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ethnographic studies of material culture are at the forefront of addressing this lacuna, of what might be termed the unconscious in culture, and in the process are providing new ways to reflect on the problems and issues that have dominated past research.

Of course, the great paradox, or aporia, of all material culture studies is that to write about things is to transform, domesticate and strip away the fundamental non-verbal qualities of the things we are investigating through this very process (Tilley 1991). Although a small sub-discipline of visual anthropology exists, going beyond a traditional concern with the anthropology of art (Collier and Collier 1986; Devereaux and Hillman 1995; Edwards 1992; Banks and Morphy 1997; Pinney 1998), and two journals are currently devoted to this field, the primary purpose of the visual illustrations still remain a foil for, and means to, authenticate the words (Wright 1998: 20). We cannot adequately capture or express the powers of things in texts. All we may conceivably hope to do is to evoke. This is why experimentation with other ways of telling, in particular with exploiting media which can more adequately convey the synaesthetic qualities of things, in particular the use of imagery and film, must become of increasing importance to the study of material forms in the future.

**JIS INVITED COMMENTS**

**Tilley Article**

**COMMENT 1**

In his thorough survey, Tilley correctly traces the discipline’s movement in and after the 1960s from functionalist approaches towards material culture through its interest in Saussurian linguistic theory. Lévi-Strauss’ formulation of structuralism helped explicate ‘native’ cognition, but was limited by explaining real-world symbolic forms, masks or otherwise, in terms of underlying, fixed or even ‘hard-wired’ binary structures. Saussurian linguistics was no help when it came to the material particulars, since its emphasis on the arbitrariness of the relation between the sign and the thing it signified provided no opportunity for the thing to answer back, to shape the human world, to be an equal partner in a dialectic between societies and objects. Any general theory of material culture should recognize this fundamental dialectic. While the influential general theories, structuralist or linguistic, have taken an unhelpful form, the empirical studies – more sensitive to how material culture works – have largely stayed at the level of the particular. Whereas spoken words are usually transient, material objects sometimes endure; certain kinds of material objects – rock-art, buildings, images in religious contexts – endure commonly for generations. With each reiterated use, the form repeats the meaning it has accumulated. Is there a generalized approach to material culture and this dialectical process that provides for the endurance of material objects and their meanings? Certainly, we need one in archaeology, where we can see clear signs that the meaning of some things and motifs was remarkably stable and long-lasting: the distinctive form of the Rainbow Serpent – best-known of the “Dreamtime beings” in the Aboriginal knowledge of northern Australia – demonstrably endures in the region’s rock-art for upwards of 4000 years (Taçon, Wilson & Chippindale 1996). A first start might be a recognition of the dialectic between object and meaning: the object – especially an enduring image in rock-art or architectural features – is created to match a meaning; but then the meaning is created by the form of the object, to some and perhaps to an overwhelming extent.

Perhaps, in C.S. Peirce’s semiotic notions of ‘indexicality’ and ‘iconicity’ we may find a useful vocabulary to frame the discussion (Peirce 1955).

In their recent article, Preucel and Bauer (2001) concisely outline the useful concepts of “index” and “icon” as formulated by the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce, for the study of material culture. Therein, they challenge Saussure’s basic structural principle of “signifier-signified” as an adequate model for deciphering meaning in material culture. Specifically, they discuss the non-arbitrary associations that pervade a wide sampling of material culture. This is achieved through “indexicality” and “iconicity” – concepts codified by Peirce to enhance and complicate Saussurian “symbology”. Anthropologically elaborated by Singer (1978) and Silverstein, “indexes are those signs where the occurrence of a sign vehicle token [here a material form] bears a connection of understood spatio-temporal contiguity to the occurrence of the entity signaled” (Silverstein 1976: 27). In language this is often a spontaneous association, such as with personal pronouns – where the meaning of “I” is concurrent with, and indexes, the speaker. With material indexes however, the span of temporal and spatial contiguity can be extended such that a ritual mace, for example, is meaningful because it references in a direct way the times and places within which it held meaning. As a Sausurrian symbol, a mace is arbitrary and possibly polysemic, but as an index, it carries and transmits contextually unambiguous “mace using” events through time.

For material culture, however, indexical meaning is still insufficient, because it may be difficult to trace meaning to an original source (the problem which tormented the structuralists into universal binary explanations). Yet when coupled with Peirce’s idea of “iconicity”, we approach something codify-able. Again according to Silverstein, “icons” are those signs whose properties or form hold a morphological similarity with the entity signaled (Silverstein 1976: 27). For example, a totem (for say the “bear clan”) not only carries the transferred indexical meaning of

1 Also often spelt as “Pierce” in anthropological literature - Editor.
the history of the bear clan – but also implies an implicit understanding of the thing in real life. Recent archaeological studies have demonstrated how understanding the “iconic indexical” properties of material forms can offer insights into the ways material forms are imbued with meaning over time, and how material forms are selected from restricted as opposed to arbitrary arrays of meaningful possibilities (e.g. Frachetti and Chippindale 2001; Liebmann 2002). That is, symbolic meanings reflect the kind of distinctions human beings see in the physical and real world of, for instance, animals: it is not coincidental that bears and wolves are full of meaning in the lands where human beings encounter these beasts, and it is not coincidental that there is some recurrence and consistency in the forms those meanings there take.

In fact, Tilley’s own emphasis on metaphor (Tilley 1999) as a sign system that “maps one domain in terms of another”, approaches the ideas of “indexicality” and “iconicity”, which Peirce sees as fundamental concepts related to how knowledge of the world is produced. Yet Tilley’s explanation of metaphorical relationships (e.g. the body mapping onto the house) does not address the requisite “sign chain” which allows these relationships to hold meaning. If a door metaphorically represents a mouth, it is more than likely due to the “iconic indexical” properties shared between the two things – both in a formal/functional sense, as well as in a contextual/cultural sense. Thus, the lower taxonomic process that allows the metaphor to be meaningful whatsoever, is the hybridism of the iconic and indexical properties of the metaphor itself (Silverstein 1976: 27).

But do linguistic approaches really solve our interpretative problems? Tilley notes, “things communicate in a different way [than words] such that if I could say it, why would I dance it, or paint it, or sculpt it?” (p. 18). He answers by suggesting that material is a subverted form of communication, where social elements may be communicated in a trusted form. He does not, however, elaborate upon perhaps the most insightful component of this statement – that the non-discursive nature of material also enables longer temporal and spatial trajectories of social practice to be enfolded within them. Material culture is indexical to the extent that it remains in circulation far longer than the spoken word, and with each reiterated use the form references the accumulation of meanings that are carried and passed along with it. Thus, we might disagree with Tilley when he suggests that “there is no starting point to ‘reading’ a pot or axe: the artefact is presented to us simultaneously” (p. 19). In human reality, the artefact is presented to us as an instantiation of meaning in a long discourse of variable, yet related pots and axes – and it is from this temporal perspective that we might better understand its semiotic importance.

Most of the examples cited by Tilley in fact skirt around the issue of how imbedded meaning remains in place, often relying on regional cultural context for the attribution of meaning (pp. 16-17). Context is indeed important, but context has a diachronic nature: place and time are constantly changing, especially in a material sense. So a richer explanation of the transferability and social resonance of material forms and their meaning is necessary – especially if we are to understand the dialectic between material and society. In fact, in his section on the “materiality of things” Tilley gently rebukes structural approaches for not considering the tangible correlates of social practice that engender particular material forms over time. In his words (p. 18) “the material medium creates and defines what it means to be a member of society in just the same way as speaking a language, but through a material medium. It is a distinct system of knowledge in its own right.” Tilley cites a number of studies, each demonstrating that material forms both are referential within a social chain of significance (e.g. Gell 1998; Kaeppeler 1978; Adams 1973) yet generative in their physical materiality and in their semiotic meanings. Tilley’s point is well made, yet what he seems to be searching for in terms of a generalized vocabulary is never made apparent.

Tilley does take note of a related processual characteristic of material culture. In his discussion of “objectification processes” he emphasizes “that material forms play a fundamental part in the creation and establishment of forms of sociality” (p. 20). To apply the vocabulary offered here, understanding the iconic and indexical properties of material forms is to understand how they become active in transmitting social information between individuals, and how material itself can act as an agent of social action and change. Thus Peirce’s vocabulary also enables a finer reading of the social biography of material culture. Through their temporal and spatial indexicality, material forms can be associated with concomitant experiential events in the social lives of agents themselves.

Tilley, in rightly noticing that material is a subverted form of communication, points to another key difference which linguistic-based theory does not address – the trajectories across space and through time which material objects take, communicating with their human neighbours as they do. A concern of all anthropology, these trajectories have special importance for archaeologists: archaeologists describe and understand their material largely in terms of its variability in form across space and through time. All the same, archaeologists often are lacking the language component by which the Saussurian and structuralist approaches are made lively. What is attractive about Peircean semiotic tools, if even as a mere component to wider interpretative approaches to material culture, is that locating “indexical” and “iconic” relationships in material forms reduces the ambiguity and arbitrariness that has frequently been posited as the blockade against meaningful interpretation in ethnographic research. Anthropologists, and especially
archaeologists, in their ambition to develop generalizing frameworks beyond individual and compelling particular stories, may do well to take a closer look at these Peircean components of sign systems.

Michael Frachetti and Chris Chippindale
Ethnography and Material Culture: A Review

Christopher Tilley

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to provide a broad overview of ethnographic studies of material culture. It discusses both different theoretical positions and subject areas of research and the manner in which these have led to a changing appreciation of the meanings of things and their relationship to the construction of social identities.

Introduction

The definition of material culture adopted here is catholic: any humanly produced artefact from a crisp packet to a landscape in the past or in the present. The category is ambiguous insofar as a boundary demarcation between culture and nature cannot be clearly defined. Such things as domestic animals and cultivated plants and landscapes are simultaneously artefacts of humanity and yet the form of their production clearly differs from that involved in making an axe. The human body is as much public artefact on which an identity is marked as a personal thing. Material culture is a reflexive category insofar as its analysis includes itself. Thus museum collections are designed to display and educate us about material forms but are simultaneously pieces of contemporary material culture themselves. Material culture is a relational and critical category leading us to reflect on object-subject relations in a manner which has a direct bearing on our understanding of the nature of the human condition and social being in the world.

Ethnographic studies of material culture tend to be of two kinds. The first, which dominates the literature, is books and collections of papers exemplifying the study of particular material forms such as housing and architecture, clothing, the body, food, landscapes, pottery, basketry, textiles, art and decoration in particular ethnographic contexts. Many of these studies have a tendency to be highly descriptive and particularistic. In any attempt to review this literature there is the constant danger of simply becoming bogged down and overwhelmed by the never ending kaleidoscope of ethnographic detail. The second is a growing body of work attempting to contribute to the study of material culture and materiality per se through the development of a general comparative
approach to the study of material forms with broad theoretical insights and implications transcending particular cases. In a short review it is simply impossible to adequately convey the intricacies of the ethnographic detail of particular cases so what follows has more the character of an outline of recent trends in the theorisation and understanding of material forms: how, and why, the study of things matters.

A brief history

Ethnographic studies of material culture have undergone a profound transformation during the past twenty years and may now be claimed to be one of the most dynamic and innovatory areas of anthropological research. This is reflected in an impressive volume of research activity, the publication of a new international journal, the Journal of Material Culture and a flood of books, edited collections and papers devoted to this theme. The study of things may now be claimed to be at the forefront of the discipline. This has not always been the case.

A concern with collecting, classifying and studying artefacts formed the core of much anthropological research from the nineteenth century birth of the discipline up until the 1920s. In the wake of Western colonial expansion there was a concern to rescue, or salvage, what was perceived to be left of ‘primitive’ culture throughout the world. This was a time in which the great museum collections were established through systematic collecting. The first scientific anthropological expedition to the Torres Strait led by Haddon in 1898 had the collection of artefacts as one of its major goals. Many more were to follow throughout the world. If the natives and their ceremonies and belief systems could not be saved, at least the material residues might be preserved for posterity. The study of material culture formed a fundamental part of the major theoretical preoccupations and debates of the day. Artefact studies provided the empirical basis for grand schemes of social evolution, diffusion, acculturation and change. The West came to know itself and its place in the world primarily through a study of the artefactual Other. Museums became the great showcases for the display of a vanishing world.

This focus on the artefact changed with the advent of the fieldwork revolution in anthropology from the 1920s and the replacement of evolutionism with functionalist and structural-functionalist theories. For example, Radcliffe-Brown’s major study of the Andaman Islanders (Radcliffe-Brown 1922) relegated the study of material culture to an appendix. The primary concern was now with social relations rather than things. A study of artefacts could no longer theoretically inform a study of culture. Conceived as dead inert matter, things were primarily conceived as having a utilitarian significance fulfilling the basic needs of human adaptation to different environments as tools, a technological substrate of life, or alternatively, as passive markers of social status and ethnic difference. A study of artefacts became reduced to a dry discussion of technologies or a description of material form illustrating social context. Artefacts became reflections of that which was deemed fundamental: social relations, political and economic systems. Thus the academic study of things largely retreated out of university departments of social anthropology and became entrenched in museums whose primary goals remained collecting and cataloguing and setting up displays in which artefacts were made to signify different peoples on a comparative basis. Melanesian and Polynesian and West African cultures etc. in the process, became reified as things.

A tacit and untheorised presupposition that social relations are somehow primary in the comparative study of human cultures still lingers on in some contemporary social anthropology. This has given the standard ethnographic monograph, from the 1920s onwards, a somewhat surreal character: a world of social interaction where things are either absent, or simply provide a kind of nebulous backdrop to relations between persons. Of course, virtually all ethnographies have had to describe and discuss material culture and consider social relations in a material setting, but this has all too often been by default rather than design. Despite a stress on social relations what is, in fact, implied by all the results of anthropological research, whether this has been a principal concern of the anthropologist or not, is that persons cannot be understood apart from things. Persons make things and things make persons.

A post 1960s shift from the theoretical dominance of functionalist to that of structuralist and symbolic anthropology paved the way for a reintroduction of the study of material culture into the mainstream of anthropological research. From a functionalist perspective things were only good to use, props for the social. Now they could become reconceptualized as ‘good to think’ in Lévi-Strauss’ felicitous phrase.

Objects and language

Lévi-Strauss’ appropriation of Sassurian linguistic theory to study non-verbal aspects of human culture was primarily directed towards the study of kinship systems, classificatory relations (totemism) and myth. While the overwhelming focus of his work remained the explication of social relations the grand master of structuralism was aware, from the very beginning, of the potentialities of a language of things (Lévi-Strauss 1968, 1973; see Tilley 1990a). His book The Way of the Masks (Lévi-Strauss 1988) provides an in-depth structural analysis of the forms of masks in native American North-West Coast cultures. The argument is that this masking tradition cannot be understood by analyzing the masks of a single culture but must be comprehended as a series of mythic and material transformations across cultures. A cross-cultural language, or grammar, of masks is claimed to generate the production of any individual mask in a relation of structured difference. So the forms of Salish Swahwe masks are argued to be in binary opposition to those of
Kwakiutl *Dzoonokwa* masks. Each of the mask forms is, in turn, associated with different types of kinship systems (*Swaliwhé* with limited exogamy and *Dzoonokwa* with proper exogamy). Myths related to Salish masks reveal an association between masks and copper, on the one hand, and masks and red snapper on the other. In many myths copper represents a chthonian sun shining either under the earth or under the sea, and the wealth of copper is also associated with negatively valued extremes of incest and exogamy. Lévi-Strauss argues that the material form of the masks parallels, or provides a homology, with both kin relations and fundamental sets of social values serving to structure, or order, those relations.

The weaknesses of Lévi-Strauss’ universalist approach to the study of human cultures have been pointed out over and over again in the literature and will not be repeated here. The abiding legacy of his version of structuralism for material culture studies is the general idea that things communicate meaning like a language. Artefacts can be considered as signs bearing meaning, signifying beyond themselves. From this perspective material culture becomes a text to be ‘read’ and a semiotic discourse to be ‘decoded.’ Advocacy of this position has generated a large number of innovative material culture studies over the last twenty years with various attempts being made to locate a silent grammar of the artefact and investigate its social significance (see e.g. Faris 1972; Gottdiner 1995; Hanson 1983; Hodder 1982; Humphrey 1971; Korn 1978; Layton 1991; Munn 1973; Riggins 1994; Vastokas 1978; Washburn 1983). In contrast to Lévi-Strauss’ own work these studies have all tended to be contextually and historically specific: local and temporally specific, rather than universal grammars of things.

Formal analyses of artefacts have been undertaken in order to isolate underlying an underlying grammar, or set of rules, capable of accounting for their forms. Attention has focussed on obviously stylistic attributes such as surface designs. The concern has been with understanding formal properties of designs, such as forms of symmetry, and the generative constituents of patterns. So a particular combination of zigzags, ovals, lines and circles may be held to generate a ‘poisonous snake’ in Nuba (Sudan) body art (Faris 1972: 103). Faris shows how by combining a small repertoire of shapes a wide variety of different designs can be generated. Similarly, Korn isolates a series of rules which ovals obey in Abelam (Papua New Guinea) art such as: “ovals can be attached upwards to smaller ovals and circles, but not if they have a rim of white dots” (Korn 1978: 172). Some structural analyses have been conducted without reference to a wider social meaning. Being able to identify a grammar of things, equivalent to a grammar of language, has been deemed a sufficient end in itself. In most cases, however, the aim has been to socially contextualize the results of design grammars in order to graft meaning onto them. Munn, for example, (1973) demonstrates the wide meaning ranges of even the simplest Walbiri (Australian Aborigine) designs and relates her analysis of design structure in a general way to a consideration of gender relations, mythological beliefs and ideas about landscape. Hanson (1983) attempts to demonstrate homologous relations (one-to-one correspondences) between Maori (New Zealand) art styles and properties of social systems associating a preoccupation with disrupted symmetry in art forms with social forms of competitive reciprocity. Gell (1998) comments that Hanson’s approach fails to be convincing because of its lack of cultural specificity. Disruptive symmetry is encountered cross-culturally and cannot be claimed to be a distinctive feature of Maori design structure. It therefore seems unlikely to be a manifestation of specific cultural features of Maori social organization.

Many studies of material culture have gone beyond a rather narrow consideration of artefact design structures and expanded out to consider a much wider range of relationships and their associations with power and hierarchies. Kaeppler (1978) attempts to demonstrate a series of similar conceptual structures in Tongan music, dance and forms of bark cloth production and design regarding these as material transformations of each other, products of the same conceptual structure. She comments that “these underlying features may be some of the unconscious, or at least unstated, principles by which individuals help to order their lives” (Kaeppler 1978: 273). Adams (1973) similarly attempts to adduce sets of structural principles linking different aspects of Sumbanese (Indonesia) society. For example, designs on textiles are organized in terms of a dyadic-triadic set and the same principle is manifest in village organization, marriage systems, patterns of gift exchange and seating patterns taken in formal negotiations. In another paper Adams (1975) demonstrates links between Sumbanese methods of the processing of raw materials, art and ritual.

The overwhelming emphasis in structuralist approaches to material culture has been the identification of systematic and recurrent rules of transformation linking different material and social practices, structural principles which systematically link different domains which are claimed to be the basic building blocks or essential constituents of the material and social worlds that people inhabit. The idea that there is a language of things has proved to be a fruitful one. The main drawback with the approach is an often excessive formalism in which all emphasis is on system and code – a position in which the actual practices of social agents tend to be ignored. The material grammars found are invariably claimed to passively reflect wider social grammars rather than acting to create them.

Gell (1998) advocates instead a rather different ‘synecdochial’ approach to the formal analysis of artworks: art is a part of culture that serves to recapitulate the whole and acts as a kind of map for it. He is
interested in looking at relations between relations containing that "any
given artwork 'exemplifies' the stylistic canons of the tradition of
material culture from which it originates, it 'stands for' this style" (ibid.: 162). He analyses in detail a corpus of Marquesan artefacts from the
South Pacific attempting to demonstrate how each is connected to the
whole through a series of complex transformational rules, the sum total
of which is unique to Marquesan design. He then argues that these are all
derived from one structuring principle – the principle of least difference:
"the forms taken by motifs and figures are the ones involving the least
modification of neighbouring motifs consistent with the establishment of a
distinction between them" (Gell 1998: 218, emphasis in original). This
principle is not detectable in any single Marquesan artefact, but only in
the ensemble of relations constituted by all of them[,] i.e. it is of a highly
abstract and generative nature. Precisely because of this, Gell argues, it
may well be a cultural principle in a wider cultural sense rather than just
applying to relations between artefacts: “a connection between the
‘principle of least difference’ in Marquesan stylistic, and the prevailing
preoccupation with differentiation in the context of dissolution which is
the hallmark of Marquesan socio-cultural attitudes generally” (ibid.: 219).

Beyond language: the materiality of things

Melanesian anthropologists have noted over and over again an
extreme reluctance on the part of their informants to talk about the
artefacts they invest so much time and energy in making and decorating.
Forge (1970,1979) has made a highly influential argument on the basis of
this observation. He suggests that the significance of Abelam art is
simply not amenable to linguistic translation in terms of individual
design elements themselves signifying particular things or concepts
beyond the artistic system itself. The meanings of the designs reside
within the designs themselves rather than referring to anything external
such as the art being a visual representation of myth. Art forms a
powerful medium for socialization precisely because of its autonomy
from spoken discourse. The material medium creates and defines what it
means to be a member of society in just the same way as speaking a
language, but through a material medium. It is a distinct system of
knowledge in its own right.

While some of the most exciting and innovative studies of material
culture during the past thirty years have exploited analogies between
language and things in terms of both being communication systems we
know that things are not texts or words and that to attempt to
communicate even the simplest sentence such as 'it is raining' with
things would be a completely redundant exercise. Things communicate
in a different way such that if I could say it, why would I dance it, or
paint it, or sculpt it? etc. Things often 'say' and communicate precisely
that which cannot be communicated in words. A silent discourse of the
object may permit the cultural unsaid to be said, or marked out. So, for
example in societies characterised by extreme sexual antagonism, as in
Melanesia, a discourse of material forms exemplified by artefacts such as
the net bag (MacKenzie 1991) or canoes (Tilley 1999) may speak about
the complementarity of male and female roles in the reproduction of
social life in a way that is otherwise denied, negated or obfuscated in
contexts of social action and speaking. Language works through
sequences of sounds that unfold their meaning in a linear way. Objects,
by contrast, are what Langer (1953) refers to as 'presentational' forms.
There is no starting point to 'reading' a pot or an axe: the whole artefact
is present to us simultaneously. We might look at it from top to bottom,
side to side, start glancing at in the middle etc. Objects relate to far wider
perceptual functions than words, they have multidimensional qualities
relating to sight, sound, smell, taste and touch enabling remarkably
subtle distinctions to be made: "try to describe in words the difference in
smell between two kinds of fish, or the shape of two different kinds of
shirts" (Miller 1994a: 407). The distinctions between things, contributing
to their meaning, can be created in an enormous variety of ways. Sheer
size and lack of portability may be important e.g. monuments and
shrines one must visit, located in a particular place. Or the significant
feature might be of smallness and portability: the ability to carry things
around and display them. Things may acquire value by having a high
degree of public visibility or by being kept secret. An absence of
something may be as crucial as its presence. It may be 'invisibly
foregrounded' (Battaglia 1994). Things may be valued because they are
local and available to all, or foreign and 'exotic' goods. Weight or
lightness may be desirable qualities in colours, dullness or brilliance,
textures, roughness or smoothness. These are all ways of employing and
creating distinctions and difference in the world of objects and are
virtually inexhaustible. Such distinctions are rarely unidimensional but
relate to a thickly textured phenomenological experience of the thing
with which we may engage with the full range of our senses: a
synaesthetic interaction and knowledge. Things perform work in the
world in a way that words can not. Their relative permanence compared
with the fleeting spoken word is important in this respect. They usually
have a practical use-value as well as a sign value. The two are
intertwined and cannot be meaningfully separated out in terms of
'functional' and 'stylistic' parameters. Material forms such as pots can
equally perform the function of containing things while taking a wide
variety of different forms (Miller 1985). Styles may have functions and
functions have styles (Boast 1997). Material forms are practically, or
performatively, as well as discursively produced, maintained and given
significance.

Objectification processes

The usual way we tend to think about things in contemporary Western
society is to set up a categorical opposition between things as objects and
persons as subjects. Things are dead inert matter that only acquire their
significance, or become personalised, through the actions of social agents.
This perspective actively blocks an understanding of the significance of
things. One of the most influential theoretical perspectives informing
contemporary material culture studies has been an emphasis on
objectification: that through making things people make themselves in
the process (Bourdieu 1977,1984; Miller 1987; Munn 1977,1986; Strathern
1988). There is a dialectic at work. This perspective overcomes an
object/subject dualism in which the former becomes regarded as passive
and the latter as active. In functionalist and structuralist approaches it
has been assumed that material forms simply reflect or symbolize
various kinds of social relations and practices. These core first and the
artefacts merely serve to signify already established social distinctions of
whatever kind. A perspective emphasizing objectification processes
emphasizes instead that material forms play a fundamental part in the
creation and establishment of forms of sociality. In other words, they are
generative of thought and action. Thus the meanings that people give to
things through their production, exchange and consumption are part and
parcel of the same process by means of which they give meaning to their
lives. Our cultural identity is simultaneously embodied in our persons
and objectified in our things. Things may be attributed agency, not in the
sense that they have minds and intentions, but because they produce
effects on persons. As Gell (1992a,1998) points out an elaborately
decorated Trobriand canoe prowboard, in the context of the exchange of
kula valuables, is not just a form of code, a non-verbal mode of
signification communicating meaning, but part of its purpose is to trap,
beguile, enchant or to impress others to yield up their valuables. For
Gell art is not so much a matter of symbolizing and communicating as
doing things in the world, creating social effects and realizing outcomes.

Structuration: knowledge and agency

Adopting a broadly structuration perspective (Giddens 1984),
Morphy's (1991) study of Yolngu (Australian Aboriginal) art
emphasizes the multiplicity of meanings of the graphic designs as both a
system of communication and a system of knowledge from an action
frame of reference. Meaning is created out of situated, contextualized
social action, which is in continuous dialectical relationship with
generative rule-based structures forming both a medium for and an
outcome of action. What Yolngu art means is produced through its use
in relation to individual and group practices and institutional structures.
Its very production may involve the changing of its structure. The art is
structured internally through the manner in which it encodes meaning.
The artistic system is in a continuous process of structuration through its
articulation with the sociocultural system. Key factors here are the system
of restricted knowledge dividing seniors from juniors and men from
women in Yolngu society and the system of clan organization. Yolngu
art both orders knowledge by the way it is encoded and, as an
institutional practice, orders the way that knowledge is acquired. The
meanings in the art and the manner in which it articulates with the
sociocultural system are reproduced or changed through individual
actions. Paintings give power to persons and make them strong. They
encode spiritually powerful ancestral designs owned by clans and storing
information about ancestral events in the mythological Dreamtime.

The meanings of paintings in ceremonies is highly complex. Here
Morphy (ibid.: Chapter 7) identifies (i) iconographic meanings denoted
by elements in the paintings (e.g. a line may represent a sand ridge), (ii)
reflectional meanings (e.g. what the use of white paint means as a
component of ancestral law), (iii) thematic meanings (e.g. selection of a
painting for a specific purpose in the context of a particular ceremony),
(iv) particularistic meaning (e.g. the association of a painting with a
specific event with its own individual significance such as the burial of a
relative), (v) sociological meaning (e.g. the association of the form of a
painting with a clan and its land). Denotative and connotative meanings
are both created and released in the context of ceremonies. On the one
hand paintings have meanings independent of the specific ceremony
because of the iconographic and sociological meanings encoded in them.
On the other hand connotative meanings are related to the use of
paintings in previous ceremonies and the associations that build up
around them. Meanings are also created through the association of the
paintings with individuals, and the ceremonial and societal events and
themes with which they are integrated. This creates multiple layers of
meaning and the knowledge of these meanings can be restricted and
controlled in order to legitimate power and authority. As a person moves
through life their initial status as an outsider who does not possess this
knowledge and cannot produce or reproduce it, moves to various
degrees to that of an insider who knows, and can be creative.

Post-structuralism: polysemy and reception theory

Post-structuralist positions in the analysis of material culture have
stressed in a similar manner to structuration and objectification
perspectives, the polysemic and often contradictory meanings of things.
They have also emphasized the multiple ways in which they may be
'read', interpreted and understood. Preston-Blier (1995) has discussed
West African Vodun (sculptural) art from the multiple perspectives of
the artist who makes the underlying figure, the producer who empowers
it with various surface additions before or during its use, the users and
audiences who interact with it and 'cultural spokespersons' (diviners,
priests, family heads etc.) who guard information on these objects. Each
sculpture is, as a result, thick with signification. No single interpretation
can suffice. The artist is but one individual in a ramifying network of
meanings, inexhaustibly altering according to social and material context.
Each individual, in effect, creates and construits his or her own artwork,
including the analyst but within distinctive 'communities' of viewers the sculptures may also be said to have certain shared meanings (ibid.: 57). Artists, producers, users and audiences all act on the sculptures, which in turn act on them so as to transpose their features and transfer their properties. Depicting human bodies wrapped and clothed in a kaleidoscopic variety of materials, the sculptures perform protective and therapeutic functions in relation to human agency and play a critical role in forming and forging personal identities and destinies. The most salient features of these sculptures, according to Preston-Blier, are the powerful human emotions they evoke, their potency is a manifestation of their psychological power to disorientate, disturb and grip the human imagination: force, fear, fury, shock, disorder and deception play critical roles in their reception and use.

Metaphor and material culture

What are the cognitive processes at work in the connection between persons and things? The structuralist answer is a digital logic of binary oppositions taking the raw materials of experience and processing them in exactly the same way. The functionalist approach leads us to believe that things mirror, represent and act so as to maintain pre-established ideas manifested in particular sets of social relations. Structuration and objectification approaches usefully stress a generative dialectic between things and persons in which neither is granted primacy. Avoiding a mind/body dualism, a recursive relationship between thought (in various ways regarded as providing principles, 'rules' and particular sets of dispositions for action) and agency is argued to be mediated through practical (embodied) activity in the world. Bourdieu (1977, 1984), in particular, stresses the contingent, improvised and provisional character of these processes and their manifestation in routinized social action: knowing how to go on in the world without this entering into public discourse which is what Giddens (1984) refers to as 'practical consciousness'. Where this literature is weak is in its generality: the relative lack of attention to specifying exactly what goes on in an embodied mind in relation to activity in the world. This is the missing link. I have recently argued that a concept of metaphor, if suitably conceptualized, provides a new way to link together thought, action and material forms (Tilley 1999). Only aspects of some of the arguments can be briefly summarized here. Some cognitive psychologists have forcefully argued that metaphors are not an embellishment or elaboration of an originary and primary literal language (the traditional theory of metaphor going back to Aristotle) but constitute its very essence as a mode of communication. 'Dead' metaphors are so ubiquitous and embedded in our thought that we rarely realise that we are even using them when we speak (e.g. expressions such as the leg of a table, the face of a clock, I see [i.e. understand] what you mean). To be human is to think through metaphors and express these thoughts through linguistic-utterances (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987; Gibbs 1994). The essence of metaphor is to work from the known to the unknown, to make connections between things so as to understand them. A metaphorical logic is thus an analogic logic in which, for example, I may express my understanding of a person in terms of what, according to commonly held cultural conventions, I know to be true of the behaviour of a particular class of animals, hence common expressions such as 'John is a fox'. Metaphors serve to map one domain in terms of another. This is precisely what we do in all interpretative work in the social sciences. Core theories of the social are all heavily metaphorical. So in functionalism society is likened to being a machine, or an organism, in structuralism society is like a language, in ethnomethodological approaches we write of persons as performing roles, settings and stages for social actions etc. The metaphors used in language are all culturally relative and historically determined. Japanese metaphors won't necessarily have any meaning in English and vice versa. The counterpoint to linguistic metaphor is 'solid metaphor': the metaphorical qualities of things which are equally ubiquitous hence the widespread occurrence of animism (a belief that stones, trees, artefacts etc. have souls, embody ancestral or spirit powers etc.) and personification (a belief that objects can variously take the form of subjects) as ascribed qualities of things present in all known societies. Material metaphors differ from linguistic metaphors in their relative density of metaphorical compression (because material forms are synaesthetic making them inherently ambiguous and polysemic in nature. Nevertheless within a particular cultural context many of the metaphorical links will be motivated, or relatively non-arbitrary e.g. linking redness with blood, white with milk or semen or employing types of metonymic (part-whole) connections e.g. referring to a body by depicting a body-part. Metaphoric extensions of the notion of containers and containment can serve to link such diverse forms as pots, houses, bodies, skulls. Notions of wrapping can link gift giving, clothing, food, houses (Hendry 1993). A path metaphor may be a way of linking things and persons in terms of sequence, method, technique or strategy thus technological processes follow their paths as do people. There may be varying degrees of coherence, or contradiction, between metaphors operating in different material domains (body metaphors, house metaphors, animal metaphors, artefact metaphors etc.). Probably the only cultural universal of any significance is the propensity of the human mind to metaphorical thought, the expression of this thought in language, and its objectification in material forms. It follows from this that all anthropology is doubly metaphorical in that metaphors provide both the medium for, and outcome of, analysis.

Objects and space

Consider the arrangement of chairs in a room. Their spatial arrangement in a circle, or in rows, has a direct bearing on the types of
social interactions that will take place in terms of relative degrees of formality/formality and the types of social interactions deemed desirable and possible. This is why, of course, that the interior and exterior design, and the images, of places like shops and shopping malls, restaurants and companies, parliament buildings and hospitals is so important. Once a building is erected it physically channels movement creating a frame for experience that may both enable or constrain forms of social interaction. The arrangement of furniture and artefacts in a room, houses in a village, settlements in a landscape all have profound effects on people and their social relationships. Acknowledgement of this serves to underline again that material culture is not passive and inert but active in the formation of agency. Social practices and activities carried out in symbolic spaces resonant with meaning usually reproduce systems of power and dominant social values. A striking example: “if a Carmelite nun spends sixty years in a Carmelite convent ... she will kneel in the same place, at the same time, 42,800 times” (Moore 1994: 84 citing Williams 1975). Material forms are structured by the actions of agents and in turn serve to structure those actions.

Both generated and generative, material forms distributed in social space-times are both the medium and outcome of human actions in the world. An excellent exposition of this general thesis is Munn’s ethnography of canoe building and exchange on Gawa island (Papua New Guinea) (Munn 1977,1983,1986). These are shown to be successive spatio-temporal transformations of social identities. The manufacture and exchange of the canoes involves converting a heavy, rooted, immobile object (the tree) into a material form that is light and mobile and moves from the island context to the outside world. On Gawa the canoe enters exchange pathways in which it moves from wife giving to wife receiving matriline mediated by yam transactions. It is then converted into a wider sphere of influence by means of its exchange for kula shell valuables. Armbands and necklaces are circulated in opposite directions around a ring of islands exchanged principally between men. The various named parts of the shells are heavily anthropomorphised, labelled after body parts, they are said to have a voice and a gender, follow prescribed exchange pathways, and have a rank order of importance. The most famous have individual names and individual histories according to who has possessed them. Kula exchange partners can only acquire their fame and identity through holding and subsequently passing on the shells. Men further transact these shells and in so doing convert them into personal fame and the ability to move distant minds i.e. receive shells from others. Men’s names are remembered even by persons they have never met in the exchange ring through their connections with the shells that they have held. In this manner the circulating shells become detached mobile elements of personal identities.

A great deal of recent attention has been devoted in ethnographic studies of material culture to issues of space and place and landscape and the manner in which they encode, produce and reproduce, alter and transform patterns of sociability (e.g. Bender 1993; Tilley 1994; Basso and Feld 1996; Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995; Lovell 1998). In contrast to much work in human geography and sociology stressing landscapes as simply cognized, a position in which culture encloses humanity into a separate world divorced from the natural environment, this work has instead emphasized a depth phenomenology of personal and social experience. Landscapes become inscribed into social relations through a mutual dialogue in which ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are regarded as part of the same social world rather than in opposition to each other. This work has stressed the biographical and metaphorical significance of paths and movement, specific named places in the landscape and above all their relational qualities in which the effective, emotional and historical qualities and symbolic densities of places produce spaces, rather than the other way round, and relate to the localised production of local identities.

The house, of course, is a primary locus for the production and reproduction of social relations. What makes a house a home is that it is far more than a physical structure providing shelter. To enter a house is to enter a body, a mind, a sensibility, a specific mode of dwelling and being in the world (Halle 1996; Csikszentmihalyi and Halton 1981; Chevalier 1998). Houses are material forms with very special characteristics: complex artefacts consisting of standardized parts that are arranged and organized into a totality. They are collective in that people collect together and organize themselves through them. Hence many social groups are referred to as ‘houses’ (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Houses actively produce, and serve to reproduce, distinctive forms of action and agency. Bourdieu’s influential study of the Kabyle house (1977) shows how it is organized according to a set of oppositions such as cooked:raw, fire:water, high:low, light:shade, day:night, east:west, male:female. Going beyond an ordinary structuralist analysis, Bourdieu shows how the symbolic divisions of the house are constantly invoked through the practical actions and social strategies of social actors rather than being an inherent feature of the internal space: a dialectic between agency, structure and meaning. A large number of other studies have emphasized the almost limitless biographic, metaphoric, social and symbolic qualities of domestic spaces. For example, houses and house parts are frequently anthropomorphized as bodies. They may provide cosmological models of the world in miniature, reflect and structure hierarchy, gender and a host of other social divisions and practices (see e.g. Humphrey 1974; Guidoni 1975; Preston-Blier 1987; Watson 1991; Kent 1990; Neich 1996; Pandya 1998).
Artefacts, time and memory

Variable times are both inside and outside artefacts forming fundamental elements of their meanings and relationships to people. In a long standing ethnographic tradition I am referring here to social time rather than time conceived as an empty linear universal reference and measurement dimensions. We are all born into a preconstituted artefactual world. The child sees and touches, manipulates and experiences the world through all the senses before being able to speak. Language acquisition and the development of social skills are relatively late in the development of the self. The first and primordial world of the child is a sensory-motor interaction with things in which even the breast may have more objective than subjective qualities. Thus material culture forms a primary and originary part of socialization. In play the child orders things and is simultaneously ordered by those things. The first act of speaking involves the singular naming of things (tree horse car spoon) and, in two-word, or telegraphed sentences, comments on the spatio-temporal states of these things (jacket gone; car more). The micro routines of daily life create specific orientations to the material world so that that world becomes embodied, accepted, taken-for-granted, objectified forming part of what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as the ‘habitus’: sets of culturally variable classifications, reproducible practices and dispositional tendencies.

The social meaning and value of things are contextually and historically relative. Age and durability may be the significant factor. Things, like antique furniture, acquire a patina of age (McCracken 1980) which works best in the ‘correct’ spatial context (a stately home rather than a council house). Or it may be novelty and ephemeral that is significant as in many consumer goods where the aesthetics of their sign value usually predominate over their practical use-value. The sheer length of time and complexity in making a thing may add to its value or the speed and simplicity of its manufacture. Things may be important in and for themselves, their uniqueness and the inability to replace them but more usually because they may be converted into other things and social relationships in time. For example, transformative principles may be stressed: exchange valuables can attract other valuables. Even the production of food may be largely geared to exchange. To consume prized yams may be wasteful because such things can be converted into establishing social relationships: a full belly is, in effect, a lost relationship (Munn 1986).

Durable artefacts such as stone monuments or an antique chest, in which time is literally inscribed as age, preserve collective and personal memories forming parts of the biographies of individuals and societies but sheer physical presence is not necessary for memory work. In collections throughout the world there are over 5,000 complex and intricate wooden Malangan carvings from New Ireland (Papua New Guinea) (Kühler 1987, 1992). They are still produced and play a fundamental role in social and ritual life but the paradox is that there is hardly a single one to be seen on the island. Despite the intricacy of the carvings Kühler has demonstrated a remarkable constancy in form of particular types produced more than a century apart. These carvings are used in death rituals and were traditionally thrown away into the forest to rot after display for a few hours during which the soul of the deceased is thought to leave the corpse and enter the carving. The smell of the rotting carving was a sign of its symbolic death in which the imagery was set free and converted into a memorized image. After colonization the alternative to allowing the sculpture to rot was simply to sell it. The significant point here is that the sacrifice of the carvings creates time not as a history visible on the surface of a durable thing but as memory, as imagery, is subject to reproduction in future carvings. These ephemeral carvings confound time, and thus are central to the production of memory in culture and society, not through their permanence but through their renewal in which the new carving is reminiscent of another seen in the past. The example of object sacrifice and its relationship to memory serves to undermine the distinction we commonly hold between material things and mental representations. While malangan are material objects, their physical existence is brief. The socially relevant carvings exist only as internalized images (Gell 1998: 228). Rowlands points out (1993: 147) that sacrificial economies such as that of New Ireland or the famous potlatch system of the Indians of the North West coast of America in which fabulously woven blankets and valuable coppers were systematically destroyed to enhance the prestige of the local group exemplify a fundamentally different relationship between representation and memory than that we are familiar with in the West with the emphasis we place on monuments and the preservation of durable artefacts. Sacrificial artefacts do not function as aide memoire or relationship to the past in itself and for itself. Instead memory is directed towards the future and the reproduction of social relations. It is not a passive acknowledgement of the events of the past but a power directing to shape them in the future.

Biographies of things

When Hoskins was interested in recording personal life histories in Sumba, Indonesia she found that the only way in which it was possible to elicit this information was to get people to talk about things. Persona identities were wrapped around and embedded in objects such as a betel bag, a drum, a spindle. Talking about things was a way of constructing materializing and objectifying the self for things contain and preserve memories, embody personal experiences. Without the things identities construction was well nigh impossible. The betel bag contained ancestral words, the spindle was a lost husband, the drum evoked female receptivity to a male voice. The social impact of the death of a youn
woman could only be recounted through using the metaphor of a shattered green bottle (Hoskins 1998). This challenges a view of life histories and identities being somehow self-evident and complete in themselves. While words so often fail us as communication and representational devices, our possessions and the homes in which we live, silently speak volumes. A narrative of the self is constructed through a metaphoric language of things.

Things, like persons, may be said to have biographies and go through various phases in their life-cycles from the moment of their production to their consumption and destruction or re-use (Kopytoff 1986). Tracing the biographies of things, their social lives, has proved to be a most fruitful way of analysing material culture. Such a perspective emphasizes the manner in which the meanings of things change through time, as they are circulated and exchanged and pass through different social contexts. Consider a hut. It might start out as a family dwelling, then become a house for a widowed person, converted into a kitchen and finally a goat house in that manner in which the meanings of things change through time, as they are circulated and exchanged and pass through different social contexts.

Biographies of everyday things such as cars, TVs, books etc. can be said to have biographies and go through various phases in their life-cycles from the moment of their production to their consumption and destruction or re-use. The biography of a fridge in the Cameroon is likely to be fundamentally different from one in rural Italy and one in Montreal.

What sorts of things can have what kinds of biographies becomes critical to trace. We can posit a relationship of relative homology between the biographies of persons and things. The multiple and uncertain social identities characteristic of ‘post-modern’ industrial societies become paralleled by a much greater degree of potential variability and ambiguity in the meaning and significance of things to different people. In small-scale societies, by contrast, the ranges of meanings of things and the kinds of distinct biographies they may have are relatively stable. For example, certain items may only circulate in restricted spheres of exchange and follow relatively prescribed social pathways. This is much more a matter for social contestation and choice in Western industrial societies than in small-scale societies not dominated by a market economy.

Technologies

The ways in which artefacts are made, the types of raw materials used, their sources, the manner in which they become combined and transformed through technological processes, the time and effort required, and consideration of the social relations of production have been a long standing concern in ethnographic studies of material culture. The traditional functionalist approach has been to investigate these parameters in terms of environmental constraints, the maximization of efficiency and the effects technologies have on culture and society. More recent approaches have suggested that technology and techniques may be far better understood as cultural choices or social productions intimately linked to systems of knowledge and value (e.g. Latour, 1993a; Lemmonier 1986, 1989, 1993; Gosselain 1992; Hosler 1996; Rowlands and Warnier 1993; Sigaut 1994; Sillar 1996; Hauser-Schäublin 1996). This moves us away from viewing technologies as mechanical actions applied to objects and requires us to think instead about the way actions on the material world are embedded in a broader symbolic, social and political system. Technical traditions have to be understood as part of a broader logic of cultural choice and local representations of techniques[,] which is why the same kinds of objects are often made in totally different ways in different societies. Uses of raw materials, tools and techniques are not only socially informed but draw on historical traditions: “it happens, for example, that, because they are conceptualized and ‘classified’ by a given society as ‘wild’ (or ‘feminine,’ or ‘impure,’ or ‘foreign,’ or ‘poor,’ or whatever), a raw material (a species of wood, a kind of ground, a particular metal or a tool) ... are included in some techniques and not in others. Another society reverses the choices.... Conversely, because it is used in a given technique, an element is mentally associated with or rejected for some other use for which it was perfectly suited from a purely material point of view. In turn, the technical function of an element affects its place in various classifications” (Lemmonier 1993: 3). Studies of technologies in small-scale societies reveal that technical knowledges are inseparable from ideas of spiritual or ancestral involvement in the production process. Techniques and tools are common metaphors for talking about society and social relations. Weaving provides a common analogue for talking about social relations, readily evoking ideas about connectedness or tying. Participants in life-cycle celebrations and in death rituals often emphasize the gift of cloth as a continuous thread binding kin groups to the ancestors and the living (Weiner and Schneider 1989), ideas about vegetation growth and rootedness bind people to the land, making a basket becomes analogous to making a person (Guss 1989).

A theoretical emphasis on choice, rather than constraint, leads us to understand that the production, acceptance or rejection of new technologies is ‘art’ rather than objectified calculating ‘science.’ In the
case of modern industrial techniques analyzed by Latour interviewing the actors about their views on a revolutionary subway system planned in the south of Paris it is revealed that it is principally non-technical factors – political interests – that are at stake (Latour 1993a). These new ethnographic studies of technological systems force us to abandon the old tired distinction between a realm of ‘efficient’ rational material practices and a realm of arbitrary cultural meaning grafted onto them. An old technicist evolutionism would claim that the modern world differs from the primitive one by virtue of the sweeping away of ‘magic,’ ‘mysticism’ and ‘irrational’ thought to arrive at a ‘purity’ of truth, efficiency and profitability. But as Latour points out when we actually ethnographically observe the ways in which technologies get produced and scientific practices are conducted and their results accepted our own world stops being modern because it looks no different from the others (Latour 1993b).

Exchange: gifts and commodities

An opposition has been set up in some of the anthropological literature between gift exchange and commodity exchange, ‘us’ and ‘them’, clan based versus class-based societies. Deriving from the work of Mauss (1900[1925]) this position has been most fully elaborated by Gregory (1982) who draws the following distinctions:

- alienable
- independence
- quantity (price)
- objects
- COMMODITIES

- inalienable
- dependence
- quality (rank)
- subjects
- GIFTS

The argument is that in clan based societies things cannot be separated from the persons who make them. They have an inalienable quality compared with alienated objects not intimately connected with their producers characteristic of capitalist production. The relationship between persons in gift exchange is primary. By contrast transactors engaged in commodity exchange have an impersonal independent relationship, strangers in which price is the mark of value of a thing. In gift exchange the fundamental principle at work is the dominance of the giver over the receiver and the social production of indebtedness. The gift must be returned after a variable degree of delay. The exchange relationship of a commodity is a relationship between things of price which creates a system of equivalence with money acting as a universal medium for equating relationships between all things. While commodities have their prices, gifts have their rank. Commodity exchange is a relationship between objects, gift exchange is a relationship between persons. In many societies to give away a woman is to make the ultimate gift cementing social relationships and alliances. From a commonsense (i.e. unexamined) Western perspective this is to treat the woman as if she were merely another exchange object i.e. it is to reify her, to treat the person as if she were a thing. But if we deny the relevance of the basic presupposition underlying this position: a subject/object dualism, then an entirely different conclusion will be reached. The entire theory of ‘primitive’ exchange developed from Mauss emphasizes in various ways that the meanings and qualities ascribed to things are in basic ways homologous to those given to persons. Things are like subjects and subjects are like objects. Gifts are inalienable because they have within themselves attributes which cannot be detached from the giver who is part of them. Thus to give away a woman is not to devalue her as a thing but to treat persons and things in just the same way. Social agency is both invested in things and emanates from things. Strathern’s particular argument is that in a commodity economy both persons and things take the form of things whereas in a gift economy persons and things take the form of persons (Strathern 1988: 176–82). The mechanisms at work are reification in the first case in which objects appear as things and persons (e.g. in selling their labour) are treated like things, personification in the second in which objects appear as persons and are treated like subjects.

This contrast between class and clan societies, commodities and gifts, has both been exaggerated and overdrawn (Thomas 1991; Carrier 1995, Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987). There is a need to move away from an ahistorical essentialism depicting reciprocity rather than trade as a diacritical marker of the ‘savage’. Distinctions between societies in which the commodity form or gifts dominate in the circulation and exchange of things are simply a matter of degree, or emphasis. These should be regarded as only being analytical distinctions. In traditional Melanesian societies all manner of things could be bought and sold as commodities from dances to magical spells to details of ritual performances to styles of house and artefact design (Gell 1992b; Harrison 1993). In modern Western societies it is not difficult to distinguish a social sphere of gift giving located in the relationships between households, family, friends, and neighbours and a much more anonymous world of ‘economic’ activities, of work, buying things in shops and trading in markets characterised by commodity relations. A crucial distinction does hold between the way things are produced and consumed in ‘clan’ and ‘class’ based societies. In clan based societies most possessions are made locally and, even if they are not produced by their owners, the owners will usually influence their form, the materials used, and know the producer.

This contrasts with the alienation of the modern Western consumer from the anonymous production process in which the choices become what is purchased, where and when.

Alienable and inalienable wealth

Weiner (1985, 1992, 1994) argues that rather than considering exchange systems in terms of rules for equivalent returns, the classical Maussian perspective, it is the desire to keep, the dread of loss, which underlie
...of reciprocity. She explains exchange through examining non-exchange: why some things are not given away and remain out of circulation: inalienable wealth. These objects are granted powers and cosmological authenticity through their links to ancestral forces or the gods. Such qualities imbue objects such as Australian Aboriginal tjurunga boards and Maori feather cloaks, the British crown jewels or things such as the Elgin marbles whose ownership is under dispute. Such things are symbolically ‘dense’ (Weiner 1994: 394) filled with cultural meanings and values and this density accrues through association with its owners, ancestral histories, sacred connotations etc. In the West we would generically refer to such things as the ‘family silver’, items that even in the direst of economic circumstances should not be sold while less dense things may be circulated with impunity. Keeping a highly prized object against all the demands for its exchange is a way of emphasizing the owner’s difference and singularity. In his classic essay Mauss, citing the example of Maori gift exchange, referred to the hau of the gift – according to him, a mystical and spiritual quality within the gift that compels its return and gives it a quality of inalienability. Weiner’s novel explanation for the hau in gifting is that it is simply a means of reconciling the social imperative to give while keeping: one can give something away but still retain its essence or soul. Exchange, rather than creating equivalence, establishes difference. The control of exchange objects through keeping while giving allows the emergence of rank and political hierarchies.

Consumption

Studies of consumption in contemporary Western societies have formed a major focus for material culture studies during the past fifteen years and this has replaced a more traditional Marxist emphasis on processes of production and distribution in the constitution of culture and society (e.g. Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987, 1994b, 1995, 1997; Carrier 1995; Clarke 1998). From the nineteenth century Paris arcades to the contemporary shopping malls of the U.S.A., the development of various practices and sites for consumption have been claimed to be the new key to unlock an understanding of our modernity and the way in which we come to know ourselves. If alienation is an intrinsic condition of our relationship to goods in Western society, it has been recognized that people convert these alienated things into meaningful possessions through endowing them with subjective meaning in relation to ethnicity, gender, social roles and statuses (Bourdieu 1984; de Certeau 1986). The enormous array of distinctions in consumption preferences both reflect and serve to reproduce key social distinctions. Theorising consumption as a social process rather than as an isolated moment of economic exchange has led to new ways of understanding the significance of commodities and theorising the construction of social identities. The recognition that it is increasingly

through the social practices of the consumption and the use of commodities that persons define themselves, create and re-create their identities means that we require in our analyses a detailed focus on the dialectics of subject-object relationships and the various cultural milieu through which objects are given social meaning from the clothes that people wear, to the manner in which they decorate and furnish their homes, the way they create their gardens, the food that they cook etc. In this manner objects move from being impersonal public commodities to personalised tokens in a domestic ‘gift’ economy. Recent research on consumption has stressed that the meanings and associations things have for people are always performatively produced, embodied, worked through contextually in relation to specific persons, groups, social networks, places and times.

From such a perspective shopping has been fundamentally reconceptualized as a network of activities of which the actual moment of purchase is only a small element in the production and reproduction of a much wider social and moral order (Miller et al. 1998: 14). Shopping becomes not a simple matter of individualized ‘economic’ calculation in relation to commodity signs but much more to do with the manner in which a persons experience of the qualities of objects (from the visual to the tactile) becomes mediated by themes such as love and sacrifice (Miller 1998a; Miller et al. 1998) i.e. shopping and shopping malls are part of a process by which goods communicate, and are communicated as, social relationships: symbolic and expressive acts.

The global and the local

We have seen that the identities of persons and things are mutually entangled, one cannot be understood without considering the other. On a much broader scale, the history of colonial encounters is a history of object entanglement in which the meanings of things become shifted, appropriated, blurred and transformed according to social context. Thomas succinctly makes the point: “to say that black bottles were given [to natives in trade] does not tell us what was received” (Thomas 1991: 108). What things get reconceptualized and how depends on specific social and historical circumstances, specifically the manner in which they can be adapted, or conflict with, existing systems of categorization. The relationship between the global and local processes is currently generating a great deal of discussion in many different disciplines. Transnational flows of material goods, services, populations, money information and the explosive growth of the tourist industry have led to claims about cultural homogenization and the erosion of local tradition. Products such as Coca-Cola and McDonald’s hamburgers have been used as meta symbols of capitalist dominance on a global scale with local cultures seemingly unable to resist their allure. Detailed ethnographic studies of material culture have shown this perspective to be somewhat simplistic. The effects of globalization have, in fact, turned out to be
cultural differentiation, 'revivals' and inventions of ethnicity. It has been shown that localized places and global processes intersect in an increasingly cremolized and hybridized world of peoples and experiences in which a search for cultural 'authenticity' seems particularly fruitless. The cultural realities are of bricolage in which things take on local meanings and are adapted to local circumstances (Appadurai 1990, 1997; Clifford 1997; Lash and Friedman 1992; Palumbo-Liu and Gumbrecht 1997; Miller 1995). Miller (1998b), for example, shows the manner in which Coca-Cola becomes ethnically contextualized within a general system of drinks within Trinidad becoming a black sweet drink with strong Black African associations contrasting with red sweet drinks connoting Indianess. Coca-Cola as brand and in its generic form as a black sweet drink becomes an image which develops through local contradictions in popular culture and this has crucial effects on its marketing and consumption. In such a perspective focussing on the materiality of things we encounter capitalism in a rather different matter than is normally the case: as a highly contextualized mode of production rather than a formalized economic logic always the same irrespective of locality.

The recent emergence of objectified national cultures in places like Belize in the Carribean (Wilk 1995) or Vanuatu in the south Pacific (Jolly 1992; Tilley 1997) are clear examples of the production of difference on a global scale. Everywhere in the 'third' and 'fourth' worlds local peoples are putting their material culture on display for a tourist market. This has led to a great deal of analysis of ethnic and tourist arts (e.g. Graburn 1976; Jules-Rosette 1984; Steiner 1994; Marcus and Myers 1995). Early analyses stressed the manner in which tourist or 'airport' art radically changed traditional forms through such means as choosing or altering forms so as to be more likely to appeal to a Western audience, through simplification of design and through miniaturisation. The emphasis was on the corrosive effects of tourism on traditional cultures. It is now recognized that art can also be used as a political weapon, something used by indigenous peoples to boost perceptions of their own identities and to attack the manner in which others represent them. Given the contemporary traffic in art from the ethnographic Other to the West, studies of art forms have tracked the processes at work in from the indigenous communities to the use and reception of these works in the institutionalized settings of Western art worlds. Attention has focused on how the meanings of things radically alter once 'primitive' culture gets put in 'civilized places' (Price 1989) in which ritualized disinterested aesthetic contemplation of the object for its own sake as 'art' replaces its original highly specific uses, as artefact, in traditional ceremonial settings. The effects of an external market in the local context on production, form, content and meaning have also been extensively studied. The study by Anderson and Dussart (1988) of Aboriginal Australian Western Desert art exemplifies this well. Until the late 1960s exhibitions of Australian Aboriginal art were extremely rare in Australia and non-existent outside it. By the 1990s this art has acquired international recognition. Whites provided the impetus to produce the art, provided the materials and organized its marketing. The art has many traditional themes and motifs but has developed in the radically new form of acrylic paintings on canvas. Such art was, and still is, collectively produced and considered embodiments of ancestral and cultural forces but there are trends to the growing identification of the paintings with individuals as they have received international recognition accompanying their display in Western museums and galleries and, to some extent, the acceptance of desert acrylics has been precisely because the art has remarkable similarities to modern abstract painting.

Indigenous reactions to Western consumer goods range along a continuum. In some cases, such as in the Cameroon, the acquisition and use of Western clothing, furniture etc. represents a tangible and immediate way to convey success and status (Rowlands 1995). By contrast, amongst the Sa traditionalists of South Pentecost in Vanuatu imported food weakens the body because its production is not grounded in tradition (Jolly 1991), among the Yeukanu of southern Venezuela foreign objects such as plastic buckets are regarded as insipid with none of the symbolic power of locally produced artefacts (Guss 1989). It is frequently imagined that the presence in 'third' and 'fourth' world contexts of houses with corrugated iron, rather than thatch, western clothing rather than penis sheaths, imported tinned food rather than local produce represents a corruption or demise of traditional culture, an acceptance of consumerism and the values of the West. Material things are thus used by Westerners as signs of an irretrievable loss of a 'primitive' identity. The equation is far too simple. In an increasingly globalized world the significances of this are in a ...instant process of contextualization and recontextualization as they move across borders and between peoples. Historically this is nothing new as Thomas has made clear in his studies of colonialism in the Pacific (Thomas 1991, 1994, 1997). It is just that the tempo and speed of these processes has heated up. Shields were a traditional item of warfare in Whagi (Papua New Guinea) culture which fell out of use after pacification following 'first contact' with the White Australian authorities in the 1930s. O'Harrow's study of contemporary Whagi shield designs (1995) shows how their form and substance has become revitalized since the 1980s with the use of advertising slogans and exogenous designs to express distinctively local issues: Moral virtue can now be expressed by representing 'good guys' like Superman; ancestral support can be summoned up by written inscriptions.
individual ownership with a much more muted claim to an undivided essence of ethnicity.

A focus on material culture in relation to issues of the global and the local has not only served to transcend and thoroughly blur these two categories: it has also fostered increasingly self-reflexive studies in which the person doing the representation (the anthropologist) becomes as much a focus of attention as the people being represented. Increasingly from such a perspective attention shifts away from the traditional anthropological question of what does this thing mean? to a rather different one: what intellectual and symbolic resource does it represent, and to whom?

The aesthetics of things

A primary characteristic of so-called post-modern society, it has been claimed, is the aestheticization of everyday life in which the style value of commodities increasingly substitutes for their use value. A pertinent recent debate within the anthropology of art has concerned the aesthetics of things (Price 1989; Coote and Shelton 1992; Gell 1995, 1996, 1998; Morphy 1992a, 1994). To what extent can the notion of the aesthetic be claimed to exist cross-culturally or is the idea of the aesthetic a peculiar and limited Western concept irrelevant to an understanding of material culture elsewhere in the world? Price, Coote, Morphy and others have all argued that a notion of the aesthetic does exist cross-culturally but that each culture has its own specific aesthetic and anthropology should be concerned to investigate the forms that these indigenous aesthetics take. One of the critical purposes of this will be to challenge narrow Western definitions of ‘art’ and aesthetics. As Morphy (1992a: 8) puts it the same object may be seen, felt, or appreciated in different ways and on the basis of different attributes to the extent that it may, arguably, become a different object ... in one case aesthetics might include how the object smelt and in the other focus on attributes of shape.” By contrast Gell radically challenges the usefulness of a notion of the aesthetic either for defining, or analyzing, art. The effect of a stress on aesthetics is simply to equate the feelings of Other peoples with our own: a reduction and denial of difference. What is important to Gell is not abstracting out aesthetic properties for the consideration of artworks but the relationship of these things to social processes: “the innumerable shades of social/emotional responses to artefacts (of terror, desire, awe, fascination, etc.) ... cannot be encompassed or reduced to aesthetic feelings; not without making the aesthetic response so generalized as to be altogether meaningless (Gell 1998: 6).

In the contemporary culture of the West one sense tends to dominate our thinking about our aesthetic and social relationship with a world of objects: vision. Our public and intellectual culture is ‘ocularcentric’ (Jay 1993), although the actual practice of our everyday lives is clearly not. Historically this has not always been the case (Ong 1967), nor du
ethnographic studies lend any credence to a notion of a primacy of the visual in culture radically separated from the influence of the other senses (Stoller 1989; Howes 1991; Classen 1993). Sounds and smells in a landscape will be as important to the hunter as sight. Vision is normally embedded in the other senses. Gibson (1986) contrasts two basic visual practices which he terms the visual world and the visual field. In the former sight is intertwined with the other senses to generate experience of depth shapes. In the latter sight becomes detached by fixating the eyes to produce ‘projected shapes’ in a world in which rules of perspectival representation prevail producing the detached Foucaultian objectifying gaze of surveillance and control in what he terms the disciplinary societies of the West (Foucault 1977).

Gender and material culture

That material culture is heavily gendered in all known societies comes as little surprise and a great deal of ethnographic work has been devoted to unravelling the differences between the maleness and femaleness of things. Artefacts, houses and house parts, landscapes, trees, plants and animals – anything and everything may have gender associations and control over these things is usually essential in the constitution and reproduction of society. Recent work has taken two main directions: first, an internal critique of systematic biases in the anthropological literature in which women’s work and women’s wealth has been either devalued or ignored with many studies addressing this imbalance. Second, a stress on the complexities of the gendering of things in which a simplistic male/female binary opposition has been challenged. Weiner’s work on women’s wealth in the Trobriand islands (1976) is a classic study, amongst many others, of the first sort in which she reveals the significance of banana leaf bundles and skirts produced, controlled and exchanged by women that had been entirely ignored by the earlier study of Malinowski (1922). A great deal of research has been devoted to understandings of what gendered identities mean, how they vary in space and time and relate to the production, exchange and consumption of material forms (e.g. Banks 1997; Moore 1986, 1994; Howell 1989; Battaglia 1990; Renne 1996; Strathern 1988; Weiner and Schneider 1989).

To cite one example, Weiner and Schneider (1989: 20–26) have shown how, on a global scale, the predominance of women in cloth production and exchange and its linkage to a widespread symbolism in which cloth evokes female power. This power may be skewed in various ways, in some cases resulting in the political prominence of women, in others acting so as to support male hegemony.

Recent studies have revealed just how complex the gendering of material culture may be. A key impetus to this research has been Strathern’s re-interpretation of the meaning of exchange in Melanesia (Strathern 1988). She sets out to challenge a basic humanism present in both Marxist and liberal economic theories with regard to the relationship between people and the things that they produce. These are based on assumptions about the uniqueness of individuals and their rights, most fundamentally, that persons own (or should own) the products of their labour. Instead, Strathern argues that no one-to-one relationship exists in Melanesia between a person, his or her work and labour products. Her alternative premises are that people are partible and products are multiply authored. There is no idea of property and therefore no scope for speaking about things being alienated from persons. Melanesian persons are partible in that they combine male and female elements (in many cases hard and durable body parts i.e. the skeleton are considered male; the covering of flesh female although there are many variants on this theme (Knauft 1989)). Persons become ‘male’ or ‘female’ by virtue of their positioning in social acts: maleness and femaleness relate to forms of action rather than types of bodies. Work is not to be understood as a process complete in itself but as a practice in which social relationships with kin, affines, ancestors etc. may be variably marked or acknowledged. Products such as yams, pigs, houses, feasts, body art, masks emerging from complex relationships and work phases become both male and female. In short they have the quality of androgyny becoming ‘male’ or ‘female’ in particular social contexts, Mackenzie’s (1991) study of the ubiquitous Papua New Guinea string bag is an excellent study of the complex gendering of a single artefact in terms of male and female elements and its appropriations and connotations in relation to cult practices in which males secretly mimic female procreative powers. Miller (1988) applies some of these ideas to produce a ‘Melanesian’ perspective to the study of kitchens and how they are used, transformed and adapted on a North London council estate. D.I.Y. as a form of male labour appropriate to the home environment complements female control over aesthetics to create a dynamic to the particular conceptualisations of gender at work in this social class. Strathern’s more general argument that a relational self exists in Melanesia, an individuated self in the West is an analytical fiction. Various degrees of individuation and relationality occur in both cases but what is valuable here is a new kind of emphasis on object-subject relations and the manner in which gender gets produced, transformed and transacted through the activity of persons and their relationship to things. But a notion of androgyny implies a kind of confusion, or mixing, of different essences. While some objects may be androgynous in this sense, others may be doubly gendered combining male and female elements which are kept conceptually separate but in dialogic relationship (Barlow and Lipset 1997; Hoskins 1998: 187).

Conclusion

A relative lack of attention to material forms as opposed to that devoted to agency and language in the social sciences is an arbitrary fold in academic thought that could be otherwise. Contemporary
ethnographic studies of material culture are at the forefront of addressing this lacuna, of what might be termed the unconscious in culture, and in the process are providing new ways to reflect on the problems and issues that have dominated past research.

Of course, the great paradox, or aporia, of all material culture studies is that to write about things is to transform, domesticate and strip away the fundamental non-verbal qualities of the things we are investigating through this very process (Tilley 1991). Although a small sub-discipline of visual anthropology exists, going beyond a traditional concern with the anthropology of art (Collier and Collier 1986; Devereaux and Hillman 1995; Edwards 1992; Banks and Morphy 1997; Pinney 1998), and two journals are currently devoted to this field, the primary purpose of the visual illustrations still remain a foil for, and means to, authenticate the words (Wright 1998: 20). We cannot adequately capture or express the powers of things in texts. All we may conceivably hope to do is to evoke. This is why experimentation with other ways of telling, in particular with exploiting media which can more adequately convey the synaesthetic qualities of things, in particular the use of imagery and film, must become of increasing importance to the study of material forms in the future.

**JIS INVITED COMMENTS**

**COMMENT 1**

In his thorough survey, Tilley correctly traces the discipline's movement in and after the 1960s from functionalist approaches towards material culture through its interest in Saussurian linguistic theory. Lévi-Strauss' formulation of structuralism helped explicate 'native' cognition, but was limited by explaining real-world symbolic forms, masks or otherwise, in terms of underlying, fixed or even 'hard-wired' binary structures. Saussurian linguistics was no help when it came to the material particulars, since its emphasis on the arbitrariness of the relation between the sign and the thing it signified provided no opportunity for the thing to answer back, to shape the human world, to be an equal partner in a dialectic between societies and objects. Any general theory of material culture should recognize this fundamental dialectic. While the influential general theories, structuralist or linguistic, have taken an unhelpful form, the empirical studies - more sensitive to how material culture works - have largely stayed at the level of the particular. Whereas spoken words are usually transient, material objects sometimes endure; certain kinds of material objects - rock-art, buildings, images in religious contexts - endure commonly to generations. With each reiterated use, the form repeats the meaning it has accumulated. Is there a generalized approach to material culture and this dialectical process that provides for the endurance of material objects and their meanings? Certainly, we need one in archaeology, where we can see clear signs that the meaning of some things and motifs was remarkably stable and long-lasting: the distinctive form of the Rainbow Serpent - best-known of the "Dreamtime beings" in the Aboriginal knowledge of northern Australia - demonstrably endures in the region's rock-art for upwards of 4000 years (Taçon, Wilson & Chippindale 1996). A first start might be a recognition of the dialectic between object and meaning: the object - especially an enduring image in rock-art or architectural features - is created to match a meaning; but then the meaning is created by the form of the object, to some and perhaps to an overwhelming extent.

Perhaps, in C.S. Peirce's semiotic notions of 'indexicality' and 'iconicity' we may find a useful vocabulary to frame the discussion (Peirce 1955).

In their recent article, Preucel and Bauer (2001) concisely outline the useful concepts of "index" and "icon" as formulated by the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce, for the study of material culture. Therein, they challenge Saussure's basic structural principle of "signifier-signified" as an adequate model for deciphering meaning in material culture. Specifically, they discuss the non-arbitrary associations that pervade a wide sampling of material culture. This is achieved through "indexicality" and "iconicity" - concepts codified by Peirce to enhance and complicate Saussurian "symbology". Anthropologically elaborated by Singer (1978) and Silverstein, "indexes are those signs where the occurrence of a sign vehicle token [here a material form] bears a connection of understood spatio-temporal contiguity to the occurrence of the entity signaled" (Silverstein 1976: 27). In language this is often a spontaneous association, such as with personal pronouns - where the meaning of "I" is concurrent with, and indexes, the speaker. With material indexes however, the span of temporal and spatial contiguity can be extended such that a ritual mace, for example, is meaningful because it references in a direct way the times and places within which it held meaning. As a Saussurian symbol, a mace is arbitrary and possibly polysemic, but as an index, it carries and transmits contextually unambiguous "mace using" events through time.

For material culture, however, indexical meaning is still insufficient, because it may be difficult to trace meaning to an original source (the problem which troubled the structuralists into universal binary explanations). Yet when coupled with Peirce's idea of "iconicity", we approach something codify-able. Again according to Silverstein, "icons are those signs whose properties or form hold a morphological similarity with the entity signaled" (Silverstein 1976: 27). For example, a totem (for say the "bear clan") not only carries the transferred indexical meaning of

1 Also often spelt as "Pierce" in anthropological literature - Editor.