

The Wonder of Data

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Abstract

The article considers the productive capacity for wonder that resides and radiates in data, or rather in the entangled relation of data-and-researcher. Wonder is not necessarily a safe, comforting, or uncomplicatedly positive affect. It shades into curiosity, horror, fascination, disgust, and monstrosity. But the price paid for the ruin caused—to epistemic certainty or the comforts of a well-wrought coding scheme—is, after Massumi (2002, p. 19), the privilege of a headache. Not the answer to a question, but the astute crafting of a problem and a challenge: what next?

Keywords

qualitative data analysis, materialist theory, wonder, post-qualitative research

Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains.

Alfred North Whitehead, 1934, p. 96

For some years now I have been intermittently writing and wondering about *wonder* as an untapped potential in qualitative research. This special issue provides an occasion, or a pretext, to return to the subject, concentrating on the capacity for wonder that resides and radiates in data, or rather in the entangled relation of data-and-researcher. I think we need more wonder in qualitative research, and especially in our engagements with data, as a counterpart to the exercise of reason through interpretation, classification, and representation. These latter acts still constitute the staple repertoire of “conventional” inquiry (cf. St. Pierre, *in press*). I do not dismiss such acts as necessarily unworthy or invalid. But in line with recent Deleuzian theory (e.g., Deleuze, 1994; Massumi, 2002), I consider them to be second order operations performed on the flux and movement of the world. They make things stand still and separate out, so that meaning, structure, and order may coalesce. The problem with such “typological thinking” (DeLanda, 2002) is that it is obsessed with sameness and the establishment of fixed, hierarchical relations among entities. It can only conceive of difference in terms of opposition between already stabilized entities, rather than addressing the manifold movements of difference “in itself” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 174) and therefore cannot open onto the new or the unanticipated. From this standpoint, data have no status other than that of “dumb matter” to be molded or informed by human interpretation or inspiration (Massumi, 2002, p. 173).

But there is, I suggest, another potentiality associated with data, beyond and beside their capacity for mute surrender to

the colonialist administrations of social science. This potentiality can be felt on occasions where something—perhaps a comment in an interview, a fragment of a field note, an anecdote, an object, or a strange facial expression—seems to reach out from the inert corpus (corpse) of the data, to grasp us. These moments confound the industrious, mechanical search for meanings, patterns, codes, or themes; but at the same time, they exert a kind of fascination, and have a capacity to animate further thought. On other occasions I have called this intensity that seems to emanate from data, a “glow” (MacLure, 2010, *in press-b*). But here, I want to think of it again as wonder.

In their authoritative study of wonder from the middle ages to the Enlightenment, Daston and Park (2001) define it as “a passion [that] registered the line between the known and the unknown” (p. 13). Lugli (1986, p. 123) describes it in similar terms, as “an intermediate, highly particular state akin to a sort of suspension of the mind between ignorance and enlightenment that marks the end of unknowing and the beginning of knowing.” It is this liminal condition, suspended in a threshold between knowing and unknowing, that prevents wonder from being wholly contained or recuperated as knowledge, and thus affords an opening onto the new.¹

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Wonder is also preeminently material: it insists in bodies as well as minds. Daston and Park (2001) describe it as a “*cognitive passion*, [emphasis added] as much about knowing as about feeling” (p. 14), and they suggest that its history is “tightly bound up with other cognitive passions such as curiosity and horror” (p. 15). We may feel the wonder of data in the gut, or the quickening heartbeat, as well as in the cerebral disappointment of failing to find the right code or category in which to park a particular piece of (what now presents itself as) data. Wonder is not necessarily a safe, comforting, or uncomplicatedly positive affect. It shades into curiosity, horror, fascination, disgust, and monstrosity. And the particular hue or tenor that it will assume is never entirely within our control. But the price paid for the ruin caused—to epistemic certainty and the “sedentary” achievement of a well-wrought coding scheme or an “arborescent” analytic framework—is, according to Massumi (2002, p. 19), the privilege of a headache. Not the answer to a question, but the astute crafting of a problem and a challenge: what next?

Wonder is relational. It is not clear where it originates and to whom it belongs. It seems to be “out there,” emanating from a particular object, image, or fragment of text; but it is also “in” the person that is affected. A passion: the capacity to affect and to be affected. When I feel wonder, I have chosen something that has chosen me, and it is that mutual “affection” that constitutes “us” as, respectively, data and researcher. In contemporary materialist terminology, wonder can be thought of as entanglement or “intra-action” (e.g., Barad, 2007), or the movements of desire and intensity that connect bodies—human and nonhuman, animate or inanimate, virtual and actual, including bodies of knowledge—in/as an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). We, and the data, do not preexist one another.

I first got interested in wonder through some chance encounters with images of the “cabinets of curiosities,” or *wunderkammern* that were assembled by princes, merchants, and clerics across Europe from the 16th to the 18th century. These collections were themselves liminal (Mauries, 2002), assembled on the threshold of modernity and scientific rationality, stuffed with the spoils of exploration, trade, new technologies, and violent conquest, but trailing the allure of a waning Gothic world of miracles, relics, and magic. The cabinets held natural history specimens, optical instruments, mechanical toys, paintings, natural and carved gemstones, maps, stuffed animals and skeletons, musical instruments (cf. MacLure, 2006). They were, in other words, assemblages.

I have been preoccupied with the cabinet of curiosities as a figure for an alternative logic of qualitative inquiry (e.g., MacLure, 2006, 2013)—one which allows for both

the discernment of order and pattern, *and* is attuned to the lively excess that always exceeds capture by structure and representation, leaving openings where something new, or something else, might issue. In other words, wonder.

The cabinet of curiosities might seem a rather static figure for the open dynamism of becoming and the wonder of data. But the contents of the baroque cabinet are alive with the contradictions of classification and curiosity. Striving toward taxonomic rigor and completion, in the carefully labeled boxes, drawers, and arrays of natural history specimens, yet always pulled toward the contrary pole of singularity, wonders and marvels that lie on the boundaries of knowledge: the dragon’s horn, the misshapen fetus, the stuffed crocodile hanging from the ceiling. Stafford (2004, p. 7) writes that the cabinets “invite us to experiment with order and disorder.”

Perhaps we could think of engagements with data, then, as experiments with order and disorder, in which provisional and partial taxonomies are formed, but are always subject to metamorphosis, as new connections spark among words, bodies, objects, and ideas. Evans and Marr (2006) caution against historically inaccurate uses of the notions of curiosity and wonder that run the risk of “creating an indiscriminate *wunderkammer* of dubious historical veracity” (p. 4). I am conscious of that risk, but take comfort from Lugli (1986, p. 123) who describes wonder as “meta-historical” and traces its recurrences in art history and practice from the baroque era through surrealism to late 20th century installation art.

The Wonder of Objects

I want to conclude by engaging with some research data from an ethnographic study of young children and problem “behavior” (see MacLure, Jones, Holmes, & MacRae, 2012, for details of the methodology and outcomes of this project). This data was not anticipated in the original research design, and we did not set out to “collect” them. Rather, they announced themselves gradually as my colleagues and I grew tired of the banality of our own, conventional ethnographic attitude. It concerns the wonder of objects—both for the children, aged 4 and 5, who took part in the study and for us as researchers.

It all started (or so it seems from the false perspective of the present) when the research team—Liz Jones, Rachel Holmes, Christina MacRae, and I—began to consider what happened to objects that the children brought from home to school—little toys, trading cards, hair bands, special pens, comic books, and so on (cf. Jones, MacLure, Holmes, & MacRae, 2012). These items were often separated from their owners at the threshold of the classroom and removed

to a place of safety—the teacher’s drawer, or a special box, to be collected later.²

The rationale for controlling the passage of objects, as reported by teachers, and formalized in home–school agreements and behavior policies, is to minimize dangers such as distraction, theft, loss, covetousness, bullying, and physical harm. Already we begin to see, then, how objects are implicated in the social and moral order of the school. Seemingly inert, their arrest at the threshold of the classroom suggests that they have a lively potential for causing trouble on a variety of fronts—pedagogic, emotional, and social. It is worth noting that the capacity for trouble that is stored in objects amounts to recognition of a sort of *agency*. When objects travel from home to school, outside to inside, they become potential agitators, both in the sense of agents, with the power to make things happen, and infiltrators who come from “outside” to stir up unwanted actions and feelings.

But the threat of objects may also be associated with the intimate and clandestine bonds that objects are capable of contracting with children (and with adults). Objects are a potential “distraction,” not only because they interfere with the pragmatics of pedagogy and socialisation but also because they might remove the child, however fleetingly, from adult influence, and block her incorporation into the collective, purposeful space of the classroom. Choosing and chosen by an object, a child forms a bond that is not amenable to adult intervention. Moreover the engagements that objects invite and receive are multisensory, and touch is often especially important. The intimate contact that this involves between objects and children’s bodies amounts to a kind of *secrecy* from the viewpoint of ideology and surveillance.

Operating through touch and other senses, mobilizing desire and intense affect, a child’s special object has an exquisite *uselessness* that renders it recalcitrant and unfit for recruitment to “proper” social relations. Massumi (2002) claims that there is an open potentiality in uselessness: “Need and utility lead to self-same reproduction. *Uselessness, on the other hand, lends itself to invention*” [emphasis added] (2002, p. 96). Bodies and objects, writes Massumi, are mutually implicated: “‘body’ and ‘object’ exist only as implicated in each other [. . .] They are mutual implications. The thing, the object, can be considered *prostheses* [emphasis in original] of the body—provided it is remembered that the body is equally a prosthesis of the thing” (p. 95). Or, to put it more concisely, “it is not clear who is used by whom” (p. 96).

Sinead’s Objects. We can perhaps learn more about the creative potential of objects through a consideration of an object made by Sinead, when she was 9 years old.



Illustration. Sinead, Untitled (Object I), March 2010.

Sinead made many objects, and most of them were assemblages, grafts, and juxtapositions of found objects and detritus that seemed to conjure strange worlds and acquire the frisson of dreams and desire. Touch was an important part of their appeal. These were objects of special care and attention by Sinead, who tended them according to logics that she seldom cared to describe. Objects moved around Sinead’s room according to invisible vectors and topologies, and into and out of her pockets. These ministrations place her objects at an intersection of dreams and reality: part of the “tactile tryst” that joins the real, felt materiality of objects, in their engagement with skin and muscle and the nervous system, with their complicity in the virtuality of the “uncompleted dream” (Brown, 1998, pp. 955-956).

Sinead’s objects did not live in the plain light of day. They were not displayed, but were always secreted—tucked behind a photograph, wrapped in a curtain, placed between two pillows. But she always knew exactly where they were, and would know if an object has been moved or removed. This is a relation of “mutual implication” as described by Massumi (2002) above: objects were folded into the space of Sinead’s room, into her pockets, into her body (through touch) and into her life.

Sinead’s objects, nested and folded into secret places, seem to open up an interior world in a similar fashion to that of the baroque cabinet of curiosities and thereby to be implicated in wonder.

The jealously guarded privacy of the cabinet of curiosities finds its *raison d’être* in a multiplicity of frames, niches, boxes, drawers and cases, in appropriating to itself the chaos of the world and imposing upon it systems—however arbitrary—of symmetries and hierarchies. It is like a shadow cast by the “unknown,” an unknown that dissolves into a shower of objects. It offers an inexhaustible supply of

fragments and relics painstakingly slotted and fitted into the elected space, heavy with meaning, of a secret room. (Mauriès, 2002, p. 12)

Conclusion

We cannot force objects, nor any other kind of data, to collaborate in the production of wonder. But it *is* a characteristic of wonder that its effects, and affects, may issue unexpectedly, if we are lucky. A couple of years ago, a few days after a brief and unplanned conversation about our research with a colleague who is also a poet, an e-mail arrived out of the blue. It contained a poem.

Object

for Maggie and Rachel

How a thing becomes itself,
wide awake as anyone

and faceless. How it is born
from matted feathers,

shreds of paper, red
rubber bands and a small

four-eyed bone button. It is not
a doll or a body. Not a god.

Something tiny there shining
is the thin flight

of its name, the way of a warrior.
Or a miniature pleasure

machine mixed from the dirt
under her nails, her own

scat and spit. It will sit and mourn
with her for days,

days when she's breaking and
tearing. Like a flower

it is burning a hole in the room
and someone has seen.

It will be confiscated. How her
confiscation begins.

Lesley Saunders

The wonder of objects has continued to take us to new places. In addition to prompting further research publications, including this one, it led to an art exhibition, "Curiosity and Classification: Objects as Incitements to Theory," to accompany the 2011 Summer Institute in Qualitative Research. Sinead's collection was exhibited alongside the work of six other artists, and one of the eight cabinets was filled by objects made by conference delegates.³ There was a joint video seminar with colleagues and graduate students at Deakin University, Australia, on "Objects, Spaces and

Learning."⁴ We are currently planning work involving babies and objects in museums and galleries.

Ultimately, we cannot know where wonder resides—not simply "in" the data; but not only "in" us either. As noted at the outset, it is both material (resonating in bodies; indissociably attached to the materiality and the singularity of objects) and virtual—a matter of potentialities and thresholds. Perhaps the best way to think the wonder of data then, in their capacity to enter into relation with researchers, is as an *event*. "To the extent that events are actualized within us, they wait for us and invite us in," Deleuze writes (2004, p. 169). But we need to be attentive and open to surprise to recognize the invitation; and once invited in, our task is to experiment and see where that takes us.

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Notes

1. On the transformative potential of the threshold, see Mazzei and Jackson (2011).
2. This account is based on a paper presented to the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Denver: cf. Allmer, MacLure, MacRae, Holmes, and Jones (2010).
3. <http://www.esri.mmu.ac.uk/siqr/ICACC%20Sheet.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2013).
4. <http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/education/events/objects-space/index.php> (accessed February 18, 2013).

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