

## **TOWARDS AN OBJECT-RELATIONS THEORY OF CONSUMERISM.**

*THE AESTHETICS OF DESIRE AND THE UNFOLDING MATERIALITY OF SOCIAL LIFE.*

### ***Abstract:***

This paper addresses some fundamental questions in the field of consumption studies through an exploration of literatures within object-relations psychoanalytic theory. It takes materiality as its central concern, dealing especially with questions of actor-commodity relations. In particular the paper uses the conceptual apparatus of the object-relations approach to propose a new way for theorising aspects of consumption practice relating to person-object relationships. After situating the discussion within contemporary debates in consumption studies, the paper uses D.W. Winnicott's work as a point from which to integrate broader literatures on aesthetic experience and subject-object relations. The paper draws out the cultural implications and affinities of Winnicott's model and argues that his approach usefully suggests pathways for developing a model of consumption which neither reduces person-object exchanges to the psyche, assemblages of practices, or to the dead hand of social-structural forces. Rather, it is argued that Winnicott's model is suggestive of the more widespread and powerful cultural implications arising from relations between actors and objects of consumption.

### ***Keywords:***

transitional object, DW Winnicott, object-relations psychoanalysis, material culture, objectual practices

## *Introduction*

This paper is founded on the proposition that that it is deep within the relations between consumers and objects of consumption that we must look to consider the fundamental problems related to the consumerist ethic. In other sub-disciplines of sociology such as the sociology of arts and cultural sociology, there has been a recent and very productive push to understand the capacity of objects to not only represent aspects of reality, but to prompt reflexive, cognitive responses in actors and collectives (see Alexander, 2008; Eyerman and Ring, 1998; Eyerman and McCormick, 2006; Swedberg, 2005). Within consumption studies there is a need to pay similar attention to the cultural effervescence of everyday material culture and the role things play in structuring and mediating cultural practice. Undoubtedly, the material turn in consumption studies is well-established, with a series of texts now taking on canonical status (Appadurai, 1986; Baudrillard, 1968; Douglas and Isherwood, 1976; Miller 1987). Extending this literature into realms of psychoanalytic thought, this paper considers the way consumer desire is realised materially, via productive interactions between individuals and commodities in 'unfolding chains' (Knorr Cetina, 1991) of material engagements.

Dealing especially with questions of actor-commodity relations through the idea of 'object transitioning', this paper looks to an underexplored yet classic source (Winnicott, 1953) to bridge literatures within object-relations psychoanalytic theory to consumption studies. The paper's focus is on what is identified as 'objects of consumption' - the material things at the heart of much consumption practice - and a particular moment of desiring practice in relation to these objects. Accounts of consumption practices have recently become a focal point for scholars within consumption studies. In linking theories of practice to matters of ordinary consumption, routines and habits, embodied performativity and the role of things in structuring everyday life this recent framing, which has been in part inspired by actor-network approaches, has become important (see for example, Hand, Shove and Southerton, 2007; Warde, 2005; Watson and Shove, 2008). This paper focuses on practices, but seeks to make strong links between embodied practices, imagination and emotion through the deployment of Winnicott's ideas. In this sense, it is consistent with Illouz's (2009) call for the analytical framework of emotion to become central to consumption studies. Objectual things are handled and used, powerfully combining embodied pragmatics with emotion, cultural myth and symbolism, which are in turn connected to wants. This approach helps us to understand how the material, pragmatic and emotional work together, and how such

interactions can be an important part of the basis for understanding the institutionalized 'stability of volatility' of consumer desire (Illouz, 2009).

This paper uses the conceptual apparatus of the object-relations approach to propose a new way for theorising aspects of some consumption practices, conceptualising them as a process of objectified imaginative elaboration and self-transformation, as suggested by object-relations theory. It argues that the cultural meanings of consumption emerge from fusions of object-centred pragmatics with imaginative, emotional engagement. Though his ideas cannot be simply transplanted as fully articulated theories of consumer behaviour, developed as they were in the context of British child development theory in the 1950s and 1960s, it is argued here that the work of DW Winnicott (1953, 1971) provides some important signposts for integrating accounts of materiality, desire and practice within consumption studies. The turn to exploring the usefulness of Winnicott's work is thus both a response to core research problems in the field of consumption studies and to the paucity of material dedicated to exploring this aspect of consumption practice. The paper uses Winnicott's work as a point from which to integrate broader literatures on aesthetic experience and subject-object relations. It draws out the cultural implications and affinities of Winnicott's model and argues that his approach neither reduces person-object exchanges to the psyche, nor to social-structural forces. Rather it is suggestive of the more widespread and powerful cultural implications arising from relations between actors and objects of consumption.

The ideas proposed here must be considered as exploratory and it is likely they are relevant for certain types of consumption more than others. A number of cautions are necessary. For example, they may apply poorly when considering routine provisioning, or in relation to using basic social services such as public transportation. Furthermore, not all consumption is 'material' in nature and much could be characterized as ordinary, routinal or habitual, and seemingly inconsequential. Nevertheless, even in these everyday or mundane forms of consumption, objects are frequently transitioned, physically and psychologically. Finally, when we begin to think about the material, we must also theorise the immaterial – questions of language, desire, emotion and discourse come into play to the extent these psychic energies are projected onto objects and can be seen to be constituted, framed and processed through them. Such cautions are considered in further detail later in the paper. At this stage it is also worth pointing out that Winnicott's ideas were originally developed in the context of child psychological development. On the basis of complementary work coming after but in the tradition of Winnicott, this paper suggests an extension of his ideas well beyond child

psychology. Moreover, Winnicott's understanding of objects is not limited to material or physical things, but extends to psychological 'objects' like a parent or body part. It is argued here that his model of object-relations has much wider application for understanding the cultural basis of the relationship between people and physical objects, especially in the context of consumer societies where goods are continuously sought and desired for various capacities, some mundane, others perceived by users to be sacred. What Winnicott's model does is to suggest a way to frame the motivations, drives and attachments between individuals and objects within a non-reductionist, flexible framework. It identifies – at least in a schematic way that suggests the need for empirical follow-up - the way emotional power is built, applied and dissipated through dealings with an object. Furthermore, Winnicott's model is not an individualist one, for in deftly theorising the processes and cultural potential of subject-object relations, Winnicott suggests that object consumption is located in an emergent space bridging inner and outer worlds, human and non-human, that is 'made' from play, invention and engagement with objects in one's environment.

#### *Theorising motives to consume in sociology: the standard approaches*

Despite a couple of decades of intensive research within sociology on consumption, the fundamental question of *why* people have continuously revitalized appetites for consumer objects and experience the need to invest consumer object 'things' with meaning remains relatively unaddressed in both theoretical and empirical terms. There are a couple of typical, historically entrenched responses provided by modern consumption theory, much of it sociologically derived, regarding this question of 'why' which are summarized in a schematic manner in the section below.

The first of the standard explanations focuses on the interplay of lack and desire as a motivational drive for consumption. It suggests people displace their needs onto consumer objects that can be either a 'quick fix' or 'false hope'. Baudrillard's (1968) critical structuralist commentaries are a prototype here, as are more recent works by McCracken (1988) and Campbell (1987) which are more refined and complex developments of this basic theory, but nevertheless consistent with the foundation points of Baudrillard's position. The emphasis in these accounts is on how the *idea* of consumer objects compels people to 'desire the feelings associated with desire', rather than objects themselves for the sake of any utility. A second strand of thinking that can be located under the broad rubric of critical theory, emphasises the social-systemic exploitation of such displaced desires. By focusing on how alienation endemic to the social system is transformed into exploitation by the economic system, and how alienation from production is

exploited through the social systems of advertising and consumerism, this oeuvre suggests people are coerced, exploited or just plain resigned into consuming. This approach develops through critical theory of the twentieth century in the works of Adorno (1991), Marcuse (1964) and Fromm (1976). While it may be politically and critically attractive, this latter skein has developed at the expense of understanding the constructive and meaningful aspects of people-object relations. Moreover, it fails to accept social action as meaningful from the perspective of actors (Miller, 2001). The former, which has focused on the idea of 'lack' and is expressed most starkly in Baudrillard's structuralist work of the 1960s and early 1970s, is similarly pessimistic in some respects because it posits the weakness and emptiness of social actors as the driving force of consumerism. By arguing for consumption as a temporary solution to a sort of anomie coupled with a heavy dose of misplaced or errant individual needs, it moves toward the crux of some aspects of consumption without really fully articulating the processes at play (Baudrillard, 1968). It places alienation and anomie too easily at the centre stage, denying social actors any viable capacity to search for and construct meanings. It also denies objects themselves the capacity for affordance; to prompt, coordinate or motivate social action.

A further approach converges on ideas of distinction and competitive display, suggesting consumers engage in inflationary games of social distinction based on the enhancement, performance and accumulation of symbolic and aesthetic competencies. The elite-mass models of Simmel (1904), Veblen (1899), and the emphasis on boundary marking in Douglas and Isherwood's work (1979) constitute classic statements of such an approach. Bourdieu's *Distinction* is also a primary example here as it emphasises the effects of communicated consumption patterns and processes on structures of class differentiation. Here, people are held to consume in order to convey messages to others and to position themselves – often unwittingly - within cultural fields. This approach is of course significant and valuable in revealing some of the social dynamics of consumption practices, yet in important ways it does not get to their cultural core. Another problem is that this approach is likely consistent with some types of consumption more than others, for example, with consumers who keep up with the very latest fashions or consume luxury or rare goods, like expensive handbags, or clothing. Even when it might be a relevant sociological explanation of consumption, it is at odds with consumer's self-understanding of their actions and tends to focus on strivings for individual distinction at the expense of collective orientations or meaning construction which are also likely to be dimensions of the same process.

A more recent development, sometimes finding productive fusions with popular perspectives in sociological studies of science and technology, focuses on consumption practices and pragmatics. In the classical science and technology studies of objects as actants inspired by ideas of semiotic and technical relationality, the 'material' element has been the subject of much research and theoretical interest often at the expense of the 'culture' aspects. What comes first are the material/technical interlinkages of person and object; the equivalence, interaction and co-productivity of bodies and objects, rather than questions of meaning, narrative and interpretation which co-exist between person and object. In social theory, this focus on 'assemblages of materials' has been associated with actor-network theory, which deals with collapsing the distinction between people and material objects and the formation of object assemblages. To some degree, this is compatible with the most exciting anthropological work in the tradition of Mauss, Durkheim and Gell, but in sociology it has been used most frequently in relation to technological assemblages and engagements, and indeed has mostly eschewed questions of human motivations and meanings. It has also been represented in emerging studies of the 'practices' of consumption (Dant 2008; Warde 2005; Watson 2008; Watson and Shove 2008). Here too, though coordinated networks of people and things are given priority in organising social life, questions tend to reside with materiality and material networks more than actual consumption practice, leaving significant cultural elements relatively unaddressed. To some, this focus on practice seems productive because it does not presume or speculate about cultural categories, meaning or symbolism but identifies how 'consumption occurs within and for the sake of practices' (Warde 2005: 145). The appeal of attending to such consumption practices seems to be that they are universal, habitual and continually unfolding within interrelated networks of other practices and hence have an apparent recursive material quality. But, this view also offers a rather restricted and truncated account of consumption, largely leaving out questions of cultural complexity, dialogic communication between people and objects, interpretation and meaning. In short, the risk with the 'practices' approach is that we develop thin accounts attendant to systems of coordinated behaviours and lose much of the cultural context that could afford us a stronger theory of consumption.

Where might Winnicott's ideas help? It is argued here that Winnicott's theory of the transitional object is a useful platform on which to build an account of consumption which is sufficiently based upon materialised sets of practices and is also appropriately emotional and symbolic in scope. Taking some inspiration from Winnicott's ideas, this paper presupposes that to have cultural potency, any object

must have a capacity to unite symbolic, material and social elements, and out of such fusions of utility with symbolic and emotional meaning, social actors engage episodes of 'transitioning' consumer objects through physical and psychological space. Whether this object transitioning process underpins all object engagements is an open question deserving of empirical exploration. At one extreme, we might imagine such material transitioning is the basis of many types of consumption. More pragmatically, we might expect particular objects to have relevance to the Winnicott model, with the range of objects structured spatio-temporally, and probably even by traditional social variables like age, gender or social class. The question of how this process might work is addressed in this paper.

*Desire and lack: core problems in consumption theory*

Following Knorr Cetina's (2001) theoretical work on epistemic objects, consumption is characterised as a series of continuously unfolding, materialized exchanges with objects wherein chains of wanting are performatively constructed from emergent lacks, which themselves are recursively formed within the structures of these chains. There are other significant works within consumption studies offering substantial and important pointers that are broadly in line with the approach developed here, notably Campbell and Baudrillard in the sociological tradition and McCracken in the field of cultural anthropology. Although each are acknowledged as important works within the field of consumption studies, the fundamental questions they ask about the development of a consumerist ethic have gone relatively undeveloped. Of course, none develop the idea of a transitional object in the way proposed in this paper, but because they emphasise the 'idea' of the commodity, and the productivity of desires centred on consumer objects, they are broadly consistent with the argument pursued here and for this reason it is worthwhile examining their arguments.

The allusion to an object-centred dialectic of lack and desire is clear in Baudrillard's structuralist commentary on consumer society, *The System of Objects* (1968), where he points out that people consume the *idea* of an object rather than the thing itself. What motivates people to be object-seekers is the promise of an object to aid self-transformation. Baudrillard's point is that objects, once acquired, eventually and perpetually disappoint – they never really satisfy the deep psychological needs that direct us toward them in the first instance. Consumer capitalism is thus founded upon a psychological lack that is perpetually stimulated, but never satiated. McCracken's (1988) theory of displaced meanings is very similar to Baudrillard's notion of lack. McCracken also postulates a deep psychic motivation for consumption. In his theory, a chronic aspect of psycho-social life is the gap that exists

between the real and ideal; in consumer societies the pursuit of desirable objects is an important resource for making bridges between the real and ideal. Dreaming and fantasizing are important, for it is in this imaginary domain that people come to define and build up their notion of an ideal which is then displaced onto consumer objects. Campbell (1987) takes up this point, giving it an historical dimension. His thesis is that, alongside the bourgeois, rationalist and technical ethic which characterized Weber's theory of capitalist development, there is a romantic, pleasure-seeking, hedonistic spirit which drives modern consumerism. Central to the cultural complex of consumerism is day-dreaming, fantasizing and self-delusion. A major part of consumption is imagination – consumers desire objects because they believe them to offer something novel, empowering or edifying. Thus, people do not have an actual desire for acquisition of objects per se, but the acquisition of 'dreams and the pleasurable dramas which they have already enjoyed in imagination' (Campbell, 1987: 90). As in McCracken's theory, so too for Campbell, purchase simply eventually leads to further lack and disappointment, and the cycle of longing and desire begins again. This idea that consumption is a continual practice, engaged processually, of imaginative engagement with objects is taken much further here via the tradition developed by D.W. Winnicott in order to examine the links and attractions between person, object and culture. If Winnicott's work suggests an answer to the question of why people consume things, it is that humans are 'object-seeking' and that object engagements assist in bridging psychological and cultural imperatives which productively move forward – or 'transition' – embodied feelings of personal efficacy, control and individuality.

#### *Transitional objects and a material sociality*

The central assertion of this paper is that important work originating from psychoanalytic theory, coming under the rubric of object-relations theory, is a potentially fruitful area for new research innovations within object studies and also for consumption studies. The following section outlines some key tenets of the 'object-relations' school of psychoanalytic theory. The first point to make - an area of potential misunderstanding - needs to be clarified. The 'objects' in mainstream object-relations theory are not always or necessarily hard, material things, though they can be. An object within this theoretical tradition could be a person, a part of another person, or indeed an item of material culture. They can be animate or inanimate, human or non-human. For the purpose of this paper, which is concerned with consumer objects, objects are principally defined by their status as commodities and thus their potential to be decommodified through subjectification practices.

In suggesting the application of this tradition of psychoanalytic theory to the study of material culture we can make general use of the theoretical endeavours recently charted by sociologically-oriented psychoanalytic theorist Nancy Chodorow (1999, 2004) who argues the efficacy of paying attention to the internal worlds of fantasy and affect to explain individual experience and action, but not at the expense of cultural complexity. She suggests that all social and cultural experiences are transformed through people's psychic lens: people are historically and socially located, but psychodynamically create a sense of meaning and selfhood. Chodorow's elegant summary of the psychodynamic perspective is instructive for thinking about consumption practices:

People create and experience social processes and cultural meanings psychodynamically - in unconscious, affect-laden, non-linguistic, immediately felt images and fantasies that everyone creates from birth, about self, self and other, body, and the world - as well as linguistically, discursively, in terms of a cultural lexicon. Social processes are given, and they may lead to some patterns of experiencing in common, but this experiencing will be as much affective and non-linguistic as cognitive (Chodorow 2004:26).

Object-relations theory can be considered a sort of modern adaptation of the Freudian psychoanalytic approach (Elliott, 1994; Gomez, 1997). Freud originally used the term 'object' to refer to anything (not necessarily a material object) that a person used in order to satisfy drives. So, in Freud's sense, objects are targets towards which people directed their desire for instinctual satiation. For Freud, these were of two main types: libidinal and aggressive. Object relations theory moves away from the somewhat reductionist approach of Freud's libidinal theory, to an emphasis on the use of objects in establishing relationships for certain types of emotional sustenance, psychological development or needs, and for bridging the inner and outer worlds, personal and cultural spheres. The emphasis in object-relations theory is therefore on fixing upon objects that satisfy key needs. People use certain objects from within their environment to develop, manage and mediate their sense of self, others and the external environment (Gomez, 1997).

Klein (1975) distinguished between part-objects and whole-objects. For example, a parent would be considered a whole-object, while the particular bodily part of the mother's breast would be a part-object. Klein's point is that all human drives become directed or centred on such objects. Once again, the object which affords psychological sustenance and growth need not be a particular material object, though it could be. Thus, within classical versions of object-relations theory, objects

can be people (such as one's mother, or partner) or material things, such as so-called 'transitional objects' with which we form attachments. These objects and a person's relationship with them are incorporated into a sense of self, becoming psychic resources for integrating maturing personhood. For example, children form relationships with toys, which act as transitional objects in the formation of the child's sense of self. As adults, some people form strong relationships with food and alcohol, which are objects used to service or overcome their anxieties or grief. Adults also have a range of special objects, to which they may feel attached: a favourite mug, a photograph, a special item of clothing, a pen, item of jewelry, and so on. So the term 'object' is more broadly inclusive of an understanding how humans form and preserve a sense of self, as well as relationships with others, through forging and maintaining relationships with a variety of material, non-human things.

This tendency to invest objects with power and energy – meanings – may generally be thought of as a process called *cathexis*. A couple of fundamental psychoanalytic processes are at play in all types of human relations with objects (Chodorow 1999:15). The first is *projection*. When we project, we put our own feelings, beliefs, or parts of self into another person, or object. The second is *introjection*, where elements of an object are taken into the self. Thus, there is a *dialectic of transference* of energies at play in people-object relations. On the one hand people *project onto* objects particular meanings, fantasies, desires and emotions, and on the other, objects are being *taken into* the self, used, elaborated, played with and eventually exhausted through a process of cathexis and decathexis. Durkheim highlights such a process clearly in his discussion of the totemic (Durkheim 1915: 230). He points out that objectification allows people to graft onto tangible things feelings and ideas which in turn come to evoke and represent ideas. Sacredness or profaneness is not an intrinsic quality of a thing, but it is added to them (Durkheim 1915: 231). We can see how such theoretical resources can be of use for inquiries into the nature of consumer societies, especially people's desires for particular consumer objects. It suggests that people seek objects in order to cultivate and meet desires and needs, and that particular objects become collectively valued within particular cultural contexts and networks because they are invested with meanings that tap into these desires, needs and fantasies (Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Holt, 2004; Illouz, 1997, 2009). A powerful sacred object is not only one that is institutionally valued – such as a piece of high art in a museum – but can exist in any social field, and become so endowed with sacred qualities by social actors who reach collective agreements about its value (Kopytoff, 1986). No object, whatever size or monetary cost, is immune. In realising this, such approaches take us away from

emphases on the social and cultural dynamics of social communication, honour and status, fashionability and cultural capital. Yet, they allow us to get to the core of questions of human desire for objects in consumer culture, complementing the focus on traditional sociological questions of consumption, status and social difference. Winnicott's specific contribution to object-relations theory is elaborated below.

*Winnicott's 'Playing and Reality': object relations and the cultural space*

DW Winnicott's (1953:1) elucidation of the idea of the 'transitional object' is an important early statement in object-relations theory that has relevance for understanding person-object relations within consumption studies. Working in paediatrics and psychoanalysis, Winnicott noted that around the second half of their first year infants become fond of holding and playing with objects. He specifically suggested many infants become attached to dolls, but the repertoire of objects probably extends further than this, to whatever is within their reach. These objects become special objects for the infant, perhaps even objects to which the infant may appear 'addicted'. Winnicott argues that it is not just that the infant seeks oral excitement and pleasure from fondling objects, or that fondling diminishes an infant's anxiety, but the object they attach to offers deeper psychological gratification around the psychic satisfaction of learning the contours of self, and others, being able to separate self and body from other, seeking comfort and learning permanency and trust. This makes engagements with material objects ineradicably a cultural phenomena, for the object becomes a material resource that affords the infant the chance to bridge inner and outer worlds, self and other. Winnicott says that engagements with objects create 'potential spaces', which are a type of intermediate space somewhere between subject and object. The most interesting and potentially profitable aspect of Winnicott's theory is this idea of a 'third space'. This space is neither the individual subject, nor the external object environment; neither inner nor outer, self nor material thing, but the spaces of creativity, play and productive imagination that are created when both meet. The third space is often taken to represent a cultural space because it unites the human subject with the external environment via a transitional object. In the process of the human subject using the object and in turn projecting emotional energy onto the object, a type of transaction is established which charges, and changes, both subject and object. It is in the third space that desires come to be materially expressed and transitioned. Winnicott says that potential space is at 'the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control' (Winnicott 1953:100). Because it partakes of both the subject and their objective, external environment, yet

also builds upon both, the transitional space represents a space where imagination meets the concrete and what develops is a product of the unity of both. Within this space, objects are 'imaginatively elaborated', or invested with meaning through practice (Winnicott 1953:101). What results is a temporary space of cultural possibility – a fusion of person with thing, the product of which is greater than the sum of its parts and which forms the basis of future social action.

According to Winnicott's theory, such playing with objects and the productive spaces created assists in the development of a 'personal pattern' through the infant's capacity to recognise the object as '*not-me*'. This is an important realisation, for it permits the infant to recognise the boundaries or borders of their self through handling/sucking/throwing the object. It also confirms to the infant that they can manipulate their environment (for pleasure, comfort and satisfaction), and that they are indebted to others by forging bonds of reciprocity and learned manners (for example, through the way parents may encourage an infant to say 'ta' after accepting an object). The object therefore assists in teaching the child important lessons. Perhaps most importantly, it prepares the ground within human actors for object-seeking patterns in later life.

What characterises a transitional object? Winnicott says that transitional objects may be just as – or more - important than relationships with other people. Furthermore, the transitional object successfully affords separation from others, and people use them often in ritual ways to establish successful patterns of behaviour, such as getting to sleep, easing anxiety or overcoming fatigue. In this sense, such objects have the capacity to soothe and smooth social relations. Transitional objects have a couple of important characteristics. Such objects: (i) have a sensual quality, they can be smelt, touched, heard or tasted and this quality becomes an important feature of their status – holding, possessing and sensing are crucial ways into these object relationships; and, (ii) they have a tactile and a textual quality; essentially, an aesthetic surface with particular qualities linked to features of hardness of softness, smoothness and roughness, which invite or eschew touching.

#### *Extending Winnicott into consumption theory: objects and self-transformation*

Bollas's (1978, 1987) work represents an important generalising development of Winnicott's idea of the transitional object. Aligned with object-relations psychoanalysis, Bollas's psychoanalytic perspective seeks to isolate the traces of early object-seeking patterns in the psychological structures people inhabit in later life. Thus, early object interactions are telling for patterns of object-attachment in later life. Crucially, Bollas (1978) introduces a fundamental shift in terminology. Whereas

Winnicott (1957) talked about transitional objects, Bollas prefers the term 'transformational object'. Bollas associates such an object with a capacity for self-transformation, whether objects are used in early childhood or indeed in later life. For Bollas, the unique aspect of the objects Winnicott isolated where that they are experienced not just as an object, but a process. That is, any engagement with an object alters both the subject and object and this is best thought of as being transformational in character, emphasizing its processual capacity and productive dimensions. Bollas also suggests that the patterns of object engagement experienced in early childhood carry over into adult life. Human beings learn very early in their lives that external things have a capacity to alter one's self-experience. Therefore, it is the deeply experienced feeling of self-transformation that is remembered and which guides object-seeking later into life, rather than any feature of the object that might be associated with utility. There is no necessary relationship between the physical qualities of an object and the meanings attached. What matters are the fundamental promises made by an object to aid self-transformation. Early memories of object-relations experiences are retained through adulthood, not in any direct way, but very deeply and existentially. Adults do not necessarily remember every important object of their childhood, but the feeling of intensely satisfying and transformational object attachments do remain. The key aspect of the transitional object which is retained is thus its association with a *promise of self-transformation* – a productive alteration of a person's physical and mental state. In later life, any object is desired not for its capacity to do assist in doing something in particular – to have a particular utility - but for its perceived capacity to afford self-change as an 'enviro-somatic transformer of the subject' (Winnicott 1978: 98). The object is thus a signifier of transformation. Bollas (1987:14) comments: 'in adult life, the quest is not to possess the object; rather the object is pursued in order to surrender to it as a medium that alters the self'.

Bollas's (1987) development of Winnicott's idea of the transitional object allows us to draw out the implications of his approach for understanding object-relations in consumer society. Consuming things – or searching for them – becomes a search for a type of promise to be transformed by engagements with objects. This search therefore becomes a search for the sacred object – for that which allows us to transcend the profane, everyday or prosaic. As much as the possession of the thing, the pleasure comes in the search, the anticipation. Bollas, like Campbell (1987), suggests that the pleasure derived during the consumption process is more about the anticipation of being transformed. In turn, the subject is inspired to treat such transformative objects as reverential, according them privileged, sacred status.

Object-seeking offers the individual an opportunity to use the object – and the search for it - as a resource for fantasising, hoping, dreaming of potency or virtuosity, and the acquisition of vision. The irony here is of course that the most prosaic or mundane thing can be seen to promise transformation. The magical element of everyday consumption is that the most banal, emptied-out, seemingly trivial thing can be a most powerful container of cultural values and ideologies. As Silverstone (1993) argued in his important paper on the idea of the television as a transitional object: culture is made by individuals within environments and with things that are not often of their own making, suggesting the way in which people creatively make use of their surroundings. Bollas says that this imaginative engagement with the object creates a sense of ‘fusion’ between person and thing (1987:16). He identifies the desire to hold sacred objects as a product of memory of early childhood experiences, which people are reminded of and know, but can never rationally and cognitively apprehend in the present. Object-seeking in adulthood thus becomes the search for transformational experiences of the past, where the new object is identified as a being a potentially powerful agent for self-transcendence.

Bollas makes the case that this type of deep rapport between subject and object is best understood as an aesthetic experience in the sense that it is manifested in practice and through the sensuous surfaces of objects (see also Alexander, 2008). It is at this point that we must seek to extend the fundamental tenets of object-relations theory into aesthetics. Bollas understands the aesthetic experience with the help of Krieger’s (1976) work, and defines it as an experience of ‘rapt, intransitive attention’ (Krieger 1976:32) between person and object. It is a type of ‘spell’ which holds person and object in symmetry and solitude. In this experience of deep rapport, the person is provided with a feeling of fitting with an object and feeling ‘at one’. Bollas notes that this type of experience is often non-verbal, given its’ primordial location in early childhood experiences, and he argues that such experiences are difficult for even adult subjects to articulate precisely because they are reminders of past instances of integration and transformation between subject and object through the sensuous qualities of objects. For this reason, aesthetic experiences are desired for their capacity to surprise, challenge, provoke and transform, but they must do so through non-verbal means – aesthetic moments are not thought, but felt. Furthermore, such moments are characterized by such intensity of feelings of awe and the sacred that subjects can be led into a lifelong quest for some type of reacquaintance or duplication of the earlier aesthetic moment. In Bollas’ scheme, the aesthetic moment is thus part of a larger human search for meaning, characterized by

people aspiring this type of 'matching' between subject and object that promises metamorphoses of the self:

'The christian may go to church and there hope to find traces of his experience, the naturalist may look for another sighting of the rarest of birds that creates for him a moment of sudden awe, and the romantic poet walk his landscape hoping for a spot in time, a suspended moment when self and object feel reciprocally enhancing and mutually informative' (Bollas (1987: 31).

Krieger (1976) makes a schematic distinction between cognitive, moral and aesthetic responses to objects, though he points out that in practice distinguishing between these is complex and indeed impossible. Like Bollas, Krieger identifies an aesthetic experience as characterized by the shutting off of other domains of judgement in favour of the purely aesthetic (i.e. the capacity to give pleasure). It is this ability to ignore the outside, to bracket or go beyond it, that defines the aesthetic moment. Immersion in an object 'for its own sake' is the key element, which gives way to the feeling of being in unison with an object. This involves a type of visual and imaginative play:

'What would characterise the experience as aesthetic rather than either cognitive or moral would be its self-sufficiency, its capacity to trap us within itself, to keep us from moving beyond it to further knowledge or to practical effects....To "use" the object would be, aesthetically, to abuse it: instead of using it, we must love it, and loving it is enough – provided, of course, it is a disinterested love' (Krieger 1976: 11).

Krieger goes on to point out that the aesthetic experience is defined by an engagement with the object which is characterized by an intense experience of fusion with things, associated with a type of play with the object:

'to the degree an experience is functioning in the aesthetic mode, we find ourselves locked within it, freely and yet in a controlled way playing among its surfaces and its depths' (Krieger 1976: 12).

This notion of 'playing' with and within an object is important, and should remind us of Winnicott's (1953) original insight into the nature of object play. Alexander (2008) develops a similar point in his discussion of iconic experience and viewing Alberto Giacometti's sculpture 'Standing Woman'. Alexander's goal is ambitious in that it relates to a general theoretical approach in sociology which gives priority to cultural experience, and in this case, the aesthetic

component of such experience. Moreover, Alexander goes into greater depth interrogating into the aesthetic terrain of the sculpture and the experience of a viewer who stands before it, and emphasises features such as surface and depth, closeness and distance, and how these play out in the interpretation of the object. His approach and insights are useful pointers to a new way of thinking about the relationship between people and many other types of objects. Alexander argues that it is through these aesthetic techniques that the sculptor Giacometti draws the viewer into the object, affording access to the object's iconic meaning. The surface appearance of Giacometti's object is its expressive feature that is in turn 'felt' by the viewer. The object becomes a universal symbol, a 'collective representation' that draws us 'to the heart of the world' (Alexander, 2008:6). In developing his argument, Alexander advances a useful relational model for understanding how such feelings of material attachment work. He proposes that what makes an object iconic is the way it affords movement from surface to depth – a form of 'immersion'. Immersion involves a dual process: one called 'subjectification' where people are able to seemingly draw an object into themselves, transforming it from object to subject, and allowing it to take on a life whereby one no longer sees the object itself, but 'oneself, one's projections, one's convictions and beliefs' (Alexander, 2008: 7). Simultaneously, through a process called 'materialization', a person is drawn into an object, effectively becoming it, or what it is seen to stand for. Via immersion, what exists is not an object, nor a person, but a oneness of material and human, united by an emotional – rather than merely mechanical - connection. Such connections with material objects are the basis for the performance and learning of cultural norms and discourses, becoming the basis for collective life through the use of typifications and iconic representations. It is this productive space between person and object where matters of desire, contemplation, emotion, materiality pragmatics and performance come to be realised, and in this transitioning process new lacks emerge urging the need for further objectual engagements.

### *Discussion and conclusion*

This paper began with the assertion that sociological research into consumption has tended to focus on the social 'work' that consumption does. In attending to these matters, sociological theories of consumption generally tend to focus on the effects and outcomes of consumption, rather than deep motivations and practices. While this focus on communication and status has clearly been a valuable and important

tradition of research, this paper has argued that focusing more closely on the nature and qualities of person-object relationships is an important way of complementing such approaches. This line of argument is consistent with the material culture studies tradition as it has developed in the last couple of decades. This paper's contribution has been to extend this body of work through the application of research in object-relations theory, making the case for a model that is able to conceptualise exchanges of emotional energy which define moments of connection between people and things. Its goal has been to suggest the usefulness of such approaches in explaining consumption, rather than dwell on the psychological or indeed the psychoanalytic dimensions of the process.

There are numerous positive distinguishing features of Winnicott's idea of transitional objects which can make a difference in consumption studies. Firstly, Winnicott's work in the field of child psychiatry shows that engagements between humans and non-humans are vital to human development. As he developed his theory, this was especially the case in the early years of childhood, but Winnicott realised this must also be true for all stages of the life cycle. Secondly, Winnicott understood that all engagements with objects are creative. They may not necessarily be judged as positive, ethical or valuable by all people, but they are always constructive in one way or another. Thirdly, engagements between humans and non-humans create a transitional or third space, which Winnicott understood as an intermediate area between the subject and object and which was a space of imaginative elaboration, extension - and perhaps even a space of 'reflexivity' - in that it drew on existing structures, material and symbolic, as the basis for the performance of social action. In advancing his theory, Winnicott manages to decenter dualisms between objects and subjects. The transitional space between subject and object is what matters; a space between subject and object, it comes into contact with both, separating each, but belonging no less to one than another. This space is a space of experimentation, play and imaginative action where pragmatics and imagination must work in unison. Within it, desires are materially engaged and from it, new lacks emerge. It is argued that Winnicott's model thus neither reduces person-object interactions to social structure, to a mechanical series of practices, to the social action motives of status and distinction, nor to the internal workings of an individual's psyche. With his emphasis on engagements with objects which are both pragmatically and imaginatively realized, Winnicott starts with the individual but opens up the idea of the cultural space generated from such engagements; person-object interaction always bridges inner and outer worlds, self and culture.

If this is a useful way of theorizing some types of consumption, the question of how to progress the idea into an empirical program is worthwhile considering. A range of candidate objects come to mind as potential objects for research, including things such as I-pods and mobile telephones, sneakers and skateboards, objects used in households renovations such as ovens or large-screen televisions. Similarly, there are more mundane consumer objects that are in some way 'transitioned' in the household: books, newspapers and magazines that are read and put aside, containers of food and drink that are emptied, clothes and toys that are used for a period, worn out, or just forgotten about, and a wide range of paper and hygienic products (Gregson, 2006). Of course, we might expect to find a range of transitional objects in people's lives, and that these objects might have their own trajectories or careers that bring them into and out of prominence. Already, a small cache of papers have emerged which apply the concept of the transitional objects. Most important, perhaps, is the work of Roger Silverstone (1993) on the television as a persistent media object within most homes which serves a significant transitioning function related to rituals, routines, spatial and temporal demarcations and the emotional textures of daily life. The concept has also received some attention in contemporary youth studies: Ribak (2009) on the mobile telephone as a material expression and mediator of the parent-child relationship, Russell and Tyler (2005) on the mediation practices of teenage girls in relation to flows of gendered consumer culture, and Waerdahl (2005) on the way items of consumer material culture become important for navigating and transitioning aspects of peer acceptance and sociability during teenage years. As well as being relevant to various developmental life phases, it might be the case that objects might help to transition daily activities and afford interaction and reflection in shorter time cycles. Detailed empirical work, using creative survey methods or ethnographies, would reveal these patterns. As noted earlier, Winnicott's ideas would seem to apply to some types of consumption more than others. It may be imagined that types of consumption such as routine supermarket provisioning or taking public transport might not fit so well with his model, though even in the former case ideals and desires relating to diet, wellbeing or kinship can influence shopping excursions (Miller 1997). Where Winnicott's model does seem most promising is in explaining the consumerist ethic that desires new, novel, special or rare goods for their capacity to transform the self. Winnicott suggests that such goods have the capacity to unite subject and object in a transitional space that constitutes materially grounded social action. Moreover, his thesis may offer opportunities to pay closer attention to both emotion and embodied action in consumption settings. By suggesting that such searches are about being reacquainted with earlier, satisfying

bonds with objects psychoanalytic theory takes this bonding process back to very early childhood and parenting, but important relationships with objects continue to stretch much further than that and indeed may characterize the lifecycle.

Indeed, on a more ambitious and arcane level, we might even suggest that consumer capitalism rests upon offering continuous opportunities for such creative, emotional engagements with objects based upon the dynamic of abundance and lack. In his work on the body and consumer desire, Falk (1994: 144) makes the connection between desire and lack transparent, and 'outlines the general principle of "consumer society" as a supplement-generator, as an apparatus creating *simultaneously* both addition and subtraction, both surfeit and deficit, both superfluity and lack'. The play of objects in the Winnicottian sense involves the materialization of desire and indeed a temporary solution to the problem of desire, but one which is exhausted by multiple episodes of use, hence creating a new lack which calls for further transitioning experiences. Using the work of Knorr Cetina (2001) on objectual practices, it is useful to think about transitional objects as having an 'unfolding' character. Theorising from a Lacanian perspective in the field of scientific practices, Knorr Cetina (2001) suggests that experts chronically tend to see insufficiencies and inadequacies in their work. This partiality constitutes a type of 'lack' that stimulates, structures and perpetuates further object-oriented practice. There is a continual unfolding pattern of practice, knowledge and lack, as objects of knowledge structure the need to find further objects. Objects thus provide their own justification for a continuation of 'chains of wanting' – they signify, but in an incomplete way and ultimately misrepresent in that they fail to fully represent the thing they supposedly articulate. Epistemic objects thus end up reiterating lack or emptiness, rather than eliminating it, and in the process they call forth the need for further objects. Of course, we can see how analogous chains of wanting and lack exist within consumer societies. Commodity-rich, semiotically flooded consumer societies provide the inherent structural materials for creating such continuing chains of wanting. Objects promise transformation and ecstatic engagement and indeed they can provide such things. But ultimately objects point beyond themselves, to another lack. The result is a continuous sequence of absences, unfolding structures which desire further objectual engagements: objects creating the need for further objects. I am not suggesting that such chains of object wanting are the basis of each and every type of consumption practice, or that people are not ever aware of, or reflexive, about such patterns. However, they surely do characterise the restlessness of spirit of the modern consumerist ethic.

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