

Review of *The Death of Things: Ephemera and the American Novel* by Sarah Wasserman. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 272 pp. ISBN 978-1517909789).

Joining the growing milieu of Benjaminian rag-and-bone men and women, Sarah Wasserman explores in *The Death of Things. Ephemera and the American Novel* the role of ephemera or “disappearing objects” in American postwar fiction. An initial temptation to theoretically align Wasserman’s work with new materialisms and object-oriented philosophies is curbed by the author’s heralding the inevitable demise of thing theory on account of a tendency to “overcorrect,” i.e., to give objects pride of place, risking a humanist lacuna in this objectual fervor. Instead, equipped with the tools of cultural studies, Wasserman rummages in the satchel of psychoanalysis to trace relations between fading objects and grieving subjects. Building on a lesser-known short essay by Sigmund Freud titled “On Transience,” the author claims that ephemerality in fact reinforces the position and relevance of the subject, since “transience [...] is the thing that links human and nonhuman material, not the thing that separates subject and object” (53). Wasserman scrutinizes these fleeting objects to make salient a tendency to focus attention either on their death or on what befalls thereupon, leaving the process of passing unheeded. Itself an allegedly dying genre, the novel, contends Wasserman, is the perfect medium to preserve and portray ephemera and their particularities.

*The Death of Things* is divided into six chapters that address different forms of embodied transience: from a collection of stamps to a bale of cotton, from housekeeping magazines to urban infrastructure like signs or storefronts. The unusual comparative method employed by Wasserman—in some chapters she collates works by two authors, in others varied novels by the same author are contrasted, and in another a work of fiction is studied against a real-life event—compensates an otherwise monotonous driving argument. Indeed, the book’s leitmotif, what Wasserman calls Freud’s transient logic, is solidly made clear in the first

chapter, becoming inevitably redundant as the book unfolds. The smooth transitions with which Wasserman connects the chapters off set an apparent loose connection between the works selected. Furthermore, the author displays an impressive awareness of the relevant theoretical frameworks that best match the novels studied. Thus, Wasserman dexterously moves from Fredric Jameson to discuss utopias, to David Harvey, Mark Davies, and Saskia Sassen when addressing gentrification, or the works of Julia Kristeva and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to propose a queer approach to domestic fiction, only to name some of the most popular scholars referenced.

Within the field of object or thing theory, however, it may be argued that Wasserman’s recorrecting previous scholars’ overcorrection misconstrues the goal of object-oriented theories. In fact, the author acknowledges that the role of objects in the building of more ethical subjects is already present in the works of new materialists and object-oriented theorists when she admits they “do not neglect the subject” (15). Similarly, her claim that these theories leave “little room to the death of things” (8) is not completely accurate. Graham Harman (2018), for one, has elaborated on the emergence, transience, and disappearance (or “death”) of objects. Finally, so far as Wasserman deals with the literary representation of material objects proper, save for a brief mention of Susan Strasser, the book misses the opportunity to engage with Waste Studies (especially in the section dedicated to Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*), arguably the most appropriate field to analyze “an object’s final chapter” (18) as Wasserman puts it, when pointing out that renowned object scholars, from Pierre Bourdieu to Arjun Appadurai, have left said chapter unexplored. Other than this noticeable absence, the book’s introduction offers a succinct but rich overview of both object theory and its application to literary criticism.

Introducing early her expanded notion of ephemera, Wasserman devotes the first chapter to an unexpected object: the world’s fairs present in E.L. Doctorow’s *World’s Fair* (1985) and Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). Discussing previous scholarship on national identities, Wasserman



remarks how “the ephemerality of fairs and their object complicate their implied political allegories” (31). Indeed, fairs expose the paradoxical character of time by offering their downfall as an allegory of the past’s futuristic fantasies being born already dead. Wasserman further derives from the image of the world’s fair a conclusion pertaining to a literary field eager to find the next post-ism when she reminds us that “a fascination with the future often obscures the forms of history and nostalgia that inhere in the new” (65). Consequently, she argues that Doctorow’s and Chabon’s novels promote neither nostalgic longings nor false promises but rather offer an opportunity to better appreciate our already fading present.

Chapter two explores the historical in-betweens opened by counterfactual narratives in the works of Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (2004). The inclusion of real objects in these novels that imagine alternative aftermaths to WWII does more than infuse the text with historical veracity, as the collectibles in Dick’s novel, i.e., counterfeit Americana, help to “expose the fragility of our institutions, our susceptibility to counterfeit and transient object worlds” (76); and some of the pieces in the book of stamps in Roth’s book, for example, symbolize how “white supremacy was (and is) a pervasive ideology in the United States” (99). Whereas the previous chapter evidenced the different scales that ephemera can reach, here the author stresses their temporality, stating that “while the speed of disappearance may produce different affective responses, it does not change the fact that vanished things leave traces, transmit pain, and make meaning” (111). The chapter ends with the insightful suggestion that the novel’s multiple genres might allow for the recording of alternate realities, which is explored in the following chapter.

Wasserman’s claim that “infrastructural change is made visible through discrete objects” (114) is developed in novel readings about Harlem’s gentrification in Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* (1952) and Chester Himes’s *Harlem Cycle* (1957-69). Interestingly, Wasserman claims that the polarization of opinions regarding

gentrification impedes an understanding of infrastructure as standing in between rigid and abstract structures and subjective agency. The author introduces the notion of “infrastructural racism” to signal how “the built environment [is] disproportionately hostile to non-white subjects” (117) and by choosing to study “discrete objects” over “hard infrastructure” Wasserman manages to cast a light on the middle space between total renewal and total loss that better represent the contradictions of black life in the postwar period. Hence, for example, discarded blueprints and random objects strewn on the floor after an eviction “mediate between abstract, external forces [...] and the subject’s interior life” (130), but also register the inherent racism that gentrification aims to conceal.

The fourth chapter begins with a revision of an essay by Thomas Pynchon in response to the Watt riots of 1966. Pynchon, claims Wasserman, uses the debris ensuing the revolt as another symbol of what America’s imperialism cannot efface without leaving a trace. The author is here at her most innovative, vindicating a new reading of Pynchon with less emphasis on the chaotic and ironic character of his early novels *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), suggesting an underlying ethical-political motif hidden in its treatment of history, which Wasserman understands as problematizing Jameson’s contention that the past has disappeared in postmodern times. Against the grain of Pynchon scholarship, which sees the novelist as the quintessential detached postmodern author and a posthumanist *avant la lettre*, Wasserman highlights the fact that “no matter how object-oriented Pynchon’s fictions are, they ultimately tell human-oriented stories [...] about the subjects we have been and can become amidst so many objects” (172).

Wasserman offers another original interpretation in chapter five, where she ventures an effective rereading of Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* (1980) beyond traditional ones that tend to reduce the novel “to an oppositional text whose only goal is to trouble conservative notions of women’s roles and women’s fiction” (179). Focusing on ephemera over the character’s nonconformism, the author highlights how “women themselves seem to become tran-



sient” (33). Furthermore, Wasserman convincingly illuminates a connection between the ephemerality in Emily Dickinson’s poetry and Robinson’s novel. The author claims that via the inclusion of “I Hear a Fly Buzz” in *Housekeeping*, Robinson manages to “rework and regender the Romantic tradition” (197), offering a subject that, counterpointing the “industrious male autonomy lauded by Thoreau or Emerson” (196), acknowledges a shared transience with vanishing objects.

In the last chapter, the author offers a comparative reading of the final part of Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) against a similar event in real life, namely a Marian appearance that occurred in 2005 in Chicago, to show how “literature dramatizes the social energies consolidated by ephemera both in their sudden appearances and in their perpetual disappearance” (201). To delineate the way DeLillo’s “language of loss [...] represents his attempt to express private grief while simultaneously joining in a shared call for political visibility and agency” (203), Wasserman turns to Walter Benjamin’s notion of *Wunschbild* or “wish image,” the present materialization of collective past utopias. The apparition of an image of the Virgin in a tunnel in Chicago, which DeLillo’s literary version would have proleptically portrayed, claims Wasserman, is an example of “perceptual faith,” a “prereflective belief in the perceived world as real and shared” (210) that permits communities to exist, however fleetingly.

Finally, a brief coda addresses the issue of the fate of printed literature, latent throughout the book, and the prospective exchanges between media and literary studies. While this addendum initially reads like an elegy for an object that is actually missing, Wasserman’s goal is to draw attention to the fragile and ephemeral character of the digital media itself. Beyond that, the author offers the case of a *faux* vintage rendition of *The Great Gatsby* in the form of a videogame as an example of how objects, digital or material, “elicit the same sorts of competing desires” (242). These changes of media, claims Wasserman convincingly, do not diminish or transform those desires, but adapt them to new contexts.

A plea to grant postmodern fiction a second life, Sarah Wasserman’s ambitious study successfully manages to posit the novel as the repository of fading objects that symbolize that human urge to blindly hold on to fantasies past and future, while inviting readers to accept and embrace the transience inherent to these reveries so, when the times comes, it will not hurt to let them go.

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