Thinking about ‘Fittingness’

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There is a radical challenge to archaeological discourse at the centre of Ian Hodder’s (2012) work through questioning the reliance of any concrete ‘material’ facts of existence that may underly the transformation of human society, a transformation that is, for Hodder, rather based upon a changing dependency between humans and things. This is not to forget that material objects and ecologies can disrupt and impact upon entanglements, just as human intentions can, but whether these stimuli result in change is not dependent upon materials or intentions themselves, but the form of what Hodder terms the ‘tautness’ of entanglement — the interlacings of the web that constitute ecological, economic, emotional, social, ideational and cognitive processes. The determination of change is produced not by an idealism or by a materialism but “by the contingent ways in which the multiple strands of entanglement are tied together” (p. 97). Entanglements themselves are ‘unpredictable’ and ‘unruly’, they have a plurality of temporalities, more so when we recognise that things are:

[…] not inert and not isolated […] humans and things live in different temporalities […] it is very difficult to monitor all the possible interactions and conjunctions. The multivariate connections multiply possible outcomes and make predictions difficult. But also humans become unruly in their relationships to things, contesting and challenging rights and duties. For all these reasons, things and human-thing interactions are often surrounded by regulation and systems of management and care (Hodder, 2013, p. xx).

What is particularly interesting in the context of Media Archaeology and Cognition is Hodder’s attempt to include a fuller description of the
temporalities of both the immaterial forces of the phenomenal world (as things themselves) and the temporality of the material world, in order to make sense of the archaeological remains which his discipline uncovers – multi-layered strata formed by remains of human, animals, geological, agricultural, biological and importantly cultural and phenomenal evidence. It is this temporality of the phenomenal world that remains somewhat on the periphery of current archaeological and media archaeological discourse (Parikka, 2012), within the context of Media Archaeology and Cognition Hodder’s text is useful to help us think about the entanglements that allow media artefacts to emerge, and endure through sets of dependencies that are themselves not only historically contingent, but are a part of the temporality of the phenomenal world of experience and cognition just as much as the temporality of the material world.

The chapter reprinted here provides an explication of what Hodder describes as the ‘fittingness’ of things within a set of historically contingent entanglements, as well as an example of an analysis of such entanglements. Hodder’s approach describes how, by focussing upon the entanglements of dependencies between humans and things, it is possible to discover a ‘fittingness’, or a ‘coming into play’ (an emergence) of properties contingent to specific historical contexts and accessible from constantly changing and specific points of view. In an earlier chapter Hodder presents the reader with an image of a Neolithic scene of hunter-gatherers which has a piano placed just if the centre of the image (fig. 1). He asks the reader to reflect upon why this piano feels ‘out of place’ within such a scene. The answer, for Hodder, is that the piano requires a certain ‘fittingness’ to an entanglement of things that is historically (and geographically) contingent, and that the ‘style’ of living which extends into the stylistic details of the artefact itself, such as the curved lines, smooth wood and aesthetic choices as well as the development of strings, materials, the style of music composed and performed, and the kinds of audience performed to (pp. 127-130). The pianos’ style has a coherence to its wider entanglement in which this particular piano, as a thing, can only ever ‘come into play’ from within the context that makes it possible.
Hodder’s *Entangled* (2012) is representative of current work in archaeological discourses (Renfrew and Malafouris, 2008; Malafouris, 2013; Ingold, 2011; Ingold, 2013) that aims to develop narratives to better understand the affective role material culture plays in the development of human experience and society. In this text Hodder identifies some particular limitations of how network models have been applied (specifically that of actor-network-theory developed by Bruno Latour) and suggests ways of thinking that may redress the tendency to overlook material constraints (which are a key source of information to archaeology) and focus upon the social within the study of archaeological artefacts. For Hodder, to bring everything into sociological analysis risks losing an important motor of change; the properties and temporalities of the materials themselves - the ‘thingness’ of things. There are forces outside of the temporality of human-nonhuman networks that lead to change, such as ‘behaviour of salts, weather, and chemical’ and these forces, just as much as human intentionality, are fundamental for any
Hodder particularly finds problems with the total mixing of things (whether human, non-human or material) implied by network theories within the study of material culture, in that humans (as things) and things are equally relational and interconnected. Recognising that at certain times in history humans and things may vary in dominance — to talk of equal relations would be false. Following Hodder’s lead, to talk of networks is rather to talk of entanglements; tensions of dependence and dependency (between humans and humans, humans and things, and things and things) which are historically contingent and constantly transform (2012, p. 94). At the centre of Hodder’s work is a re-contextualisation of what is meant by a thing as a crux of a theoretical re-shaping of the archaeological method, which requires, Hodder maintains, a theory of Entanglement. The theoretical re-shaping of archaeological discourse provided by Hodder could instigate an interesting challenge to the discourse of media archaeology, providing alternative metaphors through which to understand the affective relationships between human experience and the material world.

As Hodder describes them, things are coalescences or confluences, and offer a way to talk about the material world that avoids a reductive materialism uniquely in the service of a social construction. This focus on things rather than objects moves a discussion of the material world from one of a static, pre-existing, or at least easily defined, set of entities, to a world of emergence that has its own temporality(ies) that at times may become bound to the temporality of human experiences. In the chapter re-printed here, Hodder makes a useful exploration of the implication of this shift for the study of artefacts (or things) within the context of archaeology. The ‘things’ that Hodder is interested in talking about range across ontologies. The term is applied to any artefact that can be categorically separated, including; humans, animals, plants, materials, ideas, memories as well as things of the phenomenal world such as perceptions and feelings; they are not isolated and inert, but are always involved in complex flows of matter, energy, and information.
Things come into being in relation to, and are defined and supported by, one another, they exist because of their place and role in what he describes as an ‘entanglement’ of dependencies — humans depend upon things, and things depend upon humans, things also depend upon other things — and despite Hodder’s ontological permissiveness as to what combines to make a thing, he maintains that the relationships and dependencies between them are in no way equal in all directions, and that material events cannot be reduced to semiotic events. He critiques the ‘relational’ perspective of ANT, Latour’s symmetry (p.94) and argues that the interconnection of the network suggest an equality and free movement for things and humans within the network, instead he suggests that these networks are ‘sticky’ — to suitably account for our relation with things and relations between things, ‘reliance’, ‘contingency’ and ‘dependence’ and ‘entrapment’ must be considered, pointing away from ‘networks’ and ‘meshworks’ and towards entanglements. As humans we become entangled with things for a range of reasons; as in his example of stone walls, they ‘fall apart’, but things also “unleash potential in humans,” encouraging humans to get ‘caught up’ in relations with them. In the case of ‘materials, plants and animals…’:

When these different things come to depend on humans for their continued existence in the way that humans want them, humans too get drawn into their specific behaviors and temporalities. Humans get trapped looking after wheats that will not reproduce without them; they get trapped by walls that will not stay up without them; they get caught up in the lives of sheep (Hodder, 2013, p. 87).

The way in which Hodder develops the term ‘Entanglement’ remains close related to the way in which scholars in the humanities and social sciences — particularly using Actor Network Theory, have worked to bridge the divide between materialism and social constructivism. However, Hodder’s use of the term is from an archaeological perspective aiming to account for the active material properties of things. Humans get entangled physically in a relationship of dependence and dependency to maintain the world around them that suits their interests, whilst all the time, things fall apart and change. There thus remains a compo-
nent of entanglement that is produced by the things themselves, an aspect that the sociology of science has found difficult to conceptualise (p. 95). Hodder’s Entanglement (p. 97) differs from materialism, ecological determinism, biological reductionism, and the like in that the webs and networks in which humans live are as much symbolic, meaningful, spiritual, religious, and conceptual as they are technical economic and social, the symbolic world is bundled together in the physical co-presence of objects — the web is seamlessly material and immaterial.

Works cited:


