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thinking **through** things

SHERRY **TURKLE** (ED.)

Evocative Objects: Things We Think With

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Evocative Objects comprises thirty-four quite short pieces (most four to six pages) reflecting in often very personal ways on the 'dynamic relationship between things and thinking'. (9) Each piece in the collection is preceded by a short (half-page) excerpt reflecting on aspects of objects from the 'classics' of philosophy, history, literature and social theory, including Lévi-Strauss, Piaget, Derrida, Vygotsky, Haraway, Kristeva, Mumford, Foucault, Baudrillard, Mauss, Latour, Marx, Barthes, Kopytoff, Winnicott, Lacan and Eco, among others. A synthetic conclusion elaborates on the theoretical links between the pieces, and the bibliography broadens the context and provides an extended reading list.

While Sherry Turkle is well known for her highly influential work on the psychology of computing, including *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* and *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*,[1] this volume reflects a wider interest, since it 'contributes a detailed examination of particular objects with rich connections to daily life as well as intellectual practice'. (7) Turkle is director of the Initiative on Technology and the Self at MIT, and the Evocative Objects collections arose as a result of seminars at the Initiative. In all, three edited collections have been published by the MIT Press. *Evocative Objects* is the first, published in August 2007. The second volume, *Falling For Science: Objects in Mind*, appeared in May 2008. The third volume, *The Inner History of Devices*, was published at the end of October 2008.

Turkle's interest in evocative objects, she tells us in the introduction to this first collection,

originated in her childhood. Indeed, she wrote in the introduction to *The Second Self* that we humans 'search for a link between who we are and what we have made, between who we are and what we might create, between who we are and what, through our intimacy with our own creations, we might become'.[2] The computer itself is often an evocative object because:

> like a Rorschach inkblot test, [it] is a powerful projective medium … The Rorschach provides ambiguous images onto which different forms can be projected. The computer, too, takes on many shapes and meanings. In what follows, we shall see that, as with the Rorschach, what people make of the computer speaks of their larger concerns, speaks of who they are as individual personalities.[3]

Turkle's childhood experience of searching through family photographs and trinkets for evidence of her absent father showed her that objects can be 'clues' allowing mysteries to be solved. (4) This is because, following Lévi-Strauss, material things are 'good(s) to think with', and are essential resources for the *bricolage* of everyday life. Turkle's personal experience as a child was of interaction with objects having high emotional intensity, and she therefore 'began to consider bricolage as a passionate practice'. (5)

The contributions in *Evocative Objects* collectively reflect on a diverse array of objects. This volume, then, brings together a series of sometimes intimate reflections on how the biographies of people and things intertwine.

Reflecting on the cello allows the author of the first piece to reflect on his relationship to music and to his mother; considering the cello also speaks to the intimate relationship between bodies and things, and to issues of technical and cultural improvisation. Considering archival objects that have belonged to and had a very close association with Le Corbusier allows another author to reflect on the interpersonal closeness that can be gained through handling the objects a much admired person worked with. But digitisation changes the relationship to the objects, making them more widely available but no longer giving a sense of awe at the tangibility of connection. Digital objects, it is suggested, cannot be evocative in the same way as an original.

Changes in technology and evolution in the form of a class of objects can be part of the biography of the object: keyboards, both musical and computer or typewriter keyboards, mediate creativity and allow for 'composition' as a *manual* activity. Ballet slippers are exemplars of a technology that has shaped a cultural form. The shoes themselves shape physical artistry but the gradations coming with increasing expertise and seniority symbolise and physically track changes in the development and maturation of the dancer. Shoes can also represent the physical disciplining and transformation of the dancer's body.

A diabetic author's glucometer provides an indicator of the state of the body that is not available to direct perception, allowing for

'tight control' of blood sugar levels. The evolving relationship between people and monitoring technologies in everyday life is referenced here: the author imagines a future scenario as a 'cyborg' whose diabetes is controlled, not through external monitoring and consciously controlled action, but via a small implantable device that operates autonomously: 'In this fantasy, I do not control my disease; my computer pancreas controls it for me … In this scenario, it is difficult for me to remember that I have diabetes'. (67)

From the point of view of a child, a yellow raincoat can provide a kind of armour and give a sense of control against the complexities (even chaos) of the external world. Another writer thinks of a datebook as 'an external information organ—a piece of my brain made out of paper instead of cells'. (80) Knowing it is nearby allows her to relax, although the sense of herself as cyborg bothers her. When the datebook is lost, her ontological security is undermined. Moving to a digital diary doesn't solve the problem of the vulnerabilities of recording events in one physical location, but instead leaves her feeling 'destabilised', since the digital record doesn't leave traces of choices made and options erased.

Many of us will recognise the sense that a laptop is 'practically a brain prosthesis'. But how many of us would say that we love our laptops? 'It doesn't just belong to me; I belong to it.' (88) This object, however, is not simply itself a loved object, but also mediates intensely emotional relationships with other people, through the text on the screen and the feeling of the keys under the fingers. Evocative objects do not just attach themselves to us but are also interfaces for our relationships with other people.

In Durban, one author sees a boy carrying a wooden facsimile of a transistor radio: 'although it looked like a Braun transistor radio, this object never produced sound'. Asking the boy about this object of 'emulation and imagination', he is told: ' "It can't play music, but I sing when I carry it. One day I'll have a real one." ' (105) A young sister's stuffed bunny, named Murray, teaches a scholar of child development about the power of personified objects.

A rolling pin evokes more than nostalgia (which seems to trivialise the bond), but demonstrates how the materiality of an object makes a tangible link to the past and to loved ones who are no longer with us. But evocative objects can evoke difficult and contradictory emotions. In contrast with a gold orchid brooch, which reminds the wearer of her mother but is simply a pretty object carrying no strong emotion, the silver pin that is the focus of the piece 'evokes bruises and ambivalence, emotional knots difficult to untangle'. (191)

'Blue cheer' reminds us that pharmaceuticals can also be evocative objects for many. A last single pill, kept as a reminder of the person the author used to be, shows us how objects are able to act as mnemonics or placeholders. The pill is also an example of how aesthetics and function intertwine in evocative objects. An epigram from Baudrillard tells us that design reduces all the possible valences of an object 'to two rational components, two general

models—utility and the aesthetic' which are opposed to each other. But 'neither has any reality other than being named separately', and indeed they are 'two equally arbitrary agencies [that] exist only to mislead'. (102)

The collection perhaps works best if it is viewed as a network of nodes, as starting points for thinking about how objects come to be evocative. Indeed, the pieces of writing themselves operate (sometimes at least) as evocative objects. Like all objects, our responses to them will be individualised and idiosyncratic. One or two of the pieces, it must be admitted, touched me personally through an emotional connection with the objects or situations described. A granddaughter, for example, gathers together clothes and other mementos and packs them into a small suitcase. It remains unopened for two-and-a-half years, because 'increasingly it feels dangerous to open it. Memories evolve with you, through you. Objects don't have this fluidity; I fear that the contents of the suitcase might betray my grandmother.' (248) When it is finally opened, the author's strong emotional response will no doubt find its reflection in many readers' responses (including this one), who can readily resonate with the impulse to gather the objects that might recreate a lost loved one.

The study of material culture has experienced a surge of interest in the past few years. Daniel Miller, a British anthropologist whose work has been at the forefront of the development of material culture scholarship since the mid-1980s, has suggested that artefacts may be difficult to investigate within intellec-tual traditions based profoundly on language and the language-like features of culture.[4] While the now extensive recent literature on material culture is not referenced, this is not appropriate, since the genre of the *Evocative Objects* collection is not highly academic or focused around theoretical development, though there are many theoretical elements brought together in loose counterpoint. The collection certainly offers a wide selection of pointers to relevant theory. In the conclusion, Turkle suggests that one role of theory within the volume is to defamiliarise the familiar objects represented in the chapters. In turn, 'as theory defamiliarizes objects, objects familiarize theory. The abstract becomes concrete, closer to lived experience.' (307)

Readers will in all likelihood find some of the pieces in *Evocative Objects* more interesting to them than others. The volume is most likely to appeal to students and teachers in fields at the intersection of material culture, technology and everyday life, who will find illustrative material and pointers to theoretical directions across a broad range of kinds of objects. Miller's recent book *The Comfort of Things*, interestingly, is also less academic and more literary in form, perhaps indicating that material culture lends itself quite naturally to analysis in more literary genres of writing than more traditional academic styles.[5]

Reading the volume from cover to cover was quite a fragmentary experience, and it is difficult to develop a sense of flow in the text, because the pieces themselves are all quite short. It would perhaps be better to read

Evocative Objects by dipping into it rather than reading straight through. Indeed, it would be a good book to take on holiday, or on a long plane journey. It was good to be reminded of the works and perspectives brought to bear on the examples through the juxtaposition with the short 'orienting' extracts, and to be introduced to some unfamiliar ones. My own favourite quote is not one of the ones included, but it might as well have been, since it captures the power of evocative objects to anchor us in the world:

> Indeed, things are perhaps the most faithful witnesses of all, and in their fidelity to us they function as extensions of ourselves, reflections and echoes of who we are, were, and will become. Those things in your room, for example, those simple, ordinary things mirror who and what you are, and situated in that room they give a shape to its space, they form it into a place, they outline a world … Staying in their place, they give us our place, and without such things in our lives we would have no place at all.[6]

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1. Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit (Twentieth Anniversary Edition)*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1984/2005 and *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
2. Turkle, *The Second Self*, p. 18.
3. Turkle, *The Second Self*, p. 20.
4. Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*,: Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, p. 100.
5. Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, Polity, Cambridge, 2008.
6. R. D. Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, Routledge, London, 1989, pp. 193–4.