
Cyborg Anthropology: An archaeological and philosophical derivation of human materiality

D. V. O'Donnell

odonnedv@mcmaster.ca

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
1280 Main St. W
Hamilton, ON

Can humans be human without materials? Considering that food, shelter and the planet Earth each fall under a material category it is obvious that we cannot, for we would not exist without them. But if one allots the necessities so that we have a tranquil island to ourselves and on it an endless supply of sustenance, are we then human? Many would say that interpersonal relations are a necessary component of living, so we add to our island a group of humans with mixed reproductive capabilities. Now our population may thrive and grow, but we have yet to note any distinction between our island and an island of platypus. Language, some might say, is the answer, so we introduce it and find ourselves with an island full of shouting and sweet-talking that sounds much like a jungle during mating season. What if we add some representation of intelligence, perhaps an assortment of carving tools? Now, admittedly, we have established a population that is clearly distinguishable from any other known forms of life. Indeed, when archaeologists excavate deep into the layers of the ancient past, stone tools are the most obvious indicators of human occupation. Finding roasted seeds in a hearth depression would also suggest a human presence, while a scatter of uncooked seed shells could be attributed to any small mammal. In both cases we note what distinguishes human life from non-human life is the indirectly observed interaction between people and things. From this very basic example it is tempting to suggest that all modern humans

are made human because of our relationship with objects. While such a declaration is loaded with philosophical ammunition, it can certainly be supported with some basic anthropological theory. Here I briefly examine how materials dictate the daily actions of people, how people themselves can be objectified and how things act as humanity's ambassador through time.

Material Actors

It can be said that our daily lives are nothing more than theatrical productions in which human actors are directed by material phenomena (Thomas 1996:59 from Moore 1986). The motivation behind such a metaphor is found in the idea that materials are textual and symbolic (Hodder 1999); they are significant only because they are interpreted in some way as having a meaning (Thomas 1996:59). People react to objects in the same way they react to words; how things are situated and observed lends meaning or instruction, just as grammar does in a sentence (Buchli 1997:364). After waking each morning, one turns on the coffee pot because it is known to dispense coffee, one uses a toothbrush because it brings conformity with social demands for clean teeth and one makes the bed in pursuit of order and tidiness. Meanings are attached to each interaction between human and thing, and while most appear obvious and insignificant to the person doing them, a foreign anthropologist may look at a coffee pot or tidy bed and struggle to find their

meaning in this other reality. Thomas (1996) further illustrates the concept by noting how humans will apply an existing interpretation to objects they have not encountered before, just as indigenous North Americans first labeled the horse as a demon or a god (:65). Societies operate because the people within them can move through their lives meeting their needs and comprehending external actions by applying their knowledge of material meaning (Wylie 1992:147). Conversely, objects are constructed and fashioned by humans with a specific meaning in mind, and that meaning can spread to be understood by others through placing it in context with what is already known (Shanks & Tilley 1987:104). If one had never seen a fork, but was familiar with spoons and knives, being handed all three would permit the realization that a fork is a utensil for eating, all future forks would carry this same meaning until different contexts indicated otherwise. Viewing objects with established ideas of meaning allows them to become intrinsic extensions of ourselves, such that legs and forks are both tools that can be used to accomplish an action, whether it is to run or to eat. The whole of the known material world becomes familiar and logical as does our position within it (:98).

People as Objects

The vast web of meaning that humans attach to materials and vice versa aptly shows how objects and people are inextricably linked. But can we go further and say that people themselves are objects? Julian Thomas (2002) speaks of humanism in archaeology, bringing to light the implications that new theoretical paradigms have had on the image of the human body. Being motivated by scientific universalities in human existence, processualists perceive the human body as humanists, assuming that all people are born with the same blank canvass upon which society and culture may paint, differing only by a biologically explicit definition of sex (:30). Feminist and civil rights movements in the later half of the 20th century brought

humanism in to the realm of social correctness and it continues today as the dominant belief in western culture (:30-:31). However, as post-processualism is popularized, an anti-humanist element in archaeological theory must be introduced. As it stresses the interactions of individual humans and societal meanings, the Hodderian approach to the past necessarily rejects the existence of universal, culture-independent labels on the human body (:35-36). Sex, not simply gender, must be treated as a socially constructed item, as are all perceivable components of the body. In essence, the body has meaning assigned to it in the same way a coffee pot does. Chapman (2000) finds further reason to 'blur the human-object boundary' (:29). He suggests that the meaning and value humans place on objects, especially precious ones, compels people to become those objects in some respect (:29). Craftsmen toiling over an elaborate item may wish to insert a component of themselves into their medium, in essence personifying the object as an extension of themselves (:30). Chapman also notes the occurrence of active objectification at the social level, where human qualities are priced and possessed by those who have the power to acquire them (:28). While typically this custom is attributed to promoting discriminatory practices such as slavery and prostitution, it can certainly be applied to components of modern western society where the majority of economic transactions are in payment of services performed by people. While the distinctions between humans and coffee pots seem obvious, the meanings imposed on a person by archaeologists, societies and individuals may warrant questioning how different they really are.

The Human Story in Materials

If humans and their material world are so intertwined and objectively similar, it can be assumed that the essence of humanity is fully transferred through time by artifacts that have outlived their flesh and bone counterparts. Of course, this conclusion has

been at the heart of many class discussions over the term, for it represents much of the debate pertaining to the practice and ultimate goals of modern archaeology. Since the material record has and likely will always be the main source of data through which archaeologists make their interpretations, the question of whether or not an artifact has a traceable lifetime in itself is a key debate. Lewis Binford, representing the processualists that followed him, would reject that any useful information could be gained from something so particular as an artifact's lifespan (Trigger 2003:9). To the scientific, positivist mind, the material record is dead; its components tell no stories and can only provide an idea of how a past population affixed themselves to a specific environment (ibid.). On the other hand, Julian Thomas argues in *Time, Culture and Identity* that artifacts, like humans, are subject to temporality and can construct a traceable identity as they are affected by external processes through time (:79). Consequently he recommends that the focus of studying artifacts should not be to construct and compare attributes, but rather to examine their changes through time (ibid.). While Thomas applies his ideas in the following chapter with studies of stylistic change in Neolithic Britain (Thomas 1996b), the paradigm he and others insist upon does not seem to offer results as concrete as those of the processualist camp. The extent to which one moves from the general to the specific often impacts the conclusiveness of an interpretation, given the vagueness of prehistory. However, the archaeological potential contained within an artifact that has 'lived' through a temporally distant culture may certainly be impressive, and I believe what little clear data that can be extracted from a 'living' item with a story is at least as valuable as anything it could express while 'dead'.

Conclusions

People and things share a significant slate of characteristics. The material world is one of

many meanings that allow humans to interpret their physical surroundings and each other. People can be objectified with assigned traits, and objects can be personified with an assigned lifetime. Chapman's boundary lines between things and people appear obviously distinct at first glance, and in many ways they are – we can safely assume that no one really is a coffee pot. But it takes only a brief, thoughtful discussion to blur the line between the animate and inanimate, and to question if the two are nothing more than natural extensions of each other. In this regard, the concept of the human 'cyborg' is realized. And while mechanized people are usually the stuff of science fiction, it may be the job of archaeology to show that we have always been 'one with the machine', from our present back to our most distant past.

References

Buchli, V.

1997 Interpreting Material Culture: the trouble with text. *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meanings in the Past*. Edited by Allessandri, A., et al. Routledge

Chapman, J.

2000 Two Ways of Relating: Enchainment and Accumulation. *Fragmentation in Archaeology: People Places and Broken Objects in the Prehistory of South Eastern Europe*. Routledge

Hodder, I.

1999 Interpreting Material Culture. In *The Archaeological Process*. Blackwell Publishers, London.

Shanks, M., Tilley, C.

1987 Material Culture. In *Social Theory and Archaeology*. Polity Press.

Thomas, J.

2002 Archaeology's humanism and the materiality of the body. *Thinking through the body: archaeologists of*

corporeality. Hamilakis, Y., et al.
(eds.). Kluwer Academic.

1996a Material things and their temporality. In *Time, Culture and Identity*. Routledge

1996b Later Neolithic Britain: artifacts with personalities. In *Time, Culture and Identity*. Routledge

Trigger, B.

2003 Introduction: Understanding the Material Remains of the Past. In *Artifacts & Ideas*. Transaction Books.

Wylie, A.

1992 On “heavily decomposing red herrings”: Scientific Method Archaeology and the Ladening of Evidence with Theory. *Metaarchaeology*. Embree, L. (ed.).