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BOOK REVIEW

Review of 'Mundane Objects'

Mundane Objects, Pierre Lemonnier, Left Coast Press, UCL Institute of Archaeology Critical Cultural Heritage Series No. 10, Series Editor: Beverley Butler, 205 pages, 58 b&w illustrations, 2012, ISBN: 9781611320565

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Pierre Lemonnier's new book, the excitingly titled *Mundane Objects*, is mainly a contribution in the author's long-standing engagement with the French anthropological tradition of *technologie culturelle*, of which he has become probably the most important active proponent. While this book is definitely in the tradition of Lemonnier's work since the 1970's, it presents important new perspectives on the place of material culture in society.

In a way, Lemonnier is trying to extend the traditional programme of *technologie culturelle* from attempting to find 'the social' in the *chaine opératoire* of objects into defining what uses objects have within society. This is an attempt at bridging a gap to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of material culture studies, and at breaking down boundaries between sub-fields in the anthropological discipline which ultimately allows a more integrated view of objects and their social and cultural surroundings.

Following the basis of thought laid out by Marcel Mauss in his 1934 lecture *Techniques of the Body* (Mauss 1935 [2006]), Lemonnier's approach is that, from the point of view of the participant, action in the material world cannot be separated from other parts of life, such as social relations, religion etc. Extending the arguments of the likes of Campbell (2002), Damon (2008), Hutchins (2005), Tambiah (1968), Tuzin (2002) and Weiner (1983), he posits that objects allow people to conceptualise and converge disparate parts of social organisation and cultural expression. In line with the *technogie culturelle* approach, he argues that meaning resides not in the outward appearance

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of objects, that they are not symbols to be deciphered, but rather that the "agency" of objects lies in a non-propositional communication that is accessed by bodily engagement with them. What Lemonnier is trying to show is that objects (any objects) can be used at certain times, by certain societies, as a way of summing up, and making understandable, several key tenets of social relations, in a way that words cannot. As such, objects can become integral to the unification of notions, relationships and traditions into a cultural whole, and their making and use importantly underpins and adds resilience to this whole.

The examples Lemonnier uses are mainly drawn from his fieldwork among the Anga in Papua New Guinea. We are told about Baruya garden fences, which, for example, combine implications as diverse as gender relations, male identity, the ideology of co-operation, craftsmanship, horticulture and marriage. Similarly, Ankave fish traps, funerary drums and power bundles used at initiations are described as objects that do not necessarily look anything out of the ordinary. Their use, however, confronts the user with a multiplicity of social relations, myths and religious ideas, made all the more understandable, memorable and liveable by their transfer from the realm of words to material form. In search of a technical term for the place of these objects in socio-cultural processes, Lemonnier settles on the somewhat perplexing *franglais* expression "perissological resonators".

What does become clear from these examples is the development of Lemonnier's thought within his Anga ethnography, which he sketches in Chapter 1. The large amount of progress in thinking can be seen in comparison to Lemonnier's 1986 article, *The Study of Material Culture Today*, in which he stated that "[…] the logic of technical choices made by the Anga still escapes us […]" (Lemonnier 1986, p.179). In *Mundane Objects*, it is exactly this logic that can now be explained.

A last example is drawn from contemporary Europe. Toy models of mid- 20th century

racing cars are intended to demonstrate that any society has objects which non-verbally communicate disparate sets of ideas and which are instrumental to fostering understanding between people. This is, in my view, the most difficult, and the weakest example. While Lemonnier has probably not devoted as much time to understanding the culture of vintage racing car enthusiasts as he has to that of the Anga of Papua New Guinea, it becomes clear that he has long been heavily immersed in this world. With a large amount of self-deprecation and humour, he tries hard to take the requisite outside view, which has always been the main difficulty in auto-anthropology (e.g. Strathern 1987), but the reader is left with a sense of confusion from this chapter. In a way, Lemonnier himself is an example of his own ideas here – objects are thought to communicate non-verbally, and he, in this case a person involved in this communication, struggles far more to put the object of communication into words than in the situations where he is an outsider. Other than a deep sense of nostalgia for a childhood in the 1950's and the things and events that were important to boys then, which of course have shared relevance to men who were boys then, the reader is left in doubt as to what exactly is communicated by model vintage racing cars. As valuable and necessary as it is to include the cross-cultural comparison into the authors' argument, this example sits somewhat uneasily within the book, and I cannot help but feel that better examples (maybe further from the author's personal involvement) might have been found.

Apart from this, the book is very well written, an asset that always deserves mention in scientific publications. Lemonnier writes clearly and with humour, working at an easy-to-follow pace between observations and theoretical concepts. On the whole, then, *Mundane Objects* is an important contribution to the anthropological study of material objects from one of the most eminent scholars in this field. Coming from Lemonnier's

long-term expertise of the subject, its scope and innovation means that it is of considerable interest to all disciplines which use and engage in social and cultural theory.

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