

**English 608.3**  
**Modern Things**  
**Spring 2013; Thursdays 1-3:50**

Professor: Celia Marshik  
Office Hours: Tuesdays 11:30-12:30, Wednesdays from 10:30-12:30, & by appointment  
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**Course Description:**

Readers have traditionally prioritized the human characters in literature, finding in those figures a correlative for our own experience of the world. The rest of the substance of a book has often been subsumed under the category of “setting,” a distinction that affirms a subject/object binary in which people exercise varying degrees of control over an inert material world. Recent work in literary and cultural studies, philosophy, sociology and anthropology has worked to trouble this opposition; in various ways, “thing theory” and associated schools of thought have suggested that objects act and constitute human subjects in ways we have only begun to recognize. Among our questions will be: under what circumstances might an object become a thing? Does the power that accrues in objects endanger the subjectivity of humans? And what is the distinction between commodities/objects/things/stuff?

**Please note:** Seminar members will choose one primary text for everyone in the seminar to read. We will read and prepare the selected texts for discussion beginning April 18.

**Required Texts** (available at the campus bookstore):

Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*  
Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guines, *The Object Reader*  
Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*  
Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things*  
Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to ANT*

**Additional readings are available on-line through Blackboard and the Library website (under “Databases & E-Journals”).**

**Course Requirements**

Participation and leading class discussion with a posted question: 20%

In the first ten weeks of the semester, we will begin each meeting with questions presented by two members of the class. On the evening or morning before we meet, class members will formulate detailed questions about the readings. We will use these questions to initiate and lead discussion. Be sure that your question refers to specific passages in the readings. In your question, you are required to comment on the reading in a way that expresses your analysis of it in relation to the topics in our class. You can pose a question that will lead the seminar to examine closely the language in the reading or

compare it to other critical materials in the seminar. Your question can also express what you find most intense, meaningful, or puzzling about the reading.

Your question needs to be posted in the course website on Blackboard in advance of the seminar meeting. Each person will take turns formulating and posting questions based on the alphabetical order of last names.

Oral presentation (20 minutes) and written copy (4-5 pages): 30%

You will give one oral presentation of an argument (thesis) about your selected text. I will pass around a sign-up sheet for you to identify a text for the seminar to read in preparation for your presentation. This text might be a (short) novel, play, poem, artwork or film that exemplifies modern things; because our reading schedule does not pretend to exhaust the material published in the area, it could also be an essay about objects and things. The latter approach will be most useful if you are primarily interested in thing theory proper while the former will better suit those of you who want to apply thing theory.

In your presentation, you must provide a close reading the text that shows how it both supports your argument and generates it. It is important that you include, as part of your argument and analysis, some topics and concepts from our shared readings earlier in the semester. As part of your analysis, you may also provide any background elements that will enhance our understanding of the text (e.g., genre, historical period, biographical information about the writer, artist or director). You will conclude your presentation with one question for the class that will allow us to discuss your selected text in relation to your presentation, as well as topics and issues we've discussed in previous seminar meetings. You may include supplemental visual materials or audio recordings (in Powerpoint or another format) to enhance your argument and analysis. However do not let these supplemental materials make you lose focus on analyzing your selected text.

After your presentation, you will turn in a written (typed and double-spaced) copy of it. The written copy may be either an outline or a coherent narrative (like an essay). However, when you give your presentation in class do not just read it from your written copy. Instead, please give it as a discussion while looking at and talking directly to everyone in the seminar.

Research paper (20-25 pages): 50%

This research essay is likely to be, in part or whole, on the text that you have selected for the seminar. It may depart from or extend the explorations of some parts of your oral presentation. You are to refer to critical materials (i.e., articles, essays, book chapters, etc.) to support your analysis. In other words, you will draw to some extension secondary sources to support your analysis of your selected text(s). The topic of your paper is entirely up to you, but students who intend to apply this course toward the WaGSs Certificate must write a seminar paper relevant to that program.

## University Policies

### DSS assistance:

If you have a physical, psychological, medical, or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact Disability Support Services at (631) 632-6748 or <http://studentaffairs.stonybrook.edu/dss/>. They will determine with you what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential. Students who require assistance during emergency evacuation are encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors and Disability Support Services. For procedures and information go to the following website:  
<http://www.sunysb.edu/ehs/fire/disabilities.shtml>

### Blackboard and University e-mail:

As of January 7, 2013, any e-mail sent to you via Blackboard will be sent to your @stonybrook.edu e-mail address. Please be sure that you check your SBU e-mail account regularly *or* forward messages from that account to another you do check regularly.

## Course Calendar

Items marked with one asterisk can be found on Blackboard  
Items marked with two asterisks are available on-line through the Library  
(though the e-journals section of the website)

- January 31** Introduction to the course; sign-up for posted questions  
Screening of *Rubber* (2010), dir. Quentin Dupieux
- February 7** “Some Theories of Objects”  
*The Object Reader*, Part I: Object (ch. 1-7)
- February 14** “Some Theories of Things and Materiality”  
*The Object Reader*, Part II: Thing (ch. 8-12)  
Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory” (ch. 23)  
Two short essays of your choice from “Object Lessons” (section VII) —  
please identify those choices on BB in advance of our meeting
- February 21** “(Only) Commodities?”  
Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value”  
Igor Kopytoff, “The cultural biography of things”  
Peter Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat”
- February 28** “*Critical Inquiry into Things*” (all readings in *Critical Inquiry* 28  
(Autumn, 2001)\*\*  
Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, “Fetishizing the Glove in  
Renaissance Europe.” 114-132.  
Christina Kiaer, “The Russian Constructivist Flapper Dress.” 185-243.  
Jeffrey T. Schnapp, “The Romance of Caffeine and Aluminum.” 244-269.  
John Frow, “A Pebble, a Camera, a Man Who Turns into a Telegraph

Pole.” 270-285.

Two other articles of your choice—please identify those choices on BB in advance of our meeting

- March 7**      **“Things in Literature I”**  
Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*  
Bill Brown, “The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism).” *Modernism/modernity* 6.2 (1999): 1-28.\*\*
- March 14**     **“Things in Literature II”**  
Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*  
Judith Brown, “Cellophane Glamour.” *Modernism/modernity* 15.4 (2008): 605-626.\*\*
- March 21**     **NO CLASS (Spring Recess)**
- March 28**     **“Things and the Social”**  
Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*  
Alfred Gell, “The Theory of the Art Nexus” & “The Distributed Person”\*
- April 4**        **“Subjects, Objects and Gender”**  
Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things*  
Anne Anlin Cheng, “Shine: On Race, Glamour, and the Modern.” *PMLA* 126.4 (2011): 1022-1041.\*\*  
Liz Conor, “The Status of the Woman-Object”\*
- April 11**      **“Things in Contemporary Philosophy”**  
“Introduction” to *The Speculative Turn*\*  
Graham Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects” (in *TST*)\*  
Bruno Latour, “Reflections on Etienne Souriau’s *Les différents modes d’existence*” (in *TST*)\*  
One other essay of your choice—please identify that choice on BB in advance of our meeting
- April 18**      Selected texts
- April 25**      Selected texts
- May 2**         Selected texts
- May 9**         Selected texts

**Thursday, May 16**  
**Research Paper due in my mailbox by 4 pm**