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'Parts hide one another; and when the artifact is completed the activity that fit them together disappears entirely.'

- Bruno Latour

Introduction

Cultural studies and sociology both concern themselves with attempts to conceptualise objects over a series of visual spaces*. Bruno Latour has recently addressed this (2007) via the example of Damian Ortega's 'Cosmic Thing' installation, which provides an exploded view of a VW Beetle car. Latour is rather dismissive of this work, using it as a vehicle to rubbish Heidegger's philosophy of technology, with its four elements converging to 'enframe' any given object. Latour, I think rightly, complains about the way in which Heidegger's account of cultural objects requires us to transfer all of them, at least initially, on to the same conceptual plane;

'Not only would Heidegger see no difference whatsoever between an atomic bomb, a dam, a lie detector, and a staple — all being mere examples of the same "enframing" — but when he finally gives some respect to a shoe or a hammer it is only to see it as the assembly of four elements — his "fourfold."' (Latour, 2007: 140).

Latour thinks that some cultural objects may require a longer list than the four Heidegger provides, however he does agree with Heidegger's concept of 'enframing', the way the 'thingness' of an object is a coming-together of several elements and processes. Heidegger's 'idealist materialism' is problematic to Latour, who is essentially asking for 'thick description', something I've been getting to grips with in both my MPhil and my own practice. I have included some examples of that practice here (see figures 1&2). I am knowingly about to commit a series of crimes against the term 'thick description' itself, but recently I have come to think more about the problems and urgent imperatives for attempting expanded, joined-up accounts of culture.

Shipwrecked

Difficulties conceptualising the relationship between the here and there of culture create a stranger existential relationship with time to that of modernity, something Patrick Keiller has picked up on;

'We all live, as far as we know, in the present, and the present in Nepal, in Tokyo, or on Mars, can sometimes seem nearer than yesterday morning in one's own kitchen. As it has become easier to move around in and communicate across space, have we, perhaps, become more sensitive to the fact that we are inescapably stranded, shipwrecked almost, in our own present...' (Keiller, 2002)



The Trafford Centre, just outside Manchester, provides surrealist poetry a-plenty. Yet reconnecting elements of its bizarre spectacles can also deliver a consumer-capitalist critique. The provision of ample lifeboats in a shopping super-complex, miles from any sea, in a country where the RNLI is staffed by volunteers, is one such possible, politicised reconnection. This is part of my understanding of 'cognitive mapping', as a subjective linking of not just the base with the spectacle, but also its anomalies. This play of signification has only seemingly floated free of its relation to a highly complex series of referents. Of course, that 'seemingly' is signification itself, but those relations are there to be both uncovered and re-signified.

Keiller then links this to the dilapidation of much housing in England, the disempowerment of the state and local government, imagining that the outside may one day appear as neglected as ‘...the space behind a television, perhaps, or on top of a wardrobe.’ (ibid). He then importantly goes on to describe how, with some relief, how he later realised that exterior public spaces still thrived, in ever more staggering multiplicity.

I have experienced these seeming schisms between the built and virtual environments myself. Working for a newspaper, I operated an ADSL line, downloading syndicated news images. The download time would shift when close to newspaper deadlines, with sheer weight of traffic. The predicted time of completion would instantly jump from a hopeful ‘one minute thirty-eight seconds’, to a heart-sinking ‘one hour twenty-four minutes’. I expected to look out of the window to see shoppers and workers reversing, suddenly walking backwards in the street. As quickly as this pixel gridlock arrived, it vanished, at which point it was just as tempting to imagine the crowds outside being thrown into forward gear, accelerating away into complex patterns. The temporal relationship between here and there seemed to be morphing, as did its relationship with the world outside.

This is something most people have experienced, although future generations may well be oblivious to this developmental period. During the 1990s, it seemed impossible to attend a show of new photography without seeing large images of empty car parks or other homogeneous spaces. Perhaps these photographers were trying to express something of this existential loss of connection between the here and the elsewhere, the inside and outside. Is it possible that they were experiencing the lightly nauseous feeling of take-off, as our cultural communications sped forward?

In more theoretical terms, Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) via the work of Anthony Giddens, describe this as ‘flattening’, a term which seems more appropriate to describe our contemporary situation, with faster internet connections creating a near-instantaneous navigation of global symbolic elsewheres. Lash and Urry see both the positive and negative facets of this phenomenon:

“...the instantaneous character of contemporary time facilitates its use by powerful organizations which often result in a flattening and a disembedding of social relations. But the use of instantaneous time can also be enabling for ordinary subjects. They can view and evaluate different cultures at the flick of a switch, or via high speed (or almost instantaneous) transport. This enables the rapid and extensive juxtaposition of, and comparison between, different cultures and places” (1994: 243).

Much has been made of the poetic possibilities of modern or postmodern life;

'For much of the twentieth century, artists, writers and revolutionaries had attempted to deal with this and similar predicaments by employing more or less explicit strategies to poeticise or otherwise transform experience of everyday surroundings. The Surrealists and their followers were probably the leading exponents of this, and the Surrealist encounter with everyday experience generally involved the cultivation of subjectivities that revealed previously unappreciated value and meanings in ordinary things.' (Keiller, 2002).

I would add to this the series of modern art '-isms', especially cubism, which was concerned with attempts to represent a multi-faceted view of reality on one visual surface. This high level of frisson in a culture of rapid change continues and is important to keep in mind. Problematic takes on postmodernity, for instance Marc Auge's 'Non-places' (1995) assume that even the most homogeneous spaces can escape palimpsestual layering and the potential for unintentional signification, a claim I'm wary of.

Caught up in the mix

Active popular culture, often entailing symbolic resistance, is a long way from its increasingly de-politicised, assimilated counterparts. Postmodern cultural objects alert us to their presence by displaying certain symptoms. In semiotic terms, the divorce of the sign from its referent, coupled with a western culture of consumer spectacle, where the 'here' and 'there' of production and consumption, although part of the same long chain of events, often appear separated. New goods are available at the surface of the high street, yet are often produced thousands of miles away. Engels was shown the squalor of Manchester, hidden behind the very bourgeois facades their deference allowed to exist. The distances may change, but the form stays the same. It must suit those in the business of production, distribution and consumption for these processes to be as apparently unrelated as they seem to be for most of the young people I encounter through my job. Many of these students are hyper-aware of the ethical dimensions of shopping, 'fairtrade', 'sweatshop', etc, but discussions of the detailed processes behind these terms often trail off into quiet.

This is understandable, economies of distribution often appear illogical on the ground: A £1 air fare, contrasted with a £90 rail fare to the airport; The economic impossibility of selling champagne on BA flights to Russia (it being cheaper to give it away for free, due to staff costs and bank charges); The sudden need for 200 job losses in an apparently profit-making business. It seems to me that these incongruities are actually the only ironies which will be useful to us, facing, as we are, a series of crises. The sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska's final, insane letter from the trenches of world war one perhaps has a connotational lilt to it which is more appropriate to a fuller picture of our contemporary chains of production, distribution and consumption, especially in sites outside western Europe and north America;

'HUMAN MASSES teem and move, are destroyed and crop up again.

HORSES are worn out in three weeks, die by the roadside.

DOGS wander, are destroyed, and others come along.

WITH ALL THE DESTRUCTION that works around us NOTHING IS CHANGED, EVEN SUPERFICIALLY.'

As Slavoj Žižek wrote, (2008) the so-called 'neutral' background to experience is actually the most dangerous - because invisible - realm of ideology. The violent nexus of the relations of production, mirrored by capitalist TV, *The Apprentice*, *Dragon's Den*, *Deal or No Deal*, is the murderous roil of stability itself, the ground on which we build. It is our task to show that 'ground' to be as dynamic as Gaudier-Brzeska understood it.

Imperatives

Addressing a British Sociological Association conference, Bruno Latour (2007) discussed ecological crisis. Via the work of Peter Sloterdijk, Latour speculates on the possibility of a world in which humans will need to re-connect their 'heres' and 'elsewheres' very carefully and to think through the consequences they have on each other in a responsible way. Latour outlined Sloterdijk's term 'explicitation', which re-casts the thrust of modernity as something which slowly reveals - makes explicit - the fragility of our life-systems on earth (ibid). He asked how 'social connections' may be altered under the gloomy predictions of James Lovelock and others. Altered under the knowledge that we may be responsible for the extinction of 40% of life on the planet, that we, collectively, have the same potential to damage the life support systems of earth as 'the impact of a major meteorite' (ibid: 2). How, he asks, will that alter the way we view ourselves and each other, and our connections with each other, and other places, in the next fifty years?

Although also discussing materialism in science, Latour talks of how the same 'emancipations' created by modernity, many of them industrial and technological, now both illustrate and exacerbate the fragility of our existence on the planet;

'...never was the need for radical social sciences more pressing than it is today, and yet this is just the time when the lines of columnists in the Western world, especially in France, are complaining about the abandonment of "utopian ideals", the demise of "revolutionary impulses", the fall back into complacency, the final victory of neo-liberalism; this is just the time when the task that lies ahead is not only "revolutionary" but of truly "earth-shaking proportion" - and remember, all of those expressions are now

literal not metaphorical. We have managed to shake the Earth out of balance for good! Think of it: what was the storming of the Winter Palace, compared to the total transformation of our landscape, cities, factories, transportation system for which we will have to gird ourselves after the Oil Peak?' (ibid).

Latour describes how recent history had two core themes running through it, those 'of modernization and of emancipation' (ibid: 3). If we look back at the processes which delivered our 'individuality' and the discourses surrounding the 'mastery of nature', radiating out of the enlightenment period, we can maybe begin to understand what Latour is doing. He is debating the possibility that our outlook may well be framed, now or in the near-future, by the terms 'explicitation' and 'attachment', rather than 'emancipation'. What Latour leaves out here is perhaps the darkest irony of all, that we wouldn't have 'made explicit' the fragility of our systems at all without 'modernity' - a concept Latour has a highly personal take on. The linked scientific and industrial revolutions provide both the 'explicitation' and the 'crisis' it exposes. With this in mind, it should be clear that an expanded or re-worked way of accounting for culture is now required.

The eBay imaginary tribute band

Ian Buchanan describes the meteoric rise of 'cultural studies' and 'theory' as subjects, from obscurity 'to near hegemony' (2006: 33-4) in a decade and describes Fredric Jameson's concern with its drift over that time, saying;

'His chief complaints against cultural studies are that it is situationally unaware and politically misdirected: its approach tends to be narrow and regional in focus and lacking in any sense of the bigger picture, of the totality, or what in Marxist language would be known as the base...' (ibid).

Buchanan also describes how Jameson has been critical of recent forms of cultural studies, describing his take on Adorno as;

'...calculated to be a bitter pill rammed down the throat of what he plainly sees as a de-Marxified cultural studies, which in its sometimes facile and frequently ahistorical celebration of "what is" has tended to shun properly critical negativity in all its forms.' (ibid).

Jameson bemoans the loss of the 'critical' from critical theory, as much as he derides cultural studies which don't attempt to go the full distance in terms of accounting for the production and consumption of any given object. His simultaneous adherence to and transformation of Marxist traditions are active precisely because they attempt to account for processes at the point of both reception and making. The leap from the production of an object to its psychological reception is difficult to make precisely because the cognitive gaps - as with my examples of economic processes viewed from the ground - are very wide. But the

attempt to account for individual investments in objects, in terms of the creation of subjectivities is essential, although difficult to undertake. Jameson's term 'cognitive mapping' urges a necessarily incomplete attempt to think through the here and there of postmodern culture, relationships increasingly obscured by geographical distance, the linked symptoms of reification, the drifting of the sign from its referent and the colonization of the unconscious by commodity marketing (ibid, 2000: 25). 'Cognitive mapping' can give us some tools to attempt that. Jameson takes in a whole set of supposedly discredited, covered-in-ash Marxists from a land before time began, but his usage of these texts is historicised, and that historicisation is as much a part of the space of 'cognitive mapping' as are the objects of culture in question. 'Cognitive mapping' must always be an attempt, a praxis. 'Only' theorising it is half the battle, but that theorising must attempt to connect the object to the base, to attempt to reconnect the sign to all of its referents, to all the 'elswheres' its 'here' is straining to communicate (or just as importantly, obscure).

Towards thicker description

Understanding the processes triggered by something as seemingly simple as an online order may have to be thought through in an attached way, rather than a disconnected way. 'Attached at last!' may not have the same thrilling ring as 'Free at last!' but wouldn't it be nice to have your everyday un-flattened? Things which are delivered to us as surfaces, be they on an LCD screen or in the street, may soon have to be understood as the multi-dimensional processes they always have been. Of course, the way this plays out in the next decades can only be speculated upon, but the attempt to move away from the perceived disconnections of postmodernity to the potential 'attachedness' of the coming set of crises is essential, even though it is not an attachedness I look forward to. This is not seminal information, it can be detected in supermarkets, newspapers and magazines; the challenge for cultural studies runs deep nonetheless. Discussing the Challenger space shuttle disaster, Latour says that 'We know how to provide a "thin description" of an entity's idealized material aspects' (2007: 142) by which he means technical drawing, CAD, a priori conceptualisations.

He continues;

'...we are finally starting to learn how to give a post hoc narrative thick description of what should have been visible in the gathering that brings a thing together (similarly, after the shuttle's explosion a tough inquiry was pursued). And yet we still don't know how to assemble, in a single, visually coherent space, all the entities necessary for a thing to become an object — Ortega's installation notwithstanding. When we have learned how to do that, we might finally get our (material) materialism back — and our cosmic things to boot. That's when the plot will really thicken.' (ibid).

I'm not claiming towering objectivity for myself, I'm not even claiming that I can adequately visualise an object. My work is subjective. The 'thingness' of a derelict factory or a lifeboat is always replaced with another object, the photograph or text, or a strategic juxtaposition of the two. In semiotic terms, the sign always replaces the referent; it acknowledges both the reality it replaces and its absence. This is before we even start to discuss my speaking position and agency. I'm unsure about the potential of ever moving beyond 'idealist materialism' for cultural studies and visual sociology, although I do think Latour's recent writing provides a useful series of triggers.

Of course, attempts to account for culture in a very macro as well as objective way tends to cause discomfort. Rosalyn Deutsche (1996) has accused David Harvey's macro-lens of phallocentrism. Jameson has also drawn fire; 'More ink has been spilled denouncing both Adorno and Jameson's use of "totalisation" than any other concept in their respective critical arsenals' (Buchanan, 2006: 35). Michael Keith has written in similar terms about the survival chances of angry discourses within academia (1992). I don't rate the chances of some of my own work in this regard. Also, accounts of culture which do not try to obscure the biographical under some kind of academic sheen are, it seems, disqualifiable. James Hamilton has described Raymond Williams's 'popular characterization as a mushy "culturalist", ostensibly interested only in an impressionistic recovery of "experience"' (2005: 812). Clearly, asking cultural studies or sociology to widen its account of cultural objects risks similar criticisms, but I believe this needs to be reflexively attempted.

Slavoj Zizek (2008) has suggested that, after Adorno's assertion that poetry is impossible after Auschwitz, it is actually prose which may be the casualty, that only poesis, making or re-making reality in representation, may adequately re-present traumatic postmodernity. Instead of attempting to provide flawless representations - the near-erasure of difference between any object and its representation must carry its own risks - I'm interested in investigating the potential for a return to expanded, openly politicised, critical accounts, which nonetheless attempt to provide a much fuller picture of cultural objects and their 'enframing'. The disconnections of postmodernity need to be re-connected, here to there, sign to referent, in a very different way, as a matter of survival, in a pre- rather than post-disaster culture.



This textiles factory in West Yorkshire was subject to major embezzlement by a member of senior management. Although apparently still making large profits, despite the siphoning of millions into, among other things, a castle in Scotland, it finally closed when the group which owned it shifted finances into a company distributing large television screens and projectors for pubs. The factory produced printed fabrics, mainly for the Top Shop clothing chain. Top Shop then moved their print operation to the Czech Republic. I exhibited a series of image and text panels which brought together slogans from the surface spectacle (Top Shop's website) with the factory in a state of semi-dereliction. Just before the workers finally left, graffiti was written, including a giant England flag scrawled with messages including 'Dole.com'. In an already de-industrialised region, many workers were unable to find employment after the closure. One middle manager, unable to find another job in management, earning a living working as a security guard, threw himself under a train. Managing only to amputate his own legs at this point, he died later. After I completed this project, TV screens arrived in local pubs, becoming part of the work. To locate the site of ongoing production in the Czech Republic would be to thicken the description further.



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Notes

* I could add to this the recently expanded field of sound, another concern of mine, although here I will focus on the visual only.