

So What is it? Material Culture Studies Unmasked

Following a workshop at the University of Delaware on learning through objects, participants were asked to write brief definitions of material culture and provide a list of five texts they consider critical to the study of the field. Here are responses from eight participants.

We invite you to add your definitions and citations as well by emailing dandrews@english.udel.edu

Definitions of Material Culture

The things we make reflect our beliefs about the world; the things around us affect the way that we understand the world. There is an unending circularity to this that implies less a circle and more a kind of wheel moving. --Lance Winn, with respect to Foucault

Material culture is the history and philosophy of objects and the myriad relationships between people and things. --Bernie Herman

Material Culture Studies opens the question of the “thingness” of things—what is matter? How does it produce meaning, yield uses, constitute worlds? Material culture studies attends to the situation of “things,” their accreted associations and meanings as they are successively performed. Working with “things” is so rooted in experience, so tuned to how we perceive the world, so inductive, that teacher and student become fellow observers / users, equally able to respond to the strangeness of *this* “thing,” before them, now. “Things” matter and the knowledge they offer us transforms our sense of the habit worlds we live and make. --Julian Yates

My idea of material culture studies is a quite literal one: I see us engaged in in-depth studies of the materials of human cultures--of anything (any/thing/) for how it reflects and constructs the culture of which it is a part.--Marcy Dinius

The American Institute for Conservation's definition for "cultural property" can loosely substitute for material culture. “The legacy of our collective cultural heritage enriches our lives. Each generation has a responsibility to maintain and to protect this heritage for the benefit of succeeding generations. Conservation is the field dedicated to preserving cultural property - objects, collections, specimens, structures, or sites identified as having artistic, historic, scientific, religious, or social significance - for future generations. -AIC website---Jae Gutierrez

The rise of mass consumption was accompanied by a proliferation in objects and the multiplication of meanings, practices, and “needs” associated with these things. Material Culture Studies helps us to think about the objects, and the cultural, political, and economic systems that created them.--Will Scott

Material Culture is the unpacking or mining of both historic and everyday objects to find the embedded ideas and concepts that define the surrounding society.—Joyce Hill Stoner

Material culture is the relationship between people and things.—Arwen Mohun

Further notes from Arwen: Material culture scholars ask questions like: how do historical actors and present day people make and use objects like houses, books, and paintings? What did those objects mean to specific historical actors at specific moments in time? How might these meanings change over time? How have authors and artists used material things as symbols in art and literature? How do the physical characteristics of artifacts—the paper a magazine or newspaper is printed on, the cloth a garment is fashioned from—affect interpretation?

Some material culture scholars incorporate the answers to these kinds of questions into books and articles for scholarly audiences. Others incorporate them into the process of making or conserving physical objects and textual artifacts. Or work to engage the general public in appreciating the history of material objects.

Why does material culture studies matter (and who does it matter to?) It matters because we all live in a material world, but are educated in intellectual traditions that too often abstract, ignore, or decontextualize physical objects and processes.

Material culture studies promotes:

- material citizenship--recognition that things have politics and that our choices about how we make, buy, use, and view things are important aspects of global citizenship
- stewardship—skills to select and care for culturally significant things
- insightful new scholarship on the history of how people have made and used objects and shaped their built environments
- creativity in the creation of material culture
- common ground between the public and the academy—in K-12 education, in museum settings, as well as university classrooms and study spaces associated with various collections on this and other campuses

Material Culture Studies intersects with Women's Studies in fascinating ways. In every culture or community-- national, ethnic, religious, or other sort-- women have been and continue to be defined by notions of "femininity," and those notions are almost always embodied by and made visible through clothing, as both material (in all senses of the word) and as ideological choices—Margaret Stetz

Critical Texts in the Field of Material Culture Studies

From Lance Winn:

Marx- *The Communist Manifesto* (gives us the language to critique material)
McLuhan- *Understanding Media* (apologies for claiming such an overused text but "the medium is the message"...e=mc...squared"
De Landa- *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (impossible where to even begin, start with things as an accumulation of energies)
The Electronic Disturbance by The Critical Art Ensemble (material is often now immaterial and yet somehow still affects us)
Formless: A Users Guide by Krauss and Bois (Like all the above, they equip us with language to describe things that we take for granted... better yet they have pictures as well, and an alternative history of art that does not let you see the history of making in the same way ever again

From Bernie Herman:

Judy Attfield, *Wild Things*. Attfield offers an extraordinary perspective on the relationship between objects and design through the notion of wildness. Wildness simply is the elusive and ambiguous nature of things in the construction of meaning--in historical, cultural, and critical contexts. Her work resonates far beyond her examples.

Francis Ponge, *Soap*. Ponge dedicates the medium of the "prose poem" to the explication of ordinary objects. In *Soap* he visits and revisits this humble object in ways that offer provocative insight into the very nature of things in their greater generality. The sleight of interpretation that enables us to realize that soap is an object that diminishes in its actualization raises questions about how analysis similarly exaggerates and lessens an object. Unlike the current burst of books about things like salt and pencils, Ponge's essay reminds us of the poetical and magical aspects of objects.

Lynn Meskell, *Object Worlds of Ancient Egypt*. Meskell's discussion of the quality of agency in things is smart and informed. With implications that range far beyond her immediate topic, *Object Worlds* provides a cogent argument for object biographies. The discussion on agency raises the fundamental question of how objects "act" in/on the contexts they inhabit/furnish.

William Gibson, *Count Zero*. Gibson's second cyberpunk novel, *Count Zero* works from an evocation of Joseph Cornell's constructions in a near future defined by virtuality and artificial intelligences. Set aside the science fiction associations and read this work of fiction as a meditation on the relationships between objects that questions the role that humans play in the production and consumption of desire and meaning.

David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses*. This is a great collection of essays that explores the full array of the senses (including proprioception) in the reception of the material world. Published by Berg, this is one of several readers that contain both reprinted and original essays that explore the complex terrain on which we engage materiality through the senses as well as the varied critical positions we bring to writing and interpretation.

From Julian Yates:

George Perec, *A Species of Space and other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1997)

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005)

William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish 1, 2 and 2A" *Res* 9, 13, and 16 (1985, 1987 and 1989)
Arjun Appadurai (ed), *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

From Marcy Dinius:

Bill Brown, ed. *Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, eds. *New Media: 1740-1915*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*. New York: Knopf, 2001.

From Arwen Mohun:

Melvin Kranzberg, "At the Beginning," *Technology and Culture* 1 (1959). Mel was the moving force in creating the Society for the History of Technology and its journal, *Technology and Culture*. This manifesto remains the most concise statement about why the history of technology should be important to all of us.

Donald Kraybill, *The Riddle of the Amish*. Kraybill's explanation of how the Amish have "negotiated with modernity" through their choices about technology powerfully argues against technological determinism. He shows how the Amish have made choices about using technology in accordance with their values and, by implication, how everyone else can too.

James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* explores the history of how technologies of "seeing"—mapping, counting—in the hands of well-intentioned states have created human disasters.

Lerman, Mohun, and Oldenziel, editors, *Technology and Culture: A Reader*—most everything I know about gender and technology, I learned from working on this book.

Mike Rose, *The Mind at Work* is an educational sociologist's thoughtful discussion of the changing nature of low-paid labor and skill.

From Will Scott:

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*: A theoretical examination of the relationship between objects, practices, and social relations.

Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*: The women who populate Enstad's book are producers *and* consumers of fashion. It highlights the role of popular culture in constructing desires for objects.

Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*: A brilliant little book that "reads" punk style in 1970s Britain. A must read for those interested in the history of youth culture and fashion.

Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*: Marling treats such subjects as Disneyland, Mamie Eisenhower's fashion, power tools, and paint-by-numbers art with sensitivity and intelligence.

Anne McClintock, "Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising": A smart, oft-anthologized essay that demonstrates the cultural importance of one commodity— soap—in the British Empire.

Museum of Modern Art, *Machine Art*: The catalog accompanying the 1934 exhibition is a pictorial and textual manifesto on behalf of Bauhaus-influenced modernism, which influenced a generation of American designers.

Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* and *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*: UD's own Strasser examines the material transformation of the American home and the environmental consequences of the proliferation of things in these classics.

Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950*: The transformation of vernacular, retail architecture told through images and keen, understated analysis.

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*: First published in 1899, this social satire remains a powerful critique of the use of things for social advancement.

From George Basalla:

Daniel Miller. *The Comfort of Things*

D. Penney & Dr. Stasny. *The Things they Left Behind*. This is a book about the abandoned suitcases left in an insane asylum by inmates after their death. Includes photos and biographies of key persons. Very moving.

Deborah Cohn. *Household Gods* (The British and their possessions)

Barbara Stafford, an art historian, several books about material culture. Her books are heavy on theory but very good.

John Mack. *The Art of Small Things*

Pablo Neruda. *Ode to Common Things*

Roger-Pol Droit. *How are Things* (philosophy)

Lorraine Daston, ed *Things that Talk*. MIT Press. A big book of essays.

Bill Brown. *A Sense of Things* (American literature & Things)

Sherry Turkle. *Evocative Objects*. MIT Press.

D.B. Meli. *Thinking with Objects*

Simon Holloway. *Corrugated Iron: Building on the Frontier*. Wonderful pictures of corrugated iron buildings around the world.

H.W. Longfellow's long poem *Keramos*, about the history of pottery and the value of craftsmanship

From Margaret Stetz:

Through the Wardrobe: Women's Relationships with Their Clothes. ed. Ali Guy, et al. Berg, 2001

The Fashion Reader. ed. Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun. Berg, 2007

A Perfect Fit: Clothes, Character, and the Promise of America, by Jenna Weissman Joselit. Henry Holt, 2001.

Clothing as Material Culture. eds. Susanne Kuchler and Daniel Miller. Berg, 2005

Sex and Suits. by Anne Hollander. Kodansha, 1994