



Small objects of desire

iPhones and the price of air

ROBIN:

All right. Well, this isn't a mystery object.

THEO:

It's not a mystery object?

ROBIN:

This is it.

THEO:

It is mystery so far.

ROBIN:

It is a mystery so far, but I'm sure you'll recognise it when you see it.

THEO:

It is your phone.

ROBIN:

It's not just a phone. It's got so many functions on it. Now in fact, it's transformed my life, I have to say. You know you want to look something up, and there it is in your pocket.

THEO:

Really it is, it's a multifunctional object, isn't it? And that is quite clear even in the form of this object and how it is designed. It is a tablet that you touch it and you write messages, you interact with it. So it's not an object that you-- only that you put it here on your ear, isn't it? I mean—

ROBIN:

That's probably the thing I do least.

THEO:

Yes. Yes.

ROBIN:

I think it's a beautiful object, clearly a minimalist design. Even zen, you could say, zen-influenced.

THEO:

Yes.

ROBIN:

And, well, you can get in black, but I think the most zen-looking one is the white one, which is why I got it.

THEO:

I would like us to think a little bit how the designers managed to put all this functionality in this device.

ROBIN:

I think the engineers and designers were driven to do far more than they expected was possible. They just worked so hard at it for a very long, long time, being driven by the design leader if you like.

JEFF:

How heavy is it?

ROBIN:

Not very heavy.

JEFF:

Oh, yes. There's an interesting story about smartphones, that when they were being developed, one of the developers, Steve Jobs, with his design team, that they had a prototype. And he asked them how dense the components were. And at the end of the meeting, he took it to a fish tank and dropped it in. And there were bubbles coming up. And he told his team there was still room inside.

[LAUGHTER]

GEORGY:

I think the crucial thing about smartphones is not-- that the hardware is absolutely fantastic, there's no doubt about that-- but what makes them what they are is this coming together of the software and the hardware. Lots of it is really intuitive the way you use it. It's really simple

interfaces. And this convergence of software and hardware, I think, is what makes for a really user-friendly kind of object.

ROBIN:

It was designed as a system. It's not just this object. The software that's on the internet is part of the whole system. And so much of the software that otherwise would have had to be on the phone is actually on the internet. And so that reduces the amount of memory and so on that it's got to have.

JEFF:

But you know, these smartphones, of course, they're function. But also they're really deep cultural, iconic products.

GEORGY:

Different kinds of phones symbolise different things, have different meanings. And, you know, it may be that if you want to be in with a particular group, you need a particular kind of phone.

THEO:

I have a friend that complains to me, said that I'm not a serious academic if I don't have a smartphone.

JEFF:

Would you say that perhaps it's because phones are to people's networking, that they have a special function to play, unlike, for example, your bottle or my pencil, which are very personal things.