

OIELSX17- (S1) & OIELSY04 (S2) - Material Culture

Professor: Géraldine CHOUARD-VERON

Contact information:

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Department: International affairs

Semester: 1 and 2

Course level: L3 Undergraduate, Graduate

Domain: Marketing & Advertising

Teaching language: English

Number of in-class hours: 33

Number of course sessions: 10 + Exam

ECTS: 6

Course description and objectives

What is material culture studies?

The study of objects constitutes a relatively new field of academic enquiry, commonly referred to as material culture studies. Students of material culture seek to understand societies, both past and present, through careful study and observation of the physical or material objects generated by those societies.

Studying the physical objects of a culture gives us a better understanding and appreciation for the complex lives of the people who interacted with those objects. Material culture provides us insight into nonmaterial culture, which includes the ideas, beliefs, habits and values of a people.

Material culture consists of things that are created by humans. Examples include cars, buildings, clothing, and tools. Nonmaterial culture refers to the abstract ideas and ways of thinking that make up a culture. Examples of nonmaterial culture include traffic laws, words, and dress codes.

The study of material culture centers upon objects, the materials that they are made of, and the ways in which they provide an understanding of cultural and social relations. Over the last 20 years, the human and social sciences have taken a “material turn” with a new focus on the study of objects in their physical reality as a way of giving meaning to and explaining the economic, social and symbolic world. This study will explore the intertwined, and often dialectic, relationships between people and things.

We will observe the implications of taking seriously how and what objects communicate, especially how we can identify the ways messages are coded in the forms of familiar objects.

Material culture, which French sociologist Michel de Certeau once praised as “the history of everyday life”, has taken a newfound interest in the expression of the human subject through his/her objects, stimulating thoughts on the uses of such objects, as well as the affects and values they form (Baudrillard, *Système des objets*).

We will observe the implications of taking seriously how and what objects communicate, especially how we can identify the ways messages are coded in the forms of familiar objects.

The ever-changing world of material culture has recently taken an interest in interactions between the object and its user or consumer. In this aspect, the recent American initiative BND (Buy Nothing Day) was born out of society’s questioning of the power of goods and, more generally, the new relationship emerging between being and having in this era of globalized consumption.

This course will examine concrete cases, enriched through an interdisciplinary approach.

A new consideration will be given to the vast corpus of different object worlds that we constantly experience. From food to fashion, to toys and smart phones, the aim is to make objects talk and also understand what they are telling (of) us.

Prerequisites

- open-minded attitude regarding general interest topics
- reasonably fluent in written and oral English (B2 level)
- familiar with the general requirements for academic presentations
- able to attend all sessions, including the final exam

Learning outcomes

Material culture examines the relationships between people and things. The aim of this class is to introduce some accessible approaches to this exciting and new field of academic enquiry, which crosses disciplinary boundaries. Students will become acquainted with the kinds of objects that are considered in the study of material culture. The course will also provide an opportunity to practice communication skills and develop confidence in delivering presentations in English on material culture topics, maximizing the effective use of visual aids. Some questions we will explore include: how is the value or significance of objects created in different social contexts? Should we understand items of material culture as ways of fulfilling human needs? Or rather as symbols that "say" something about their users, and if so, what?

By looking at the diversity of material forms, students will gain an appreciation for the ways that "things" help us to connect to the world and see it in a new way, and the ways "things" give meaning to our lives and the lives of those around us.

Assignments and grading

Students are expected to deliver one 30-minute presentation, alone or with another student. The presentation must include visual aids (PowerPoint or Prezi) and a handout (with your name title, pictures with captions, 15 key words, summary, illustrations).

- One oral presentation (on one of the 10 topics listed below)
- One mid-term quiz
- One final exam

The numerical grade distribution will dictate the final grade. The passing grade for a course is 10/20.

Class participation: Active class participation – this is what makes classes lively and instructive. Come on time and prepared. Class participation is based on quality of comments, not quantity.

Exam policy: In the exam, students will not be allowed to bring any document (except if allowed by the lecturer). Unexcused absences from exams or failure to submit cases will result in zero grades in the calculation of numerical averages. Exams are collected at the end of examination periods.

Course structure

Session	Topic
1	Introduction to Material Culture
2	The Cult(ure) of Food - From Still Life to Food Porn
3	Fashion and Appearance: Dress, Image and Practice
4	Of People and Smartphones: A Culture of (Dis)connection
5	Toys: Playthings, Transitional Objects, Social Agents
6	Patchwork as an Art Form: Why Quilts Matter
7	Symbol of Power and National Identity: Stamps, Coins and Banknotes
8	The 3 R's: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" - Waste Management and Recycled Materials
9	Jewelry: Displays of Personal Adornment and Body Art
10	To be decided in class

Bibliography

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Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life. Oxford: Berg, 2000

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La distinction : critique sociale du jugement. Paris : Minuit, 1979.

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L'invention du quotidien. Vol. 1 : Arts de faire. Paris : Gallimard, 1980.

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Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives. London: Routledge, 1998.

Kopytoff, Igor.

“The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process.” In Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, 64–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Miller, Daniel.

Stuff. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

Consumption and Its Consequences. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

Material Culture and Mass Consumption. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

Mullins, Paul R.

The Archaeology of Consumer Culture. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011 / 2012.

Woodward, Ian.

Understanding Material Culture. London: Sage, 2012

Lecturer’s biography English

Professor at Paris-Dauphine

University/PSL, Researcher based at

ECELLES (Research Laboratory in

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University) Lecturer and researcher in the field of American studies, specializing in visual and material culture. This field of expertise, namely the visual arts and, more generally, the cultural practices of the image of the 20th and 21st centuries in America, invites a constant intersection of perspectives from the history of society, ideas, and the arts with those of aesthetics and literature.

Moodle

This course is on Moodle: **Yes**

Academic integrity

Be aware of the rules in Université Paris Dauphine about plagiarism and cheating during exams. All work turned in for this course must be your own work, or that of your own group. Working as part of a group implies that you are an active participant and fully contributed to the output produced by that group.