

Acting things: agency

SOC 562, week 9, April 17th, 2019

Mauss – things and persons are culturally defined

MATERIAL TURN IN 1980'S

- **Appadurai (Social life of things, 1986):** Objects are passive; they are recontextualised (commodified, decommodified); methodologically things in movement defined human and social world/context
- **Miller (Material Culture and Mass Consumption, 1987)** things and subjects constitute each other in a dialectical process of objectification.

AGENCY

- What things **do** rather than what they **mean** and how they are entangled with social relationships
- Agency is „the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act.“ Laura Ahern (2001)
- WORK IN GROUPS 1: Think of an example where agent/actor is not an individual human being.

Alfred Gell

Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology. 1999. In Eric Hirsch (ed.) *The Art of Anthropology*. London: Atlone. 159-186.

WORK IN COUPLES

QUESTION 1: What is methodological philistinism?
What is methodological philistinism? How does Gell use this concept?

Alfred Gell

- Methodological philistinism
- Art does not represent, art acts and do, has social effects
- Gell x Bourdieu, Panofsky

WORK IN COUPLES

QUESTION 2: What is technology of enchantment?

Alfréd Gell, technology of enchantment

Art as technology of enchantment / canoe as a psychological weapon



Trobriand canoe, kula

- <http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/chaparralbrad/sets/72157621788001471/>



Alfred Gell, enchantment of technology

- Technology of enchantment depends on enchantment of technology
- Enchanted technology, magic as a folk concept of agency

WORK IN COUPLES

QUESTION 3: What is enchantment of technology?

Picasso a Duchamp



Trobriand kanoes, Kula



Gell, Art and Agency: Anthropological Theory. 1998

- Refusal of aesthetic theory of art -> Art has practical mediating role in social processes:
„the nature of art object is a function of social-relational matrix in which it is embedded“ p.7.

Asmat shields



Art and Agency

- Patterns are interested for an art-historian. For a warrior the shield is weapon provoking fear
- Shield is not effective because of its beauty, but because its effect - it is a social agent

Art and Agency

- Social actor (a person, an object, collectivity) initiates causal sequences of certain type, events are caused by will, intention, they are not purely physical consequences
- Things are created as a for of instrumental acting, they are supposed to influence thinking and acting of others.
- Material objects embody complex intentions and mediate social agency

Art nexus

- **Artist** is originator of index, primary social agent
- **Index** - usually artefact, secondary social agent
- **Prototype** - entity, represented by index (the king)
- Index enables **patient (recipient)** to create causal inference related to abilities or intentions of **artist**
- This operation is **abduction of agency**

Anthropology of art is anthropology dealing with situations containing indexes

Goya, Duke of Wellingtonu



Art and Agency

- Theory of abduction – it is not causal inference, but inferred intentionality
- Art achieves effects through distribution of agency of one subject to other subjects
- Created product becomes distributed mind affected other minds
- Objects have “secondary” agency: embodiment of human agency, we are inferring they contain it
- Objects have effects AS objects / things with material qualities

Gell - Latour

- Gell (1998:20-21) Latour (1999: 176-80) land mines:
- Latour: hybrid agency, network
- Gell: secondary agency.

Latour - ANT

Actor-network theory (ANT)

- Extends the notion of agency beyond human actors – non-humans as well as humans can be actors.
- Not bilateral relation between person and thing as in material culture studies, but networks of relations between various actors



Latour: US airforce acts, not B52,
not a pilot, not a bomb

Latour - ANT

Laboratory Life: the Social Construction of Scientific Facts 1979

- objects of scientific study are *socially constructed* within the laboratory
- scientific activity as a system of beliefs and culturally specific practices—science is reconstructed not as a procedure or as a set of principles but as a culture

Latour - ANT

We Have Never Been Modern, 1991

- Modernity makes a dualistic distinction between nature and society. **Purification**: an endeavor to keep nature and society; objects and subjects; politics, science and religion separated.
- However, modernist distinction between nature and culture never really existed. Reality of the world consists of **Hybridity**: mixing of human and non-human agents, of politics, science and religion, we can not recognize separate elements

Latour - ANT

„The prime mover of an action becomes a new, distributed, and nested set of practices whose sum may be possible to add up but only if we respect the mediating role of all the actants mobilized in the series.“
Latour 1999:181

“You discriminate between the human and the inhuman. I do not hold this bias but see only actors—some human, some nonhuman, some skilled, some unskilled - that exchange their properties”(Latour 1988: 303).

Latour - ANT

- His concept of agency is a strategy against purification