The (post-human) consumer, the (post-avian) chicken and the (post-object) Eglu: towards a material-semiotics of anti-consumption

Shona Bettany & Ben Kerrane
University of Bradford, UK
What came first…. …the chicken or the egg?

“still much confusion about the differences and similarities between anti-consumption and consumer resistance and ask for contributions that discuss what the most pertinent redundancies and differences are in these two topics”

• Agency
• Binary thinking
• Cartographies, categories and definitions

“we take an adjacent position to this question, and challenge the requirement to harden these underpinning categories of analysis, but instead to view these as categories in process, with a focus on how these categories come to matter, that is to materialize and mean, in the material-semiotic practices of consumption activity”

That is not “why do consumers choose”, but instead understanding what are the conditions under which the “behaviours” we classify in particular ways emerge
Material-semiotic theoretics

• Post humanist, emergent ontology
• Latour (2000:192) argues that, ‘purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of objects, but they are also not properties of humans either. They are properties of…collectives of human and non-humans’. That is, agency is attributed in terms of formations of meaning and materiality in which objects, bodies and other heterogeneous entities are embedded

• Everything is “at stake” and in process and understanding how things come to be what they are (how they become obdurate at objects, consumers and categories) is the focus of analysis

• Provides an alternative to, and a critique of, neo-liberal discourses of consumer choice and action (Connelly and Prothero 2003, Moraes, Szmigin and Carrigan 2008)
Why chickens?

- Fast growing consumer trend
- Food 2030 (Defra)
- Egg is a volatile product
- Welfare/health concerns
- Urban chicken keeping is an contextual implosion of many key concerns of anti-consumption and consumer resistance
The eglu

Omlet© Eglu™, a low maintenance, polymer chicken coop (fig.1) designed for the first time chicken owner.

to unpick how this object emerges as a multiple and ambiguous actor in the cultural milieu of urban henkeeping, and the repercussions for the kinds of consumer agency that can co-emerge
Simple analysis

• “Health” and “welfare”
• Key choice drivers for self-production of eggs
• The Eglu emerges as an ambivalent actor within the socio-material practices of urban stock keeping
• It stands for consumption and anti-consumption and for consumer resistance and compliance/domination
The natural and humane Eglu

- the keeping of domestic chickens is framed within discourses of welfare and the evocation of a golden age of natural food production
  - The Eglu emerges as a key actor enabling a particular vision of the natural and humane to emerge
- The Eglu is a risk averter, a dependency reducer and control facilitator
  - Enabling voluntary simplicity, feelings of control and the ability to make safer choices emerges for the consumer
- The Eglu emerges as a political actor
  - Anti the power of the supermarkets/central figure enabling an animal welfare politics to be enacted
- The Eglu emerges as an enabler of social connections
  - co-configuring a particular version of community and connectivity to others and to nature and the world
The artificial and inhumane Eglu

- The Eglu emerges as reproductive of mass consumerism
- The Eglu emerged as a co-producer of an inauthentic anti-consumption
- The Eglu emerged as an inhumane actor
- The Eglu emerged as disembudding agent within the community
How were these paradoxes being reconfigured as counting as authentic anti-consumption and consumer resistance practices?

– Hybrid coops
  • Plastic/wood
  • Homemade/shop bought
  • Unique/mass produced
• Natural/Welfare as categories to be understood?
• Nature and welfare not only enrolled as powerful actors for and against the Eglu but co-configured with the Eglu
  – What stands for nature and for welfare is being co-produced by the Eglu as part of a socio-material network of effects
• Our stories of the Eglu show that to enact what might be called “anti-consumption behaviour” requires complex assemblages of human and non-human objects, bodies, stories, skills and possible practices with a theorization of ambivalence, interstices, both/and at the same time and complexity.

• In our account the Eglu emerges as an actor of both anti-consumption and consumption, of resistance and domination, as political and apolitical, natural and unnatural, of progress and retrogress, humanity and inhumanity and connection and disembeddedness.

• As an important actor within the cultural formations of urban hen-keeping its fluid boundaries, co-actualisations of consumer practices, and ambivalent ontology can be unpicked to craft accounts of how the worlds of human and non-human actors co-emerge, are orderings in process, and how what appears obdurate and fixed is achieved as such. In such accounts bodies, objects, worlds, discourses, and the categories themselves are all at stake and up for grabs.

• Furthermore, this approach challenges reproductions of choice and consumer agency. Here we show that the Eglu takes shape as an actor, like the consumer, only within the heterogeneous relationalities within which it is embedded. We illustrate the possibilities for accounts of how consumers with ambivalent objects like the Eglu embedded within a myriad of often conflicting material-semiotic worlds are enacting and co-producing the binaries of consumption/anti-consumption and resistance/domination.

• These then can be seen as categories in process and of practice, always at stake and open to creative re-negotiation, a deliberately unfinished literacy suitable to enliven our practical imaginations.