

A Call for Sustainable Actions: The Voice of Little Things in Tom McCarthy Micro-story “Mermaid Figurine”

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Abstract: This paper reveals the importance of stories associated to specific objects. The study argues that storytelling can infuse life and meaning into insignificant things. From a semiotic point of view, material objects become signs linked to particular people, experiences, desires, values, thus creating strong emotional bonds with the landscapes part of human daily routines. Beyond fetishism or consumerism, these significant objects could serve the purpose of eco-critical awareness. Through the lenses of a micro-narrative by British novelist Tom McCarthy, attached to the insignificant object of a “Mermaid figurine”, the paper explores the ecology of little things in order to draw attention to sustainability concerns.

Keywords: Semiotics, Significant Objects, Sustainability, Thingness, Tom McCarthy.

INTRODUCTION

The sociocultural impact of narratives has long been acknowledged by scholars in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Narratives involve actants, human and nonhuman, who take on certain roles and are confronted with issues and constraints to be solved. Thus, narratives help identify agents as drivers of change. It is easy to think about human lives along plotlines, with archetypal figures solving problems in fictional and non-fictional contexts, serving as models to others. Scholars agree that facts emerge more easily as truths when “conceived as mimetic simulation” (Gallagher 2006: 341). Are the limits of our world defined only by human languages, as Wittgenstein claimed, or can nonhumans speak? What value does a story add to an object? How do we infuse objects with meaning and value?

In a recent interview, artist and director of the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien ZKM in Karlsruhe, Peter Weibel describes his work at the intersection of art, science and technology and asserts that tech tools expand the horizons of human perception (Rosell 2021). Weibel insists that the borders of our world are also defined by the objects we use,

allowing humans control over many aspects of the surrounding world. Unfortunately, a complete disregard for non-human languages has brought us to a critical moment in the history of the earth and humankind. This is a time when the nonhuman speaks back in the language of pandemics, environmental catastrophes and climate change. Responding to these challenges requires collective action.

The utopian worlds described in the early writings of poets and writers, from Plato's *Republic* to Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) could be seen as containing the roots of what we could call today an ecological worldview (López-Varela 2021). However, the vitalism and the holistic vision displayed by Romantic authors comes closer, as Jonathan Bate has theorized in his *Song of the Earth* (2000), to the contemporary affinities between the role of imagination and caring for the biosphere.

In the 1980s, biologist Edward O. Wilson postulated an inherent link between everything that exists. He speaks of an “impulse to join other forms of life” and which he calls “biophilia”. (1984: 84). Combining phenomenological description with hermeneutics in *From Text to Action*, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur claimed that imagination invites us to see, and that the paradox of fiction lies in “setting perception aside” as “the condition for augmenting our vision of things” (1991: 171). In his previous seminal works, Ricoeur had argued that there exists a linguistic productive imagination, and that language contains within itself resources that allow to use creatively. The French scholar stressed that the task of hermeneutics was to show how existence becomes language, expression, and meaning, and how this process is a “reflection only through the continual exegesis of all the significations that come to light in the world of culture.” (1978: 106) Just like today ecocritics, Ricoeur takes on a non-anthropocentric position that views the Cartesian cogito as a contradiction, a position that “grasps itself directly in the experience of doubt”, and is “a truth as vain as it is invincible” (Ibid. 106), completely disregarding sociocultural and natural change and, therefore, the provisional, partial and contingent nature of solutions. As Bill McKibben writes,

Artists, in a sense, are the antibodies of the cultural bloodstream. They sense trouble early, and rally to isolate and expose and defeat it, to bring to bear the human power for love and beauty and meaning against the worst results of carelessness and greed and stupidity. So when art both of great worth, and in great quantities, begins to

cluster around an issue, it means that civilization has identified it finally as a threat. Artists and scientists perform this function most reliably; politicians are a lagging indicator. (2009, n.p.)

Similarly, voices coming from literary narrative and poetry, like John Elder's landmark, *Imagining the Earth* (1985), have been pointing out the intersections between poetry, literature and ecology, and how the principles of ecology change one's vision of nature as well as the form in which that vision is expressed in art.

In the Anthropocene, a growing body of narratives and poems are contributing to displace the human in favour of nonhuman perspectives. Using fantasy and imagination, along with defamiliarizing techniques, they challenge anthropocentrism and contribute to a new geopolitics of life forms. Some literary fictional genres, like fables, speculative fiction and science fiction have already a strong tradition of featuring nonhuman characters –plants, animals, hybrid and alien races, robots and cyborgs– who can also become narrators.

A growing range of critics and analysts are asserting that fictional narratives can bring understanding on scientific truths to non-specialists and help raise consciousness on sustainable development and ecological imagining by fusing a “bio-geo-chemo-semiotics” (National Public Radio NPR organization in the United States 2013: n.p.) that, in different ways, grants a certain form of agency and ontogenetic force. As early as 2009, climate scientist Mike Hulme claimed that “[r]ather than placing ourselves in a ‘fight against climate change,’ we need a more constructive and imaginative engagement with the idea of climate change.” (2009: 361). In “The Unbearable Lightness of Green” (2013), Greg Garrard noted that this position has aesthetic as well as epistemic, existential and political relevance, forcing a reconsideration of how human and nonhuman others live together. In his 2019 volume on *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Timothy Clark also recognizes that storytelling helps rethink the demands of sustainable development and environmentalism and notes that conventional aesthetic expectations must be revisited and transcended by using modes of re-imagining the relationships between nonhumans, including things, and humans.

Human experiences are not only mediated but even constituted by the use of material things which are integral to human cognitive architecture.

(Malafouris, 2013: 45, 244) Malafouris uses the term “thinging” and speaks of the “metaplasticity” of material engagement (2020: 3). Following this understanding, objects would have some degree of “operational intentionality.” (Gallagher, 2017: 67)

Humans create strong emotional bonds with things that are part of our daily routines. Material things become signs associated to particular persons, experiences, desires, values etc. Stories give meaning to objects just as objects give stories tangibility. Some objects have become mythical: stones (i.e. Mecca stone), the shield of Achilles, or the Holy Grail. Others occupy a prominent place in human lives, with mirrors and lenses allowing new ways of looking and driving technological process, from the microscope and telescope to today’s screen devices. Knowing the stories behind the objects we use can open avenues for sustainable action.

A member of the object-oriented philosophy movement, Timothy Morton's work explores the intersection of object-oriented thought and ecological studies, an area frequently not so visible in Green Humanities. Object-oriented philosophy can be said to have its roots also in the 1980s. Specifically in Actor-Network Theory ANT, initiated by sociologist Bruno Latour and other researchers at the Center for the Sociology of Innovation in Paris. ANT offered a new way of understanding human agency, insisting that the environment and the social are not pre-existing realities, separate and self-evident, but maintain an expansive interrelationship through which all action unfolds as an emerging co-creation.

Interactions surprisingly arise from the proliferation of relationships, both material and semiotic (Morton 2010: 33, 47). Haraway speaks of “material-semiotic nodes or knots through which bodies and meanings take shape.” (2008: 4) In other words, the relational frameworks between different entities are located both on the material plane and on the significant plane, acquiring their individual meaning from their interactions. These networks undermine the habit of attributing acting power only to living organisms, shedding light on how objects exert discernible actions, often obliquely. Morton uses two concepts that refer to this interconnectedness of all living and non-living things; the concept of “dark ecology” and the idea of the “mesh”, both in *The Ecological Thought* (2010: 16, 30). He writes that

All life forms are the mesh, and so are all the dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings. We know even more now about how life forms have shaped Earth (think of oil, of oxygen—the first climate change cataclysm). We drive around using crushed dinosaur parts. Iron is mostly a by-product of bacterial metabolism. So is oxygen. Mountains can be made of shells and fossilized bacteria. Death and the mesh go together in another sense, too, because natural selection implies extinction. (Morton 2010: 29)

In his 2013 book, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Morton argues that the emergent effects of geophysical events are largely due to the human creation of hyperobjects, entities that have entered ecological systems and will not have degraded within an imaginable stretch of human time. Along similar lines, in *Dancing with Disaster* (2015), Kate Rigby's examines human responses to climate change as shaped by a historical relationship to calamities, a truth even more evident after the Covid-19 pandemic. Rigby's research brings a historical dimension to what she terms "eco-catastrophes", bringing to the fore the interplay between the geophysical and cultural factors and a revision of the changing attitudes towards the natural world since the Enlightenment. Mandy Bloomfield (2015) says that some of these human-induced objects and events produce a strange temporality that requires new ways of imagining and telling. Situating the perspective on the objects themselves can help unsettle the privileged stability of human voices, exploring the otherness of the nonhuman. Manuel De Landa speaks of "dynamic elements" or forms of "non-linear causality" (2000: 20) that human beings have in common with -inanimate beings and inert forms.

Thus, as briefly summarized above, in the Anthropocene, it is impossible to avoid concerns for material environments; not only from perspectives linked to science, but also from the impact that cultural aspects may have, as pointed out by Donna Haraway (2008: 15-16). This is obvious in the ecological turn seen within philosophy and cultural studies, with authors such as Jane Bennett (2010) who speaks of 'vibrant materiality', or Stacy Alaimo (*Bodily Natures* 2010) with her concept of 'transcorporeality'. Objects and their stories are not reducible to a mere anthropomorphic perspective. Matter is inert and mechanistic only when viewed anthropocentrically. As Bennett states, it appears immobile only "because its becoming proceeds at a speed or level below the threshold of human discernment." (2010: vii).

In order to present a case study for the intimate relationships between material objects and the stories associated to them, this paper draws attention to the project “Significant Objects” and to a specific object with a story attached; a story that highlights the problematics of finding a language to voice to environmental pollution.

SIGNIFICANT OBJECTS

Beyond their beauty or value, small things and insignificant objects can become significant or valuable when associated to a story with an emotional impact. What value does a story add to an object? How do we infuse meaning into objects? Can significant human constructions around objects serve as awareness of the importance of sustainable development and the need to take care of our environment?

Through the exploration of micro-story of a small worthless object, this paper draws attention to the ecology of little things. The example analysed comes from the project “Significant Objects”, a literary and anthropological experiment devised in 2009 by New York Times columnist Rob Walker and editor, writer, and semiotician Josh Glenn. In 2007, Glenn had co-edited *Taking Things Serious*, a collection of 75 photographs and essays on objects he termed of “unexpected importance.” Two years later, Walker and Glenn launched “Significant Objects”, an experiment aimed at proving, as the authors explain on their web, that stories are a powerful driver of the emotional value of any object. They also wanted to measure that value objectively. To do this, they acquired a series of objects for a little over one US dollar each, and commissioned some 200 collaborating writers to write micro-stories about each of the objects.

The objects and their stories were later auctioned on eBay, some of them fetching up to ten times their original value. Of course, some of the stories were unpublished narratives by well-known authors like William Gibson. Tom McCarthy or Lydia Millet, among many others. Walker and Glenn managed to gather around \$8,000 in profits, which were shared among the participants and also with non-profit creative writing organizations (including “826 National” and “Girls Write Now”). All the stories are preserved on the project website, although a commemorative volume was published in 2012 by the Fantagraphics publishing house.

The micro-stories of small objects presented in “Significant Objects”, reveal the margins between the human and the nonhuman, the organic and the inorganic while, at the same time erasing those limits.

“Mermaid Figurine” is one of the objects of the “Significant Objects v2” project. The short story that accompanies the object has many echoes of the themes that interest its author, British novelist Tom McCarthy. McCarthy’s first novel, *Remainder*, won the Believer Book Award in 2008. *Satin Island* was shortlisted for the Man Booker and Goldsmiths prizes in 2015. The novel’s protagonist is an anthropologist named U (perhaps alluding to the reader, since U sounds like ‘you’ in English) who faces the difficulties of writing an important ethnographic report on the contemporary era. U is faced with the challenge of trying to create a map that visually accounts for the possible connections between different historical data, and following in the footsteps of various philosophers and writers such as James Joyce. Like the protagonist of *Residues* and Joyce’s own anti-heroes, U realizes that at the end of his digging, the only thing left are toxic remains; emanations of a reality that becomes real only at the end of the search; when it no longer exists. The novel becomes an allegory of the failure of the creative process that can only be captured as a recycled past. McCarthy’s latest novel, *The Making of Incarnation* (2021) is involved in the search for a specific object, Box 808, from the archive of an American psychologist and engineer interested on studies on time and temporality.

The micro-story “Mermaid Figurine” contains many echoes of McCarthy’s works and interests, as well as echoes from the authors who inspire him, like the Irish writer James Joyce. It begins with an explanation of the story’s origin, “shipped rolled into a vintage bottle found on the beach of Dead Horse Bay, Brooklyn.”(n.p.) From the start, the eschatological references present in the story remind us of Joyce’s writing. McCarthy talks of “Pollution coastal waters can have / the black sun of melancholy / signature of all things I am here to /” I’m here to/] (n.p.).. In particular, the line “signature of all things I am here to” is one that opens episode 3, called ‘Proteus’, of Joyce’s monumental work, *Ulysses* (1922).

McCarthy goes on to link water pollution to the recycling intertextuality present in literary fiction, citing mythical as well as literary figures such as Phoebus (Apollo) or Byron. The (literary) waters mentioned by the

narrator are sampled weekly or fortnightly. By way of numbered instructions reminiscent of Leopold Bloom's speech in episode 17 of *Ulysses*, known as 'Ithaca', including expressions such as "wind-generated surface advection" and "with parameter estimation". The voice of the second protagonist of Joyce's novel, Stephen Dedalus is also present; in particular, echoes from 'Proteus' like the expression "limit of the diaphane" (n.p.).

McCarthy weaves an intricate story in which his sources of inspiration converge with the songs of sirens; intertextual references are forced into a recycling textual process: "Wild sea money / dc and dt: decay and mixing / language tide and wind have silted / to a build-up of pollutants during / the night of the tombs, you who consoled me /" (n.p.).

The mathematical variables dc and dt are used to measure the speed of certain processes; in this case deterioration due to pollution. This terminology evokes again the practical language of Leopold Bloom as well as Stephen Dedalus's utopian discourse. Terms like "bladderwrack" come from Joyce:

pollution forecast, modeled by / the grid where the vine and the rose entangle [...]
The coastline is roughly aligned with / the sighs of the Saint and the cries of /
prevailing wind positions at this / lolled on bladderwrack / in the chambers of /
pollution forecasting, modeled by / the grid where vine and rose enmesh. (n.p.)

The micro'-story ends with the sarcasm that characterizes both McCarthy's and Joyce's texts: "Two brief field studies, made to walk on the beach"; one with Bloom's pseudoscientific realism, the other with Stephen's aesthetic and idealistic voice where terms like "snotgreen" that take us back to 'Proteus'. The encounter with the mermaid on the beach is modulated by the author and his lyre; where U is wind and T is time.

Two brief field surveys, carried out to / walk upon the beach / accumulated rainfall
and runoff pollution which / snotgreen, bluesilver, rust / where U is wind and T is
days / have modulated on the lyre of / drainage flow-rates for / the mermaids singing,
each to / the 'first-flush effect', as visible in Fig. 3 / forehead is still red from the
Queen's kiss. (n.p)

The Sirens episode in Joyce's *Ulysses* is number 11, an eminently specular number. It takes place in the bar-restaurant of the Ormond hotel some

time before 4 pm. The episode is an example of spatiotemporal synchronicity, with a narrative that presents events that occur simultaneously with those of the previous episode, “Wandering Rocks” which also takes place at a different geographical location.

The chapter is dedicated to sound and music and takes the form of a fugue, where human voices mix with the nonhuman sounds of objects in the kitchen of the bar: “Imperthnthn thnthnthn. Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.” There are two barmaids, their half bodies visible like mermaids behind the bar. In The *Odyssey*, Odysseus plugs his crew’s ears with wax to prevent them from hearing the sirens’ song. As mentioned, the episode replicates the qualities of music, like for example temporal simultaneity. While Joyce’s text ends with Bloom adding intestinal gas to the musicality of the episode, McCarthy’s story closes with a kiss and a blush, visible and “still red from the Queen's kiss.” (n.p.)

CONCLUSION

This enigmatic micro-story by Tom McCarthy, interwoven with echoes from Joyce’s *Ulysses* (among other sources), invites readers to reflect on the perplexing capacity of objects; in this case a little figure of ceramic representing a mermaid, probably thrown into the sea as waste.

The micro-narrative places its emphasis not so much on the figurine, but on the story she has to tell, associated to the coastal environment where natural beauty coexists with pollution and environmental degradation. The location is Dead Horse Bay, used since the 19th century as New York City dump. The bay was so-called because of the remains of dead animals, particularly horse bones, scattered all over the shore, coming from a nearby slaughterhouse.

The micro-story explored in this paper speaks of human coexistence with other material bodies; real cities (New York, Dublin) recreated in the recollections and imaginations of two writers. The story also speaks of other narrative texts; interwoven, reprocessed and interacting with these memories, as well as with the imaginaries of readers. The textual pattern created by McCarthy’s short story is one of co-creation and also of recycling.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut claimed that stories are timeless and that the reason why we love in them is because of the depths of their

many marvellous moments seen all at one time. It is fair to say that with its complex and oblique telling, McCarthy's story does create a temporal suspension, capturing complexity in a micro-text; as small as the little object it refers to. However, in this case, the story does not serve to rekindle a wonderful vision. The insignificant figure and its micro-story, found in a bottle in Dead Horse Bay, carries a message from the past. But it also brings a message from the future; a vision of the catastrophes and environmental problems yet to come. The only course of action is to make sure we change the story.

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Bioprofile

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