Why and how is modern consumer capitalism so wasteful, and what might be done to restore an ethos of ongoing attachment to our existing goods and the production of objects that foster such concern? Could a new examination of the roles of care, labour and personal identity in relation to today’s consumerist objects help point ways forward? This is the area that Christine Harold seeks to investigate in this work, centrally inquiring ‘how might we manage the material excesses of consumer capitalism by building on, rather than repudiating, our attraction and attachment to objects?’ (p. 18).

To this end, the book opens with an unusually extended introduction – 40 pages – devoted to the importance of our attachment to objects, with attachment conceived as ‘the word we give the act of connection itself’, even if temporary, and more substantively as ‘one register on which we can create practices that open up – expose – both subjects and objects such that their mutual connectivity is felt more viscerally’ (p. 19). Accordingly, in the interests of better understanding our interactions with objects, the remainder of this section gives an overview of the Marxian account of commodity fetishism followed by some reflections on Baudrillard’s helpful addition – i.e. an account of sign value in addition to use value and exchange value – and then some thoughts on current socio-cultural tendencies both to stockpiling and to reducing the quantities of objects owned in affluent Western nations, especially the USA. The introduction concludes with thoughts on the interplay between design and consumption-critical lifestyle movements, such as those of the Minimalists and Marie Kondo, and their interaction with contemporary design practices, thus setting the scene for the 5 more tightly focused chapters that follow.

Chapter 1 duly examines the ways in which we collect and form attachments to objects, and ways in which some of us have more difficulty controlling the impulse than others. Comparing and contrasting the orientations towards objects manifested by hoarders and by Kondo’s followers, Harold notes that contrary to stereotypes of flint-hearted Scrooges, hoarders operate by being overly empathetic towards objects, which they emotionally connect to people and experiences, while for both orientations, ‘an object’s role in either memorialising one’s past or animating one’s future is the standard for measuring its worth’ (p. 45). The differences lie in the inability of hoarders to discriminate, whilst in contrast “‘Konverts’, who learn to pass on items that no longer give joy, are encouraged to see objects as only transitory vehicles for history” (p. 64). Drawing upon George Bataille’s concept of ‘the accursed share’ that is a productive system’s excess, the analysis moves steadily towards a broader analysis of how we are tempted to overconsumption, rejecting
the Kondo strategy on systemic grounds, for ‘Kondo’s enormously popular method does nothing to stop the Hefty bags piling up like so many corpses in a Tarantino film’ (p. 73). The following two chapters accordingly home in on two businesses that self-consciously market products in ways designed to generate enduring or at least consistent attraction, namely the US department store giant Target (Chapter 2) and the Swedish self-assembly furniture company IKEA (Chapter 3).

The significance of Target is primarily that they manifest a particularly strong awareness of the aesthetic strand in contemporary capitalism whereby certain star designs and designers are deployed to push a Bauhaus-like rhetoric of combining beauty with mass production. It is this that enabled Target to win acceptance from middle class consumers who would usually resist large box stores, and even to go beyond the sign value of brand identification by fostering greater awareness of the logics and languages of design. But this faux democratisation ultimately stops short of participation, which takes us instead to IKEA, where mass design interacts with the consumer’s own labour activity. Here Arnold highlights findings that the effort consumers put into constructing IKEA materials caused them to be valued disproportionately highly when completed, and suggests that whereas Target’s goods may manifest what Walter Benjamin called ritual value (i.e. employment of the object in rituals of self-expression), self-assembled objects like those from IKEA manifest what she names ‘project value’, in which the consumer may come to identify with and have some affection for the end product and brand precisely because they invested effort into it. Sadly there is no enduring craftsmanship here, the items are easily disposable and replaceable, the landfills will continue to clutter up: ‘IKEA is among the most recognizable symptoms of what Julia Butterfly Hill calls the disposability consciousness of our current cultural moment’ (p. 128).

But Arnold nonetheless maintains that the disposability in question should not blind us to the reality of the attachment generated by the earlier engagement with the objects, and this leads her to the focus of the final chapters. Chapter 4 accordingly engages with ways in which attachment to objects may be boosted and transformed by harnessing the power of stories to grant extra significance. We learn of several impressive projects, such as the Tales of Things and Electronic Memory project in Britain and the Pass the Baton initiative in Japan that seek to enrich and revitalise understandings of objects by adding personal stories to the items, sometimes operating in partnership with thrift shops to encourage a sense of connection and stewardship to existing objects through invoking a sense of shared history and enduring meaning. This leads to reflections on ‘emotionally durable design’ (p. 151), an attempt by designers to produce objects that ‘as a result of the physical properties of their form and content, have the potential to bear memories both symbolically and materially’ (p. 154), and one to which Arnold responds with fractured affirmation, recognising its strategic potential for promoting attachment and
sustainability but also acknowledging its significant limitations, such as the ease with which such products can be faked. The engagement with design then takes a further step in Chapter 5, wittily dubbed ‘The Handmade Tale’, in which the topic turns to the popular resurgence of crafting, manifested in phenomena from Etsy and popular TV shows through to attempts to hack mass produced objects and transform them to more human scale creations. Here the circle begins to close, as Arnold invokes aspects of the Marxian tradition that associate human fulfilment with creative social labour, specifically referencing the thought of William Morris, and noting the way in which these ideas and practices have been resurrected today by the maker movement, which links the traditional craft community to computer hackers and digital tinkerers, celebrating ‘the inherent joy or satisfaction one gets from working with one’s hands’ (p. 203) and an ‘intimate engagement with the material world around us’ (p. 205) to counterbalance the distractions of digital consumerism. The incorporation of such care, engagement and beauty into design, Arnold writes in her conclusion, may help fulfil the ecological need to ‘put a thumb on the side of the scale that envisions a more robust mode of design and that offers us new and more thoughtful ways to value objects’ (p. 230).

It is easy to find either dark green screeds against capitalism’s iniquities or mildly reformist injunctions towards green consumerism, so I found this book attractive in its willingness to recognise consumerism’s seductiveness as well as its real evils, and its implicit attempt to turn the system’s own strengths back upon itself. Though it was a tad disappointing that Harold is apparently unaware of much earlier injunctions towards William Morris’s union of sustainability with beauty and crafting found in environmental philosophy, most notably Keekok Lee’s work (Lee 1989), the largely empirical analysis does a good job when focused on the psychological aspects, as one might expect from Harold’s being a rhetoric specialist. The book will interest those working at the interfaces of ecological design, green politics and sustainable consumption.

References

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