

OIELSX17 – Material Culture

Professor: Géraldine CHOUARD-VERON

Contact information:

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Department: International affairs

Semester: 2

Course level: L3 Undergraduate

Domain: Marketing & Advertising

Teaching language: English

Number of in-class hours: 33

Number of course sessions: 10 + Exam

ECTS: 6

Course description and objectives

What is material culture studies?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prerequisites

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

Learning outcomes

Material culture examines the relationships between people and things.

The aim of this class is to introduce some accessible approaches to this exciting and new field of academic enquiry, which crosses disciplinary boundaries.

Students will become acquainted with the kinds of objects that are considered in the study of material culture. The course will also provide an opportunity to practice communication skills and develop confidence in delivering presentations in English on material culture topics, maximizing the effective use of visual aids. Some questions we will explore include: how is the value or significance of objects created in different social contexts? Should we understand items of material culture as ways of fulfilling human needs? Or rather as symbols that "say" something about their users, and if so, what?

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

Assignments and grading

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

One oral presentation (on one of the 10 topics listed below)

One mid-term quiz

One final exam

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

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

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

Course structure

Session	Topic
1	Introduction to Material Culture
2	The Cult(ure) of Food - From Still Life to Food Porn
3	Fashion: Dress, Image and Practice - Case study : The Politics of the Sneakers
4	Of People and Smartphones: A Culture of (Dis)connection
5	Toys: Playthings, Transitional Objects, Social Agents
6	Patchwork as an Art Form: Why Quilts Matter Other forms of textile art can be included in this study
7	Political & Marketing Artifacts : Promoting Ideas Through Things
8	The 3 R's: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" - Waste Management and Recycled Materials
9	Jewelry: Displays of Personal Adornment and Body Art
10	Driven Societies: The Culture of the Car (and other vehicles)
11	Final Exam

Bibliography

https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/events/cogutmaterialworlds/4163.html

Jean Baudrillard, *Système des objets*, 1968.

Victor Buchli, *The Material Culture Reader*, 2013.

Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, 1980.

Marie-Pierre Julien et Céline Rosselin, *La culture matérielle*, 2005.

Daniel Miller, *Stuff, 2009 et Consumption and Its Consequences*, 2013.

Paul R. Mullins, *The Archaeology of Consumer Culture*, 2012.

Christopher Tilley, *The Handbook of Material Culture*, 2013.

Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 2007.

Lecturer's biography

Moodle

This course is on Moodle: **Yes**

Academic integrity

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