

# Less is more: the age of minimalism

Who needs books, DVDs or photos now that our lives are increasingly digitised? There are some things we can never let go

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**I**n Poussin's painting *Landscape with Diogenes*, the ancient philosopher is depicted casting away his last possession, a drinking bowl. He realises he doesn't need it after seeing a youth cupping a hand to drink from a river. True, he seems to be keeping that grubby-looking over-the-shoulder blue sheet, but let's not spoil the story.

Diogenes's spiritual descendants are everywhere, if not as radically possession-free as he was. "I can carry everything I own," says Jason Edwards. "I have a few changes of clothing, laptop, two pots, bowl, spork, futon and flask. I like sitting on the floor eating fruits, nuts, vegetables and rice."

You're probably now hating Jason, but stay with him. "The nice thing about a bare room is that you begin to notice the space around you in a physical sense and you begin to notice other things like the changing sunlight during the day . . . Many possessions tend to tie one down mentally and physically - seeing too much permanence in inanimate objects rather than being aware of the vitality of the outside world of nature."

Then there is Robby who, in 2001, had a revelation. As he drove away with his girlfriend and dog from his flooding house in Austin, Texas, he realised: "Everything we owned was back there. And it didn't matter. There was nothing in that truck that I would trade for anything else in the world, no possession left behind for which I would risk our lives. It's a shame that it took a natural disaster to teach me what was truly worth valuing in my life."

These stories came from [missminimalist.com](http://missminimalist.com) and [becomingminimalist.com](http://becomingminimalist.com) respectively. There are hundreds of similar sites, clogging the internet like stuffed toys in a spoiled toddler's cot. My favourite is [tinyassapartment.blogspot.com](http://tinyassapartment.blogspot.com): "Wish you had a five-bedroom mansion in the hills and enough money to decorate it with stuff from Anthropologie that's NOT on sale? Face it - you live in a tiny-ass apartment with only enough cash to buy . . . nothing. Here's how to still be fabulous."

And then there is Kelly Sutton, a 22-year-old software engineer from Brooklyn, who last year got rid of all of his possessions except for his laptop, iPad, Amazon Kindle, two external hard drives, a "few" clothes and sheets for a mattress that was left in his newly rented apartment. Yes, these few remaining possessions may be worth more than most

people in the world will earn in a lifetime, but the story of the new minimalism is nothing if not bitterly ironic.

Sutton has a website, Cult of Less, for freecycling his unnecessaries and proselytising for his Zen-lite lifestyle. Personally, I'm thrilled that Sutton got rid of his "Seduce This" T-shirt because nobody - ever - needs to own that. "I think cutting down on physical commodities in general might be a trend of my generation - cutting down on physical commodities that can be replaced by digital counterparts will be a fact," he says.

Everyone's trying to cut down in this age of austerity, not just Brooklyn hipsters. We try to reduce our carbon footprints, our waistlines, our monthly outgoings. We contemplate adhering to George Monbiot's minimalist stricture. You know, the one where he told us to get rid of our extra rooms to solve the housing crisis or face massive taxes or, worse, his withering frown.

Now we must divest ourselves of the objects that - we are told - are asphyxiating us. None of us wants to wind up like Edmund Trebus before his death in 2002, who had so much stuff in his five-bedroom villa in north London that he was reduced to living in a corner of his kitchen. But some of us fear we're heading that way, given that the nation's leading pastime is shopping and because of our unwillingness to let stuff go.

The new minimalism suggests a way out of domestic asphyxiation. We don't need shelves of books when everything we want to read can be on our Kindle. Increasingly, our spending patterns reveal we're moving in this direction. Kindle ebooks sales now outstrip those of paperbacks on Amazon. One can see why. "Books," as Philip Larkin (and he was a librarian) noted in his poem *A Study of Reading Habits*, "are a load of crap". At least, he might have added, in terms of their efficiency as delivery systems. Did you ever try reading Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* in hardback (weight: 2lb 3oz) while strap-hanging on public transport, nose in the armpit of a taller traveller? I did. My God, I nearly put my back out and gave myself the world's first case of Booker prize-related tennis elbow. I would have killed for the Kindle edition (weight: 8.02 oz).

Think about what's happened to photography. Only losers - and the occasional Cartier-Bresson homagist - buys camera film today. Why even print pictures when you can recline on your futon in your tiny-ass apartment with your legs around your ears watching digital images scroll by on the digital photoframe of your clock radio? Consider also DVDs. A few years ago, in response to the truth that we weren't watching scheduled TV any more but customising our nightly viewing experiences (a generous way of describing nights in with a bottle of gin and a hard drive filled with *Come Dine With Me* episodes), the Guardian launched a column called *Your next box set*. But how many people still want to fill shelves with physical box sets of, say, *The Shield*, when they can download it from iTunes and lose the shelves?

True, DVDs aren't quite obsolete: for a while longer some of us are going to be posting rental discs back to those great warehouses off the M1 but Blockbuster, the once-dominant DVD rental chain, filed for bankruptcy protection last year in the US because it couldn't compete with the video streaming service Netflix. Earlier this month,

it was reported that Amazon.com is poised to launch a service to compete with Netflix.

Farewell then to paperbacks, CDs, DVDs, LPs, camera film. In principle anything that can be digitised is expendable. Love letters? Photograph them, upload them to iPhoto and shred the evidence. But what about how they smelled of her perfume? And how can I cry into her notepaper when it's digitised? Look, nobody said transcending the tyranny of objects was going to be easy.

But there's a twist. Yes, the death rattle of physical media is everywhere. But no, the object is not dead. Technology has facilitated, as Sutton realises, his lifestyle upgrade. Without iTunes, Hulu, Flickr, Facebook, Skype and Google Maps, he wouldn't be proselytising for his cult. Without his iPad his faithful wouldn't be sitting in Starbucks reading great classics of western literature on their tablets while looking quite so eminently slapworthy.

We are not really going cold turkey to break our addiction to objects. We are just acquiring new stuff that means we can bin (or freecycle) our old stuff. Diogenes, who was quite the cynic philosopher, would have seen through this imposture in seconds. Some are cutting back because they are immiserated by government policy; others because they can afford to buy new kit to make the minimal dream a reality. The latter are still fetishising commodities - just different ones from those they collected a decade ago.

To understand what has happened we must go back to the interregnum between the Sony Walkman and the Apple iPod. Remember when we sat on buses with Discmans, changing CDs every 40 minutes? I used to take box sets of Wagner operas for longer journeys by public transport in the early noughties. It was such a palaver changing discs, that by the end I didn't care whether Valhalla burned or not.

And then came the iPod. We felt so free, so unencumbered, so devoid of shoulder ache as we strutted along singing Dizzee Rascal's I Luv You or nodding sagely over an In Our Time podcast.

And then we brought our iPods home and looked, with mounting disappointment, at our shelves and thought, "Hang on, why am I keeping all these CDs like a loser?" Sales of CD towers plummeted. And then we settled back on our sofas, looked at all those bloody paperbacks on our Ikea Billy bookcases and thought, "Sheez, when is somebody, ideally one of Steve Jobs's lackeys, going to do for books what they've just done for music?"

And then we had another thought. Why buy even stuff on iTunes, which (frankly) is ludicrously expensive. Why not just stream it on Spotify? Or - though you shouldn't - borrow CDs from the library at minimal cost and rip them on to your hard drive?

This was the moment when the nascent philosophy of new minimalism got interesting. The death rattle of the object chimed with the Freeconomics thesis extolled by Chris Anderson of Wired magazine. In our putatively post-object age, and thanks to the internet, Anderson told us - and we believed him - there is no need to spend as much as we did. Craigslist, Skype, Freeview, Wikipedia and Google created a demographic that didn't just resent paying, but expected stuff to be free and take up next to no space in

your tiny-ass apartment.

"The internet has revolutionised economics," Anderson told me then. "On the web, the marginal costs of manufacturing and distribution are zero, or close to it. This means that you can now experiment with giving away one thing to sell something else much more than you could in the pre-internet era." Not only that: we could revolutionise the look of our homes for ever.

New minimalists don't urge you to burn your books or crush your CDs, just make sure you have them as digital files and take the physical objects to the charity shop. But the rest of us are weak. We find it hard to put that philosophy into practice. For example, last year my brother kindly digitised some of my old vinyl LPs. I had kept them for decades even though I'd got rid of my record player about three house moves ago. Thanks to him, I was back half a lifetime ago, snarling to John Cooper-Clarke's Beasley Street ("Keith Joseph smiles and a baby dies/In a box on Beasley Street"). Then I filed the LPs back on the shelves where they will sit unplayed, possibly for another 30 years. Why would I do something so inimical to the new minimalist zeitgeist? Because my memories are wrapped in cellophane, card and vinyl. Because I am weak.

In a sense what has happened is that technology has gone beyond our dreams and made us a little queasy. Yes, we scan in our photo albums and rip our CDs, but such is our insecurity about our hard drives crashing (is all our stuff securely backed up somewhere?) and - more importantly - the pathos of our nostalgia for physical objects, that we can't get rid of stuff. Even though we know we should.

What do we keep in an age when every object is, in principle, expendable? Things that are saturated in sentiment or status. For example, at Christmas I was given a framed photo of me and my late father walking through midwinter mist down a glistening Warwickshire footpath. It's hanging over my desk, next to a picture of my partner when she was a little girl. What, really, would be lost if I scanned these on to my hard drive and shredded the hard copies? But what it is to properly remember and honour the beloved and the dead is bound up with keeping those objects close. My descendants may well not feel such fetishistic compunctions. My daughter may keep family snaps on whatever digital devices exist when I am dead. If, indeed, she chooses to keep any.

As for status objects, the enduringly high sales of posh, functionally expendable gear amazes me. Last year I wrote an article for a Harrods supplement that showcased watches of £15,000 plus. All the time I wondered, why do these grotesque items of chronoporn still exist? I'd written a few years earlier predicting their demise as they were eclipsed by mobile phones, but they still seemed to be covetable objects of conspicuous consumption.

Clearly, the ostensible function of the £20k watch is negligible enticement to owning it. The same is true of first editions, and even the continued existence of that eminently expendable phenomenon, the pocket diary. This year, 2011, is the first in which I'm doing without a paper diary. I'm relying instead entirely on iCal (Apple's computer calendar). But despite the rise of online calendars, the likes of Smythson and Moleskine

aren't exactly going out of business. Why? Because we're still fetishists when it comes to luxury goods.

There's a third reason that our homes may still be clogged with expendable crap in the digital age. Small children. While adults have cultural products that lend themselves to digitisation, children don't roll that way. Yes, you can watch CBeebies on iTunes, but there is no way yet that you can digitise the cuddliness of a teddy bear.

So when we imagine what our homes will look like in a future where books, CDs and DVDs are in general replaced by digital non-objects, we may be deluding ourselves. We probably won't be living in cool minimalist apartments filled with nothing more than a futon, laptop, gym-buff lover and a couple of changes of clothes. No matter how much we want to. No matter how much new puritan glossies insist we should. We are sentimental, status-driven, beset by the overweening desires of small humans and - let's not forget - lazy.

As if to prove the last point, interior designer Mark Garside of Livingetc currently has a thriving online advice surgery offering storage solutions. He doesn't counsel getting rid of stuff, but rather recommends buying more stuff (flexible trugs, lidded containers etc) to hide the first lot of stuff from view. More advice: "Scan your home for dead spaces that might be transformed into hidden storage - alcoves, corners, behind opening doors, even staircases with drawers in each step."

I love Garside's philosophy: get that decluttered minimalist look without having to lose a thing. There's no reason to think such bad faith will change soon. We aren't ruthless enough to emulate Diogenes and cast away our possessions. And in any case, none of us is ready to willingly cast off the largest objects that burden us and that cannot yet be reduced to digital files, namely our homes.

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