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THE LIFE OF AN ARTIFACT IN AN INTERPRETIVE ARCHAEOLOGY

Abstract

This paper deals with the character of material culture. It takes the form of a set of related notes about time and material things, the relation between people and things, the process of design, and the work of the interpreting archaeologist. It draws implications for conservation on the one hand, in some comments about ruin and aura, and also epistemology, in its argument for a pluralism based upon the interpretive indeterminacy of the life-cycle of an artifact. Intellectual contexts include interpretive archaeology and its interest in active material culture, sociologies of technology, and constructivist philosophy of science.

Keywords: archaeological theory, material culture studies.

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INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETIVE ARCHAEOLOGY – AN OBLIQUE PERSPECTIVE

This paper tries to get to sketch some of the key features and implications of an interpretive archaeology, as postprocessual archaeology is now termed by many of its proponents (for example, Thomas 1995, Tilley ed 1994, Hodder 1991, Hodder et al eds 1995). It does this in a different way, setting out to answer no common archaeological question of method or theory, even though it begins with one which seems so easy to answer – the date of an artifact. This approach may seem to some oblique and perhaps abstract, but it has been deliberately chosen to connect archaeology directly with cognate fields and with some common social experiences.

An origin of the paper is my fascination with an issue in the social sciences the social construction of scientific knowledge and its intellectual connections with new sociologies of technology and their stress upon agency. For me this was captured in the debate between Bruno Latour and Pierre Lemonnier which was the background to a colloquium I attended at Les Treilles, Provence, in the summer of 1992 and at which was discussed the relations between society and material culture (see Lemonnier ed 1993). Historians of science and technology talked with anthropologists, ethologists, archaeologists, cognitive scientists and philosophers about matters from early hominids, social origins and tools, to kitchen design and human-computer interaction. What drew it all together was an *archaeological* interest in the theory of material culture.

My key points concern material culture and the materiality of the social fabric; how artifacts act as social agents; more generally, the character of human agency; the construction of our objects of archaeological interest through discourse and in this the fundamental symmetry of past and present; in all, a search for archaeological method which avoids essentialism (this is to treat archaeological sources as representative of some underlying and abstract essence or logic such as social structure – for a definition see Hodder et al ed 1995, page 236-7).

I particularly emphasise the notion of active material culture. This has always been a central proposition of postprocessual archaeology, that society is inconceivable without artifacts which actively communicate and help build society into what it is. Closely connected is the issue of social agency, the power and intentionality in creating society (for a general review Buchli 1995). Goods have come to be seen not as epiphenomena (representing, for example economic structures),

but as being central to the working of society. One particular and much debated line was to conceive material culture, through an analogy with text, as a semiotic and communicative medium (cf also Hodder 1986).

It is in this context that I take up the proposition that a radical opposition of people and things should be rethought. This has various dimensions. The issue of alienation and the commodity form finds clear definition in the work of Hegel and Marx, with a dialectic of production and the relationships between people and their creations. It has been the focus of a long-running debate in anthropology surrounding the nature of the gift and its insertion in social and cultural structures (after Mauss 1954). Some sociologists of technology have thrown considerable doubt upon the validity of distinguishing technical and scientific relations with nature and the material world from their sociocultural milieu (references below). The sociology of the body, with an interest in material selves and the embodiment of society, is now a distinctive interdisciplinary field which has taken hold in archaeology (from Shanks and Tilley 1989 to Barrett and Richards eds 1998). Some interpretive archaeologists have explicitly proposed that some prehistoric artifacts were not alienated from social relations and so acted as agents (Tilley 1996, Thomas 1995). Behind all this is a radical challenge to the enlightenment opposition of mind and body, society and nature.

Interpretive archaeology claims to deal with social agency in the past. The corollary is an acceptance of archaeological agency in constructing the past in the present. The past, as object of archaeological interest is not discovered, but (re)constructed in archaeological discourse. Here are the much debated issues of the politics of the discipline, very much, for example, in the forefront of the world Archaeological Congress; there is also the on-going and contentious debate between objectivism and relativism (lately summarised in Lampeter Archaeology Workshop 1997). In this paper I add the gloss of the fundamental symmetry of past and present. Social agency in the construction of society and of history brings together both past and present: archaeology as social practice, is a mode of interpretive cultural production like any other, past or present. This is also the matter of the temporality of archaeology and its objects (outlined in Shanks and Tilley 1987b).

On the one hand the issues here have been pivotal in the development of my thinking. Agency and the politics of discourse were at the heart of my earlier work with Tilley, and the anti-essentialism of Laclau and Mouffe's socialism (1985) continues to inform my work. I make no apologies for the considerable debt this paper owes to the work of Latour which has taken us so far into answering many of the conundrums of material culture. In all, this paper could almost serve as a preface to my latest book on Greek art (Shanks 1998).

On the other hand I see these same issues as relevant to the continuing debate about the character of archaeological interpretation. I believe that a comparison of these convergent strands of thought generates new insights into some key archaeological issues and sketches out more clearly the lines of a humanistic archaeology.

LIFE-CYCLE

Of what time is an archaeological find? A date can be attributed to an artifact. And, of course, dates may be used as the basis for chronological systems; they are important for ordering the heterogeneous confusion of things found; they allow comparisons to be made according to the similarity and difference of dates.

The attribution of date does not answer the question of the time of a find, however. Which date or moment or period of time is to be chosen? Normally date is accepted to refer to the time of the making of an artifact, or the time of its incorporation in the archaeological record. The relationship between the two times may be of interest to the archaeologist as indicator of some social process such as curation. But why these two dates? The archaeological find is also of our time in that it has been found. This date may also be attributed to an artifact; museums record dates of accession. But these are usually considered to be secondary to those dates which are conceived to belong to the original context of the artifact – that which is of interest to the archaeologist.

All these dates are points upon a continuity. That continuity is the duration of the material find. It is the durability of the find which allows there to be these different dates which are chosen as significant moments along that continuity. In this respect it is common to refer to the life-cycle of an artifact (for example Schiffer 1987: 13f; Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 46; the classic in anthropology is Appadurai ed 1986 and especially Kopytoff 1986). Raw material is taken and transformed according to conception of design, an artifact produced, distributed or exchanged, used, consumed and lost or discarded. It may be recycled, given new life. This can be held to end when the artifact enters the physical archaeological record. But it is quite possible to argue that, found in the archaeological excavation and written into archaeological discourse, an ancient artifact is being recycled. The durability of the artifact, its histor-

ical continuity, holds together these events of its life-cycle. There is a continuity, albeit one with lacunae.

DECAY AND MORBIDITY

The life of an artifact is accompanied by physical changes and processes. An artifact wears in its use and consumption. Marks upon it attest to events it has witnessed, things that have happened to it. It can deteriorate. The artifact ages.

People too display analogous changes and marks of time and experience. Some are gathered in the term physiognomy. People show signs of their experience and ageing. These are the human conditions of mortality, physicality and morbidity (Olivier 1994).

Marks of origin and individuality. Marks of ageing, time and use. Discard and disposal. Deterioration and death. The physical processes and changes that occur and accrue to objects and people in their life-cycles are archaeology's *very condition of being:* archaeology is simply not conceivable without them. They are explicitly considered under the heading of site formation processes (natural, cultural, of all kinds) (Schiffer 1987), wear studies (Hayden (ed) 1979; Keeley 1980; Vaughan 1985; new ref Hurcumbe), mortuary analysis (Chapman and Randsborg 1981; O'Shea 1984; new reference), and matters of preservation and conservation (Plenderleith and Werner 1972; Kuhn 1986; Cronyn 1990).

But I argue that these conventional and legitimate archaeological approaches sometimes also neutralise and sanitise their object. Wear studies, conservation, mortuary analysis, and the formation processes which are the object of middle range theory are treated as technical issues or belonging with the natural sciences. A conservator deals with chemical and other means of dealing with decay. Mortuary analysis is the methodological means of moving from traces of the practices focusing upon the dead to social process or structure. Middle range theory is often held to be a technical means of uniting the statics of the archaeological record with the dynamics of social process (Binford 1977, 1981, 1983). The study of site formation processes is concerned with behavioural and natural processes which form the archaeological record: understanding formation processes is a means to an end, a means to regain the past (Schiffer 1987).

What is missing? Life and death. They are avoided.

Ironically archaeological mortuary analysis is little concerned with death and the accompanying putrefaction. Just as the sentiments which surround bereavement are considered unnecessary or contingent to mortuary analysis, so too are the manifold dimensions of the central physical processes – death and rot (but see now Tarlow).

Consider the conservation ethic. That things from the past should be preserved or conserved seems unchallengable. The past should be protected and conserved (Lipe 1977; Lowenthal and Binney (eds) 1981; Cleere (ed) 1984; Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 470-80; Carman 1996). It is more than a little sickening to think of the loss of so much of the past due to contemporary development and neglect. The seduction of conservation is one of gratification – ridding the self of this nausea of loss and decay. Associated with loss and decay are dirt, death, illness, those organic properties of the past. They are to be removed. The past is to be purified in a staunching of decay; death held in check. The task is given to science. Science is applied to clean up the wound and sterilise (Shanks 1992a: 69-75).

In Britain many ancient sites, usually architectural, are in the care of the state and are open to the public. There is a very distinctive style to most of these monuments. Many are ruins, but consolidated. Loose stones are mortared in position. Walls are cleaned and repainted. Paths tended or created. Fine timber walkways are constructed. The ground is firm with neatly trimmed and edged lawns. Park benches are provided. This is all justified in the terms of health (stopping the further decay of the monument) and safety (of the visiting public). However reasonable such a justification, it creates a distinctive experience of the visit to such a past monument. Masonry, grass and sky: such monuments are interchangeable, if it were not for their setting (Shanks 1992a: 73).

Conservation is a potential sanitisation and sterilisation of the past. Life and death are missing. We can forget that objects haunt. We can fail to feel the ghosts (Shanks 1993).

DECAY, AURA AND HISTORICITY

Ageing and decay, basic aspects of the materiality of both people and things, are today often considered negatively. Worn out things are thought to be of no use to anyone and, when cleaned up, only of interest to a museum or collector. To be old and retired is not always to be valued and respected (Fig. 1).

Instead of this negative attitude, and with David Lowenthal (1991), I make a plea for pathology.

Consider plant pathology. Most gardeners strive to

eradicate slime mould, rust and fungi. Yet these are natural, even essential adjuncts of plants they infest. Many attack weeds. Others create compost. Some, like entomophthora, kill off flies. But these ecological virtues still leave them unloved by flowerfanciers. When bacterial fasciation infects forsythia, clusters of distorted leaves tip plank-like shoots. Rather than cutting them off for burning, why not keep them? They do not spread; and their oddity adds varietal interest to any garden. Slime moulds congeal into a mass of powdery grey or sulphur and crimson spores, and enliven lawns. The intricacy of bird's nest fungus is a striking adjunct of stem decay. (Lowenthal 1991: 2-3)

Here infection, fungal and bacterial action, which also accompany decay, are seen as complements to the life and health of a garden. Lowenthal argues for the architectural value of age and decay, a sensitivity to the qualities of the materials of building. In archaeology the argument is that decay is an *essential adjunct* to a *living* past.

Conservation may stem processes of ageing and decay. Death may be delayed. But immortality cannot be achieved. This is not to hold that we should allow the past to rot away, but to have a living past we should cherish decay and ruin. It can be incorporated into our archaeological projects in the way that we attend to the life of an artifact. I will be explaining how through the course of this paper.

Both people and artifacts have life-cycles. Decay and fragmentation are a token of our symmetry with the physical world. Sensitivity to wear and decay is a mark of humility before the otherness and independence of material things. The signs of wear upon something that I have just acquired show that it existed before me; it was not created just for me, but has a particular history of its own. Historicity, the sense of the linear, directional flow of history and its events, depends on historiography, writing the plot of history. Writing distances us from cyclical routines of the everyday and the repetitions of life-cycle, and into which we can be immersed. So the marks upon an old pot are often also a form of writing, attesting to the history the pot has witnessed, *its own* historicity.

The decay of an artifact is a token of the *human* condition. The fragment, the mutilated and incomplete thing from the past, brings a sense of life struggling with

Fig.1. Esgair Fraith, West Wales. Abandoned farmstead.

time: death and decay await us all, people and objects alike. In common we have our materiality.

When a building collapses, the order of its construction and interior spaces disperses. We meet the commixture of materials and things in our excavation whose object is, among other things, to reorder, to abolish the disorder of collapse and dilapidation, to find significance and signification in the apparent chaos. Archaeologists clear up and tidy the remains of the past. But we might remember too that the litter and discard which accompany decay are interesting in their heterogeneity: juxtapositions of fibula and quemstone, gold ring and ox scapula in sifting through the cultural rubbish tip. The strange and oftentimes surreal juxtapositions of things with which archaeologists deal may be dismissed as distraction, or reduced to manifestation of cultural practices about which we know well; but a sensitivity to the strangeness of litter can reveal preconceptions about our cultural classifications, for example surrounding dirt (Hodder 1982a: 62f; see also Douglas 1966). Such an everyday and mundane occurrence like litter can be surprising.

There is, after Nietzsche, a well-worked argument that discovery and innovation arise from metaphor, the juxtaposition of what was previously considered separate (discussed by Knorr-Cetina 1981, chapter 3). Litter creates.

So too, the fragment of the past evokes. We can work on the archaeological fragment to reveal what is missing; the shattered remnant invites us to reconstruct, to suppose that which is no longer there. The fragment refers us to the rediscovery of what was lost.

More generally it can be argued that the disfunction which accompanies wear need not, indeed should not be seen as a problem (see the discussion of Heidegger on disturbance and breakdown by Dreyfus 1991: 70-82). Disfunction refers us to the being of something; it draws attention to the artifact or social actor which is otherwise overlooked and ignored. I do not notice the working of my washing machine until it goes wrong, 'goes on strike', and then I treat it as a problem. But to accept disfunction as a revelation of being involves a project of *maintenance* – of getting on with something on a day-to-day basis. To treat disfunction as a problem calls for a project of *intervention* – not just getting on with things, but acting *upon* them. David Pye (1978) has detailed an approach to design which accepts that nothing is ever purely functional in that useful devices always do useless things; design is always partly failure. Washing machines do and always will break down. Cars are comfortable ways to transport ourselves, but they generate noise and heat, they guzzle fossil fuels, pollute the earth, and they always break down eventually.

AURA AND THE COMMODITY FORM

When disfunction and decay are not conceded there is a desire for *dead* things, things which do not change, essential qualities of things (abstract and unchanging), things which do not go wrong. This desire is encompassed by the concept of commodity.

The commodity form is a principle of abstract and universal exchange. Money, as a medium of universal exchange allows the exchange of anything for anything else. The particularity of what is exchanged does not matter. Any transaction is the same as any other, and can thus be termed homogeneous or abstract. Because the commodity form takes no account of different things, no account of the particular and historical life of things, it is the principle of death represented by pure repetition.

The commodity form may find expression in the mass-produced object – the output of controlled, predictable, repeated, and standardised production. Every commodity is seen as the same as any other. A particular washing machine is representative of its class of artifact and is held to wash clothes. This is compromised when it goes wrong; breakdown is a problem. We are detached from its life-cycle which runs through the relations of its production, distribution and processes of ageing. The washing machine goes wrong; throw it away and get another – repeat the purchase.

The death represented by the commodity becomes clearer if I contrast the mass-produced artifact with the product of craft, a piece of studio ceramic for example (Fig. 2). The latter is a denial of pure repetition. Its life resides in its resistance to its making, its unpredictability. Its life-cycle may also involve it in the art-market, arguably a market of commodity forms.

Walter Benjamin (1970a, 1970b) related the rise of the commodity form to changing conceptions of aura. Aura refers to the sense of associations and evocations that cluster around an object; correspondences and interrelations engendered by an object. Aura is a sense of distance, no matter how close an object may be: it somehow seems more than what it is. 'To perceive the aura of an object is to invest it with the ability to look at us in return' (Benjamin 1970b: 190); it is the transposition of qualities of the animate to the conventionally inanimate world.

When we speak of something having sentimental value we are referring to aura; the article means something to us because it evokes memories of a common history; both the article and we have shared a life. Benjamin discusses the aura of works of art. Tourists cluster around the Mona Lisa in the Louvre because of the singularity of the painting achieved through its associations and evocations.

Aura is not a quality which people bring to something. We do not read aura into the work of art. Consider rock brought back from the moon by astronauts in the late 60s and early 70s. The piece of rock displayed in a museum is not just any piece of rock. It is from up there, the moon. It is not of this earth. The rock is both present to me now, but also beyond (admittedly also on the other side of the glass in the museum). Moon rock has an aura. It may be objected that this is something I read into the rock, something which is not an attribute of the rock. If I were to find out that it was not in fact from the moon its aura would dissipate immediately and it would become just a mundane piece of rock. But here is a difference between two pieces of inanimate material which physically may be identical. So what is the difference? It is the life histories of the two pieces of rock. One has an everyday history. The other is part of a project which took people up in rockets and spacecraft for great distances and at great effort, and then back again. It ties in American political manoeuvres in the 60s, my watching TV as a child and those ghostly figures stepping down on the moon surface. Aura is the mode whereby these associations and events are gathered around an artifact. Aura refers to the life of things.

Such particular relations with things can be lost with the rise of massproduction and the commodity form which deny any living relationship with the material world, treating it as the stuff of manipulation and controlled repeated production.

Aura and the commodity form are not however exclusive. In collage and montage the commodity can be treated as a heterogeneous fragment. Evocation, association, displacement, meaning, life can be found in the gaps between things, in difference and dissonance (Berger et al 1972; Shanks 1992a: 104-5, 188-90). This is made conspicuously clear in subcultural style for example the mobilisations of things and their associations in punk of the late 70s (Hebdige 1979; see also

Fig. 2. Studio ceramic: life in a resistance to making.

Clifford 1988). Safety pins became very unfamiliar. It is something many of us do everyday in juxtaposing in our homes and offices things brought from all sorts of aspects of lives; together they generate meaning and association. They may bring homes and offices alive. This too is the life and fascination of litter and rubbish.

WHY AND HOW ARE OBJECTS CONCEIVED DIFFERENTLY TO PEOPLE?

In the common process of life, life-cycle and history there are these many parallels and associations between people and things. Why then, and how, are things held to be different to people?

Simplicity and complexity. Objects are often thought to be simpler than people. But many interactions between people are very simple; people often merge into the background and may be, *in particular circumstances, treated* far more simply than many machines. It is quite possible to have a complex relationship with a computer. Or indeed a work of art which can gather around itself many associations and connotations. Don Norman (1988) argues that most of the complexity of everyday knowledge lies not in people's heads but in the objects with which people surround themselves. There would seem to be a continuity from simple to complex irrespective of whether we are dealing with people or things.

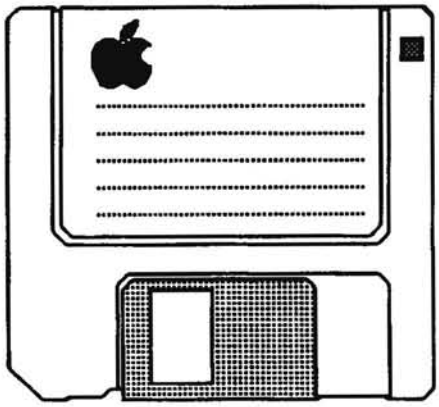
Lack of consciousness. Objects, it can be argued, do not possess consciousness as do people. I am not necessarily for imputing consciousness to things, but it might be asked how could you tell? Think of the issues raised by Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner.* If you create an artifact (a cyborg) which performs as a human and also give it personal memories, how is it different to a person? The Turing test (Turing 1950) sets out to answer the question of the nature of artificial intelligence, and holds that if a questioner cannot tell from the answers to a series of questions whether those answers come from a machine or not, then it may be accepted that the answers come from an intelligent being. This is irrespective of the form or materiality of the entity answering. Whatever the validity of the Turing test, the field of artificial intelligence raises serious questions about the boundaries and interactions between human and object or machine worlds. Many objects do display extremely complex and independent behaviour. The mathematics of chaos deal with object worlds which are based on regularised principles but which nevertheless display unpredictable and independent, 'lifelike' behaviour. And what of animals? They may not have a consciousness as we understand it in ourselves, but this does not mean that we are absolved morally from treating them as equals. Why not also apply this to things?

But does this not involve a naive anthropomorphism? Immoral because human suffering should not be debased by comparison with an object world which lacks feeling and consciousness (but see above). This criticism can be answered with other questions. Who mixes the worlds of objects and things? Doctors do. They connect people, chemicals, artifacts, bacteria. In what ways are they immoral? There are no simple ethical answers here. (Latour 1989: 125)

Surely objects are passive, inert, inanimate? But consider a computer diskette (Fig. 3). It looks like an inert and passive square of plastic and magnetic medium. Diskettes are inserted into computers. As a square you might think there are six different ways you could do this. But you can't. The diskette will not let you. It will allow only one mode of insertion. The diskette is active. So too are these bookshelves in my room, though they are apparently passive. They hold up my books and allow them to remain in order. Objects and artifacts can do work. Simply think of what a person would have to do to replace an artifact and then it can be seen how active the object world is.

Language: only humans talk, and when artifacts are said to speak it is through a human intermediary. But there has been an enormous amount of work associated with structuralism and poststructuralism which shows convincingly that a linguistic analogy can be applied to the material world: it is often structured like a text and communicates (see, among others, Hodder 1986 and Tilley ed 1990 for archaeology). But again this may be ascribed to an intermediary – 'society' making its classifications. Thereagain some have argued for the death of the author (after Barthes (1986) and Foucault (1986a)), that issues of linguistic and textual communication are not simply about an agent or subject expressing themself. Consider also representative democracy. Who is speaking when a Member of Parliament speaks in the House of Commons in London? Is it the member or their constituency? It is impossible to tell apart those who speak directly or indirectly, unless we start to argue about the nature of representation (political and other). There is no simple answer to the issue of language, agent and object. In a scientific experiment the object world responds to questions put and trials made upon it – the natural world 'speaks'. Is this to be

Fig. 3. An active artifact.



denied? Solipsism is the result if it is denied. No, it cannot simply be argued that people speak and objects do not. The issues are far more subtle.

The world of objects is that of objectivity; not anything can be done with the object world: it has its own logic and rules (laws of nature) which impose limits on human manipulation. Now here we are getting to the matter. Objects are considered to belong to another order. People and things are inscribed into a series of dualities, from which they cannot, and indeed must not, be extricated (so it is conventionally held).

OBJECTS AND DUALISTIC THINKING

Objects are written into another order separate from the social:

human world	object world
society	environment
history	nature
the social	the technical
humanities	natural sciences
mind	body

The former may be held to *supplement* the material world; the latter to be to do with materials, science, technics, the environment, objectivity and the inanimate. And these dualisms underlie the arguments around processual and post-processual archaeology, the place of the interpretation of (social) meaning in archaeology, the character of scientific archaeology (Hodder 1982b, 1986; Shanks and Tilley 1987a, chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 1987b; *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 1989; Preucel 1991; Bintliff 1993; cf Lampeter Archaeology Workshop 1997).

There are perceived dangers in not upholding the dualisms. If the object world is collapsed into the social world (via notions such as the symmetry of people and things in their common life-cycles) it might appear that objective standards of truth are lost and relativism results; if objects and their materiality are historical, objectivity (the quality an object possesses) would be contingent. This is because the object world is seen as providing constraints and limits on what can be said and done through its quality of objectivity which is beyond the historical particularities of the social. Society is seen as weakness, objectivity as strength. With no constraints there would seem to be idealism and all its dangers.

It is because of these dualisms that archaeology cannot cope with the evocations of decay and morbidity; they threaten abstract and timeless objectivity, the solid rock upon which fact and truth are supposed to be built. Life-cycle is instead ascribed to the technical and the natural; decay is a problem and to do with preservative chemicals. Archaeology cannot have objects which are somehow on a par with people otherwise the dualisms threaten to dissolve. The past has to be killed off. This is the guilt at the heart of archaeology: in excavation archaeologists destroy that which they think they cherish.

ACCEPTING THE LIFE OF AN ARTIFACT: MIXING PEOPLE AND THINGS

I am arguing that the archaeological experience of ruin, decay and site formation processes reveals something vital about social reality, but something which is usually disavowed. Decay and ruin reveal the symmetry of people and things. They dissolves the absolute distinction between people and the object world. This is why we can so cherish the ruined and fragmented past.

What follows if it is accepted in this way that artifacts and people are similar, both having a material and historical nature which is expressed in the concept of life-cycle?

People and the realm of the social become material, and the object world, nature, acquires a history (of different relations with people). So there is nothing purely social or technical, human or non-human. There has not been a 'pure' human social relation for perhaps over 2 million years, since artifacts came to regularly accompany hominids. If a pure social relationship is sought, reference should be made to primate society

(Byrne and Whiten (eds) 1988; Strum and Latour 1987). So where are we now? We are inextricably mixed up with non-humans. Our histories are united. This is also to argue that society is not sui generis, but has to be materially constructed. The implications for social archaeology are considerable. I will unpack some of these ideas in the next sections.

This means that we are part machines (Haraway 1991, Law 1991). The easy integrity of the person and the self have been questioned in a historical and philosophical decentring of the subject. A monstrous elision of people and things is a continuation of the contemporary project of inscribing text on bodies and things, constituting agents in discourses (from Levi-Strauss through Foucault and beyond; the focus on agency and the social theory of those such as Giddens). If you do not like being part machine what are you going to do? Become a baboon? (See Deleuze and Guattari 1980).

If there is no essential difference between the social and object worlds, and if objects come to be in their history, then objectivity (the quality of the objective world), which is often conceived as the basis of fact and truth, is not an essential and abstract category, removed from history. Objectivity and truth are not absolute but come into being; they are achieved. They are contingent, but nonetheless real. They are both material and social.

If there is no timeless quality such as objectivity, the technical world and that of science are social practices like any other (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Knorr-Cetina 1981; Knorr-Cetina and Mulkay (eds) 1983; Lynch 1985; Latour 1987; Pickering (ed) 1992). In a world of no essential difference between people and things, the social and the technical, the arts and sciences are united or symmetrical in that they all deal with *mixtures* of people and things.

Regarding the environment and object world, it is better perhaps to think not of constraints out there, separate from society and impinging upon its working, but of *resources* (people, things, energies, ideas) *mobilised* in a particular and historical project. We cannot negotiate with gravity falling out of a 10th story window. But neither is it easy to negotiate with a terrorist bomber. These circumstances do not often occur however. 'Hard' reality does not often suddenly impose itself. It is usually more gradual, during which time 'society' may negotiate and change its practices: consider environmental change. It is more useful to focus upon human creativity. Gravity may be seen not so much a constraint as a resource used, for example, by an engineer in the building of a bridge.

Accepting the symmetry of people and things, their common materiality and historicity, means that problems of methodology threaten to dissolve! Much social archaeology starts from a list of essential or abstract categories or factors (eg the social, technical, environmental, religious, economic), specifying their relationships and relative importances, then moves to investigate their expression in a particular historical case (Shanks and Tilley 1987a: 119-22, 1987b: 54-60). The origins of the categories and factors remains a mystery. Are they universal? What if the people being studied did not recognise the same factors; what if society then was not constructed in the same way? Worse, what if the categories of society and the object world are really historical? We might instead start from the allocation of categories and labels made by the actors (human and non-human). I will indicate below how this can be done. Instead of *general factors,* the technical, social, religious, etc become *local achievements* (Latour 1986: 272-3). Society needs constructing.

IF OBJECTS AND PEOPLE ARE TO BE HELD IN SYMMETRY, WHAT IS AN ARTIFACT?

I need to expand on some of these points to clarify.

Consider the pot in Figure 4. What is it? It is a pot – a ceramic vessel of a particular kind. Its objective substratum is 'potness'. How can it be denied that it is ceramic? So does this mean that materially its object quality is that of the ceramic, while the rest – its social meanings, aesthetic qualities – are supplemental?

This position upholds the dualism of social and technical. It does not allow for difference: the ceramic substratum is here an essential quality, abstract and general. Although it is quite legitimate to unite things through qualities of sameness it is vital to consider also difference and variability, both within the category, and applied to the uniting category itself. The very category of ceramic is a changing and historical one. In the context of this paper on the temporality of an object, the attribution of this pot to an objective category such as ceramic does not explain the origin (the genealogy) of our category 'ceramic'. Above all, to identify this as a 'pot' does not explain the particular *life* and historicity of this artifact – its movement through production, exchange, consumption, deposition, decay and discovery, reconsumption in the 19th century museum and 20th century text. Are all of these contingent to its nature, its objectivity? If so, how did it come into being, then and here and now? How is it here now, as a picture in this journal? Is this irrelevant to its reality?

POTS AND PROJECTS

The pot ties people and things together in its *life-cycle* (raw material – design – production – distribution – consumption – discard – discovery etc). What did it unite? This particular artifact brings together clay and potter, painter and new brushes (for miniature work), a new interest in figurative work, the interests of patron perhaps and trader, heterogeneous elements in its figured designs (animals, warriors, monsters, violence, flowers, special artifacts), perfume (it is a perfume jar), oil (perfumed), the body (illustrated and anointed), travel away from Korinth (its place of making), ships, sanctuary of divinity, colonist, corpse and cemetery (pots such as this were given to divinities and the dead) (Johansen 1923; Payne 1931, 1933 and many works after; the pot is fully discussed in Shanks 1992b, 1992c, 1995 and 1998). The perfume jar helped constitute the nineteenth century art museum (albeit in a small way). This pot has been mobilised many times in defining the discipline of classical archaeology (see the bibliographical listings of Amyx (1988: 23) and Benson (1989: 44)). And this life-cycle can be extended to include myself and a reader – the pot unites us here even now, mobilised as it has been by me in this *project* of mine (Shanks 1996, chapter 1).

Fig. 4. Entering an assemblage of people and things. A Korinthian perfume jar of the seventh century BC.

In its life-cycle the pot brings together all this, including aspirations, futures, distances, feelings, hopes as well as objects, people and social relationships. This is a network of heterogeneous actors (Law 1987 for the term). And in this network or assemblage, the pot gathers through people's interests and projects.

THE NON-IDENTITY OF AN OBJECT

Consider the following diagram (Fig. 5).

Identity (i) may be asserted (A=i), or the n dimensions of association and affiliation followed through it's life-cycle A – n, while its 'identity', is suspended (- i). Regarding classification and identity, the self-contained identity of an artifact may be defined according to attributes (a). The discovery of identity may equally be made by following an agglomerative and synthetic articulation that is the artifact's life-cycle – following the artifact as it gathers heterogeneous actors (people, things, feelings, interests ...).

I am here proposing a conception of the artifact as a multiplicity, an historical and heterogeneous *assemblage* (Shanks 1998, chapter 2 for a full discussion of this term). Abstract identity (ceramic) is bracketed as we follow the artifact in its life.

An artifact, as is accepted, is a multitude of data points, an infinity of possible attributes and measurements. Which ones are made and held to constitute its identity depends conventionally upon method and the questions being asked by the archaeologist. But I also hold that the artifact is *itself* a multiplicity. Its identity is multiple. It is not just one thing. The artifact does not only possess a multitude of data attributes, but is also itself multiplicity. We come to an object in relationships with it, through using, perceiving it, referring to it, talking of it, feeling it *as* something. This *as* is vital. It is a relationship of analogy – *as if it were something.* And it is always ironically something else our references to the object are always metaphorical. That object find *is* not the word/label/category 'pot', though we can legitimately treat it *as if* it were, given certain interests and goals – projects. And these projects, interests and goals are culturally and socially constructed and meaningful. There are an infinity of possible relationships with an object and these literally make it what it is for us. The relationships are not abstract or given, but social and

historical. So the materiality of an object has a history. That pot found by an archaeologist is not what it was.

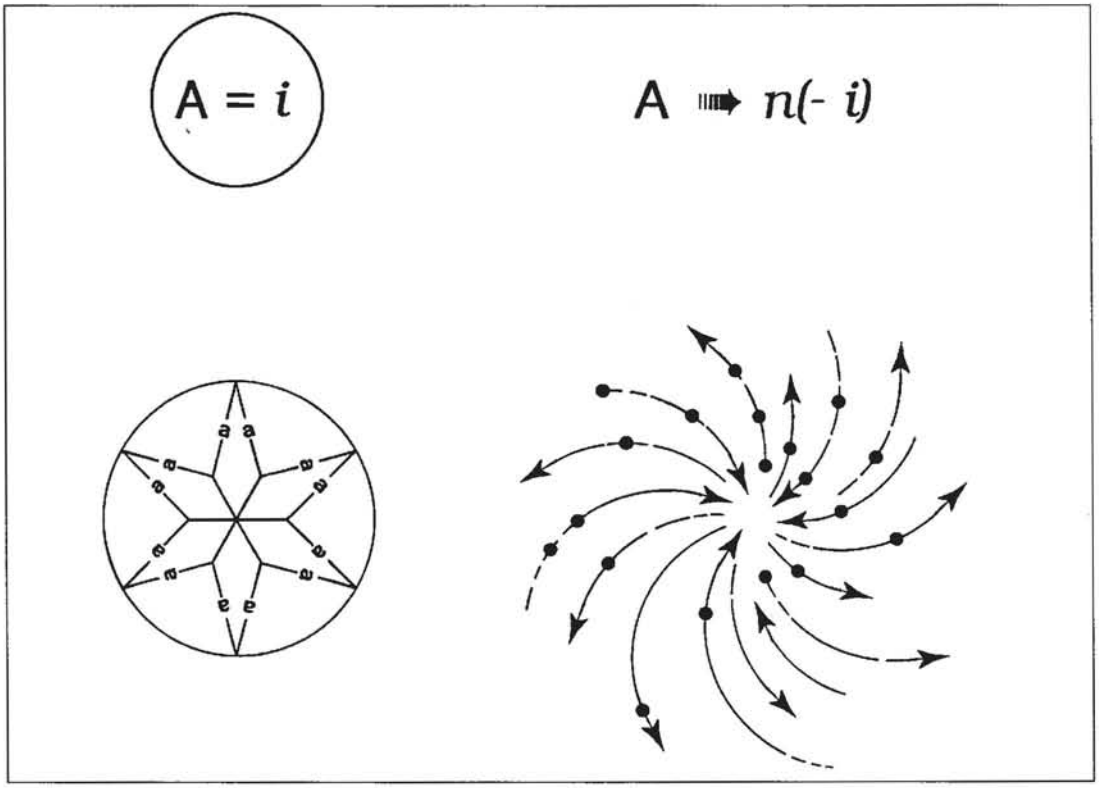
Skara Brae in the Orkneys is an archaeological site, a prehistoric settlement. It is the objective reality of the past. What does this mean? I am arguing that a site such as this does not possess an abstract essence such as objectivity, and that its objective being has a history. Things have a history which is often tied to that of people. This means that Gordon Childe, who excavated Skara Brae with a team of archaeologists, is part of the (multiple) existence of Skara Brae. Just as Skara Brae is part of the biography of Gordon Childe, so too Gordon Childe is part of the life-cycle or biography of Skara Brae. Gordon Childe *happened* to Skara Brae.

How could you conceive of Skara Brae before the storm which revealed the site and before the project of Gordon Childe? Are we to apply his work retrospectively and suppose that Skara Brae was there all along, even without Childe, his workers, the British archaeological establishment, the funding agencies, the hard realities of archaeological work? Are we to project the present into the past? Isn't that what ideological archaeologies do? Nazi archaeologists find their political realities in the past, projecting back from the present.

Of course you may *believe* that Skara Brae was there all along. But really it is of no necessary concern. And how would you prove it? Is there a time machine which would allow an archaeological team to excavate Skara Brae in the 14th century to check that it was there then? Is it not better to accept that the object world comes to be in our relationships with it? Gordon Childe and everything he brought with him is part of the historical reality of Skara Brae.

So rather than saying that this illustrated object *is* a pot, we might also acknowledge that this object *becomes* a pot, that is due to my productive relationship with it. Of course, this does not mean that I can say it is an axehead, but I can make of it many things, depending on interest and purpose. I might explain its painted designs in terms of a history of animal art, or I might relate the form of the figures to ideological conceptions of the body. In both cases this may mean making no reference to the object being a ceramic form. I simply work on its materiality in the craft that is archaeology

Fig. 5. Conceptions of an artifact (A); its classification and identity.



(Shanks and McGuire 1996).

We can never capture raw materiality. Why should we? The object always withholds something. I put a thin section of the ceramic beneath my polarising microscope and it becomes another world of colours and patterns which technical skills can interpret as mineral inclusions and effects of temperatures. And even specifying chemical and physical composition is understanding as. Metaphor and analogy are essential, as particle physics with its strangely named entities and forces conspicuously shows. The vital role of metaphor and analogy, for example in innovation, is widely accepted in the philosophy of science (as mentioned above: see also Black 1962; Hesse 1970).

All this is to open space, not to deny the undoubted validity of much scientific interest. That pot can take us in many directions, but so many seem closed by the standard narrow and empirical definitions of archaeological method and science. We are invited to follow the artifact and the people it unites through their projects and interests to attend to the artifact. This is a sensitivity to its historicity, its life and the way it gathers many sorts of things, people, feelings, aspirations.

'INVENTOR' THOMAS EDISON

In the list of dualisms above the object world is often associated with the realms of science and the technical. These are frequently considered to be separable from the social world because they deal with the application of reason to objective reality. Science and technology may be put to political and evil purpose, but they are in themselves neutral. The practical successes of technology surely indicate this?

Technology is a major field of interest in archaeology. Consider the conventional treatments of technology in archaeology: descriptions of mechanical processes and material effects; a focus on objects themselves and the formal aspects of their construction and use; technology in a book or chapter of its own, isolated from social, symbolic, moral contexts; a focus on visible features of objects: marks of tools, processes and use (Hodges 1976; MacGregor 1984; Cotterrel and Kamminga 1990; Tylecote 1992, for example). Technology is also used as an independent means of classification (the three ages of stone, bronze and iron). There is an interest too in inventions and their diffusion. Technology, technical subject of scientific interest, is thus treated as independent, coming from man's (sic) application of reason to the object world, society operating upon nature via technology which is thereby divorced from society (but contrast the French and other approaches to technology as represented by many of the contributors to *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 9 1990: Technology in the Humanities, and the journal *Techniques et Culture).*

But what happens when we give back to the technical artifact its life?

Technology is often associated with invention, the work of the inventor. What is the character of this work?

Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. In his work is it possible to see the supposed separation of technical and social factors? Edison has been studied by Thomas Hughes in the context of the electrification of the United States (1983, 1985).

Edison did not just 'invent' the lightbulb. The model of technology which supposes the application of reason to material and objective reality is not at all adequate. The light bulb was part of a sociotechnical system which required and enabled its invention and use. Edison was a system builder (Hughes 1987). He worked on inanimate physical materials, on and through people, texts, devices, councils, architectures, utility companies, economic considerations ... . He travelled between these different domains weaving an emergent web which constituted and reconstituted the bits and pieces that it brought together. In the history of Hughes the distinctions between humans and technical devices is subordinated to exploring a sociotechnical system: cable laying, electrical transmissions and resistances, city power stations, politics of city government, gas utility companies, laboratory experimentation. It was the characteristics of this network that conditioned the design of the light bulb – down to the material of the filament which had to perform in a particular way to suit the rest of the network.

In the words of John Law, Edison was a *heterogeneous engineer,* linking diverse elements in his work, elements which do not respect the conventional and abstract boundaries between people and things, the social and the technical (Law 1987).

Many other works in the sociology and history of technology and science reveal this intermixture of people and things (Mackenzie and Wajcman (eds) 1985; Bijker, Hughes and Pinch (eds) 1987; Elliott (ed) 1988; Law (ed) 1991; Latour 1987, 1988). Their 'thick description' results in concepts such as heterogeneous engineering, seamless webs (Hughes 1988), actor networks (Callon 1987, 1991), wherein are no absolute distinctions and categorisations; they are all being historically defined and redefined.

BLACK BOXES

Artifacts are often treated as entities in themselves, self-contained, their interactions with people separable. We forget or ignore their living. Artifacts become black boxes – closed, technical, often a mystery.

Consider the video recorder. This is indeed for many people a mysterious black box, high-tech product. The troubles people have with video recorders are notorious. At the same time they are very popular as providers of home entertainment. Manufacturers battled over the format of cassettes, compete to provide different functions, compete to make operation easier (from programmable remote controls to light pen input, to numerical programming supplied by newspapers and magazines). The video recorder delegates and prescribes all sorts of actions and troubles to its users, while bringing together viewers, artifact designers, stylists, programme makers, film companies, repair men, newspaper editors, frustrations, wonder, families, discord etc etc.

When the black box is opened there is no easy distinction between people and things, the social and the technical. What is social and what is technical about the video recorder? I suggest that we forget the question and ask – what does it hold together and how does it do it? What work does it do?

SO WHAT IS THE ARTIFACT?

To return to the Korinthian pot (Fig. 4). What is this artifact? Well probably not a 'pot'. So what is a pot? It depends on all sorts of things; there is no generally applicable answer. An artifact is always active – tying together heterogeneous things, material and human. It is society made durable (Latour 1991). When, then, does an artifact belong to the object world? When it has disappeared beneath the ground and is no longer of concern.

THE LIFE OF THINGS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ARCHAEOLOGY

What are the implications of bringing people and things together into symmetry, of giving artifacts life?

Enabled is a true and material history of archaeology. No longer is the archaeologist separated from the object of study, divided into two separate realms of the social and the object world, present and past. The present receives materiality and the past its historicity. Archaeology itself becomes different and historical associations and mobilisations of people and things, because there is a symmetry of the agent and object of archaeological knowledge – the archaeologist and the object. The histories or lives of Skara Brae and Gordon Childe are tied together. The history of archaeology becomes associations of people and things like this. The history of archaeology becomes more materially textured and is less about the supposed advance of reason in the minds of great men or conditioned by social movements (as, for example, Daniel 1981, Trigger 1989).

Accepting the life of things enables an archaeology materially in the present. Archaeologists lose absolute objectivity rooted in the timeless reality of the past, but the discipline gains many other real and material qualities because archaeology is part of the social construction of the present. If timeless essences and their dichotomies are put to one side we do not lose the solidity of archaeological facts. They are still real and important, but so too are archaeologists, volunteers, publishers, television companies, photographers, feelings, interests, instruments and laboratories which gather and bring to historical reality those facts. There is no necessary monopoly of one particular archaeological mobilisation of people and things which is tied to objectivity. We are hereby more attuned to different archaeological projects. Reburial issues, treasure hunting, landscape art become commensurable with professional archaeology: they are but different assemblages of resources (things, practices, people, aspirations, projects ...).

Archaeology may be placed on a par with such 'fringe' concerns, but this does not mean we cannot judge between them. Here it is important to distinguish *epistemic from judgemental* relativism (Bhaskar 1979). Epistemic relativism holds that knowledge is rooted in a particular time and culture. Knowledge does not just mimic things. Facts and objectivity are constructed. Judgemental relativism makes the *additional* claim that all forms of knowledge are equally valid. But judgemental relativism does not follow from epistemic relativism. To hold that objectivity is constructed does not entail that all forms of supposed knowledge will be equally successful in solving particular problems. Epistemic relativism simply directs attention to the reasons why a statement is held to be objective or strong; it directs attention to the heterogeneous assemblages of people and things and interests and feelings etc mobilised in particular projects. To argue a relativism which

maintains objectivity is socially constructed is to argue simply for *relationality*. (The issues are fully covered in Lampeter Archaeology Workshop 1997).

Entailed through the lives of things is a congenial and living programme of conservation. How do you preserve nature? – pickle a squirrel! Instead of pickling the past, conservation, planning and architecture can be sensitive to the life of materials, cherishing ruin and pathology in a rediscovery of the romantic. This accompanies a green archaeology responsible to natural history. Nature acquires a life, a history, and an ethical independence of people. It is no longer the stuff of technical control. Involved also is a respect for the materiality which is ourselves – a project of embodiment. (For a philosophical angle see Adorno 1973; Buck-Morss 1977: chapter 3.)

An archaeology of the life of things is more humble and democratic because there are no more experts of abstract reason and objectivity. The mystery and awe are taken out of archaeological science. Archaeology becomes a skill of mixing pasts and presents, its knowledges located between past and present. In denying a theology of communion with the timeless beyond – objectivity and reason – archaeologists come to be those who mobilise the archaeological.

With archaeology detached from the dualisms of society and object world, and no longer concerned with simply establishing correspondences with 'objective reality', there comes a sensitization to experience of our own materiality and historicity. The fascination and evocation of the ruined past is intimately and necessarily part of archaeological practice. It is another resource with which we may work, no longer a contingent issue of the present (as opposed to the past), of feeling (as opposed to fact), of presentation (as opposed to discovery of knowledge) (for some preliminary ideas: Shanks 1992a).

There is a symmetry between past and present in a conception of the social as heterogeneous assemblages of people and things – archaeology itself and its object both consist of actor networks wherein 'actor' has no definitive meaning. The old dichotomies of culture and nature and the like become historical and local constructions rather than universals (MacCormack and Strathern (eds) 1980). We are directed to consider social construction and people's agency, as in more recent social archaeologies (Hodder 1986; Miller and Tilley (eds) 1984; Barrett 1988; Thomas 1991, 1996, Tilley 1996, for example), but now with a renewed awareness of the importance of things.

Herein is a recovery of strangeness (strange-mess) and historical particularity. A pot becomes something unfamiliar, yet still understandable. And we too are monstrous and outrageous assemblages of material practices, interests, goods and thoughts, both centred and dispersed through our projects in the world (Law 1991).

Things have a life and particular histories. We are invited to open the black boxes of everyday things in a phenomenology of artifacts and archaeological experience, attending to the heterogeneity of the world. Such a phenomenology is an attention to the secret life of things; it is rooted in the realisation that there is something altogether different behind everyday things such as an axe or a pot (consider Spector 1991; see Thomas (1993a and 1993b) and Tilley (1996) on megalithic monuments). Indeed something altogether different within what we take to be archaeology. The archaeological involves us in energies of discovery, detection, mystery, genealogy and lineage, legality and judgement, authenticity, identity and belonging, energies beyond archaeology which nevertheless constitute its practices and are in turn constituted by them (Shanks 1992a: part 2). It is the realisation that there is no essence to things; it is the secret that their identity is fabricated piecemeal from alien forms. At the root of a pot is the dissension of other things, disparity (Foucault 1986b: 78-9). This is its life, its being in the world.

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