

ABSTRACT

Within a semiotic account of our relations with things, we are able to observe a continuum from do to show to tell. Some things just do what they do. That is, we might question what they do, but in their doing, we are passive. A door opens or it does not. We may quibble about each of these limits but inasmuch as the door does something as a door, it opens and/or it closes. Its semiotic constraints are exceeded by its functionality: it does do stuff.

Some other kinds of things show, in their operations, indications of otherness. That is, the plant puts forth buds which shows a stage of development that implicates a subsequent flowering and thence a blowing and then on to decay. In budding, the plant shows the indications of a system that is open to being discerned. That is, while we observe the process, we do not initiate the process and hence we are passive in this sense: something is shown to us

Then there are the things that tell. We say a clock tells the time. We might reply that it is us, as semiotically engaged observers, who are required to make sense of the telling but nonetheless the tell is on the side of the clock. It tells the time; we read the time based on its telling. Other examples of things that tell, things that are knowing things include spirit levels and carpenters' rules or squares.

Keywords: knowing things, do, show, tell, semiotics

1 INTRODUCTION

Imagine that before us is a door. What if we didn't know what to do with a door? What if we knew something about doors in general but not enough about this door? What if we could see the handle and understand its purpose but still could not operate the door? What a strange circumstance to find oneself in and more to the point, what a strange problem to pose. According to Wittgenstein: "A man will be imprisoned in a room with a door that's unlocked and opens inwards; as long as it does not occur to him to pull rather than push it" (1998, p. 42).

This problem sounds like a philosopher's problem and it was a philosopher, Wittgenstein himself, who came up with a solution. Hadi Teherani and the people at Franz Schneider Brakel (FSB), talking about the Lever Handle Model 72, 1183 designed by Teherani, offer this account:

For framed doors we are familiar with offset handle shapes on the closing side of the door, and standard shapes on the other side, the so-called "Wittgenstein solution".

Hadi Teherani solved the function of the offset handle to avert the risk of skinning your thumb on the door frame, by simply shifting the handle's axis of rotation to the left. (<http://www.fsb.de/>)

For Teherani and FSB, the "Wittgenstein solution" seems to simply be a solution to the problem of "skinning your thumb" but in light of Wittgenstein's existential quandary of a man unable to determine which way the door wishes to be used, we can see another answer to another problem. Wittgenstein's solution is not simply to offset the handle, it is also to make the handle on one side of the door, the closing side of the door (the side that gets pushed through the frame), significantly different to handle on the opening side of the door (the side that meets the frame). We should also remember that Wittgenstein, the philosopher, actually designed the kinds of handles we are talking about here. That is, his ponderings were not mere idle speculation; he had such handles made to his specifications.

2 THE PROBLEMS OF DO, SHOW AND TELL

Wittgenstein's handles do not simply *do* their job of working the door mechanism; and nor do they simply *show* their function in the respect that Wittgenstein's example handles indicate there are levers to be pulled down; but they *tell* a story: the lever on the outside of the door is offset so that when the person pushes the door through the frame they do not skin their thumb. If we were to be inside the room with such a door handle system, we would know that the door was meant to be pulled rather than pushed because the door handle would tell us that it was a handle to be pulled because it was not offset as the handle to be pushed was offset.

There are obvious similarities between the general categories of *do*, *show* and *tell* being employed here and the threefolds or triads elaborated by C. S. Peirce. *Do*, for example, can be seen as related to *Quality*; *Show* can be related to *Reaction*; and, *Tell* can be related to *Representation*. Importantly, we can embrace Peirce's designation of these phenomenological categories as *Predicaments*. That is, as Wittgenstein points out, we are surely in a predicament when we don't know what to do with a door. And, when we do know what to do with a door, it is, in some crucial sense, because the use has been predicted as a predicate. This predication is most obvious in the cases of things that *tell* because of the *representation*. (For a useful introduction to the work of Peirce, see the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* - <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce/>.)

Being in the predicament of door handles that miss-tell occurs dramatically in the film, *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001). Here Amélie, the hero of the film, messes with the mind of the cruel local shopkeeper, Collignon. Amélie does such disruptive things as swopping his comfortable slippers for smaller one, changing the time on his clock and, reversing the handles on the internal door so that the lever, which is normally on the outside of the door, is replaced with the knob which is normally on the inside of the door. This causes Collignon much confusion as he pulls when he should push. Collignon is briefly Wittgenstein's imprisoned man though in his case, he is locked out of his living room. His look of consternation is the look of a man in a world where the world is telling the wrong tale.

In his account of "a theory of meaning for artifacts in use", Klaus Krippendorff raises Wittgenstein and Gibson to assist in his own elaboration of how meanings can enable "individual users of artifacts to get involved, revealing what can be done with them and how, and ultimately rendering them reliable". For Krippendorff :

A theory of meaning for artifacts in use accounts for how individual users come to understand their artifacts and interact with them in their own terms and for their own reasons. It follows Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1953) suggestion to locate the meaning of artifacts (for Wittgenstein: words) in their use, not as referring to extraneous things. It embraces James J. Gibson's (1979) ecological theory of perception but goes beyond it by focusing on human interfaces with artifacts, not only on what they essentially support. (2008, p. 356)

Here, for Krippendorff, artefacts (such as our example of door handles), in their uses, go beyond being seen as mere markers of their function in terms of their uses. They participate, as artefacts, and semiotic markers, in a story. That is, they are part of meaning making. The handles don't just do and show. Within the interface with users, such artefacts tell.

3 THINGS THAT TELL

A carpenter's rule or square is an ancient device. In simple terms, it allows us to not only draw straight lines but also to construct right angles. Its functions, as a ruler are to bring things into conformity or to normalise them. All the angles in a construction can conform to the rule. In these ways, the ruler does things and it shows things but how does it tell things?

For Wittgenstein, there is a problem with the way that simple rulers do things and the things that they show. That is, if there is a one metre bar somewhere in Paris that is used as the standard against which all other rulers are measured, what is the standard against which the bar in Paris is measured? This is a schoolboy problem that is even better told through the absurdity of using the current King's foot as the standard for the measure of one foot. It is not that the standard for measurement is arbitrary, rather that it is variable. In the case of the one metre bar in Paris, reducing the variability by controlling the temperature does not overcome the arbitrary nature of the standard. The approximation of the earth's circumference as the original quantity that was divided does not solve the problem. This, for Wittgenstein is an example of a language game.

While these issues with simple rulers can be successfully dealt with in practical ways, the arbitrary nature of what the ruler does and shows haunts the process of measurement. When we look at the carpenter's square, we find something different going on. In the case of Latin, the carpenter's ruler or square is known as a *norma*. In the case of Greek, the word for a carpenter's square is the same as the word for the pointer on a sundial, *gnomon*, from which, in English, we derive the words know and knowledge etc. That is, while the Latin term points to things like precepts and patterns and conformity, the Greek term indicates that something else is going on, knowledge is being evinced.

When we look at the pointer for a sundial we can see that we are being told something. This also happens with a mechanical clock. Mechanical clocks tell time in that their mechanisms are formed such that there is a relationship

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between what they do, and show in terms of something else. Their gears are in ratios that are informed by an understanding of the earth's rotation around the sun, and hence their gears are able to inform the watcher of the clock of the location of the earth at this time in relation to the sun. Rather than a language game, what happens with a clock is a story. The same is true of the sundial's pointer. It is structured in a relationship between the earth and the sun such that the story of this relationship is told through the position of the shadow formed on the dial. The clock might be normalised to suit time zones but it is normalised within the ratios of the earth and the sun. It could be brought into conformity with the local observation which is the full story told by the sun dial's pointer and its shadow.

In this sense of a structured interrelation of knowledge, the pointer of the sundial is a knowledge stick. Just as one might drop a plumb blob on a piece of string to point to the centre of the earth, so one can put a stick in relationship with the sun to determine the location of that part of the earth in relation to the sun. The pointer is a thing that knows; the relationship it forms is one of objectivity. That is, between the sun, as one object, and the stick as another object, a third and necessary object arises, a shadow. This third object is self-identical on all occasions that it emerges. That is, it is reliable and hence it is not subject to the whim of the observer or the arbitrary nature of the stick itself. As an experiment it can be duplicated and replicated while ever there is a sun and an earth.

4 SELF CONSUMING ARTEFACTS

Objects that form necessary relationships that indicate knowledge can all be described as things that tell. So far we have listed clocks and carpenters' squares and plumb bobs. Many carpenter's squares come with floats or spirit levels. Fluids, when constrained, will always form a relationship with the earth and hence we can objectively establish levels with the same certainty of our ancestors by using a bubble in the fluid as we use a shadow in the sundial. All these relationships would seem to fall into the area of what Krippendorff describes as "causal connections":

Meaning is a cognitively constructed relationship. It selectively connects features of an object and features of its (real environment or imagined) context into a coherent unity. The reasons for such relationships are numerous. Engineers and ergonomists have almost exclusively settled on functions, measurable, causal connections that are manifest in the push and pull of controlled physical forces. (Krippendorff, 1989, p.12)

The "coherent unity" being ascribed to carpenters' squares would seem to be nothing other than an account of the "push and pull of controlled physical forces". While one can accept this as a fair criticism, it is nonetheless a disguising account of the objects we have been looking at. The necessity of the coherence in the case of these relationships exceeds the "cognitively constructed relationship" by virtue of grounding the cognition. One has to see the shadow to be able to see the tale being told by the sundial and one has to recognise that this shadow is telling a tale. So, in that way, the story being told is cognitively constructed. But, the leap required in recognising the tale being told is a transcendent leap inasmuch as it is a requirement of the tale being understood that the tale must be deemed to have been told by the relationship between the

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Tells and knowing things

Keith Russell

pointer and the sun as shown in the shadow. We cannot see the tale without giving over our consciousness to the embracing of the objective quality of the tale.

To accept the affective nature of this experience of objectivity, we need to allow that the events in our brain have an affective quality that is a grounding for consciousness and not simply a peripheral event. That is, in experiencing objectivity my feeling is the evidence of the neural event which is the ground of the cognition. This is very definitely a radical proposition in the sense that it argues for a root causal event and, radical in the sense that it is disruptive of much common-sense. Demasio and Parvizi can help here:

The problem of how the movie in the brain is generated and the problem of how the brain also generates the sense that there is an owner and observer for that movie are so interrelated that the latter problem is nested within the former. The second problem is that of generating the appearance of an owner and observer for the movie, that materializes within the movie.

The new proposal [put forward by Demasio and Parvizi] specifies that we first become conscious when, in addition to being awake and capable of making sensory images of an object, our organisms internally construct and internally exhibit a specific kind of wordless knowledge - the knowledge that the organism has been changed by an object - and when such knowledge occurs along with the salient enhancement of the object image caused by attention being allocated to it. (2001, p. 137) -

The "knowledge that the organism has been changed by an object" is the central focus of this current paper. That is, this awareness of change, as an affect, is the ground for the subsequent cognitive attention. We do not pay attention to events that have not be so grounded by the affect of the awareness of a change. In the case of the sundial, the change that has been experienced, as an affect, is the change that announces objectivity. Our attention is drawn, by the particular nature of the affect of objectivity to the event of change which is then determined as objectivity. We give ourselves over to this affective moment of change as an identity: we are the ones so affected and the ones changed by the awareness of the change.

This giving over is a giving over to what can seem an essence. That is, there is nothing in the relationship between the shadow and the sundial that is not found in the cognition but there is nothing in the cognition that is not in the relationship. In this sense, this kind of cognition is self-consuming. The idea of a self-consuming artefact comes form the work of Stanley Fish. In looking at kinds of mediative poetry, Fish argues that through repeated interpretive engagements with a poem, the meanings might be constructed such that there comes a point in the interpretation when the interpretant has consumed the artefact and then stops interpreting: "the reader's self . . . is consumed as he responds to the medicinal purging of the dialectician's art, and that art . . . is consumed in the workings of its own best effects (1972, p. 3). So, we look at the sundial, comprehend the coherence of the relationships, give ourselves over to the tale being told, read the tale and then know the time. The artefact has been used up in its cognitive use and we have no remainder to haunt us as can happen with the arbitrary nature of the one metre bar in Paris. There is no post-modern agony.

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5 SUBJECT-OBJECTS

In comprehending the coherence of the relationships, we are experiencing a cognitive affect, here called the affect of objectivity. In pointing out that engineers have “almost exclusively settled on functions” as they way to account for our meaningful relationships with things, Krippendorff is pointing to a division between those who account for our dealings with things in general from the side of the object and those who account for our dealings with objects from the perspective of a subject. The fulcrum, and point of agony, that allows this see-saw to operate is the logical necessity for knowing which then, of itself, implies the thing/object know and the subject/thing knowing.

This see-saw can be observed in Bruno Latour’s deconstruction of the messy account of subject-object relations that can be discerned in modernism. Scott Lash, in his essay, “Objects that Judge: Latour’s Parliament of Things”, provides an illuminating introduction of great use here:

The central dualism of modernity is that nature is transcendent while society and the subject are immanent. To be transcendent means not to be constructed, it means to be universal in time and space. It means somehow to be real as in social-scientific realism, to be objectively true. Modernity’s constitution holds nature, scientific facts and technologies and other objects and things to be in this sense transcendent. However, the sociology of science, for example, has demonstrated the mythic character of this in demonstrating nature’s immanence, in showing how facts and theories themselves are constructed. (<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0107/lash/en>)

For many engineers, as pointed out by Krippendorff, the rules of nature are “objectively true” and therefore “scientific facts and technologies and other objects and things . . . [are] in this sense transcendent”. This is the *see* side of objects in a modernist; this is how science sees the world of things. The *saw* side of the modernist world is the assertion from the sociology of science that “facts and theories themselves are constructed”. What neither side of this see-saw bothers to indicate is the affective aspects of the knowing. That is, in knowing what we know, we experience certain cognitive affects. We form cognitive relationships with things; we do not simply have cognitive experiences independent of our affective connections with the things we cognise.

When we have cognitive relationships with objects we experience a range of affects. The peculiar affect of knowing that a thing is, of itself, telling us its tale, is a distinct experience that of the affect of objectivity. In giving oneself over to the knowledge that is there, in the object relationship, we form an identity relationship with the object (as an object in a cognitive relationship) much as we do when we give oneself over to an art work such as a novel. There is no author present in the text except we form an identity relationship with the text as an authored object, as a thing that has a tale to tell.

It is not really any different when we give oneself over to a story teller in the flesh, in real time and space. It may in fact be easier for us to understand this relatively novel concept of an affect of identity by reflecting on such real world experiences. That is, we already understand intimacy as an identity that is marked by an affect that we might call love and the bonding affect. It would be absurd to suggest that one could experience intimacy and bonding and not

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experience the affect of intimacy and bonding. And, many people can relate to the forming of an identity relationship with a work of art wherein they experience an affect as the marker and indicator of the identity that is formed we might call the aesthetic identity affect. This experience of the aesthetic affect is perhaps not as universal as the affect of bonding (and its opposite, the affect of not-bonding). But, it is nonetheless clearly acknowledged, if not equally valued, in all societies and cultures.

Here we can look at Heidegger account of what is going on in the scientific view of objects. According to Judith Wambacq in her paper, "Subject-object in Martin Heidegger, Bruno Latour and Manuel De Landa", for Heidegger:

the weighing of a stone doesn't reveal anything of its essence. Weighing is nothing else than converting the heaviness of the stone in the calculation of its weight. The solidity of the stone shows itself only when remaining unexplained. Every attempt by science to penetrate is doomed to failure, and results in a being degraded to a dumb object. Science is an example of subjective, propositional thinking, which rapes beings. The term "propositional thinking" is to be read literally: science positions the object in front of it and tries to examine it from different perspectives. But this way of examining creates a distance between subject and object which excludes any real understanding. (<http://www.constantvzw.org/verlag/spip.php?article79>)

The absence of any affect here is accounted for in terms of the propositional approach to the stone. What then is missing from this account of the propositional approach? In our terms here, what is missing is an account of the affect of approaching the object in its objectivity. That is, the affect of objectivity is not seen as an indicator of the relationship being formed between the subject and the object. The affect is not so much denied as being obviated, That is, given that we have acquired the affect of objectivity as an identity at some point, we are able to take this identity relationship as a given in the circumstances where it is present. The initial experience of giving over to the objectivity of the relationships has been normalised and subsumed and forgotten.

Afterall, this process of an affect drawing attention to change which then draws attention to the change as an object before consciousness is just what happens all the time, and so, in our stream of consciousness we are forgetting affects as often as we are moving towards attention to the next change that has been presented as another affect. But, we can recover understandings of these affects and the cognitive exchanges we have with objects if we bother to look for evidence of these exchanges in our everyday dealings with things.

6 TALES AND DOOR HANDLES

The door handle making firm, SFB (already mentioned above) bothered to give just such an account of what goes on, beyond the proposition approach, when we approach the tales of door handles. In an interview, conducted by W. O. Geberzahn, Jürgen W. Braun reported:

One day we were sitting in Johannes Potente's old studio - it must have been June 1985 - and Aicher asked: "What makes the products of Johannes Potente different from other door handles?"

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We all looked at one another. Somebody said: "They feel good in the hand." We started to describe what "feeling good in the hand" might be. I said something like, "the thumb finds its stop, the index finger its indentation, the roundness, the volume . . ." and after quarter of an hour we had defined the four laws of grip. Otl Aicher wrote them down immediately: 1. thumb stop, 2. index finger indentation, 3. roundness, 4. grip volume - and did a drawing to go with them. That led to a poster. Although here in the company, people were initially embarrassed. (2001)

The embarrassment is, in part, a recognition of the associated affects of giving oneself over to the door handle in order to experience the tale, the telling that the handle and the hand formed. The thumb is found in a relationship with a place for the thumb just as the thumb might be found in its spot in the shaking of another's hand. I have a hand and the door handle has a spot for my thumb to rest. The handle tells my thumb. The same applies to the indentation for the location of the index finger. In terms of the grip volume, the tale is a little different in terms of the double nature of apprehension: in order to take hold I am also taken hold of. When I grip the handle, the handle forms (informs) my gripping. If there is a reciprocal response in terms of the grip volume being just right, then the tale of my grip is given to me. In terms of the roundness, the telling is perhaps more a muted and aesthetic tale. That is, I enjoy the awareness of roundness that is given to me when I give over to the roundness of the handle. To experience this as a pleasure, I have to be literally and cognitively intimate with the handle.

7 SLIPPERY ESSENCES

It is obvious in our everyday dealings with things that tell tales about "controlled physical forces" that we are prone to granting objects essential qualities. As Homer Simpson is aware, the chair goes up and the chair goes down. Or, in this context, the door opens and the door closes. We are mostly happy with this semi-magical operation. But in being happy, we can be disappointed (which is the focus of much of work on affordances undertaken by Donald Norman, see his *The Design of Everyday Things*, for example), and we can be drawn into a world of semi-magical engagements with things that remind us of the stories that things once told to us before we normalised this strange connection we have with things.

The idea that John Lasseter pitched was called "Toy Story". It sprang from a belief, which he and Jobs shared, that products have an essence to them, a purpose for which they were made. If the object were to have feelings, these would be based on its desire to fulfil its essence. The purpose of a glass, for example, is to hold water; if it had [p. 285] feelings, it would be happy when full and sad when empty. The essence of a computer screen is to interface with a human. The essence of a unicycle is to be ridden in a circus. As for toys, their purpose is to be played with by kids, and thus their existential fear is of being discarded or upstaged by newer toys. (Isaacson, 2011. pp. 285-6)

The sadness of glasses that would be filled is the telling of the forgotten tale that glasses continue to tell except as adults we have stopped listening. Doors do not have existential fears, nor do toys. But, when we recall the existential fears that Wittgenstein raised in the context of the man who didn't know how to open the

door (and then proceed with the narrative of going through the doorway), we can see how *Toy Story* functions as the tale of the un-told-tale of our existential engagement with things.

8 CONCLUSION – DESIGNS THAT TELL

The thrust of this account of *do*, *show* and *tell* has been, in C. S. Peirce's terms, towards the predicament of representation. That is, towards the communication end of the spectrum of objects that are designed. The working surfaces between two things tell tales of the relationships between these things. In this context we are able to determine another kind of objectivity that exceeds the semiotics of us making meanings. The door tongue and the striker plate work as the door is opened and closed. This working leads to a certain sacrifice. One part (the tongue or the plate) must be softer than the other; one part must sacrifice or else the two parts would bind in use. The marks of this sacrifice tell the tale of the door lock in its operations. This kind of tale is both objective in the case of the reality of an operation and aesthetic in terms of things like clothes that have been scrubbed and damaged prior to being worn. Designer can and do use both kinds of tale telling in their designs.

Looking for the *Toy Story* essence of things that can be indicated in tells that are found in the operations of things, offers designers a pathway to follow. That is, if our affective engagement with things is as radical as Demasio claims, then designers may take advantage of the deeper kinds of connection and identity relationship that we have with things. In order to do so, designers will need to go beyond the Braun embarrassment when disclosing the affects of things. It may be hard to design a glass that wants to be filled because to do so is to shift the burden of design onto the consciousness of the designer and away from the testing laboratory of eye-tracking and surveys. Surely what is being described here is the artist-designer. Just as the affect of knowing needs to be remembered, so too the affects of making need to be revived.

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