Course Title
Material Culture: Why Things Matter

Professor
Géraldine CHOUARD

Contact Information
Email: geraldine.chouard@dauphine.fr

Language
English

Overview
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.

Material culture, which 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*).

The ever-changing world of material culture has recently taken an interest in interactions between the object and it 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

Course Objectives

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?

Requirements

Students are expected to deliver one 25-minute presentation, alone or with another student. The presentation must include visual aids (PowerPoint or Prezi) and a handout.

Learning Outcomes

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.

Mode of Assessment

One oral presentation (on one of the 10 topics listed below)
One mid-term quiz
One final exam
Course Schedule

| 1  | Introduction to Material Culture (Methodology & Class assessments) |
| 2  | Of People and Smartphones: A Culture of (Dis)connection |
| 3  | The 3 R’s: “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” Waste Management and Recycled Materials |
|    | Minimalism: A Documentary about the Important Things, by Joshua Fields Milburn & Ryan Nicodemus |
| 4  | Political & Propaganda Artifacts Promoting Ideas Through Things |
| 5  | The Use of Pictures Photography as Objects in the Digital Age |
| 6  | Patchwork as an Art Form: Why Quilts Matter |
| 7  | Fashion as Dress, Image and Practice |
| 8  | The Cult(ure) of Food From Still Life to Food Porn |
| 9  | Dolls Playthings, Transitional Objects, Social Agents |
| 10 | Beyond the Lollipop: Lolita and After Objects in the novel (Nabokov, 1855), the film (Kubrick, 1962) and Japanese “Lolita fashion” |
| 11 | Jewelry Displays of Personal Adornment and Body Art |
| 12 | Final exam |

Bibliography


MyCourse
This course is on MyCourse: No

Grading
The numerical grade distribution will dictate the final grade.

**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.

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.