

Understanding Material Culture, Ian Woodward, 2007, Sage

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There have been a number of attempts to write general textbooks on material culture. Clearly I form one part of a particular grouping within UCL anthropology that has itself produced a good deal of material of this kind. So for me it is interesting and refreshing to also find works that come from different positions and perspectives. Having said that, there have been others I have not been very impressed by. But I would recommend this new textbook by Ian Woodward. It is a book which keeps a balance between what might be expected of a textbook, trying to be conscientious and fair to all positions and act simply to synthesise, and also acts as a book with its own agenda that is seeking to promote a particular approach of the authors choosing.

It is clearly composed, with guidelines setting out what it intends and what it has achieved for each chapter. It starts with a fairly gentle introduction to the cultural nature of objects, and a reasonable history of the development of this inter-disciplinary concern. Chapter three provides a concise and conventional coverage of Marxist arguments, and means that material culture is initially largely identified with commodities. As such other branches of material culture studies, such as museums and anthropology, may feel relatively neglected. Although, at least methodologically, they might find chapter four's coverage of structuralism quite useful for teaching. While chapter five has a strong culturalist agenda focusing on the anthropological contribution, with perhaps more on Durkheim than I might have expected. This is not balanced by any anti-Durkheimian perspective such as Latour, who is completely absent.

The next section is called objects in action. Chapter six is mainly concerned with issues of distinction and social status, while chapter seven is directed at the role of objects in respect to identity. Since this is intended as a textbook, it is actually no bad thing that the coverage to this point remains conservative and balanced. There is perhaps a bit more social psychology in chapter

seven than might have been found in some social science. To some degree a more social orientation in chapter six is balanced with this more individual orientation in chapter seven. Chapter eight is probably the most original contribution, setting out a route from more conventional debates to what seems to be the author's own perspective. This centres on issues of narrative and performance and follows fairly smoothly from the social psychology of the previous chapter. These are seen as the frames within which objects are recognised and make sense for people. This is also used as an excuse to bring in the home as a case study. It takes us back to methodological and epistemological issues of how we constitute our findings, with as much an emphasis upon language as upon objects. As it happens I don't much agree with the arguments, or find them that persuasive, but that's just one person's opinion. I would still welcome them as an original and different approach. It seems quite fair that the author, having done a patient treatment of everyone else, should be allowed some advocacy for the kinds of approaches in the final two chapters which I assume are those he most favours. Overall then I think this book deserves its niche, both as a textbook covering long standing debates and discussions, but also as an entry point to a particular perspective. It comes about as close as anything I have seen to a genuine standard textbook, that tries to transcend particular disciplines.