

## THE CURIOSITY OF THINGS, OBJECTS, AND SUBJECTS IN MARK HADDON'S NOVEL OF INCIDENTS

A CURIOSIDADE DAS COISAS, OBJETOS E SUJEITOS NO ROMANCE DE INCIDENTE DE MARK HADDON

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**ABSTRACT:** I begin with a moment from Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) describing an encounter with things, in the form of an enumeration and a collection of sorts, where bodily, sensory, mental, and imaginative life are fused. Probing the porous boundaries, affinities, and frictions between contemporary subjects and objects, between bodies, special minds, and things, this essay develops novel approaches to notions of materiality, the object world, and embodied experience while also interrogating developments in the area of material culture, object studies, cultural phenomenology, and thing theory. Haddon and Boone insisted on the material basis of all aspects of human existence and finally suggested that the subject can be materially transformed through interacting with objects.

**Keywords:** Haddon; lists; Thing Theory.

**RESUMO:** Começo com um momento de *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003), de Mark Haddon, descrevendo um encontro com as coisas, na forma de uma enumeração e um tipo de coleção, onde vida corporal, sensorial, mental e imaginativa se fundem. Ao sondar as fronteiras porosas, afinidades e fricções entre sujeitos e objetos contemporâneos, entre corpos, mentes especiais e coisas, este ensaio desenvolve novas abordagens para noções de materialidade, do mundo do objeto e da experiência corporificada enquanto também questiona desenvolvimentos na área da cultura material, estudos do objeto, fenomenologia cultural e teoria das coisas. Haddon e Boone (o narrador/protagonista) insistiram na base material de todos os aspectos da existência humana e finalmente concluíram que o sujeito pode ser transformado materialmente por meio da interação com objetos.

**Palavras-chave:** Haddon; listas; Teoria das Coisas.

*I affirm that it is not natural to be what is called "natural" any longer. (SYMONS, 1958, p. 74)*

*Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know. (WILDE, 2006, p. 8)*

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## I Prologue: the poetics of things

I begin with a moment from Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) describing an encounter with things, in the form of an enumeration and a collection of sorts, where bodily, sensory, mental, and imaginative life are fused.

This is what I had in my pockets

1. A Swiss Army knife with 13 attachments including a wire stripper and a saw and a toothpick and tweezers
2. A piece of string
3. A piece of wooden puzzle which looked like this [drawing of the wooden puzzle]
4. 3 pellets of rat food for Toby, my rat
5. £1.47 (this was made up of a £1 coin, a 20p coin, two 10p coins, a 5p coin and a 2p coin)
6. A red paper clip
7. A key for the front door (HADDON, 2003, p. 13)<sup>2</sup>

The adolescent's vitality wanes, the collection of things takes center stage at the desk of a police officer. Adolescent and collection of pocket things exist in a continuum. His bodily and psychic life flows onto the lackluster table so that they (life, table, and things) are permeable to one another as the vividness of the pocket things succumbs to possibly psychological illness. The strangely faded pocket things on the police table may speak of the adolescent's disability and of the arousal of his curiosity brought about by the mental abuses he has suffered from neighbor and "loving" father. The loss of his former aggressive energy and the reawakening of his earlier intense desire to discover who killed Wellington, the dog, with a garden fork, translate into an aesthetic and exotic - almost magical - set of things, objects, and subjects. Such set of things, objects, and subjects become invisibly and indivisibly joined in the constructive body and mind as well as in the recovery or finding of desire. The scene remains so thoroughly permeated by the sensory experience of the material world that Christopher's whole being (mind and body) is determined by it. In what follows, I explore the dynamic modes in which subjects and objects merge, exchange positions, and materially transform one another in a wide range of contexts, scenes, and genres in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*.

Christopher Boone, our hero, who is rather autistic, is fifteen years old. He lives with his father in a confusing and chaotic suburban world filled with things and objects. He is a fan of murder mystery and especially admires the champion of Conan Doyle's classic stories. The novel explores at this level the dynamic modes in which subjects and objects merge and materially transform one another in a wide range of 21<sup>st</sup> - century literary contexts: children's tale, *Bildung*, detective story, disability narrative, journey through the underworld, discovery of the thing lost (a disappeared mother). When Christopher finds his neighbor's dog stabbed to death with a garden fork, he stumbles into a real-life murder mystery complete with unexpected

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<sup>2</sup> I will concentrate solely on this collection/enumeration of things/objects in Christopher's pockets. Like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), whose protagonist/narrator is also an adolescent, Haddon's novel revolves around lists (accumulations, enumerations, collections, series, inventories, registers, files, rolls, tables).

complications, a wide array of things as well as objects and a series of unanswered questions. Christopher decides to write the story of that mystery as a first-person narrative, his very own autobiography.

I give particular attention to instances in which Christopher's body and mind take on attributes of objects, with their rendition on lists (accumulations or the above enumeration/collection), and develop within cultural suburban scenarios where objects are turned into things through their participation in practices traditionally associated with subjective agency. This special rendition and development bring together a set of cultural narratives in which bodies and things mediate between subject and objects by placing every single participant in networked and processual relationships. Haddon places these contexts and genres in dialogue with a variety of objects, including the garden fork, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, cardinal and prime numbers, Siobhan (his teacher) as well as the policeman, the difficulty of metaphors (I laughed my socks off [HADDON, 2003, p.15]), maps and mathematical formulae, among other things. Probing the porous boundaries, affinities, and frictions between contemporary subjects and objects, with bodies, special minds, and things, this article develops novel approaches to notions of materiality, the object world, and embodied experience while also interrogating developments in the area of material culture, object studies, cultural phenomenology, and thing theory.

## II Catalogue: the poetics of reception

Christopher Boone, much like his literary predecessor, James Daugherty's *Daniel Boone*, is an example of the individual's potential for achievement because he embodies the best characteristics of all the pioneers and that his successes are a direct result of his adherence to things. Having what some would term a "special" mind, he performs great feats by relying on his own merits and on his own resourcefulness with things, objects, and subjects. His concern for a dog who was mysteriously murdered leads him to undertake long, dangerous journeys (to the police station or from Swindon to London) to find out another mystery in his life: his long thought dead mother living in London. Stefania Ciocia, in "Postmodern Investigations: The Case of Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*," relates Christopher's journeys and mysteries to literary precedents in terms of postmodern experimentation with genre and intertextuality:

Detective fiction has often provided fertile ground for postmodern literary experimentations, accompanied by reflections on the art of writing and subversions of the rules of the investigative game and of its narrative codification. Writers such as Jorge Luis Borges ("The Garden of Forking Paths" [1941] and "Death and the Compass" [1942]), Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49* [1966]), Italo Calvino (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* [1979]) and Paul Auster (*The New York Trilogy* [1987]) have all fruitfully explored this territory, laying the foundations of a new subgenre: the metaphysical detective novel, or, as Stefano Tani (1984) terms it, the anti-detective novel. Both labels draw attention to the generic changes involved when the logic of postmodernism, with its radical uncertainty, is applied to the conventions of detective fiction; that is, to a narrative tradition that hinges on a rational interpretation of reality in order to yield indisputable answers. (CIOCIA, 2009, p. 321)

The aim of *Ciocia* is to make explicit the crossover between Haddon's novel and its postmodern revitalization of the detective formula. The play with the conventions of the clue-puzzle version of the genre presents the reader with both an adventurous and humorous plot and some unnaturally clever metanarrative and typographical reflections.

On the one hand, Ruth Gilbert, in "Watching the Detectives: Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and Kevin Brooks' *Martyn Pig*" (2005) argues the human condition is marked by a search of narrative or desire for plot. As most of us seek to introduce some concord into the everyday chaos and discord around us: "Christopher ... experience(s) more 'discord and dispersal' than most ... Christopher has to cope with his experience of Asperger's Syndrome (a form of autism that is not directly named by Haddon but is nevertheless clearly evident within the narrative)." (GILBERT, 2005, p. 242). Gilbert supports the idea that "detective fiction thereby supports Christopher's desire for a highly delineated existence" and that "in writing his detective story he attempts to read and shape the apparent random nature of the world around him. Ambiguity of any kind upsets him." (2005, p. 244). As an example of this frame of mind, Christopher is blunt and direct in his answer when challenged about dividing his days into good and bad by the school psychologist:

I said I liked things to be in a nice order. And one way of being in a nice order was to be logical. Especially if those things were numbers or an argument. But there were other ways of putting things in a nice order. And that was why I had Good Days and Black Days. (HADDON, 2003, p. 24)

On the other hand, Mariana Mussetta, in "Semiotic Resources in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*: The Narrative Power of the Visual in Multimodal Fiction" (2014), returns to special modes to shed light on exceptional cases when she calls Haddon's novel multimodal:

Multimodality in fiction ... is the phenomenon shared by those novels which "feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives" (Gibbons, 2012, pp. 420). Multimodal stories—also called visual texts—are those fictional texts which purposefully subvert graphic and typographical conventions by means of the introduction of various semiotic resources which are devices belonging to the verbal, non-verbal, or combinations of verbal and non-verbal modes. (MUSSETTA, 2014, p. 100)

Haddon frequently has the readers aware of the visual nature of printed words by his use of bold type and different fonts. His nonconventional use of the space available on the page highlights the plot, while shifting from text to image to text again and resorting to a combination of the verbal and the non-verbal to unfold his narrative, let alone his use of graphs, tables, numbers, and lists of things. The exploitation of letter writing and chapter labeling as well as the introduction of authorial and metafictional footnotes, pictorial devices, and scientific or academic discourses in *TCI* are some of those semiotic resources that visually contribute to Haddon's creation of chaos and discord around Christopher. In the combination of typographic resources, Haddon achieves an internal logic and order that play with the foregrounding of the materiality of the text and with the productions of lists (based on words

and/or images), where conventions that are challenged are materialized in order to be broken again, in games readers take part in awe and delight.

Another critical assessment to take into consideration is Sarah Ray's "Normalcy, Knowledge, and Nature in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*" (2013). Ray proposes that the novel's protagonist/narrator presents a social model of disability by challenging dominant society's treatment of him as not normal or natural, which leads us to the epigraphs to this article. According to Ray, Christopher is ostensibly diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in texts commenting on the novel, although the novel never explicitly labels him as disabled in any way. It is more than evident, as Ray argues, that through Christopher's views on things, language, knowledge, objects, and subject social constructions in general, and on disability in particular, we learn that disability is an unstable category, a cultural construct like any other, and that dominant society can be disabling. Importantly, though, Christopher's critique of society is fundamentally material: things turn to objects and later on objects turn into subject-things that are objectified. Ray states that "Christopher's views of language, knowledge, and even the more-than-human world itself are central to his destabilization of the category of disability" and that his "environmental sensibility and critique of society's disabling qualities emerge primarily through his discussions of language, which he finds suspect because it distances humans from the world it describes." (RAY, 2013). Thus, the novel suggests that the disabling features of society upon which Christopher stumbles and which he challenges are the same features that distance humans from the material world, particularly through language.

List-oriented and important in the critical legacy of Haddon's novel is Rose Irene's "What can we do with *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*? Popular fiction and representations of disability" (2008). Irene makes a list of other critics of Haddon and of other novels, which revolve around Asperger's in one way or another:

The most prominent analyses of the novel so far have come from Bill Greenwell (2004), James Berger (2005), Heather Liane Talley (2005), Vivienne Muller (2006) and Stuart Murray (2006). All situate their responses to the novel within the light of what they identify as specific socio-historical ideologies of disability; however, Greenwell's is the only account to acknowledge that there were four novels released within the same cultural context as *Curious* that had Asperger's syndrome as the central focus of their narrative (Greenwell, 2004: 273). These novels were Marjorie Reynolds' *The Civil Wars of Jonah Moran* (1999), Kathy Hoopman's *Of Mice and Aliens* (2001), Elizabeth Moon's *Speed of Dark* (2002) and Gene Kemp's *Seriously Weird* (2003). (IRENE, 2008, p. 46)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Greenwell (2004) discusses the novel in the following terms: "The reasons for the success of this suburban comedy include the consequences for the reader of Haddon's choice of the sufferer from Asperger's as narrator, especially the generation of unconscious humour and the range of literary forms he uses to tell his story." James Berger published a book chapter ("Alterity and Autism: Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident* in the Neurological Spectrum") in (2008) and treats Christopher Boone as a mathematical savant because of his autism. Heather Liane Talley (2005) has as main thesis of her article: "it is essential to consider the ways in which disability gets produced and read, and by whom." Vivienne Muller (2006) argues for an ecological view in society by debating the current trends of disability theory in relation to Haddon's novel. Stuart Murray's discussion (2006) on autism conveys throughout that autism rarely emerges from the various images we produce of it as a comprehensible way of being in the world.

The supposed centrality of disability is balanced out by Stephan Freißmann's "A Tale of Autistic Experience: Knowing, Living, Telling in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*" (2008). He concludes that the novel "demonstrates the pervasiveness of narrative as an instrument for knowing, living, and telling in everyday life, highlighting its functions *ex negativo* through the first-person narrator's condition." (FREIBMANN, 2008, p. 415). In other words, Freißmann abstracts the specialness of Christopher Boone by clearing out that the novel stresses the close intertwining of narrative thinking with cultural models, highlighting the role of cultural and material transmission in every type of human cognition. (FREIBMANN, 2008, p.415)

Finally yet importantly in the critical assessments of the novel, there is Holly Blackford's "Raw Shok and Modern Method: Child Consciousness in 'Flowers for Algernon' and 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time'" (2013). Blackford focuses on the distinct ways a child-narrator or child-protagonist defamiliarizes the material world of objects and cites Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), another novel presenting a child-protagonist-collector, which is the hallmark of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel and whose technique is close to that of Haddon's. Curiously enough, Blackford goes on to add that:

In both *Flowers* and *Curious Incident*, reconciliation with the mother is sought and ambiguously conveyed. Memories of abject moments in both novels—moments of excrement, vomit, screaming—are conjoined with mothers (in Kristevan fashion), who turn out to be only human after all and who are displaced by nurturing teachers more equipped to guide their sons. The abject expulsion of feces or vomit in both novels occurs in moments when external rather than internal environments are out of control... the wail of Christopher's mother when she finds out the truth, and her unmet need for touch when they are reunited, speaks volumes about the primitive desire for connection voiced by novels about alienation and modern life. Christopher interprets his mother's wail by analogy with animals on nature programs, an analogy that has the potential to tap into his connection to animals but which never does. I think the key element here is that Christopher hears her not as a real animal—not the bleeding dog that he picked up while still warm—but an animal on television, nature mediated by a mechanical object. The problem of how modernity mediates social relationships is deeply intertwined with [post]modern literature and art. (BLACKFORD, 2013, p. 300)

Both Haddon and Daniel Keyes (*Flowers for Algernon*), according to Blackford, continue the debate between imitation, perception, adaptation, and learning that has raged for the past 150 years, and they seem to point toward the realization that choices are not really freedoms, but believing they are is perhaps one way to experience life and literature.

Bearing the critical assessments discussed here in mind, my own reading takes up Bill Brown's notion (2001, 2003) of the thing as an intermediary between object and subject, and I discuss it in conjunction with the mediating functions performed by the human body. By building on the assumption that the human body, like objects turned into things, is a site where subject (Christopher) and object (real animal or animal on television, among many other possibilities) positions are hybridized, I propose that the dynamics between subjects and objects should be understood as continuously evolving networked associations and shifting alliances. Subjects, objects, and things are "processual in nature rather than static or fixed identities." (TILLEY, 2006, p. 61)

### III Epilogue: the poetics of collected objects

Like human subjects, objects possess complex biographies, trajectories, and histories, social and cultural lives. They are animated with a life of their own without being animistic. Different theorists have attributed agency and animation to them. According to Alfred Gell, “[t]he ways in which social agency can be invested in things, or can emanate from things, are exceedingly diverse” (1998, p. 18); and Andrew Jones has commented, “we treat objects as social in the same way we treat people as social. Objects are always bound up in the social projects of people, and it is this that makes them animate” (2009, p. 35). The things Christopher Boone carries in his pockets and later on shows us at a police table resume the notion of the body/mind’s simultaneous enmeshment in the domain of the subject. Again and again, this enmeshed simultaneity (subject, thing, object) is anticipated as a list: a Swiss Army knife with 13 attachments including a wire stripper and a saw and a toothpick and tweezers; a piece of string; a piece of wooden puzzle which looked like this; 3 pellets of rat food for Toby, my rat; £1.47 (this was made up of a £1 coin, a 20p coin, two 10p coins, a 5p coin and a 2p coin); a red paper clip; and a key for the front door.

Let us begin with the Swiss Army knife: it is linked to the garden fork metonymically and to the signs on page 169 metaphorically.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the knife is multifunctional, may cause death by perforating a body, and may even be used in minor gardening tasks, the same object may be used to cut through a plethora of signs, posts, and ads. This is especially so when this same plethora of signs, posts, and ads, as we see in the train station, are transformed into a contemporary impervious hieroglyph (page 170), against which Christopher has to use his knife for protection: “I stood there and I opened my Swiss Army knife in my pocket to make me feel safe and I held on to it tight.” (HADDON, 2003, p. 170). I do have to mention that there are theorists that posit subjects and objects in an antagonistic relationship in which the contemporary subject inhabits the position of the alienated consumer while the commodified subject becomes dematerialized.<sup>5</sup> The case in question, however, I approach more like the human body becoming an assemblage of matter, embodied perception, and lived experience that link the object world and the self.

This perspective often dovetails with phenomenological concepts of the body (let us not forget that Christopher’s mind is special), most notably with the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For the French philosopher, subjects and objects constitute one another in a relation characterized by reversibility and intertwining: “I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject, and this life among things has nothing in common with the elaboration of scientifically conceived objects”. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p. 215). Merleau-Ponty describes the body (again, in Christopher’s case, the mind/body enmeshment is especially important), through which we perceive and interact with the object as

a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these

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<sup>4</sup> I can only reproduce a small parcel of a type of “Rabelaisian” and extravagantly typographical list/catalogue: “Sweet Pastries Heathrow Airport Check-in Here Bagel Factory EAT excellence and taste YO! ... (HADDON, 2003, p. 169)

<sup>5</sup> The result is that, in our global culture, being a consumer is what ultimately defines the subject (BAUDRILLARD, 1998; BAUMAN, 2007; DUFOUR, 2008). See also Featherstone (2007), Jameson (1991), Hearn (2008), and Xavier (2016).

two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each thing calls for the other”. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002, p. 137)

In the case of the piece of string and the red paper clip Christopher carries with him, it is conspicuous that the objects constitute the subject in terms of binding, tying, and unifying. Christopher feels from his being “non-natural” that he needs things turned objects for such order of a subject as himself. The double belongingness between the order of the object and the order of the subject in Haddon’s novel is definitively a non-oppositional relation, but a relationship characterized by reversibility and intertwining. Christopher feels like a puppet on strings, in need of a piece of string to tie himself onto the material world around him and of a red paper clip that symbolizes those ties to will and desire. The will to find whom did it (murder Wellington and hide the letters from his mother) and the desire to go in search of this lost object (the mother) with all the passion he can muster. The red paperclip may also be a promise that order can eventually be restored to life, home life, and psychic life.

Thing theory, according to Brown in his 2003 book, interweaves psychoanalytical and phenomenological approaches to ask how things “become recognizable, representable, and exchangeable to begin with” as well as “why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make to re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies” (BROWN, 2003, p. 4). It reads interactions between subjects and objects in relational rather than oppositional terms, which also applies to the pellets of rat food and the key to the front door Christopher carries with him. The analogy between the body and the thing/object is of major interest to this novel. It offers a potential way out of the impasse between views of the body/mind as a mere social and cultural construct and perspectives that locate a measure of agency and resistance in its recalcitrant materiality, specifically when viewed alongside objects that “subjectify.” The collection/enumeration that we began with provide a framework for thinking about the body/mind and thing/object as relational, processual, and as an in-between. The wooden puzzle and the coins also serve as an interface between what we have come to understand to be culture and the object world that opens up non-hierarchical and non-dualistic vistas on the relationship between these entities.

Whereas the wooden puzzle opens out to intertextuality in general (from Jorge Luis Borges to Georges Perec, from Arthur Conan Doyle to James Daugherty to Joseph Conrad), it also points to a special mind with super-powered mathematical abilities. It is no coincidence that the novel has an appendix with a question and an answer the great majority of readers (body, mind, and calculators) would not be able to understand, let alone state if it is “merely” fictional, right or wrong. The novel’s understandings of bodies and things, the subject-object relationship, are shaped by cultural concepts of artifice, performance, and subjectification on and off the page, on and off the mental pictures we make of them. Ontological definitions of subject- and object-hood become ambivalent in *The Curious Incident of the dog at the night-time* because they are stylized in the mythological (a journey not unlike that of Ulysses), mathematical, and teleological (the nature of being among things and objects that tell us who we are) auto-bio-graphy Christopher wrote with the things and objects he carried in his pockets.

With the emergence of new technologies, the rise of the Digital Age and the proliferation of virtual forms of post-human interactions, it has become necessary to re-think materiality itself. Haddon and Boone insisted on the material basis of all aspects of human

existence and finally suggested that the subject can be materially transformed through interacting with objects and things. We have moved from what Katharina Boehm lists as the sciences that associated human and material life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "... understanding of the relationship between the self and the physical world were fundamentally reconfigured through rapidly advancing industrialization, the unprecedented growth of consumer culture, and the rise of evolutionary theories, physiology, and other biological sciences." (BOEHM, 2012, p. 3). As Michel Serres has taught us (BROWN, 2001, p. 1), the subject is born of the object (*le sujet naît de l'objet*) and even the three pellets of rat food our hero carries in his pocket, not necessarily taking them with him in his *peripli*, point to his docile and special nature.

I will end by giving Serres the last word: "knowledge results from the passage that changes a cause into a thing and a thing into a cause." (SERRES, 1995, p. 22). I have commented on the exact moment when things (objects collected in a pocket) act as a passage, a third term, mediating bodies and special minds, not preying upon them. In the oppositional world of bodies and things, the latter is less important than the ways things can pass into a cause and result in knowledge. Christopher Boone carried in his pockets and showed us in the police station the extent to which he was born a hero out of the objects onto which he held. The things he kept served him as a passage from the power/knowledge of a cause: not to have the answer to the initial mystery of who killed Wellington, not to necessarily know the ultimate mystery of the whereabouts of his mother (is she dead or alive?), not to have the power to know and demonstrate the answer to the mathematical problem in the appendix. The ultimate passage/mystery/thing Christopher delighted us with was, symbolically, "a key from the front door" of how special he is in the material world of things.

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