

power relations but also how these relations are framed and structured in relation to critically reading visual imagery and visual culture. This might be her most relevant work to date not only for her followers in the academe but also for those with interest in exploring the discourses of war that penetrate the everyday.

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Daniel Miller. *The Comfort of Things*. Cambridge: Polity, 2008. 302 Pages.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller is recognized for his innovative studies of material culture and consumption, outlined in his 1987 publication *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* and developed through more recent works such as his 2005 edited anthology *Materiality*. Though driven by the same mode of inquiry, his new work *The Comfort of Things* departs from what Miller regards as his “usual academic tone” in its presentation of short narrative “portraits” of thirty individuals all living on a single London street that he calls “Stuart Street.” The portraits, presented as distinct chapters, were gathered as part of a larger study of 100 households conducted with graduate student Fiona Parrott to investigate the ways material objects help people deal with loss and change; the results of their investigation are forthcoming. “In the meantime,” Miller writes, “it seemed that the richness of our encounter could lend itself to a different genre of writing—one intended to share our experience with a much wider readership and also to introduce more generally the branch of anthropology I teach: material culture studies” (300).

The Comfort of Things indeed functions both as an accessible introduction to Miller’s methodology and a demonstration of how one can learn about people through the medium of their things. As part of Miller’s promotion of material culture studies alongside more traditional branches of anthropology, Miller prepares readers by discussing the limitations of using conventional interviews to learn about people’s lives. People usually present a carefully constructed script for such interviews, he writes, one that is often defensive and restrictive and doesn’t yield much useful information. To avoid relying on these unreliable narratives, Miller and Parrott asked

questions not just of the people they visited, but of the things in their homes. "We asked what decorations hung on the walls, what the people who greeted us were wearing, what we were asked to sit on, what style of bathroom we peed in, whose photographs were on display, what collections were arrayed on mantelpieces," Miller writes (2). Together, this accumulation of things presents, for Miller, a tangible expression of that person or household.

As part of this exploration, Miller investigates the role of possessions in personal relationships. At a time when it seems we are besieged with "stuff," Miller seeks to complicate common notions that connect our relationships to material possessions with our relationships to people, particularly the assumption that as we become more materialistic we become more superficial, and that our relationships with people suffer as a result. Miller claims that this assumption is rarely tested, and promises readers that "By the time you finish this book you will discover that, in many ways the opposite is true; that possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer are relationships with people" (1).

With this theoretical stance in place, Miller sets his first two portraits in deliberate opposition. "Empty" is the story of George, a seventy-five-year-old man whose flat is strikingly devoid of material objects and whose life is likewise unfulfilled. "Full" is a portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, a couple who employ their heirloom decorations, priceless collections, and endless homemade pies in a complex web of social meaning, generously shared with their close network of family and friends. Taking a casual, often humorous and sympathetic tone, Miller moves to portraits of individuals falling somewhere within this continuum, such as Marjorie, a woman who has gradually accumulated an extraordinary number of photographs and decorations in an effort to provide a loving, welcoming environment for more than forty foster children. We meet Jorge, a Brazilian immigrant of Italian descent who sold part of his prized album collection to help pay for his sister's wedding, and Malcolm, who keeps his life quite literally inside his laptop, as his work schedule prevents him from keeping a flat in any one country for more than a few weeks at a time. We step inside the home of Sharon, an amateur wrestler and sociology teacher who constantly rearranges her furniture to clear her head.

Miller's relaxed narrative is bolstered by a decidedly didactic framework, guiding readers through the pitfalls of material culture research and reflecting on his own process. He admits to struggling

at points during the project, and to “the tentative nature” of some of his analyses. He writes of visiting Stan, a mercenary once hired to protect an arms dump in Colombia, responsible for dozens of civilian deaths. He had just survived the latest in a succession of suicide attempts when Miller and Parrott visited him at his home in London. “We could not help Stan find redemption,” Miller recalls. “All we did was to listen a bit. We mattered for a day or two, but not that much” (93). Miller also warns of imposing “the clichés and moralities of some TV script” upon the stories of people such as Aidan, a young man addicted to sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. One couple had a serious argument after Miller and Parrott pointed out the marked imbalance in the number of objects each person contributed to the household. “This,” Miller confesses, “was undoubtedly our fault” (178).

After introducing readers to these thirty London residents and demonstrating the basics of material culture studies, Miller closes *The Comfort of Things* with an epilogue addressing broader concerns signaled throughout his study. He poses an ambitious question: “If this is a street in contemporary London and these are its people, what, then, is modern life, and what is the nature of that humanity which lives in these our times” (282)? Turning to social science for answers, he addresses long-standing theories suggesting that when life becomes “too modern,” without religion, nationalism, or even communism to provide a common identity, then society would fragment into isolated individuals with no purpose or order. Miller firmly rejects this idea, asserting that the individual and the household is now responsible for creating such order, and this order “is still an authentic order even if one creates it for oneself and makes it up as one goes along, rather than inheriting it as tradition or custom” (293). He finds evidence of this order in each of the households he visits.

Despite this independent control over order, Miller disagrees with the notion of a dangerous “cult of the individual,” arguing that most of his subjects in the present study equated individualism with loneliness, living alone with failure. If he were to ask them what matters in life, Miller surmises, they would almost uniformly focus on their significant relationships. While Miller acknowledges that this response would most likely indicate a desire for relationships with friends, family, and perhaps the community, he believes material objects are integral to all of these relationships. “People exist for us in and through their material presence,” he writes. “An advantage of this unusual perspective is that sometimes these apparently mute

forms can be made to speak more easily and eloquently to the nature of relationships than can those persons” (286-7).

As Miller hoped when he set out to write this book, *The Comfort of Things* provides entry into material culture studies for a wide range of readers. Some may wish to simply engage with its carefully crafted portraits, some sad, some scandalous. Others might find the book suitable as a starting point for the discipline’s more theoretical literature or as a model for similar studies. In all cases, readers will become attuned to the complex role played by objects in our lives, and indeed in our relationships with others.

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