*The Mezzanine,* Baldly Encountered

“Le sujet naît de l’objet.” Bill Brown opens his essay on Thing Theory with this quote from Michel Serres, which translated, is taken to mean simultaneously: “The subject creates the object” and “the object creates the subject.” In other words, he seeks to undo the historical binaries of Cartesian dualism, which states that humans impose meaning upon the objective world around them. Instead, Brown makes the claim that humans create the world, *and* the world creates humans. The pivotal question then becomes: *how* do we encounter the world, and how does it encounter us? Thing Theory in part describes this object-subject relationship. A ‘thing’ is part of the process by which we come to encounter and understand objects in our world, and how we award them both personal and societal meaning. In Nicholson Baker’s novel *The Mezzanine,* narrator Howie exemplifies this relationship between objects and the people who encounter them. The novel orbits around Howie’s examination of objects; they have become instrumental in shaping his identity as he matures. His examinations often lie outside objects’ practical uses, as he looks *at* them in their physical form, and *through* them, towards the heart of their essence. Bill Brown’s three main aspects of Thing Theory – materiality, liminality, and excess – can be used to examine Howie’s relationship with objects throughout the novel.

Brown’s first aspect of Thing Theory, materiality, addresses objects in their physical forms. This construct suggests that “we begin to encounter the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls…” (Brown 4). When objects stop working, our relationship with them is altered. For Howie, a primary example of this conundrum is his shoelaces. He describes the breakage of his left lace, just one day after the one on the right: “… I pulled the left shoelace tight, and *bingo*, it broke. The curve of incredulousness and resignation I rode out at that moment was a kind caused in life by a certain class of events, disruptions of physical routines…” (Baker 13). As suggested by this quote, it is the breakage of these laces that prompts Howie’s meditation on shoelaces as objects. This quote leads into an extended contemplation of shoelaces that spans not only the ensuing chapter, but recurs throughout the novel as well. When his shoelaces no longer serve the function they are supposed to, Howie is prompted to consider their ‘thingness,’ as Brown suggests: the laces as physical objects with related characteristics, and as metaphysical symbols of his maturation, as he reflects back on their role in his life from childhood to present adulthood. Howie is influenced by his relationship with shoelaces over time. In pondering his laces’ physicality and how it could be that they broke at nearly (but not quite) the same time, he recounts “… the first *three* major advances in my life… have to do with shoe-tying” (Baker 16-17). In reflecting on his newly altered relationship with his shoelaces, Howie also reflects on the way that objects have shaped his identity as he has grown. The way Howie ponders the so-called ‘class of events’ that includes the breakage of his shoelaces suggests he has some level of awareness of the circumstances of materiality. He understands that the breakage prompts a unique awareness of such objects and their functionality. Howie proceeds to list a multitude of circumstances that prompt similar awareness, such as the emptying of a roll of Scotch tape, or the attempted use of a stapler that is out of staples (Baker 13-14). These occurrences alter both the relationship between the object and the subject who intends to use it, and the status of the objects themselves. Such circumstances prompt the consideration: is an object still the same ‘thing’ if it can no longer perform its intended function? To tie in the related thought experiment of Theseus’ ship: if along his voyages, hero Theseus has to replace every part of his ship in turn, does he return to port on the same ship he departed on if none of the same materials remain? To contemplate this, we now turn to Brown’s second aspect of Thing Theory.

Liminality is the second notion of thingness: the place between the nameable and unnameable, the way some things elude meaningful categorization. Bill Brown summarizes this as: “On the one hand then, the thing baldly encountered. On the other, some thing not quite apprehended” (Brown 5). In other words, objects are imbued with the ‘magic of presence.’ They exist as what they are: physically, plainly, baldly. Simultaneously, objects possess a ‘magic’ that transcends them to ‘thingness’ – an immaterial characteristic that defines them, but cannot be explained. An example of liminality within *The Mezzanine* is in Howie’s analysis of brain cells. In describing his eighth ‘advance,’ or major discovery in his life up until that point, Howie first examines brain cells in a material manner: “…the weak ones fizzle out and the gaps they leave as they are reabsorbed stimulate the growth buds of dendrites…” (Baker 23). This quote shows the physical nature of brain cells as objects, and how their structures, grow, change, and die. It also shows how the physicality of objects has shaped Howie, since he considers this pondering one of his critical life ‘advances.’ As Howie’s account ensues, however, he considers brain cells more abstractly, in terms of the use they provide and the indefinable qualities that make them what they are: “Individual ideas are injured along with the links over which they travel… When they molder or sustain damage, they regenerate more as a part of the self, and less as a part of an external system” (Baker 24). As Howie examines the functional intricacies of brain cells, he touches on their abstractness. Brain cells are physical objects and yet they melt into the identity of their bearer, their physicality invisible, removed. Like ideas (the epitome of abstractness), they become ‘part of the self’ rather than ‘part of an external system.’ Brain cells possess a uniqueness about them that distinguishes them as uniquely ‘brain cells,’ no other thing. Howie’s attempts to understand brain cells as objects leads him to comprehend their liminality, the strange space that all objects inhabit between the physical and metaphysical. In their ‘thingness,’ objects often occupy a domain outside of that which is easily categorized. This indefinable capacity is also critical to Brown’s third and final aspect of Thing Theory.

Excess is the potential of objects to be greater than themselves. It describes the transformation of objects from mundane and everyday to something grander: the significance they are ascribed in association with a particular person, place, or time. This external capacity exists outside of the object’s material capacity, yet defines it just as utterly. The person who assigns it this value transforms the object; the object shapes that person in turn. It is hard to pinpoint a specific instance of excess in the novel because so much of Howie’s life is defined by the excessive significance he ascribes to everyday objects. In fact, he expounds for an entire page on ‘systems of local transport’ that entranced him as a child: escalators, as well as “…airport luggage-handling systems… supermarket checkout conveyor belts… supermarket roller coasters… milk bottling machines…” and so on (Baker 35). Though all of these objects have their own material functions and qualities, their significance to Howie lie in the nostalgia they provoke. They become idols in his mind: revered items symbolic of his childhood that he has clung to as he matured. This quality of excess lies outside of the objects’ material composition, yet defines these ‘things’ in Howie’s mind just as distinctly as what they are made out of. In fact, Howie’s fondness for nostalgia and infinite wonder becomes one of his defining characteristics as the novel progresses. “I will try not to glide on the reminiscential tone, as if only children had the capacity for wonderment at this great contrivance” Howie states (Baker 40). Though he refers specifically to escalators here, this quote connotes Howie’s generalized mindset regarding his delight in everyday objects. Howie’s wonder and reminiscence instill excess in the majority of objects he encounters and ruminates on.

Bill Brown’s Thing Theory depicts the reciprocal relationship between Howie and his objects as he examines their material and immaterial properties and their role in his life. Howie exemplifies the concept of objects shaping their subjects. Within this novel, his identity is defined through his experience with objects around him; the novel hinges around his obsession with the objects that have shaped his past and present. Howie’s way of encountering the world is through his objects. Though he imposes his own interpretation and meaning on the objects around him, they significantly shape his identity as well.

Author’s Note: Should I include more than one object-example in each paragraph / section? For instance, the segment about unintended behaviors arising from objects (straw wrappers, shaking the sugar, etc.) would be great in the liminality section, but I didn’t want to get to excessive in my explanations and examples…

Works Cited

Baker, Nicholson. *The Mezzanine*. Vintage Contemporaries, 1990.

Brown, Bill. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–22. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1344258.

*The Mezzanine* Essay Draft

* Introduction
  + Thing Theory – Bill Brown – open with “Le sujet naît de l’objet.” – Michel Serres – translation: The subject creates the object, the object creates the subject.
    - Humans create the world and the world creates humans
      * This counteracts the previous Cartesian idea that humans impose meaning on the world, and the objective world is secondary
    - How do we encounter the world around us and how does it encounter us?
    - A ‘thing’ is part of the process by which we come to encounter and understand objects, and how we award them both personal and societal meaning
  + In *The Mezzanine,* narrator Howie exemplifies this object-subject relationship between things and the people who encounter them
    - Objects have become instrumental to Howie as he matures in shaping his identity
    - He looks at *and* through objects
    - His examinations often lie outside objects’ practical uses
    - Bill Brown’s three main aspects of Thing Theory (materiality, liminality, and excess) can be used to examine Howie’s relationship with objects throughout the novel
* Materiality
  + We confront the materiality and ‘thingness’ of objects when they stop working as they’re supposed to – our object-subject relationship is altered
  + Shoelaces
  + Is an object still an object when it can no longer perform its function? Use the magic of presence, Theseus’s ship as a tie-in to…
* Liminality
  + The place between the nameable and unnameable, how some things elude meaningful categorization
  + The thing baldly encountered vs. the thing not quite comprehended
  + Brain cells
* Excess
  + The transformation from mundane, everyday objects to something greater – the idea that all objects have the potential to be greater than themselves
  + People are transformed just as these objects are
  + Signatures
* Conclusion