

“Redemptive Reification”

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Brown, Bill. *Other Things*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2015. xiv + 396 pages. ISBN 9780026076652. Hb. \$40.00

By the end of the nineteenth century, the untenability of modernity's value system became apparent. Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, and many other social critics, philosophers, and artists tried to uncover the mechanisms on which notions such as reality, representation, as well as the dissociation of the subject from the object world were based. Questioning the very idea of one given reality, they challenged the rational approach to the world, and aimed at discovering alternative realities and histories, as well as new modes of representation. *Other Things*, Bill Brown's latest contribution to the increasingly popular field of thing studies, delineates how material culture became the site of this revolution.

Brown's starting point incorporates Georg Lukács's claim according to which, in commodity capitalism, the sensuous qualities of objects are obscured by the commodity form, and Georges Bataille's observation that in capitalism, the proliferation of objects (commodities) and the devaluation or devitalization of the object world go hand in hand. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's and Jacques Lacan's object-thing dialectic, and André Breton's notion of the “crisis of the object” (qtd. in Brown 10), Brown creates his own conception of the thing that designates a momentary disruption of habitual ways of seeing, the moment when the materiality of the object emerges as a result of an encounter between subject and object. As Brown emphasizes, these moments of otherness have a critical potential, since they reveal to us the mechanisms of the commodified system we live in, which, however, we usually take for granted in our everyday relation to objects. Resulting from the defamiliarized way of seeing things, the thing emerges as an excess that points toward alternative ways of experiencing reality and history. Reaching this potential through the thing was the main aspiration of modernist and avant-garde artists, as well as of thinkers such as Marx, Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Heidegger, and Theodor Adorno.

Indeed, Brown acknowledges their ambition to “philosophize out of . . . things” (Adorno qtd. in Brown 39), however, he aims to discover thingness not in or through philosophy, but as a result of his engagement with literature, and the visual and plastic arts. His conviction is that works of art have a “material unconscious,” that is, “they *register* transformations of the material world that they do not necessarily *represent* or intentionally express” (9). It is

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies 24.2. 2018. Copyright © 2018 by HJEAS. All rights to reproduction in any form are reserved.

this assumption from which Brown's methodology derives; he borrows Arjun Appadurai's term, "methodological fetishism," to delineate his critical approach to artworks, claiming that "perhaps only an analytic overvaluation of the object allows literature to teach not just a history *of* things but a history *in* them" (221). By the former, he means "their circulation, the commodity's 'social life,'" while the latter marks "the crystallization of the anxieties and aspirations that linger there in the material object" (221).

Through his dialogue with various kinds of artworks, Brown demonstrates how thinkers and artists of the long twentieth century reclaim the "semantic plenitude" (13) of objects reinvigorating the "devalitized object world of modernity" (8). Since several "modes of thought"—such as history, philosophy, social and literary criticism, anthropology, science studies, and psychoanalysis—surface in his studies, he goes beyond mere art historical concerns, and is able to provide a complex, multi-faceted picture of the period in question. Brown discovers the "alternative histories" contained by objects accentuating the anxieties, aspirations, and desires preceding and following tragic events, like the world wars and 9/11, or phenomena such as economic scarcity, the proliferation of commodities after the Second World War, the sudden advance of the media and its role in identity formation (cultural icons), environmental crisis, the progress of technology, and globalization.

According to Brown, things and dealing with things have become current and relevant again; after having been dismissed by "structuralism and deconstruction," which were preoccupied with language, text, and meaning, things have reappeared in the academic sphere and the arts (12). The reason for this is the "dematerialization of material culture" (in Colin Renfrew's words), the anxiety caused by digitalization, the threat of the extinction of our planet, and the appearance of new, nonhuman agencies (robots) (12).

Although the volume consists of onetime lectures and treatises some of which Brown already published individually, they form a coherent monograph. Nine of the ten chapters are clustered in three sections. The volume starts with an "Overture," an introduction and an analysis of Achilles's shield in Homer, as well as its various interpretations, and a chapter on Brown's theoretical background, in which he provides his concept of the object-thing dialectic, which he further explores in Heidegger's and Lacan's works.

The chapters in the first section, "The Matter of Modernism," call attention to the extent to which modernist and avant-garde artists "were thinking with (or through) the object form" (88). With the help of Virginia Woolf's "Solid Objects" (1920), Man Ray's surrealist photographs, and Philip K. Dick's science-fiction novels, as well as numerous other examples, Brown

argues that both Modernism and the avant-garde were preoccupied with the objecthood of the artefact. He insightfully points out that while modernist art wanted to deny this objecthood, avant-garde works emphasized it, and still, their motivations were fairly similar: to overcome objecthood in order to produce thingness. This artistic practice served as social criticism, an attempt to disrupt habitual ways and create new modes of relating oneself to the everyday world. Attacking the commodity aspect, that is, the use-value and the exchange value of objects, the surrealists, in particular, aimed at creating what Brown calls “misuse value” (51).

The second section, “Unhuman History,” focuses on the anxiety caused by the ecological crisis, the waste economy of post-world war America, and the unstoppable progress of technology which urged several thinkers and artists—Hannah Arendt, Bruno Latour, Harold Searles, Myla Goldberg, and Brian Jungen, among others—to create a distance from modernity’s progress, and to view human history as relative, uncertain, and part of a larger picture: the unhuman history of the earth. The chapter on Jungen, a contemporary First Nation artist, illustrates most soundly what Brown regards a core aspect of the thing: that it “emerges from a kind of oscillation,” a vital indeterminability (216). Involving various object cultures, Jungen’s works have an uncertain “identity,” they can be interpreted in multiple ways.

The issue of “ontological ambiguity”—to use Brown’s formulation here—resurfaces in the subsequent chapters of the last section, “Kitsch Kulchur,” which deals with the paradoxes lying at the heart of commodity capitalism (2). With the help of Shawn Wong’s novel, *Homebase* (1979), Tony Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk* (1991), Brown delineates the anxiety caused by the “hyperpresence” of objects in 1950s’ America, where people found their lives increasingly overwhelmed with objects, and their desires and identities mediated by consumer culture (230). The protagonists of these novels—all children—divert from mainstream American cultural identity through finding a different relation to its icons. Drawing on Benjamin’s theories on the critical potential in children’s play, Brown reveals how the children in the three novels create alternative identities with the help of things, as well as alternative histories, that is, their immigrant past, which had been repressed by mainstream white culture. The analysis of these novels supports Brown’s claim that we should find the other thing “not outside the order of consumer culture . . . but in some desperately different relation to it” (195). In Spike Lee’s film, *Bamboozled* (2000), where the animate and the inanimate become uncannily inextricable, Brown similarly investigates the “repressed apprehension” of commodity capitalism, namely, the

objectification of people and the possibilities of overcoming this objectification (268).

The last chapter in the section deals with 9/11 memorabilia, reflecting on the prevalence and popularity of collectibles, and the accumulation of things that survived the World Trade Center, questioning the necessity of such things in remembering the most well-documented and broadcasted catastrophe. Brown observes that these objects compensate not really for the loss of the Twin Towers, but for the “loss marked . . . by their presence” while they stood (276), as they “symbolized change, abstraction, consumption” (281). After the tragedy, the towers themselves acquired a new meaning; they ended up as a much more powerful symbol than they had been. “As a missing object, the towers became a Thing, a metaphysical presence more massive than they ever really were” (281).

In his “Coda,” Brown discusses the contemporary situation of art and points out, with the help of Dan Flavin’s “light sculptures,” that its function today is “to rethink and rework the objects of daily life” in order to compensate for the loss of the significance of objects (294). Similarly to the previous ones, this chapter also demonstrates that, as Brown claims, we “continue to inhabit” modernity, thus, it is necessary to “leave the subject-object binary in place” (20). Brown warns against eliminating the subject-object boundary and “getting lost in the object,” that is, “succumbing to [a] merely empiricist” criticism (272). His understanding of the thing is ontical: it designates a dynamic subject-object relation, and not some kind of an essence in objects.

Other Things is a thorough and engaging work, and, as it is located at the intersection of several fields, I recommend it for a wide audience; those interested in Modernism, art (history), social criticism, thing studies, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, or museology will all find it a useful read.

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