

ONE

The Material as Culture. Definitions, Perspectives, Approaches

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER CONTENTS

This chapter introduces material culture studies and demonstrates the usefulness of the material culture approach. It has two main sections which:

- introduce key principles, terms and associated terminologies in the study of material culture
- demonstrate the application of the material culture approach through case studies.

Living in a material world

Objects are the material things people encounter, interact with and use. Objects are commonly spoken of as material culture. The term 'material culture' emphasises how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity. Objects range in scale and size from discrete items such as a pencil, key, coin or spoon, through to complex, network objects such as an airliner, motor vehicle, shopping mall or computer. Traditionally, however, the term material culture has referred to smaller objects that are portable. Although scholars from a variety of disciplines have studied objects, their uses and meanings since the beginnings of modern social science scholarship, it is only in relatively recent times that the field of 'material culture studies' has been articulated as an area of inquiry.

The field of material culture studies (hereafter abbreviated to MCS) is a recent nomenclature that incorporates a range of scholarly inquiry into the uses and meanings of objects. It affords a multidisciplinary vantage point into human-object relations, where the contributions of anthropology,

4 sociology, psychology, design and cultural studies are valued. Material culture is no longer the sole concern of museum scholars and archaeologists – researchers from a wide range of fields have now colonised the study of objects. As well as fostering productive multidisciplinary approaches to objects, MCS can provide a useful vehicle for synthesis of macro and micro, or structural and interpretive approaches in the social sciences. By studying culture as something created and lived through objects, we can better understand both social structures and larger systemic dimensions such as inequality and social difference, and also human action, emotion and meaning. Objects might be seen then, as a crucial link between the social and economic structure, and the individual actor. If we think of the material culture of consumer societies, they are in fact the point where mass-produced consumer objects are encountered and used by individuals, who must establish and negotiate their own meanings and incorporate such objects into their personal cultural and behavioural repertoires, sometimes challenging and sometimes reproducing social structure.

A primary assertion of MCS is that objects have the ability to signify things – or establish social meanings – on behalf of people, or do ‘social work’, though this culturally communicative capacity should not be automatically assumed. Objects might signify sub-cultural affinity, occupation, participation in a leisure activity, or social status. Furthermore, objects become incorporated into, and represent, wider social discourses related to extensively held norms and values enshrined in norms and social institutions. In a complimentary fashion, objects also carry personal and emotional meanings, they can facilitate interpersonal interactions and assist a person to act upon him or herself. For example, wearing certain clothing may make a person feel empowered by altering their self-perception. Objects, then, can assist in forming or negating interpersonal and group attachments, mediating the formation of self-identity and esteem, and integrating and differentiating social groups, classes or tribes.

When studying and accounting for material culture, one needs to keep in mind the relative viewpoints of the analyst and actor. For the analyst to perform a virtuoso analytic deconstruction of any given object is by no means easy, but it is uncomplicated by the idiosyncracies, incoherencies and sheer mundanity of the user’s perspective. Take Barthes’ (1993[1957]) classic essays on aspects of French culture in his book *Mythologies* as an example. As elegant and instructive as these essays are, one wonders about the equivalence between the manner in which everyday users of such objects perceive them, and Barthes’ sophisticated textual ‘reading’ of them. Furthermore, it is not just a matter of individuals pondering what objects might mean, but individuals reading objects in relation to other individuals within complex intergroup networks patterned by social status and role, and space–time contexts. For the analyst then, the object can be rendered all-powerful, perfectly understandable and historically crucial in the course of any literary reflection. However, once the voice of the user is introduced, clarity and certainty give way to multiple interpretations,

5 practices and manipulations. What was once fixed by analytic measure and conceptual clarity alone melts away.

The current interest in material culture is associated with two key developments in the social sciences: the profusion of research into consumption across a range of disciplines, and the rise of poststructural and interpretive theory. Attention to objects as rudimentary elements of consumer culture has acquired renewed status in socio-cultural accounts of consumption processes in late-modern societies. This interest in consumption objects is also tied up with broader developments in social theory, particularly the so-called ‘cultural turn’. Although social scientists have historically had an enduring concern for the material constituents of culture (Goffman, 1951; Mauss, 1967[1954]; Simmel, 1904[1957]; Veblen, 1899[1934]), the recent interest in objects has developed in the context of prominent socio-cultural accounts of modern consumerism, and in turn, the emphasis these have given to the material basis of consumption processes, and the cultural meanings that colonise such objects as they move through social landscapes (Appadurai, 1986; Douglas and Isherwood, [1996]1979; Miller, 1987; Riggins, 1994). The second development is connected to the general turn toward language, culture, sites and spaces in poststructural social theory, and the associated interest beyond traditional social scientific analytic categories associated with ‘big’ social forces like class, gender and race. Linked with the rise of poststructural theory is an interest in the importance of different variables and sites in social formation and transformation such as the body, space and objects. These approaches don’t ignore social-structural dimensions; however they do consider them in a contextualised, grounded way. As well as interpretive and textual work in the humanities and cultural anthropology (such as Clifford Geertz), the work of Foucault has been of major importance in this development, for it takes social scientists away from studying traditional macro, structural patterns and directs their interest to discourses, technologies and strategies that are applied at the level of ideas, the body, time and space, as techniques for social governance. While Foucault generally ignores questions of meaning and interpretation that are the central focus of the current work, he has made us aware that it is through the micro-physics of temporal and spatial organisation that social power and control is both established and challenged. Objects such as the guillotine, the uniform, the timetable, the school writing desk, or the panopticon – which is the central motif in his work *Discipline and Punish* – are important material tools in the establishment of such capillaries of power, rather than mere ‘props’ or environmental filler.

How can objects be ‘cultural’? A selection of case studies

Having made some preliminary progress, the best way to proceed is to think about objects and culture through practical applications and

exemplar cases. This section emphasises the varied capacities of objects to do cultural and social work. In particular, the following case studies demonstrate the diverse capacities of objects to afford meaning, perform relations of power, and construct selfhood. The three sections show how objects can be (i) used as markers of value, (ii) used as markers of identity and (iii) encapsulations of networks of cultural and political power.

Objects as social markers

It is in Bourdieu's (1984) writing on taste that the idea of objects as markers of aesthetic and cultural value is most thoroughly developed. Bourdieu emphasises the role of aesthetic choice – one's tastes – in reproducing social inequality. Bourdieu usurped the (Kantian) idea that judgements of taste are based upon objective and absolute criteria by showing that particular social and class fractions tended to have distinctive taste preferences, which amounts to professing a liking for certain objects over others. Moreover, dominant social groups have the authority to define the parameters of cultural value (e.g. notions of what is 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' culture), thus devaluing working class modes of judgement as 'unaesthetic'. In consumer societies where taste becomes a highly visible marker of difference, such judgements are implicated in structures of social position and status. Importantly, aesthetic choice is so thoroughly learnt and ingrained that class markers are expressed in the body, self-presentation and performance. Simple learning of cultural and aesthetic rules may not be enough, as one's demeanour and comportment ('bodily hexis', in Bourdieu's words) can seldom succeed in betraying one's class origins.

With this brief overview of Bourdieu's theory of aesthetic judgement in mind, one can progress to consider the following case studies where objects act as markers of aesthetic value and of self-identity. These cases were gathered as part of a larger project into the narrativisation of aesthetic judgement, which is more fully discussed elsewhere (see Woodward, 2001, 2003; Woodward and Emmison, 2001). Note that it is not just the actual objects these respondents choose to discuss which is important, but also the *content of their talk about the object*. The object is given meaning through the narrativisation of broader discourses of self, identity and biography, which link aesthetics to ethics of self, and social identity. So, when you read the following case studies, look not just at the *what* (i.e. the actual object), but the *why* and *how* (i.e. the narrative and performative accompaniment) of aesthetic judgement.

Helen

For Helen, a chair that sits in a corner of her main bedroom is an object which exemplifies her aesthetic taste. In the research interview, Helen interprets the chair through an aesthetic frame, reflecting on its style

and design and how she feels this fits with her self-presentation. Throughout the interview, Helen portrays a high level of aesthetic competence – in Bourdieu's terms, she has mastered the 'symmetries and correspondences' (1984: 174) associated with her choices. As a result, she is able to contextualise her own choices within wider social and aesthetic trends with a degree of high cultural authority, bringing a range of cultural knowledges and expertise to bear on her discussion of the chair.

Helen is someone who places a high value on appropriate home styles and choices, to the extent that she works with an interior designer through important phases of home renovation. Helen and her partner are both professionals in high-salary positions. Helen lives in the inner north east of the city on top of a prominent hill with outstanding views to the city's east toward the ocean. In terms of questions of taste and style, Helen could be classified as 'modern classicist': one who is committed to traditional, classic notions of 'good taste' which are based on subtle colour combinations founded in whites and creams, with soft blues and greens as highlight colours. Helen's aesthetic choices are not directed towards the bright or ostentatious. Rather, decorative schemes are themed consistently through the house, employ neutral-based colours, and present an image of understatement and timelessness that are typically ascribed characteristics of classic 'good taste'. Asked during the interview to describe her own style, Helen responds:

Pretty minimalist, without being minimalist in terms of futuristic minimalist. I certainly tend to be a ... it's the same with the way I dress, fairly uncluttered, fairly simple, clean lines, certainly very neutral in colours, simple patterns, very classic I guess.

Helen has such a well developed conception of what constitutes her style that she is able to adroitly sum up her aesthetic values through the use of an exemplar object – a chair that stands in a prominent corner of the main bedroom. Helen uses the chair as a prop for her account. The chair – apart from its functional or use value which is not addressed by Helen – is an object that signifies, and summarises, the style of its owner and the desired ambience of the whole house. The chair's simplicity, neutrality and classical enduring style are instructive:

I can't see myself ever really taking the plunge and going really bright with the upholstery. As I said, in the main bedroom, come in and I'll show you, it's probably the most recent. To me that chair, that sums up my idea. That's me, I love that. That sort of cream, neutral, New England look.

Helen's chair then sits as an example, reminding her of the bounds of her own aesthetic variance which she describes as: 'really simple patterns and simple colours and again very neutral'. There are no serious or problematic issues to be faced in the chair. For example, some may wonder whether investing such importance in this chair is trivial, or overly materialistic. The most challenging issue for Helen is the progressive 'modernisation' of her taste and the chance that the chair will no longer fit variations in her style. However, Helen feels that such variations are unlikely to challenge the basic, well-honed values of her modern, classic aesthetic: 'I don't think I'll ever be ultra-modern, but I think I'll go a little less cottagey'. One of the impressive, important aspects of Helen's aesthetic value system is the degree to which it is a finely tuned, almost 'technical' (Bennett et al., 1999: 56), scheme of knowledge. Its basis is so thoroughly realised in Helen that the nuanced distinctions she makes of shade and style in this piece of material culture are rendered entirely natural.

Christina

The following section turns to a different case altogether, using interview data from the same research project. Christina lives in the same suburb as Helen, though with a less prestigious view, and is approximately the same age (early to mid-30s). However, her aesthetic choices and the reasoning and narrativisation that accompany them, are widely different. Christina has lived in this house, originally the family home, for over 25 years. Now without both parents, the house belongs to Christina and her sister. The house is an architect-designed bungalow built in the late 1940s. Christina's family was originally from a farming region, and Christina retains a strong affinity for the country despite her privileged private school education, which she now rails against. Christina sets apart her own identity from what she sees as the snob-based culture of most in her suburb to the extent that she has now centred important aspects of her life in different parts of the city:

Christina (C): I live my social life in other suburbs, I certainly started off doing the old 'creek' 'hammo' [*Landmark local pubs frequented by upwardly mobile, socially conservative young people*] sort of deal ... because I went to St Margaret's, and most of the people were private school around here – we had Churchie boys, we had Grammar next door, we had Churchie [*these names refer to elite, 'private' secondary schools*] down the road, Ascot state school was about as state school as it got ... everyone went to Ascot 'til grade seven and then went off to their private schools at enormous expense ... um, that was when I first started but then it didn't really suit me very much

so I sort of moved on to different sorts of people so I hang out at Mansfield [*a middle-class, rather unremarkable suburb in the mid to outer zone of the city*] suburb these days to tell you the truth ...

Interviewer (I): So you have friends out there?

C: yeah, yeah ...

I: So what sort of activities do you get into, what sort of lifestyle and leisure things do you like?

C: well ... I suppose pretty much the pub sort of scene really, just a few pubs, go to the football a bit, go to the races a bit, I don't go to the races as much as I used to, that's more for this sort of crowd. And I do a lot of things on my own really, I just go over there, I've got a boyfriend over there and spend a few nights and that's about it really ...

I: Were your parents more into this scene?

C: Well, it was a single parent family and mother actually came from out west, but that's probably why we didn't jump straight into this, she knew a few people who had country links but she didn't really know this sort of snob value group here ...

This is important contextual material for the aesthetic stance maintained by Christina, which is relatively hostile to conventional concerns about colour, design and style:

C: I've always been totally disinterested in décor, I don't care as long as there's a seat, a kitchen and a bed, that's all I really care about so you don't have an interest in it?

I: no, don't care, really don't care ... I like clean, I like neat, but I don't care if it sort of clashes or whatever.

Christina moves to distance herself from mainstream ideas about taste and style, on the basis of its elitist nature, its lack of person-centred authenticity, and its perceived lack of relevance to her key leisure interests: cable television, pub culture, football and clothes shopping. This anti-style position is reflected in one of the objects Christina chooses to discuss in the interview – what she calls the 'wartishog':

I'm a bit of a wood girl, and I can show you another piece that I like I'll bring it to you ... I got this over in Africa for \$50, and one of my friends did it up for me ... I like the warthog, my cousin's been living in Africa for about seven years, we just went over there I think it was two years ago and did a driving holiday around South Africa and it was just in

one of those reserves, it's really a game park, a lot of them carve them, but he was just a really good piece ... but not finished, totally unfinished, that sheen, the finish has been done since I've been back, which has made it come up a whole lot better ... he's just unique, everyone goes 'ughhh ... what's that!!!' ... wartishog ... I sort of like oddities I suppose, something that no one else has got that's a bit weird you know ... not because it's really expensive but because it's a bit weird ... it's unique, you're not going to find things like that in many houses in Hamilton, are you?

As an object the 'wartishog' seems to have been chosen partly for its perceived lack of conventional beauty or fashionability – for its aggressively anti-style position. Seen in this context, Christina adopts a strongly political attitude toward conventional prescriptions of taste, which has its origins in an anti-fashion outlook. At the same time, Christina's stance is display-oriented, because of its emphasis on the shock-value of the object, manifested through its perceived strangeness or quirkiness. The sign-value of the object for Christina is thus not based in conventional standards of beauty or taste. Its value lies in the same domain as other status objects, but obtains its currency through different signifiers: physically shocking rather than refined and understated, provocative rather than calming, aggressive rather than peaceful. In addition, it is apparent that the wartishog is strongly associated with Christina's experiences of travel, family and friends. It is an exotic object (Riggins, 1994), linked to a specific touring experience and the contacts with friends and family involved in such travel. These two cases show how people attach various meanings to commonplace objects, using them to think through and account for aspects of self and society more broadly.

Objects as markers of identity

As the previous examples show, separating aesthetic claims from narratives or claims about self-identity in the study of objects is somewhat futile, for in everyday talk – and especially within the artificial setting of a research interview – a personal aesthetic choice is generally required to be accompanied by a justification. Such justifications – which sociologists might classify as being a matter of 'aesthetics' – are rarely couched in purely aesthetic terms, but associated with matters of self-identity and a range of external factors (such as, for example, monetary cost or needs associated with one's life stage). So, while it is rare for respondents to ignore matters of identity in relation to possessions (even when they are 'aesthetic' possessions), the following case looks at a very private object with a high degree of personal meaning and a very strong association with personal identity – a bible. The

bible – like any sacred religious text – is perhaps the ultimate case of a mass-produced object retaining a powerful aura. Even though it is an important spiritual text, it is also an object of mass production with a vast circulation. At odds with the status of a sacred text, a bible originates from nowhere special, essentially having the same qualities as any other mass-produced textbook or magazine. Yet, it manages to retain an aura of authority. The following case is not just about *any* bible, for example, the sort you may find in a bedside table draw when staying at a hotel, but a highly personalised, customised object.

A bible is an object that is not generally displayed or carried in public, but reserved for particular occasions and rituals. It may symbolise deeply held, cherished values for Christians, and may be respected by people as a possible legitimate moral code whether or not they are Christian. Yet, depending on your attitude to religion, the bible can also be an object with particular stigmas attached – for example, its association with Christianity as a form of moral imperialism and entrepreneurship, morally and socially conservative values generally, and adherence to strict or anachronistic moral codes. This said, the bible may seem an entirely appropriate accoutrement for a conservative Christian to carry or exhibit, but what about a university student majoring in philosophy and sociology? The following case study considers university student Sarah, through her own words, who nominates her bible as a focal object for understanding her identity.

Sarah

For Sarah, her Christian faith is a crucial aspect of her identity which defines her life's direction and meaning. She wishes to live her life consistent with Christian beliefs and perceives a significant difference between her life choices and the life choices those of those who do not have such beliefs. Her bible is symbolic of her beliefs and, she says, offers her a way of 'fighting' the social pressures that could pull her away from such beliefs:

My bible comes to represent my identity, and to shape it. When I say that it represents me I do not mean that it is simply any bible that can express my identity. It is with the book that I saved to pay for, that I hand covered, and that I have spent hours poring over, and sometimes crying over, that I identify.

Sarah's bible represents her decision to identify with the Christian beliefs as defining parts of her personal search for direction and meaning. Yet, she cannot control the way the bible is perceived by others, and recognises that some people may perceive it with suspicion. Hence, she reports some anxiety about how the object is perceived by

12

others, especially amongst young people and particularly her peers at university – ‘my nervousness about carrying the bible in public ... can in some ways be seen to indicate the pressure I feel to conform to a more secular lifestyle’. While the bible carries special, significant meanings for her, she also recognises that it may signify conservative, restrictive values to others. Her response is to customise the bible, transforming it from a mass-produced object into a personalised object that serves to deconstruct typical notions of how a bible (and a Christian) should appear. One might say the pressures she feels relate to (apparently) contradictory roles or membership category locations – sociology and philosophy student, Christian, alternative university student, member of a youth sub-culture. Sarah has customised a young person’s bible:

My fear of being misunderstood can be seen in the way I adorn my bible. I am aware of the hypocrisy of many people who share my belief in God and choose not to live a life that exemplifies this, and so I wrap my bible in corduroy and fill it with poetry so that an observer can see that it is something I treasure. I want people to see that it is interpolated into my life, and that it interacts with other parts of my identity ... It is because I am afraid of being seen as a traditional rule-focused Christian that I need to cover my bible and fill its pockets with other identity markers.

Sarah’s bible is then a marker of who ‘Sarah’ is, both in terms of her social identity and for Sarah herself. Furthermore, its meaning is mediated through popular and contradictory discourses related to Christianity, youth and being a university student that Sarah has to negotiate as she reflexively monitors her identity. Her bible thus retains its core meaning to her as a spiritual guide, but, in its customised form, helps Sarah to socially mediate aspects of her identity, given the multiple social locations her identity intersects (youth, alternative lifestyles, Christian, university student).

Objects as sites of cultural and political power

In this oeuvre, which emerged from new theorisations of the relations between people and technology, objects are constructed by particular power relations, and in turn also actively construct such relations. In this tradition, known as actant-network theory, objects are produced by particular networks of cultural and political discourses and, in conjunction with humans, act to reproduce such relations. So, the discourses and networks which connect people to objects are not only inextricable as if they are one actor, but may in fact be ‘made of the same stuff’ (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 25). Arising from work in the sociology of science and

13

technology, actant-network theory tends to focus on new technology objects such as mobile telephones, machinery which ‘acts for’ people such as remote controls, speed-bumps or door-grooms, and ‘technological network’ objects like aeroplanes, buildings and motor vehicles. The next section discusses Foucault’s famous example of the panopticon to explain how objects are at the centre of discourses and networks of power, and how they ‘act’ to influence human action. Since Foucault died before the current research on ‘actant-networks’ arose he is not identified with that field. However, his work can be seen as developing some important themes taken up by the current group of actant-network scholars.

Foucault’s genealogical studies of the prison, the hospital and the asylum plot the emergence of historical discourses which condition the formation of social institutions and practical knowledges. They might be said to be historical studies, but first and foremost chart a genealogical history of the present. Therefore, *Discipline and Punish* is not a history of punishment and incarceration. Rather, it is a history of oscillating historical discourses surrounding punishment. The conclusion it reaches has implications more far-reaching than understanding the history of incarceration. The corpus of work is to be found in the case studies presented by Foucault in the book’s opening chapter which deals with how the body of the condemned prisoner is treated. In these, he juxtaposes the story of Damiens, guilty of regicide and committed to make the *amende honorable*, with the rules drawn up by Faucher for a house of young prisoners in Paris. Drawn from newspaper sources, the story of Damiens’ execution is entirely gory and sanguineous, with the body’s destruction the focus of the state’s brutal revenge. This account contrasts starkly with Faucher’s rules for prisoners which emphasise routines, classifications and timetables which serve to discipline the prisoner’s body, or make it docile. Only 80 years separates these divergent penal styles. Both strategies focus on the body. However, one makes a spectacle of bodily humiliation, the other takes place out of public view and touches the body lightly, and only to direct its routines on a spatial and temporal plane.

This novel penology forms the basis of new economies of power which play on the body and soul in various subtle but highly efficient ways. It is this new mode of power, generalised throughout society, which Foucault heralds as paradigmatic of disciplinary society. While the emblem of the classical age of punishment was public torture and spectacle, Foucault argues that modernity has abandoned this for the architectonic configuration of the panopticon (first proposed by the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham). The panopticon is thus a product of emergent discourses about the nature of punishment, and its relation to the body and soul. Without the existence of ideas about discipline and surveillance, it cannot exist. But more than this, the panopticon as an object of technology *acts for* people. The insidious elegance of the panopticon’s design (through the use of lighting and architectural form) is that it allows for the efficient surveillance of a prison population, for prisoners cannot tell with

14 certainty if they are being surveilled or not. Faced with this ambiguity, and their relative powerlessness as prisoners, they are encouraged to self-monitor their behaviour under the assumption that they are under surveillance at all times.

The panopticon is thus an object which is the product of historical changes in discourses about punishment, and which – although ‘inanimate’ – as a product of its design ‘acts’ to achieve political and organisational ends. In this way, the distinctions between the discourses about punishment, the panopticon as material object and the human actors involved (in the first instance prisoners and guards) can be seen to result from a network of understandings and relations – as ‘enactments of strategic logics’ (Law, 2002: 92) – about punishment and control of the body. Furthermore, the distinction between the panopticon as merely an ‘object’ and the humans who designed and inhabit it is of minor importance, as the object and human actors perform in concert to achieve certain ends.

Defining ‘material culture’

Having presented introductory material and considered a range of cases that fuse with selected theoretical ideas which give a flavour for how objects can carry cultural meanings, the final section of the chapter defines the key terminology of material culture studies. Studies of material culture have as their primary concern the mutual relations between people and objects. In particular, studies of material culture are concerned with what uses people put objects to and what objects do for, and to, people. Furthermore, scholars working in the field of material culture studies aim to analyse how these relations are one of the important ways in which culture – and the meanings upon which culture is based – are transmitted, received and produced. Readers will observe from the previous case studies that objects have various symbolic meanings for people, as much as their physical presence is important in structuring the pragmatic aspects of social life. In its popular scholarly usage, the term ‘material culture’ is generally taken to refer to any material object (e.g. shoes, cup, pen) or network of material objects (e.g. house, car, shopping mall) that people perceive, touch, use and handle, carry out social activities within, use or contemplate.

Material culture is, chiefly, something portable and perceptible by touch and therefore has a physical, material existence that is one component of human cultural practice. Moreover, consistent with contemporary work in consumption studies that emphasises the mental or ideational aspects of consumption desires which are mobilised through media and advertising, material culture also includes things perceptible by sight. This ability to visualise material culture allows it to enter the imaginary realm of fantasy and desire, so that objects are also acted upon in the

mind as ‘dreams and pleasurable dramas’ which are the basis of ongoing desires for objects of consumption (Campbell, 1987: 90). Having made this point, it is important to note that in everyday practice this distinction between discrete physical, embodied and ideational elements of material culture is indistinguishable and artificial – objects are culturally powerful because *in practice they connect physical and mental manipulation*.

15
What term is best to describe the ‘material’ component of material culture studies? The term ‘material culture’ is often used in conjunction with ‘things’, ‘objects’, ‘artefacts’, ‘goods’, ‘commodities’ and, more recently, ‘actants’. These terms (with the exception of the last) are, for most purposes, used interchangeably. There are, however, some important nuances in the meaning of each term, which help to demarcate the context in which it should be used. We can begin with the most general term and move to the most specific. ‘Things’ have a concrete and real material existence but the word ‘thing’ suggests an inanimate or inert quality, requiring that actors bring things to life through imagination or physical activity. ‘Objects’ are discrete components of material culture that are perceptible by touch or sight. ‘Artefacts’ are the physical products or traces of human activity. Like objects, they have importance because of their materiality or concreteness, and become the subject of retrospective interpretation and ordering. Artefacts are generally regarded as symbolic of some prior aspect of cultural or social activity. ‘Goods’ are objects that are produced under specific market relations, typically assumed to be capitalism, where they are assigned value within a system of exchange. The word ‘commodity’ is a technical expression related to the concept of a ‘good’. Similarly, a commodity is something that can be exchanged. Objects enter into and out of spheres of commoditisation, so that an object that is now a commodity might not always remain a commodity due to its incorporation into private or ritual worlds of individuals, families and cultures. ‘Actant’ is a term developed from recent approaches in the sociology of science and technology which refers to entities – both human and non-human – which have the ability to ‘act’ socially. By dissolving the boundary between people who ‘act’ and objects which are seen as inanimate or ‘outside’, the term ‘actant’ is designed to overcome any a priori distinction between the social, technological and natural worlds, and emphasises the inextricable links between humans and material things.

When using any of these terms there is a danger of reification – that is, of imagining that objects are simply there for human actors to engage with or use up, as though they exist apart from cultural and social history, narrative and codes. Kopytoff (1986) points out that in western thought a mythic dichotomy exists between the notion of ‘individualised’ persons and ‘commoditised’ things which has constructed an inflexible and limiting binary for understanding the relations between persons and things. What’s more, there is a danger in pursuing a hard distinction between objects as part of an artefactual world and the other natural world (Miller, 1994: 407). As Miller argues, we should take care to recognise that ‘the