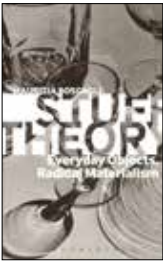


REVIEWS



General



Maurizia Boscali, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism*

New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. 277 pages. Paperback \$24.95; hardcover \$80.00. ISBN 978-1-6235-6225-0 (paperback); 978-1-6235-6268-7 (hardcover).

STUFF THEORY is “materiality out of bounds,”(3), an accumulation of things no longer useful or desired, but still invested with lingering claims of sentiment or association on their human counterparts, objects that engender profound ambivalence over simple acts of riddance. Unworn clothing piles up in the closet, souvenirs of past travel migrate to the attic, old and long unread letters sit in boxes. Clearing out the possessions of a deceased loved one can resemble an act of personal treachery. Boscali offers a heady theoretical encounter with “stuff” as a particular and particularly problematic condition of late capitalism, and as such, her work is a contribution to the development of critical languages used to discuss materiality. In Boscali’s writing, the market provides not only an unprecedented abundance of accessible goods, it also generates a churning cycle of desire that continually renders yesterday’s fashions into a mounting pile of stuff, a volatile materiality. Lingering associations with stuff, the claims stuff makes for memory and forgetting, and its resistance to easy banishment counters the optimal capitalist notion of the commodity as a sterile commodity fetish, a puppet whose strings are pulled by the market only. Following Daniel Miller’s work, which recuperated the social signification of modern commodities, stuff is social just as kinship is social; it is not predetermined but affects different users in different ways. Stuff is known through its several histories and consequences, which is to say, stuff can be explored and analyzed through its various ethnographic possibilities.

But Walter Benjamin, more than Miller, is the acknowledged apical ancestor of Boscali’s project, with his notion of human/object interactions as “wily, unpredictable, and open-ended” (38) rather than as a totalizing work of commodification

only. Boscali leads us through Benjamin's productive musings on the ghostly traces left in old photographs, his fascination with the urban flotsam left in the dusty shops of no-longer-fashionable arcades, and his surrealist ability to "hallucinate" the commodity into a multi-faceted object. Michael Taussig, in his portrayal of capitalism's "nervous system" with its holes and fissures and in his own engagement with Benjamin's work, is the choirmaster, driving a creative and challenging prose style. Some readers will thrill to sentences like "First, to newly make the commodity into a fetish, he [Benjamin] studies it as a dialectical picture puzzle where different, opposed notions of value stand in an unresolved opposition, in a clashing montage that Dada-like and stereoscopically produces a new meaning" (43). Others of us will find this heavy-going. Independent filmmaker Angie Varda, whose imagery of gleaned potatoes and withered hands opens and closes the book, is the project's patron saint, following the "gleaners" whose bodies and creative impulses are nourished by things that others leave behind.

Boscali's engagements with literary works are, for this reviewer, the least compelling aspect of her work. In her chapter on the "unnatural uses of clothes" she posits fashion as a mode of both fantasy and dissent, but her examples, Gerty MacDowell in the "Naussica" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the object of a pornographic gaze imagined by a male author, and Erika Khot, the masochistic protagonist of Elfriede Jenlenik's *The Piano Teacher* did not convince this reader. I found more intellectual nourishment in Boscali's penultimate chapter, "Paris circa 1968," which situates the work of Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Guy Debord in a particular history, a reaction to a postwar milieu of invasive mid-century American modern, a landscape of seemingly boundless and sterile simulacra. She creatively traces the contribution of the three French thinkers to the events of 1968 where stuff became literally inflammatory when deployed in barricades. The volume concludes with a discussion of "garbage in theory," as "a full affront to ordered materiality" (227) and describes some of the ways that junk becomes relevant for a new politics of materiality, allowing one to "rethink relationally in a way which situates the object *and* myself in a multiplicity of relations—perceptual, bodily, affective, economic, individual, collective—with other materialities, people, discourses, events" (229). Varda's gleaners lead the charge.

Although Asia is not present in Boscali's discussion, stuff theory is well worth importing into diverse Asian landscapes where conditions of late capitalist material excesses are similarly evident. Reading of Varda's gleaners I thought of the far less easily romanticized Mumbai scrap gatherers of Katherine Boo's description, and of discarded clothing sorted in Hong Kong and sold in the Philippines as described in Lynn Milgram's ethnography. As a commentary on the claims of things, I thought of the Chinese' artist Song Dong's painstakingly re-presenting, as an installation work in New York's Museum of Modern Art, all of the stuff that his mother had gathered into her tiny hut, a material explosion compulsively marking the end of decades of material privation. As a student of popular religion I thought of Japanese *kuyo*, rites performed to sever a personal relationship with a personally salient object, a doll, a pair of eyeglasses, a cell phone, or a laptop computer. These rites are a resolution of stuff where several scholars suggest that far from a "survival" of

premodern animism, *kuyo* is a flourishing contemporary practice. In my own work, I thought of the liminal status of statues resting in church storerooms in Vietnam because it is difficult to destroy once-blessed things and (for a while) not right to sell them. I thought of Korea—the retired shaman’s god images bundled under an altar because the gods would no longer reside in them but, as sites of an old attachment, they were difficult to destroy. *Asian Ethnology* could have an interesting and multifaceted discussion about stuff.

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