

INTRODUCTION TO PART FIVE

THE STUDY OF MATERIAL culture clearly has an enormous affinity with the study of everyday life. The investigation of 'things' as they are made, used, discarded, refound, loved and loathed is central to everyday life studies. Our modern life-world contains objects and material practices that connect us to a lived relationship with culture. *How* this culture is lived is a question that concerns a variety of approaches to everyday life. Modern material culture is marked by the machinations of capitalism (where exchange-value triumphs over use-value) at the same time it is also marked by our most intimate experience of the world. An item of clothing or a piece of crockery can evidence a mode of production relentlessly driven by the desire for profit, while simultaneously being a vehicle for personal memories, unfulfilled longings, or aspirational desire. A trip to the shops can be a routine task (the endless replacing of exhausted commodities) or can be filled with the kinds of ecstasy that was traditionally linked with sacred rituals.

Negotiating this ambiguity is not an easy task and the question of whether to privilege the personal, the singular, and the intimate, or the structural, the anonymous, and the institutional is a perennial problem for attending to everyday life. It is no surprise then that the kinds of attention that have been directed towards 'everyday things' are often driven by a dialectical approach that continually weaves together the particular and the general. For instance a dialectical approach can look at modern commodity culture as the promotion of individuality; yet while looking at individuality as a personal experience it can also examine the way that 'individuality' is a social process that exists at a very general level (individualism as being peddled to all). The fetish aspect of modern commodities also provides a way of negotiating between the particular and the general. To think of commodities as 'fetishes' in the way that Marx did is to recognise that they are often invested with magical properties available to all with the power to purchase. However, since Freud, the term fetish resonates with the psychic dynamics of personal histories, where 'things' are endowed with the power to ameliorate psychic trauma. In its negotiation of the large-scale structures of

political economy and the small-scale (but also social) histories of intimate life, fetishism provides a useful form for attending to the material culture of everyday life.

In the chapters in Part Five, fetishism might be seen as an implicit and loose orientation. Whether it is tracing the way that modern commodities parade themselves and promise freedoms, or the way that everyday things connect you to the past, the modern commodity is always more than it seems. In this, the very materiality of everyday objects must be recognised as extending far beyond the boundaries of the designed object. It is not that the 'thing itself' cannot be separated from its context in everyday life, rather the thing itself *is* the context of everyday life in which objects and their practices exist.

Georg Simmel

THE BERLIN TRADE EXHIBITION [1896]

(Source: Frisby, David and Featherstone, Mike eds (1997) *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, London and Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, pp. 255–8)

Editor's introduction

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) is one of the founders of modern sociology and sociocultural theory. Until fairly recently interest in Simmel has been eclipsed by attention to his more famous contemporaries (particularly Emile Durkheim and Max Weber), yet it is becoming clear that Simmel's approach has much to offer present-day studies of culture and society. Simmel's work is critically placed between the abstractions of philosophy and detailed empirical attention to the everyday material world. By attending to what Baudelaire called 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent' of modern life (which for Simmel included such 'trivial' phenomena as fashion and urban life) Simmel can be seen as one of the first philosophers of modernity. What also made Simmel's approach distinctly modern was his reluctance to interpret the world from the perspective of abstract theories; instead he finds philosophical generalisations within the everyday world. Meals, city living and money are Simmel's particular philosophical objects out of which he extracts the general. His approach is perhaps best described by the titles of the short essays he wrote for the journal *Jugend* – 'snapshots from the perspective of eternity' (*Momentbilder Sub Specie Aeternitatis*).

In this review of the Berlin Trade Exhibition, Simmel demonstrates a number of themes that will continue to characterise his writing. First, we should note that the subject matter was hardly the kind that turn-of-the-century academics deemed worthy of consideration. Second, we see a familiar preoccupation: the everydayness of modernity wears you down and assaults your nerves. Third, and perhaps most important, is the dialectical response that qualifies any immediate assessment of modern life. So, if a description of this trade exhibition might simply suggest that it should be seen as a cause of modern existential malaise, Simmel reveals that is also one of the cultural forms adequate to the culture of modernity. Similarly the objects in the exhibition (like modern individuals) strive for

uniqueness and individuality, at the same time (and for the same reasons) as they become submerged in a sea of conformity and homogeneity.

The reassessment of Simmel is clearly still in progress and is no doubt being fuelled by the evident influence he had on his students (for instance, Kracauer (Chapter 30) and Benjamin (Chapter 2). His philosophical approach to the everyday will no doubt provide a fruitful perspective for developing the study of everyday life.

Further reading: Felski 1995; Frisby 1985, 1992a, 1992b; Highmore 2002; Leck 2000; Lehmann 2000.

IN HIS *DEUTSCHE GESCHICHTE* Karl Lamprecht relates how certain medieval orders of knights gradually lost their practical purpose but continued as sociable gatherings. This is a type of sociological development that is similarly repeated in the most diverse fields. The double meaning of the word 'society' symbolizes this twin sense. Alongside the very process of sociation there is also, as a by-product, the sociable meaning of society. The latter is always a meeting-point for the most diverse formation of interest groups, thus remaining as the sole integrating force even when the original reasons for consociation have lost their effectiveness. The history of world exhibitions, which originated from annual fairs, is one of the clearest examples of this most fundamental type of human sociation. The extent to which this process can be found in the Berlin exhibition alone allows it to be placed in the category of world exhibitions. In the face of the richness and diversity of what is offered, the only unifying and colourful factor is that of amusement. The way in which the most heterogeneous industrial products are crowded together in close proximity paralyses the senses – a veritable hypnosis where only one message gets through to one's consciousness: the idea that one is here to amuse oneself. Through frequency of repetition this impression overwhelms countless no less worthy impressions, which because of their fragmentation fail to register. The sense of amusement emerges as a common denominator due to a petty but psychologically subtle arrangement: every few steps a small entry fee is charged for each special display. One's curiosity is thus constantly aroused by each new display, and the enjoyment derived from each particular display is made to seem greater and more significant. The majority of things which must be passed creates the impression that many surprises and amusements are in store. In short, the return to the main motif, amusement, is more effectively achieved by having to make a small sacrifice, which overcomes one's inhibitions to indulge, than if a higher entry price, giving unrestricted access, was charged, thereby denying that continuous small stimulation.

Every fine and sensitive feeling, however, is violated and seems deranged by the mass effect of the merchandise offered, while on the other hand it cannot be denied that the richness and variety of fleeting impressions is well suited to the need for excitement for overstimulated and tired nerves. While increasing civilization leads to ever greater specialization and to a more frequent one-sidedness of function within an evermore limited field, in no way does this differentiation on the side of production extend to consumption. Rather the opposite: it appears as though modern man's one-sided and monotonous role in the division of labour will be compensated for by consumption and enjoyment through the growing pressure of heterogeneous

impressions, and the ever faster and more colourful change of excitements. The differentiation of the active side of life is apparently complemented through the extensive diversity of its passive and receiving side. The press of contradictions, the many stimuli and the diversity of consumption and enjoyment are the ways in which the human soul – that otherwise is an impatient flux of forces and denied a complete development by the differentiations within modern work – seeks to come alive. No part of modern life reveals this need as sharply as the large exhibition. Nowhere else is such a richness of different impressions brought together so that overall there seems to be an outward unity, whereas underneath a vigorous interaction produces mutual contrasts, intensification and lack of relatedness.

Now this unity of the whole creates a stronger impression and becomes more interesting when one considers the impossibility of surveying the objects produced in a single city. It is only as a floating psychological idea that this unity can be apprehended since in its origins the styles and emerging trends receive no clear expression. It is a particular attraction of world fairs that they form a momentary centre of world civilization, assembling the products of the entire world in a confined space as if in a single picture. Put the other way round, a single city has broadened into the totality of cultural production. No important product is missing, and though much of the material and samples have been brought together from the whole world they have attained a conclusive form and become part of a single whole. Thus it becomes clear what is meant by a 'world city' and that Berlin, despite everything, has become one. That is, a single city to which the whole world sends its products and where all the important styles of the present cultural world are put on display. In this sense perhaps the Berlin exhibition is unique, perhaps it has never been so apparent before how much the form of modern culture has permitted a concentration in one place, not in the mere collection of exhibits as in a world fair, but how through its own production a city can represent itself as a copy and a sample of the manufacturing forces of world culture.

It is a point of some cultural historical interest to follow how a particular style for such exhibitions has developed. The specific exhibition style is seen at its clearest in the buildings. An entirely new proportion between permanence and transience not only predominates in the hidden structure but also in the aesthetic criteria. In doing this the materials and their intrinsic properties have achieved a complete harmony in their external design, so satisfying one of the most fundamental demands of all art. The majority of the buildings, in particular the main ones, look as if they were intended for temporary purposes; because this lack of permanence is unmistakable they are absolutely ineffective as unsolid buildings. And the impression of lack of solidity works only where the temporary can claim permanence and durability. In the exhibition style the imagination of the architect is freed from the stipulation of permanence, allowing grace and dignity to be combined in their own measure. It is the conscious denial of a monumental style that has produced a new and positive shape. Elsewhere it is the meaning of art to incorporate the permanence of form in transient materials, and the ideal of architecture is to strive to give expression to the permanent, whereas here the attraction of the transient forms its own style and, even more characteristically, does this from material that doesn't appear as if it was intended for temporary use. And in fact the architects of our exhibition have succeeded in making the opposition to the historical ideal of architecture not a matter of absurdity or lack

of style; rather they have taken the point last reached in architecture as their starting-point, as if only this arrangement would allow its meaning to emerge fully against a differently coloured background and yet be seen as part of a single tradition.

It is on the architectural side that this exhibition reaches its acme, demonstrating the aesthetic output of the exhibition principle. From another point of view its productivity is at least as high: and here I refer to what could be termed the shop-window quality of things, a characteristic which the exhibition accentuates. The production of goods under the regime of free competition and the normal predominance of supply over demand leads to goods having to show a tempting exterior as well as utility. Where competition no longer operates in matters of usefulness and intrinsic properties, the interest of the buyer has to be aroused by the external stimulus of the object, even the manner of its presentation. It is at the point where material interests have reached their highest level and the pressure of competition is at an extreme that the aesthetic ideal is employed. The striving to make the merely useful visually stimulating – something that was completely natural for the orientals and Romans – for us comes from the struggle to render the graceless graceful for consumers. The exhibition with its emphasis on amusement attempts a new synthesis between the principles of external stimulus and the practical functions of objects, and thereby takes this aesthetic superadditum to its highest level. The banal attempt to put things in their best light, as in the cries of the street trader, is transformed in the interesting attempt to confer a new aesthetic significance from displaying objects together – something already happening in the relationship between advertising and poster art.

Indeed it strikes one as curious that the separate objects in an exhibition show the same relationships and modifications that are made by the individual within society. On the one side, the depreciation of an otherwise qualified neighbour, on the other, accentuation at the expense of the same; on the one side, the levelling and uniformity due to an environment of the same, on the other, the individual is even more accentuated through the summation of many impressions; on the one side, the individual is only an element of the whole, only a member of a higher unity, on the other, the claim that the same individual is a whole and a unity. Thus the objective relation between social elements is reflected in the impression of things in unison within a single frame yet composed of interactively excited forces, and of contradictions, yet also their confluence. Just as in the exhibition the contours of things in their interactive effects, their moving to and fro undergoes an aesthetic exploitation, so in society the corresponding patterns allow an ethical use.

German, in particular north German, exhibitions could compete only with difficulty with French ones where the ability to accentuate by all means possible the stimulus of appearance has a much longer history and wider applicability. Nevertheless this exhibition shows the attempt, often successful, to develop aesthetic opportunities which through display can contribute to their attractiveness. Certainly the qualities of taste are mostly lacking in the individual items of the exhibition. Aside from the practical motive of Berlin's exhibition, it is to be hoped at the least that the aesthetic impulse is encouraged beyond the exhibition itself and becomes part of the way products are presented.

Siegfried Kracauer

BOREDOM [1924]

(Source: Kracauer, Siegfried (1995) *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, translated by Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 331–4)

Editor's introduction

While Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) is still probably best known for his (US) postwar writing on cinema, there is now a growing recognition of the importance of his earlier (German) work. This chapter was written for the newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a newspaper Kracauer worked on (for the most part as editor of the cultural section [*feuilleton*] of the paper) from 1921 until Hitler took power in 1933. During those Weimar years Kracauer developed a diagnostic critique of modernity that specifically took what he called 'inconspicuous surface-level expressions' as their subject matter. Here the influence of his one-time teacher Georg Simmel is vividly evident. Arguing that 'we are most deeply and continually influenced by the tiny catastrophes that make up daily life', Kracauer wrote about everyday life in Weimar Germany by attending to the new cultural forms, aimed particularly at the 'salaried masses' (shop workers, clerks and others). Best-selling novels, movie palaces, dance troupes and waiting rooms (hotel lobbies, employment exchanges and so on) supply the symptoms for Kracauer's diagnosis of the condition of modernity.

'Boredom' was written in 1924 and can be seen to anticipate his more extensive analyses of modern everyday life as a culture of distraction (a theme also explored by his friend Walter Benjamin). Here the environment of modernity is made up of commodified forms of communication (adverts, films, radio and so on) that aggressively hail and inculcate their audience. Here a world of banality inhabits the lives of people who have been left vacant by what Henri Lefebvre will call the colonisation of everyday life by the commodity. For Kracauer, in a reversal of received wisdom, boredom is not the outcome of banality, but its critical refusal. The failure to be bored in such a culture marks the success of distraction. In this he shares a slightly bizarre commonality with the Punk Rock bands of the late 1970s: to declare yourself bored is not a mark of failure but the necessary precondition for

the possibility of generating the authentically new (rather than the old dressed up as the new).

What is striking in this essay is the animated agency that he gives to the world of things. In his study of white-collar culture *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (first published in serial form in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1929) he comments on the ability of a particular female filing clerk to sing along to every popular hit: 'But it is not she who knows every hit, rather the hits know her, steal up behind her and gently lay her low' (Kracauer 1998: 70). For Kracauer the designed environment of the commodity has set its designs on us.

Further reading: Giles 2000; Harootunian 2000; Katz 1999; Koch 2000; Kracauer 1995, 1998; Petro 1989.

PEOPLE TODAY WHO STILL HAVE TIME FOR BOREDOM and yet are not bored are certainly just as boring as those who never get around to being bored. For their self has vanished – the self whose presence, particularly in this so bustling world, would necessarily compel them to tarry¹ for a while without a goal, neither here nor there.

Most people, of course, do not have much leisure time. They pursue a livelihood on which they expend all their energies, simply to earn enough for the bare necessities. To make this tiresome obligation more tolerable, they have invented a work ethic that provides a moral veil for their occupation and at least affords them a certain moral² satisfaction. It would be exaggerated to claim that the pride in considering oneself an ethical being dispels every type of boredom. Yet the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery is not actually what is at issue here, since it neither kills people nor awakens them to new life, but merely expresses a dissatisfaction that would immediately disappear if an occupation more pleasant than the morally sanctioned one became available. Nevertheless, people whose duties occasionally make them yawn may be less boring than those who do their business by inclination. The latter, unhappy types, are pushed deeper and deeper into the hustle and bustle until eventually they no longer know where their head is, and the extraordinary, radical boredom that might be able to reunite them with their heads remains eternally distant for them.

There is no one, however, who has no leisure time at all. The office is not a permanent sanctuary, and Sundays are an institution. Thus, in principle, during those beautiful hours of free time everyone would have the opportunity to rouse himself into real boredom. But although one wants to do nothing, things are done to one: the world makes sure that one does not find oneself. And even if one perhaps isn't interested in it, the world itself is much too interested for one to find the peace and quiet necessary to be as thoroughly bored with the world as it ultimately deserves.

In the evening one saunters through the streets, replete with an unfulfillment from which a fullness could sprout. Illuminated words glide by on the rooftops, and already one is banished from one's own emptiness into the alien *advertisement*. One's body takes root in the asphalt, and, together with the enlightening revelations of the illuminations, one's spirit – which is no longer one's own – roams ceaselessly out of

the night and into the night. If only it were allowed to disappear! But, like Pegasus prancing on a carousel, this spirit must run in circles and may never tire of praising to high heaven the glory of a liqueur and the merits of the best five-cent cigarette. Some sort of magic spurs that spirit relentlessly amid the thousand electric bulbs, out of which it constitutes and reconstitutes itself into glittering sentences.

Should the spirit by chance return at some point, it soon takes its leave in order to allow itself to be cranked away in various guises in a *movie theater*. It squats as a fake Chinaman in a fake opium den, transforms itself into a trained dog that performs ludicrously clever tricks to please a film diva, gathers up into a storm amid towering mountain peaks, and turns into both a circus artist and a lion at the same time. How could it resist these metamorphoses? The posters swoop into the empty space that the spirit itself would not mind pervading; they drag it in front of the silver screen, which is as barren as an emptied-out palazzo. And once the images begin to emerge one after another, there is nothing left in the world besides their evanescence. One forgets oneself in the process of gawking, and the huge dark hole is animated with the illusion of a life that belongs to no one and exhausts everyone.

Radio likewise vaporizes beings, even before they have intercepted a single spark.³ Since many people feel compelled to broadcast, one finds oneself in a state of permanent receptivity,⁴ constantly pregnant with London, the Eiffel Tower, and Berlin. Who would want to resist the invitation of those dainty headphones? They gleam in living rooms and entwine themselves around heads all by themselves; and instead of fostering cultivated conversation (which certainly can be a bore), one becomes a playground for worldwide noises that, regardless of their own potentially objective boredom, do not even grant one's modest right to personal boredom. Silent and lifeless, people sit side by side as if their souls were wandering about far away. But these souls are not wandering according to their own preference; they are badgered by the news hounds, and soon no one can tell anymore who is the hunter and who is the hunted. Even in the café, where one wants to roll up into a ball like a porcupine and become aware of one's insignificance, an imposing loudspeaker effaces every trace of private existence. The announcements it blares forth dominate the space of the concert intermissions, and the waiters (who are listening to it themselves) indignantly refuse the unreasonable requests to get rid of this gramophonic mimicry.

As one is enduring this species of antennal fate, the five *continents* are drawing ever closer. In truth, it is not we who extend ourselves out toward them; rather, it is their cultures that appropriate us in their boundless imperialism. It is as if one were having one of those dreams provoked by an empty stomach: a tiny ball rolls toward you from very far away, expands into a close-up, and finally roars right over you. You can neither stop it nor escape it, but lie there chained, a helpless little doll swept away by the giant colossus in whose ambit it expires. Flight is impossible. Should the Chinese imbroglio be tactfully disembroided, one is sure to be harried by an American boxing match: the Occident remains omnipresent, whether one acknowledges it or not. All the world-historical events on this planet – not only the current ones but also past events, whose love of life knows no shame – have only one desire: to set up a rendezvous wherever they suppose us to be present. But the masters are not to be found in their quarters. They've gone on a trip and cannot be located, having long since ceded the empty chambers to the 'surprise party'⁵ that occupies the rooms, pretending to be the masters.

But what if one refuses to allow oneself to be chased away? Then boredom becomes the only proper occupation, since it provides a kind of guarantee that one is, so to speak, still in control of one's own existence. If one were never bored, one would presumably not really be present at all and would thus be merely one more object of boredom, as was claimed at the outset. One would light up on the rooftops or spool by as a filmstrip. But if indeed one is present, one would have no choice but to be bored by the ubiquitous abstract racket that does not allow one to exist, and, at the same time, to find oneself boring for existing in it.

On a sunny afternoon when everyone is outside, one would do best to hang about in the train station or, better yet, stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one's boredom on the sofa. Shrouded in *tristezza*, one flirts with ideas that even become quite respectable in the process, and one considers various projects that, for no reason, pretend to be serious. Eventually one becomes content to do nothing more than be with oneself, without knowing what one actually should be doing – sympathetically touched by the mere glass grasshopper on the tabletop that cannot jump because it is made of glass and by the silliness of a little cactus plant that thinks nothing of its own whimsicality. Frivolous, like these decorative creations, one harbors only an inner restlessness without a goal, a longing that is pushed aside, and a weariness with that which exists without really being.

If, however, one has the patience, the sort of patience specific to legitimate boredom, then one experiences a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly. A landscape appears in which colorful peacocks strut about, and images of people suffused with soul come into view. And look – your own soul is likewise swelling, and in ecstasy you name what you have always lacked: the great *passion*. Were this passion – which shimmers like a comet – to descend, were it to envelop you, the others, and the world – oh, then boredom would come to an end, and everything that exists would be . . .

Yet people remain distant images, and the great passion fizzles out on the horizon. And in the boredom that refuses to abate, one hatches bagatelles that are as boring as this one.

Notes

- 1 Kracauer here plays with the resonance between *langweilen* ('to bore') and *lange (ver)weilen* ('to tarry' or 'to linger').
- 2 In the copy of this article pasted by Kracauer into his scrapbook, this adjective was crossed out in pen. It reappeared, however, when the essay was reprinted in *Das Ornament der Masse*.
- 3 Kracauer here plays on the resonance between *Funk*, which means 'radio', and *Funke*, which means 'spark' or 'flicker'.
- 4 The semantic fulcrum of this sentence is provided by the ambiguity of *Empfängnis*, which can mean both 'reception' (as in a radio broadcast) and 'conception' (the result of a sexual – as opposed to radiophonic – dissemination).
- 5 This English expression, rendered as 'surprising party' in the first printing of the article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, was subsequently corrected in the 1963 reprinting.

Roland Barthes

PLASTIC [1957]

(Source: Barthes, Roland (1973) *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, London: Granada, pp. 97–9)

Editor's introduction

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) can be seen as the writer who did most to achieve semiology's goal of becoming a form of analysis that would be applicable to all aspects of life (irrespective of conventional disciplinary boundaries). In the 1950s he popularised semiology through a number of newspaper articles that 'read' everyday objects and practices. In 1957 these were collected into what is perhaps Barthes's most famous book – *Mythologies*. The 'socio-pathological' portraits that make up *Mythologies* included such everyday material as detergents, steak and chips, striptease, the new Citroën, wrestling, and plastics (reprinted here). The importance of Barthes's work does not seem to diminish with age and his contribution to cultural analysis should be crucial to everyday life studies.

'Plastic' is exemplary of Barthes's approach to everyday life at this time. By giving plastic the kind of attention that is usually reserved for the canon of literary works he recognises in the work-a-day world of plastics a cosmology of magic and myth. The reason for treating everyday materials in this way is not simply to bring them out of hiding (so to speak) but to draw attention to the way that they circulate in modern life. In the world of advertising, a perfume, for instance, is not simply a nice smelling liquid, but an 'essence of sensuality' that will cause landslides, earthquakes or, at the very least, the user to become irresistible. In capitalist culture the commodity becomes 'magical', containing properties normally bestowed on sacred objects (fetishes and gods). Thus for Barthes the everyday world contains the mythologies of a secular culture.

Barthes's post-*Mythologies* writing continued to exhibit an attraction towards the everyday. His study of fashion journalism (Barthes [1967] 1990) immersed itself in rhetorical environments that consistently echo at the level of everyday life. Even his later more

'hedonistic' writing on photography, love and himself (Barthes 1977) continually invoked the everyday as the realm in which pleasure and unease are experienced.

Further reading: Barthes [1967] 1990; Burgin 1996; Ungar 1983.

DESPITE HAVING NAMES OF GREEK SHEPHERDS (Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, Polyethylene), plastic, the products of which have just been gathered in an exhibition, is in essence the stuff of alchemy. At the entrance of the stand, the public waits in a long queue in order to witness the accomplishment of the magical operation par excellence: the transmutation of matter. An ideally-shaped machine, tubulated and oblong (a shape well suited to suggest the secret of an itinerary) effortlessly draws, out of a heap of greenish crystals, shiny and fluted dressing-room tidies. At one end, raw, telluric matter, at the other, the finished, human object; and between these two extremes, nothing; nothing but a transit, hardly watched over by an attendant in a cloth cap, half-god, half-robot.

So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement.

And as the movement here is almost infinite, transforming the original crystals into a multitude of more and more startling objects, plastic is, all told, a spectacle to be deciphered: the very spectacle of its end-products. At the sight of each terminal form (suitcase, brush, car-body, toy, fabric, tube, basin or paper), the mind does not cease from considering the original matter as an enigma. This is because the quick-change artistry of plastic is absolute: it can become buckets as well as jewels. Hence a perpetual amazement, the reverie of man at the sight of the proliferating forms of matter, and the connections he detects between the singular of the origin and the plural of the effects. And this amazement is a pleasurable one, since the scope of the transformations gives man the measure of his power, and since the very itinerary of plastic gives him the euphoria of a prestigious free-wheeling through Nature.

But the price to be paid for this success is that plastic, sublimated as movement, hardly exists as substance. Its reality is a negative one: neither hard nor deep, it must be content with a 'substantial' attribute which is neutral in spite of its utilitarian advantages: *resistance*, a state which merely means an absence of yielding. In the hierarchy of the major poetic substances, it figures as a disgraced material, lost between the effusiveness of rubber and the flat hardness of metal; it embodies none of the genuine produce of the mineral world: foam, fibres, strata. It is a 'shaped' substance: whatever its final state, plastic keeps a flocculent appearance, something opaque, creamy and curdled, something powerless ever to achieve the triumphant smoothness of Nature. But what best reveals it for what it is is the sound it gives, at once hollow and flat; its noise is its undoing, as are its colours, for it seems capable of retaining only the most chemical-looking ones. Of yellow, red and green, it keeps only the aggressive quality, and uses them as mere names, being able to display only concepts of colours.

The fashion for plastic highlights an evolution in the myth of 'imitation' materials.

It is well known that their use is historically bourgeois in origin (the first vestimentary postiches date back to the rise of capitalism). But until now imitation materials have always indicated pretension, they belonged to the world of appearances, not to that of actual use; they aimed at reproducing cheaply the rarest substances, diamonds, silk, feathers, furs, silver, all the luxurious brilliance of the world. Plastic has climbed down, it is a household material. It is the first magical substance which consents to be prosaic. But it is precisely because this prosaic character is a triumphant reason for its existence: for the first time, artifice aims at something common, not rare. And as an immediate consequence, the age-old function of nature is modified: it is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be regained or imitated: an artificial Matter, more bountiful than all the natural deposits, is about to replace her, and to determine the very invention of forms. A luxurious object is still of this earth, it still recalls, albeit in a precious mode, its mineral or animal origin, the natural theme of which it is but one actualization. Plastic is wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used: ultimately, objects will be invented for the sole pleasure of using them. The hierarchy of substances is abolished: a single one replaces them all: the whole world *can* be plasticized, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas.

Jean Baudrillard

STRUCTURES OF INTERIOR DESIGN [1968]

(Source: Baudrillard, Jean (1996) *The System of Objects*, translated by James Benedict, London and New York: Verso, pp. 15–29)

Editor's introduction

The System of Objects was Jean Baudrillard's first book and can be read as a form of 'structuralist phenomenology' (see Gane 1991: 162). What this meant in practice was that Baudrillard attempted to describe the living experience of commodity culture (a kind of cultural phenomenology) via the kind of analysis afforded by structuralism. Indeed Baudrillard's work on the new designed environment can be productively compared with Roland Barthes's (1990) work on fashion in his book (published in 1967, a year before Baudrillard's) *The Fashion System* (and of course the way this echoes in the title of Baudrillard's book clearly invites such a comparison).

Both Baudrillard and Barthes are concerned not simply with the 'objects themselves' (clothes, furniture and so on) but also with the discourses that surround (and to some degree saturate) these objects. The attention to the promotional language as a *desiring* language that accompanies such objects provides the route for both authors to analyse their objects. Yet differences are also apparent. Whereas Barthes is predominantly interested in a sophisticated semiotics of a particular *moment* in fashion, Baudrillard is interested in reading the contemporary world of interior design as registering a historical shift in everyday life. On the face of it the new designed environment offers a number of evident freedoms (especially from the old spatial rigidities of a bourgeois patriarchy), yet these freedoms are limited. Indeed it might be seen that the historical shift is from a system dominated by the moral landscape of bourgeois patriarchy to a system dominated by the amoral landscape of consumption. Such a diagnosis suggests that the contemporary world of interiors primarily reveals the extent to which social subjects have become identifiable as consumers. In this he seems closest to the writing of his one-time teacher Henri Lefebvre (Chapter 22). Indeed Lefebvre's assessment of the postwar period as one that witnesses

the penetration of everyday life by the commodity might be the most adequate description of Baudrillard's *System of Objects*.

Baudrillard's subsequent writing is of course much better known than this fairly 'tame' piece of analysis. Yet his more (in)famous discussions of the modern world as a simulacra obviously impacts at the level of the everyday. A study of Baudrillard's oeuvre as an articulation of the everyday would clearly be productive.

Further reading: Barthes [1967] 1990; Baudrillard 1994, 1998; Gane 1991; Genosko 1994; Kristin Ross 1995.

The traditional environment

THE ARRANGEMENT OF FURNITURE offers a faithful image of the familial and social structures of a period. The typical bourgeois interior is patriarchal; its foundation is the dining-room/bedroom combination. Although it is diversified with respect to function, the furniture is highly integrated, centring around the sideboard or the bed in the middle of the room. There is a tendency to accumulate, to fill and close off the space. The emphasis is on unfunctionality, immovability, imposing presence and hierarchical labelling. Each room has a strictly defined role corresponding to one or another of the various functions of the family unit, and each ultimately refers to a view which conceives of the individual as a balanced assemblage of distinct faculties. The pieces of furniture confront one another, jostle one another, and implicate one another in a unity that is not so much spatial as moral in character. They are ranged about an axis which ensures a regular chronology of actions; thanks to this permanent symbolization, the family is always present to itself. Within this private space each piece of furniture in turn, and each room, internalizes its own particular function and takes on the symbolic dignity pertaining to it – then the whole house puts the finishing touch to this integration of interpersonal relationships within the semi-hermetic family group.

All this constitutes an organism whose structure is the patriarchal relationship founded on tradition and authority, and whose heart is the complex affective relationship that binds all the family members together. Such a family home is a specific space which takes little account of any objective decorative requirements, because the primary function of furniture and objects here is to personify human relationships, to fill the space that they share between them, and to be inhabited by a soul.¹ The real dimension they occupy is captive to the moral dimension which it is their job to signify. They have as little autonomy in this space as the various family members enjoy in society. Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value – what might be called a 'presence'. What gives the houses of our childhood such depth and resonance in memory is clearly this complex structure of interiority, and the objects within it serve for us as boundary markers of the symbolic configuration known as home. The caesura between inside and outside, and their formal opposition, which falls under the social sign of property and the psychological sign of the immanence of the family, make this traditional space into a closed transcendence. In their anthropomorphism the objects that furnish it become household gods, spatial incarnations of the emotional bonds and

the permanence of the family group. These gods enjoyed a gentle immortality until the advent of a modern generation which has cast them aside, dispersed them – even, on occasion, reinstated them in an up-to-date nostalgia for whatever is old. As often with gods, furniture too thus gets a second chance to exist, and passes from a naïve utility into a cultural baroque.

The dining-room/bedroom pattern – an arrangement of movable property closely bound up with the house as immovable property – continues to be widely pitched by advertisers to a vast public. Department stores such as Lévitan and Galeries Barbès still titillate the collective taste with evocations of ‘decorative’ ensembles – despite the fact that contours are now ‘stylized’, despite the fact that decoration is out of favour. This furniture still sells, not because it is cheaper but because it embodies the official certainties of the group and enjoys the sanction of the bourgeoisie. A further reason is that such monumental furniture (sideboard, bed or wardrobe) and its arrangement echo the persistence of traditional family structures across broad social strata of modern society.

The modern object liberated in its function

The style of furniture changes as the individual’s relationships to family and society change. Corner divans and beds, coffee tables, shelving – a plethora of new elements are now supplanting the traditional range of furniture. The organization of space changes, too, as beds become day-beds and sideboards and wardrobes give way to built-in storage. Things fold and unfold, are concealed, appear only when needed. Naturally such innovations are not due to free experiment: for the most part the greater mobility, flexibility and convenience they afford are the result of an involuntary adaptation to a shortage of space – a case of necessity being the mother of invention. Whereas the old-fashioned dining-room was heavily freighted with moral convention, ‘modern’ interiors, in their ingeniousness, often give the impression of being mere functional expedients. Their ‘absence of style’ is in the first place an absence of room, and maximum functionality is a solution of last resort whose outcome is that the dwelling-place, though remaining closed to the outside, loses its internal organization. Such a restructuring of space and the objects in it, unaccompanied by any reconversion, must in the first instance be considered an impoverishment.

The modern set of furniture, serially produced, is thus apparently deconstructed yet not restructured, nothing having replaced the expressive power of the old symbolic order. There is progress, nevertheless: between the individual and these objects, which are now more supple in their uses and have ceased to exercise or symbolize moral constraint, there is a much more liberal relationship, and in particular the individual is no longer strictly defined through them relative to his family.² Their mobility and multifunctionality allow him to organize them more freely, and this reflects a greater openness in his social relationships. This, however, is only a partial liberation. So far as the serial object is concerned, in the absence of any restructuring of space, this ‘functional’ development is merely an emancipation, not (to go back to the old Marxian distinction) a liberation proper, for it implies *liberation from the function of the object only, not from the object itself*. Consider a nondescript, light, foldable table or a bed without legs, frame or canopy – an absolute cipher of a bed, one might say: all

such objects, with their ‘pure’ outlines, no longer resemble even what they are; they have been stripped down to their most primitive essence as mere apparatus and, as it were, definitively secularized. What has been liberated in them – and what, in being liberated, has liberated something in man (or rather, perhaps, what man, in liberating himself, has liberated in them) – is their function. The function is no longer obscured by the moral theatricality of the old furniture; it is emancipated now from ritual, from ceremonial, from the entire ideology which used to make our surroundings into an opaque mirror of a reified human structure. Today, at last, these objects emerge absolutely clear about the purposes they serve. They are thus indeed free as *functional objects* – that is, they have the freedom to function, and (certainly so far as serial objects are concerned) that is practically the *only* freedom they have.³

Now, *just so long as the object is liberated only in its function, man equally is liberated only as user of that object*. This too is progress, though not a decisive turning-point. A bed is a bed, a chair is a chair, and there is no relationship between them so long as each serves only the function it is supposed to serve. And without such a relationship there can be no space, for space exists only when it is opened up, animated, invested with rhythm and expanded by a correlation between objects and a transcendence of their functions in this new structure. In a way space is the object’s true freedom, whereas its function is merely its formal freedom. The bourgeois dining-room was structured, but its structure was closed. The functional environment is more open, freer, but it is deconstructed, fragmented into its various functions. Somewhere between the two, in the gap between integrated psychological space and fragmented functional space, serial objects have their being, witnesses to both the one and the other – sometimes within a single interior.

The model interior

Modular components

This elusive space, which is no longer either a confined externality nor an interior refuge, this freedom, this ‘style’ which is indecipherable in the serial object because it is subordinated to that object’s function, may nevertheless be encountered in *model interiors*, which embody a new emerging structure and a significant evolution.⁴

Leafing through such glossy magazines as *Maison Française* or *Mobilier et Décoration* [Furniture and Decoration],⁵ one cannot fail to notice two alternating themes. The first reaches for the sublime, presenting houses beyond compare: old eighteenth-century mansions, miraculously well-equipped villas, Italian gardens heated by infrared rays and populated by Etruscan statuettes – in short, the world of the unique, leaving the reader no alternative (so far as sociological generalization is concerned, at any rate) but contemplation without hope. Aristocratic models such as these, by virtue of their absolute value, are what underpin the second theme, that of modern interior decoration and furnishing. The objects and furniture proposed here, though they are high in ‘status’ value, do impinge on sociological reality: they are not dream creations without commercial significance but, rather, *models* in the proper sense of the word. We are no longer in a world of pure art, but in a world which (potentially, at least) is of interest to the whole of society.

These models of the home-furnishing avant-garde are organized around the basic distinction between COMPONENTS and SEATING; the practical imperative they obey is that of INTERIOR DESIGN, or syntagmatic calculation, to which may be contrasted, as seats are to components, the general concept of ATMOSPHERE.

TECMA: Extensible and interlocking components. Can be transformed or enlarged. Harmonious – they create a perfectly matching set of furniture. Functional – they answer all the needs of modern living. And they meet all your furnishing requirements – bookshelves, bar, radio, cupboards, wardrobe, desk space, cabinets, dresser, drawers, display unit, file storage, hideaway table. . . .

TECMA is available in oiled teak or finished mahogany.

OSCAR: Put your OSCAR environment together with your own hands! Exciting! Unprecedented!

The OSCAR furniturama is a set of specially pre-cut components. Discover the fun of designing a miniature three-dimensional model of your furniture, in colour and just the right size to handle! You can build your model and change it around to your heart's content – all in the comfort of your own home!

Then, with perfect confidence, order your original and personal OSCAR furniture – soon to be the pride of your household!

MONOPOLY: Every MONOPOLY ensemble is your personality's best friend. A high-quality cabinetwork system, in teak or makoré. Jointing and assembling leave no traces. Four-sided components can be put together in an infinite variety of ways – an infinite variety of genuine furniture adapted to your own particular tastes, size requirements and needs.

These are multi-combinable single-block components. You're sure to want them so that you too can give your home that refined atmosphere you've been dreaming about.

These examples reveal how the functional object is being transcended by a new kind of practical organization. Symbolic values, and along with them use values, are being supplanted by organizational values. The substance and form of the old furniture have been abandoned for good, in favour of an extremely free interplay of functions. These objects are no longer endowed with a 'soul', nor do they invade us with their symbolic presence: the relationship has become an objective one, founded on disposition and play. The value this relationship takes on is no longer of an instinctive or a psychological but, rather, of a tactical kind. What such objects embody is no longer the secret of a unique relationship but, rather, differences, and moves in a game. The former radical closure has disappeared, in parallel with a distinct change in social and interpersonal structures.

Walls and daylight

The rooms and the house themselves now transcend the traditional dividing-line of the wall, which formerly made them into spaces of refuge. Rooms open into one another, everything communicates, and space is broken up into angles, diffuse areas and mobile sectors. Rooms, in short, have been liberalized. Windows are no longer imposed upon the free influx of air and light – a light which used to come *from outside* and settle upon objects, illuminating them *as though from within*. Now there are quite simply no windows, and a freely intervening light has become a universal function of the existence of things. In the same way objects have lost the substantiality which was their basis, the form which enclosed them whereby man made them part of his self-image: it is now space which plays freely between them, and becomes the universal function of their relationships and their 'values'.

Lighting

Many significant features of this general evolution might be pointed out. The tendency for light sources to be made invisible is a case in point. 'A recessed ceiling conceals perimeter neon fixtures for general diffuse lighting.' 'Uniform lighting is ensured by neon tubes concealed in various places: the full length of the recessed ceiling above the curtains, behind and all along the top rim of the built-in units, beneath the upper row of cupboards, etc.' Everything suggests that the source of light continues to be evocative of the origin of all things: even though it no longer illuminates the family circle from the ceiling, even though it has been dispersed and made manifold, it is apparently still the sign of a privileged intimacy, still able to invest things with unique value, to create shadows and invent presences. Small wonder that a system founded on the objective manipulation of simple and homogeneous elements should strive to eliminate this last sign of internal radiance, of the symbolic envelopment of things by look or desire.

Mirrors and portraits

Another symptomatic change is the disappearance of looking-glasses and mirrors. A psycho-sociology of the mirror is overdue, especially in the wake of so much metaphysics. The traditional peasant milieu had no mirrors, perhaps even feared them as somewhat eerie. The bourgeois interior, by contrast, and what remains of that interior in present-day serially produced furniture, has mirrors in profusion, hung on the walls and incorporated into wardrobes, sideboards, cabinets or panelling. As a source of light, the mirror enjoys a special place in the room. This is the basis of the ideological role it has played, everywhere in the domestic world of the well-to-do, as redundancy, superfluity, reflection: the mirror is an opulent object which affords the self-indulgent bourgeois individual the opportunity to exercise his privilege – to reproduce his own image and revel in his possessions. In a more general sense we may say that the mirror is a symbolic object which not only reflects the characteristics of the individual but also echoes in its expansion the historical expansion of individual consciousness. It thus

carries the stamp of approval of an entire social order: it is no coincidence that the century of Louis XIV is epitomized by the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, nor that, in more recent times, the spread of mirrors in apartments coincided with the spread of the triumphal Pharisaism of bourgeois consciousness, from Napoleon III to Art Nouveau. But things have changed. There is no place in the functional ensemble for reflection for its own sake. The mirror still exists, but its most appropriate place is in the bathroom, unframed. There, dedicated to the fastidious care of the appearance that social intercourse demands, it is liberated from the graces and glories of domestic subjectivity. By the same token other objects are in turn liberated from mirrors; hence, they are no longer tempted to exist in a closed circuit with their own images. For mirrors close off space, presuppose a wall, refer back to the centre of the room. The more mirrors there are, the more glorious is the intimacy of the room, albeit more turned in upon itself. The current proliferation of openings and transparent partitions clearly represents a diametrically opposed approach. (Furthermore, all the tricks that mirrors make possible run counter to the current demand for a frank use of materials.) A chain has definitely been broken, and there is a real logic to the modern approach when it eliminates not only central or over-visible light sources but also the mirrors that used to reflect them; by thus eschewing any focus on or return to a central point, it frees space of the converging squint which gave bourgeois décor — much like bourgeois consciousness in general — such a cross-eyed view of itself.⁶

Something else, too, has disappeared in tandem with mirrors: the family portrait, the wedding photograph in the bedroom, the full-length or half-length portrait of the master of the house in the drawing-room, the framed close-ups of the children almost everywhere. All these, constituting a sort of diachronic mirror of the family, disappear along with mirrors themselves when a certain level of modernity is reached (although this has not happened as yet on any wide scale). Even works of art, whether originals or reproductions, no longer have a part to play as an absolute value, but merely in a combining mode. The success of prints as decoration in contrast to framed pictures is in part to be explained by their lower absolute value, and hence greater value in association. No object, any more than lights and mirrors, must be allowed to regain too intense a focus.

Clocks and time

Another illusion forsworn by the modern interior is the illusion of time. An essential object has vanished: the clock. It is worth recalling that although the centre of the peasant room is the fire and fireplace, the clock is nevertheless a majestic and living element therein. In the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois interior it takes the form of the clock that so often crowns the marble mantelpiece, itself usually dominated by a mirror above — the whole ensemble constituting the most extraordinary symbolic résumé of bourgeois domesticity. The clock is to time as the mirror is to space. Just as the relationship to the reflected image institutes a closure and a kind of introjection of space, so the clock stands paradoxically for the permanence and introjection of time. Country clocks are among the most sought-after of objects, precisely because they capture time and strip it of surprises within the intimacy of a piece of furniture. There is nothing in the world more reassuring. The measuring of time produces anxiety

when it serves to assign us to social tasks, but it makes us feel safe when it substantializes time and cuts it into slices like an object of consumption. Everybody knows from experience how intimate a ticking clock can make a place feel; the reason is that the clock's sound assimilates the place to the inside of our own body. The clock is a mechanical heart that reassures us about our own heart. It is precisely this process of infusion or assimilation of the substance of time, this presence of duration, which is rejected, just like all other returns to inwardness, by a modern order based on externality, spatiality and objective relationships.

Towards a sociology of interior design?

It is the whole world of *Stimmung* that has disappeared, the world of 'natural' harmony between movements of the emotions and the presence of things: an internalized atmosphere as opposed to the externalized atmosphere of modern 'interiors'. Today, value resides neither in appropriation nor in intimacy but in information, in inventiveness, in control, in a continual openness to objective messages — in short, in the syntagmatic calculation which is, strictly speaking, the foundation of the discourse of the modern home-dweller.

The entire conception of decoration has changed too. Traditional good taste, which decided what was beautiful on the basis of secret affinities, no longer has any part here. That taste constituted a poetic discourse, an evocation of self-contained objects that responded to one another; today objects do not respond to one another, they communicate — they have no individual presence but merely, at best, an overall coherence attained by virtue of their simplification as components of a code and the way their relationships are calculated. An unrestricted combinatorial system enables man to use them as the elements of his structural discourse.

Advertising widely promotes this new conception of decoration: 'Create a livable and well-organized three-room flat in 30 square metres!'; 'Multiply your flat by four!' More generally, it always talks of interior decorating in terms of problems and solutions, and it is here, rather than in 'good taste', that the current direction of decoration is to be found: it is no longer a matter of setting up a theatre of objects or creating an ambience, but of solving a problem, devising the subtlest possible response to a complicated set of conditions, mobilizing a space.

In the case of serial objects, the possibilities of this functional discourse are reduced. Objects and furniture of this kind are dispersed elements whose syntactic links are not evident; to the degree that they are arranged in a calculated way, the organizing principle is penury, and the objects appear impoverished in their abstraction. This is a necessary abstraction, however, for it provides the basis, at the level of the model, for the homogeneity of the elements in functional interaction. First of all man must stop mixing himself up with things and investing them with his own image; he will then be able, beyond the utility they have for him, to project onto them his game plan, his calculations, his discourse, and invest these manoeuvres themselves with the sense of a message to others, and a message to oneself. By the time this point is reached the mode of existence of 'ambient' objects will have changed completely, and a sociology of furnishing will perforce have given way to a sociology of interior design.⁷

Both the images and the discourse of advertising attest to this development: the

discourse, by placing the subject directly on the stage as actor and manager, in both the indicative and the imperative moods; the images, to the contrary, by leaving the subject out, for his presence would, in a way, be an anachronism. The subject is himself the order he puts into things, and this order excludes redundancy: man has simply to remove himself from the picture. His presence has accomplished its task. What man now creates is a space, not a décor, and whereas the figure of the master of the house was a normal part – indeed, the clearest connotation – of the traditional décor, a signature is thoroughly alien to any ‘functional’ space.

Man the interior designer

We are beginning to see what the new model of the home-dweller looks like: ‘man the interior designer’ is neither an owner nor a mere user – rather, he is an active engineer of atmosphere. Space is at his disposal like a kind of distributed system, and by controlling this space he holds sway over all possible reciprocal relations between the objects therein, and hence over all the roles they are capable of assuming. (It follows that he must also be ‘functional’ himself: he and the space in question must be homogeneous if his messages of design are to leave him and return to him successfully.) What matters to him is neither possession nor enjoyment but responsibility, in the strict sense which implies that it is at all times possible for him to determine ‘responses’. His praxis is exclusively external. This modern home-dweller does not ‘consume’ his objects. (Here again, ‘taste’ no longer has the slightest part to play, for in both its meanings it refers us back to self-contained objects whose form contains an ‘edible’ substance, so to speak, which makes them susceptible of internalization.) Instead of consuming objects, he dominates, controls and orders them. He discovers himself in the manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system.

There is clearly something abstract about this model of the ‘functional’ home-dweller. Advertising would like us to believe that modern man no longer fundamentally *needs* his objects, that all he has to do now is operate among them as an intelligent technician of communications. Our environment, however, is a *directly experienced* mode of existence, and it is very abstract indeed to apply to it computational and informational models borrowed from the purely technical realm. Furthermore, this objectivizing approach is accompanied by a cascade of ambiguous phraseology – ‘to your own taste’, ‘to your own measurements’, ‘personalization’, ‘the atmosphere will be yours alone’, and so forth – which appears to contradict that approach but in fact covers for it. The objective game which man the interior designer is invited to play is invariably taken over by the double-dealing of advertising. Yet the game’s very logic conveys with it the image of a general strategy of human relations, the image of a human project, of a *modus vivendi* for the technical age – a genuine change of civilization whose impact may be discerned even in everyday life.

Consider the object for a moment: the object as humble and receptive supporting actor, as a sort of psychological slave or confidant – the object as directly experienced in traditional daily life and illustrated throughout the history of Western art down to our own day. This object was the reflection of a total order, bound up with a well-defined conception of décor and perspective, substance and form. According to this conception, the form is an absolute dividing-line between inside and outside. Form is a

rigid container, and within it is substance. Beyond their practical function, therefore, objects – and specifically objects of furniture – have a primordial function as vessels, a function that belongs to the register of the imaginary.⁸ This explains their psychological receptiveness. They are the reflection of a whole view of the world according to which each being is a ‘vessel of inwardness’ and relations between beings are transcendent correlations of substances; thus the house itself is the symbolic equivalent of the human body, whose potent organic schema is later generalized into an ideal design for the integration of social structures. All this makes up a complete mode of life whose basic ordering principle is Nature as the original substance from which value is derived. In creating or manufacturing objects, man makes himself, through the imposition of a form (i.e. through culture), into the transubstantiator of nature. It is the passing down of substances from age to age, from form to form, which supplies the archetype of creativity, namely creation *ab utero* and the whole poetic and metaphorical symbolic system that goes with it.⁹ So, with meaning and value deriving from the hereditary transmission of substances under the jurisdiction of form, the world is experienced as given (as it always is in the unconscious and in childhood), and the task is to reveal and perpetuate it. So too, with the form perfectly circumscribing the object, a portion of nature is included therein, just as in the case of the human body: the object on this view is essentially anthropomorphic. Man is thus bound to the objects around him by the same visceral intimacy, *mutatis mutandis*, that binds him to the organs of his own body, and ‘ownership’ of the object always tends virtually towards the appropriation of its substance by oral annexation and ‘assimilation’.

What we glimpse today in modern interiors is the coming end of this order of Nature; what is appearing on the horizon, beyond the break-up of form, beyond the dissolution of the formal boundary between inside and outside and of the whole dialectic of being and appearance relating to that boundary, is a qualitatively new kind of relationship, a new kind of objective responsibility. As directly experienced, the project of a technological society implies putting the very idea of genesis into question and omitting all the origins, received meanings and ‘essences’ of which our old pieces of furniture remained concrete symbols; it implies practical computation and conceptualization on the basis of a total abstraction, the notion of a world no longer given but instead produced – mastered, manipulated, inventoried, controlled: a world, in short, that has to be *constructed*.¹⁰

Although it is different in kind from the traditional procreative order, this modern order nevertheless also depends on a basic symbolic system. Whereas the earlier civilization, founded on the natural order of substances, may be said to have been underpinned by oral structures, the modern order of production, calculation and functionality must be viewed as a phallic order linked to the enterprise whose goal is the supersession and transformation of the given and the opening up of new objective structures; but it is at the same time a faecal order founded on an abstraction or quintessence meant to inform a homogeneous material world, on the measuring off and division of material reality, on a great anal aggressiveness sublimated into play, discourse, ordering, classifying and placement.

The organizing of things, even when in the context of technical enterprise it has every appearance of being objective, always remains a powerful springboard for projection and cathexis. The best evidence of this is the obsessiveness that lies behind so many organizational projects and (of most relevance to our present discussion) behind

the will to design. Everything has to intercommunicate, everything has to be functional – no more secrets, no more mysteries, everything is organized, therefore everything is clear. This is not the old slogan of the house-proud: a place for everything and everything in its place. That obsession was moral, today's is functional – and explicable in terms of the faecal function, which requires absolute conductivity in all internal organs. Here we have the basis for a character profile of technical civilization: if hypochondria is an obsession with the circulation of substances and the functioning of the primary organs, we might well describe modern man, the cybernetician, as a mental hypochondriac, as someone obsessed with the perfect circulation of messages.

Notes

- 1 They may also have taste and style – or not, as the case may be.
- 2 We cannot help but wonder, however, whether he is not henceforward strictly defined through them relative to society at large.
- 3 Similarly, the bourgeois and industrial revolution gradually freed the individual from his involvement with religion, morality and family. He thus acceded to a freedom in law as an individual, but also to an actual freedom as labour-power – that is, the freedom to sell himself as labour-power. This parallel has nothing coincidental about it, for there is a profound correlation here: both the serially produced 'functional' object and the social individual are liberated in their 'functional' objectification, not in their singularity or in their totality as object or person.
- 4 In other words, these things happen at a privileged level. And there is a sociological and a social problem with the fact that a restricted group should have the concrete freedom to present itself, through its objects and furniture, as a model in the eyes of an entire society.
- 5 A glossy magazine devoted to mass-produced products is unthinkable, the only appropriate form here being a catalogue.
- 6 The mirror occasionally makes a comeback, but it does so in a baroque cultural mode, as a secondary object – a romantic looking-glass, say, or an antique or bull's-eye mirror. The function is no longer the same.
- 7 Roland Barthes describes this new stage as it affects cars:

the uniformity of models seems to belie the very idea of technical performance, so 'normal' driving becomes the only possible field in which phantasies of power and invention can be invested. The car thus transfers its phantasied power to a specific set of practices. Since we can no longer tinker with the object itself, we are reduced to tinkering with the way it is driven . . . it is no longer the car's forms and functions that call forth human dreams but, rather, its handling, and before long, perhaps, we shall be writing not a mythology of the automobile but a mythology of driving. ('La voiture, projection de l'ego', *Réalités*, no. 213, October 1963)

- 8 A law of dimension also seems to come into play, however, at the level of symbolic organization: any object above a certain size, even one with phallic significance (car, rocket), becomes a receptacle, vessel or womb, while any below a particular size becomes penile, even if it is a bowl or a knick-knack.
- 9 Intellectual and artistic production, traditionally seen in terms of gifts, inspiration or genius, has never really been anything more than an echo of this archetype.
- 10 As a matter of fact this model of praxis emerges clearly only when a high technical level has been attained, or in the context of very advanced everyday objects, such as tape recorders, cars or household appliances, whose dials, dashboards or control panels bespeak the degree of mastery and coordination required to operate them. It should be noted that everyday life is still very largely governed by the traditional forms of praxis.

Luce Giard

DOING COOKING [1980]

(Source: de Certeau, Michel, Giard, Luce and Mayol, Pierre (1998) *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living Cooking*, translated by Timothy J. Tomasik, Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 152–9)

Editor's introduction

As well as being an established historian, Luce Giard worked alongside Michel de Certeau on the project that culminated in the two volumes of *The Practice of Everyday Life* (see Chapter 6). Giard's contribution to the project needs to be seen as both an intervention in, and a continuation of, de Certeau's initial plan. Giard argued that as far as the empirical side of the investigation went little space had been given to consider that women's everyday life might feature distinct limits and pressures, and that it might also evidence specific ways of operating. Her decision to centre her research on cooking was made after watching Chantal Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Akerman has said of her film that it 'is a feminist film because I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman' (Akerman quoted in Martin 1979: 24). In the same way Giard's descriptions of the 'art of cooking' similarly give time and space to the gestures and practices of what she calls 'Kitchen Women Nation' (*le peuple féminin des cuisines*).

Giard's approach to domestic cooking navigates between a number of perspectives. Recognising that domestic routines are evidence of gender inequalities, Giard nevertheless wants to both celebrate women's inventiveness in 'doing cooking' and memorialise the skills (the know-how) passed on from one generation of women to another. Memory plays a large part in this phenomenology of the cooking environment, where smells and gestures evoke places and pasts that hold out against powerful tendencies within modern life. Thus women's 'art of cooking' can evidence a tenacity that resists the packaged amnesia of nostalgia while refusing the over-modernisation promoted by the manufacturers and celebrants of the latest in (cooking) technology.

Giard's 'sociology' of cooking is purposefully intimate: her 'informants' are friends and acquaintances (rather than 'focus groups'), and their voices combine with hers in an evoca-

tion of 'doing cooking', rather than providing illustrations for an authoritative interpretation of domestic practice.

Further reading: Gullestad 1984; Highmore 2000b, 2002; Margulies 1996; Martin 1979.

ONE DAY FINALLY, when I was twenty, I got my own small apartment, apart from school barracks, that included a rudimentary but sufficient facility in which to prepare my meals. I discovered myself invested with the care of preparing my own food, delighted with being able to escape from the noise and crowds of college cafeterias and from the shuttling back and forth to face preordained menus. But how was I to proceed? I did not know how to do anything. It was not a question of waiting for or asking advice from the women in the family because that would have implied returning to the maternal hearth and agreeing to slip back into that discarded feminine model. The solution seemed obvious: just like everything else, these sorts of things could be learned in books. All I had to do was find in a bookstore a source of information that was 'simple', 'quick', 'modern', and 'inexpensive', according to my then naive vocabulary. And in order to secure the means to do so (at least, so I thought), I undertook the close study of a paperback cookbook devoid of both illustrations and 'feminine' flourishes. To my mind, this absence endowed the book with eminent practical value and sure efficiency.

From the groping experience of my initial gestures, my trials and errors, there remains this one surprise: I thought that I had never learned or observed anything, having obstinately wanted to escape from the contagion of a young girl's education and because I had always preferred my room, my books, and my silent games to the kitchen where my mother busied herself. Yet, my childhood gaze had seen and memorized certain gestures, and my sense memory had kept track of certain tastes, smells, and colors. I already knew all the sounds: the gentle hiss of simmering water, the sputtering of melting meat drippings, and the dull thud of the kneading hand. A recipe or an inductive word sufficed to arouse a strange anamnesis whereby ancient knowledge and primitive experiences were reactivated in fragments of which I was the heiress and guardian without wanting to be. I had to admit that I too had been provided with a woman's knowledge and that it had crept into me, slipping past my mind's surveillance. It was something that came to me from my body and that integrated me into the great corps of women of my lineage, incorporating me into their anonymous ranks.

I discovered bit by bit not the pleasure of eating good meals (I am seldom drawn to solitary delights), but that of manipulating raw material, of organizing, combining, modifying, and inventing. I learned the tranquil joy of anticipated hospitality, when one prepares a meal to share with friends in the same way in which one composes a party tune or draws: with moving hands, careful fingers, the whole body inhabited with the rhythm of working, and the mind awakening, freed from its own ponderousness, flitting from idea to memory, finally seizing on a certain chain of thought, and then modulating this tattered writing once again. Thus, surreptitiously and without suspecting it, I had been invested with the secret, tenacious pleasure of *doing-cooking*.

When this became clear in my mind, it was already too late; the enemy was on the

inside. It then became necessary to try to explain its nature, meaning, and manner to myself in the hopes of understanding why that particular pleasure seems so close to the 'pleasure of the text', why I twine such tight kinship ties between the writing of gestures and that of words, and if one is free to establish, as I do, a kind of reciprocity between their respective productions. Why seek to satisfy, with one as with the other, the same central need to *spend* [*dépenser*], to dedicate a part of one's lifetime to that of which the trace must be erased? Why be so avid and concerned about inscribing in gestures and words the same fidelity to the women of my lineage?

There have been women ceaselessly doomed to both housework and the creation of life, women excluded from public life and the communication of knowledge, and women educated at the time of my grandmothers' generation, of whom I would like to retain a living and true memory. Following in their footsteps, I have dreamed of practicing an impoverished writing, that of a *public writer* who has no claim to words, whose name is erased. Such writing targets its own destruction and repeats, in its own way, that humble service to others for whom these non-illustrious women (no one knows their names, strength, or courage anymore) represented for generations basic gestures always strung together and necessitated by the interminable repetition of household tasks performed in the succession of meals and days, with attention given to the body of others.

Perhaps that is exactly what I am seeking in my culinary joys: the reconstruction, through gestures, tastes, and combinations, of a *silent legend* as if, by dint of merely living in it with my hands and body, I would succeed in restoring the alchemy of such a history, in meriting its secret of language, as if, from this stubborn stomping around on Mother Earth, the truth of the word would come back to me one day. Or rather, a writing of words, reborn, that would finally achieve the expression of its wonderful debt and the impossible task of being able to return its favor. Women bereft of writing who came before me, you who passed on to me the shape of your hands or the color of your eyes, you whose wish anticipated my birth, you who carried me, and fed me like my great-grandmother blinded with age who would await my birth before succumbing to death, you whose names I mumbled in my childhood dreams, you whose beliefs and servitudes I have not preserved, I would like the slow remembrance of your gestures in the kitchen to prompt me with words that will remain faithful to you; I would like the poetry of words to translate that of gestures; I would like a writing of words and letters to correspond to your writing of recipes and tastes. As long as one of us preserves your nourishing knowledge, as long as the recipes of your tender patience are transmitted from hand to hand and from generation to generation, a fragmentary yet tenacious memory of your life itself will live on. The sophisticated ritualization of basic gestures has thus become more dear to me than the persistence of words and texts, because body techniques seem better protected from the superficiality of fashion, and also, a more profound and heavier material faithfulness is at play there, a way of being-in-the-world and making it one's home.

[. . .]

Culinary practices situate themselves at the most rudimentary level, at the most necessary and the most unrespected level. Traditionally in France, the responsibility for them falls almost exclusively on women and these tasks are the object of ambivalent feelings: the value of French cuisine is enhanced when compared to that of

neighboring countries; the importance of diet in raising children and care for the family is emphasized in the media; the responsibility and role of the housewife as primary buyer and supplier for the household are stressed. At the same time, people judge this work to be repetitive and monotonous, devoid of intelligence and imagination; people exclude it from the field of knowledge by neglecting dietary education in school programs. Yet, except for residents from certain communities (convents, hospitals, prisons), almost all women are responsible for cooking, either for their own needs or in order to feed family members or their occasional guests.

In each case, *doing-cooking* is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one's self, marked by the 'family saga' and the history of each, bound to childhood memory just like rhythms and seasons. This women's work has them proliferate into 'gesture trees' (Rilke), into Shiva goddesses with a hundred arms who are both clever and thrifty: the rapid and jerky back and forth movement of the whisk whipping egg whites, hands that slowly knead pastry dough with a symmetrical movement, a sort of restrained tenderness. A woman's worry: 'Will the cake be moist enough?'; a woman's observation: 'These tomatoes are not very juicy, I'll have to add some water while they cook.' A transmission of knowledge: 'My mother (or aunt or grandmother) always told me to add a drop of vinegar to grilled pork ribs.' A series of techniques [*tours de main*] that one must observe before being able to imitate them: 'To loosen a crêpe, you give the pan a sharp rap, like this.' These are multifaceted activities that people consider very simple or even a little stupid, except in the rare cases where they are carried out with a certain degree of excellence, with extreme refinement – but then it becomes the business of *great chefs*, who, of course, are men.

Yet, from the moment one becomes interested in the process of culinary production, one notices that it requires a multiple memory: a memory of apprenticeship, of witnessed gestures, and of consistencies, in order, for example, to identify the exact moment when the custard has begun to coat the back of a spoon and thus must be taken off the stove to prevent it from separating. It also calls for a programming mind: one must astutely calculate both preparation and cooking time, insert the various sequences of actions among one another, and set up the order of dishes in order to attain the desired temperature at the right moment; there is, after all, no point in the apple fritters being just right when the guests have barely started on the hors d'oeuvres. Sensory perception intervenes as well: more so than the theoretical cooking time indicated in the recipe, it is the smell coming from the oven that lets one know if the cooking is coming along and whether it might help to turn up the temperature. The creative ingenuity of cleverness also finds its place in culinary production: how can one make the most out of leftovers in a way that makes everyone believe that it is a completely new dish? Each meal demands the invention of an alternative ministrategy when one ingredient or the appropriate utensil is lacking. And when friends make a sudden, unexpected appearance right at dinnertime, one must improvise without a score and exercise one's combinatory capacities. Thus, entering into the vocation of cooking and manipulating ordinary things make one use intelligence, a subtle intelligence full of nuances and strokes of genius, a light and lively intelligence that can be perceived without exhibiting itself, in short, *a very ordinary intelligence*.

These days, when the job one has or seeks in vain is often no longer what provides

social identity, when for so many people nothing remains at the end of the day except for the bitter wear and tear of so many dull hours, the preparation of a meal furnishes that rare joy of producing something oneself, of fashioning a fragment of reality, of knowing the joys of a demiurgic miniaturization, all the while securing the gratitude of those who will consume it by way of pleasant and innocent seductions. This culinary work is alleged to be devoid of mystery and grandeur, but it unfurls in a complex montage of things to be done according to a predetermined chronological sequence: planning, organizing, and shopping; preparing and serving; clearing, putting away, and tidying up. It haunts the memories of novelists, from the fabulous excesses of Rabelais's heroes, all busy eating, digesting, and relieving themselves,¹ to the 'long lists of mounds of food' of Jules Verne,² passing through the 'bourgeois cuisine' of Balzac's creatures,³ the recipes of Zola, and the tasty simmering dishes of Simenon's concierges.⁴

Listen to these men's voices describing women's cooking, like Pierre Bonte's simple people, whose hearty accents [on an early morning radio talk show] used to populate city mornings with good savages:

You see, this soup, made with beans, is what we call, of course, a bean soup, but you shouldn't think there are only beans in it. My wife made it this morning. Well, she got up at seven o'clock, her pot of water was on the wood-burning stove – she put her beans on to soak last night – then she added two leeks chopped very fine and some nice potatoes; she put all that together, and when it started boiling, she put her salt pork in. An hour before serving it to us, after three and a half to four hours of cooking, she made a fricassee for it. A fricassee is made in a pan with bacon drippings. She browns an onion in it, and when the onion is nice and golden, she makes up a nice flour roux and then puts it all in the soup.⁵

I will admit it myself: I still dream about the rice croquettes and the fritters that nice children in the Comtesse de Ségur's books used to eat for dinner as a reward for good behavior; I was less well behaved than them and these unknown dishes, which seemed to me adorned with exotic flavors, were never served at our family table. But, taken out of its literary dressing and stripped of its fleeting ennoblement, culinary work finds itself once again in dreary reality. This women's work, without schedule or salary (except to be paid off through service to others), work without added value or productivity (men have more important things to calculate), work whose success is always experienced for a limited duration (the way a soufflé just out of the oven, balancing in a subtle equilibrium, in this glorious peak, is already wavering well before it finally collapses). Yes, women's work is slow and interminable.

Notes

- 1 On Rabelais, Noëlle Châtelet, *Le Corps à corps culinaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 55–92.
- 2 'This narrative, but also all the others, and this one with no exception, are interlarded with long lists of mounds of food, as in Dickens, Rabelais, Cervantes . . . For Verne, as for those writers, there is a naive and simple fantasy of feeling full, the horror of emptiness . . . nature is the mother and she provides food. She is full everywhere, as Leibniz said, and she cannot be hungry.'

Man is the hole in Nature, he is the hunger of the world' (Michel Serres, *Jouvenances sur Jules Verne* [Paris: Minuit, 1974], 176).

3 Robert Courtine, *Balzac à table* (Paris: Laffont, 1976).

4 Robert Courtine, *Le Cahier de recettes de Mme Maigret* (Paris: Laffont, 1974), with a preface by Georges Simenon; and *Zola à table: trois cents recettes* (Paris: Laffont, 1978).

5 Pierre Bonte, *Le Bonheur est dans le pré* (Paris: Stock, 1976), 232. See the book review by Catherine B. Clément, 'Pierre Bonte et ses philosophes du matin: le Christophe Colomb de Chavignol', *Le Monde*, 5–16 February 1976.

Lynn Spigel

INSTALLING THE TELEVISION SET [1992]

(Source: Spigel, Lynn "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948–1955," *Camera Obscura* (16:1, Winter 1998). Copyright 1998. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Duke University Press.

Editor's introduction

Lynn Spigel's work on television is of particular interest for the study of everyday life. If television has become a crucial element in our everyday environment, Spigel approaches it as both an everyday material object and a signifying media that continually figures and refigures this environment. So, rather than limiting herself to the analysis of television programmes as discrete texts or focusing on the empirical study of how television is received (the two dominant forms of academic attention), she instead foregrounds television as something that both reflects and constructs social relations via both discourses and material practices. By navigating across a range of texts (television programmes, adverts for television sets, popular representations of TV in the home, and so on) she reveals how television (especially in its early years) ambiguously both threatened and supported dominant familial and gendered relations.

This ambiguity of television's role in domestic life becomes clear when it is seen as a practice that both unites and divides. For early enthusiasts, TV could bring families together in the shared practice of sitting round the TV set watching 'family favourites'. But it was also clear that the practice of watching TV was as likely to divide families as it was to unite them. In particular, age and gender differences were seen as something that TV might exacerbate rather than placate. Such differentiation might be something that has been greatly extended by even more targeted programming via satellite and cable stations.

In many respects Spigel treats TV as a material practice that encompasses (in complex and often contradictory ways) a whole variety of forms that impact on everyday life. TV for Spigel is so ubiquitous and so much part of our everyday life that it extends far beyond the actual device and the programmes it transmits.

Further reading: Moores 2000; Silverstone 1994; Spigel 1991, 1992b, 2001; Walkerdine 1986.



Figure 34.1 Dumont advertisement, *House Beautiful* 91 (November 1949), p. 1

THIS ESSAY BRINGS TOGETHER a variety of popular discourses on television and domestic space which were distributed from a number of institutions – including popular books and magazines, especially middle-class women’s home magazines, magazine advertisements for television which idealized a middle-class lifestyle (Figure 34.1), and early television narratives, especially family situation comedies which took the middle-class domestic interior as their principal setting.¹ In examining these discourses in connection with one another, I want to establish the ways in which representations disseminated by different media institutions converge or intersect around questions of television’s place in the home. I want to look at the meanings

attached to the new object and the modes of use or reception which the media advised. Although these discourses most certainly do not reflect directly the public’s response to television in the postwar period, they do begin to reveal the intertextual context through which people (and here especially middle-class women) might have made sense of television and its place in everyday life.

[. . .]

Given its ability to bring ‘another world’ into the home, it is not surprising that television was often figured as the ultimate expression of progress in utopian statements concerning man’s ability to conquer and to domesticate space. In 1946, Thomas H. Hutchinson, an early experimenter in television programming, published a popular book designed to introduce television to the general public, *Here is Television, Your Window on the World*. In his opening pages, Hutchinson wrote, ‘Today we stand poised on the threshold of a future for television that no one can begin to comprehend fully. . . . We do know, however, that the outside world can be brought into the home and thus one of mankind’s long-standing ambitions has been achieved.’² And in *Radio, Television and Society*, a general readership book of 1950, Charles Siepmann explained that, ‘television provides a maximum extension of the perceived environment with a minimum of effort. Television is a form of ‘going places’ without even the expenditure of movement, to say nothing of money. It is bringing the world to people’s doorsteps.’³ Indeed, as this statement suggests, television meshed perfectly with the aesthetics of modern suburban architecture. It brought to the home a grand illusion of space while also fulfilling the ‘easy living’, minimal motion principles of functionalist housing design.

In fact, I would argue that the ideological harmony between utopian dreams for housing design and for technological solutions to distance created a joint leverage for television’s rapid growth in the postwar period. Both of these utopias had been on the agenda well before television’s arrival in the 1950s. As Leo Marx has suggested with reference to nineteenth-century literary utopias, the dream of eradicating distances was a central trope of America’s early discourse on technology. Particularly in the post-Civil War years, it was machines of transport (especially the train) which became the rhetorical figure through which this dream was realized in popular discourse and literature.⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, communication technology had supplanted transportation. It was now the telegraph, telephone, radio – and later, television – which promised to conquer space.

In the years following World War II, this technological utopia was joined by a complementary housing utopia which was for the first time mass produced. Although the 1950s witnessed the most extreme preoccupation with the merging of indoor and outdoor space, this ideal had been part of the model for interior design in the first suburban houses of the latter nineteenth century. In their widely read book of 1869, *The American Woman’s Home*, Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe suggested, for example, that the thrifty Victorian housewife might fashion a ‘rustic [picture] frame made of branches . . . and garnish the corners with . . . a cluster of acorns’, or else copy their illustration of a large window ‘ornamented with a variety of these rural economical adornings.’⁵ For the Beecher sisters the merging of indoor and outdoor worlds was a response to the Victorian cult of domesticity – its separation between private/female and public/male domains. Also concerned with bringing nature into

the home, the architects of the late 1870s began to build bay windows or else smaller windows that were grouped together in order to form a composite view for the residents.⁶ Here, the natural world was associated with the 'true woman' who was to make her home a kind of nature retreat that would counteract the signs of modernity – smokestacks, tenement buildings, crowded streets – found in the urban work centers. As the sharp gender divisions between private and public worlds became increasingly unstable at the end of the nineteenth century, the merging of outside and inside space became more important for domestic architecture, and its meaning was somewhat altered. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the nature ideal still would have been understood in terms of its association with femininity, but it also began to have the more modern meaning of an erasure between separate spheres of public and private life. The bungalow cottages built across the country began to merge inside and outside worlds with their window views and expansive porches.

The most exaggerated effort to erase spatial barriers took place in the modernist architecture movements which emerged in the 1920s in Europe. Architectural modernism, or the 'International Style' as it was also called, quickly took root on American soil, and architects working from a variety of traditions developed many of the principles of modernist design, not least of all the erasure between public and private domains. Homes ranging from Richard Neutra's classical modernist Lovell House of 1929 (a machine-like futuristic structure) to Richard Keck's almost-all-glass Crystal Palace of 1934 to Cliff May's rambling ranch-style homes of the 1940s, foregrounded the merging of indoors and outdoors with window walls, continuous living areas, and/or patio areas that appeared to extend into interior space.

Although these 'homes of tomorrow' were clearly upper-class dream-houses – too expensive or too 'unhomey' for most Americans – the public was at least to some degree familiar with architectural modernism because it was widely publicized through fairs, museum exhibitions, department stores, home magazines, and the movies.⁷ In the years following World War II the spatial aesthetics established by modernists appeared in a watered down, mass-produced version when the Levittowns across the country offered their consumers large picture windows or glass walls and continuous dining-living areas, imitating the principle of merging spaces found in the architectural ideal. That this mass-market realization of utopian dreams for housing was to find its companion in television, modernity's ultimate 'space-merging' technology, is a particularly significant historical meeting.

Indeed, the ideological harmony between technological utopias and housing utopias created an ideal nesting ground for television's introduction to the public in the postwar years. Women's home magazines often displayed television sets in decorative settings which created the illusion of spatial conquests. The set was typically placed in rooms with panoramic window views, or else installed next to globes and colorful maps.⁸ The image of television as a 'global village', which media critic Marshall McLuhan spoke of in the 1960s, was already suggested in the popular discourses of the postwar period.

Even the manufacturers seemed to realize the marketing potential of this new global village in a box. Advertisers for television typically used this illusion of the outside world as part of their promotional rhetoric. They placed their TV sets against scenic backgrounds suggestive of the far-off spaces which television promised to make domestic. In 1953, Arvin's advertising campaign used the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben as

backdrops for its console models.⁹ In that same year, Emerson TV went further than Europe. Its television set, with a picture of New York City on its screen, appeared among the planets (and note that the ad also included a smaller TV with a little girl and her poodle, thereby tying domestic meanings to the sci-fi imagery).¹⁰

This obsession with a view of far-away places was also registered in family sitcoms. Like the model homes in women's magazines, these TV homes incorporated an illusion of outside spaces which could be seen through large picture windows that often dominated the *mise en scène*. It was not just that these domestic interiors repeated the popular architectural ideal; they also fulfilled the expectations about television which were voiced in popular discourses of the time. That is to say, the depiction of domestic space appears to have been based in part upon those utopian predictions which promised that television would provide for its audiences a view of outside spaces. Thus, the representation of the family's private interior world was often merged with a view of public exteriors, a view which was typically a fantasy depiction of high-priced neighborhoods not readily accessible to television's less affluent audiences. Beginning with its first episode in 1950, *The Burns and Allen Show* included numerous windows and glass doors through which appeared a painted backdrop depicting George and Gracie's Beverly Hills yard. In *Make Room for Daddy*, a slightly more realistic window view of New York City dominated the *mise en scène* of the Williams's luxury penthouse. Margie Albright, the spoiled rich girl character of *My Little Margie*, was typically depicted lounging in her sprawling New York apartment – complete with a terrace view of the city skyline. In 1955, the most popular show on television, *I Love Lucy*, attempted to give the TV audience a vicarious vacation by moving its characters to Hollywood for the entire season. The Ricardo's hotel suite contained a wall of windows through which audiences were given a panoramic view of the Hollywood Hills. This travelogue motif was to become conventionalized in the sitcom form when, for example, subsequent seasons saw *Burns and Allen's* move to New York, *I Love Lucy's* and *The Honeymooners'* season-long European vacations, and *Make Room for Daddy's* visit to the Grand Canyon.

This interest in bringing an illusion of the world into the home can be seen as part of a larger historical process in which the home was designed to incorporate social space. Increasingly in the twentieth century, home appliances and other luxury items replaced community facilities. In the postwar years the community activity most under question was spectatorship. According to a 1955 *Fortune* survey, even while postwar Americans were spending a phenomenal '30 billion dollars for fun' in the prosperous postwar economy, when calculated in terms of disposable income, this figure actually reflected about a 2% decline since 1947. By far, the greatest slump was in the spectator amusements – most strikingly in movie attendance, but also in baseball, hockey, theater, and concert admissions. The *Fortune* survey concluded that American spectators had moved indoors where high fidelity sound and television promised more and better entertainment than in 'the golden age of the box-office'.¹¹

Fortune's analysis indeed describes what happened to spectator amusements during the early 1950s. But its conclusion was also typical of a wider discourse which spoke of television as part of a home entertainment center which promised to privatize and domesticate the experience of spectatorship. Moreover, as in the case of the *Fortune* survey, it was primarily the movies and the movie theater which television promised to replace. In 1948, *House Beautiful* told its readers that 'looking at a television

program is much like going to a movie'.¹² Advertisements variously referred to the 'family theater', the 'video theater', the 'chairside theater', the 'living room theater', and so forth. A 1953 Emerson ad went one step further by showing an oversized television set which appears on a movie theater stage as a full house views the enormous video screen. The caption reads, 'Now! A TV picture so clear, so sharp . . . you'll think you're at the movies.'¹³

The discursive refiguring of the site of theatrical exhibition was by no means a matter of simple substitution. While 'going to television' might replace going to the theater, this replacement ushered in a grave spatial problem, primarily stated as a woman's problem of spatial confinement in the home. The movie theater was not just a site of exhibition, it was also an arena in which the housewife was given access to social life in the public sphere. In 1951, a cartoon in *Better Homes and Gardens* stated the problem in graphic terms. On his way home, a husband imagines a night of television viewing while his kitchen-bound wife dreams of a night out at the movies (Figure 34.2).¹⁴ As this cartoon suggests, the utopian discourses which promised that television would connect the home to outside spaces were met by dystopian counterparts. For even if television offered a grand illusion of the outside world with its panoramic vistas and travelogue plots, it seems likely that women were critical of this illusionism, that they recognized the discrepancy between the everyday experience of domestic



Figure 34.2 Cartoon, *Better Homes and Gardens* 29 (November 1951), p. 218

isolation perpetuated by television, and the imaginary experiences of social integration which television programming constructed.

Beyond this separation from the public sphere there were other complications for women in their new 'family theaters'. Although television was often promoted as the great instrument of family togetherness, it was just as often depicted as a divisive force. This was especially true in the case of women, who were typically shown to be isolated from the group watching television. In 1951, *American Home* showed a continuous living and dining room in which a woman supposedly was allowed to accomplish her housework among the group watching television. However, as the graphic representation shows, the woman's table-serving chores clearly isolate her from the television crowd which is pictured in the background, as the woman stands to the extreme front-right border of the frame.¹⁵ This problem of female spatial isolation gave way to what can be called a corrective cycle of commodity purchases. Typically, in 1950, Hotpoint advertised its dishwasher by claiming that the machine would bring the woman into the living room where she could watch television with her family.¹⁶

The television advertisements in women's home magazines (as well as general audience magazines like *Life* and *Look*) also attempted to negotiate this conflict between women's domestic isolation and their integration into social life. Here, the television set itself was figured in the context of a night out on the town. Advertisements typically displayed glamorously dressed husbands and wives whose evenings of television took on, for example, the status of a theater date.¹⁷ According to the logic of such ads, television turned the home into a public meeting hall in which residents could imagine that they were involved in a social occasion.

Indeed, television – at its most ideal – promised to bring to audiences not merely an illusion of reality as in the cinema, but a sense of 'being there', a kind of *hyper-realism*. Advertisers repeatedly promised that their sets would deliver picture and sound quality so real that the illusion would come alive. In 1952, Motorola promised that its 'new dimension of realism brings action right into the living room.'¹⁸ Far exceeding the imagination of Motorola's advertising firm were the advertisers for Sparton television who produced what might be called the emblematic advertisement of this 'come to life' genre. The 1953 ad pictured a large full-color photograph of a baseball stadium. On home plate stood a Sparton TV console whose screen showed a picture of a baseball player up at bat. Out in right field (and in the foreground of the composition) stood a modern-style easy chair with baseball bats and catchers mitts placed nearby. In this way Sparton TV literally transported the living room to the baseball field.¹⁹

[. . .]

The arrangement of the perfect view in the home was constantly discussed in women's home magazines, which advised readers on ways to organize seating and ambient lighting so as to achieve a visually appealing effect for the spectator. In these discussions the television set was figured as a focal point in the home, with all points of vision intersecting at the screen. In 1951, *Good Housekeeping* advised its readers that 'television is theatre; and to succeed, theatre requires a comfortably placed audience with a clear view of the stage.'²⁰ Furniture companies like Kroehler 'TeleVue' advertised living room ensembles which were completely organized around the new TV center.

As this focal point of vision, television was often represented in terms of a spatial mathematic (or geometry) complete with charts indicating optimal formulas for visual pleasure. In 1949, *Better Homes and Gardens* suggested, 'To get a good view and avoid fatigue, sit on eye level with screen at no more than 30 degrees off to the side of screen.'²¹ Even the TV networks recognized the significance of this new science. CBS in conjunction with Rutgers University studied 102 television homes in order 'to determine the distance and angle from which people watch TV under normal conditions'.²²

This scientific management of the gaze in the home, this desire to control and to construct a perfect view, was met with a series of contradictory discourses which expressed multiple anxieties about the ability of the domestic environment to be made into a site of exhibition. The turning of the home into a theater engendered a profound crisis in vision and the positions of pleasure entailed by the organization of the gaze in domestic space. This crisis was registered on a number of levels.

Perhaps the most practical problem which television was shown to have caused was in its status as furniture. Here, television was no longer a focal point of the room; rather it was a technological eyesore, something which threatened to destabilize the unities of interior decor. Women's magazines sought ways to 'master' the machine which, at their most extreme, meant the literal camouflage of the set. In 1951, *American Home* suggested that 'television needn't change a room' so long as it was made to 'retire at your command'. Among the suggestions were hinged panels 'faced with dummy book backs so that no one would suspect, when they are closed, that this period room lives a double life with TV'.²³ In 1953, *House Beautiful* placed a TV into a cocktail table from which it 'rises for use or disappears from sight by simply pushing a button'.²⁴ These attempts to render the television set invisible are especially interesting in the light of critical and popular memory accounts which argue that the television set was a privileged figure of conspicuous consumption and class status for postwar Americans. This attempt to hide the receiver complicates those historical accounts because it suggests that visual pleasure was at odds with the display of wealth in the home.

It wasn't only that the television set was made inconspicuous within domestic space, it was also made invisible to the outside world. The overwhelming majority of graphics showed the television placed in a spot where it could not be seen through the windows of the room.²⁵ This was sometimes stated in terms of a solution for lighting and the glare cast over the screen. But there was something more profoundly troubling about being caught in the act of viewing television. The attempt to render television invisible to the outside world was imbricated in a larger obsession with privacy – an obsession which was most typically registered in statements about 'problem windows'. The magazines idealized large picture windows and sliding glass doors for the view of the outside world they provided. At the same time, however, the magazines warned that these windows had to be carefully covered with curtains, venetian blinds, or outdoor shrubbery in order to avoid the 'fish bowl' effect. In these terms, the view incorporated in domestic space had to be a one-way view.

Television would seem to hold an ideal place here because it was a 'window on the world' which could never look back. Yet, the magazines treated the television set as if it were a problem window through which residents in the home could be seen. In 1951, *American Home* juxtaposed suggestions for covering 'problem' windows with a

tip on 'how to hide a TV screen'.²⁶ Even the design of the early television consoles, with their cabinet doors which covered the TV screen, suggested the fear of being seen by television. Perhaps, this fear was best expressed in 1949 when the *Saturday Evening Post* told its readers, 'Be Good! Television's Watching.' The article continued, 'Comes now another invasion of your privacy. . . . TV's prying eye may well record such personal frailties as the errant husband dining with his secretary'.²⁷ The fear here was that the television camera might record men and women unawares – and have devastating effects upon their romantic lives.

The theme of surveillance was repeated in a highly self-reflexive episode of the early 1950s science fiction anthology, *Tales of Tomorrow*. Entitled 'The Window',²⁸ the tale begins with a standard sci-fi drama but is soon 'interrupted' when the TV camera picks up an alien image, a completely unrelated view of a window through which we see a markedly lower-class and drunken husband, his wife and another man (played by Rod Steiger). After a brief glimpse at this domestic scene, we cut back to the studio where a seemingly confused crew attempts to explain the aberrant image, finally suggesting that it is a picture of a real event occurring simultaneously in the city and possibly 'being reflected off an ionized cloud right in the middle of our wavelength, like a mirage'. As the episode continues to alternate between the studio and the domestic scene, we learn that the wife and her male friend plan to murder the husband, and we see the lovers' passionate embrace (as well as their violent fantasies). At the end of the episode, after the murder takes place, the wife stares out the window and confesses to her lover that all night she felt as if someone were watching her. As this so well suggests, the new TV eye threatens to turn back on itself, to penetrate the private window and to monitor the eroticized fantasy life of the citizen in his or her home. That this fantasy has attached to it a violent dimension, reminds us of the more sadistic side to television technology as TV now becomes an instrument of surveillance. Indeed, this fear of surveillance was symptomatic of many statements which expressed profound anxieties about television's control over human vision in the home – especially in terms of its disruptive effects on the relationship between the couple.²⁹

Television brought to the home a vision of the world which the human eye itself could never see. We might say that in popular culture there was a general obsession with the perfection of human vision through technology. This fascination of course pre-dates the period under question, with the development of machines for vision including telescopes, x-rays, photography and cinema. During the postwar period many of these devices were mass produced in the form of children's toys (including microscopes, 3-D glasses, and telescopes) and household gadgets like gas ranges with window-view ovens.

Television, the ultimate expression of this technologically improved view, was variously referred to as a 'hypnotic eye', an 'all seeing eye', a 'mind's eye', and so forth. But there was something troubling about this television eye. A 1954 documentary produced by RCA and aired on NBC suggests the problem. Entitled *The Story of Television*, this program tells the history of television through a discourse on the gaze. A voice-over narration begins the tale in the following way:

The human eye is a miraculous instrument. Perceptive, sensitive, forever tuned to the pulsating wavelengths of life. Yet the eye cannot see over a

hillside or beyond the haze of distance. To extend the range of human eyesight, man developed miraculous and sensitive instruments.

Most prominent among these instruments was the 'electronic eye' of television.

In this RCA documentary, the discourse on the gaze was used to promote the purchase and installation of the TV set. However, even in this industry promo, there is something disturbing about the 'electronic eye' of television. For here, television inserts itself precisely at the point of a failure in human vision, a failure which is linked to the sexual relations of the couple. Accompanying this sound track is a visual narrative which represents a young couple. A woman frolics on the hillside and we cut to an extreme close-up of a man's face, a close-up which depicts a set of eyes that appear to be searching for the woman. But the couple are never able to see one another because their meeting is blocked by an alternate, and more technologically perfect view. We are shown instead the 'electronic eye' of a TV control tower which promises to see better than the eyes of the young lovers. Thus, the authority of human vision, and the power dynamics attached to the romantic exchange of looks between the couple, is somehow undermined in this technology of vision.

This failure in the authority of human vision was typically related to the man's position of power in domestic space. In 1953, *TV Guide* asked, 'What ever happened to men? Once upon a time (Before TV) a girl thought of her boyfriend or husband as her prince charming. Now having watched the antics of Ozzie Nelson and Chester A. Riley, she thinks of her man as a prime idiot.' Several paragraphs later the article relates this figure of the ineffectual male to an inability to control vision, or rather television, in the home. As the article suggests, 'Men have only a tiny voice in what programs the set is tuned to.'³⁰

In a 1954 episode of *Fireside Theatre*, a filmed anthology drama, this problem is demonstrated in narrative terms. Entitled 'The Grass is Greener', the episode revolves around the purchase of a television set, a purchase which the father in the family, Bruce, adamantly opposes. Going against Bruce's wishes, the wife, Irene, makes use of the local retailer's credit plan and has a television set installed in her home. When Bruce returns home for the evening, he finds himself oddly displaced by the new center of interest. Upon entering the kitchen door, he hears music and gun shots emanating from the den. Curious about the sound source, he enters the den where he sees Irene and the children watching a TV western. Standing in the den doorway, he is literally off-center in the frame, outside the family group clustered around the TV set. When he attempts to get his family's attention, his status as outsider is further suggested. Bruce's son hushes his father with a dismissive 'Shh', after which the family resumes its fascination with the television program. Bruce then motions to Irene who finally – with a look of condescension – exits the room to join her husband in the kitchen where the couple argue over the set's installation. In her attempt to convince Bruce to keep the TV, Irene suggests that the children and even she herself will stray from the family home if he refuses to allow them the pleasure of watching TV. Television thus threatens to undermine the masculine position of power in the home to the extent that the father is disenfranchised from his family whose gaze is fastened onto an alternate, and more seductive, authority.

This crisis in vision was also registered in terms of female positions of pleasure in television. In fact, for women, pleasure in viewing television appears to have been a

'structured absence'. These representations almost never show a woman watching television by herself. Typically, the woman lounges on a sofa, perhaps reading a book, while the television remains turned off in the room.³¹ Two points emerge. First, for women the continuum, visual pleasure – displeasure, was associated with interior decor and not with viewing television. In 1948, *House Beautiful* made this clear when it claimed, 'Most men want only an adequate screen. But women alone with the thing in the house all day, have to eye it as a piece of furniture.'³² Second, while these discussions of television were often directed at women, the continuum, visual pleasure – displeasure, was not associated with her gaze at the set, but rather with her status as representation, as something to be looked at by the gaze of another.

On one level here, television was depicted as a threat to the visual appeal of the female body in domestic space. Specifically, there was something visually displeasurable about the sight of a woman operating the technology of the receiver. In 1955, Sparton Television proclaimed that 'the sight of a woman tuning a TV set with dials near the floor' was 'most unattractive'. The Sparton TV, with its tuning knob located at the top of the set, promised to maintain the visual appeal of the woman.³³ As this ad indicates, the graphic representation of the female body viewing television had to be carefully controlled; it had to be made appealing to the eye of the observer.

Beyond this specific case, there was a distinct set of aesthetic conventions formed in these years for male and female viewing postures. A 1953 advertisement for CBS-Columbia Television illustrates this well. Three alternative viewing postures are taken up by family members. A little boy stretches out on the floor, a father slumps in his easy chair, and the lower portion of a mother's outstretched body is gracefully lifted in a sleek modern chair with a seat which tilts upward.³⁴ Here as elsewhere, masculine viewing is characterized by a slovenly body posture. Conversely, feminine viewing posture takes on a certain visual appeal even as the female body passively reclines.

This need to maintain the 'to-be-looked at' status of the woman's body within the home might be better understood in the context of a second problem which television was shown to bring to women – namely, competition for male attention. Magazines, advertisements and television programming often depicted the figure of a man who was so fascinated with the screen image of a woman that his real life mate remained thoroughly neglected by his gaze. Thus, in terms of this exchange of looks, the television set became the 'other woman'. Even if the screen image was not literally another woman, the man's visual fascination evoked the structural relations of female competition for male attention, a point well illustrated by a cartoon in a 1952 issue of the fashionable men's magazine, *Esquire*, which depicted a newly wed couple in their honeymoon suite. The groom, transfixed by the sight of wrestling on TV, completely ignores his wife.³⁵ This sexual scenario was also taken up by Kotex, a feminine hygiene company with an obvious stake in female sexuality. The 1949 ad shows a woman who, by using the sanitary napkin, is able to distract her man from his TV baseball game.³⁶ Perhaps, the ultimate expression of female competition with television came in a 1953 episode of *I Love Lucy* entitled, 'Ricky and Fred are TV Fans'. Lucy and her best friend, Ethel Mertz, are entirely stranded by their husbands as the men watch the fights on the living room console. In a desperate attempt to attract their husbands' attention, Lucy and Ethel stand in front of the TV set, blocking the men's view of the screen. Ricky and Fred Mertz become so enraged that they begin to make violent gestures, upon which Lucy and Ethel retreat into the kitchen. Having lost their husbands to television,

the women decide to go to a drugstore/soda shop. However, once in the drugstore they are unable to get service because the proprietor is likewise entranced by the TV boxing match.

But in what way could this sexual/visual competition appeal to women? A 1952 Motorola ad provides some possible answers. The graphic shows a man lounging on a chair and watching a bathing beauty on the TV screen. His wife, dressed in apron, stands in the foreground holding a shovel, and the caption reads, 'Let's go, Mr. Dreamer, that television set won't help you shovel the walk.' Television's negative effect on household chores was linked to the male's visual fascination in the televised image of another woman. This relationship drawn between the gaze and household chores only seems to underline TV's negative appeal for women; but another aspect of this ad suggests a less 'masochistic' inscription of the female consumer. The large window view and the landscape painting hung over the set suggest the illusion of the outside world and the incorporation of that world into the home. In this sense, the ad suggests that the threat of sexuality/infidelity in the outside world can be contained in the home through its representation on television. Even while the husband neglects his wife and household chores to gaze at the screen woman, the housewife is in control of his sexuality insofar as his visual pleasure is circumscribed by domestic space. The housewife's gaze in the foreground and cited commentary further illustrate this position of control.³⁷

This competition for male attention between women and television also bears an interesting relationship to the construction of the female image in domestic comedies. Typically the representation of the female body was de-feminized and/or de-erotized. The programs usually featured heroines who were either non-threatening matronly types like Molly Goldberg, middle-aged, perfect housewife types like Harriet Nelson, or else zany women like Lucy Ricardo who frequently appeared clown-like, and even grotesque.

Popular media of the postwar years illuminate some of the central tensions expressed by the mass culture at a time when spectator amusements were being transported from the public to the private sphere. At least at the level of representation, the installation of the television set was by no means a simple purchase of a pleasure machine. These popular discourses remind us that television's utopian promise was fraught with doubt. Even more importantly, they begin to reveal the complicated processes through which conventions of viewing television in the home environment and conventions of television's representational styles were formed in the early period.

Magazines, advertisements and television programming helped to establish rules for ways in which to achieve pleasure and to avoid displeasure caused by the new TV object/medium. In so doing they constructed a subject position – or a series of subject positions – for family members in the home equipped with television. Certainly, the ways in which the public took up these positions is another question. How women and men achieved pleasure from and avoided the discomforts of television is, it seems to me, an on-going and complicated historiographical problem. The popular media examined here allow us to begin to understand the attitudes and assumptions which informed the reception of television in the early period. In addition, they illustrate the aesthetic ideals of middle-class architecture and interior design into which television was placed.

As historian Carlo Ginzburg has argued, 'Reality is opaque; but there are certain points – clues, signs – which allow us to decipher it.' It is the seemingly inconsequential trace, Ginzburg claims, through which the most significant patterns of past experiences might be sought.³⁸ These discourses which spoke of the placement of a chair, or the design of a television set in a room, begin to suggest the details of everyday existence into which television inserted itself. They give us a clue into a history of spectators in the home – a history which is only beginning to be written.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on the research for my dissertation for UCLA, 'Installing the Television Set: The Social Construction of Television's Place in the Home and the Family, 1948–55'. Three leading home magazines (*House Beautiful*, *Better Homes and Gardens* and *American Home*) and one leading women's service magazine which foregrounded home economics (*Ladies' Home Journal*) were examined in entirety for the years under consideration. All of these magazines presented idealized (upper) middle-class depictions of domestic space, and were addressed to a female-housewife, middle-class reader. According to audience research studies conducted at the time, the magazines all attracted a largely female, middle-class readership. See for example, Alfred Politz Research, Inc., *The Audiences of Nine Magazines* (N.p.: Cowles Magazines, Inc., 1955). In addition to examining these publications, I used sampling techniques to analyze leading general magazines, men's magazines, and a leading women's magazine, *Good Housekeeping* (which was directed at a less affluent class). The print advertisements were found in these magazines. Finally, the paper is based upon a large number of programs from the early period including almost all episodes from *Burns and Allen*, *I Love Lucy*, and *The Honeymooners* as well as numerous episodes from *Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Goldbergs*, *Make Room For Daddy*, and *I Married Joan*. I refer to these programs as sit-coms, although it should be noted that at the time the sit-com form for television was not yet fully conventionalized.
- 2 Thomas H. Hutchinson, *Here is Television, Your Window on the World* (1946; New York: Hastings House, 1948), p. ix.
- 3 Charles Siepmann, *Radio, Television and Society* (New York: Oxford, 1950), p. 340.
- 4 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford, 1964), see especially p. 193.
- 5 Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1869), pp. 91, 96.
- 6 Gwendolyn Wright discusses this in *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 107.
- 7 For an interesting discussion of how modern architecture was popularized through the cinema see Donald Albrecht, *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
- 8 See, for example, 'Home Without Compromises', *American Home* 47 (January 1952), p. 34; *Better Homes and Gardens* 33 (September 1955), p. 59; *Good Housekeeping* 133 (September 1951), p. 106.
- 9 *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 48; *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (December 1953), p. 21.
- 10 *Better Homes and Gardens* 33 (March 1953), p. 130.
- 11 *Fortune* editors, '530. Billion for Fun', reprinted in *Mass Leisure*, ed. Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyersohn (1955; Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), pp. 162–8.
- 12 *House Beautiful* 90 (November 1948), p. 230.
- 13 *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 8.
- 14 *Better Homes and Gardens* 29 (November 1951), p. 218.
- 15 *American Home* 46 (September 1951), p. 27.
- 16 *House Beautiful* 92 (December 1950), p. 77.
- 17 See, for example, *Ladies' Home Journal* 67 (May 1950), p. 6; *American Home* 46 (October 1951), p. 8; *House Beautiful* 97 (November 1955), p. 126; *Colliers* 126 (9 December 1950), p. 58.

- 18 *Better Homes and Gardens* 30 (October 1952), p. 215. For other examples see, *Life* 34 (26 October 1953), p. 53; *Life* 35 (5 October 1953), p. 87; *House Beautiful* 91 (November 1949), p. 77.
- 19 *Life* 34 (27 April 1953), p. 12.
- 20 'Where Shall We Put the Television Set?' *Good Housekeeping* 133 (August 1951), p. 107.
- 21 Walter Adams and E.A. Hunferford, Jr., 'Television: Buying and Installing It is Fun; These Ideas Will Help', *Better Homes and Gardens* 28 (September 1949), p. 38.
- 22 Cited in 'With an Eye . . . On the Viewer', *Televiser* 7 (April 1950), p. 16.
- 23 'Now You See It . . . Now You Don't' *American Home* 46 (September 1951), p. 49.
- 24 *House Beautiful* 95 (December 1953), p. 145.
- 25 See, for example, *House Beautiful* 91 (October 1949), p. 167; *Better Homes and Gardens* 30 (March 1952), p. 68; *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (December 1953), p. 71.
- 26 *American Home* 45 (January 1951), p. 89.
- 27 Robert M. Yoder, 'Be Good! Television's Watching', *Saturday Evening Post* 221 (14 May 1949), p. 29.
- 28 Circa 1951–53.
- 29 We might also imagine that television's previous use as a surveillance medium in World War II and the early plans to monitor factory workers with television sets, helped to create this fear of being seen by TV. For an interesting discussion of these early surveillance uses, and the way in which this was discussed in the popular and industry press, see Jeanne Allen, 'The Social Matrix of Television: Invention in the United States', in *Regarding Television*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: University Publications of America, Inc., 1983), pp. 109–19.
- 30 Bob Taylor, 'What is TV Doing to MEN?' *TV Guide* 1 (26 June–2 July 1953), p. 15.
- 31 See, for example, *Better Homes and Gardens* 33 (September 1955), p. 59; *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (April 1953), p. 263; *Popular Science* 164 (February 1954), p. 211; *Ladies' Home Journal* (May 1953), p. 11.
- 32 W.W. Ward, 'Is It Time to Buy Television?' *House Beautiful* 90 (October 1948), p. 172.
- 33 *House Beautiful* 97 (May 1955), p. 131.
- 34 *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 151.
- 35 *Esquire* 38 (July 1952), p. 87.
- 36 *Ladies' Home Journal* 66 (May 1949), p. 30.
- 37 *Better Homes and Gardens* 30 (February 1952), p. 154.
- 38 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop* 9 (Spring 1980), p. 27.

Daniel Miller

MAKING LOVE IN SUPERMARKETS [1998]

(Source: Miller, Daniel (1998) *A Theory of Shopping*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 15–23)

Editor's introduction

Over recent years Daniel Miller has promoted the study of *material* culture as a practice that grounds the anthropology of modernity in the things that circulate in everyday life. In this section from his book on shopping, Miller is concerned with the daily shopping habits of north Londoners. Miller's approach to the performance of shopping is to look for what might be thought of as the deep structures at work in the everyday. By suggesting that shopping is an affective practice based in 'love' and 'sacrifice' Miller uses a language more familiarly used for describing sacred rights. In this insistence that an anthropological language fashioned through contact with tribal communities can 'fit' the seemingly secular and rationalised world of western-style shopping, Miller performs the classic move of 'making the familiar strange'. This defamiliarising of everyday conventions allows the mundane to be seen as a vehicle for values and meanings that might at first glance seem excessive – yet it is in precisely this way that Miller recognises a crucial feature of the everyday life of secular modernity.

From this perspective secular modernity does not simply abandon religious values, rather those values migrate and dissipate into more secular and everyday realms. Birth, death, sacrifice, guilt, all those passionate intensities that were once the province of religion, have migrated into more earthly spaces. Television, for instance, is saturated by police and medical dramas: where once we were shepherded off the earth by various envoys of the Gods, in a secular society the best we can hope for is a good-looking, sympathetic and not too desperately overworked doctor. In secular modernity the commodity fetish is quite literally a talisman invested with magical powers, a token in a cosmology of meanings and effects.

Material cultural studies as practised by Miller and others combines a range of approaches. If here the emphasis is on evidencing the sacred in the everyday (see Chapter 36

for this as well), material cultural studies is also concerned to track things as they circulate within the global networks of advancing world capitalism.

Further reading: Attfield 2000; Hollier 1988; Miller 1987.

FOR MANY PURPOSES the main division in the street where I conducted fieldwork lies between the council estates on one side and the private housing on the other. But the significance of this division cannot always be assumed. Although she lives in an owner-occupied maisonette, Mrs Wynn comes across immediately as quintessentially working class. Her husband is an electrician but has been unemployed for several months owing to an injury. She is a childminder, taking into her home other people's children while they are out working. Between his injury and the fact that someone recently ran into their car while it was parked outside their house, they were not having an easy time of it. Nevertheless, as often proved to be the case, her concerns in shopping bear little upon the contingencies of the moment, and relate more to longer-term issues surrounding the personal development of each member of the family. She was pretty fed up with the consequences of these unexpected events, but shopping as a topic drew her back to things that at one level were more mundane. But these were relationships which she cared about a great deal and was constantly thinking about and forming strategies to deal with. In conversation she notes:

A¹ My husband is quite fussy vegetable wise and he's a big meat eater, but yes I've been doing a lot of stir fries because I found I could get him to eat a lot more vegetables if I do stir fries, and he likes Chinese. He likes spicy stuff. He's got a lot better than when I first met him because his mum's Irish and overcooked everything and was pretty basic and he's got so much better in the years.

Q Do the kids eat the same as him?

A No. Jack my son's got very fussy, definitely in the last year. I would say he's a good vegetable and fruit eater but he's the basic chips and burger and I'm afraid so.

Q Do you cook separately for them?

A Pasta he loves pasta. Yes, and separate times as well.

Later on in the same conversation she notes:

A I try not to buy a lot of convenience [foods]. I do buy meat that is marinated and stuff like that and then think what can I do with it, but now and again I will sit down and get my books out and have a look. I did it last week just because I was getting a bit tired of things. But also what I will do is buy the sauces and the stir-fry things, stuff like that, and then just add it to everything so it makes a bit of difference, but I seem to get stuck doing the same things over and over again. So, every now and then, I've got to get my books out to remind myself or think of some new things.

Q Is it you that's bored?

A No. He will say as well, we've had this a bit too much. I'm a great chicken eater and he says chicken again!

Later still she starts discussing the purchase of clothing for the family, making it clear that she buys her husband's clothes. She notes that out of preference he would just wear some old T-shirts, and often would then go on to use these as cloths during his work. It's not just his clothing she buys. In practice she prefers not to let him do any of the shopping. She feels that if she lets him shop, then he misses things on the list she has made, or buys himself things like biscuits on a whim.

A So it's more hard work. I'd rather him stay here and look after the children and I'll do it. Then it's a break for me and you know.

These views were reiterated when we were out shopping in a local supermarket. She again noted the problems with getting her children to eat what she wants them to eat rather than what they would choose for themselves. She claimed to be quite strict with the children that she was paid to look after, but with respect to her own children, she tended to be much more lenient — 'anything for a bit of peace and quiet.' Again and again her actual purchases are related back to household preferences. When she buys mint-flavoured lamb at the butcher's she notes in passing that this had gone down really well the week before and that she had been asked to get it again. Equally, some jam tarts purchased previously because they were under offer (going cheap) had been well received. The only exceptions to this orientation to the household in her shopping come with the purchase of some bread rolls and frankfurters for a friend who will be coming round for tea. Also at another point in our expedition she buys a fancy ice cream called Vienetta which she declares is 'a treat for herself'.

By no means all the shoppers I accompanied were like Mrs Wynn, but she is representative of a core of households. She should anyway be quite a familiar figure from many previous feminist studies of the housewife. [. . .] Many researchers have acknowledged that which would be clearly evident here. However oppressive the outside observer might find this subsumption of the individual to her husband and children, the housewife herself insists that she merely expresses thereby a series of responsibilities and concerns with which she strongly identifies and of which she is generally proud.

Mrs Wynn acknowledges that she is constantly monitoring, even researching, the desires and preferences of her household. These include both foundational goods which are expected to be constantly present and available in the house, but also transient desires which arise from a preference for at least a subsidiary element of change and innovation. But she would by no means regard herself as merely the passive representative of these desires. Indeed if she merely bought what the other members of her household asked for, shopping would be relatively easy. The problem is that she wishes to influence and change her husband and children in quite a number of ways. She is constantly concerned that they should eat healthier foods than those they would choose for themselves. By the same token she wants them to wear either better quality or at least more respectable clothes than those they prefer. She sees her role as selecting goods which are intended to be educative, uplifting and in a rather vague sense morally superior. It is precisely their unwillingness to be uplifted by her shopping choices that creates the anxieties and battles of shopping. In vindicating their decisions, such housewives often lay claim to a wider perspective than that of other family members. They see themselves as having the foresight to prevent the

embarrassment and disdain that others might feel if they let their families dress as they choose, or determine their own food choices.

Of course, all these efforts could be reduced to her interests. It could be argued that she is buying better clothes because she feels she will be made to suffer the opprobrium of criticism by others if she doesn't. She buys healthier foods because she would have to look after the person who otherwise becomes ill. But for us to try to figure out whether the constant hassle of arguing with her family, in order to persuade them to adopt her preferences, actually pays some kind of long-term dividend is the kind of daft calculation we may safely leave to economists, socio-biologists and their ilk. There is no reason to suppose that Mrs Wynn engages in any such weighing up of cost or benefit. As far as she is concerned, the reasons that she researches their preferences and equally that she then tries to improve upon them are the same. Both are assumed by her to represent the outcome of a responsibility so basic that it does not need to be made explicit or reflected upon. In short, her shopping is primarily an act of love, that in its daily conscientiousness becomes one of the primary means by which relationships of love and care are constituted by practice. That it is to say, shopping does not merely reflect love, but is a major form in which this love is manifested and reproduced. This is what I mean to imply when I say that shopping in supermarkets is commonly an act of making love.

One could use other terms than love. Care, concern, obligation, responsibility and habit play their roles in these relationships. So also may resentment, frustration and even hatred. Can these latter be the ingredients of something we may properly term love? As long as it is clear that we understand by this term 'love' a normative ideology manifested largely as a practice within long-term relationships and not just some romantic vision of an idealized moment of courtship, then the term is entirely appropriate. Love as a practice is quite compatible with feelings of obligation and responsibility. As Parker (1996) has noted, love for infants is inevitably accompanied by hatred and resentment, and this is perhaps rather more evident for partnerships. The term is certainly justified by ethnography in as much as these shoppers would be horrified by the suggestion that they did not love the members of their family or that there was not a bedrock of love as the foundation of their care and concern, though they might well acknowledge some of these other attributes as well.

I never knew Mrs Wynn well enough to be able to gain a sense of the more intimate moments within her household. I don't know how free she felt about expressing her love in explicit forms. In general, a reticence with regard to more overt expressions of emotion is regarded as a typically British characteristic, and was commented upon by those born elsewhere. But this reticence about love need not imply its absence, so much as its being essentialized as so natural that it becomes embarrassing to feel the need to express it. One consequence of this reticence is that love has come to be primarily objectified through everyday practices of concern, care and a particular sensitivity to others, within which shopping plays a central role.

During the course of this essay the term 'love', which first appears here as the common term by which relationships are legitimated will become used to represent a value that leads us towards the problems of cosmology and transcendence. These terms are not intended to obfuscate or make complex some simple phenomenon. They merely remind us that within a largely secular society almost all of us still see

ourselves as living lives directed to goals and values which remain in some sense higher than the mere dictates of instrumentality. Daily decisions are constantly weighed in terms of moral questions about good and bad action indicated in traits such as sensitivity as against style, or generosity as against jealousy. Though these may not be made explicit, the accounts we use to understand each others' actions depend on the continued existence of cosmology as a realm of transcendent value.

The terms 'cosmology' and 'transcendent' suggest values that are long lasting and opposed to the contingency of everyday life. They are intended to imply that although we focus upon the particular persons, children, partners and friends who occupy our concerns at a given moment of time, the way we relate to them is much influenced by more general beliefs about what social relations should look like and how they should be carried out. At one level then, love is a model of one particular type of identification and attachment. It is one we are socialized into and constantly informed about. This ideal is then triggered by an individual, such as a family member who makes it manifest. A relationship then builds its own specificity and nuance which (sometimes) goes well beyond the transcendent model with which we started. When the term 'love' is used, as here, in a more general sense, actual relationships are found to develop on the basis of much wider norms and expectations which pre-exist and remain after the relationship itself.

The term 'love' then indicates more than a claim to affection made during courtship. It stands for a much wider field of that to which life is seen as properly devoted. In later parts of this essay it will be more closely related back to devotional practices in which the term 'cosmology' is more obviously appropriate since the context is more clearly that of religion. The ethnography suggested that just as devotion is the taken-for-granted backdrop to the carrying out of religious rites in other times and places, so in North London love remains as a powerful taken-for-granted foundation for acts of shopping which will be argued to constitute devotional rites whose purpose is to create desiring subjects.

I would call Mrs Wynn a housewife, even though for the present she is the sole wage-earner of the family, because, for her, housewifery is her principal *raison d'être*. As feminist research has made clear, a person such as Mrs Wynn is more likely to view her earnings as simply part of her housewifery than as a job equivalent to that which her husband would be engaged in were he fit. As someone who identifies with being a housewife, the requests made by her family for particular foods are not viewed with resentment but are in fact desired by her. This is made quite explicit in another conversation with a working-class Cypriot woman.

Q Do you enjoy cooking?

A Yes I do, I'm afraid I do.

Q Does your family appreciate it?

A Oh yes, they do they love the food, my daughter when she comes home she says 'Oh mum food', she opens the fridge as soon as she comes in.

Q Is your husband particular?

A Oh he doesn't like very hot, very spicy food, but no he just eats what he's given really.

Q Does he make any requests?

A Oh I wish he would! No he doesn't.

Here, as is so often the case, there is no evident resentment at being identified unambiguously with housewifery. On the other hand, there is a considerable desire that this should be appreciated by the family members, and not taken for granted. A specific request for an item when shopping is taken as a kind of bringing into consciousness of the role played by the shopper and is most often viewed positively, even if it becomes a cause of contention. The subsequent argument is itself an opportunity for the housewife to demonstrate that she is only contradicting the request because of how much she cares for the person and therefore the consequences of what she buys. In general, the problem many housewives expressed was the lack of valorization, most particularly of the moral, educative and provisioning roles that housewives see as of immense importance. They would not normally use the term 'love' for such concerns, but it is clear from what they do say, that it is love alone that can satisfactorily legitimate their devotion to this work. It is also clear that to be satisfactory the subjects of love should desire and acknowledge that which the housewife sees as her ordinary devotional duty.

In the [1980s and 1990s] we have become far better informed about the work involved in keeping a home going and activities such as shopping. This is almost entirely thanks to a series of important empirical studies of housework inspired by the feminist critique of housewifery as unvalorized labour. Within a short time a normative pattern was uncovered and well documented which suggested that women tended to be largely responsible for the basic provisioning of the household, while men tended to be responsible mainly for extra items that were of particular interest to themselves, but were relatively unimportant in, for example, provisioning for children. Male work outside the home was found to be fully acknowledged through wages and through an endorsement of its centrality to the maintenance of the home as in the phrase 'bringing home the bacon'. By contrast, women's work in the home was not only unpaid but even the homemaker tended to downplay the sheer weight of labour involved in keeping house. This degree of exploitation and the asymmetry of power was reinforced rather than redressed in consumption, where housewives were found to give the best of their labour in meals and comforts to others while often denying themselves the pleasure they strove to create for others.²

In general, our fieldwork revealed similar patterns to those uncovered in this previous work, and merely demonstrates that these generalizations still largely hold for the 1990s in this area of North London. Our research thereby also confirms the main conclusion of these other studies as to the basic asymmetry of housework and the exploitation of female labour. By the same token these previous studies provide the bulk evidence for the centrality of love and care as the ideology behind mundane domestic activities such as shopping, to which this case study becomes merely an additional exemplification. The primary examples are these highly conventional expressions of care and concern within households. But there is a wide range of other ways in which love is expressed. Examples include love within egalitarian couples, by the elderly, between friends, siblings and a gamut of other relationships. Even if love is extended to this degree, however, I am obviously not claiming it is ubiquitous. Not every shopping practice is about love; there are others that relate more to selfishness, hedonism, tradition and a range of other factors. What I will claim, however, is that love is not only normative but easily dominant as the context and motivation for the bulk of actual shopping practice.

Notes

- 1 Throughout this essay 'A' is the informant's answer to a question and 'Q' is the question asked. The speech is reported verbatim and I have not tried to convert it into formal grammar or 'accepted' words.
- 2 Examples for Britain start with Oakley (1976), and a good selection of the genre may be found collected together in Jackson and Moores (1995). Feminist research is complemented by other genres of sociological research of which Finch (1989) is a particularly important representative and whose results have largely confirmed the centrality of woman as carer and worker within the family.

Steven Connor

ROUGH MAGIC: BAGS [2000]

(Source: first broadcast as part of the series 'Rough Magic' on BBC Radio 3, 9 January 2000, with a transcript made available at <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/eng/skc/magic/bags.htm>)

Editor's introduction

This chapter is an expanded transcript of what was originally one of a series of radio talks by Steven Connor offering 'philosophical adventures in the everyday'. This series, called 'Rough Magic', exemplifies an approach to material culture based on the fairly modest project of 'thinking through things rather than thinking them through' (Connor 2000a: 4). Initially these forays into the 'magic' of everyday things might bare comparison with Michel Leiris's surreal ethnography in 'The Sacred in Everyday Life' (Leiris [1938] 1988). Yet while Leiris is interested in what constitutes the sacred for him, Connor has a much more cultural and therefore communal project in mind.

The term that Connor uses to describe his approach to the material world is 'cultural phenomenology', and it is the qualification of 'phenomenology' by the term 'cultural' (and vice versa) that suggests its pertinence for approaching the everyday. For Connor:

Cultural phenomenology would aim to enlarge, diversify and particularise the study of culture. Instead of readings of abstract structures, functions and dynamics, it would be interested in substances, habits, organs, rituals, obsessions, pathologies, processes and patterns of feeling. Such interests would be at once philosophical and poetic, explanatory and exploratory, analytic and evocative. Above all, whatever interpreting and explication cultural phenomenology managed to pull off would be achieved by the manner in which it got amid a given subject or problem, not by the degree to which it got on top of it.

(Connor 1999: 18)

The things examined in 'Rough Magic' (bags, wires, screens and sweets) implicitly suggest the fruitfulness of recovering a perspective on everyday life that navigates across and

between the anthropological and the psychoanalytic, the structural and the phenomenological.

Further reading: Clucas 2000; Connor 1999, 2000b; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Trotter 2000a.

THese programmes are about the role in contemporary lives of certain, very mundane, but at the same time quite magical things. The more abstract, placeless and bodiless our existences, the more we come to live beside ourselves, and encounter the world and each other at a distance and through various kinds of remote control, the odder and lovelier things can become, and the greater the importance in our lives can be of objects that we can lay hands on, manipulate, transform and do things with. Human beings are such incorrigible fidgets, such manipulators of objects, of things we can touch and handle, or think of touching and handling, that it is scarcely possible for us to think, dream and imagine without things exerting their shaping force upon us. We think with shapes and weights and scales and textures. We literally keep ourselves in shape by the ways in which we heft and press and handle things. 'One does not think', Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have written, 'without becoming something else, something that does not think – an animal, a molecule, a particle – and that comes back to thought and revives it.'¹ The effort to prolong this way of thinking through things is what constitutes the group of writings assembled here under the title of *Rough Magic* [only 'Bags' is included here].

The essence of a magical object is that it is more than an object. We can do whatever we like to objects; but magical objects are things that we allow and expect to do things back to us. All magical objects surpass themselves. There is no more magical object than a ball. The first magical objects are probably the blankets, rattles and teddies that young children use for comfort and security, and to ease the growth of the knowledge that the world is full of things that are not them. Children know that their blankets, rattles and teddy-bears are not them, but are nevertheless theirs. Magical objects are for doing magic with; but we use the magical objects in which I am most interested to do magic, not so much on others as on ourselves. These objects have the powers to arouse, absorb, stabilise, seduce, disturb, soothe, succour and drug. They have a life of their own: a life we give them, and give back to ourselves through them, thereby giving rise anew to ourselves. Some of the magical objects about which I talk are ancient, some belong to the world of contemporary technology. All of them are strangely anachronistic.

Bags

If you were to arrive on this earth from another planet, what would be the thing that would strike you most about humans, compared with other species? It would not, I think, be the possession of language, the capacity to laugh, or to remember, or to use tools, or any of these more traditional prerogatives human beings like to accord to themselves. It would be our need, apparently unshared by any other species, to carry things around with us. We are not homo erectus, or homo sapiens, but homo ferens. If

we like retrievers and gundogs, it is because we have taught them to share our tenderness about the act of carrying things.

On the isle of Laputa, Swift's Lemuel Gulliver encounters a people who are so mistrustful of language that they carry around in a sack all the objects to which they may need to make reference during the day, producing and displaying them as the occasion arises. Human beings have evolved a fantastic and still-expanding set of ways of dispensing with having to carry our worlds around with us, language being the most important of them. Yet the need persists to bear the weight of things around with us. I am a light traveller by preference; my heart droops at the thought of having to cram my possessions into bags that I will then have to lug around with me wherever I go. I look forward to the day when I can step off the aeroplane in shorts and trainers, have my security details scanned via subcutaneous barcode and walk straight out of the airport. And yet, like everybody else, I also find travelling without luggage intolerable. We are beings apt to feel unbearably light without 'our things'. We don't seem to be able to transport ourselves without transporting things with us. Bags mean this possibility. Bags mean ownership, identity, self-possession. They are memory, the weight of all we have been. Bags! children used to say. That's not my bag, as jazzmen and hippies had it.

Human beings are given to conceiving of themselves in terms of bags and receptacles. The mother's breast is perhaps at the origin of the sense of promise and secret goodness attaching to bags, and embodied in Santa's bulging sack. Our stories are full of the excitement of delicious and dangerous powers hidden away in bags; letting the cat out of the bag is a dangerous and exciting proceeding, as is letting the winds out of the bag of Aeolus. Sausages and saveloys were sometimes known in the nineteenth century as 'bags of mystery'.

Because they are in essence such fleshly or bodily things, bags enact as nothing else does our sense of the relation between inside and outside. We are creatures who find it easy and pleasurable to imagine living on the inside of another body; we ourselves come into independent existence very slowly, being carried, like bags, for long enough to come to know this intermediate condition intimately, and never to be able to forget it. Independence literally means not hanging. Human beings make the world into bags, because holding things together, holding things up, and being ourselves held and held up, is so important to us. Infant human beings are carried for longer than any other creature. For no other creature, it seems, are carrying and being carried so inextricably a part of one's identity. This is indicated clearly enough in the many different senses in which carrying and carriage are threaded through our language. Carrying things is important for how we carry ourselves. The fact that we understand so well what it is to be carried, what it is to be in a bag, or to be like one, accounts for our concern for and even tenderness towards bags. We carry bags, but we design them also to be able to cling on to us, our shoulders, or the crooks of our arms, or even to hang at our waists. When we give bags handles, we give them hands. Bags are the little people we once were and still are. We love portable property because we were it. Since the months I spent carrying my babies in slings, I have been unable to see or hold a bag without tenderness. Bags must be treated with care, because of the life there is in them. It is impossible to be wholly without grace when carrying a bag.

Bags join space to time. We do indeed, in every sense, 'bear children'. Both 'bearing' and 'carrying' conjoin in the same way the meanings of holding up and

holding out: of supporting, holding and transporting through space, and enduring or lasting out through time. You bear an ordeal, or carry out a task, or hold on through suffering, as though time were something we experienced as a kind of weight. 'Time', we say, 'hangs heavy'. To bear, to carry, means to endure, to last out; to carry and to carry on, to carry over, to endure: weight means time: so weight means waiting. Samuel Beckett puns lengthily on the two different kinds of wait in his play *Waiting for Godot*, which contains a memorable bag-carrier in the person of Lucky, the slave of the tyrant Pozzo, who spends most of the play encumbered by his master's enormous bags. Because he is kept at the end of a long rope tied around his neck, Lucky is himself a kind of bag, more or less. Estragon, one of the two tramps who meet Pozzo and Lucky in the indeterminate landscape of the play, is tormented by the question 'Why doesn't he put down his bags?', asking it again and again.² The question itself holds up the action, which in this play of ultimate inaction, actually means keeping it going. When eventually Lucky does put down his bags, in order to start incomprehensibly thinking out loud, the others find his monologue intolerable, and beat him to the ground. Carrying not only weighs us down, it also, it appears, keeps us up.

And is not Beckett the great, hitherto uncelebrated dramatist of bags? In his play *Happy Days*, the first act of which is the monologue of a woman buried up to her waist in a mound of earth, the action is punctuated and parcelled out by Winnie's plunges and sallies into her bag – for lipstick, toothpaste, mirror, medicine, and all the possibilities they bury of beguiling the vicious time they embody. ('Perhaps just one quick dip', she says, as a boozier to his tittle.)³ When, in the second act, she is inhumed up to her neck, the horror of her situation is signalled most of all by the bag which lies on the mound, tauntingly gaping just in sight and to hand, though for the handless Winnie now unreachable; as though all the resources of life and memory and history were held inaccessibly in it.

Lives are full of bags. Bags are full of lives.

Bags are female seeming objects, and have strong associations with female experience in many cultures. Few women are able to bear the horror of male fingers rummaging in their handbags; there is no man who has never itched to do this. In Britain and America, subtle, untaught but unbreachable rules still govern the kind of bags that men and women can feel comfortable holding or carrying. One of the rules seems to be that the floppier the bag, the less male it seems. Another bizarre rule concerns the length of the handle. The longer the handles of a bag, the more effeminate the bag, perhaps because the more handle there is attached to a bag, the more it can appear to be something hanging on to you, rather than something that you are actively holding. And then, for reasons which I cannot easily explain, a man's masculinity seems more compromised by a string bag than any other kind. But then why do women, whom men delight in imagining to be made up almost entirely of dark recesses and hidden cavities, usually have no pockets? My father used to say that somebody or something was 'as useless as a pocket in a singlet'. But such a thing has only to be named for me to be able to imagine its marsupial comfort and utility. I would willingly wear a singlet in secret if only to have such a thing close to me.

In every household I know, there is a special place where plastic carrier bags are hoarded. A drawer, or a box, or, nine times out of ten, a bag of bags. What is it for? What is the meaning of this? Perhaps because there is always something ruthless or insulting about simply throwing away a bag. In our cellar, we have an even more

marvellous contrivance. It is a luggage nest. On the outside, there is a large, firm, capacious suitcase, snapped shut with latches. Inside that, there is a slightly smaller suitcase; unzip that, and there is an aptly-named holdall, clasped tightly round a vanity case, and then a series of ever flimsier, but more tightly-budded pouches, purses and something I cannot forbear calling a reticule, though I do not know what this is. And round the whole thing, holding together the whole bursting, visceral contraption, there is a sheet of polythene against the dust, swollen skin-tight. It is a body we have got down there, a cannibal organism that binges on and breeds itself. I have just remembered that, when I was at school, the girls used to bring in anatomical dolls, that you could fold open to reveal their inner organs. Kneeling in front of our luggage nest, my hand plunging through the layers, groping for the little overnight bag I want right in the last level, I am doing the same play-surgery as they did in the playground.

If bags irresistibly suggest wombs, bellies and breasts, and may suggest an identification with women in their containing function, they have some distinctively male ingredients, too. For the shape of bags is rhythmic. Bags are defined by a rhythm of alternation between rigidity and collapse. Held, or worn, or carried, bags come into their own, assume and hold their own shapes. Put down, bags sag and crumple, their rigidity and definition ebbing from them. And bags offer quickening excitement in the contrast between hard and soft shapes; the pillow-case on Christmas morning, jutting with exciting knobs, elbows and corners, or the inverse, the impermeable outer casing containing folded softness.

You can think of bags as concrete meditations on the nature of human weight and shape. The principle of a bag is that it runs from the skimpiest form, which does nothing but wrap its contents, through to the sturdiest skeleton, which gives no clue as to the size or shape or weight of what lies inside. It is the operative difference between men, who may think of themselves as impermeable and undentable, but who nevertheless know, perhaps even more intimately than women, the bag-like rhythm of tumescence and collapse, and women, who cannot give birth without having to change their shapes. Bagmakers and bag users relish the jokes this contrast allows: a lock on a floppy bag is the most lovely futility imaginable.

How we carry bags is important. Bags are carried in the hand, in the crook of the arm, over the shoulder, on the back. In the form of pockets, bags can blister out on chests, thighs and hips. Our care for baggage extends to our means of transport, which have bags attached to them, from saddlebags to the boots of coaches and cars. We carry bags on our fronts, on our heads, to the side, on our backs. Bags are a way of keeping and displaying connections between our fronts and other parts of us, less visible, more vulnerable. A couple of years ago, do you remember, girls took to wearing tiny, exquisitely functionless little rucksacks, like a ganglion in the middle of their backs. It was as though they had a third eye, or a little growing homunculus clinging to them. Bags are our most intimate selves, even when we wear them most casually strung around our necks or on our backs.

Just as we sleep in sleeping bags, we have a need to restore ourselves to bags and sacks when we die, just as we come from bags and sacks in getting born. This is why we find the idea of putting a body straight into the ground so difficult to do, and why bags and sacks are associated with death just as much with life. Nineteenth-century resurrectionists, who dug up newly-buried bodies for the purposes of medical dissection, were known as 'sack 'em up men'. The more like bags we become, the more we

sag and dangle, the more we are weighed down with ourselves, rather than carrying ourselves, the closer we are to death. War means servicemen coming home in body-bags. The First World War poet Isaac Rosenberg refers to the body of a soldier about to be reduced vilely to mere matter as the 'soul's sack'.

So, as well as goodness and wealth and plump incipience, bags are also the sign of indigence and indignity. Uselessness, indignity and superannuation. Giving somebody the sack derives from the phrase 'to give someone the bag to hold' common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A woman who left a man at a dance to flirt with another would give him the metaphorical bag to hold, the idea being, I suppose, that to be left holding somebody's bag, left uselessly hanging on, or hanging around, you have been reduced to the condition of a bag. Holding her bag, the jilted would have become it. Similarly, to be given the sack and made useless is to become a sack. No beggar so poor as to be unaccommodated with a bag of some kind; in the late sixteenth century, to 'turn to bag and wallet' meant to become a beggar. Tramps and bag ladies need bags to make the nothing they have and are into a kind of portable property.

Bags are antique and aging things. You can call someone an old bag, but it would be ridiculous to call someone a young bag. We carry more and more bags about our persons, which themselves become more and more baglike, as we age. Clothes enact our relationship to this ageing into the state of baggage, rags, luggage. Our very clothes keep us clear of death and age only as long as they hold us, the function of clothes not at all being to cover, but to contain and sustain. Is there a grimmer witness to our good riddance than our clothes when they are emptied of us – a flung sock, or a tangled brassière?

The absurd uselessness of baggage at the approach of death identifies baggage with death's ultimate beggary. Perhaps this is why packing, even in the midst of life, is always a bit like picking over and putting away the possessions of the newly dead.

Notes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) *What Is Philosophy?*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill, London: Verso, p. 42.
- 2 Samuel Beckett (1986) *Waiting for Godot*, *Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber & Faber, pp. 28–9.
- 3 Samuel Beckett (1986) *Happy Days*, *Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber & Faber, p. 151.