

Anna Kérchy. University of Szeged, Hungary akerchy@ieas-szeged.hu

The Secret Life of Things. Rethinking affect and agency through human-object relations as sites for posthumanist ethics in eco-philosophical children's books

Course designed for the Children's Literature Summer School organized for MA and PhD level international university students by the University of Antwerp, Belgium, 2023 Summer <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/summer-winter-schools/childrens-literature/>

Ecology and Children's Literature Strand

- Material studied: short children's stories, picturebooks, tales
- Learning outcome: introduction to theories of posthumanism, eco-philosophy, object oriented ontology, thing studies
- Types of exercises: in-class discussion, creative writing of autobiographical flash fiction, pair work, team work, critical self-reflection
- Direct outcome: innovative interpretation of children's books
- Indirect outcomes: develop empathy, ethics, pedagogical skills

According to Greg Garrard, "the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" in culture. This workshop will explore how humans' relationships with non-human objects influence our understanding of being and non-being in the nature-culture continuum. How do encounters with things shape our phenomenological sense of enworlded, embodied identities, our spatiotemporal dis/locations, our affective belongings, and our general philosophical ideas about a life worth living? We shall start out from three, apparently simple children's stories – Margery Williams's *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing* (2000), and David Lucas's *The Lying Carpet* (2008) – which thematise the charismatic pull of objects (toy, machine, artwork) brought to life by human imagination that is revitalised by their thing-power, on its turn. These thought-provoking tales allow us to ask important questions about how childhood's favourite things shape adult futures, how capitalist material culture's commodity fetishism can be challenged by fantastic it-narratives, how objects can talk back to propagate a posthumanist ethics where all are recognised as equal actants in a complex network of entanglements.

Required Reading List

- Margery Williams's *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922)
- Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing* (2000)
- David Lucas's *The Lying Carpet* (2008)

Preparatory Tasks for all Students

1. Think of an object that was of special importance to you when you were a child. Write a piece of flash fiction, a very short memoir of a few sentences or a paragraph in which you recall your childhood self from the perspective of that object. Make this object the narrator of the reminiscence.
2. Read the three stories and compare how they represent anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric notions of space and time (home, memory, forgetting, history, etc).
3. Watch Czech Surrealist puppeteer Jan Svankmajer's short film *Dimensions of a Dialogue* (1983). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-gGpWpra-g> How does his stop-motion animation of ordinary objects create an uncanny effect? What do these object-encounters say about the challenges of human communication?

Additional Task for Students Taking Credits

Think of an object that was of special importance to you when you were a child. Write a short memoir of 500-700 words in which you recall your childhood self from the perspective of that object. Make this object the narrator of the reminiscence.

Classroom Exercises

Think of the different meanings of objects: commodity fetishism in consumer culture, use value, market value, nostalgic/emotional value, private memorial charge etc

Compare the verbal and the visual descriptions of the object protagonists: the carpet, the toy rabbit, and the lost thing

Compare the texts with classic IT narratives, eg Andersen's The Fir Tree

Relate texts to main assumptions of the philosophical trend of Object Oriented Ontology

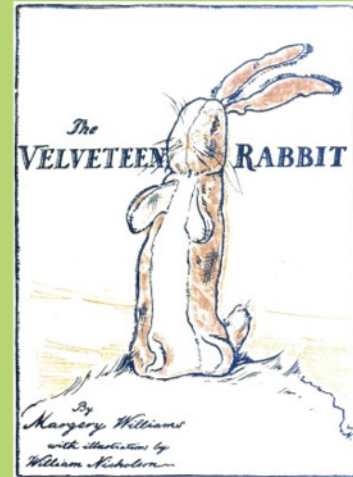
- „The world is not the world as manifest to humans, to think reality beyond our thinking is not nonsense, but obligatory” (Graham Harman)
- „Ask yourself: what does your toaster want? How about your dog? Or the bacteria in your guts? What about the pixels on your screen? How is their day going?” (Timothy Morton)
- Object memory (alchemical tradition/ witnessing +shaping reality)
- Matter starts to matter (things become perceptible via malfunctioning)
- Jane Bennett: matter is always already pulsing w life, objects can produce dramatic effects, make a difference in the world, shape web of interrelationships: „a toy doll, a dead rat, a gunshot residue sample can be self-contained actants”

Relate the Freudian notion of the uncanny to the concept of the abandoned object

SCROLL down to see select slides facilitating in-class discussion

Margery Williams (1881-1941) *The Velveteen Rabbit or How Toy Becomes Real*, 1922

- It narrative
- Tale of magic metamorphosis: series of reanimations/rebirths
- Consumer object → loved toy → imaginary friend → trash → live animal
- Magic realist: what facilitates transformations /animations? Mundane and marvellous reasons
- Philosophical fable
- Parallel realities (childhood: play realm, coming of age: different relation to toys)
- Changing value of object
(commodity value, sentimental value, use value, moral worth)
- Autobiographical aspect (Pamela Bianco, elegy for a daughter who grew up too fast)
- Inspired by real toy bunny, Fluffy
- Sequel: *The Skin Horse*



Questions for *Velveteen Rabbit*

- What does it mean to become real?
"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, Not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real."
- Hommage to object agency?
hierarchy between toys in cupboard: „the mechanical toys looked down on everyone else..."
- Tale with a moral?
- Does it manage to go beyond anthropocentric perspective?
Does the story go beyond human notions of space, time, identity, agency?
- How do human and non-human affects change in the story? Interspecies relations
„So much love stirred in his little sawdust heart that it almost burst"
„wisdom and beauty in his button eyes"
- Nursery room magic?
„he isn't a toy, he is real"
- Bittersweet ending...
"Why, he looks just like my old Bunny that was lost when I had scarlet fever!" But he never knew that it really was his own Bunny, come back to look at the child who had first helped him to be Real. "
- Childhood's association with nature --human/non-human bonds
„Spring came, and they had long days in the garden, for wherever the Boy went the Rabbit went too. He had rides in the wheelbarrow, and picnics on the grass, and lovely fairy huts built for him under the raspberry canes behind the flower border. "

David Lucas. The Lying Carpet, 2008

• **What are the intertexts?**

Flying Carpet – Arabian Nights – Sheherazade / Olympia (Hoffman: Sandman) / Oscar Wilde. The Happy Prince / fairy tale metamorphosis, ekphrastic tradition

• **Storyteller/reader relation**

Unreliable object narrator/storyteller (carpet) VS. Reluctant, hesitant confused reader (statue)

• **INTERSPECIES RELATIONS?**

• **Role of Art objects in human life**

• **OBJECT AGENCY?** Things usurping anthropocentric privileges?

• **Postmodern destabilization** of connection bw subject/object, truth/fiction, hybrid uncertainty: a statue who feels like a girl or a girl petrified under a magical spell -- **WHY/HOW transformation?**

• What does **BEING REAL** mean? **What is truth** from the perspective of object reality?

• **Ethics of storytelling:** lies/fantasies/faith/belief/consolatory nonsense

„The truth is bitter and lies are sweet, but the truth is better for you.

But on this side of the glass, truth and lies are one”

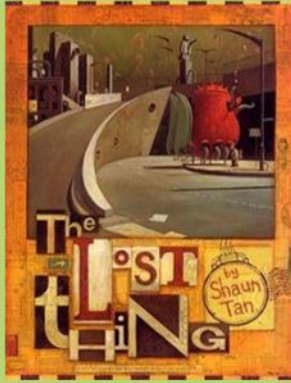
• **PLAY WITH LANGUAGE:** Language games: riddles, puns, tall tales

• **IT NARRATIVE:** Does the story manage to go beyond anthropocentric perspective?

Does the story go beyond human notions of space, time, identity, agency?



- Object Consciousness :
- Dilemma of Faith: Am I under a magic spell or am I just a statue?
- Pinocchio: Boy or Wooden Puppet / PK Dick: Android or Human?
- Existential philosophy: Descartes: Cogito ergo sum.
- Taoist Philosophy: Chuang Tzu: Life is a butterfly's dream.
- Tiger's Philosophy: You should simply believe what you prefer.
- Object memory: tiger's tales about fairy tales, beetles, feet trodding on it
- Object perception of time: time is a tangled knot, my life is flat w no fear or hope, remember past + fantasize about future
- Object perception of space: mobile/static
- Object morality: Am i a better rug for having suffered?
- Object consciousness: tiger is fabulist, detective, witness, magician
- Object affect: faith, hope, anxiety, humour
- The Story is a Metaphor for: desire for stories, disability, secret life of objects
- Wordmagic breaks curse: BUT I AM REAL.
- Ambiguous ending: spell broken/ recursivity of human-object transformation, Dont believe the tiger. Nothing he has said is true. / Death Watch Beetle: „ It is a lie that dark, and rotten world is all there is, but the Truth is brighter than my poor eyes can bear”



Shaun Tan. *The Lost Thing* (2000)

Object oriented narrative
Non-anthropomorphized, hybrid object preserves its THINGNESS
Machine provokes wonder and fear -posthuman identity
Sci-fi: Humanization of machine, Zoomorphization /
cyborgization of human, mechanization to dehumanize
INTERSPECIES CONNECTIONS: shared experience of being lost in dystopian world

The Thing
Hybrid, undefinable
Liminal, „weird, sad sort of look”
Abandoned, lost, being out place, from nowhere, heading to nowhere
Other: child-animal-machine -outcast, marginalised (race, class, disability, immigrant)
Dystopia: consumer culture, eco-catastrophe, urbanization, mechanization
Empathy/Entropy
Utopia /Heterotopia

Status of objects in story: boy collects bottle tops, Federal Dept of Odds and Ends, place for lost things „None really fit, none really belong, but they seemed happy enough tough, so maybe it didn't matter.”

GENRE: Nonsense story, Surrealistic Dream Fantasy, Fable about Social concerns, Existential Dilemmas, METANARRATIVE on Storytelling, Memory, growing up

