**Thingness of Things**

What is the right way to begin an essay on things? Does the object world have a starting point? An edge? What constitutes a thing? What does a thing hold? To think about ‘thingness’ in an abstract way, to think about the ideas *within* things, without right away starting to think about the ideas *of* things, is not an easy task. It seems like thingness and the kinds of thingness are not inherent in things; they are results of understanding, of recognitions of complex systems of relations and values.

The thing has many names; the object, matter, substance, the world, reality and so on. In various standard dictionary definitions we read that ‘thing’ is an object, fact, affair, circumstance, or concept considered as being a ‘separate entity.’ It is any inanimate material object, or ‘an object that one need not, cannot, or do not wish to, give a specific name to.’ As Brown said in his essay on 'Things Theory', ‘Things become the most compelling name for that enigma that can only be encircled and which the object (by its presence) necessarily negates’ (Brown, 2004, p.5). Barthes in 'Semantics of the Objects', in his search for an object definition, mentions a few more vague descriptions he found elsewhere: an object is defined as what is produced, an element of consumption, a standardized substance, ‘something used for something’ as well as an ‘object is what is presented to sight, it is what is thought in relation to the subject who thinks.’ Often an object is defined purely by its function, by its ability to be useful, to serve man, to modify
the world.

‘Is a hard thing, such as stone, more material than a soft thing such as bubble?’ (Miller, 2010). ‘Is the air a thing? Does a thing have to be solid? Does it exist in time? How long must it exist for in order to qualify as a thing?’ asks Droit in his year-long Philosophical Experiment, 'How Things Are' (2003). Are things vanished ideas, people and memories endowed in a present reality? Or are things, rather, mute, self-evident, inaccessible? Can a thing, using Sartre’s expression, ‘be-in-itself”? Can they be what they are? But what are they? It is a concept of which Baudelaire talks in 'Philosophy of Toys', when children have a strong desire to see the inside, the soul of their toys. To see what they are made of, what makes them special. But soon they find out that the thingness of thing is not inside, nothing can be found there, as it seems that idea of things is everywhere and nowhere.

‘Apprehending the mereness of things can become a difficult task’ (Brown 2003, p.1). Is the thingness of a thing, in things themselves? Or does the idea of things lie somewhere outside of themselves? ‘Are there objects outside of meaning?

‘Only things speak to me’ claimed Rilke (1903, p.122). Analogically, William Carlos Williams (1970) said in his poems, ‘No things but in ideas’. Both try to point to a thingness of things, somehow reaching beyond the dualism of things, where objects signify only themselves and nothing more. ‘No symbolism, no depth, no reference to a world beyond the world, no pattern of imagery, no dialectical structure, no interaction of subject and object-just description’ (Miller, 1966, p.14).
It is impossible to see objects in their fullness as we look through them as transparencies, as codes by which, instead, we create meaning. ‘When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object’ (Nabokov, 1972, p.1). But we cannot overcome the feeling that there is something more than a history that lies within the object itself. After all, as Heidegger discovers, it is not the hard material surface of the jug that constitutes the thingness of the thing, but the void it holds. When we fill the jug we fill the emptiness, the nothingness of the vessel, and that is what the jug is; it holds the possibility of gathering, holding, containing and gaining another meaning. Lacan also points out the hollowness, the emptiness of the vase, which is at the centre of the real. And that precise hollowness is the heart of the object. In a like manner, Bachelard describes the inner spaces of drawers, chests and wardrobes which possess entity of depth. These objects hold the possibility of new dimensions that can be filled with memories and intimacy.

Within an object we can find the subject, ourselves. We overlap with things, and elements of things are hidden inside us.

Objects point out to us an object-subject relationship. Objects make us subjects. When we look at them, we look at ourselves. They become an extension of us. Their objectness points out our subjectivity in the world. It differentiates us from the world around us. It
makes us more real, corresponding to Lacan’s thesis in 'The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis'.

‘Objects make us as part of the very same process by which we make them. Ultimately there is no separation of subjects and objects’ (Miller, 2010, p.60). According to Hegel’s philosophy, we see ourselves in our creations. There is a dynamic, dialectical process between objects and subjects. Analogically, in a Marxist sense, things are social relations. They both are, and affect, social relations. People and things are kin entangled in a social chain, a network of relations, and we should think of objects as such. ‘The object of labour is therefore the objectification of the species-life of man: for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he had created’ (Marx, 1997, p. 329). Because of this correlation, the meaning of objects lies not wholly in itself or outside of the object, but somewhere between the object and the subject.

To understand how objects operate on multiple levels, we need to go beyond things themselves and look at the system of connections. ‘Material Culture does not provide a mirror to society or a window through which we can see it’ (Tilley, 1991). There are multiple relationships between things and people. To understand those relationships, we need to read them accordingly. This hybridity is an ordinary condition of objects and all things can be read in a number of different ways - from aesthetic, through useful to material and so on. ‘Things in any minimally complex system carry an indefinite number
of actual or potential overlapping uses, significations and values. No single game exhausts their function; no single description exhausts the uses to which their properties might appropriately or inappropriately lend themselves, and they are always shadowed by the traces of virtual uses and the complicated circuits of knowledge, need, and desire that map those virtualities’ (Frow, 2001). There is no self-contained meaning; there is only an endless matrix of the properties of people with properties of objects.

Objects are bound into a network of connections and references. When we use something, it is always part of the system, part of a larger constellation. Our everyday understanding of the world is complex, we do not analyse objects in an isolated matter. Only when something happens, when an unnoticeable object suddenly stops working, when it is taken out of its context, out of its typical use, only then do we start to confront its thingness. We see it at present, we contemplate its uselessness. We finally stop looking through things when, instead, we look at them. We drop pre-labelled meanings that make them transparent to us in day-to-day life. We really look at them for what they are, or what they could be, and we wonder about them. For once we try to make sense out of them. Droit’s philosophical experiment comes to mind yet again, his year-long quest for understanding things. He speaks of voiceless, nameless things; unrecognized at once when looked at more closely. ‘This is my shirt, this is my watch, over there is a boat, up there is the moon. But they no longer tell me anything. Is my shirt a thing in the same sense as my watch? Or as the moon? And what about the boat? Again the question arises:
are there, lurking behind that one world, innumerable distinct universes? Do we talk of things to mask a proliferation and plurality without end?’ (Droit, 2003, p.5).

All objects operate as signs, as Barthes points out. The world is full of complex signs, whose meaning should not be analysed in isolation. It is central to Strauss’s tradition of structuralism; nothing should be regarded in isolation. Things should be analysed not in themselves but in the relationship between them - as elements who paint the whole picture only in relation to the whole. Analogically, as outlined in Saussure, meaning therefore is found in the relationship between signs, not in singular signs themselves.

‘Nothing can escape and everything is worked out on the level of signs’ (Baudrillard, 1996, p.78). Barthes says analogically ‘There is no object which escapes meaning’ (1994, p.82). Objects signify, they carry information within themselves, they communicate as well as combining to form a complex system of signs. An object is polysemantic, it has several meanings. They can be read as archaeological messages, which carry the physical trace of a past life on their surfaces. They are a solid evidence of the existence of the past. An object can become a symbol, which can be analysed in various ways according to context, experience and knowledge.