



The Collyer brothers, Homer and Langley, became synonymous with hoarding after they were found dead at home in New York City in 1947.

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Rise of the Clutterologists

By JAMES DELBOURGO

COLLECTORS ARE INSANE. The point has been made many times, many ways. Movies in the 60s did so in style. In *The Collector* (1965), based on John Fowles's debut novel, a deranged butterfly collector played by Terence Stamp kidnaps a female art student and tries to make her part of his collection. "All collectors are anal-erotics," the British psychoanalyst Ernest Jones stated in 1918. For Freudians, like Jones, collecting was to be understood by reference to the anal-retentive phase of childhood development. For the poststructuralist theorist Jean Baudrillard, collecting was an activity appropriate to childhood but suspect in adults, symptomatic of a "depleted humanity" unable to move from the love of things to a love of people.

Modern views of collecting as pathological or perverted have often emphasized this theme of twisted love: Things are treated as people and people as things. Thus in Eric Rohmer's film *La Collectionneuse* (1967), the character played by Haydée Politoff collects lovers as though they were mere objects, leaving a trail of existentially disquieted par-amours in her wake.

Scott Herring's book *The Hoarders* tackles the contemporary medicalization of "hoarding" as a psychiatric disorder. Taking aim at the reification of hoarding disorder by doctors and professional organizers, this is a book less for psychiatrists than for those interested in the idea of hoarding in American culture. Herring's argument could be glossed as follows: There is no such thing as hoarding, and this is a book about it.

An associate professor of English at Indiana University at Bloomington, Herring largely ignores hoarding's deeper historical relationship to cherished objects in centuries past — as in the hoarding of treasure — and the practice of money hoarding. And he es-

chews framing his account by reference to consumer culture. One might easily observe that while the poor *board*, the rich *collect*, but perhaps Herring was wary of slipping into economic reductivism. Instead he interprets the pathologization of hoarding as a form of social conformism that seeks to impose "normalcy" on a "deviant lifestyle," language he links rhetorically to sources such as the Christian Right.

Herring cites the American Psychiatric Association's listing of hoarding disorder as a relative of obsessive and compulsive disorders in the 5th edition (2013) of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), and the TV show *Hoarders*, which sensationalizes the plight of people threatened by the contents of their own homes, though he does not dwell on either one. Dismissing scans that point to "different patterns of glucose metabolism in the brain" and speculations that "something at chromosome 14 may be associated with hoarding," he takes aim at the self-serving loop he perceives among a range of expert "clutterologists": the diagnosticians, psychiatrists, and professional organizers who want to save people from their own possessions.

Clutterology involves a certain linguistic totalitarianism. There is "abnormal acquisition," "extreme accumulation," "proper object conduct," "clutter addiction," "clutter rehab," "clutterbuddys" at "Messies Anonymous," and the Institute for Challenging Disorganization, the likes of which promote "an orderly, satisfying, supportive lifestyle free of clutter and the drive to collect."

There clearly are people who obsessively overload their homes with piles of goods and ephemera, and who love the sheer physical possession of hoarded things. However, that hoarding in contemporary American society has more to do with the political economy of capitalism than with brain chemistry and chromosomes seems a safe bet.

HERRING LINES UP a series of all-American hoarders like Homer and Langley Collyer, the white brothers who barricaded themselves in their Harlem mansion against the increasingly African-American society that came to surround them, until they were found dead and buried in 1947 in mountains of booby-trapped possessions. This is followed by a consideration of Andy Warhol's remarkable private stash of art and ephemera, which juxtaposed paintings by Picasso and indigenous artifacts from Northwest Coast Indians with mustard packets and airsickness bags, discovered crammed in his Manhattan apartment after his death, in 1987. And the Albert and David Maysles film *Grey Gardens* (1975), which documents the reclusive lives of the aging Edie and Edith Bouvier Beale, cousins of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, in their decrepit Long Island mansion.

Along the way, Herring sketches in some key phases of the transformation of collecting into a mass pastime for consumer society in postwar America. He describes the boom in the collectibles industry, propelled by such seemingly innocuous titles as James Michael Ullman's *How to Hold A Garage Sale* (1973), written for "people with collecting instincts but more modest budgets," as well as numerous specialist guides and price lists to facilitate the accumulation of items as varied as ashtrays and piggy banks. "A lot of what we do is like biology," quipped the collectibles guru Terry Kovel in a 1980 interview, "devising categories and subcategories for things that have never been categorized before." Herring's suggestion is that these bland but ultimately sinister pimps of kitsch enabled, in turn, the rise of the clutterologists to save the hyperaccumulative from their own stuff.

Herring also excavates a key scene in the annals of collecting: the production of a certain Gothic horror when private collections are opened to public audiences. Herring presents three examples: the huge crowds that appear outside the Collyers' mansion after their deaths; the Maysles' filming inside *Grey Gardens*; and the auction of Andy Warhol's collections at Sotheby's. "When you first came in here, you thought, 'What a weird thing,'" commented the estate lawyer on entering Warhol's apartment. What was weird was the miscellany and the seeming equality of all its contents. Nothing seemed to have been sorted according to hierarchies of value, leaving the collector's true intentions, and very identity, in question.

Not for nothing did Sotheby's sort Warhol's miscellany into clear categories for its six-volume auction catalog. "Is it just a bunch of stuff, or is it invested with a higher meaning?" asked one journalist at the time. What seems especially paradoxical about hoarding in America today is that consumer accumulation is both an imperative and an illness. Maybe Herring is right: We should leave hoarders alone rather than reprogram them with drugs — or is it only the rich who have the right to destroy themselves through accumulation? Shop till you drop, unless the psychiatrists and organizers get you first. ■

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REVIEW

The Hoarders
By Scott Herring
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