

2005

Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory

John Plotz

Brandeis University, plotz@brandeis.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Plotz, John (2005) "Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory," *Criticism*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol47/iss1/5>



J O H N P L O T Z

Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory

Things, edited by Bill Brown. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Pp. 471. \$49.50 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession, by Stephen M. Best. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Pp. 362. \$69.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images, edited by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart. London: Routledge, 2004. Pp. xi + 222. \$115.00 hardcover, \$40.95 paper.

Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science, edited by Lorraine Daston. New York: Zone Books (MIT Press), 2004. Pp. 447. \$34.50 cloth.

IT USED TO BE THAT “living things” were mainly found in eighteenth-century speaking-object narratives. Scholars interested in talkative objects might have stretched a point to include late-nineteenth-century “commodity fetishes” and horror films. No longer. What is coming to be called “thing theory” urges us to take our account of “things that talk” as far back as Hieronymous Bosch monsters (in Joseph Koerner’s persuasive “Bosch’s Equipment”), and as far afield as Rorschach blots and the exemplary soap bubbles (anatomized in Simon Schaefer’s “A Science Whose Business Is Bursting”) by which late Victorian physicists demonstrated universal laws of molecular behavior to bedazzled audiences (both articles appear in Lorraine Daston’s impressive new collection, *Things That Talk*).

Defining what one even means by talking about *things* can rapidly become an arcane dispute, especially when waged by scholars quoting and counterquoting Heidegger’s chewy phenomenological account of the “thingness of things.” But ordinary language can provide some useful guidance here. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s original subtitle for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “The Man Who Was a Thing,” is

meant to shock us far more than Uncle Tom's merely being an object might (a person can be, after all, the "object of admiration" or "object of my affection"). And Phil Harris's chart-topping 1950 song about an unnamable horror that is indicated only by an ominous drumming (e.g., "Get out of there with that—RAT-TAT-TAT—and don't come back no more") was called "The Thing Song" for good reason. "Thing" is far better than any other word at summing up imponderable, slightly creepy what-is-it-ness. "Thing" is the term of choice for the extreme cases when nouns otherwise fail us: witness the thingamagummy and the thingamabob.

Thing theory is at its best, therefore, when it focuses on this sense of failure, or partial failure, to name or to classify. Thing theory highlights, or ought to highlight, approaches to the margins—of language, of cognition, of material substance. "Things" do not lie beyond the bounds of reason, to be sure (that would be absurd or paradoxical, or flat out impossible), but at times they may seem to. That seeming is significant: these are limit cases at which our ordinary categories for classifying signs and substances, meaning and materiality, appear to break down.

Thing theory, then, is not a theory about the cultural significance of objects. There is a familiar rationale for appraising evocative objects, the eloquent signifiers by which a culture makes itself known to itself. Anthropological discourse has systematically refined that approach, with some selective importations and, lately, more wholesale exportations of the concept, ever since Bronislaw Malinowski's accounts of "ka" exchange in the Pacific Islands—Nicholas Thomas, Marilyn Strathern, and Maurice Godelier being among the prime exporters. The logical objection to such work is that it generally hears the objects saying nothing that the ambient culture has not carefully instilled. From Mauss to Strathern, the aim has been to unpack what the culture *meant* objects to mean, rather than to reflect on failures of meaning, or on the slippages that occur between the intended meaning and the actually embodied substance of, let us say, a pair of fighting cocks in Balinese hands. Clifford Geertz sees no such slippage when he pins down the cock's poetic associations in his memorable article on "Deep Play."

We can fairly readily imagine what might be called an eco-critical or simply anti-Enlightenment alternative to such a culturalist object theory, an objection based on the thing's capacity to speak for itself. In fact, Miguel Tamen's *Friends of Interpretable Objects* and Walter Michaels's *The Shape of the Signifier* both take aim at what can be called an "immanentist" scholarship that ardently desires things qua things to speak to us, in some kind of mysterious yet comprehensible outsiders' language. Is that kind of anti-semiotics the new core of thing theory? I think not. In writing a review essay that covers three collections and one monograph, with a total of forty-three authors, I only rarely encountered what Michaels and Tamen criticize—namely, a politically charged desire to speak for the inhuman world while simultaneously proclaiming that world's (that Nature's?) inherent voicelessness.

If anything, I was struck in the books under review by a frequent return to a more culturally circumscribed "object theory," so leery are most scholars about

venturing claims about what a “thing” at the very edge of cognition might be. So it is, for example, that the essays in *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* disavow ambitious theoretical manifestos in favor of a modest account of “materiality” that licenses a set of small but productive claims about the historicity of particular kinds of photography. With the exception of Geoffrey Batchen’s contribution (discussed below), this collection’s dozen articles attempt a delimited and cautious history of images as material objects. They explore what sorts of meanings can be resurrected by attending not to hermeneutic analysis of photographic images but rather to what they call photographs’ “ubiquitous materiality” or their “concrete embodied substance.” The claims in Nuno Porto’s account of “Photographs and Performance in Colonial Angola” and Clare Harris’s “Dynamics of Tibetan Relationships with Photography” or Richard Chalfen and Mai Murui’s “Print Club Photography in Japan” all take on what might fairly be called the diminished mission of object theory: to specify time, place, and people who might be tempted to give a particular set of objects a certain sort of life. These, in other words, are objects that talk only because an enormous amount of effort has been put into delineating the context, the interpretive community, in which such speech can be heard.

Many of the best articles in *Things* and *Things That Talk* similarly attend to the requirements of historicizing objects so that we can reconstruct what sort of significance powerful actors (and occasionally weak or marginal ones) found in them or attached to them. The admirable pieces in *Things That Talk* include “Staging an Empire” by Norton and Elaine Wise, about the Peacock Island near Potsdam, where the most improbable and various sorts of imperial fantasias could be played out in a safely delimited wonderland. Also wonderfully memorable is “News, Paper, Scissors: Clippings in the Sciences and the Arts Around 1920” by Anke te Heesen, a lucid account of the blurring of the line between news, art, and uncodable visual experience in the various uses made of newspaper clippings in the early twentieth century. If space allowed, I would do more than allude to similarly strong pieces in *Things*; for example, Charity Scribner’s terrific account, in “Object, Relic, Fetish, Thing,” of Joseph Beuys’s relationship to East German material culture, or Peter Stallybrass and Ann Jones’s work on the dividing line between hands and handled objects in “Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe.” And anyone who has followed with pleasure the debates about the significance of the rise of automata that may have blurred the dividing line between objects and people in Enlightenment Europe will be deeply impressed by the new account offered of the consequences of convincing mechanical animalia detailed in Jessica Riskin’s “The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life.”

I did, though, find amid work that was by and large thorough and admirable on its own terms precisely to the extent that it disavowed any transcendental or decontextualizing force, three works that went further, dared more, and as a result provoked both stronger reactions and deeper admiration. That I also found

a few articles that dared more without result, that made claims insupportable from their historical premises and incoherent in their philosophical underpinnings, is not surprising. But since the worst that can be said of such work is that it engenders no useful further thought, either on account of its factual errors or conceptual incoherence, why say more? I'd like to discuss, with as much attention to their divergences as possible, three articles that together encouraged me to offer the account above, of thing theory as an approach to the margins of meaning: Geoffrey Batchen's "Ere the Substance Fade: Photography and Hair Jewelry" (in *Photographs Objects Histories*); Peter Galliston's "Images of Self" (in *Things That Talk*); and, finally, Stephen Best's book, *The Fugitive's Properties*.

What sort of things is thing theory good at explaining? Well, consider Charles De Wolfe Brownell's 1857 painting, "The Charter Oak." The painting does not merely depict that famous Hartford tree, but it also rests in a frame carved from the wood of the tree itself. In fact, the frame itself contains minute carved representations of the oak as well. What we see in Hartford's Wadsworth Athenaeum, then, is a nested set of representations of the tree (carvings and painting), but it is also the substance of the tree. So are we looking at image or essence—at a sign for the thing, or the thing itself?

The painting I'm describing might seem nothing more than a curio, a Hartford one-off, did we not have a substantial new body of work that has begun to investigate the curious doubleness that attaches to certain limit-case objects. Geoffrey Batchen's "Ere the Substance Fade: Photography and Hair Jewelry" provides a stunningly lucid account of how to theorize such a thing, an object that is troubling because it is perched on the boundary between sign and substance. Batchen does not begin by proclaiming an interest in the nature of the thing. Indeed, his avowed intention is to force the field of photographic studies to take seriously a Victorian culture oddity: that is, hair jewelry conjoined with photography. To the editors of *Photographs Objects Histories*, where his article appears, this would seem reason enough. After all, the main purpose of this volume is to remind us that photographs, too, are objects, embedded in cultural practice, made out of certain mixtures of organic matter and heavy metals, of varying degrees of durability, and so on.

However, Batchen's work is manifestly thing theory nonetheless. He studies Victorian photographs that were stored along with hair of the depicted person: sometimes woven as jewelry, sometimes simply attached, in one case draped to form a blonde wig over the photographed face of a departed soldier. Such photos appear to their viewers, Batchen contends, as something more than simple symbolic objects, more than pieces of the material world that come to us already marked up as signifiers, with a definite human meaning attached to them by way of representation.

Recall the Charter Oak painting with a frame actually made out of the Charter Oak: Batchen's photographs edged with the actual hair represented in the photos embody the same logic or illogic, the same artificial conjunction of Image and "Reality." Batchen quotes an advertising jingle (by studio photographer J. H. Fitzgibbon of St. Louis, Missouri, in 1852) that perfectly elucidates the boundary status of these photographs: "secure the shadow ere the substance fade / let nature copy that which nature made." The point is that, like hair, the photograph is in some sense consubstantial with the person depicted—this "shadow" is made by nature, in direct contact with the now-absent person. Yet it is this very consubstantiality that makes it into not an object (which one might expect) but rather a thing, since it is at once the essence of a person and yet at the same time utterly material, devoid of all the spiritual qualities that an actual person would have. The photograph, because it is the direct record of a bygone human life, thus becomes at once more than an object—because it is partially human—and yet also less than an object—because what is human in it is so intangible, so removed from the zone where human interaction might take place.

It is worth noting that the attachment of hair jewelry to photographic images created, in its day, little overt agitation. These were not radical transgressions against the ordinary order of image etiquette, but rather extremely mainstream indexes of how people chose to memorialize the absent or the dead. Batchen argues that these hairy photos are crux points where the weakness of the guarantees of Truth show through and hence sites where people are forced to redescribe what it is they are looking for in an art "object." Conceptually and transcendently, he may be right to emphasize the "deconstructive" force of these hybrid image/substances, but historically the sheer ordinariness of this practice is perhaps the most valuable reading clue we have. It is when such objects give up their objecthood, when representations seem to lose their power to represent, that there is glimpsed, beneath, a kind of bedrock assurance associated with the thing that is no sign—not the art object, but the enduring thing that once was human, or part of a human being. Of course this is odd: the fact of that bedrock's being trotted out—as woven jewelry, as a blonde wig draped over a photo—would seem to be proof indeed, from a twenty-first-century standpoint, of how alarming the world becomes when signs stop being signs, when objects are not just objects to hand. And yet the reassurance, the nostalgic referent and the comfort that these photographs were evidently able to provide, is a valuable clue to how the shifting space between representation and embodied object was successfully navigated during the early decades of photography—navigated in ways that now to us seem almost irretrievably strange.

Peter Galliston, too, begins with objects so strange that the contemporary mind is practically baffled in an effort to imagine how they could ever have seemed

revelatory. Galliston has reconstructed the genesis and adolescence of the Rorschach blot. He shows that the Swiss Jungian Herman Rorschach so wildly succeeded with his blots because he produced an artifact that functioned as if it contained no artifice at all.

Galliston's article stems from the notion (which also shapes Lorraine Daston's insightful introduction, and colors to a greater or lesser extent all the other articles in *Things That Talk*) that it is crucial to historicize the seemingly immutable boundaries that are visibly drawn between thing and person. That is, deliberating what counts as an object, or a speaking object, and what counts as human attention to that object is not a metaphysical project but a genealogical one, and the shifting boundaries turn out to reveal shifting ideas about the location of selfhood and subjectivity. Galliston and Daston have, of course, been doing this sort of brilliant historiographic work for decades now, often collaboratively, so their success is unsurprising; but I enjoy being redazzled by it, nonetheless.

By Galliston's account, Rorschach's insight, in his 1921 advocacy and distribution of a set of "Rorschach cards," was that a "degree zero" of thingdom in the form of ruthlessly engineered blots designed to evoke no "ordinary" human association would elicit from inside persons the true contents of their subjective selves. "Not only did these cards talk; they did so in virtue of their form and color down to the smallest detail. If the blots suggested even a shard of human design, certain patients would seize on that fragment, losing their own ability to speak from within. For this reason, nothing was more important to Rorschach than creating and reproducing cards that would register as undesigned designs" (271).

The crucial contribution of this account is that it locates the problem of the "talking thing" not within the thing itself but at the vexed boundary between self and world, where we are forced to articulate what kind of knowledge about the world exists only within people and what knowledge is actually latent in the world, waiting to be brought out. Galliston thus approaches afresh what is in a certain sense the same problem that Marx's account of dancing tables and the "commodity fetish" brings out: deciding what is "contained" in objects involves a series of prior, potentially ideological decisions about where you imagine human labor or human thought residing. Thus by Marx's account his contemporaries see as immanent within an object certain aspects of labor power that he thinks rightly belong not to the object but to the person whose work brought that object within the human economy.

By the 1920s there existed a strong model of a coherent inner self, knowable only in its encounter with a "truly objective" outer world (objectivity is represented in the case of the blots by pure meaninglessness). Hence, a single test of seemingly loquacious objective reality (Talk to the Blots!) was enough to elicit the whole of the person inside. The Rorschach blot, says Galliston, works only if the talkative object is so perfectly of the "objective" outer world that one can be sure that no other human agency was there before one—what one says about the

objects makes one's encounter with the pure outsidership of the world in all its delightful, and hence intensely meaning-laden, rigidity. "The [Rorschach blot test] means that the functions of subjectivation (how subjects are formed) and objectivation (how objects are formed) enter at precisely the same moment. To describe the cards (on the outside) is *exactly* to say who you are (on the inside)." The importance of Galliston's reading resides in the close fit that the Rorschach blots produce with other early-twentieth-century texts on what it might mean for indisputably mute objects to "speak" the inner truth that they contain, to disgorge out of their abiding flatness some kind of depth that bespeaks the character of the people with whom they abide.

Fin-de-siècle sociologist Georg Simmel's work on "adornment," for example, also aspires to the telos of impersonality that Galliston maps in Rorschach's thinking. For Simmel, jewelry's seductive appeal lies not in the diamond necklace's capacity to conform to or flatter the particular, idiosyncratic beauty of the face it frames, but rather the opposite. Our allegiance to our jewels, our capacity to model ourselves upon the markers of prestige we have acquired, is the true apotheosis of modern selfhood. Galliston's work, then, helps us to uncover a very different boundary from the one that Batchen maps with his doubly material and representational photographs. These blots are objects that plumb the depths of early-twentieth-century psyches exactly to the extent that they refuse interiority, and mark their alignment with a material, objective, coldly impersonal world of meaning located elsewhere. This paradigm is a helpful one in explaining the cultural success of everything from Freudianism to T. S. Eliot's poetry, with its "objective correlative" and its pseudo-magisterial footnotes.

Stephen Best's *The Fugitive's Properties* at first glance would seem hardly to consort with these other approaches to thing theory at all. After all, Best's own professed goal is to articulate how contract and property evolve in nineteenth-century American jurisprudence: the underlying historical trajectory being, in his account, the vitiation of the oft-invoked ideal of "equality" once it becomes clear that such equality is already conditioned by the willingness of the law to treat slaves as property—and hence to continue to imagine even "inalienable" possessions like one's voice or one's image as part and parcel of the same contractable property. In Best's account of his own work, then, what's crucial is showing how American jurisprudence is shaped by its own metaphors and tropes—and shaped, more crucially, by the nonaccidental "instances" that underlie the evolution of property law—the way that the assumptions of slavery continue to color property relations in all aspects of American law (not just Jim Crow), even after the abolition of the Peculiar Institution. Where's the thing theory in that?

The other articles I have been discussing are interested in what happens when an object steps over a boundary and becomes a thing. But Best is largely indifferent, like the legal tradition he studies, to the fate of special objects. He

cares only what can be done, what has been done, to persons, and what the later structural and “poetic” (meaning imaginative) consequences are of such treatment. And by Best’s account, the overworked, muted slave has not simply been objectified, but *thingified*. To Best, that horrific thingification is most overtly registered in tort law. It is under the principle of tort, which elevates the importance of property (and which can readily treat certain people as nothing more than property), that slavery’s fully dehumanizing effects are most visible.

Best’s point—cloaked though it is in an intricate verbal joust with American case law—is a cogent one. He wants to show that the effort required to figure slaves as no more of a conceptual or legal problem than any other kind of property relation (tobacco, land, precious jewels, an education, etc.) requires an excessive legal violence, a rupture that makes human beings not merely into objects but into things.

Best’s work might almost be said to trace Galliston’s in a moral register: if the point of the Rorschach blot is carefully to craft a set of blots that bear no trace of the human upon them, you might say that the work of slavery-related case law (and what congeries of judges, politicians, and interested parties is the ultimate author of that corpus?) is to craft a description of human beings so that they seem to retain nothing of the human about them. Pushed to the edge of cognition, their existence is reduced, by a macabre set of legal precedents as sublimely disquieting as any poetic text, to a set of alienatable labor practices. And what that macabre reduction suggests to Best is that even attributes that are a seemingly inalienable part of one human being—my personality, my face, my voice, my talent—might also be *thingified*, turned into separable properties liable to transaction on the open market. The slavery of the whole body made into a thing, Best argues, gives way to the serfdom of the human attribute made into a thing by being parted from its host body.

In that final claim—that this logic of slavery comes to inform twentieth-century logic of things and people in a contractualized modern capitalist state—Best uses what might be seen as a striking variation on thing theory to raise a quarrel with most accepted accounts of American legal history. Historians have generally seen the new kinds of expropriation of property that emerge in the Gilded Age and the early twentieth century as dependent on emergent contractual private law rather than dependent on the more innately dehumanizing claims of slavery-tainted tort law. Best wants to insist on the lingering logic of slavery’s thingification even in contract relations, which might seem inherently to restore all people (who are responsible for signing their own contracts, after all) to the status of negotiating subjects. By Best’s account, slavery’s tort logic leads into, and even perhaps engenders, capitalism’s contract logic.

The connection Best works so hard to prove, however—between, for example, the discourse of slavery in *Dredd Scott* and the discourse of privacy rights in Brandeis and Warren’s famous article “The Right to Privacy”—is not as clear as he

wants it to be. The details of this debate are arcane at times and may seem historically specific, but they matter because it is so patently not clear, even today, exactly what thumbprints the institution of slavery, and its particular application to black people, has left on America's law and its guiding economic and political ideologies. Best's move is to insist that the use of the law to destroy the possibility of black people appearing in public as persons ought actually to make us, as Stanley Fish and other "neo-pragmatists" have argued, give up on the principle of equality itself. I left the book unconvinced that it was the principle of equality that had been compromised by the dire story of American legal and constitutional complicity in slavery. Rather, the peculiar logic of slavery, especially when linked to the horrific ideology of race difference that has so plagued the last two centuries in America and Europe alike, enabled interested parties to evade the otherwise fundamental insight that people are not things. The danger with Best's approach is that it advocates jettisoning the only principles by which the concepts both of equality and of justice can be maintained. The separation of people and things is in principle inextricable from the logic of justice and equality both, and each undergirds the other. When you lose your way distinguishing between people and things, you lose equality and justice; but it's also true that when you turn equality and justice into mere ad hoc procedures, when you give up on their having any sort of transcendental force, you lose the only strong reason not to allow the thingification of people.

In fact, one might challenge Best's claim of historical causality (the "torts into contracts" claim) to argue that the unsettling transformation of people into things under the new legal dispensation of Gilded Age America lay in the rise of the very "objectivation" that Galliston refers to. That is, the belief that there might be mechanistic determining "objective" structures through which people's fates could be determined and their legal autonomy systematically circumscribed actually derives from a thorough undermining of American "equality" by way of newly corrupt contract logic, rather than via a persistent, insidious logic of slavery and concomitant racism. Best documents two eras (the 1850s and the 1890s) when human beings were made to look like mere inanimate and disposable things by the logic of a legal system that abetted the worst sorts of oppression. What is most interesting about the *fin de siècle*, though, is its affinity to the kind of creeping impersonality that Galliston documents, a modernist willingness to see particular attributes of people available as detached bits and pieces rather than as coterminous with a singular life. It should hardly need pointing out, however, that my even venturing to disagree with Best on this historical point already indicates how far we are in agreement about the basic terms by which "thingness" can appear an attribute even of human beings—and how much I have learned from his admirable book about how the line between subject and thing comes to be drawn.

How then to bring three such vivid and remarkable essays on thing theory back together under one roof? What impresses me about the best work under review

here is its interest in tracing not simply the movement of objects within the realm of symbolic circulation, but the limit cases of different epochs and locations, the examples that pushed and pulled at the problem of where an object's "meaning" ended and its "materiality" began. The three works I have discussed have very different notions of what causes such a conceptual problem. In Stephen Best's book about the logic that turned slaves not only into possessions but also into things, the question is political: how does such morally abominable logic of thingification persist into latter-day America? To Peter Gallison, the question for Rorschach blots is about how modernists understood the psyche, or the idea of a "deep" human subject. And for Geoffrey Batchen, who is more overtly deconstructive, the point is to trace the Victorian exploration of how a photograph might be both a representation of its subject and in some sense a literal extension of that subject—a "nature-made" image that thus has the same Nature as that which it depicts.

What all three authors share, however, is a commitment to articulating the boundary conditions under which both objects and people start to strike one as RAT-TAT-TATs or thingamabobs. At its best, then, it seems to me that thing theory must remain not so much inter-disciplinary (that suggests a boundary at which two different idea systems may meet) as *extra*-disciplinary. That is, its job should consist of noting the places where any mode of acquiring or producing knowledge about the world runs into hard nuts, troubling exceptions, or blurry borders—of anatomizing places where the strict rules for classifying and comprehending phenomena seem suddenly no longer to apply. Lacunae like these cry out for thing theory.

Brandeis University