

# “Things Don’t Like Me”: The Material World & Why It Matters



We all have a contentious relationship with our material reality. The blankets are tangled, the roads are icy, the colors of the walls are wrong, the sun is too hot, the universe is too big. Once our basic needs are met, why do we continue to adapt, transform, and refine our physical environment? Why and how do human beings invest objects with meaning – and at what cost to others? Drawing upon the insights of scholars from such fields as history, literature, anthropology, visual art, architecture, and material culture studies, we will seek answers to these questions. We will read literary texts and analyze how the authors reflect as well as imagine material reality, and how they deploy concrete objects to create meaning in their work.

Topics will include:

- Inanimate objects that challenge the distinction between animate and inanimate
- The body on the boundary between “person” and “thing”
- Objects of desire and the commodity fetish
- Sacred objects
- Monuments and museums as embodiments of material memory and catalysts for controversy
- Glass and the transformation of vision
- Clothing as identity, convention, and second skin
- Food and its multiple cultural meanings



The course will consist of mini-lectures, class discussion, and oral presentations. We will also have a field trip to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Class meets Tuesday and Thursday, 10:10-11:40 in Humanities 213.