving it at the same time, thus managing to 'trick' their own fetishisation.

The role of women in fetishism as well as women as analysts of the same subject deserves special attention. Early sexologists and psychoanalysts were of the ludicrous opinion that only men behaved in a fetishistic manner. Although Freud briefly declared all women to be fetishists, namely of clothing, in a side note from 1909, he never pursued this observation any further. Like most of his successors, for Freud, fetishism was definitively male. It is difficult to decide whether the reason for this lies in the limited vision of scientists of that time or whether the rise of female fetishism really did only begin in the early twentieth century. Women researchers have discovered forms of female fetishism in earlier

periods (see for example Apter 1991; Garber 1992). In any case, whether it ever existed or not, a gender-specific distribution of fetishistic practices can no longer be identified in today's culture. However, the fields in which fetishism is played out can certainly be divided according to gender.

The great efforts female theorists have gone to in order to free themselves from the dogmatic prescriptions of psychoanalysis, particularly Lacan's, is remarkable. However, only rarely has this been fully successful. Today though, we can safely say that the days of phallocentric theoretical speculations, usually nothing more than machismo masquerading as theory, are over, or at least should be over. For theories of fetishism, this means that the way the cultural analyst or psychoanalyst looks at things can be a little more relaxed, more liberal and more attentive to the enormous diversity of forms that cultural fetishism takes today.

This also applies to the tradition of Marxism and cultural criticism. In this case, consumerism was never understood as anything but alienation and reification – very similar to the way that sexual fetishism was only ever viewed as perversion in the psychoanalytic tradition. The discourse on fetishism has always fundamentally been imprisoned in theory: pigeon-holed into either Christian, Marxist or psychoanalytical dogmas. Yet it was these three variants of orthodoxy that generated fetishism as deviant behaviour – as superstition, reification or perversion – in the first place. The task of this book will be to historically trace these three strands in their mistaken dogmatic approaches and, in each case, to remove from them whatever we recognise in them as arrogance, ignorance and misunderstanding. This work must be approached as a history of science if the aim is to open up new terrain for cultural analysis in future. In that sense, the spirit of the Enlightenment is also at work in this book, even if the theoretical blindness in the field of cultural fetishism is in fact rooted in it.

There is something symptomatic in this apparent contradiction: although Marxist criticism and psychoanalytic theory are criticised, they are not rejected outright. The reverse is also true of this book. It goes all the way back to biblical aniconism or Christian theological interpretations of idolatry not only to show how much the discussion of idols and fetishes has been dominated by this tradition until at least the twentieth century, but because the Hebrew Bible and Christian texts recognised something valuable, something that is still useful today for understanding magically charged objects. This applies equally to early religious studies, ethnology, Marxism and psychoanalysis, which, although it is the most recent entry into the discourse on fetish, is nonetheless already more than one hundred years old.

6 The status of theory

This book's approach is based on two different observations: firstly, that modernity can only begin to understand itself if it makes use of cognitive resources from epochs considered to be premodern. Because modernity is a radically historical era. By which I mean: powerful traditions continue to exist in it, despite having nothing to do with modernity genealogically; they nonetheless belong to its present. Although modernity locates itself in a position that opposes all of history (otherwise it would not be modern), at the same time, more than any other era, it embodies the presence of all previous historical periods (otherwise it would not exist). The maxim therefore holds true: the more we remember the past, the richer the future will be. Secondly, the classical theorists of modernity (since the Enlightenment) developed a range of analytical instruments designed exclusively for what is modern about modernity. That is why there is not even an adequate language to deal with what magic, fetishism, autonomously powerful things, idolatrous devotion, unrestrained consumption, etc. really are – beyond their theoretical banishment and pathologisation, their moral or political rejection.

From the perspective of this book, being modern is precisely not creating or upholding an opposition between reason and fetishism, but about developing a reason that allows the horseshoe to remain hanging. Being modern means living with oneself in contradiction, without having to reconcile the contradiction. A modern culture deserving of that name would consist of a differentiated view of both rationalism and self-reflection, and would not merely tolerate fetishistic practices, but develop them too. For we need them, not just in our everyday contact with things and for the experience of community on a supra-everyday level (as the 'glue' of social life), but also as an essential resource for aesthetic creativity and erotic desire. This does not mean that rationalism and fetishism will ever 'agree' with each other. Rather, culture could be both a reflexive and mediating form, which would allow us to switch between the two, to develop both, to moderate between both or to leave both (be). Culture, as an instance of observing observation, is also the art of situating: the ability to situate the different and contradictory aspects of our selves in whatever placement is agreeable to those aspects and to us, to embed them in such a way that a kind of republicanism of contradictions, an aesthetic ensemble of the heterogeneous and the incompatible, and an ethical recognition of the non-ethical would become possible.

What follows will not attempt to construct a theory from these briefly sketched principles and develop it into a macro-theory of fetishism and modernity. It is sufficient to embed the theoretical in the process of the book's argument and in

its approach to the sources. Occasionally, as the reader will surely notice, the theoretical focus will become more intense; at numerous points in each chapter. However, it is important to me to allow the theoretical to develop out of the process of investigation, out of the specific details of the sources. My aim is not to propose one more theory of modernity among or even in opposition to existing well-developed ones. What is expressed in the formidable formulation, perhaps a bit of a mouthful, of the subtitle, *A Different Theory of Modernity*, can be found above all in the process of the investigation: the way the sources are dealt with, how the chapters are structured, in the stance taken towards both renowned and perhaps more leftfield thinkers, scholars, phenomena or practices, each of which will however be treated with the respect they are due and allowed to speak in their own language. Because history's path is often a winding one and the sources are sometimes a little strange or eccentric, rather laborious work on unfamiliar material was sometimes necessary, until a new trail could be found again. But when one is working on the basis of the conviction that fetishism can no longer be excluded from any theory of modernity, or postmodernity, then one can also no longer choose the genre of 'grand narrative', stretching from the Jewish prohibition of images to the museum, and from Native American tribes to the Central African *minkisi* cults and the ritual cartographies of the aborigines – but which has nothing to do with us.

For these reasons, I also have no intention of presenting an examination of existing theories of modernity in order to delineate my own position in critical opposition to them. First of all, this book is not a sociological theory, but rather a study of the history of culture and science, one which also analyses the culture of the present on the basis of the historical past in each chapter. Furthermore, this study does not fundamentally oppose the history of theory since Kant's three great *Critiques*, with which the theory of modernity begins, continuing on with Hegel, Comte, Spencer, Simmel, Max Weber, and up until Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. It is nonetheless striking that (almost) nothing can be found in these theorists about the cultural fields that will be investigated here. Fetishism, the practice of idolatry and the magic of things are basically excluded. "A different theory of modernity" therefore does not mean that this book is in competition with the above-mentioned theories, but that modernity is viewed from the position of a "different" field, which up until now has been neglected. One of the idiosyncrasies of the field of fetishism and magic is that their relationships to modernity are not immediately evident, and only become apparent in the process of historical analysis. And with good reason. Firstly, it quickly becomes clear that standard historical eras cannot really be applied to the subspecies of fetishism. Fetishism is much older than modernity. It has not only survived many historical eras, it is also relatively independ-

ent from and has outlasted many political regimes. It is the *longue durée* of cultures and in fact appears to be the most widespread and variable in the very era that believes it has overcome it: modernity. The specific achievements that characterise modernity, i. e. that which differentiates it from previous eras (and this is the subject of the important theorists named above), will therefore not be addressed here. The focus is instead on what modernity takes with it from previous eras and incorporates into its own structure in a new form. In this way, I hope, modernity's reflections about itself will become more differentiated and complex.

7 Fetishism, ethnology, cultural studies

Considering the book's aims, it would be inappropriate to comply with the frequent suggestions to do away with the concept of fetishism altogether, or to restrict it and only use it extremely precisely in its original sense as an ethnological term. Fetishism has never been an exclusively ethnological concept; indeed it is perhaps especially useless in the ethnological field. It is my opinion that fetishism has many roots and that it has therefore grown outwards in way that is hard to grasp in its entirety, because, as I will argue, it is actually a term used by European societies to describe themselves, and not non-European cultures. We only became aware of this, however, after a long history of detours and cumulative effects: this is what I aim to show. Once we are aware of this, then logically we must also 'Europeanise' the concept of fetishism and bring it up to date with the status quo in our culture. This does not exclude the possibility that the term may also be useful for describing tribal magical practices or for the analysis of non-European cultures characterised by cross-cultural ruptures between modernisation and traditional social forms today. Michael Taussig (1980) has shown this in his impressive investigation of South-American mine workers, although his attempt to adequately explain the definitively modern phenomenon of "state fetishism" was rather more unsuccessful, due to an over-eclectic use of theory (Taussig 1993). Using the example of the Stalin cult, I will attempt to make his ideas work.

The situation with fetishism is similar to that of totemism, which has been judged rather harshly by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962/1963). By his time, totemism had spread rapidly throughout international ethnology (but also to Freud's psychoanalysis) and had become a kind of shibboleth of theory. Lévi-Strauss therefore made the polemic decision that he need not pay attention to *what* and *who* were being described by this term, nor *on what grounds*, but instead that he should observe *those who were using the term:* perhaps totemism could say

more about ethnologists than about the cultures they analysed. Lévi-Strauss drew the conclusion that "the mind of the scholar himself plays as large a part as the minds of the people studied; it is as though he were seeking, consciously or unconsciously, and under the guise of scientific objectivity, to make the latter – whether mental patients or so-called 'primitives' – more different than they really are. The vogue of hysteria and that of totemism were contemporary, arising from the same cultural conditions" (1963, 1). "Totemism is firstly the projection outside our own universe, as though by a kind of exorcism, of mental attitudes incompatible with the exigency of a discontinuity between man and nature which Christian thought held to be essential" (ibid., 3). These ideas provide important clues for this book too, in that we will not deal with cultures declared to be fetishistic, but rather the discourse of those who make such declarations. I am convinced that fetishism discourse provides more insights about those who use it, than about those to whom the discourse refers. This book is therefore not a contribution to ethnological research, but rather to the history of science and its phantasms, which originate within in the conditions of European civilisation.

Quoting the American anthropologist Robert H. Lowie (1883 – 1957), Lévi-Strauss emphatically warns us to pay attention to "whether we are comparing cultural realities or merely figments of our logical modes of classification" (1963, 10). By and large, that is this book's methodological guiding principle. For Lévi-Strauss's observations on totemism also apply to the history of fetishism scholarship.

All this leads some to the conclusion that the concept of fetishism should be taken out of circulation altogether. This kind of suggestion appears for the first time around 1900. It will not be paid heed to here. The semantic sprawl and rampant disorder of the concept will not be remedied by burying it. The fetish would simply return as a ghost. Instead, the peculiar terminological confusion of fetishism will be transformed into something positive. It will be shown that there are semantic cores to the term on various different systemic levels in each of three main fields of chapters two to four (religion/ethnology – commodity fetishism – sexuality/psychoanalysis). Each of these semantic cores will be applied to cultural fields of practice and tested out. The broad spectrum of meaning and a certain claim to universality associated with the concept will undeniably be preserved; yet at the same time, I will demonstrate that, in spite of its breadth, one can most certainly work with the concept in a methodical manner and use it for the analysis of both the past and the present.

This means that certain traditional distinctions will be dispensed with. I will not follow the generally accepted belief that magic is the expression of a primitive, pre-causalistic relationship to the world to be kept strictly separate from

(more developed) religion, not to mention from the intellectualised world. Magic, as I wish to show, not only belongs to world religions like Christianity, but also to modernity and the enlightened mind. Although we think almost entirely in scientific terms nowadays, we also maintain magical relationships to things, people and symbolic icons, without being primitive because of it. Furthermore, the strict differentiation between idols and fetishes will not be upheld here. Though there are of course differences between the two, which will also be explained. However, what is important is that the mechanism through which both idols and fetishes have an effect are structurally similar, so that both often form 'ensembles', and also, that both are made possible by an identical "magic milieu" (Marcel Mauss). Because of this, my work will also take phenomena of idolatry into account – from the Hebrew Bible to the cult of Stalin.

Fetishes and idols are always material things; yet neither is limited to the material. What is so special about them is that they are matter that has incorporated something 'other' than itself into itself: meaning, symbols, forces, energies, power, spirits, ghosts, gods, etc. Their thingly aspect leads us to the question of what things actually are in the first place and how they can 'mean' something at all. This is almost a child's question. Or the kind of question St Augustine stumbled upon when he asked what time is: as long as we refrain from asking, we know what it is; but as soon as we ask, we are not so sure anymore. Things are intimately familiar to us. But as soon as we want to know what they are, they become strange to us. To understand fetishes and idols and the mechanisms through which things become fetishes or idols for us, we first need to know what things are. That is why the first chapter concerns the fundamentals and is dedicated to this question. It still amazes me how sparse the research on things is. A start has of course been made in philosophical phenomenology and in (ethnological) research into everyday life; there is also the psychological study by Friedrich Heubach for example on "life as conditioned* by things" (*Das bedingte Leben* 1996) or the empirically substantial study by Tilmann Habermas on "objects we love" (*Geliebte Objekte* 1996). But ultimately their focus is entirely on human beings or the socialising function of things. It is my hope that I might lay the foundations for a theory of things that could be applied far beyond the fields of fetishism and idolatry.

* The German word for 'condition', *Bedingung*, contains the noun 'thing', *Ding*.

8 A book is never alone

Any book one writes always has close relations. This book is particularly closely tied to the 2003 study by Karl-Heinz Kohl (2003). We had already heard of each other in the 1990s, and knew that we were working on similar topics. Universities are sometimes something of a Moloch. The responsibilities of my position as dean and the setting up of a *Sonderforschungsbereich* (special research group) prevented me from finishing this book for years, although the material had been prepared and had already been tested out in numerous papers. Some sections of our books are quite similar to each other, because, especially with regard to religious prehistory and older ethnography, we were working on the same or similar sources. However, fortunately, in the end our books are very different overall in terms of the focus, the style, the aims and the methodology. It is not my place, but that of the reader, to verify that. I should be permitted to say, however, that thanks to both of these books the extraordinary lack of research has been, if not remedied, at least somewhat improved: while fetishism research has flourished in the USA for more than twenty years in many disciplines – from sociology to economics, from cultural anthropology to literary studies, from women's studies to psychoanalysis – the same cannot be said for Germany. In many respects, American but also French research were important models for this book. From France, apart the fabulous collection of essays by Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1970) and Jean Pouillon's book (1975), the quite recently published study by Laurent Fedi (2002) deserves mention, although it concentrates on the traditional model of the history of theory and does not extend to cultural analysis. The most ambitious general study, bringing together many extremely different African fetish practices and belief systems in one theoretical model, and based on empirical field research as well as religious studies, has been provided by the ethnologist Albert de Surgy (1995). There is nothing comparable in Germany. The work of the Italian Alfonso M. Iacono (1985a/b) is, like the book by Fedi, very philosophically orientated and concludes with a lucid chapter on Marx. Nonetheless, none of these works approach a cultural analysis of the European societies that have constructed the concept of fetishism, societies to which the concept is also more applicable than African ones. These studies are also not comparable to this book in terms of the history of science or the theory of things. In that sense, American research has proved more useful. The present volume therefore represents the attempt to at least bring German research into line with American and French research, while on the other hand also placing a stronger focus on cultural history and areas of application within cultural studies.

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I Now That's Some Thing – An Introduction to the World of Things

For things are only the boundaries of man.
(Friedrich Nietzsche)[1]

1 The Bartelby effect

Let us conduct a thought experiment: imagine that things could demonstrate the Bartelby effect. That they could go on strike. But first, let us remind ourselves of Hermann Melville's story, "Bartelby the Scrivener", first published in 1853, which has experienced an astonishing renaissance in recent years.[2] A low-level, previously always compliant copyist in a New York lawyer's office begins, at first occasionally, then regularly and then persistently, to respond to any request to carry out tasks that are part of his job with the strange, but gently amiable answer: "I would prefer not to". Apparently with no needs himself, but permanently refusing to make himself useful in any way, he sets himself up in the office, where he then also lives, sleeping in the corner like a discarded thing, which in its unimposing obstinacy, causes extreme irritation, even distress to the self-certain minds of the lawyer and his employees. An "uncanny guest", to use E.T.A. Hoffmann's phrase. Eventually, he is disposed of in a prison, where he refuses to eat anything and is found dead one day like some unwanted thing. In his reticence, he is a tragic relic of a radical refusal of life.

Let us imagine then, that things could also do this:[3] that they would prefer not to. Things would prefer not to follow our instructions. They would persist in

1 Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, book I, no. 48 (1982, 32).

2 To mention but a few: Deleuze 1998; Agamben 1999. Almost at exactly the same time in 1859 (though it had been partly published early), the novel *Oblomov* was published by Ivan Alexandrovich Goncharov. Although it is situated in a different social class – Oblomov is landowner – it is the Russian counterpart to Bartleby. From the beginning, Oblomov's life is marked by being "extinguished", gradually transforming into the famous Oblomovian disease: an apathetic lack of action and a weak drive, which became an image for an entire class.

3 Lorraine Daston opens her recently published book *Things That Talk* with the thought experiment of a world without any things at all: "an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one" – "just a kind of porridgy oneness" (2004, 9). She quickly abandons that idea, and instead pursues the loquaciousness of things. Yet in many cultures there is a clear history of a fascination with the pre-structural world, one thinks for example of the biblical *tohu wa bohu*, Hesiod's chaos,

silent refusal. Would just be there, hanging around, undemanding and unresponsive. Let us imagine that we were not subjects that ascribe characteristics and features to objects; we would not be able to say anything about things or determine any factual situations in which we could 'place' things. It would be a topsy-turvy world. Or worse: we would form those sentences, but things would prefer not to comply; they would prefer not to. They would no longer be at our beck and call, would not serve us obediently, eluding all attempts to use them. Their inconspicuous condition – and this is how things have always been understood in Western philosophy, as the condition that silently always implicated our own condition – transformed into an obstinate presence, which would be increasingly uncanny. I would type on my keyboard – but no letters would appear on the screen. The mattress would refuse to accommodate my weight and just lie there, hard as rock. The radio: switched on, but silent. The vacuum cleaner would refuse to budge from its corner in the hall cupboard. The tap would not let itself be turned. The chair would refuse to stand, but would collapse on the floor under any weight. And so on.

It would be a moment of silent revolution, a "rebellion of things", as Erhart Kästner once wrote (*Der Aufstand der Dinge*, 1973), a revolt consisting of nothing more than a passive general strike by things. 'Nothing more than…': it does not take long to grasp that this would be a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. Our lives would be over. Chaos. We would lose our unique anthropological position. For this special position always silently implied: we are the ones who know how to form sentences so that things are affected and consequently comply.

These kinds of thought experiments are necessary in order to understand that we are dependent on things in an obscure, overlooked way. Our claims to sovereignty in the realm of things (and living beings) would be finished. It is almost as if we invented physics to protect ourselves from such silent attacks on our lives: things are the way they are; they cannot be any other way, that is the law that governs them, or even their fate, in the sense that this law means that they will allow themselves to be transformed from things into stuff without any protest, as Heidegger says. All this means is that we can assume with the

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Plato's chora and the pre-Socratic atomists' amorphous sea of matter (wonderfully described later in Lucretius) and their rich reception history – right up to abstract painting, which can sometimes be viewed as a world before any differentiation in things (cf. Böhme 2003). One might also think of Fra Angelico's strange amorphias, which Georges Didi-Huberman has called the "art of dissemblance" (1995, fig. 5–12) or in the peculiar defigurative particles of matter that Dürer chaotically 'throws' across his painting of the Ensisheim meteorite, known as the 'thunderstone' (Böhme 2005) – not to mention the wonderful cosmological cycle in Robert Fludd (1574–1637): 1617, starting at vol. 1.1, 26 ff.

utmost confidence that things will be compliant, insofar and as long as we respect the laws of physics. Obeying the laws of nature is the way to have command over things. This the Western principle par excellence, explicitly stated by Francis Bacon, if not earlier.[4] But it is also the principle of technology, and, almost more fundamentally, the principle of language. To speak means to formulate things as factual circumstances, to determine them and to have them at one's command. In this way we control them, they belong to our regime.

And our regime is this: things are made into functional things by us; they are 'there' to be useful. That alone justifies their existence. If they are not useful, they are rubbish (like Bartleby in the end). Or they are things that belong to nature, which are permitted to be 'as they are' as long as they do not disturb us or they contribute to our aesthetic pleasure. As aesthetic things, they can have a kind of secondary use, as elements of a landscape, as collector's items – pretty shells, rare fossils, fleeting clouds or elegant cars – which awaken pleasure and desire. But the same rule always applies: things, whether natural things or things of utility, are dead matter, subjectless, they do not have agency, they only obey: the laws of physics and us. It is precisely as such obedient things that they form the broad foundation of our existence. And the growing kingdom of our will. Growing, because the population of things is always increasing. In the last two centuries, artefacts have multiplied immeasurably. We need and consume them so that we can live. And because we can be certain that things are not actors, that we have no reason to fear a revolt or silent refusal like Bartelby's from them, the deep-seated dependence on things we have by now found ourselves in has never even crossed our mental horizons.

Speaking about things, turning them into statements and facts and having command of them technically, creates this trust, and we could not live without it. Indeed, we describe things as objects. *Obiectum* is the thing thrown our way or presented opposite us. In this, there are echoes of the constantly renewed experience that things resist us and that it requires effort to overcome this resistance: we put work into getting things moving. This is so obvious that it seems part of our nature: to work, in order to achieve goals with and against things. But concealed beneath this certainty is yet another assumption: our trust that things will not respond to us like Bartleby. That in their dumb self-containedness, their obscure closedness, they would never 'go' so far as to make themselves 'independent', to become 'wilful', even if only in the form of silent refusal.

4 Georg Simmel recognised the dialectical implication of Bacon's principle early on: "Although it is true to say that we control nature to the extent that we serve it [...] the control of nature by technology is possible only at the price of being enslaved in it." (1900/2004, 482)

Yet this fundamental assumption is in no way universal or primal. We share it neither with older societies nor with contemporary cultures in which things are (have remained) 'alive', magic and animated, as though they had a life force of their own that they could use to act and possibly win power over us.

In terms of world history, it is most certainly a late achievement to have developed philosophies and technologies that are constructed to make things stay 'there', where they have been left, motionless and silent, waiting to be called by their name or used, waiting for our language and our hands. All things are potentially nameable; and they are all potentially 'ready-to-hand', as Heidegger says. This even applies to the furthest stars: they may be out of reach, but they are close enough for us to identify them, measure them, observe them. Although they are not real, they have been mentally appropriated. Protagoras' *homo mensura* formula is proven by this: *pánton chremáton metron estìn ánthropos, ton mèn ónton ós éstin, ton dè ouk ónton ós ouk estin* (Plato: *Theaetetus* 152a, Diels-Kranz 80 B1: Man is the measure of all things, of things which are, that/how they are, and of things which are not, that/how they are not).

This is early philosophical evidence of this attitude, in fact it is the beginning of autonomous philosophy at all; it is also very late evidence, because it strikes out or reverses a cultural truth that had been valid for hundreds and thousands of years, namely that things make their own fate and have their own sphere of action, in comparison to which man is ephemeral and weak. This power of things, which we grandchildren of the Greek Enlightenment and sons of early modern technology and science can no longer believe in, this power of things (and living beings) was dominant for much longer in history. For things 'live', in their own strange way. Children who treat lifeless things as though they were equal actors in their agency as a matter of course, are – well, children. They have not yet made the cut that divides the world into living and dead objects, and which opposes both these huge categories to ourselves: as objects of our knowledge and activity. Anyone who wants to grow up or any so-called 'primitive' person who wants to participate in the enlightened world must perform this cut on themselves, one which fits things into our measure of them and makes them predictable and available from the autonomous position that is our privilege as subjects and constitutes us as such. In the process, we forget that subject comes from *subiectum*, the subordinated (which we still hear in the derogatory phrase *verkommenes Subjekt**). Bartleby is a *subiectum*, in other words, nothing but an obedient servant to his superior, who becomes disturbing because he mu-

* Literally 'degenerate subject'; usually translated as 'bad lot'.

tates into an object that is not even 'ready-to-hand', not even a functional thing or equipment.*

2 "The rebellion of things"

Into his "Byzantine notes", the subtitle of his book *Der Aufstand der Dinge* [The Rebellion of Things], writer and director of the Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel Erhart Kästner (1904–1974) wove in a series of reflections on things that sound strangely not of their time in their metaphysical, culturally critical style. On the market square in Delos, recalling the slavery of the ancient world, Kästner muses:

> Might it not turn out to be a terrible mistake to believe that things, now enslaved instead of slaves, will simply endure the terror without ever retaliating? To believe that this century, woven from trickery – for research is our way of outwitting things – will survive this way? To believe that these victims of our cunning are so defenceless? That we have no resistance to fear? No Spartacus? No rebellion among these new slaves? No self-defence? When we believe the things of this world to be so dull, so dead? [...] Contempt for humans in the past, contempt for things now? Was it not contempt that let us believe that all that was needed was a little trickery and a little pressure in order to make them submit, dumb and compliant? Do we really believe that the project of calculating the world and manufacturing the world would never strike back? [...] Has the thought not yet arisen that in the future [...] a form of socialism concerned with oppressed, outcast, scrutinised and exploited things could arise? (1973, 157–158)

Kästner ponders "the *possibility of a general strike by things*", which might consist of things turning away, closing themselves off, falling silent, withdrawing – the Bartleby effect. Kästner understands 'withdrawing' here literally as 'the pulling away of things', but also as a translation of 'abstract': the abstract takes the place of the withdrawn things. He sees paintings from the *peinture métaphysique* of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) as a symptom of this pulling away, their dead atmosphere reminding him of "funerals for things". "It is not God that is dead," argues Kästner, repudiating Nietzsche's famous aphorism (2001, 109)[5], "but

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* *Zeug* can also mean 'stuff', but in standard translations of Heidegger, which Böhme discusses below, it is usually rendered as 'equipment'.

5 References to Nietzsche are abbreviated as [The standard German editions Böhme refers to are:] Nietzsche: KSA = Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Kritische Studienausgabe* [Critical Edition] in 14 vols, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Munich 1988. Nietzsche: Werke = Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Werke* [Works] in 3 vols, ed. by Karl Schlechta. Munich 1966. [As a standard English

things; the message was muddled, there was an error in transmission, it was a false announcement. Things are dead, and it was we (that was right) who probed, strangled and killed them" (1973, 159). One can assume that Kästner, an educated man, was familiar with Francis Bacon's description of the experiment, which implied that it was close to inquisition and torture, and also that he was familiar with Goethe's dictum: "Nature grows dumb when subjected to torture".[6] Moreover, continues Kästner, the silence of things, their rebellion, is a response to our breach of contract with them, a reaction to "modernity's madness for dominion", by which Kästner primarily means rationalism and the natural sciences (ibid., 161, 163–166). In order to counter this, Kästner helplessly summons conservative cultural criticism, which reassures itself with the thought that things could come over to its side and plot a rebellion – to fight for the "natural rights of things". "The belief that things can be indefinitely oppressed, without rights, will, feeling or the need to decide for themselves can only be held by someone who also believes that they have no life or power. They have both" (ibid., 160).

It is clear that Kästner uses language to bring things to life, although he wishes to avoid all "Don Quixotery", and that he elevates them to the status of subjects, giving them rights and autonomy like those of humans. By anthropomorphising things in this way (which is no doubt a risky transgression of boundaries), he can portray the human-thing relationship as an intersubjective social relationship and assess it in terms of morals and rights. Things are not only the slaves of society, they are the modern proletariat. One can undoubtedly also read *Aufstand der Dinge* as Kästner's attempt to create more awareness for the necessity of a criticism of the way modern man has seized power in things' sphere of existence. He also uses old literary motifs to support his argument, for example the fairytale "Das Lumpengesindel" [The Pack of Scoundrels*], Goethe's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", or stories about the "malice of objects", like those by E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose protagonist Anselmus in "The Golden Pot" constantly finds himself up against things at the beginning of the story.[7] The children's book

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edition of complete works is not yet fully available, English references are given in square brackets where possible.]

6 Krohn (1994) provides a balanced discussion of Bacon's formulations in the *Novum Organum* (1620). Goethe's dictum, directed against Newton, can be found in: Goethe 1998, 14. – Cf. also Plato, *The Republic* 531b and Pseudo-Virgil 1963, verses 261ff, 541ff. For more on the ancient understanding of experiment as torture, see Kornhardt 1952, 379ff.

***** The German *Lumpen* means both 'rags' and 'scoundrels' or 'rascals'. It can also be found in the word *Lumpenproletariat*, meaning 'underclass'.

7 The malice of the object is phrase from Friedrich Theodor Vischer's (1807–1887) novel *Auch Einer. Eine Reisebekanntschaft* [Someone Too: A Travelling Acquaintance] (1879), here 1918, 21; 27. Vischer describes a number of grotesque misunderstandings that can occur with things and

Die Reise nach Tripiti [The Journey to Tripiti] by H.U. Steger (1967), on the other hand, tells of a group of broken toys who go on a journey, their numbers growing as they go: a great disfigured troop of the discarded and the tossed away, who refuse to become junk and rubbish. In Tripiti they find (or invent) a utopia, a society of things, a place where things can end their lives peacefully – without any people, for people seem incapable of respecting the broken toys' value and individuality, which lie precisely in their imperfection. Here, 'old' things will be given back the dignity that all things are entitled to in Kästner's view.[8] Whether a rebellion of slaves or a general strike by the proletariat, whether a gang of mischief-makers (as in "Das Lumpengesindel" or "Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten" [The Town Musicians of Bremen]) or a utopian retirement home for broken old toy-pensioners: these kinds of stories always use the ancient pattern of things magically brought to life in order to reflect mankind's questionable treatment of things by breaking with the norm. This goes all the way to Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature*[*] (2004).

Still, the Swiss constitution has by now at least granted animals the right to dignity. And from the Middle Ages up until as late as the early modern period, animals were unequivocally considered legal persons. Formal legal proceedings were brought against animals and animals could be legally represented. However, it was not animal rights that were the main concern here, but instead animals as delinquents that had in some way offended the human order. Today, the legal representation of animals is being seriously discussed in discourse on ecology and law (one might also think of Erich Kästner's 1947 *Konferenz der Tiere* [Conference of the Animals], where quite the reverse is the case and the animals rep-

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that things are accused of by those affected: as if they were autonomous actors, deceitfully tripping up humans and getting up to all kinds of mischief with them whenever they can. – Vischer's novel, very popular in his day, ensured that the phrase 'the malice of objects' passed into general use in German. Ludwig Wittgenstein criticised this malice of objects as a "stupid anthropomorphism" – it certainly is true that seeing one's own clumsiness and ineptitude as the rancour of things is merely a projection. It is, however, a humourless Enlightenment solution to describe such a ubiquitous mechanism as stupid, while Vischer makes it the fulcrum of his very amusing novel.

8 In 1883, van Gogh writes to Anthon von Rappard on this subject: "Today I was at the spot where the rubbishmen bring the rubbish etc. I'll be damned, it was lovely. [...] Tomorrow I'm going to get some interesting objects from this rubbish dump [...] That would be something for an Andersen fairytale, this collection of worn-out buckets, baskets, kettles, soldier's cooking utensils, oilcans and wire, streetlamps and stove pipes" (cited in Scholz 1989, 16). Van Gogh rightly associates fairytales with this, and at the same time anticipates strategies for an aesthetic of rubbish that has led to the development of 'rubbish art' – as a criticism of consumerism – since the 1970s.

* The German title of Latour's book translates as 'the parliament of things'.

resent incapable humans at a world peace and future conference). One can go even further back in history: in epistles by the Ihwan as-Safa, the Brethren of Purity, from the ninth to the tenth centuries, there is a court case by the animals against representatives of the human race (Goodmann/McGregor 2009, cf. Dieterici 1861). Friedrich Dieterici, the editor of an early German edition, significantly calls this fictive trial scene a "fairytale". With extremely convincing arguments, the animals describe mankind's injustice, brutality, imperiousness, social inequality, egoism and lack of legitimation. Man wrongly bases his despotism over animals on a privileged position in creation and his capacity for reason. All forms of the violent oppression of animals are addressed: killing them for food, the gory hunt, their imprisonment, the suffering under the yoke of forced labour, the complete lack of respect for their feelings as living beings, the brutality of their punishment, the use of their skin, horn and fur for cloths, jewellery and machinery, their training for human entertainment, etc. The first prosecution speech ends with the following: "Instead they [mankind, H.B.] must now prove that this is their incontrovertible right over us, that they are our masters and we their servants and that any one of us who escapes is a runaway slave, rebellious and refusing to be obedient. This is all without any legitimate claim over us, without any proof or logical argument, but is based on violence and oppression alone" (Ihwan as-Safa 1990, 10). Compared to the animals, man seems far more beastly than any beast, and the animals seem more humane than humanity.

Our relationship to things is always reflected in our relationship to animals, for the thing-status of animals is established as early as Roman law, the very decree against which the animals are bringing their case in the writings of the Brethren of Purity. This status, which animals shared with women for so long, survives far into the twentieth century and forms the basis of the legality of the kinds of utilitarian practices common in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim cultural sphere: animals are things, things subject to our will, means to our ends, and when they are not, they are bad, hostile, redundant, as pests and beasts.

What can be said of animals can be equally applied to all of nature and therefore extended to include all allegedly lifeless things. Paulus Niavis' *Iudicum Iovis oder Das Gericht der Götter über den Bergbau* [Judicum Jovis or the Judgement of the Gods on Mining] from 1490 opposes such a view. This text portrays the first formal trial of mankind, accused of murdering nature. A personification of Earth heads the prosecution of *homo faber* in the presence of the highest God, Jupiter. Although man is specifically accused because of his mining activities, the case is more fundamentally about the legitimacy of human privilege, man's dom-

ination of nature and his disregard for religious traditions that restricted the exploitation of the Earth (Niavis 1485 – 1490/1953).[9]

There is therefore most definitely room for allowing things a certain amount of their dignity in occidental thinking – which today is being negotiated as the possible application of constitutional rights to the natural environment. One might argue that the issue here is not individual things, but instead the whole ecosystem. But what actually are things? Are single trees things or trees in general, extremely important agents in the world's climate? Is climate a thing? No? But a cloud is? While the wind is not? Is the emission of carbon dioxide not a feature of the thing 'car' and the thing 'coal-fired power plant' in the same way that the release of oxygen is a feature of the tree? Are things only things when they can be distinguished as a compact, self-contained unit and are not processual in nature? Would a static car be a thing then, but not a moving one that 'consumes' energy and influences the climate with its emissions? It is clear how quickly one gets into difficulties in modern discourse, difficulties which are glossed over with playfulness by the Brethren of Purity and in children's books, in Erhart Kästner and in the Grimms' fairytales. We are therefore not in a position to simply continue to accuse Kästner of essentialist metaphysics as long as it is not clear what a thing is. Indeed, it might make sense to ascribe quasi-lifelike characteristics to things, symbolically, ecologically or legally, if we could agree on a definition of things that would restrict them to single, materially compact, clearly defined objects, located in specific spatiotemporal 'positions'. This 'definition' would also consist of arriving at a more reasonable place in the sociotechnical regulation of the human-thing relationship. If we allow this, cultural accounts and practices based on an understanding of things as somehow alive, now so alien to us, would not be automatically considered irrational. The same also applies to the mechanism with which individual societies or society in general fetishise things – natural things, artefacts, junk or artworks, football jerseys or little pictures of saints, money or locks of hair.

3 "The Cares of a Family Man"

Of course, the tentative restoration of the aliveness of things, which we will also assume – in order not to drive ourselves mad – are not subjects, always has another side to it. This was already somewhat evident in Kästner's *Aufstand der Dinge* or in the trials against humanity. Even if we are nowhere near such drastic

9 On this cf. Bredekamp 1984; Böhme 1988.

forms of action taken by things, their animation gives rise to deep anxieties. These are perhaps most disturbingly formulated by Franz Kafka in his tiny short story, "The Cares of a Family Man" (1917).[10] The narrator (the family man of the title) tells of a mysterious "creature", "called Odradek", sometimes referred to in the masculine, sometimes in the neuter form (he/it). This "creature" is first introduced as nothing more than a word; yet neither the Germanic nor the Slavic origin of it provide an "intelligent meaning". This has apparently not prevented researchers from investigating the many 'linguistic roots' of 'Odradek'. This is, of course, possible with any word. In the first paragraph on the 'name' of the thing, however, Kafka seems to want to say that words will *not* allow any conclusions to be drawn about the "creature" and the "meaning" of the thing they describe. This is followed by a description of Odradek's appearance. It is subjunctive, cautious, conjectural, reading the "signs"; yet nothing can be gleaned from the appearance of the "creature" that would clarify it fully, indeed not even the visual attributes are certain. The strange little "creature"* that seems to be 'assembled' from various materials (therefore heterogeneous, inorganic) – like a miniature assemblage – also refuses to be grasped on the second level, the linguistic expression of visual impressions. Once again, assigning meaning is impossible: "the whole thing looks senseless enough, yet in its own way perfectly finished."

The third attempt is to grasp Odradek by his movement and to understand him via communication. Odradek is now no longer an 'it', but a 'he'. But no sense can be made from his movements either: he lives – sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, here and there – in intermediate spaces, places of transit, in attics, stairwells, corridors, halls (Kafka's preferred locations in general). This 'in-between' – one might also think of Foucault's heterotopia or Marc Augé's "non-place" – seems to 'characterise' Odradek. However, this word might already be too much. For the in-between means precisely that Odradek is "extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of" and therefore can also not be 'characterised'; unless he could be characterised by the paradox that Kafka is writing a story about this ungraspable thing and therefore gives him a linguistic 'frame', which Odradek constantly undermines and denies. This paradox also ultimately becomes clear in the family man's attempt to

10 This story first appeared in the collection *Ein Landarzt. Kleine Erzählungen* [A Country Doctor: Short Stories], Munich and Leipzig, 1919. The following is not intended to be a literary interpretation. – Peter Geimer (2003, 220) also discusses this story. – For an interpretation that is still current, see Hillmann 1967.

* The standard translation is 'creature', though *Gebilde* means something more like 'construct', 'formation' or 'object'.

start a communicative relationship with Odradek by addressing him “like a child”. This is where the anthropomorphisation of the ‘thing’ begins: and he/it does actually answer, calls itself “Odradek”, says it has “no fixed abode” and laughs. Speaking and laughing (I am thinking here of Helmut Plessner 1941/1970) are genuinely anthropological characteristics. Yet Odradek is not a person, and his/its laughter is also “only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it” – “like the rustling of fallen leaves”. Is he only “as wooden as his appearance”? Even Odradek’s materiality is uncertain. In the fifth part, the narrator reflects on Odradek’s temporality and asks himself whether Odradek, who does not seem to trouble himself with aims and activities like all other life forms, will still be rolling down the stairs at the feet of his children’s children. That Odradek is “likely to survive” the family man is an “almost painful” idea for him.[11]

In many ways, the story of Odradek can be read as depicting our inextricable entanglement with things. Neither language nor (visual) perception, neither communication nor mental reflection help us get closer to the “creature” Odradek. He shares the neuter form with things, the material, the apersonal (the it). However, like all things that we interact with, Odradek is anthropomorphised and given person-like characteristics, without being identifiable in any way. He is ‘there’, he is; yet what or who he is cannot be deciphered. He seems to be an artefact, yet he does not demonstrate any characteristics of something made, and so it is unclear whether he is *physis* or *techné*, *terrigenus* or *factitius*, organic or synthetic. He is, depending on the perspective, neither one thing nor another, or sometimes one thing, then another. If anything, Odradek seems always to be whatever he is perceived as, interpreted as, verbalised as, addressed as – yet exactly this is subject to a permanent doubt, a deconstruction of any construction. He is, as already mentioned, an in-between, a neither-nor, one thing as well as another. He demonstrates characteristics of usefulness but also uselessness, of meaning and meaninglessness. His coordinates in space are equally as impossible as those in time. This distinguishes him from things that demonstrate a clear here-and-nowness, a spatiotemporal position that they occupy. And yet he is, like things, complete ‘by himself’, calmly centred so to speak, a “whole” and “perfectly finished”, as “broken” as he may seem. He is solitary, singular, belongs to no species or category (unlike things) – in that sense he is like a work of art; and yet he is indeterminately determinate, ge-

11 I am not taking into account that Odradek’s homelessness is linked to Kafka’s feeling of rootlessness as a Jew or is an image for the ‘eternally’ wandering Jew. The intertextual relationship to other Kafka texts is also deliberately not addressed here.

neric, because he is placeless and timeless, voiceless and vocal, infinitely reinterpretable, unsettling, alive and dead, incommensurable – in these ways too like a work of art.

His in-between being resembles a phantom, an apparition that has materialised, but is made of materials that are heterogeneous and indistinct, and has forms that cannot be classified. His ability to move around by himself allows him to appear alive, and yet he is a dead thing (we also say: the car moves, the airplane flies, the train drives; but is that really the case? Or are they being moved, flown, driven?). The fact that he has a name makes him resemble man, that creature of names. But we also give animals and things names, indeed, we even baptise them – for example ships. This peculiar unattainability, ungraspability, inarticulability, as concrete and as diverse in their attributes as they are, has regularly been observed about things. As clear, closed off, self-contained as they might appear to us, the more they are pure rejection and withdrawal as soon as we want to get closer to them. The closer we get to them, the further they retreat, it seems. If they had a secret, they would guard it; indeed, they themselves are a secret that conceals nothing. That is what makes them so fascinating. It is the reason why we reach out beyond ourselves to them, "inclined to speak to him", as Kafka writes: a desire for appropriation that they constantly withdraw from, although we are supposedly the "man of the house" like the family man, powerful patriarchs. This state of being withdrawn, which is exactly what makes things appear alive to us – how could something dead escape beyond our reach? – is the reason why ultimately every relationship we establish with things ends in "cares"*: our anxiety about ourselves. Things will survive us, even if that might be as the useless rubbish that Odradek also could be. Unrelenting, wordless, they are a *memento mori* par excellence. While we must give up our being a person in death in order to become things, things, to which we lend the appearance of the person-like, retreat into their thingliness: to a universe without death. No matter how much one demolishes any thing, things always remain (particle physicists too have learned this). One cannot banish the thingly from things; it is as present in every fragment as in the finished work of art. All we can do is transform things into mental concepts. But a 'thought thing' is no longer a thing. In the end, Odradek too is not a thing at all, but rather a figure of language, a series of images, associations, con-

* The German *Sorge* is more clearly negative, as in 'worries' or 'troubles', than the standard translation as 'cares'. Likewise above, *Hausvater* can also be translated as 'the man of the house', instead of 'family man'.

junctives, assumptions, retractions, limitations – nothing but the movement of a text. Was Odradek a thing at all? Or just a mobile web of arbitrary signs?

Our anxiety about our own death and the fact that things will never lose their thingliness as we will lose our lives drives us to transform the universe of things into thoughts. The symbolic, which allows us to represent things, is the precondition for us being able to create virtual models with objects as thoughts. These are the preliminary models of our real, technical intervention in the world: we thereby manage to achieve a small amount of the independence from things that we aspire to; an independence one might say we have always desired. On the other hand, there is a radical resistance to the mental: we long to be things ourselves. For as long as we are material and therefore somehow part of the realm of things, we are permitted to say: we are alive. This is also where the desire for the resurrection of the flesh comes from; virtual existence, as a ghost, is infinitely sad, as the Greeks who populate Hades tell us.

Here, once again, we encounter a paradox. All of our cultural energy is put into transforming things into the immaterial so that we can grasp them symbolically and in real terms; yet at the same time, the immaterial desires to make itself material, so that it can share the deathlessness of things. For it is not the immaterial, the mind, that is eternal (as pure spirit nothing but a traceless fluttering in the universe), but the thingliness of things. Perhaps, our longing, our greed, our desire for things is nothing but the attempt to cheat death. We die, but in things we live on. We will encounter this again as a structure of fetishism. It seems that we, the enlightened, have precisely the relationship to things that we usually disapprove of, one which seems to be more rationalised than anything else: a religious one.

4 “Where a thing ends and where it begins”

It would be extremely difficult to cope with every thing being Odradek. It would mean living in an endless paradox. But do we not have a similar relationship to things? Perhaps we cannot actually rely on them at all? Do objects’ little disruptions, breakdowns, wearing out and refusal to cooperate not ultimately confirm the *grosso modo* consistent stability of things? Of course, we have to learn how to use them, which is sometimes difficult enough; of course, bitter poverty also consists of a lack of things; of course, the ‘course of things’ is regularly jammed; of course, processes repeatedly collapse, a chain of actions is broken, the flow of our activity is blocked by the resistances that inadvertently issue from things. But we have prepared for this: with repair services, technicians, techniques, products that rectify faults and unblock blockages, which replace worn-out

parts and make things work again. "How are things?"[12] Things are good (including the problems). "How are you?" – Fine.

In his short 1905 essay "Der Henkel" [The Handle],[13] using the example of the handles of a container, Georg Simmel shows how difficult the categorical and aesthetic description of things is, even if like containers they are 'man-made' and made to be used, based on a clear logical pattern of how they are to be used – unlike natural objects or works of art, which coalesce into "self-sufficient unity" and are intended to be "insulated and untouchable". In contrast, functional objects should 'be ready to hand'. That is their "reality", which is "completely irrelevant" to the artwork and "as it were, is consumed in it". The handle is the thing on the container that implies how to use it, the taking of it in one's hand, and belongs to its practical use – unlike the aesthetic form of objects. The handle is "a mediating bridge" and "a pliable joining" of the shape of the container and the hand handling it. "The principle of the handle – to mediate between the work of art and the world while it remains wholly incorporated in the art form – is finally confirmed by the fact that its counterpart, the opening or spout of the vessel, works according to an analogous principle. With the handle the world approaches the vessel; with the spout the vessel reaches out into the world." Thus the handle is "the point of entrance for a teleology that is completely external to that form". This teleology stems from the way it is handled, in contrast to the "*breadth* of symbolic relations" that the container owes to its design, its shape, but also to its social meaning. The handle and the spout are the two elements that make the container a mediating space for actions, directing the path of the liquid; they demonstrate the object's function on the object to ensure proper handling. However, the form of the object belongs to yet another order. It positions the vessel as *aistheton*, as a perceivable thing. Its design reveals a relationship to pleasure, 'a sensitivity to form', the feeling of desire or aversion (Kant), which in a certain sense opposes the function. Both aspects 'belong to' the thing, but also to the subject that handles it and which positions itself doubly in relation to it, aesthetically and practically, emotionally and pragmatically.

This leads us once again to the problem of saying what the thing 'vessel' actually is. It is precisely not a self-contained entity: it is comprised of functional links with activities (as Simmel says: the "world approaches the vessel" and the vessel "reaches out into the world"). It has, as Bruno Latour would say, assem-

12 This turn of phrase serves as Droit's starting point (2005, 15).

13 Simmel, "Two Essays: The Handle, and The Ruin" (1958, 371–385). However, here I [Böhme] have cited the later version [the first version was published in 1905]: *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essais*. Berlin 1911/1983, 99–105.

bled or associated with us into a collective. The hand that grips, the lifted carafe, the wine pouring forth into a glass from its mouth, a glass held by someone else, both people at a laid table, their social situation perhaps marked as a date, in a candlelit room, the sentences exchanged during the 'pouring', the style of socialising marked by gestures, clothing, facial expressions: all of this forms a self-contained whole made up of things and people, signs and materials, articulations and silences, actions and attitudes. Within this whole, the two hands, the glass, the stream of wine, the carafe and the handle form a "bridge", a transition, without which everything would fall apart. Independently of this material ensemble of things and bodies (and independently of all of the social meaning produced within it), the host pouring the wine senses, then communicates with his eyes and hands, that the elegant shape of the carafe so pleasing to the eye, with the harmoniously attached handle, is somehow uncomfortable, awkward to hold; while the woman holds the lovely old glass perfectly in her hand, which she however somehow dislikes, because she is a proponent of the 'form follows function' principle, and therefore does not like antique things. And so a growing sense of discord descends upon the wonderfully interconnected ensemble of bodies and things, which does not bode well for the rendezvous.[14] To use Bruno Latour's terms: the collective of things and people that are communicating here, experience, despite all their intentions, the first feelings of perplexion.

Recently, following in the footsteps of Simmel and Francis Ponge[15] (without referencing them) and also of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (who are referenced without much justification), Roger-Pol Droit has presented a few short phenomenological observations on everyday objects such as paperclips, boilers, scythes, photocopiers, spirit levels, etc. (a total of fifty things).[16] These studies become literary miniatures almost unavoidably; writing about things in a non-literary style is almost impossible. Giving things a name "as bearing witness to its [the thing's] unique existence" (Droit 2005, 10) requires engaging with their silent

14 This is a reference to the tea-pouring scene at the beginning of the story "Die Vollendung der Liebe" [The Perfecting of a Love] from 1911 (Musil 1986, 179–182). – Cf. Jakob 2004, 44 f.

15 Francis Ponge (1899–1988) is perhaps, along with Rilke, the greatest wordsmith when it comes to a poetic vision of things and their reflection in aesthetic perception. Cf. e. g. Ponge 1947; 1995; 1998 and 1986. – On Ponge cf. also: Sartre 1947.

16 Droit does not mention Vilém Flusser either, who wrote a very similar book, which I will discuss in more detail later (Flusser 1993, partly translated in Flusser 1999). – Cf. Panati 1987. Panati uses the fiction of an alphabetic lexicon to bring a large and yet ultimately inconsequential number of cultural-historical items and functional objects into an inevitably arbitrary order. He therefore relieves himself of the problem of an "order of things" and uses the liberty he has thus gained for a sometimes amusing, sometimes insightful, always incidental collection of textual miniatures, a kind of linguistic museum of everyday objects.