course description

The context for much of the current interest in material culture is a fear.

It is a fear of objects supplanting people.


Is it really true that the world is becoming emptied of things?

— John Frow (2004:357)

An intensified concern with “thingness” and materiality has emerged in the past decade as an explicitly interdisciplinary endeavor involving anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, literary critics, and philosophers among others. The new material culture studies that has resulted inverts the longstanding study of how people make things by asking also how “things make people”, how objects mediate social relationships—ultimately how inanimate objects can be read as having a form of agency of their own. In this seminar, we will explore many of the recent foundational works by Daniel Miller, Alfred Gell, Bruno Latour, Lynn Meskell, and others who have situated their work at the increasingly blurred boundaries between such “things” as object and subject, gift and commodity, art and artifact, alienability and inalienability, as well as at the disciplinary boundaries between ethnography, archaeology, art history, and literary studies.
object ethnographies

Seminar participants will not be asked to compose a traditional academic term paper. Rather, each participant will construct a series of three short “object ethnographies”. Unlike the classic ethnographic methodology in which the cultural world is approached through the thoughts, experiences, and actions of human agents, these mini-ethnographies will follow in the spirit of Barthes’s Mythologies, offering quick sketches that rely upon object agents as their entrée into the cultural. The primary ethnographic gaze should be upon an object individual, a class of objects, or a discrete community of objects—what Appadurai has referred to as a “methodological fetishism” in which one accepts that “it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.” Beyond this core focus on the object world, participants will have the latitude to use these ethnographic sketches as platforms for commentary on issues of identity, meaning, structure, social critique, materiality, immateriality, etc. as they move through object agents to an analysis of the human agents with whom these objects interact.

Object ethnographies will be presented periodically throughout the seminar. The format of these short presentations will be at the discretion of the participant, although use of photography and video to illustrate objects and their contexts is strongly encouraged. (Equipment for such documentation is available and there are human resources on campus to help with this sort of thing). Depending on our abilities and inclinations, we may decide to develop a website to further present and share our work.

readings

The following required texts will be available for purchase at Labyrinth Books:


We will also be reading substantial portions of the following texts which you may opt to purchase off the web:


A coursepack of additional readings will be available at Village Copier within a few days following our first meeting.

syllabus

Session 1 (1.23): Introduction (“Ponderable Objects”)

Session 2 (1.30): The Gift

What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?

— Marcel Mauss (1990:3)


Related Lecture (2.2):

Michael Herzfeld will be presenting on “Global Hierarchy and
Comparative Critique: Bodies, Objects, and Values” as part of the Society of Fellows in the Humanities lecture series. Thursday, February 2, 12:00 in the Common Room of the Heyman Center.

Session 3 (2.6): Sacred Objects, Substitute Objects


Session 4 (2.13): Materializing Ethnography


Supplementals:


Cetina, Karin Knorr. 1997. Sociality with objects: Social relations


Session 5 (2.20): Presentations I

Session 6 (2.27): Technology

In a way, I do not want to move one inch from my intransigent position that the study of technology alone... is scientifically sterile. At the same time, I have come to realise that technology is indispensable as a means of approach to economic and sociological activities...

— Malinowski (1935:460)

Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies...

— Marshall McLuhan (1964:45)


Supplementals:


Session 7 (3.6): Object Worlds


Session 8 (3.20): Thing-Persons

... the belief in thing-persons produces a general metamorphosis of reality and an inversion in the way one thinks the real relations involved. Objects are transformed into subjects and subjects into objects.

— Maurice Godelier (1999:106)


Supplementals:


Session 9 (3.27): Presentations II
Session 10 (4.3): Beyond Objects, Beyond Subjects

COLLECTIVE: Unlike society, which is an artifact imposed by the modernist settlement, this term refers to the associations of humans and nonhumans. While a division between nature and society renders invisible the political process by which the cosmos is collected in one livable whole, the word “collective” makes this process central. Its slogan could be “no reality without representation.”

— Bruno Latour (1999)


Related Lecture (4.6):

Bill Brown will be presenting on “Commodity Nationalism and the Lost Object” as part of the Society of Fellows in the Humanities lecture series. Thursday, April 6, 12:00 in the Common Room of the Heyman Center.

Session 11 (4.10): Materiality


Supplementals:


Session 12 (4.17): and Immateriality.


Supplementals:

Session 13 (4.24): But the Thing is...


Supplementals:


(Online at http://www.reconstruction.ws/052/clinton.shtml)

Sessions 14 (5.1): Presentations III