

Studying Material Culture. Origins and Premises

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER CONTENTS

This chapter has two main sections which:

- review the interdisciplinary origins of material culture studies
- summarise the basic premises of the material culture approach.

The nature and growth of material culture studies

This chapter introduces the most important disciplinary influences in the formation of what is understood as the material culture perspective. Studies of material culture have a multidisciplinary history, and their origins can be traced to a range of theoretical literatures and research traditions, some of which have faded in their popularity and others which are burgeoning. The fields of research discussed are: (i) evolutionary anthropology, (ii) modern sociology and social theory, (iii) marketing and psychological approaches to consumer behaviour, (iv) consumption studies within sociology, and (v) the new anthropologies of consumption and economic behaviour.

Evolutionary anthropology and the exhibition of cultural difference

Early studies of material culture had a relatively narrow focus and existed within anthropology to document and categorise the material expressions of diverse human cultures. The first studies of material culture catalogued and described objects, generally of non-western or, more specifically, non-European origin. These were often objects and technologies such as

spears, knives or shields. The manifest goal of these studies was to use such artefacts as a means for retrospectively understanding human behaviour and culture. However, the latent effect was to objectify, hierarchise and marginalise the cultural expressions of non-western cultures. During the zenith period for museum collecting – the 'museum age', formally between 1880–1920 (Jacknis, 1985: 75) – such displays of material culture performed a perverse educative role by demonstrating evolutionary stages and models of cultural development, and implicitly communicating the superiority of western culture.

A novel way of ordering material culture for viewers' gaze that performed an educative role was pioneered by Franz Boas at the beginning of the twentieth century. Termed the 'life group' arrangement, the idea was to build a realistic, scale model which scenically represented some aspect of social life as it was supposed to have been practised (Jacknis, 1985). Models were dressed appropriately, within particular social contexts, and were typically depicted engaging in some aspect of work or art production. A savvy cultural audience might now read with some irony Boas' accompanying captions, which allow us to visualise the style of these displays: 'A woman is seen making a cedar-bark mat, rocking her infant, which is bedded in cedar-bark, the cradle being moved by means of a cedar-bark rope attached to her toe' (Boas, cited in Jacknis, 1985: 100).

There was a strong preoccupation in these early manifestations of material culture studies with ordering and arranging collections of the artefacts of 'others'. Consequently, debates ensued over the principles of organising presentations of such artefacts that centred upon either evolutionary or comparative, and geographic principles. An intriguing example was Pitt Rivers (a.k.a. A.H. Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers) who first became interested in the progression of rifle and musket models as a result of his time as a British military officer (Chapman, 1985). Rivers could be characterised as a keen, even obsessive, amateur collector who had academic tendencies. He possessed an apparent heroic desire to provide public instruction and articulate a type of universal material order through the objects he assembled. Rivers' overseas military career afforded him the perfect opportunity to amass a variety of artefacts and his burgeoning collection began to attract interest from academic ethnographers and museums. His collection was eventually to be housed in a newly built annex of Oxford University Museum in 1884. Rivers' interests were evolutionary and ethnological – using material culture to 'trace all mankind back to a single source and to reconstruct the history of human racial differentiation and interconnection' (Chapman, 1985: 39).

Over time, the ethnological principle that informed the basis of such collections aroused suspicion, and was increasingly interpreted as problematic for it implicitly attached a hierarchical ordering of value to the artefacts of other cultures. Moreover, the emptiness and isolation of objects presented apart from their original cultural and spatial contexts was seen as unsatisfactory. Rather than developing as a discrete discipline of

inquiry, material culture became integrated into anthropological inquiry generally, with objects used principally for evidence and illustrative purposes related to larger anthropological themes and narratives. No specific interest in the sub-discipline of material culture studies endured. Up until the 1960s and 1970s the field was predominantly colonised by archaeologists who had a specific interest in the analysis of materials, and by museum scholars and practitioners whose task it was to document and present cultural artefacts. Readers interested in contemporary debates on the meanings of material culture in museum contexts should consult the numerous very useful works by Susan M. Pearce.

Sociological theories of modernity: commodities and the values of modern society

A central theme within classical political economy, sociology and cultural theory from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries concerns the contradictory effects of the great productive capacities of burgeoning capitalist economies. In this body of literature capitalism is acknowledged to have an immense capacity to produce a surfeit of consumption objects. However, there is an underlying suspicion about what such excesses of consumer objects could do to individuals, and society generally. Within these discourses it is not the actual objects or consumption practices of actors that theorists are concerned with. Rather, these literatures are really discourses on the ethics and ideologies of consumption objects, and the burgeoning culture of materialism more broadly.

Adam Smith saw the tendency to admire and strive for the vices, follies and fashions of the wealthy, as goals which lead to the sacrifice of wisdom and virtue, and ultimately as 'the universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments' (Smith, 1969[1759]: 84). While it is Marx who represents the most radical manifestation of this line of thought, such sentiments also find unique, sometimes more or less subtly cultural expressions, in a number of other works. These include Veblen's acerbic critique of the pecuniary nature of taste judgements (1899[1934]), Simmel (1904[1957]) on fashion and style (1997a, 1997b) within modern contexts, Bataille (1985) on abundance and the expenditure of 'useless splendours' that define capitalism, and Sombart's (1967[1913]) analysis of the role of luxury goods in the genesis of capitalism.

Later chapters will focus on these authors in more detail. However, in introducing their ideas as part of this group of classical modern writers concerned with material culture, we can turn to Simmel and Marx to briefly distinguish two dominant threads in classical analyses of material culture. First, to Karl Marx's writing on the commodity as a symbol of estranged labour. Marx acknowledged that the wealth of capitalist societies was based on their ability to accumulate capital through producing an immense array of commodity objects. For Marx, one of the principal characteristics of being human is to fashion an objective world. It is by

understanding the objective world of things or objects that humans can understand themselves: 'man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created' (Marx, 1975: 329). As the fundamental objective unit of production and consumption, the commodity object symbolises both the glorious success and the exploitative basis of capitalism. The political economy of production also entails a significant loss for workers. Capitalism 'produces marvels for the rich, but it produces privation for the worker. It produces palaces, but hovels for the worker' (Marx, 1975: 325). As later chapters of this work show, Marx had a deep suspicion – bordering on outright hostility – toward the objects of capitalist economic production, and saw objects of consumption as the embodiment of exploitative capitalist relations.

Of the classical sociologists who charted early forms of modernity and capitalism, it is Georg Simmel who had the most explicit interest in how material culture defined the nature of modern experience. A foundational element of Simmel's work was the insight that the modern economy precipitated an unprecedented multiplication in the numbers of things, objects and materials. In recognising this Simmel makes a similar observation to Marx, yet he goes further in exploring the cultural and experiential implications of this observation. His fundamental claim is that this ever-growing body of things becomes increasingly important in the mediation and experience of modern life. In particular, as objects multiply in style and type they are appropriated by individuals to differentiate themselves. Further, objects perform a tragic role by creating a distance between the human sphere and the sphere of material things, which is increasingly out of the grasp of people. This becomes the basis of modern reification and alienation.

Simmel's sociological interests were diverse, to the extent that his work was considered by some as brittle and shallow (see Frisby, 1992: 68–101). Furthermore, he did not pursue any methodologically formal analysis of material culture as understood by anthropologists of the day. But despite this apparent diversity and – perhaps – superficiality, much of his work is centrally about the dialectical, contradictory forces that propelled modernity – the problem of individual differentiation within the context of the peculiarly modern trajectory of uniformity and solidarity. Simmel was interested in understanding the nature of relations between individuals, which he termed 'forms of sociation'. Crucially, objects played a significant part in mediating these forms of sociation. Simmel's interest in objects can be partly understood as an element of his overarching concern with the role of the senses on social life – particularly the sense of sight – and with the experience of metropolitan life in the burgeoning cities of Europe. Both of these interrelated elements privilege the role of objects in mediating forms of sociation.

It is not just the objects of money and fashion that Simmel writes about, he also has essays on the symbolic capacities of objects such as bridges,

doors, handles, picture frames and domestic interiors. His masterly analysis of fashion and style is essentially an attempt to understand processes that propelled modernity, and in turn their impact on the psycho-social development of the modern person. Fashion and style represented much more than merely clothes, home decoration or manners; they were fundamental processes of modern social life, in fact, 'a universal phenomenon in the history of our race' (Simmel, [1904]1957: 53). Processes of conflict, compromise, elevation and adaptation, all serve the basic Simmelian dialectic: generality/uniformity versus individuality/differentiation. The clarity of Simmel's understanding means that even though his analysis of fashion and style are arguably flawed and anachronistic in some ways, much of what he says provokes interest and rings true for present-day lay and specialist readers alike.

Marketing and psychological approaches to consumer behaviour

There are some excellent research contributions within this oeuvre that genuinely advance knowledge on matters of consumption and the nature and meaning of human-object relations, whatever discipline or approach one identifies with. Those with more of a cultural interest may not take to the psychological, positivist flavour of much of this research, in its attempt to develop clear measures and means for studying people-object relations. However, this research approach has some advantages over other styles. Take work by Belk (1985, 1988, 1995; Belk et al., 1989), Wallendorf (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988) and Kleine and Kernan (1991) (also Kleine et al., 1995) in the field of marketing and consumer research, and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Schultz et al. (1989) within the field of psychology, as examples of such universally excellent research. These are, however, high profile and exceptional exemplars. A significant amount of research in this field is indeed unsatisfying from a cultural perspective, leaving the work of major research figures within the fields of sociology of consumption and cultural anthropology, particularly European and British scholars, unconsidered. By focusing predominantly on the psychological elements of human-object relations this work precludes understanding consumption and materialism as cultural practices and values that generate social inequality and difference. Yet, these types of studies do succeed in an important way, for while sociologists and social theorists have persistently referred to the salience of identity management in contemporary consumption processes without attention to empirical settings and processes, these studies have fostered advances by empirically exploring the way self-identities are generated by processes of attachment to, integration of, and individuation, based on relations with material culture (e.g. Schultz et al., 1989). Their high level of conceptual clarification and specification, and attention to empirical detail, gives such psychological studies advantages.

For example, in a unique study Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) use a triangulated methodology with samples of respondents from USA and

Niger to explore the notion of favourite objects. Their theoretical premise is that objects serve a fundamental psychological function by providing a material site for attachment of meaning. Following Douglas and Isherwood ([1996][1979]), they assert that rather than being about materialism, acquisition is about meaning making and intelligibility of one's cultural universe. Their key findings are as follows: the US sample is more instrumental and materialistic in their focus on possessions as a key goal of consumption; females select biographical and family-based items while males select objects to reflect mastery and accomplishment; and young people's consumption is pleasure-based compared to older respondents who emphasise intergenerational bonds.

Much of this genre of research is associated with marketing, business and consumer research studies, most strongly developed in North America, whose main aim is to apply scientific research techniques in order to understand consumer behaviour. The ultimate goal is to market and sell products more effectively. The end result of such research is not necessarily to understand patterns of consumption or materialism (let alone to challenge them as core cultural values), but to actually advance materialist values by generating more accurate, and ultimately strategic, understandings of consumer behaviour. As Rose points out concerning the government of consumption: 'It is the expertise of market research, of promotion and communication, underpinned by the knowledges and techniques of subjectivity, that provide the relays through which the aspirations of ministers, the ambitions of business and the dreams of consumers achieve mutual translatability' (Rose, 1992: 155). What is interesting about this research is that it seems to thrive in North America, where consumerist and materialist values reign, and suggests an association between thriving marketing faculties and materialist societies. This speculation aside, through careful selection, scholars of material culture could make profitable use of such literatures – paying limited attention to those which are most strongly empirically abstracted and acultural, but engaging with those which make genuine connections between consumer psychology and cultural narrative and forms.

Consumption studies within sociology

Attention to objects as rudimentary elements of consumer culture has acquired renewed status in socio-cultural accounts of consumption processes in late-modern societies. While sociologists and political economists have historically had an enduring concern for the material constituents of culture and consumption broadly (Goffman, 1951; Marx, [1954][1867]); Simmel, 1904[1957]; Sombart, 1967[1913]; Veblen, 1899[1934]), the recent interest in the material objects of consumption has developed in the context of prominent socio-cultural accounts of contemporary consumerism and, in turn, the emphasis these have given to the material basis of consumption processes (Appadurai, 1986; Douglas and Isherwood,

[1996] 1979; Miller, 1987; Riggins, 1994). Moreover, the optimism generated by the emergent material culture perspective within sociological studies of consumption seems in part a reaction to the excesses of prominent celebratory accounts of postmodern consumption. Such accounts embraced the expressive, astrultural and aesthetic possibilities of particular types of consumption, and associated them theoretically with identity-maintenance, choice and freedom, and reflexivity. Emerging from some of the key texts in European and British social theory and cultural studies published from the 1970s onward, these accounts located consumption at the core of contemporary processes of social change and introduced a variety of concepts which were theoretically rich and novel. However, it could be argued that they were also generally without systematic empirical warrant or methodological sophistication, and have latterly been seen to place too much emphasis on the expressive and identity aspects of consumption. They were successful in narrating the apparent tempo of the era and sketching macro scale social changes, but often inadequate in specifying, measuring and empirically tempering the claims they established.

The gist of the postmodern claim is that consumption has been aestheticised and semiotised by recent processes of hyper-commodification (Featherstone, 1991; Jameson, 1991[1984]; Lash and Urry, 1994). The contrast made commonplace in commentary on consumption processes is that if consumption could ever be characterised in historical perspective as typically utilitarian – that is, being essentially a question of utility in use – then by contrast it is now characteristically constructive: identity-forming, reflexive, expressive and even playful.

Featherstone's account of the contours of contemporary consumer culture is principally indebted to the theoretical work established by Jameson (1991[1984]), Lash and Urry (1987) and Harvey (1989) and the semiotic analyses of Baudrillard ([1996][1968]) and Barthes, (1967, 1993[1957]), who established new ground by the application of semiotic techniques to everyday consumer culture. Featherstone's analysis of the move to a postmodern consumer culture finds the concept of lifestyle to have particular salience in a postmodern regime of consumption. Of the three approaches to consumer culture Featherstone (1990) outlines, he chooses to emphasise the role of pleasure and desire in framing recent consumption practices. The development of a postmodern consumer culture rests on an assumption about the use of goods as communicators, not just utilities. Featherstone sees this trend as a component of what he has labelled 'the aestheticization of everyday life' (1992), for in a society where the commodity sign dominates, by default each person must be a symbolic specialist.

There are two relevant applications of Featherstone's (1991) discussion of aestheticisation which are applicable to consumer culture, or at least some social fractions of it. The first is where life is conceptualised as a project of style, where originality, taste and aesthetic competence are

measures of success and superiority (1991: 67), and thus become important motivators for social action. This is a style project that is not merely accomplished by the outlay of sheer sums of disposable income. While Featherstone assigns the avant-garde and intellectuals an important role in the dissemination of new consumption ideas – and he also endorses Bourdieu's (1984) emphasis on the new middle classes as the fiscal backbone of the consumer economy – all classes are held to approach the project of lifestyle with an outlook Featherstone labels 'calculating hedonism, a calculus of stylistic effect and an emotional economy' (1991: 86). The notion of lifestyle is particularly useful for Featherstone's formulation of consumer culture, because it suggests how people act as postmodern symbol processors through the coherent and meaningful deployment of symbols that exist within 'economies' of commodity objects:

Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle. The modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, decoration, car and other activities which are to be read in terms of the presence and absence of taste. (Featherstone, 1991: 86)

The cultural and postmodern turn in consumption studies rests substantially on a scepticism concerning the totalising claims of the critical or neo-Marxist approach to consumption which has stressed the manipulative, ideological nature of consumer capitalism (for example, Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987[1944]; Marcuse, 1976 [1964]). The logic behind this flight from critical versions of consumption theory is built in part on the substantial body of literature that has recently emerged concerning social and economic processes of spatialisation and semiotisation associated with what have been labelled 'late' (Jameson, 1991) forms of capitalism (see also Beck, 1992; Harvey, 1989; Lash and Urry, 1987, 1994). The groundwork of this approach rests on the identification of a variety of fundamental transformations in the circulation of global capital, and an array of associated cultural changes (tellingly understood as a mere 'dependent variable'), which generally include shifts in the way consumer objects are produced and consumed. A principal claim advanced in this literature is that the nature of consumption has changed as capitalism spatialises and semiotises in unique ways at an accelerated pace; and as a corollary, consumption is commonly theorised as an important sphere for reflexively monitoring self-trajectories and for generating a social identity. As part of their theorisation of flexible flows of capital and signs, Lash and Urry exemplify this view in their description of the consumption component of these regimes of reflexive accumulation:

What is more important is the process of *Enttraditionalisierung*, of the decline of tradition which opens up a process of *individualization* in which structures

such as the family, corporate groups and even social class location, no longer determine consumption decisions for individuals. Whole areas of lifestyle and consumer choice are freed up and individuals are forced to decide, to take risks, to bear responsibilities, to be actively involved in the construction of their own identities for themselves, to be enterprising consumers. (Lash and Urry, 1994: 61)

The new anthropologies of consumption and economic behaviour

It is from within the discipline of anthropology that some of the most influential recent works on the cultural aspects of consumption have emerged. These new approaches are distinguished by the application of anthropological concepts and methodologies to contemporary consumption settings and practices, such as shopping, fashion and home decoration. While there are strong and influential bodies of related work within sociology, North American consumer research, anthropology, psychology and sociology which deal with objects have already been highlighted (and), contemporary manifestations of material culture studies have principally been drawn around the work of Daniel Miller. Miller's status as a virtual one-person industry in material culture studies is based mainly on the groundbreaking achievements of his work *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987) and the large volume of work published since then. Its principal accomplishment was to show how material culture studies could be profitably applied to studies of contemporary consumption, using concepts from across the disciplines of anthropology, philosophy and sociology. Though in this work Miller deals primarily with the abstract and philosophical dimensions of objects as material culture, throughout it he retains an interest in modern life and its fundamental processes as they were understood in classical social theory: individualisation, materialism, alienation and objectification. In prefacing this work Miller suggested that the re-emergence of the field of material culture studies may give hitherto unconnected threads in an otherwise homeless and residual field of inquiry 'a new integrity as a basis for tackling topics such as mass consumption' (1987: vii). Judged against this goal, the success of *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* is undisputed, as this aspiration has been substantially realised. In 1996, Miller and Tilley became the founding editors of the *Journal of Material Culture*, whose broad concern they defined as interdisciplinary research dealing with 'the ways in which artefacts are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities' (Miller and Tilley, 1996: 5).

The other significant accomplishment of *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* was to provide a new analytic focal point for studies of consumption and to actually name the framework of 'material culture' as a field for common inquiry. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood ([1996]1979) may have managed the same some years earlier had they used something other than the term 'goods' to proclaim their interest in

anthropological accounts of contemporary consumption. This disciplinary defining aspect of Miller's success must be understood within the evolution of the field of consumption studies. Consumption studies within sociology and cultural studies flourished in the 1980s via emerging accounts of postmodernity and its basis in expressive, consumption-based reflexivities and identities. But in the 1990s fresh empirical accounts and re-evaluations by leading scholars surfaced that questioned some of the extravagant and unfounded claims in the literature. These criticisms were based particularly around the focus on particular forms of consumption as the foundation for generalising postmodern accounts. In contrast, by emphasising the transformative capacities people possess when they deal with objects, the material culture approach had the advantage of encouraging a grounded, empirical focus that addresses mutual relations between people and consumer objects.

Material culture studies may once have had a coherent basis within the discipline of anthropology, as a strand of evolutionary anthropology. However contemporary studies of material culture have developed a strongly interdisciplinary nature. Various disciplines have as their concern aspects of material culture: art history, design and fashion studies, architecture and landscape design, consumer research and marketing studies. All of these disciplines deal with aspects of material culture as their principal empirical focus. However, with the exception of consumer research and marketing studies, they are not centrally connected to the current scholarship associated with the growth of material culture studies, nor would they necessarily identify themselves as practising material culture studies. Likewise, there are various sub-disciplinary concerns within sociology that commonly deal with material culture as part of their inquiry, for example, studies of the body and body modification, urban and spatial studies, and technology studies. Few scholars within this field would be likely to explicitly identify themselves as doing material culture studies, though within the field of technology studies Michael (2000: 3) is one who has explicitly identified studies of mundane technologies and their role in mediating everyday life as part of material culture studies. Despite the tendency to celebrate the inclusiveness of an interdisciplinary approach, there is some danger in including all and sundry accounts of material objects within the field of material culture studies, simply because they study objects or artefacts in some way.

Basic premises of the material culture approach

Having surveyed various disciplinary bases and origins of theory and research into material culture, the next section generalises about the common assumptions of these diverse approaches. Such principles are not necessarily directly manifest in each of the individual approaches previously

discussed, nor are they an attempt to constitute a type of mantra on how to practise legitimate material culture studies. Rather, the following principles provide the rationale and foundational assumptions that underpin these diverse approaches to accounting for objects.

Interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary inquiry

The first characteristic that defines the contemporary field of material culture studies is its interdisciplinary approach and cross-disciplinary focus. Interdisciplinarity refers to studies of material culture that make use of multiple disciplines – for example, sociology, history, anthropology and psychology – as complementary elements of their explanation. In this interdisciplinary model, no discipline is given authority over explanations of material culture as each is seen to enhance the insights of the other. This is important because no object has a single interpretation – objects are always polysemous and capable of transformations of meaning across time and space contexts. For example, in his important examination of the process of commoditisation of objects, Kopytoff (1986) intertwines history, philosophy, anthropology and sociology to show how objects undergo changes in status and meaning over time, and across cultural spaces. Furthermore, there is an inherent diversity of analytic methodologies deployed within material culture studies, broadly ranging from formal structuralism and semiotic interpretations, to ethnography, interviewing and observational studies.

The idea of cross-disciplinarity is quite different. The cross-disciplinary nature of material culture studies means that discrete studies of material culture are undertaken across multiple disciplines, but do not necessarily make use of interdisciplinary approaches. For example, the North American tradition of consumer research and business studies is generally, though not exclusively, associated with psychological, positivist approaches to studying human-object relations (the work of Belk and Wallendorf are prominent exceptions to this generalisation). The restrictive and exclusive focus of this style of research means that one generally does not find reference to important sociological or anthropological traditions within it, even to those one might consider being amongst the most important and influential – including Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Mauss or Simmel. Yet, on the other hand, many important questions are addressed within this broadly positivist oeuvre using well-conceptualised, novel empirical approaches that build upon accumulated research findings from within the restricted field. To date, both approaches have tended to largely ignore each other's work. It is also accurate to say that the discipline-bounded focus of much psychological research into material culture has been generally overlooked by sociologists and anthropologists, save a few prominent exceptions such as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and the work of Belk on collectorship (1995) and materialism (1985, 1995).

Objects matter

The fundamental conviction of material culture studies is that objects do matter for culture and society, and that social analysis should take account of objects in theorising culture and how it works. Even though the tradition of studying elements of material culture is relatively long, like theorists who have argued that social theory has too long ignored space, emotions, or the body, theorists of material culture are attempting to 're-materialise' social theory through an attunement to people-object relations. This is precisely the agenda that underlies Daniel Miller's case for studying material culture. He notes the contradiction that 'academic study of the specific nature of the material artefact produced in society has been remarkably neglected ... This lack of concern with the nature of the artefact appears to have emerged simultaneously with the quantitative rise in the production and mass distribution of material goods' (Miller, 1987: 3). But why are objects held to matter? The answer is not just because they are more plentiful or ubiquitous, but because they are involved in social representation or symbolisation, and are recognised as containing important meanings for social action. Thus, as semiotic studies of objects illustrate, objects represent or symbolise some aspect of culture, and have cultural resonance because they are recognised by members of a society or social group. So, objects represent and are recognised within society.

Not only do we constantly engage with objects in a direct, material way we also live in a world where objects are represented as images and have global mobility. This means that understanding the 'social lives' (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) of objects is one of the keys to understanding culture. In his efforts to develop an alternative political economy that understands the processes which underpin people-object relations, Baudrillard (1981, 1996[1968]) writes persuasively in favour of a social theory that takes account of objects, which up until now had 'only a walk-on role in sociological research' (1981: 31). Baudrillard expresses a desire to see objects in terms of their general structure of social behaviour, and 'as the scaffolding for a global structure of the environment' (1981: 36). More recently, Miller (1998b) has asserted that, in the first instance, things or objects – rather than people alone – do matter in studies of culture. By focusing on objects in a way that is inclusive of the subjects who use them and of their motives and meanings, such approaches avoid fetishisation of material culture. In showing how objects matter, Harré (2002) suggests that all objects belong to material and expressive orders. The former relates to their practical utility, and the latter component to their role in helping to create social hierarchies of honour and status. He usefully reminds the reader that social life can be seen to be made up of a series of symbolic exchanges which construct and manage meanings (ie. 'culture'), and that such exchanges cannot be accomplished without the help of material things. What's more, this means that the narrative – storylines,

talk, conversation and interaction – and the material orders cannot be separated, for to 'become relevant to human life material beings must be interpreted for them to play a part in human narrative' (Harré, 2002: 32).

A concern with the cultural efficacy of objects has enduring salience within sociology and anthropology, and includes some of the foundational statements within each discipline by, for example, Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Malinowski, Mauss and Veblen. While these texts are not always, and not principally, concerned with objects or material culture directly as are today's studies, objects do play an important role in these canonical analyses of society and culture. What distinguishes these classical, modern studies of society from current material culture studies is that current studies have a direct interest in people-object relations as the prime motive and aim of their analytical work. For example, Marx spoke of objects within his larger theory of capitalist development, Durkheim of objects as representations of fundamental classes of things as either sacred or profane, and Veblen of the ability of objects to show off luxury and beauty. In current studies of material culture the object-person relation is the direct focus of inquiry, and taken to be a matter of interest in its own right. This means there is a greater potential for material culture to be theorised and conceptualised in more sophisticated ways, made central to the theoretical narratives and arguments of researchers, and become more pivotally imbricated in the articulation of social actions and outcomes.

Objects have social lives

One of the basic insights of recent conceptualisations of material culture studies has been the idea that objects have 'social lives' (Appadurai, 1986) or 'biographies' (Kopytoff, 1986). Essentially, this means that in modern societies, where meanings and interpretations attached to images are relatively flexible and fluid, objects have careers or trajectories whereby their meaning for consumers changes over time and space. As Kopytoff (1986) points out, this may involve objects shifting in and out of commodity status. That is, at some stage of their lives, objects are primarily defined by their relation to a monetary or exchange value which defines them as 'commodities', while at other times, generally some time after an economic exchange has taken place, they become 'de-commodified' as they are incorporated – or 'subjectified' (Miller, 1987) and 'singularised' (Kopytoff, 1986) – by people according to personal meanings, relationships or rituals. For example, Corrigan (1997) uses the example of a pet, such as a cat, to illustrate this distinction. When the cat is engaged in a pet store it is primarily a commodity, yet when its future owner exchanges cash for it and brings it home, its commodity status dissipates and the pet is primarily defined by its relations to its new owners and 'family'. Kopytoff (1986) also gives the case of art to explain this process. An iconic piece of modern art is principally defined by its commodity status when it enters the market for sale, for example when it is displayed in an

auctioneer's room in preparation for sale. Yet, once purchased, it re-enters the sphere of 'art' once more, and is presumably put on display as a symbol of beauty, status or the good aesthetic taste of its new owner.

The trajectories and biographies of objects are not just related to their commodity status, but to more complex meanings and interpretations given to them by individuals, restricted taste communities (such as those who appreciate avant-garde, or fans of a particular pop group or television show) and larger social groups (such as social classes, or 'tribes', see Maffesoli, 1996). The underlying assumption of this argument is that in complex, differentiated, pluralistic societies inhabited by omnivorous, knowledgeable and flexible consumers, the rules or criteria for discriminating and classifying the worth of material culture are diffuse and variable. As Kopytoff states (1986: 78–9):

...the public culture offers discriminating classifications here no less than it does in small scale societies. But these must constantly compete with classifications by individuals and by small networks, whose members also belong to other networks expounding yet other value systems. The discriminating criteria that each individual or network can bring to the task of classification are extremely varied. Not only is every individual's or network's version of exchange spheres idiosyncratic and different from those of others, but it also shifts contextually and biographically as the originators' perspectives, affiliations and interests shift. The result is a debate not only between people and groups, but within each person as well.

Hebdige's (1988) essay on the networks of production and consumption meanings and discourses which construct the life of the Italian scooter is a seminal illustration of how commodities have such trajectories. The 'scooter' is, of course, a small wheeled, low-capacity cycle with a flat, open platform and engine mounted over the rear wheel. The first scooters were the 'Vespa', manufactured by Piaggio in 1946, and the 'Lambretta', produced by Innocenti in 1947. The scooters were originally targeted to continental women, and youths in general, who were the new, emergent consumers of the era. The scooters offered mobility and freedom, and were marketed as an object that carried possible emancipatory effects for young women. In 1950s Britain, the scooter acquired a strong association with 'Italianness' and continental style and sophistication, which for design and aesthetics conscious British consumers symbolised 'everything that was chic and modern' (Hebdige, 1988: 106). In the late 1950s and 1960s the scooter was appropriated by Mod youth as an identity marker which fitted their sartorial and musical preferences and aspirations. Customisation and accessorisation of the scooter followed, as did the establishment of rules for scooter wear, and an associated 'correct' way of riding.

Turning to more recent phases in the biography of the scooter, what can be noted is that scooters remain associated with youth, and particularly inner-city consumers due to their economy, size and mobility. Readers

may be familiar with the image of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver scooting in and out of East London laneways on his way to find the 'freshest seafood', 'most pungent herbs' and 'matured cheeses'. Once again, the scooter is a lifestyle accessory, appropriated to suit the gentrified, inner-city market. Just as Hebdige has written the biography of the scooter, so other pop culture objects spring to mind as having their own careers: the Doc Marten boot which was once skinhead wear, became a mass youth brand somewhere in the 1980s or early 1990s, and is now being challenged by the 'sneaker' market; the 'Ben Sherman' and 'Fred Perry' shirts, again associated with skinhead and mod sub-cultures in Britain, then latterly inner-city, 'cool' consumers, and now are emerging as mass brands whose mainstream success have the potential to alienate their loyal base of original consumers. In these cases, the objects become saturated with meaning for particular sub-cultural groups, or 'tribes' (Maffesoli, 1996), and as they circulate amongst and throughout these cultures – often as a result of fashions – they are seen to have a trajectory or 'social life'.



SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Slater's *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997) is an authoritative contextualisation of consumption cultures within social theory. See especially Chapters 5 and 6 of this work which look at the meaning and uses of things. The Editorial essay by Miller and Tilley (1996) which introduces the first edition of the *Journal of Material Culture* modestly develops a manifesto for contemporary studies of material culture, drawing together various strands and traditions of intellectual engagement with objects. Hebdige's (1988) essay on the trajectory of the Italian scooter (described above) within popular culture makes interesting reading and deftly illustrates the way commodities have cultural trajectories. I would also recommend consulting the first few chapters from Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981). Though it may sometimes be difficult to grasp the historical and intellectual context of Baudrillard's writing (given his engagement with intellectual traditions including structuralism, Marxism and semiotics), this is an ambitious, unique and readable work that takes up the case for studying objects as part of social life. For a design perspective on material culture, see works by Atfield (2000) and Heskett (2002). For a social psychological perspective on people-object relations, consult the works by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Lunt and Livingstone (1992).

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