*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. Howie latches onto objects as constants in a world full of change, but must ultimately confront the fact that the objects around him are changing as much as he is as he grows and matures. Bill Brown’s three main aspects of Thing Theory – materiality, liminality, and excess – can be used to examine Howie’s relationship with objects, specifically the mezzanine’s escalator, 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. Though the escalator to the mezzanine never completely stops working within the novel, there are several instances that cause Howie to contemplate its ‘thingness.’ Howie first describes the material nature of the escalator after observing a maintenance worker cleaning its mechanisms: “This guy probably knew every landmark of that rubber handrail as it circled around – the chip in it where it looked as if someone had tried vandalizing it with a knife, and the section where it warped outward, and the fusion scar where the two ends had been spliced together to form a loop” (Baker 63). The need for cleaning places the escalator in an imperfect state that must be remedied. In watching its cleaning, Howie notices its status as a material object, a stark, physical presence in his life, suddenly visible and distinct from the use it provides, as evidenced by his detailed descriptions of the escalator’s minutiae. He even references his own materiality here, purposefully taking the handrail that had *not* just been polished, not wishing to “(heighten) the always nearby sense of futility of building maintenance” (Baker 63-64). Howie’s encounter with the escalator highlights how he affects the objects around him – and how they have affected him in turn. Howie is then prompted to consider previous times in his life when he has noted an escalator’s materiality, such as in his youth after his mother doubted their safety: “And escalators *are* safe: their safety the result (I now believe) of a brilliant decision to groove the surfaces of the stairway so that they mesh perfectly with the teeth of the metal comblike plates at the top and bottom, making it impossible for stray objects, such as coins and shoelace-ends, to get caught in the gap between the moving steps and the fixed floor” (Baker 65). The attention to the detailed construction of the escalator here demonstrates Howie’s awareness and appreciation of their physical form Not only does this observation reference another prominent object of materiality within the novel, Howie’s broken shoelaces, it also shows how Howie’s experience with the escalator’s material nature forges connections between his past and present. As an object that appears within multiple stages of his life, the escalator becomes symbolic of Howie’s maturation. Just as Howie becomes aware of the escalator’s material state and flaws, so too do readers encounter Howie’s growth as he journeys via escalator towards the mezzanine. Howie’s obsession with his escalator ride indicates the significance of the current transitional stage of his life as he navigates his own past, present, and identity. The importance of the escalator thus exists not only in its material form. 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.’ For instance: a chair is easy to identify as a material object. Yet many different chairs, made from many different materials, can still be identified as ‘chair,’ through some intangible quality, a ‘chair-ness’ about them. Objects 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. The escalator takes on this quality of ‘thingness’ in its status as a symbol within Howie’s life. Howie contemplates many escalators throughout the novel: the one leading to the mezzanine, but also escalators in his local childhood department store, as well as escalators as an abstract ‘thing.’ As Howie contemplates escalators, their physicality becomes invisible in the face of their liminality. He, the subject, creates the conceptual object of escalators, crafting them into a sort of comfort object – he even states that one of his favorite things about them is that they mostly have not changed over time. “Nothing has been lost,” he declares (Baker 41). Howie clings to the concept of escalators as a material constant throughout time. But in his desire for constancy, he overlooks that escalators themselves are a tool of transition – both physically and metaphorically. Their cyclical steps circle inevitably onward, just like Howie’s steady march towards adulthood. An example of how escalators fuel transition lies in how Howie’s escalator habits change over time. “A year of riding the escalator to work changed me,” Howie asserts as he details how he has shifted from walking up the escalator to standing still and ‘gliding’ (Baker 101). As Howie matures through working at his first job and learning to engage the world as an adult, his relationship with objects such as the escalator changes as well. The escalator thus can be seen as liminal, both a physical object and a representation of the present transitional period in Howie’s life. This indefinable capacity of ‘thingness,’ both material and immaterial, 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. The footnotes Baker employs so frequently throughout the novel are evidence of this, as footnotes are comprised entirely of excessive thoughts that don’t fit within a text’s main body. Another example is how Howie expounds for an entire page on ‘systems of local transport’ that entranced him as a child: escalators of course, 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, and the wonder they instill. Howie’s objects become idols in his mind: revered items symbolic of his childhood that he has clung to as he matured. Yet in his capacity for wonder, Howie encounters the same objects differently each time, bestowing them with a renewable state of newness as he marvels and reminisces again and again. In fact, Howie’s fondness for nostalgia and infinite wonder becomes one of his defining characteristics as the novel progresses. “You’re on a moving stairway. *Feel* your own effortful, bobbing steps melt into the inexhaustible meliorism of the escalator…” Howie states (Baker 101). Though he exclaims over specifically to escalators here, this quote connotes Howie’s general delighted mindset regarding objects, instilling them with excess. Baker’s entire novel is essentially comprised of the excess accompanying Howie’s escalator ride as Howie associates memories, habits, and realizations with this object. The culmination of this excess is in the novel’s closing chapter. As Howie finally disembarks from the office escalator onto the mezzanine, his transition appears complete. Not only has the escalator ride come to a close, but so has the novel, and with it, Howie’s interactions with his objects, and his development as a character. The escalator becomes a “vehicle of this memoir,” as Howie describes (Baker 37). Just as the escalator carries Howie physically from the ground floor to the mezzanine, the course of this novel carries Howie from his childhood to his adulthood.

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 escalator in particular shapes Howie in all its dimensions of thingness. The novel hinges around Howie’s self-awareness about his own maturation; the escalator becomes his guide as he transitions both figuratively and literally. 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.

Works Cited

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