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9/22/19

Object Ecology

Chironian Wood

First I’d like to talk a little about the Hogan’s Chironians again. I wish we could have gotten a look inside Chironians “consumption” (we’ll think more on this word later) habits. We get a little bit of an idea in how they dress, where people wear an eclectic mix of business formal to mad max level brown fatigues. We also get an interesting intersection when some of the Terrans are talking after a shopping spree at the store where everything is free. The Terran Celia ironically remarks that the goods are “priceless” (which they literally are), and this is lost on her friend Mrs. Crayford, who agrees that they must be worth a fortune and that the Chironians have no idea of the “true value” of things (Hogan 130). This idea of possession without price status is something I’d like to relate to the objects in my own life. I unfortunately do not have the same privilege of valuing my objects *completely* outside of their worth as defined by their status and societal value. I would however like to try to think, or start thinking about the objects around me as unweighted by their prices.

Take for example my car, a used 2005 Audi A4 2.0 liter turbo (120,000 miles), lovingly named ”Fast Willie” after Steelers Running back Willie Parker, which to me has three apparent levels of value. The first and least Chironian value is its appearance value. The four rings carry a lot of significance (seemingly) to others around me and myself as a status item. I once got a parking ticket outside my house, and my friend Andrea, who didn’t know it was mine, remarked, “Ah guy’s got an Audi, I’m sure the tickets’ nothing”. What I’m saying is that its value is presupposed by its artifice, and the cultural baggage the car carries. However, the second level of value takes away this artifice. The car was purchased for 4000 dollars (Thanks Philips Tank & Structure!), but the Kelly Blue book value now is anywhere from 900 to *maybe* 2000 dollars. While not anything to sniff at, the market certainly doesn’t hold up its monetary value. It’s got rust spots, the trunk doesn’t work, the brakes squeal, etc. This value is then flipped again when I think about the car’s value to myself (the third valuation). Here it becomes extracted from how it appears or is described, and I deal with it as a *car* (or I try to)*.* As an object for saving time (in its ability to cover large distances quickly) and energy (less walking, biking, etc) its value is tremendous. It projects whatever I can do myself over a much bigger distance, and it allows geography to become a much smaller obstacle to my existence. I could commute to a better job that is farther away, for example. Therefore, as a *car*, abstracted from artifice, the object still has immense value to me.

I’d like to bring this idea of Chironian value, extracted from its status in the market, to the rest of my object ecology. In my current ecology, the objects I’ve surrounded myself with do embody some aspects of this method of valuation. I generally like objects without distractions or widgets. These things are generally erroneous additions, usually constituting a combination of two or more other objects/concepts to upgrade the product. These “upgrades” to me seem only necessary when viewed as things to position the object in a spectrum on a product line (justify its relative cost in this product line) or to contrast it with other similar items in its product category. A good general example is the smart fridge and other “smart” kitchen appliances, but more personally I’ve experienced this in general with my coffee/tea /other caffeinated beverage making devices. I’ve tried or seen quite a few of the high tech “widgeted” coffee makers (with alarms, app ties ins, notifications, recipe “suggesters”), and I always go back to the simpler, if less convenient pour over and Aeropress1 methods. The Aeropress1[[1]](#footnote-1) is an interesting product because its entire design is almost solely centered around the *process* of making a cup of coffee, rather than the collection and distribution of information surrounding this process. My mate Guampa2 is another similar object in my ecology to the coffee maker(s), in that it is another processed focus object. It’s also a very “Chironian” object. In the same way that we see an eclectic mish mash of styles from around Earth on Chiron, the Guampa, an object unique to select places in South America has found its way to some white boy in Pennsylvania. Although I suppose I (and perhaps gen Z all together) was taught by robots (or Algorithms in our case) in a slightly similar way to the Chironians, so it makes sense that object usage would be similar.

I mention these two things together because I wanted to talk about objects that involve processes that match their informational bandwidth output to the brain bandwidth I’m able to input into it. It’s possible that these things are so attractive to me because my attention is able to be totally devoted to them, while also not being overwhelmed with information being output from them. This contrasts directly with the personal computers in my life (phone and laptop). I single these out because both of these computers are multi-purpose (to an extreme degree), high bandwidth, non-inert, and programmable interfaces which can is output more information that I can realistically pay attention to (faster as well). They are multipurpose because I can write this paper, play a game, and pay bills all on the same object. They are high bandwidth because I can do all these things at relatively the same time in a continuous stream. They are non-inert because they can process and give me information even when I am not interacting with the devices (think push notifications) and they are programmable because all of these previous functions *can* (in some circumstances) realistically be modified by *some* user.

One important thing I take away form looking at these things first is the bandwidth mis-match. These objects can output orders of magnitude more information than I can input into it. This seems to make me rendered both incredibly powerful and powerless by the same devices. This fact has made me think about the idea of “mental dieting”. Much like food related “dieting” is prevalent because of the extreme abundance and availability of highly caloric food (as opposed to most of human history where the opposite may have been the case), perhaps “mental dieting” is necessary. The idea is that I would limit my gluttonous devouring of information and content in order to try and live a more “healthy” mental life. So, in the same way it’s good to be hungry sometimes, maybe it is also good to be bored sometimes.

My phone and computer also beg the question, “What objects do I really own?”. Or rather, “What do I have permission/ability to modify?”. My computers are a good place to start, because they represent an intersection between modification and stasis. With my laptop (a Microsoft Surface Book 2) there is some form of extensibility in that I can write and compile my own programs to change the functionality. This is of course extremely limited as core functions of the OS cannot be modified (unlike GNU/linux and others). The hardware, is also almost completely static, and any modifications would damage it, or at least void the warranty. My phone (iphone), is even less extensible than that, as the programs written for it cannot be developed on it (although they *can* be developed). In addition this, I can supposedly edit the information that they take from me and give to the companies that issued the devices, but as we’ve seen, the amount of control over my data and its collection, especially when an internet connection is involved, is shaky at best. And to a certain extent, why would I want to mess with “perfection”? These objects represent a sphere of highly sophisticated objects (along with most other electronics I own, like peripherals, headphones, fit bit, etc) that are carefully developed so as to require almost no maintenance by the end user. Any outside interference, if not directly blocked, is at least heavily discouraged (DRM for example). Modern sculptor Tom Sachs[[2]](#footnote-2) has an interesting insight to this though when he says, “I’ve always wanted to make something as good as an iPhone,[[3]](#footnote-3) and I never could, but Apple could never make anything as shitty as one of my sculptures or movies. And that’s a huge advantage”. Sachs also mentions that his sculpture is, in his view, a kind of “Sypathetic Magic” where imitation or simulation of objects gets you half way there to having it (in the collector/consumers’ view). This is the view I’d like to take towards the adjustment and modification of my environment. Essentially, It seems I would be behooved to modify or build on top of these “perfect” objects in an attempt to actually gain true ownership over them.

1. <https://aeropress.com> (not sponsored!)

   2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mate\_(drink) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 3 See Discussion on sympathetic magic and “shitty” sculpture by Tom Sachs at <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/tom-sachs-van-neistat/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 4 I also wanted to discuss my interaction with Morton’s *Hyper-Objects* and my situation as being surrounded by Baudrillard’s *Simulacra* but I ran out of time and Energy. Perhaps I’ll incorporate those ideas into the final project somehow. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)