



Does it spark joy? Marie Kondo, Raymond Williams, and the Structures of Feeling of Contemporary Material Crisis

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Crisis, what Crisis?

Fashions and crises can create, at least occasionally, a sustained ‘presentist’ moment in that they demarcate the contemporary from both a by-gone past and a prospective future: on the one hand, the out-of-date, the no-longer-fashionable, the nostalgic good old days of supposedly lost regularity and normality, and, on the other, the yet-to-come better days, the always already new, and the innovative. Both, then, are crucial for critical observations of the present; the more so when crises become fashionable, when crises are en vogue – and in *Vogue*.

On January 15, 2018, the renowned fashion and lifestyle magazine *Vogue* published a list of “7 nonfiction books that will change your life” on its website – and thus right on time to inspire and support its readers’ new year’s resolutions. The list was compiled by *Vogue.com*’s culture writer Bridget Read, who admonishes her readers to “remember that mental health, mindfulness, and intention should be tended to just as much as your winter skin, or your beach body”. Read’s advice, however, is less concerned with, say, improving mental resilience, how to prepare for a year of rest and relaxation, or dealing with severe anxiety. Instead, she aims at something else. The recommended books include the following four: Krista Suh’s *DIY Rules for a WTF World* (2018), Cait Flander’s *The Year of Less: How I Stopped Shopping, Gave Away My Belongings, and Discovered Life Is Worth More Than Anything You Can Buy in a Store* (2018), Margareta Magnusson’s *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning: How to Free Yourself and Your Family from a Lifetime of Clutter* (2018), and, last but not least, Shoukei Matsumoto’s Japanese bestseller *A Monk’s Guide to a Clean House and Clean Mind* (2018). The remarkably international titles advise on how to address the seemingly ubiquitous first-world problems of material affluence and conspicuous consumption. Accordingly, the list seems to suggest that, in striving for mental peace and clarity, it is key to reconsider and reorganise our relation to and dependence on the material world.



Read's list, however, does not only illustrate the extent to which hegemonic, dominant cultural practices and forms can incorporate alternative and/or oppositional ones – after all, it is not without irony that a magazine such as *Vogue* emphatically recommends stopping to shop. This article argues that *Vogue's* list can also be observed as both a response to and an expression of a particular crisis, which becomes manifest in the contemporary lifestyle trend of minimalism and which is articulated in various media, including, of course, the aforementioned self-help books,¹ as well as documentaries, Websites, and TV shows.

Incidentally, the title of Matsumoto's account of Buddhist cleansing practices echoes the title of a fictitious book that made a short appearance in the eleventh episode of the 28th season of *The Simpsons*, which was first aired on January 8, 2017. At the local car wash, Marge Simpson stumbles upon a copy of a book with the seductive title *The Japanese Warrior Monks' Guide to Tidying Up*. The book advises on how to declutter the domestic space in order to “reach a state of entidyment” (2'13”). But how is that achieved? As Marge instructs her unconvinced family, “you take every item you own, and ask: Does it still give me joy? If yes, then you keep it. If not, you thank it for its service and throw it away” (2'31”-2'40”). Most viewers of this episode will have identified the target of its satire and parody easily: Marie Kondo and her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* (2014).

Originally published in Japan in 2011, the book became immensely popular in the English-speaking world after a translation appeared in 2014.² The initial response to *The Magic of Tidying Up* was emphatically positive and a series of reviews were published in media as diverse as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *InStyle*. *Time Magazine* even included Kondo in its list of the 100 most influential people in 2015. Some of Kondo's success might be due to her rather idiosyncratic organizational regime, which is solely based on the question of whether a given object makes its owner happy or not – the catchphrase “Does it spark joy?” quickly became a meme.

Taken together, then, the *Simpsons* episode, Marie Kondo's approach to tidying up, and the titles listed on *Vogue.com* not only illustrate the relevance of material objects for the fashioning and worlding of everyday life, but they also seem to illustrate a changing attitude towards these objects. This attitude is, I shall argue in the following, embodied in certain affective reactions triggered by encounters with even mundane objects, things, and stuff, which, in turn, are experienced as a form of crisis. But how can the relationship

¹ The popular phenomenon of self-help books is usually rather the object of ridicule than of serious analysis. However, for its genealogy and overlap with the literary see the recent, profound contribution by Blum (2020).

² In addition to English, Kondo's book has been translated into over 25 languages, including German, Italian, French, Portuguese, Catalan, Chinese, and Indonesian.



between subject, object or thing, and affect be read? What does it mean that these interrelations are experienced and described as crises? And which subject positions articulate themselves in the underlying sociological and cultural tensions?

To address these and similar questions, I suggest turning to Raymond Williams' concept of 'structures of feeling'. While notoriously difficult to define and hard to grasp, it has repeatedly been revisited in the wake of the current and extensive interest in affect theory (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Clough 2007; Wehrs and Blake 2017; Figlerowicz 2012; for a noteworthy critical comment see Leys 2011). In their introduction to the edited volume *Structure of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, for instance, Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup argue that by adding the layer of affective infrastructures to the analysis of social and material ones, Williams' work "seems to prefigure the conspicuous contemporary interest in affect studies" (2015: 2). It thus seems timely to rethink this concept and its possible contributions to the analysis of everyday life and its cultural practices. What is more, deploying 'structures of feeling' for investigating a decisive crisis-laden moment of the contemporary conjuncture allows for reassessing Williams' influential concept itself.

What to Feel About (Structures of) Feeling

It has often been observed that while 'structures of feeling' are central to the design of Williams' approach to literature and culture, they remain somewhat vague and undertheorized. Williams first uses the phrase as early as 1954 in the co-authored study *Preface to Film*. Here, it is deployed to clarify a complex argument. Given that dramatic forms and conventions are an inseparable part of a social totality, they can serve as a medium that testifies to the intricacies of this social totality as a lived experience, thus rendering it visible. Emerging changes or differentiation of dramatic forms and conventions in a given period, then, are due to structural – albeit oftentimes implicit and abstract – changes in and of said totality:

As the structure changes, new means are perceived and realized, while old means come to appear empty and artificial. This could be shown, I believe, in the detailed study of a convention like the Greek chorus, which moved from dominance in the drama, through active equal participation, to the position of a mere observer and commentator, and finally, as its distance from the centre of action increased, into a mere interlude, and, finally, a hindrance. (Williams 2001: 33)

What Williams suggests, in other words, is to approach literature not as an isolated, self-contained entity, but rather as unfinished, open, and responsive work that emerges within a perpetually evolving cultural dynamic:



But while we may, in the study of a past period, separate out particular aspects of life, and treat them as if they were self-contained, it is obvious that this is only how they may be studied, not how they were experienced. We examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole. And it seems to be true, from the nature of art, that it is from such a totality that the artist draws; it is in art, primarily, that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied. (ibid.)³

Williams thus advocates an approach to literary texts – including drama – that transcends the boundaries of hermeneutics as well as of the decidedly ahistorical and thus apolitical ‘practical criticism’ as envisioned by F.R. Leavis and the so-called Scrutiny School. To be able to adequately understand a work of art, Williams claims, it needs to be historicized, contextualized, and re-embedded in the intricate networks that have informed it.

It is important to note, however, that actual structures of feeling remain volatile and evasive. When all pertinent discursive connections and relations are stripped from a work of art,

there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the *structure of feeling* of a period, and it is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole. (ibid., emphasis in the original)

There are at least two ambiguities here that Williams does not engage with any further and which are possibly responsible for some of the (wilful) misreadings the phrase has triggered.⁴ The first is an unresolved tension between the individual and the collective. To some extent, this tension is precisely what Williams aimed at by yoking together the seemingly paradoxical concepts of ‘structure’ and ‘feeling’ – the former denoting “commonality, a series of relations and repetitions”, the latter “the private property of an individual” (Highmore 2016: 147). However, it remains unclear why there should only be one single ‘structure of feeling’ in a given period, especially since Williams identifies a structure of feeling not with dominant, but rather with emergent or even pre-emergent notions. What is more, periods are by no means self-evident temporal units, but, first and foremost, discursive and contingent constructs. The second ambiguity stems from the qualifier ‘only’: can the structure of feeling *only* be registered through the experience of the work of art, or through the experience of its totality?

³ More than two decades later, Williams will use the exact same phrasing again in his *Marxism and Literature* (cf. Williams 1977: 128-35).

⁴ For an overview of critical stances towards ‘structures of feeling’, see, among others, Matthews (2001) and the pertinent chapter in Higgins (1999: 21-45).



Williams himself seems undecided. On the one hand, 'structures of feeling' prove to be a constant in his thinking for more than two decades, with verbatim iterations of the concept's key elements both in *The Long Revolution* (1961: 63) and the magisterial *Marxism and Literature* (1977: 134). On the other hand, the respective emphasis on either one of the phrase's constituents is subject to change as is the one on the role of literature as its carrier. In Williams' later essay "Literature and Sociology" (1971; reprinted in Williams 2005: 11-30), for instance, he puts a clear emphasis on 'structure' – a shift that was provoked both by Williams' intense, albeit short, interaction with Lucien Goldmann and a struggle with continental structuralist theory. Strikingly, Williams maintains the critical stance on practical criticism.

David Simpson has offered an extensive overview of the concept's history and evolution throughout Williams' thinking, aiming at some fundamental criticism. His outline starts with *Culture and Society* (1958) – thus omitting the earlier elucidation in *A Preface to Film* – observing that, here, the phrase "occurs somewhat casually" (1995: 36). In *The Long Revolution*, he sees its "first sustained account [...]. The structure of feeling is now glossed as something that is at once 'firm and definite' yet operative in 'the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity'. [...] It is especially evident in the arts" (ibid.: 37-38). In addition to identifying the tension between the collectively concrete and intangible subjective as well as the centrality of literature and the arts – both of which I discussed above –, Simpson rightly points to a fundamental problem: "Williams does not seem to sense the need", he argues concerning Williams' historical analysis in *The Long Revolution*, "to address the very difficult question of how we decide that what we receive from the past is truly of the past" (ibid.: 38).

In more contemporary parlance, Simpson raises the issue of mediation: If we perceive the past – or rather past experiences – *only* through the lens of literature (and other pertinent arts), then our perceptions are necessarily distorted. Like all media, in selecting, processing, and transmitting its information, literature inscribes itself and thus transforms the message it conveys in the process. In other words, it is hard to comprehend why particularly literature should provide access to past experiences 'in solution', given that the literary text is always already a (temporarily) hardened form.

Williams' insistence, however, that it is precisely literature that allows for particular access to a period's structure of feeling – after all, even *Preface to Film* is predominantly concerned with drama – raises a related problem. While he puts crucial emphasis on the subjective experience of 'feeling', the medial-material bias of this approach entails the difficulty of observing any non-literary historical data. As a result, the whole endeavour becomes unbalanced. When pressed for a more nuanced explication by the interlocutors from the *New Left Review*, Williams states that "the peculiar location of a structure of feeling is the endless comparison that must occur in the process of consciousness



between the articulated and the lived. The lived is only another word [...] for experience” (Williams 1979: 168). Ultimately, however, the dialectics between articulated text and emotive experience is terminated by solely focussing on the literary text – a text, that is, which is not purely mimetic, but always already aesthetically shaped.

The fact that the supposed dialectics is structurally cancelled out is also put forward by Alex Houen in his introduction to the recently edited volume *Affect Theory and Literature*. He claims that “Williams’s structure of feeling [...] involves seeing emotion and cognition to be flexibly fused no less than individuality and community” (2020: 11). While Houen acknowledges that Williams’ concept thus transcends the conceptual rigidity of ideology,⁵ he continues stating that while “stressing the important affective labour that writers perform in exploring social feelings, Williams has relatively little to say about how writers might transform those feelings or turn them into something distinctly literary” (ibid.: 12).

Here, too, the insistence on the literary proves to be a decisive problem. The strength of the concept, however, as can be summarized at this point, lies in the emphasis on emotional-affective reactions and responses, which can be observed as structures in their possible accumulation/assemblage. Not least for this reason, Ben Highmore recently made an emphatic plea for using Williams’ concept not only for analyzing contemporary culture but especially for dealing with the materialities that have a decisive influence on it: “In many ways the world of clothing and furnishing might offer a different sensitivity for registering changes in ‘structures of feeling’ than that found in language and dramatic form. [...] Clothing, food and furnishing [...] are much closer to the world of commerce, and much more sensitive to the vagaries of taste, as well as directing and giving form to such changing tastes. They are syncopated to much faster rhythms” (2016: 159). In the material crisis, therefore, a structure of feeling is not necessarily something that is *thought*, but first and foremost something that is *felt*.

Crisis in Abundance

Admittedly, neither a trend nor a fashion necessarily constitutes – let alone responds to – a given crisis. In fact, if *crises* are understood as something that is “constructed as an extraordinary event that interrupts a routine state of affairs” and thus destabilizes

⁵ Notions of ideology have often been at the core of fierce criticism of ‘structures of feeling’ and can be traced as far back as to Terry Eagleton’s vitriolic assessment of Williams in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976). Residual moments can still be found in Hall (1989) and Simpson (1995). John Higgins (1982) has claimed that Eagleton argues from a decidedly Althusserian point of view, thus constituting a (wilful) misreading that seeks to enforce a specific kind of Marxism. More recently, David Hartley (2017: 67-74) has shown how the debate over the question of ideology and Marxism in general even had formative influence on the respective writing style of both Williams and Eagleton.



individuals, groups, or societies, “especially when they occur abruptly, with little or no warning” (Ang 2021: 2), then both concepts seem to be rather antagonistic. It is striking, however, that a specific reaction of the middle classes in the Global North to material abundance is often rendered precisely as such.

In 1997, the American public broadcaster PBS aired a one-hour television special exploring the high social and environmental costs of materialism and overconsumption. Accordingly, much of the documentary addresses crucial, albeit familiar tropes of accelerated consumer society including the increasing indebtedness of private households, advertising’s ruthless targeting of children, and last, but not least, the annihilation or pollution of whole ecosystems. At the same time, however, it renders visible a decisive shift away from the pressing, well-known collective consequences towards peculiar individual plights, which is already signalled by the show’s title: *Affluenza*. The catchy portmanteau juxtaposes the show’s rendition of *Kulturkritik* to one of the central crises of the twentieth century. What is more, it consciously adopts its specific connotations: Just like the flu, affluenza is contagious, it is potentially lethal, and it proves to trigger a moral panic. In his now-classic study *Folk Devils and Moral Panic*, Stanley Cohen describes the latter as follows:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereo-typical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions. (2002 [1972]: 1)

Indeed, *Affluenza* features a whole array of experts and specialists setting forth the immense, yet often concealed “costs and consequences for us, our families and communities, for future generations and the earth itself” (3’47”-3’55”) that are the inevitable outcomes of late modern consumerist lifestyle. Its proclaimed precariousness is amplified by the way this short sequence is edited. In quick succession, a montage shows an exhausted-looking woman, holding a crying toddler, who stands between a grey, dreary façade in the background and a moving excavator shovel in the front. Next comes an extreme long shot of an industrial site, which is clouded in thick, greyish smog. The sequence then cuts to a close-up of a waterlily that is entangled with splintered plastic cups, dirty cellophane wraps, and used Styrofoam boxes.

While the articulation of a moral panic seems not to be a matter of subtlety, it is striking that *Affluenza* adds a certain layer. As both the quote from Cohen and the sequence from the documentary, which is representative of the production as a whole, illustrate, moral panics aim at the protection or salvation of shared, abstract structures, such as a society, or a culture, or nature. In the documentary, however, a shift to the individual shimmers through, although only in rare moments and often rather implicitly.



This discursive move is already signaled during the opening sequence, which culminates in a dictionary-like definition, which is shown as a kind of intertitle: “affluenza *n.* An unhappy condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from dogged pursuit of more.” (3’42”) To this, the narrator’s voice-over adds that “untreated, it can cause permanent discontent” (ibid.). What is new in affluenza and what proves to be constitutive is that it triggers a specific affective reaction, so that while it still contributes to a general crisis on a larger scale, it is, first and foremost, perceived as a crisis of the individual subject. A decisive part of a contemporary structure of feeling is, in other words, a peculiar awareness of feelings themselves and of the ways they are affected by the material world. While in the opening sequences these feelings are the result of a specific behavior – a ‘dogged pursuit of more’ – and originate within the subject, *Affluenza* points to yet another shift.

The documentary introduces, among others, Jennifer Geilus and Olivia Martin – two young American women who wrote and produced an award-winning play: *Barbie Get Real*. The play details the everyday lives of a group of anthropomorphized Barbie dolls, who happily spend their days shopping in the mall, popping sugary pills. One day, however, one Barbie named Neon refuses to take her medication and revolts against her materialist lifestyle. Trying to express her identity crisis to her boyfriend John, the following dialogue ensues:

Neon: Something happened to me today. I’ve been feeling so alone and I don’t feel comfortable –

John: – [interrupting her] Isn’t there a shoe sale next week?

Neon: Why are you so afraid of having a real conversation with me? Don’t you want to know more about me and who I really am?

John: I know who you are! You are Neon Barbie and that is all I need to know!

Neon: There’s more to me than where I go, who I’m with, and my accessories. Well, at least I wish there was.

John: There is more than that. You’re beautiful too. You drive a great car, you live in a Dream House, complete with your own Barbie Bubbling Spa, and you’re dating me! What else is there?

Neon: I’m hollow inside! (PBS 15’54”-16’29”)

To some extent, *Barbie Get Real* is a naive and simplistic approach to mindless consumerism that deploys trite dichotomies such as the one between appearance or surface and depth to criticize late modern shopping culture as the apotheosis of what Thorstein Veblen has described as conspicuous consumption: the constant display of excessive expenditure to impress others and to assert one’s own identity. What is striking about the play, however, is that it allows observing the emergence of a not yet fully articulated notion: In capitalist, market-driven societies crises do not only affect the



ecology and economy – at least not primarily – but the individual subject, who reacts emotionally. The feelings that Neon Barbie experiences and vaguely expresses – anxiety, discontent, discomfort – signify an affective crisis that is not the reaction to a lack or shortage of something, but precisely to abundance and affluence. In other words, Neon’s feelings surface not *although*, but precisely *because* she owns everything one could desire. Her emotive distress is immediately caused by the multiple objects and things that surround her.

The structure of feeling of individual affective crisis in face of material abundance is taken a step further – and thus made more explicit – by the English author James Wallman in his book *Stuffocation* (2013). Here, the physical, affective reaction to stuff takes centre stage: “*Stuffocation* is the story of one of today’s most acute, till now unnamed, afflictions. It is about how you, me, and society in general, instead of *feeling* enriched by the things we own, are *feeling* stifled by them. [...] Overwhelmed and suffocating from stuff, we are *feeling Stuffocation*” (8-9, emphasis added). The verbatim iteration makes it abundantly clear that the late modern material crisis is, in fact, one of feeling. This indicates a further shift. Instead of depicting human agents as part of an intricate enmeshment of objects and environments as seen in *Affluenza*, it is now only the affected individual that is of concern.

While this notion is put forward throughout Wallman’s book, it comes emphatically to the fore in a chapter entitled “The Anthropologist and the Clutter Crisis”. The chapter opens with a brief outline of the interdisciplinary, long-term fieldwork investigation performed by the *Center of Everyday Lives of Families* (CELF).⁶ The scholars of the CELF, mostly anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists, empirically gathered detailed information on the everyday life of middle-class families and their relation to material possession. Wallmann’s account, however, quickly becomes fundamental:

Perhaps [...] you are wondering if ‘crisis’ is too dramatic, too harsh a word. Shouldn’t we, after all, only call a problem a ‘crisis’ if it is bad for the physical and psychological health of a significant number of people? That, as it turns out, is exactly the problem with having too much stuff, and why the word ‘crisis’ is appropriate here. (2013: 109-10)

In Wallman, the crisis is thus no longer the realm of moral panic. Rather, it is replaced by sustained care for the afflicted individual self. This becomes clear in the affect that Wallman considers to be crucial to the clutter crisis – stress. In the course of their fieldwork, Darby Saxbe and Rena Repetti – two of the participating scholars – compared quantitative and qualitative interviews of home owners to the cortisol levels they extracted from samples of the house owner’s spit, collected throughout the day: “The

⁶ For further information on the CELF, see <http://www.celf.ucla.edu/>. For a survey of their findings, see Arnold et al. (2012).



idea was to compare the results from each experiment, to understand if how people *felt* about their homes – as indicated by what they said – could predict how well they were, or were not *coping with stress* – the cortisol levels would show that” (ibid.: 112, emphasis added). According to Wellman, the study came to a surprising conclusion. It was particularly women who found their cluttered surroundings stressful, and the more they talked about their homes as being cluttered, the more likely they were to experience depressive moods.

Wallman does not discuss whether this approach is scientifically valid and neither is he interested in possible explanations for his findings. After all, it could be possible that the affective reaction is not directly caused by the cluttered mess, but stems from cultural expectations and gender norms. It is striking, however, that Wallman reduces this complex problematic to a solely affective one: “clutter causes stress and stress causes clutter” (ibid.: 115). What emerges in this shift is a subject position that does not understand itself through the *value* of an object, but almost exclusively through emotional affectation, regardless of whether this is experienced negatively in the presence of things, or positively in their absence or in the wilful act of discarding them. If, then, the home and the family are indeed “happy objects”, as Sara Ahmed claims (2010: 29-51), *Stuffocation* brings a reversal in the structure of feeling to the fore, that renders the home – unhomey. Affects remain ‘sticky’, but their intentionality changes.

It is as if the stuff around us, reducing our agency, affects and infects us with negative feelings as agent in everyday assemblages. After all, it is precisely on the level of affect that we encounter the agency of vibrant matter as Jane Bennett puts forwards:

Glove. Pollen. Rat. Cap. Stick. I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing – between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman’s efforts, the litterer’s toss, the rat-poisoner’s success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of that rat, that configuration of pollen, that otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap. (2010: 4, emphasis in original)

In Bennett’s reflection on her random encounter with various displaced items, an almost Manichean struggle comes to the fore that renders the questions as to the agency of human and object ambiguous.



Does it spark joy?

Much of the contemporary structure of feeling of material crisis can be read as a sustained struggle of coming to terms with this precariously affective figuration as well as trying to re-assert and maintain agency both over the everyday objects and the affects they trigger. While ultimately this is the kind of self-care that Bridget Read promotes, the most prominent example is arguably Marie Kondo and her *Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Here, she exclusively focuses on the private household, all the stuff that can be found in there, and the feelings it causes. The (re-)negotiation of agency thus takes on a decidedly praxeological dimension – tidying as a practise that, first, re-establishes spatial order to restore, second, mental peace and tranquillity. Marie Kondo thus radicalises and makes absolute the constituents of the contemporary structure of feeling as described above:

I never tidy my room. Why? Because it is already tidy. The only tidying I do is once, or sometimes twice a year, and for a total of about one hour each time. The many days I spent tidying without seeing permanent results now seem hard to believe. In contrast, I feel happy and content. I have time to experience bliss in my quiet space, where even the air feels fresh and clean; time to sit and sip herbal tea while I reflect on my day. As I look around, my glance falls on a painting that I particularly love, purchased overseas, and a vase of fresh flowers in one corner. Although not large, the space I live in is graced only with those things that speak to my heart. My lifestyle brings me joy. (2014: 35)

The passage is rhetorically striking: The constant iteration of the personal pronoun *I* sets it in direct relation to its spatial surrounding. What is more, the passage illustrates a shift away from an active, unhappy self towards one of joyful, passive contemplation. The happiness the subject experiences, however, does not emanate from within, but is the affective response to ‘those things’ that are in its presence. At the same time, the conspicuous focus on the self together with the construction of an almost ‘natural’ pastoral place – the air clean, flowers fresh – give the impression of an ascetic recluse.⁷ It seems apt, therefore, to speak of an ‘egotistical material sublime’. The prerequisite for the articulation of Kondo’s position can be seen in two momentous, intertwined reductions: First, the exclusive focus on whether an object in question ‘sparks joy’, and, second, the radical reduction of things to their material status. It is precisely here that the structure of feeling of a contemporary material crisis comes to the fore.

Kondo is at pains rendering the process of ‘sparking joy’ as an affective, physical reaction that is caused by haptic and tactile encounters. In the first episode of her Netflix

⁷ It is important to note that this ‘brand’ of asceticism is an entirely ‘inner-worldly’ one that operates independent of any transcendental or metaphysical *telos*. On this, see Schlegel (2018).



series *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019),⁸ she describes it as follows: “When you touch the item that sparks joy for you, you feel [...] All of your cells are rising. [...] You feel it when you hold a puppy or when you wear your favourite outfit. It’s a warm and positive feeling” (S1E1, 18’14”-18’46”). This leads to what tentatively could be described as an emotive economy, in which the affective response to a given thing overrides the rather traditional categories of political economy, that is, use value and exchange value. In *Spark Joy*, her second book, Kondo makes this unambiguously clear:

For example, one day I threw away a vase that was chipped, only to miss it the very next day. I made a perfect substitute, however, by covering a plastic bottle with a favorite piece of cloth. After discarding a hammer because the handle was worn out, I used my frying pan to pound in any nails. Since getting rid of my stereo speakers, which had sharp corners and simply didn’t bring me any joy, I’ve used my headphones as speakers. (2016: 20)

While Kondo acknowledges the practical downsides of this approach – “I tried using a ruler to tighten a loose screw, but it snapped down the middle. This almost reduced me to tears as it was one I really liked.” (ibid.: 22) – it nonetheless remains the *sine qua non*. The structure of feeling of the contemporary material crisis is thus constituted by what is felt, by the (predominantly negative) affects triggered by various things and objects.⁹

When, however, use value and exchange value are entirely substituted for emotive value, then things appear as sheer materiality. Not least, this becomes obvious with Kondo’s treatment of books. According to Kondo, when assessing the value of a book, it was a mistake actually reading them: “The criterion is [...] whether or not it gives you a thrill of pleasure when you touch it. Remember, I said when you *touch* it. Make sure you don’t start reading it. Reading clouds your judgment. Instead of asking yourself what you feel, you’ll start asking whether you need that book or not” (2016: 103-104, emphasis in original). In fact, Kondo argues for seeking aesthetic pleasure not in the act of reading, but elsewhere – the book’s materiality. This, however, puts an end to treating books as books, and literature as literature:

Books are essentially paper – sheets of paper printed with letters and bound together. Their true purpose is to be read, to convey the information to their readers. It’s the information they contain that has meaning. There is no meaning in their just being on your shelves. You read books for the experience of reading.

⁸ Compared to the books, the Netflix series is somewhat more traditional. In eight episodes, Marie Kondo and her interpreter visit as many households, helping the occupants navigating their personal crises, which include marital problems, bereavement, and parent-child-relations. The clutter serves a mere symbolic function in that it stands for the respective issues. The proposed logic is quite simple: If I sort through my late husband’s belongings, or if I thoroughly tidy and clean my partner’s and my apartment, then I will come to terms with my mourning, or, respectively, my parents will be accepting of our same-sex relationship (see S1E4 and S1E5, respectively).

⁹ For a distinction between things and objects and a theoretical assessment see the seminal contribution by Brown (2001).



Books you have read have already been experienced and their content is inside you, even if you don't remember. (ibid.: 105)

To state that there is 'no meaning' in books when they are stacked on a shelf could either be read as outright naïve,¹⁰ or as conscious, noteworthy claim that, once more, emphasizes the emotive value of things and thus the close relations between them and their subjects. This practice ultimately amounts to removing both objects and subjects from any circulation and exchange – be it semiotic or political. Kondo's affective economy is thus a decidedly apolitical one.

What is more, Kondo's negation of political economy leads her to acknowledging not only her feelings for things, but also the feelings *of* things. She casually remarks, for instance, that bras "have exceptional pride and emit a distinctive aura" (2016: 105). She is even more outspoken on this when she describes the way some of her customers treat their coins:

I have also noticed that for some unfathomable reason many of my clients start saving coins in bags when their piggy bank is full. Years later during my course, they stumble across a bag bursting with coins in the back of a cupboard. By that time, it is pungent with the smell of rust and mould, the coins are discoloured and they make a dull clinking sound instead of jingling. At this point, my clients would rather just ignore the bag's existence. Writing this description is hard enough, but to actually see these coins, stripped of *their dignity as money*, is heartrending. (2014: 126, emphasis added)

Thing and individual subject enter a complex relation, in which the one always already influences the other. This relation, however, is not an entirely equal one, as the things seem to be more powerful, their influence more pervasive.

Significantly, Kondo gained this insight as a teenage girl after an episode which she describes as an existentialist crisis of sorts – despite being a rigorous and at times even excessive cleaner, she found herself constantly overwhelmed by the presence of her stuff, which made her unhappy and depressed. Indeed, it is odd to see that a book, which is particularly renowned for its insistence on whether something sparks joy, is, at times, somewhat depressing. Underlying the book and thus a constant point of reference is Kondo's own story, her lonely childhood in Japan as a neglected middle child who "spent most of my time at home on my own" (2014: 15) and became obsessed with home and lifestyle magazines at the age of five. School does not seem to have brought more companionship, although she did win the coveted (by her, at least) task of re-ordering

¹⁰ In some cases, books have meaning precisely because they are kept unread on a shelf as in the house of Charles Bovary: "The volumes of the *Dictionary of the Medical Sciences*, their pages uncut but their bindings shabby from being handled by so many different owners, were virtually the only books on the six shelves of a pine bookcase" (Flaubert 2004: 30). For numerous examples of practically engaging with books without actually reading them, see Leah Price's *How to do Things with Books* (2012).



the classroom: “From the fact that I spent my break time alone, tidying, you can guess that I wasn’t a very outgoing child” (ibid.: 208). As a result, in a final chapter that confesses to a lifelong difficulty with trusting others, she writes, “it was material things and my house that taught me to appreciate unconditional love first, not my parents or friends” (ibid.). Engaging with – and thus ultimately reducing – the vibrant matter in everyday encounters is a way of working through anxiety and its affects.

Conclusion

Throughout Kondo’s books, feelings are presented as being rather simple and one-dimensional. You either feel pure love for an object or you let it go. But beneath some of the self-help-inspired platitudes about your personal gains and spiritual growth you will experience after you have let go of items you do not enjoy, there is a cultural politics at work. First, there is a constant, latent tone of judgement of those who do not manage to properly tidy their homes. Second, Kondo’s depiction of our relation to the clutter around us is obviously from a privileged point-of-view, for which the absence of any lack is constitutive. Third, her books occasionally seem to embody neo-liberal fantasies in which individual behaviour is financially rewarded and the home and the economy thus intertwined. What the structure of feeling of contemporary material crisis simultaneously illustrates in its struggle to maintain agency via affects and feeling, however, is not so much the ubiquitous lament of *self-optimization*, but rather a notion of *self-defence*. The structure of feeling, in other words, that asserts itself in *Affluenza*, in *Stuffocation*, and in the CELF’s ‘clutter crisis’, and which finds its apotheosis in the mass-market compatible, billion-dollar enterprise of Kondo, is one of a precarious subject position. What emerges here is a self that appears to be so weak that it could be disrupted by simple impulses of nostalgia, or the ambiguity of mixed feelings that are, more often than not, stored in memory objects. What has to be defended is an individuality that is no longer defined by the possession of objects, but by the renunciation of them. It is not a contradiction but a constitutive part of the cultural logic of this structure of feeling that the renunciation itself can be understood as a commodity. This structure of feeling is thus both the product and motor of a crucial, processual displacement, re-negotiation, and reconstruction of the cultural semantics of bourgeois middle classes and their subjectivity. It is a crisis that may become the swansong of society as we know it.



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