

On the Custom of Naming Artefacts

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Our attitudes to the material objects of everyday life vary as much as our attitudes to people. The comparison is intentional, because we treat some of these objects as we treat human beings: we give them proper names. All artefacts carry some sort of meaning: they are medium for technical information and for social messages, but also for personal attitudes. Named artefacts may shed light on the latter category of meaning. The naming may be simple convention, but it may also be contended that these objects are – or have been – invested with more meaning than most artefacts. This essay discusses the practice and meaning of naming, and argues for a conception of meaning that is based on experience, rather than on cognition.

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From Roland's sword to jumbojets

A sei meïsme la cumencet a pleindre:
E! *Durendal*, cum es bele e clere e blanche!
Cuntre soleill si luises e reflambes!
(*La chanson de Roland* 1.2312–15. Count Roland speaking to himself, or rather to his sword, in his last agony. Text from c. 1100).

Well, *Faithful*, that's your shooting for today.
... Come on, *Old Faithful*, that's enough rabbits
... (From the movie *The problem with Harry*, A.Hitchcock 1955. A Hunter in Vermont, USA, chatting to his shotgun)

What do they have in common, a sword of a medieval hero and a modern hunter's shotgun? Not very much, apparently, apart from the fact that they have been invested with proper names. There is more than a millenium between *Durendal* and *Old Faithful*. The one belongs to medieval Europe and the other to the new world. The first name has become public property, the second is only a private pet name. Still, their individual names distinguish them from the majority of artefacts.

Their number is not insignificant. Sword names like *Excalibur* and *Durendal*, *Tyrving* and *Gram*, have been passed on from gene-

ration to generation through oral and literary traditions. Many Norwegians will nod in recognition when *Moses* and *Aron* are mentioned, the two veteran canons that greeted the German invasion army in April 1940. *Lunik* and *Sojus*, *Challenger* and *Columbia* have become familiar to millions through modern mass media. Spears and rifles, small boats and big ships, houses and cottages, locomotives and areoplanes, mainframes and space carriers ... The list is not exhausted. The custom of naming certain types of artefacts has a long tradition in western culture. It thrives in our "rational and enlightened" society, just as it did in "the dark, superstitious" middle ages.

Onomastics, or the study of proper names, has been a field for grammarians and linguists. Its main object is names of persons and places, and its principal tools morphology and semantics. Somewhat simplified, we may say that the linguist asks *how* objects are named. The naming of artefacts, however, seems worth while to investigate in a broader cultural perspective. The subject of this essay is *why* some artefacts are named.

The practice of giving certain inanimate things a proper name expresses a special attitude towards those objects. This essay focuses not on the artefacts as such, but on people's

attitudes to things. An analysis of some named artefacts may elucidate certain aspects of the multifarious relationship between man and his surroundings.

For practical reasons a restricted number of examples will be presented. Medieval weapons, yesterday's hunting guns, and modern means of transport represent artefacts from different periods. This approach stresses the extension and the continuity of the praxis and provides material for comparison.

Classification and meaning, individualization and reference

The subject is a phenomenon that manifests itself through language usage. Artefacts are expressed by the grammatical category "nouns". *Common nouns*, or appellatives, are lexical terms with a certain meaning. Their function is to *classify*. *Proper nouns* have no meaning in the strictest sense (according to most grammarians), but a reference. Their function is to *individualize*. Thus, the appellative *sword* has a lexical meaning and points to a whole class of artefacts. The proper noun *Excalibur* has no meaning, but it has as reference a particular artefact – the sword that allegedly belonged to king Arthur.

There is no universal way to classify reality. Categories are arbitrary. Also, the types of artefacts that are named may vary from culture to culture, from one period to another. When a group gives an object a proper name, they are merely making use of a possibility offered by their conceptual system.

Rational and scientific western culture has tended to regard as absolute the distinction between animate and inanimate objects. But when live, non-human objects (animals) may be individualized by naming, and when live human objects (slaves, and in some contexts soldiers, workers, women ...) may be classified as nameless commodities, why not also individualize certain inanimate things? Most cultures do, our own included.

A note on works of fiction and the study of usage

Artefacts sometimes function as a structuring element of a story, or help to put action forward. Medieval literature furnishes examples of rings, swords, signal horns etc., all with proper names, that play important, almost active roles.

Modern examples are the use the Norwegian authors Gabriel Scott (1874–1958) and Mikkjel Fønhus (1894–1973) make of rifles in the novels *Fant* and *Josefa*, and *Reinsbukken på Jotunfjell*. Fønhus (1926:5) announces the three actors in this way: "Those were the days when *Sylvbukken* [a reindeer buck] lived, when the reindeer hunter *Stuttlekken* roamed the mountains with *Langfredagsrifla* [*The Good Friday rifle*]"¹.

Scott (1928, 1930) uses the rifle *Lensmannsdøden* [*The Sheriff Killer*] as the structuring element of the two novels. It appears as an ominous sign on the first page, and follows the protagonist at every crucial point. It is his reified friend and his security in life, but also his cruel destiny.

The naming of artefacts might thus possibly be interpreted as poetic licence. However, works of fiction can be valuable sources for the study of customs and usage, if the setting is fairly close in time and space to the author's own experience. No author will normally risk being turned down by his public because of unreliability in details that they are familiar with. Fiction may thus mirror everyday life and bring to posterity information that other written sources rarely supply. Actually, almost all examples that we have of naming artefacts in early periods derive from fiction.

The literary use of proper names for guns is confirmed by other sources, as shown below. Sharp observers of society, these authors make use of popular customs to serve their own ends. Admittedly, they "overdo" it for artistic reasons, but that does not reduce the source value.

With due consideration to poetic peculiarities, we may also contend that the anonymous medieval authors did not "tell tales" that would offend the cognitive categories of their public. The fact that proper names are used over and

over again for some types of artefacts confirms this view.

Example I: The medieval hero and his sword

Medieval man had no reason to doubt that mysterious, non-human forces, good or evil, could descend into material objects. The holy *Graal* was one "proof", all the sacred relics another. These objects – fictitious or real – were Christian symbols.² But medieval man sought inspiration, consolation and suspense in many types of objects. In mythology and legendary tales, arm rings and finger rings had a specially central position.³

More than most objects, weapons must have occupied the minds of medieval men. Proper names for spears are known from mythology, and have also been found in Germanic runic inscriptions, even on preserved remnants of spears (KLNK vol.17:543). Literary sources and popular tradition tell about peasant weapons like bows and axes that carry proper names. We also know of a few knives that have been named.⁴

But above all, swords were individualized by names. We know approximately 170 Nordic sword names from written medieval sources,⁵ and the custom has survived in oral tradition up to the 19th century.⁶ To this can be added an uncounted number of sword names in non-Nordic European literature. Two of these will serve as examples:

At the battle of Roncevaux the armies of Charles the Great fought the invading Arabs. The historical person Roland, count of Bretagne, died there on the 15th of August 778. This event has been handed down to us in *La chanson de Roland*. Here, Roland addresses his sword in the following way, in a text from around 1100:⁷

"*Durendal*, my good sword, I feel sorry for you! / I am going to die. You will no longer be of any use to me. /.../ *Durendal*, how you are beautiful and holy! / Your golden pommel is full of relics: / St.Peter's tooth ... Bits of Saint Mary's cloths; /.../ No man shall own you, who shows cowardice! / With you I have conquered many a



Fig. 1. Roland's death. In the first scene, Roland tries in vain to destroy the sword *Durendal* by striking the rocks. In the second scene, he renders his life to the archangel, symbolically expressed by handing over his gloves. In all three scenes we see the bugle horn with the proper name of *Olifant*, an artefact that plays an important role in the ballad. A whole army is extinguished because Roland is too proud to blow it, even if he is continually urged to do so. From stanza to stanza, we are reminded that the voice of *Olifant* would bring in reinforcements. 14th century miniature, library of Sankt Gallen, Switzerland.

province / Now held by Charles the Great..." (1.2303–04, 2342–51)

Roland knows that death is approaching, and he desperately tries to destroy the sword by striking wildly into rocks. The rocks crush to pieces, but the sword is not damaged. Finally, he conceals it under his body. A sword like *Durendal* should not fall into the hands of the enemy.

In the Anglo-Romance tradition, the most famous sword would be *Excalibur*, from the Arthurian epic cycle. The following passage gives a glimpse of the relationship between the man and his sword. The sword is the only thing that occupies his mind at death's door, in this version of *La mort le roi Arthu* from around 1230:

⁴ Ethnologia Europaea XX,1



Fig. 2. Arthur proves his right to the throne, by drawing a bewitched sword from an anvil. Drawing by Howard Pyle, 1903.

"The king unbuckles his sword and draws it from the sheath. After having gazed at it for a long time, he exclaims: *Excalibur*, my magnificent sword, the best there is in this world, ... You are going to loose your lord now. Will you ever again meet a man in whose hands you shall serve as well as you did mine, unless you go to Lancelot?" (V.192 1.26–34)

The king's last will is that the sword be thrown into a deep lake. When this order is executed by his reluctant companion, a supernatural arm raises out of the water, grasps the sword, brands it in the air and disappears in the lake.

The sword occupied a central position in medieval life. A good sword was expensive, only an elite could afford it. It was instrumental in many ceremonies, and thus of strong symbolic signification: investiture and coronation ceremonies, feudal ceremonies of vasselage and enfeoffment, when rendering to an enemy, to mark certain relations between man and woman, etc. (Falk 1914:41–42). Also, it represented physical power. But we have no proof that medieval swords were normally named. All we can maintain, with reference to the abundant material, is that naming of swords must have been a well known praxis.

Example II: Yesterday's hunter and his gun

"Fenrik had an errand to Tvisteinen today, where he hoped there would be a chance to go hunting. *Lensmannsdøden* [*The Sheriff Killer*] was placed astern in the rowboat, in the usual position with the barrel pointing over the port side gunwale, ready cocked for a shot ..." (Scott 1986:170)

"He had his rifle with him. *Langfredagsrifla* [*The Good Friday Rifle*] he called it. ...

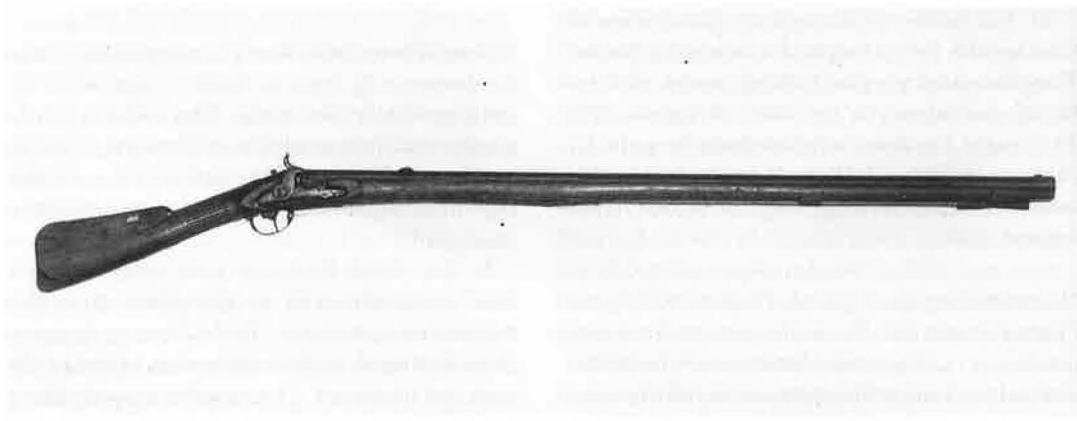


Fig. 3. A late 18th century flintlock rifle, later rebuilt to percussion, that carries the name of *Makalausa*. *Makalausa* (the name meaning *The Unequalled*) was a famous bear rifle. It has been the destiny of some 15 to 30 bears. Photo *Norsk Skogbruksmuseum*, Elverum.

Suddenly the reindeer poses against the grey, naked mountain. *Langfredagsrifla* roars with its coarse voice, and the powder smoke spreads a strong, nauseous smell." (Fønhus 1926:51, 86)

These examples show how authors have made use of a popular custom. This custom has also been noted by students of folklore, and a couple of named rifles have been preserved. One of these is *Makalausa* [*The Unequalled*], that was used for bear hunting in the Swedish-Norwegian frontier area (Nord-Trøndelag). One of its owners (1807–1896) allegedly shot 15 bears. The next owner (d. 1906), who gave the rifle its name, also shot 15 bears with it. Fifteen silver nails in the butt remind us of these adventures, and an inlaid silver coin is in memory of an episode when the bear nearly won. (Fossum 1982)

Knut Hermundstad (1967:19) mentions some occurrences from Valdres (Oppland):

"Some hunters called their rifle *Bjødnaustussa-ren*. The rifles were told to be good for shooting bear and other game with. The rifle of the great hunter Bjødna-Jacob was named *Jacobsstuten*. Jacob i Skoge in Skrautvøl called his rifle *Hova*."

Hermundstad quotes stories where informants use these names. The flintlocked muzzle-loaders *Jacobsstuten* and *Hova* are both associated with dramatic bear hunts. *Jacobsstuten* was said to bear marks of bear teeth after a scuffle between Bjødna-Jacob and a wounded animal (1967:98–99). Popular traditions are full of vivid details. As several of these stories go, the hunters did not even have time to pull the ramrod out of the barrel before firing into the wide open jaws of the charging animals. Another story tells how Jacob i Skoge on one occasion shot three bears with *Hova* (1967:19–20). The worst part of it was to keep the second and the third bear in check with a pole while recharging the muzzle-loader!

These stories were collected between 1930 and 1960 in peasant milieus, and probably refer to persons and events from the early part of the 19th century. We also have knowledge of

the custom from other social sets. The following citations are from the autobiographical notes of major Andreas Vibe (1801–60), a man of a bourgeois milieu. In 1828, Vibe and the lieutenants Hagerup and Paludan (later a cabinet minister and a high civil servant), were on a topographical survey expedition in northern Norway (Vibe 1860:64, 69):

"... when it came to shooting birds in flight from a point in motion, Paludan was the champion. To my surprise I have seen him – not once, but several times – take down the wild goose in quick flight at a considerable height, from the deck of a ship at full speed. Paludan just threw *Dobbeltstyggen* [*The Frightening Double*] to his chin, and without more than a second of aiming the shot went off and the hit bird sank slowly towards the sea. ...

I was sitting below, reading a book, when Peter came in with shining eyes and said: "There's a bear swimming in front of us." I grasped the binoculars and *Fløiten* [*The Flute*], that was always loaded, and ... jumped into the dory."

Example III: Modern man and transport

There is actually a vogue for naming in the public transport sector in Oslo. A recent newspaper heading, "*Düsseldorf* at Majorstua",⁸ was followed by this explanation:

"*Oslo Sporveier* [the communal tramway service of Oslo] has brought the new two-sectioned trams to the baptismal font at Grefsen car barn. ... The passengers may now choose if they will travel with *Düsseldorf*, *Helsinki*, *Gøteborg*, *Grenoble*, *Basel* or *Norrköping*. Or *Oslo*, as one was named, with town councillor Leif Nybø as godparent." (*Akersposten*, 24th Nov.1989).

The names refer to towns in Europe that still have trams. The tramway is very popular in Oslo, and a proposal to paint the blue trams red a few years ago provoked very strong reactions from the public. By naming seven new trams (the older ones have no names), *Oslo Sporveier* tries to prove, according to the jour-

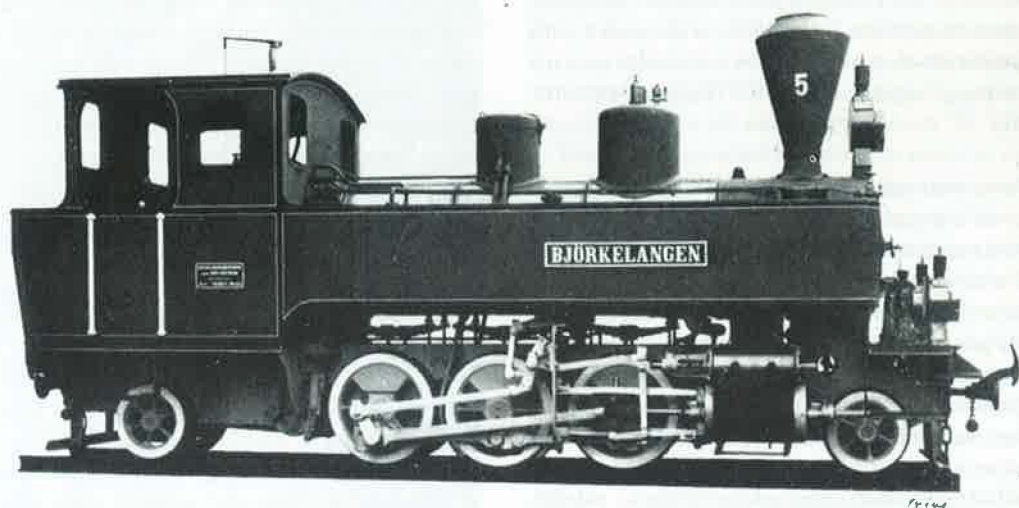


Fig. 4. *Bjørkelangen* was no. 5 of the 7 locomotives of *Urskog-Hølandsbanen*, near Oslo. The photo shows *Bjørkelangen* when delivered in 1924. No.7, the last steam engine delivered in Norway (1950), was named *Prydz*. The identification numbers were painted on them, but people preferred to use the names. Photo UHB, Sørumsand.

nalist, that “the tram has a soul”. Furthermore, the result for the citizens will be “the same personal relations to the tram that have the staff of *Oslo Sporveier*”.

We are so familiar with the custom of individual names for means of transport, and – at least for ships – with baptism ceremonies, that other examples are hardly needed.

For ships, the naming tradition goes as far back as we have knowledge. The custom has spread to almost all means of conveyance. Locomotives and aeroplanes have long been objects of naming. There is a fair chance that the SAS *Ottar Viking* will be parked next to British Airways’ *City of Birmingham* at the Frankfurt airport, or side by side with Air New Zealand’s *Aotea* at the Singapore airport.⁹ Small aircraft used to be named in the early days of aviation, and allied bombers and other military planes from the second world war were commonly named. The custom has been extended to special craft like airships, satellites and space carriers.

Private cars¹⁰ and even bikes may occasionally be named, but far more often vehicles of public transport. In some countries, like the United States, trucks are very commonly



Fig. 5. *Asmund Viking* of the SAS fleet. The viking names add something positive to the image of the Scandinavian Airlines System, just as the royal names do to Bråthen SAFE. Photo SAS.

named. In later years the custom has spread to Scandinavia, where quite a few long-distance trucks now can be seen with a name painted on the door. The same tendency can be observed for tourist busses. There is also a recent tendency to name trams and trains. The inter-city *Pågatogen* in southwestern Sweden is one example among several.

Whatever may have been the motives behind the naming of ships originally, this custom has definitely also become a convention that is rarely broken. One may ask if the naming of all sorts of means of transport may be reduced only to a "contamination" effect from this maritime convention, or whether other motives intermingle. For modern air liners convention seems to be a far more weighty argument for naming than it was for the early veteran biplanes, or for today's trucks and busses.

Giving the names. Practise and principles.

Nordic swords were named after former owners, after the smith, after general appearance or ornamental details, after actual or desired qualities (swords that are lethal, make blood run, break settlements), after their sharpness, after dangerous animals, or after some abstract concepts (honour). Apparently, they were not named when forged or taken in use, but only after having attracted attention because of their appearance or special characteristics, or after having been connected with special persons or events. (KLNm vol.XVII, Falk 1914).

Some of these principles also apply to hunting guns. Named rifles often belonged to well-known hunters, and many of them are associated with dramatic episodes. Many rifles were perhaps named only at a late stage, when they had demonstrated their quality – or their owner's hunting luck.

Guns offer examples of both "public" and "private" names. By public names I mean names known to and used by a group of persons, like the rifle names that folk tradition has preserved for posterity. By private names I mean pet names used only by the owner, like

the *Old Faithful* of the Vermont hunter. Private names are probably quite common, but rarely noted down – if revealed at all by the user. Also, guns might well be named even if they were not associated with special events (Vibe 1860:63):

"We were also equipped with good hunting guns. Paludan had four, Hagerup one and I two. At the time of departure we had careful deliberations about which names to give our excellent guns. Paludan had a heavy rifle, intended for bear and big seal, ... which was named *Sagittarius*. A double-barreled unrifled gun was baptized *Dobbeltstyggén* [*The Frightening Double*], a single-barreled gun for birds *Skovtroldet* [*The Forest Troll*] and another, finer rifle *Kom, men ikke gå* [*Come but don't go*]. Hagerup's gun got the name *Bulderbassen* [*The Blusterer*]. Of my two guns the unrifled one was called *Sjelesørgeren* [*The Curator of Souls*] and an excellent rifle *Fløiten* [*The Flute*]."

The custom of giving names to means of transport is so comprehensive and varies so much with time, place and type of vessel or vehicle, that I can give only a few examples in this brief survey.

For modern crafts like aeroplanes, trains etc., i.e. objects named by companies, there seems to be a tendency to choose historic, geographic and national names. SAS has chosen viking names, Bråthen SAFE Norwegian king names, British Airways names of cities and rivers, etc. Truck names, often painted on the door, are of another type. They are given by the drivers, who often choose personal nick names, humorous or popular names. These "cowboys" of the road, as they call themselves, often use international names; *Black Bandit* is a Danish truck that often roams the Norwegian highways. For busses, the company sometimes selects the names, but very often the drivers themselves hit on names that the companies accept to be painted on the bus.¹¹

For ship names there have been noticeable changes over the centuries. There is a far cry from the names that our forefathers gave their boats, to the many humorous, witty, even flip-

pant names often used for today's leisure boats along the Norwegian coast. Among the former ones we often find pious names, and names that expressed a hope for a safe or lucky voyage. Also, the names of the captain's or owner's wife or daughters were often used, and – in intellectual or bourgeois circles – names with roots in a glorious or mythological past.

The choice of names for artefacts is subject to fashion, as it is for personal names. This is by no means only a modern phenomenon. Vibe (1860:2–3) tells that a *Fridthjov*¹² vogue swept over the country like an epidemic in the 1820ies, and that “big and small ships by the dozen were baptized *Ellida*” – one of his own included. The same has been the case for names of private houses in Norway, a field where foreign influences can be observed. For a long time Danish and German names or name elements have been popular for villas. With the afterwar tourism there has been a tendency to give Spanish, Italian or French names to villas, a custom that has been strongly criticized by linguists. (Hovda 1978).

Identification

After these excursions into three groups of artefacts, it is time to return to the initial question: Do they have anything in common, apart from a proper name?

A proper name always has an *individualizing function*. The name distinguishes the object from other objects of the same class. An important aspect of naming is *identification*.

But identification can normally be secured in other ways: by characterizing attributes, by adding the name of the owner or the producer, by a serial or a registration number, etc. We normally don't name cars, and a registration number is a much more efficient means of identification than a proper name.

There is no absolutely compelling reason to name an aeroplane. Actually, some companies do not mark them by names. The identificatory aspect will hardly ever be the sole reason, perhaps even not the main reason, for naming an inanimate object like an aeroplane. The same might perhaps be contended for boat names, as all boats of a certain size also have a regis-

tration number. Historically, however, boat names have obviously served identificatory purposes. They still do, as names are much easier to remember than numbers, but one may ask why there is such a difference between boats and cars.

This line of argument is all the more valid for weapons. Why should there be any need to identify swords and guns in this spectacular way? The same applies to house and cabin names. “Strictly speaking, nearly all urban house-names are quite unnecessary, save as a treat to the owner's feelings.”, states a British linguist (Cottle 1983:186). Obviously, we must look for other aspects than the identificatory.

Evaluation and emotion

“A treat to the owner's feelings” is clearly a relevant comment, though not a satisfactory analysis. The naming indicates an attitude of some sort towards the artefact, and characterizes the owner more than the artefact.

From an analytical point of view, the term *singularization* may be more appropriate than *individualization*. To “individualize” means “to distinguish between individuals”, “to identify particulars” (hence the identificatory aspect), but has no element of evaluation. The term “singular”, on the other hand, may be paraphrased as “distinguished by superiority”, “set apart from everyday experience”.¹³ Naming an object individualizes it, but also marks it out as singular.

Theoretically, a man may give a proper name to his worn but cherished slippers or his best pipe, or even a pejorative name to an artefact that is a disagreeable but inevitable part of his existence. However, artefacts that are singularized by naming will normally be objects of *high status*. This is an *evaluative aspect* of the man-artefact relation.

The naming of houses and cottages may be seen in this perspective. A villa of one's own, a cabin or a summer house, may represent a longtime cherished dream. Symbolically, they stand for the owner's success in life, in economic, social and personal affairs. The mainframes or computer clusters at my university are



Fig. 6. The gate of a villa in Oslo. *Solvang* is a rather typical name, but the custom of naming houses seems to be receding in an urban environment like Oslo. Photo B.Rogan.

named *Inger*, *Vera*, *Kari*, *Victor* and *Ulrik*. These names serve addressing purposes. But this way of identifying may also be seen as a singularization that pays tribute to their status as technological wonders. A viking was a forceful person, and his name on an airliner undoubtedly adds something to the company's image. In short – an evaluation, and often a positive one.

However, this aspect cannot be decisive. We are surrounded by status objects. Few objects are more indicative of the owner's success than his car, which is rarely named. We can safely assert that most high-status objects will not be given a proper name just because they are high-status objects.

For the singularity of the object, an *emotive aspect* is probably much more important. "The gun was like a living thing to the old hunters ..." says Knut Hermundstad. One of his informants (b.1840, d.1942), who shot more than 300

reindeer with one single rifle, puts it like this: "A good gun is like a friend. If you know her well, you know when she wants game." (1967:23, 21).

As for houses, there is a long tradition for naming, and in some cases the custom needn't be much more than adherence to local convention. However, a house is the material manifestation of the home, and may be conceived of as a refuge in an insecure world, as the safe harbour for the family, full of memories and hopes. In short: "My home is my castle", and no castle without a name. The choice of human personal names for computers may be seen as an effort to prevent a feeling of alienation and a fear of technological inferiority.

The transport sector can illustrate the emotive aspect. Only those bus drivers who regularly drive particular long-distance coaches, and thus acquire special experience with their vehicles, tend to name them. Among Norwegian truck drivers, only those who belong to "the hard core", i.e. "who pass 240 days a year or more in the truck", will be inclined to name their vehicles. These drivers are often the proud owners of big, expensive, well-kept trucks. This man-truck relationship may have a rather peculiar character. "The truck is not only their home during the greater part of the year, but it is also the other woman in their life. So you can see why they give her a name.", a truck driver explained to me.¹⁴

Naming may be a way to admit and to express *the vital importance* of the artefact to its owner. He may owe his life to the high quality of a sword or the perfect functioning of a ship. The welfare or even survival of his family may be dependent upon the hunting rifle. The naming may be interpreted as an attempt to make this dependency a bit less insecure, as a strategy to gain control over physical surroundings by a symbolic act. We are now approaching a metaphysical aspect.

Popular belief and metaphysics

In some cases, this "vital importance" may be felt so much of a burden that a person feels a need to seek relief in forces stronger than himself. The naming may be seen as a symbolical

way of giving life to inanimate things, a belief that the artefact stands in relation with supernatural forces, perhaps even that it is endowed with magic power. This is a *metaphysical aspect* of the man-artefact relation.

Let us return to the named swords. Most of them are described as outstanding weapons, and many were supposed to have *magic qualities*. Those were swords that never missed, swords that always brought victory, cursed swords that caused the death of a man whenever drawn from the sheath, etc. No medieval weapon was so closely linked to superstition as were swords, according to the foremost expert on Germanic weapons (Falk 1914:43):

“Vor allen anderen Waffen wurden mit dem Schwerte abergläubische Vorstellungen verknüpft. Es wurde ihm eine Art persöhnliches Leben beigelegt, das sich u.a. darin kundgab, dass es bei gewissen Gelegenheiten von selbst erklang. ... Die berühmtesten Schwerter waren mit gewissen übernatürlichen Kräften und Eigentümlichkeiten ausgestattet und mussten auf eine bestimmte Weise behandelt werden.”

Durendal, a gift from the king to his vassal and a weapon that served king and Christianity well, was praised for its qualities. It was of vital importance for Roland's career and the unification of Charles' kingdom. The evaluative and emotive criteria are both present. But apart from its formidable qualities¹⁵ and the benediction through relics, it belonged to this world. *Excalibur*, on the other hand, certainly formed a link with strange, supernatural forces. It had emerged from a bewitched lake and disappeared the same way. It always gave its holder victory, and the sheath had healing power.

Similar arguments apply to hunting guns. The names of the famous bear rifles appear in contexts that a modern rationalist would call supernatural. The hunter was alone in a wild and strange nature, a nature sometimes avaricious, sometimes profusely lavish. He might be hunting dangerous animals, or the sustenance of his family might be sorely dependent upon the results. He had to have a comprehensive

knowledge of nature, the game and its habits. But a successful hunter also had to have luck, and luck might perhaps be won through magic.

Popular tradition is full of stories about rifles that never hit or never killed because they were bewitched. Many used to take precautions to pacify the supernatural forces, and very few, if any, took the chance of annoying them. Some hunters were suspected of being in direct contact with these forces. Popular tradition gives plenty of advice for what to do with bewitched rifles, and many strange remedies have been tried, probably far into our time.

Popular beliefs about rifles and swords show interesting parallels. A sword could be made blunt and a gun lose its killing effect by evil people touching them. The remedies were often the same. Amulet-like things were placed in hollows in the butt of the gun, just as relics might be put into sword pommels. Some guns gave a sign, a clicking sound, when there was a chance for a successful hunt. People used to say that some rifles *sa te'* (“told”, “warned”). This is exactly what some swords were said to do, when action was required (cf. Falk above). Fønhus follows a widespread tradition when he lets *Langfredagsrifla* make a clicking sound as the hunter approaches a reindeer. Also, the traditions about the forging of (magic) swords and (supernatural) rifles have much in common. *Langfredagsrifla* got its name because the barrel was forged on Good Friday night in three successive years.

These attitudes are found not only in peasant milieus, but also among the bourgeoisie (Vibe 1860:64–66):

“Most good hunters are superstitious, and this was also the case with [engineer lieutenant] Paludan. One morning ... I found him occupied with a very strange activity. He held *Sagittarius* in front of him, and out of the barrel whipped the tail of a serpent.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Well, both *Sagittarius* and *Dobbeltstyggen* hit very well, but they don't always kill, and that's why I need the serpent.

“Which serpent?”

“Actually, serpents can cure guns that hit but still don't kill.”

"I don't understand."

"Well, if you lead a serpent down the barrel of such a gun, the shot will kill again. That's why I have caught this grass snake and put it into *Sagittarius*. I'm going to get him into *Dobbelt-styggen* afterwards."

"You're superstitious!"

"Call it whatever you like. But it certainly has helped many a hunter and many a gun. ... Perhaps you'd like to try it in *Sjelesørgeren*?"

We shall briefly view naming in the transport sector from this angle. There is much material on ship names and superstition in earlier periods. Are there still traces of such attitudes? Last month the newspapers carried a notice about a craft that is going to be launched next year. It is now decided – after some deliberations – that the name will be *Uredd* [*Intrepid*]. Strong objections had prevented this name from being given to a similar craft in the 1960ies. The reason was that the first *Uredd* sank in 1942. "Strong emotions, mixed with some superstition" was a newspaper comment (*Arbeiderbladet*, 20th Nov. 1989). There is perhaps nothing very remarkable about this hesitation about the name, had it not been for the fact that *Uredd* is a very special artefact: an ultramodern hi-tech one-billion-crowns submarine of the Norwegian navy.

In old (Germanic) tradition, names had protective power. It is also commonly thought that the naming of persons in medieval times was associated with a magic purpose for the future of the child. The name expressed a hope for courage or strength, opulence, good looks, etc. (KLNМ vol.XII:206–09). For a later period, this idea may be illustrated by the naming below. In the early 19th century it was not uncommon that names of the local cargo boats (*jekter*) on the coast of Northern Norway were written in the stern as complete verses. The verses might be long, full of biblical allusions, or short, like this one (Helseth 1928:38–39):

*Elida jeg heder
Gud mig Veien leder
Til Bergen jeg agter
Til Hjemmet jeg tragter.
[Elida is my name
God shows me the way
To Bergen I am heading
For my home I am longing.]*

This "name" expresses a pious attitude, a hope for a prosperous voyage to the commercial center, and a yearning to get safely home.

May naming of artefacts express any purpose today? Is the naming of a modern jumbo-jet nothing but ritual practice? Or is it also a way of appropriating one's surroundings? Naming a truck is certainly a matter of emotive attitudes. Attitudinal factors will vary with the types of objects in question. Man has never hesitated to brave the elements. But sailing the oceans, travelling through air or voyaging in space is not free from risks. Man is constantly a potential victim of aleatory events. Technology can never secure full control. Today, probably very few people believe that a proper name can be of any help. But it can't do any harm, either. So why not stick to old rituals and avoid challenging fate?

Belief in the supernatural is a difficult but inevitable topic in a discussion about the custom of naming artefacts.¹⁶ It is commonly said that such belief wanes in modern societies. But belief in anything, including supernatural beings, is a very elusive phenomenon, historians of religion tell us. Their advice is to characterize such phenomena in terms of attitudinal factors and ritual practice.

Named artefacts, meaning and experience. Summing up.

When an artefact receives a proper name, it is pointed out as singular. This means that a person has an idea about this particular artefact and its qualities. This idea will be part of the cognitive contents of the artefact – for him, but perhaps not for others.

Artefacts have a broad cognitive potential. *Technological information* may be derived from their form and use. However, for a study

of technical aspects of tools, craft, houses etc., the naming is irrelevant. Also, artefacts serve communicative purposes as medium for *intentional messages*, i.e. symbolic meaning based on convention. For studies of such dynamic processes between persons, the naming of artefacts may perhaps be of some interest.

But there is a third field of meaning, that the proper names lead us to. In table, I have earlier argued for a division in three of the cognitive contents of artefacts (Rogan 1987). Most objects are carriers of meaning, or *private associations*, that individuals put into them. Until recently, this aspect of our material surroundings has been avoided by students of culture. One reason is of course that intersubjective control is hardly possible. The artefacts are indicative of cognitive structures that none but the owners have full access to.

The phenomenon of naming artefacts is so taken for granted that it may seem banal to make a problem of it. Still, the custom may perhaps shed light on an important but elusive aspect of material culture, and offer a gateway to a more systematic discussion of the relationship between persons and their surroundings, between the self and the artefact. This presupposes that naming artefacts is a phenomenon that takes place both on an individual and a collective level, cf. the examples of "private" versus "public" naming.

The naming of artefacts must obviously be seen in the light of conventions. But it will hardly ever be a matter of *pure* convention. It will also serve some practical function and satisfy some personal need. Admittedly, the conventional aspect is very strong when it comes to naming leisure yachts, houses and airliners today. But historically, at least, the conventions must have grown out of some motive or attitude. In table I, I have used the concept of *mode* to mark the cases where the conventional aspect must be considered important.

On the surface, these artefacts are linked together by a nonphysical feature, their proper name. The analysis has shown that this mass of artefacts does not form "a cultural category" distinct from other artefacts. The discussion of a seemingly homogenous phenomenon has

disclosed a bundle of functions and aspects, or "attitudinal factors" (Table I).

Table I

Function	Aspect	Mode
1. Individualization	Identifying	Conventional
2. Singularization	Evaluative	Conventional
3. Singularization	Emotive	Individual
4. Singularization	Metaphysical	Individual

For a named artefact, the identifying aspect is always present. But no inanimate object will ever be individualized through naming unless there is a need to singularize it, for evaluative, emotive or metaphysical reasons. These three aspects, or attitudes, are not of equal importance for the naming; the two latter ones are by far the most important.

It may be argued that aspects 2, 3 and 4 belong to a continuum, rather than being absolute categories. The analysis has shown that there is seldom one single attitudinal factor behind the naming. My old slippers (if they should happen to be named) will be named only for emotive reasons, and so must also be the case for *Old Faithful*, the retired captain's shotgun. But many hunting rifles were named for both emotive and metaphysical reasons. There are evaluative, emotive and metaphysical reasons for naming the sword *Excalibur*.

The common characteristic for named artefacts is perhaps that *they have been invested with more meaning than most artefacts*: memories of what has been, pride and delight, hope and fear, sometimes even a link with cosmic forces. The artefact mirrors its owner's experience, an experience based on his interaction with other people, with nature and – eventually – with cosmos. Artefacts are integrated and indissoluble parts of experience. Thus, artefacts may be said to play an active role in the creation of meaning. This is valid for all "material culture", but all the more so for the named artefacts. The old (credulous) hunters experienced nature, with its explicable and inexplicable traits, through their rifles.

Rationalist tradition, including modern structuralist approaches, tend to claim that

meaning occurs because of structures of the mind, and not through and by experience. One effect of this claim is the separation of ideas and material manifestations, as is reflected for example in several current versions of the culture concept. This essay may be read as a somewhat critical comment on this tradition. Meaning is created through interaction between man and his surroundings, and in this process artefacts are instrumental.¹⁷

Notes

1. All translations from Norwegian to English by the author.
2. Relics were, in certain contexts, also a commodity of considerable economic interest. See Appadurai & al. 1987. The *Graal*, the cup that had been used to collect the blood of Jesus on the cross, was one of the supreme Christian symbols. The quest for the holy *Graal* was a main preoccupation of king Arthur and the knights of the round table. But the *Graal* also has several traits of the "wishing object".
3. Odin's magic bracelet *Draupne* and the sinister ring *Andvare* are two among many. The magic force of rings, as it is handed down to us through Germanic, Latin and Celtic legends, has been skilfully exploited by J.R.R. Tolkien in his masterly fiction trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*.
4. We have a reminiscence of the naming of bows in *Gråsuli* (informed by professor Olav Bø). The axe *Ættarfylgja* appears in Kristin Undset's novels about Olav Audunssøn. The knife *Flusi*, preserved in the collections of Sogn Folkemuseum, is reputed to have been used for killing an ogre.
5. Falk 1914:47-64 lists 176 proper names for swords. KLNLM vol.XVII:544 says "approximately 100 known sword names".
6. Examples are the legend from Setesdal about Harde-Aslak and his sword *Kalledreng* (Liestøl 1927), and the Norwegian version of the popular ballad about *Roland and Dyrumdali*.
7. All translations from Old French to English by the author.
8. *Majorstua* is a town area of Oslo.
9. The custom of officially naming airplanes is not universal. Several airlines do not paint names on the machines.
10. In Norway, named cars are found mainly among youngsters having their first car, and, more commonly, for *russebiler* (cars belonging to high school graduates).
11. Interviews with truck and bus drivers in the Oslo area Dec. 1989.
12. The old saga about Fridtjov and Ingeborg became immensely popular in the early years of the 19th century, thanks to E.Tegnér's version

(1825). Fridtjov had three very valuable things: a magnificent ring, the sword *Angervadil* and the ship *Ellide*, which was the best one in the Nordic countries and could understand what people said.

13. The term *singularization* (individual and cultural, private and collective) has been used by Igor Kopytoff in Appadurai & al. (1986), but in an other sense (= "not for sale"), and primarily as opposed to *commodification* of artefacts. Kopytoff has not treated artefacts with proper names.
14. Interviews with truck and bus drivers in the Oslo area, Dec. 1989.
15. Like many famous swords, it was supposed to be "forged by elves", and thus so sharp that it could "cleave the Pyrénées".
16. Anthropology and history of religion have treated similar phenomena in terms of fetishism, animism, animatism, totemism, mana etc. I have avoided these terms, as some are closely related to specific theories or historical phases of the disciplines and now discarded, others to particular (exotic) cultures.
17. See Csikszentmihalyi 1987 for a further discussion of this topic.

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