


THE MEANINGS OF THINGS, WRITING, AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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The Meaning or Meanings of Things?

The first time you glance at the cover of The Meanings of Things and read that title, it somehow doesn’t seem to read quite right; you say it out loud and it feels like more of a mouthful than a phrase made up of four simple words should do. Then you realise what the problem is -- it’s that pluralising ‘s’ on the end of ‘meanings’. Wouldn’t ‘The Meaning of Things’ have had a better rhythm to it and still said the same thing?

That ‘s’ is in fact central to the argument which at least superficially informs the book. The point is exactly that the ‘things’ of material culture are understood in relationship to culturally and historically specific groups of meanings, and cannot be adequately rationalised purely within cross-cultural, non-overlapping sets of general meaning. For example, such an argument can itself be seen to fit within the particular meanings of one historical and cultural context; when Hodder chooses to link the papers in The Meanings of Things with the current post-modernism debate, he makes a connection as much historical as simply thematic. Indeed, the ‘s’ of ‘Meanings’ in that sense sits sympathetically on a book cover design itself bound up with the post-modern cultural style. As the prominent photograph of a contemporary art exhibition explicitly references post-modernism’s self-conscious awareness of style by style for style, so that is equally implicit in The Guardian like typeface chosen for the title lettering, the ‘designer’ One World Archaeology series logo, and the pale/pastel shades of the bands of grey and blue which bound the design at top and bottom. Style with a big ‘S’ accompanies meanings with its own ‘s’. Twenty years ago, the book would indeed have been called simply ‘The Meaning of Things’, and the words would have been embossed in upright letters on a plain cover of one colour.

Appropriately enough, then, the book can also be categorised in a variety of ways. On the one hand The Meanings of Things is the latest of a series of books written or edited by Ian Hodder in the 1980s (e.g. Hodder 1982; 1986; 1987), and which together have formed one of the more visible and influential strands of the emergent ‘post’-processual archaeology, and its attack on the New Archaeology’s attempts to build some kind of universalising frame of absolute archaeological knowledge. Alternatively, a perhaps more important series to which the book belongs is, of course, that arising from the publication of the proceedings of the World Archaeological Congress held at Southampton in 1986. There is an evident link between these two contexts; the controversy surrounding the Congress demonstrate more clearly than any theoretical argument the fact that archaeologists write the past only in terms of specific histori-
cally and culturally bounded meanings and power relations (Whether they like it or not -- and as Southampton showed many of them clearly didn't).

On opening the book, it emerges that Hodder's own editorial strategy is informed by an awareness of this connection. We are told then that the ideals motivating his editorial approach 'include self-critical awareness of (The Meanings of Things) as a constructed book involved in strategies of power, the critique of Western domination of the control of meanings in archaeological writings, and more generally the use of material culture (including this book) as a means of linking the control of meaning to the control of people.' (p. 78).

These ideals are articulated alongside a discussion of post-modernism and post-structuralism. Through this the problem of context is introduced; how is the systematic whole of singular meaning sustained when it is realised that our interpretive contexts do not so much group related 'things' together, as divide a heterogeneous continuum of 'things' apart? Where is a 'proper' context to be grounded? It is out of this question that the transition from meaning to meanings appears. As an example, Hodder cites the 'archaeological art of the Boyle family, recreating randomly selected bits of the earth's surface in the surroundings of an art gallery, so breaking down the boundaries of what is representation, meaning, aesthetic understanding. It is following the Boyle model that Hodder situates the strategy of his own 'self-critical', editorial awareness.

Thus it is that the reader does not find all this out by turning to page 1 and reading the introduction. Page 1 turns out to carry the heading for Chapter 18, and the introduction is to be found somewhere in the middle of the book (p.64-78). In the fashion of the Boyle family art, mixing the order of the chapters unsettles the conventional arrangement of contexts at work in the book and the networks of assumed academic dominance and dependence they support. Thus Hodder argues, "The random ordering in the contents page at the beginning of the book seems to place terracotta worship in fritage Bengal on the same level and in the same category as 'etnics, emics and emplathy in archaeological theory'. Perhaps that is as it should be." (p. 78).

Maybe, but looking at this the reader might still feel a bit uneasy. Is it quite right that 'The random ordering' only 'seems' to place terracotta worship in fritage Bengal on the same level and in the same category as 'etnics, emics and emplathy in archaeological theory'? The word 'seems' appears to say the exact opposite of the nominal meaning of the sentence. Flitting through the rest of the book, you begin to wonder if this is just a rather unfortunate piece of phrasing, or if it tacitly reveals the fault along which Hodder's good intentions are flawed. At least, the random organisation of the chapters rapidly starts to look like a bit of a gimmick. Then you arrive at the preface - which rather curiously is still at the front of the book - and find Hodder exclaiming 'I want people to say "This is a weird book..." or "What a gimmick!!". Evidently one is responding according to plan, so perhaps the strategy is working!

In a way it is. The only claim is to make the reader aware of the uneqnal structures on which the book is founded, not that those structures are actually changed in any way. After all, the rhetorical device of scrambling the chapter order implies that there is an original and 'correct' order from which to scramble them, and this we are duly supplied with (p. 76-7). It remains clear enough, who is holding the academic capital in this volume, and that this capital is not re-distributed by the organisational strategies of the editor. Following Hodder's own instructions, "Academic archaeologists of high visibility...are the ones who write...theoretical or methodological statements... the referring or citation networks demonstrate this most clearly" (p. 77). Thus the papers of, for example, Lemmonier, Tilley and Cribad, building thematic statements with frequent reference to authors such as Levi-Strauss, Godelier, Derrida, Barthes and Foucault are evidently distinguished from the basically descriptive papers with their more 'parochial' citations, such as those of Kubick (on Angolan ideograph), and Biaggi (on Maltese figurines). It is likely to be the former which are seen as the more 'high brow' and potentially influential contributions to the debate. That 'seems' may not be quite politic against the background of this book, but there is a clear sense in which it is the correct word nonetheless.

To the extent that Hodder's 'self-critical awareness' is indeed thus flawed, it is then not so much that the 'gimmick' by which he chooses to represent that awareness is superficial, but rather that it sets out from the starting point that it can only be superficial, a gimmick. Initiating the critique becomes an end in itself without any sense that the critique might be actually fulfillable. Nor is that limit just a reflection of the simple realisation that the unequal relationships governing the status of archaeological texts are vested not so much in the surface effects of writing strategies, as in the more general 'writing' of a whole network of social, political and cultural structures barely threatened by self-critical awareness in any shape or form (for example, in the sense that the phrase 'one World Archaeology' - however it potently translates in the specific context of the Southampton controversy - still ultimately means, for deeply entrenched historical reasons, a One Archaeology World based on the value structures of the West).

What is also at work here is the limit imposed by a more fundamental conceptual tension. There are two sides to this. On the one hand is a kind of moral feeling (all the more accentuated by Southampton) that different 'levels and categories' of archaeological practice
and knowledge should be viewed as equally significant and equally meaningful as independent accounts of the past (here in the sense that 'One World Archaeology' is to be read as a sort of conceptual acronym built out of the equivalent status of alternative archaeologies the world over). And yet on the other hand, there is the sense that all levels of archaeological knowledge cannot really be 'equal', or else the abyss of relativism is implicitly opened, and the very means of positively determining such equal status thrown away.

Ultimately, despite the initial rhetoric, event and interpretation, context and meaning, must be made simultaneous rather than left separated by the ambiguous distance called for by the moral ideal -- for it seems such distance has precisely the power to unseat that ideal. Meaning must absolutely, and in hierarchical order, reside somewhere, or else it can with equal validity reside anywhere -- including very 'unequal' ways of viewing the world. The critique is opened, but the very rationale of that opening is to say that for its own good, it cannot be completed. Thus we have the compromise of 'seems' rather than 'is'. So too, the necessary acceptance as the lesser of two evils of apparently contradictory and unsatisfactory side effects; the critique Hodder attempts in The Meanings of Things clearly becomes a part of the power play it supposedly questions, with those papers which are not 'critically aware' seeming more, rather than less, 'secondary' and 'out of place' in Hodder's avant garde format. We end up after all, apparently as part of a necessary compromise, in the realm of meaning rather than meanings, within the guise of modernism rather than post-modernism.

Perspectives on Post-Modernism

This dilemma (if such it is), may appear only rather superficial in the context of The Meanings of Things, but nonetheless points to a more deep rooted and often unspoken ambiguity in the wider intellectual reaction against post-modernism. It has been easy enough to snipe at the surface associations of the post-modern view, particularly the apparent connection of that view with an increasingly alienated, consumer oriented society where meaning is trivialised and robbed of depth by its endless dispersal through the media of mass communication, coupled with an individualistic world view marked by a parallel rejection of broader contexts of social and political responsibility. If this is what it means to 'free' the signifier, then it seems worth a certain 'logocentric' cost to recapture it. How that cost is to be paid has taken various and contradictory forms in recent debate, from Jameson's (1983) basic assertion 'Always historicise!' to Habermas' (1984) insistence on the need to rediscover a grounding for meaning in the reciprocal exchange of the basic communication process.

Such critique has been both fashionable and influential, notwithstanding the fact that it treats -- perhaps in one way appropriately -- the surfaces rather than the depths of the post-modern position. One problem here is the often confused implication that the post-modern 'condition' we might observe in the contemporary West is somehow sanctioned, or at least implicitly adumbrated, by the thinking of critics like Lyotard and Baudrillard, when of course that 'condition' is as much under critique by those authors as by the neo-Marxists or the critical theorists. The post-modern 'style' observable from architecture to advertisements or book covers, where meanings are disengaged from concrete historical, political or social contexts and recombined in the synthetic meta-context of contemporary representation is clearly very 'un' post-modern as far as the ends of a thinker like Baudrillard are concerned. For Baudrillard (1981), the products of this 'post-modern' style are still narrowly emblemic, one dimensional signs, firmly located in the singular of late capitalist meaning -- they do not act, nor are they conceived as the free flowing symbols they seem to ape. (In the same way we have seen that The Meanings of Things adopts a nominally post modern structure without really reaching in truly post-modern fashion from meaning to meanings -- in Baudrillard's terms its post-modern structure is a sign rather than a symbol). Post-modern criticism does not necessarily have any more direct affinity to the post-modern world than any other current of thought.

This leads into the deeper paradox which the popular critique of post-modernism has not openly confronted; which is that while post-modernism and the associated movement of post-structuralism have been typically attacked for opening the floodgates of relativism, those positions likewise claim exactly to confront relativism. For these 'post' postures, the metaphysical attempt to control meaning within exclusive contexts is not so much unsatisfactory because it asserts that meaning is limited by prevailing contexts -- which, after all is unavoidable in the necessarily constrained space that 'discourse' operates -- but because it goes on to convert that phenomenological observation into a general statement that there are therefore necessarily correct contexts for meaning and necessarily incorrect ones. The question which post-structuralism explicitly (eg Derrida 1976), and post-modernism implicitly, raises is how such a claim can be justified if meaning is constructed through differences between 'things' rather than produced out of innate qualities 'in' 'things', if then there is no original, necessary ground upon which to situate a finally 'valid' context? The point is not that there is no meaning, only that meaning is not quite as 'natural' as Western reason has taught us. The experimental writing strategies which post-structuralist critics particularly have used to emphasize and articulate the freezing of the signifier have in some degree suggested the misleading implication that meaning is opened completely, and opened completely at every moment by this insight, when the real idea is that it is rather the relative possibility of infinite chains of meaning that is opened. What is dissolved is an absolute distinction between right or wrong meanings, nor the surface structure of context itself. The difficulty is not in itself that a text like this one 'means' through a context -- whereas The Meanings of Things is only discussed in a very limited way as it relates to the wider theme of this volume -- but rather it is the difficulty of accepting that there will always be a further set of meanings excluded regardless of how the context is structured, and that this persistent 'silence' is as central to the meaning (or rather incipient meanings) of the text as what is directly said within it. We may never comprehend all the meanings.
of a given textual formation, but what we do comprehend is perceived through the possibility of all those latent meanings rather than as a reflection of any necessary or intended meaning.

We can now begin to see the 'relativist' that postmodernism questions. It is the relativism that proceeds from interpreting differences in a right/wrong framework, from trying to establish things as absolutely present, rather than relatively present to other absent things. The problem for postmodernism is that while we can see the structure of such distinctions -- for example between the statements 'men are superior to women' and 'men and women are equal' -- how ultimately does that structure translate itself at the level where one statement is 'wrong' the other 'right'? The answer is, in a way, that we cannot, for if the statements are grounded in the claim of 'natural' 'right' then there is no means for the former to refute the latter as 'wrong' without implicitly removing the justification through which it itself claims to be 'right'. Arguments about relative evidence to 'prove' each assertion aside, then what is clearly so unsatisfactory is that both statements might with equal logical (if not moral) validity call itself 'right'. The mere structure of opposites does not intrinsically attach itself to a right or wrong meaning.

This then is the relativism that, according to postmodernism, lies at the heart of modernity. It is only by breaking the absolute structure of right and wrong, presence and absence, text and context -- by breaking what Foucault calls 'the Fascism in our minds' -- which implicitly links us in an inescapable circle with 'wrong' views even as we advance our 'right' ones -- that paradoxically we can, in a sense (a rather special sense not existing in the language of the words through which we must speak it) get an absolute understanding of the world in which some levels of understanding are made completely absent. This departure takes place exactly in the supposedly 'anything goes' situation unleashed when postmodernism disbands the order of right and wrong contextual distinction. The whole point is that anything does not go in this 'open' space of meaning beyond context. What does not go is precisely those viewpoints integral to whose identity is the notion that anything does not go, those viewpoints which can only exist in the closed context of absolute meaning. So while that sanction must equally apply to the statements 'men are superior to women' and 'men and women are equal' as such, there yet remains in the postmodern dispersal an incipient sense, a trace, a latent possibility of the latter while the former is completely disqualified since there are no terms in the postmodern 'void' in which an unequal separation of categories can even begin to have a meaning. To say that meaning is unlimited, that context is never closed, identity never consummated, is in fact to say implicitly that all meanings are not equally valid in a way that the reason of modernity, for all its claim to be saying exactly that, never could. One might then summarise the postmodern argument as simply this: where the reaction against postmodernism plays on the fact that without context there is no way of demonstrating that positions which seem clearly wrong -- such as sexist or racist viewpoints -- are 'wrong', postmodernism turns round and says that is exactly the kind of reason that allows such viewpoints to exist. Where meaning is unrestricted by context it means not that there is no meaning, but that there is no unequal meaning.

From this perspective the 'anti-rationalist' impacts of postmodernism become more explicable and understandable, and not even in surface effect as destructive as is often represented. For example, it is frequently argued that postmodernism is fundamentally anti-historical (and accordingly anti-archaeological). This is true, in so far as 'history' is meant as an over-arching and absolute frameworks of historical meaning linking phenomena together across time and space in one particular network of interpretive sense. It is not the case, however, that the more localised historical contexts defined by causality and change are dispersed; rather they become the units between which the difference of multiple historical meanings can be relatively observed. History as suspended in a layered time, where 'now-here' is 'now-everywhere' is abolished, but history as the connection of the causal events acting on and reaching out from disconnected moments of 'now-here' remains. It may not be possible to say that two distant historical events are simultaneous either in terms of their meaning or even of their time, but that is to add to the possibility of their historical sense, not to deprive them of that sense altogether.

Back to Archaeology, Meanings and Writing

The point of all this has been to argue that the dilemma on which The Meanings of Things chokes itself is not the failing of postmodernism, it is the failing of postmodernism still conceived in the context of modernist (in its broadest sense) meaning. Postmodernism disqualifies neither meaning, nor history, nor understanding. Rather it seeks to re-qualify them in a new kind of reasoning framework seeking to avoid the very real and serious pitfalls the reason of modernity carries with it. The difficulty is that this 'framework' runs contrary to everything our deep rooted prejudices have taught us 'reason' must involve. Thus, indeed in The Meanings of Things Hodder gives his most coherent definition of the postmodern 'method' only as the announcement of what he is about to turn away from, try and naturalise in more 'reasonable' terms:

The more I try to tie down postmodernism the less coherent it seems...ultimately it engulfs any attempt to fix it. It runs off freely, following laws that we all know but that none of us understand. However, still I try to grasp it, understand it and control it in my structured text (p. 65).

In a way it is not clear why, to an archaeologist, such a level of understanding ought to be so difficult to grasp. If, in the above passage, one were to replace the words 'post-modern-
ism' with 'the meaning of the past', then we would have an accurate statement of the problem
which archaeologists routinely face. This is not just a trivial point, for the archaeological
past does seem to read -- despite and perhaps because of our attempts to translate into a more
'intelligible' form -- in post-modern terms, where the context of the meaning and some of the
elements in the signifying system are forever missing. Consequently the past can accordingly
be understood with equal empirical validity in very many different ways.

Archaeologists, of course, have tended to bemoan this situation born of the uncertain
representative integrity of 'the data', and have seen much of their task as devising ways of
getting over these shortcomings so they can raise their analyses to an equivalence with those
possible in history or anthropology, where the data are more complete, more visible in their
'natural' order. The understanding of material culture as text (which is a theme running
through many of the papers in The Meanings of Things) has been the latest conceptual device
employed to this end, though as usual it has served only to emphasise how elusive an end it is.
Material culture is not text 'like' exactly in those areas where a text asserts its single meaning;
material culture texts are not read in linear order, their meaning often seems to be conveyed at
a non-discursive level, and their elements are more easily reassembled within entirely new
parameters of meaning in a given contextual situation. The post-structuralist argument that all
texts are 'writing' -- that is constituted through systems of difference rather than identity, and
accordingly only ever provisionally closeable -- does not seem to help the archaeologist much
in going from an understanding of a text like this one to one 'written' in the shape and decoration
of pots, or the organisation of settlement space.

On the other hand, it might if the statement was written the other way around, that is if
all the ambiguity of understanding the material culture text was actually nearer to the way in
which meaning works, a better model of 'text', than a page of writing like this one pertaining
to a linear and single meaning. And from a post-modern perspective, that would, of course, be
exactly the situation. Archaeology in this sense finds itself studying the material world where
it appears in its most 'objective/true' form. To pursue the post-modern past -- which but for
the perception of it as such, we already deal with -- would perhaps paradoxically be the route
to the distinctively archaeological knowledge that has frequently been held up as the goal of
the discipline in the last twenty years. It would be less difficult for archaeology than most
other fields of human study to accept that meaning is only ever rhetorically in the singular, and
to create a much more meaningful interpretation of the past out of that.

Fine to say, but what in practice does it involve? In the first place it means replacing
that 'seems' of Hodder's with 'is', and, what is more difficult, believing that manoeuvre to be
more than another merely 'liberal', 'aware' gesture. That, however, does not necessarily imply
any radical surface change to the way in which we write the past, only that we write from the
standpoint of the relative equality of other writings to our own (at least those similarly con-
ceived), and in those terms allow an archaeological meaning to 'level out' rather than to try and
define absolutely what that meaning is. With this 'voice' the past will not 'speak' to us with
any single meaning, but nor will it speak to us with any meaning whatsoever -- though it may
certainly speak to us with some meanings which confront our prejudices about what the past
has conventionally been allowed to say. Really all that is involved is looking at the possibility
of those kinds of interpretation which are not all excluded by the data -- for example those
'archaeological' interpretations considering social and political questions in the past/present
but which are excluded by a formidable battery of cultural and 'thinking' prejudices.

If, then, the basic criticism of Hodder's handling of The Meanings of Things is that he
does not go far enough in his 'experimental' re-writing of the book, that does not mean he
should have gone further by editing the papers in the form of double text, or have adopted
some other more extreme or 'sophisticated' rhetorical device. All that criticism suggests is that
he should take his 'gimmick' seriously -- believe he is constructing more than just a moral
metaphor in the context of Southampton -- and see what happens. This paper has argued that
to do that would not be to open the space of relativism, and to destroy the ideals the book
rightly strives for, it is to end relativism and confirm those ideals. This is the kind of radical 'writ-
ing' we, as archaeologists, are uniquely well placed to pursue.

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References


The recent influence of post-structural critique has caused archaeology to acknowledge the textuality of its discourse and has prompted questions concerning how the discipline 'writes' itself (e.g. Hodder 1989a; Shanks & Tilley 1987, 12-24; Tilley forthcoming). For a number of years archaeological texts have been liberally sprinkled with appropriate literary quotations (which can be interpreted as an admission of failure to communicate through the couched language of academia and the employment of literature to convey an indirect sensation of their too-distant subject; Evans 1985, 91). Reviews of relevant fiction have even recently been included in at least one major journal (Antiquity: Mulvaney 1988; Merriman 1988a; Bradley 1989). All this could suggest that archaeology is about to enter a phase of 'genre blurring' (Geertz 1983) and reflexive written experiment - territory already explored by history (e.g. Pomar 1989) and social anthropology (e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Tuveson 1987; cf. Kapferer 1988 and Spencer 1989).

This paper will not directly address problems of written discourse within the discipline, but rather the manner in which prehistory and 'archaeology' have been variously employed in recent novels. The higher public profile of archaeology since the Second World War has determined that the subject, its practice, and practitioners have all frequently appeared in fiction (Thomas 1976, 314). These literary archaeologies merit attention specifically because they are written without the constraints of a 'disciplinary code' (Hodder 1989a). They are also indicative of the way in which archaeological knowledge is disseminated (i.e. which of its interpretations register with broader audiences) and reflect public attitudes towards its practice.

The 'pulp' end of the publishing spectrum is in some ways the more informative. It certainly displays great diversity in its many pasts (Evans 1983). Antiquarians and archaeologists have long featured in adventure and detective fiction (e.g. Buchan, Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard; Thomas 1976, 312-313; Mann 1984). Recent years have, on one hand, seen the rise of a new flourishing 'barbaric' (sword-and-sorcery) genre in which the atmosphere of heroic, vaguely past worlds are evoked with little or no respect for academic credibility. On the other hand, academically-referential futurist anthropological and archaeological practices (e.g. Van Vogt 1951; Le Guin 1986) have, on occasion, been the subject of science fiction². There now also exists a thriving 'realist' school in which a 'hibbyist' attention to detail is spent on the 'ethnographic' reconstruction of prehistories. Typified by Aczel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* series (despite its feminist content), many of these novels are essentially 'period pieces', with literary roots in historical romance (e.g. Walter Scott) and the fiction