



When *stuff* gets covered in *fluff* in order to build up a paradoxical existence

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Abstract

Living immaterially in an over-materialized world seems to have become one of today's paradoxes. More and more often what can't be touched looks like getting greater "weight" than palpable things, commonly known as stuff. It seems that we are living in a "fluff-made world" as Richard Lanham, author of "The Economics of Attention" (2006) underlined in his study; a world he perceives as being mainly made up of information and visual representation. Even if we are dealing with everyday realities, talking about the surrounding fluff tends to receive a science fictional connotation. Various authors have fantasized over this topic, but getting inspired by a true story, Emma Donoghue succeeded into masterly depicting the ways in which a desperate mom got the power to deliberately mix fluff and stuff in a spectacular way. "Room" (2010) is a fascinating story of a young woman kidnapped, raped and locked up for years in a room together with her son.

Keywords

Stuff, fluff, reality, life, world, imagination

Since we open our eyes early in the morning and until we close them up late at night we are surrounded by *stuff*². Commonly, we are used to calling like this all the touchable things we get to interact with everyday – starting with the pajamas we wear and ending with the water poured in the glass that is aimed to do away with our thirst during the night. But *stuff* is able to mean more than this! Let's imagine how often do we witness or

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take part in a short dialogue made up of the following lines: “What have you been doing lately? / Lots and lots of *stuff!*” - meaning pretty much anything, from going to school to attending business meetings, from watching TV to climbing up a mountain. Nowadays *stuff* became an encompassing term. It’s the century’s “it”.

But here comes an unexpected paradox: “Just when we are drowning in *stuff*, we seem to be abolishing it. *Stuff* and what we think about *stuff* seem to be changing places” (Lanham, 2006). The author of “The Economics of Attention” (2006) goes much further than associating *stuff* with any definite action one can do. He praises for the replacing of *stuff* with something having to do with the world of information and of virtual representations. And that would be *fluff*. “When you interpret nature as information, *stuff* and *fluff* change places. The <<real>> world becomes a printout created increasingly by computer graphics, by digital design” (Lanham, 2006).

Fluff is about shape and imagination and couldn’t be weighed or measured as good old *stuff* could. As a consequence, the more one would struggle to understand the boundaries of *fluff*, the more disappointed and more ignorant one could feel.

But what would happen when one would deliberately decide to transform *stuff* into *fluff* in order to create a paradoxical, still coherent existence for another, out of love and despair? What would happen when real *stuff* would be provided with *fluffy* features by a human’s imagination and not by a fancy machine? Is it possible to juggle with palpable *fluff* for a good cause and, by doing this, to avoid the feeling of not being able “to tame” it?

All these questions seem to find their answers in Emma Donoghue’s shaking novel “Room” (2010) - a fascinating story of a young woman kidnapped, raped and locked up in a room for no less than seven years, together with her son, now at the age of five – offspring of the attacker. The book is written through the eyes of the child and was inspired by a true story that took place in Austria.

“Ma”, as the boy calls his mother, tries and succeeds to create a normal living environment for her little one, out of a tiny, unwholesome place – or better said: out of their cell. She does this by developing a pretty common daily program for her boy, Jack, guided by well-known rising up rules that must be followed strictly. The little boy is practically an actor in a fictional play conducted on a basis of a real-life experience he knows nothing about: “We have thousands of things to do every morning”, Jack says (Donoghue, 2010).

In this novel, the “printout” Richard Lanham talks about appears to be a five-year-old boy’s representation of the real world. His mother’s behavior put together with his own overflowing imagination construct the most interesting context: a cold world made up of scarce *stuff* becomes *fluffier* than the most entertaining, well designed video-game.

And there are two different ways in which *fluff* takes the floor: on the first hand, there is the manner already mentioned above – Ma’s decision to protect little Jack from the cruel truth and on the other hand, the boy’s capacity of imagining and personifying things, also empowered by the cartoons he is allowed to watch and by him lacking friends or any other playmates apart of Ma. As a consequence, surrounding *stuff*,

including Room itself, comes to life. He personifies Rug, Oven, Table, Shelf or Mirror, calling them by name and attributing them human features according to their appearance: “<<Design>> is our name for the interface where *stuff* meets *fluff*. The design of a product invites us to attend to it in a particular way, to pay a certain type of attention to it. Design tells us not about *stuff* per se but what we think about *stuff*” (Lanham, 2006).

But this process wouldn't have been possible without the information provided to him by his mother and by the TV programs he watches. Jack uses his knowledge to turn his *stuff* into *fluff*. Lanham's theory (2006) could explain this process by the fact that: “We have always had information as a perspective on *stuff*, to be sure, and toggled back and forth between the *stuff* and the information that informs it (...) But now it is much easier. The information economy leaves the toggle switch in the information position”. Being caught in a primary, atypical environment in terms of space and interactions, Jack uses all the possible knowledge he receives to transform the *stuff* in a warm, lively world. Still, the effect of the social constructed reality remains astonishing.

Due to his peculiar conditions of expressing, Jack's human capital gets, somehow, environmentally limited. This way, the boy is able to develop his attention capital and consequently his imagination (probably also genetically inherited from his mom): “Ma takes her pill from the silver pack that has twenty-eight little spaceships and I take a vitamin from the bottle with the boy doing a handstand and she takes one from the big bottle with a picture of a woman doing Tennis” (Donoghue, 2010).

The child is a very skilled actor in the economy of information: he internalizes all the data but provides a unique pattern of interpretation to his life very much resembling an artificial one that “seeks to evolve biological systems within a computer, to create living systems based on silicon (information) rather than carbon” (Lanham, 2006).

Still, a *fluff*-based world seems to be very much conditioned by special environment conditions. In a small world, populated by only one other human being and a small number of representations, *stuff* is easily transformed into non-*stuff*, imagination can run wild. But when the world becomes Outside, more personages populate the scene of life and the social roles are plenty, the difference between *stuff* and *fluff* is easier to perceive. For little Jack, escaping from Room and entering real life is a shocking experience primarily due to the forced renunciation to a *fluffy* world of ideas and to the insertion in the real society.

The frustration and incapacity-like feelings one encounters during an everyday existence were unknown to Jack who had been protected within his mother's imaginative self-created *fluffy* world. The plenteousness of *stuff* hits him hard, also does the *fluff* surrounding it which is not looking like a harmless fairytale anymore even if things are still about pretending to be something else than they really are: “Also everywhere I'm looking at kids, adults mostly don't seem to like them, not even the parents do. They call the kids gorgeous and so cute, they make the kids do the thing all over again so they can take a photo, but they don't want to actually play with them, they'd rather drink coffee talking to other adults. Sometimes there's a small kid crying and the Ma of it doesn't even hear” (Donoghue, 2006).

And so does little Jack's real life begin: in a real half-stuff, half-fluff environment.

All in all, *stuff* and *fluff* are said to go together in everyday life, the least being a consequence of the informational era we are living in. As far as I am concerned, I believe that shape without essence couldn't picture a realistic existence. Moreover, I would plead for a *fluff* that comes out of virtues and principles backing up people's attitudes towards palpable *stuff* and more important – towards each other.

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