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This essay will investigate why individuals become attached to objects and how personal belongings tell and hold a story. To help understand why individuals form an attachment to objects, the theories of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Donald Winnicott, and Jonathan Chapman will be discussed. This will be followed by looking at key artists that explore the theme of 'object attachment.' The key artists being Robert Therrien and Katherine Jones. Finally, the essay will conclude with how these themes influence my practice.

Attachments are mental bonds which connect us to other forms of life, Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim who wrote *Consumer-Product Attachment* explain what consumer product attachment is "consumer-product attachment as the strength of the emotional bond a consumer experiences with a durable product. Consumer-product attachment implies the existence of an emotional tie between a person and an object" (Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008, p.1). The connections we make in life are huge to our identity, relationships and the consumer world. Making attachments is a primitive instinct, since birth infants attach themselves to 'mother.' The 'mother' being the one most likely to feed and provide everything a child needs. Primitive instincts like this come from the unconscious. To understand why these attachments are made to objects, the way that consciousness works will be discussed.

Sigmund Freud, also known as the father of psychoanalysis, was the first to look into consciousness and influenced many other theories, such as the Mirror stage and *Objet petit a* by Jacques Lacan. Freud explored the unconscious bond between mother and child, and how these primary instinct influences the rest of the child's life. Freud's main theory was that the human psyche consisted of three parts the id, ego, and superego, all appearing at various stages in a human's life. These three parts also go alongside the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. In *General psychological theory* (1997) Freud described his findings on how they interact, "We have found a preconscious activity passing into consciousness with no difficulty,

and an unconscious activity which remains so and seems to be cut off from consciousness” (Freud, 1997, p.53). He found the unconscious is unable to communicate directly with the conscious. He also described them as an iceberg, the conscious being fully aware of everything above water, the preconscious as anything that has the potential to be brought to the conscious mind, slightly underwater but still visible. And finally, the unconscious anything that individuals are not aware of, not visible underwater. Every infant starts their life solely with their id. The id is a part of the unconscious acting on instinctive drives. Having a carer around, the needs for the individual are met. However, the ego develops when the infant’s needs are not met. The ego is conscious, rational thinking and keeping an individual substantiated and aware. Freud compared the id to a horse and ego to the rider “the id it is like a man on horseback... that the rider tries to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces.” (Freud, 1997, p.25) Freud made this comparison to help explain that without the ego the id becomes chaotic. The superego, however, is the last to emerge, the superego develops from learning parental and social rules, becoming the moral guide. The superego influences the ego to become the ideal self, choosing right from wrong and feeling guilt. They all interact with each other to influence personality and behaviour. These ideas, however, are now seen to be outdated compared to French Philosopher Jacques Lacan’s theories on the subject who links consciousness to desire.

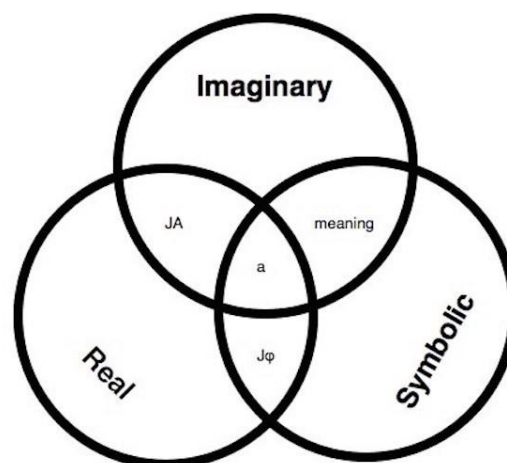


Figure 1

Lacan began using Freud's teachings to propose the latest ideas about identity, the mirror stage, the three orders of consciousness and *Objet petit a*. The mirror stage is the starting point in every infant's life usually around 6-18 months when they recognise themselves in the mirror. This recognition leads to the realisation of not only one's self but others around them (Chapman, 2008, p.49). From this, he then put forward a new conclusion on the three orders of consciousness. Like Freud, he explained these are the three main moments in an individual's life: the imaginary, symbolic and the real. The imaginary develops from the mirror stage and creates the "ideal-I," our fantasies and desires, the symbolic is what is made possible by society. These two components work together to form people's perception of reality, and not to be mistaken for the real. The real is the unconscious, and only when trauma is faced, the truth of reality can be seen. Lacan once described these three as interconnecting rings as Philippe Julien states in *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud* (see figure 1) "The knot below is "Borromean" for this reason: if any one of the three rings is cut, the other two also come undone." (Julien, 1994, p.176). The registers are to be known in the Borromean knot as equals, each as important as the other and without one the others do not exist. In the centre of this knot is the '*Objet petit a*,' as the dictionary of critical theory states most called the object cause of desire. The 'a' (autre) stands for the 'other.' (Buchanan, 2018) When an individual realises the other, they become aware of their inner void and begin to desire. The object cause of desire is something which can never be obtained, the 'lack'. These objects of desire disguise themselves as the cause of desire, trying to satisfy their lack. Once they obtain these objects, their symbolic feelings now tether them to their personal belongings. Unconsciously, a personal bond is then created with each item, restraining the individual from now losing this item because, once again, they will feel the lack. This is the underlining starting point of why people begin attaching themselves to intimate objects.

The first object attachment begins in early childhood. This first object is called 'traditional object' and was introduced by Donald Winnicott, another writer on psychoanalysis. Winnicott explains why the object is obtained in the first place, "The object represents the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate" (Winnicott, 1991, p.14-15). The traditional object is important as it is the first transition from mother to object. The infant is influenced

by the 'other' most likely father, him having something which the infant does not. The object, most likely to be soft, holds special value to the infant, once this attachment begins the child claims rights over it. The infant passionately loves the object, taking it everywhere and relying on it to relieve anxiety. This object is particularly important to emotional development, it is the beginning of memory, empathy, and creativity. The 'other' is a major influence on our desires. As humans grow our ego and superego develop, and desires become more conscious. The ideal-I is influenced by society, they begin learning to desire from others, which is very important in consumer sales. Lacan theorised that 'man's desire is the desire of the other' they always desire something that they do not have, our desires are never really our own because humans are social beings and live together in society.

This brings me to the next level of object attachment in the modern world, the consumption of goods. Johnathan Chapman is a huge developer in the understanding of object attachments, looking at the theoretical frameworks of durable design and meaning. In his book, *Emotionally Durable Design* Chapman explains how design should be improved by looking into the emotional attachments humans make with objects. He states in this book, "It is therefore imperative that designers endeavour to weave greater degrees of intricacy amongst the layers of products to ensure the sustainability of their meaning." (Chapman, 2005, p.37), In the design industry deeper meanings must be implicated to get products the most recognition, consumers are more attracted to products that signify meaning. Society strives to find things which represent themselves, he also wrote "Consumers deploy objects to designate their particular being as separate from that of society, and the process of owning objects and engaging with material culture enables this vital self-defining process to occur" (Chapman, 2005, p.181), In modern society individuality is also attempted, as the ideal self is sought out, more and more possessions begin to be obtained, and each item that's acquired extends this self-identity. Each individual and the others around them are more enlightened about what they like and dislike, goals and achievements are. Using these belongings to interact with one another, creating bonds through similarities, and exchanging gifts becomes more meaningful. The longevity of the items increases as emotional attachments are formed, and the resistance to parting with the objects becomes harder. Losing any emotionally attached belonging would feel like losing a part of ourselves.



Figure 2



Figure 3

An artist who explores emotional connections with objects is Robert Therrien. Therrien likes to play with scale and dramatize certain meanings, exploring the physical and emotional aspects of day-to-day life. Looking at his piece entitled *No Title (Stacked Plates)* (see figure 2), he exaggerates the mountain of stacked plates to explain their impact on us. The stacked plates are scaled up perfectly to not overdo the meaning but yet to immerse the audience into feeling they're towering over them as if they own them. This is very impactful as everybody can identify with this piece, recalling their own experiences whether they may be good or bad. Objects are like art in a way that personal experiences control how we see and feel towards them. Chapman mentions how experiences should be left to the audience's own impressions, "Narrative experiences must not be over-programmed; spontaneous

occurrences create the magic between the subject and the object” (Chapman, 2005, p.117). Here he is trying to explain that the most effective form of personal experience comes at the most arbitrary moments, when these experiences do form, they are the most powerful and meaningful. Therrien does this perfectly, using familiar objects to discover object meanings.

Humans unintentionally make connections all throughout their life, and many a time these attachments can become addictive and are sought out. When our lack is filled we gain stimulation, this stimulation can be very comforting. As Freud mentions

“when the object becomes a source of pleasurable feelings, a motor tendency is set up which strives to bring the object near to and incorporate it into the ego; we then speak of the “attraction” exercised by the pleasure-giving object, and say that we “love” that object.” (Freud, 1997, p90)

Explaining that once the item provides pleasure, unconsciously humans begin to increase their affection for the object. This overload of emotion can cause us to become obsessed, the seeking for constant stimulation gets wrapped up in searching for and collecting objects. Therrien also uses found objects to investigate the meaning of objects, delving into emotional connections, and a sense of nostalgia (see figure 3). The ‘*Red Room*’ is a display of a cupboard which was once a part of his home, filled with 888 red objects all collected over a seven-year span. He started collecting red objects when he was sent a variety of red plastics, the room stores a range of items all tightly packed to merge together creating a “monochrome painting” (Tate, N.D). Having a vast amount of these red objects the viewer can easily see how humans can become fixated on something, and then taking over our lives. By placing random objects next to each other, magic is formed, generating new connections, and sparking old feelings. An image of the stacked plates is also seen placed on the cover of a book. Displaying these objects in a tight cupboard makes the audience feel at home, as Therrien mentioned to the Tate “imagine that a family might live here: a father, a mother, and two children, all with red hair, of course”. ( Tate, N.D) That even though most of these objects are personal to Therrien, as a viewer they can also make their own connections to them.



Figure 4

A maker that influences me is Katherine Jones an artist and architect from Cardiff. Jones loves to help people connect to places through her art. Her memory boxes (see fig 4) began when she went travelling, collecting many treasures along the way, which needed a new home. This way of displaying her valuables evoked many fond memories, resulting in finding a perfect new addition to her work on connecting people to places, and now to objects and memories. Jones makes bespoke memory boxes of all different themes, from bereavement to nature, crafting cherished possessions into beautiful, personal artworks. Memories were found to be the most powerful reason for product attachment in a study by Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim “the extent to which a product evoked memories was positively related to the degree of product attachment.” (Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008, p.6) The longer the item is owned the more experiences and memories are associated with it, these memories are the main reason society holds onto belongings. Human belongings are the only physical thing to link us to the past and people, they transcend time longer than anything. Therefore keeping loved ones’ belongings when they die, is a way to hold onto their spirit and carry on their legacy.



Figure 5

In my own practice, I work a lot with found objects giving them a new life and story to tell. (see figure 5) I like using found objects as there is always a story told by them, exploring the connection and relationships I can make with other materials and objects is exciting. In this way, I can give the objects a new means to live, extending their story and lifespan. As a maker, I can create my own story's through objects and art, to connect to my audience and give them a new enlightening experience. I am currently exploring how old objects like keys carry a memory and meaning, and how we are unable to part with such items even though they serve no function to us anymore, they are the only way to hold onto the past. Chapman mentions how time is the true beauty of an object "To avoid such wasteful obsolescence, products must mutually evolve alongside users, sustaining value by revealing their true beauty only through the slow passing of time" (Chapman, 2008, p.48). He is explaining that objects should and can evolve with us becoming more precious to us, waste of products is very upsetting, as a maker there is always new life to give. As a designer/maker, the customer is almost the most essential thing, finding and fulfilling the needs of the consumer is very important. To be successful in the modern world finding what is popular is important, targeting the right customers with the right product is make or break.

To conclude, consciousness is a powerful thing which we still do not fully understand. There are many workings at play which influence and control our behaviours and thoughts. Making bonds with inanimate objects is an unconscious essential thing we participate in constantly, it is vital to making interpersonal connections, finding yourself and experiencing life. Objects

are just physical things, but it is the personal attachments we make to them which make them special and evoke these powerful emotions and memories. In the practice of design making impactful products for your customers is crucial to being successful. Storytelling and making experiences are what consumers want, placing emotion into your pieces is going to push your product further.

### Figures

Figure 1. *Borromean knot*. Available at: <https://thedangerousmaybe.medium.com/lacans-borromean-knot-and-the-object-cause-of-desire-3fd580df80b> (Accessed: 2 January 2023)

Figure 2. Therrien, R. (2010) *No Title (Stacked Plates)*. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/robert-therrien-2312/robert-therrien-objects-and-stories#:~:text=Robert%20Therrien's%20installation%20RED%20ROOM,sent%20samples%20of%20red%20plastics>. (Accessed: 3 January 2023)

Figure 3. Therrien, R. (200) *RED ROOM*. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/robert-therrien-2312/robert-therrien-objects-and-stories#:~:text=Robert%20Therrien's%20installation%20RED%20ROOM,sent%20samples%20of%20red%20plastics>. (Accessed: 3 January 2023)

Figure 4. Jones, K. (N.D) *Memory Boxes*. Available at: <https://www.katherinemgiones.com/about.html> (Accessed: 3 January 2023)

Figure 5. Baldwin, T. (2022) *Form and Structure final piece*

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