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## Paulina Aroch Fugellie - Anecdotes of an Obsolete Object, a Thing Astir Called Book

What is a book? Perhaps the notion refers firstly to an articulate format: to a substantive amount of printed pages bound together. Yet it also presupposes an articulate discourse: these pages are bound together for a reason, they have a single organizing principle in the conceptual as in the material level. The order in which the pages are arranged corresponds to the gradual spinning out of an overall sense. Furthermore, this coherent material and discursive entity circulates in social worlds, becoming charged with different attributes according to context. A consistent symbolic role in a given time and place may lead a book to operate as *the* book, or at least allow the generic idea of the book to act as a constant mediation in our relationship with any particular volume. Homi Bhabha, for example, has described how "the English book" - a blanket reference to canonical Western texts such as *The Bible* - impacted the postcolonial contexts in which it was introduced. According to Bhabha, the English book is emblematic of original truth, whether it be the word of God, the entrance into history by way of the written record, or the universal truths proclaimed by humanist literary traditions. All these truths tend to become reified by means of the foreign, imposed, printed text in contexts of reception that hold different configurations of orality and writing (102-122).

Yet the idea of the book as an abstract entity that nonetheless mediates actual socio-cultural relationships is also centrally relevant to the postmodern context at a global scale. Books circulate in economic worlds, and this participation often co-determines their material and semantic constitution. The present and potential political significance of how we engage with books, both discursively and in our everyday actions, is informed by how we read that relationship between the material

“ ***As we have witnessed, technological developments have led to a destabilization of the traditional book format...*** ”

and the ideological.[1] As we have witnessed, technological developments have led to a destabilization of the traditional book format. The idea of the book today thus mobilizes anxieties concerning old and current technologies and their production/use/co-optation by the reigning socio-economic order. A pressing question is therefore the degree to which and the ways in which the changing material constitution of the book and its changing modes of circulation and consumption affect the coherence of its discursive structure as well as affecting the way in which the idea of the book is socially constructed.

Apologists of the new information and communication technologies highlight the efficiency that is gained when moving to electronic book formats. Many of them also point to the plausibility of a continued discursive coherence across the changed material supports. Particularly in relation to this last argument, however, others would hardly agree. I am not just referring to those considering the question from perspectives akin to Marxism, but also to those considering the question from the paradigmatic "linguistic turn" in contemporary thought. This is not initially evident since the field emerging after the linguistic turn in the humanities and known as "theory" engages in the self-referential, sign-centred, short-format sort of discourse that is akin to contemporary technologies. As critics of that field, like Benita Parry, have pointed out, the linguistic turn has brought with it a disregard for the analysis of political economy at a macro-structural scale (55). Timothy Brennan shares Parry's stance and sarcastically defines "theory" as "an *American* and *British* translation of *French* refinements of conservative *German* philosophy" (9, emphases in original).

But while sympathising with Parry's and Brennan's diagnosis, I find it more productive to seek ways to exploit the critical potential within theory itself, precisely because it is an increasingly hegemonic trend in the humanities of the Western academy today. Much contemporary theory stems ultimately from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, which, while being in many ways idealist, centrally involves an awareness of the indivisibility between the letter (realm of the technological) and meaning (realm of the ideological).[2] As Ranjana Khanna indicates, "for Heidegger technology (*techne*) and knowing (*episteme*) are linked" (107). As inherited by French post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, and then taken up by contemporary

Anglo-American theorists, the idea of this basic link has served to question the presuppositions of grand meta-narratives that, ever since the Renaissance, were written as if they were not enunciated from a particular place. Theory thus enacts a trenchant critique of how the Western philosophical canon has been legitimized in terms of its alleged freedom from material specificity. This points to the importance of the awareness of history in a field that has paradoxically also served to blind from view how large-scale, economic interrelations determine small-scale historical situatedness.

I consider that, if taken in conjunction, post-structuralist and Marxism-informed modes of analysis - and, more particularly, deconstruction and negative dialectics as specific analytical tools - may pave the way for an exploration of the role of the book today that considers both its materiality in the literal sense, and its contextual constitution as an object from a much wider viewpoint. Theodor W. Adorno proposes that, "the thing itself is its context, not its pure selfhood", and therefore "the history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in relation to other objects" (162-63). According to Adorno's perspective, the object realizes itself only as it opens itself up to exteriority, an exteriority which, in turn, "potentially determine[s] the object's interior" (162). This dialectic articulates well with Jacques Derridas' conception of language as a structure organized around a center, whereby "the center [...] constitute[s] that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality." Since, according to Derrida, the history of metaphysics can be envisaged as "a series of substitutions of center for center" and since that center, ever since the linguistic turn is "not a fixed locus but a function," I propose that the history of ideas in and through discourse can be investigated much in the same way as objects in relation to their own historicity (278-281). The book being both an idea and an object, these two perspectives will be implicit in my own approach.

With this method, I seek to keep vigilant of the continued celebration of Progress and technology as well as of a fetishistic nostalgia for the disappearing object. I believe that both attachments, though apparently opposite, work under the same Manichean opposition and, as I will argue, that opposition operates in tandem with the *status quo*. To approach the question of what a book is (necessarily mediated by the question what *the* book, as a generic construct, is today) I will draw on a philosophical concept and on a discursive practice that, in different ways, both describe, in principle, what a book is *not*. The concept is that of "thingness", the practice, that of "anecdote".

“ ***But what happens if we try to locate the thingness of a book?*** ”

In "Thing Theory", Bill Brown proposes that the thingness about an object is that which exceeds its use value. Brown examines the thingness about a specific object, one that is obsolete, that no longer has any pragmatic use, and so its thingness is patently

exposed. But what happens if we try to locate the thingness of a book? Books are objects whose use value is so central to our everyday academic life that trying to picture them as anything other than what we use them for poses a challenge to the imagination. With the concept of "thingness", therefore, I intend to explore the relation between our imaginations of the book and the ideological, cultural and technological realities associated to its material format at this particular historical juncture.

With the concept and discursive practice of "anecdote" I pursue a similar objective. The etymological root of anecdote describes it as the excluded other of the book. Something which, while originally being part of the prime material of a historian, is unsuitable for publishing. As stated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term stems (through the Latin and French) from the Greek word for "things unpublished", and it was first "applied by Procopius to his 'Unpublished Memoirs' of the Emperor Justinian, which consisted chiefly of tales of the private life of the court; whence the application of the name to short stories or particulars" (319). [3] Hence, today an anecdote is colloquially understood as a (usually first-person, informal) narrative dealing with private rather than political, religious, academic or other issues of public import.

In the section below, in actually practising anecdote, I intend to probe the relations between form and content that the destabilization of the book today brings to the fore. As I put forward in the opening paragraphs above, the idea of the book refers not only to a well-bound object, but also to a well-bound discourse. It is not gratuitous, therefore, that "monograph" is the technical term used by librarians to categorize books and to differentiate them from periodicals. The unity highlighted by that categorization contrasts with the concept of anecdote. As a particular form (the un-published), the anecdote becomes associated with a particular content (the private). Perhaps more importantly, like many forms of virtual communication exchange prevailing today, the anecdote foregrounds the contingent and the incidental. In so doing, it allows us to explore the question of coherence and its (in)dependence in relation to the book format.

## Anecdotes of an Obsolete Object

Usually, I would not consider myself to be an object-oriented person. I grew up in several countries in different continents, a geo-cultural instability that was accompanied by other types of instability: economic, familial, political and even military. I learnt not to rely on external realities, but to find comfort in the abstraction of thoughts and feelings, becoming more attached to the continuities offered by the dimension of time, such as my stream of consciousness, than to those foreclosed in the dimension of space, including any particular place, object or community at large. Yet there is an exception. An internal contradiction that, as Slavoj Žižek would say, lays open the falsity of my claims.[4] That exception is symptomatic of some of the major technological, political and ideological changes our globe has undergone in the past few decades; changes which have marked the structure of my life as well as my relationship to a generic, yet particular, object: the book.

Books are the only objects I feel attached to and, when it comes to books, I am possessive. Be careful to leave one in my hands because I might involuntarily sign my name on it the moment you turn around. There are books at home that have my signature on more than one page (sometimes scribbled over my partner's) and if, for some reason, I end up with double or even triple copies of the same book, I just cannot let them go. I cannot resist a book that insinuates itself as mine and I certainly cannot stand the sight of one in the trash. From European, African and Latin-American garbage-cans alike I have recovered volumes I will never read: cheap hardcover romance novels from the forties in Dutch (a language I do not speak), books on Mexican statutory law (a subject that bores me to death), and some oddities like the second volume of a guide to pressure point grappling or *Fifty Hikes in Eastern Pennsylvania* (which, frankly, I have no intention of taking); not to forget, of course, about my newest acquisition from the garbage: *101 Hamburger Jokes*. So I confess: despite all the lack of attachment of my presumed identity, I am unquestionably a book fetishist.

But are the two really so far apart? Is not the book precisely the object that seeks to personify the idea, the object that rebels against its status as object and, like the modernist work of art, emulates subjectivity as best as an object can? To extrapolate a formula by the Slovenian philosopher once again, the book can be seen as an externality possessing the form yet not the ontological status of thought.[5] And this condition is what makes (or perhaps, as I will discuss, *made*) it such a viable object for the accumulation, legitimation and ostentation of cultural capital.[6] So, in confessing my fetishism, I am confessing my ostentation, my desire to consolidate in an object-like form a belonging to a culture of dispossession, a secret valuing of mind over matter, a subterranean desire to be identified, even as (or perhaps especially as) unidentifiable. Fetishes mediate our anxieties of transcendence.

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Last night I attended a roundtable presentation in the context of a symposium on art and trans-disciplinarity (*Primer Encuentro Arte Transversal: Diálogos Transdisciplinarios*) here, in Mexico City. In the follow-up discussion with the audience, someone suggested that, since the lack of funding did not allow for the publication of the symposium proceedings, the organizers should consider publishing them online. The speaker commented that, besides being free of cost, that method had the added advantage of dodging the long and laborious bureaucracies that usually go into publishing with the aid of a funding institution. One of the roundtable discussants, who was also one of the organizers, confronted her with the problem that such a project would require the investment of a lot of unpaid time (which, in Mexico City, very few people can afford to employ in an activity other than transport or sleeping). So the first interlocutor suggested Twitter. Twitting, she explained, allowed you to upload texts of up to 140 characters, effortlessly, at any time of day. Whenever one of the organizers recalled a relevant idea, they would be able to upload it and, by using "hash-tags", they would later be able to group all the Twitts together and, *voilà*: the first draft of the proceedings was ready.

After an echo of celebratory agreement, skepticism took hold. A man conclusively argued that, even if Twitter was not dependent on a traditional institution, it still responded to other grounded interests and was not as transparent as it would seem. Likewise, it was not cost-free, but required the ownership of a computer, yet preferably a portable device such as a BlackBerry, and the technological know-how and cultural capital to which these are associated. Mostly, he stressed, 140 characters could not account for the sort of discussions that had been taking place during the symposium. The book, as a particular format, brought with it a particular aesthetics, a particular mode of thinking and a particular epistemic sensibility. All these ways of knowing would necessarily disappear with the format itself. The man's participation was followed by a brief silence after which the chairman closed the session. From my knowledge of the permanently over-worked schedules of some of the participants, and from the tired looks of some of the others, I took that silence to be one of generalized acceptance. Whether in plain agreement or in resignation, most people in the forum knew that the Third-World realities of the

participating artists and researchers could not be outdone so easily by the promises of Twitter, and that the longed for book containing the symposium proceedings was slowly drifting away.[7]

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I swim at one of the few and recently installed public swimming pools in this city. This morning, as I walked into the reception area, still savoring the aftertaste of the roundtable discussion, an elderly, talkative woman that works there greeted me hello. I asked her how she was, and she complained having too many people swimming there and the records getting misplaced with people changing their swimming schedules, but their corresponding papers not being re-grouped into the new file. Automatically I commented with the intention of making her feel better: "But I heard you're getting computers next week and putting them all in, right?" As soon as I heard myself say this, I bit my tongue. First, it was obvious that this elderly woman of scarce resources had still to learn how to use a computer and the prospect I mentioned seemed more of a complication than a solution to her problems. However appalled I felt by the naiveté of the Twitter-celebrators last night, I had the same automatic belief in the efficiency that technology promises and the same automatic oversight of those dealing with these questions from different geo-economic, social or cultural positions. Second, I realized that the Twitter supporters had a point: un-virtualized modes of operating are becoming increasingly dysfunctional in our present demographic, ideological and material conditions.

I realized something that had been gaining ground in my thoughts for a year or two. I have spent the last few years in Europe, seeing many colleagues go through the public defense of their theses in different departments across the humanities and social sciences, in different universities throughout The Netherlands, and a couple in the UK. Being an interested reader of the work of a number of them, I realized that the reception they got from their committees rarely corresponded to my appreciation of the quality of their work. As I gradually learned, this was partly due to the fact that the people whose work I appreciated tended to write books developing a thesis of their own which they elaborated throughout the whole text, rather than those I did not appreciate, yet proved most successful, taking an already established (though usually contemporary) theory and applying it in a series of isolated, self-sustainable chapters or case-studies, perfectly accessible if read out of context.

As time passed and I became closer to people who participated in or were close to those in defense committees, I started to hear anecdotes. To my incredulity (friends that had been in First-World academic circles longer took it as a natural fact), the committee members who actually read the book they are judging are exceptional. The common practice, in a professional niche where prestige and salary depend on number of publications and in which professors participate in defenses every so often (besides having an enormous amount of other academic targets to fulfill in making their way up the ladder), practically no one can afford to read a whole book. Instead, they select a chapter.

Today, as I swim in Mexico City, with these memories making waves, and the prospect of my class in a few hours at a private university I lecture at, where my students will not have read the assigned texts, but instead consulted Wikipedia, where my boss will remind me these are no longer the nineties, nor a literature department and I should lower my expectations, I wonder: Does it really make sense to write something that makes sense if that implies a rhythm and a depth such that no one will actually read it? Is there a way of letting go of the articulate format of the book and still remain articulate? As I leave the pool, the old lady at the reception waves me goodbye. I guess the questions on her mind are more compelling than mine.

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In the sixth century of our era, a famous Byzantine historian, Procopius of Caesarea, wrote *The Secret History*, which spanned over the same period as the first seven books of his *History of the Wars* of Emperor Justinian. *The Secret History* dealt not with the official story, but with gossip and secrets of Justinian, his wife, and their court. It remained unpublished for over one thousand years, but its existence was known ever since the sixth century. The text was usually referred to by contemporary sources as *Anekdotia*, the Greek word that gives rise to the modern English term "anecdote", literally meaning, as I have suggested, "things unpublished".

As Douglas Harper elaborates, the "unpublished memoirs of Emperor Justinian, full of court gossip, gave the word a sense of 'revelation of secrets', which decayed in English to 'brief, amusing stories,'" the sense that prevails today. As this quote

“**Today, when book-length discourses are losing ground to shorter, more rapidly produced**

makes clear, there has been a historical displacement from "anecdote" as a particular format (i.e. "unpublished") to "anecdote" as a particular content (i.e. "gossip" or "amusing stories"). Today, when book-length discourses are losing ground to shorter, more rapidly produced formats of writing, and where these new formats (paradigmatically: email, Facebook, sms, Twitter) correspond to the realm of the private, the changes in form and structure of communication are implicating alterations in the content-matter of different realms of discursive production.

Not only are printed academic books suffering a displacement from single author versions to edited volumes and conference proceedings, autobiography is also emerging as a growing and growingly accepted genre in fictional literature. In turn, the autobiographical mode is taking a hold in the social and human sciences, where the scholar's overt acceptance of his or her limited historical situatedness is increasingly valued.[8] I have myself engaged in a first-person anecdotal narrative that articulates - in what is (or was) a traditionally nonacademic way - some of the themes that motivate my exploration of the book and the book format. Since etymologically the anecdote is that which is excluded from books, the left-over of the coherent whole that is published, I have done so in the hope of mobilizing the idea of what the book (as the preposterous remainder of the anecdote) is. With that hope still in mind, I now turn to the question of the material remainder that the printed book embodies in the virtualized contemporary world.[9]

### **A Thing Called Book**

A number of odd books lie on my desk as I write these lines. To my left, *Rayuela*, the Spanish original of Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch*. At the top of a pile on my right-hand side lies a volume that I hesitate to call a book, a set of photocopies of an academic text, Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*. In the limited universe of my desk, these two objects become paradigmatic of two contrasting ways in which coherence and fragmentation weave or bite into each other when it comes to books. I want to briefly compare *Hopscotch* with *The Social Life of Things* because their difference points to the gap between the fragmentation of discourse as part of (typically modernist) formal experimentation, and the random, contingent fragmentation of discourse that tends to occur in postmodern contexts independently of intentionality.

Cortazar's novel deals with questions of order and chaos, and it is particularly concerned with the exploration of these themes at the level of form. The first (unnumbered) page is a "Table of Instructions" that explains how to read the novel. I translate the beginning:

In its own way, this book is many books, but mostly it is two books. The reader is invited to choose one of the two following possibilities:

The first book is to be read in the regular way, and it ends with chapter 56, at the end of which there are three flashy little asterisks which stand for the words *The End*. Consequently, the reader may ignore what follows without regret.

The second book is to be read beginning with chapter 73 and then following the sequence indicated at the end of each chapter. In case of confusion or forgetfulness, one need only consult the following list: 73 - 1 - 2 - 116 - 3 - 84 - 4 - 71 - 5 - 81 - 74 - 6 - 7 - 8... [The list continues in this random manner, jumping back-and-forth over a total of one-hundred-and-fifty-five chapters, for fourteen lines].

As this "Table of Instructions" suggests, the novel seeks to question the traditional unity (and linear sequence) of the book. Cortazar's structure, as well as other formal devices such as alternating between different narrators, focalizers and narrative techniques across chapters, produce a sense of fragmentation that resonates with a thematic interest in it, and so a self-reflexive effect is achieved. In other words, the very questioning of the book as a coherent, autonomous whole becomes a reaffirmation of it. This is due to the fact that a self-reflexive form is one in which the formal constitution can be held accountable for the meaning produced, and so an articulate discourse in the New Critical sense of the term prevails.

By contrast, the fragmented nature of the set of pages headed *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* is fragmentary largely (though not exclusively) despite itself. My copy is incomplete, including only the essays that were most relevant for me in 2001, when writing an M.A. thesis. Despite the fragmented, unattractive (and, today especially, politically incorrect) nature of my copy, I have taken it with me back and forth across continents for these past ten years. Not being easily available in Mexico at the time, I felt lucky when I discovered someone else who had a photocopy of it, and I made my own from his, never having touched the book itself. It was only as the years passed and I continued to refer to it, that I discovered through online

resources what the actual cover looked like, and that I filled some of the missing gaps of information from my copy by consulting different online versions of it, which were likewise fragmented for commercial and copyright reasons.

But there is also an intrinsic reason that contributes to the fragmentary nature of the text. *The Social Life of Things* may be appreciated as a product of the contemporary academic system, which in most countries is based on a hierarchical structure that allegedly equates the production of scholars to different prestige and salary scales. That "production" is evaluated almost exclusively in quantitative terms (considering quality only in terms of its institutional legitimation and then translating that recognition into quantifiable values). One of the most characteristic labor conditions of late capitalism - outsourcing - does not exclude the academy. Scholars today are not just competing for a better position, they are competing for a position as opposed to teaching under small, part-time, short-term contracts in the First World, or as opposed to teaching single subjects with no contract at all in the Third. In these conditions, academics have increasingly less time and an increasingly greater need to publish. Sometimes the result is that authors end up publishing low-quality work in large volumes or, alternately, the same article over again with different titles and slight variations.

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Yet other scholars choose the intellectually more productive road of joining forces. While full-length single author books in the academy are on the decrease, collected volumes, especially as a result of other academic activities, are thriving. The essays that together make up Arjun Appadurai's edited volume are the product of a workshop and symposium held as part of the University of Pennsylvania's Ethnohistory Program in the early 1980s. It was among the initiators of the trend in multipurpose

academic writing. The volume was cutting-edge in terms of content too. It was one of the first to precipitate academic interest in the world of things, a trend that was to concentrate much greater scholarly attention only until the 1990s.[10] The most characteristic feature of the various contributions to the volume is a return to Marxism in the U.S. academic sphere, but with a focus on the demand - rather than on the production - side of economic life.

The collected essays explore the life-histories of specific commodities as they circulate in and across different cultures. But even within the same culture, commodities cross epistemic boundaries. In Appadurai's introductory essay, which provides the overall theoretical framework for the book, the consumer and producer ends of a commodity's life-history are described as divergent epistemic poles. At each pole, there is a specific technical, social, aesthetic and even mythical knowledge that goes into either effectively fabricating or appropriately consuming the commodity in question. At the production pole, knowledge about the commodity is at its most uniform, as the commodity has not yet had the opportunity to accumulate diverse interpretations or a particular history of its own (41).

In Appadurai's book, "commodity", "thing" and "object" are used interchangeably. In contrast, for U.S. cultural theorist Bill Brown, the distinction between object and thing is crucial. In his 2001 article, "Thing Theory", Brown poses that an object is to be defined as such in terms of its use value. The thingness about an object is precisely that which exceeds its use value. Brown explores the thing-like qualities of a gallery piece, a sculpture by Claes Oldenburg entitled *Typewriter-Eraser: Scale X*. As an obsolete object, the *Typewriter-Eraser* no longer possesses any use value, and so its thingness is exposed. This thingness refers to the material surplus of the *Typewriter-Eraser*, its useless, excessive and bulky materiality. However, Brown argues, we also use the word "thing" to refer to abstract qualities which we cannot fully grasp, as in: "There's a thing about that poem that I'll never get" (4). Therefore, the thingness about the object also refers to its *metaphysical* excess, that is, to the ungraspable, indefinite semantic qualities that surpass the object's function. In sum, thingness refers to both the physical and the metaphysical surplus that precedes and/or exceeds the object.

The distinction that, following Heidegger, Brown makes between thing and object, allows us to approach the latter as a construct rather than a given.[11] This possibility is made much more concrete in the work of Arjun Appadurai and his co-authors. As Brown himself indicates when commenting *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai does not ask what objects are but "what work they perform [...] in particular temporal and spatial contexts" (Brown 7). Thus, for example, I have described how Appadurai is concerned with the form in which the idiosyncratic knowledge about a commodity is diversified only as the commodity travels further away from its site of production. Let me now turn to how such a conception enlightens our understanding of books as commodities and of a book such as *The Social Life of Things* as a particular commodity.

A book, especially one that is the result of academic inquiry, as is Appadurai's, does not circulate far beyond its

site of production. Those who produced it are academics and those who consume it, mostly academics too. The fact that both producers and consumers belong to the same cultural niche, makes their idiosyncratic knowledge about the commodity appear as objective, because this knowledge is corroborated to be the same across apparently contrasting sites of observation. It is only natural that the book is a thing to be read, only natural to read it from left to right. Most importantly, it is only natural that the book's discursive propositions be privileged and that its qualities as a cultural object be disregarded.[12]

It is not surprising, therefore, that none of the book's contemporaneous reviews take into consideration the book's status as an object. But, in our own culture of increasingly digitalized information, the book, as an object, is becoming obsolete. Its physical dimension is revealed as redundant. This material surplus, no longer obscured by its use value as an object, is left free to be turned into a metaphor of a culture to which we somehow no longer belong. Once we are able to access the physical surplus of the object, its metaphysical surplus comes to the fore as well, because the metaphysical surplus is the thing turned metaphor, turned theory. Thus, the obsolete *Typewriter-Eraser* speaks of inscription, erasure and trace: the vocabulary of post-structuralist theory.[13]

From my historical vantage point, I face *The Social Life of Things* as a quasi-obsolete object, insofar as the redundancy of its material dimension is brought to the fore. To exemplify the possibilities that the item offers when its trivial, material qualities are not taken for granted, I will reflect on the fact that not all pages are covered in print. Either completely or partially empty pages appear in-between the book's five different sections and in-between the texts of its multiple authors. It was first published in 1986, the book has not disappeared, but is becoming fragmented. A single author is no longer its articulating principle. The value of the book is no longer in its overall, internal coherence but, as Appadurai writes and the rest of the contributors strive to demonstrate "exchange is the source of value" (56). I am concerned with how that statement, perhaps the book's central proposition, resonates when placed back in the historical context of the book's production.

"Exchange is the source of value" is a premise that Appadurai and his colleagues recover from Georg Simmel and which, as it is conjured in the 1980s, announces the advent of global capitalism, not only in terms of the digitalized economy, but also in pointing to the redundancy of the book's material dimension. The "return to Marxism with a difference" implied in the phrase "exchange is the source of value", speaks back to its context of enunciation: a period which at once describes the end of the Cold War, but also its persistence. While one condition marks the popularization of Marxism within the U.S. academy (when it is no longer threatening), the other marks the resistance to it (as the bi-polar world order still prevails). The authors' re-reading of Marx by focusing on the demand, rather than on the production aspect of commodities, is the analogy, within economics, of a contemporaneous literary shift away from the author and towards the receptor. Thus, the book's theoretical propositions resonate back into its blank pages. The blank space signals that it is my role as a reader to fill the gaps, to articulate the pieces together.

Appadurai's discourse thus allows me to read his book as an object *in situ*, because objects, unlike things, may always function as signs. Things, on the other hand, have no cultural value, they have not been physically and semantically molded into objects within a culture. To imagine the object as a thing allows us to suspend our most basic assumptions about it. As Jonathan Culler writes:

Freeing ourselves from our most pervasive ideology, our conventions of meaning, makes no sense because we are born into a world of meaning... But even if we could, we should find ourselves amidst a meaningless babble... What we must do is *imagine* freeing ourselves from the operative conventions so as to see more clearly the conventions themselves (482).

The fact that the culture of the book is one to which we at once belong and don't belong functions as a historical vantage point allowing us to focus on the space between object and thingness, the place where the book is constituted. As the thing is that which precedes and exceeds the object, not only in historical, but also in spatial and in logical terms, such a position could also be reached through an effort of the imagination. However, our imaginations themselves are fed by our culture, by our personal, every-day experience, and by the realm of the anecdotal.

## Reminders

Horacio Oliveira, the main character in Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, refuses to play his expected part in any pre-fabricated social narrative. His resistance is acted out in - geographical, occupational, affective - displacements, a fragmentation that is reproduced in the narrative structure and varied formal style of the novel. As Gregorovius, another character in the novel, intimates, Oliveira constantly dodges involvement with an overwhelming world,

one whose physical and metaphysical surplus are too much for Oliveira to take.

La Maga, Oliveira's lover, tells Gregorovious that perhaps Oliveira would have been less sad if he had been born in another historical period, because:

Here everything hurts him. Even aspirins hurt him. Last night I gave him an aspirin because he had a toothache. He held it and stared at it, he had a hard time deciding whether to swallow it. He said some strange things: that it was repugnant to use things that one doesn't really know, things that have been invented by others to calm other things, things that aren't really known either... You know how he goes on.

"You've repeated the word "thing" many times," said Gregorovious. "It's not elegant, but it does illustrate very well what Horacio suffers from. He is a victim of thingness. It is evident."

"What is thingness?" asked La Maga.

"Thingness is that unpleasant feeling that where our presumption ends, our punishment begins... I mean that Oliveira is pathologically sensitive to the imposition of his surroundings, of the world one is to live in, of what has happened upon him... In a word, he can't stand circumstances. More briefly, he has a world-ache." (83-84, translation mine)

Commenting the passage, E.D. Carter proposes that "Horacio [Oliveira] exhibits an almost pathological fear when confronted with the possibility of becoming emotionally involved with another human being. For Oliveira, fragmentation is the ideal way to avoid the 'sacrosanct castrating obligations', such as a wife, a home, children, and a job". Carter adds that the world's "complexity provokes a chaos within him, and his view of the universe serves as a perfect rationalization for avoiding involvement. Like Juan Pablo Castel in Ernesto Sábato's *El tunel*, Horacio [Oliveira] suffers from what psychologists refer to as 'aboulia'... In confronting life's complications, fragmentation is his best defense" (92).

That fragmentation, as I have suggested, is as much a fictional theme as it is formally enacted in the novel. Oliveira is the protagonist - but also, and more often than not, the narrator - of *Hopscotch*, a novel largely constituted by brief, first-person focalized episodic chapters. If, as the quote above suggests, thingness is that overbearing imposition of external-spatial categories over time-consciousness, then these anecdotal chapters would function as an antidote for Oliveira, insofar as the anecdote opens up a strategic place for individual consciousness.[14]

As I engaged in my own anecdotal narratives above, I claimed a similar tendency to rely on time-consciousness over space-externality. I located that tendency in the context of a typically postmodern circumstance of geo-cultural displacement, one among the many migratory experiences that are becoming a normal part of contemporary life. Yet, I signaled a fetishistic fixation on the book as an exception; an exception that revealed the contradictions inherent in my self-narrativization. And here the question of the "I" is as important as the question of the fetish.

**“That fragmentation, as I have suggested, is as much a fictional theme as it is formally enacted in the novel...”**

I touch on the question of the "I" first. The notion is relevant here since the figure of the author was largely what kept the idea of the book together throughout modernity. As Michel Foucault writes, that figure emerged after the Renaissance in close association with the entrance of literature into the circuit of property values. The author thus emerged, in a sense, as a reification of subjectivity, located at the point of convergence between a historical subject and the articulating principle of a text, also known as the author-function (124-27). In modernism, with the advent of structuralism and schools of literary appreciation such as New Criticism, that abstract yet formally deducible articulating principle prevailed. Post-structuralism (with paradigmatic works such as Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author") continued that emphasis on the formal dimension of discourse to the degree that it had a paradoxical effect. In emphasizing the constructed nature of the conflation between the writer as a social agent and the author function, post-structuralism freed not only the textual entity but also its social counterpart.

Today, we witness an increasing valorization of the idea of the social agent and of the immediacy of experience. With the mediatization of every-day life through communication technologies and the hypertrophied self-involvement of language and other forms of representation comes a greater valuing, and even a romanticization, of "the real". The growing importance of this cultural value is evidenced in the thriving of autobiographies, biographies, how-to- books, self-improvement books and catastrophe or wilderness survival books, in contrast to more traditional fictional literary genres. Likewise, TV abounds with reality shows such as *Big Brother* and *The E! True Hollywood Story*, as well as all sorts of contest shows with "real" people participating rather than actors.



This trend has also impacted the spheres of high art and of the academy. In the visual arts, with the prevalence of conceptual art, the artist's discourse about her work has displaced craftsmanship, while in the humanities and social sciences, as I have mentioned, it has become standard for the author to place herself at a personal level as a way in which to acknowledge a consciousness of the constructed nature of the narration she authorizes. The "I", as a preposterously included remainder of academic discourse, is aimed at pointing to the ways in which the individual perspective co-constitutes the latter.

However, this recognition may also function as a self-legitimizing reification. Jonathan Culler writes of such a tendency within post-structuralism at large. He argues that while structuralism aims at dismantling ideology, post-structuralism attempts to supersede such truth-finding through the discursive deconstruction of its own statements (471-477). But, he continues, being itself inescapably based on ideological assumptions, post-structuralism fails in its attempt, often falling into a recursive yet empty self-referentiality, the ultimate aim of which is to institute itself (480-81). Having thus pointed to the double-edged staging of the "I" in academic discourse, let me now turn to the second question I opened up above, and which is closely associated to the former, the question of the fetish.

The authorial "I" may incur in a sort of fetishism that is specific to academic discourse. Arjun Appadurai encourages engagement in what he calls "methodological fetishism", which Bill Brown takes up. The Indian anthropologist does so on the following grounds:

even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. No social analysis of things [...] can avoid a minimum level of what might be called methodological fetishism. (5, emphases in original)

Referring to Appadurai's passage, Brown comments that such a fetishization is strategically necessary in order to open up again the questions foreclosed by "more familiar fetishizations: the fetishization of the subject, the image, the word" (7). If methodological fetishism undoes the tightly tied knots of more naturalized fetishes, perhaps the fetishization of the book in the context of more invisible, yet equally fetishized, technologies can do a similar work.

Nonetheless, to keep that strategic possibility in force and to avoid its own naturalization and subservience to the *status quo*, it is important also to question whether our relationship to the book is one of melancholic attachment or a mourning of the fetish. As Slavoj Žižek argues in an online lecture, "the symptom" is the opposite of "the fetish", and it may be understood as the return of a repressed truth in the context of an organized lie. The symptom used to be crucial to decipher ideological configurations in the past (min. 17). Today, however, melancholy, understood as an attachment to the fetish, prevails. Žižek claims that the fetish may be understood as the particular lie that allows one to endure the truth; the truth of social inequality, of one's participation in it, etcetera (min. 19). In a printed article on the same topic, "Melancholy and the Act", Žižek insists that melancholy is the structure by which ideology operates today. (657-8). To safeguard that structure, the academy advocates the reversal of Freud's valuing of mourning over melancholy (658-959).

According to Sigmund Freud, melancholy is pathological, whereas mourning is not (243). For Freud, mourning implies successful sublimation, a coming to terms with loss through processes of symbolization and internalization. Melancholy, on the other hand, is the narcissistic identification with the thing lost.[15] Proceeding along Freud's line of thought, Žižek argues that melancholic attachment precedes and anticipates the actual loss of the object. The melancholic person still has the object but has lost the cause of his desire. What makes him sad is not that he will lose the object (which he exaggeratedly mourns), but the possibility that he will lose desire itself. Thus, his attachment elides the object and the latter functions as the positivization of a lack (659-663).

Whereas in mourning one renounces the object but keeps its meaning by internalizing it, in melancholy what prevails is the attachment to the object in its particularity. Asserting that the contemporary *doxa* is to reverse the Freudian valorization of the two terms, Žižek emphasizes how today the only possible form of allegedly true fidelity is supposed to be fidelity to a fetishistic remainder. He exemplifies that academic trend with the case of postcolonial studies and its excessive valorization of what he terms the lost ethnic Object:

The melancholic link to the lost ethnic Object allows us to claim that we remain faithful to our ethnic roots while fully participating in the global capitalist game... [W]hat is wrong with the postcolonial nostalgia is not the utopian dream of a world they never had... but the way this dream is used to legitimize the actuality of its very opposite, of the full and unconstrained participation in global capitalism. (659)

In this way, Žižek points to melancholy as the politically correct form of relating to a fetish that stands in as a substitute for actual change in the present, and thus perpetuates the *status quo*.

Like so many other book fetishists, I like the smell, the feel, the weight of books; the rhythm that they follow when piled on wooden bookcases by the wall. The warm smell of printed newspaper is as fundamental to my definition of "morning" as is the smell of fresh coffee; no online version of the newspaper can compare. Maybe this is melancholic attachment. Maybe it is a longing for a utopian past that never was; for discursive, ethical, social coherence, for an imagined world in which things weren't a threat to the I, but a home. But perhaps it is not.

The use value of the book is gone. Its redundant materiality and its metaphysical excess foreground our anxieties. The disappearance of its physical bulkiness becomes a metaphor of what we miss in the idea of the book: articulation in so many more senses than that of the bounded copy. Thus emerged the question of melancholic attachment, of an obstinate narcissistic identification that will not let go, and of mourning the fetish that is no more, just as object and meaning become disentangled from one another. It is a question of whether, in letting go of the book, we are ready to let go of our desire for the idea of the book. A question of whether in renouncing the object we are willing to internalize its meaning. A meaning that we invent just as the hard-copy on which we write, and read, and reflect about it disappears into thin air.

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[1] Ideology is a contested term in contemporary discourses. Yet, as Carlos Pessoa, among numerous other critics, has argued, by claiming for itself the title of "post-ideological," the contemporary hegemony attempts "to mask the very ideological gesture that is the basis of its claim" (486). Agreeing with Pessoa, I use the term "ideology" throughout, yet keeping in mind that ideology today can no longer be approached in terms of a clear-cut distinction between the material and the ideological, that distinction being merely a theoretical presupposition.

[2] Meaning always already presupposes ideology, for meaning can only be constructed within an ideological framework. As Jonathan Culler argues: "Freeing ourselves from our most pervasive ideology, our conventions of meaning, 'makes no sense' because we are born into a world of meaning" (481).

[3] Procopious' *Anekdotia* has been variously translated as *Unpublished Memoirs* and as *The Secret History*.

[4] Here I extrapolate from Žižek's conception that the "social symptom" presupposes that "every ideological Universal - for example freedom, equality - is 'false' in so far as it necessarily includes a specific case which breaks its unity, lays open its falsity" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 21).

[5] I benefit from Žižek's notion of the "real abstraction", which he proposes to understand as "the form of thought external to the thought itself - in short, some Other Scene external to the thought whereby the form of the thought is articulated in advance" (19).

[6] Here I am referring to what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital in its objectified form: "The cultural capital objectified in material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments, etc.", which is "transmittable in its materiality" (246). Bourdieu adds that objectified cultural capital "presents itself with all the appearances of an autonomous, coherent universe, which, although the product of historical action, has its own laws, transcending individual wills" (247).

[7] "Third World" was first employed to refer to non-aligned "developing" countries during the Cold War era (Ahmad 292-97). But the term was then discarded for its teleological implications (Young 4-5). For a full length analysis and historization of the category see Ahmad 287-318. Here I only clarify that although "Third World," as a term referring to poor, non-aligned countries does characterize a geo-political zone as "backward" on an evolutionary scale, the term reflects not only a teleological framework, but also the realities of a historical project (Third-World developmentalism) that was cut short by the advent of neoliberalism, hence my choice to persist in its usage.

[8] Examples of this are Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Rethinking Working-Class History*, Anthony Appiah in *In My Father's House* or, to a lesser degree, Gayatri Spivak in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*.

[9] Here and below, I profit from Mieke Bal's concept of "preposterous history".

[10] Here I am referring to its innovatory quality within the realm of the U.S. socio-cultural studies exclusively. In a wider geographical and disciplinary context, the interest in things as such was explored much earlier, with, for example, *The System of Objects* by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard or, even if in a different way, as early as 1925, with the famous text by French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*.

[11] In contrast to the German philosopher, with the concept of "use value" the Anglo-American cultural theorist implies that the ontic constitution of objects is mediated by eco-cultural practices. Nonetheless, by focusing on how objects come to be constituted out of the thingness that precedes and exceeds them, Brown's questions are still mainly of an ontological nature.

[12] This homogeneity is possible insofar as I am referring to the conceptual and not the material site of production of the book.

[13] Conversations are often determinative references in writing, yet they rarely make it into bibliographies. In destabilizing "the book" format (even if only to grasp it better), I want to acknowledge Murat Aydemir's central contribution to my reading of "Thing Theory" here and above. Likewise, Ingrid Fugellie's discussion of what she calls the contemporary "copy-paste ideology" exerts an important influence.

[14] Here the notion of "place" is crucial since it is what allows consciousness to operate strategically in the sphere of spatial external realities. Michel de Certeau points to the importance of place in the definition of strategy: "It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority*... can be managed... every 'strategic' rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its 'own' place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an 'environment'... [I]t is an effort to delimit one's own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other." (35-36, emphases in original). The very title of Cortazar's novel, *Hopscotch*, speaks of strategy insofar as the figure is a mapping out of possible trajectories. As de Certeau elaborates, tactic is to strategy what trajectory is to map. A trajectory is a temporal movement in space. It draws a figure that can only be apprehended at a single glance once it is mapped out, thus turning "the *temporal* articulation of places into a *spatial* sequence of points. A graph takes the place of an operation" (35, emphases in original).

[15] This narcissistic identification accounts for the close association between the question of the "I" and that of the fetish.

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