

CAPACIOUS AESTHETICS

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Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, 194pp, £65.00 hardback

Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism*, New York and London, Bloomsbury, 2014, 279pp, £16.99 paperback

Elizabeth Chin, *My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries*, Duke University Press, 2016, 239pp, £19.99 paperback

Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, translated by Sarah de Sanctis, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, 174pp, £65.00 hardback

Anyone with half an eye on trends in research and publishing in the theoretically-inclined humanities and social sciences might have noticed two particular orientations emerging over the last decade or so. One orientation is concerned with the material world of things, of objects and stuff. The other is attentive to affects, atmospheres and moods. A casual observer might see a degree of conflict or bifurcation in the way that these concerns have emerged simultaneously. On one hand they would be right: a good deal of the writing around affect, for instance, stresses intangible forces and ineffable eruptions of affective energy; most of the writing around 'things' is keen to apprehend a world of solidities on which we can, potentially at least, stub our toes. A less casual observer (or at least an observer who has been doing their observing for a while) might want to notice some similarities and overlaps between the two themes. Both might invoke a form of 'new materialism', both are attentive to bodies (as a scene of affect, as a quasi-object), both draw on a diverse range of historical and disciplinary sources.

Seen as part of a non-linear unfolding of theoretical sensitivities since the 1950s we could see this theoretical moment as something like a time of 'post-post-structuralism'. It is an ungainly term, and might not be particularly helpful in capturing the range of enthusiasms and concerns at work across thing-work and affect-work, but it does, I hope, make vivid the fading of one theoretical proclivity and the rise of another. Seen from the perspective of post-post-structuralism, post-structuralism's inordinate interest in theorising subjectivity as radically disjointed, explosively divided and dynamically unfinished, can look like a form of 'wholeness' that is unavailable to the thing theorist or the affect mapper. What would be the point of such an attention towards human subjectivity if it ignored the hordes of creaturely and non-

creaturely objects, devices, and systems that are clamouring at the doors of history? What would be the point in unsettling the world of consciousness by investigating the disruptive powers of the unconscious if it meant being unresponsive to all those other pulsations and propulsions floating around bodies and environments?

One way of characterising the move from post-structuralism to post-post-structuralism is a move from the split and fragmented to the scattered and diffuse. Like most shifts and turns in theory there are gains and losses along the way. What might have been lost is the idea of a central problematic around which (and against which) a debate can be focused, and concepts can be tested ('how do you conceive the subject?'). One of the first gains, though, has got to be the way that this emphasis on a scattered set of atmospheric conditions and material environments can allow for a new understanding of collective experience. If post-structuralism decentred the subject as an agent of history, post-post-structuralism seems to provide a wildly capacious aesthetic attention that can re-find the subject, as a subject-amongst-subjects and an object-amongst-objects. It is this potential to see human subjectivity as already entangled in all sorts of other realms (environmental, biological, animal, technical, and so on) and to see it as simultaneously articulated and disarticulated by a vitalism that is distributed across the human-non-human continuum, that offers the potential for a worldlier engagement with culture. And I think that this engagement can fruitfully be termed as aesthetic in its concern with trying to describe sensations, perceptions, energies, and qualities of the world. That this aesthetic approach is particularly capacious is, I think, demonstrated by a field that can incorporate an attention both to a world of things and a world of affects and atmospheres.

Elizabeth Chin's *My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries*, is a fantastic book. I can't imagine anyone reading it and not wanting to become an anthropologist. It is also one of the funniest books I've read in a long time, with actual laugh-out-loud moments. One of the overarching themes of the book is that theory, the sort of theory 'we' automatically reach for to explain something like consumption, is nearly always ethnocentric, and quite often deeply racist. So, for instance, the decision that Marx made to describe the commodity form as fetishistic would have been recognised at the time for what it was: a racialised slur. But her solution to this state of affairs is brilliant: rather than vigilantly denouncing the ethnocentrism of theory at every available moment (which would be exhausting for all concerned), she localises it. In this she follows anthropologists like Joanne Kealiinohomoku who write about ballet as a form of ethnic dance, as well as acting on Dipesh Chakrabarty's invitation to 'provincialise Europe'.

It is worth following how she does this in some detail. The book, as the title suggests, has an autoethnographic component at its centre. As is usual in books about 'things', especially ones that encourage autobiographical description, one of the first 'things' to be named is her childhood comforter

or security blanket; a piece of cotton material (pink and white) with a picture of two teddy bears on it. This piece of cloth she names Banky. After describing how she used it and how she lost it, she launches into a theoretical 'digression' (her term) by turning her attention to D. W. Winnicott's famous account of 'transitional objects' (which is a psychoanalytic investigation of objects like Banky). But rather than buying (or not) Winnicott's account she works to reveal its cultural circumstance. Using the estrangement techniques famously deployed by Horace Miner in the 1950s in his description of the Nacirema tribe (which is 'American' spelt backwards) she shows how the Nacirema ('us' in other words) are a culture who put an inordinate value on getting children to sleep alone, in their own special places, separated from others. This is a characteristic that the Nacirema people share with none of the other great cultures (hunter-gathers, or agricultural peoples), and it marks them out. Rather than offering their children the warmth and softness of their own bodies for comfort they buy them soft toys, give them brushed-cotton blankets and make them drink warm soothing drinks. Thus insisting that they, right from the get-go, make meaningful social relationships with things rather than rely on the comforts of other members of the culture.

What we are witnessing, with Banky and the young Betsy (Chin), is not a 'universal' child searching out for their first 'not-me' object, but a distinct child rearing practice that privileges thing relations as an inauguration into a culture of possessive individualism (for Winnicott, Banky-like objects are an important first 'possession'). In this, psychology stops being a spuriously over-reaching account of universal verities, and instead becomes a local explanation. And it has to be said that in doing this (provincialising him) she makes Winnicott much more useful in explaining the world (provincialising is not reductive critique but is both generative and generous in its effects). Now Winnicott can be recruited as an explainer of something that is perpetually underexplored: how do we learn commodity fetishism? Or as Chin asks: 'How does one *learn* to mesh self and sneakers, identity and eye shadow?' (p48). 'In the end, then, Winnicott's notion of the transitional object' writes Chin, 'is incredibly useful because it helps us understand the social processes through which the imperatives of capitalism shape our most fundamental being, the way we experience ourselves, naturalising our alienation to the point where we experience it as proper parenting, as citizenship, as patriotism, as love' (p55).

All those instructions on how to get your child to go to sleep on their own turn out to be a foundational lesson in modern capitalist object relations. But people don't always stick to instructions (Chin, herself, happily slept with her child against the dire warnings of the child rearing manuals). And so it turns out that the Nacirema people's entanglement in capitalist materialism is never straightforward. People surprise you with what they do with things: 'One girl I talked with while doing research on children and consumption told me she had at least ten Barbies. 'What do you do with them?' I asked,

imagining faux beauty contests and fashion shows. 'I take their heads off,' she replied, 'and go bowling with them!' (p10). The answer to the question posed by the abstractions of social theory (or psychology recoded as vernacular social theory) is always fieldwork: 'our own imaginations are not nearly rich enough to come up with all the possibilities that others have explored' (p10). *My Life with Things* is fieldwork conducted as autoethnography. What unfolds is a relationship with things that is never simply free of capitalist object relations, but can't be reduced to a blind capitulation to it either. Her love for beautiful Oriental rugs and intricate antique lace, for instance, isn't accomplished by simply ignoring the social relations that produced them, as if they arrived in her world 'heaven sent'. She knows the child labour practices that ruined eyesight and bent spines and which went into making nineteenth-century Bedfordshire lace. In this her appreciation of things (which is often simultaneously absurdist, joyous and deeply melancholic) has to reconcile itself with Walter Benjamin's sense that every 'document' is indelibly tainted by barbarism.

The book's final section is a piece of narrative fiction, which she describes as a 'surreal autoethnography of what might have happened' (p203). It concerns the found diary of an anonymous academic who has, in an extreme version of Benjamin's collector, learnt to reverse the procedures of commodification, but in doing so has become a hoarder who can't even let go of her pets' excrement. But this story doesn't end with a tragi-comic overwhelming by the proliferation of things; instead the anonymous academic becomes involved in a siege at an ethnography museum. In this the process of de-commodification is the explicit recognition of the barbarism of all forms of commodification, including museological commodification. Objects speak to her by revealing the social relations that fashioned them and that conspire to keep them as mute historical witnesses, and these objects call upon her to be the spokesperson for a slave revolt of things. Let's just say that the siege doesn't end particularly well for her or for the artefacts in the museum, though it does suggest the possibility of another, more sensitive way of living with things.

In light of Chin's critical anthropology, Maurizia Boscagli's *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* could be seen as an example of an ethnically specific materialism. I don't think Boscagli would object to such a designation. The names that congregate in the index to this book will be familiar to most people who have studied European modernism across the twentieth century: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Surrealism, Henri Bergson, Georges Bataille, and so on. A late modernism is also present in the attention given to writers and filmmakers such as Georges Perec, Agnes Varda, Peter Greenway, Elfriede Jelinek and Jean-Luc Godard, as well as to theorists such as Roland Barthes, Henri Lefebvre, and Jean Baudrillard. The chapters of *Stuff Theory* are thematic rather than chronological but they all gather together constellations of different items that tend to be drawn from

periods of financial and material crises (the 1920s and 30s, the 1970s and 80s). So, for instance, in a chapter on 'the unnatural use of clothes' Boscagli moves between Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* (1983) to show shifts and continuities in the recalcitrant possibilities of dress and gender performance across the century. Other chapters are concerned with memory, garbage and space.

Stuff Theory attempts to systematically reconfigure a tradition of modernist materialism by submitting it to the concerns of a putative 'new materialism'. The 'hinge' between these two worlds is supplied by the endlessly suggestive writing of Walter Benjamin who acts as the richest example of what can be gleaned when these two worlds are entangled. 'Stuff', for Boscagli 'refers to those objects that have enjoyed their moment of consumer allure, but have now shed their commodity glamour - without yet being quite cast aside' (p6). You can see immediately why Benjamin would loom large over a project with such a central concern. Benjamin's interest in the recently outmoded (last year's fashion, last century's architecture), in kitsch objects (snow globes and taxidermy) and in depictions of the good life promised by a previous generation's advertising, makes him the ideal candidate for rescuing 'stuff' from landfill. And rescuing 'stuff', for Boscagli, will require attending to stuff's 'willingness not to be contemplated but to be touched' so 'that we may find, in their complex concreteness, a template of a materiality to come' (p6). The fact that this 'materiality to come' was announced (or at least presaged) ninety years ago by Benjamin might make you wonder if the realisation of a new materiality will be a constantly delayed and deferred promise.

Boscagli both follows Benjamin and pushes his work into new arenas. Initially he operates as a spirit guide demonstrating a range of critical procedures for attending to stuff. Benjamin's attitude towards commodification isn't to demystify it and return it to the world of labour. In many ways he works to increase the magical properties of the commodity by giving it a life beyond the moment of its promotion. This dynamism reveals 'the unpredictability of the object' which 'stands as a form of chance capable of unsettling the system of use and exchange value with which the fetish is saddled in modernity' (p43). While this loosens one aspect of the commodity's fetish character (it cancels its promissory note, so to say) it does little to unshackle it from the fate that capitalism has bestowed on it. What is needed is *more*, rather than less, fetishism: 'Through a play of disenchantment *and* re-enchantment the commodity is transformed from an object carrying the inscription of capital, that is, an object whose materiality has been irreversibly disembodied and abstracted, to a fetish which carries traces of a collective dream' (p47). The collective dream is the planetary memory of a classless society that can be glimpsed when the object is seen from the perspective of eternity. But what Boscagli also insists on is that 'stuff theory' doesn't just reveal an obdurate materiality in objects, it undoes the identity values that are inscribed across subjects too, making it an essential tool for feminists.

Stuff Theory's engagement with 'new materialism' is wide ranging (Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway, Catherine Malabou, etc.), but at its heart lies the idea of the 'quasi-subject quasi-object' that Michel Serres first introduced in 1980 in his book *The Parasite* and which was then adopted by Bruno Latour. Serres' classic example of a quasi-object is a football, which, when in play, is the centre of the action - a sun around which players circulate. 'Playing' writes Serres, 'is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance'.¹ It is this ability of objects, as 'stuff', to invoke human subjects as attributes, as materials in accord or discord with other materials, that is at the heart of Boscagli's book. To this end it isn't Benjamin who is the exemplary stuff theorist of the book but the filmmaker Agnes Varda, who in her documentary film *The Gleaners and I*, a film about people who forage for farmers' leftovers, demonstrates the aesthetic capacities of stuff as 'quasi-subject, quasi-object'. Varda films 'stuff', she films people who forage for stuff (be they hungry and in search of food, or artists in search of 'finds') and she films images of people foraging for stuff (in famous and not-so-famous paintings of gleaners). Sometimes the stuff she films is her hand holding a potato or trying to 'grasp' the image of passing truck with her hand. Her hand reveals her age, her stuff-ness, her creaturely-ness. When she picks an over-ripe and discarded fig, she declares it beautiful, she opens it up, bites into it, consumes the fruit and throws the skin into the trees.

'Stuff theory', with its foregrounding of 'quasi-objects, quasi-subjects', disrupts the stable organisations of subjects and objects. They (objects, subjects) fail to stay in their proper places, they wander, bleed into one another, collide and merge. The undoing of subject and object stabilities is something that is shared by affect theorists, where affect is precisely that which is pre-individual and unmoored from material supports (though it may still be reliant on them in some form). As Ben Anderson suggests, affect theorists have been inordinately interested in affects' capacities to disrupt equilibriums, to rain chaos down on order. But 'what is needed', writes Anderson 'is an account of how affective life is organised and mediated that sits alongside the emphasis of the excess of affective life over and above existing determinations' (p17). This, then, is the project of *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*, and it is a generative and necessary one.

Unusually for current work on affect, Anderson's most significant theoretical resource is Michel Foucault. In one sense what Anderson proposes is an approach to affect (and its cognates such as mood, atmosphere and feeling) that wants to see how it is managed and mobilised. So while affect is never simply a property of an object or subject, and is always wayward in its affections and attachments, it can become regulated and predictable in certain historical and geographical circumstances. Or at least this is what all sorts of agencies (from advertising to psychology, from interior designers to government departments) expend energy on attempting. And this is where Foucault provides the foundational perception. It is the notion of

1. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2007, p226.

the *'dispositif'*, a French term that is often translated as apparatus but can refer to physical devices, legal provisions, systems and plans, and so on, that is crucial for Anderson's book. The heterogeneity and intermeshing of an apparatus was what was important for Foucault: for instance, a visit to a doctor's surgery involves a vast array of arrangements, which include the physical circumstances of 'waiting', the archive of your medical records, the vast array of medical statements, the training of the doctor, the dog-eared magazines and the décor and notices in the waiting room, and so on. And it is this that provides the theoretical perspective for attending to some of the regularities of affect. For instance, in an evocative case study based around a company that produces various smells for businesses it isn't the scent on its own that is the apparatus, but the ensemble of environment, scent delivery system, the scent, the consumers, the idea of branding, and so on. A smell might be used to manage the anxiety of a patient undergoing an MRI scan (and 'beach-themed' scent has been used to such an end) but there is no direct correspondence between seaside smells and calming affects: rather it is the encounter within an apparatus or ensemble that is the scene of affect.

Encountering Affect is often primarily concerned with theoretical discussions of affect, aesthetics, emotions, sense (and so on) and with the political and cultural outcomes of different ways of understanding affect, but it is also laced with some memorable case studies. Some of these are historical; for instance, there is fascinating discussion of the way that morale was discussed and managed during World War Two. As part of a discussion of Raymond Williams' understanding of 'structures of feeling' Anderson explores the popular historical practice of naming a period (often a decade, or similar chunk of time) as an 'age' of anxiety (or some such affective descriptor). Crucially, he recognises that such designations don't belong to the past but are a product of a particular encounter with its documents, memories and material traces: 'it would be' he writes, 'very easy, for example, to characterise liberal-democratic societies in terms of an age of rage, an age of boredom, and age of a vague feeling of being connected, an age of pleasure in the suffering of others, and so on' (p109). And yet while it is easy to critique designating a period with one overarching feeling, it does offer a perspective for doing heuristic 'meso-level' work connecting large scale accounts of social organisation with the patterns of experience that are often felt by those caught up in the dominant forces of change. Anderson provides a very useful analysis of how designating our contemporary moment as an 'age of precarity' allows all sorts of phenomena to be connected as a 'generalised affective condition' (p126) where instability is normalised and where premonitions of catastrophe are part of a general mood.

Other case studies are ethnographic and include some powerful accounts of how music can reconfigure an emotional situation in surprising as well as predicted ways (and in today's world of portable music systems, a personal soundtrack is often an everyday form of mood management). One particular

ethnographic case study describes the author taking part (but as an observer) in an exercise simulating a disaster (a nuclear strike, a biological attack, or some other catastrophic event). It is an intriguing case study partly because it has been anonymised (as a condition of being allowed access to such planning) so we have no idea what arm of state is simulating this particular disaster scenario and planning exercise. In this ethnographic case study, the author explores affect as a particular atmospheric arrangement that attunes and orients bodies to events as a form of attention. It is in describing this ability to gather and focus, to dissipate and scatter, that draws out and reveals the general orchestrating capacities (of sense, perception, emotion and so on) of the affective apparatus. And it is this which is the substantial achievement of *Encountering Affect*.

Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Space continues the exploration of the vague 'air' of material environments and affective situations. If atmospheres name a situation that we all comment on ('you could cut the atmosphere with a knife', 'you should have been there, what an atmosphere') but find hard to pin down in any great detail (beyond the evaluation of them being conducive or not, comfortable or not, and so on), then how should we go about attending to them? Does the elusive vagueness of an atmosphere require a mode of investigation that will need sidelong glances, rather than being met face on? Just as you need to record the sound of wind by registering its ability to make leaves rustle or telephone wires whistle, atmospheres might best be registered as they exert their effects on bodies and situations. This is partly the way that the Italian philosopher of aesthetics Tonino Griffero approaches atmospheres in his book on the topic.

Atmospheres pursues its vague 'object' through a sustained dialogue with a tradition of existential phenomenology, to which it also contributes. The great benefit of treating atmospheres from the perspective of phenomenology is that phenomenology, particularly when it is informed by Heideggerian sensitivities, is particularly adept at drawing attention to ambient orientations *as ambient orientations* (rather than as meaningful entities that should be named, located and evaluated). Thus in Heidegger ideas of 'care' or 'mood' or 'attunement' become both foundational and constitutional of our being-in-the-world without losing their phenomenal form as ambient and organisational. The phenomenological tradition that Griffero is in dialogue with consists of both familiar names (Heidegger, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) and less-familiar phenomenologists such as Ludwig Klages, Herbertus Tellenbach, and Hermann Schmitz. Indeed, it is in relation to the latter, who conducted investigations into atmospheres as part of a programmatic 'new phenomenology' in the 1960s and 70s, that Griffero orients his work. If Schmitz used atmospheres to produce an objectivist and externalist phenomenology, Griffero sees atmospheres as phenomena that function as sensorial ambiance (often registered through a general synaesthesia) that requires sentimentally attuned subjects. For Griffero atmospheres are a

form of 'emotional weather' that objectively exists but only for us as sensitive barometers.

Atmospheres exist as 'a spatialised feeling', as 'a something-more, a *je-ne-sais-quoi* perceived by the felt-body in a given space, but never fully attributable to the objectual set of that space' (p6). But this 'something-more' isn't just something to name as a quality or as qualia (the way that the world seems to us): it also requires a taxonomical approach - its own 'atmospherology'. The atmospherology undertaken here is often directed by an attention to the sensual and sensorial environment - to qualities of light, to the climates of space (vastness, urbanity, and so on) and to the peculiar qualities of materials. For instance, wood has its own atmosphere 'for being a material whose stiffness is not at the expense of its 'warmth' and its certain rustic authenticity' (p97). As Griffero notes this might well be culturally specific. After all, for wood to function in this way might well require a society that also has steel, concrete and glass. The historicity (and therefore the cultural politics) of atmospheres is not, here, developed. In the end *Atmospheres* reads as establishing the foundations for an approach to our ambient and sentimental being-in-the-world, that intervenes at the level of theoretical orientation rather than offering an approach that could grasp the particular qualities of significant atmospheres that are being mobilised today by political rallies, by media assemblages, and by institutional settings.

These books represent a diverse range of work. It would be unfair to see them together as representative of a condition of 'post-post-structuralism', and as a symptom of our academic climate. They do, however, seem to point to the capaciousness of an aesthetic approach to the world, where the object of aesthetics is neither the artwork, nor the 'art-ification' of life, but where aesthetics instead attends to the whole gamut of sensual and affectual life, to the pulsions and propulsions of our material and sentimental world. And in that they also reveal the capaciousness of the aesthetic realms of life in things and stuff, in affects and atmospheres.

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