OSTALI ZNANSTVENI RADOVI / OTHER RESEARCH PAPERS

12

WHY INTERACTIONS AND INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN THINGS AND SUBJECTS MATTER: ON THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF THE NEW MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES

DOI: 10.17234/SEC.36.12
Original scientific paper
Received:
15th April 2024
Accepted:
12th November 2024

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The article aims to provide an insight into the analytical approach that has emerged over the last four decades, known as new material culture studies. The first section, drawing primarily on the overviews by Miller (1994a) and Buchli (2002a), delineates the most important stages and turns of the interest of social sciences in material culture. The second section enumerates some of the distinguishing features characterizing (most of) the research projects that adopt this analytical approach, with a special focus on material agency (how do things construct subjects?), objectification, as well as the perspectives of things-in-motion and things-in-process (Domańska 2006). The third section highlights some of the main directions of the problem sensitivity that is at the heart of new material culture studies (concentrating, among other issues, on the nature of the boundary between subjects and things, the social constructions of authenticity, the politics of style, taste, and aesthetics, as well as the complex relationship between things and memory). Finally, the last section describes how the biographical method has gained such popularity in recent decades among researchers committed to this analytical approach and reveals the reasons for its explanatory power.

Keywords: *new material culture studies, material agency, objectification; things-in-motion, biographical method*

THE EMERGENCE, MARGINALIZATION, AND REHABILITATION OF OBJECTS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Evolutionism, colonialism, museums: Objects as cultural brokers

Miller (1994a) and Buchli (2002a) argue that the systematic interest of social sciences in objects became prominent in the second half of the 19th century, mainly due to the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment (interest in the idea and possibility of universality), the evolutionary perspective on society and culture in anthropology, and colonialism. Evolutionism interpreted the differences between social formations and cultures within the framework of a hierarchical model, assuming that all societies and cultures go through the same stages of development. The idea of a straight line of development linking the 'primitive' with the 'modern,' which also served to legitimize and naturalize the dominance of the political elite, meant that societies and cultures with different social structures and technical development were associated with different values. According to the vision of evolutionism, the European Victorian society (as the most modern and advanced social formation in terms of spirituality) represented the pinnacle of social and technical development, while other non-European societies were placed in the lower region of the hierarchy, with the various hunter-gatherer societies at the bottom (see Buchli 2002a:3). As Buchli points out (2002a:4), material culture in this context was interpreted as an obvious sign or evidence of the development level of the societies being compared, i.e. it was thought that "social progress could be 'read' from the material culture of a people or nation as a fossil could be read to determine stages of the evolution of life on earth (…). Thus, objects were intimately connected with notions of progress – historically, technically and socially – in short, material culture as it was conceived in the nineteenth century was the modernist super-artefact and the supreme signifier of universal progress and modernity."

Colonialism, which multiplied the number of cross-cultural encounters, brought objects from distant, foreign cultures to the West in unprecedented quantities and with unprecedented speed, and, like the items once accumulated in the cabinets of curiosities owned by the Western aristocracy, they were mainly housed in public museums. The most common way for the interested Western observer to interact with members of foreign cultures was to view and interpret objects that were bought, bartered, or forcibly appropriated as representations of 'the Other.' The most important function of these objects was therefore "to symbolize the people who created it. For the travelers, explorers, and missionaries, before the emergence of mass photography, the object

provided the major means of representing the exotic places and people visited. The original anthropology was largely practiced in the drawing-room, where objects were a convenient symbol for actual peoples whose presence was neither required nor desired" (Miller 1994a:13–14). The social scientific significance and attractiveness of objects interpreted as representations of 'the Other' in this period thus stemmed from their ability to act as cultural brokers or interpreters to appease the curiosity of the interested Westerner: to represent, materialize, explain, and justify the values (or partial lack thereof) and stereotypes associated with the culture of 'the exotic Other.' For most Western researchers and lay people, the relationship with foreign cultures was mediated by traveling objects that crossed symbolic and political boundaries, that is, it was constructed through encounters and interactions with things-in-motion.

Social anthropology and participant observation: The marginalization of objects

From the 1920s and 1930s onwards, interest in objects in the social sciences began to decline significantly (see Miller 1987:3; Olsen 2003:87), with the popularity of objects remaining unchanged only within the walls of museums and among archaeologists. According to Buchli (2002a:7), this trend can be explained, at least in the English-speaking world, by the emergence and expansion of British social anthropology, and more specifically by the transformation of the dominant methods of data collection in the social sciences (the mass adoption of photography and the emergence of participant observation). The place of the "armchair anthropologists," who used objects as semiophores[1] representing the invisible and exotic culture of 'the Other,' was taken over by researchers who "sought to understand societies directly through the innovative technique of participant observation over long extended periods of time: interview, discourse, observation and the reconstruction of social structure prevailed as a more perfect means of understanding" (Buchli 2002a:7). The researcher, leaving behind his study room and its local social context, who personally visited members of foreign societies, no longer considered imported objects exhibited in museums as the most promising sources of information, and therefore these objects lost their former academic significance and attractiveness. "Photography and other methods of recording visual

[1] The term *semiophore* is quoted by Buchli (2002a:6) from Pomian (1990), who uses it to denote meaningful objects whose utility derives mainly from the fact that they display what is otherwise invisible ('the exotic stranger,' etc.).

information made objects less important. (…) The objects, the museum studies, the older theories were now a peripheral pursuit, secondary, in some senses dated, and unlikely to contribute to the development of modern 'advanced' theories and perspectives, but better used as a secondary and simplified level of signification to the general public…" (Miller 1994a:14–15). At the same time, the central group of problems of academic interest was also reorganized: evolution was gradually relegated to the background and replaced by the study of social structure, kinship, and various aspects of culture. "Material culture as an intellectual and political tool became irrelevant, and faded by the wayside" (Buchli 2002a:7).

Miller (1987) attributes the marginalization of objects in social sciences to three factors. Firstly, he argues that, as (everyday) objects have surrounded subjects in increasing numbers and in ever more diverse ways over the 20th century, subjects tend to think of their presence as trivial, invisible, and inconsequential, and therefore to regard them as uninteresting and insignificant to study from the perspective of social sciences. This interpretation, however, obscures the very nature of the relationships between objects, as well as between objects and subjects. According to Miller, it is partly this underestimation of the impact of (everyday) objects on subjects that leads to the rejection of material culture studies and the loss of academic prestige of this field of research.

Another reason for the turn away from objects and their study, argues Miller, is that social sciences have generally paid much more attention to different aspects of production than to consumption. While for much of the 20th century attempts were made to trace the development of social relations back to relations of production, analytical attempts neglected and marginalized consumption as a practice, underestimating its impact on social relations (see Miller 1987:3). As a result, an important group of interactions between goods and consumers, as well as between producers and consumers – which (would have) provided clear evidence of the importance of material culture and that most dimensions of culture, economy, and society are essentially unintelligible without a close examination of material aspects – have been rendered partly invisible and underrepresented.

Finally, the third reason for the 'exile' of objects from social sciences, according to Miller, is the widespread 20th century attitude that interprets the spectacular increase in the quantity and types of objects surrounding subjects as a threatening, destructive process. Critical analyses that considered the consequences of technological development and the growth of consumer demands tended to stigmatize objects: they were often defined as negative fetishes that threatened human relationships and personhood (see Miller 1987). At other times, objects were presented as useless or oppressive (Woodward 2007:98), or defined as sources of alienation, depersonalization, and automatization

(Olsen 2004). This "…very strong negative attitude in modern critical (and not-so-critical) thinking towards the material (e.g. the Frankfurt school, Heidegger, Popper, Sartre)," Olsen (2003:94) argues, lead to the consequence that "the machine, the instruments, the cold and in-human technology became the incarnation of our inauthentic, estranged and alienated modern being."

Olsen (2003:95), drawing on the work of Bruno Latour (1993), points out that the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment also played a role in the development of the neglect of objects in 20th century social sciences. For example, Olsen emphasizes the damaging influence of Cartesian dualism, which divided the world into rigidly separable groups of subjects (spirit) and things (body), defined as different in nature. These dichotomies themselves contribute to the emergence and legitimation of the notion that the study of objects – because they are alien, distant and of a different nature from the subjects – is an exercise of little intellectual value or utility.

Miller (1994b:417) defines this approach, which emphatically distances material culture from the world of subjects, as a "dualistic or reductionist approach." The vision of the world as a dichotomous one – divided into subjects and things – is misleadingly reductionist because it sees both categories as separate and distinct spheres, suggesting that subjects can exist without the presence and active contribution of things, that is without interactions with things. Olsen, like Miller, argues that the marginalization of objects in social sciences is a process whereby "imperialist social and humanist discourses" "silenced and 'othered'" objects (Olsen 2003:100), i.e. alienated them from subjects and obscured their true significance in the lives of individuals and social groups. Elsewhere, Olsen (2003:87) defines the dominant concept of culture and society in the social sciences as simply anti-material.

The material turn in the social sciences: Rediscovering and rehabilitating objects

From the late 1980s onwards, more and more researchers – mainly anthropologists and archaeologists – recognized that the academic significance and role of material culture studies was in urgent need of redefinition, and more and more researchers became intensely interested in the material aspects of things and their effects on subjects. This trend soon spread to disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, art history, history, and consumer studies (see Buchli 2004). The spectacular revival of interest in objects in the social sciences and the striking increase in research and publications on the complex relations between objects and subjects is referred to by many authors as the material

turn in the social sciences (see Edwards 2002:69; Kitzmann 2005) or the beginning of new material culture studies (see Olsen 2003:93).[2] Olsen (2004:89) defines this process as a "reinvention" or a "rehabilitation of objects," Woodward (2007:28) describes it as a process to "'re-materialise' social theory," and Miller (1998a:4) argues that we are witnessing "a general renaissance" of material culture studies. "After several decades in the academic doldrums this [material culture – P.B.] has re-emerged as a vanguard area liberating a range of disciplines from museum studies to archaeology" (Miller 1998a:4).

The material turn can be traced back to the realization that the things that surround us are not marginal – on the contrary, the study of objects is an indispensable part of most social science research, due to the constant interaction, interplay, and interdependence of subjects and things. Ignoring this realization can easily lead to a concealment or underestimation of the capacity of objects to shape culture, society, and identity, with the direct consequence that our understanding of the nature of subjects and their relationships to the (external) world can be limited and partial. Structuralist/poststructuralist theories have played a significant role in the rediscovery and rehabilitation of material culture (some of the works of Claude Lévi Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, among others; see Olsen 2006), the development of social constructivism, semiotics, and cultural studies, the emergence and spread of academic interest in consumption, and the emergence of critical attitudes towards the text- and language-centeredness of the social sciences (see Woodward 2007:5; Miller 2002:237).

NEW MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES: HOW DO THINGS CONSTRUCT SUBJECTS?

What are the main characteristics that link research projects (or at least some of them) that can be classified as new material culture studies? (See, for example, Tilley et al. 2006; Woodward 2007; Cunzo and Roeber 2022).

(a) The cornerstone of the self-definition of new material culture studies is the recognition that it would be a mistake to regard the study of the objects around us and the social relations they help to create as a mere corollary of other research projects, since the impact of material culture on society and economy is sufficient reason for turning scholarly interest towards new material culture studies. (However, this is not to give the impression that this approach would wish material culture to be understood in isolation

[2] It should be noted that different authors associate the beginning of the material turn with different dates, depending on the field(s) of research that are the focus of their attention.

from its social, political, economic, and other dimensions, out of context. As I shall return to later, the situation is the reverse.)

A significant part of the rehabilitation of material culture studies is the deconstruction of the misconception that the preoccupation with objects is nothing more than their fetishization (in the negative sense). Miller and Tilley (1996:11) argue that this correspondence is "a simple-minded humanism, which views persons outside the context and constraints of their material culture and thereby establishes a dichotomy between persons and objects, that is the true source of such fetishism. Indeed, it may be only material culture studies that has the will and knowledge to undertake the key task of de-fetishizing objects that is today as important a form of emancipating humanity as it was a century ago."

The defetishization and rehabilitation of objects, Miller argues, can only be achieved through a detailed exploration of their true significance: through the recognition and investigation of their actual role in the construction and maintenance of social relations, categories, and boundaries. One of the ways in which Miller attempts to demonstrate the indispensability and everyday power of things is by drawing attention to the "humility of objects" (see Miller 1987:85–108, 1994b:408, 2005a:5) and its consequences. In other words, although in the value judgements and choices of subjects the objects around them usually go unnoticed and often appear to be of marginal importance, the fact that they do not always attract attention does not mean that they do not have a significant impact on subjects and their choices.

> In a sense artefacts have a certain 'humility' in that they are reticent about revealing their power to determine what is socially conceivable. Curiously, it is precisely their physicality which makes them at once so concrete and evident, but at the same time causes them to be assimilated into unconscious and unquestioned knowledge. When viewing a work of art, it is often the frame which determines our perception of the quality of the content (that is, it cues us in to the fact that we are about to have an aesthetic experience), when the contained item, left to itself, might well have failed to evoke the 'proper' response. In a similar fashion, 'subtle' cosmetics are intended to enhance the attractiveness of the face without drawing attention to themselves. Thus artefacts may be most effective in determining our perception when they express a sense of humility in which they avoid becoming the direct focus of our attention. Many artefacts, whether house decorations or daily clothing, incline to this position on the borders of our perception rather than, as with the picture itself, capturing the focus of our gaze. They most often attract our attention when we feel

there is either something new or something wrong about them. (Miller 1994b:408).

The notions of insignificance and passivity that the superficial observer often associates with the invisibility of objects due to their humility is a deceptive one, and seeing this can lead us to a surprising realization that "objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not 'see' them" (Miller 2005a:5).

(b) New material culture studies do not consider the meticulous description of the material properties of objects taken out of their original contexts of use or the enumeration of things in butterfly-collection-like catalogues to be its most important goal. In other words, the new material culture studies are not interested in the more static, context-independent moments in the social careers of things, and it firmly rejects the view that things and subjects coexist as isolated, autonomous, and self-sustaining worlds, as well as the assumption that only the subjects are worthy of being the focus of academic investigation. This does not mean, however, that it turns away from material aspects of objects such as form, materiality, color, or durability and devalues their social significance – quite the contrary. New material culture studies place a strong emphasis on the rematerialization of things (see Domańska 2006:173), that is, understanding how their material properties influence subjects' decisions and choices, how they participate in coordinating their relation to the (external) world (for example, in organizing perception or memory), in materializing their identities as well as how they allow for the representation of abstract categories such as nation, transcendence, feelings, or groups of experiences. The material dimensions of objects can only be considered marginal to academic inquiry if they are understood as static, passive, and decontextualized properties, and objects are removed from the complex networks of social relations and meanings of which they are an integral part and on the formation of which they themselves have a significant impact.

It is worth noting that some researchers argue that new material culture studies still do not pay as much attention to the material aspects of things as they really deserve. In their view, the material turn in the social sciences is not yet complete, or, to put it another way, it is only partially complete, because material culture studies cannot sufficiently detach itself from the language-, text-, and meaning-centeredness of social sciences, and as a result often considers the material dimensions to be secondary to the world of meanings and values associated with objects. To quote Olsen's argument (2004; see also Olsen 2003:90), "the 'new' material-culture studies (including landscape studies) – despite their self-proclaimed success (see Miller 1998a:3; Buchli 2002b) – have moved away from thing's materiality and subsumed themselves to hegemonic anti-material and

social constructivist theories."

(c) New material culture studies focus on various aspects of the complex system of relations between things and subjects. One of the most frequently asked questions can be summarized as follows: How can the origin and distribution of agency be determined in the case of interactions between things and subjects? Is it primarily the material world that shapes the subject interacting with it, or, on the contrary, is it primarily the acting subject that forms the material world in the course of interactions, shaping it to its own likeness and needs? (See Gell 1998; Pinney and Thomas 2001; Knappett 2002, 2005; Dant 2004:60–83; Binsbergen 2005:19–22; Miller 2005a:11–15; Latour 2005:63–86; Osborne and Tanner 2007; Knappett and Malafouris 2008) In recent decades, a number of studies have attempted to develop theories of the source and social distribution of agency that break with the one-sided: subject-centered view that emphasizes the exclusivity and superiority of the human factor.

A characteristic feature of this approach is that most of its representatives do not conceive of the subject and its identities as pre-existing, completed qualities, and do not understand the material world as a passive and static imprint that serves to represent and reproduce these qualities (as it has long been), but rather acknowledge the agency of things. In other words, this approach holds that not only do subjects shape the things around them, but that things also have a significant effect on subjects, to varying degrees and in varying ways depending on the context. Therefore, agency is not exclusively related to the world of either things or subjects: these two worlds are created and make meaning in the context of interactions between them, so that things and subjects are both shapers and products of these interactions, as well as of each other. The dialectical interpretation of the relationship between subjects and the material world leads to the idea of a more democratic or symmetrical distribution of agency, which is precisely what is implied by the recent spread of the concepts of hybrid agency and material agency in the social sciences, and the interpretation that considers the source of agency to be in the context of interaction itself. (See the work of authors who developed the Actor-Network Theory and the critical literature of the latter [see, for example, Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005].)

New material culture studies therefore tend to focus on the nature of "interplay between animate and inanimate worlds" (Attfield 2000:1), that is, on "how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity" (Woodward 2007:3). To put it slightly differently, while the earlier material culture studies were primarily interested in how subjects create various objects, new material culture studies are more interested in how objects (things) create subjects (see Olsen 2003:100). More specifically, how, in the context of our

interactions with things, through the interactive medium of object use, we create and define ourselves, how we construct, represent (materialize), and manipulate identities, social boundaries, and relations. These studies also highlight the fact that material culture is far from being a passive and marginal part of the lives of subjects and social groups, arguing that "artefacts are a means by which we give form to, and come to an understanding of, ourselves, others, or abstractions such as the nation or the modern" (Miller 1994b:397). It is therefore useful to capture the relationship between things and subjects through concepts such as relationality, ongoing interaction and interplay, as well as interdependence.

The best-known and most influential theory of the relation between subjects and things, which conceives of this relation as a dialectical relation, is undoubtedly that of Daniel Miller (1987, 2005a:7–10). The often-cited core concept of Miller's theory, which is based on Hegelian foundations, is objectification, which many scholars regard as a key category in the self-definition of new material culture studies. To quote Tilley (2006:61):

> Objectification (…) is a concept that provides a particular way of understanding the relationship between subjects and objects, the central concern of material culture studies. It attempts to overcome the dualism in modern empiricist thought in which subjects and objects are regarded as utterly different and opposed entities, respectively human and non-human, living and inert, active and passive, and so on. Through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting and living with things people make themselves in the process. The object world is thus absolutely central to an understanding of the identities of individual persons and societies. Or, to put it another way, without things – material culture – we could neither be ourselves nor know ourselves.

(d) Representatives of this approach prefer to resort to the strategy of methodological reanimation of objects (Lury 1996:26), that is, they often endow them with properties usually associated with subjects. Research on the social lives (see Appadurai 1986), cultural biographies (see Kopytoff 1986), identities (see Hoskins 1998, 2006) and identity politics of objects are obvious examples of this practice. As Lury (1996:26) points out, the methodological reanimation of objects contributes greatly to deconstructing the object = static and passivity equation and facilitates the recognition and interpretation of dynamic and processual aspects of object use that would probably remain hidden if we were to focus our attention only on a single moment in the social career of objects. The terms dynamism and processuality are used here in two senses. On the one hand, they refer to the modification of meanings, values, and functions associated with objects (from

an everyday object to a work of art or museum exhibit; from a mass-produced object to a singularized souvenir endowed with biographical or sentimental value, etc.), i.e. to the internal dynamism of object use. On the other hand, they refer to the social practices, relations and qualities that are organized around objects and created through their use (for example, consumption and consumer subcultures: communities of taste and brand; conflicts around identity symbols; or the social and economic effects of various technological innovations [mobile phones, internet, etc.]), i.e. to the "external" dynamics related to the contexts surrounding things. Since the "world is constituted through a continuous dynamism, a dialectic of object-subject relations" (Miller and Tilley 1996:6), new material culture studies should be concerned with the dynamics surrounding objects rather than with the more static moments of their classification and definition, argues Myers (2001:8).

(e) A defining feature of new material culture studies is that it does not define itself as a distinct discipline, but as an approach, and does not even consider its goal to become a discipline in its own right (see Miller 1998a:4).[3] For this reason, I also speak of a mere approach (sometimes a common framework of interpretation or a common field of interest) and avoid using the term discipline. New material culture studies are one of the loosely organized approaches with little institutionalization, bringing together researchers from many disciplines (sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, archaeology, art history, etc.), often temporarily, for the duration of a single research project, through virtual threads of similar problem sensitivities, research questions, theoretical orientations, and conceptual frameworks.

Publications discussing the nature (theoretical and methodological specificities) of new material culture studies usually place great emphasis on the need to be aware of the advantages of rejecting disciplinarity (see, for example, Miller and Tilley 1996; Miller 1998a; Attfield 2000:36; Tilley et al. 2006; Woodward 2007:26). It is often suggested, for example, that in this way they:

- avoid the trap of "disciplinary chauvinism" (Miller and Tilley 1996:6), i.e. the practice of sociologists or anthropologists reading primarily themselves,
- get rid of many of the drawbacks of being a discipline (constraints and limitations), the reductionism that often characterizes scientific problem-sensitivity and methodology (Miller 1998a:4). The conscious disregard of these disciplinary constraints and limitations, Miller and Tilley (1996:13)

[3] As Attfield (2000:3) points out, among researchers interested in the new material culture studies, there are few who argue for the necessity of existence as an independent discipline.

argue, results in the fact "that being undisciplined can be highly productive if it leads us to focus upon areas that established disciplines have ignored because of boundary constraints. This is lack of discipline with a purpose, not merely the eclectic play of a libertarian's individualism for its own sake,"

- gain an opportunity to integrate material culture research carried out in the contexts of various disciplines, without reproducing the inequalities that arise from asymmetrical power relations between disciplines,
- due to the lack of existence as an independent discipline, are presented with an opportunity to demonstrate and reproduce the heterogeneity of material culture and material culture studies defined as a core value. According to the editors of the Handbook of Material Culture: "Such an intellectual field of study is inevitably eclectic: relatively unbounded and unconstrained, fluid, dispersed and anarchic rather than constricted. (…). This we regard as a strength rather than a weakness and an alternative to the inevitable disciplinary restrictions with regard to research which is validated, or otherwise, as valuable, serious or appropriate" (Tilley et al. 2006:1).

The advantages of refusing to function as an independent discipline are best summarized by Miller and Tilley (1996:5–6) in the introduction to the first issue of the *Journal of Material Culture:*

> The fact that no discipline called 'material culture studies' exists may be regarded as a positive advantage. Disciplines, with their boundary-maintaining devices, institutional structures, accepted texts, methodologies, internal debates and circumscribed areas of study tend, by virtue of their very constitution, to be rather conservative in nature. (…) Our aim, therefore, in developing this journal is not to draw together studies of contemporary consumer goods, landscapes, archaeological finds, studies of architecture, artworks or ethnographic collections into a new, 'disciplined' subject area, or even a subdiscipline, but to encourage the cross-fertilization of ideas and approaches between people concerned with the material constitution of social relations. As such we have no obvious genealogy of ancestors to whom we should pay homage, and are not concerned to invent any. In developing this journal we remain firmly committed to a politics of inclusion.

The scientific approach of research projects that can be classified as new material culture studies is often defined as interdisciplinary, i.e. an approach characterized by the

exchange and borrowing of methods, theories, and concepts from different disciplines. The other group of research projects tends to explore contexts and problems that lie outside the fields of interest of existing disciplines. Still others see anti- or post-disciplinarity (see Attfield 2000:1) as a characteristic feature of new material culture studies, i.e. they argue that disciplinary frameworks are out of date, as they are a source of disadvantages and limitations rather than advantages for scientific research. While the inter- and transdisciplinary approaches define themselves in relation to existing disciplines by accepting their existence, the anti- or post-disciplinarity approach considers disciplinary existence as unnecessary and useless.

PROBLEM SENSITIVITY THAT CONNECTS: COMMON KEY QUESTIONS

Although there are many research directions that could be addressed, in which the approach of new material culture studies plays a decisive role, I will mention only a few of them here. It should be noted that the following topics sometimes overlap partially, and it is not this article's aim to present the main research findings and professional debates related to them – the following paragraphs only aim to stimulate the reader's interest in new material culture studies by mentioning some frequently investigated problems related to different aspects of the interactions between subjects and things.

(a) *The nature of the boundary between subjects and objects.* One of the central questions in new material culture studies is the problem of the boundary (formation and maintenance) between persons and things (see Miller 1994b:415–417; Dant 1999:176–195; Keane 2006:197–202). Where and according to what criteria are the symbolic boundaries separating subjects from things in different social and cultural contexts and historical periods marked out? Is it necessary, following the Western Cartesian tradition, to conceive of the dividing line between them as an impassable barrier?

(b) *The social construction of object authenticities.* New material culture studies show an intense interest in authenticity as a social product, its construction, and the possibilities of its social, political, and economic exploitation (see Cohen 1988; Wang 1999; Lacy and Douglass 2002; Gerstenblith 2019; Marrone and Beltrametti 2020). More specifically, it is highly interested in the strategies, ideologies, and criteria used by various communities of practice to create their own interpretations of authenticity, and the motivations – economic gain, identity politics, etc. – that drive them to separate authentic objects, experiences, and practices from non-authentic ones.

(c) *The complex interplay and interdependence between subjects and objects.*

Research projects related to new material culture studies often ask how things are involved in the self-definition attempts of subjects and social groups, i.e. in their identity projects and narratives. (See, for example, Yates 2022.) In the context of interactions with things – and with other subjects – how do we create, represent, or materialize, and manipulate various layers of identity (ethnic, national, gender, local, religious etc.), as well as social boundaries and relations? How can we characterize the inner dynamics of symbolic conflicts emerged around the ownership of identity symbols endowed with identity and emotional value, as well as the set of ideologies, practices, and strategies employed by the groups competing for them?

(d) *The politics of style, taste, and aesthetics.* New material culture studies are keenly interested in how conscious consumption of cultural and other goods, and the strategic choice of how to consume them, organizes consumer tastes and styles, and through these consumer (sub)cultures (e.g. style and brand communities) and identities (see Bourdieu 1984; Thornton 1995; Klein 2020; Shanafelt 2022).

(e) Objects and memory (materializing memory). The role of material culture in organizing, representing, and shaping the relationships with the past is often questioned by the scholars of this approach (see Kwint et al. 1999; Forty and Küchler 2001; Hallam and Hockey 2001; Küchler 2002; Saunders 2004; Terry 2015; McAtackney 2022; Polezzi 2023).

(f) *Interactions between objects or between object classes.* New material culture studies devote considerable attention to the study of interactions between objects resulting from intercultural encounter situations. See, for example, analyses of colonization/postcolonization that examine how the material culture of the colonizers influenced local worlds and vice versa: how did ritual and everyday objects, styles, forms, and patterns, typical of African, American or Australian first nations, find their way into the colonizers' homes, museums, galleries, and auction houses, and what meanings and values were attached to them (see Thomas 1991, 1994, 1999; Pinney and Peterson 2003; Lydon 2005; Hunt 2005, etc.). Similarly, research over the last few decades has paid considerable attention to the flow of knowledge, technologies, and other immaterial commodities between cultural and social contexts. This is well illustrated, for example, by studies (see Wilk 1995; Miller 1998b:169–188; Miller and Slater 2000; Foster 2008), which, in an attempt to criticize the claims of the damaging effects of globalization, examine how local worlds are able to shape their own likeness of the icons of globalization such as Coca-Cola or the Internet and to make them a constitutive and useful part of local identity projects.

(g) *Contact zones between subjects and objects: the politics of recontextualization, representation, and value.* Some of the research associated with this approach has focused on the contact zones (Clifford 1997:192, see also Pratt 1992:6–7; Sorin 2022; Herman 2023) that are the interactional contexts of encounters between objects and subjects

(or various groups of the latter: visitors, curators, sponsors). In the case of the museum, the most studied contact zone, one of the questions often asked is how the incoming objects undergo symbolic transformations during their multi-level recontextualization, that is, how do the meanings and values associated with them change? How can museum representation become a strategic instrument or context for the identity politics of different political, ethnic, or cultural groups, i.e. a limited resource or symbolic arena of values (Appadurai 1986), which is often subject to intense competition for control?

(h) *Intellectual property, copyright, and the politics of cultural heritage.* In the last two or three decades, social sciences have paid increasing attention to the analysis of the demands of various social formations (ethnic populations, nations, or states) for the repatriation of materialized or other goods that were once the property of their ancestors, but have since been expropriated by colonizing powers (foreign states, museums, or universities, etc.). (See, for example, Harrison 1995, 1999; Brown 2004; Glass 2004; Cuno 2008; Dreyfuss and Siew-Kuan Ng 2018.)

(i) *Art, dominance, and the globalizing art market.* One of the frequently examined questions about art can be summarized as follows: how do social, political, and cultural differences affect the taxonomies associated with the concept of art, and vice versa: how can the latter contribute to the reproduction, exploitation, and naturalization of social and political hierarchies and inequalities (see Bourdieu 1984)? In other words: how can art (its institutional system, canons, etc.) and aesthetic value judgments and preferences be used as technologies of power (see Foucault 1980; Marcus and Myers 1995a, 1995b; Phillips and Steiner 1999a, 1999b; Jules-Rosette and Osborn 2021; Archer 2022)?

(j) *The social lives or cultural biographies of things.* In the mid-1980s, following Appadurai's and Kopytoff's book chapters (Appadurai 1986 and Kopytoff 1986; see Dant 1999:130–152), a number of researchers interested in new material culture studies began to apply the 'biographical method,' which had hitherto been associated with persons, to objects. In their research projects, they attempt to reconstruct and/or document the social career of a particular object (type) from its production to its withdrawal or destruction (or a shorter stage of its life) – drawing attention to the dynamic aspects of the social life of objects.

(k) *Object identities and the identity politics of objects.* The emergence of the term 'object identity' in research projects adopting the approach of new material culture studies (see Domańska 2006; Hoskins 2006) is primarily due to the recognition that (a) our identities are often constructed and represented through the medium of object use, and (b) that in doing so, we often also personalize things by endowing them with identities primarily connected to subjects. When we genderize, ethnicize, or nationalize objects or technologies, or when we define them as symbols of local identity, we are in

effect attaching social, cultural, and other types of identities to them.

(l) *Technology as material culture.* New material culture studies pay great attention to the interpretation of the interplay between technologies and societies/cultures, and their impact on each other (see, for example, Gaskell and Carter 2020; Coupaye 2022). More specifically, it often examines how the emergence and diffusion of new technologies bring about social changes (how new technologies of mobility have contributed to the emergence of different forms of tourism and made them everyday commodities; how the spread of the Internet has given rise to new types of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) and has transformed the meanings of the notions of transnationalism or diaspora) as well as how social and market needs have influenced and oriented technological development.

(m) *Material aspects of things and (sub)cultures of perception.* New material culture studies are intensively interested in the role that material properties of things (shape, color, materiality, durability, and so on) play in the interactions between subjects and things, that is, when, why and how are material properties of things associated with meanings and values, and how material properties influence subjects' choices about things (see Miller 2005b; Yates 2022). In line with this, a growing body of research over the last few decades (see Classen 1993; Howes 2003, 2004; Edwards et al. 2006) has paid attention to how particular cultural or social variables (gender, ethnic identity, age, locality, etc.) influence processes of perception. How can (sub)cultures of perception be characterized and how do they differ (see, for example, population-specific concepts of body image; gender-, cultural- or ethnic-based meanings of color as well as communities of consumer taste organized around specific types of works of art)?[4]

(n) *The body as object: its aestheticization and commodification.* The body has become a focus of research in new material culture studies not only because of its importance as a site of perception, but also because of its sociocultural determination and the interest in the practices of aestheticization and commodification. In the former context, the strategies, and techniques through which the aestheticization of the body is carried out and exploited have been mostly investigated. For example, a number of studies have investigated the cultural and social meanings associated with dressing up, also defined as a "second skin" (see Küchler and Were 2005; Küchler and Miller 2005), tattooing (see Gell 1993; Pitts 2003; Thomas et al. 2005), and body jewelry, or forms of body design and maintenance that are (also) driven by aesthetic concerns, such as body-conscious eating or a group of plastic surgery procedures.

[4] See, for example, research on touch (Classen 2005; Pye 2007), smell (Classen et al. 1994; Drobnick 2006), sound/audition (Bull and Back 2003), taste (Korsmeyer 2005), or different aspects of visual culture (Mirzoef 2002).

(p) *Consumption.* Many academics using the approach of new material culture studies are keen to investigate consumption-related ideologies, practices, trends, and processes (see, for example, Miller 1987, 1998b, 2002; Lury 1996; Berta 2019). Consumption studies is one of the most dynamically developing subfields of new material culture studies first because consumption is a ubiquitous practice that offers numerous possibilities and contexts for a deeper understanding of how the subtle system of relations between subjects and things develops and works, how the dynamics of this system of relations can be characterized, and what aspects influence the change of these dynamics. The findings of consumer studies also highlight, among other things, the significant role that consumer goods, choices, and decisions play in subjects' identity projects, and draw attention to how shared consumer ideologies and practices can become significant sources of group cohesion (see, for example, the phenomena of consumer brand, taste communities or consumer boycott).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: ON THE ACADEMIC CAREER OF THE BIOGRAPHICAL METHOD IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

If I had to choose a single book from among the early publications that later significantly oriented the problem sensibility of new material culture studies, it would be Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective,* published in 1986. Two chapters in this edited volume have gained above-average popularity among scholars receptive to the approach of new material culture studies: Appadurai's introduction *(Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value)* and Kopytoff's chapter *(The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process)*. One can agree with Graeber's (2001:30) comment that "if there is one essay that has the most influence on the way anthropologists nowadays talk about value, it is certainly Arjun Appadurai's 'Commodities and the Politics of Value' (1986), the introduction to a volume called 'The Social Life of Things'." The importance of this book for social sciences is also illustrated by the extensive volume edited by Wim van Binsbergen and Peter Geschiere (2005), focusing mainly on Africa *(Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities. /The Social Life of Things Revisited/)*, which both analyzes the impact of Appadurai's volume on social sciences and provides a series of research results on the cultural and social dynamics of commodification.

Appadurai's and Kopytoff's chapters have become immensely popular (not only among researchers applying the approach of new material culture studies) because their authors have created and introduced a set of thought-provoking and inspiring analytical

categories that have become extremely useful elements in the frameworks of interpretation aiming at a deeper understanding of the complex web of relations between things and subjects. Appadurai's study, for example, gave rise to the terms 'regimes of value' and 'tournament of value,' while the term 'cultural biography of things' became widespread thanks to Kopytoff's chapter. The academic significance and impact of Appadurai's and Kopytoff's contributions, however, stems not only from the introduction of the categories mentioned above, but also from the fact that they offered a new, more dynamic, and context-sensitive analytical perspective for the investigation of the complex interplay and interdependence between things and subjects, as well as of object transformations. At the heart of this new perspective is the biographical method. According to Kopytoff (1986:66–67),

> In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its "status" and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life," and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?

Representatives of the biographical approach start from the assumption that objects, from the moment they are manufactured until their final withdrawal from use, are not only capable of materializing the life histories of their owners, i.e. of becoming memorabilia or biographical objects, but that they can also acquire socially constructed and attributed biographies. These object biographies can encompass many aspects of the object's social career: the place and time of production, the succession of owners, the object's migration between contexts of use and value regimes, major changes in the meanings and value of the given piece, and the socially constructed categories (commodity, identity symbol, etc.) into which its users have classified it at different periods of its lifetime. As Appadurai (1986) points out, it is worth separating the individual cultural biographies of objects from the social career of a class of object (e.g. artefact, relic), as the latter requires a broader perspective over a wider time span and may lead to conclusions of a different nature.

The novelty and explanatory power of the biographical approach lies primarily in the fact that it offers a dynamic and context-sensitive perspective capable of tracing the symbolic and material metamorphoses of objects and their movements between

value regimes and contexts, that is, it is able to perceive and capture the processual and relational nature of the social lives of objects – thus enabling a deeper understanding of the interactions and interdependence between subjects and things.

While Appadurai and Kopytoff explore the social dynamics of commodification and singularization, they point to a number of insights and relations concerning the social lives of things that have later become prominent parts of the problem sensitivity of the new material culture studies. What are they?

(a) On the one hand, the experience that things are not static "accessories" of the subjects' lives but are themselves constantly changing: they undergo significant symbolic transformations (regarding the meanings and values attributed to them), their material properties can alter, their ownership history can also be modified, and so on. Therefore, they should also be examined rigorously from the perspective of the social dynamics that are organized around them and that they generate. That is, things are not "finished," "closed," but are "open" entities throughout their social career, both in terms of their symbolic and material properties. As Domańska (2006:181), paraphrasing Kristeva, points out, the biographical method is primarily "interested in the 'object in process' (or the processual object)."

(b) Closely related to this processuality is the methodological sensitivity to the perspective of things-in-motion. According to this, researchers must also consider, with equal emphasis, the movement of things between value regimes and contexts of use, and how these movements affect the things, value regimes and contexts involved, and the subjects associated with the latter.

(c) Finally, the chapters of Appadurai and Kopytoff also draw attention to the significance of material agency, that is, to the fact that things are far from being passive elements of the social lives of subjects. Quite the contrary, things can constantly and significantly shape and transform subjects' identities, relationships, and feelings. The notion of material agency also warns us that things are inseparable from the world of subjects, and the relationship between these two realms are basically dialectical: both realms shape each other and therefore they are both producers and products of each other.

The biographical approach has played a key role in many research projects. This approach has been used, for example, by Callahan (1999) on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia; Hamilakis (1999) on the marble statues of the Parthenon in Athens; Gosden and Marshall (1999) on a necklace from Fiji, now in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford; Hansen (1995) on certain types of second-hand clothing; Rainbird (1999) on pottery from Western Pacific Island societies; Saunders (1999) on pearls; Gillings and Pollard (1999) on megalithic stone blocks; Stengs (2005) on portraits of the ruler Chulalongkorn; Turgeon (1997) on copperware from Europe coming to America; and Berta (2019) on

silver objects defined as luxuries among the Gabor Roma living in Romania.

In the fields of critical museology and anthropology of art, which are intensely interested in the politics of value attributed to material culture, the study of cultural biographies or social lives of objects has proved particularly productive, but the biographical method is also extremely useful in the analysis of the complex relationships between objects and memory, the social constructions of authenticity, the politics of cultural heritage and repatriation, as well as in the analysis of the global antiques market and transnational auction houses.

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Zašto su interakcije i međuovisnost stvari i subjekata važne: o objašnjavajućoj moći novih studija materijalne kulture

Péter Berta

Ovaj članak nastoji pružiti uvid u analitički pristup koji se razvio tijekom posljednjih četiriju desetljeća, poznat kao nove studije materijalne kulture. Prvi dio, oslanjajući se prvenstveno na preglede Millera (1994a) i Buchlija (2002a), opisuje najvažnije faze i prekretnice interesa društvenih znanosti za materijalnu kulturu. Drugi dio navodi neka od prepoznatljivih obilježja što karakteriziraju (većinu) istraživačkih projekata koji usvajaju ovaj analitički pristup, s posebnim naglaskom na materijalno djelovanje (kako stvari oblikuju subjekte?), objektifikaciju, te perspektive stvari-u-pokretu i stvari-u-procesu (Domańska 2006). Treći dio ističe neke od glavnih smjerova problemske osjetljivosti koja je u središtu novih studija materijalne kulture (usredotočujući se, među ostalim, na prirodu granice između subjekata i stvari, društvene konstrukcije autentičnosti, politiku stila, ukusa i estetike, te na složen odnos između stvari i sjećanja). Na kraju, posljednji dio opisuje kako je biografska metoda postala iznimno popularna među istraživačima koji koriste ovaj analitički pristup te otkriva razloge njezine objašnjavajuće moći.

Ključne riječi: *nove studije materijalne kulture, materijalno djelovanje, objektifikacija, stvari-u-pokretu, biografska metoda*