The ‘Living Dead’: an Exploration of the Social Biographies of Donor-Cadavers As Intentional Objects

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This paper seeks to advance the burgeoning interest concerning the role of the (material) object in consumer research. The aim of this paper is to ‘recover’ the agentic capability of things, by exploring how the embedded intentionality of objects is enacted through the intersubjective network in which they are situated. We will focus our analysis within the context of organ transplantation to consider the extent to which donor-cadavers can be regarded as intentional objects (what objects do). In particular we will explore the way in which participants trace the ‘social biography’ of machine-ventilated-cadaver, which display an ambiguous intentionality that problematize the status of the body as a marker of subjectivity and a biomedical production of routine cyborg. In so doing, our paper has thematized the agentic capability of objects (donor-cadaver) in enhancing/resisting the meaning-making process surrounding the consumption practice of organ donation.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

In this symposium we attempt to re-assert the role that the object has to play in our understandings of the consumption process in exploring ‘what things do’. As such the symposium aims to open out recent debates surrounding materiality in consumer research (Bettany 2007, Borgerson 2005, Zwick and Dholakia 2006). While the role material objects play in meeting needs, wants and desires, and their centrality as resources for identity construction, has been discussed by consumer researchers in depth (i.e. Belk 1988), much less attention has been paid to matter and materiality. In his 2005 book ‘Materiality and Society’ Dant argues strongly for a closer focus on the ‘material stuff of life’ and observes that the mundane routine ways in which objects are taken up in everyday lives have been neglected. Of course such an approach regards the meanings of objects not as intrinsic to the objects themselves, but as socially and culturally (re)produced (see for example Miller 1998). We seek to take this one step further by exploring the agency that might be afforded the more-than-human world of objects, or in Borgerson’s words objects’ ‘non-intentional capacity to facilitate alteration’ (2005: 440).

Rather than offer a description of each of the papers here, it is perhaps more instructive to draw out key themes operating across the three papers. In seeking to explore object agency and intentionality (i.e. in thinking through ‘what things do’) all three papers unpack the capacity of objects to resist our attempts at meaning making. Lai and Dermody, and Brownlie both use the trope of ‘hybridity’ to explore the ambiguity of object intentionality. Lai and Dermody view the donor-cadaver as an ambiguous hybrid, which destabilizes the boundaries between (living) subject and (inert) object. Likewise, Brownlie observes that music is ‘simultaneously abstract and concrete, physical and mental, material and social, concept and ‘thing’.’ For Parsons a focus on the aesthetics of antique objects similarly draws out the concomitance of the substantive and communicative dimensions of things.

Through this exploration of hybridity the authors also seek to problematise prevailing understandings of subject-object relations in consumer research. This is most obviously accomplished by Lai and Dermody in their exploration of donor-cadavers, ‘the living dead’ which achieve a liminal quality being neither fully subject, nor fully object. Brownlie similarly persuades us to reflect on the liminal quality of music, he argues that studying music as social interaction in material context has potential to destabilize tensions between the object-subject divide. Finally, the authors in the symposium all identify the importance of understanding the embodied, performative and staged elements of the consumption experience. As Brownlie observes, there are ‘riches to be found in getting out of the object-subject divide and the production-consumption ghetto, into the area of materiality and embodied habituated social practice.’

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“The ‘Living Dead’: An Exploration of The Social Biographies of Donor-Cadavers as Intentional Objects”
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This paper seeks to advance the burgeoning interest concerning the role of the (material) object in consumer research. Bettany (2007) observes that there has been an ontological departure within the discipline to accord greater agentic primacy to the consuming subject. This has been conceptualized most recently in Consumer Culture Theory, where consumers’ ‘actively rework and transform symbolic meanings’ encoded within the marketplace as part of their identity-projects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Consequently, the object remains a passive res-extensa subordinated to the consuming subject (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). As such, consumer researchers are increasingly called to explicate the intentional (purposive) orientation between the subject and object (Borgerson, 2005; Dant, 2005; Bettany, 2007; Lai et. al., 2008).

The aim of this paper is to ‘recover’ the ‘agentic capability’ of things, by exploring how the embedded intentionality of objects is enacted through the intersubjective network in which they are situated (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002; Borgerson, 2005; Bettany, 2007). This paper will answer this special session call from an embodied perspective drawing from the existential philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) and Heidegger (1927/1962). We will focus our analysis within the context of organ transplantation to consider the extent to which donor-cadavers can be considered as intentional objects (what do objects do) and how these cadavers enter into a purposeful communion with various members of the transplant community (subject). Accordingly we will present key themes emerging from the embodied narratives of 14 potential female donors, aged 21-30, who claim to be ambivalent as they explore the ideas surrounding cadaveric organ donation (Lock, 2002).

Specifically, we analyze the way in which participants trace the ‘social biography’ (Kopytoff, 1986) of cadaver-donors, as they consider the social significance of the body in relation to the liminality of the machine-ventilated-cadaver in organ transplantation (Hogle, 1995). This is understandable as organs are generally donated by patients who suffer from brain stem death (BSD). These machine-ventilated cadavers are occasionally referred to as heart-beating cadavers or neomorts (Hogle, 1995). As an ambiguous hybrid, its marginal identity destabilizes the boundaries that customarily mark the donor-cadaver as (living) subject and (inert) object. In particular, the lifelike appearance of the neomort (Hogle, 1995; Lock, 2002) raises panhuman controversies over its agentic status as a marker of subjectivity, which is constantly being negotiated, abolished and redefined within the intersubjective network of the transplant community. In short, the neomort exudes an ambiguous intentionality, which problematizes the cultural meanings surrounding the status of the body as a lingering site of the donors’ personhood and a biomedical production of routine cyborg (Hogle, 1995).

Our analysis of the biomedical narrative reveals that the neomort is stripped of its intentionality. The body is ‘staged’ by biomedical experts in an attempt to construct a boundary marker to reduce the ambiguity of the neomort (Hogle, 1995). Medical rituals and protocol are orchestrated around the body, where the ‘human-ness’ of the donor-cadaver is eradicated. For instance, the body is

1Brain Stem Death should not be confused with Persistent Vegetative State (PVS). BSD refers to the irreversible damage of the brain stem and PVS refers to injury to the higher brain while the brain stem remains intact.
The first look to be explored is 'Eccentric Englishness'. Roger uses several freelance finders to source his unusual objects and then transforms them in his workshop for sale to dealers (mainly American). When asked if he is interested in a specific period of antiques he says ‘not into a period no- more into a look, the whole look exactly’. When asked about the look he is creating he comments ‘English and a bit of French’. For inspiration Roger refers to the American interior design magazine ‘Veranda’ which he has copies of around the showroom. The second look to be explored is ‘Scandinavian Design’ Steve has a shop and workshop in the same small town as Roger but is involved in creating this very different look. He underlines that his look is ‘that sort of Scandinavian Gustavian look which is really quite strong at the moment—as long as it’s not too distressed’. Similar to Roger, Steve relies on interior design magazines for inspiration and to get a feel for what is popular, he cites Homes and Gardens (a British interiors magazine) as influencing his look.

In exploring these two looks it becomes clear that while the look represents a style or theme within the antique shop, on a deeper level this style or theme also becomes demanding of the dealer in choosing and/or altering the right objects to complement, and fit in with, the look. Therefore it is argued that ‘looks’ operate right across markets, influencing the practices and processes of producers, designers, retailers and consumers (see Entwistle’s 2002 work on modelling). In this sense the look might be more usefully conceptualised as an ‘aesthetic regime’ around which networks of these cultural intermediaries are organised. This concept is useful in that it allows a consideration not only of the way in which aesthetics directs the purchase and consumption of goods, but also their modes of production, distribution and presentation. Geographers have explored a ‘commodity chain’ approach to consumption (i.e. Hughes and Reimer 2003). But further research would explore how markets are mediated by ‘aesthetic regimes’ and how such regimes both direct, and place demands on, those involved in networks of dealers, retailers, interior designers and consumers. For consumer researchers the focus will undoubtedly be on the last of these, however it is argued that consumer cannot be studied in isolation of these wider networks of provision.

“Creating ‘The Look’: Staging Value in the Antique Shop”
Elizabeth Parsons, Keele University, UK

This paper adds to our understanding of the way in which value is ‘staged’ in the consumption experience through an exploration of the antique shop. Staging and dramatic metaphors have been widely explored in the context of services marketing (i.e. Grove and Fisk 1983, Arnould et al 1998) and more recently developed through the emerging language of consumptionscapes (Ger and Belk 1996, Venkatraman and Nelson 2008). However, these accounts focus largely on the relations between consumers, employees and the consumption surroundings. Here objects often merely act as props to the business of consumption. The aim in this paper is to explore in more depth the role that objects themselves might play in the value staging process (taking centre stage as it were). Dealers typically choose, alter, repair and assemble their objects for sale to achieve a particular look. It is argued that the innate style of objects and their presentation on the shop floor create a specific ‘look’ becomes a key communicator in the staging of value. The services marketing literature has identified a split between communicative and substantive modes of staging the service experience. The focus on object aesthetics in this paper (see Wagner 1999), suggests a rejoining of these two concepts. It is argued that communicative staging, in particular dealers’ story telling around the histories of objects (Parsons 2008), cannot be separated from the substantive nature (physicality) of the objects themselves. In highlighting the role of the object the paper applies a material culture perspective on consumer behaviour and markets (Gell 1992, Attfield 2000, Borger 2005, Dant 2005, Miller 2005, Bettany 2007). With a particular concern to further explore ‘what things do’ in the consumption process (Verbeek 2005).

The paper draws insights from a wider project involved with exploring the social and material dimensions of antique dealing. Discussion is based on 15 interviews with antique dealers in two UK locations: Glasgow in Lanarkshire and Leek in Staffordshire. In this paper two cases are drawn from this research population for further elaboration. In each of these cases the dealers are involved in creating and maintaining quite different and specific ‘looks’ in their showroom or shop floor.

“On the ‘Hybridity’ of Music”
Douglas Brownlie, University of Stirling, UK

The paper will argue that the category of ‘music’ as ‘culture in the making’-as social interaction in material context-is worthy of further consideration within the consumer culture research cannon. As a provocation, the claim is offered on this basis; that examination of the current status of ‘music’ as analytical object within consumer research reveals widely held assumptions about the relationship between subjects and objects of consumption (Wallace, 1997; Heckler & Blossom, 1997). That ‘music’ as it presents itself is simultaneously abstract and concrete, physical and...
mental, material and social, concept and ‘thing’; that it simultaneously inspires ambivalence and clarity, detachment and solidarity, offers a convenient stage on which to explore distinctions between the phenomenal and the noumenal that, as Kuchler writes, “emerged from the Enlightenment to drive a theory of culture in which not things, but humankind, is at the helm” (2005: 205). She goes on to argue that “[as a result] the world as experienced and the world as ontologically framed remain in tension, despite a long line of scholarship devoted to situating thought at the heart of the individual and of culture” (2005: 206). The paper argues that such tensions are present, if apparently dormant, within the consumer culture research project too. An adequate treatment of ‘music’ as material culture has, we suggest, the potential to destabilise this tension, problematizing trains of thought whose architecture unwittingly draws upon essentialist ontologies and the credo of the object-subject divide they authorize.

There is something to be gained from stepping aside from the instrumental agenda that appears to have inspired previous consumer research studies—where music is often seen as way of socially engineering an atmosphere that is conducive to certain forms of behavioural outcomes. In seeking to ‘reassemble’ (Latour, 2007) studies of music as consumer culture, it is clear to me that the ‘actant’ potential of music (cf Latour, 1991, 1992; Law 1991) is not merely as another form of powerpoint adornment-i.e. playing rock anthems to lighten up the presentation and lend it fashionable capital. In its viscerality and materiality music can be experienced as a transformative agent (Sacks, 1985, 2007), a shapeshifter, having the power to transport us between worlds as a way of bringing forth altered states of consciousness (Law, 1994; Kuchler, 2005). In that sense it has things in common with witchcraft. Indeed there is a long line of musicology that investigates the important part played by music (and cuisine) in bringing forth materiality in the context of resisting colonial acculturation (opposition) and opening up spaces for alterity and emancipation. This is especially so in the history of ‘code-switching’, a subtle form of re-signification to be found around the rhythmic space of syncopation as a material site of identity work done on the musical and social self. This work is done on the body, constructed not only as ‘other’, the site of necessary distinctions and resistance to them, but in its embodied alterity, as a site of beauty, sexuality and pleasure. Social identity and musical experience are mutually constitutive and, as Negus and Velazquez argue, “the subject and collectivity are mediated through musical experience” (2002:134). In my view current discussions of music and consumers framed through the subject-object divide seem only to work through upon us a rhetorical strategy which admits unnecessarily narrow views of ‘music’ as material sociality.

By considering the character of performance we will explore practices already inscribed on bodies (playing, dancing, clapping, participating, observing), drawing attention to the embodied and material features of social action, revealing for inspection art-world knowledge (Becker, 1974) through performing and constructing an empirical site for the observation of embodied praxiological skills. The overall idea is to explore the riches to be found in getting out of the subject-object divide and the production-consumption ghetto, into the area of materiality and embodied habituated social practice (making music as materiality). This, in my view, constitutes the contextual relevance of music as a site of materiality as embodied social action within consumer culture research. Hopefully we will also further excite interest in the materiality of social life (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Latour, 1991, 1992; Dant, 2005; Miller, 2005).

### REFERENCES


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