

Sarah Blake: “Agency”

My keyword is **agency**: a concept I’ve been thinking about a lot lately, as I complete a project on material culture in the ancient world, tracing out the ways in which entities: (i.e., the humans, the not-quite-humans and the not-at-all humans) act and inter-act in the pre-modern urban landscape of ancient Rome. The concept of agency has come into play as a loose way of representing an entity’s capacity for action or for producing effects, a capacity that is not solely a human property. This is a fairly common usage of the term in Material Culture studies, particularly anthropology and archaeology: things can have agency, landscapes and environments, materials, and so on.

The word “agency” seems sometimes to be everywhere. It has a certain sheen to it, a slipperiness that makes it both a useful idea and one that should be handled with care. It means a variety of things in different contexts, and some of these meanings are uses are not entirely compatible.

Here’s a report about an object that has “agency / capacity for action”: in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, the Greek travel writer Pausanias described a ritual practiced by the Athenians for centuries called the ‘Bouphonia’, or the ox-slaughter (Paus. 1.24.4-5). As a sacrifice to Zeus Polios, or City Zeus, priests led an ox to his altar on the Acropolis and offer it food. If it ate, a priest called ‘the ox-slayer’ kills the ox with an axe, but then throws the axe down, and runs away. The other priests then put that axe on trial for the murder of the ox. The ox-slayer denies his own guilt, and - since the axe is unable to speak in its own defence – it is found guilty, and thrown into the sea, thus completing the ritual and expiate the priests. [\*There are similar rituals in English history: deodands; scapegoating.]

The axe, with its unique physical properties of sharpness, is the guilty agent.

What’s remarkable about the Bouphonia axe is that it is put on trial as a person would be, and given a chance to speak, as a person would have, and suffers punishment. In this legal situation, the axe is a person with agency and in that moment/circumstance possesses social agency on par with the other human actors in the scene: the priests. More so, perhaps, in that it is found to be **the sole** agent; and it alone faces the consequences of its actions.

In this instance, the word **agency** feels apt: it allows us as observers / analysts to connote the action, to mark that some action has occurred, but it does not do any more than that. It allows us to think about what the axe DOES, without having to say definitively what the axe IS.

The term does not necessarily bring with it any indications of intention, deliberateness, or consciousness, on the part of the agent. It simply allows us to take seriously the idea that the axe was an active participant in the ritual.

The vagueness or slipperiness, the openness of the concept of **agency** is thus useful for situations like this one, in which action appears enigmatical or enchanted, involving inanimate objects, gods, the weather, disease, any mysterious force, or multiplicity of forces.

On the other hand, just as **Agency** is doing this useful duty in the world of material culture studies, it persists within many other important intellectual and cultural discourses as something uniquely human, as a quality, in fact, at the core of the human and key to human dignity: an actor who can interpret the structures of the world meaningfully, and exercise free will. In sociology, in philosophy, in psychology and politics, agency can often stand in for the distinctive human capacity for choice, for analysis and for reflection. To possess “agency” is here an innate human quality and an ineradicable human freedom.

Mapped onto politics, the possession of **agency** of this type is an active political goal; agency as the capacity for self-determination, and the enactment of intention, is the very quality denied to oppressed and marginalized groups. The lack of agency is a critical point and the central focus of contests and conflicts about social injustice and the act of resistance to oppressive structures. This should not be forgotten.

But neither of these two uses - any entity's capacity for action / fundamental essence of humanity - are the primary (or historical) uses of the term agency. These intellectual discourses (philosophy, sociology, political theory) have borrowed a concept from a very practical usage which opens a window – for me – onto the polyvalence and the essential **mystery** of this key term.

Agency in its most common use connotes action, or more often, **trans**-actions undertaken on behalf of another. An **agent** acts as a functional proxy, as an envoy, or some other substitute for someone else, typically in an effective, pragmatic sense. Think here of the difference between an actor (an entertainer) and an agent: the actor plays a creative role, the agent oversees the practical matters of the business, acting for her client in a practical role; organizing transactions and conducting business (this is reductive, but you get the idea).

Agency in this sense – its common sense - means MEDIATED action; an action arranged in-between parties. The action (or the desire or intention to act) originates in one source X, which then outsources it to the agent Y. The action/intention is thus disembodied, multiplied from X and transferred over into the authorized agent Y's body which temporarily houses it; the intention to act is dislocated, yet still shared between the originator and the agent. It tethers them to each other.

Delegating one's intentions and actions, through the transfer of one's personal authority to another entity can be risky, potentially leaving one vulnerable; thus action perpetrated through an agent / agency in our world is very often stabilized, shored up by means of legal contracts, waivers, disclaimers, etc. to protect the interest of individuals.

From its earliest usage in English (borrowed from medieval Latin, does not exist in classical Latin usage), AGENCY connotes a formal organization (a bureau, an office) that acts in the interests of others: a sense that survives in the idea of the government agency, the travel agency, the detective agency. So, often, "the agency" is a group, a corporation, or an institution that works together on behalf of or in the interests of others. Here, action is again mediated and multiplied, in that it is now diffused throughout the incorporated entity; distributed; collective; never residing in any one person but somewhat in all the participants. Capacity for action is thus increased while risk is shared.

Corporate groups effect action as agents but the structure of "the agency" provides protection to individuals in that liability, responsibility, is dispersed throughout members of a collective, each of which is only partially involved.

The 'Agency' has power that is embodied in a corporate body. As a result there is an opaque quality to it: it is screened. Where is this action originating? Who is doing it? How? Think here of the sinister associations of the word 'Agency': the CIA; the secret agent; Agent Orange.

I mention Agent Orange because it brings us to the problem posed by 'agency' in these multiple places: as a chemical agent (the scientific sense of the word which is often borrowed into other contexts) Agent Orange has the capacity to defoliate, among other properties. It acted at a distance, enacting the intention of those far away to weaponize it. And it had unforeseen outcomes.

When action is disembodied, when it floats and drifts, and sometimes hides: Who is accountable? Among a collective agency, who is liable? Who is responsible? If agency is abstracted, floating or drifting power/ capacity; is it not a potentially dangerous force?

In critique, we might want to ascribe agency in a concrete and transparent way when reparations must be made. In the Bouphonia, the axe became an agent and was found to be responsible for the murder of the ox. The agency of the axe (a weapon, like Agent Orange) emerged in a specific context to absolve the priests, to complete a process of justice.

Due to its slipperiness, its polyvalence, “agency” works beautifully for tracing out and registering an infinite variety of actions. Armed with the concept of agency, one can trace action without any proscriptive sense of what that action might be, what forms it might take or in which bodies it might reside or pass through: we can stay open to the vital and vibrant behavior of things beyond the human: beyond the visible, the legible, the traceable.

At the same time, agency as ‘effect abstracted’ is an unstable force, even politically dangerous in its quality of disguising power or intention and of diffusing responsibility, but its fundamental indeterminateness is a useful conceptual tool for capturing the enigmaticalness of action in certain phenomena, both human and other-than-human.