Artefact mens : een interdisciplinair onderzoek naar het debat over materialiteit binnen de material culture studies

Hoogsteyns, M.

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Summary

This study compares two current approaches within contemporary studies of material culture, namely the dialectical approach and the Actor-Network Theory. The research shows that both approaches align well with the current discourse on material culture, in which the subject of materiality is very much to the fore. The research also makes clear that the schools of thought are mutually exclusive on fundamental points and hence create tensions in the research field. However, this is hardly mentioned within the research field. By comparing the two approaches, the points of contention with regard to materiality emerge, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of both standpoints. This information provides foundations for the debate on materiality and gives it a clear form.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe recent developments in material culture studies (MCS), an interdisciplinary research platform in the social sciences in the Anglo-Saxon world. The platform comprises scholars in the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, geography, design studies, history of art and architecture, psychology and sociology. Participants in the platform share the view that material culture plays a central role in the construction of the social world. An important assumption in this context is that objects are closely related to the production of meaning. From that perspective, a fork is not regarded as an intrinsically useful or logical artefact. Its function relates to everyday practices and to ideas about food etiquette and hygiene. These ideas and practices evolved historically and are part of specific social and cultural contexts.
Seen from this position, objects also have a role in the construction of social identities. In the case of the fork, one could say: you are how you eat. Importantly, objects can have this effect without appearing to do so. We perceive the fork largely as an everyday and trivial phenomenon. Objects therefore conceal their influential nature. This school of thought, whereby material culture plays a non-discursive yet crucial role in identity formation and processes that convey meaning, is current in MCS.

Since the turn of the century, however, different voices have been heard in the research field. Researchers such as Bjørnar Olsen, Tim Ingold, Alfred Gell and Chris Tilley argue that the above approach overlooks objects. By focusing on meaning and identity, researchers reduce everything to the subject’s perceptions. Things function solely as the carriers of meanings, identities and experiences of people. But what about the actual properties of the things themselves? The corset represents Victorian ideas about femininity and sexuality, but should we not pay attention to the technical properties of the corset? To the way in which it literally restricts the wearer physically and thus constructs a specific body language? Moreover, could it not be that the arrival of the corset pushed the development of the female image in an unexpected direction? Why should it only be a reflection of a prevailing mentality?

According to this criticism, the materiality of the world hardly has an explanatory role in current material culture studies. Prominent researchers in MCS are therefore advocating that tangibility and the ‘input’ from things be included in research. I describe this plea as a ‘call for materiality’.

In Chapter 2, I distinguish between three aspects of this call for materiality. First, the intention is that the tangible and functional properties of things are considered more closely in analyses. Second, objects – and their material properties – should be accorded an explanatory role in research. Third, researchers believe it is important that, in emphasising materiality, there should be no lapse into the essentialism and technical determinism that prevailed in artefact research before the 1980s and 1990s. In order to prevent this, it is emphasised that subject and object are not oppositions. This last aspect of the call for materiality thus implies that researchers want to let go of the strict distinctions between materiality and mentality, and between nature and culture, that are so characteristic of modernism. The call for materiality therefore involves denying the existence of autonomous ‘materiality’. This paradox is the thread that runs through the debate.

The discussion in Chapter 3 makes it clear that the majority of researchers in the field of material culture studies (MCS) welcome the changes. Some of them are extending the boundaries of existing approaches – such as dialectics, phenomenology and semiotics – in order to give materiality a place. Others are turning to new approaches. The two
The most important new approaches are the object-agency theory of anthropologist Alfred Gell and the *Actor-Network Theory* (ANT).

Both approaches focus less on the human world of experience, and more on what things *do*. Whereas Gell’s theory aligns readily with the principles of the current approach, the same cannot be said of ANT. My research begins with the suggestion that ANT, which is becoming increasingly popular within MCS, might be overturning the existing research field.

ANT was developed within the field of science and technology studies, a research field that focuses on the mutual influences of society, science, and technology. Within MCS, Bruno Latour, the French philosopher and sociologist of science, is considered to be the leading proponent of ANT. In many respects, ANT is geared towards the goals described above. The theory increases the focus on materiality and, at the same time, opposes a strict distinction between the psychological and the material. With regard to the latter, the *Actor-Network Theory* goes much further than is usual. The theory almost completely invalidates the distinction between culture and nature, subject and object. By extension, ANT refuses to assume an a priori difference between human and non-human properties or, for example, between artefacts and natural phenomena.

The question is whether this controversial standpoint is compatible with some of the principles of material culture studies. For example, the status of material culture as a unique, non-discursive source of information no longer appears to exist. Strangely, the introduction of ANT in material culture studies prompted very little discussion. It seems as if all possible points of contention are being ignored.

However, for the development of the subject area it is essential that these points of contention are acknowledged and studied. The aim of this study is therefore to clarify the possible tensions between the *Actor-Network Theory* and the current Anglo-Saxon view on material culture, thereby clarifying some of the implications of the renewed emphasis on materiality in the research field. In order to make this comparison as concrete as possible, at the end of Chapter 3 the confrontation is ‘distilled’ into the ideas of just two people: Bruno Latour and the British anthropologist Daniel Miller. As mentioned above, Bruno Latour is the most important representative of ANT in the debate. Daniel Miller played a pioneering role in establishing MCS. He is the main advocate of *dialectics*, an approach that shaped the fundamental principles of the current research field.

I pose the following questions: on which points are the approaches of Latour and Miller and, by extension, ANT and dialectics (in)compatible? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches? The comparison is related to three themes that are central to current research into material culture, namely the role of the artefact as a...
source of information, the approach to *agency* and the approach to *change*. The themes are linked to concrete case studies.

The first theme, the position of material culture in research, is dealt with in Chapter 4 and is related to an analysis of the socio-technical functioning of bicycle locks and picture postcards. I consider how, according to the theories of Miller and Latour, bicycle locks and picture postcards, as physical objects, exert an influence on the way people think and act.

The case study reveals a difference in terms of a preference for certain artefacts. From Latours perspective, I focus mainly on technological artefacts, yet from Millers perspective these are precisely what I avoid. However, the main difference is that, with Miller, we assume that researchers can gain a great deal from the non-discursive nature of objects. According to Miller, studies of material culture are interesting because they can reveal processes and meanings that are invisible to participants.

Latour’s view of material culture is diametrically opposed to this. He acknowledges that objects often conceal their influence on situations and people. However, Latour regards this as an obstacle to researchers. If the working of an object is invisible to the participant, then it is also invisible to the researcher. We must therefore study situations in which the working of an object becomes explicit because it is under discussion, for example during the design phase, during the transition to a new user context, or when it breaks. Miller and Latour are therefore on opposite sides when it comes to the view of material culture as a source of information.

This points to an underlying epistemological gulf between dialectics and ANT. One seeks to *interpret*, while the other seeks to *describe*. Millers work assumes the existence of a dialectical process. People and things form each other through continuous processes of alienation and appropriation. This mutual development process forms the context in which Miller observes phenomena and events.

Latour rejects the use of such overarching interpretation models. ANT assumes that nothing exists of itself. Everything must continually be constructed. That also applies to the dialectical process. Such a phenomenon can never serve as an explanation for events; it is the thing that requires explanation. Researchers must try to follow the actors (human and non-human) that bring about these phenomena and processes. The emphasis is on performativity.

By the end of Chapter 4 it becomes clear that everything within these approaches is interrelated: the extent to which the distinction between subject and object is abandoned, the vision of science, the status of material culture in research. In all these cases, ANT and dialectics are diametrically opposed to each other. Because material culture
studies are deeply rooted in the dialectical approach, the contradistinction on these points applies to the whole subject area.

The first important conclusion to be drawn is, therefore, that the introduction of ANT is indeed creating a contradistinction that is fundamental and insurmountable. It asks every researcher to what extent he or she is prepared to relinquish the dichotomy between subject and object. Will we subscribe to the radical position of ANT, or will we remain loyal to the current approach to material culture? What is to be gained from the two positions? To a certain extent, this choice is also an ideological one. Do you believe in the a priori existence of something like a dialectical process? Do you believe that researchers can and should focus on ‘invisible’ mechanisms?

In Chapters 5 and 6, the contradistinction is explored in greater depth, and I search for foundations for a well-considered and lucid discussion. I examine the strong and weak features of ANT and dialectics in relation to the themes of agency and change. For this purpose, I use two case studies: the world of ballet and the Dutch mediaeval city. The cases are introduced here.

The general view in anthropology is that ballet dancers work in a culture that is traditional, strict and hierarchical. Furthermore, ballerinas are confronted with a very forceful female image. In her research, anthropologist Anna Aalten asks whether self-realisation and agency apply to ballet dancers and, if so, what form they take. Agency has been a central theme in the research into material culture for many years. In Chapter 5 I suggest that the current focus on materiality (and hence the input of objects) is changing our views on agency. I link the discussion of agency in the world of ballet to the changing ideas on materiality. Which ideas will we develop from Millers and Latours position on the agency of ballet dancers? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their concepts of the theme of agency?

In Chapter 6, I discuss an historic artefact: the late-mediaeval cesspit. In their research, historians and archaeologists have to assess processes of change. How do we regard change from the perspective of the renewed emphasis on materiality, and the idea that subject and object are not separate? Do we look differently at changes in artefacts themselves, for example at their emergence? And are artefacts being given a more prominent role in explaining change? From a Millerian and Latourian standpoint, I focus on the strong increase in the number of cesspits in the cities of the province of Holland in the late Middle Ages. I consider what their approaches can contribute to existing research into cesspits. Above all, I consider the differences between the concepts of Miller and Latour. What are the strengths and weaknesses in their concepts of the theme of change?
The findings from Chapters 4, 5 and 6 come to the fore in Chapter 7, providing an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of ANT and the dialectical approach. I begin with the properties of dialectics.

The dialectic approach presupposes links between the non-discursivity of objects, processes of alienation, appropriation and subject formation. With this framework in mind, we quickly arrive at bold and substantial analyses of the role of material culture. In Chapter 5, for example, it becomes clear how profoundly a ballet student is 'shaped' by the learning process involving ballet shoes. It is also evident that these pointe shoes, as artefacts, play an important role in terms of actualising an 'ideal of (im)materiality' in the world of ballet. That same ideal ensures that the shoes are produced in a traditional manner, which in turn ensures they require considerable material care and attention every day from the dancer. From a dialectical perspective, acknowledging the highly material nature of ballet – as in the production of shoes and the approach to the body – could have a positive effect on the self-realisation of dancers. In Chapter 6, the dialectical conceptual framework offers a unique perspective on the consequences of the increasing use of cesspits on relations between social groups in mediaeval towns and cities in the province of Holland.

There are also disadvantages to assuming a dialectical process, however. When the ideas are applied, they give rise to a certain dualism between subject and object. As a result, for example, we are sometimes unable to reach the 'input' of technological objects, such as the internal mechanism of bicycle locks. Furthermore, 'natural' phenomena, such as the ozone layer, remain outside our field of vision.

Also, in dialectical analyses the researcher focuses on how subjects are constructed. In relation to this, a struggle between structure and agency is often presupposed. Chapter 5 shows that this restricts our perceptions. In Aalten's study, dancers describe magical moments in which everything comes together: music, movement, performing. The dancer feels as if she can move without any effort. These moments are considered to be an important source of motivation for dancers. Such events, for which no source of action can be identified, are not given a central, explanatory role in dialectical approaches. They are interpreted in terms of subject-formation, in this case the self-realisation of dancers.

Similarly, the dialectical approach offers only limited insight into the nature of change. The multiple factors involved in change cannot always be interpreted in terms of identities, alienation or appropriation. In the analysis of cesspits, for example, factors such as happenstance or the availability of brick are accorded no significant role in our understanding of changes, although these factors certainly influenced the local techno-social
impact of the cesspit. Hence there is a risk that, when we interpret the \emph{how} and \emph{why} of change, we still tend to do so from a social/cultural reductionist perspective.

ANT, on the other hand, scores highly on these latter aspects. ANT does not allow us to work with conceptual models and categories. This means that all phenomena are interesting for research. Even subjects that were previously avoided in MCS, such as the ozone layer, sewage systems and the internal mechanism of a bicycle lock are being added to the research agenda.

Furthermore, as a result of the emphasis on performativity, ‘the ballet audition’ emerges in Chapter 5 as a moment at which the definition of ‘the ballet dancer’ is continually up for discussion and negotiable. Various (human and non-human) parties prove to be relevant to this, and nothing and no-one has the last word. Here we see that the ANT perspective distances itself from the idea of a struggle between structure and agency. Agency is not something that belongs to a person or thing, but is something that circulates and constantly changes. It is no longer, as with Miller, automatically linked to a struggle for self-realisation or identity. This allows us greater scope when describing and understanding a situation. We can focus on events for which there is no identifiable course of action, such as the ultimate dance experience. In our understanding of the dance world, this experience can be given a central, explanatory role.

Moreover, because we have such a wide perspective and consider every possible actant to be relevant, we can precisely describe not only the \emph{consequences}, but also the \emph{how} and \emph{why} of changes. Chapter 6 explains why cesspits were made compulsory in 15th-century Delft, but not elsewhere. In each city, the cesspit is the result of a different set of factors, relations and events. It is also clear that the effect of a cesspit’s properties varied from period to period and from city to city, and therefore gave rise to a different reality. In the city of Delft in the province of Holland, the cesspit made a vital contribution to the development of a city policy in which every inhabitant had responsibilities.

ANT also has its disadvantages, however. On principle, it does not allow us to presuppose links. All human and non-human actors and the work they perform must be visible. The lack of a conceptual model means that analyses have to be constructed with care and patience. We cannot jump to conclusions when interpreting information; all relationships must be shown.

As a result, by no means all research situations are suitable for analysis. The consequences of this become apparent in Chapter 6, in the analysis of cesspits. It proves difficult to assess, on a visible level, the daily use of cesspits in a specific city. We have to leave aside the more abstract considerations. It remains a blind spot. The analysis is therefore dominated by economic and pragmatic developments. In this specific case, there is a risk that we nevertheless tend towards a primarily functionalistic description.
A structure is revealed by setting out the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. The dialectical approach, with its focus on the construction of the subject, scores well on a methodological level. The approach is very accessible for analysing material culture and quickly produces a substantial result. However, its scope is limited. ANT removes the distinction between subject and object as far as possible, and rejects the use of a conceptual model. This means that the approach allows considerably more scope for observation and description. At the methodological level, however, ANT is very demanding.

The comparison made here between ANT and dialectics produces several valuable insights. First, the scale of the debate on materiality becomes clear. It appears that the debate is about where the researcher makes a distinction between people and things, and the information value that the researcher attributes to artefacts. However, this cannot be considered separately from where the researcher seeks the causes of change, or from his view of the role of science. But the debate also aligns with the existence of an affinity with ‘social’ things such as the Internet and wedding rings or technological things such as metros and bicycle locks. Materiality therefore touches on themes that are fundamental and inevitable for every researcher studying material culture.

Second, the case studies give ‘body’ to the above contradistinctions. The content-related and methodological implications of the standpoints are set out, thus providing concrete foundations for the discussion on materiality.

Third, the confrontation between ANT and dialectics has shed light on deeply rooted assumptions in current, interpretative research into material culture. We see the implications of the somewhat compulsive focus on identities and subject formation. Whether or not the researcher embraces ANT, the approach opens a new field of vision for MCS.

Finally, progress has been made at the level of the case studies. Fundamental questions are formulated in the discussion of self-realisation (in this case, of ballet dancers) as it is now being conducted in the social sciences and therefore in MCS. Also, our understanding of cesspits has been broadened. The pit, as an artefact, appears to have made an active contribution – social as well as technical – to the construction of local urban networks. The idea is put forward that materiality may have played an unexpectedly important role in developments that led to what we refer to as a ‘civilisation process’. And so the circle is complete; this study is, ultimately a plea in favour of materiality. A plea in favour of seeing the full scale of things again. The challenge lies in finding the nuance, in daring to surrender the idea of the pure human and the pure thing.