“Even in our grandmothers’ attics, in the flea market, in town dumps, in scrap heaps, in rusted factories, in the Smithsonian Institution, objects still appear quite full of use, of memories, of instructions…”

-- Bruno Latour, in Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture

“Our addiction to materialism is in large part due to a paradoxical need to transform the precariousness of consciousness into the solidity of things…”

-- Mihalyi Czikszentmihalyi, “Why We Need Things”

“The slogan for our times, then, is not ‘things fall apart,’ but ‘things come alive.’” (W.J.T Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Some objects are magical. They possess an allure and fascination—some might say even a sacred power (or at least an ability to make us feel or behave in a certain way—for instance, to collect obsessively, spend money we don’t have, or fundamentally re-structure our lives, as we have done for the iPhone). Other—or maybe the same—objects are dangerous or taboo, inspiring radical or disturbing behaviors, or expressing ideas we might question. What gives material things such power?

This multidisciplinary course explores the complex nature of the human relationship to objects, seeking to understand their seeming powers of enchantment, which, as Marx noted, can never be separated from their status as commodities—that is, crystallized forms of human labor and creative energy. What gives material things potency, value, and cultural significance? What social, psychological, cultural, economic and political purposes do they serve? Do today’s consumers have a unique (or maybe uniquely dysfunctional) attachment to things? In short, how and why do objects take hold of us?

In answering this, we will consider objects of all sorts—from the mundane and utilitarian to the strange, the rare to the fetishized, the hand-made to the mass-produced, the famous to the anonymous or abandoned—attending to their everyday and symbolic functions, their participation in regimes of commodification and power, and their relationship to the history of material + visual culture, as well as mass-production and media representation. Along the way, we will consider the situations, public and private, in which objects have developed their powers of enchantment (such as the museum and the department store) or other negative, even fearsome associations (such as the landfill or the hoard). Our work will be influenced by approaches and theories from a wide range of fields, creative and scholarly, and will involve lots of hands-on and exploratory work with objects and their histories.
OBJECTIVES FOR LEARNING

This course is broadly multidisciplinary and exploratory. In addition to readings from a range of fields (anthropology, history, sociology, museum studies, cultural studies, and others) and brief study of influential theories of material culture (from Marx, Freud, Baudrillard, and others) we will do a lot of hands-on and observational work, and also conduct interviews.

In doing this work, we will seek to do three main things:

1. Understand how objects are used, situated and given various meanings.
2. Explore some of the cultural forces and social trends that shape those uses and meanings.
3. Historicize our relationship with, and attachment to, objects, in particular, considering the history of capitalism and related subjects.

In the process, you will also:
- develop a sense of how to “read” objects as expressions of culture (and hopefully also how to read culture through objects!).
- engage and understand the social, psychological, and economic significance of objects in American culture.
- learn about a range of concepts/theories about objects.
- learn how to pose compelling questions about objects, and in answering them, to trace out the complex “lives” that such things often lead.

In addition to the above, you can expect to think critically about objects and the idea of possession, and to contemplate how material culture informs our individual + collective sense of identity and meaning.

This is an especially pressing subject today, in a period characterized by dramatic marketplace transformation (think Amazon.com) resource exhaustion, economic redistribution, and digital mediation. How, we will consider, does our relationship to the material world reflect broader political, social and economic realities that are shaping American and global cultures today? And what should we—as designers, artists, scholars, and citizens—do with this knowledge?
WHAT WE WILL BE DOING IN THIS CLASS?

The course combines reading, writing, and observation with class discussion + project work.

READING: There are two book-length readings:
1. Jean Baudrillard’s System of Objects (Verso, 2007, ISBN: 1844670538) and

These are available in the bookstore. All other readings will be distributed via Box (box.wustl.edu), which requires a WUSTL Key.

WRITING: You will do several kinds of writing:
1. regular short responses or SRs (1-2 pp. each unless otherwise specified*)
2. a take-home midterm (a few short responses + 1 short essay)
3. a final project (8-pp. interpretative essay)

*There are a couple 3-4 pp. SRs that will give you room to explore your findings from a “fieldwork” study.

FIELDWORK:

You will be asked to conduct small-scale fieldwork activities, including:
1. Taking a guided tour of a local museum on Friday, 3/27 or Saturday 3/28 (you will sign up in advance and we will take the tour together). The entry fee is $8 (please bring cash, and if this fee is a hardship, please let me know).
3. Conducting an interview or your roommate or close friend about a personal possession, and write up your findings (prompt to be provided). This will be due March 3.
4. Visiting a thrift / resale shop by March 17 and purchasing an object of interest (prompt to be provided), and writing your observations about it by March 19.

GRADE WEIGHTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Project (including a Lightening Presentation)</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short Responses / Homework</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; Participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
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Midterm: A take-home mini-exam distributed at the start of class on Tuesday, February 25 and collected at the end of the session. The midterm will include 4-5 short answer questions and a brief essay; a study guide will be distributed in advance.

Final Project: An interpretative essay (8 pages—more is fine.) exploring an object of your choosing that draws upon at least concepts + methods explored in the course. In it you will develop a reading rooted in research, including close observation and an interview with an owner or steward of the object. You will prepare a preliminary outline with thesis + bibliography by 4/16; present your findings in a lightening presentation on 4/21 or 4/23, and submit the project on Monday, 5/4 at NOON.

Short Responses + Homework: Preparing for class involves doing all the readings (taking some notes for use in discussion as you go) and completing small homework tasks or Short Responses (SRs). There will generally be two kinds of SRs: those which engage topics and discussion questions in the readings (1-2 pp., informal in style but focused/substantive), and those that are based on observations (a bit longer—3-4 pp.). Both should be turned in during class on the day they’re due.

ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION:

Both attendance and participation are crucial in this course!! For this reason, only 2 absences will be allowed without repercussion (see Sam Fox policy below). Please let me know right away if you have personal obligations or an illness or other difficulty that will prevent you from attending any class any day, and/or that will impact your effort and overall preparedness / performance, and we can make suitable arrangements. And please read on further for more on maximizing your contributions in class.

SAM FOX SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICY:

“Attendance is mandatory, and will be documented for all course meetings. You are expected to arrive ready to participate and be fully engaged in the day’s coursework during the entire scheduled class period. Participation in major critiques and reviews by all students is essential to the development of all of students. Failure to do so will have an impact on your final grade.

Following university policy, class will begin promptly at 10 minutes past the start time listed in the undergraduate bulletin. Students are allowed two unexcused absences. After two unexcused absences, students will receive one full letter grade penalty for each subsequent absence. Three late arrivals and/or early departures will equal one absence. If you miss more than 20 minutes of a class, you are considered absent. Missing a review or critique equals two absences.* If you must miss a critique, please inform the professor beforehand. Any student who misses class is responsible for contacting a fellow student to find out what they missed, for making up all work, and for being prepared for the next class. In the case of severe medical or family emergencies, contact the Dean of Students Georgia Binnington as soon as possible: gbinning@wustl.edu, 314-935-6532.”
As for attendance issues that may come up in relationship to disabilities or health issues, please see below (*) for the attendance and participation information.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MAXIMIZE YOUR LEARNING:

This course engages material culture in a cross-disciplinary fashion, meaning it draws upon multiple methods and strategies and fields of research, as well as hands-on activity. It is meant to be interactive—full of opportunities to experiment with new ideas and approaches, and learn by doing. Everyone can learn to engage meaningfully with objects and ideas about them, but intentional work, reflection, and practice are needed to help you to gain the conceptual and analytical skills, not to mention confidence, to do it well.

This is a combined lecture-discussion course. This means that, while there will be some material presented formally (through slides, lecture, and guest speakers), much more of it will be explored through group engagement. All of us are responsible for contributing to one another’s learning experience.

In light of the above, there are two main ground rules:

1) **Come prepared to contribute.** This means you should have read the material, and engaged thoughtfully with it, and that you are ready to share your ideas and questions. Contributions will be enhanced by careful reading and preparation, including the field-based assignments.

2) **Any behavior that makes others feel uncomfortable in the classroom will not be tolerated.** This kind of behavior includes:
   - interrupting others while they are talking, or shutting an idea down;
   - causing disruptions or distractions by, for example, carrying on conversations separate from class discussion, or constantly checking your phone or Facebook;
   - making comments that could be perceived as offensive in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic status, ability, etc.

Please make every effort to maintain an atmosphere in which everyone feels comfortable sharing and responding to ideas. I reserve the right to impose more-specific ground rules if they become necessary.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR CLASS + MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS:

1) **Read all the assigned reading for each class, and take notes as you read.** I recommend you develop your own system of note-taking that feels comfortable to you, and tracks such things as:
   - The **main arguments / ideas of each reading** [no need to outline the entire argument in all its nuances; just jot down main ideas]
   - **provocative / useful examples** and **key concepts** presented in course material
   - **your own questions about ideas/arguments**, the author’s approach to material culture, etc.

These insights will be crucially important to discussion, and to your understanding of the historical and methodological content in the course.
2) **Make good use of a notebook / sketchbook.** You don’t need to copy down slide content, as all lecture notes (PPT presentations) will be shared on Box. Instead, use your notebook/sketchbook to keep track of ideas / concepts shared verbally and on the board, including things your peers say. Class conversation often yields important insights that we will carry into subsequent sessions. When visiting sites such as the Campbell House, bring your notebook / sketchbook and take notes as you go. Such notes are a valuable processing tool, and a way to keep track of your own thoughts and ideas. They will also help you prepare for written assignments.

3) **Take short responses seriously**—that is, as opportunities for intentional exploration and processing. This work will be graded for your effort and care, not for the elegance of your prose! Think of these as thought-experiments in which you can test out concepts or specific examples; draw upon your insights from reading/class discussion as you write them.

4) **Come to office hours!** We can discuss your interests, your questions, what you are wondering about in the readings, or ideas you’ve got for your final paper. And you can develop confidence about your engagement with the course—that you’re getting the most out of it that you can.

5) **Consult about your final project!** We will set aside office hours for that purpose at the right moment in the semester.

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**WHERE YOU CAN FIND SUPPORT:**

The university provides a wide range of supports for students; please take advantage of them, and let me know how I can be supportive with any challenges you may face.

- **Mental Health/ Wellness:**
  - Student Health Services: [https://shs.wustl.edu/MentalHealth/Pages/default.aspx](https://shs.wustl.edu/MentalHealth/Pages/default.aspx) | 314-935-6695
  - Uncle Joes Peer Counseling and Resource Center: [https://unclejoe.wustl.edu](https://unclejoe.wustl.edu) | 314-935-5099

- **Sexual Assault:**
  - Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center: [https://rsvpcenter.wustl.edu/](https://rsvpcenter.wustl.edu/) | 314-935-8761
  - Sexual Assault and Rape Anonymous Hotline: [http://sarah.wustl.edu/](http://sarah.wustl.edu/) | 314-935-8080
  - Title IX Office: [https://titleix.wustl.edu/student/](https://titleix.wustl.edu/student/) | 314-935-3118

- **Washington University Police Department:** [https://police.wustl.edu/Pages/Home.aspx](https://police.wustl.edu/Pages/Home.aspx) | 314-935-555
- **Center for Diversity and Inclusion:** [https://diversityinclusion.wustl.edu/](https://diversityinclusion.wustl.edu/) | 314-935-7535
- **Bias Reporting and Support:** [https://diversityinclusion.wustl.edu/brss/](https://diversityinclusion.wustl.edu/brss/) | 314-935-7535

- **Academic Resources:**
  - Writing Center: [https://writingcenter.wustl.edu/](https://writingcenter.wustl.edu/) | 314-935-4981

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**Accommodations Based upon Sexual Assault:**

The University is committed to offering reasonable academic accommodations to students who are victims of sexual assault. Students are eligible for accommodation regardless of whether they seek criminal or disciplinary action. Depending on the specific nature of the allegation, such measures may include but are not limited to implementation of a no-contact order, course/classroom assignment
changes, and other academic support services and accommodations. If you need to request such accommodations, please direct your request to Kim Webb, Director of the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center, or Jen Durham Austin, Support Services Counselor. Both Kim Webb and Jen Durham Austin are confidential resources; however, requests for accommodations will be shared with the appropriate University administration and faculty. The University will maintain as confidential any accommodations or protective measures provided to an individual student so long as it does not impair the ability to provide such measures.

If a student comes to me to discuss or disclose an instance of sexual assault, sex discrimination, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence or stalking, or if I otherwise observe or become aware of such an allegation, I will keep the information as private as I can, but as a faculty member of Washington University, I am required to immediately report it to my Department Chair or Dean or directly to Ms. Jessica Kennedy, the University’s Title IX Director. If you would like to speak with directly Ms. Kennedy directly, she can be reached at (314) 935-3118, jwkennedy@wustl.edu, or by visiting the Title IX office in Umrath Hall. Additionally, you can report incidents or complaints to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards or by contacting WUPD at (314) 935-5555 or your local law enforcement agency. See: Title IX

You can also speak confidentially and learn more about available resources at the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center by calling (314) 935-3445 for an appointment or visiting the 4th floor of Seigle Hall. See: RSVP Center

Bias Reporting: The University has a process through which students, faculty, staff and community members who have experienced or witnessed incidents of bias, prejudice or discrimination against a student can report their experiences to the University’s Bias Report and Support System (BRSS) team. See: brss.wustl.edu.

Mental Health: Professional staff members work with students to resolve personal and interpersonal difficulties, many of which can affect the academic experience. These include conflicts with or worry about friends or family, concerns about eating or drinking patterns, and feelings of anxiety and depression. See resources listed above.

Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI): The Center of Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) supports and advocates for undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students from underrepresented and/or marginalized populations, creates collaborative partnerships with campus and community partners, and promotes dialogue and social change. One of the CDI’s strategic priorities is to cultivate and foster a supportive campus climate for students of all backgrounds, cultures and identities. See: diversityinclusion.wustl.edu/

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

You are responsible for adhering to the university’s academic integrity policies (see http://studentconduct.wustl.edu/integrity/policy). Among other things, you are expected to

- produce your own work on written assignments
- avoid inappropriate collaboration (except when invited to collaborate of course!)
- avoid various other forms of academic dishonesty, including falsification of data and misrepresentation of sources.
Exchanging ideas is an important part of learning, and we will do a lot of that in routine class discussion. In addition, you will periodically work in small groups during class. However, your final project, as well as any written work you produce (e.g. homework), should be generated on your own, and should be entirely your own.

Failure to cite and formally acknowledge your sources constitutes plagiarism, and could result in a failing grade for the course (and likely disciplinary action within the bounds of Washington University’s policies and practices). You should be very clear in your acknowledgement of others’ work—attributing not only quoted material, but ideas and language (and images and other online content) to those from whom you got them. When in doubt, cite! To be on the safe side, include in your bibliography sources you consulted, including online material.

OTHER STUFF YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

Citations and Formatting: All written work for the course should use the Chicago Style of Documentation (footnoting of each source every time you quote, paraphrase, summarize or otherwise reference it – see http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html or other such sources for guidance).

Footnotes have the added benefit of allowing you space to elaborate or explain something without disrupting the flow of your main argument/reflection, and taking the place (at least in this context) of a Bibliography.

ALL OF YOUR SOURCES, including entirely web-based content, SHOULD BE CAPTURED IN YOUR FOOTNOTES. Otherwise, you’ll need a separate Bibliography which includes “works consulted” at the end. Be sure to cite any images you use as well. This is just responsible citation practice overall.

Please use an 11-point font and one-inch margins. Double space your work, include page numbers and your name as well as a brief descriptive title for each submitted assignment.

LAPTOP AND CELL PHONE POLICY

You’re in class to learn from discussion and lecture—and from one another. This requires focused attention. For this reason, I require you to turn off your cell phone during class every day, and to limit your laptop use to note-taking. Please do not use social media or surf the web while you’re in class. This is hugely distracting. If you cannot resist, put your laptop in airplane mode while you’re in class. I reserve the right to restrict use further if I find that laptop use is becoming a problem.
COURSE SCHEDULE

This schedule is subject to minor adjustments to suit the needs of the class. Course readings other than Baudrillard’s System of Objects and Glenn & Hayes’s Taking Things Seriously will be available on Box. Readings/Assignments are due on the day they’re listed.

| TTS = Taking Things Seriously | SR = Short Response | Baudrillard = J. Baudrillard’s System of Objects |

WEEK 1
Tuesday, January 14: Course Introduction | Why Things Matter
M. Csikszentmihalyi, “Why We Need Things”; Hamrah’s Zippo Lighter (TTS)

Thursday, Jan. 16: The History of Consumption | Status + Patina

WEEK 2
Tuesday, January 21: The History of Consumer Culture | Waste and Want
S. Strasser, “The Stewardship of Objects”; 1898 Sears Catalog [please consult the prompt]
SR 1 due (hieroglyphic object)

Thursday, January 23: The History of Consumer Culture | Mail Order Catalogs + Amazon

WEEK 3
Tuesday, January 28: The History of Consumer Culture | Department Stores
W. Leach, “The Land of Desire”; Sister Carrie (excerpt); view department store images.
SR2 due (Sears catalog object)

Thursday, January 30: Systems of Objects | Traditional vs. Functional Things
Baudrillard, Intro. and Sects. A.1-A.2 (to end of “A Model Material: Glass”). Homework on traditional/function objects [see prompt on Box].

WEEK 4
Tuesday, February 4: Personal Possessions | Extended Selves
R. Belk, “Possessions as the Extended Self”; Introduction of TTS; Daniels’ Pencil Sharpener, Akuma’s Grammyfoam, and Keen’s Computer Cabinet (TTS) SR3 due (extended self)

Thursday, February 6: Personal Possessions | Social + Talisman Objects
D. Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, Social Meaning of Things; Snell’s Dirt Pile (TTS)

WEEK 5
Tuesday, February 11: Personal Possessions | Domestic Objects + the Home
S. Riggins, “Fieldwork in the Living Room”; Baudrillard, System, Sect. B.1. SR4 due

Thursday, February 13: Personal Possessions | Epiphany Objects + the Home

**NOTE:** Visit the *Multiplied Exhibition* at the Kemper Museum by Thurs. Feb. 20 (it opens on 2/7 and the museum is open Mon. and Wed–Sun 11 am–5 pm).

**WEEK 6**
Tuesday, February 18: Mass-Production + Consumption | *Gendered Objects*
SR 5 due.

Thursday, February 20: Mass-Production + Art | *Readymades + Kinetic Art*
**Guest speaker:** Meredith Malone (Associate Curator, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum)

**WEEK 7**
Tuesday, February 25: Take-Home Midterm [post to Box by end of class period 1 PM]

Thursday, February 27: Personal Possessions | *Comfort + Melancholy Objects*
Winnicott, “Transitional Objects”; Newgarden’s Mickey Mouse soaky; M. Gibson, “Melancholy Objects.”

**WEEK 8**
Tuesday, March 3: Accumulation | *Collecting*
Belk, “Collecting in a Consumer Society”; Baudrillard, B.II. SR 5 due (roommate interview)

Thursday, March 5: Accumulation | *Kitsch Objects*
*Allee Willis, Hit Maker and Kitsch Curator*” podcast; S. Binkley, “Kitsch as a Repetitive System”; Chichiwan, Ugly-Pretty Doll (TTS).

**SPRING BREAK: March 6-March 15**

**NOTE:** You should visit a thrift store or resale shop (maybe it can be a Spring Break outing!) and acquire an object for less than $5 by class on March 17. SR 7 will be a response to that purchase.

**WEEK 9**
Tuesday, March 17: Accumulation | *Hoarding*
Frost and Steketee, *Stuff* (excerpts); *Buried Alive segment*; Kube’s Nailclippings (TTS).

Thursday, March 19: Salvaging | *Found Objects*
Irwin’s Bowling Trophy, Till’s Marble, Pond’s Naked Lady, Wood’s Porcelain Hands (all in TTS). Additional reading TBD. SR 7 due (thrift store object).

**WEEK 10**
Tuesday, March 24: Salvaging | *Numinous Objects + Antiques*
*Antiques Roadshow* episode; Clouse, “Narratives of Value and the Antiques Roadshow”; selections from *Significant Objects*; Purcell’s Bread (TTS).
Thursday, March 26: Musemification | Artifacts + Museum Objects
Maines + Glynn, “Numinous Objects”; S. Pearce, “Objects Inside and Outside Museums”; Kelly’s Bagel (TTS). SR 8 due (antique or numinous object)

NOTE: You will visit the Campbell House Museum (a required fieldtrip) on either Fri. 3/27 or Sat. 3/28 (a sign-up will be circulated in advance). Be sure to read Kolk, “Caretaking” (Taking Possession) before you go.

WEEK 11
Tuesday, March 31: Museumification vs. Disposal | Trash
M-11 (NYC’s “trash museum”) material; Pierson’s Whippets + Drenttel’s Artichoke (both in HHT). In class: discuss Kolk, “Caretaking” and Campbell House responses.
SR 9 due (Campbell House)

Thursday, April 2: Disposal vs. De-cluttering | Marginal Objects
Read G. Lucas, “Dispossession and Disposability”; P. Green, “Marie Kondo Wants to Sell You Nice Things. What’s wrong with that?”; find an household organization video or website, and come ready to discuss.

[Sign up for a conference to discuss your Final Project]

WEEK 12
Tuesday, April 7: Death + Disposal | Memory Objects + Memento Mori

Thursday, April 9: Death + Disposal | Memory Objects
M. Sturken, “The Objects that Lived”; R. Finn, “Curator of the Objects of Terrible Memory”; other death/memory objects you find [see prompt].

Week 13
Tuesday, April 14: Racialized and Taboo Objects
R. Bernstein, excerpt from Racial Innocence; Kara Walker’s A Subtlety and related readings.
Outline, Thesis + Bibliography for Final Project due

Thursday, April 16: Gadgets | Technological Objects
Baudrillard, Sections C. and D.I; other TBD (maybe excerpt from Mechanization Takes Command)
Guest speakers: Jonathan Hanahan (Sam Fox School) and Dave Walsh (American Culture Studies)

WEEK 14
Tuesday, April 21: Lightening Presentations | Troubleshooting
3-minute presentations of Final Project findings.

Thursday, April 23: Lightening Presentations | Final Discussion
3-minute presentations of Final Project findings. Baudrillard, Conclusion

Monday, MAY 4, 12 NOON: FINAL PROJECT DUE