

Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism

THEOCRIT 9436: The Subject of the Object

Fall term, 2018

Wednesdays, 1:30-4:30

The title of this course is playing with the various ways in which a physical object can be approached: as a subject of study, subjected to human thought and perception; as an entity that has its own version of what we call “subjectivity”; as one among a whole world of things that impinge on us and may be crucial to our very sense of self. In this sense, it is we who are subjected to the object.

Considerations of the object are not new to philosophy, but in recent years these have been given a new intensity. In 2001, introducing a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled simply *Things*, Bill Brown referred to “what might be called object studies”; and that is what it has been called since then. However, this newly defined field was almost immediately shaken up by the rise of object-oriented ontology: a radical attempt to think of physical entities from their own perspective, or at least a perspective that doesn’t fold them back into human concerns.

Early in the term, we will read Heidegger’s “Various Ways of Questioning about the Thing.” This could be an alternative title for the course. Every answer leads to more questions about this subject, the subject of the object. If we let it, it will leave us with a heightened sense of the strangeness of everyday things.

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Office hours: Mondays, 1:30-2:30
Office: Stevenson Hall Rm. 2157

Sept. 12 Object and Thing

Bill Brown, “Thing Theory” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001), 1-16.

Object Lessons:

Francis Ponge, selections from “The Pebble” and *Soap*

Zbigniew Herbert, “Pebble”

Wendy Walker, goblet and rose from *The Secret Service*

Franz Kafka, “The Cares of a Family Man”

Sept. 19. Heidegger

Martin Heidegger, “Various Ways of Questioning about the Thing”
(pp. 1-52, *What is a Thing?*)

“The Thing” (pp. 163-86, *Poetry, Language, Thought*)

The Broken Tool (sections 15 and 16 of *Being and Time*, pp. 95-107)

Sept. 26. Harman I

Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology I* (pp. 1-102). Object Lesson due.

Oct. 3 Harman II

Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology II* (pp. 149-193; 221-241)

Oct. 10 Reading Week

Oct. 17 Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, pp. 1-74.

Oct. 24 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter I* (pp. 1-61)

Oct. 31 Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter II* (pp. 62-122)

Nov. 7 Subjects formed by Objects

D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena"

Bruno Latour, "Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts"

(<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/50-MISSING-MASSES-GB.pdf>)

Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to *Ding*-Politik or How to Make Things Public" (<http://pavilionmagazine.org/bruno-latour-from-realpolitik-to-dingpolitik-or-how-to-make-things-public/>)

Nov. 14 Collecting

Walter Benjamin "Unpacking my Library: A Talk About Book Collection"

Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting"

Haim Steinbach; online, at will.

Nov. 21 Marxist Objects

Marx, *Capital*, Chapter 1. 4, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret"

Peter Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat"

Nov. 28 Gender, Sexuality and Objects

Katherine Behar, "An Introduction to OOF"

E.L. McCallum, "The Epistemology of the Object" (Coda to *Object Lessons: How to Do Things with Fetishism*)

<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org>

Dec. 5 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*, part 1 (pp. 1-95). Online at

<http://massivelyinvisibleobjects.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Hyperobjects.pdf>

Required Texts

Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*.
Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*

These two books have been stocked by the Western Bookstore. Other readings for the course are available through OWL, or can be photocopied from a folder in the Theory Centre office. The remainder are online.

Assignments:

15% Object Lesson essay, 1,500-2,000 words.
See <http://objectsobjectsobjects.com>

35% Teaching Stint (15%) and short paper arising from it (20% at 8-10 pages, conference paper size), due two weeks after the seminar has been presented.

50% Final Paper (15-20 pages), due before the end of December.

The assignments for this course, when completed, should yield you: a modest on-line publication, which might also serve as a book proposal; a conference paper; an article-length essay; and some practical teaching experience.

One possible conference venue for either your first or your second assignment is *Back to the Things Themselves* (<https://btttt.net/call-for-papers/>)

The Object Lesson

Choose an object. Think about it. Write about it, in 1,500-2,000 words. This will bring you in line with the specifications laid out in the *Object Lessons* site:
<http://objectsobjectsobjects.com>

In writing about your object, you may wish to use (as so many of the pieces on the site do) history, cultural-social analysis, personal anecdote, description etc. None of these by themselves will do justice to the elusive nature of the object, but you can use them to move yourself closer to a hypothesis with implications for theory. You are trying to address two different audiences, then: one is a lay audience who will appreciate accessible, lively, and eloquent prose; the other is me, representing the Spirit of Theory.

The Teaching Stint

You will notice that I'm not describing this as a "seminar presentation." That's because I'd like people to avoid, as much as possible, reading aloud at others from an already written paper. The aim of teaching, here as elsewhere, is not so much to let people know what you think as to help people discover what they think. Questions are more fertile than answers. So you might want to focus on a particularly knotty passage; or lay out certain problems suggested by the text; or invite people to resist / extend the author's argument. As the discussion unfolds you should be prepared to think on your feet and modify or shift the position that you initially held. Your mark will be a combination of the content that you are putting forward, and your teaching ability.

There is room for two teaching stints per class, one before the break and one after it. If two people do sign up for the same day, they should consult with each other in order to avoid duplication, and to determine the most logical order for their topics.

You may be wondering how you can determine beforehand which readings will engage you most fruitfully. Before you sign up for a particular day, you can get some sense of the readings through quickly browsing them; Harman includes brief summaries of Garcia, Bennett, and Morton in the chapter titled "Varying Approaches to OOO."

Two weeks after you have led the seminar, I want you to turn in a conference-length paper (8-10 pages) based on the seminar discussion.

The End-of-Term Paper

At 15-20 pages, this paper gives you more room to develop ideas; coming at the end of the course, it allows you to think in broader terms. Please meet with me some weeks before the term's end to discuss the topic you are planning to address. We can meet again later if that seems advisable; this includes the possibility of my reading a first draft.

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf