

The secret life of things (Virginia Woolf and the matter of modernism.

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## **The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)**

*Bill Brown\* (bio)*

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You should be reading this with something in your hands besides a journal. And something, really, besides a pencil or pen. Something like an empty glass, a rubber band, a paper clip that you can rub between your fingers, that you can twist and bend back and forth. For the idea is to wonder whether—while concerning ourselves with one or another crisis of the subject—we haven't also been in the midst of an effort to think about the object, if not indeed to liberate material objects. The comic version of this effort would resemble a scene from the *Mork and Mindy* show: when asked what could have happened to all the sponges in the kitchen, the alien (Robin Williams) proudly announces, "I took them to the river and set them free."

A somewhat more serious version can be found in the work of Jean Baudrillard, who denounces the way that the object, because it is considered "only the alienated, accursed part of the subject," has been rendered unintelligible, "shamed, obscene, passive." Undoing the privilege of the subject is not for him a matter of attending to the subject's fraught, fragile, and divisive constitution. It is a matter of imagining how the "destiny of the subject passes into the object," of naming the object "sovereign," of celebrating the crystal's revenge, indeed "crystal revenge."<sup>1</sup> And yet, of course, the luminous transparency of the crystalline object, its auratic singularity, can only impoverish other objects, material objects, or material understood as itself an object—not shimmering, exquisite crystal, let us say, but glass that is nothing but glass. Is it not the very splendor of the object that allows objects to disappear so readily **[End Page 1]** in Baudrillard's subsequent work, evaporating into one or another version of the hyperreal?

No less than the tradition he writes against, Baudrillard seems to suffer from what Theodor Adorno called the familiar "allergies to entity," a chief symptom of which is the failure to recognize that there can be no "primeval history of the object," only a history "dealing with specific objects." The passage into materialism, as Adorno came to describe it, requires acknowledging "things" outside the subject/object trajectory,

which means thinking sensation in its distinction from cognition. For the “dignity of physicality” is indissoluble in, and not exhausted by, the subject/object relation, epistemologically or phenomenologically understood.<sup>2</sup> Still, if “things” are indeed not exhausted by that relation, it is only in the subject/object nexus where they occur, or where they can be *narrated* as the *effect* (not the ground) of an interaction at once physical and psychological, at once intimate and alienating. To the degree that the “thing” registers the undignified mutability of objects, and thus the excess of the object (a capacity to be other than it is), the “thing” names a mutual mediation (and a slide between objective and subjective predication) that appears as the vivacity of the object’s difference from itself. What happens, should we drop the crystal, should it shatter, and should we glance at the bits of glass that, though they are nothing but glass, captivate our attention? What happens when we deauratize *the* object (that is identifiable only within a fundamentally static structure) and begin again with the vertiginous banality of things—with some sense of the curious thingness of those objects we incessantly if unconsciously touch, the objects we see without ever looking? What if we looked?

In fact, “things” seem to have achieved a new discursive visibility. From the disciplines of anthropology and history, as from the interdiscipline of “material culture studies,” important anthologies summon us to attend to things: *The Social Life of Things* (1986), *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (1998), *History from Things* (1993), *The Sex of Things* (1996). These volumes assume the task of denaturalizing consumer practices, of tracing (both within and between cultures) the *work* of exchange and consumption: the way economic value is created in specific social formations, the way cultural values become objectified in specific material forms, the way that people...



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