

Affects matter

Jonas Frykman & Maja Povrzanović Frykman (eds.) 2016. *Sensitive Objects. Affect and Material Culture*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press. 285 pp. ISBN 978-91-87675-66-9.

Material culture is fundamental in ethnology and anthropology. So far, it has rarely been explored from the viewpoint of affects and emotions, although affect research is a fashionable field in academic disciplines. *Sensitive Objects. Affect and Material Culture* proves that affect research is successfully invading the ethnographic study of material culture. The book aims to examine the potential for epistemic gain from material culture research in connection with studies of affect.

The book is based on the papers presented at the conference 'Sensitive Objects', in Dubrovnik, Croatia, in 2014. The fourteen contributors from five countries (Norway, Sweden, Croatia, USA, UK) have written twelve essays in which they show how established ways of analysing culture benefit from the achievements of affect studies. Most of the contributors are ethnologists and anthropologists with an extensive experience of fieldwork and sensitivity for material objects. They help us to understand the affective potentialities of objects. Some of them contribute brand-new ethnographic material, whereas others use material gathered in earlier ethnographic studies or take examples from popular culture.

The book starts with three theoretical and methodological chapters followed by five essays with specific analyses of when, how, for whom and why particular objects become sensitive. Three articles place the discussion of this sensitivity in the wider frame of their authors' professional interest in innovation and culture tourism, while

the last chapter lends the book a finishing twist towards experimental writing.

In the introductory chapter, 'Affect and Material Culture', the editors Jonas Frykman and Maja Povrzanović Frykman, ethnologists, look at how affects matter and how they are related to the body, environment and things. They notice that the words affect, emotion, feeling and sentiment are often used interchangeably. Furthermore, intensity, contingency and potentiality are common keywords when describing affect. The editors believe that ethnologists and anthropologists can make an important contribution to the field of affect research. They also hope that the book will be read across disciplines to further theoretically informed empirical approaches to affect and material culture.

Nils Gilje, philosopher and professor of cultural studies, writes about 'Moods and Emotions' and sees the present interest in the field as linked to how a cognitive bias, largely omitting moods and emotions, has left whole areas of human life uncharted. He displays some of the philosophical ideas involved in the recent 'affective' and 'existentialist' turn in ethnology and social science, focusing primarily on Kierkegaard, Spinoza and Heidegger. Although fundamental to an understanding of how the world is 'attuned' through affects and emotions, they leave out what ethnologists and anthropologists have taken as their main focus – practice.

In his chapter, 'Ethnography and the Choices Posed by the "Affective Turn"', Stef Jansen, anthropologist, disentangles the implications of some central components of affect theory for ethnographers. He begins by referring to a film evocative of the atmospheres in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the 1990s war. Then, leaning on Kathleen Stewart's ideas in *Ordinary Affects*

(2007), he makes a case for ethnographic investigations aiming for analysis through hermeneutics, conceptualisation and critical argument. He concludes that the ethnographic study of affects may be at its best when it also historicises their specific forms, tries to detect patterns in their operation and conceptualises them in dialogue with other scholarly work.

Maja Povrzanović Frykman's article is titled 'Sensitive Objects of Humanitarian Aid'. On the basis of fifteen interviews, she writes about what people remember of the international humanitarian aid during the 1992–95 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and how they talk about their memories two decades later. The author discusses several methodological issues that can arise in interviews, focusing on objects and their 'sensitivity'. She explains why some objects emerge as sensitive ones and shows how corporeal war memories are preserved and communicated through affective relations to such objects. The chapter frames affect hermeneutically in the constellation of meanings specific to the setting in which it arises.

Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, ethnologist, and Sanja Potkonjak, cultural anthropologist, write about 'The Titoaffect'. They describe the presence of the former Yugoslavian president Jozip Tito in pictures, busts, bric-a-brac and even flowerbeds in post-socialist Zagreb. They also tell about a birthday party that was ruined when an object from the past, a portrait of Tito, unexpectedly turned up as a gift. Immediately, the atmosphere became suffocatingly thick. With one shocking example – an old object with new and different meanings for people in different affective communities – the authors succeed in depicting the affective charge of history, politics and place.

Orvar Löfgren, ethnologist, writes about a suitcase that becomes an 'Emotional Baggage'. Referring frequently to literature and films, he asks how things harbour hopes and dreams, traumatic memories and a hard-to-verbalise sense of abandon and adventure when they are thrown together in a suitcase. The packing of ordinary luggage means both preparing for a journey and assembling objects that might appear 'sensitive' inasmuch as they trigger affects. Having non-rep-

resentational theory or bricolage approach as his point of departure, Löfgren also employs a historical perspective in his chapter and demonstrates the malleability and formation of emotions.

Jonas Frykman's chapter, 'Done by Inheritance', is inspired by theories of affect and a phenomenological approach based on the ideas of Heidegger, Arendt, Sartre and Bourdieu. He analyses traumatic conflict situations in families while an inheritance is divided, and his empirical material comes from the Swedish peasant society and contemporary conditions. When parents' home and its objects are undone, some things get a distinct affective value and simultaneously serve as symbols, focus of narrations and starting points for a return to past worlds. Emotions run high and siblings may become mortal enemies. However, by juxtaposing corporeal and cognitive processes in fieldwork situations, understanding affects becomes harder.

Britt Kramvig, social anthropologist, and Anne Britt Flemmen, sociologist, ask 'What Alters When the Traditional Sámi Costume Travels?' Using theories of affect, they explain what happened when a traditional Sámi costume was mocked by the display of Chinese-manufactured copies. The event caused a heated debate in the media where opinions about the rights of indigenous people, colonialism, safeguarding heritage and the humiliating abuse of the costume were voiced. When analysing affects in relation to material culture, time and place matter as well as the relations and context that give the object substance.

Drawing her theoretical inspiration from phenomenology, Elisabet Sørjorddal Hauge, cultural geographer, demonstrates the strong relation between affects, creativity and place in her essay 'In the Mood'. She writes about a successful Norwegian black metal band and its lead guitarist whose music draws inspiration from his immediate material environment: his home village with its old buildings, waterfalls, surrounding forests and fields. All these put him 'in the mood', make him feel that there is 'something in the air' and inspire his compositions and performances. Even other musicians, producers, record managers, volunteers and audiences experience this 'mood' and this 'something'.

Kirsti Mathiesen Hjemdahl and Jonas Frykman, ethnologists, write about 'Innovation and Embodiment in a Small Town Hotel'. They locate their research in the Norwegian coastal town Lillesand and discuss how a female entrepreneur runs a successful hotel. For several years, the proprietor has been an active member of a cluster, which works to develop the tourism and culture industry. She has developed an intuitive 'sense' for what the customers want, how to choose between different cultural activities and how to communicate this to the staff. The researchers explain her success with the aid of affect theory.

In her chapter, 'The Performative Museum', Sarah Holst Kjær, ethnologist, pursues the question, can applied research contribute to theoretical advances in affect studies? She describes how two groups of visitors reacted to the storm-swept lighthouse museum of Lindesnes in southernmost Norway. The place spurred utterly different reactions: the European pensioners felt exhilarated at being exposed to the elements, whereas the Chinese young adults shivered and longed for protected sites. Her interviews and observations showed that the groups had different expectations and they experienced the place in accordance with different cultural organisation of the senses, affects and emotions.

The last chapter, 'Companion Pieces Written Through a Drift' gives a surprise even to readers familiar with thick description. One has to ask

if this is ethnography or pure literature. Lesley Stern, professor emerita of visual arts, and Kathleen Stewart, anthropologist, experiment with ethnographic writing and non-representational theory. They take the readers to a car-journey from Austin to Marfa in Texas in which affective relations to places and objects are central. By writing about their experiences along the way, they test the limits set by academic traditions and scholarly expectations. For me, in a scholarly book, one chapter like this is enough.

The ways of approaching affects in this book are predominantly ethnographic. It is the practices of the people who use the objects or who are inspired by environments that the authors observe, and it is the people who tell in interview situations how they understand their practices and experiences. By exploring things in the context of closely observed situated practices, the authors have gained insights that you cannot get from textual or visual sources. Moreover, they show how applied research projects can also contribute to the theoretical advancement of affect studies. To conclude, I quote Jansen, who states that 'we must write in ways that allow our readers, including the people we write about, to talk back to our work on the basis of evidence or experience, or in terms of the coherences of our argument.' (p. 74)

Leena Rossi