

Materializing Culture – Culturizing Material. On the Status, Responsibilities and Function of Cultural Property Repositories within the Framework of a “Transformative Scholarship”

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1. Introduction¹

Certain theoretical streams in the cultural and social sciences that are occasionally subsumed under the term “New Materialism”² (see Witzgall), as well as recent social, political, cultural and media technology developments require a theoretical and research-political repositioning of academic object repositories. For it is obvious that under the influence of these multi-layered, partly interwoven process-

es, the status, responsibilities, as well as the function and spheres of activity of these object or cultural property repositories with research commitment (on the term see section 2 below) are currently undergoing long-lasting change.

For the respective institutions, these changes not only result in complex challenges regarding contents and structure, but also present extraordinary opportunities for the fulfillment of their academic, social and political responsibilities.

The appropriate handling of these challenges and opportunities can substantially contribute to the sharpening of the academic and social profile of these institutions and increase their visibility on both a national and international level.

In this context, the concept of a “transformative scholarship” (“transformative Wissenschaft”) that serves “as a platform for the oriented integration of knowledge from different knowledge inventories in a society” and as a “catalyzer for processes of social change” (Schneidewind and Singer-Brodowski 69) may be useful.

Object repositories with research orientation may become the protagonists of such a “transformative scholarship” if they exploit their potential for “transdisciplinary research” (Schneidewind and Singer-Brodowski 42 and passim)—for example, in the field of cultural property protection—better than they have done in the past.

The present contribution shall set benchmarks for the theoretical and research-political repositioning of object or cultural property repositories with research commitment, as well as for future discussions on this topic.³

2. Object Repositories – Cultural Property Repositories

Before such a repositioning can take place, the question needs to be addressed which characteristic features are shared among institutions such as archives, libraries, museums or academic collections whose object inventories fall within the scope of cultural and social sciences, and how these features can—irrespective of the

material, formal, cultural, chronological and geographical disparity of their objects—be consolidated under a concise and theoretically founded term.

For only by defining shared characteristics will the shared role the respective institutions may have in science, culture, politics and society become obvious.

A helpful theoretical perspective is offered by the approach of *'artifact biography'* which stems from archaeologically influenced research into material culture (see, for example, Blinkhorn and Cumberpatch; Gosden and Marshall; Mytum; Shanks). This approach successively documents the different socio-practical contextualisations of an object, without distinguishing between its 'original' (that is 'primary') and 'hybrid' (that is 'secondary') 'participations' in social practices and thereby academically privileging and hierarchically ranking these various socio-practical 'scenarios.' According to this interpretation, artifact biographies are to be understood as "praxeographies" (Hilgert, "Text-Anthropologie" 115).

The theoretical and practical advantage of this view is that it does not favor any of the various socio-practical contextualisations of an object, an approach that diversifies the object-oriented research theoretically, methodically and with regard to contents.

For according to this approach, successive 'recontextualisations' of an object—especially in the context of contemporary academic, museal or digital practices—may become the subject of object-oriented research in the same way as the production of this object and its 'first participation' in social practices, a participation often privileged in research without obvious reason.

A relativistic perspective on objects and their consecutive 'participations' in social practices is furthermore offered by the concept of *multiperspectivity* that, generally speaking, describes the phenomenon of an attribution of varying meanings to objects depending on "systems of collective knowledge (including know-how and motivational knowledge), as well as subjective attributions of meaning conforming to those" (Reckwitz, *Transformation* 565).

Thus, in practical terms, the term "multiperspectivity" refers to the fact that the meaning and function of an object are always multiple and that 'our view on things' is not necessarily identical with that of other people.

An object showcased in a museum, for example, that in this particular context 'only' represents a certain object category within a scientific taxonomy can, at the same

time, be the icon of national pride in the place of its origin or a powerful cult object in the eyes of a religious community.

Thus, in principle, 'object identities' are variable and unstable, as they originate as a result of dynamic processes of subjective attributions of meaning and, accordingly, are subject to constant change. The appropriate treatment of human remains in museums and academic collections, a question that is controversially debated at present, is only one of many illustrative examples for this fact.

The assumption of entirely constructed and thus variable 'identities' of an object entails that inventories of archives, libraries, museums or academic collections can no longer be classified and described—at least not for the purpose of their cultural-theoretical conceptualisation—using, for example, material, formal, typological, cultural, chronological or geographical criteria. Rather, they have to be understood in general as theoretically and socio-practically indeterminate ensembles of objects that only become 'defined object collections' by their socio-cultural conceptualisations (e.g., "archive," "library," "museum") or the social practices they are exposed to (e.g., collecting, arranging, classifying, preserving, presenting), respectively.

If one assumes that the most prominent characteristics of institutions like archives,

libraries, museums and academic collections are their inventories of material and digital objects, overseen and curated, as well as the research conducted on them, one may describe these indeterminate ensembles of objects in theoretical and socio-practical terms as research-oriented *object repositories*.

“Repository” thereby designates any anthropogenic ‘conglomerate’ or cluster of objects in a particular arrangement or spatial context, whereas the term “object” refers likewise to inscribed and uninscribed, marked and unmarked, material and digital artefacts, as well as natural things. Thereby, the term “object repository” also offers the greatest ‘flexibility’ for its epistemological, theoretical and methodological operationalization, such as in the context of object-oriented research, for example.

Furthermore, if one applies a political and social perspective on object repositories, one can say that they are *cultural property repositories*.

If nothing else, what is made clear by choosing this term is that the competences of the respective institutions lie particularly in the multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary field of cultural property research and that, therefore, these institutions have a special responsibility in protecting cultural property (see below

4.), an area of engagement increasingly becoming more relevant both socially and politically.

3. The Academic, Political and Media Technology Setting

3.1. “Materializing Culture,” *Culturizing Material, and Virtualizing Material Culture*

The academic, political and media technology frameworks within which object or cultural artifact repositories can act have been changing rapidly in recent years.

Status, responsibilities, as well as function and spheres of activity of archives, libraries, museums and academic collections with research mandates in the humanities or social sciences are presently influenced by three very dynamic processes that are located at the interface between research, society, politics, culture and technology, and that are extraordinarily multi-faceted. They can be characterized as “*materializing culture*” (Reckwitz, “Materialisierung”), *culturizing material* and *virtualizing material culture*.⁴

According to Andreas Reckwitz, “*materializing culture*” may be understood as a “fundamental reconfiguration of the perspective of cultural theories and cultural studies” by those theories that are often simplifyingly subsumed under terms like *cultural turn*, *practice turn* and *material turn*.

According to Reckwitz, “theories on media technologies, artifacts, space and emotion...” open up “new, additional empirical fields of analysis for recent cultural sciences” which, however, all contain a “more fundamental claim.”

This fundamental claim consists in “pointing to the fact that the socio-cultural world has ‘always’ been structured by media technologies, by artifact constellations, by spatial arrangements, as well as by affectivity and affectation, only thereby receiving its form” (20).

More than two decades after Bruno Latour vehemently argued for the inclusion of the “hidden” and “despised” masses of things (“non-humans”) into sociological analysis, objects as material participants in social practices regulated through meaning are increasingly becoming the focus of research strategies in the humanities and social sciences (see also Witzgall).

For cultural studies, the basically interdisciplinary field of material analysis acts as a bridge to questions and methods in disciplines such as sociology, natural science and information technology (for example Hilgert, “Artefaktanalysen”).

The term *culturizing material* is supposed to designate a thematic tendency that currently may be observed in different social, political and cultural spheres of activity.

Culturizing material manifests itself in the phenomenon that objects increasingly become the subject of practices and discourses located outside the fields of science and research and by now have attracted remarkable interest, a “new sensibility” (Coole), within the social, political and cultural spheres.

This involves three overarching complexes of problems that all belong to transdisciplinary cultural property research (see below 4.) and thus are also relevant for future measures in the field of cultural property protection:

1. the *provenance* and *appertinence* of objects;
2. the principal *multiperspectivity* of objects, depending on the individual or collective attributions of meaning (see above 2.);
3. the ‘translation’ of objects in situations of variable, transcultural reception.

Here, the term “provenance” does not only refer to the problem—currently under intense discussion—of cultural property unlawfully seized from its original owners during the Nazi Era, but, more generally, to the legal, political and cultural circumstances under which objects have arrived at their present location, to their legal status, and to the conditions

under which they could or should remain where they currently are.

In this context, one primarily thinks of cultural property of particular national or cultural significance, human remains, or archaeological objects for which no documentation is available regarding their circumstances of discovery or acquisition.

It remains unclear at present how the process of “culturizing material” in society, politics and culture is related to the tendency of “materializing culture” in cultural and social sciences as diagnosed by Reckwitz.

There are, however, far reaching implications, as postulated by Diana Coole, who assumes “that the new materialism offers a new ontological world of imagination, possibilities for a new sensibility, and practical guidance for the initiation of a critical social theory that is adequate for the 21st millennium” (Coole 46).

Finally, deriving from the multiperspectivity of objects (see above 2.) is the problem of ‘translation’ the objective of which is to achieve this multiperspectivity in the documentation, research and presentation of objects.

Relevant keywords in this context are the central principles of object presentation, “inclusion” and “accessibility,” the latter of which describes not only unlimited physi-

cal access, but also comprehensive linguistic and cultural accessibility.

Finally, parallel to “materializing culture” within academic institutions and “culturizing material” in the spheres of society, politics and culture, there are the processes often described as “digital revolution” or “digital transformation” and the possibilities generated through them for the digital documentation, representation and modelling of objects. They lead to a *dematerialization* of objects.

Very soon, this process of *virtualizing material culture* will not only cause a paradigm shift in object-oriented humanities and cultural studies research, but will also require a strategic repositioning of object repositories committed to research.

For only object or cultural property repositories can—by ways of their all-embracing object competence—accompany curatorially, consolidate scientifically, ground theoretically and guide practically this virtualization of material culture.

3.2. *Institutional Consequences*

In all likelihood, the three processes described above will permanently change the status, responsibilities and function of object repositories committed to research in the humanities or social sciences.

It can already be noted today that the tendency to materialize culture has signifi-

cantly enhanced the epistemological and political status of these institutions: Research questions and designs in the humanities are converging with the characteristic portfolio of topics and problems of object repositories committed to research. The artifacts that are curated by these institutions turn out to be indispensable evidence for research, especially for third-party-funded projects that are inquiring into different material cultures. All of a sudden, analytical skills in relation to objects that have long been dismissed as “ancillary sciences” have become key research competencies.

Institutions previously regarded as academic service facilities have become highly sought-after research partners on equal par whose unique features are the object inventories in their charge.

Obvious indications for this development and the political reevaluation of researching object repositories in Germany are, for example, joint third-party-funded interdisciplinary projects in the field of *material culture* research,⁵ thematically relevant lines of funding by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (Federal Ministry of Education and Research; BMBF),⁶ the “Empfehlungen zu den wissenschaftlichen Sammlungen als Forschungsinfrastrukturen” (Recommendations for Academic Collections as Research Infra-

structures) of the Wissenschaftsrat (Academic Research Council) (2011), or the establishment of the BMBF's joint project “Marbach - Weimar - Wolfenbüttel” (since 2014), within which the “Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach” (German Literature Archive Marbach), the “Klassik Stiftung Weimar” (Weimar Classics Foundation) and the “Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel” (Herzog August Library Wolfenbüttel) want to link their collection-based research and establish joint research infrastructures, especially in the field of *Digital Humanities*.⁷

“Culturizing material” above all entails new and extensive social and political responsibilities for archives, libraries and museums.

Dealing appropriately with the challenges of the provenance, multiperspectivity and ‘translation’ of objects within the framework of transdisciplinary research on cultural property, as well as the resulting obligations for care and due diligence, open up various new fields of research and action for object repositories.

They can also render these institutions leaders in the cultural-political discourse on the general autonomy and equality as well as the mutual accountability of all involved dialogue partners. Internationalization and transculturation of object-oriented research in the humanities and in

social sciences can thereby develop in relation to the pertinent institutions’ aspiration to communicate the multiperspectivity of objects and the variability of “object identities,” to a broad public in a socially inclusive and culturally accessible way.

Virtualizing material culture—that is, the ‘dematerialization of objects’ by means of representation through digital media—offers possibilities and perspectives for such a broadly defined mediation that are only in their infancy at present.

Individualized mobile applications in museums that offer subtly nuanced and flexible representation options, digital artifacts that enable object-oriented research independent of the original, or virtual reconstructions of lost or destroyed coherent groups of artifacts will significantly increase the visibility and operating range of object repositories as institutions of research, culture and education on a national and international level.

In particular, the three-dimensional (3D) digital documentation of cultural property offers enormous potential compared to traditional 2D methods of documentation. Amongst other things, this potential accrues from the almost endless availability of the significantly more flexible and detailed 3D models, from their potential in the areas of cultural property documentation, fundamental research, and exhibition

design, as well as from the option to physically reproduce digital models by rapid prototyping procedures (for example, 3D-printing).

Finally, advances in digital 3D and automation techniques make commercially viable the serial capture of large numbers of cultural artifacts.

However, in all the fields mentioned above there remain academic, technological and legal challenges to which the object repositories with research commitment can contribute sound and demonstrable solutions, thereby guaranteeing the transfer to other, non-academic fields of 3D object digitalization.

3.3 Consequences for Research Policy

“Materializing culture,” culturizing material and virtualizing material culture all create an important frame of reference for repositioning object or cultural property repositories in relation to research policies. This political repositioning must be constituted by those unique features of object repositories that are immediately relevant for research as well as for the transfer of research results in scholarship, society and politics, and that render object repositories significantly different from other institutional actors of the academic system⁸ (especially universities and non-university research institutions).

Among these unique features are:

1. the object collections curated by object or cultural property repositories;
2. the analog and digital data and meta-data inventories that refer to these collections of objects;
3. the research relating to these object and data collections, as well as the pertinent theoretical meta-research;
4. the mediation or the translation of the object and data collections as well as of the research results into the academic and non-academic sphere;
5. the prominent position of many object or cultural property repositories at the interface between research, culture, society and politics.

Under the influence of the processes of “materializing culture,” culturizing material, as well as virtualizing material culture, these unique features enhance the formation and development of specific, high profile skills that all share a characteristic orientation towards objects.

In turn, these specific skills lead to certain social and political responsibilities associated with fields of action for the institutions in question. These characteristic competence and action areas are:

1. Fundamental object-oriented research, as well as the development or provision of object-oriented research

infrastructures. For example,

- digital and non-digital documentation; primary and detailed scholarly evaluation; publication of objects and object groups (in analog and digital versions); reconstruction of previously coherent collections of objects; material and conservation science-based analysis and documentation;
- analysis of objects and object groups under research schemes of the humanities, social and natural sciences, or information technology, also including external object collections;
- classification and publication of comparable external object collections; research projects with regional, chronological or socio-cultural reference to own object collections; archaeological field research; development of analytical methods and documentation and representation tools deriving from natural sciences and information technology, respectively;
- the generation and provision of 2D and 3D object data for flexible scholarly use, for example, in the reconstruction or surface analysis of objects, in museum contexts as well as in the internet of things and services;
- meta-research on theoretical conditions, disciplinary dispositions, methods, processes, standards and solu-

tions in the field of inventory-oriented research as well as digital research of objects (epistemological analysis);

2. Research-based protection of cultural property as well as “object politics”, for example,

- historical, institutional and political contextualization of objects (provenance, appertinence); biographical research on objects (“artifact biographies”); security and so-called dark field research (illicit excavations of archaeological sites, looting, illegal trade in cultural property); research into legal frameworks and (multilateral) processes of mediation;

- meta-research on disciplinary dispositions, methods, processes, standards and solutions in the field of cultural property research;

3. Mediation and translation of objects, as well as cultural education, for example,

- inclusive, accessible, multi-perspective presentation and mediation of objects and object groups (physically, digitally) and pertinent meta-research; research into methods and instruments for the transcultural presentation of objects;

4. Academic and social transformation by means of transdisciplinary research and design of social processes, for example,

- in the fields of cultural property protection as well as the multi-perspective mediation and translation of objects in transcultural spaces of reception (see below 4.).

A primary duty of object or cultural property repositories with research commitment must be to consolidate and further develop these duties and skills by means of innovative, transdisciplinary and trans-institutional research. Thereby archives, libraries, museums and academic collections can answer to their special responsibilities in shaping current social transformation processes.

4. Cultural Property Repositories as Agents of a “Transformative Scholarship”

The aforementioned skills and duties characteristic of object or cultural property repositories are marked by the fact that the underlying research features a transdisciplinary disposition.

It is an essential feature of “transdisciplinary research” that it offers “contributions to the solution of socially relevant problems” (Schneidewind and Singer-Brodowski 42).

Thereby it is necessarily interdisciplinary and links different scholarly disciplines. Moreover, it involves relevant, non-scholarly actors in its research in order to achieve realizable recommen-

dations for actions. ... Transdisciplinary research reacts to the extended role of scholarship in modern times in which it is no longer only a producer of knowledge, but has also increasingly become an advocate and broker of knowledge. Transdisciplinary research catalyzes processes of transformation in society and thereby becomes a ‘transformative scholarship’. (ibid.)

According to Schneidewind and Singer-Brodowski, it is also possible to observe a differentiation of forms of knowledge that are created within the framework of a transdisciplinary research. Besides the classical *system knowledge* (as ‘objective’ knowledge about correlations in and between natural and social systems) there is now also knowledge about transformations, i.e. about the practical reconfigurations that are possible, dependent on the respective actors, and knowledge about desirable (and therefore automatically ranked) futures. (42-43)

Physical and digital object research, cultural property research and research on object politics, as well as research on the multi-perspective mediation and translation of objects in transcultural spaces are research areas that are not only of high relevance for society and offer great potential for social transfer, but which also re-

quire the necessary integration of various non-academic actors (for example, institutions of education and culture, companies, ministries, public authorities, NGOs) and their respective skills and expertise.

Not least because of their prominent position at the interface between research, culture, society and politics, research-oriented object or cultural property repositories are virtually predestined to carry out transdisciplinary research.

For unlike any other group of institutions within the academic system, they are able “to integrate the knowledge of different disciplines and their interdisciplinary connections with actor’s knowledge regarding practical social and political challenges.” Thus, they have the capacity to “create a new balance between disciplinary and interdisciplinary research as well as transdisciplinary integration capacity” (Schneidewind and Singer-Brodowski 47). An excellent example of such a challenge with social and cultural relevance to which object or cultural property repositories—in collaboration with other academic and non-academic actors—can make a significant contribution, is the protection of cultural property.

Because of the multiplicity and diversity of the tasks that result from the protection of cultural property, as well as the academic and practical skills and expertise that are

needed for their implementation, the protection of cultural property is an ideal example of transdisciplinary research.

For transdisciplinary research into cultural property ranges from fundamental object-oriented research (conservation, protection and maintenance, documentation, exploitation, publication) and research on provenance and appertinence to research on the prevention of illicit excavations, looting and the illegal trade in cultural property, as well as to research into the creation of legal frameworks that are optimally adjusted for the protection of cultural property (see for example the report of the German federal government on the protection of cultural property in Germany; Deutscher Bundestag).

Moreover, the transdisciplinary cultural property research should also provide the scientific basis for training programs and mediation models that are adjusted to the needs of all persons that are active in the field of cultural property protection (for example, scholars, museum personnel, staff of customs and law enforcement agencies), as well as decision makers in various executive authorities.

Finally, transdisciplinary cultural property research also strives towards the clarification of epistemological questions, such as the consideration of disciplinary dispositions, methods, processes and standards

in the fields of research on and protection of cultural property, as well as the theoretical reworking of concepts and terms (for example, Falser and Juneja).

Thus, transdisciplinary cultural property research not only provides a contribution to the protection of cultural property, but also catalyzes current processes of social transformation.

In particular, this concerns the social challenges of the mediation and translation of cultural differences, the improvement of bilateral and multilateral relationships on an international level, and the achievement of an international consensus on what “cultural property” and “cultural heritage” of global importance are and how they can be preserved in the long term.

The actors whose commitment is necessary for the accomplishment of these challenges originate from both academic and non-academic social realms, ranging from scholars in universities and non-university institutions, to the staff of ministries and law enforcement agencies, and representatives of the art trade.

Because of their unique features as well as their specific skills and responsibilities (see above, 3.3.), object or cultural property repositories can play a central role in transdisciplinary cultural property research.

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Thus, in the course of their theoretical and political repositioning, they can become pioneers of a “transformative scholarship” that serves as a “stage for the oriented integration of different knowledge inventories in a society” and supports “transformation processes practically, by means of the development of solutions as well as technical and social innovations” (Schneidewind and Singer-Brodowski 69).

This would not only significantly sharpen the academic and institutional profile of the respective organizations on a national and international level, but also lead to an even stronger social integration of cultural property repositories and the scholarly and practical skills maintained by them. But first and foremost, object or cultural property repositories are thus best positioned to face the important socio-political challenges that lie ahead.

Notes

¹ A slightly modified German version of this article is published under the title “Materialisierung des Kulturellen – Kulturoisierung des Materiellen. Zu Status, Verantwortlichkeiten und Funktion von Kulturgutrepositories im Rahmen einer ‘transformativen Wissenschaft’” in Material Text Culture Blog 2014.2 <http://www.materiale-textkulturen.de/mtc_blog/2014_002_Hilgert.pdf>.

² All translations of German quotations are my own.

³ I would like to thank Kristina Heizmann for critically reading the present text and for numerous helpful comments.

⁴ On the related terms “New Materialism” or “Neo-Materialism” see in summary Witzgall.

⁵ For example, the SFB (Sonderforschungsbereich = Collaborative Research Center) 933 “Materiale Textkulturen. Materialität und Präsenz des Geschriebenen in non-typographischen Gesellschaften” (Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies) of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation; DFG) at the University of Heidelberg, since 2011.

⁶ For example, “Sprache der Objekte” (Language of Objects), since 2012.

⁷ A comprehensive compilation of further scientific activities that can be understood as expression of the “materialization of the cultural” is offered by Witzgall 13 n. 1.

⁸ For the definition of the term “scientific system” see Schneidewind and Singer-Brodowski 23.

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