

THING

Marlis Schweitzer

Associate Professor, Department of Theatre, York University
schweit@yorku.ca

The word “thing” peppers our everyday speech – we often use it as a synonym for action, as in “Do the right thing” or “Why do you do that thing with your face?” – but we also use it as a surrogate for “object”, as in “Where’s the thing for the tv?” or “Did you see that thing she ate?” The word “thing” also refers to monstrous or frightening beings – recall the classic horror film *The Thing* (1982 - and its 2011 prequel). So “thing” can mean a lot of things – even Hamlet used it: “The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.” In this famous passage Hamlet points to the dynamic relationship between performance and thing-status and to the thing’s (in this case the play’s) anticipated effect on human subjects. It’s significant that Hamlet does *not* refer to the actors in the play and *their* effect on Claudius but to the play itself. It is the play as an active agent – a thing - that will expose the king’s guilt and presumably spur Hamlet to action. In other words, the play’s action will drive Hamlet’s action – the play/thing will transform him from an inert being (indecisive Hamlet) into a vengeful prince.

I am not a Shakespearean scholar – and so my reading of Hamlet’s line may be way off – but I use it as a starting point for considering how a “thingcentric” perspective might reshape the way we think about, analyze, relate to, and create theatre and other kinds of performance – and also influence how we (as humans) engage with and perform alongside nonhuman or more-than-human beings/ entities.

My own thinking about things is indebted to the work of US literary scholar Bill Brown, who introduced an entire branch of theory dedicated to things – fittingly called “thing theory.” I have likewise drawn inspiration from theatre and performance scholar Robin Bernstein and her brilliant application of Brown’s theories (among others) to advance theatre and performance studies methodologies.

For Brown, a “thing” is less ambiguous than some of my earlier examples might suggest. He draws a critical distinction between objects and things, arguing that objects *become* things with and through their interactions with humans – as when a computer stops working and suddenly becomes an antagonist in our daily lives or when a beautiful sculpture or a cute pair of shoes in a shop window stop us dead in our tracks. In such moments, the objects leap up and affect us physically, emotionally, psychologically. “The story of objects asserting themselves as things,” Brown writes, “is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”¹

Building on Brown’s writing, Robin Bernstein describes how a thing “asserts itself within a field of matter.”² She uses the example of a knife to make her point. In the hands of the amateur, the knife is merely an instrument used to complete a specific task: it is a means to an end. In the hands of the chef, however, the knife is a critical tool, an extension of the self. The knife as thing scripts the chef’s actions, leads her to perform certain tasks,

and in so doing “forces a person into an awareness of the self in material relation to the thing.”³ [Sweeney Todd example – “at last my arm is complete again!”]

Such things disrupt the boundary between humans and objects, spotlighting how human subjectivity is constituted with/ through an engagement with the material world.

Bernstein extends Brown’s “thing theory” by introducing the term “scriptive thing” to describe how objects direct, influence, or script human actions. She argues that “scriptive things” work like play scripts to support specific kinds of human-object interactions, while allowing for variation in response and interpretation (e.g. no foreclosed performances). For example, a doll made of soft fabric *encourages* but cannot force one to cuddle it. Rejecting previous distinctions between archive and repertoire, Bernstein emphasizes how “scriptive things archive the repertoire – partially and richly, with a sense of openness and flux. To read things as scripts is to coax the archive into divulging the repertoire” (13).

This new materialist way of thinking is important, not only because it allows us to think differently about the formation of human subjectivity (how entangled we are with objects) but also because it opens up new methodologies for approaching performance both past and present. In this, we can start to pay closer attention not just to human performance but to the performances of other beings/ entities – animals, plants, props, costumes, set pieces, and other so-called “inanimate” objects, etc.

Bernstein’s book *Racial Innocence* offers a series of extended examples of “scriptive things” but for our purposes today, I thought I might just offer one example from my own research – a moment when the archive divulged the repertoire...

One of my most peculiar archival encounters (I had written “finds” and then “discoveries” but realized how colonialist/humanist that sounded and so have opted for encounters instead) occurred at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts a few years ago. I was looking through the papers of early c20 director David Belasco and came across a bizarre 1887 letter written on a piece of birch bark. In the letter co-authors Henry C. DeMille and Belasco celebrate the completion of a new play for the Lyceum theatre and then explain why they have opted to write on birch bark:

As we have used up all our paper in writing the play, and are miles from civilization, we are compelled to tear bark from the birch trees, in order to communicate with you.

Trusting that the bark from us may be followed by no bite from you, we are
Sincerely yours,
Henry C. De Mille
David Belasco (His mark)

Here, then, is a most fascinating scriptive thing – and its scriptive thingness works in multiple ways. First, the birch bark letter is scriptive in the way it asserted itself to/on me when I first encountered it in the archive (and presumably it also asserted itself to the

archivists at the NYPL who have included it in their collections). The letter was unusual, different – memorable. And I could go so far as to say that it has compelled me to write about it... Second, the birch bark is scriptive in that it led DeMille and Belasco to seize upon it when they ran out of other paper options. For them it became more than the part of a tree –it became the means for communicating an urgent message. This can lead us then to imagine the actions of the men themselves – going through reams of paper at their Echo Lake retreat (now a fishing resort in New Jersey) as they worked to complete their play. And finally, I suppose, the birch bark letter is uniquely scriptive in that it references an actual play script -the “thing” (to hearken back to Hamlet) that has been driving their actions at the resort...

I’ll end here because I’m aware of but I’ll just say that I’m excited to see how these conversations might lead us to think and work differently with objects and things.

Thank you.

[As a side note, we can trace the influence of more traditional “materialist” thinking on Bernstein’s decidedly new materialist approach if we look to the work of Bertolt Brecht and his stage techniques – for example, his use of signs or his deliberate exposure of stage machinery and lighting rigs in order to call to mind the material aspects of stage production. Though Brecht was not interested in granting agency to the objects that appeared on his stage, the signs and exposed lighting *did* assert themselves as things by refusing to recede into the background – by calling attention to the matter (literally) undergirding human action...]

¹ Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1-22, at 4.

² Bernstein, “Dances with Things,” 69. Bernstein offers a more extensive exploration of the “scriptive thing” in *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

³ Bernstein, “Dances with Things,” 69-70.