

## FORUM: ON PRESENCE

4.

### THE MATERIAL PRESENCE OF THE PAST

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#### ABSTRACT

This article deals with the material presence of the past and the recent call in the human sciences for a “return to things.” This renewed interest in things signals a rejection of constructivism and textualism and the longing for what is “real,” where “regaining” the object is conceived as a means for re-establishing contact with reality. In the context of this turn, we might wish to reconsider the (ontological) status of relics of the past and their function in mediating relations between the organic and the inorganic, between people and things, and among various kinds of things themselves for reconceptualizing the study of the past. I argue that the future will depend on whether and how various scholars interested in the past manage to modify their understanding of the material remnants of the past, that is, things as well as human, animal, and plant remains. In discussing this problem I will refer to Martin Heidegger’s distinction between an object and a thing, to Bruno Latour’s idea of the agency of things and object-oriented democracy, and to Don Ihde’s material hermeneutics.

To illustrate my argument I will focus on some examples of the ambivalent status of the disappeared person (dead or alive) in Argentina, which resists the oppositional structure of present versus absent. In this context, the disappeared body is a paradigm of the past itself, which is both continuous with the present and discontinuous from it, which simultaneously is and is not. Since there are no adequate terms to analyze the “contradictory” or anomalous status of the present-absent dichotomy, I look for them outside the binary oppositions conventionally used to conceptualize the present-absent relationship in our thinking about the past. For this purpose I employ Algirdas Julien Greimas’s semiotic square.

In recent decades we have tended to think about the presence of the past in terms of representation, but presence might be considered from within an emerging new paradigm that offers a viable alternative to representation. To show this I will consider the spatial dimension of presence—a presence that is in front of me, a presence of things. I will claim that, while a turn from representation to presence marks a change in our focus of attention, it is not necessarily an alternative to representation. Attending to presence reflects a need for concrete actions when merely intellectual considerations fail to effect changes in the world. Thus, I will focus my attention on the material presence of the past—on things. I am trying to rethink the material aspect of traces of the past in a context other than semiotics, discourse theory, or representation theory, and to focus the analysis of those traces on an aspect that is marginalized or neglected by traditional notions of the source. That is, I mean to focus on the materiality and thingness of the trace rather than on its textuality and content.

I believe that the future (and the future of thinking about the past) depends on whether and how various scholars interested in the past (historians and archaeologists but also anthropologists, sociologists, and artists) manage to modify their understanding of the material remnants of the past, that is, things as well as human, animal, and plant remains. Questions concerning the status of relics from the past, relations between the human and the nonhuman, the organic and the inorganic, between people and things and among things themselves, are of fundamental importance not only for reconceptualizing the study of the past, but also for the future of a world that involves technologies such as cloning, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, biotechnology, and transplantations using animal organs and biotronic implants.

In order to discuss presence in the context of the material presence of the past, it is not enough to call for an interdisciplinary approach within the social sciences and the humanities, because the presence of things pushes us to reconsider the dialogue between the humanities and the sciences. Besides, discussions about the relations between the human and the nonhuman, the organic and the inorganic, and people and things, show that the anthropocentric character of history construed as “the science of people in time” (Marc Bloch) is too narrow. Required is an approach that might be called “a non-anthropocentric history” or “post-human history.” This kind of history distances itself from a humanist conception that places human beings at the center of the world; instead, it considers humankind as one among many organic and non-organic beings existing on the earth.

#### I. THE RETURN TO THINGS

These ideas are drawn from the context of the so-called “return to things,” “back to things,” and “turn to the nonhuman” that have appeared in the humanities since the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> It should come as no surprise that, after the long-lasting dominance of deconstruction, constructivism, and narrativism, the longing for reality as such became stronger and gave rise to a different approach. However, the perception that constructivism and its ilk may have taken us too far away from “the real past” and from reality in general only partially accounts for the return to things. I would like to distinguish four further tendencies underlying the recently renewed interest in things: 1) the critique of anthropocentrism (rejecting the idea of the supreme importance of the human being, and turning to other, equally important forms of existence, such as animals, plants, and things); the critique of humanism; 2) the changing conception of the dichotomy between spirit and matter, or the mind and the body, in which matter is no longer perceived as inferior to spirit; 3) the crisis of identity (at the *general* level, things [relics of the past, keepsakes] can be used to help us determine who we are; the thing becomes the “other” of human being; the thing participates in creating human identity, legitimates it, and becomes its guarantor; it also marks changes in human identity. At the *collective* level things

1. See, for example, *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Cf. also “Materializing Ethnography,” theme issue of *Journal of Material Culture* 9:1 (2004); *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. Victor Buchli (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

help build and strengthen interpersonal relations as they serve to connect people); and 4) the critique of consumer society, and the attempt to see things as more than commodities or tools for use.

Of course, things have not been totally neglected by the human and social sciences. On the contrary, an interest in things has its own long tradition, including the history of material culture. However, present-day “thing studies” and the so-called “new material culture,”<sup>2</sup> reject constructivism, narrativism, and textualism on the grounds that these approaches have “dematerialized” things by comparing the thing to a text, and research to reading, by perceiving the thing solely as a message or sign. In an attempt to reverse those tendencies, “new material studies” points to the agency of things, accentuating the fact that things not only exist but also act and have performative potential. Thus, in the “return to things,” it is not the topic that is new, but the approaches to things and the forms of studying them.

Of course, the very definition of a thing is problematic. In dictionaries a thing is defined as an entity having material existence; the real and concrete substance of an entity; an entity existing in time and space; an inanimate object. The word “object” is used as a synonym (“object” is defined as a “material thing,” a “tangible and visible entity that can cast a shadow”). *Res* is differentiated from *persona*. A *persona*—as the civil law states—is a subject of rights, while *res* is an object of rights (this understanding is challenged when we talk about “the rights of things”). Archaeologists often use the word “thing” interchangeably with “artifact” (Latin *arte+factum*), which means “a manmade object” or, in a broader sense “any material remnant of human activity.” In this sense the artifact is in binary opposition with an “ecofact,” that is, a natural object produced by natural processes without human intervention.

Many scholars interested in “thing studies” invoke Martin Heidegger’s distinction between an *object* (a material entity present-at-hand) and a (useful) *thing* (a material entity ready-to-hand). Heidegger was interested in useful things that are “encountered in taking care” and in their being. For example, a hammer’s being reveals itself by its handiness; this handiness, in turn, is discovered in the act of hammering. By objects, however, Heidegger means entities that are objectively present and about which we can reflect and make statements. Thus, handiness (*Zuhandenheit*) reveals itself when a useful thing is utilized, whereas the objective presence (*Vorhandenheit*) of an entity as “occurrent” or “at-hand” (*vorhanden*) requires a distance in order to look at it and speak about it. Those in “thing studies” find these distinctions useful in discussing the being of things around us and how things manifest themselves, and in putting things in relation to humans and treating them as active agents of social life.<sup>3</sup>

2. “New material culture” was developed by British archaeologists, who in 1996 founded the interdisciplinary *Journal of Material Culture*.

3. According to Heidegger, things (things-at-hand) are important for *Da-sein* to exist since *Da-sein* is always already also *Mit-sein*—being with and for others. “A return to things,” following his approach, would mean to study the way of being of things (what is a stone as a thing?; what is its being?) and to investigate how to let things unveil what has remained hidden. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 62–71, and *What is a Thing?*, transl. W. B. Barton, Jr. and Vera Deutsch (Chicago: Regnery, 1970). Cf. also works by a representative of so-called “Heideggerian archaeology,” Julian Thomas, *Time, Culture and Identity: An Interpretive Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

## II. NO DEMOCRACY WITHOUT THINGS: BRUNO LATOUR

For one of the leading scholars of things, the French anthropologist of science Bruno Latour, the Heideggerian distinction between an object and a thing is crucial. Latour is interested in how objects could become things again (in Heideggerian terms), and he insists on the agency of things. Of course, the notion of the agency of things does not mean that things have intentions or consciousness; Latour does not animate things, but rather claims that things enjoy a particular status in their relations with people. For scholars inspired by Latour and by Marcel Mauss's idea of the gift, things perform a socializing function: they solidify interpersonal relations, they participate in the creation of human identity at the individual and collective levels, and they mark its changes.

Latour's recent ideas might be of special interest for theorists of history. Once one of the most famous constructivists, he has recently become very critical of his earlier position. He now advocates a renewal of empiricism, getting closer to facts, and a return to a realist attitude that focuses more on "matters of concern" than on "matters of fact."<sup>4</sup> For Latour, "matters of concern" should be the main point of interest for critical theory, and the notions of protection and care should be its key concepts. His interesting shift toward things is based on the assumption that because "something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution." He continues: "I am aware that to get at the heart of this argument one would have to renew also what it means to be a constructivist, but I have said enough to indicate the direction of critique, not *away* but *toward* the gathering, the Thing."<sup>5</sup>

Latour asks the question "what would an object-oriented democracy look like?" He notices that *Res-publica* refers to a public thing, and he is interested precisely in things that create a public sphere around them. To indicate this shift of interest, Latour introduces the German neologism *Dingpolitik* as a substitute for *Realpolitik*. For him politics is no longer limited to humans, but extends also to things; he is interested in how publics gather around things, and how things attract various gatherings in places like supermarkets, computer networks, scientific laboratories, churches, markets, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Many anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, and literary scholars are following Latour's lead. For instance, consider the following fragment from the manifesto "In Defense of Things" by Norwegian archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen:

4. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30:2 (Winter 2004), 231. Latour writes extensively about current changes in the social sciences in the context of the change in thinking about the relations between the social and material worlds. Cf. Bruno Latour, "When Things Strike Back: A Possible Contribution of 'Social Studies' to the Social Sciences," *British Journal of Sociology*, Special Issue: "Sociology Facing the Next Millennium," 51:1 (January/March 2000). Cf. also Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

5. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 246.

6. *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press and Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM, 2005); Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, transl. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Archaeologists should unite in a defense of things, a defense of those subaltern members of the collective that have been silenced and “othered” by the imperialist social and humanist discourses. I am tired of the familiar story of how the subject, the social, the episteme, created the object; tired of the story that everything is language, action, mind and human bodies. I want us to pay more attention to the other half of this story: how objects construct the subject. This story is not narrated in the labile languages, but comes to us as silent, tangible, visible and brute material remains: machines, walls, roads, pits and swords. . . . Thus, the need for a new regime, “a democracy extended to things” (Latour), becomes ever more evident.<sup>7</sup>

In the contemporary world “there is no democracy without things”—such a slogan harkens not only to Latour’s and Olsen’s ideas, but to the “return to things” phenomenon in general. (Of course, one might ask, on what assumptions does Olsen presuppose that things should and need to be defended? Do objects/things have rights? Should people act as advocates of things and speak in their name? What kind of change in human–thing relations does this manifesto suggest?)

### III. MATERIAL HERMENEUTICS: DON IHDE

In this and the next two sections I would like to focus on a very specific kind of organic thing, namely, human remains. In this section I will propose the thesis that the ambivalent and “uncanny” status of the dead human body in its various forms (bones, ashes) often resists the dichotomous classification of present versus absent. In the next section, I will focus on the body of the disappeared (*desaparecidos*) understood as a paradigm of the past itself, and in the section after that on the idea of being both continuous with the present and discontinuous from it, simultaneously being and not being.

Don Ihde, a well-known representative of so-called “technoscience studies,” examines the case of Otzi the Iceman. The frozen remains of a man who lived 5,300 years ago were discovered in 1991 by hikers on the Austrian-Italian border. Ihde describes how through various instruments (microscopes, spectrographs, radiocarbon dating, and so on) Otzi’s history has been reconstructed and what initially could not have been seen suddenly became visible. Ihde’s argument is that the Otzi story could have been uncovered without the aid of textual hermeneutics, and thus that material hermeneutics is not a supplement to, but rather a necessary part of, fragmentary textual hermeneutics. Instruments enable scientists to perceive aspects of reality that cannot be perceived without them. The history of Otzi the Iceman is co-shaped by the instruments with which he is studied. This means that instruments co-constitute the reality studied by scholars. Their role is not simply instrumental, but hermeneutic: they shape the ways that people gain access to reality. In such an approach we witness an expansion of hermeneutics from texts to materiality. Human interpretations of reality are not to be understood in terms of textual and linguistic structures only, but also as mediated by artifacts. In the same vein as Latour, who claims that the social sciences have too exclusively focused on humans and forgotten about nonhumans, hermeneutics has only been using half its capacity, occupying itself only with texts and neglecting things.

7. Bjørnar Olsen, “Material Culture after Text: Re-Membering Things,” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 36:3 (2003), 100. Cf.: *Making Things Public*, ed. Latour and Weibel.

In light of this, Ihde proposes a way of moving beyond both the positivistic description of things, on the one hand, and the semiotic approach to the thing as text, symbol, or metaphor, on the other. He develops what he calls a “material hermeneutics.” Ihde claims that the belief that the natural sciences and the social and human sciences have different methodologies is outdated and that an expanded notion of hermeneutics might cancel this “Diltheyan Divide” (as he calls it). As Ihde puts it: “The main point of an expanded hermeneutics is that what the natural sciences teach us is that there are ways, through instruments—technologies—by which things can show themselves. A material hermeneutics is a hermeneutics which ‘gives things voices where there had been silence, and brings to sight that which was invisible.’”<sup>8</sup> He is thus interested in how tools relate and influence the production of knowledge, and in his approach mediation has replaced alienation as the key concept for analyzing technology.<sup>9</sup> Technologies should not be conceived solely as instruments to estrange people from themselves and their world, but also as the means that mediates their existence and experiences.

#### IV. THE DEAD BODY AS EVIDENCE OF CRIME AND AS OBJECT OF MOURNING<sup>10</sup>

The discourse of death and the “politics of dead bodies” have become key issues in the humanities during the past few decades. Questions of whether it is justifiable to disinter human remains and examine them for scientific purposes have caused intense controversies, as has the problem of putting them to political use. Tensions have arisen between the expectations of the living and the rights of the dead, for whom, it is often assumed, the body no longer matters. The distinction between the corpse as “thing” and as “person” is well known, but even speaking of the personality of the dead body in the context of its inviolability (law) and memory (doing honor to the dead person) involves the ubiquitous “politics of heritage.”

It was largely thanks to the Mothers of the Disappeared, who formed a group known as *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, that the problem of the *desaparecidos* (opponents of the regime who disappeared without a trace) in Argentina became widely known.<sup>11</sup> Because of disagreement among the Mothers over the trials and exhumations, in 1986 the group split apart. Twelve of the activists formed

8. Don Ihde, “More Material Hermeneutics,” paper presented at the meeting on “Hermeneutics and Science,” June 7-11, 2003, Tihany, Hungary, <http://traumwerk.stanford.edu:3455/Symmetry/admin/download.html?attachid=178178> (accessed April 22, 2006). See also his *Expanding Hermeneutics: Visualism in Science* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

9. On the role of mediation in archaeological research, see Christopher Witmore, “Four Archaeological Engagements with Place: Mediating Bodily Experience through Peripatetic Video,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 20:2 (2004). For Witmore, “mediation is mode of engagement, which takes us beyond narrative. . . . I argue, following Michael Shanks, that it is a way of *rescuing the inef-fable*. Moreover, mediation is a process that allows us to attain richer and fuller translations of bodily experience and materiality that are located, multi-textured, sensory, and polysemous” (60).

10. By way of illustration of my thesis I offer the following case-study, a version of which has appeared in an earlier publication. See Ewa Domanska, “Toward the Archaeontology of the Dead Body,” *Rethinking History* 9:4 (2005), 402-405.

11. It is estimated that between 1976 and 1983 about 30,000 people disappeared in Argentina, while for the whole of Latin America since 1964 the number amounts to 90,000. The vanishing, or forced disappearance, of opponents of the regime (and then of random people) became a common and effective mechanism of repression in that part of the world.

a group called *Línea Fundadora* (the Founding Line); they were in favor of the exhumations of the bodies of the *desaparecidos*, which were to demonstrate that they were tortured to death. The mourning and proper burial of the remains of their disappeared children were for them of fundamental importance. The other group of the Mothers objected to the exhumations. For them the identification of victims was not as important as the identification and trial of those guilty of their deaths.

The situation in Argentina is one of many examples of “the institution of the disappeared” and the controversial problem of exhuming their bodies. An important issue is the ambivalent status of the *desaparecidos* and their absent bodies. A person (not to mention a body) who has been disappeared without a trace takes on a ghostly character, as Zoë Crossland has pointed out.<sup>12</sup> The Freudian category of “the uncanny” may thus be useful in analyzing it.<sup>13</sup> The liminality and “monstrosity” of the disappeared, of whom we do not know whether they are dead or alive, prevents the trauma of loss from being healed by means of rituals. The ambivalent status of the disappeared, their almost unearthly nature, endows them with great power. The justice-seeking Mothers used this power, knowing that the junta’s crimes would not be forgiven and forgotten as long as the relatives for whom the Mothers were looking retained the status of *desaparecidos*, situated in the “between” that separates life and death. Therefore, as I have noted above, some of them were in favor of the exhumation and identification of the bodies, whose examination would confirm that the person had not fled abroad or died a natural death, as the junta would claim. Others, conversely, would not accept the death of the loved ones, and they perceived the exhumations as part of a secret plan to falsify the facts of the government’s criminal actions. Still others believed that transforming the *desaparecidos* into identified remains made possible the performance of rites, healing the wounds, and curing and rebuilding the community, which, in their opinion, simply meant closing a painful chapter of Argentina’s history.

The absent bodies and empty graves prevented settling the issue of the *desaparecidos*. For their history to end, as Frank Graziano has expressed it, “the graves must ultimately be filled.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, maintaining the liminal condition of the

12. Zoë Crossland, “Buried Lives: Forensic Archaeology and the Disappeared in Argentina,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 7:2 (2000), 152 and 155.

13. In his well-known essay “The Uncanny” (1919), Sigmund Freud says that the feeling of anxiety, fear, and horror caused by staying in haunted houses, or by contact with a dead body, wax figures, or mechanical dolls may be described as “uncanny” (*unheimlich*). “The uncanny” is terrifying because it is strange and unfamiliar, yet we actually have this feeling in relation to something that used to be familiar (*heimlich*), but that has become unfamiliar as a result of repression. It is something alien, weird, and demonic, the experience of which is petrifying. In his definition of this concept, Freud cites a statement by Schelling, for whom “the uncanny” is all that should stay hidden but has been revealed. One source of this feeling, according to Freud, is uncertainty caused by the ambivalent nature of a thing about which we do not know whether it is dead or alive, man or machine, and so on. Cf. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *Collected Papers*, vol. IV, authorized translation under the supervision of Joan Riviere (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953).

14. Frank Graziano, *Divine Violence: Spectacle, Psychosexuality, and Radical Christianity in the Argentine “Dirty War”* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 188. It is worth noting this interesting and controversial book, which situates historical considerations in the context of a psychoanalytic scrutiny of the relation religion–violence–psychosexuality. “My inquiry is grounded in the romantic

disappeared was important to those who were more interested in “crime, guilt, and punishment” (trials and punishing the guilty) than “mourning, forgiveness, and forgetting” (soothing memories and building a new reality together). The key to the matter, then, is the difference between the function of the dead body as evidence of a crime (the rhetoric of justice) and/or as the reference point for the work of mourning (the rhetoric of memory).

The case of the absent bodies of the *desaparecidos* shows that both the discourse of the regime (the one that provides the official view of the past) and the discourse of the injured (the one that provides the individual, personal view of the past that puts the former to the test) are interested in the question of “the benefits and harmfulness of the remains to life,” because for both these discourses it is the living rather than the dead, life rather than death, the future rather than the past, and the presentification of the past rather than its absence, that provide the reference point for reflection. In reckoning with the past the dead body is valuable either as a “body of evidence,” or, more specifically, the “evidence of a crime”—*corpus delicti*—bearing the marks of a person’s experiences before death (torture) and the kind of death (homicide) he or she endured, or as what can be used for political purposes, or as the object of mourning through which a community is consolidated and reborn. “The corpse is an effective instrument,” says Louis-Vincent Thomas, “if only one knows how to use it: it makes a great impression and perfectly fulfills all expectations.”<sup>15</sup> The dead body is a witness (“a witness from beyond the grave”) and evidence at the same time. It is also an alternative form of testimony. In this way it serves the living, becoming the space of conflict between different interests of power, knowledge, and the sacred. The body is politicized, it becomes an institution, and death itself turns out to be more of a political fact than an individual experience.

If the remains are described as evidence, it is only natural that the archaeologist who excavates them, the anthropologist who examines them, and the historian who writes about them should play the part of detectives, which is how they are often described by the media. Such a conception of their work dehumanizes the exhumation process, since a scientific investigation done by a professional researcher and the treatment of dead bodies as evidence introduce, in the name of the struggle for justice, a radical distance between the researcher (subject) and the object of analysis (the body), forcing the reflection into scientific patterns of discourse about scientific truth, objectivity, and the logic of argumentation. When the remains are treated as an “object of study” or an “object of mourning”—the word “object” alone implies the dead body’s helplessness to resist the violence of a variety of discourses—they are separated from a particular personality and become a thing. For even the identification of the body, its change of status from anonymous remains to the remains of a specific person, and its mourning do not

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belief that we can erode the viability of State violence by exposing the psychosexual structures perpetuating it and by demythologizing the politico-religious masquerade that endows it with eschatological necessity” (x).

15. Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Le cadavre: De la biologie à l’anthropologie* (Brussels: Complexe, 1980), 120.

prevent its instrumental use. As Michael Parker Pearson has said, “dealing with the dead, recent and ancient, inevitably must serve the living.”<sup>16</sup>

V. THE *NON-ABSENT PAST*, OR THE PAST THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

As I pointed out above, the ambivalent, “uncanny” status of the disappeared person (dead or alive) resists the dichotomous classification of present versus absent. In this context, the disappeared body is, as it were, a paradigm of the past itself, which is both continuous with the present and discontinuous from it, which simultaneously is and is not. Since there are no adequate terms to analyze its “contradictory,” anomalous status, I will look for some outside the binary opposition of present and absent to which we often refer when thinking about the past. For this purpose I will use Algirdas Julien Greimas’s semiotic square.<sup>17</sup>

Greimas’s model illustrates the principle of semantic field formation. It is a useful instrument that helps us visualize the mechanism of creating meanings when binary concepts are subjected to the processes of building oppositions, contradictions, and implications. Relations founded upon the tension between binary concepts and secondary concepts form a dialectic model based on a double binary, an alternative to Hegel’s tripartite model. Thus, by creating secondary concepts, Greimas’s model opens up the possibility of identifying the logical implications of a simple binary model.

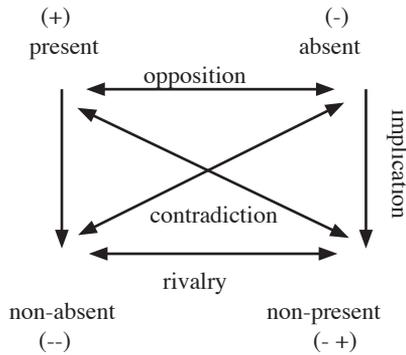


Figure 1. The present-absent semiotic square

I am less interested in the terms *present* and *absent*, which are usually used to distinguish between the present and the past, than in the secondary concepts, that is, a past that is non-absent (whose absence is manifest) or non-present (whose presence is not manifest). I would like to see these concepts as competing but complementary rather than as opposed. Contemporary debates about historical

16. Michael Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 192.

17. Algirdas J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, transl. Danielle McDowell et al. [1966] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Greimas, “Elements of a Narrative Grammar,” *Diacritics* 7 (1977), 23-40; Greimas, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, transl. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (London: Frances Pinter, 1987); Greimas and J. Fontanille, *The Semiotic of Passions: From States of Affairs to States of Feeling* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

knowledge are centered around the non-present past, that is, the non-manifest presence of the past (the debate about the possibility of presentifying and representing the past involves the question of whether it is possible to attain knowledge about something that no longer exists).

I suggest that the *non-present past* should be related to the question of modifying the present. Since scholars are still coping with the insufficient manifestation of the past, its residues and their interpretation can easily become instruments of manipulation helpful in creating a desirable vision of the past. Every time we have to do with representation of the non-present, we are especially inclined to manipulate interpretation. The category of the *non-absent past* (the past whose absence is manifest), however, seems more interesting. Based on double negation, it acquires positive meaning (two minuses equal a plus). By focusing on it we avoid the desire to presentify and represent the past, and instead we turn to a past that is somehow still present, that will not go away or, rather, that of which we cannot rid ourselves. The non-absent past is the ambivalent and liminal space of “the uncanny”; it is a past that haunts like a phantom and therefore cannot be so easily controlled or subject to a finite interpretation. It is occupied by “ghostly artifacts” or places that undermine our sense of the familiar and threaten our sense of safety. This is a conceptual space where I would like to see the missing bodies of the *desaparecidos*. The trace-being—the missing body—possesses a kind of *power of absence*, where I use the word “power” deliberately to refer to the magic and mysteriousness of the past that is not absent.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The “enchantments with things” observable in the humanities of today can be placed within the context of ongoing attempts to create counter-disciplines, such as counter-history, counter-archaeology, and so on. In such counter-disciplines, things, which hitherto have been silent and reduced to passivity, are allowed to speak in their own voices. Counter-history or counter-archaeology becomes part of the “insurrectional”—and “repossession”—discourses in which things are perceived as Others who demand their place in discourse. Objects are no longer seen as subaltern Others: the choice of the word “thing” instead of “object” in Heideggerian archaeology attests to this change.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, however, the thing conceived as other shares the fate of those others who cannot speak for themselves, such as animals or the dead. Living people speak in the name of things, which means that the discourse of things is always incorporated into our discourse, our needs and expectations, and our pragmatics, such as gaining knowledge, the discourse of mourning, the discourse of reconciliation or of justice. A question arises whether such an apparent defense of things is not a means of neutralizing and taming their threatening otherness, or whether it is not a perverse method of disciplining things by way of their domestication. Things as others are welcomed

18. True enough, counter-archaeology departs from the simplistic approach to things in terms of their functionality and usefulness, and the new archaeologist sides with things as active creators of social life. However, is counter-archaeology anything more than a clever move on the part of the dominant system of knowledge that attempts to incorporate and neutralize all potentially threatening discourses?

insofar as they are somehow “integrated” into a dominant discourse, but only if their difference can be neutralized. The dual process of anthropomorphization of things and the reification of humans proves the adage: “become like me and I will respect your difference.”<sup>19</sup>

Like every “Other,” the dead can be approached in two ways: we can either see their otherness as pathological and try to normalize them by making them similar to the living, or we can treat them as members of a certain “culture” (or cultures). In most cases, the dead are spoken of in terms of the living: they have dominion, they are a family, we should cultivate their memory. Such treatment of the dead is ultimately infantilizing, since they are presented as being in need of care, like children. Caregiving—to risk repeating the obvious—presupposes a certain hierarchy: the person who receives care is considered weaker, the caregiver claims to be in charge. In fact, care means control, and care for the dead is no exception. Most scholars interested in similar problems approach the dead from a pragmatic point of view. The dead are important insofar as they serve the living and can be utilized by the living, either as a source of inspiration (Laura in Petrarch’s sonnets), or as the *corpus delicti* (trials concerning homicide), or, last but not least, as objects of the work of mourning (families desperately trying to recover the bodies of missing relatives so as to be able to conduct a proper burial).

Gísli Pálsson describes three paradigms of human–environment relations: orientalism, paternalism, and communalism. *Orientalism* establishes a fundamental break between nature and society; it legitimizes anthropocracy (humans are masters of nature) that engenders an exploitative attitude toward nonhumans and an aggressive colonization. Things are seen as usable objects that, because they have no rights, can be treated in any way whatsoever. In this kind of relationship with things there are no ethical considerations. *Paternalism*, on the other hand, presupposes a protective attitude toward things. It still implies human mastery and relations of hierarchy, but presumes a certain responsibility not only toward other humans but also toward nonhuman beings. In this approach people act on behalf of things thereby fulfilling a “protective contract.” Such an approach still promotes a colonizing discourse in which a thing is treated as the fragile and victimized other in a vein similar to that of women, children, and the disabled; however, it is not as aggressive as the case of the orientalist approach. *Communalism* rejects the separation of nature and society, and is characterized by the notions of contingency and dialogue. It suggests generalized reciprocity, engagement, and an ethical attitude toward the nonhuman based on close, even intimate, relationships. Pálsson stresses that communalism does not mean a return to the pre-Renaissance, medieval idea of humans as the integral center of the world, or to naive Romanticism.<sup>20</sup>

The approaches to things (including human remains) discussed in this paper testify that the paternalist paradigm is still the dominant one. In this approach human beings are still mastering the world of nonhumans and claiming rights to control

19. See the criticism of the politics of difference by Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2002).

20. Gísli Pálsson, “Human-Environmental Relations: Orientalism, Paternalism and Communalism,” in *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Philippe Descola and Gísli Pálsson (London: Routledge, 1996).

them and to speak in their name (“paternal contract”). What we need, however, is to establish a human–nonhuman relationship based on a non-anthropocentric approach and on a relational epistemology as proposed by the paradigm of communalism. As Nurit Bird-David has shown, communalism is based on a relational epistemology that is marked by an absence of the ontological dualism of nature and culture, and body and mind, that are characteristic of Western thought; self and personhood are relational to, and not separated from, the world. The world in this approach is a heterarchical one, rather than hierarchical.<sup>21</sup> “I relate, therefore I am,” writes Bird-David, describing the intimate engagements of the natives with their environment. For the Nayaka, for instance, a person is someone or something with whom one shares. Moreover, Bird-David does not reify the notion of “relationship” into an entity but prefers to talk about “‘relatedness’ meaning two beings/things mutually responsive to each other.”<sup>22</sup> She proposes to treat animism as a “relational epistemology” and a performative act of knowing, which allows her to focus on what is done in animistic acts rather than what is represented in them.

This short description of Bird-David’s understanding of animism and personhood that focuses on relatedness with other beings and engagement with them directs us to a possible model of relations between humans and nonhumans that is also found in the works of such advocates of things as Bruno Latour and Bjørnar Olsen. However, while the paradigm of communalism seems to project a utopian future, the paradigm of paternalism still constitutes the dominant approach in thing-studies.

It seems that we have to recognize the presence of nonhuman actors—and that this would mean that they have presence (and not only that they are present)—in order to challenge our relationship with the past.

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21. The term “relational epistemology” is also used by Latour, especially in his Actor-Network Theory. Referring to collectives of humans and nonhumans, this epistemology—as it is in Bird-David’s approach—rejects the positivist view of objects or actors as closed and separated from the world of individuals, existing in themselves prior to any participation in ecosocial and semiotic networks of interactions (including the interactions in which they are observed, named, and so on). See Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47:4 (1996), <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9801/msg00019.html> (accessed April 22, 2006).

22. In a traditional objectivist paradigm, speaking about mutual responsibility between beings/things does not make sense, but in Bird-David’s approach it is explained as follows: “If ‘cutting trees into parts’ [as botanists do in order to study the tropical forest] epitomizes the modernist epistemology, ‘talking with trees,’ I argue, epitomizes Nayaka animistic epistemology. ‘Talking with’ is shorthand for a two-way responsive relatedness with a tree—rather than ‘speaking’ one-way to it, as if it could listen and understand. ‘Talking with’ stands for attentiveness to variances and invariances in behavior and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them. To ‘talk with a tree’—rather than ‘cut it down’—is to perceive what *it* does as one acts toward it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility.” Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revised: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” *Current Anthropology* 40, Supplement (February 1999), 77. See also her “The Giving Environment: Another Perspective on the Economic System of Gatherer-Hunters,” *Current Anthropology* 31:2 (April 1990).