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## CHAPTER 1

# Why some things matter

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The title of this chapter is intended to be taken quite precisely. It is as different from the question “Why things matter”, as it is from the question “Why some things are important”. It is these differences that represent the original contribution of this volume. The question “Why things matter” would have led to the general study of materiality and the foundation of material culture studies in the insistence upon the continued importance of material forms. This was in effect the battle fought against mainstream social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s and the insistence that taxonomies of material forms were often of significance precisely because being disregarded as trivial, they were often a key unchallenged mechanism for social reproduction and ideological dominance.

The development of material culture studies may then be seen as a two-stage process. The first phase came in the insistence that things matter and that to focus upon material worlds does not fetishize them since they are not some separate superstructure to social worlds. The key theories of material culture developed in the 1980s demonstrated that social worlds were as much constituted by materiality as the other way around (e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987). This gave rise to a variety of approaches to the issue of materiality varying from material culture as analogous with text (e.g. Tilley 1990, 1991) to applications of social psychological models (Dittmar 1992).

This book represents a second stage in the development of material culture studies inasmuch as the point that things matter can now be argued to have been made. This volume, by contrast, concentrates on something different and equally important. The volume demonstrates what is to be gained by focusing upon the diversity of material worlds which becomes each other's contexts rather than reducing them either to models of the social world or to specific subdisciplinary concerns such as the study of textiles or architecture. It will be argued, by example, throughout this volume that studies of material culture may often provide insights into cultural processes that a more literal “anthropology” has tended to neglect.

A volume called *Material cultures* is obviously situated within what may

as a vanguard area liberating a range of disciplines from museum studies to archaeology. Although there are a large number of volumes and articles which together constitute the evidence for this development in academic interests, there are still relatively few publications that have as their particular concern the nature of material culture or material culture studies. This is in part because the subject does not exist as a given discipline, and it is not part of this volume's agenda to propose or attempt to legitimize any such discipline. As has been argued in the introductory editorial to the new *Journal of Material Culture*, there are many advantages to remaining undisciplined and many disadvantages and constraints imposed by trying to claim disciplinary status.

This freedom from disciplinary foundations and boundaries is used to considerable effect by the contributors to this volume. Together they demonstrate the excitement and rewards of taking an unshackled approach to the topic of material culture. More specifically this is expressed in a freedom from reductionism. Studies of the house do not have to be reduced to housing studies, nor studies of design to design studies. By the same token studies of the transnational identity of commodities do not have to be reduced to kinship, class or gender.

Prior to the very few works that act as precedents to the current volume, most works in material culture are best understood in relation to the issues that they address. In effect they make up relatively discrete bodies of texts formed around particular problematics. An early example was a series of works that centred upon historical archaeology in the USA and that was influenced by structural analysis but applied this to diachronic data (such as the work of Glassie 1975; Deetz 1977). This paralleled the concern for objects that was arising within European historical studies that conjoined macro-surveys of material culture, both at the regional level as advocated by Braudel (1981) and at the temporal level as advocated by Friedman and Rowlands (1977), with the micro-studies of specific context exemplified by Schama's (1987) work on Amsterdam (see also Brewer & Porter 1993). One of the most influential bodies of work has arisen from the discipline of anthropology and has been primarily concerned with the nature of commodities and consumption (Miller 1995a, 1995b). Key works include Douglas and Isherwood (1978), Appadurai (1986) and Bourdieu (1984). Another trend was the analysis of visual materials as pseudo-texts which, through journals such as *Screen*, dominated media studies for more than a decade. One of the most recent examples has emerged from a new self-consciousness within museum studies, and in particular, the focus upon collecting as a more general activity within industrialized societies (Belk 1995; Pearce 1995).

Indeed these few conspicuous examples of literatures that involved taking a stance with respect to material culture studies can easily turn into a flood

continuity of tradition within the many European institutions of ethnology (Frykman and Löfgren 1987; Rogan 1992), as well as a continuous production of exemplary studies within more mainstream anthropology and sociology (Forrest 1988; Guss 1989; MacKenzie 1991). But on the margins there are a vast number of studies which range from obvious parallels with much of the work that has been developed through cultural studies (e.g. Grossberg et al. 1992) to some of the concerns within geography on space and place, or within architecture and design on the materiality of buildings. These also include many individual essays that seem to have arisen out of some particular eye for detail on artefacts such as record sleeves (Gilroy 1993) or other minutiae of everyday life (Baker 1986).

Each of these literatures contributes to the sense of vitality within material culture studies as a whole. Some, such as the work of Bourdieu (1977) in *Outline of a theory of practice*, have remained key texts for two decades. But in many cases material culture is better identified as a means rather than an end. Furthermore it was most often a means that emerged pragmatically from other concerns with little self-consciousness about the implications of this particular technology of investigation. There are exceptions, for example, the work of Ian Hodder (1982) and his students within which, although the initial agenda was archaeological interpretation, much of the work did focus on general issues within material culture studies (e.g. Hodder 1982; Moore 1986; Tilley 1990, 1991). One of the reasons that material culture was avoided as the primary focus of attention was that it invited the accusation of fetishism. It was assumed that the ideals of social analysis would be so usurped by the means of artefact analysis that this would prevent rather than enhance the study of cultural life that has been the avowed aim of all those who study material culture, including the contributors to this volume.

This legacy of these academic studies mainly conducted since the mid-1970s is the context for the present work. Our aim is to steer a course which unlike most of the work just reviewed, does indeed take as its immediate focus the study of material culture *per se*. But in using the term "material culture" we believe that there are many ways in which the results can be far less fetishistic than many of those works that do not purport to have such an object focus. At the same time the intention is to focus upon the artefactual world without this being founded in any general theory of artefacts or material culture. The next section is intended to indicate how this might be accomplished.

## The diversity of material domains

Material culture differs from, for example, linguistics partly in the sheer diversity of its subject matter. In the case of language many of the most

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interesting things that an academic can address relate to the generality of linguistic phenomena. In material culture, by contrast, although this is also a possible strategy there is a great deal more potential in looking at the diversity of material form than would be the case with linguistics.

Languages consists of relatively few specific domains. These might include the written word, speech and grammar. Each divides up the larger sense of linguistics into domains with their own specificity. These remain relatively restrained and encompassable differences. By comparison, material culture virtually explodes the moment one gives any consideration to the vast corpus of different object worlds that we constantly experience. Within an hour of waking we move from the paraphernalia of interior furnishing through the decisions to be communicated over choices of apparel through the moral anxieties over the ingestion of food stuffs out into the variety of modern transport systems held within vast urban architectural and infrastructural forms. Each of these domains possesses considerable specificity in comparison to the others, and in turn generates considerable internal diversity.

For this reason the current volume attempts no general theory of the object world as an abstract set of relationships to be applied indiscriminately to a plethora of domains. Instead what this book addresses is perhaps rather more useful and exportable to the wide range of people who work with material culture though not necessarily within material culture studies. Unlike language we cannot hope even to enumerate the types and varieties within which the object world might be categorized and we are soon aware that any attempt imposes various arbitrary classifications over what is actually an endless creative and hybrid world. This problem of unordered diversity is perhaps one of the main stumbling blocks in the formation of a material culture studies as against linguistics, but it also offers a huge potential if we try to consider what it might offer academic analytical concerns. The clear imperative then is to turn what at first seems daunting and problematic into the very significance and interest of material culture studies.

To do this, I want to suggest that the generality of materiality, that is any attempt to construct general theories of the material quality of artefacts, commodities, aesthetic forms and so forth, must be complemented by another strategy that looks to the specificity of material domains and the way form itself is employed to become the fabric of cultural worlds. To a degree this has arisen by default. We have already constructed in academia specific journals and academies concerned with the study of food, of clothing, of architecture and so forth. Each of these takes as axiomatic the particular character of their domain. But because these have arisen by default through pragmatic and increasingly commercial concerns, they do not perceive themselves as part of a larger study of material culture and therefore at present do not even much concern themselves with how the

specificity of each particular material domain might add up to the larger, as it were, generality of difference.

This, however, is exactly what material culture studies should do. It is of some concern that something so obvious in the potential of material culture at present remains overlooked. One of the disadvantages of the present state of academic study is that the specificity of material forms are most likely to be of interest and concern if they happen to fall within what has already become constituted as an institutional domain such as building studies or food studies. What this book is designed to demonstrate is how much is thereby lost. The topics that this volume covers may flow in and out of such previously constituted disciplines, but the bulk of what is addressed here would probably not find any easy or evident place in any of them, with the possible exception of anthropology. It is precisely because all the contributors take their commitment and orientation from material culture as a more general phenomena that they have emerged with such a fascinating set of diverse topics of enquiry.

So the positive potential of material culture studies is presented in the form of studies that range from musical forms such as calypso through gardens to the use of paper in the office. None of these chapters have to constrain themselves to fall within an institution devoted to furnishing, clothing or the arts. But this is only the first stage of what may be perceived to be the benefits of such an approach. Merely allowing more creative selection of topics of enquiry would itself be important, but it is what one does with the topic and not merely its selection that counts. This leads to the second stage in the development of such studies which is drawn from this same emphasis upon specificity.

### The materiality of specific domains

There is a marked difference between the chapters of this volume coming out of material culture studies and the way these same topics might be addressed within some other tradition, and this is simply the degree of attention given to the specific materiality of each topic investigated. Indeed that this should be so follows directly from the first stage of delineating material culture studies. If we focus directly on the materiality of things then we must immediately confront the different forms of object that they represent.

The chapters that follow bring out clearly both this diversity but also what is gained by a focus upon their specificity. Let us take as an example Chapter 2 by Tacchi on radio soundscape. The author has used the very idea of material culture to interpose a key element between the more traditional studies of radio and its audience. This is textured soundscape that is emitted by radio and that is used to form a kind of space within the home. The

material presence of a radio that is on is quite different from the little box constituted by a radio that is off. It fills an area with volume and substance and may be experienced as much as an emanation expressive of the associated individual as coming from the box itself. Indeed, using material culture as her foundation, Tacchi is able to make radio more like clothing than media, expressive of highly individualized presencing. At the same time she focuses on the particular qualities that radio has as radio. For example the material presence of sound is opposed to the equally material presence of silence as a form that, in relation to conditions such as loneliness, can have a quite oppressive, almost claustrophobic texture. If, as I suspect, Tacchi is able to evoke the manner in which some people can or indeed must "feel" silence with a poignancy that gives that sense of silence a particular presence for the reader, then the argument for its use as an example of material culture is surely made. Tacchi's findings emerge directly from her sensitivity to what here is being called the specificity of materiality.

Almost exactly the same point can be made with an entirely different medium in the case of Jarman in Chapter 6. It is easy to see what others are likely to make of the banners used in the Orange Order marches in Northern Ireland. These could easily be decontextualized as an item within the discussion of politics or as an icon within a presentation of art within a gallery or museum. By insisting that first we address the materiality of the banners, Jarman manages to contribute more to both the political and the aesthetic understanding of these forms than a more direct expropriation would have done in either case. First, Jarman draws attention to what the banners are made from and argues for the centrality of such textiles to the recent social and economic history of the area, which is precisely what makes them of such significance to political debate. In this and in his more general work on the topic, it is again a focus on the precise details of what is being portrayed and how it is being portrayed that prevents the banners being superficially recontextualized as art or craft objects and forces us to engage at a more profound level with the form and aesthetics of the banners as against some other expressive form such as murals or the phenomenon of marching itself.

A third case may be made from my own study of Coca-Cola in Chapter 8. Once again the literature on this topic is voluminous. But in almost all cases Coca-Cola is flung around as some generic symbol that stands for almost anything people want to fill it with. I argue that its presence is rather like that which Quinn (1994) has argued for the European use of the swastika, a kind of meta-symbol that is dangerously separated off from the world as a symbol of symbols or in this case commodity that stands for all commoditization. My argument is intended to directly confront this kind of free-floating symbol and bring it back down to its most basic artefactual quality as glass bottle containing a sweet fizzy drink. It is only then as material culture that we can address the actual context in which Coke

becomes a quite specific element in the objectification of Trinidad as a whole and being Trinidadian as an identity divided between various component parts.

It is as unlikely that Jarman's chapter would have been written from a school of studies of textile than Tacchi's would come out of conventional media studies, or mine from studies of business. What we may regard as unique to our approach is that we remain focused upon the object that is being investigated but within a tradition that prevents any simple fetishization of material form. Indeed we feel it is precisely those studies that quickly move the focus from object to society in their fear of fetishism and their apparent embarrassment at being, as it were, caught gazing at mere objects, that retain the negative consequences of the term "fetishism". It is for them that Coke is merely a material symbol, banners stand in a simple moment of representation or radio becomes mere text to be analyzed. In such analysis the myriad diversity of artefacts can easily become reduced to generic forms such as "text", "art" or "semiotic". In such approaches it is not only the objects that remain fetishized but also, as Latour (1993) has argued with respect to the fetishism within debates about science, it is the idea of "society" as a kind of thing-like context to which all such materials should be properly reduced that becomes equally a moment of fetishism. Here, by contrast, through dwelling upon the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms, in part, because of the particular qualities they possess. In a similar fashion, the effect of Pellegam focusing directly upon paper in the office is not to fetishize paper, but on the contrary, to reveal what a material, which is so mundane as to be taken for granted, is actually doing in social terms.

By adopting an approach constituted by the term "material culture studies", each individual study resists the more immediate contextualization in the realm of that particular form. The study of gardening by Chevalier in Chapter 3 is not contextualized by a general literature on gardens or even by a comparative anthropology of gardens. By taking the garden as material culture, it is first assessed in relation to other material domains. In this case the English garden is situated in relation to the English lounge and its equivalent in France is argued to be not the French garden but the French kitchen, since Chevalier argues that the English passion for the transformations of natural forms enacted in the garden are most clearly comparable with the passions with which the French confront the skills of cuisine. By avoiding the immediate locating of gardens in gardening, the idiomatic potential of the work on the garden can be located and used for a wider academic analysis. The same applies to the chapters by Clarke, Finden-Crofts, Rausing and Johnson, where the contextualization is more immediately social life. In these chapters the objects of concern, be they television, gold jewellery, aid from Sweden, calypsos or catalogues of goods

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for sale, are not focused upon so directly but the importance of their specific materiality emerges through studies that show how the images of society people live through are constituted through these domains.

## Material matters

As already noted, the point that material things matter and can be theorized as such may now be regarded as having been made and there is little point in reiterating it here. There was, however, a major fault with the body of work that established this theorizing of cultural forms, much of which came out of various versions of formal, structural and semiotic analysis associated with writers such as Barthes, Baudrillard, Douglas and Lévi-Strauss (see Riggins 1994 for a more recent example of how this tradition has developed). In formal analysis the major technique was to reveal the homologies between distinctions drawn in one sphere with those of another. So, for example, a dimension already regarded as important such as class or gender could be shown to be reproduced in part through a host of material taxonomies as in clothing, building or systems for the classification of time, which may not at first have appeared to be based upon the same structural order but through analysis were revealed to be part of what Bourdieu called the same "habitus".

The problem with such analysis is that it could apply to almost any area of cultural life, or material form, and although it pointed to the significance of domains of difference in general it did not specify, or single out, any particular artefacts as being of special significance. Since the roots of this analysis lay in the structuralist concern with order in general, the items used in manifesting that order were in some sense arbitrary. Furthermore, such analysis tended to a kind of social reductionism that rarely challenged the foundational social distinctions that are taken as axiomatic goals of analysis. That is, studies that map material culture onto gender or class are hardly likely to do other than reiterate the ideas of gender and class that they start with.

Since then one development has been the rise of more sophisticated theories of material culture which, by using concepts such as that of objectification, refused any such reductionism or privileging of something called "society". In my work on Trinidad I have tried to show how kinship and ethnicity could be taken equally with home decoration or the media as forms though which certain value systems have been transformed over many decades (Miller 1994: 257-90).

Here, however, the concern is rather to move from the general question of the importance of material forms to the specific analysis of particular artefacts or artefactual domains. The emphasis on selectivity demands a criterion for prioritization and this is why the distinct element of the question "Why things matter?" rests ultimately upon the last word of my

title, that is "matter". I would argue that the term "matter" tends to point in a rather different direction from terms such as "importance" or "significance". These alternative terms tend to imply a criterion derived solely from analytical enquiry, as in the idea that "I demonstrate an important relationship between social dimension A and artefact form B". The term "matter", by contrast, tends to a more diffused, almost sentimental association that is more likely to lead us to the concerns of those being studied than those doing the studying. It puts the burden of mattering clearly on evidence of concern to those being discussed.

We have to recognize how easy it is to be wrong about what matters. Geertz (1980) reports a case where the Dutch, having conquered the Celebes in Indonesia, were trying to establish the exact boundaries between two principalities that had often fought each other in the past, and were surprised that, given this degree of fighting, the princes still seemed unclear as to where the boundaries lay. One of the princes replied, "we had much better reasons to fight with one another than these shabby hills". In other words it is quite problematic merely to assume another group's criteria for mattering (Geertz 1980: 25). Similarly in my current ethnographic work on shopping in north London, I could argue that a choice matters to a housewife because it reflects the love she bears her partner, but this would be open to the critique that it should matter because it obscures the amount of work and exploitation involved in such an act of caring, even from the woman who is doing the shopping.

The issue of mattering not only leads to a concern with the consequence of things for those associated with them but also fits well with a move from a primary emphasis with producing things to a concern with consuming things. All of those writing in this volume have relinquished a simpler Marxist ontology that insisted a priori that the species being is constituted in the act of production, to an appreciation that the key moment in which people construct themselves or are constructed by others is increasingly through relations with cultural forms in the arena of consumption. This is in recognition of a historical shift from production to consumption and a legacy of the neglect of consumption as people remained wedded to theories devised in another time (Miller 1995a).

The idea of "mattering" is, however, by no means a simple or straightforward criterion. It is certainly not reducible to an open question to an informant "does this matter?" and being led by the answer. Sometimes, of course, this is the source of our concern. For example, an outsider might claim that it should not matter that a particular group in Northern Ireland is able to march down a particular street in Londonderry, but underlying Jarman's Chapter 6 is the clear evidence of the many people to whom it clearly matters a great deal. Similarly the starting point of Finden-Crofts' Chapter 7 is that while calypso at one level should not be of any great regard, being merely a form of popular song, many people in Trinidad insist

that such songs matter to the degree that they can bring down governments or pronounce on the current state of almost any important issue in the island.

This in and of itself would lead to the fairly simple criterion that "if it matters to them, it should matter for us". This certainly removes us from the tradition of formal and structural analysis, which took no regard at all as to whether something mattered. Lévi-Strauss (1982) famously pronounced of the "hau", as analyzed by Mauss, that it was of little consequence whether the native thought the ideas mattered. Yet this new criterion is in many ways as problematic as that which it negates, since it leaves the question of what matters entirely to the declared judgement of those being studied. As such it would fit current fashions in anthropology and some other social sciences particularly well. Books such as *Anthropology as cultural critique* (Marcus & Fischer 1986), which were the harbinger of a massive shift from structural analysis to a kind of postmodern redefinition of academic responsibility, have led to some academics going to the other extreme and claiming that the only thing that matters is what those being studied identify as mattering. To attempt to refuse these "voices of experience" is said to impose an unwarranted authority by academic fiat, which cannot be morally justified.

In the more extreme forms of this approach, the role of the academic becomes merely to give voice in establishment and educational contexts to those who could not give a criterion for mattering because they themselves were not deemed to matter. It also returns us to the most old-fashioned form of positivism which forbade the philosopher to go beyond that which was immediately observable (or in this case sayable), since that alone represented the key goal of "experience", the term most often used to mask the positivistic grounding of this work.

This would be clearly disastrous for a study of material culture, whose subject is almost always mute and where the importance of the object world is often precisely that artefacts were often most effective in social reproduction when they were assumed to be merely trivial and not to matter. The epistemological foundation of material culture must remain realist rather than positivist, with a clear latitude for the critique of ideology. For this purpose material culture must find some channel between on the one hand mere reportage of the voice of experience, and on the other hand the merely formalistic application of schema of analysis. We must have our own criteria for determining why some things matter.

The solution to this dilemma is, however, not particularly hard to find. Another characteristic of the present volume is that every chapter is the result of ethnographic study. Ethnography tends to lead to a much deeper involvement in people's lives than just what they say about themselves. Ethnography used in material culture also tends to emphasize careful observations of what people actually do and in particular do with things. As

such we are constantly faced with the everyday discrepancies between what people say matters to them and what they actually give their attention to. Pellegram starts her Chapter 5 with a consensus that paper should not matter. The Estonians described by Rausing in Chapter 9 are trying to pretend to themselves that Swedish aid does not matter, since they feel degraded by being the recipients of charity. The Trinidadians described by Finden-Crofts in Chapter 7 are quite ambivalent whether calypso should be allowed to affect directly a field that is formally supposed to matter a great deal more, that is politics.

The kind of material culture analysis presented in this volume has therefore its own criterion of mattering, one that emerges largely through ethnographic enquiry. It is one which insists that it does indeed emphasize those objects that can demonstrably be seen to matter to people, even where those same people do not make any claim. Language is as often taken to be merely a form of legitimation. In my recent ethnography I found several cases of elderly informants who in public claimed to support corner shops and bemoan the rise of huge supermarkets, and in private praised large supermarkets and declared themselves happy for corner shops to disappear.

Clarke, with whom I conducted joint fieldwork on provisioning in a north London street, documents in Chapter 4 the increasing use of *Argos* as a catalogue that allowed people to browse for goods at home rather than through shop windows. One advantage of this is that one has greater leisure to establish mattering as a criterion for spending money as opposed to the impulse purchasing that may arise from more traditional window shopping. *Loot*, which is used to advertise second-hand goods, by contrast, leads to the direct exploitation of uncertainly creating the condition for a more game-like interaction where people, who feel they have the requisite skill, can take advantages of this lack of clarity as to how much things might be worth.

The logic of mattering is equally well exposed in the climax to Chapter 5 by Pellegram. Here there is in a sense a double discrepancy to the question of mattering. On the one hand this is a particularly fine example of the ethnographer putting into focus a substance – paper – which is disregarded as in itself trivial, even though through observation of, for example, the concern with the place it is stored, it can certainly be shown to matter. Beyond this, however, is a marvellous instance in which the transformation of mattering takes place quite explicitly at the scene of the action. All paper that becomes part of the archiving of information is assumed not only to matter but also to be essential. Bureaucrats who failed to give full regard to the importance of duplicating and storing such paper would be unlikely to retain their job. Yet after this virtual fetishism of paper as archive over a considerable amount of time, the management constructs a new ritual in which people are free suddenly to remove vast amounts of the same paper that up to that point mattered so much and declare it sufficiently insignificant that it can be thrown away, in an orgy of de-archiving.

By the time we reach the chapters by Rausing and Johnson, the issues of mattering achieves a poignancy that allows us to contemplate directly the kind of sentimentality that the concept of mattering evokes as a term. The problem for both Estonians in the post-Soviet world and Filipina women is that the criteria of what could or should matter have themselves become extremely fragile; as a result people are left with an uncomfortable ambivalence in directing their own actions, since for them (as for the ethnographer) mattering is designated as much by what they choose to do as what they say. There is a humiliation for Estonians in not knowing whether they should consider Western or Eastern goods as high or low quality. For the Filipina women studied by Johnson in Chapter 9, everything that has led up to a certain point has insisted that what should matter is gold. Yet there is clearly some force that has led to a moment in which when they go to work in the Middle East, the Hungry Bunny burger has become an object of such significance that its consumption is deemed essential, even though the net result is that a woman returns without the gold expected of her. Johnson's task is precisely to define those radical oppositions between tradition and the modern that have become objectified in women's values and positions and that reveal mattering to be itself pulled apart in highly opposed aspirations.

Ambivalence and tension are central also to Rausing's account in Chapter 9 of the relationships to the new, Western objects on a remote collective farm in Estonia. There, the distinction between the old/Soviet and the new/Western goods tends to be unstated and inarticulated, despite the dramatic process of appropriation complemented by the recontextualization of Soviet forms. The reason for this is that too explicit an articulation of the foreign-ness of the Western would threaten to expose Estonian ethnicity as something Eastern, rather than support their claim to be already "naturally" Western. Humphrey (1995) has shown how this kind of transience of mattering has been taken to its extreme in Moscow, where the sheer level of uncertainty has made it virtually impossible to know what one should or should not care about.

The question of mattering is then precisely the point at which the chapters in this volume move from the general concern with the materiality of each specific domain of artefacts that they have chosen to study to the criteria that allow us to choose particular articulations between persons and objects as significant. This is the shift that allows the subtlety and nuance of ethnographic enquiry to deepen more formalistic analysis. At this stage Tacchi moves from the importance of radio sound to the considerable differences between individuals in their regard for such sound depending upon the current state of their social life. Similarly Rausing demonstrates the strategies developed by an individual Estonian to keep the sympathy of different audiences by dressing herself differently according to each context.

## Consumption and space

Having opened out this wider potential for the study of subject-object relations, it would be hard to say where the boundaries of such a study might be. Once we ask which things matter to whom and why, we are immediately faced with an endless proliferation of criteria of mattering. Obviously only certain of these can be addressed either in this introduction or in the chapters themselves. For present purposes I shall focus on a single dimension that acts as a common thread though the volume and thereby defines it against other potential uses of these ideas. It not only acts to describe what all the chapters have in common but also is a key dimension of difference that organizes them into distinct sections. This dimension of space links a concern with the most private domestic arena to the most public and global sphere. The volume accomplishes this in three stages: the first three chapters reflect on the private sphere, the second three on the public sphere, while the final three help bridge the relationship between the two spheres.

The chapters by Tacchi and Chevalier are both concerned with the way people take forms from the public sphere and use them to construct a balance between privacy and sociality. Tacchi's Chapter 2 reflects the considerable difficulty of bringing the potential of ethnographic enquiry into the topic of privacy and loneliness. Using comparative ethnography, she is able to evoke the sense in which both sound and silence can become a richly textured presence, part of an almost sensual intimacy for the individual. As such she is able to reveal sound as a highly material aspect of culture. At the same time radio becomes a key instrument by which the private domain is more or less exposed to another kind of space – one that can stretch from the more immediate space-time of a local chat show through to the vast space-time of global pop classics. As such, tuning into the radio becomes a kind of tuning in to sociality in the larger world in order to make the highly private and immediate domestic sphere that much more livable, but within the safety of one's own domestic arena.

Chevalier in Chapter 3 also deals with the minutiae by which people bring a global form, in this case nature, into what may be called literally the "domesticated" sphere. She notes its implications for both intra-household relations and also positioning the home within the neighbourhood. But to Tacchi's ethnographic sensitivity she is able to add a historical aspect, since the differences between the French and the British articulation between gardens and homes makes sense only in terms of longstanding differences in the way the temporality of the family itself is constructed as a project of inheritance. Yet in turn the significance of these different historical trajectories is made manifest only through the detailed account of both her informants' views on the garden and Chevalier's detailed observations of precisely what is done to both home and garden.

With Clarke in Chapter 4 we move to a still more complex understanding of what is presently constituted as the domestic. In many ways this reflects the kind of new thinking about space that is evident in Morley's (1992) discussion of the television usually situated within the living room of a private home but that is at the same time the primary contact with the globe. One of the major impacts of the *Argos* catalogue is that it returns much of shopping choice to the home itself, and thus has a major impact on groups such as children, where shoppers would wish to consult their children but know full well the dreadful consequences of actually having children with them during the act of shopping. *Loot*, by contrast, appears to be a comparatively local journal based in London, but it is best used by people with highly cosmopolitan knowledge, including picking up on the connotations of which particular part of London their exchange partner is living in, and then often travelling a great deal further than would be likely in more conventional shopping. So the local is best appropriated by those with the most global forms of knowledge.

The next three chapters are in some ways in marked contrast to the first three, which reflects the often radical disjuncture in contemporary societies between the domestic sphere and the public sphere. As will be evident in the details of the chapters themselves, this becomes of considerable significance in examining the question of why certain things matter. The difference is essentially between what people do within the privacy of their own homes and the implications of display within an open social context. Again the three chapters provide an interesting sequence with respect to this difference. They move from a chapter where mattering is largely hidden and has to be excavated by the ethnographer, through calypso where there is a public discourse that retains some uncertainty as to whether such things should matter, through to the situation in Northern Ireland where banners are explicit symbols, sometimes literally to die for.

In all three cases there is a carefully analyzed relationship between the medium and the message. Pellegram's Chapter 5 contrasts the relative intimacy of the yellow Post-it® Notes and the way that formal paper is used to express the seriousness of the organization as a whole to the outside world. Finden-Crofts shows in Chapter 7 that with calypso the singers compete to be the key medium for the expression of that particular year's style, whether it is the party spirit of the Donkey Dance or the spirit of political critique. In Jarman's case in Chapter 6 the banner takes its specific place against the qualities of alternative media such as murals or the parades themselves as a mobile form in which the symbol of a group can (as it were) mark its territoriality.

Another common theme for material culture in the public sphere relates to the pragmatic advantages of plurality in form. Jarman concludes on this theme, and sees it not only as a means for using history without the formalism of historical narrative but also as a means by which banners can confront their different contexts, for example, both facing inwards to the

community who produce them and outwards as an expression of that community to others. The situation is similar for Finden-Crofts, though here this plurality exists within the specific frame of that year's carnival, where a large number of new calypsos compete to become (as it were) the key banners paraded for public debate in that particular year. We would expect and indeed find that the bureaucratic context for Pellegram's investigation imposes a more rule-like order upon the relationship between difference and context, though even here there is relative flexibility if one moves between the two modes she describes of overt and latent message.

Being part of the public sphere sets its own constraints not found in the first three chapters. The topic of mattering is brought out into the open, though in quite different ways. Where the Trinidadians are quite ambivalent about the importance of calypso, Pellegram's office workers are as consensual about the unimportance of paper as the Northern Irish are consensual about the importance of banners. By juxtaposing the three chapters, one can see how consensus about mattering can become a rather problematic form of closure as against the open debate that is evident in Trinidad.

The final three chapters may be seen as in some ways addressing the disjuncture between the chapters that deal with domestic and those that deal with the public sphere. This is because their subject matter is largely that of global-local identity. In a sense they bring out the meta-level at which the previous chapters are connected, since in many ways the local is objectified in the construction of a domestic sphere which achieves its sense of privacy precisely through defining itself against another sphere experienced as public or increasingly as global. In all three cases the primary concern is with the way this articulation is expressed in consumption, but perhaps unusually for consumption studies, they are all explicitly concerned with the implications that follow from the source of these goods, for example, in production for Miller and in gifts from abroad for Rausing and in actually going abroad for Johnson.

In all three cases consumption is also highlighted as the instrument that both expresses and resolves dual aspects of identity. Miller in Chapter 8 shows how the red sweet drink (as opposed to Coke) becomes the form by which African Trinidadians can complete their own identity as Trinidadian through ingesting a symbol of the other ethnic group – the Indian. Rausing in Chapter 9 shows how Estonians struggle to construct a sense of being naturally “Western” in order to divest themselves of what might otherwise erupt as an ambivalence between a desire to incorporate elements of the West while retaining what otherwise would have to be acknowledged as “Eastern” aspects of their identity. Johnson in Chapter 10 shows how women struggle to retain their sense of being female while incorporating something of the freedom and access to externality that was previously largely associated with males.



Material culture studies can thereby proclaim itself as one tradition that does not fall apart into the antinomies that Latour (1993) has drawn attention to between a reification of science that is in general opposed in anthropology, and a reification of society which in some ways material culture studies is often better placed to critique than mainstream anthropology. Instead the following chapters reveal such studies as a highly effective means to enquire into the fundamental questions of what it is to be human within the diversity of culture.

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The degree to which a generic notion of the “West” or more specifically “America” has become the specific instrument of globality is striking in all these chapters. Estonians, Trinidadians and Filipinas all seek to lay claim to what may be regarded as the modernity and style of Coca-Cola or Marlboro cigarettes, but in all three cases they have developed mechanisms for disaggregating the qualities symbolized by Western goods into those that they are able or desire to accept as against those qualities that they see as evil or at least inauthentic to themselves. Indeed in comparison with the general discourse of local–global articulation, this emphasis upon material culture seems to offer important insights into the ability of groups to use the variable objectifications available in a range of commodities to create a much more subtle and discriminatory process of incorporation and rejection than that allowed for in simple models of Americanization or globalization.

The subtitle for this part, “World Wide West”, has then a serious import. All three chapters demonstrate the complexity of the question as to where “the West” is located, even prior to the use of the Internet. Rausing notes that 53 per cent of the people in her otherwise rather marginal village had been abroad. The material effect of working abroad for Filipinos is evident in Johnson’s chapter, with the added poignancy that it is women, commonly emblematic of the domestic, who are primarily involved in this circular migration. At the most extreme, my surveys in Trinidad found that the majority of families were transnational at the nuclear level. Yet the impact of this is, if anything, more acute through the presence of local signs of the West, which threaten the integrity of that which would otherwise be the unambiguous symbol of the local. As Rausing puts it, it is the local West that is at issue here. Indeed it is striking that much of this debate is informed by encounters with equally aggressive candidates for global status – Soviet socialism in the case of Estonia and Islam in the case of the southern Philippines.

Johnson suggests that the tension set up by a concept of “Western” style simultaneously takes two entirely opposed forms. On the one hand, style can be taken as the “tradition” of the West, which in turn can be incorporated locally as simply a new version of tradition, as in an extra ceremony within a wedding. At the same time the West can represent a much more radical form of individualized freedom from structures that would repudiate both kinds of socialized tradition, the older form and the new. The dilemma for many women is that their new experience as migrant workers allows them to objectify either of these forms of Westernization, but one tends to be at the expense of the other.

This part exemplifies the advantages of this volume over other approaches to the same issue. There are a plethora of books published on “local–global” relations and articulations. Many of these tend to constant repetition about global homogenization or heterogeneity using symbols such as Coke and hamburgers reduced down to clichés and dramatic juxtapositions of Western goods in exotic contexts. By contrast, Johnson

and Rausing provide a nuanced sense of just how these encounters are experienced and how what have been represented as grand clashes of meta-symbols become the mundane reality of everyday life.

## Conclusion

These final chapters bring us in many ways full circle back to the opening chapter by Tacchi. She also focused on how material culture is used to objectify the presence of a space-time that evokes a global world of possibility held against a highly constrained set of domestic obligations and responsibilities. As such this reinforces the larger point that material culture is often the concrete means by which the contradictions held within general concepts such as the domestic or the global are in practice resolved in everyday life. Throughout these chapters it is clear that one of the key struggles of modern life is to retain both a sense of authentic locality, often as narrow as the private sphere, and yet also lay claims to a cosmopolitanism that at some level may evoke rights to global status.

This achievement cannot be reduced to either method or theory *per se*. There is certainly an ethnographic orientation to fieldwork, but there are also historical sections in many of the chapters and most particularly in Jarman’s chapter. Material culture studies is not then constituted by ethnography, but remains eclectic in its methods. Approaches from history, archaeology, geography, design and literature are all equally acceptable contributions. Similarly while these chapters are theoretically informed, they do not reduce their material to overly abstract theoretical models such as formalism or a structuralism derived from linguistic analogy, which treat objects as signs but do not account for the degree to which they matter to people. At the same time the concept of mattering used here is a wide one that does not reduce down to merely what people say about things. There are many instances where clearly things matter to people even when in speech they deride them as trivial and inconsequential.

The possibility of material culture studies lies not in method, but rather in an acknowledgement of the nature of culture, as understood by theorists such as Simmel (e.g. 1968). We as academics can strive for understanding and empathy through the study of what people do with objects, because that is the way the people that we study create a world of practice. As Simmel argued, human values do not exist other than through their objectification in cultural forms. The specific form taken has an intrinsic tendency to fetishize and be understood merely as form and no longer as the embodiment of ourselves. This is what he saw as the tragic potential inherent in culture. But it is not only academics, but also all social agents, who strive to avoid such a fate and bring back cultural forms of all kinds into the task of humanities self-construction.