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Office Hours: Monday 1:00-3:00  
AD White House 201

Spring Semester 2011  
SHUM 4953  
Wednesday 2:30-4:25

## THE POLITICAL LIVES OF THINGS

Our political lives are rife with objects (red tape, rubber stamps, etc.). Yet we rarely inquire as to how these things have shaped our sense of authority and our attachment to the polity. This seminar explores the materiality of political life by drawing broadly on contemporary works in art history, social thought, media studies, archaeology, socio-cultural anthropology, and literary theory to piece together a sense of the political lives of things. The goal of the course is to juxtapose the sense, sensibility, and sentiments of objects with the production and reproduction of authority. In so doing, the course opens an interdisciplinary dialogue on both the nature of our relationship with things and our ties to our political communities.

Each week of the seminar will open with an introduction to a single “critical assemblage”, a group of objects that will serve as a focal point for discussion. These critical assemblages will be drawn broadly from an array of sources, prehistoric and modern, instrumental and representational. The goal of this pedagogical technique is to encourage students to not only establish a conceptual vocabulary for theorizing things, but also a methodology for engaging with them. As a result, students will emerge from the class not only knowing how to read about things, but to read them directly and thus frame the formal and aesthetic features of the world around them. This is, in effect, training students to be archaeologists of the everyday, to note the histories and sociologies embedded in the vast material world that suffuses their lives.

### **Course Requirements**

Student performance in the course will be evaluated based on four assignments.

- 1) Students are expected to have completed the required reading prior to each meeting and participate ACTIVELY in class discussions (10%).
- 2) All students will be required to lead class discussion twice during the quarter. Discussion leaders should begin with a brief presentation on the critical themes and ideas raised by the reading(s) AND illustrate these themes in relation to an assemblage of the presenter’s choosing (i.e. not the critical assemblage of the week). Presentations should be no longer than 5 minutes and should lead into a sustained discussion of the texts (20% total).
- 3) At the end of week 7, students will hand in a 5 page description of an assemblage of their choosing (ideally one which will lead into the final paper). The paper should focus on detailing the key parts of the assemblage (distribution, form, style, historicity etc.) that make it an intriguing set of objects for thinking through a political issue. More details on this assignment will be provided in class. (30%)

4) All students are required to write a final paper that engages with a material culture assemblage of their choosing in relation to a problem of political life. Undergraduate papers should be 15-20 pages in length; graduate student papers should not exceed 25 pages. Topics should be cleared with the instructor by the 9<sup>th</sup> week of classes. During the last class period, students will provide a brief in-class synopsis of their assemblage and the findings of their analysis. (40%)

### **Texts**

All students are expected to complete the readings required for each class period. The readings are available on the course Blackboard site.

## **PART I. OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS**

### **I. JANUARY 26. THE POLITICS OF THINGS: ARTIFACT AND ARTIFICE**

*CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE*: “WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION”

### **II. FEBRUARY 2. SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS**

*CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE*:

Plato

1941 *The Republic*. Basic Books, New York. “Allegory of the Cave”

Hobbes, T.

1991 *Leviathan*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Introduction, Ch. 13, 17.

Protevi, J.

2009 *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. Ch. 1.

### **III. FEBRUARY 9. THINGS IN AND OUT OF ORDER: CLASSIFICATION AND CONTROL**

*CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE*: INTERNATIONAL METROLOGY PROTOTYPES

Foucault, M.

1989 *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge, London. Ch. 5.

Winner, L.

1977 *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. Ch. 5.

IV. FEBRUARY 16. THINGS IN AND OUT OF TIME: HISTORY AND THE SUBLIME  
*CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE: CABINETS OF CURIOSITY*

Kopytoff, I.

- 1986 The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In *The Social Life of Things*, edited by A. Appadurai, pp. 64-91. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Nye, D. E.

- 1994 *American Technological Sublime*. MIT Press, Cambridge. Ch. 2 "The American Sublime"

V. FEBRUARY 23: MATERIALS AND MATERIALITY  
*CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE: ROCKS*

Ingold, T.

- 2007 Materials Against Materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14(1):1-16.

Miller, D.

- 2005 Materiality: An Introduction. In *Materiality*, edited by D. Miller, pp. 1-50. Duke University Press, Durham.

VI. MARCH 2: SIGNS, SURFACES AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY  
*CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE: PORTABLE AUDIO PLAYERS*

Clifford, J.

- 1988 *The Predicament of Culture*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge. Pp. 215-251.

Benjamin, W.

- 1968 The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In *Illuminations*, edited by H. Arendt, pp. 217-251. Translated by H. Zohn. Schocken Books, New York.

VII. MARCH 9: INTERIORS AND THE ENCHANTMENT OF TECHNOLOGIES  
*CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE: TOASTERS*

Gell, A.

- 1992 The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology. In *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, edited by J. Coote and A. Shelton, pp.40-63. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Masco, J.

- 2004 Nuclear Technoesthetics: Sensory Politics from Trinity to the Virtual Bomb in Los Alamos. *American Ethnologist* 31(3): 349-373.

## PART II. THE POLITICS OF THINGS

### VIII. MARCH 16: THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

#### *CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE*: AUTOMATA

Bennett, J.

- 2010 *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, Durham. Ch 1 and 2.

Latour, B.

- 2005 *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. Pp. 63-86.

Film Clips from: The Maltese Falcon (1941, dir. J. Huston)

The Matrix (1999, dir. A. and L. Wachowski)

### IX. MARCH 30. CRAFTING POWER

Marx, K. and F. Engels

- 1978 *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Norton, New York. "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844: Estranged Labor".

Sennett, R.

- 2008 *The Craftsman*. Allen Lane, London. Prologue and Ch. 1.

Film: *Objectified* (2009, dir. G. Hustwit)

### X. APRIL 6: GIFT/VALUE

#### *CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE*: THE APADANA AT PERSEPOLIS

Appadurai, A.

- 1986 Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value. In *The Social Life of Things*, edited by A. Appadurai, pp. 3-63. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Simmel, G.

- 1900 A Chapter in the Philosophy of Value. *The American Journal of Sociology* 5(5):577-603.

### XI. APRIL 13: COMMENSAL POLITICS

#### *CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE*: SPAM

Dietler, M.

- 2001 Theorizing the Feast: Rituals of Consumption, Commensal Politics, and Power in African Contexts. In *Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics, and Power*, edited by M. Dietler and B. Hayden, pp. 65-114. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.

Veblen, T.

- 1994 The Theory of the Leisure Class. Dover Publications, New York. Ch. 4.

XII. APRIL 20: OBJECTS OF DESIRE

CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE: WHITE CASTLE SLIDER

Brown, B.

2003 *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. Ch. 1

Hersey, G. L.

2009 *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. Ch. 1-2.

Mini Film Festival

XIII. APRIL 27: THINGS AND MEMORY

CRITICAL ASSEMBLAGE: THE STILL LIFE

Keane, W.

2005 Signs are not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things. In *Materiality*, edited by D. Miller, pp.182-205. Duke University Press, Durham, N.C.

Snyder, J.

2004 Res Ipsa Loquitor. In *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, edited by L. Daston, pp. 195-221. Zone Books, New York.

XIV. MAY 4: AUTHORITY AND ASSEMBLAGES

Student Presentations