

On the ambiguity of the past: Material culture analysis in the scientific frame of historical inquiries. Conference report on "Materielle Kulturforschung – eine Zwischenbilanz. Zum epistemischen Gewinn einer neuen Perspektive"

Schloss Friedenstein, Forschungszentrum, Gotha, 5-7 December 2013

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On the ambiguity of the past: Material culture analysis in the scientific frame of historical inquiries. Conference report on "Materielle Kulturforschung – eine Zwischenbilanz. Zum epistemischen Gewinn einer neuen Perspektive"

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This conference was a result of a cooperation between the Gotha Research Centre (University of Erfurt) and the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (University of Giessen), facilitated by MARTIN MULSOW (University of Erfurt, Gotha) und ANNETTE CREMER (University of Giessen). With the ever increasing importance of material culture research for historians in the German academia, the aim of this conference was to bring together scholars engaging with the innovative, object-based approaches within the discipline, in particular focusing on the early modern period. Since material culture studies have been largely dominated by archeologists and ethnologists, the question arose if such type of research was really appropriate for historical sciences and if so, what the direct benefits of such an approach could be. The potential of broadening the scope of analysis that historical

scholars engage with was also explored.

Material identities

BENJAMIN STEINER (University of Frankfurt am Main) explored in his paper how objects and buildings, left as artefacts of European colonial presence around the world, were represented in the archival literature. While looking at the ways in which colonial buildings were described and illustrated in the historical documents, Dr Steiner highlighted the importance of those media in creating knowledge, authority, and hence the self-definition of France as an

imperialistic state. Furthermore, aesthetic and engineering qualities of the material culture itself were suggested to be the means of such nationhood identity formation.

Material praxis

MARTINA WERNLI (ETH Zurich) opened up a new panel on material practices, suggesting the vital importance to material culture analysis of writing instruments, such as goose quills. Dr Wernli highlighted their 'disciplining' influence on the body and hence, an indirect impact on the techniques behind the written texts.

Correspondingly, GIANERICO BERNASCONI (University of Zurich) masterfully showed how, by analysing portable objects such as fans and binoculars as techniques of social interaction in the 18th and 19th centuries, one could not only analyse the social life of things, but most importantly their defining role in framing public behaviour and social etiquette.

Finally, CHRISTOF JEGGLE (University of Bamberg) drew the participants' attention to the fact that, in addition to having cultural significance, most of the material practices could, and moreover, should be seen as economically influenced. Dr Jeggle suggested striking differences in the economic logic of material objects in the pre-industrial history and went as far as arguing economic agency of things that could be analysed through evaluation and consumption practices.

In the context of the new panel, ESTHER HELENA ARENS (University of Cologne) posed a difficult question to the participants: whether the plants that were studied in the context of colonial occupation could be actually seen as artefacts. Dr Arens convincingly argued that those plants produced the material culture of craftsmanship around them, shaping the knowledge of different storing, transporting, and cultivating techniques. Such botanical knowledge was a mean of negotiating relationships with the locals as well as actively contributing to the circulation of plants and products that was at heart of the European colonial projects.

As clarifying as some artefacts can be, PAOLA VON WYSS-GIACOSA (University of Zurich) and Martin Mulsow (Gotha Research Centre) offered an alternative perspective in which an object was a source of confusion in scientific discourse. The nature of scientific drawings of artefacts was suggested to be very contradictory, since those images were mainly influenced by the historical educated guesses about the origins and meanings of those objects, rather than documented facts. Prof von Wyss-Giacosa and Dr Mulsow emphasised the important role of objects as origins of compromises that scientists had to make between materiality and historical deduction practices, on which much of the scientific knowledge of the 17th and 18th century was actually based.

Trans-epochal history of material possessions

In the concluding key note of the day, Prof HANS PETER HAHN (University of Frankfurt am Main) offered participants an insight into ethnological research on personal property expansion, cultural change, and global entanglements. In his comparative analysis, Prof Hahn showed multiple examples of object ownership practices influenced by different types of social and economic logics. Those usually included the practical notions of using same objects for different purposes, treating objects as connections to certain kin members or seeing things as status signifiers. The question that was left open for the plenary: Why do people in some societies, like our own, invest such an effort in acquiring a mass possession of objects that are soon forgotten?

Semantics

CHRISTOPH SCHANZE (University of Giessen) introduced a different perspective on analysing German novels of 15th and 16th century while looking at the material culture presented in the text. According to Mr Schanze, different objects presented in the novels were endowed with power and symbolic meaning, and provided further information about cultural circumstances of the narrative. He also outlined how the journeys of objects are selectively and strategically collated with stories of protagonists to create a row of milestones for the plot development. However, it is not through the objects of culture that the story was mediated, but rather with the objects that different cultural contexts were described and genealogical discourses were elaborated on.



Furthermore, Annette Cremer (University of Giessen) suggested that in the context of using material culture analysis in different epochs one has to be extra cautious about terminology that is applied. Such an epoch-sensitive approach, however, posed quite a difficult dilemma in which the deeper understanding of certain terminology could not be constructed due to the limited literary sources on everyday use of objects and vocabulary attached to them.

Historic object discourse

KIM SIEBENHÜNER (University of Bern) addressed itineraries of the material in her talk, looking at the history of objects and the flow of jewels in the early modern period. Prof Siebenhüner advocated looking at objects as parts of historical social practices, rather than just 'goods' or 'commodities'. Positioning jewels within societal power structures of gift, inheritance, and collectables allowed for bringing a different light on researching the historical flow of objects among continents and historical actors.

LIZA REGAZZONI (University of Frankfurt am Main) further elaborated on the historical practices of reinterpretation of material artefacts. She provided an example of megaliths and genderless statues, which often lacked any inscriptions, and hence were regarded as historical gaps left open for interpretation. According to the research of Dr Regazzoni, knowledge creation within the 18th century French scientific community was based on diverse prejudices, values, and political identity claims that were made in relation to these material testimonials. Those were the creative processes in which less attention was paid to the existing antique discourses, and more to the presumed historical narratives. Those practices were influenced by the weight of the historization of the culture and the legitimation of the cultural roots that brought prestige to the politics of the time. Hence, the question arose about how the artefacts of the scientific practices (pictures depicting objects and text describing them) should be analytically assessed, given their interpretative and politicised nature.

STEFAN LAUBE (Herzog August Library Wolfenbüttel) joined the debate with an illustrative example of the Idol of Sondershausen, a bronze figure that provoked multiple debates on its meaning, functions, and origin. Since the object itself was quite uncommon, it was the performative potential of the figure that was widely elaborated on. The figure posed ambiguity with regard to the potential transformation of the place (given its presumed features of blowing water or fire), as well as the nature of its meaning (diverse ideologies and cults that potentially were related to the figure). Such incompleteness of meaning resulted in the productivity of the object, potentially creating knowledge, imagination, and even memories. It was in the cultural irritation that Dr Laube saw the role of such 'incomplete' objects.

The theme of copies as ways of exploring the meaning of material culture was picked up in the talk of BRITTA RABE (University of Frankfurt am Main). Her presentation was dedicated to the theme of collecting antiquity and shaping numismatics, providing an example of copies of objects that played an important role in the development of a scientific field. Despite the obvious material differences of casts of the real coins (such as color and weight), creating such copies, collecting and exchanging them back in the 18th century allowed for connection, observation, and reversing the knowledge production among scientist and enthusiastic collectors.

Concluding commentary

Prof Dr IVAN GASKELL (University of New York) posed an important question that had been in minds of the participants during the three-day conference – does the unstable/interpretative nature of objects question historical pasts, by suggesting the different ways of looking at the 'historic truths'? Despite the challenges that were discussed, the plenary was mostly convinced that the radical instability which a material-culture approach brought to historical studies significantly advanced its reflection potential – not fragmenting our knowledge of history, but potentially deepening it.