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The Cinema of Things: Globalization and the Posthuman Object, by Elizabeth Ezra. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 208 pp.

James Mulvey

Elizabeth Ezra's book expertly charts the gradual reshaping of once-established borders that exist between people and things. As objects have begun to develop a life of their own, people have become "prosthetically engaged with life beyond the human" (1). The moving global mass of communication has muddied the distinction between centre and periphery. Consumers ingest objects unabated, while sexual and racial objectification reduces "others" to objects of gratification, fascination and labour. By exploring how people relate to objects, it becomes clear how technology supplants human agency within a global economy. Consequently, for Ezra, globalisation becomes an ideal space in which to contemplate the fusion of technology and economics. Building on Jacques Derrida's conception of "supplementation" through Bernard Stiegler's notion of "prosthesis", Ezra elucidates how objects, once designed as tools to complete people, have, in earnest, led to a paradoxical sense of deficiency. The human venture, to move beyond the national and onto the global, has exploited the in-built contradiction of the supplementary, which lends itself to the posthuman and the demarcation of any defining line in splitting the virtual from the actual. This book clearly illustrates how cinema is perfectly placed to trace the dehumanisation of the subject through the hyperconsumption of objects, "which begins as the supplementation of people by objects and results in the supplementation of objects by people" (8).

Ezra establishes a dichotomy between French and American cinema. The former is representative of an old imperialism, where the subject is exoticized and objectified, while in Hollywood a new form of imperialism has emerged, whereby the cultural consumption of people, objects and labour exists inside an empire. However, with no outside, it inherits all the problems of previous empires. As a result, Ezra suggests that cinema is best placed to articulate the dehumanization of people through advanced capitalism, whereby objects once designed to aid the existence of people have instead subordinated human existence to the role of objects. The book consists of five chapters and a detailed introduction, which offers a nuanced and articulate description of the area of study. Ezra maps the shifting delineation of definitions to guide the reader through the changing nature of things, objects and stuff. The reader is put through their paces as the author swiftly moves from Bill Brown's Heideggerian thingness, to Jean Baudrillard's functional objects, to Bruno Latour's quasi-objects, through to Maurizia Boscagli's stuff theory. Ezra also points to the emergence of the philosophical movement of object-oriented ontology, with its thesis that nothing is elevated hierarchically, and everything remains equal. Ezra adds that Rosi Braidotti offers a succinct definition of the posthuman as "life beyond the self" (3).

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The first chapter, "Consuming Objects", develops an insightful argument examining hyperconsumption, planned obsolescence and the consequential waste created by this process. Through *Sex and the City 2* (2010), *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *The Help* (2011), the author provides an in-depth analysis of the role contemporary Hollywood plays in all of this. Ezra offers a misgiving she shares with Andrew Cole regarding the autonomy currently gifted to objects in philosophical discourse. This fetishization of objects argues that consumer capitalism is structured around prosthetic supplementation. To unpack this, Ezra considers how the economic market works in tandem with being in the world, or that commodity culture works in conjunction with the Heideggerian idea of readiness-to-hand (15). This confronts the reader with the role surplus plays in maintaining the endless growth of global capitalism. Surplus illustrates the paradoxical relationship between human beings and goods through supplementation. Ezra points to the process of reification, but also the in-built expiration of fashionable commodities. This drives an unquenchable frenzy of choice for the consumer, and the overproduction of consumer goods, while simultaneously maintaining an endless process of circulation of newer goods. This is fostered by a continuous desire to feel complete and to supplement the self through consumption, the perfect you found in the purchasing of the next object of desire. Ezra directs the reader to the hand fashion has in driving consumption through planned obsolescence, and then questions what happens to waste created by hyperconsumption, whether it manifests as human or commodity. On the surface, Ezra illustrates the unsustainability of consumer capitalism but, through close textual analysis, draws attention to a global system harbouring not only the consumption and waste of objects, but also of people. The chapter forces the reader to consider the impact of globalisation on humanity and how people are also consumed and become obsolete, and how the residue of exploitation, sexism, colonialism and racial segregation maintain this system (32).

In Chapter 2, "Exotic Objects", the shifting boundary between people and objects is thoughtfully considered through the concept of exoticism. The discourse of the exotic is observed through the affirmative role cinema played in the dissemination of colonial propaganda. Given the chapter's focus on French cinema, Ezra helpfully defines exoticism as "the objectifying and ultimately dehumanizing representations of non-French cultures" (67). Propelled by the global trade of objects, encounters between France as a colonial empire and other cultures led to the commodification of cultural difference. Ezra examines the role cinema plays in the propagation of the exoticist discourse from two distinct cinematic epochs. This chapter begins in the 1930s, marking the zenith of French colonialist propaganda and culminates in the early 1960s, whereby the Algerian war delineated the end of French colonialism. Ezra builds on Jean Epstein's position of the camera as black body, permitting the viewer to go beyond, to enter and scrutinise an object as a means of understanding. This invasion of the human body emphasises the fetishistic nature of the cinematic image. As Ezra argues, "the human body is a halfway house between humanity and objecthood: stripped of subjectivity, people are reduced to their bodies" (20). The gaze of the camera exoticizes, removes subjectivity, and reduces humanity to a mere body. By way of example, Ezra cites Josephine Baker, the African American/French actor, whose body elucidates the redrawing of the line between person and object. Baker's body is exoticized as an instrument of resistance against American imperialism. Baker's exoticized "*primitive body*" narrates her voyage from immigrant to star on screen (68; emphasis in original). However, her body is commodified, she becomes a global star, and her reified image is commandeered as an act of performance, affirming France's position at the centre of a colonial empire.

The second half of Chapter 2 continues to probe the changing relationship between subject and object, by emphasising the interconnectedness of race-thinking and mass culture

through the lens of cinematic exoticism. Specifically, Ezra considers the function of the primitive mask, arguing that "they represent the cultures and places from whence they come […] and they also suggest a temporal décalage or gap between instances of dehumanizing violence" (79). Masks are both primitive artefacts and consumer goods; as products, they are exotic objects designed for mass consumption. These objects move from the outside to inhabit domestic spaces, making the unfamiliar knowable. Nevertheless, there remains an historical trauma hidden inside the mask. This decorative object hides, in plain sight, the horror of historical, colonial violence, and even though the object has been ascribed a new meaning, there is a residual hangover. Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory is expressed as knots of memory (87), which puncture the surface of the narrative, forcing the viewer to observe the historical violence of objectification. Ezra thoughtfully maintains that once context is removed, exoticism essentially facialises both humans and masks, rendering them interchangeable, further muddying the distinction between subject and object.

Chapter 3, "Part-Objects", centres around censorship, absence and the impact those who go missing during wartime have on society. The chapter focuses on French and American cinema made during the First and Second World Wars, by homing in on how the logic of substitution objectifies people. Ezra lucidly articulates how the process of abstraction creates an exchange value and, when applied to people, disaffirms difference. For Ezra, "abstraction is what allows individuals to be reduced to part-objects" (95). Abstraction creates part-objects, a term coined in the psychoanalytical work of Melanie Klein, whose conception of limited perception reduces the whole to a part. Ezra posits that when people become interchangeable, the logic of substitution is implemented, fostering an environment of sameness. In periods of upheaval, national identities disavow difference by proffering from the illusion of oneness, while fanning the flames of racial hatred. Ezra argues that the logic of substitution also underpins the structure of the fetish (23). Sigmund Freud's symbolic linking of decapitation and castration is evoked and rejected through Charles Bernheimer, who argues that, since Freud, the reader is conditioned to automatically interpret the text through the metaphor of castration. However, the fetish substitutes an absence, a phantasmal red herring denying the actuality of events. For example, in the *Les vampires* (Louis Feuillade, 1915–1916) serial, Ezra argues against a fetishized reading, favouring a direct engagement with the trauma causing the absence. The image of people moving lifelessly along a Fordian-style carousel conjures up the construction of a fetishized group identity, where sameness dehumanises, reducing people to part-objects. In the Marx Brothers film, *The Big Store* (Charles Reisner, 1941), the department store becomes a space for the continual consumption of goods, paralleling the expendable use of people during wartime. The mechanisation of capitalism provides a new aesthetic to illustrate the logic of substitution. Ezra points to the use of comedy during periods of war as a means of expressing the unspeakable. In Henri Bergson's work, laughter occurs when humans take on non-human characteristics, or when a person is automated, becoming a cog in the machine. For Ezra, in Jacques Rancière, slapstick represents the moment of malfunction, or the breaking down of the machine. The machinic production of people renders them interchangeable, thus reducing them to that of part-object, where they become representative of the whole, obliterating difference.

In Chapter 4, "Objects of Desire", attention turns to the role male desire plays in the creation of women on screen and, as a consequence, their objectification. Beginning with Laura Mulvey's concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness", Ezra lays out how the leap from creating a woman on screen, to the shaping of the perfect construction of femininity is alarmingly short. In an industry dominated by men, the deconstruction, reconstruction and creation of women reduces them to tools, specifically designed to supplement male fantasy. The scope of this chapter is

impressive; it spans from early French cinema through to contemporary Hollywood, relaying an overlapping historical arc of misogyny. This is a nuanced and in-depth study, which examines the representation of women in great detail through the objectification of the female body. It offers a full discourse analysis, which critically outlines the portrayal of women as fantasy objects, initially in terms of modernity on a mechanical level, and follows this line of enquiry right through to the digital age. Beginning with Georges Méliès, *Illusions funambulesques* (*Extraordinary Illusions*, 1903), in which a male magician assembles a woman from lifeless body parts. For Ezra, this woman is merely a reproduction, constructed and programmed by a man to behave as a woman, machine-like, and lacking in the autonomy of a real woman. Ezra maps the construction of woman for the reader, and draws on Judith Butler's conception of performance, where gender is constituted through habitual practice, as opposed to being expressed as part of performance. Consequently, for Ezra, gender is prosthetic, and therefore supplementary to one's identity, forcing the reader to consider the structuring of sexual desire as a lack requiring a mode of supplementation. Cinema becomes a space attempting to capture the transience of desire through objects that paradoxically offer to fulfil your needs, but continually fall short, echoing Derrida's logic of the supplement. To unpack virtual desire, Ezra provides an insightful and provocative close textual analysis of two Hollywood films, *S1M0NE* (Andrew Niccol, 2002), and *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2014). S1mone is a virtual simulacrum formulated in binary code and controlled by a man. She is a voiceless, digital substitution made passively subordinate to the ambitions of a director, who renders her an extension of him. In *Her*, the male character falls in love and pursues a relationship with the female voice of an operating system. The voice remains virtual and never manifests corporally, which for Ezra exposes the lack of humanity existent in the post-human era. However, it does suggest how technology has becomes an element in the breaking down of the division between subject and object.

In Chapter 5, "Posthuman Objects", the blurring of the boundaries between human beings and their technologies is set against the landscape of a depleted earth, an alien future and science-fiction film. To analyse the resurgence of contemporary national communities, Ezra builds on Philip Rosen's construction of the three modes of the digital utopia. These are the "practically infinite manipulability of digital images; the convergence among diverse image media, and interactivity" (163). Rosen conveniently aligns these elements with the established branches of the existing film industry, manipulability with production, convergence with distribution and interactivity with exhibition (163). Ezra coherently harvests multiple examples from James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) to iterate Rosen's model. Most disturbing is the interaction between the viewer and the Na'Vi, the local inhabitants of the fictional planet Pandora, who have been graced with human characteristics, but ultimately are objectified for their commercial worth. In this chapter, Ezra builds on the solidity of the previous chapters to explore the blurred division between people and their manufactured technologies (27). The socially and digitally engineered Americanised imaginary becomes a substitution with which to examine a nostalgically constructed era which never really existed. Ezra reminds the reader of the worth of Gilles Deleuze's concept of becoming other through the transplantation of ideas moving between the actual and the virtual, reinterpreting the social milieu of the actual in a coded virtuality. The film's title, *Avatar*, alerts the viewer to the creation of an alternate virtual identity, one designed in the actual but played out in the virtual, further fogging the clarity of essential differences existing between the spaces. The created simulacrum of Pandora, along with Benedict Anderson's allegorically imagined communities, provides Ezra with the tools to examine the relationship between people as virtual avatars and other life forms. For Ezra, the virtual extension of self provides a means for exploring the prosthetic supplementation of humanity through its relationship with technology muddying the divide between subject and

object. What Ezra brilliantly helps the reader realise is how cinematically imagined worlds provide the perfect space to engage with the Stieglerian perspective of the interrelation between technology and people, and the formation of the posthuman object.

Elizabeth Ezra's *The Cinema of Things: Globalization and the Posthuman Object* is a noteworthy addition to a topical field, encouraging the reader to rethink the philosophical norms of established thought concerning the relationship between subject and object. The book is boldly imaginative, with Ezra bringing a depth of contemporary and historical cinematic knowledge to tease out the shifting tension between humans and things. The text helps the reader to think through how cinema provides a space to deconstruct the interaction of people and otherness, both in a globalised and a simulated future world. While Ezra is to be commended for her use of very accessible filmic examples, the work could perhaps benefit from an engagement with experimental cinema, although, needless to say, the parameters of the argument must be drawn at some point. Ezra puts it best when she states: "As watching films, even bad ones, extends our vision of the world, what we see (and hear) courses through us, globalizing our consciousness" (182). Ezra plugs into the power of cinema as a means of expression, in which the cinematic machine supplants the viewer, filling in the empirical gaps by tapping into a global awareness.

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