

# Journal of Material Culture

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## Editorial

SAGE Publications

*Journal of Material Culture* 1996 1: 5

DOI: 10.1177/135918359600100101

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mcu.sagepub.com/content/1/1/5.citation>

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The launch of this new journal emerges from an extraordinary range of innovative research on material culture that has taken place across the humanities and social sciences during the last two decades. The aim, quite simply, is to provide a forum for interdisciplinary discussion and debate to bring together and encourage communication between scholars working within different fields. The common focus of this interdisciplinary research is on the ways in which artefacts are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities.

The study of material culture may be most broadly defined as the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space. The perspective adopted may be global or local, concerned with the past or the present, or the mediation between the two. Defined in this manner, the potential range of contemporary disciplines involved in some way or other in studying material culture is effectively as wide as the human and cultural sciences themselves.

Definitions of the origins of being human abound, and have altered historically, but two in particular have always taken centre stage: to be human is to speak, and to make and use tools. Consideration of the linguistic basis of humanity has given rise to linguistics. The use and meanings of artefacts have, by contrast, no obvious disciplinary home. Yet it could have been otherwise; the systematic study of language might be scattered through as large a number of different disciplines as the study of material culture is today.

The fact that no discipline called 'material culture studies' exists may be regarded as a positive advantage. Disciplines, with their boundary-maintaining devices, institutional structures, accepted texts, methodologies, internal debates and circumscribed areas of study tend, by virtue of their very constitution, to be rather conservative in nature. Changes within them most frequently come about through borrowing ideas from outside. Our aim, therefore, in developing this journal is *not* to draw together studies of contemporary consumer goods, landscapes, archaeological finds, studies of architecture, artworks or ethnographic collections into a new, 'disciplined' subject area, or even a subdiscipline, but to encourage the cross-fertilization of ideas and approaches between people concerned with the material constitution of social relations. As such we have no obvious genealogy of ancestors to whom we should pay homage, and are not concerned to invent any. In developing this journal we remain

firmly committed to a politics of inclusion. There are already enough constraints imposed on our ability to think and to write fresh and creative work without inventing any new ones.

An adequate understanding of any social actions and relations, we would maintain, demands an understanding of material culture and vice versa. The world is constituted through a continuous dynamism, a dialectic of object–subject relations that can only be more fully explored through developing theoretical perspectives, methodologies and empirical studies drawing on different types of evidence from alternative contexts. We hope, through the contributions to this journal, to further stimulate a general comparative approach to the study of the embeddedness of humanity in society.

Let us take two obvious aspects of the materiality of human existence. All human groups dwell in space, most commonly in houses in settlements that form part of wider landscapes. Houses and landscapes form an evident concern for sociologists, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, geographers, architects, psychologists, museologists, and people involved in design and consumer studies (to name but a few). Whether or not it is placed in the foreground, the physical presence of houses and landscapes is there as a material environment that creates people (has an impact, or effects, facilitates or constrains activities) as much as it comprises structures that people create. Scholars from different disciplines make extremely valuable contributions to an understanding of houses and landscapes, but usually only of a limited number of aspects. For example, a psychologist might be interested in the emotional impact of houses or landscapes on people using or entering them: the effects of high or low ceilings, dark or light rooms, rocky or wooded valleys. An anthropologist might be interested in gender symbolism in landscapes and houses in highland Papua New Guinea, an archaeologist in temporal changes in houses and landscapes over the long term. No single discipline can claim a monopoly of knowledge. An archaeologist, through his or her particular expertise and knowledge of the evidence, has a great deal to teach an anthropologist or a geographer about landscapes and houses, and vice versa. Breaking down the kind of disciplinary chauvinism in which anthropologists and sociologists may read only the work of other anthropologists and sociologists, our aim is to make the *Journal of Material Culture* a forum in which people from disparate intellectual backgrounds can learn from and inform each other and engage in debate. Most productively, we would like to see the journal developing into an arena where, say, archaeologists and geographers, anthropologists and psychologists, might write together and interpret houses and landscapes, whether the empirical database be Bronze Age hut circles in south-west Britain, house compounds in Cameroon or the streets of Harlem.

As another example, the last decade has seen museums come of age,

in the sense that questions about their role and about what had seemed almost an intrinsic conservatism have led to a new self-consciousness about their function, and, more important, the consequences of that function with regard to the people who come to them. As museums give rise to museology, it becomes clear that the point of articulation with the rest of the academic world is through material culture studies. Without material culture studies, museums have substantive problems and issues but no foundation for the study of objects in context. If we were to attempt to create a material culture discipline we would probably find some resistance from both archaeologists and museum workers, who may not wish to cross boundaries and have to ascribe to yet another set of constraints and definitions. By not being a discipline, however, we become a point of articulation instead of division and we are able to unite such people with many others who share common interests.

Attempts to establish interdisciplinary links and collaboration are not new, and one can readily identify a number of conferences and their published proceedings together with collaborative books. But what has been entirely lacking within material culture studies has been the kind of continuous focus drawing together a community of interested scholars that only a periodical published at regular intervals can provide. It is our hope that the *Journal of Material Culture* will fill that gap. There are many academics in a whole variety of disciplines who do not relate their work to the term 'material culture studies', or who are not even particularly aware that such a category exists. A general 'raising of consciousness' about the possibilities latent in this category may well help to facilitate a greater freedom of communication and collaboration.

The lack of a disciplinary foundation could lead to a lack of confidence in the independent contribution we might make. At worst we would merely become followers of disciplines hitching on to the band-wagons of academic fashion. We hope we do not represent merely an addition to a sequence of 'structuralism and material culture', 'Marxism and material culture', 'postmodernism and material culture', etc. Of course some application of new ideas to our particular concerns may well prove valuable and of common interest. Furthermore, such appropriation can still be creative. Structuralism may have developed through linguistics, but in studying the relationship between symbol and object advances occurred in the elaboration of semiotic theory precisely because objects are not like language.

In addition, however, we hope this journal will represent the independent contribution that material culture studies can make to wider concerns in the humanities and social sciences. For example, theories of objectification have helped to transcend subject-object dualities. Focusing upon both the transience and longevity of objects has helped develop new approaches to the nature of social memory. Studies of the consumption

of commodities helped stimulate the study of consumption in media and cultural studies. The fact that objects tend to be meaningful rather than merely communicate meaning has helped move our concerns from narrow questions of semantics to larger issues of identity. In this journal we would wish to promote such approaches, which take from the specific qualities of materiality and lead us to rethink general theory.

What links all these studies together is a common focus on the material aspects of human existence, theories and methodologies. The last few decades have seen a burgeoning of theoretical approaches in the humanities and the social sciences. It is now strikingly obvious that no one single theoretical or conceptual approach can provide a grand solution to the study of material culture. Different perspectives, from structuralism to phenomenology, poststructuralism to hermeneutics, exploit alternative aspects of the evidence in the interpretations they provide. Critical theory and discourse perspectives have led us all to be increasingly self-reflexive: what exactly are we doing and why? The aim of this journal will be to foster a non-partisan approach to the study of material culture in which scholars coming from different theoretical backgrounds can hopefully talk to, rather than past, each other. We would hope to avoid some of the empty rhetorical gestures and open (and unpleasant) competitiveness that individual disciplines more often than not encourage and relish. Through the systematic exploration of different theories in relation to material culture we would hope to foster an increased understanding of both their strengths and weaknesses. What we do hope to foster in all the papers published in the journal is a critical perspective on the world. Our project is, of necessity, a political one, in relation to both academia and the society in which we live and work. A greater appreciation of the material basis of our social conditions of life will hopefully lead to their transformation.

## **MATERIALITY AND THE MATERIAL LEGACY OF THE PAST**

In considering material culture, the comparison is often most easily made with linguistics. Material culture certainly gained a great deal from the highly energized study of language that culminated this century in the development of structuralism. But this had its drawbacks as well as advantages. It has become increasingly apparent that taking artefacts, images and performances as quasi-texts is to overlook their most fundamental properties so far as users and witnesses might be concerned. Current theories of material culture do not advocate any simple physicalist attention to the material quality of things, but they do acknowledge that materiality often plays an important role in creating their particular significance and meaningfulness as well as their symbolic efficacy.

The domain of linguistics should be comparatively easy to define, but

even here too pedantic an attempt to define what constitutes language would be tiresome, and much of the most interesting work occurs at the fringes of linguistics. We assume a similar situation with regard to material culture. Thus we would hope, for example, that debates within this journal will interest academics interested in music and sound. The materiality of sound is already recognized as a major issue in the study of music. The atmosphere created by heavy metal rock music, the private domain constituted by a lonely listener at home with the radio and the uses of 'piped' music in the public domain all immediately reflect upon sound's material presence. While there are many issues of ethno-musicology that are not particularly relevant for us, a debate on the material presence of sound in comparison with other cultural forms might prove invaluable.

As in the case of rock music, materiality is something that is often hard to ignore and often present as a sign of other people's agency and not one's own. Most often, as in the landscape and buildings that surround us, the agents so signified are historical, representing the accrued labour of generations. As Bourdieu amongst others has pointed out, it is not just the material environment of agricultural field systems, buildings and boundaries that we inherit, it is also our specific taxonomies and ways of interacting with that environment, ranging from whether we sit or squat to the way religious traditions in our area have conceptualized over millennia the gross world of material form.

It is interesting to note, in this context, that one of the key debates that has emerged in sociology during the past 5 years has been over modernism and its relation to postmodernism and the supposed development of a postmodern cultural condition. Whether the latter is viewed, as by Jameson, as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' or by others as a liberalizing force in society, considerations of the material form of architecture, seen as the physical manifestation of powerful cultural codes and ideologies, have played a key role in the debates. This further serves to emphasize both the embeddedness of material culture in schemes of perception and cultural categories and the intended and unintended consequences that can, as often as not, be best highlighted and understood through study of their physical manifestations and effects. The materiality of history, as our inherited legacy, brings out two of the main branches of material culture studies. The first is the study of historical artefacts, the second resides in the wider connotations of the term materialism.

The potential of material culture studies is perhaps nowhere more evident than when we consider the integration of studies of the present and studies of the past. Precisely because of the devotion of archaeology, to excavation, of prehistory to research in archives and of anthropology to ethnography, for a considerable time a gap has existed which periodically has led to the emergence of particular schools of material culture studies. For example, in the 1950s in France a group of scholars associated

with Leroi-Gourhan developed an approach to technology that included both prehistoric and contemporary sources. In the 1960s scholars such as Deetz and Glassie working in the United States saw the potential of historical archaeology for again transcending the dichotomy between synchronic and diachronic studies. In the 1980s in Britain two groups emerged. One, based at University College, developed the study of long-term social structure as a contribution to the emergence of neo-Marxist studies, while others working with David Clarke and Ian Hodder at Cambridge created a similar contribution to structuralist studies.

In the 1990s new regional foci seem to be emerging which exploit this same niche. Examples might include work by Australian scholars interested in material culture as a means of studying the colonial encounter in the Pacific, or work in the United States on trying to theorize diaspora communities of the past in relation to a new sense of transcending national identity felt by many groups today. It is perhaps time that students of material culture capitalized upon what has been an immensely positive contribution to interdisciplinary studies sustained over many decades and build still further on these foundations. Few groups have so consistently refused to be characterized as either diachronically or synchronically based.

## **MATERIALISM AND DE-FETISHISM**

A consideration of the material legacy of the past leads us equally to the recognition of the importance of materialism per se. One of the many contributions made by Karl Marx was his commitment to understanding how the materiality within which we live constrains who we can become. In the particular circumstance of the industrial revolution this became largely a concern with the grounding of history in labour and the economy. Today this notion of materialism may be enlarged. For example, we might feel constrained by the presence of the consumer world of commodities within which most of us live. We might recognize this as overwhelming in the same sense that the industrial revolution was an overwhelming presence a century and a half ago. We may have many different responses to this condition but still recognize that in a profound sense we are constituted by it.

Materialism stresses our limited control over the forces that create us. In the case of Marx this led to an empathy with those who were most oppressed by history and least able to see themselves in the world created around them and often by them. We may wish to retain a perspective that prevents us from too easily blaming the victim for their circumstance. This is but one example of the way in which attempts to understand the significance of buildings, commodities, agricultural systems and soundscapes are important. So, far from detracting from the understanding of

people, they are the foundation for a more genuine empathy for and sympathetic comprehension of the lives of others.

This is important because many academics outside our concerns tend to assume that by using the label 'material culture studies' we enhance an already present fetishism of the object. By contrast, many of us believe it is a simple-minded humanism, which views persons outside the context and constraints of their material culture and thereby establishes a dichotomy between persons and objects, that is the true source of such fetishism. Indeed, it may be only material culture studies that has the will and knowledge to undertake the key task of de-fetishising objects that is today as important a form of emancipating humanity as it was a century ago.

The dichotomy of persons and things is itself a particular historical and regional phenomenon. The literature on Melanesia is famous for illustrating just how thing-like people can be and people-like things can be. Most historians recognize the discovery of (a clearly gendered) 'man' as a particular product of the European Enlightenment, although it no doubt had its equivalents in other times and places. The Enlightenment enthroned man as the measure of all things, such that the material world become defined as an object of knowledge and separated out as de-humanized science and technology. Only the arts retained the project of transcending this dichotomy, and they become an increasingly specialized subfield of human practice.

In the last 20 years a considerable literature has developed that suggests that after several centuries this period of explicit humanism is in decline, and that the relationship between persons and things is becoming once again a less dichotomous and more fluid one. This has been one of the core contentions of the debates over postmodernism. The cause of this shift is generally felt to be the rise of commodities, where, as Simmel first pointed out, the sheer quantitative increase is such as to constitute a qualitative change in many of our lives. So far the debate over what this change portends is relatively crude. There is now one well-established line, most clearly associated with Baudrillard, that views this transformation as the loss of humanity. We are all reduced to being the sign-servants of the object world. On the other hand, there are many other possibilities that have been less fully explored. We might, for example, simply be returning to the kind of precommodified relationship encountered in anthropology and history. It is clear that material objects appear pervasively in adjudications about modern life, but grand generalizations about whether they overwhelm us or whether they (or we) have become mere simulacra tend to involve the projection of philosophical logics upon self-evident objects, whereas this journal will be concerned to demonstrate that such things are by no means self-evident and require constant dedicated analysis.



In the rapidly growing study of commodities and consumption other contradictions have emerged. For example, consumption might be viewed as the labour of housewives who gain little by way of credit or respect for their skills as consumers. At the same time there is the sense that such consumption, when translated into the increasing power of retail on the one hand and economic institutions such as GATT on the other, has become the major source of power in the contemporary world. Precisely because this is not recognized, it would follow that the labour of consumers is now as important an area of fetishism as the labour of producers once was. Material culture studies that aim to uncover such contradictions thereby become an important instrument of de-fetishism with significant potential political consequences. This is only one example of arguments that would place material culture studies at the heart of any rethinking of contemporary critical theory.

### **THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING UN-DISCIPLINED**

As already noted, the term 'discipline' is highly appropriate for the established categories of academic teaching. We fight for resources with grant-giving agencies on the basis of boundaries drawn that include our academic 'territory' and also set boundaries on who may use this label of being a 'proper' historian or student of design. Now it would be disingenuous for us to argue that such disciplines or boundaries should not exist. We would not survive in a libertarian academic anarchy. We do have to take responsibility for jobs, students, allocating resources and other tasks that depend upon the maintenance of categories and taxonomies. Parochialism must unfortunately be maintained. But in a sense material culture studies has been blessed with an unusual and potentially fruitful legacy. Dismissed for many decades as the antiquated end point of evolutionary studies, it was able to lie dormant while other structures came into being and were sedimented into more concrete forms. As a result people working in material culture studies have been able to maintain a dynamic presence in the interstices between other activities. An example already noted is the combination of archaeology, history and ethnography into a general study of the evolution of social structures in the 1970s. Another example has been the virtual reinvention of consumer studies apart from some highly parochial economics and psychology in the later 1980s. The new concern with consumption, with its redirection of attention to the social life of commodities, has in turn become an idiom through which many other facets of modern life such as nationalism or morality can be studied, since these are often highly pertinent to the labour of consumption.

The phenomenal growth of cultural studies in the 1980s provides the best example of the advantages of remaining undisciplined and pursuing

a field of study without respect to prior claims of disciplinary antecedents. Many disciplines had – or increasingly claim to have – a concept of cultural studies as central to their respective fields, such that analysis of meaning and interpretation has become one of the most powerful synthesizing modes of thought in the social sciences. As a field, cultural studies has been immensely productive precisely because it lacked constraints on what should be investigated and how phenomena should be conceptualized. Some of the aims of cultural studies are similar to those advanced in this journal. **The major differences are our emphasis on the material constitution of sociality and a greater commitment to comparative studies.**

We argue then that being undisciplined can be highly productive if it leads us to focus upon areas that established disciplines have ignored because of boundary constraints. This is lack of discipline with a purpose, not merely the eclectic play of a libertarian's individualism for its own sake. At every level the construction of our categories means making decisions. For example, there are already journals that relate to particular cultural forms, journals for textiles, for buildings, for glass, for other bodies of artefacts. Clearly there are particular issues that are specific to buildings that are of limited interest to those working on dress. The term 'material culture' looks to areas such as issues of identity or a critique of the concept of function that would equally address both. We recognize that if we unite some studies that appear parochial from the point of view of our domain, so we in turn appear parochial to those who do not want to consider materiality as an issue and are looking for still more general philosophical, political or aesthetic concerns. For them also this journal would be the wrong outlet. We hope that the criteria are general enough that the concern is genuinely interdisciplinary and of interest to people involved in other classes of subject matter. We want to see this concern illustrated as much through specific domains of objects as through specific regions and periods.

It would also be disingenuous to pretend that a journal does not itself have to adopt certain disciplines such as criteria of acceptance and scholarship. This journal has editors, there are criteria by which articles will be selected and there is an educational agenda that affirms knowledge and, above all, understanding as goals in the Enlightenment tradition. We would wish therefore to be clear that our 'indiscipline' is seen as potentially creative. We are looking for papers that are more than the anecdotes and opinions of individuals looking for self-expression. There are a number of other journals that seem to have taken that turn, and we do not propose to follow them. If we have not seen 'the death of the author' that was proclaimed in the 1970s then at least we might expect the humility of authors who have taken the trouble to immerse themselves in the labour of others – be they informants, the objects produced

by labour, or a community of academics – and who have had the patience to work out and present clearly the relationship between what they have to say and the academic context in which they are saying it.

We hope that we can escape some of the least-necessary disciplinary features. We hope we will have the integrity to publish the most interesting and significant papers from whatever quarter, irrespective of the official qualification or position of the authors. We hope that the initial format will be open to criticism and change so that the journal continues to fill a genuine niche. In future issues we intend to include review articles of major texts. We are also considering a section reviewing relevant debates on the internet. If this serves a genuine purpose in archiving for longer-term usage conversations whose ephemeral quality results in genuine loss, then we feel that is the kind of task our journal should take on. **But if it turns out that it is better to regard the two media as complementary, with the internet employed for working out ideas and this journal for establishing a reference collection of studies, then it is best we remain apart.** We hope that the readers of this journal will feel free to write and comment directly on what we are doing and feel part of the production, rather than just the consumption, of the journal.

Finally, we do not want to be limited by any regional base. We would particularly welcome papers from areas that have their own traditions of material culture analysis or contemporary concerns they may wish to share. Equally, we would welcome papers from areas that are not often involved in particular considerations of material culture because their base in artefacts is less obviously material. These might range from the study of the social consumption of electronic communications, through the cultural significance of sensory media such as smell, taste and sound, to discursive analyses of text and film.

These then are the aims; we do not know yet how long it will take us to refine and develop them, but it will only happen with support and participation from a large interdisciplinary group. We already know there is considerable enthusiasm behind the development of this journal from many regions and quarters, but our ability to realize these goals depends upon contributions coming from as wide a sphere as possible and being maintained in the longer term. Above all, in developing this journal, we are interested in the *creativity* of different disciplines and bringing about dialogues that will stimulate the development of new ideas, providing a wider context for more 'parochial' concerns. Together, then, we hope that being 'undisciplined' can be constructive and contribute to a critical understanding of the present and the past.