The Screen and the Drum: on Form, Function, Fit and Failure in Contemporary Home Consumption

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ABSTRACT  This paper explores consumers’ connections to their domestic objects. Focusing on two particular objects (televisions and vacuum cleaners), the paper reflects upon why consumers desire particular domestic objects and how they assemble, arrange and use things in the home. It reveals how functionality is intimately infused with form, how design informs the consumption of everyday domestic objects and how both function and form can fail, deceive and trick. The mundane movements and moments that comprise homemaking encompass a whole
suite of entanglements between object, subject, agency and space. In all sorts of ways this opens up exciting – but also difficult and perplexing – possibilities for consumer agency in the production of home. New kinds of temporality, the rapidity of fashion and design shifts, transformative technologies and new modes of fabrication require new forms of consumption knowledge, competence and skill.

KEYWORDS: Domestic consumption, brands, design, television, Dyson, accumulation, practice

Introduction
Consumers share complex and often troubling relationships with their domestic appliances. We begin our discussion with an extended excerpt from an in-depth interview that captures a number of these issues. Laura had just left her husband and the substantial family home, moving with her two children into rented accommodation. She had been making do with her old vacuum for several years. She had been longing for a Dyson cleaner but knew her husband would disapprove. Eventually she threw the old model into the rubbish bin, “because it was absolute rubbish and blew out more than it sucked in.” She continues to recount a painful story about her desire for a Dyson but her anxiety about the purchase too. The vacuum becomes symbolic of her disappointment with her husband, his meanness and of her unfulfilled needs in the relationship:

My mean ****ing Yorkshireman husband would never let me buy a Dyson and that’s why I bought one . . . I cut the cord on our old Electrolux and went to Tesco and came back with a Dyson DC08. Dead funky. Yellow. He came home and ranted and raved and said they’re over-marketed and over-priced and over-hyped. He said he’d looked it up in a Which report. What a loser. To think I’ve spent 10 years living with a man who reads the Which report. In 15 years he’s never bought a thing. He never spent a penny on the house. And you don’t buy a £500,000 house and never spend a penny on it or buy a thing. It was unloved. It was horrid. It’s not right.

This talk reveals so clearly how Laura’s things (or lack of them) became metaphoric of her lack of love, of the neglect she felt from her husband. She was unloved, unfulfilled, and their domestic infrastructure and (his lack of) investment in the home became the vehicle through which she articulated this lack of love. Her severing of the vacuum cord seems freighted with emotional release, a symbolic cutting of the umbilical cord of their relationship. The
detailed story she tells about her vacuum cleaner is about so much more than appliance breakdown and replacement. Rather, we see how an ordinary domestic object becomes metaphoric of desire and longing, love and loss, worth, value and respect. Objects come to symbolize love, loss, memory and yearning in much the same way as Winnicott theorized the child’s first blanket and the freighted emotional attachment that it came to symbolize (1953). And here we see how, once in our possession, many of the things we have around us assume not only expressive capacities but come to stand for us and are used to narrate our sense of who we are as consumers. Objects are bought (or otherwise acquired) for far more than their functionality.

Drawing on two particular objects (televisions and vacuum cleaners), this paper explores three dimensions of this relationship: the role of product branding, representation and design; the significance of consumer agency and desire; and the influence of commodity form and function in shaping home consumption. We focus on the connections between people, their home-spaces and the meanings enmeshed within their domestic objects. These meanings emerge through object acquisition, assemblage, placement, use, misuse and disposal. The paper focuses on this complex and messy nexus of commodity:home:consumer, not in order to unravel it but to suggest a number of broader theoretical contributions to debates on design, consumption and space.

Three key themes emerge as particularly significant: the creation and destruction of object value; new ways of conceptualizing agency; and the significance of the mundane. I will address each in turn. First, we argue that commodity meanings are mobile and diffuse; they are configured, inscribed and appropriated by consumers through placement and use and not just at the point of production. This is significant in our theoretical search for the creation and destruction of value. It requires that we shift our consumptional gaze away from production, design and retail sites and toward the entangled spaces of the commodity-consumer-home. The commodity form is but one component within a much more complex assemblage of the technical, the symbolic and the social.

Second, the paper argues that commodities require emotional, sensory or performative investments by consumers in order that their value be realized. Brand value needs to be retrieved, or excavated through consumer practice – quite literally brought alive by consumers. Whilst brands can be envisaged as devices for the calibration of the market and as ways of enunciating markets and framing value (Callon 1998; Lury 2004: 4), they also have to be enacted, reproduced and translated (Dant 2005; Law and Singleton 2005), their power residing in part in the minds and actions of consumers (Holt 2002; Arvidsson 2005: 236). This of course opens up theoretical and practical space for consumer agency in value determination. Theoretically this is important as it suggests that the
material qualities of objects may take on a far greater significance than those who produced them could possibly have envisaged. The connections between the brand, the consumer, the commodity and its place within a domestic space are hugely variable and contingent. These connections reveal a great deal about the unintended agency of homes, consumers and commodities – agency that can produce quite unanticipated effects.

Finally, the research highlighted the importance of the mundane and the ordinary. We had (perhaps implicitly) imagined that the most instructive and interesting narratives would emerge through discussions about key brands – objects whose cultural credentials are established in part through conscious designer intervention and authorship and a high price tag (Julier 2008: 77). We imagined that design “classics” or spectacular, technologically radical, deeply desired or status-laden objects would form key objects of desire, display or discussion within contemporary homes: Smeg fridges, Dualit toasters, B&O music equipment, Apple Mac computers or Alessi kitchenware (Lees-Maffei 2002; Belk and Tumbat 2005; Julier 2008). But what emerged from the research was how some of the most ubiquitous and ordinary domestic objects were those with the most interesting stories to tell. The important point here is that the normative assumptions one might hold about the aesthetic and technical conventions imputed to everyday objects are largely just that – scripts, projections, imaginings and conventions that are rarely, if ever, evident in practice.

The Screen and the Drum: What Can Televisions and Vacuum Cleaners Reveal About Value?

The following discussion draws on a range of primary research undertaken between 2003 and 2005 in order to explore how the biographies of things interlock the technical and aesthetic worlds of objects with their social lives. In this section we explain why these two particular domestic objects (the television and the vacuum cleaner) are appropriate lenses through which to explore the different ways in which commodities are relationally produced and consumed through practice and use.

The two commodities emerged during the research as being significant both empirically and conceptually and were undergoing design and functionality transformations in the marketplace at the outset of the research.² Both reveal very acutely the interlocking importance of fashion, form, design, technology and gender in the constitution of object value.³ They are household staples and feature in almost every contemporary UK home – pluricultural products that play a role in the “everyday life of almost everyone” (Graham and Thrift 2007: 3). Both exhibit a range of technological, aesthetic, functional and temporal attributes that one might assume to be significant in understanding the conjoining of brand, consumer and home in the determination of object meaning, but they exhibit these
in varying (and often unexpected) ways. Finally, these particular objects told stories that we hadn’t anticipated at all at the outset of the project. Rather than revealing normative tendencies or predictable sets of practices and desires, our entwined object-use-home stories highlight the variability of practice, the relational status of objects and the significance of their failure, (in)visibility, placement and displacement.

The Screen: Focality, Placement and Presence of the Television in the Lounge
The first object, the television, is mobilized in order to explore a number of broader questions about technological change, consumer knowledge and object placement, presence and assemblage. The primary research on which this paper is in part based was undertaken at what, with hindsight, was a critical moment in the evolution of the television set, a technological tipping-point as new formats were beginning to be affordable and desirable within many homes in the UK.

Technological Lash-up
In terms of object value, the television would appear at first sight to be very much about the meshing of product technology with price. In spite of national household penetration in excess of 90 percent (Mintel 2005), television sales by volume continue to rise dramatically in the UK (25 percent increase between 2000 and 2005) and demand for new, replacement or duplicate models is high. The strong growth in television consumption appears to be driven by new technologies, new service providers and falling prices in real terms (Euromonitor 2004).

The television as a category of good is subject to rapid technological change, enormous product variation, wide price and size variations and multiple technical configurations. This changing television form and function (particularly the spectacular growth in screen size) is an example of what Molotch refers to as “lash-up” (2003), whereby its existence depends on an assemblage of other socio-technical developments, including digital supply, the multiplication of channels, IP-connected devices throughout the home and interoperability. Molotch would argue that the transformation of domestic television screens is thus contingent on the existence and successful functioning of a range of other devices – and depends intrinsically on consumers enrolling into the “project” of the screen (2003). As we demonstrate below, such enrolment in the project is neither uniform nor unproblematic across UK households.

Accommodation
In spite of the significance of product technology and price in influencing television consumption, the significance of design and aesthetics was underestimated at the outset of the research project.
The television might be intuitively imagined as primarily a functional good, whose consumption and use are governed more by use than display, by functionality not form (Woodward 2006). Design and aesthetic considerations, one would imagine, would be of secondary importance in informing consumption. But emergent, particularly digital, interactive and convergent technologies, and specifically the recent affordability of big screens, have invited an aesthetic reconsideration of living space orientation and layout.

Such reconsideration is, of course, nothing new. The postwar arrival of the television into domestic settings prompted a series of debates about its role and function (Is it a piece of furniture? A technology? A vehicle for consumerism? A threat to family unity and communication? A status object?). Spigel explains well the domestic tensions surrounding “placing the television set” in early postwar America and the effects of its arrival on family ideals and sociality (1992). Whilst some tried to hide it, others made it the center of attention. Both placing practices are far more than interior design; they are designs for living as a screen replaces a hearth as a key family space (Vinikas 1993). For much of the latter postwar period the television was routinely positioned as the corner-piece of the living room, sitting low and square with furniture arranged around it. The recent growth in large and specifically flatscreen television sales has forced a reappraisal of the form, function, fit and placement of the television within domestic spaces. The large yet slim size of non-CRT televisions, and their cinema-screen styling and positioning on a wall (or stand against a wall) rather than in a corner as was formerly the tradition, invites a potentially different kind of room organization, a new kind of focality that can be both liberating and troublesome.

New technological designs can thus act to open up spaces for a new aesthetic organization of the home, for a reappraisal of order, fit, function and focality. More generally this has implications for how we physically accommodate things in our homes. The fireplace and hearth formed the traditional centerpiece of family homes in the UK. The derived aesthetic position of a new screen in the home is thus transformative but troubling as it relies on a particular aesthetic of “contemporary” interior design and living (living room as uncluttered blank canvas) – an aesthetic that, even where it might be desired, is rarely achieved in practice in the home. By inviting the new screen into a “traditional” home we may inadvertently introduce a whole series of difficulties. These will very likely relate to competing focal points (fireplace versus flatscreen), conflicting furniture orientation (three-piece suite versus contemporary modular arrangements), the trouble of where to put the visible “clutter” of everyday life (books, magazines, toys, CDs and DVDs) in order to free the field of vision in the living room toward the screen and the awkward spatial fit of excessively large television screens that drown small rooms and shout spatial domination.
The decision to purchase a new television can provoke a whole series of troubling domestic accommodations. At its most extreme, the arrival of the large new television implies that old, awkward or uncomplimentary furniture and fittings must be expelled or rejected in a classic example of the Diderot effect (McCracken 1990). The television becomes a focal point, an engaging object that signals its presence and demands to be seen. It asks for attention and involvement and desires a practice of engagement (Borgmann 1984, 1995; Verbeek and Kockelkoren 1998: 41).

As a number of our focus group discussions reveal, size and form matter acutely in the case of televisions, and the desire for the new can be at times overwhelming: “we’ve got TVs everywhere ... when anything new comes out he has to have it ... And now he wants a plasma screen tv. 42” screen...” (Anila). A number of the men in another focus group reveal their desire for the new too: “I want a widescreen, surround-sound TV to replace the old colour portable I’ve got” (David) and Steve would like a data projector TV next, where “you can have a really big screen but the whole thing is hidden away pretty much.” Here we see how the television as domestic object within certain homes brings with it new sets of decisions and desires. Where once a television seemed to become more invisible through time in spite of its bulk, watched but not seen, the acquisition of a new model engenders a reappraisal of the object, its creative surface, placement and functionality. Questions of use versus presence thus become not different qualities of things, but instead are complementary, combined (Hallnas and Redstrom 2002; Gregson et al. 2009).

**Displacement, Duplication and Disposal**

Partly as a result of such market changes and cycles of acquisition, and partly because of the difficulties of disposal, there has also been an increasing trend toward multiple ownership of televisions within the home: 40 percent of homes in the UK now have three or more television sets and three fifths of households now have a television in the bedroom (Mintel 2005). These national tendencies towards duplication were strongly echoed within our research and acquisition of the new is often accompanied by displacement within the home (to bedrooms and kitchens), movement to peripheral “pending” spaces such as lofts and cellars and in turn to disposal out of the home. The acquisition of the new object may in turn usher in a number of anxieties relating to the displacement and disposal of the outdated model. For some, the decisions about what to do with multiple sets in varying states of disrepair are left pending, like the objects themselves (Figure 1), the resulting roomscape long way removed from the minimal, contemporary aesthetic so often assumed by acquisition and home “make-over” narratives.

Other households appear to agonize rather more about the duplication of objects and their placement. Having been rendered
invisible by way of its familiarity, the television is now seen afresh, as if for the first time, and the vision can be troubling. Its presence presupposes acceptance (Hallnas and Redstrom 2002: 226), and this just won’t do. Its meaning and value have been irrevocably damaged in spite of its material stability (Thomas 1991: 125). The bulky-backed, space-hogging object must disappear or be displaced or dumped accordingly. It simply doesn’t fit anymore. It is old, wrong. It has to go.

This in turn brings its own set of negotiations and anxieties relating to both displacement and disposal. Whilst circulation and displacement of televisions from a primary space in the home to a secondary area was common throughout our research, this was not entirely unproblematic. Debates around equity and safety abound (which of the children should have it? How safe will they be with a television in their bedroom? How will I monitor what they watch?). The multiplying array of converging communication devices (PCs, mobile phones, digital and interactive TV) are scrambling the boundaries and limits of domestic space and familial safety. As has been argued recently (Gregson 2007), the expansion in home-based entertainment both reinforces notions of the safety, comfort, convenience and familiarity of the home (as counterposed to a potentially dangerous outside world of unknown others), whilst at the very same time bringing the ‘dangerous’ world out there into the home via the screen and testing the very real limits of parents’ control over their children’s viewing content. One group of mothers articulated their confused strategies of parental boundary-setting...
over their children – all had managed to keep televisions out of their children’s bedrooms – “quite remarkable” said one. But this same group then admitted to allowing their children to have computers in their bedrooms, musing “urm, it’s interesting what we’re doing with computers though isn’t it?” (Susy).

The disposal of an unwanted television is an equally anxious activity: Am I allowed to take a television to the rubbish dump? Can I really discard a fully functioning object? And we encounter here the very real difficulties of disposal and material and emotional weight that our domestic objects carry. Objects endure, they are promiscuous (Thomas 1991), they refuse to retreat but rather they linger, the relics of the CRT landscape cluttering our domestic spaces. And whilst the categories to which things belong and the emotions and judgments they prompt are reconfigured, the materiality of things remains stable, stubborn, static. And so the problem becomes simultaneously one of how to integrate new objects into an aesthetic order – a patina of affinity (Miller 2001:114) – and how to dis-integrate, disconnect and displace old or outmoded things. Such anxieties challenge our trusted assumptions about form as the “shifting ephemera on the surface of life” (Hollander 1993), as trivial and fleeting expressions of a seriousness that resides elsewhere (Kuchler 2005: 211). Form matters here, acutely, and through the placing, re-placing and assemblage of domestic objects we are literally reinventing our material worlds.

The Drum: When the Invisible Appears
The second case study object is the vacuum cleaner. Like the television discussed above, the vacuum cleaner is a ubiquitous domestic staple that the majority of households possess. Mintel Market Research estimate that 96 percent of households own a vacuum cleaner (Mintel 2008) and 6.5 million vacuum cleaners were sold in the UK in the 12 months to July 2008 (GfK 2008). It is comparatively small in size, has a relatively low unit cost when compared to many other consumer electronics items, has a comparatively frequent replacement rate and generates high expectations about levels of cleaning performance. Like the television, vacuum cleaners have undergone dramatic technological and design shifts in recent years, and again the research behind this article was undertaken at a particular moment in the evolution of the domestic vacuum market, as a new brand (the Dyson), offering new technological “solutions” to vacuuming, was launched onto the UK market.

Managing Mess
The vacuum cleaner is part of a repertoire of appliances that enable (in principle if not practice) the attainment of contemporary, clutter-free domestic interiors. Their intended function is to help to displace unwanted matter and to temporarily remove dust and dirt, holding it in a state of absent presence (Hetherington 2002):
with us, but invisible. The vacuum is thus characterized more by its ability to mask and conceal matter than by its inherent focality or specularity. The vacuum cleaner demonstrates well the twin processes of concealment and exposure; our desire for order and our failings in its achievement (Shove 2003; Pink 2004). As we go on to demonstrate, the desire for order and the daily routines of housework may not neatly coincide in practice. In many homes all is rarely as it seems and the disjuncture between surface appearance and hidden interiors reveals a great deal.

Like televisions, vacuum cleaners might at first sight appear to be “functional” commodities, whose value relates to how well they perform the task in hand. But a closer interrogation of the vacuum reveals that value is a far more slippery concept to define and rarely conforms to deterministic laws about function or price, supply or demand. The vacuum cleaner is, we argue, a household commodity whose consumption, use and disposal exposes the malleability of object meanings, their power to seduce and to betray. Whilst nominally about straightforward attributes of use (how well it cleans carpets, how heavy it is, how easily it can be stored and maneuvered), what this research reveals is how functionality is intimately infused with form and how both function and form can fail, deceive and trick.

**Dirty Dyson**

Domestic desires and anxieties are perhaps most acutely revealed through a close reading of the “Dyson” story. A new and revolutionary form of carpet cleaner that reveals rather more than the marketing message would lead one to believe, the Dyson was intended to do what no other vacuum cleaner had done before – to display the dust and dirt in a transparent drum rather than secrete it invisibly away in a paper bag. The DC01 was launched in 1993 and was marketed as representing a new entrepreneurial sensibility, embodied in this case by the heroic British inventor James Dyson (Julier 2008). The individual, the product design and the brand were surrounded by a coherent and celebratory brand narrative – a mythology that officially “fixed” the brand’s image and identity (Julier 2008: 115). The Dyson Dual Cyclonic bagless cleaner became the bestselling upright in the UK by revenue within 12 months of its launch and captured 47 percent of the upright vacuum cleaner market in 2001 (Mintel 2004). There are currently over 20 Dyson models on the market, which cost from £140 to £350 (about twice the price of most other brands). Dyson pitched into the marketplace with an assumed whole suite of new features including improved suction performance, better filtration capacities and ease of use. The latest model, called “The Ball,” is advertised as offering a new way to turn corners as it pivots on a motorized ball rather than on four fixed wheels. Although its basic function is the same as that of a conventional vacuum cleaner (to clean floors), its revolutionary design, invitational pull and
assumed aesthetic appeal resulted in it becoming a transformative appliance—desired, discussed, yearned for, this is no ordinary vac.

This was a brand that prompted great discussion during our research, and a number of participants had bought a Dyson because they liked the colours, the design or the technology. One focus group member, Lucy, adores her Dyson and its transparent plastic drum: “I love it. I love seeing the dirt because you know it’s cleaning. I like a nice clean house. I love seeing the dirt. If it’s in the cylinder you know it’s not in your house.” Another revealed her dedication and brand loyalty by buying not only a Dyson vacuum cleaner, but also the washing machine: “It’s great. You can wash a duvet in it” (Fran). As with the case of the television, there are clear signs here of the persuasion of the brand and of technological lash-up as the purchase of one item from a suite of branded options entices further acquisition (Molotch 2003). In these examples the visibility of dust and dirt within the Dyson cylinder enables the respondent to “see” cleanliness, to quantify the dirt and dust removed, to visually confirm competence as a maintainer of domestic order. The visibility of the dust through the plastic Dyson drum signals (for some consumers at least) its erasure, not its presence (Pink 2004: 5).

The arrival of a Dyson in the home, like the arrival of a new television, frequently prompts displacement of the outmoded, unloved vacuum to peripheral or liminal zones, left in a state of pending, suspension. Of all the household objects that were talked about during our interview work, vacuum cleaners seem particularly likely to be both duplicated and in transition: partly to do with size we suspect (small enough to be hidden in cupboards or under the stairs, but large enough to be irritating, difficult to lug up and downstairs), but also a function of low per-unit cost and the difficulties of repair—vacuum cleaners are cheap enough to duplicate and replicate. They multiply (Figure 2).

And the purchase of an additional cleaner then forces the old model into a secondary role—upstairs, into the garage, the student house or into liminality (the loft, shed, cellar, outhouse). Such peripheral spaces of the home are seen as appropriate locations for stuff that we cannot part with but which is also not in active use or on display. Spaces for the stashing of things in limbo—not necessarily broken, but not quite right either, hidden in spaces that are neither for rubbish nor use.

But the pull of the Dyson brand appears in practice to be treacherous and all is not what it seems. The design and desire are there, but in reality the sales pitch fails to deliver on its promises; the mythology is lost. Without appropriate functionality or service support the Dyson so often becomes at best a disappointment and at worst demonic. Far from enabling autotelic flow, complete and satisfying immersion in the activity in hand or intrinsic satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Lloyd Jones 1991; Julier 2008), the Dyson seems, in practice, to defy use and to embody
the frustrations and labors involved in housework. One focus group participant had had three Dysons, all of which spent their short lives being taken apart, manually unblocked (an unpleasant process that involves picking lumps of matted dust, hair and damp food particles out of the cylinder and tubing), returned for repair, replaced and eventually skipped (Figure 3). Exciting colorways and radical designs are no surrogate for poor performance.

The Dyson’s breakage and inoperability brings it into visible focus within the home, an unintended object of attention, forcing us to deal with its failings (Verbeek, 2004; Graham and Thrift, 2007: 2). Its blockages, breakages and the visibility of the filth within become constant reminders of our mistaken purchases, our ability to be duped by clever marketing messages and our inability to manage our domestic interiors. Another focus group participant explained...
her revulsion at the bagless Dyson – she sees the visible dirt in the see-through cylinder as a constant reminder of the detritus in her home and says she “can’t stand that plastic container that takes all the dust in. When you come to empty it, it’s the most dirtiest thing and I just can’t stand it” (Emma). For her, dirt should be visually and physically expelled from the house rather than moved around it and left visible in the bagless plastic drum of the vacuum cleaner. Here we see the significance of imagined boundaries between presence and erasure. The distinctions between visibility and invisibility break down in the case of the Dyson, whose cylinder constantly displays our dirt and dust. Instead of making matter invisible, Dyson does just the opposite. It displaces dust, from floor to drum, where it remains, clear and visible, held in suspension. This is displacement not removal, and is troubling for many. The need to physically encounter the dirt via emptying the drum further highlights the excesses of household dust and dirt, its polluting capacities when not concealed within the sanctity of conventional bagged cleaner.

The complexity of the machine and its multiple possibilities for failure (blockages, trapped food, kinked pipes) further complicate the role of the Dyson and its user. Because the consumer/possessor is conceptualized as a “user,” their place in relation to the object comes to be defined, or “scripted” (Akrich, 1992), by the designer “in” the object or machine. That is, what a consumer can do and ought to do is “written into” the equipment itself and is defined in the instruction manual – plug it in, press buttons, insert appropriate materials. But for a number of people their role as object owner and user doesn’t always go quite according to script. Many lose, discard or never even look at assembly or instruction manuals. Others appear to
intentionally misuse objects, enticing them into premature failing or death in order to justify the acquisition of a replacement. Yet others fear the machine, its complexity and their lack of knowledge about basic functionality, maintenance and repair. Part of the appeal of the product, it would seem, is its hidden, silent and mysterious functionality. Lucy, for example, appears to relish the lack of life in her things because it means she can constantly buy new. Her domestic objects act as coconspirators in her ongoing refusal to read instruction manuals – she mistreats appliances, they misbehave. Coconspirators in a domestic accumulation strategy, together they ensure ongoing acquisition. Lucy appears unaware that their failure is in large part the result of her failure to operate objects according to their script. Her vacuum cleaner story, for example, is a perfect illustration. “I bought a new hoover because the old one wasn’t working. It really wasn’t. Apparently it’s because I didn’t change the bag properly. But I’ve never changed a bag so how could I not have done it properly?” The replacement, she continues, was a Dyson that had no bag. She now has “three. One upstairs. One downstairs and one in the garage for the car.”

Another focus group participant – Laura, the vacuum owner who had just left her husband – revealed her intentional destruction of an unwanted vacuum cleaner in order that she could purchase a Dyson. Such sabotage is clearly willful and goes beyond the mere incompetence of users who fail to read operating and maintenance manuals. Laura cut the cord of her old Electrolux, thereby disabling it.

In our final example we return to the more traditional terrain of the bagged cleaner, revealing that it too has the potential to outwit and expose its users. One participant discusses how he uses an old conventional vacuum cleaner in the student house he rents out as a mechanism to ensure that his tenants vacuum the house once a week. Here we see how the traditional bagged vacuum cleaner serves a particular purpose that would be impossible with a Dyson. As their landlord, Henry prohibits the students from emptying the vacuum cleaner bag: he visits the house once a week and changes the bag. At the end of the tenancy he empties the bag and then vacuums the property himself. If there is any dust collected in the bag he uses this as a means to retain the students’ deposit, which is returnable only on condition that the property is fully cleaned prior to departure. The vacuum bag thus becomes an instrument of surveillance at-a-distance, a tool for the external management of approved cleaning practices and a weapon of financial punishment where necessary. Should outgoing students (or their parents) complain about the non-return of the deposit, Henry has been known to post the vacuum bag and its dusty contents to the complainants as material evidence of their failure as tenants. The bag is thus the means through which Henry disciplines his tenants, the material representation of his authorial presence and the objectification of their financial indebtedness to him. Thus far, he has never returned
a deposit to any of his tenants: all withheld on the bulky evidence of the vacuum bag.

And so we see how, through seemingly routine encounters with ubiquitous objects, our home possessions can be duplicitous and difficult, mocking reminders of our mistaken purchases and our failings as careful and crafty consumers. The acquisition, use and disposal of everyday domestic goods is not simply a matter of price, value, thrift or function. It is also very significantly about aesthetics, taste, display and design. And it can be about trickery and duplicity too – things are not what they seem. Objects have the capacity to threaten our sense of self, to create anxieties and to make us angry – not simply through their failing, but also through their working. They enjoy considerable agency. Our things reveal our failure to purchase, operate and dispose of things correctly; they endorse our anxieties as incompetent consumers and slaves to the marketing message. Vacuums are ambivalent accommodations within the domestic: we depend on them, we desire them, but so often despise them. This is an object that is both hated and feared for its capacities to refuse to do what it was manufactured to do – making matter invisible. They fail, they fail and they refuse to behave according to script. We buy new, duplicate them, they multiply in our homes, but ultimately they disappoint. We hide them, stash them, kick and abuse them. And still dirt and dust remain visible, constant reminders of the failings of our choices, of our inabilities to control and of our failed housekeeping skills.

Reflections
We conclude with two broad reflections on what this research suggests about consumers’ connections to their domestic objects, their design and desire, use and placement within contemporary homes. The first point relates to value, the second to agency, both central concepts in how we understand and theorize design, consumption and practice. By focusing on two seemingly mundane and common objects and their inhabitations in contemporary homes we have explored how apparently ordinary and taken-for-granted practices (watching television, vacuuming floors) can uncover a great deal about how products are placed and used in homes, and in turn how our living spaces are organized, orchestrated, imagined and inhabited.

First, we have argued that the reasons why our goods are valued and/or devalued relates to a complex interweaving of the technological, functional and aesthetic qualities of the good in question, mediated and refracted by its place within our social worlds and our own subjectivities. Value is simultaneously shaped by the material and immaterial qualities of a good; by its social relations and its technological capabilities; by form, function and memory.

We have exposed the complexity of the relationships between design, branding, representation and use. While a consumer’s
initial sensory engagement with an object may be visual or brand-dependent, users invariably enter a range of other engagements as they experience, habituate and appropriate domestic objects – tactile, aural, olfactory, spatial, relational experiences that mediate and transform object meaning and value. Object status and meaning is as much about the performative practice of consumers in the home as it is about revolutionary technologies, extraordinary advertising campaigns or designer-heroes. Commodity value is thus configured, inscribed and transformed by consumers via practice not purchase. Value needs to be fetched out of an object through consumer use. Objects are not inert. They inhabit relational worlds that are always contingent on other objects, activities, placements and engagements. The mundane movements and moments that comprise homemaking encompass a whole suite of entanglements between object, subject, agency and space. Objects and their acquisition, use, placement and value are thus mutually constituted, relationally governed by both production and consumption. Categories of goods need to be imagined as culturally and socially constructed entities, and as such are far more than the sum of their technical histories. Commodity value and meaning is rarely, if ever, singularized or static. It is mobile, diffuse, relational and temporary. This attests to the coconstitution of materiality and agency, object and user subjectivity.

Second, this reframing of value in turn opens up exciting (and troublesome) possibilities for both consumer and object agency in the production of “home.” Such entanglements expose our fragility, uncertainty and failings as domestic producers. Our mundane domestic objects reveal the difficulties of aesthetic and technical judgments surrounding object acquisition, use and placement and expose our ongoing lack of certitude. New kinds of temporality, the rapidity of fashion and design shifts, transformative technologies and new modes of fabrication require new forms of consumption knowledge, competence and skill. Ongoing acquisition and the difficulties of disposal combine to challenge – perhaps threaten – our abilities to create and sustain the ideal home. They certainly call into question our competency to control the agency of our unruly domestic objects.

Notes
1. Equally, domestic objects can reveal intentionalities that are outside both the producer’s intentions and the consumer’s expectations (Petroski 2006; Watkins 2006). Examples abound here. An expensive domestic appliance of “reputed” brand status can fail prematurely. Cheap “throwaway” objects can unwittingly endure, their functioning a mocking refrain to their owners, who just wish they would die. Objects can misbehave and be disobedient (the leaking washing machine, the buzzing fridge, the freezing computer).
2. These two categories of good are amongst a much larger array of commodities that were explored as part of a broader two-year ESRC-funded project entitled “Disposal, Devaluation and Consumerism: or How and Why Things Come Not to Matter” undertaken jointly by the universities of Nottingham and Sheffield. In this paper we draw on two components of the research. Firstly, a series of longitudinal, repeat interviews with fifty-nine households in Nottinghamshire, UK. Households were interviewed on four separate occasions over one year about what household objects they disposed of, why and where. Homes were photographed, interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Households were recruited in roughly equal proportions from four areas of the city: Castle View, an affluent private Victorian estate; Player Fields, an inner-city multicultural neighborhood with high levels of benefit-dependency; Raleigh Heights, a mixed inner-city neighborhood with high levels of student occupancy; and Trent View, a largely middle class, family-oriented suburban area dominated by post-1970s housing estate development. The households span the full range of UK income bands, employment categories, age ranges, ethnicities, housing structures and housing tenures.

In addition we undertook twenty-five focus groups in the East Midlands in order to interrogate consumers’ connections to brands, stores, the product lifecycle and their domestic objects. The majority of focus group discussions included in this paper were amongst decidedly middle class households where cycles of acquisition and replacement tend to be more rapid for economic reasons.

3. In addition, these objects appear to have been neglected in research terms when compared to the range of work that focuses on kitchens and bathroom spaces and devices such as fridges (Watkins 2006), freezers (Shove and Southerton 2000), laundry equipment, microwave ovens and video recorders (Silverstone 1993; Parr 1999).

4. Sales of “big-box” sets have fallen from 80 percent to 20 percent of sales in the UK (2004–5) and a number of retailers, including Dixons, have stopped supplying cathode ray televisions. “No one wants a bulky telly in their sitting room anymore” (John Clare, Dixons, 2006). Widescreen television has become the dominant color format, accounting for 40 percent of volume sales in 2003 (Euromonitor 2004). And 60 percent of televisions sold by Argos, the UK’s biggest television retailer, in August 2005 were flatscreen plasma or LCD sets.

5. Some 53 percent of households surveyed by Mintel in 2004 had a television set with a screen size of 26 inches or more and sets of 30 inches or more accounted for 45 percent of all sets sold in the UK in 2005. This question of screen size and placement looks set to continue to be significant.
6. The flatscreen television, it has been suggested, has caused more room designs than all the television makeover shows put together (Derbyshire 2005).

7. Recent research by Mintel (Vacuum Cleaners Report 2006) suggests that 79.5 percent of the 25,000 adults they surveyed “really care about the house being clean” and 53 percent “care about the floors being spotless.” Interestingly too, however, and indicative of the ongoing tension between the desire for domestic order and the difficulties of realizing this in practice, are the 27.5 percent of Mintel respondents who reveal that “my house is often a mess.” Clearly the aspiration and the achievement of spotless homes are rarely congruent in practice.

8. The Guardian feature on the death of the repair industry highlights the practical and financial difficulties of repairing failed domestic appliances, although it does note that failed Dysons have been a savior to the repair trade. The report continues:

   styled like an oversized training shoe, my stricken mauve vacuum cleaner squats on Alan Levine’s worktop. After two hours of scouring the electrical shops of North London, I’ve found someone who will diagnose my vacuum’s malady . . . You’ve got a crap cleaner . . . In eight months I’ve had two satisfactory vacuuming sessions and a dozen scraping, sweating, heaving, tugging, unblocking, scrubbing attempts to persuade this cleaner to remove the most rudimentary crumbs from the carpet. (Dowling: 2007)

Graham and Thrift (2007), conversely, argue for the centrality of maintenance and repair to the reproduction of contemporary urban economies.

9. A Which report, for example, reveals that Dyson is the only brand of vacuum with below average reliability (2004 Which consumer review guide). One consumer wrote:

   My Dyson was in the skip 5 years after buying it. Trim fell off in the first 18 months, it had to be repaired when it failed to suck. It constantly blocked and I spent hours unblocking, taking out screws and then in the end it went to be replaced by another bagless upright at less than half the price which is twice as effective. Never again.

References


