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Film, Objects, Publics

A screeching microphone, a nondescript room filled with folding chairs, human actors, props and personal effects (like books, papers, pens, nail clippers, food, soda cans, cups, and cigarettes), and an ordinary public document taken as a shooting script. Even the most mundane assemblage of materials can be taken as the basis for a cinematic story. Perhaps the most mundane of material objects are indeed what a narrative film might help us to rediscover as cinematic viewers. And by limiting our views to the most basic objects of our material surroundings, we might also learn how moving images have reshaped our very experience of the everyday world.

"What becomes of things on film?" The American philosopher Stanley Cavell once posed this question in an attempt to articulate just what happens when material

objects are photographed and projected before our eyes as moving images.[1] Can we speak of a unique transformation or specific relationship between the absent originals and their fleeting projections on the screen? Or does the appearance and significance of cinematic objects emerge more in relation to the other images that come before and after in a sequence of shots? Or, better perhaps, does an experience of objects on film occur more in relation to that larger bundle of images that have left their mark on us as viewers of cinema in general? Put somewhat differently: what do moving images do to our perception of the world and what sort of alternative worlds have they themselves brought about?

In answering his initial question ("what becomes of things on film?"), Cavell evokes the early silent film comedies of Buster Keaton as an instance of the cinematic medium's ability to make us experience the material world anew. With his stoic resolve and blank facial expressions, Keaton's comedic persona encounters the material world as an obstinate force. Its objects stubbornly refuse to perform their intended functions and actively subvert and redirect his will as a human agent. Keaton's use of a door brings a wall crashing down around him. A flight of stairs starts to move beneath his feet, and the automobile he is driving falls to pieces on the road. A ladder turns into a seesaw, then a catapult, and sends him flying in the opposite direction of his initial climb. In Keaton's films, the breakdown of commonly relied-upon objects like doors, stairs, cars, and ladders makes the viewer palpably (and comically) aware of the crude materiality of things. Everyday objects are thus experienced not primarily in terms of their knowable

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[1] Stanley Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film?" [1978], in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), 1–9.

forms, appearances, or instrumental functions, but rather as the raw and stubborn materials that make up our physical world, yet are normally taken for granted.

These comical disruptions of the everyday are linked in Cavell's writings on film to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger famously analyzed the breakdown of the tools, equipment, and work environments of humans as bringing about an awareness and rediscovery of everyday objects with regard to "their conspicuousness, their obtrusiveness, and their obstinacy."[2] With the skillful manipulation of a hammer, for example, the tool itself tends to recede from view and disappear into the embodied rhythms of the work of hammering. But if the shaft breaks, its head falls off, it turns out too heavy, too light, too small or large for the job, or an unlucky finger gets in the way, the tool becomes suddenly conspicuous as the material thing that it is: inert, potentially useless, or perhaps dangerously uncontrollable.[3]

The connection between these experiences and Keaton's silent film comedies reaffirms itself every time we find ourselves at odds with our everyday world of materials and objects. When technology breaks down or backfires, when we struggle with things that do not fit, or are used incorrectly, when a chair breaks or a foot slips on ice—these are the moments when the material world intrudes with a vengeance. At these times, we inevitably think of those now distant, black-and-white slapstick routines that dominated

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[2] Ibid., 2. See also Cavell's 1976 remarks republished in the appendix to his, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981), 272.

[3] For Heidegger's detailed analysis of objects and equipment, see *Being and Time* [1927], trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 66-75.

silent film comedies of the 1920s. The subtle humor of watching someone clumsily pour a drink from a plastic cup back into its aluminum can has a certain kinship with these earlier comic films. It has the similar effect of making us see objects anew for their strange designs and crude material constructions.

The ability of film to evoke the conspicuousness and obstinate materiality of things is not inherent to the technological medium itself. It is only one possibility of cinematic representation—and perhaps an historical one at that. More often than not, today's commercial narrative films, with their spectacles, quick cuts, and special effects, tend to obliterate all sensuous awareness of material objects through plots driven by explosions, violence, sex, celebrity, and formulaic dialogue. By contrast, Heidegger's analysis of tools and equipment came at a time when the new mass medium of cinema fascinated both theorists and popular audiences for the ways that it revealed and heightened one's awareness of the active roles played by material things in relation to humans. Alongside the physical comedic stunts of Keaton, the resources of camera

techniques and editing were also employed to accentuate the presence and force of things in narrative films. The technique of the close-up shot was especially valued during the 1920s for its ability to isolate and intensify the visual appearance of everyday objects in relation to the expressive faces and gestures of human actors. Close-ups of watches, pistols, keys, doorknobs, telephones, tools, utensils, and machines indeed make such objects appear as much the agents in a cinematic narrative as the human actors themselves.

There is something brilliantly and productively anachronistic to revive this fascination with the cinematic close-up on things in a more contemporary context. The overlooked complexity of a mundane occurrence of a recent public hearing in small-town America can be discovered in all the otherwise ignored interactions—between hands and personal effects, mouths and microphones, digital projectors and portable projector screens—that provide the material structure, visual textures, and temporal rhythms of the event in question. The ability of the cinematic medium to displace objects before our eyes, to displace us before objects,[4] whether through reenactment, editing strategies, or the straightforward operations of camera and projector, allows the filmmaker to represent a series of actions so as to accentuate the presence and roles of material things in ways that would be habitually ignored by those present at the original event. When a microphone squeals with feedback during a public gathering, the audience involuntarily winces and then quickly forgets the disturbance. When it happens on film, with a close-up on a microphone that returns time and again as the center of the proceedings, the disruptive technology becomes a character itself in the cinematic narrative.

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[4] Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film?," 9.

By multiplying such close-ups on other material objects, the story of a typical public hearing unfolds before our eyes as a complex assembly of not only spoken statements and procedural structures, but also the numerous, physical materials that alternatively support and direct people's involvement in the proceedings (pens, paper, nameplates), distract their attention (food, drink, cigarettes, shoelaces, jewelry), or even make such an event possible in the first place (a room, chairs, table, microphones, printed texts, a tripod projection screen, and digital projector). In its dryly-comical representation of the various material entities involved in a small-town assembly, James N. Kienitz Wilkins' 2012 film *Public Hearing* reanimates early cinema's fascination with the close-up on objects and innovatively involves these shots within a broader, contemporary reflection on the thing-like nature of sound, found text, and images in the digital age.

Close-ups

In the 1920s, when the new mass medium of film was first being theorized as an art form, critics and filmmakers frequently honed in on the close-up shot as a technological capability that was unique to cinematic aesthetics. "The close-up is the soul of the cinema," wrote French filmmaker Jean Epstein in 1921.[5] Others agreed. In one of the earliest books of film theory, first published in 1924, the Hungarian writer Béla Balázs declared: "Close-ups are film's true terrain. [...] the magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life, it allows us to feel the texture and substance of life in its concrete detail."[6]

A predominant focus of early film theory was to elevate cinema as a distinct art form and not simply a visual entertainment for the masses or a poor derivative of the literary arts. Here, the inherent limitations of the medium were refashioned as its unique strengths. In contrast to the live performances and spoken words of theater, film offered only a silent, flickering image of human actors. In contrast to the abstract meanings and subjective depths of poetry and prose, it presented only visually animated pictures of people and things. But because early silent film was lacking in language, it also opened up a whole new atmosphere for visual experience. With a close-up on an actor's face, the focus was no longer on the content of his or her words but on the subtle and expressive

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[5] Jean Epstein, "Magnification" [1921], in Richard Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology*, vol. 1: 1907-1929 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988), 236.

[6] Béla Balázs, *Visible Man or the Culture of Film* [1924], in Erica Carter (ed.), *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 38.

play of facial features.[7] And because humans were just as silent in cinema as the lifeless objects on screen, a close-up on things also granted them a "vitality and significance" and allowed inanimate objects to "say just as much" as their human counterparts—a cinematic possibility that seemed to transcend the limits of theater and traditional narrative fiction, with their inert props and inanimate background settings.[8]

The close-up's ability to isolate, magnify, and train our attention on a visual experience of objects was thus taken as the grounds for cinema's unique potential as a new form of art.[9] Painting and photography had already explored the close-up details and expressiveness of humans and things, but it was only with the invention of film that these enlarged views gained animated motions comparable to the fleeting visual events occurring ceaselessly around us in everyday life. Photography was capable of freezing a visual fragment from a stream of events. But the cinema camera and projector could reproduce the whole, dynamic sequence of an object's otherwise unnoticed movements and visible interactions.[10]

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[7] Ibid., 37.

[8] Ibid., 23.

[9] In contrasting theater with film, the German-born psychologist Hugo Münsterberg similarly praised the close-up and went as far as to conceive of the technique's isolation and enlargement of objects as an external objectification of our internal "mental act of attention." See Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* [1916], ed. Allan Langdale (New York: Routledge, 2002), 87.

[10] Epstein, "Magnification," 236: "I have never understood motionless close-ups. They sacrifice their essence, which is movement."

In early theories of cinema, the close-up was understood not only as a unique capability of the medium and a means of elevating inanimate things to the status of actors. It also promised to reveal new knowledge through visual appearances. The combination of the cinematic close-up and the human face, in particular, held the potential to divine inner truths from surface-level features: "I am sure [...] that if a high speed film were made of an accused person during his interrogation, then beyond his words, the truth would appear, unique, evident, written out," claimed Epstein in 1928.[11] Film was also attributed a revelatory potential in Walter Benjamin's famous essay from the 1930s, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," which shifted attention to the expressive interactions between objects and hands:

> We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon,
>
> but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still

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[11] Quoted in Tom Gunning, "In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film," *Modernism/modernity* 4.1 (1997): 1.

less how this varies with different moods. This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object.[12]

With his notion of the "optical unconscious," Benjamin speculated on a whole range of external visual phenomena that remained just below the conscious threshold of visible experience. Through film, however, the mechanical eye of the camera could capture and store such fleeting and overlooked phenomena, which would then explode back into view through the cinematic projector, bringing about a conscious knowledge of those otherwise inaccessible realms of the everyday visual world.

In Balázs's language, the cinematic close-up was understood to have revived the older and largely discredited science of physiognomy, that is, the practice of determining the inner essence, personality, or character of living things through a classification of their outer, physical appearances. For Balázs and others, the physiognomic potential of the close-up extended beyond the typical focus on the human face to include "the living physiognomy that all things possess," enabling the cinematic medium to reawaken a

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[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" [1936, 2nd version], in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings*, vol. 3: 1935-1938, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), 117. Balázs remarks similarly: "[The cinematic close-up] shows you what your hand is doing, though normally you take no notice [...] it will show you the adventures and the ultimate fate of the cigar in your unsuspecting hand and the secret—because unheeded—life of all things that accompany you on your way and that taken together make up the events of your life." *Visible Man*, 38.

childlike fascination with each thing, not as a useful tool or means to an end, but rather as "an autonomous living being with a soul and face of its own."[13] That this untimely return of some obscure, magical or animistic experience could lead to a greater knowledge of things was a central paradox in early theoretical discussions of film. The technological resources of cinematic techniques can certainly reveal the movements and interactions of objects that are otherwise invisible or inaccessible to the naked eye. But how could the supposed magic of a detached, fleeting, and technologically animated image reveal more about an object than the material object itself?

One possible answer to this question is that the animated life of things on film, as theorized in the 1920s, has a certain structural affinity with Karl Marx's analysis of the

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[13] Balázs, *Visible Man*, 46. See also, Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*" [1924], in Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism*, 316-17: "cinema is a language, and like all languages it is animistic; it attributes, in other words, a semblance of life to the objects it defines. [...] And it confers this life in its highest guise: personality."

commodity form. In both cases, a material object takes on a second life as an abstract and exchangeable image, living out a fantastic existence apart from its immediate use-value in the context of the physical needs and social lives of humans.[14] The ephemeral and mystifying appearance of objects in a cinematic close-up brings about an immediate visual experience of things, but also an awareness of how cut off we are from such objects, from where they are produced, whose hands they have passed through, and the real material conditions and needs that account for their existence.[15] In this sense, the knowledge produced by the cinematic image of an object is a negative one: the estranging effect of the close-up reveals how little we truly know about the everyday objects that make up our material world.

Gatherings

In a given film, close-ups on everyday objects do not exist in isolation, of course. Rather, they are only one type of shot within an overall cinematic construction that might also include images of human actors, spoken words, noises, music, and, more recently, digital animations. The estranging effect of the cinematic close-up—its ability to foreground the obstinate materiality, fantastic life, and agency of things—is thus further complicated by the larger assembly of elements, which might display their own thing-like characteristics.

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[14] See Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), 73-75.

[15] See also the comments on Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1967) in Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film?," 8-9.

In writing unrelated to the study of film, the French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour has more recently drawn on Heidegger's account of the breakdown of equipment and tools in order to theorize the social agency of technical objects. In one essay, Latour notes how the breakdown of an overhead projector in a classroom, for example, results in the interaction of a complex assembly of humans and things. The projector itself ceases to be a functioning "black box" that can be taken for granted and is instead rediscovered for all its various technical parts, each of which might be the source of the problem. The broken-down object additionally becomes the center of an assembly of concerned humans, who take apart and inspect the machine, follow repair-manuals, and try out replacement parts.[16] In his account of the overhead projector, Latour tacitly combines Heidegger's analysis of tools and equipment in *Being and Time* with the philosopher's later meditations on the etymology of the word "thing" (*Ding*) as a "gathering" or assembly around a matter of concern.[17] The breakdown of the overhead

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[16] Bruno Latour, "A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans: Following Daedalus's Labyrinth," in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 183-85.

[17] While Heidegger remained infamously distant from any serious interest in democracy, Latour emphasizes that the etymology of the word "thing" is tied in many languages to archaic political assemblies and is still present in the names of today's Norwegian and Icelandic parliaments. See Latour, "From Realpolitik to *Ding*politik or How to Make Things Public," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 14-41; and Heidegger, "The Thing"
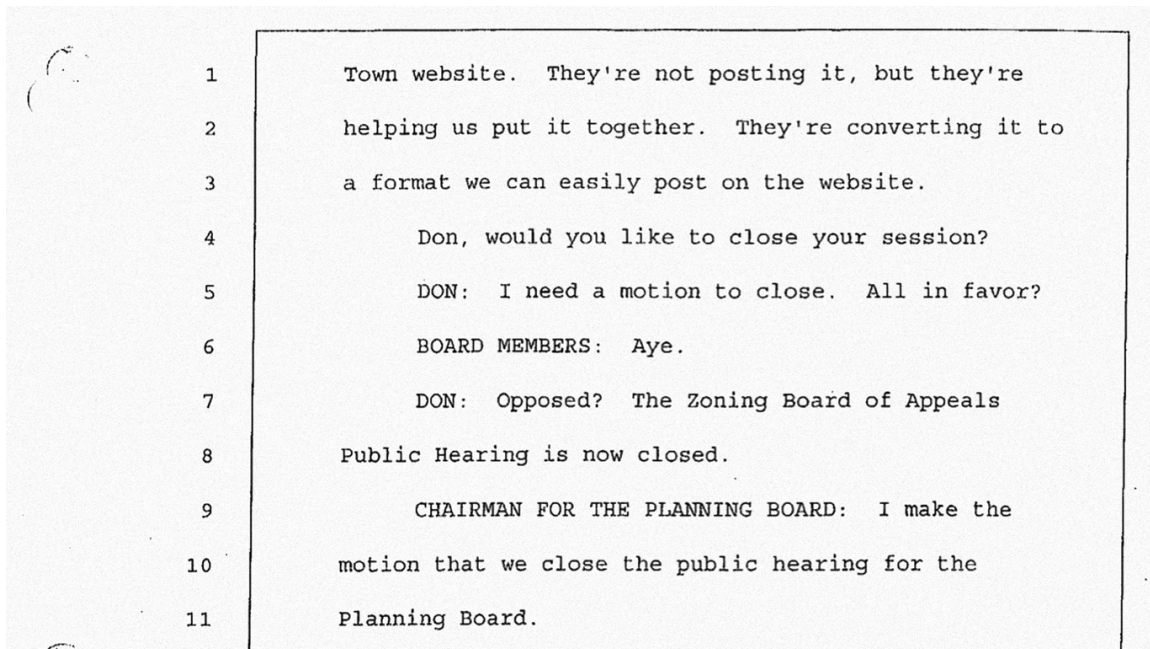
projector, according to Latour, not only makes the object conspicuous in its materiality; it also turns the taken-for-granted object into a complex gathering of human agents and active technical parts. In short, the functional object becomes a concerning "thing."

This brief recourse to Heidegger and Latour also offers some insights into the construction and aesthetics of cinematic objects. On the level of content, a film might simply depict the breakdown of an object (a stationary shot of Latour's broken-projector scenario, for example). On a formal level, the cinematic medium itself is also frequently involved in the breakdown and reconstruction of the material events it represents. Through montage, film is especially adept at breaking apart an occurrence, action, or gathering into its constituent parts—in ways that allow the event to be reassembled so as to account for the involvement of both human actors and material things. "Films can be an excellent means of materialist exposition," Benjamin remarks, since the performance of actors can be structured around the decisive influences and functions of material objects; by treating actors as props and props as actors, "film is thus the first artistic medium which is able to show how matter plays havoc with human beings."[18] Following Latour, we might also say that film as an artistic medium is especially suitable for visualizing the complex and dynamic gatherings of humans and things that form around any troublesome "matter at hand."

[1951], in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 163-84.

[18] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 126 nt. 21.

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  1        Town website.  They're not posting it, but they're

  2        helping us put it together.  They're converting it to

  3        a format we can easily post on the website.

  4             Don, would you like to close your session?

  5             DON:  I need a motion to close.  All in favor?

  6             BOARD MEMBERS:  Aye.

  7             DON:  Opposed?  The Zoning Board of Appeals

  8        Public Hearing is now closed.

  9             CHAIRMAN FOR THE PLANNING BOARD:  I make the

 10        motion that we close the public hearing for the

 11        Planning Board.
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By taking the script for his film from a lightly reworked transcript of a real public hearing, Kienitz Wilkins treats the text that structures the actors' performance as yet one more material thing within the cinematic assemblage. The document's origins as a PDF file found in an online public archive points at once to the new realities of electronic digital media, as well as the longer-running bureaucratic world of paperwork. The portable document format (PDF) is not so much a document in itself but rather a digital file format that conjures the *image* of a document on the computer screen.[19] And yet, by evoking the fixity of print and the form of the printed page, the PDF remains stubbornly thing-like, pointing backward to older technologies for the storage and transmission of textual information like the filing cabinet and the fax machine; and despite its detractors, the PDF still persists as a standard file format that connects digital computer networks to

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[19] Lisa Gitelman, "Near Print and Beyond Paper: Knowing by *.pdf," in *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), 111-35.

the physical world of paper documents (through scanners and printers).[20] When printed

up on a stack of paper and bound, the PDF of the transcript even comes to resemble a

standard script for the shooting of a film.

As a thing that makes its presence felt within the film, the transcript provides the

entire narrative structure and models the clumsy and comical dynamics between the

speaking parts of the actors. As Kienitz Wilkins explains in a recent interview, the

transcript of the public hearing was taken as the foundation for the film, but in a way that

makes the words themselves conspicuous and opaque and disrupts the audience's

absorption in the represented event: "in the first 20 minutes of *Public Hearing* you stop

being able to understand what [the actors are] talking about and the content just melts

away and people become objects and you watch them acting."[21] The opacity of the

spoken words is visually reinforced by the (often extreme) close-ups on actors' faces,

whose appearances take on a caricature-like quality and whose facial expressions and

gestures seem more the product of practiced citation than genuine expression.

Along with the close-ups on material objects, the thing-like nature of the guiding

text and performing actors in the film refashion the public hearing as a complicated

gathering of statements, procedural structures, gestures, personal effects, and the material

objects that support the involvement of all those in attendance. Were we present at the

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Interview with James N. Kienitz Wilkins, *Visions: Documentary and Experimental Cinema*, 13. April 2014, Web 28. Jan. 2015, <http://www.visionsmtl.com/public-hearing-interview-en.html>.

event, we might see the public hearing differently: as a chance to have our point of views heard; as an opportunity to bring about positive change; or as a legally mandated event that has little bearing on anything but must be patiently endured. Is this the case of a breakdown in democracy? Or perhaps the breaking apart and inspection of its material parts? If the public hearing is itself a black box with different inputs and a particular result, then *Public Hearing* is an attempt to open the box and lay out its parts before another audience in attendance: the film-going public. The question, "what becomes of things on film," is thus not only a matter of how the world is transformed by the experience of moving pictures. It is also a question of how films might help to intervene in relation to physical objects and thus reshape our engagement with the material world.