

## Review

Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, Cambridge: Polity, 2008. ISBN: 0745644031. 300pp.

Daniel Miller, *Stuff*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009. ISBN: 0745644244. 220pp.

Daniel Miller's *The Comfort of Things* (2008) and *Stuff* (2009) are two books that contrast in style but that argue the same point: material culture matters and is worthy of academic study. In doing so Miller shows the breadth of his writing ability, with the two texts presenting their arguments in rather different ways. Both books are particularly important for the development of audience and reception studies, as they show the differing ways in which material possessions are used and negotiated in the home. *The Comfort of Things* is Miller's account of anthropological study that took place on "Stuart Street", a fictional name given a real London street (including a few streets that run off it). The book is comprised of thirty 'portraits' (chapters), which is an appropriate choice of word, as Miller writes in a deliberately non-academic style (or at least what is traditionally considered academic). In the book Miller argues that human relationships are central to modern life, and that material culture is fundamental in underpinning them. On the first key argument, Miller surveys the related themes of loneliness and individualism in modern life and finds that '... most people seem to feel that being solely an individual is, largely speaking, a failure in life' (p.285). Here 'Individualism *per se* is most fully equated with loneliness' (p.286), a problem for some of his subjects (see portraits of George, Harry and Stan). On the second key argument — the centrality of material culture to relationships — Miller draws on the work of Bourdieu to suggest that people are in part socialised through objects, as '...everything they touch and do is infused with the underlying order that gives them their expectations of the world, and which are characteristic of their particular society' (2008, p.287).

When reading *The Comfort of Things* one is reminded of Norman Collins' *London Belongs to Me*, which Ed Glinert calls 'the capital's great vernacular novel' (Glinert, 2008, p.vii). At the heart of Collins' book lies No. 10 Dulcimer Street, Kennington, the boarding house that serves as the setting for the greater majority of the plot. In that house the characters lead interconnected yet distinct lives, as they reside on either side of the same wall, or on the floors above and below each other. Collins opens his novel on Christmas morning, and uses the various activities of his characters living on each floor of the house to invite the reader to consider how people lead their lives (and treasure their possessions) within a few feet of each other. *The Comfort of Things* deals with this sociological curiosity

in much the same way, and it is difficult to conceive that Miller's subjects live on one London Street (or within the vicinity of a few streets) given the differences in their lives. This is shown nowhere more starkly than in the distinction between the portraits 'Empty' and 'Full'. Again we can draw a parallel to Collins' book, as 'Full' describes a house that celebrates Christmas to the extent that '...no childhood memory of the *Nutcracker* ... no West End store window or specialist Christmas shop window in Alsace or National Trust recreation has ever appealed as this lounge and dining-room setting of Christmas' (2008, p.19). Here the Clarke family has created a living space where objects play a central role, evoking memories and underpinning numerous family traditions.

George, the subject of 'Empty', leads a life in strikingly sharp contrast to the Clarke family. He lives in a flat devoid of any personal possessions, with one picture on view of a place he has never been. Indeed the flat itself reflects George who has a 'mechanical impersonal quality' in his speech, speaking 'always in complete sentences' (2008, p.9). In 'Home and Homeland', the ambiguous relationship that Mrs. Stone has with the capital is explored. Despite living in London, she leads a proxy life in Jamaica (where she owns a house). Here Miller draws out the often complex associations with the concept of home experienced by Jamaicans who live overseas, arguing that identity can become confused to the extent that 'they may feel they are no more at home in Jamaica than they were in London' (2008, p.78). *The Comfort of Things* is a persuasive and interesting read, and a clever antidote to the prosaic academic monograph. On a technical point, the role of the researcher Fiona Parrot is so extensive and fundamental to the book that one wonders why she was not credited as a co-author, aside from the fact that the main authorial voice is Miller's (cf. 2008, p.298-299).

While *The Comfort of Things* reports new research, *Stuff* (2009) serves as a retrospective of some of Miller's previous work on material culture. It is not merely an edited collection of previous published research, but rather is a set of reflections on that work which Miller intends to serve as an examination of his 'academic trajectory as a whole' (2009, p.3). The central thrust of *Stuff* is to '...challenge to our common-sense opposition between the person and the thing, the animate and the inanimate, the subject and the object' (2009, p.5), sharing the aim of the previously discussed volume. Following this principle, *Stuff* examines material culture in five areas: clothing; theories of material culture; houses; media; and life and death. Taking the chapter 'Houses: accommodating theory' allows us to make a comparison with *The Comfort of Things*, as space does not allow for a fuller survey. In this chapter Miller takes a critical look at theory, and argues that the grounding of theory in the everyday is essential to the formation of theory that serves as 'compassionate embrace, rather than aloof distaste' (2009, p.80):

So the task now is to take our artistic-looking idealized theory ... and drag it back into the mud and murk of everyday life until it looks a lot less intimidating and more like something we feel at ease with bringing home to the folks (ibid.)

Following this line of argumentation, Miller posits houses as important sites of research within the study of material culture. (A similar theme was taken up by BBC Radio 4's (UK) programme, *Thinking Allowed*, in 2011). This is especially important for Miller as due to their size and value, houses attract various forces of power upon them, such as from the state.

Miller discusses how his past research on North London council housing (Miller, 1988) found that residents would frequently make changes to their kitchens — despite the state-provided kitchens being of a good quality. Miller found that the residents, reacting to the stigmatization by Margaret Thatcher of those living in state-provided housing — ‘had come to believe that the kitchen fittings they had been supplied with couldn’t possibly be any good and needed replacing’ (2009, p.86). Miller notes that while major structural change to the properties was forbidden by the authorities, making minor aesthetic changes to the kitchen was a way for residents to negotiate their relationship between their home and its ultimate owner, the state. Here, like in *The Comfort of Things*, Miller returns to the central argument that underpins both books, and which renders both works important: material culture is central to our lives, our relationships, and our wider relationship with society. Both books enrich our understanding of the audience, and the way in which material possessions are received and negotiated in such vastly different ways. They are important to the development of audience and reception studies as they argue for greater emphasis to be placed on material possessions.

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### References:

- Glinert, Ed, ‘Introduction’, in N. Collins, *London Belongs to Me*, London: Penguin Classics 2008, pp.vii-xiv.
- Miller, Daniel, ‘Appropriating the state on the Council Estate’, *Man*, 23, 1988, pp.354-72.