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Giving the Toaster Eyes:

Applied Anthropomorphism and its Influences on User-Object  
Relations with Everyday Objects

A Master's Thesis for the Degree "Master of Arts (Two  
Years) in Visual Culture"

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ABSTRACT

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by Marissa Frayer

Anthropomorphism, or the attribution of human characteristics and attributes to nonhuman objects, is evidenced in the design world, especially in product lines by companies such as Alessi and Koziol. As case studies, this thesis investigates Fred Flare's *Inanimates* and Jenny Lundgren's *Plasticks*, both of which are sheets of stickers that feature cartoonish facial features like eyes and mouths. These two products encourage the user to express *applied* anthropomorphism, wherein the user should literally *apply* facial features to an everyday object such as a coffee mug, stapler, toaster, shampoo bottle, etc., to explicitly demonstrate an anthropomorphic relationship. This thesis develops prior research by investigating how the stickers encourage and/or limit anthropomorphism in design and whether the stickers weaken or strengthen the user-object relationship.

Though grounded in visual culture, this thesis first discusses anthropomorphic research from cognitive sciences to explore potential theories regarding why humans anthropomorphize. Next *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are visually analyzed regarding: visual and material characteristics; suggestions of use; limitations of use; indications of audience; and speculations of design. The stickers and anthropomorphic theories are then considered with respect to various design theories—user/designer roles, ornamentation, interaction, care/attachment—to analyze *applied* anthropomorphism's effects and possibilities for user, designer and object. *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are then studied using Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theories regarding embodiment and the flesh to establish how the stickers may create stronger user-object relationships. Further implications for the stickers and *applied* anthropomorphism are suggested, whereby increased attachment and care could promote recycling and prevent premature object disposal.

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## Introduction

The year is likely 1990. I am a rather normal, happy, contented six-year-old American girl plopped in front of the family television cuddling my white, torn, indispensable blanket while watching my favorite childhood animated movie, *The Brave Little Toaster*. In the film, a boy—“The Master,” as he is known—abandons his old toaster, radio, vacuum, lamp and electric blanket when he sets off for college.<sup>1</sup> Cast aside but very much still functional and devoted, the objects embark on an epic journey to reclaim their position in The Master’s heart and life. In one scene, an ornery, skeptical air conditioner questions the dedicated group, “You guys really have an attachment for that kid, don't you?” To which Blanky the electric blanket replies, “Yes. He was our master.”<sup>2</sup> So formed my relationship with objects—they were my things. I was to love them so they would in turn love me like Toaster and Blanky loved The Master. I would develop attachments to objects not solely because they were mine, but because I gave them life and humanity.

In short, I began to anthropomorphize. According to anthropologist and theorist Stewart Guthrie, anthropomorphism is “the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things or events” that is also “familiar, pervasive, and powerful in human thought in action.”<sup>3</sup> Houses easily contained eyes and mouths, as did electrical outlets or cars. They could be happy, sad, angry or tired. They could help me if I treated them with care or hurt me if I wronged them.

### 1.1 The problem

Fast forward more than 20 years and I have noticed as a visual culture student that many design firms have made reputations for themselves by playing with anthropomorphism. German brand Koziol produces housewares like pizza slicers, whisks and more that even include human-like names such as Gaston and Gloria.<sup>4</sup> Italian company Alessi is probably the most well-known anthropomorphizier, with

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<sup>1</sup> *The Brave Little Toaster*, video recording, Walt Disney Pictures, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> S E Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Koziol your kitchen,’ Koziol home page, viewed on 14 April 2010, <[http://www.koziol-gluecksfabrik.de/aw/Gluecksfabrik/Koziol\\_Gluecksfabrik/Shop/~qv/koziol\\_your\\_kitchen/?GFV\\_page=2&=&GFV\\_sortdirection=ascending&GFV\\_orderby=name#paging](http://www.koziol-gluecksfabrik.de/aw/Gluecksfabrik/Koziol_Gluecksfabrik/Shop/~qv/koziol_your_kitchen/?GFV_page=2&=&GFV_sortdirection=ascending&GFV_orderby=name#paging)>.

rather famous products like their human-emulating Anna G. and Alessandro M. corkscrews<sup>5</sup>, (whose arms raise as the cork loosens) and Te ò tea strainer who helps the user strain tea by dangling over a cup's edge.<sup>6</sup> Though these two companies are better-known anthropomorphizers, the phenomenon is prevalent among many design companies and users alike. For example, a number of blogs highlight face-seeing tendencies or human form mimicking objects like *Faces in Places* via [facesinplaces.blogspot.com](http://facesinplaces.blogspot.com), *Face Ahoy* via [faceahoy.wordpress.com](http://faceahoy.wordpress.com) and *Things That Look Like Other Things* via [thingsthatlooklikeootherthings.tumblr.com](http://thingsthatlooklikeootherthings.tumblr.com).

The practice of including humanly suggestive elements or forms in design and art is of course nothing new. A painter like Giuseppe Arcimboldo, for instance, lived from 1527 to 1593, when he created a reputation for constructing human faces and busts from fruits, flowers, birds and animals.<sup>7</sup> A plethora of human-imitating vessels from 1300 to 1500 Mexico, first millennium B.C. China and pre-historic Troy inhabit museums across the globe.<sup>8</sup> Buildings have long-standing traditions of emphasis on the body, as put forth in first century B.C. by architect and writer Vitruvius, who constantly compared architecture to the human body.<sup>9</sup> Even contemporary photographers like brothers Francois and Jean Robert have documented faces in the everyday.<sup>10</sup> The list grows exponentially.

The problem in the area of design, however, is anthropomorphism's potential influences on the relationship between user and object. An object created by a designer to carry rather anthropomorphic attributes evidently suggests a more developed relationship, one wherein the user gives human characteristics to the object. This anthropomorphism changes and likely strengthens the user-object relationship, inching closer to the Toaster-Master bond.

In this thesis, the problem of anthropomorphism in design is further challenged by two sets of facial feature stickers called *Inanimates* [Fig. 1] and *Plasticks* [Fig. 2]. Both products are collections of cartoonish stickers depicting eyes, mouths and the

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<sup>5</sup> 'Alessi Corkscrews, Corkscrews with Personalities,' viewed 8 March 2010, <<http://www.alessicorkscrews.com/>>.

<sup>6</sup> 'Te ò , Tea-Strainer – Alessi tea-strainer,' viewed 8 March 2010, <<http://www.alessi.com/en/2/3695/tea-and-coffee-accessories-breakfast/asp09-daz-te-o-tea-strainer>>.

<sup>7</sup> W Kriegeskorte, *Giuseppe Arcimboldo*, Taschen, Cologne, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Phaidon Press, London, 1994, p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> S E Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> F and J Robert, *Faces*, Chronicle, San Francisco, 2000.

like with the specific intention of being attached to other design objects. These expand the anthropomorphic user-object relationship because they give the user agency to express and acknowledge anthropomorphism where it may not have been envisioned or intended by the professional designer. This specific way of expressing anthropomorphism is referred to in this thesis as *applied* anthropomorphism, as developed by the author. Employing research on anthropomorphism, discussion of various design theories and the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this thesis will investigate the user-object anthropomorphic relationship encouraged by *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*.

### *1.2 Current research and relevance of the work*

The main researchers on anthropomorphism and design are Carl DiSalvo, an assistant professor at Georgia Institute of Technology<sup>11</sup> and Francine Gemperle, a design and technology consultant in Pennsylvania.<sup>12</sup> The two have collaborated (sometimes with other researchers) on a number of papers including, ‘From Seduction to Fulfillment: The Use of Anthropomorphic Form in Design.’ This brief work was published as part of the proceedings of the 2003 International Conference on Designing Pleasurable Products and Interfaces. In the article, the two discuss theories of anthropomorphism, establish four uses of anthropomorphic form in design and ultimately identify two qualities—seduction and fulfillment—that address user experience with anthropomorphism.<sup>13</sup> Though DiSalvo and Gemperle have no published record of collaboration since 2004, their considerations of anthropomorphism and design have greatly informed and aided this thesis.

Other researchers like Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz and John Cacioppo have also published work regarding anthropomorphism and possible theorems as to why humans anthropomorphize. Though the authors include references to design objects, like visual help assistants often used in computer programs like Microsoft Word, they focus primarily on anthropomorphism’s ties to psychology and not design. Waytz,

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Carl DiSalvo, Asst Professor LCC GA Tech,’ viewed 8 March 2010, <<http://www.lcc.gatech.edu/~cdisalvo3/>>.

<sup>12</sup> ‘MAYA Design: Francine Gemperle,’ viewed 8 March 2010, <<http://www.maya.com/about/francine-gemperle>>.

<sup>13</sup> C DiSalvo and F Gemperle, ‘From Seduction to Fulfillment: The Use of Anthropomorphic Form in Design,’ *Designing Pleasurable Products And Interface: Proceedings of the 2003 International Conference on Designing Pleasurable Products and Interfaces*, 2003, pp. 67-72.

Epley and Cacioppo have published this year in *Current Directions and Psychological Science* regarding anthropomorphism, social cognition and dehumanization.<sup>14</sup>

This is not to say other research regarding anthropomorphism and design is nonexistent. What exists, however, is directed largely at examining consumer behavior and response. A brief round table discussion was conducted at California State University in 2006 regarding anthropomorphism and consumer behavior.<sup>15</sup> Researchers in psychology at Colorado State University have published work about car drivers, anthropomorphic car attributes and aggressive driving.<sup>16</sup> Pankaj Aggarwal and Ann McGill have conducted two studies on the ease and effectiveness of anthropomorphism and products.<sup>17</sup>

No research has been found, however, that considers anthropomorphism and design from an in-depth perspective, particularly focusing on the user-object relationship.<sup>18</sup> This thesis will incorporate these publications and others to essentially pick up where the central anthropomorphic researchers have left off. *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* broaden the field of anthropomorphism and design since they were essentially created on the understanding/assumption that people do and *want* to anthropomorphize.

As noted above, approaching anthropomorphism in terms of design theory and phenomenology is a rather unexplored endeavor. In academia, anthropomorphism is discussed almost solely in relation to the natural sciences.<sup>19</sup> When analyzed in visual culture spheres, research pertains largely to robotics, especially such topics as

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<sup>14</sup> A Waytz, N Epley and J Cacioppo, 'Social Cognition Unbound: Insights Into Anthropomorphism and Dehumanization,' *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2010, pp. 58-62.

<sup>15</sup> T Kiesler, 'Roundtable: Anthropomorphism and Consumer Behavior,' *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 33, 2006, pp. 149-150.

<sup>16</sup> J Benfield, W Szlemko and P Bell, 'Driver Personality and Anthropomorphic Attributions of Vehicle Personality Relate to Reported Aggressive Driving Tendencies,' *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 42, 2007, pp. 247-258.

<sup>17</sup> P Aggarwal and A McGill, 'Is That Car Smiling at Me? Schema Congruity as a Basis for Evaluating Anthropomorphized Products,' *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 34, 2007, pp. 468-479.

<sup>18</sup> Searches were performed using Lund University's ELIN database search engine, as well as Louisiana State University's online databases and Google Scholar using terms like, but not limited to: anthropomorph, animism, animate, Alessi, design, emotion, faces, phenomenology, interface, interactivity, Koziol, human schema, products as personalities, Merleau-Ponty design.

<sup>19</sup> See: L Daston and G Mitman (eds.), *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005.

artificial interface design or depiction of androids in film.<sup>20</sup>

This thesis is relevant for its unique multi-faceted approach, incorporating theories regarding anthropomorphism, design and phenomenology to better understand how the designer, user and object are established and influenced by anthropomorphic design objects. Further, it goes beyond simply analyzing pre-existing anthropomorphic design objects and instead questions the role of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* in promoting user-as-designer *applied* anthropomorphism. This creates many layers for in-depth analysis. Conclusions from this thesis could spur changes in approach to design theory, as well as increased attention to anthropomorphic details in visual culture.

### *1.3 Question, research goals, hypotheses*

Though some theories as to why humans anthropomorphize are discussed in this thesis, its goal is not to answer this question, which lays far beyond the borders of visual culture. Simply, it is taken as a given in this thesis that humans do anthropomorphize, to varying extents and strengths. Rather, the goal of this thesis is the pursuit of answering how: How do *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*' use of anthropomorphism encourage and influence the user-object relationship?

Additionally, this thesis will address the following research questions. How do these stickers encourage and limit anthropomorphism in design? How do these stickers surpass ornament to further interaction between user-object? Do these stickers ultimately weaken or strengthen the user-object relationship? How can these stickers be used in the future to facilitate care and attachment to objects?

As part of the central hypothesis, this thesis holds *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* explicitly encourage anthropomorphism among users by visual and textual aids on their packaging. Chapter Two, however, shows the two products differ slightly in their depicted suggestions of use. Though the products are rather clear in their hints to anthropomorphize, they equally limit the user's choices in expressing anthropomorphism based on which facial features are included in the stickers and

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<sup>20</sup> See: A Don, S Brennan, B Laurel and B Shneiderman, 'Anthropomorphism: from Eliza to Terminator 2,' *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems: Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems*, 1992, pp. 67-70.



how they are depicted. From a design perspective, it seems the user is given more power by professional designers to design an anthropomorphized product of their own (i.e. to give facial features to something like a coffee mug that was not professionally designed to include such). Yet perhaps it is still the professional designer who retains the ultimate power, since they are responsible for design decisions concerning what and how *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* should look and operate.

A different hypothesis, however, holds the user-object relationship is strengthened simply because the empowered user feels more directly involved in the creation of the anthropomorphized object. This particular hypothesis gains strength in this thesis by employing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological musings regarding the body, flesh and relationships with objects. Essentially, objects and subjects, being that they are in the world and of the same flesh, work together to construct one another. Therefore, the user-object relationship strengthens because the user is more involved in the object's creation. Through this connection, the user more so recognizes the awe and power in his or her own existence.

#### *1.4 Method, structure and theories*

The methodology of this thesis is predominately a literature review of research and writings on anthropomorphism, design and phenomenology. Because I found no pre-existing research specifically pertaining to all three of these facets, resources had to be pulled from a variety of disciplines to ultimately address this user-object anthropomorphic relationship from a humanities perspective. Further, due to *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* rather recent existence (2006 and 2009, respectively), no specific mention of either product was found beyond surface-level blog and newspaper references. Moreover, given these stickers' everyday nature, it is possible they are not considered important enough to be worthy of theoretical probing.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted this thesis is not interested in making a historical or cultural overview of any and all facial feature stickers. Though similar stickers may exist, this

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<sup>21</sup> It is beyond this thesis to fully discuss the sociological importance of everyday objects. For further reading, see J Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, Berg, Oxford, 2000 or M Csikszentmihalyi and E Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981.

thesis has chosen *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* for their rather unlimited spheres of use and their position as design objects.<sup>22</sup>

Chapter One begins by considering anthropomorphism to establish a foundation upon which the reader can view the phenomenon in relation to design and phenomenology. Since the term is unfamiliar to most, it is necessary to provide means for the reader to comprehend anthropomorphism. In addition to examining how anthropomorphism is discussed primarily in academia, a working definition of anthropomorphism is created in the chapter. Further, though no precise scientific explanation of anthropomorphism has been found, a number of explanatory theories are offered to better understand why it occurs.

Chapter Two places the case studies of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* under the visual culture analysis microscope to examine the products for their external features as well as their imbued meanings and suggestions. Because this thesis mostly views and speaks of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* as one collective unit, it is important to step back and discuss the two for their similarities and differences. In this chapter, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are visually analyzed regarding: visual and material characteristics; suggestions of use; limitations of use; indications of audience; and speculations of design.

Chapter Three covers a large amount of design theory territory in a nuanced and condensed manner. A variety of design thinkers like Richard Buchanan, Tony Fry, Adolf Loos, Victor Margolin, Donald Norman and John Thackara, will be employed alongside many others to provide a dynamic discussion regarding applicable design theories. First, the chapter will question *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*' relation to user and designer. Then the stickers' roles as elements of ornament will be discussed. Next, user interactions will be investigated, especially with respect to pleasure. *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* will also be studied in regard to care and attachment. Finally, uses of anthropomorphism in design will be considered.

Chapter Four attempts to explain the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a digestible fashion so as to relate his thinking to the user-object anthropomorphic relationship created by *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*. Though tenets of

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<sup>22</sup> The author was first made aware in spring 2009 of *Plasticks* as part of Ung7 Young Swedish Design exhibition at Form/Design Center in Malmö.

his philosophy are deeply interwoven, this thesis attempts to simplify his central concepts by considering them somewhat individually before ultimately combining them. Therefore, his trademark notion of the body and embodiment are discussed first. Then the fabric of flesh that binds the body to objects is considered. Next an explanation for what happens when the body perceives an object is formulated. Finally, these concepts are all tied together with respect to the relationship created between user-object with *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*.

Throughout the thesis, an example will be made of an anthropomorphized toaster [Fig. 3] to better explain the sometimes complicated theories and processes discussed.

## 1. Anthropomorphism considered: “Talk to me, toaster!”

Though anthropomorphism has been discussed lightly in the introduction, it is essential to consider how anthropomorphism is discussed primarily in academia, to further define anthropomorphism, to demonstrate why anthropomorphism is thought to happen and why focusing on anthropomorphism is important. This chapter explores these matters to give the reader a grasp on anthropomorphism’s possibilities and restrictions within this thesis.

### 1.1 Discourse and histories

Although this thesis deals with visual culture, it would be erroneous to discuss anthropomorphism without mentioning its place within the natural sciences, since a great deal of published work on anthropomorphism is found in these sciences. Anthropomorphism’s place in the natural sciences is quite precarious and attitudes toward anthropomorphism in visual culture can be influenced by other disciplines. In *Thinking with Animals*, James Serpell cites archaeologist Steven Mithen, who claims anthropomorphism “is one of the defining characteristics” of *Homo sapiens* and “that it probably evolved no more than 40,000 years ago.”<sup>23</sup> When Charles Darwin published his investigations and observations of animals in the late 1800s, his language suggested highly human-centric observations of human-like, emotional traits in animals.<sup>24</sup>

Since then in the natural sciences, the application of any human thought or emotion in describing animals, genes, electrons and the like invoked “suspicions of sloppy thinking” or “feeble-mindedness.”<sup>25</sup> In *The New Anthropomorphism*, John Kennedy cites D.Q. Estep and K.E.M. Bruce and their example of the verb ‘rape’ to summarize a danger of anthropomorphizing animals: “Rape is an emotionally charged word that carries with it a wide range of social and ethical implications. By using the term to describe non-human behavior, we are forcing certain human cultural standards on non-humans.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Hank Davis argues

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<sup>23</sup> J Serpell, ‘People in Disguise: Anthropomorphism and the Human-Pet Relationship’ in *Thinking with Animals*, L Daston and G Mitman (eds.), Columbia University Press, New York, p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> E Knoll, ‘Dogs, Darwinism, and English Sensibilities’ in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes and Animals*, R Mitchell, N Thompson and H Lyn Miles (eds.), State University of New York Press, Albany, 1996, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> L Daston and G Mitman, ‘Introduction’ in *Thinking with Animals*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> J S Kennedy, *The New Anthropomorphism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 53.

anthropomorphism's error, since; "We do not know enough about the role of conscious thought in determining human behavior to extrapolate to any other species."<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, this thesis sides with Lorraine Daston, who writes, "Hence the investigation of animal minds became only a more far-flung case of figuring out how other human minds worked, the difficulties of understanding one's dog differing only in degree from those of making sense of a Frenchman."<sup>28</sup> Just because the human mind has not been completely resolved does not mean we will cease trying to explain its processes, much less assuming or believing (however incorrectly) those processes apply to dogs, toasters or cars.

### *1.2 Definitions and limitations*

The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines anthropomorphism as "attribution of human form or character: ascription of a human form and attributes to the Deity or ascription of a human attribute or personality to anything impersonal or irrational."<sup>29</sup>

This definition, however, is not enough for our purposes. Nor is it sufficient to look only to the term's Greek etymology, whereby *anthropos* means human and *morphe* means shape or form.<sup>30</sup> Stewart Guthrie's formerly cited definition as "the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things or events" that is "familiar, pervasive and powerful" is also not concise enough.<sup>31</sup>

Drawing on studies that will be further explained below, let us create an amalgamated definition of anthropomorphism that serves the purposes of this thesis. Anthropomorphism is a human process of attributing external physical human traits and internal uniquely human features to nonhuman, inanimate objects that can vary in strength and conviction, but is nonetheless prevalent. By 'external physical human traits,' the notion of a human form is implied, but does not require any totality of

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<sup>27</sup> H Davis, 'Animal Cognition Versus Animal Thinking: The Anthropomorphic Error' in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes and Animals, op. cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>28</sup> L Daston, 'Intelligences: Angelic, Human, Animal' in *Thinking with Animals, op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> 'Anthropomorphism,' in *Oxford English Dictionary* online, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, viewed 8 March 2010,

<[http://dictionary.oed.com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/cgi/entry/50009445?single=1&query\\_type=word&query\\_word=anthropomorphism&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/cgi/entry/50009445?single=1&query_type=word&query_word=anthropomorphism&first=1&max_to_show=10)>.

<sup>30</sup> N Epley, A Waytz and J Cacioppo, 'On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism,' *Psychological Review*, Vol. 114, No. 4, 2007, p. 865.

<sup>31</sup> S E Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

parts for constitution (i.e. the human form does not have to possess two arms, two legs, two eyes, etc.).<sup>32</sup> By ‘internal uniquely human features,’ notions of assumed human characteristics like a soul, rationality, emotion, intelligence, morality and the like are intended. ‘Nonhuman, inanimate objects’ are those objects without life, breath and a heartbeat that may bear little resemblance to the human form. The term ‘objects’ is stressed here, as this thesis does not cover events, phenomena and such (clouds, storms, etc.) commonly said to be anthropomorphized. This definition purports anthropomorphism ‘can vary in strength and conviction,’ meaning it does not have to occur every second of every day, much less throughout a lifetime or even with a repeated level or amount of attribution.<sup>33</sup> Anthropomorphism’s prevalence is also assumed, given the amount of dedicated research and its established history. Much of this research will be cross-referenced throughout this thesis.

Unlike the *OED* definition, this constructed definition does not suggest the anthropomorphized object in question is ‘impersonal’ or ‘irrational.’ As this thesis will explore, anthropomorphism is seen to be a process that encourages social ties and relationships, thereby making ‘impersonal’ irrelevant. ‘Irrational’ suggests a slight, though possibly unintentional, critical judgment regarding the mental state of one who anthropomorphizes. In this thesis, anthropomorphism is not deemed crazy, improper or irrational. Finally, any suggestion of religious involvement or purpose is restricted from this constructed definition to avoid the inclusion of one or all sects.

Most commonly, anthropomorphism is confused or associated with animism. As Guthrie argues, animism is the process of “attributing life to the lifeless.”<sup>34</sup> This process, he says, happens in humans and animals and gives examples of a mechanic seeing a tool “as rebellious,” a runner viewing “fire hydrants as dogs” or a cat seeing a fluttering leaf “as prey.”<sup>35</sup> With animism, it is not only humans who can participate, and there is no requirement to attribute the human form, much less human characteristics and features. In keeping with the toaster example, animism could say, “The toaster stole my bread;” whereas anthropomorphism might say, “The greedy, evil, little toaster guy stole my bread.”

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<sup>32</sup> C DiSalvo and F Gemperle, *op. cit.*, p.67.

<sup>33</sup> N Epley, A Waytz, S Akalis and J Cacioppo, ‘When We Need a Human: Motivational Determinants of Anthropomorphism,’ *Social Cognition*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2008, pp. 144-5.

<sup>34</sup> S E Guthrie, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

### *1.3 Explanatory theories*

As the prior section exemplifies, science is far from understanding all the intricacies of the human mind and its processes. Anthropomorphism is no exception and bears no clear cut explanation for its occurrence. Instead, research and studies considered here suggest five main reasons why humans anthropomorphize: prediction and precaution; self-extension and formation; social relationships; the human template; and control. These reasons/explanatory theories can function alone or in conjunction with one another, as they often overlap and address multiple motivations.

#### *1.31 Prediction and precaution*

Stewart Guthrie's main argument in *Faces in the Clouds* surmises humans anthropomorphize akin to the fight/flight response or a "better safe than sorry" mechanism.<sup>36</sup> He argues we anthropomorphize as a precautionary measure, for if we view something as humanlike, we can prepare ourselves for an upcoming interaction. Therefore, "If it turns out not to be alive or humanlike, we usually lose little by having thought it was. This practice thus yields more in occasional big successes than it costs in frequent little failures."<sup>37</sup>

In 'From Seduction to Fulfillment,' Carl DiSalvo and Francine Gemperle refer also to Guthrie and his line of reasoning as the "best-bet thesis."<sup>38</sup>

#### *1.32 Self-extension and formation*

DiSalvo and Gemperle use "object subject interchangeability" as a thesis for anthropomorphism. Using this concept, they state people give meaning to objects in the "construction, adaptation, and maintenance of the self," which in turn may encourage anthropomorphism to further give the object more human-like power in "defining who we are individually or culturally."<sup>39</sup>

Tina and Sara Kiesler researched self-extension in their 2005 study, 'My Pet Rock and Me: An Experimental Exploration of the Self Extension Concept.' Participants of

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<sup>36</sup> S E Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> C DiSalvo and F Gemperle, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

the study were given a small “pet” rock and assigned to design a rock, which they would either keep for themselves or sell. More than half the participants gave their rocks a humanlike face.<sup>40</sup> The study found those who designed the rock for themselves were more likely to say it symbolized themselves; those whose rock symbolized the creator rated the rocks’ personality more similarly to their own personalities.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the authors summarized even the “simplest of activities ... can lead to feelings that the object symbolizes the self.”<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, DiSalvo and Gemperle list “phenomenological intersubjectivity” as a separate thesis for anthropomorphism. They say that since phenomenology in relation to object experience muddles the invisible line between self and other, anthropomorphism is a response to make sense of the humanlike objects.<sup>43</sup> Self and other can be viewed here as strikingly similar to subject and object, mentioned above. Making sense of an anthropomorphic, humanlike object is unconsciously making sense of one self, thus being included in self-extension and formation reasoning.

### *1.33 Social relationships*

In ‘On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism,’ Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz and John Cacioppo argue sociality as one motivational determinant of anthropomorphism. “Thirsty people seek water,” they write. “And socially disconnected people seek social connection.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, anthropomorphizing nonhuman agents “enables social connection to develop—however anemic it may be compared with social connection with actual humans.”<sup>45</sup> As a simple example, think back to the film *Cast Away* with the lonely, stranded Tom Hanks and his volleyball-cum-companion, Wilson.<sup>46</sup>

The same authors (with Scott Akalis) also published research entitled, ‘Loneliness and Perceived Agency in Gadgets, Gods, and Greyhounds.’ In three separate studies, they confirmed participants who were “chronically disconnected from others” or

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<sup>40</sup> T Kiesler and S Kiesler, ‘My Pet Rock and Me: An Experimental Exploration of the Self Extension Concept’, *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 32, 2005, p. 366.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>43</sup> C DiSalvo and F Gemperle, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>44</sup> N Epley, A Waytz and J Cacioppo, ‘On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism,’ *op. cit.*, p. 876.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 879.

<sup>46</sup> *Cast Away*, director R Zemeckis, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp., 2000.



“momentarily led to think about disconnection” appeared to anthropomorphize or “create humanlike agents in their environment.”<sup>47</sup> Further, the authors suggest people who feel alone or disconnected may prefer easing social disconnection by anthropomorphizing instead of reconnecting.<sup>48</sup>

After citing a list of medical evidences acknowledging the benefits of social support and human health, James Serpell, in *Thinking with Animals*, also extends the argument for social relationships beyond animals. Serpell asserts these positive effects of social relationships should apply to any social relationship where a person “believes that he or she is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations.”<sup>49</sup>

DiSalvo and Gemperle’s “social thesis” derives from their interpretation of Caporael and Heyes’ “Species-Specific Group- Level Coordination System,” which holds anthropomorphism is a way of altering values humans place on objects or animals and how humans behave accordingly.<sup>50</sup>

### *1.34 The human template*

Similar to self-extension and formation is the idea of the human template. Guthrie says people are unconsciously preoccupied with a human prototype or template to guide perception, whereby we pay attention to those that fit the template and “temporarily ignore” those that do not fit.<sup>51</sup> Related to the concept of social relationships, Guthrie also states that since one of the greatest human needs is for other people, any “schema” or template used to detect humans takes priority in daily life.<sup>52</sup>

Another factor in Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz and John T. Cacioppo’s ‘On Seeing Human’ article, is similar to self-extension, formation and DiSalvo and Gemperle’s “phenomenological intersubjectivity.” Quite simply, because humans can only know

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<sup>47</sup> N Epley, S Akalis, A Waytz and J Cacioppo, ‘Creating Social Connection Through Inferential Reproduction: Loneliness and Perceived Agency in Gadgets, Gods, and Greyhounds,’ *Psychological Science*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2008, pp.118-9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>49</sup> J Serpell, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>50</sup> C DiSalvo and F Gemperle, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>51</sup> S E Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

for certain what it is to be human, we use this base of experience to evaluate and consider nonhuman agents.<sup>53</sup>

In their own work, DiSalvo and Gemperle phrase this primarily as the “familiarity thesis,” because anthropomorphism allows humans to explain what we do not understand according to what we do—and they say we understand ourselves best.<sup>54</sup> They also discuss the “comfort thesis,” which says we are emotionally uncomfortable with things not like us (i.e. that do not fit the human template), thus anthropomorphize to reduce discomfort.<sup>55</sup>

### *1.35 Control*

Related to the notion of comfort is the feeling of control. Guthrie turns to Auguste Comte and Sigmund Freud to explain control in relation to anthropomorphism. In our early stages, we see ourselves as the absolute center, equipped with complete control and are thus able to exert influence on others and objects alike.<sup>56</sup> “Moreover,” Guthrie says, “Having a social relationship with some object, human or not, means being able to influence it.”<sup>57</sup> Control, then, is also tied to social relationships.

In Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo’s ‘On Seeing Human,’ the authors contend that control varies among persons and encourages anthropomorphism to “organize the present and establish predictability in future interactions with a nonhuman agent.”<sup>58</sup> Also, the authors cite research indicating those with strong desires for control demonstrate more acts of attribution in attempts to explain others’ behavior, which hints at greater levels of anthropomorphism.<sup>59</sup> Finally, they suggest adults may desire control more so than children.<sup>60</sup>

DiSalvo and Gemperle offer a “command and control” thesis according to widely cited consumer research and marketing scholar Russell W. Belk. Through his work on collecting, Belk discusses anthropomorphism as a way for collectors to gain

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<sup>53</sup> N Epley, A Waytz and J Cacioppo, ‘On Seeing Human,’ *op. cit.*, p. 868.

<sup>54</sup> C DiSalvo and F Gemperle, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> S E Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> N Epley, A Waytz and J Cacioppo, ‘On Seeing Human,’ *op. cit.*, p. 873.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 874.

control of objects by creating “a little world of an intimate family in which the collector reigns as an absolute sovereign.”<sup>61</sup>

#### *1.4 Anthropomorphism's importance*

One last time in this chapter, let us look to the work Epley, Waytz, Cacioppo (and Akalis) for two defenses of caring about anthropomorphism: moral agency and dehumanization. Since anthropomorphism entails an ascription of internal human features, they argue this carries the “consequence of moral agency,” thereby turning anthropomorphized nonhuman objects into “moral agents.”<sup>62</sup> They evidence this defense by citing examples such as referring to “mother earth” or “suffering animals.”<sup>63</sup>

Regarding dehumanization, the authors contend understanding anthropomorphism could shed light on dehumanization—the process when humans do not see other humans as human at all—with the potential consequence of treating humans as objects.<sup>64</sup> Summarily, exercising anthropomorphism influences the way humans perceive, interact, understand and treat inanimate objects. If design objects such as *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* encourage anthropomorphism, they hold the possibility of altering humans' attitudes toward inanimate, everyday objects.

#### *1.5 Anthropomorphism conclusions*

This chapter has sought to establish the foundation for how anthropomorphism is considered within this thesis. By examining its place in other discourses, creating a working definition of anthropomorphism, providing potential explanatory theories and emphasizing its importance, this chapter has given the reader a pair of glasses through which to view anthropomorphism. To reiterate our conclusions, let us briefly consider what it means to say “Talk to me, toaster!” Firstly, those in the natural sciences may debate whether talking to one's toaster is an error or fallacy, but herein by visual culture its legitimacy is not questioned. Talking to a toaster is an instance of anthropomorphism or a human process of attributing external physical human

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<sup>61</sup> C DiSalvo and F Gemperle, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>62</sup> N Epley, A Waytz, S Akalis and J Cacioppo, ‘When We Need a Human,’ *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

traits and internal uniquely human features to a nonhuman, inanimate object that can vary in strength and conviction, but is nonetheless prevalent. Though science can offer no concrete reason as to why one talks to one's toaster, any or all five explanatory theories could be in play. These theories are prediction and precaution; self-extension and formation; social relationships; the human template; and control. Finally, it is important to question why a person talks to a toaster because this process turns the toaster into a moral agent and offers potential insight into why humans often dehumanize other humans and objects. The next chapter will look further into the case studies of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* to investigate how they encourage anthropomorphism.

## 2. Case studies: *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*

As points of departure regarding *applied* anthropomorphism, this thesis employs Fred Flare's *Inanimates* [Fig. 1] and Jenny Lundgren's *Plasticks* [Fig. 2] as case studies. Oversimplified, these products are sets of cartoonish, line drawing stickers resembling facial features. The intended application of both is to be adhered to other design or everyday objects. This case studies chapter will detail the similarities and differences of the products regarding visual and material characteristics, suggestions of use, limitations of use, indications of audience and speculations of design.

### 2.1 Fred Flare's *Inanimates*

Fred Flare is an American, web-based design retailer owned by Chris Bick and Keith Carollo, with a storefront in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>65</sup> Though the company has existed for more than 12 years,<sup>66</sup> *Inanimates*' packaging indicates a copyright of 2006. No specific designer is associated with the creation of *Inanimates*.<sup>67</sup> Excluding shipping, a package of *Inanimates* with 124 stickers retails for \$9 US (approximately 65 SEK). No information is provided regarding the material make-up of the stickers, but they are waterproof. Packaging indicates *Inanimates* are made in China. One package contains two sticker sheets, measuring 15x20 centimeters each. Recycling information is not given.

### 2.2 Jenny Lundgren's *Plasticks*

Jenny Lundgren is a Stockholm-based Swedish designer with a master's degree in design from Gothenburg's School for Design and Crafts (HDK).<sup>68</sup> Though Lundgren is the sole designer of *Plasticks*, the copyright is attributed to Renew Ideas Sthlm, with a 2009 copyright date, per its packaging. Excluding shipping, a package of *Plasticks* with approximately 70 stickers retails for \$7.50 US (approximately 55 SEK). Per *Plasticks*' website, "The stickers are made of a water-resistant, adhesive polyethylene (PE) foil."<sup>69</sup> Packaging indicates *Plasticks* are made in Sweden. One

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<sup>65</sup> M Albo, 'No Frown is Left Unturned,' *The New York Times*, Nov. 13, 2008, Section E, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> The relationship between Fred Flare and Worldwide Fred, the company listed on *Inanimates*' packaging, is unclear. Worldwide Fred was contacted via e-mail 14 April 2010 regarding specific design information about *Inanimates*, with no response.

<sup>68</sup> 'Jenny Lundgren: About,' viewed 4 April 2010, <<http://www.jennylundgren.se/om-mig/?l=en>>.

<sup>69</sup> 'Plasticks - Facts,' viewed 4 April 2010, <<http://www.plasticks.se/fakta/?l=en>>.

package contains one sticker sheet, measuring roughly 19x30 centimeters. Packaging indicates stickers can be recycled alongside plastic containers.

### 2.3 Aspects of visuality

From a visual standpoint, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* share similarities in their cartoonish, line drawn depictions of facial features including eyes and mouths. Average sticker size is comparable too, with a pair of *Inanimates*' eyes measuring roughly 3x2 cm and *Plasticks*' eyes measuring about 4x2 cm. These observations, however, are nearly where their similarities end.

Firstly, color choice is starkly different between the two. *Inanimates* use white and black throughout, with the only other colors being washed out sage green or washed out baby/periwinkle blue, differentiated by sheet. These colors invoke rather serious connotations. Conversely, *Plasticks* use vivid, bright colors of hot pink, red, purple, sky blue, forest green, chartreuse, yellow, orange, brown, peach, etc. These colors invoke rather playful connotations.

Secondly, facial features included in each package vary widely. *Inanimates* contain only eyes and mouths—with just one pair of eyeglasses and three sets of eyes where the eyeballs are drawn already connected. Some eyes have colored irises. Other eyes have eyelashes. Even still, some eyes are simply 'x' marks, indicating death or unconsciousness. The mouths of *Inanimates* are largely teeth-oriented, featuring buckteeth, missing teeth and clenched teeth, among others. Also included are apostrophe-shaped black stickers that could serve as eyes, noses, mustaches or mouths. Otherwise, *Inanimates* contain no noses, mustaches or other accessories. Alternatively, *Plasticks* include eyes, mouths, noses, mustaches and accessories like teardrops, sunglasses, water goggles, bow ties, crowns, angel wings, hearts, stars, anchors, etc. Present in *Plasticks* are: 16 sets of definite eyes where the eyeballs are already connected; four individual eyeballs; and no fewer than 14 “dots” that could be eyeballs, noses, mouths or beauty marks. *Plasticks*' definite eyes all show the sclera (white part), iris (colored part) and pupil. Also, all the definite eyes include white window pane-esque markings to indicate reflective surfaces.

Thirdly, the emotions depicted by each suggest different feelings. *Inanimates* imply stress, worry, confusion, surprise, happiness, contentment, unconsciousness and even

death. *Plasticks* imply less concrete emotional suggestion but include fatigue, worry, suspicion, happiness and contentment. Later in section 2.7, this chapter will further discuss emotion and face perception.

#### 2.4 Suggestions of use

Visual and textual packaging elements are indispensable in discussing *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*' suggestions of use. *Inanimates*' front packaging [Fig. 3] features three objects that have been subjected to stickers—a handheld calculator, a coffee mug and a stapler. All three now have two eyes and a mouth/teeth.<sup>70</sup> The stickers, however, have been clearly “affixed” only in the digital realm: They have been obviously digitally placed onto the objects. *Plasticks*' front packaging [Fig. 4] features 11 objects with a variation of stickers—eyebrows, eyes, sunglasses, noses, snot, mustaches, lips, bow ties, etc. All the objects are brightly colored, shiny, clean plastic personal hygiene bottles—shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, body wash, lotion, etc. These particular types of bottles may have been chosen for their resemblance to the human form. In their study of the human schema, Pankaj Aggarwal and Ann L. McGill note a 1999 research report by Graham and Poulin-Dubois that demonstrates objects shaped like people are more likely to be anthropomorphized.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, the high amount of reflection from the bottles' surfaces and the detail of the image indicate the stickers were physically attached to these objects and then photographed.

Outright, the suggestions for use differ. *Inanimates* appear targeted more toward personal use either in the home, office or home office. Calculators, coffee and staplers represent number crunching, paper pushing and efficiency. *Plasticks* aim for playful use in the home, particularly the bathroom. Grooming and hygiene bottles represent cleanliness, care and routine.

Textual packaging elements add further levels of interpretation. Per its packaging [Fig. 4], *Inanimates*' tag line is “Add character to your inanimate objects.” Further description on the packaging reads, “Suddenly your stapler becomes a new friend. ... These guys sure add life to the place!” *Inanimates*' text evidences the tendency to anthropomorphize and the need for social connection. *Plasticks*' packaging text [Fig. 5] is solely in Swedish, but its English-version website contains the same

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<sup>70</sup> It is assumed the stapler's backside is also stickered since only one side is shown.

<sup>71</sup> P Aggarwal and A McGill, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

information. Therefore, *Plasticks*' packaging tag line says, "Give used plastic containers a second life." Further text reads, "Create your own unique characters out of used plastic containers. ... Play with your new friends anywhere you like! ... Recycle your friends when you are tired of them."<sup>72</sup> *Plasticks*' text also evidences anthropomorphic tendencies and the need for social connection and disconnection when it is "needed." Moreover, it incorporates and promotes environmental responsibility.

These textual elements imply that although the suggestions for spheres and intended objects of use may differ, the underlying suggestion of anthropomorphic use is evident and shared.

### *2.5 Limitations of use*

*Inanimates* and *Plasticks* share nearly identical limitations of use. Neither can be affixed to an object whose material will not adhere to the stickers. For example, it would be difficult to stick *Inanimates* onto a plate of spaghetti. It would be equally challenging and potentially painful to adhere *Plasticks* to an acupuncture mat. Though these examples may seem self-evident, they nonetheless illustrate the stickers' limitations.

Also, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are not ideal for extremely small or large objects. Doing so could result in disproportion that weakens and perhaps nullifies their anthropomorphic intentions. Eyes and a mouth of *Inanimates* would appear rather dominant and over sized if attached to a thumbnail. Conversely, a face of *Plasticks* would seem small and insignificant if affixed to a water tower.

Not all spheres of use or situations may be deemed appropriate for *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*. For example, it could be said that a 'scalpel with a face' is not a necessary or desirable when a surgeon is operating on a patient. The surgeon could be perceived as flippant or unfit for duty. On the other hand, it could also be contended that 'scalpel with a face' might put a patient at ease prior to or during an non-anesthetized operation, especially if the patient is a child.

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<sup>72</sup> 'Plasticks – Create, Play, Recycle,' viewed 4 April 2010, <<http://www.plasticks.se/?l=en>>.



Though *Inanimates*' packaging may proclaim, "The possibilities are endless—so stick with 'em," there are indeed limitations to the possibilities of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*.

## 2.6 Indications of audience

Although *Plasticks* indicate no persons between the ages of 0 to 3 may use the product, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* directly make no other restrictions on their intended audience. More subtle indications, however, give a few clues regarding audience. On its packaging [Fig. 5], *Plasticks* refers to itself as an environmentally friendly, creative game "for large and small," alluding to a play aspect for kids of all ages.<sup>73</sup> *Plasticks*, for instance, include a gray-haired mustache and a baby's pacifier, which hint at use by a range of ages. Also, since *Inanimates* display a (full) coffee mug with a face, this suggests use by those of at least coffee-drinking age.

Given that both *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are cartoonish in their depiction of human facial features, race may not seem to be an issue in usage. Yet given that *Plasticks* include three recognizably Caucasian noses, it can be said that *Plasticks* at least lean more toward Caucasian representation and usage. Otherwise, both stickers allow for a rather race-less use.

Closely tied to race is culture, where *Plasticks* again contain more stickers at issue. *Plasticks*' inclusion of accessories like bow ties, crowns, stars, hearts, anchors, flowers, etc., can signify a multitude of cultures. Specific intentions are beyond the scope of this thesis; however, diamonds, bow ties and crowns hint at more upper-class cultures that value wealth and tradition. With both *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*, it is difficult to distinguish cultural traits from individual eyes and mouths alone. No stickers are drawn overwhelmingly "American, Western, Swedish, Asian, etc." in their depiction of facial features.

Gender, too, cannot be determined exclusively through individual facial features. Yet *Plasticks* represent very feminine features in red and pink voluptuous, pouting lips. *Inanimates* do the same in two instances with full, fleshy lips—albeit in shades of blue and black. Also *Inanimates* have several eyes with well-defined eyelashes—a

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<sup>73</sup> *Plasticks*' packaging is in Swedish. The text referred to here reads "En miljösamt och kreativ lek för stora och små!" and was translated by the author.

trait more commonly associated with femininity. Where *Plasticks* include eyelashes, they are alongside what appears to be hot pink eye shadow. Contrastingly, *Plasticks* have four mustaches, which are typically associated with masculinity. Any gender suggestions contained in the stickers are also dependent on how and what objects they are affixed. For example, researchers Jack Ingram and Louise Annable note that rounded, organic forms tend to reflect ‘female’ gender expression, whereas more mechanical, angular shapes are ‘masculine.’<sup>74</sup> Gender representations and performativity are beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is important to recognize what gendered elements are included in *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* and that these elements can influence who uses the products and how they are used.<sup>75</sup>

Though *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* give some indications regarding the intended age, race, culture and gender of their audience, a pinpointed audience is difficult to establish. Generally, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* allow for a diverse group of users since neither is noticeably overwhelmingly favorable regarding age, race, culture or gender.

## 2.7 Speculations of design

Although it is not the task of this thesis to interview *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*’ designers regarding specific decisions and intentions, observations can be made speculating certain lines of reasoning behind these designs.

For example, why do both limit human representation to facial features? True, *Plasticks* include accessories like bow ties and belts, but neither product includes features like arms or legs. Perhaps this is due to the undeniable importance of the face. Indeed, face pattern recognition is demonstrated in infants with an average age of 42 minutes.<sup>76</sup> With the exception of rare cases, human facial features are arranged almost identically in adherence to sensory, dietary and linguistic needs (i.e. we need lips to be where they are for eating and speaking).<sup>77</sup> Separate eye-tracking studies by

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<sup>74</sup> J Ingram and L Annable, ‘I See You Baby, Shakin’ That Ass: User Perceptions of Unintentional Anthropomorphism and Zoomorphism in Consumer Products,’ *Proceedings of the Design and Emotion Conference*, 2004.

<sup>75</sup> See J Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,’ in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, A Jones (ed.), Routledge, London, 2003, pp. 392-402.

<sup>76</sup> V Bruce and A Young, *In the Eye of the Beholder: The Science of Face Perception*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 252.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Alfred Yarbus<sup>78</sup> and Guy Thomas Buswell<sup>79</sup> show a human tendency to give faces more attention than other objects when viewing pictures. Today's digital cameras have been equipped with face detection algorithms/modes since at least 2005 with Nikon's "Face Priority" mode.<sup>80</sup> Yet even with an overall template that often machines can detect, human faces are identifiably unique. Such variations can indeed cause face detection systems to fail, like in the case of Nikon's "racist" Coolpix S630 digital camera.<sup>81</sup> Nikon's advanced face-priority detections backfired when a Taiwanese-American woman noticed her camera always prompted 'Did someone blink?' after shooting and displaying photos of herself or her family.

Aside from recognition, faces are especially important for their ties to conveying emotion. A renowned psychologist in the field of facial expressions, Paul Ekman describes faces as "the most skilled non-verbal communicator" and "the best 'nonverbal liar.'"<sup>82</sup> He is quick to point out faces are rarely seen in a context less vacuum—body movements, body positions, words, voice tone, events, setting, present company, etc., can all influence emotional displays.<sup>83</sup> Yet his experiments demonstrate the face can provide accurate information from the face alone, regardless of context.<sup>84</sup> Through his research, Ekman has been able to create a list of minimal emotion categories that can be judged from photographs of posed facial behavior—happiness, surprise, fear, anger, sadness, disgust/contempt and interest.<sup>85</sup> His research relates to *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* since when the facial features are applied, certain emotions can be communicated. The stickers' professional designers have designed-in a range of emotions into the eyes and mouths that can be said to limit what emotions are available, which in turn could influence anthropomorphic relationships.

Another speculation involves why the stickers are cartoonish. Why not stickers that are photographs of actual eyes, mouths, noses and the like? Quite frankly, that might just be too lifelike with the possibility of becoming too creepy. Photographs and their

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<sup>78</sup> A L Yarbus, *Eye Movements and Vision*, trans. B Haigh, Plenum, New York, 1967. p.191.

<sup>79</sup> G T Buswell, *How People Look at Pictures*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1935, p. 20.

<sup>80</sup> K Cheung, 'CES 2008: Face Detection a New Trend for Camcorders,' Camcorderinfo.com, 14 Jan. 2008, viewed 4 April 2010, <<http://www.camcorderinfo.com/content/CES-2008-Face-Detection-a-New-Trend-for-Camcorders-34250.htm>>.

<sup>81</sup> A Rose, 'Are Face-Detection Cameras Racist?,' *Time* magazine online, 22 Jan. 2010, viewed 4 April 2010, <<http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1954643-1,00.html>>.

<sup>82</sup> P Ekman, V Friesen and P Ellsworth, *Emotion in the Human Face: Guide-lines for Research and an Integration of Findings*, Pergamon Press, New York, 1972, p. 23.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

representations are also not under consideration by this thesis, but their signifying power can be illustrated briefly. In discussing the power of an image, W.J.T. Mitchell attests, “When students scoff at the idea of a magical relation between a picture and what it represents, ask them to take a photograph of their mother and cut out the eyes.”<sup>86</sup> Photographic representations of human features as stickers with the aim of being attached to inanimate objects would be too steeped in reality. And as Donald Norman notes in *Emotional Design*, perfect human replicas can be problematic if they are not distinguishable from humans—a prospect that carries with it angst and possible violence.<sup>87</sup> A person may want to talk to their cartoony, anthropomorphized toaster, but they probably do not wish for the toaster to become convinced that it is indeed human. After all, photographs are not necessary to depict faces—familiar or unfamiliar—as commonly demonstrated by line-drawn caricatures.<sup>88</sup>

Further, why do both *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* give particular attention and space to eyes? Perhaps because the eyes have it. Or that the eyes are the window to the soul. In their work on the eyes, Vicki Bruce and Andrew Young point to a 1986 report by C.L. Kleinke, that lists the social functions of gaze or eye contact. These include, but are not limited to: regulating turn-taking, expressing intimacy, exercising social control and facilitating service and task goals.<sup>89</sup> Cultures past and present deeply romanticize and signify the eyes. Chinese folklore tells the story of a famous painter Zhang Sengyou, who one day was asked by monks to paint dragons on the walls of Anle Temple. He painted four lifelike dragons, all without eyes. Since their eyes held their spirits, he said, if he painted their eyes the dragons would fly away. To prove on-lookers’ disbelief, he painted eyes on two dragons that quickly broke the temple wall and flew away.<sup>90</sup> In the Roman Empire, *damnatio memoriae* was common practice to erase the memory of a dead public enemy by “eradicating visual representations of the person, a ban of the name and a prohibition of the observance of the funeral and mourning.”<sup>91</sup> A *Wall Street Journal* article regarding the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad echoes *damnatio memoriae*. David

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<sup>86</sup> W J T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p. 9.

<sup>87</sup> D Norman, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*, Basic Books, New York, 2004, p. 176.

<sup>88</sup> V Bruce and A Young, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

<sup>89</sup> V Bruce and A Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-4.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Good Stories from China: Painting the Dragons’ Eyes,’ *The Epoch Times online*, 24 May 2006, viewed 4 April 2010, <<http://www.theepochtimes.com/news/6-5-24/41889.html>>.

<sup>91</sup> C Hedrick, *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2000, p. xii.

Freedberg writes, "... the first thing iconoclasts often do is to take out the eyes of an image, to make clear that it has finally been drained of its supposed life."<sup>92</sup>

Though these are all mere speculations in attempts to explain design decisions regarding *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*, they nonetheless serve to defend the importance and power of anthropomorphism and design.

## 2.8 Conclusions of case studies

This case studies chapter has addressed a number of facts, observations and speculations regarding *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*, yet the case studies do not end here. Throughout the thesis, properties of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* will be analyzed and evidenced repeatedly. Though this thesis largely addresses the stickers as interchangeable entities, it was the intention of this chapter to highlight their similarities *and* differences regarding: visual and material characteristics; suggestions of use; limitations of use; indications of audience; and speculations of design. No two faces are exactly the same. No two facial feature sticker design objects are exactly the same. For instance, though the stickers are both cartoonish, their visual depictions of eyes and mouths differ by color, facial features included and emotion suggestions. The stickers' packaging materials both include visual and textual suggestions for use, wherein both overwhelmingly suggest anthropomorphism. *Inanimates* stresses a more "serious" home or office use whereas *Plasticks* focuses on more "playful" use with personal toiletry bottles. Both products have natural limitations for use like what materials they can be stuck to, what size design objects are ideal and which spheres of use are appropriate. Though both indicate no outright restrictions by age, race, gender or culture, they both sometimes carry hints of limitations, like *Plasticks'* Caucasian-toned noses. Moreover, it is noted both products focus mainly on facial features (the eyes especially), that the stickers suggest ranges of emotion and they both are cartoonish instead of more life-like. The next chapter will undertake discussion regarding various design aspects of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* to fully consider them as design objects.

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<sup>92</sup> D Freedberg, 'Damnatio Memoriae: Why Mobs Pull Down Statues,' *Wall Street Journal*, 16 April 2003, Section D, p. 10.

### 3. Design deliberated: “Who made you, toaster?”

Forgive what is perhaps stating the obvious, but since *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are both available as products, it is given that they were designed. Indeed, they are (wo) man-made objects that were formed “by human intentionality.”<sup>93</sup> As such, they can be subjected to a variety of design intensive discussions.<sup>94</sup> This chapter will first address how *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* can be examined from the user and the designer’s points of view. Then they will be discussed in relation to their roles as elements of ornament. Next, user interactions will be investigated, especially with respect to pleasure. *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* will also be studied in regard to care and attachment. Finally, uses of anthropomorphism in design will be considered. These sections of discussion are not meant to stand-alone. For just as design is co-operative,<sup>95</sup> so should its deliberations be.

#### 3.1 Questions of user and designer

Firstly, are we discussing users or consumers? According to August Morello in *Discovering Design*, a user “is the subject who uses” whereas a consumer “is a subject who chooses for use.”<sup>96</sup> Since these stickers exist to be applied to other objects, it cannot be said that they are used until they are physically placed onto another object. This creates rather confusing specifications of who is consumer/user/designer.

Applying Morello’s definitions, a consumer of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* would be the initial purchaser of the product. When the consumer applies the stickers to an object, the consumer becomes the user as well. Since each product contains multiple stickers, it figures the consumer might likely share the stickers, thereby creating a plethora of users. The lineage of users could stop here if it were that simple. Yet because *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* must be applied to objects, their usage extends beyond initial application. Because each object given eyes or a face thanks to these stickers can be used according to its original function, a stickered object has the

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<sup>93</sup> M Csikszentimihalyi and E Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 14.

<sup>94</sup> V Margolin, ‘The Product Milieu and Social Action’ in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*, R Buchanan and V Margolin (eds.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p. 122.

<sup>95</sup> V Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, Reaktion, London, 1999, p. 67.

<sup>96</sup> A Morello, ‘Discovering Design Means [Re-]Discovering Users and Projects’ in *Discovering Design, op. cit.*, p. 6.

potential for unlimited users. For example, a coffee mug given a face by one user could be placed in an office kitchen to be chosen for use by a co-worker, thereby making the co-worker both a consumer and user.<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps John Thackara's idea of viewing people as actors instead of users or consumers would benefit this discussion.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, any person who *interacts* with these stickers is an actor, whether they initially bought the stickers or applied them to the object. For the sake of limiting this discussion, where possible, anyone who interacts with *Inanimates* or *Plasticks*—whether as first applier or anthropomorphized object interactor—will be called an actor. When necessary, a distinction will be made between an actor who applies the stickers (applied actor) versus one who uses an already stickered object (established actor).

The discussion of actor versus designer is slightly less complicated, although it also contains multiple dimensions. Since major companies sell *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*, it maintains everyone cannot necessarily make these stickers. As Victor Margolin reiterates, there is a difference between the professional and nonprofessional designer. Among other arguments, he cites professional designers have qualities like “motivation, experience, access to design tools and production facilities, along with criteria determined by professional associations, cultural institutions, and the media.”<sup>99</sup> The professional designer of *Inanimates* is not credited. Jenny Lundgren is the professional designer of *Plasticks*.<sup>100</sup>

These professional designers, however, intentionally designed-in or incorporated the role of nonprofessional designers, so that the applied actor is also a designer. This act aligns with a fair amount of contemporary thought regarding design, which John Thackara summarizes, “We are all designers now.”<sup>101</sup> Several other authors echo these sentiments, including Victor Papanek,<sup>102</sup> Ben Highmore,<sup>103</sup> Richard

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<sup>97</sup> Even stickier, if the stickers are reusable, they can be removed from an object and applied to another at the whim of any user. It is not indicated on either product's packaging whether they are reusable or not.

<sup>98</sup> J Thackara, *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 226.

<sup>99</sup> V Margolin, ‘The Product Milieu and Social Action,’ *op. cit.*, pp. 125-6.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Plasticks – The Idea,’ viewed 20 February 2010, <<http://www.plasticks.se/iden/?l=en>>.

<sup>101</sup> J Thackara, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>102</sup> V Papanek, *The Green Imperative: Ecology and Ethics in Design and Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, pp. 59-60.

<sup>103</sup> B Highmore, ‘Introduction’ in *The Design Culture Reader*, B Highmore (ed.), Routledge, London, 2009, p. 5.

Buchanan,<sup>104</sup> Nigel Cross<sup>105</sup> and Victor Margolin.<sup>106</sup> Margolin, in particular, identifies independent design as a part of the product milieu wherein people design and use things for themselves. He lists six reasons why people might do things for themselves: cost, satisfaction, empowerment, self-reliance, self-actualization or to satisfy a social need.<sup>107</sup> Applied actors of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are designers in the sense that they choose which facial features to bestow on other design objects and how the features will be arranged, thereby creating a new design object. As independent designers, applied actors have made something new for themselves, for whichever combination of Margolin's six possible reasons.

Regardless of whether the applied actor will use the designed object himself or herself, both the applied actor and the established actor are designing. For example, an applied actor sticks a face on a coffee mug. She then places the coffee mug in her office's kitchen cabinet, alongside the rest of the office's coffee mugs. Her co-worker enters the kitchen, opens the cabinet and chooses the aforementioned coffee mug with a face, becoming the established actor. The applied actor has designed the face onto the coffee mug. But the established actor is also designing, since he or she must decide how and where the coffee mug will be placed on his or her desk. Norman summarizes, "While we may not have any control over the design of the many objects we purchase, we do control which we select and how, where, and when they are to be used."<sup>108</sup> In phenomenological discussions in Chapter Four, it will be argued that the coffee mug is also designing or creating the applied actor and the established actor. In summation, those who interact with *Inanimates* or *Plasticks* are both actors and designers.

### 3.2 Values of ornament

The inherent nature and function of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* suggest they are objects of ornament. More or less, they exist in the same vein as a checked pattern or a floral scroll—as decoration. Though design objects in their own right, these facial stickers are essentially an afterthought to the objects they are applied. It can be assumed, but perhaps not proven, that a professional coffee mug designer does not leave a solid,

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<sup>104</sup> R Buchanan, 'Rhetoric, Humanism, and Design' in *Discovering Design, op. cit.*, pp. 48-9.

<sup>105</sup> N Cross, 'Discovering Design Ability' in *Discovering Design, op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>106</sup> V Margolin, 'The Product Milieu and Social Action,' *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>108</sup> D Norman, *Emotional Design, op. cit.*, p. 224.



uninterrupted blank surface so people can apply *Inanimates* or *Plasticks*. A designer cannot fully know how a design object will be used,<sup>109</sup> much less how it will be further ornamented. Some objects may be inadvertently designed as conducive to applying these stickers (coffee mugs, staplers, shampoo bottles) while others may be discouraging (sofas, ballpoint pens, surgical scissors). Nonetheless, these stickers are ornament as much as they are objects.

Without undertaking an extensive debate on the necessity of ornament, let us discuss these stickers as such. A central antagonist of ornament, Alfred Loos, says, “The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.”<sup>110</sup> His main argument against ornament seems to be its cost to man in the forms of wasted labor and health.<sup>111</sup> Yet what is the cost to an applied actor who places the stickers on a coffee mug as ornament? The actor must earn money to pay for the stickers and the mug, but no more. Almost no physical labor is needed or wasted for the applied actor to create the ornamentation.<sup>112</sup>

Karl Grosz says people long for ornament now as it was in earlier times when weapons, vehicles, utensils, tools, etc., were ornamented to distinguish them from the mass of the everyday.<sup>113</sup> He argues, “Now we yearn for enrichment, for ornament, once more.”<sup>114</sup> Enrichment is a particularly striking term to associate with ornament—imploring notions of adding value, wealth. Value cannot necessarily be quantified. Perhaps ornamenting a coffee mug with a face adds greater value to the applied actor as a social relationship. This type of *applied* anthropomorphism creates other functions for ornament aside from traditional roles like giving pleasure through beauty<sup>115</sup> or emphasizing the important.<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, E.H. Gombrich notes faces, eyes, animals and humans have been used in ornamentation to frighten and protect against evil.<sup>117</sup> *Inanimates* or *Plasticks* could

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<sup>109</sup> V Margolin, ‘The Product Milieu and Social Action,’ *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>110</sup> A Loos, ‘Ornament and Crime’ in *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750-1940*, I Frank (ed.), Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, p. 289.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>112</sup> The author acknowledges but cannot undertake discussion here regarding the physical labor used in the production of these stickers. Working conditions and worker’s rights are not at issue here.

<sup>113</sup> K Grosz, ‘Ornament’ in *The Theory of Decorative Art, op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> W Morris, ‘The Arts and Crafts of To-day’ in *The Theory of Decorative Art, op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>116</sup> D Rams, ‘Omit the Unimportant’ in *Design Discourse*, V Margolin (ed.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 111.

<sup>117</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-265.

also be used in this way or conversely to lure and attract. As Gombrich says, “Like the child who turns a stick into a hobby horse or a leaf into a boat, the decorator can indulge his fancy by re-interpreting the things around him and make others share his pleasure.”<sup>118</sup> As ornament, the purpose of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* can be debated heartily. This thesis concludes these stickers give pleasure, can potentially aide actor/object interaction, enrich the actor and emphasize the important—humanity. Visually representing humanity through ornamentation can serve to remind the actor of his or her own humanity as well as the human element involved in making the object. This idea will be explored more fully in Chapter Four.

### 3.3 Elements of interaction

In *The Design of Everyday Things*, Donald Norman argues usability and understandability are more important in a design object than its attractiveness.<sup>119</sup> He uses the term ‘affordance’ in reference to “the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used.”<sup>120</sup> When affordance is optimized, interaction with a design object is easier for the actor since fewer labels, directions, etc., are required.<sup>121</sup> Affordance works alongside conceptual models that allow actors to predict the effects of their actions.<sup>122</sup> Herein are what Norman says are the fundamental principles of designing for people: “provide a good conceptual model and make things visible.”<sup>123</sup> As design objects, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* adhere to both fundamental principles. The conceptual model predicts that when applied, the stickers will give a face to an object. Affordances are optimized in that actors know to peel, arrange and stick.

Yet the stickers can do more. During and after application, the stickers can aide actor interaction with the object. For example, consider *Inanimates*’ packaging suggestion of placing eyes and teeth on a stapler. On the surface, this may seem like an office worker’s attempt to liven up an otherwise bland cubicle existence. But it could also serve as a warning. Imagine a young child encounters the toothed stapler. The stapler’s stickered eyes and teeth may better help the child understand that the stapler

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.

<sup>119</sup> D Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, Doubleday, New York, 1988, p. viii.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

“bites” when its “mouth” closes. Tiny staple wounds in thin, slender fingers are averted. The conceptual model predicts the “jaws” will mash together when the stapler closes, possibly causing pain. Affordances are optimized so the child knows pushing the stapler’s “mouth” closed will make its teeth “bite.” This is not to say *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* work this way in every instance. Indeed, the stickers could conversely attract a child to the stapler as a toy where a faceless stapler may otherwise not be seen as a toy and entirely ignored. Yet *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* have the possibility to be used to help some designs communicate more effectively.

Another of Donald Norman’s works, *Emotional Design*, observes that while an object’s usability and utility are obviously important, they coexist with elements of fun, pleasure, joy, excitement, anxiety, anger, fear and rage.<sup>124</sup> He illustrates this idea in one instance using Alessi’s Te ò tea strainer by Stefano Pirovano—the same mentioned in this thesis’ introduction. Initially seen as merely “cute,” once Te ò is analyzed for its functionality—how the arms hold the tea in the water while the spread legs balance against and hug the cup’s exterior—“cute” becomes “pleasurable” and “fun.”<sup>125</sup> The physical characteristics of Te ò’s arms and legs suggest how the object is expected to function, which in this case operates accordingly. Te ò is expected to perform as such not only because of its human characteristics (affordances), but also because of built up expectations based on prior experience (similar to the conceptual model).<sup>126</sup> Conversely, objects can elicit negative emotions if they break an actor’s trust and do not function or perform according to expectation.

But can pleasure be designed into an object? Patrick Jordan argues pleasure “is not simply a property of a product but of the interaction between a product and a person.”<sup>127</sup> Products, in his eyes, should be seen as “*living objects* with which *people* have *relationships*.”<sup>128</sup> Throughout *Designing Pleasurable Products*, Jordan makes a case for designing “living objects” using human pleasures as tools to better approach people as holistic entities. He employs four primary pleasures according to Lionel Tiger’s *The Pursuit of Pleasure*: physio-pleasure (body and sensory organs), socio-

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<sup>124</sup> D Norman, *Emotional Design*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>127</sup> P Jordan, *Designing Pleasurable Products: An Introduction to the New Human Factors*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2000, p. 12.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7. (Original italics.)

pleasure (relationships), psycho-pleasure (cognitive and emotional reactions) and ideo-pleasure (values).<sup>129</sup> People's different characteristics, Jordan asserts, must be addressed through a living object's properties to create a pleasurable interaction in any of the four spheres.<sup>130</sup>

A simplified example brings us back to the stickered stapler. When the applied actor chooses the facial features to design the face and adheres them to the stapler, the applied actor considers (however consciously) his or her own characteristics to generate pleasure. Perhaps the actor believes the stapler will improve his or her social image in an office, allowing the actor to be perceived as quirky or funny (socio-pleasure). Or maybe the humanized stapler allows the actor to release stress by using it to "bite" paper (psycho-pleasure). Finally, the actor may find applying the stickers makes the stapler more aesthetically pleasing (ideo-pleasure).<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, this applied actor may not only weigh his or her own personal characteristics when designing the new stapler, but incorporate them as well. Jordan finds personal characteristics may be reflected in the final living object itself. He writes about his 1997 prior study showing participants had a "statistically significant preference for products that they felt reflected their own personality."<sup>132</sup> This echoes results from Tina and Sara Kiesler's 2005 'My Pet Rock and Me' research discussed in Chapter One, where participants were more likely to say the pet rocks represented themselves when they had designed it themselves and whose personalities reflected their own.<sup>133</sup>

Whether optimizing affordances, taking advantage of conceptual models or weighing personal characteristics, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are themselves design elements that contain the potential to influence user-object relationships through interaction.

### 3.4 Recipients of care

Care, attachment and meaning: These three words almost interchangeably represent ideas of commitment, dedication, relationships, tenderness and love. Are they too strong to apply to objects? Not necessarily. As explored in many works, it is not

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-4.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>131</sup> Physical pleasure could be addressed by this stapler if it is ergonomically designed to improve ease of use, thereby already meeting a physical characteristic.

<sup>132</sup> Jordan, *op.cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>133</sup> T Kiesler and S Kiesler, 'My Pet Rock and Me', *op. cit.*, pp. 365-6.

unfathomable for people to develop emotional links and affections toward objects.<sup>134</sup> This is often achieved through what Norman refers to as “making something personal,” which is beyond customization or modifying an object to a person’s wants or needs (like a customized or personalized tailored suit).<sup>135</sup> Personal attributes like marks, dents or stains cannot be “built-in” or envisioned by the professional designer.<sup>136</sup> These attributes, he says, “... make the objects personal—ours.”<sup>137</sup> This “ours” does not signify possession in the sense that an object is *mine*, but that the object is associated and identified, i.e. in a relationship, with its actor.

This “ours” signals, therefore, a personal positive relationship or—attachment. In his article, ‘A Perspective on the Person-Product Relationship: Attachment and Detachment,’ Özlem Savaş defines attachment to a product as:

a positive emotional state of the relationship between an individual and a product, which indicates a strong linkage between them, and results in considering the product as part of the self with a strong will to keep that product.<sup>138</sup>

True as Norman says, these links cannot be foreseen or created by the professional designer. In the case of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*, applied actors and established actors are in positions where their actions with the stickers can create this “making personal” and attached relationships.

Savaş further states, “Individuals had a tendency to take care for the product to which they feel attached, with the aim of keeping it for a long time.”<sup>139</sup> Here, care implies a meaning more in the sense of maintenance, upkeep and repair. Tony Fry, however, views care with graver significance. Since design continues designing, Fry asserts we must find or create faith in objects—a sort of sacred design wherein we are more able to recognize our fortune in existence.<sup>140</sup> “Care is able to be claimed as the custodianship of one’s own life as elemental to life itself, and as the love of others it joins with the generality of sacred design,” he writes. “It is predicated not upon command but attachment.”<sup>141</sup> In the case of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*, how better to

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<sup>134</sup> See M Csikszentmihalyi and E Rochberg-Halton’s *The Meaning of Things*, op. cit., among others.

<sup>135</sup> Norman, *Emotional Design*, op. cit., pp. 218-23.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>138</sup> Ö Savaş, ‘A Perspective on the Person-Product Relationship: Attachment and Detachment’ in *Design and Emotion*, D McDonagh, P Hekkert, J Van Erp and D Gyi (eds.), Taylor & Francis, London, 2004, p. 318.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>140</sup> T Fry, ‘Sacred Design 1 - A Re-Creational Theory’ in *Discovering Design*, op. cit., pp. 191-8.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

demonstrate sacred design than by injecting anthropomorphic life into a coffee mug to facilitate care and attachment?

To briefly summarize, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* encourage increased care, attachment and meaning since they permit the actor to “make something personal,” thereby promoting the development of positive emotional relationships between actor and object. This can lead to both actors and objects as being recipients of care in the recognition of life as elemental and sacred. The potential implications of more attached, care-centered relationships will be suggested in this thesis’ conclusion.

### *3.5 Uses of anthropomorphic form*

In their work on anthropomorphism and design, Carl DiSalvo and Francine Gemperle outline four primary uses of anthropomorphism in design, which they stress are not mutually exclusive nor always of the same strength.<sup>142</sup> The four primary uses are: keeping things the same, explaining the unknown, reflecting product attributes and projecting human values.<sup>143</sup> Many of these uses coincide with previous discussions in this chapter. For example, the stapler with “teeth” reflects product attributes and potentially explains the unknown.

Additionally, DiSalvo and Gemperle identify seduction and fulfillment as qualities that “address how anthropomorphic form is used and the experience of interacting with anthropomorphic forms” in regard to whether or not object meets the actor’s “cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural expectations” suggested by the anthropomorphic form.<sup>144</sup> They say seduction attracts an actor to the object, whereas fulfillment increases an actor’s understanding, engagement and relationship to the object.<sup>145</sup>

Whatever anthropomorphic form’s use(s) in an object, this thesis looks beyond seduction to fulfillment as a key motivator for *applied* anthropomorphism. Above all, an interaction with *Inanimates* or *Plasticks* is a reflection of human values—showing that humans practice anthropomorphism because as we see humanity in the object, we see ourselves. In the following chapter, how we see humanity and ourselves in an

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<sup>142</sup> C DiSalvo and F Gemperle, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

anthropomorphized object will be addressed using Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theories.

### *3.6 Design conclusions*

To summarize this design chapter, let us look to our anthropomorphized toaster. Simply asking, "Who made you, toaster?" leads to a long, branched line of answers. Firstly, a professional designer(s) made the toaster. Then, acting as nonprofessional designer, an applied actor added *Inanimates* or *Plasticks* facial features. Next either the applied actor or an established actor used the anthropomorphized toaster. In affixing the stickers, the applied actor added a layer of ornamentation to the toaster, providing beauty, potentially aiding actor/object interaction, enriching the actor and emphasizing the importance of relationships. Even this simple, decorative act proceeded to encourage increased care, attachment and meaning to the anthropomorphized toaster because the actor has personalized the object. All these design discussions of user/designer, ornament, interaction, care and form overlap to establish *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* as anthropomorphic design objects that actors use in pursuit of fulfillment with other design objects.

#### 4. Phenomenology explored: “Toaster, how do you make *me*?”

Before pursuing phenomenology as a means of bringing anthropomorphism and design together, let us step back to consider the definition of anthropomorphism created in Chapter One: Anthropomorphism is a human process of attributing external physical human traits and internal uniquely human features to nonhuman, inanimate objects that can vary in strength and conviction, but is nonetheless prevalent. The thesis went on to explain that although “external physical human traits” heavily suggested the human form, no totality of parts is necessary. This highlights the main reason for employing phenomenology—specifically Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology—in this thesis: the body. Both anthropomorphism and design share an implicit relationship with the body, whether it be solely the body’s face or a body’s entirety. This chapter will explore Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theories regarding the body, flesh and objects to establish a relationship between anthropomorphism, design and phenomenology that is evidenced by *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*. Though it is impossible to disentangle Merleau-Ponty’s concepts, for clarity’s sake, they are approached somewhat individually below.

##### 4.1 Building the body

Like a child realizing his fingers are controllable, uniquely, indeed his own, Maurice Merleau-Ponty has a devoted fascination to the human body. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he establishes the body’s primacy. Summarily, he says, “The body is our general medium for having a world.”<sup>146</sup> Notice the body is just not *in* a world. The body possesses a world, a world that is exclusively one’s own. Though a body is exclusive to each individual, it is just as elusive and imperceptible. Merleau-Ponty writes of the body, “To say that it is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with* me.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, C Smith (trans.), Routledge, London, 1989, p.

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.



To further prove the body's complicated, yet critical existence, Merleau-Ponty likens the body to a work of art, calling it "a nexus of living meanings."<sup>148</sup> Writing on Merleau-Ponty's work *Signs*, author Richard Shusterman points out how the body to Merleau-Ponty is almost magical. For Merleau-Ponty, even an act minute as a glance "...does not cease to arouse a thousand natural marvels in it" and "...already has its own miracles."<sup>149</sup>

With all our wonders, living human beings are more than pure consciousness.<sup>150</sup> We are embodied—mediated by sense organs, a brain, a nervous system and functions for movement.<sup>151</sup> Consciousness and embodiment permit humans to make each one's own, individuated world. As Eric Matthews explains, one makes his or her own world "in the sense that the things and relationships in it get their meaning for me through their relationship to my purposes, activities, and needs."<sup>152</sup> Though human needs are often universal (all bodies need water), my body has particular needs, desires and activities. For example, my movements to fulfill a need for water can be customized. I can choose to be an established actor and drink water from the coffee mug with a face. This anthropomorphic-centered action may also fulfill a need within me to create more social relationships, as previously explored in Chapter One.

Because a body is one's own, it therefore becomes an object, too. Matthews uses Merleau-Ponty's common examples of how bodies can be touched and touching, seen and seeing, like when the left hand touches the right or when we shake hands with another body.<sup>153</sup> As Merleau-Ponty says, "It is therefore an object which does not leave me."<sup>154</sup> Matthews summarizes this dual nature as subject and object as a showcase of how we are in the world. He says we are, "...embodied beings, acting upon things, and at the same time being acted upon by them."<sup>155</sup>

Since the body is both subject and object, an underlying relationship connects the body to an object. In 'Eye and Mind,' Merleau-Ponty writes, "Visible and mobile,

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>149</sup> R Shusterman, 'The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, T Carman and M Hansen (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 161.

<sup>150</sup> E Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, Acumen, Bucks, 2002, p. 57.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>154</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>155</sup> E Matthews, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing.”<sup>156</sup> This fabric of the world, as we will explore in the next section, is flesh.

#### 4.2 *Binding the flesh*

The concept of flesh is not easy to define. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty addresses what the flesh is not: matter, mind nor substance.<sup>157</sup> He describes flesh as “... the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body... .”<sup>158</sup> Perhaps it is easiest to define the flesh according to a prior reference by Merleau-Ponty as a “means of communication”<sup>159</sup> between the seeing body and the thing or the body and the object.

In his earlier work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty lays the groundwork for the concept of flesh, without naming it as such. He writes, “To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion ... the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things.”<sup>160</sup> This way of communicating, of fusing the body with objects, is how we are able to experience and build relationships with others—other bodies or objects. Flesh is not only “the fabric of the world,”<sup>161</sup> it is an opening. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty also writes, “The world around us must be, not a system of objects which we synthesize, but a totality of things, open to us, towards which we project ourselves.”<sup>162</sup>

As a means of communication, flesh, Merleau-Ponty says in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “...can traverse, animate bodies as well as my own.”<sup>163</sup> The following section addresses how the body and flesh operate in relation to seeing and perceiving objects.

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<sup>156</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind’ in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, R Kearney and D Rasmussen (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, Malden, 2001, p. 290.

<sup>157</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, M, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, C Lefort (ed.), A Lingis (trans.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968, p. 139.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>160</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

<sup>161</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind,’ *op. cit.*, p. 290.

<sup>162</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

<sup>163</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

### 4.3 Perceiving the object

So far, it has been established the body and flesh are necessary in perceiving an object. Without embodiment there is no means of encountering an object, whether a mere glance or a proper grasp. Without flesh, there is no opening for communication between subject and object, body and thing.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

In perception we do not think the object and we do not think ourselves thinking it, we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal for synthesizing it.<sup>164</sup>

This quotation touches on nebulous notions of being nothing and everything that are also necessary for perceiving an object. Given that an object is seen from a body with a particular perspective, an object can never be perceived in its three-dimensional entirety. A view from everywhere, from everything would be optimal.<sup>165</sup> Although a body cannot be everywhere, flesh permits the body to see all the objects around our desired object, thus accessing all possible viewpoints to perceive a fused three-dimensional object.<sup>166</sup> This perception can only be if we are nothing. As Merleau-Ponty explains, when we have a desired object before us, "... I am not an absolute nothing, I am a determined nothing: not this glass, nor this table, nor this room; my emptiness is not indefinite, and to this extent at least my nothingness is filled or nullified."<sup>167</sup> One must be nothing, a determinate nothing, to be as close to everywhere as possible.

With an ethereal way of being nothing and everything, nowhere and everywhere, in perceiving an object, a living human being perceives himself or herself. As Merleau-Ponty notes in 'Eye and Mind,' "This explains why they [artists] have so often liked to draw themselves in the act of painting (they still do - witness Matisse's drawings), adding to what *they* saw then, what *things* saw of them."<sup>168</sup> But embodiment is not limited to artists, therefore all living human beings have vision. As Merleau-Ponty further defines:

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<sup>164</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

<sup>165</sup> S Dorrance-Kelly, 'Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty,' *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-2.

<sup>167</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>168</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' *op. cit.*, p. 293. (Original italics.)

Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside—the fission at whose termination, and not before, I come back to myself.<sup>169</sup>

Here again, when we perceive something and take it into vision, we must be nothing and absent from ourselves. For in this absence, we are made conscious of our presence. When we become conscious of our own presence, Matthews furthers, we are made aware of other bodies and living human beings who share the world.<sup>170</sup>

And share the world is what we do, with objects and bodies alike. In the next section, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology will be extended to *Inanimates*, *Plasticks*, design and anthropomorphism.

#### 4.4 Applying the case studies

In 'Eye and Mind,' Merleau-Ponty focuses on painting, largely the work of Cézanne and his attempts to paint "the world's instant."<sup>171</sup> This instant, more or less, is how a subject comes to be from a particular perspective at an instant of time, how it makes itself visible. What a painter asks of a mountain, for example, Merleau-Ponty says, is "to unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself a mountain before our eyes."<sup>172</sup> What an embodied man asks of a mountain, however, is how that mountain came to make *him*. The instant we crave, it seems, is how we make ourselves before our eyes—that moment of our absence becoming presence. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty remarks, "I am no more aware of being the true subject of my sensation than of my birth or my death."<sup>173</sup> We may never become fully aware of our presence, but that does not stop us from trying. To know our presence will ultimately confront us with our eventual, unavoidable absence.

With *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*, the living human being becomes more conscious of him or herself. The living human being is shown more clearly that his or her presence in the world depends on his consciousness of him or herself and on the existence of others. "Man is mirror for man," Merleau-Ponty writes. "The mirror itself is the instrument of a universal magic that changes things into a spectacle,

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>170</sup> E Matthews, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>171</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>173</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself.”<sup>174</sup> *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* exist to become this mirror—transforming a stapler, a coffee mug, a toaster into (wo)man—using visual representations of anthropomorphism.

Any object, anthropomorphized or not, can bring human presence to the forefront, according to Merleau-Ponty. Yet *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* do it better. First, as previously established in Chapter Three, the actor of either product is both user and designer. This involves a high degree of choice and expression. Actors choose to enter into this anthropomorphized subject/object relationship. Applied actors may even choose to create an object in their own likeness, as already shown. Moreover, applied or established actors are *designers* who create a relationship with a human-like object. Secondly, the stickers resemble other living human beings. It is seemingly easier to recognize oneself as seeing and being seen when an object quite literally looks back at you. As one touches a toaster, it touches you. Also, Merleau-Ponty states, “...it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world.”<sup>175</sup> Since *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* enhance an object’s depiction of the body of another, this optimizes the living human being’s perception since the stickered object offers greater familiarity. Finally, since this thesis defines anthropomorphism as an attribution that can vary in strength and conviction, this aligns with phenomenology’s individual emphasis. Being an applied or established actor with *Inanimates* or *Plasticks* ultimately depends on the individual. Aside from the stickers’ professional designers, actors involved with *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* do not need any outside confirmation or belief in anthropomorphism from others to acknowledge it. A coffee mug with a face belongs uniquely to the living human being perceiving it.

#### 4.5 Concluding phenomenology

To conclude this chapter, let us answer the question posed of the toaster: “Toaster, how do you make *me*?” Because I am a living human being, I am embodied. This embodiment allows me to have a world that is exclusively my own. A body, however, can be touched and touching, object and subject. Between, around, inside

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<sup>174</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind,’ *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>175</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, pp. 353-4.

objects and subjects is flesh, which acts a means of communication between a body and a thing. Flesh allows a body to be everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing, thus able to perceive things and other bodies. During this absence from ourselves, we become conscious of our presence. This instant of conscious recognition is one we living human beings constantly strive to attain. It is akin to the moment of our birth and our impending death. *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* aid this struggle for the instant by: encouraging actor/designer participation and expression; resembling other living human beings; and emphasizing phenomenology's insistence on unique perspectives.

## Conclusion: “What have we learned, toaster?”

In the concluding scenes of *The Brave Little Toaster*, the old toaster, radio, vacuum, lamp and electric blanket have successfully navigated from The Master’s summer cottage through thunderstorms, waterfalls, junk shops and high-tech luxuries back into his loving arms in the big city. When The Master (also known as Rob) magically happens upon his faithful objects, his attachment to them is fully realized. A dialogue with his girlfriend, Chris, exemplifies his feelings:

Chris: Really, now, why don't you just go out and find a new one?

Rob: Are you kidding? Where am I gonna find another toaster like this?

[Shows her badly damaged Toaster.]

Chris: Like that? Probably nowhere.<sup>176</sup>

The Master’s girlfriend is clearly not one with express anthropomorphic tendencies. If she were, perhaps she might better understand The Master’s devout relationship to his everyday objects. This brings us to what we have learned from *Inanimates*, *Plasticks* and our anthropomorphized toaster.

### C.1 Toaster teachings

First, we have learned anthropomorphism has no concrete explanations, but by examining explanatory theories and coupling them with various design theories, we can begin to understand its potential impact on the design community. Primarily, *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* function beyond the role of ornament since they allow the user to assume the role of designer, with the capabilities of adding pleasure, aiding user interaction and personalizing the design object to facilitate greater attachment and care. Coupled with explanatory theories of anthropomorphism from Chapter One—prediction and precaution; self-extension and formation; social relationships; the human template; and control—relationships between *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are more evident. A stapler with eyes and teeth better prepares the user for precautionary measures (aids user interaction), helps form the self through designing (adds pleasure), builds a potential social relationship (facilitates care), utilizes the human template (aids user interaction) and gives the user perceived control over the object (facilitates care). This conclusion prompts the thesis to agree the stickers encourage anthropomorphism in design, which strengthens the user-object relationship.

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<sup>176</sup> *The Brave Little Toaster*, *op. cit.*

Second, we have learned that although *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are rather unique in their outward suggestions of anthropomorphism, they ultimately serve to limit the actor, whether applied or established. The visual properties of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* constrain the applied actor's options when it comes to designing the anthropomorphized object's external facial features. Applied actors only have access to the stickers included in each product—stickers that are drawn and chosen by professional designers—and objects that have sticker-friendly surfaces. As shown in Chapter Two, the stickers do vary in types of facial features included, how they are depicted and whether race, gender, culture and emotion can be inferred. These parameters in turn influence the variety of choices the established actor can make. This conclusion prompts the thesis to say the stickers both encourage and limit anthropomorphism in design, which neither weakens nor strengthens the user-object relationship.

Third, we have learned through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theories that *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* essentially construct the user and the object. Being that actors, whether applied or established, are embodied subjects in the world, they are of the same flesh as *Inanimates*, *Plasticks* and other anthropomorphized design objects. Because *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* quite literally give the subject the power to bestow eyes onto objects, it further helps the subject realize they too are an object—seeing and being seen. With this moment comes the subject's awe of existence, his/her own and the existence of others. From a phenomenological perspective, this conclusion prompts the thesis to say the stickers encourage anthropomorphism in design, which strengthens the user-object relationship.

### *C.2 Further considerations*

This thesis has demonstrated how *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* can alter the user-object relationship, the possibilities of which should be considered across many disciplines. Moreover, further consideration should be given to how *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* can possibly enhance the care and attachment a user feels toward an object.

In *What Things Do*, author Peter-Paul Verbeek investigates various philosophies' attitudes toward technology and design to attain views regarding user-object relationships and perceptions of the world. His underlying intention seems to



question “What do things do to *us* and what do we *do* to things?” His research was prompted by a Dutch industrial design organization called Eternally Yours, which works to develop durable products by means of giving products “properties that allow humans to develop attachments to them.”<sup>177</sup> Eternally Yours believes this is one approach that will help avoid products being thrown away before they are obsolete.<sup>178</sup> Indeed, the organization often quotes Italian designer Ezio Manzini, who says, “It is time for a new generation of products, which can age slowly and in a dignified way, can become our partners in life and can support our memories.”<sup>179</sup>

Manzini sounds quite blatantly like he envisions a new generation of products that encourage anthropomorphism. Perhaps *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* belong in an Eternally Yours world wherein actors apply anthropomorphism to enrich care and attachment to objects, therein holding onto objects as long as possible. This seems to reflect Jenny Lundgren’s vision of *Plasticks*. After all, the *Plasticks*’ idea reads:

Our daily lives are full of short-lived plastic containers that become garbage way too fast. With *Plasticks* stickers, the containers not only get a second life – the chance of them ending in the recycling system is also increased. Because, who would want to throw a friend in the waste basket?<sup>180</sup>

But why should second lives or longer lives be limited only to plastic containers? Coffee mugs, staplers, toasters—a multitude of everyday objects are incessantly cast aside in favor of new and improved products. If The Master wanted to bring his crappy old Toaster to college because he has an anthropomorphic history with it, what’s so bad about that? If I were to hold onto *Inanimates* or *Plasticks* adhered, anthropomorphized toaster long when it breaks in hopes of repairing it, what’s so bad about that? Even a beyond-repair, broken toaster has many chances at a second life—planter, cooking utensil holder, vase, bookend, etc.<sup>181</sup> These considerations should be given further attention.

Additionally, if we are to follow Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological view of the user-object relationship, another avenue is established whereby *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* could increase attachment, possibly curtail premature object disposal or at

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<sup>177</sup> P-P Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency and Design*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2005, p. 218.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 220-1.

<sup>180</sup> ‘Plasticks – The Idea,’ *op. cit.*

<sup>181</sup> These suggestions, are of course, meant to be executed with caution and attention to electrical components.

the very least promote recycling. As established in Chapter Four, the stickers help bring the user to the forefront, so he or she better recognizes the phenomenon of his or her own existence and the existence of others. Taken further, this awareness could promote better understanding of how objects come to be as they are—and that objects are indeed created. With anthropomorphized objects, it could be even more likely that the user acknowledges all the intricacies involved in the design and creation process. A pair of eyes on a toaster could arguably better remind a user of the humanity behind the toaster. Mass produced or not, an object is rarely made without the help of human somewhere during the process. If, as Walter Benjamin claims, “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition,”<sup>182</sup> perhaps *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* are one way to help restore an object’s unique existence, its connection to tradition and to humanity. Maybe *Inanimates* and *Plasticks* have the power to help put human factors back into consideration in an increasingly detached user-object-consumer-producer relationship. These suggestions are worth further consideration.

### C.3 Blanket feelings

The year is now 2010. I am a rather normal, happy, contented twenty-six-year-old American woman plopped in front of my laptop cuddled by my blue, fuzzy, slowly threadbare blanket while watching my favorite childhood animated movie, *The Brave Little Toaster*. My childhood blanket is more than 5,000 miles away, safely kept in storage. There it shall rest until I have a more permanent home for it, because it has always had a home in my heart—and was always ready to hug me and listen to my bad days. For as that grumpy old air conditioner chides the steadfast cast of objects for their reunion plan with The Master, “Now get this through your chrome. We’ve been dumped! Abandoned!” it is the shy, sheepish Blanky who retorts, “But he loved us.”<sup>183</sup> Through anthropomorphism, design, phenomenology and our analysis of *Inanimates* and *Plasticks*, we realize it is love we stand to give and gain in objects, ourselves and others.

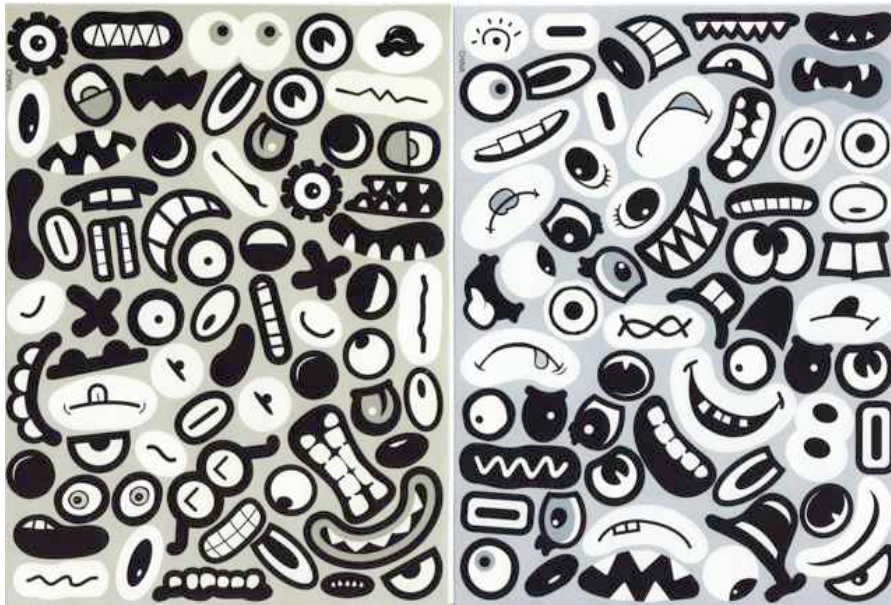
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<sup>182</sup> W Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’ in *Continental Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, p.168.

<sup>183</sup> *The Brave Little Toaster*, *op. cit.*

## Image appendix

Fig. 1



Fred Flare's *Inanimates* stickers, author's scan.

Fig. 2



Jenny Lundgren's *Plasticks* stickers, author's scan.

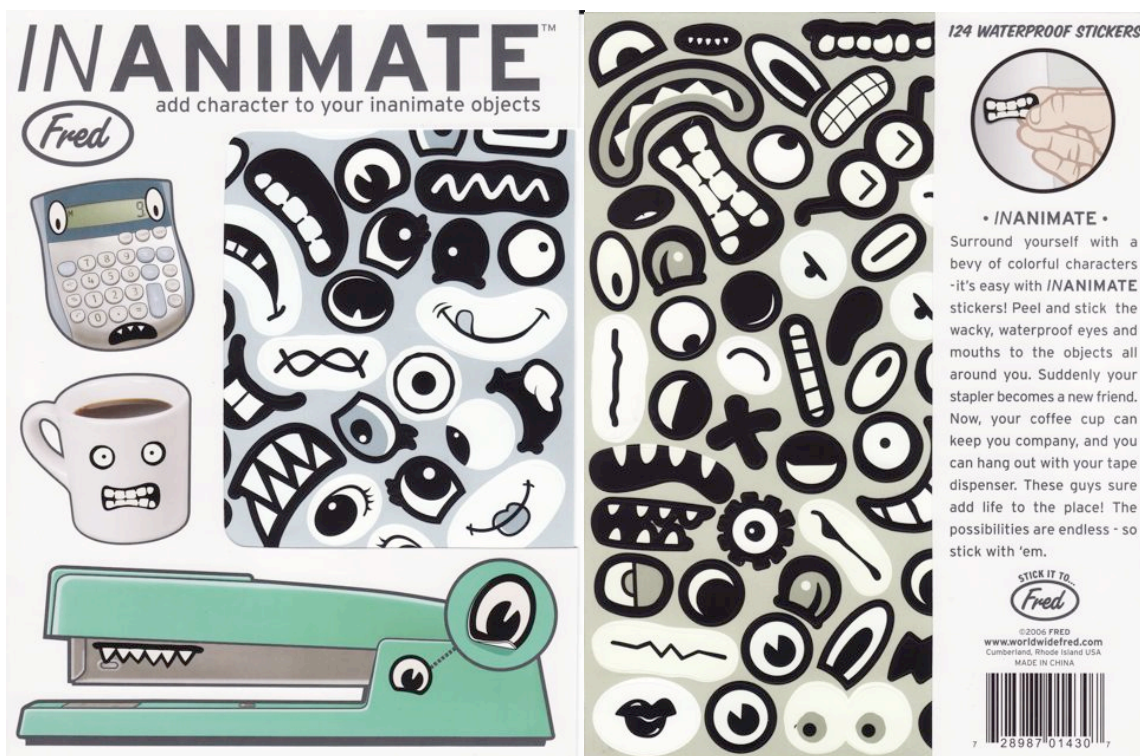


Fig. 3



A toaster using *Inanimates* (left) and *Plasticks* (right). Photographs by Marissa Frayer.

Fig. 4



*Inanimates*' packaging front and back, author's scan.

Fig. 5



Plasticks' packaging, author's scan.

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