Essais inédits – Unpublished essays
Écran Total – Total Scren
Exposition et symposium – Exhibition and symposium
Montreal, 2021 – www.ecrantotal.uqam.ca

At Home with All of My Things, or, The Pandemic System of Objects

By Andrew Burke, University of Winnipeg

Whereas it may seem that these Covid times are tailor-made for the Baudrillard of screens, signs, simulations, and mediations, I must confess that the book of his I have returned to most avidly of late is *The System of Objects* (1968). Stuck at home for months on end, surrounded by my accumulated stuff and immersed in a domestic space forced to function as both home and office, kitchen and classroom, *The System of Objects* has served as a guide to the semiotic systems that structure these pandemic interiors and the objects that populate them.

Surveying the consumer society that emerged in the postwar period and the colonization of everyday life by the commodity, *The System of Objects* is very much tethered to its time, a sociological snapshot of what must have felt like a complete transformation of domestic life, a subbing out of the old for the new, and the dramatic arrival of new technologies and modern conveniences. These changes, of course, have now themselves become domesticated, with the routine arrival, based on a timetable determined by the logic of planned obsolescence and periodic upgrade, of appliances, devices, and systems that promise so much, but deliver so little. Despite this domestication of the consumer logic of modernity, the book remains bracing rather than banal, a study that, in its attention to our everyday experiences of spaces and things, speaks to the present as well as documenting the past. If the pandemic has been defined by mediation, the total screen world of never-ending Zoom meetings and the temptations of binge-watching, it has also been defined by a renewed sense of the material, our grounding in the domestic object-world of the home that now constitutes

the territory and terrain of an everyday mode of life limited by lockdowns and constrained by circuit-breakers.

Baudrillard's analysis of the furniture and fashion of modern life and the rise of functionality as the defining characteristic of contemporary design resonates down the decades. While postmodernism may have seen a return of the rococo and all kinds of ornamental flourishes, my sense is that functionality has remained resilient over the years, an aspiration that continues to manifest itself in contemporary minimalisms and the drive to declutter that defines the present. Baudrillard's withering assessment of "the moral theatricality of old furniture" marks the rise of the flat-packed modernity of modular units and integrated design systems (16). It is hard to imagine, from the vantage point of a present populated with named furniture collections bearing the iconic umlauts and slashed ø's of IKEA, how revolutionary and how modern the new functional furniture of the 1960s must have felt. In August 2020, the IKEA Museum launched its digital archive of catalogues, making the full run from 1950 onwards available. Dropped in the middle of a long, pandemic summer, this collection garnered extensive media coverage and fueled a nostalgia for modernism, with much of the commentary focused on the precise period that fueled Baudrillard's mid- to late-sixties speculations on the rise of functionality.

The archival images scattered throughout the IKEA catalogues of the mid-60s to mid-70s readily confirm that the primary task of the postwar modern domestic consumer is to ensure that, to steal a phrase from Mme. Arpel in Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* (1957), "everything communicates." Houses and flats are not simply depicted as "machines for living in," as Le Corbusier put it, but as spaces to be managed and manipulated. As Baudrillard argues, "'man the interior designer' is neither an owner nor a mere user – rather, he is an active engineer of atmosphere. Space is at his disposal like a kind of distributed system, and by controlling this space he holds sway over all possible reciprocal relations between the objects therein, and hence over all the roles they are capable of assuming" (25). As Kristin Ross points out in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies:*

Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture, there is a nice irony in Baudrillard's observations about the new integrated communicational totalities of furniture systems and domestic appliances (105). Baudrillard's commentary arrives as the country in thrown into a crisis catalyzed at least in part by the breakdown of communications between young and old, bosses and workers, government and citizens. The IKEA catalogues of that period, as well as the glossy magazines Baudrillard explicitly refers to – *Maison Française* and *Mobilier et Décoration* – provide images of domestic integration and harmony on the level of furnishings and decoration as a kind of substitute for the distinct lack of these things on a national political level (17).

The 1968 IKEA catalogue in particular is packed with photos documenting the low-slung horizontality that defines the decade's modernism, but also reveals how each room functions as a kind of integrated communicational system, colour with colour, pattern with pattern, material with material, and shape with shape. Moving beyond the specific political situation in France, these rooms signify the fantasy of modernity itself, a system in which there is no semiotic viscosity or opacity of any sort. Baudrillard notes that "modern man" is a "cybernetician […] obsessed with the perfect circulation of messages" (29). For the modern consumer, the home is where "everything has to intercommunicate, everything has to be functional – no more secrets, no more mysteries, everything is organized, therefore everything is clear" (28). IKEA may not have landed in France until 1981, yet the Prisunic mail order catalogue – launched in 1968 and representative, with its pop art covers and brightly-coloured plastic furnishings, of France's development as a modern design-driven consumer society – confirms Baudrillard's sense that the consumer doesn't simply acquire objects anymore, but functions mainly as "an intelligent technician of communications," maintaining control over the semiotic systems that circulate through and constitute modern domestic space.

Perhaps the most resonant concept for the present moment in Baudrillard's observations about interior design is the notion of the home-dweller as an "active

engineer of atmosphere," one who "discovers himself in the manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system" (25). Of course, as Baudrillard qualifies, this process binds the individual ever closer to the consumer system, which offers for sale the component parts of the semiotic system of the home from which the desired atmosphere is created and maintained. And, while today "atmosphere engineer" sounds like a fancy term for event planner or names a vaguely-defined position in a Silicon Valley start-up that inexplicably garners a six-figure salary, in *The System of Objects*, it pinpoints with surgical precision the internalization of a whole set of technics – the skillful manipulation of signs, the ability to signal taste, an adeptness in the domestic distribution of objects and things – that make up the modern disposition. This is the modern subject as master of signs, curator of domestic objects, and architect of ambiance.

These extended periods at home, of course, may have prompted many of us to rearrange furniture and optimize domestic spaces for the claustrophobic listlessness of pandemic life. Yet there is a much more tangible way in which we have all become active engineers of atmosphere these days, and it has everything to do with the total screen world that Baudrillard so incisively named and documented. In the pandemic, the technics of tone and mood reside in the production of the screen image, the precision lighting and carefully selected backdrops that, in a Zoom world, form a key part of the mediated image and represent the substitution of sign for scholar. There has, to be fair, a kind of playful self-reflexivity about all this, a popular understanding that the real to some extent disappears in the swirl and surplus of onscreen signs and the mediated image. While professors are accustomed to, for better or for worse, being the centre of the attention, whether in the seminar room or lecture hall, the pressure of being the pinned square brought with it clear anxieties about how the self was being mediated onscreen. This pressure extends to the background, which in the flat screen world of Zoom functions as a prosthetic extension of that self, to be managed and curated, even carefully calibrated and engineered, to communicate an integrated message about the subject and to generate a specific sort of mediated atmosphere.

Some professors are gloriously un-self-conscious about all this, broadcasting from their sofas, with low angles revealing blank walls or even ceilings. Others, in their efforts to reproduce or replicate the campus office, or to project the expected signs and symbols of academic authority, carefully frame their bookcases behind them, the weighty materiality of the books themselves dissolving into their sign-function when they appear onscreen. Nothing has captured this phenomenon better than Bookcase Credibility (@BCredibility), a Twitter feed that satirically assesses the legitimacy – or, to use a term that in every way suggests the possibility of a bookcase drag, the *realness* – of the meticulously curated bookshelf backdrops that appear onscreen during media appearances of stars, experts, correspondents, and commentators. Whether it is the veritable Prospero's library that appears behind Morgan Freeman, ratifying his star identity as sage and elder, or the askew line of books behind Natalie Portman, suggestive of frequent consultation and the grabbing of volumes for reference and citation, these bookshelves connect early and later Baudrillard. They speak to the atmospheric engineering of the earliest work, but also to the frenzied circulation of signs that characterizes hyperreality, the bookshelf both material and dematerialized.

I want to end with a brief consideration of collecting, that "marginal system," as Baudrillard terms it, that I think has experienced an uptick during these pandemic times. Collecting sometimes feels like an outmoded enterprise, tied to an earlier historical moment defined by a specific type of scarcity and in the absence of the relative online availability of everything. That said, even if the thrill of the hunt, especially with the coronavirus, has migrated from flea markets to Etsy shops, there nevertheless seems to be the drive to acquire and order, to tend to a collection and expand it. Part of this impulse surely derives from being at home with all of our stuff, which calls out for organization and attention. For many, the pandemic has brought with it a steady stream of Amazon packages that add to the object load of the home, but it has also meant the prolonged co-habitation with all the things you have bought before. In some cases, I am sure, this has led to the gathering up and throwing away of things, decluttering as the

kind of displacement activity that both alleviates anxiety and makes room for it all at the same time. But it also invites and intensifies a relationship with already owned objects. I must confess that I have been thinking about this in large part because it has taken a pandemic for me to take the time to sit down and actually listen to the large number of LPs I picked up while travelling in pre-pandemic times. There is something telling here in the fact that I pass the time when I am away from home by immersing myself in the familiar space of the record shop, which, no matter where it seems to be, comes with a common set of rituals and expectations. But I also recognize that in both buying LPs while away and unpacking my record collection here at home – I realize that I am echoing Benjamin here as much as Baudrillard – I fall squarely into collector cliché. Baudrillard writes, "the urge to collect tends to wane with the onset of puberty, only to re-emerge as soon as that stage has passed. In later life, it is men over forty who fall victim to this passion" (93). As the kids on the internet would say, *I feel seen* by Baudrillard here. And as much as I might protest that my accumulation is a passion for the content rather than a fetish for the object or attempt to gentrify the activity into research or curation, there seems no doubt that it is both regressive and compensatory about it.

Collecting is a substitute ordering of the world in the face of a world that is very definitely not under my control. The revival of collecting during the pandemic speaks to this anxious desire, with the objects conscripted to "serve in a regulatory capacity with regard to everyday life, dissipating many neuroses and providing an outlet for all kinds of tensions" (96). Baudrillard, of course, makes clear this activity is compensatory and compulsive rather than mitigating the actual chaos of the world in any way, adding for good measure that collecting is "*a tempered mode of sexual perversion*." (107). There is some consolation, I suppose, in Baudrillard's comment that the "passionate involvement" of the collector "lends a touch of the sublime to the regressive activity of collecting" (94). I will take this to heart as I continue with the pandemic project of listening to my LPs from A to Z, secure in the knowledge that Baudrillard would have easily predicted that my collection was alphabetized.

Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects* 1968. Trans. James Benedict. Verso, 2005.
Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. MIT Press, 1995.

Andrew Burke is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg. His book, *Hinterland Remixed: Media, Memory, and the Canadian 1970s*, was published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 2019. He is currently at work on a project provisionally titled "Cinema and the Object-World of Modernity" that examines the representation of objects and design in films from the 1960s and 70s