

First, Turnock emphasizes that rail was but one of several technological and institutional changes that produced this remarkable age. However, while he argues that railways may not have been “absolutely essential for Britain’s nineteenth-century growth,” they had a greater impact than other innovations (25). Thus, they had a clear economic-multiplier effect because they employed large numbers of workers, especially skilled ones, and consumed large amounts of coal, iron and steel, and other matériel produced by Britain’s burgeoning industries. Nevertheless, by 1870–1914, the very apogee of its role in national life, rail technology was already demonstrating structural problems of over-investment, declining profits, and prospects of corporate failures (23).

But as argued by others, the greatest effect was on the quality of life of the people with the advent of an efficient transport system that was accessible to the masses. Clearly, the speed and frequency of

rail transport did much to achieve the spatial integration of regionally dispersed populations. It did little, however, to attain social integration: concepts of first, second, and third class travel were a long-standing signifier and reinforcer of putative social differences that underpinned the realpolitik of British social control.

What is argued here is that the railway played an important role in the process of social and economic change that was diagnostic of nineteenth-century Britain. Indeed, for some of us, the material evidence of the railway age lasted well after the Second World War: the smell of steam and the sound of whistles; parlour-like accoutrements of compartments and waiting rooms; signal boxes and station masters’ watches; and the mega-projects of tunnels, bridges, and viaducts. They were all part of the bric-a-brac of railway culture and the iconography of a world replaced by motorways, electronic highways, and inefficient commuter lines.

NOTES

1. Thomas Cottrin Keefer, *The Philosophy of Railroads and other Essays*, ed. Henry Vivian Nelles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1977], 1986); Michael Freeman,

Railways and the Victorian Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Andy Albert den Otter, *The Philosophy of Railways: The Transcontinental Railway Idea in British North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Christopher Andreae, *Lines of Country: An Atlas of Railway and Waterway History in Canada* (Toronto: Boston Mills Press, 1997).

Michael Brian Schiffer with Andrea R. Miller, *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior, and Communication*

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Schiffer, Michael Brian, with Andrea R. Miller. *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior, and Communication*. New York: Routledge, 1999. xiv + 158 pp; biblio., cloth, US\$80, ISBN 0415-20032-6; paper, US\$23.95, ISBN 0-415-20033-4.

Michael Schiffer’s theoretical treatise deals with one main approach to the study of artifacts: he appropriates communication theories — specifically the models of performance — to interpret artifacts. In doing so, two main questions can be raised in terms of his book: how does it fit within the previous scholarship on performance (both general studies and those relating specifically to artifacts)?

and, what insights do communication and performance theories provide generally for the study of material culture?

Writing this review from a folklorist’s background, the importance of these theoretical models is more than obvious. In the 1970s, folklore as a discipline set about redefining itself by stating that research should focus not just on items but on performance. Communication theories borrowed from writers like Ray Birdwhistel and Erving Goffman re-charted the course of the discipline, so that many folklorists argued that the focus of all research should be communication based in performances. An important collection of essays appeared in 1975,

Folklore: Performance and Communication (edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein); the volume heralded the new direction that would ground folkloric research in questions of message, performance context, performer and audience.

Since the 1970s, then, folklorists working on material culture have been using performance and communication theories to interpret objects. Writers explained objects with these models; typical statements included Dell Upton's "Toward a Performance Theory of Vernacular Architecture" (in *Folklore Forum* 12, 1979) and Bernard Herman's "Time and Performance" (in *American Material Culture and Folklife*, edited by Simon J. Bronner, 1985). Indeed, Michael Owen Jones' magisterial study of Kentucky chair makers (*Craftsman of the Cumberlands*, first published in 1975) raised all the questions a student of performance might ask of a series of artifacts. Since the 1970s, then, folklorists working on material culture have drawn widely from performance and communication models, a theoretical approach that continues within folkloristics thirty years later.

Schiffer's book displays little knowledge of the work of folklorists on performance theory, or the performance studies of material culture commonplace within this discipline. His calls for the utilization of this theory may be a new direction for archaeologists, but his book should convince many readers in other disciplines to examine the large body of performance scholarship. Within folkloristics, this approach has already been extensively used to analyse material culture, and forms one of the cornerstones in contemporary theory. Readers might start with the conceptual survey by Deborah Kapchan, "Performance," published in a special "Keywords" issue of *Journal of American Folklore* in 1995.

Schiffer's main point is that he proposes a general theory of social and cultural study based on the artifact (read "item") using communication models. This approach links artifacts with behaviour through communication. What Schiffer's book proposes is, in a sense, one of the key assumptions of the discipline of folklore: that items communicate, and that this happens through a person, to an audience, in a place, at a time. David Buchan, one of folklore's leading ballad scholars, once remarked that those scholars working on oral texts could learn much from researchers studying artifacts. But, in a reciprocal context, researchers working on artifacts no matter what the discipline can learn from those working in the text-centred world of folkloristics.

One of Schiffer's main goals in his study is to point to the centrality of the artifact in day-to-day communication. While communication involves any number of channels using different modes,

Schiffer argues that the material world cannot be separated from these other modes. One of his major audiences, then, is scholars working outside the world of material culture, who may not realize the importance of the artifacts in daily life. Schiffer's book, thus, raises theoretical issues for those working outside of material culture studies. What his communicative approach comes back to again and again is the centrality of items communicating in any performance event. In the 1960s, many disciplines (including archaeology) were lured by the promised land of positivism and the scientific method. But performance approaches made it clear the multiplicity of interpretations possible for each thing, ever changing, dependent on performer and audience. The performance event situates objects centrally in any form of communication.

What does Schiffer's book offer to material culture researchers? Some readers will find Schiffer's volume quite heavy going. This book is a theoretical work, first and foremost; while he does use artifact examples throughout to illustrate his points, it is the theory that is foregrounded. Those who have worked with performance and communication scholarship may find the book less groundbreaking than those for which such approaches are new. For the novice, one might begin with Bernard Herman's *Stolen House* or Henry Glassie's *Art and Life in Bangladesh* for models of how performance can contribute to the understanding of historical or contemporary studies of artifacts. Both books are solid case studies drawing on performance and communication models.

What makes Michael Schiffer's book important to those outside of folkloristics or archaeology is the methodology that places the artifact as central to any understanding of human beings. Other disciplines often pay lip service to the importance of the artifact, but often are merely quantitative rather than qualitative. Studies appear that maintain they are studies of material culture, yet objects play minor roles as evidential sources. Studies of consumerism are the latest example of such trends, often merely enumerating objects, finally being treatises on economic history rather than material culture. Objects must remain central in our investigations.

What is needed is the recognition that the artifact must be foregrounded in order to understand its place in all cultures. Objects are not illustrations; rather, they are complex items of behaviour performed in everyday social exchanges. Schiffer's message is basic: that we cannot and do not exist without things, and until things become a central issue in all cultural research, we will be neglecting an important part of human behaviour.