2014 | *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (1): 517–521

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Resonators uncased

Mundane objects or bundles of affect?

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Comment on Lemonnier, Pierre. 2012. *Mundane objects: Materiality and non-verbal communication*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

This book bubbles over with the boyish enthusiasm, disarming honesty, and generosity of spirit that are as characteristic of the author in person as they are of his work. It is a hard act to follow, not just because of its exemplary quality, but because to do so would mean picking up the thread from anthropological conversations that were going on some four or five decades ago, as if nothing had happened between then and now. Those were the days when Victor Turner (1967) was telling us about the capacity of certain things to attract meanings like iron filings to a magnet—meanings that by no means substituted for the things themselves but rather augmented and enriched them without limit. Such things, we were told, are condensers that compress levels of experience which might otherwise remain apart, from the subconscious through the consciousness of individuals to the super-consciousness of collective representations, animating each level with the values and motivations of the others. Thus social structural principles are fired by subliminal desire, and individual agency by social values. And from another corner of the ring, Edmund Leach (1966, 1968) was intent on dethroning the concept of ritual from its essentialist identification as the executive arm of religion, by allowing objects of every sort to have a ritual aspect—from the neighbor's fancy front-room curtains to the bizarre costumes of academic processions—so long as they not only had practical-technical effects or functions but also made some kind of statement about social relations, identity, status, or the like. No doubt curtains add to the comfort of a lounge, and robes might conceal the sartorial ineptitude of the processing scholar, or simply keep him or her warm. But it is what they say

ISSN 2049-1115 (Online). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14318/hau4.1.035

about social status, according to Leach, that gives them a ritual dimension. Thus the most mundane objects can serve as signs in systems of nonverbal communication in which a society would engage in long conversations with itself about itself. Then along came the pragmatists such as Stanley Tambiah (1981), fresh from their rereading of Malinowski's *Coral gardens and their magic* (1935) and armed with Austin's *How to do things with words* (1962), pointing out that most if not all saying is doing anyway—that it is inherently performative—and therefore that the practical uses of things cannot sensibly be separated from their communicative effects.

And now here's Pierre Lemonnier, building stockades and making traps with people on one side of the world, and racing his model cars with people back home, on the other side. What does he tell us? That mundane objects pull together different domains of life into a highly condensed bundle. That they play their part in practices of nonverbal communication in which the key values underpinning social relations are periodically reaffirmed. That their sheer physicality, and the bodily effort of making them and doing things with them, gives a compelling force and durability to the statements they communicate that the spoken word—airy, ephemeral, and given to rapid fading—cannot command. That thanks to all this, they are key to maintaining the stability of the social systems of which they are a part. Strategic artifacts that serve this purpose, says Lemonnier (2012: 128–29), are "perissological resonators." It's a catchy phrase, which will doubtless feed the anthropological appetite for words that make us sound cleverer than we really are. *Perissology* is the equivalent of what communications theorists used to call redundancy: the use of multiple registers or channels to communicate the same message so as to strengthen the signal in the face of interference or noise that might otherwise cause it to break up. Redundancy, in this sense, was key to Leach's theory of ritual communication, as perissology is to Lemonnier's. *Resonance* refers to the capacity of phased signals to reinforce each other: thus with their perissological resonators, people dance to the same tune, a point that will be obvious to anyone who has marched to the accompaniment of pipes and drums. Not that all objects that play this kind of role—according to Lemonnier—are ritual objects. Some are, and some are not. This conclusion, however, and the apparent difference with Leach on the point, is an artifact of definition. For unlike Leach, Lemonnier holds that there can be no ritual without religion, and no religion without supernatural beings whose actions violate scientific principles of causality. The involvement of supernatural beings, on this account (Lemonnier 2012: 156), may reinforce the perissological purchase of strategic artifacts, but does not establish it. That is to say, such beings are not essential to the artifacts' communicative function. Leach would have agreed, differing only in his assertion that ritual itself is defined by its communicative function and not by any appeal to the supernatural.

So what's new? Nothing much. Not only are the insights of these older approaches reproduced here, but so too are many of their attendant problems. Not least of these is the appeal to shared representations that allegedly inhabit the actors' minds but which they are unaware of—or at least are unable to articulate—yet which are nevertheless accessible to the visiting anthropologist, whose sovereign perspective enables him or her to distinguish the "emic" worlds of native imaginaries from "etic"

realities. Indeed Lemonnier (2012: 77, 140) appeals to the emic/etic distinction without batting an eyelid, as though no objections had ever been raised against it! Minds exist, by his account, to process the data of the senses and to house the manifold representations that people draw by inference from what they observe, without actually knowing that this is what they do. The communicative function of artifacts thus lies in their capacity to circulate the representations that would otherwise remain latent inside every actor's head. Time and again, Lemonnier insists that this mode of communication is *nonpropositional*. Yet he is equally insistent that what is communicated thereby consists of *statements*. To take one example of many, we are told (2012: 134) that in their manufacture and use, the objects in question lead to a convergence of thought and practice that "triggers or anchors a nonpropositional and new statement about essential social relations or values found in the actors' own world." Now to my ear, "statement" is another word for "proposition," which makes the "nonpropositional statement" a contradiction in terms. It seems that the contradiction can only be resolved by admitting that what is a proposition for us (i.e. a statement *about* the world) is not a proposition for them (since it is an intervention *in* it). It is, in other words, an admission to the double standards that have long underwritten the classic anthropological problem of crosscultural comparison, of which Lemonnier's book is such a fine exemplar. Privileged spectators in the gallery of human variation, anthropologists see propositions everywhere, where for the people in the pictures, there are none. Cue the word "implicit": anthropologists can recognize propositions for what they are; the people cannot.

I am myself in possession of a perissological resonator—and I can go one better than Lemonnier's model racing car, since mine actually (rather than metaphorically) resonates. This is my cello. In many ways it is like the drum of the Ankave people of Papua New Guinea, to which Lemonnier devotes an entire chapter. With its hourglass shape, the drum funnels a transfer of vital powers across an interface (the surface of a pool) between the living and the dead, but embodies no power *in itself*. The same is true of my cello. Stowed in its case, it is just an object. In my estimation, it is a beautiful and superbly crafted object. Beyond that, however, not much is to be ascertained merely by looking at it. The instrument begs to be played. Yet at the moment when I start to play, the cello ceases to be an object that I might interact with. It becomes something more like a bundle of affects, a meeting of bowhair, rosin, metallic strings, wood, and fingers, coupled with resonant air, a place where a certain mindfulness immanent in skilled bodily gesture is rendered audible as a sinuous and sonorous melodic line. I have elsewhere (Ingold 2013: 102) described the cello as a *transducer*, in that it converts the *ductus*—the kinetic quality of the gesture, its flow or movement—from one register, of bodily kinaesthesia, to another, of material flux. From what Lemonnier tells us about it, I think the Ankave drum is also a transducer in this sense, mediating between the registers of life and death. But then it too, in performance, is a bundle of affects rather than an artifact. Moreover, with the drum as with the cello, it makes little sense to regard the performance as an instance of nonverbal communication. It is not as though, when I play, I first encode in sound a set of musical representations that exist inside my head, which you, the listener, then derive by inference in yours through a reverse process of decoding. For music *is* sound, not a compendium of atonal ideas to be communicated by means of it. To play is to create an auditory ambience in

which all who have ears and the will to listen may participate. It is to share a sensory world, not its mental representations.

Perhaps there is something to be said for going back to the anthropological debates of the 1960s and 1970s on such themes as symbolic condensation, the distinction (or lack of it) between ritual and practical-technical actions, and how to do things with and without words. Arguably, our understandings have not been much advanced by subsequent approaches to material culture, for example by treating it as a system of signs whose meanings could be read off from the objects themselves, by entering them as candidates for social life but only as tokens of exchange among human beings, or by focusing on their consumption at the expense of their production. Nor—and here I agree wholeheartedly with Lemonnier—is there anything to be gained from leaving the heavy lifting to such philosophical juggernauts as "agency" and "materiality." Most agency-speak is as tautologous as the functionalism it replaced: where before, if the presence of a thing has effects (and it would not be present if it did not), these effects were attributed to its functioning, nowadays they are attributed to its agency. The argument is no less circular, and equally ridiculous, especially coming from the mouths of celebrity philosophers. The concept of "materiality" is just as vacuous, no more so than when the abstraction that led from materials to materiality is followed by a counterreification from materiality to materialities, leading to the absurdity of describing a thing made from many different materials as an assemblage of multiple materialities. We have had more than enough of both agency and materiality, and they have got us nowhere. We need to go back to basics. But do we start with objects or affects, artifacts or materials, communication or participation? In each of these pairings, Lemonnier opts for the former. I opt for the latter (Ingold 2012). I wonder whether there might be some way of putting these two perspectives together. Now, that *would* be an advance.

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