

THE OBJECT AS SCORE

IT NARRATIVES

1.

In the 1988 movie *Vibes*, Jeff Goldblum plays a psychometrist¹ named Nick Deezy who claims he can decipher the history of events around objects by simply touching them. The film's plot takes Deezy to Ecuador with companion Sylvia Pickel (played by Cyndi Lauper) where the two are held hostage by a criminal gang intent on exploiting their extra-sensory powers. The duo is lead to an ancient pyramid built by aliens which is supposedly imbued with all the psychic energy in the world.² Ordered to activate the thing, Deezy is powerless but, when Sylvia lays her hands on the pyramid, the supernatural floodgates open. What follows: bodily gyrations, speaking in tongues, a mini earthquake, violence to captors, and later, Jeff Goldblum scores back at the hotel.

Vibes is not a piece of finely crafted cinema, but it proposes something worth revisiting. The argument is that objects have a concealed psychic imprint – energetic forces produced from the history of their use – and that these energies can be obtained via an act of 'object-reading'. The relevant point here is that it's not the scientist (well pseudo-scientist) Goldblum who has that power but, instead, the artist Cyndi Lauper who, ultimately, can read and release the potential of objects.

I like the idea that artists know the trick to unleashing the hidden agency or secret function of an object. That artists have an alternative remote control with special buttons that trigger other unexpected possibilities for objects.

In the narrative world of *Vibes*, the alien pyramid truly does contain special energy which, when transferred to Lauper, allows for her supernatural act. But a counter reading, perhaps more grounded in reality, is that the pyramid is simply a prop, a wholly inanimate thing onto which Lauper projects her destructive or perverse fantasies, thus granting herself permission to realise them. For the writers of *Vibes*, whether the pyramid-object is legitimately energetic, or just a convenient alibi for Lauper's repressed desire, doesn't really matter. These things only ever end one way: dead-bad-guys, Lauper-Goldblum-hotel-room.

In animistic thinking – a pre-operational cognitive stage theorised by developmental psychologist Jean Piaget – inanimate objects are imagined to have life and mental processes. Through the prism of this world view, the ball rolling down the hill isn't simply a dumb sphere obeying the laws of gravity, but a sentient thing running away from you, possibly out of fear, even though you kicked it in the first place. I wonder if thinking an object as score is similar? Artists sense a powerful energy in objects, and are compelled to perform actions that extend from this sense. However, the 'object-reading' is in truth an alibi, granting permission to act on a desire that would otherwise be unaccountable.

2.

In certain situations, both real and fictional, objects literally speak aloud and address the world around them (because they are either programmed to, are a ventriloquist trick, or are in fact magical). Speaking objects, being so unnatural, frequently end up the casualties of their own discursiveness. Red Dwarf's, 'talkie toaster', programmed to verbally promote its own functionality, is a case in point.

"He's defective, he wants everyone to eat toast all the time. He's obsessed with it, and if you don't want to eat like four-hundred serves of toast every hour, he throws a major wobbly, that's what caused the accident in the first place."

"What accident?"

*"The accident involving me, the toaster, the waste disposal and the fourteen-pound hammer."*³

'Talkie toaster' is the unwitting victim of a violent human psychodrama, a scenario familiar in the 'it-narratives' of eighteenth-century literature told by anthropomorphic coins, banknotes, slippers, shoes, umbrellas, coats, pin-cushions, watches, sofas, corkscrews, atoms.⁴ In these stories, the narrating object-protagonists 'have little agency of their own: rather they are repeatedly constituted as having a peculiar or magical capacity to "intuit" (a word used frequently in object narratives) and recall the entire experience of those who possess them. Their movement through the public sphere depends on their debased users, for whom they rarely express admiration.'⁵

Do the objects instrumentalised by artists as scores feel the same denigration and contempt as the 'it' narrators of Victorian literature? Or do they feel the pride associated with intuiting the experience of such imaginative users? Today's 'enchanted objects' (a term coined by Silicon Valley technologist David Rose) follow a score at once more sympathetic and more insidious. Enchanted objects are built to respond, sense, interact and react to us. They are everyday things – watches that set your life tempo, sofas that measure your lounging, corkscrews that oversee your drinking – with built-in artificial intelligence functioning, thus decreasing the need for humans themselves to be functional. In this sense, enchanted objects gain access to subjectivity through the impoverished subjectivity of their users, who become increasingly conditioned by them. The logical consequence of this is that enchanted objects appear to serve, but eventually come to dictate the parameters of human agency, privacy and autonomy. This phenomenon could be characterised as an inverted telekinesis; where once humans moved objects with their minds, now enchanted objects gain the ability to move or bend people, controlling them as one would a puppet.

3.

When an artist makes an inanimate object a score they are at the same time revealing its secret or alternative potential, and also projecting their own desires onto it. It may not matter as either way you will end up in a hotel room with Jeff Goldblum. When an object speaks aloud it tells us things about ourselves we may not want to know and as a consequence the object usually occasions its own demise. When an enchanted object simultaneously attends to and conditions the needs of a person, that person becomes a score. The enchanted object both interprets and composes a score instituted in human desire. The sequel to this show should be 'human as score for enchanted objects'.

JOEL STERN

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NOTES

¹ Psychometry (or token-object reading) is a form of extra-sensory perception characterised by the claimed ability to make relevant associations from an object of unknown history by making physical contact with that object. Supporters assert that an object may have an energy field that transfers knowledge regarding that object's history.

² The movie currently has a rating of 6% on Rotten Tomatoes based on 16 reviews. Another interesting note: composer Van Dyke Parks makes a cameo.

³ Red Dwarf (TV Series), White Hole (1991).

⁴ Jan Alber & Rudiger Heinze, 'Unnatural Narratives – Unnatural Narratology', *Linguae & Litterae*, 2011.

⁵ Christopher Flint, *Speaking Objects: The Circulation of Stories in Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction*, PMLA, 1998.

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JOEL STERN

exhibition text by

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EVENTS AND PERFORMANCES

Thursday 5th March, 5:30pm

Opening celebration

Friday 6th March, 12:30pm

Sean Baxter – Schmelzwerk

Torben Tilly – artist floor talk

Saturday 7th March, 2:30pm

Matthew Day – Weighting (2015)

Helen Grogan – CONCRETE ROOM (2005–) and LIGHT (2003–)

Ernie Althoff

Saturday 14th March, 2:30pm

Matthew Day – Weighting (2015)

Saturday 21st March, 2:30pm

Matthew Day – Weighting (2015)

Shelley Lasica and Katie Lee – Possibility of Performance'

Arini Byng – Ready for the House

Joel Stern

Saturday 28th March, 2:30pm

Matthew Day – Weighting (2015)

EXHIBITION DATES

6th March to 4th April 2015